

The Shackled City

A story by Ken "Lazybones" McDonald (km4101@netzero.net)

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Author's Note

This is a work of fiction that I serialized on ENWorld's Story Hour forum between June 2003 and September 2005. The story involves the adventures of a group of 1st level characters that I ran through the "Shackled City" Adventure Path of modules published in *Dungeon* magazine. Ultimately eleven adventures in this series were published: "Life's Bazaar" in issue #97, "Flood Season" in issue #98, "Zenith Trajectory" in #102, "The Demonskaar Legacy" in #104, "Test of the Smoking Eye" in #107, "Secrets of the Soul Pillars" in #109, "Lords of Oblivion" in #111, "Foundation of Flame" in #113, "Thirteen Cages" in #114, "Strike on Shatterhorn" in #115, and finally "Asylum" in #116. The complete series has also been released in a hardcover edition by Paizo Publishing.

This story is entirely a work of fiction, although as with my earlier *Travels through the Wild West* story I'm using standard D&D rules behind the narrative. I've taken a few liberties with the material; this story is set in the Forgotten Realms, and I have modified and added to the default plotline in a few places.

Book I: "Life's Bazaar"

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Chapter 1

It was a stark and bracingly clear day, with the sun a bright orb in a sky that was one unbroken sheet of azure that stretched from horizon to horizon. A few wisps that weren't quite clouds hung in the distant sky where the land met the vast expanse of the Shining Sea, barely visible even from the rising hills that gradually rose from the border of the Forest of Mir until they graduated into the jagged heights of the Alamir Mountains.

It was a rough, untamed region. The mapmakers put it within the borders of Calimshan, and the city of Almraiven with its magical wonders and gleaming towers of bronze was only a few days' ride distant to the south. But the difference between the low country along the shore of the Shining Sea and the interior highlands was more than the sum of the miles that separated them, and the barrier of the Alamirs, for all their looming majesty, was only a slim separator from the chaos and violence of the city-states that perched like boils along the western shores of the Lake of Steam.

But for all that it bore a look of pristine isolation, the region was not *entirely* untouched by the taming hand of civilization. The long coastal road that ran hundreds of miles from Manshaka to Almraiven continued north along the shores of the Bay of Almraiven until it rose up into the Alamirs, forging a tenuous connection between Calimshan and the lands around the Lake. And there were settlements here, few and far between, but adapting to the demands of life in the region in often creative fashion.

One such sign of habitation was the winding road, little more than a track, that wound its way up into the hills from the lower country that abutted the Forest of Mir. This trail had a lengthy pedigree, originating hundreds of leagues distant in the Tethyrian city of Saradush, but here, out in the middle of nowhere, it seemed of little function save for accommodating the occasional wild creature traveling on its own private errand.

High above this landscape, coasting on the updraft that rose up out of the hills, a single eagle hung alone in the sky. As it followed a general southerly course, it flew over a pair of travelers making their way in the same direction along the road far, far below. For a moment the bird swept lower, as if curious, but then it changed course and headed abruptly westward, toward the unbroken sea of green that marked the expanse of the Forest of Mir.

One of the travelers looked up at the raptor as it flew off, tracing its movement with her eyes, one hand held to her brow to offer shade against the midday sun. She was tall and lean, clad in plain but well-made traveling clothes, a tunic of faded green cotton over breeches that were tucked into calf-high leather boots. Numerous pouches dangled from the belt that ringed her waist, as well as a sheathed dagger, and over it all she wore a long woolen cloak with a cowl pulled tight around her face despite the warmth of the sun. Wearing the cowl so kept her features encased in shadow, but revealed enough to show that she was fair-skinned, with a few stray wisps of rust-colored hair showing around the edges of her face.

“It’s just a bird, Zenna. Sheesh, relax, will you?”

The speaker was the tall woman’s companion, who cut quite a different figure. She was a gnome, her three feet of height barely bringing her up to the other woman’s waist. Her face was youthful, almost childlike, although there was a knowing twinkle in her bright green eyes. In contrast to the closed-off, almost suspicious manner of her fellow traveler, the gnome bore a friendly, open air about her. Her auburn hair fell loosely around her face, curling at the ends where it hung just shy of her shoulders. She was clad in attire similar to her companion, although her clothes were more muted in coloration, soft grays and dusky browns that blended well with the surrounding landscape. She too was armed, with a small sword on her hip that looked deceptively large on her frame, and the wide arm of a light crossbow jutted out from over her shoulder, above the compact traveling pack that she carried. The two walked together in a manner that bespoke long familiarity, the taller shortening her stride automatically to match the slower gait of her short companion.

Zenna turned and glanced down at the gnome woman. Her eyes, shaded by the edge of her cowl, were dark orbs that flashed with emotion.

“There is reason for my caution, Claresse, even if you will not admit it. This is more than just a lark; these are dangerous lands, in more ways than one.”

The gnome rolled her eyes. “Gads, you love the drama. I keep telling you, if they’d really wanted to find us, they would have long ago.” At the other’s suddenly penetrating look, she added, “Yes, yes, I’m wearing my pin. Anyway, I’m not a child, no more than you, anyway; I know to be careful. And call me by my chosen name, if you please; I show you the same courtesy, ‘Zenna’.”

Zenna’s features took on an expression that bespoke long sufferance with the mannerisms of her companion. “It is a vulgar name for a young woman.”

“I like it. ‘Mole’ suits me well, and it’s not inappropriate for an adventurer, don’t you think?”

“Very well, Mole; I wouldn’t want it said that my upbringing had not included instruction in proper manners for a young lady.”

The gnome laughed, knowing full well that this conversation was one they’d already had before and likely would again. Zenna’s lips tightened, and she opened her mouth to say something further, but Mole interrupted, “Let’s change the subject. So this place we’re going, this ‘Cauldron,’ it’s really built on the inside of a volcano?”

“Indeed. From what I’ve heard, it’s quite unique. The town is constructed in concentric layers, descending down into the rim of the caldera.”

“Aren’t they afraid that it’ll erupt someday? I mean, it doesn’t sound like the safest place to build a settlement, if you ask me.”

Zenna laughed, but it was an edgy, sardonic sound, in contrast to Mole’s easy and light laughter earlier. “Apparently it’s extinct, or sufficiently so that the residents aren’t preoccupied with the matter; there’s even a lake in the center. I think that the concern was more with security, given the nature of the region, and the site *is* defensible.”

Mole shot her friend a sly look. “And do you think you’ll find what you’re looking for, in this place?”

Zenna didn’t respond, though her jaw tightened slightly. Mole, regretting the provocation, immediately shifted the conversation yet again.

“So, how much further is it? My feet feel like we’ve already walked to Halruaa and back.”

“We might have been able to afford horses, if you hadn’t given away half your purse to those thieves in Saradush.”

“They were just children,” Mole said. “And it’s not like we’re broke; they needed it more than we did, and there’s always more gold to be had.”

“An interesting philosophy,” Zenna commented. “I’m sure there’s more than a few laborers, peasants, and tradesmen who might disagree with you. In fact...”

She broke off as Mole abruptly touched her arm softly. The young gnome was scanning the trail ahead, where the road twisted raggedly between a series of squat, uneven hills. The entire area was choked with thick, nearly dead brush that crowded up onto the fringes of the trail, along with the occasional stunted tree eking out a meager existence on the stony soil of the hills. A great deal of cover.

“What is it?” Zenna hissed, tensing as she scanned the area.

“There’s something there…” Mole began, already reaching back for her crossbow. She’d barely touched it, however, when the brush flanking the trail ahead stirred, and three men appeared. The trio were ragged-looking specimens, their dull brown garments further darkened by layers of dust and dirt, sporting careless beards and hard, almost feral looks that took on a particular intensity as they regarded the two women. All three bore weapons at their belts, and one also clutched a loaded crossbow that he brandished menacingly.

“You jees leef thet bow where eet ees,” said the crossbowman, the steel point of his quarrel lined up decisively with Mole’s chest.

One of his companions, a reedy man with a nasty scar that ran down the left side of his face, chortled, caressing the hilts of a pair of long knives tucked casually through his belt. The final stranger, who carried a scabbarded blade almost large enough to be called a sword, smiled at them, but the expression carried little in the way of warmth.

“Good day to you, ladies,” he said, and the calm way he spoke seemed to make the statement just that much more menacing.

Chapter 2

“What do you want?” Zenna said, as Mole stood frozen, her eyes locked on the crossbowman’s deadly quarrel, beside her. Zenna herself felt a cold terror grip her somewhere deep down inside her gut, but she willed it aside through a sheer force of will.

The man with the sword stepped forward, flanked by the crossbowman on his right and the scarred man with the knives to his left. A good ten paces separated the two groups, but there was no shelter close enough to offer a possible escape from that crossbow.

“Just our due, m’lady, just our due,” the leader said. He took another step closer, slowly, as if not to spook them.

Mole started shaking, and let out a tremulous sound that might have been a sob of terror. She leaned slightly over toward Zenna’s leg. Still looking as though she was paralyzed by fear, Zenna could just make out the words that drifted up in the lyrical speech of the gnome tongue.

Can you handle the crossbowman?

Zenna reached down and patted the gnome, as if to console her. “Look, we don’t have anything... we’re poor travelers, we’ll give you what little we have, just don’t hurt us...” Under her breath, she added, also in gnomish, *Need distraction...*

“Please don’t hurt us!” Mole shrieked, falling to her knees in the middle of the dusty trail. “Please!” she repeated, clutching her hands before her.

If the bandits—for they were clearly that—were moved by the display, they did not show it. The knife-wielder chuckled again, and licked his lips, his eyes drinking in the lines of Zenna’s figure. The crossbowman said nothing, but the bolt-head did not move, holding both of them in line as ready targets.

“This doesn’t have to get ugly,” the swordsman said. “Throw down your weapons, and you won’t be harmed.”

“Yeah, I’ve known women who believed men who said that,” Zenna said, her voice tinged with equal measures of bitterness and sarcasm.

“We can do this the hard way, or the easy way,” the bandit persisted. “The easy way, you might not like it, but you’ll walk away from it, I promise. Zeek here,” he said, with a slight nod toward the scarred man, “he likes the hard way.”

Suddenly Mole let out another loud shriek, drawing the attention of all three men to her. She fell to the side, as if collapsing, but at the last instant she tucked into a roll, springing back to her feet in a single smooth motion. Even as she regained her footing, her arm snapped up, and a gleaming object flew from her fingers toward the bowman.

The crossbowman had tracked her movements with his weapon, and as she rolled to her feet he sneered and tightened his grip on the trigger of the bow. But even as Mole began her maneuver, Zenna was taking action as well. Her stare became intensely focused as she drew her hands across her body in a complex pattern, weaving an invisible lattice with her slender, nimble fingers. Arcane syllables erupted from her lips, words not meant to be spoken by mundane folk.

The swordsman had drawn his blade, but as he recognized the signs of spellcasting, quickly threw himself aside.

The scarred man, on the other hand, drew both knives and leapt greedily toward Zenna.

A cone of blazing colors erupted from Zenna’s fingertips, engulfing both the charging knife-fighter and the crossbowman behind. The scarred man screamed as the lights overwhelmed his senses, knocking him unconscious. The crossbowman fired even as the *color spray* hit him as well, but Mole’s thrown knife had glanced off of his arm, doing no damage but throwing off his aim just enough so that the deadly bolt passed harmlessly between them. A moment later he, too, fell to the ground, out cold.

Two of the three bandits were down, but the third, the swordsman, had dodged out of the path of Zenna’s spell and now lunged at her from the side. The woman, her own vision dazzled from the effects of the *color spray*, did not appear to see him at first.

“Zenna, look out!” Mole cried. The gnome leapt into the path of the man, slicing at him with her shortsword. The bandit quickly dodged back, and the two faced off, their weapons of roughly equal size, but the human towering over the slight figure of the gnome.

Zenna blinked, then hurriedly drew back out of the way of the melee. The swordsman grinned as he took the measure of his foe, but his expression twisted into a frown as Zenna, now safely clear, started casting another spell. He quickly lunged forward, knocking aside Mole’s blade and thrusting his own weapon deep into her shoulder. Mole cried out and staggered back, a blossom of bright scarlet erupting over her tunic from the savage wound. The bandit was already rushing forward, hoping to finish the mage before she could unleash her magic upon him.

But Zenna completed her spell, and with a gesture the swordsman staggered, his sword dipping limply in his hand as a mental fog dropped over him. The *daze* only lasted a few moments, but even as he shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, Mole came up behind him and with a vicious cry slipped half of the length of her sword into his back. The swordsman staggered forward a step and crumpled, but the attack had clearly cost the gnome, for she too fell, her sword slipping from her fingers to clatter uselessly in the packed dirt of the trail.

Zenna was there in an instant, bending over her friend. The wound was critical, she saw immediately, with blood continuing to gush out onto her shirt. Zenna, who was no stranger to battlefield wounds, quickly applied pressure to the wound with her hand, and clumsily tore off a length from her own undershirt to fashion a makeshift bandage. Her vision grew blurry as she worked to save her friend, and she realized that tears were flowing down her face.

“Damn you, Mole, don’t leave me...”

The gnome’s eyelids fluttered, and she looked up at her friend, the pain evident in her eyes. “I... I’m hurt bad, Izandra. I’m sorry...”

“You’ll be alright... we’re not far from Cauldron, I’ll get us there, you’ll see...”

Mole’s face twisted in pain as the wizard drew the bandage tight about her shoulder. Zenna—Izandra—feared that the thrust might have punctured her lung, but there was nothing she could do about it now. In Cauldron, there might be a priest that could provide magical healing; here there was no option except to wait for her friend’s death.

Mole took a ragged breath and looked up at Zenna. “Those others—they’ll recover shortly, and won’t be in a good mood when they do...”

Zenna nodded, and gently laid her friend down before she stood. With a grim expression, and her hand clutched so tightly on the hilt of her dagger that her fingers were white, she turned and walked away.

Shortly that problem was permanently solved.

Mole was pale, and her eyes had closed, but the bleeding at least appeared to have stopped. For a moment Zenna's heart clutched in her breast as she feared that Mole had died, but then she saw the soft rise and fall of the gnome's chest, and relaxed.

But that relief was only temporary, as she cast her gaze around her at the vast, empty hills that surrounded them. Mole needed healing, and she needed it soon.

Zenna worked quickly, first shrugging out of the light traveling pack that she wore under her cloak, and then dumping the contents of two of her larger belt pouches—holding a miscellany of basic gear—onto the ground. She opened the pack and quickly took out small packets of food, rope, a few spare shirts and assorted undergarments, and a compact lamp with a hooded shutter. She also took out a half-full waterskin attached to a leather thong, which she tucked into her belt. The backpack was now all but empty, and she quickly put it back on. She glanced down at the cloak. Without the concealing cowl, the full light of the afternoon sun illuminated her, revealing the details earlier obscured. She was young and attractive, her red hair framing soft, delicate features.

And also a pair of short, ivory-colored horns that jutted from her head just beyond where her forehead gave way to her cap of hair.

Quickly she bent down and recovered the cloak, sweeping it across her shoulders and snapping its clasp back into place before tugging the cowl back up to conceal her features. She then bent over the unconscious form of her friend, quickly divesting her of excess gear much the same way that she had just done for herself. Mole's pack and crossbow were quickly discarded. Zenna glanced down at the gnome's sword, now sticky with the congealed blood of her enemy, considering for a moment, but finally left it where it lay.

She bent low and wrapped her arms around the motionless form of her friend, and with a grunt lifted her as gently as she could. Mole wasn't that heavy, but Zenna wasn't very strong, and she knew that the burden would grow quickly with every step.

Without even a look back at the three corpses lying in the dirt, she started down the long road ahead, a road that she quietly hoped led swiftly to Cauldron.

Chapter 3

As the sun began to set behind the distant western horizon, the fifty-foot high city walls of the city of Cauldron, fashioned of massive slabs of black malachite, blazed with a glow that seemed almost magical. In the light of the setting sun the wall became a temporary shining crescent that ran halfway around the circumference of the great caldera. It was a dramatic sight, but one that the city's four and half thousand residents, accustomed to the view, generally ignored as they hastened to complete their day's business before the final waning of the day.

As the final remnants of sunlight faded and the city settled into shadows the glows of lamps and torches began to pop up throughout the city. From above it appeared as though the lights were clinging to the interior slope of the crater, for the town descended in concentric rings until one reached the lip of the dark lake that filled the center of the dormant volcano.

A hundred sounds filtered together within the confines of the bowl; the clop-clop of horses and the creak of wheels as teamsters hurried home after the final run of the day, the general sounds of a hundred different conversations as folk likewise returned from their daily labors, even the whisper of the evening breeze from the mountains as it passed over the walls and swirled for a bit within the crater before continuing on its way.

Zenna staggered with difficulty down the wide boulevard of Obsidian Street, the outermost of the four avenues that ringed the interior of the crater. The pain in her arms and legs had subsided to a mercifully dull ache, but every step she took felt increasingly difficult, as though she was walking up a hill that grew steeper with each passing stride. In her arms, clutched against her body, she bore the limp form of Mole, only the labored sound of her breathing offering reassurance that her friend still lived.

Around her passed shadows, the citizens of the crater town. Her own mixed heritage gave her the power to see as clearly in the dark as in the brightest day, but to her eyes the people around her were still shades, insubstantial beings rather than living, caring people. Thus far, at least, the people of Cauldron had proven less than considerate, not that Zenna had expected anything different. Since leaving her home, the tiefling girl's perceptions of the world had grown increasingly cynical. Faerûn was a cruel and heartless place, this sentiment only reinforced by the things that she saw and heard, and only those with strength and determination survived.

She could not know that the people of Cauldron had been confronted with their own difficulties in recent tendays, and that it was in part the stranger woman's own demeanor that drove them away, rather than offering to help. Those few people she'd asked for directions had been startled at the way she'd appeared, a cloaked figure with her cowl drawn well down to conceal her face, carrying a heavy burden close against her body, and speaking with a voice drawn to the edge of hysteria, turning away half-before the surprised townspeople could fully realize what was happening.

But Zenna, in her agitation, lacked the perspective to see this, instead projecting her own feelings onto the strangers around her.

At least she'd gotten into the city, she thought grimly. The guards had been suspicious of the lone woman arriving at the north gate as the sun was setting below the horizon, but at least they'd let her bring Mole into the guardhouse, and one of them, an old veteran who'd clearly seen his share of battlefield injuries, helped by cleaning the ugly wound in the gnome's shoulder and applying a fresh bandage. They'd directed her to the church of Helm, a short distance from the north gate, where she could find a cleric to help her injured friend.

Zenna bit back a curse as her boot scuffed on a loose paving stone, barely recovering from her stumble before she fell. If those guards had sent a rider to get a cleric, Mole would already be well, instead of just clinging to life. That part of her that was mired in cynicism wondered what the guards would have said if they'd seen her true form. The *change self* spell was among the first that she'd learned, allowing her to hide, at least for a brief time, the obvious features that betrayed her heritage. That brief duration, in fact, was what had driven her to haste, all but grabbing her friend from the surprised guardsmen and heading into the city to find the promised cleric.

A thin voice in the back of her mind whispered a warning, of how the clerics of the Vigilant One might respond to her appearance, but she squashed that thought ruthlessly. She could not afford to let that divert her, for Mole's sake.

But it was with a sob that she hurried on, carrying her stricken friend.

She passed before the mouth of a dark alley, and it was her distraction, rather than an inability to see through the shadows, that caused her to miss the watcher until she was almost right on top of him.

Surprised, she drew back suddenly, as the dark figure stepped out from his vantage in the lee of one of the high brick walls of the alleyway.

The stranger was a man, and with her darkvision Zenna could clearly see that he wore a mask—no, his face was painted, with a garish design that covered half of his face in black, the other in white. He wore his greasy black hair tugged back into a ponytail, and a silver stud glinted slightly in one earlobe. He was clad in a black tunic that could not fully conceal the bulk of armor underneath, and the hilt of a short stabbing sword jutted from his belt.

“Move on,” the man hissed. “This is none of your concern.”

Belatedly, Zenna became aware of a commotion further down the alley. Looking in that direction, she saw a pair of tall men, attired and disguised in similar fashion to the one before her. The two men were assaulting a third figure, who was sprawled out on the dirty cobbles between them, trying in vain to shield himself from the kicks that the other two were raining down on his torso.

Zenna felt two things simultaneously; a tremor of fear that clutched at her gut like a cold hand, and a surge of anger that was so intense that for a moment red flecks flared in her vision. The man watched her, his eyes wary, with a touch of nervousness as they flicked out over the main boulevard, but all Zenna saw was the sinister mien, the threat inherent in the man's posture, that hilt that his hand drifted toward...

The conflicting surges of emotion gave her strength. Clutching Mole against her body with one hand, she twisted the fingers of another in an arcane gesture, close against her body where the man would be unlikely to see in the gathering gloom. She felt a tingle as magical power flowed through her, the touch of the Weave that always sent a rush like the first flush of intoxication into her body. It was addictive, that feeling.

Zenna opened her mouth, and the cry she uttered was a stark scream, sounding too-loud in the quiet murmur of the evening.

“Guards! Guards!”

“Damn it,” the masked man muttered, coming forward quickly, his sword hissing as it issued from its scabbard. He lifted the weapon with its hilt forward, perhaps intending to quiet her with a quick blow to her head.

But Zenna's spell was already taking effect, and even as the echoes of her cry faded in the night, other sounds were audible from a short distance down the street. The sounds of heavy boots on the cobbles, the clank of metal on metal, the voices of men drawing nearer. On hearing them the man abruptly came up short, his attack arrested in mid-stroke. With only the briefest hesitation he darted into the alley, where his two compatriots had already interrupted their assault, listening.

"It's Gothrok's boys!" the watchman hissed, and with that the three turned as one and darted down the alley, where it sloped down sharply toward the next lower street below. Behind them their victim lay stirring on the ground, moving in obvious pain.

The sounds of the approaching guards faded—it had been merely an illusion, a *ghost sound* cantrip summoned by Zenna's magic—and the young woman started back down the street toward her destination. Before she'd gone more than a few paces, however, she hesitated. In her arms, Mole was quiet, but Zenna could feel the soft rise and fall of her chest. As the rush of excitement from the brief confrontation faded, her exhaustion returned tenfold, and only determination kept her from sagging against the front of the nearby building. For a moment, she thought she could almost hear Mole's voice, remonstrating with her in that way she always did.

Sighing, she turned back to the alley and the battered victim of the masked men's mugging.

Chapter 4

"Are you all right?"

"I... I think so."

The speaker was a young man, in his late teens, perhaps, his body lean and lanky. His hair hung in an unruly mess about his face, which was marred by a nasty bruise on his right temple that was already beginning to deepen in color. He wore a plain cotton robe that had been torn in the melee, and as he shifted, slowly and painfully pulling himself up to a kneeling position, Zenna was surprised to catch a glimpse of what looked like a chain shirt underneath.

"Oooh, they gave me quite a going-over," the young man said, probing his side with slender fingers before gently touching at his bruised face. Wincing, he clasped his left hand to his throat, where Zenna noticed that some sort of amulet or device was hanging on a slender chain around his neck. The young man's hand closed around it before she could identify it, but to her surprise a soft blue glow began to shine from beneath, through the gaps between his fingers. The young man's face became focused, and his voice took on a resonant, deeper tone, as if echoing from the insides of a spacious temple.

"Vigilant Helm, share your mighty blessing with your unworthy servant..."

The result of the injured man's words was immediately evident, as the blue glow flared briefly before sinking into his body, infusing him briefly before it faded. With a suddenness that surprised her, he got up quickly, his earlier discomfort gone utterly.

“A cleric... you’re a cleric,” Zenna said.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry, I neglected to thank you for your help. My name is Ruphos Laro, acolyte of Helm. While I don’t think those toughs were planning on killing me, I’m sure they would have left me quite a bit more uncomfortable before they—what’s the matter?”

As he was speaking, Zenna, whose exhaustion and emotion had finally caught up with her, had sagged backward, only the wall of the alley keeping her from collapsing. She clutched at Mole with both her hands, trying to protect her friend, unable to keep a sob from slipping through her strained façade.

No, mustn’t be weak, she berated herself. But her strength, already taxed beyond limit, had finally faltered.

The young man was beside her in an instant, a worried look on his face. Zenna slid down to the ground, her legs folding painfully under her, and her cloak parted to reveal her burden.

“What’s this? A child?” Ruphos exclaimed, carefully extracting Mole from Zenna’s arms to get a better look at the injured gnome.

“No... my... friend... bandits...” Zenna managed. Tears were beginning to slip down her cheeks, defeating her best efforts to bite them back. “I tried to help her, I had to get her here... You’re a cleric, had to find a cleric...”

“Shhh,” the young man said softly. “I will help her.” Once more he touched his amulet—his holy symbol—and called upon the power of his god, holding Mole gently with his other arm. Zenna watched with fascination—she’d seen this before, of course, had seen her stepmother use healing spells many times, but it was impossible to deny the wonder and beauty of divine magic being wrought, each time somehow new and unique.

And then it was done. Mole stirred, and her eyes opened, searching around her with that inquisitive manner that the gnome girl carried about her like a second skin. “What happened?”

“You were injured, but your friend was able to bring you safely to me,” the cleric said. He reached over and extended his hand to touch Zenna’s face, preparing to extend the benefit of his powers to her. But Zenna, worried that he might see... that he might see too much, drew back suddenly. The cleric started in surprise, but shifted his attention to helping Mole up to her feet.

“You’ve lost a great deal of blood, and you’ll likely be weak for a time,” Ruphos told her. “You—both of you, should come with me to the Temple of Helm. My brethren can help tend to your needs, and see that you find someplace safe and comfortable where you can rest and recover from your travails.”

Zenna, bracing against the wall, struggled back to her feet. It was clear that the gesture cost her no small amount of energy, but she put on a determined look as she looked down at the cleric, still kneeling in the dirt of the alley.

“Thank you for what you did for my friend,” she said. “But really, we should—”

“What she means to say, is thank you, of course we’ll accept your generous offer of hospitality,” Mole broke in. “We’ve only just arrived in the city, and we appreciate any help you can provide us.”

Ruphos glanced at them both, his gaze settling finally on Zenna, who—reluctantly, it was clear—nodded.

Chapter 5

“So what happened back there?” Zenna asked, as the three of them continued down Obsidian Way, where the blocky outlines of the Temple of Helm could already be seen a few blocks ahead. Temples to the Vigilant One existed in cities and towns across Faerûn, and in contrast to regional variations in architecture and building styles, those temples all tended toward a simple, blocky structure that tended to make them easily recognizable wherever one traveled. Even in the near-darkness the two-story temple building was clearly distinct from its neighbors, its white marble setting a stark contrast to the black volcanic stone from which most of the city’s buildings were constructed.

The three had exchanged brief introductions, and Zenna had given a cursory summary of their recent troubles that was as much to inform Mole as to placate the cleric.

“It’s a long story... I’ll be happy to tell it to you, once we’re back at the temple. Things have been pretty tense here lately; there’s been... some abductions.”

Zenna glanced over at him; he looked troubled, but she could sense that he was holding something back. Not surprising; she and Mole had only just arrived in the city, and with a deep sword wound in the shoulder of one of them to boot. She looked around the darkened street, which was all but deserted now that night had arrived in earnest. She recognized it, now, the furtive looks and concern in the faces of the people she’d seen since arriving in the city. Cauldron wasn’t a happy place right now.

She could sense rather than hear Mole walking along beside her. Her friend was all but silent when she wanted to be, which was most of the time. With Ruphos present there had been no opportunity for any more lengthy discussion of what had happened to them, just a few knowing looks that promised more explanations later. The two had known each other and traveled together long enough so that they could coordinate their actions with little or no verbal communication, when necessary. Zenna frowned. Not that it stopped Mole from doing what she wanted, like when she had broken in to accept the cleric’s offer of hospitality at his temple. The mage wasn’t comfortable with it, not by a long shot, but there didn’t seem to be anything to be done about it now... they had arrived.

Now that they were here, the temple didn't seem as large as it had from a distance; a strange trick of shape and perspective. The façade of the main building that fronted the street was connected to a low wall that provided access to a courtyard adjacent to the structure. The main temple doors were flanked by a pair of statues, also apparently of white marble, carved into the representation of a pair of armored knights, their maces lifted high into the air. Ruphos did not head for the main entrance, however, instead turning to the side wall and opening a latch on a gate of thick iron bars that led into that courtyard. The courtyard, sheltered from the street by the wall, was deep with shadows, but Ruphos was familiar with the path and neither Zenna nor Mole had any trouble with the poor illumination. Ruphos, of course, didn't know that.

"Careful, the path is clear, but there's a few benches here that you can stumble into if you're not careful. Just follow me, the rectory's just over there."

Zenna, of course, could see the building perfectly, a squat stone structure with a roof covered in overlapping crescent-shaped tiles. She pretended not to see Ruphos's outstretched hand, offering them guidance, but Mole quickly took it, half-pulling the cleric down the path, chatting about some element of religious life or other. Zenna's thoughts were on other matters, like what they might encounter inside the temple complex.

Ruphos led them to a heavy wooden door recessed into the stone wall of the rectory building. As he opened the door a shaft of warm light spilled out into courtyard, but before Zenna could gauge what lay beyond, Ruphos and Mole were already going inside.

The room wasn't large, but looked comfortable and lived in. A considerable stone hearth in the far wall was cold, but a pair of oil lamps on the mantle above shed a cheery light. There were several comfy-looking armchairs flanking a wall-mounted bookcase holding several dozen titles, and a small table flanked by a trio of chairs beside a long wooden sideboard. Two doors led to other parts of the building, while to their right a narrow corridor appeared to give access to the temple itself.

"Everyone's probably at the temple, or still out in the town," Ruphos said cheerily. "With everything that's been happening, we've been putting in some long days of late, and we only have a handful of clerics on staff here." Now that he was home, in his element, some of his earlier gloom had departed. With his bruise faded, only the tears in his robe remained as evidence that he'd only minutes before been the victim of a violent assault. "I'll get you some food and drink, and a place to rest, but first we'd better go tell Jenya what happened."

There was no way to get out of it; well, not without an unpleasant display, so Zenna joined Mole and the young cleric as he led them down the passageway that connected the rectory with the temple. As they approached a thick stone arch Zenna could make out the smell of incense hanging heavily in the air, and the faint sound of a chime that reverberated for a moment then faded into nothingness. As she passed under the arch, she felt a momentary tingle pass through her body; a strange sensation that was gone before she could describe it.

The passage opened onto the back of the nave of the church. Despite the limited size of the structure, Zenna could not help but be a little impressed. Thick beams held up the roof,

rising to a peak some twenty feet above. Wooden pews ran in twin rows from the entry hall to the altar area just in front of her, with an ornate wooden door to her left probably leading to the sacristy where the vestments and other sacred accoutrements of organized religion were kept. Though there were no worshippers present at the moment, everything was immaculate, clearly well-tended by the clerics of Helm that ran the temple. She estimated that perhaps a hundred worshippers could gather here at once; a paltry sum compared to the number that could fit in the Moontower in Iriaebor, or the great temples she'd heard about in Baldur's Gate and Waterdeep. Not that she'd seen them; while her parents went gallivanting off about the Realms, she'd been kept at home, under the watchful eyes of her parents' friends, where nothing ever happened...

She started as she realized that she'd let her thoughts drift, that Ruphos and Mole were already talking to other people, several of whom were looking at her curiously. She felt herself color as she stammered out an apology, and came forward. The others were a pair of young humans, a man and a woman a few years older than Ruphos, clad in similar robes.

Mole sidled over to her, and covertly jabbed her in the thigh with her elbow. "Ruphos was just telling Morgan and Illewyn about our little misadventure," she said. "Jenya, the acting High Priestess, isn't here right now, but she's..."

"Acting?" Zenna interrupted. "Was the former High Priest one of those abducted?"

She regretted her hasty words instantly, as the two young clerics looked at her intently, and even Ruphos looked a bit uncomfortable. Morgan, finally, whispered something to Ruphos, and the cleric nodded before turning back to her.

"Ah, in all the excitement, I'd forgotten... It's a rule in all places sacred to the Watcher—no one can enter the presence of the Vigilant One with a hat, mask, or cowl that conceals one's features. You'll have to take off your cowl."

Zenna felt her heart clench in her chest. She'd never been inside an actual temple of Helm, hadn't known about such a rule, but she'd feared something like this ever since Mole had suggested coming here. She looked down at her friend with an accusatory look, but the gnome only smiled.

"Go ahead, Zenna... it's all right."

The three clerics were all looking at her now. The older man, Morgan, had tucked his thumbs into his belt, to Zenna's eyes his hands threatening close to the iron mace that he wore dangling on his hip. Her mind was blank; she couldn't think of an excuse, a way to get out of doing what she'd dreaded since they'd first arrived in this place.

It would be all the same as before. Coming here had been a mistake.

She sighed and reached up, dropping back the cowl.

Chapter 6

The gathered priests drew in a collective breath of surprise as Zenna revealed her face, and the stubby horns that jutted from her temples that were instantly visible. Ruphos's eyes widened in astonishment, but Morgan's response was more dramatic.

"A fiend in the Sanctum!" he croaked, drawing back and clutching at his mace.

"Oh, do control yourself, Morgan," came a voice from the entry. All present turned toward the newcomer, a short, brown-eyed woman of perhaps thirty years. She was clad in a simple but functional clerical robe, and wore her long brown hair in an elaborate coif that fell down to her neck in a flowing cascade. She wore an expression that reflected impatience and brooked no challenge, and her frown was directed at the other clerics as much as the two strangers.

The woman strode with deliberation over to them, and rested her hands on her hips as she cast an evaluating gaze first upon Zenna, giving her horns the merest tilt of an eyebrow, then Mole, and finally Ruphos. Finally, she turned to Morgan, who was still clearly agitated, with his fingers white on the haft of his weapon. At least he hadn't lifted it from the hook on his belt.

"Have you forgotten, Brother Morgan, that the wards upon the Sanctum prevent any evil creature from entering its confines?" Zenna nodded to herself, remembering the tingle she'd felt on passing through the arch earlier. But the woman had already turned back to face Zenna, fixing her with an imposing stare for all that she had to look up to meet the eyes of the wizard.

"I apologize for the precipitous behavior of my priest. I am Jenya Urikas, acting High Priest of the Temple of Helm in Cauldron. I extend to you the hospitality of our church. I can see that you've come a great distance, and are clearly exhausted by your travels. Illewyn, take our guests to the rectory and see that they have food, drink, and the opportunity to wash off the dust of the road. Morgan, go to the festhall and get Malakar and Serrah; they were helping with the work on the Winter Fund and have likely forgotten the hour."

The two clerics nodded quickly. Under Jenya's expectant stare Morgan moved toward the door, looking back once with uncertainty—and finding Jenya still looking after him—before turning and heading out into the night.

"He's a good priest, but he takes the 'vigilance' part of our code a bit too close to heart," Jenya muttered, as the man left. Turning to Ruphos, she said, "I heard on the way over that there had been a bit of excitement. Come to my office, and tell me what happened. You ladies, please go with Illewyn; I'll come and meet with you again shortly."

With Mole and Zenna staring after her open-mouthed, Jenya took Ruphos decisively in hand and steered him toward the door in the rear wall of the nave. Belatedly, they realized that they hadn't even told the priestess their names. Illewyn noticed their reaction and smiled.

“Yes, she’s a force of nature,” the young cleric said. “But she’s had a lot to deal with since High Priest Delasharn departed.”

“Seems like there’s a lot going on here that we don’t know about,” Mole stated simply.

The cleric sighed. “These are difficult times in Cauldron. It was bad enough with the earlier disappearances, but now, with the children being taken... Jenya has publicly committed the Church to finding them, and bringing their abductors to justice, but thus far there’s been no information...”

“Children?” Zenna asked. “Children have been abducted? Ruphos mentioned some kidnappings, but he didn’t say...”

Illewyn nodded. “Come, we can talk about it more over a hot meal. Jenya can tell you more, later.”

* * * * *

A short while later, Mole and Zenna were together in a small, simple room with walls of undressed stone within the rectory. A curtain hanging in the doorway offered a modicum of privacy, and a pair of simple cots offered an opportunity for rest. Zenna was standing over a basin that sat on a table against the wall, the sleeves of her tunic rolled up as she washed her arms and neck with a towel already gray with the dirt she’d accumulated on the road. Mole was lying on one of the cots, although her eyes continued to roam the room, taking in every detail. She had her purse in her hand, and by the look on her face as she jangled it, she wasn’t pleased with what she heard.

“You left *all* my weapons? The least you could have done was recover my throwing knife! I had that specially made, you know! And that crossbow, that cost twenty crowns!”

“I didn’t exactly have time to look for your knife, and other things were on my mind at the moment,” Zenna said without turning. Bending low, she lifted two handfuls of water and splashed them into her face, letting herself enjoy the cool feeling of the water against her skin. “And you were heavy enough besides.” Memory stirred of that long hike, her friend dying in her arms, and she felt a cold shudder.

She straightened and felt a hand touch her arm. Looking down, she saw Mole there, an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. “I’m sorry... Thanks, it must have been... difficult.”

Zenna nodded, and smiled, taking the gnome’s hand in her own.

They looked up as the curtain parted, revealing Illewyn’s familiar face. “Jenya would like to see you, now.”

Chapter 7

The High Priest's office was as plain as most of the quarters in the temple complex, furnished in spartan fashion with a wide wooden desk, a few wall-mounted shelves, and several chairs. A bright open flame that burned brightly on the desk illuminated the room. Jenya was sitting at the desk as they entered, and Ruphos was there, standing at her shoulder with his hands clasped behind his back. Illewyn did not enter with them, instead departing back for the rectory after closing the door behind them. Jenya gestured for them to sit in the chairs that faced the desk.

"Ruphos has told me what happened," the cleric began. "It would seem that we owe you a debt of thanks, for scaring off his attackers."

"Do you have any idea of who it was who attacked him?" Zenna asked.

Jenya glanced up at Ruphos, and the two clerics exchanged a brief look. "Cauldron is normally a quiet city, but street crime is not unheard of."

"But this wasn't a run-of-the-mill mugging," Mole prodded.

"No. The way those thugs painted their faces... it is a symbol of a secret organization that calls itself 'The Last Laugh.'"

"A thieves' guild?" Mole asked. The cleric nodded.

"And you think they're the ones who are behind these abductions?" Zenna asked.

She and Mole had learned a bit more of what was going on in Cauldron from Illewyn, although the cleric knew little more than the vaguest outline of the facts. The disappearances of people had been going on for several months now, with both the Town Guard and the city's various churches utterly stymied in terms of tracking down whoever or whatever was behind them. But what had the town in an uproar was the recent—only a few nights' previous—abduction of four children from the city orphanage. The four had simply vanished from their rooms one night, without the faintest clue as to who had taken them or why.

"I... I just don't know," Jenya finally admitted. "The Last Laugh is certainly not an upright stalwart of Cauldron, but they've never done anything like this before. But tonight..." she glanced again up at Ruphos, who shifted slightly. "Ruphos had gone to the orphanage earlier, to offer consolation to the other children. Tell them what your attackers told you."

Ruphos looked a bit uncomfortable as their attention shifted to him, but he cleared his throat and said, "They jumped as I was walking home, and dragged me into the alley. At first I thought they were just thieves after my purse, but as they were beating me, one grabbed me and said, 'Stay away from the orphanage!'"

"Well, that seems like a pretty incriminating bit of evidence, I'd say," Mole said.

“We appreciate what you’ve done, offering us your hospitality, healing Mole,” Zenna said. “But why are you telling us all this? We’re just a pair of complete strangers who have only just arrived in town.”

Jenya didn’t respond immediately, only regarded them with an impenetrable gaze. Finally, she leaned forward across the desk, folding her hands before her. The desk was a bit too large for her, and she nearly had to stand to do so.

“I don’t know what brought you to Cauldron,” she began. “From what Ruphos told me, you had some trouble on the road, but overcame a difficult encounter. And you handled yourself well against those Last Laugh thugs. Clearly your skill in the arcane is significant.”

“My talents approximate those of a full apprentice,” Zenna said plainly and truthfully.

“Let me be completely frank with you. The Church has been placed in a very difficult position by these abductions. The people are scared, and they want answers. We’ve done what we can, used our resources to their fullest potential, worked with the other churches, and the guard... and yet those answers have not been forthcoming.”

“I still don’t see how this concerns us,” Zenna said, though in truth she was beginning to see where this was going.

“Whoever is behind this, they clearly know enough about the churches—ours and the others... the churches of Lathander and Tempus, while of divergent faiths, have been cooperating with us on this—to avoid detection. What we need is an outsider, someone who can poke around in the shadows, and hopefully uncover a clue that we’ve missed.”

Even though she’d suspected it was coming, Zenna was still surprised to hear the words. “So you want us to work for the church of Helm? And what’s more, to work for the most lawful and disciplined church in Faerûn as... I don’t know what word to use, ‘spies,’ ‘agents’?”

Jenya’s mouth tightened slightly as an expression of displeasure. “As I said, these are difficult times. And we’re willing to compensate you for your help, if you’re able to find out anything that can help us.”

Mole had perked up noticeably with the cleric’s last statement, but Zenna continued before her friend could chime in, her voice soft but earnest. “You have gotten a good look at me, I assume. Who is going to trust someone of my blood?”

Jenya did not back down. “I have no doubt that you’ve had a difficult time, and have learned to adjust for the reactions that you must constantly get. Cannot you see, that this experience makes you even more suited for such a task?”

Zenna blinked, and opened her mouth before she realized that she couldn’t think of a ready response. She felt Mole’s hand on her arm, and subsided. Her friend asked, “What other leads do you have?”

Jenya's gaze shifted to the gnome. "I... there is a clue, though I have not yet been able to make meaning of it." She glanced up at Ruphos yet again, just for a second, but in that glimpse it seemed as though the cleric's face had held a hint of—what?—embarrassment?

"The Church possesses a weapon of great power, the Star of Justice. This device is rightfully within the custodianship of the High Priest, but in his absence... Late last night, I called upon its power to cast a *divination*. As is the way with such magics, however, the information I received was cryptic."

Mole was sitting on the edge of her chair, clearly fascinated. Zenna, however, was feeling quite less sanguine. "What did the spell tell you?" the gnome asked.

"It was a riddle, of sorts," Jenya explained. She took on a focused expression, then recited,

*The locks are key to finding them.
Look beyond the curtain, below the cauldron
But beware the doors with teeth
Descend into the malachite hold
Where precious life is bought with gold
Half a dwarf binds them, but not for long*

"Ah, a riddle indeed," Mole said.

"What was the question that you posed, specifically, when you cast the spell?" Zenna asked.

Jenya blinked, surprised by the question. "As I recall, I asked, 'Where are the children who were abducted from the Lantern Street Orphanage?'"

"Below the cauldron... it could be that they're being held somewhere under the city," Mole suggested.

"I thought of that," Jenya said. "But the locks? The locks of the orphanage, perhaps?"

"I spoke to the headmistress of the orphanage today, when I visited," Ruphos said. "There wasn't any sign of forced entry."

"Perhaps an inside job, then," Mole suggested.

"A question that I hope you will be able to answer," Jenya broke in. "In any case, it cannot hurt to have another group of eyes and ears joining the search."

"We have not yet agreed to help," Zenna said.

"Say we did agree," Mole said. "What support could we expect from you guys?"

"The Church can provide healing, and other divine aid, but it would be best if you did not come here, at least not openly. It would defeat the whole purpose of having a group of

outside investigators if you were seen to be connected to us. You can work through Ruphos, who will be your contact, and will help with your investigation.”

Zenna raised an eyebrow, and glanced up at the priest, who fidgeted slightly under the scrutiny. “Him? Forgive me, but Ruphos doesn’t exactly seem like the ‘covert operative’ type, and as you said, people here would recognize him easily.”

“Perhaps not,” Jenya said. She reached into one of the drawers under her desk, and drew out a small cloth object. It was a hat, a simple and rather worn device of faded green fabric with a peaked front and a felt liner. She handed it to Ruphos, who shook it out and placed it onto his head.

As Zenna and Mole watched in fascination, Ruphos’s features began to twist and reform, shimmering slightly before settling into the appearance of a new man. He was now a good deal older, perhaps in his forties, with a thick beard and dark eyes that seemed almost black. The hat was now a wide-brimmed leather teamster’s cap.

“What about his clothes?” Mole asked.

“This particular *hat of disguise* only works with facial features, and of course its own appearance,” Jenya said. “But clothes can be changed. It doesn’t change the voice, either, but I suspect that few would associate Ruphos’s voice with his true identity, given a dramatic enough change in appearance.”

Mole nodded, considering. “I can see how that would be an advantage. Now, we were talking about gold...”

But Zenna had not taken her eyes from Ruphos. “We’ll help you find the children,” she interjected. “In exchange for the hat.”

Chapter 8

The Drunken Morkoth was one of the livelier taverns in the city of Cauldron. It played regular host to a diverse crowd of teamsters, caravan guards, merchants, adventurers, and a fair number of townfolk who found the barely-controlled chaos of the place a draw. On typical evenings, such as this one, a handful of hired musicians plied their instruments furiously on a compact stage crammed in against one wall, their music just one small part of the loud din of conversation, shouts, insults, and general clatter. The common room was sprawling, large enough so that someone standing on one end would have a tough time spotting a comrade on the far side through all of the smoke and movement. A long bar ran across half of the back wall, staffed by a small army of serving women, and the line of employees coming and going from the twin swinging doors to the kitchens was equally constant.

In one corner of the common room, Zenna and Mole were seated around a compact round table. The long shadows that came in through the windows high along the wall behind them said that it was sunset, the end of their first full day in Cauldron. Zenna, as always,

wore her cowl up despite the heat in the crowded room, but that didn't draw much notice here; she wasn't the only customer of the Morkoth who valued her privacy.

"You know, you're not a very good negotiator," Mole said, as she sipped from a mug of ale that looked huge in her diminutive hands.

"At least they agreed to pay for some new weapons," Zenna said, indicating with a lean of her head the neat pile of gear on the vacant chair beside them. The pile included a pair of light crossbows, a small leather pack fat with supplies and equipment, and two quivers stuffed with squat bolts. Mole had a new sword at her hip as well, a fine Tethyrian-forged blade.

"Yes, but we'll never know how much they were willing to pay, will we?"

Zenna leaned in over the table, so that her words would not carry. She needn't have bothered; the din within the common room was such that nobody could hear what anyone was saying more than a few feet away, unless they shouted. "You know how much that hat means to me, Mole."

The gnome sighed, but nodded. "Well, at least we have those healing potions Jenya gave us, in case we run into somebody *else* who wants to stick a sword into one of us."

Zenna leaned back, her own ale untouched. "What did you think about the orphanage? Or more specifically, the people at it?"

"The headmistress... Tashykk, wasn't it? She seemed suspicious, almost paranoid, but I suppose that's only to be expected, given what's happened. The rest of the staff, they seemed dedicated enough, genuinely concerned about their charges." Mole paused for a second, a thoughtful look on her face. "That half-orc, though... I think he was hiding something."

"The janitor? I thought he was a half-wit."

Mole shook her head. "I would think that you, of all people, would refrain from making judgments based on appearances."

"So do you think he's involved with what happened?"

"I don't know. Let's talk to Ruphos when he gets here, see what he thinks."

"Where is he, anyway? He was supposed to meet us here by sundown, and by the look of it, he'll be late again." The wizard's lips tightened in a gesture of disapproval. "Not that we wouldn't be better off conducting our investigation tonight without him; he's not very good at keeping a low profile."

"Don't underestimate him, Zenna. He's got good instincts, and can read people pretty well. Remember that he hasn't been out traveling the world like we have; he told me that he grew up in a village just a few days' travel from here, and has spent almost six years now here in Cauldron."

“Oh? I wasn’t aware that you’d had a chance to talk so much. I hope you haven’t told him—”

“Relax, I know when to be discreet. But you shouldn’t insist on keeping people at arm’s length all the time, either. Not everyone out there is a bad guy, you know.”

Zenna finally picked up her mug, taking a small sip. Softly, so that her whisper was muffled by the clay rim of the cup, she said, “No, only most of them.”

Mole had sharp ears, but her attention had been turned toward the center of the common room, where a disturbance was growing.

The ruckus was coming from two spacious circular tables separated by a small no-man’s-land that was currently occupied by members of two distinct and apparently hostile groups. The residents of the first table were apparently caravan guards or mercenaries by their clothes, while the other company had the hard, muscular look of laborers. Together the dozen or so men that comprised both parties shared a similar appearance: rough, dirty, and more than a little drunk. The initial confrontation had started with just one member from each table moving into the space between, but already, as words became shouts and pushes, more of their companions were rising from their tables to join what looked like a brewing confrontation.

The staff of the Morkoth was used to such things and was quick to respond, and already a half-dozen toughs—who looked much in common with the ruffians at the tables—were making their way through the crowd toward the disturbance, stout billets held tightly in their thick fists.

“It’s none of our business, Mole,” Zenna said. The gnome rolled her eyes, and quickly climbed atop the table, to get a better view. Many of the patrons apparently had a similar interest, based on the growing attention paid to the fracas, although a number took advantage of the delay to quickly move out of the radius of the contest.

The pushes grew more strenuous and it looked as though matters were about to explode when a sharp voice of command broke through the din.

“All right, that’s ENOUGH! You want to break some heads, go jump off the roof! Mayhap I’ll toss a few of you off myself, to show you how it’s done!”

Both groups drew back in surprise, as a short, stout figure—a dwarf—strode boldly into their midst.

Dwarves were not uncommon in the south, but this dwarf cut an unusual figure. His skin was a deep brown, the color of freshly-tilled soil, indicating that he was likely a gold dwarf of the Great Rift, who were far darker in coloration than their northern shield dwarf counterparts. He was clean-shaven, itself an uncommon feature for a dwarf, with shoulder-length hair that was as black as jet. He wore a suit of overlapping iron scales that covered his body like a second skin, and a pair of light hammers were tucked through his belt.

Across his chest he wore a plate medallion of polished silver a full foot across, bearing on its face an impressed icon of a hammer superimposed upon a great anvil.

For an instant, the dwarf's intrusion had united the two warring groups in hostility toward this newcomer. "This ain't none o' yer business, dwarf," one of the laborers growled, and several of the others echoed his sentiment.

The dwarf met the man's eyes with a stare as sharp as a dagger's edge. "It looks like we might have a volunteer," he said coldly.

But the delay had given the tavern's bouncers time to reach the site of the disturbance, and now they formed a ring around the erstwhile combatants, their clubs as ready as their fists. Grumbling, the two groups separated and returned to their tables, though not without more than a few dark glares that promised much that were shot at the other party, the dwarf, and the bouncers... with a few thrown out in the audience for good measure.

Abruptly, though—perhaps not willing to completely abandon the prospect of a good fight—one of the laborers spun and produced a short length of iron pipe from under his tunic, taking a swing at the back of the dwarf's head.

"Behind you!" Mole shouted in warning.

The dwarf turned quickly, and as the man's makeshift—but very heavy—club came down, he caught the man's fist in his own hand. The club's downward sweep was arrested as if it had struck a stone wall, and the man's face twisted in pain as the dwarf held his hand captive, and *squeezed*.

"Now, that wasn't a smart thing to do, my friend," he said, his voice as deep as the Great Rift itself. The others stood around him, watching, too surprised to react. The dwarf abruptly twisted his wrist, and with a loud *snap!* the pipe went flying. Freed from the dwarf's grip, the man collapsed to the ground, clutching at his hand.

"Me hand! You broke it! Aarrghh!"

"There was no call to do that, ser dwarf," one of the other laborers said. "Man needs his hands to work, to eat."

"If that club had hit, me thinks I'd be feelin' far worse," the dwarf countered, but he stepped forward, to stand over his would-be attacker. The laborer, for all his size and muscles, cringed as the dwarf loomed over him.

"Stay away from me!" he said.

"Ah, quit your bawling," the dwarf said. He reached down and grabbed the man's tunic, drawing him quickly up to his feet. No one interfered, the tavern quiet now as its patrons watched the unfolding drama.

The laborer tried to shield his hand, but the dwarf quickly uncovered it and lifted it for an examination. The man winced in pain, but knew better this time than to resist.

“It’s just a sprain,” the dwarf said. “Not that you deserve this, now, but your whining is starting to get on my nerves...”

He closed the man’s injured hand in both of his own. The laborer cried out and tried to draw back, but the dwarf held him firmly. Suddenly a white glow erupted from between his hands, lasting only an instant, and when it was done, the dwarf released his captive.

“Go, get out of here,” the dwarf said. “And watch who you take a swing at.”

The laborer looked at him with surprise, then quickly retreated, leaving the tavern without even looking back at his companions. As if his departure was a signal, the activity within the Morkoth began to return to normal, until the usual din had returned to its full force.

The dwarf, now apparently forgotten, turned to return to wherever it was that he had come from.

Mole, who had watched the entire scene with rapt interest, smoothly leapt down from the table to her chair, and then to the floor.

“Where are you going?” Zenna asked.

“I’m going to talk to him,” Mole said over her shoulder.

“Mole, no!” Zenna hissed, but it was too late; the gnome girl had already vanished into the crowd.

For a moment Zenna grappled with going after her, but she was decided a moment later when she saw Ruphos making his way through the crowd toward her table.

To her eyes, his identity was instantly obvious. It wasn’t that his disguise was poor; in fact, the power of the magical hat was without peer in terms of making a mundane disguise. After some discussion, they’d finally settled on a look that appeared competent but not especially threatening. His features were those of an older man, Ruphos’s age nearly twice over, with hair and beard starting to give over to gray. The hat was now a peaked forester’s cap that rode high upon his brow. The magic of the hat did not change the cleric’s body, though, so the “older man” still looked hale and fit, and Ruphos wore his chain shirt openly now, over a suit of plain but well-crafted woolens. His mace rode at his hip, within close reach.

Zenna frowned. No, the disguise was perfect, but Ruphos just wasn’t very good at playing any role other than the one of his own true identity. He walked like a young cleric, he moved his body like a young cleric, and when he spoke, he sounded like a young cleric (he’d tried to shift his voice to sound older, but that had been even worse). They’d agreed that she and Mole would do most of the talking, which was just as well, given that the priest’s points tended to be the opposite of what she or Mole would suggest in most situations.

“You’re late,” she told him, once he’d gotten close enough so that she didn’t have to raise her voice.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “There was an accident... a wagon broke loose of its team, and a young woman was injured, broke her arm.”

Zenna raised her eyebrows. “You didn’t...”

The cleric looked sheepish, but he matched her gaze without flinching. “I could not leave her lying there in the street, Zenna. It is my duty...”

“What about the children?” Her voice was growing louder, and a few people were glancing in their direction, so she grabbed him and half-pushed him into the chair Mole had vacated. “What about the missing children, you know, the one’s we’re looking for? If you’re going to go around casting spells and healing people, why even bother with a disguise?”

Ruphos’s expression darkened—for him, an unfamiliar turn. “Would you have had me leave her lying there?” he asked.

“You could have taken her to the temple, or any of the other churches in the city. You could have been subtle. You could have remembered what we are about here...”

The cleric lowered his eyes, but his hand had tightened into a fist. “Look. I didn’t ask for this task, but I will fulfill my mandate as best I can.” He lifted his head and met Zenna’s eyes squarely. “I want to find those children as much as you do, Zenna, and not for a reward.”

Zenna turned away—too quickly, indicating that the cleric’s words had stung. Ruphos looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. The silence between them stretched out for a long minute, broken finally when Mole returned to the table. The gold dwarf was behind her.

“Hey guys, this is Arun, Arun Goldenshield. He’s a paladin of Moradin, and he’s going to help us! Isn’t that great?”

Zenna opened her mouth to reply, but no words came.

Chapter 9

The next morning dawned cold and dreary in Cauldron, for the weather had turned with a sheet of ugly gray clouds sweeping down out of the mountains over the night.

The companions—now numbering four—walked along the innermost of Cauldron’s four avenues that formed wide circles around the inside of the caldera. Ash Street was fairly quiet, for it was the tenth day and many folks were taking advantage of that to stay in their beds and get a late start on their day.

Mole and Arun were walking side-by-side a short distance ahead of Zenna and Ruphos. The two taller folk were quiet, with a residue of tension from the night prior still hanging in

the air between them, but the gnome was keeping up a steady torrent of chatter, punctuated by occasional replies from the dwarf.

“I haven’t seen a *whole* lot of dwarves, I admit, but I have to say that I can’t remember seeing one clean shaven.”

The dwarf glanced down at her. He looked even more imposing this morning, for in addition to his suit of masterwork scale armor and the two light hammers tucked into his belt, he now bore a heavy steel shield and had a massive warhammer slung across his back.

“I shave my beard as a sign of my commitment to the Soul Forger,” Arun replied in his sonorous voice. “It is a warning common among my people, so that when the evil races of the Underdark see a beardless dwarf coming at them, they know that they face a warrior consecrated to the Anvil.”

“Well, you’re different,” Mole went on. “Most dwarves I’ve seen have quick tempers and foul mouths, and aren’t all that into bathing. And they like the drink, ooh yeah.”

Arun raised an eyebrow. “Well, they say most gnomes are nosy, annoying pranksters, who can’t keep their mouths shut or their eyes out of other people’s business. Perhaps both stereotypes are overly... limited.”

Mole looked up at him suspiciously, weighing the amount of insult inherent in the dwarf’s comment. Arun only looked straight ahead, not betraying any clues in his expression. Finally, Mole laughed, and then the dwarf did smile.

“In any case, I would suggest that your cross-section of dwarvenkind was a limited one. Perhaps someday you should visit a dwarven hold, and see our people as they live among their own kind, in their homes with families and friends close at hand.”

“Yeah, I’d like that,” Mole said.

Behind the pair, Zenna and Ruphos walked in silence. Finally, though the cleric turned to her. “Look, I’m sorry about last night,” he said quietly. When Zenna didn’t reply, he added, “This isn’t easy for me... I’m not very good at this business of sneaking around and asking questions. I don’t know why Jenya picked me for this. Or for that matter, why she chose you.”

“Oh? And why is that?” Zenna asked softly.

“Um... oh, it’s not because... I mean... Look, I’m not like Morgan.”

“I see,” Zenna said.

Ruphos looked at her, but the tiefling woman did not turn her head, her face masked within the shelter of her cowl. The cleric opened his mouth to say something else, but was interrupted as Mole and Arun halted up ahead.

“Hey, this looks like the place,” Mole said.

Ghelve’s Locks was a compact, two-story shop that fronted onto Ash Street, flanked by other buildings of indeterminate purpose. Its identity was proclaimed by a large sign bearing the image of, naturally, a large clasp lock and a ring of keys.

They had decided last night to come here as the next step in their investigation. It was only natural, given that Jenya’s divination had specifically mentioned locks, and the gnome Keygan Ghelve was responsible for most of the locks in the city. Ruphos didn’t know much more about him than his name, but a few queries by Mole had revealed that the gnome was skilled at his trade, rather introspective, and a magic-user to boot.

“What if the shop’s closed?” Zenna asked. “It’s tenth day, and pretty early.”

“He’s a gnome,” Mole said. “It’ll be open.”

As if to confirm her words, the door to the shop opened, and someone stepped into the street. The individual was a lean, furtive-looking man with hints of elvish ancestry in his features, clad in plain brown woolens and a coat of cured leather that just about rose to the level of being armor. He started slightly in surprise at the four of them gathered in the street before the shop, then quickly turned and headed down Ash Avenue in the opposite direction.

“Well, let’s hope that Mr. Ghelve is not so jumpy,” Mole said, heading for the door.

A small bell attached to the jam tinkled faintly as they entered, announcing their presence. The front room of the shop was compact but cozy, with a fire burning in the hearth along the left wall, flanked by a pair of plushly padded armchairs. On the mantle above the hearth was arrayed a collection of the accoutrements of a tobacco addict, including a tinderbox, a clear vase of leaves, and a small collection of pipes in a wooden rack. To the right a long mahogany counter ran along the wall, with a curtained exit behind it.

Almost before the little bell had stopped its tinkling, the shopkeeper burst through the curtain into the front room. He was an odd character, a gnome of middle years, his facial features jutting prominently from his face. Perhaps most startling was the fact that he walked on stilts—actual wooden stilts!—that put him on eye level with Zenna and Ruphos. His features were a bit ragged, with dark circles under his eyes, but he composed himself quickly and addressed them in a slightly squeaky voice.

“Yes, what is it? How can I help you, what do you want?”

Mole stepped forward and hopped up onto the counter with a single sprightly burst. They’d agreed earlier that she would be their spokesperson, both for her easy manner and her racial connection to the locksmith. Ruphos walked over toward the chairs, pretending to examine the shop, while Arun just stood there, a dark look crossing his features as he started looking around, sniffing the air as if he’d suddenly caught a whiff of a foul odor.

“Well!” Mole said, with a disarming smile, giving the locksmith a good up-and-down look before settling her eyes on his. “We’re interested in locks, silly! Why else would we be here?”

The gnome harrumphed, but as they started talking it was clear that the girl’s manner was catching hold. The locksmith shot a few suspicious glances at her companions—his eyes lingering on Zenna in her cowl for a few heartbeats, and widening fractionally as they settled on Arun, but soon the two gnomes were animatedly discussing some of the intricacies of the craft.

Zenna let out a sigh—most of Mole’s knowledge of locks came from more dubious sources than honest crafting—but let her friend do her thing while she walked over to where Ruphos had paused in front of the fireplace. The cleric was staring into the hearth, and the flames that danced merrily within.

“Are you all right?” Zenna whispered, as she came up to him.

Ruphos turned to answer, but his eyes suddenly widened as he caught sight of the room behind her. Zenna turned to see Arun suddenly lunge forward, reaching around the edge of the counter toward the gnome. Ghelve squawked in surprise and tried to dodge back out of the way, but as he leaned back on one leg the stilt on the other jutted out to where the dwarf could get a firm grasp on it. Arun heaved and the gnome went flying, flailing in an unwieldy arc over the dwarf. For a moment Ghelve was heading for a face-first collision with the hard wooden floor, then Arun’s thick hand snapped out and caught a fistful of his coat from behind, drawing him up just an inch or two from impact.

For a moment the dwarf’s companions just stood there, shocked. Ruphos was the first to start forward, outrage written clear on his face, but Zenna stepped smoothly in front of him, grasping his arm to arrest his progress. The cleric turned on her, but she hissed, “Wait a moment!” She only hoped that the cleric would trust her, as she was trusting the dwarf.

Arun lifted Ghelve until the gnome was hovering just a few inches from the dwarf’s beardless face. The locksmith, as surprised as the companions by the sudden developments, and finding himself in very close proximity to an apparently mad dwarf, trembled as he tried to stammer out something comprehensible.

“What... what...” he managed.

“Don’t play the innocent with me!” the dwarf roared, spraying spittle over the gnome’s face. “I kin sense the taint hanging over this place like a shroud! There’s evil here, gnome, and yer’d better be quick about revealin’ it, or I start bashin’!” To emphasize his point, he lifted one of his light hammers up between them, spinning its fat iron head.

The companions stood there, watching, the room silent save for the labored breathing of the captive locksmith. Mole had stood instantly atop the counter as soon as Arun had moved, and now she walked down to its end, twirling a dagger between her fingers.

“I’d tell him what he wants,” she said. “He really does love the bashin’ part.”

Ghelve's eyes were as wide as saucers as he looked first at Mole, then back to the dwarf. "I... I..."

Ruphos, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly agitated. Mole, seeing this, caught Zenna's attention and inclined her head toward the curtain to the back room. The wizard nodded, all but dragging the reluctant cleric back in that direction. Ghelve reacted notably to their movement, his face betraying a sudden worry beyond even the panic induced by Arun's attack. Both Mole and the dwarf saw it, and Arun shook the gnome, drawing his attention back to him.

"Well? Don't be lying to me, I can tell if yer be lyin' to me..."

The back room was slightly larger than the front area of the shop, and was apparently a storage area. A large bay window to the right was set out as a display of the locksmith's wares to passersby on the street outside, and a compact staircase in the rear of the room led up to a balcony that overlooked the room and obviously offered access to the second story of the shop. Three considerable oak chests were arranged in the center of the floor, and a few tables were pushed up against the far wall, underneath a portrait of a silver-haired gnome.

As soon as they were through the curtain, Ruphos spun on Zenna. "What is this? I didn't agree to assaulting citizens!" At least he had the foresight to keep his voice low, but Zenna, knowing first-hand how sensitive gnomish ears were, drove him further back into the room anyway.

"He's a paladin!" she hissed. "They have the ability to detect evil, or don't you know that? Trust his instincts."

"Trust? *We just* met him." He gestured toward the curtain, but his eyes never wavered from Zenna when he said it. He looked indecisive, and said, "This is crazy."

So intent were they on each other, neither had a chance of seeing the shadow that detached itself from the wall along the balcony above, and leaned forward over the railing, looking down at them...

Chapter 10

Zenna cried out in surprise as a dark form hurtled down from above. Ruphos didn't even sense it before it slammed hard into him, knocking him sprawling roughly to the floor. The attacker sprang quickly to its feet before Zenna, who drew back in astonishment.

The light that filtered into the room through the narrow windows wasn't sufficient to clearly distinguish the newcomer. It was a man-sized humanoid figure, apparently naked save for a web-belt that supported a light crossbow and a scabbard for the rapier that it carried at the ready. It was strange enough that it appeared to lack gender, without any obvious sex organs. But its flesh—its body was a mottled, gray color that seemed to ripple with dark striations *within* the skin, causing it to blend unnaturally with its surroundings. Its face was

a stunted, ugly caricature of a human's, his eyes a stark blue and without pupils, its mouth twisted with a snarl as it lunged at Zenna.

The startled wizard tried to call upon the words of a spell, but she managed only a single syllable before the creature lashed out with its rapier, smashing the hilt across her face. Blood exploded from her shattered nose and she crumpled, unconscious.

"Zenna!" Ruphos cried, clutching at his the mace at his belt as he tried to get up from where he had fallen. His cloak caught on one of the nearby chests, however, and he stumbled, landing awkwardly on his hip.

The skulk looked at him with an expression that could only be described as unmitigated hatred, and hefted its rapier as it stepped toward him. It turned, though, as the curtain flew open, revealing two hundred pounds of dwarven fury hurtling at full speed toward it.

The skulk tried to dodge out of the way of the charging dwarf. It moved swiftly and nimbly, but not nimbly enough as Arun swept his warhammer around in a wide arc that landed solidly in the center of the creature's chest. The skulk went flying roughly to the side, impacting the wall beneath the staircase with enough force to crack a few of the boards. The creature hung there, for a second, those uncanny blue eyes staring at them, then it sunk inevitably to the cold floor, not to arise again.

Ruphos, however, wasn't watching the skulk as it died. He half-crawled over to where Zenna had fallen, half-frantic as he called upon the power of his patron god. The blue healing light of Helm's grace poured from his hands into Zenna's shattered face, and she started, her eyes popping open in sudden surprise.

"What...?" she asked, as he eyes gained focus. "Help me up," she commanded, grabbing onto Ruphos's shoulder.

Arun was looking around for other foes, scanning the balcony above, but apparently the skulk had been alone—or its companions had elected to flee rather than fight. But before the three could discuss what had happened, a nimbus of flaring colors appeared around the borders of the curtain leading to the front of the shop, and a soft thump followed from that direction.

"Mole!" Zenna cried, pulling free from Ruphos's grasp and darting in that direction. The cleric and dwarf were right behind her.

As they passed through the curtain, they could see the gnome locksmith, standing behind Mole's limp body, holding the unconscious girl up against him as a shield with one arm. His free hand was holding Mole's dagger against her throat, though they could see the weapon trembling in his hand.

"Don't come any closer!" Ghelve cried. "I don't want to hurt her, but I will if you come any closer!"

Chapter 11

The three companions, Ruphos, Zenna, and Arun, faced off against a gnomish locksmith who was clearly involved in some quite shady dealings. At the moment, he was holding a knife to the throat of their friend, who had been knocked unconscious through some unknown magic.

“Drop your weapons!” the gnome commanded. “And keep your distance!”

Arun dropped his heavy warhammer, which landed on the stone floor with a solid thunk. But he only used that as an opportunity to draw out one of the lighter hammers from his belt, and he hefted it easily in his hand, a missile ready to be hurled in an instant.

“You harm her, you will face the justice of the Soul Forger,” he said, his voice flat with deadly earnest.

Zenna’s mind whirled, as she tried to come up with something that could ease this situation, and save her best friend in the world... her only friend. But it was Ruphos who stepped forward, who tore the magical hat from his head to reveal his true features.

“Keygan! I’m Ruphos Laro, of the church of Helm! Keygan, don’t do this!”

“Ruphos?” the gnome said. His entire body was trembling, now, but he did not release his grip on the dagger, nor did its edge dip from Mole’s throat.

“Keygan, you’re a respected member of this community? What are you doing? Whatever trouble you’re involved in, we can help you!”

The gnome shook his head. “Look, just go, get out of here. I’ll let her go if you leave, and don’t come back!”

“We can’t do that, Keygan,” Ruphos said. “Keygan, they took children. From the orphanage, four innocents.”

The gnome let out a sob, and staggered. “I’m... I’m so sorry,” he said, heaving the dagger away from him and releasing Mole. Zenna was there in an instant to catch her friend, while Arun kept the gnome under close scrutiny, his hammer still noticeably handy in his fist. But all fight had gone out of Keygan Ghelve, and he sagged to the floor, a broken man.

Mole was stirring, and she seemed all right, just stunned. Zenna helped her up, and the four of them faced the gnome, who seemed to shrink under their scrutiny.

“You’d better start from the beginning,” Arun intoned.

* * * * *

The gnome’s tale answered some questions, but left others tantalizingly unanswered.

Deep within the volcano, far under the city of Cauldron, lay various networks of tunnels and caverns. Many of these were natural, formed by ancient volcanic action while the volcano was still active, while others had been expanded and altered by residents who came after. One such group was the gnomes of Jzadirune.

Jzadirune had been a thriving underground community of gnomes who had prospered in the early days of Cauldron. Created by practitioners of the arcane mysteries, it had become known for a time for its magical creations, including rings and other miscellaneous items of great power. But Keygan told them that about three generations ago, the community had experienced a very sudden and dramatic decline. The gnome's information was vague on the details, but apparently a sickness of magical origin had emerged within the community, claiming many of its members. The survivors had gathered their possessions and left Jzadirune behind for some distant and unremembered destination.

By now most Cauldronites had forgotten that the gnome city had even existed, but the Ghelve family had maintained one link to this history. Under his shop lay a hidden staircase, the sole remaining access from the surface to the gnomish enclave. Keygan had all but forgotten about it—he certainly wasn't going to go exploring there—when one day some months ago, his life had changed.

They came through the secret door in the middle of the night, catching him by surprise, subduing him before he could defend himself. To compel his obedience, they'd taken captive his closest friend and companion, his rat familiar. Through the bond that existed between wizard and familiar, he could sense Starbrow's distress, alone and hungry in a dark place somewhere below.

Ghelve told them everything; there was no reason for him to hold back, now. The creatures came in two varieties; "tall ones"—skulks, like the one they'd killed, and "short ones." The latter Ghelve described as sinister gnome-like beings, except with pale, sickly flesh, bulbous noses, and cloven hooves for feet. There had been no leader that Ghelve had seen, indicating that whoever was coordinating these attacks might possibly have remained below the city, in the abandoned gnome enclave, or perhaps deeper. Ghelve acknowledged that he really didn't know what else lay below the city, but it was possible that other occupied caverns lay deeper, or perhaps even an access to that deepest of caves, the Underdark.

The gnome was able to give them one final guide: an ancient parchment that contained a finely traced map of the gnome enclave. This useful document Mole took into custody, examining it for several minutes before rolling it carefully and tucking it into her belt pouch.

An hour after they had entered the shop, the four companions gathered at the base of the stair, near the secret door. The boards were cracked where the skulk had slammed into them, making the edges of the hidden portal more obvious. The dead creature had been pushed into a corner, his corpse just a lump under the cover of a carpet. Ghelve, still under the watchful eyes of the dwarf paladin, fidgeted, his hands and feet bound securely by a length of rope that Mole had found in one of the rooms upstairs. The room was dim, as they'd closed the drapes in the display window. Ghelve's Locks was, for the moment, closed for business.

“Better gag him, too,” Mole suggested, putting her own suggestion into effect by stuffing a kerchief into his mouth even as the locksmith opened it to protest. Working quickly, she wrapped a length of cord around his head, securing the makeshift gag.

“You seem to be enjoying that,” Zenna said.

Mole shrugged. “It’s my own fault, I let him catch me off guard.” But she did seem a bit eager as she tested the gnome’s bonds, giving each a good yank and ignoring Ghelve’s grimace each time.

“I still say this is foolish,” Ruphos said. “We should contact the proper authorities... at least let me go and notify Jenya of what we found!”

“The messenger we sent will give her enough information to find her way here,” Mole said, as she stood. “But we cannot afford to delay. Remember the last line in Jenya’s divination: *Half a dwarf binds them, but not for long.* We have to act quickly, especially if that skulk was able to send a warning to his friends below.”

Ruphos persisted, saying, “But... we don’t know how many there are, there’s just the four of us!”

Arun sent him a cold look. “Go then, priest, if you think it best. I fear not the dark places under the earth, and certainly not those scum,” he added, indicating the lump that was the dead skulk.

“I’m not afraid,” he said defiantly, but then he shook his head. “All right, so I *am* afraid, but it’s also common sense! What happens if that man you hired decides not to deliver the message to Jenya, or gets run over by a wagon in the street? At least let’s rouse the Guard!”

Zenna came up behind Ruphos and touched him on the shoulder. “We’re all afraid, Ruphos; this is deadly serious stuff, not something we’re doing on a lark. But we have to assume that whoever is holding the children is going to be aware that this part of his operation has been discovered, if he hasn’t already. If we wait, or head down there with a large armed force, we may lose our chance to find them.”

Arun, who’d unlimbered his heavy shield and warhammer, looking fierce indeed in his scaled armor and helm, snorted. “Enough talking, let’s do this thing. Go with your warning, priest. Tell your friends they can follow the bodies of the evildoers we’ll leave in our wake.”

Ruphos looked at Zenna, who nodded. But the cleric swallowed and said, “All right, let’s get going then.”

Mole and Zenna exchanged a look, then moved into position behind the dwarf. Ruphos fell in behind them, hefting his mace.

Arun tucked his hammer into the crook of his shield arm, and with a mighty wrench pulled open the damaged secret door, revealing a black space beyond that waited expectantly for them.

Chapter 12

Jzadirune.

Once a lively place, even buried deep within the earth under Cauldron's slumbering volcano, filled with the sounds of its gnomish residents' labors and their sport.

That was before the Vanishing came.

The product of a botched magical experiment, it crept upon the gnomes of Jzadirune like an assassin come in the night. Before they could even diagnose what went wrong, a goodly percentage of the enclave's residents had contracted the plague, and begun the inexorable fading that would eventually lead their complete disappearance, leaving not even a drop of blood to mark that they had ever been at all.

Now Jzadirune was silent, abandoned by those who had built it... but no longer uninhabited...

Arun led the way down the stairs, negotiating the steps with ease despite his armored bulk. As a dwarf, he had no difficulty seeing in the dark, but while Zenna shared the gift of darkvision as a product of her mixed heritage, both Mole and Ruphos required light. The cleric, bringing up the rear, bore a lamp taken from Ghelve's shop, its flickering flame casting a tenuous glow that cast long shadows ahead of his companions as they negotiated the stairs that seemed to twist ever deeper into the earth.

But finally the stairs came to an end, depositing them in a square chamber of worked stone perhaps forty feet on a side. A corridor exited the chamber on the far wall opposite where they entered, and to their left stood two unusual doors, round wooden portals set into thick thresholds of dressed stone. One of the doors was partly open, rolled aside enough so that they could see that the outer edge of the portal resembled the notched teeth of a gear. Light shone from that opening, a golden shaft that spilled out in a long angle across the room's floor.

"Do you hear that?" Mole asked, as they came to a halt.

As the echoes of the sound of their footsteps and the clatter of their gear faded, they all *could* hear it, a sound of whispers, rustling leaves, and faint laughter that bordered just on the edges of their perception. The noises were merry, quite a contrast to the dark and heavy atmosphere that the abandoned hold seemed to hold for the four adventurers. The sounds persisted, not acknowledging the presence of intruders here.

"A persistent illusion, perhaps," Zenna suggested.

"What are those?" Ruphos asked, holding his lamp aloft to get a better look at the walls. The light glinted off of metal objects that hung from the walls at regular intervals around the perimeter of the room.

“Masks,” Mole said, walking nearer the walls, scanning the room around her as she walked, her crossbow loaded and ready in her hands. “Made of copper, it looks like... hmm, I wonder how much they’re worth?”

“Careful, Mole,” Zenna said. “Something’s not right here, I can feel it.”

“Ah, you worry too much,” the gnome said. But she kept her distance close to the others.

Arun was more direct, walking straight to the partially opened door. It appeared that the round doors were designed to roll into an open space within the jam, to the side. A heavy piece of stone had been wedged into the door’s gears, holding it open. As they all gathered around the dwarf, they could see that there was writing on the door, a single rune etched in bold lines into the reinforced wooden beams of the portal.

“It’s a gnomish letter ‘A’,” Mole told them. “There’s a ‘Z’ on that other door,” she said, indicating the adjacent doorway that was fully closed.

“Decent work,” the dwarf noted, peering into the lit space beyond the door. A non-descript chamber lay beyond; the light originated from a shining object in the center of the floor. A few squat objects that were probably chests were scattered haphazardly along the walls of the room. The door wasn’t very large, and the stone held it only half-open, but the dwarf slung his shield on its long strap across his back, and cautiously grasped the door.

“Maybe I should go first, check it out,” Mole suggested helpfully.

“Patience is a virtue of the long-lived,” Arun said, as he gave the door an exploratory heave. The door rolled easily enough within its mechanism, and Mole reached in to relocate the stone to hold it more fully open. The dwarf nodded to her, and reaching for his shield, stepped forward into the room beyond the door.

And cried out in surprise as two dark forms lunged out from the shadows flanking the portal, and thrust at him with slender blades.

Chapter 13

“Blast you blasted sneaks!” the dwarf cried out, as the pair of enemies flanking him stabbed at him. The dwarf, caught off guard, was fortunate in that the first thrust glanced off of the layered scales of armor that covered his torso. Even as he turned in that direction, though, the second attacker slipped its rapier into a gap in the armor under his arm, penetrating the thick leather there and driving several inches of the slender steel into the dwarf’s side. Arun grunted and jerked back, and his foe’s blade came away with its tip sheathed in bright red.

The ambushers—revealed as skulks, as the bright golden glow of the light on the floor shimmered on their color-shifting skin—did not stay to follow up on their assault. Even as Arun abandoned his effort to unlimber his shield and hefted his warhammer with both hands, the two skulks darted away, each toward one of two round tunnels that apparently had been bored through the walls of the room. The creatures were fast, certainly moreso

than the armored dwarf, and they had nearly reached the two exits by the time Arun had readied his weapon.

Mole, however, was quicker to respond, and she leaned around the dwarf enough to get a clear bead on one of the creatures. Her crossbow snapped, and the skulk staggered as her bolt caught it high in the back of one shoulder. It recovered and would have likely escaped a moment later, but Arun tossed his heavy hammer to the floor, and with a single smooth motion drew and hurled one of the light hammers from his belt. The second missile caught the creature solidly in the base of its skull as it crouched to dart into the tunnel, and it crumpled in a heap in the rubble-strewn opening. The second creature had already vanished through the second tunnel.

Mole quickly reloaded her crossbow, and moved into the room, looking for signs of any more of the creatures. Arun recovered his warhammer and readjusted his shield, while behind them Zenna and Ruphos came warily into the room.

Mole took a look at the fallen skulk, confirming that it was dead, and scanning the tunnel to make sure no other danger lurked from that direction. The two tunnels were rough-hewn and compact, each a little less than five feet in diameter. Arun crossed to the center of the room, and the source of the light—a sunrod, its golden head shining with brilliant light.

Zenna came up behind the dwarf. “You’re hurt,” she said, noting the streak of blood where the skulk had scored with his rapier. “Ruphos...” The cleric was already coming over, but Arun forestalled him with a raised hand.

“Save your healing,” the dwarf rumbled. “I’m fine.”

“Ah, just like a man,” Mole said, joining them. “Pretend it doesn’t hurt, and maybe it will go away. Look, we need you to be at one hundred percent... the next skulks might not decide to run away so quickly.”

“You remind me of my brother’s wife,” the dwarf returned. “There was no peace for any man when that woman was about!” But he did not protest as Ruphos came over and took a look at the injury, and called upon the healing power of Helm to aid him.

“One got away,” Mole said, indicating the tunnel in the wall to the side. “Might be back with friends.”

“Should we retreat?” Ruphos asked, but by the look on his face, he knew the answer even before Arun turned on him.

“Retreat? After a little tussle like that? Wasn’t even a proper battle!”

“Which way, then?” Mole said, returning to the passage where the dead skulk lay. She was the only one of them short enough to move freely within the tunnel without bending over, and leaned inside, wrinkling her nose as she glanced down at the dead skulk.

“Careful, Mole,” Zenna warned. “There may be others in ambush, waiting for us.”

“Oh, I’m sure there are,” the gnome said distractedly. She’d taken Ghelve’s map from her pouch, and held it up to catch the light from the sunrod on the floor. “These tunnels aren’t on the map,” she reported. “This one forks after a ways, and I can see another light from somewhere ahead.”

“Let us go this way,” Arun said. “I do not think that we will catch that one that fled before he warns his comrades, but we may yet catch some in this direction unawares.”

“Okay,” Mole said, but even as she started down the narrow tunnel, Arun forestalled her.

“Let me take the lead,” he said.

The gnome frowned. “I can handle myself, and I’m a lot quieter than you are in all that metal.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Arun said. “But I have extensive experience in underground areas and tunnels like this one, and we’ll be traveling close together, and with our own light, so whoever’s down there will detect us coming anyway.”

“He’s got a point,” Zenna said.

“Let’s just get going,” Ruphos said, eyeing the other tunnel where the second skulk had escaped.

Wary of another ambush, the companions pressed on, stepping over one slain foe and creeping into the confines of the rough tunnel.

The tunnel was just under five feet in diameter, forcing even the squat—but wide—Arun to scrunch himself a bit to avoid scraping his shield or armored elbow against the uneven walls. The corridor appeared to have been rough-hewn from the solid stone of the volcano, although the dwarf remarked that the work was unusual, and that he couldn’t quite identify the method used for the excavation. With that mystery added to the total tally presented by Jzadirune, the companions pressed on.

After just a short distance the tunnel branched to the left and right. To the right the tunnel split again after about ten feet, with a side passage jutting left. The light that Mole had seen seemed to come from that direction, so Arun led them that way, with the others close behind. The dwarf held his heavy hammer at the ready, with Mole and Zenna with their crossbows loaded and ready to shoot, while Ruphos brought up the rear nervously with his mace held tightly in one hand, the lamp in the other. Every few steps the cleric shot a wary glance backward, peering into the dark length of the tunnel for any signs of pursuit. As the tallest member of the company, he had the most difficulty in the confines of the tunnel, bending low and frequently scraping his head on the rugged ceiling.

“And she complains about *me* making noise,” the dwarf grumbled to himself as they reached the second fork and headed toward the light.

After the turning the tunnel continued for only another ten feet or so before it emerged into a copious, vaulted chamber. The light came from a series of flickering globes that hung in

the air, floating idly back and forth. The place was the largest open space they'd yet encountered in the complex, easily a hundred feet in length from where they stood to the far wall, where a fountain of sorts could be seen. Twin rows of pillars stretched down the length of the chamber, flanking a central isle a good twenty feet across. Several more mundane passages than the tunnel by which they'd arrived were visible along the side walls, and a few of the round rune-doors were visible in their familiar stone lintels.

The companions left the confines of the tunnel and cautiously moved forward into the room. Clearly this had been a gathering place of sorts, and the gnomes had put a great deal of effort into improvements. Faded murals covered the walls, and the thick pillars had been carved into the forms of gnomes standing upon the shoulders of their comrades, all the way to the ceiling high above.

"Lots of shadows," Mole commented. "Lots of places to hide." The others nodded, recognizing what the gnome had; while the magical dancing flames provided enough light to illuminate the entire chamber, their flickers and movements made that illumination very conducive to the sneaking of the treacherous skulks.

"By the fountain," Arun said, gesturing with his hammer. They could see that to one side of the fountain, at the far end of the chamber, several piles of loose rubble were scattered near another tunnel entrance. The four adventurers started in that direction.

As they passed one of the glowing globes, Mole reached up and touched it, smiling as her hand passed through the flickering light.

"Careful, Mole!" Zenna hissed in warning.

"Oh, it's just another illusion," Mole said. "It's not like I haven't seen this sort of thing, you know."

Zenna turned, frowning. She knew, and it was yet another reminder of the life she'd chosen to leave behind.

They were nearing the center of the room, having passed by several of the side corridors that exited the hall, when suddenly Mole stiffened.

"What is it?" Zenna whispered.

"I thought I heard something," she replied, scanning the darkness.

"I didn't hear anything," Ruphos murmured. But they all heard the next sound, a few moments later, the familiar twang of crossbows being fired.

Chapter 14

The first bolt glanced off of Arun's shield, skittering off one of the pillars with a noisy clatter. A heartbeat later, a second sliced out of the shadows in the direction of the fountain, clipping Mole on the side of the neck as it shot past. Had the unseen crossbowman's aim

been a few inches to the left, the gnome would have been in serious trouble, but as it was the bolt merely grazed her.

Arun's reaction was quick and decisive. Rumbling some dwarven warcry, the paladin of Moradin hurled himself forward into a full-out charge toward the fountain and the source of the missiles. Mole hefted her crossbow and took careful aim, firing into the shadow where the bolt that had come at her had originated. Her return shot vanished into the shadows, although it was uncertain at first if she'd hit anything.

"Come on," she urged the others, drawing her shortsword and rushing after Arun.

Zenna took a step after her, but hesitated. Ruphos had taken up his holy symbol, holding it in one fist while clutching the lamp and mace awkwardly together in the other. His expression had shifted to that vacant look that it took on when he was communing with his patron, a look that Zenna understood, even though the source of her power was the Weave, rather than the might of some god. His lips moved, although Zenna could not make out the words that issued from his lips.

Whatever spell he cast, it only took a few seconds, and she could not immediately determine the result. She did, however, see the crossbow bolt than sank with a meaty thunk into the back of his thigh. Ruphos staggered forward with the impact, barely keeping his feet as he clutched at the protruding bolt. The lamp, however, fell from his grasp, smashing onto the floor with a crash that was immediately followed by a blaze of burning oil that spread outward into a fiery puddle on the stone floor of the chamber.

Zenna's eyes widened in horror and she scanned the end of the chamber and the tunnel from which they'd come, and where the bolt had to have originated. She could see nothing but shadows, though, continuing to shift as the magical globes of light twisted and danced.

The cleric also turned, limping heavily as he drew back from the spreading pool of flaming oil. He looked confused, and wasn't able to react in time to avoid a second bolt that streaked from the shadows to catch him hard high in the chest. His armor absorbed some of the impact, but the bolt still sank several inches into his shoulder, and he cried out as he fell to one knee, blood fanning out across his tabard from the wound. He wavered there, only barely remaining upright, a stricken look on his face.

Zenna was already moving, rushing to Ruphos's side. Although she could still not see their attackers, she knew that the skulks would reload quickly enough. She grabbed the cleric roughly by the shoulder, and felt something tear inside her as Ruphos screamed again in pain as she pulled at him.

"We've got to get to cover!" she yelled back, all but dragging him to his feet. The two of them lurched over to the shelter of one of the nearby pillars. Ruphos sagged to the ground against the base of the pillar as she released him, his face pale and his breathing labored. She was dimly aware of the noises of battle on the far side of the room, where Mole and Arun had engaged the original group of ambushers. Her attention, however, was fixed on those behind, and on the wounded man clinging precariously to consciousness at her feet. As if to confirm the threat, a bolt suddenly glanced off of the pillar less than a foot from her face, ricocheting wildly off into the shadows. Suddenly she caught sight of movement, and

the gleam of metal glinting in the flame of the *dancing lights*. A rapier, a first appearing disembodied like the magical glows, until her eyes adjusted and she could make out the color-shifting form of the skulk holding the weapon. A moment later she spotted a second, even as it lowered its empty crossbow and drew its own rapier.

Apparently they'd seen her as well, as they charged straight for the pillar that sheltered her and Ruphos, separating to come at them from both sides at once.

Zenna ducked back behind the pillar, her heart pounding in her chest, knowing that they would be on her in a few seconds. She glanced down and saw the Ruphos had lost consciousness, a bright red stain continuing to spread across his jerkin from the wound in his shoulder.

Steeling herself, she took a deep breath, and started walking backwards.

She was about six feet away from the pillar when the skulks appeared, one from around each side of the granite shaft. At this range, she could see them clearly, even though the shifting light and continuously changing color of their skin combined to make it difficult. They glanced down at the fallen cleric, clearly no longer a threat, and then at her. She continued to retreat, moving at a deliberate pace, even though her instincts told her to run.

The skulks exchanged a glance and came for her, warily but with their intent clear.

She'd readied the spell, and the words came pouring from her lips, her hands weaving a pattern that echoed the complex matrix of the Weave that powered magic in the Realms. The skulks realized what she was doing and rushed at her, but before they could draw close enough to strike her *color spray* engulfed them. The blaze of light lasted only a heartbeat, but when the afterimage had faded, both skulks were lying on the ground, unconscious.

As Zenna reached for her dagger, she felt a surge of memory of another encounter on the road to Cauldron, a memory accompanied by a surge of revulsion. But there was no way around it; the spell only incapacitated a foe for a few seconds, and she had no illusions about what these skulks would do to her and her friends if they got a second chance.

A short time later she was crouching beside Ruphos. His breathing had grown weaker, but at least he still lived to draw breath. Gently she took his head and drew it back until his mouth opened, and then she upended the vial given to her by Jenya into the dying cleric.

There wasn't much liquid in the vial, not enough to choke him, and almost as soon as it entered his body the healing power infused into the fluid began its work. Zenna gritted her teeth and yanked the bolt out of Ruphos's shoulder, twisting it free of the torn links of chain of his armor shirt. Even as she drew it out, the wound closed, the flow of blood ceasing. She attended to the bolt in his leg in the same fashion, aiding the healing magic as it finished its work.

Ruphos opened his eyes. The healing potion had been potent; the man's serious wounds had been fully cured. For a moment he just looked up at her, something flashing deep within those deep brown eyes as she stared at her. The scrutiny was enough to make

Zenna suddenly blush, and she quickly drew back, rising into an awkward crouch. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by another voice from behind the mage.

“Are you all right?”

Zenna and Ruphos turned to see Mole, a look of concern on her face. She looked unhurt, although the shortsword in her hand was slick with blood. She glanced down at the two dead skulks, regarding them with a matter-of-fact appraisal that seemed odd coming from a girl who would still be considered a teenager, by human standards. As Ruphos nodded, and got up, Mole gestured back toward the fountain.

“We got one, but the second fled into the tunnel. Arun chased after him, but we’d better help him! Hurry!”

She darted back toward the tunnel, the others close behind.

Chapter 15

Arun barreled down the confines of the narrow tunnel like a boulder rolling down a steep slope, heedless of trap or ambush. His arm stung where a skulk’s rapier had briefly penetrated his defenses, but he ignored the hurt as a trifling thing, certainly nothing in the face of the evil that required immediate smiting.

The others might be behind him, or might not; the thought did not distract him from his purpose. He was used to fighting alone, outnumbered but standing fast against the forces of evil. His new companions were competent enough, he supposed—even that bumbling boy-cleric. The gnome girl had surprised him again, forcing him to yet again rethink his assumptions about the inhabitants of the world outside the Rift. A world that was in many ways till new to him, a world into which he’d been thrust eight months ago.

He’d been engaged with a pair of the skulks, and had already taken one hit to the arm when she’d rushed boldly into the melee, apparently fearless, stabbing one of the skulks in the back with her shortsword. The creature had turned to face her, opening itself to a crushing blow from Arun’s hammer that had dropped it flailing to the ground.

He’d gotten a glancing hit on the other before it had disengaged and fled into this tunnel, but Arun was far too canny to assume that it was no longer a threat.

The tunnel ended up ahead, slanting up steeply to a small opening in the ceiling a good seven feet above the floor. This wasn’t going to be easy. Arun barely hesitated before shrugging out of his shield, and sliding his warhammer into the straps across his back. With his strong hands and feet working in unison he propelled himself up the steep slope, latching onto the edges of the opening and pulling himself through.

He’d expected the attack, so it was no surprise as he sensed the movement behind him. The attack was rushed, though, desperate, and instead of running him through the rapier just glanced off of his shoulder-plate, narrowly missing his neck. Arun heaved himself clear

of the opening and rolled forward, one of his light hammers coming into his hand as he regained his feet and spun to face his adversary.

The skulk was fleeing, darting toward the far side of the room where one of the round gear-doors could be seen. It didn't make for that closed portal, however, instead reaching for an empty torch-sconce set into the wall.

Its hand closed around it at the same moment that Arun's hammer slammed hard into its back.

The skulk crashed into the wall and spun away, its legs thrashing as it let out a terrible moan of pain. Arun stepped forward to stand over it, his second hammer ready to hurl in his hand.

"*No keel,*" the creature said, huddling against the wall, covering its head with its arms. It spoke in Undercommon, a tongue in which the dwarf was fluent, a language commonly understood within the deep ways under the Great Rift. "*Warf no keel, me helps, no hurts, no keel.*"

Arun regarded it coldly, tapping the butt of his hammer against his open palm.

* * * * *

Mole, Zenna, and Ruphos found him there just a few minutes later, Ruphos's mace glowing with the bright glow of a *light* spell. Zenna briefly reported the outcome of the failed ambush from behind, but their attention was fixed on their captive, who shrank from their scrutiny. The dwarf indicated the sconce that the creature had been trying to reach, and Mole quickly discovered that the wall contained a secret door, operated by turning the bracket to the side. They left that, for the moment.

The room was relatively compact, with one corner dominated by the hole leading down to the tunnel below. A foul stench filled the place, the source immediately obvious as the carcass of a slain creature. The thing was some sort of giant worm-like insect, its body culminating in a gaping maw ringed with almost a dozen long tentacles. Arun identified it as a "carion crawler," and all of them gave it a wide berth. There was also a small heap that turned out to be a collection of chain shirts and bucklers, obvious designed by and for gnomes. Mole examined those, and admired the workmanship. After a moment's consideration, she took one of the chain shirts and shrugged into it, replacing her breastplate of boiled leather.

"Well, if we're going to be getting into all these battles," she said, at Zenna's querying glance. Tucking her hair back over the rear of the shirt, she spun and asked, "How do I look?"

The others did not reply, their attention focused instead on the captive skulk, whom Arun was interrogating in a harsh, guttural language. Zenna walked over to them, noticing that the skulk cringed at her arrival.

"What have you found out?" she asked him.

“Well, they’ve been working with the gnome—the locksmith—all right,” Arun said. “Though he blames the kidnapping of the children on the ‘creepers.’ I imagine that they’re the ‘short ones’ that Ghelve spoke of.”

“Where are the children now?” Ruphos said. He looked at the wounded skulk with a mixture of pity and revulsion, but made no move to help it.

“It says that they’re somewhere below, in ‘Dar Drumbos Malachot’... ‘the Malachite Fortress’.”

“Why do I not like the sound of that?” Zenna asked.

“Oh, and he says he knows where the gnome’s rat is, if you care,” Arun said.

“Well, if we run across it, let’s take it,” Zenna said. “It can keep him company in prison.”

While Arun, Zenna, and Ruphos confronted the skulk, Mole had walked over to where they carcass of the carrion crawler lay. Her nose wrinkled as she studied it, but then she saw something that caught her eye. Walking around to the side of the creature, she prodded it with her sword.

“Hey, guys, I think I found something here...”

They turned as she lifted a heavy flap of rotting flesh that had been cut in the creature’s side. The smell redoubled as she revealed the creature’s insides, but she also revealed a pair of small wooden coffers that had been jammed into the crawler’s guts.

“Ah, sneaky little buggers,” Mole said. She grimaced as she reached in, her boot making a sickening plop as it stepped in the crawler’s decaying organs. After a few more exclamations, “Oh, that’s just gross! Oh gods, I’m going to be smelling that for a week!” Mole had both coffers out where they could all see them.

“We don’t have time to be playing around with dead bodies and treasure chests,” Ruphos said. “Remember the divine message... we may have already lost our chance to find the children!”

“Oh, there’s always time to play around with treasure chests,” Mole said cheerfully as she scraped the crawler’s guts from her boots with her sword and tried to get most of the gunk off of the coffers. Then she knelt before them, examining them carefully. “You guys have to finish questioning that skulk anyway—hey, shine that light over here, will you?”

Zenna caught Ruphos’s gaze and smiled, shrugging while she and Arun turned back to the skulk. The dwarf continued with his interrogation, while Zenna suggested a question or two for him to pose. The skulk seemed utterly broken, occasionally breaking into a screech or a wail of pain, his cries only growing worse when the dwarf threatened him. It became clear after a few minutes, however, that it knew little more than what it had already told him.

"It's stalling for time," Zenna finally said. "It knows that an alarm has probably been issued, and it expects others to come looking for us."

"I suspect you're right," the dwarf said.

"Hoo, boy!" Mole exclaimed. She'd gotten the first of the coffers open, and was exclaiming over a hefty pile of copper, silver, and gold coins inside. Ruphos stood over her shoulder, holding aloft his *lighted* mace, impatience written clear on his face. "So what do we do with him?" he asked, gesturing at the skulk.

The answer came swiftly, as Arun suddenly brought his fist down, crushing the skulk's head with a single solid blow from his hammer. Ruphos jumped, then turned on the dwarf with an angry look on his features.

"He'd surrendered!" he protested. "You... you killed him in cold blood!"

"Aye," the dwarf said, meeting the cleric's gaze squarely. "And what do you think he'd do, if our places were reversed? How do you think those children felt, when him and his pals crept into their rooms at night, and tore them away from the safety of their beds?"

Ruphos did not answer, but his feelings were clear in his face. Biting off a curse, the dwarf turned away. "Get your stuff," Arun told them. "We're getting out of here."

Mole let out a small sound, hurriedly pouring the contents of the second coffer into a small sack. She tried to fit the sack, already bulging with the coins from the first coffer, into her backpack, but had some difficulty getting it to fit.

"Oh, here," Ruphos said, taking the sack from her and lifting it. "Hey, this is heavy!" Still, he managed to fasten it to his belt, tying it fast with a simple knot.

Mole smiled. "Oh, yeah."

The dwarf crossed to the torch sconce, turning it so that the secret door in the wall popped open. All of them, with the exception of Mole, who was trying to estimate how heavy the sack carried by Ruphos actually was, had grim looks on their faces as they moved back into the halls of Jzadirune.

Chapter 16

The secret door opened onto a corridor that ran ahead and to their left. To their left a set of stairs led down to the main hall where they'd fought the skulks, so they went straight, where the corridor forked again after a short distance, a side-branch heading off to their right. Reaching that intersection, they saw that to the right the corridor continued a short distance before ending in one of the gear-doors, while ahead it opened onto a room.

"What about these doors?" Zenna asked. "The skulks don't appear to use them, and if they're setting an ambush for us somewhere ahead, maybe we should try another route."

“The skulk said they’re all trapped,” Arun reported. “That’s why they don’t use them.”

“Beware the doors with teeth,” Zenna said. “That’s was in Jenya’s divination.”

“Gnome traps can be tricky things,” Mole confirmed. So they pressed on ahead, toward the chamber.

Ruphos’s light pushed back the shadows, revealing a oval-shaped room with a vaulted ceiling a good fifteen feet above. Another passage identical to the one they entered through exited on the far side of the room, and another gear-door was visible in the wall to their right. But their attention was drawn to the center of the room, where a stone-rimmed bath easily twenty feet long took up much of the floor space in the room. A grinning stone mouth poured water into the bath from above, which in turn swirled into a drain on the far side. But that wasn’t what had caught their eye; rather, it was the network of cobwebs that cluttered the ceiling, and the man-sized husk that dangled from them just above the center of the pool.

“Ugh, spiders,” Mole said.

“I think I know the drill here,” Zenna said. “We go for the body, expecting to find some nice treasure, and then the spider—probably hiding somewhere above—goes for us. No thank you.”

“Maybe we should go back, through the main hall,” Ruphos suggested. “There were several other exits without doors that we didn’t try.”

“Bah, it’s just a bug,” Arun said, stepping into the room. They noticed that he remained near the wall, however, giving the pool a wide berth as he headed for the far exit. The others followed, all eyes on the webs above.

“Too bad,” Mole said, glancing at her soiled boots. “I could’ve used a bath, too.”

They were halfway around the room when the spider leapt out of the pool—apparently not inconvenienced in the least by all the water—and sprang at the gnome.

The thing was the size of a pony, but several times as fast, darting forward with its eight hairy legs clacking slightly on the stone floor as it moved. Its fangs were the size of daggers, and it stabbed them as Mole as the gnome shrieked and tried to get out of the way. Her crossbow went off, but in her panic the shot went wide, glancing harmlessly off of the far wall of the room.

Ruphos, just a few steps behind her, surged in, grabbing the gnome even as the spider lunged. Its fangs snapped on empty air as the cleric spun and dragged Mole out of its reach, tossing her behind him. The spider did not relent, immediately turning on the human and directing its terrible bite at this larger, juicier prey. Ruphos screamed as the vermin bit him in the leg, injecting its poison into the wound.

The cleric’s companions rushed to his aid. Zenna fired her crossbow at its fat abdomen, but the bolt merely glanced off of its leathery hide. Arun was there a moment later,

charging with his heavy warhammer at the ready. His blow caught the spider solidly into the center of its torso, and there was an audible crack as the beast sagged under the force of the blow. It turned toward the dwarf—slower, this time, clearly crippled—but before it could mount a new attack, Mole darted in behind it and thrust the length of her small blade into its body. With a terrible screech, the spider crumpled, its legs twitching violently before it finally fell still.

“Ruphos, are you all right?” Mole asked, as the cleric leaned against the wall, his face a rictus of pain. He was clutching the wound with both hands, and soon they could see the glow of healing spread from his fingers into the wound.

“It... the poison... I’ll be all right, just a little weak,” he said.

Zenna, who was reloading her crossbow, glanced up and saw two more spiders descending from the webs, one crawling along the slanted wall toward them while a second dropped on a slender strand of webbing directly toward Arun. These were smaller, perhaps the size of small hounds, but still imposing as they dropped to attack. “More of them!” she shouted, quickly fumbling a bolt into place.

“Blasted bugs!” Arun shouted, as the spider dropped onto his shoulder. It tried to bite him, but its sharp fangs only glanced off of the metal plates of his armor. Arun snapped his hammer up into its face, knocking it roughly off of him to the floor a few paces away, where it skittered, dazed.

The second spider looked to be heading toward Ruphos, but Zenna’s bolt transfixed it, holding it against the wall for a moment before it fell heavily to the floor. Ruphos drew quickly back out of its way.

Mole, meanwhile, drew a bead on the spider Arun had wounded. She drew a long knife out of her boot and hurled it at the vermin, scoring a hit to the head that finished the creature.

The four companions scanned the webs, looking for more attackers, but it seems that if there were more spiders, they were content to let the adventurers be for now. “Let’s get out of here,” Zenna said, her crossbow covering the webs as she backed away.

No one disagreed, so they left via the other passage, Ruphos still limping slightly as he followed behind.

[Story Note: following the suggestion given in the module, and the fact that the events here are following a time schedule that doesn’t really allow for retreat/rest, I allowed the characters to level during their progress through Jzadirune. All 3 of the 1st level characters had sufficient xp to reach 2nd level after the spider encounter, with Zenna well on her way to 3rd. Zenna won’t get to memorize new spells, of course, until she has a chance to rest and study, and she won’t get to add new spells to her spellbook until the next break between adventures. Readers familiar with the module will also note that the scroll that Mole found has an additional... surprise... that may become important later. ;)]

Chapter 17

“It looks like this complex is just a big ring around the center stairs,” Mole said, studying the map that they’d gotten from Ghelve. “It also looks like we’re not going to get anywhere without getting through some of those doors... at least not through the normal passages.”

“So it’s back to the skulk tunnels,” Zenna said. “Wonderful.”

They were back in the main hall, occupied only by themselves, the magical *dancing lights*, and the bodies of the skulks they’d slain earlier.

“Well, I think...” Ruphos began.

“I know,” Arun interrupted. “You want to go back to the surface, get help.”

Ruphos shook his head. “Actually, what I was going to say, is that we should see about finding the entrance to this ‘Malachite Fortress’. What did the skulk tell you about how to get down there?”

Arun looked hard at the cleric for a moment, then nodded. “He said that there’s a lift that connects the gnome enclave to the fortress. It’s accessed by a secret door, he said that it’s in the area occupied by the leader of the creepers, to the northeast.”

“Descend into the malachite hold, where precious life is bought with gold,” Zenna intoned.

Mole elbowed her. “Stop it with that, will you? It’s creepy.”

“Nonetheless, the divine message has not steered us wrong yet,” Ruphos said. “We should pay heed to its guidance.”

“Bah, I prefer a god who speaks clearly, and not in stupid riddles,” Arun said. He hefted his hammer. “Well, if we’re going to thrust our heads into the dragon’s mouth, let’s be about it, then!”

“Let’s try the tunnel that the first skulk took, the one that got away,” Mole suggested.

They retracted their steps to that room. Ruphos’s *light* spell had faded, but Mole had a few torches in her bag that she handed to the cleric to illuminate their way. Soon they were back in that first room off of the chamber of the masks. The room was dark now, the sunrod that they’d seen before lying expired on the floor where they’d left it. The body of the skulk, they instantly noticed, had been drawn out of the mouth of the tunnel and left to the near the adjacent pile of rubble.

“Somebody’s been along this way,” Arun warned, needlessly.

The dwarf led them into the new tunnel. This one stretched on for far longer than the ones they’d taken earlier, and they crept warily down its length for a good while before it crooked to the left and then back right again, drawing them gradually to the east. Finally they

reached a fork, with the tunnel splitting off into identical tubes heading north and south. Following the directive given by the skulk prisoner, Arun led them to the north.

The tunnel continued for a good forty feet or so before it emerged on the eastern edge of a lengthy hall. The chamber stretched a good fifty feet or so ahead of them, and was perhaps twenty feet across. Arun, with his darkvision, could just make out another rough-hewn tunnel at the far end of the hall, and two passages that exited via the north and south walls. There was a pile of rubble stacked against the wall to their right, but other than that the place appeared barren, empty.

“And if you believe that, I’ll be sellin’ you a diamond mine I know of,” the dwarf grumbled.

“What’s that, Arun?” Mole asked.

“Nothing. Stay alert.”

The dwarf moved warily into the chamber, the others crowded into the mouth of the tunnel behind him. He’d barely managed a few paces, however, before a warning from Mole brought him up short.

“Arun!” she hissed. “You’re... fading!”

The dwarf looked down at himself—it was true, as he watched he found that he could see *through* his arm to the floor below, and a heartbeat later there was nothing, not even an outline of his bulky, armored frame. It was as if he had suddenly become disembodied, a ghost without tangible substance; except that he could *feel* his body around him, nothing had truly happened to him save for the shroud of invisibility that had drawn about him.

Belatedly, the dwarf realized that the others did not realize what had happened. “Arun! Are you...” Zenna cried out softly.

“I’m all right, just invisible,” he told them. He moved about, slightly relieved that he could still hear the sounds of his passage.

“Another persistent magical effect,” Mole said. She stepped out into the room, ignoring Zenna’s word of caution, holding up her hand before her so that she could witness the effect more clearly. Sure enough, the hand began to fade from view just a few moments after she entered the room.

She was distracted, however, at the sound of a voice that echoed clearly from the far end of the chamber. “*Taral yan zygge!*” it said, the voice rough and masculine.

“Hey, that’s gnomish!” Mole said. As she was already invisible, however, her friends could not see the sudden look of realization that hit her face, as she realized exactly *what* in her tongue the words signified...

A loud creaking noise, metal protesting being forced into motion, filled the room. Its origin was close, close enough almost to feel the vibrations as a solid thump! followed the initial sound, followed a moment later by an almost painful metallic screech. Before any of them

could react to these sudden developments, they heard yet another sound, a loud dwarven cry of pain that was followed by a clatter of metal falling upon unyielding stone. Arun's hammer suddenly appeared, falling to the ground and skittering to a stop a few feet away, as did a spray of red droplets that hung in the air for an instant or two before falling to splatter on the stone floor.

Chapter 18

"Arun!" Zenna cried. She nearly rushed into the chamber, but Ruphos held onto her, knowing that whatever had struck down the dwarf was still raging within the invisibility. As the noise of its initial assault faded, however, the air seemed to solidify from where the noises of creaking and whirring continued to issue, and the form of their attacker took shape.

It was a mechanical shape, a construct of plates and gears that had the look of an iron barrel, with squat legs and stubby arms that ended in heavy, pointed steel heads shaped like the ends of a flanged mace. It had no discernable eyes, ears, or mouth, but it clearly had no difficulty marking them as targets even within the aura of invisibility. It came forward toward the tunnel entrance, where Zenna and Ruphos watched in horrified fascination. Zenna hefted her crossbow, although it was difficult to see how a mere bolt could harm such a thing, while Ruphos stepped boldly in front of her, holding his mace tightly in both hands.

"Blasted hunk of junk!" came Arun's voice, pain warring with anger in his tone. The hammer lifted off of the ground, wavering slightly before coming up high, poised to attack.

"Wait!" Mole said, her voice likewise issuing from thin air, but directly in the path of the automaton. "*Mek taral neth!*" she cried, speaking in the gnome tongue. *Halt, don't attack!*

The automaton lurched to a stop, the spinning heads on its arms grinding to a halt and dropping down toward the ground. Arun's hammer came to a halt as well, directly behind the creature, still hanging ready in the air. "Well?" the dwarf's voice came to them. "We smashing it, or what?"

Mole clapped her hands together. "It does what I say!" she said, gleefully. She gave it a command in gnome, and obediently the machine turned about, moving slowly in a circle. After a few moments the invisibility effect present in the room began to take effect upon it once, more, and the automaton faded from view.

"We've got ourselves a new ally, it would seem," Zenna noted.

* * * * *

The companions quickly took stock of their situation. A bit of cautious probing uncovered the limit of the invisibility effect, which was apparently a sphere perhaps fifteen feet across. A second one was located on the far side of the room, where the command that had unleashed the automaton upon them had originated. The spheres were fixed in place, and

only affected beings that moved into them; once they left the radius of the effect, the individual returned immediately to visibility.

Ruphos treated Arun, who'd been grievously wounded by the automaton's assault. The dwarf did not complain, this time, as the cleric channeled healing energy into the stricken paladin. The four of them, trailed by the lumbering automaton, gathered in the center of the hall, where they could see each other free of the invisibility spheres. Mole was continuing to experiment with the device, giving it a variety of commands. The pulverizer was powerful, but unreliable; often it would hesitate or simply stand there for up to half a minute before finally lurching into action.

"What should we name it?" Mole asked the others. "How about, 'smashy?' You like that, Smashy?"

The automaton, of course, did not comment, but Arun, Zenna, and Ruphos shared a concerned look, standing close together and speaking in low voices.

"We can assume that the creepers know we're here, and that they may be preparing an ambush as we speak," Zenna said. "If they're not watching us right now... with that invisibility effect, one could be standing right over there and we'd never even know it."

"Well, that one that ordered the golem to attack either fled, or it's hiding," Arun said matter-of-factly. "Either way, it's a coward."

"We can't underestimate them," Zenna insisted. "Those tunnels are perfect for a surprise attack, and there's little we could do to react."

"I'm more worried about our resources," Ruphos added. "My spells are almost depleted, and we don't have much more in the way of healing. I have a single potion that Jenya gave me, but it is only good for one treatment."

"Hey, I still have my potion as well," Mole said, stepping into their circle. "And now that we have Smashy here, perhaps we can take a... *different* approach."

The three taller companions exchanged a glance, and looked expectantly at the gnome.

Chapter 19

Trust.

Trust was a double-edged sword, one that could turn on you and be thrust into your back when you least expected it. This was a truth that Yuathyb understood all too well, given what he was, and his current position.

The fact was, he was desperate, but he kept that fact well hidden from his minions. He'd always been suspicious of them, a wise precaution in any circumstances, but especially so given recent developments. Over the last few days, he's seen the way that the creepers had looked at him, the furtive glances that seemed to be weighing options, opportunities...

He did not blame them for that. In their circumstance, he would likely be doing the same thing.

One of the creepers came over to him, nimbly avoiding the broken pottery and glass that carelessly littered the floor. Of course, there was nothing careless about it, but there was nothing to be done for it now anyway.

The creeper looked up at him with hooded eyes, the rest of its face covered by the enfolding wrap of his cloak. Yuathyb knew what it was thinking, knew it was trying to judge how far the sickness had progressed since their last meeting, but he refused to draw his own cloak closer around himself.

“Report,” he snapped.

“They have taken control of the automaton,” the creeper hissed. “They have a gnome among them. Mzrak is keeping watch, in the tunnel.”

Outwardly, Yuathyb betrayed nothing, but inside he cursed. He should have anticipated that the intruders might have a gnome among their number. He glanced at the skulk, who at the moment was living up to its name, huddling in a corner. The creature had been less than useless in terms of describing the intruders, failing to report even this basic snippet of information, but the stalker could not blame it, either; at least the blasted things were consistent in their cowardice.

Yuathyb turned back to his minion. “Tell Mzrak not to engage, but to monitor the progress of the intruders and report back. We will ambush them here, and put an end to their meddling in a single blow.”

The creeper nodded, an anticipatory gleam in its dark eyes as it bowed incrementally before darting away toward the tunnel entrance.

The stalker watched it depart. The two other creepers that remained eyed him with the same evaluating stare as their companion, but Yuathyb ignored them, already lost in the complex machinations of thought.

He did not believe that the creepers would betray him—not now, with a common enemy to fight. Perhaps after these enemies were beaten, if he were left sufficiently weak, but Yuathyb was too canny a veteran to let himself be drawn directly into a battle if minions were available instead. They resented him, to be sure, particularly so with the memory of the lesson he’d had to impart just a few days ago fresh in their minds. It was a pity that had been necessary; he could have used Zirtak’s skills in the coming confrontation.

A sound drew his attention, a metallic scrape that seemed to come from the direction of the gnome door in the south wall. His creepers and the skulks alike avoided all of the gnome portals with their resetting traps and defensive wards, still quite potent despite the decades that had passed since the gnomes had abandoned Jzadirune. Once Yuathyb had discovered the pulverizer, they’d been able to create new tunnels that bypassed the doors, making them moot.

The stalker gestured, and one of the creepers slinked over to the door, careful not to touch it, leaning close against the wood to listen.

Suddenly there was a loud CLANG! and the door shuddered visibly. Almost immediately, a dense cloud of cloying purplish smoke erupted from all around the threshold, engulfing the creeper and filling a good portion of the space directly in front of the door. Yuathyb himself drew back quickly, although it was clear that the smoke was not spreading further into the room. The noise continued, accompanied now by the sounds of splintering wood as the door gave way before what had to be the assault of the automaton.

It would appear that I underestimated them, the stalker thought grimly to himself. He watched as the creeper staggered out of the cloud, clearly suffering its effects, his face ravaged and blackened, his cloak sagging as the acidic vapors continued to burn through the fabric. The creeper he'd sent just a few moments before emerged from the tunnel well away from the door, and Yuathyb froze the skulk who'd already begun edging away toward the passage exit in the north wall with a cold look.

The cloud was already beginning to clear. The stalker drew his sword, pointing it to the ruin of the doorway where the pulverizer was just coming into view.

His minions moved into position.

Chapter 20

As the cloud of acidic vapors triggered by the trap on the door cleared, the four companions could see the pulverizer automaton, its metallic hide scarred by the gas, continuing its assigned chore of dismantling the obstacle of the portal. Its twin rotating drills had already bored a sizeable hole in the center of the door, and it was now quickly widening it, sending shards of stone and wood flying.

"Well, I'd say we've lost the element of surprise, at least," Zenna noted dryly.

Arun moved up behind the automaton, trying to see into the chamber beyond. "Tell this thing to get out of the way," he said to Mole.

The gnome nodded, and ordered the automaton forward. The golem lowered its arms, and obediently lurched forward. The grinding noise of its movements had grown louder; apparently the cloud of corrosive gas had damaged its internal workings.

Arun followed the automaton into the room, which had the appearance of a ruined laboratory or workshop. Crushed pottery and shards of glass littered the floor, and tables surmounted with the ruin of once-extensive glassworks, shelves, and miscellaneous apparatus were pushed up against the walls. Also present was a short, squat, gnomelike figure, clad in a cloak that was a ruin of shredded fibers that barely hung together about him. Beady, hostile eyes met Arun's gaze, and he let out a terrible screech as he drew back, drawing a long dirk out from under his cloak. Arun hefted his hammer, but before he

could do anything, the shadows around the creature seemed to *thicken*, gathering about him into a cloak of darkness that obscured his body from view.

“Your black sorceries will not save you from justice, fiend!” the dwarf shouted, stepping boldly forward into the room.

“What’s happening?” came Mole’s voice, from behind the door. The companions were pushing through the ruin of the doorway, but the jagged remnants of the portal that remained in the threshold were slowing their progress. Zenna’s face appeared through the gap, but then Ruphos pushed through, his mace in one hand and a torch in the other. Zenna was right behind him, holding her loaded crossbow at the ready.

As light from the burning brand flooded into the room, the shadow-cloaked creeper let out another angry cry. And the light revealed another short, cloaked figure who stepped out from the adjacent wall near the tunnel mouth to the left, right behind Arun...

“Arun! Watch out!” the cleric cried.

But the warning came too late, for even as he shouted, the creeper slipped up behind the dwarf and thrust his long knife into his side. The attack was devastating, punching through the gap in the dwarf’s scale mail under his arm and deep into the flesh and muscle and organs underneath. Arun staggered to the side, hurt badly, and the creeper cackled gleefully, his dagger slick with dwarvish blood along its entire length. The acid-burned one moved to join the attack, sweeping wide to come up on Arun’s far side to flank the dwarf.

Ruphos hefted his mace and prepared to come to the dwarf’s aid, but hesitated as a crossbow bolt lanced out from the right, narrowly missing him. He held the torch out in that direction, revealing a familiar tall form, its pale skin rippling with color to match the wall behind, already loading its bow for another shot.

“Skulk!” Ruphos warned. At his warning, Zenna lifted her bow and fired, though her hasty shot went wide and struck the table beside the skulk, smashing a clay beaker into a hundred fragments.

As if in response, another shadow stirred under a table near the wall just to the right of the door, the light from Ruphos’s torch refusing to penetrate its darkness as it started forward toward the two adventurers.

And it wasn’t as bad as it was going to get, either.

The light of Ruphos’s torch did not reach as far as the back of the room, leaving it a maze of deep shadows. From that direction a clear, angry voice filled the room. “*Telath nur zyg’zet!*”

And in response, the pulverizer, standing forgotten in the middle of the room, turned toward the dwarf, its drill-hands beginning once more to spin with their grinding cadence.

“*Neth!*” Mole cried, shouting at the automaton as she entered the room, biting off a curse as her cloak caught on the jagged edge of a shattered board. “Smashy, don’t!”

The automaton hesitated, caught between two conflicting commands. Finally it just stopped, lowering its arms, electing to do nothing.

From the back of the room came another command, spoken in a tongue that was rough and guttural, like pebbles being ground together. Arun was the only one among the four who spoke Undercommon, and thus understood the mandate directed at creepers and the skulk.

Kill the gnome!

“You’ll have to get through me, first!” he yelled back in challenge, sweeping his hammer with deadly force despite the grievous wound in his side. He assaulted the creeper in front of him, catching it with a glancing blow to its shoulder. The creeper drew back, summoning the magical shadow-cloak that protected its fellows before coming in again, its bloody knife darting in and out of the dark shroud at the dwarf. Meanwhile, the injured creeper came up on Arun from behind, seeking another weakness that it could exploit with a devastating sneak attack. Its knife came back, then darted forward...

And stopped, as the creeper, a dazed expression on its face, simply stood there, wavering. For several long seconds it hesitated, doing nothing, before it finally shook its head, clearing it of the mental fog that had descended upon it.

Just in time to clearly mark the hammer that came crashing down squarely upon its forehead.

Zenna nodded grimly as she witnessed the result of her spell. Arun turned to face his remaining opponent, but Zenna could not spare him any more aid at the moment. Ruphos had attacked the third creeper, while behind them, Zenna could see that the skulk had reloaded his crossbow, and was looking for targets. It staggered, though, as a bolt sank deeply into its side. The wizard glanced back and saw Mole, standing in the doorway, flashing her a thumbs-up before she started reloading.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, a long shaft came slicing directly toward her. Somehow instinct took over, and Zenna hurled herself aside, the javelin narrowly missing her before it slammed hard into the surviving jam of the door. Her heart pounding in her chest at the close call—she had no doubt that the missile would have killed her, had it struck her unawares—she lashed back without thinking, eschewing her magic for a more primal, basic power that was part of her very being.

A globe of pure blackness, darker even than the shadows beyond the radius of the torchlight, appeared in the back of the room. Zenna looked on in horror as she realized what she had done. She had tapped into the power of her mixed heritage—of the corrupt, shadowed side of what she was; a power that she’d sworn that she would never use. The taint that she’d hated all her life, ever since she’d learned what she was.

“Zenna! Are you all right?”

She looked up and saw Mole, her face a mask of concern. And also the shadow that rose up in the doorway behind her, a gleaming knife the only clearly discernable part of its form...

“Mole!”

Chapter 21

“Mole!”

The gnome saw her friend’s gaze shift, realized what it signified even as she dropped her bow and dove ahead to the side, out of the doorway. She felt the hot pain explode in her back even as she started to move, and knew that she’d been too late to react. Instead of dropping into a smooth roll that would have brought her back to her feet, she landed hard, sprawled on the stone, the impact launching a new wave of agony through her lower body. She tried to order her body up, but the pain fought her, freezing her muscles and slowing her movements. She did manage to pull herself up enough to look behind her, enough to see the creeper that was coming for her, its features obscured in shadow, its knife wet with her blood.

Arun and Ruphos were caught up in their own struggles as the battle in the chamber raged on. Having slain one adversary, Arun faced off against the other. Even seriously wounded, the dwarf was stronger and deadlier than the creeper, but its magical shadow-cloak made it difficult to discern its true location in the poor light. Already two punishing hammer-blows had gone astray, smashing only through empty shadows. The creeper was a canny opponent, darting in and out of the dwarf’s reach, stabbing with its small but still dangerous weapon. Although the dwarf’s armor had thus far protected him from another wound, it was uncertain which combatant would land the next, possibly deadly, blow.

Ruphos, meanwhile, had faced his adversary with bravery. He had height and reach over the smaller creeper, and his mace was a more formidable weapon than the creeper’s dagger. But the creeper’s shadow-cloak gave it a significant edge, one that it used to full advantage.

And the creeper wasn’t alone.

The cleric swung his mace in a determined blow that caught only empty shadows, overextending the priest as the weapon smashed against the wall hard enough to strike sparks. The creeper was quick to take advantage, darting in and stabbing Ruphos in the leg, leaving him with a shallow but painful wound. Ruphos quickly recovered and attacked again, more cautiously. This time he hit something solid, but the creeper darted back, not hurt seriously if it had been at all. Ruphos, gritting his teeth in determination, took a step after it, but staggered as a crossbow bolt from the skulk caught him solidly in the shoulder, almost in the exact spot where he’d been hit earlier.

“Aargh!” he cried in pain. The creeper cackled and leapt forward, and the priest hurriedly brought up his mace to defend himself. But instead of attacking him, the creeper took advantage of his distraction to slash at his off hand, knocking the torch out of his grasp.

The torch flared as it landed on the adjacent table, but while it remained lit it grew much dimmer, and the shadows throughout the room abruptly deepened.

Ruphos stumbled backward, and in desperation lashed out blindly with his mace. He felt a solid impact as he hit something hard, but it took him several long seconds to realize that the shadows in front of him had stopped moving, and that a dark form lay huddled at his feet.

Mole struggled to get her injured body to obey her, to get up before the creeper could reach her. It looked like a race that she was doomed to lose, but then, she saw a tall form rise up behind the creeper, and leap at it.

“Stay away from her!” Zenna shouted. She’d unclasped her cloak, and swept it out over the creeper’s head, catching it up in the folds of the garment. The creeper snarled and drew back, tearing a long rent in the heavy fabric with its sharp knife, fighting free.

“I’ll kill you, woman,” it hissed, turning toward her. Zenna, her face ashen, drew her dagger but did not back down.

Mole was not idle with the time that her friend had bought her. Digging in her pouch, she found the vial that Jenya had given her, and downed its contents in a single gulp. She felt as if someone had poured a cold waterfall through her body, its touch washing away the pain and weakness she’d felt. Leaping up, she drew her sword and charged at the creeper from the side. With its attention distracted between her and Zenna, the creeper was just a heartbeat slow to react, a heartbeat that cost it as Mole thrust the full length of her sword into its side. The creeper let out a strangled hiss as it stiffened, and fell to the floor.

Arun seemed to be slowing as he lost blood, while his creeper opponent, encouraged by the fact that the dwarf hadn’t been able to land a second blow, continued to dart in and around him, seeking an opening. Finally the hammer came around in a wide arc that overextended the dwarf, and the creeper gleefully leapt in to strike a finishing blow.

That was a mistake.

Abruptly Arun shifted, reversing the hammer and driving it hilt-first into the center of the shifting mass of shadows that shrouded the body of the creeper. The nimble creature tried to dodge, but wasn’t quite fast enough as the hilt crashed like a spear into his face with enough force to crush bone. The creeper fell, its defensive screen of darkness dissolving into wisps of black that quickly faded, still struggling as it tried to get up, to get away.

It failed on both counts, as the dwarf’s hammer came up and then down one more time.

The skulk, meanwhile, observing how the battle was turning, and not seeing any response from the dark stalker since the magical *darkness* had fallen over the back of the room, decided that discretion might, in this case, be the better part of valor. Following the curve of the wall, it started backing toward the back of the room, holding its loaded crossbow before it like a shield.

It didn't, apparently, work quite as well as a shield, as a bolt from Mole's bow caught it in the leg just above the knee. Combined with the wound it had already suffered, the new injury was just about too much for the hapless creature to bear. Dropping the crossbow, it fell hard against a table, sending crockery flying to the ground with a crash. Righting itself through a titanic effort, it tried desperately to get away, ignoring the painful scratches to its feet as it stumbled over the broken glass and pottery shards that littered the floor.

It made for the darkness, and the relative sanctuary that it offered, but came up short as the dwarf stepped into view, a light hammer cocked and ready to hurl in its hand. The dwarf shook his head.

The skulk slumped to the ground, beaten.

Chapter 22

The four companions, bleeding and battered, gathered wearily in a small chamber adjacent to the room where they'd battled the creepers. The room had been sealed by one of the gnome doors, but the automaton had made short work of it, surviving the blast of flames triggered by its opening. The skulk prisoner was on the floor between them, a defeated look on its face. The pulverizer automaton was in the corner, quiescent for now. Despite being seriously damaged, it was still a potentially potent weapon, one that they obviously did not want to leave lying around.

They'd been weakened, and their resources were all but depleted. Ruphos was out of healing spells, having used his final osiron to stabilize the skulk and keep it from bleeding out from the two punctures in its side and leg. Arun had not been pleased with that, but they'd needed answers, and none of them felt particularly like seeking out and challenging the mysterious leader of the creepers that had fled during the battle. Particularly not after the skulk had given them a description of the creature, the "stalker" named Yuathyb.

"We are fortunate that the leader did not join immediately in the attack," Mole commented. "One more skilled enemy in that melee, and things might have been different." Zenna nodded, but she remembered a javelin that had sped from the darkness, and the power she'd called upon in response, and shuddered.

"Your reprieve is going to be very short, skulk, unless you start talking, real fast now," Arun said to the prisoner in Undercommon. The dwarf's injuries were still serious, although he'd called upon the power of his patron god to stop the bleeding and ease his pain somewhat, and that and the escape of the enemy leader had not left him in a forgiving mood.

The skulk looked up at them. "If you swear upon your gods to set me free, I tell you everything." This one spoke a halting Common, enough for them to understand it through its thick accent.

Arun frowned, but Ruphos quickly stepped in. "Our need is great, and time is short," he said, more to the dwarf than to the prisoner. "We accept your terms, skulk, but all deals are void, if your words are false."

The skulk, however, seemed to have lost any motivation to dissemble. It spoke quickly, incorporating some words in Undercommon that the dwarf translated for the rest of them. They learned that the first skulk captive they'd taken had indeed misled them, directing them here to the lair of the stalker and its creeper minions rather than to the true location of the lift that provided access to the Malachite Fortress below.

"Tricky," Mole said. "Of course, we could have uncovered this, perhaps, if we'd brought the last prisoner with us, instead of bashing its skull in."

Arun did not respond in words, but his snort was a comment of sorts. The skulk, however, did respond, letting out a high-pitched whine and covering its head with its arms. "Hey, stop that, shut up," the dwarf said, kicking the skulk almost absently. The skulk subsided, its expression a mixture of fear and surly discontent.

On prodding, however, it revealed the rest of what it knew. The children, along with a number of other captives stolen from the city by the skulks and their creeper allies, were being held by a half-breed part-dwarf—the skulk could not be more specific—who commanded a significant force of hobgoblin renegades in the citadel deep underground. Apparently this creature and its followers were the ultimate driving force behind the abductions that had been going on in Cauldron, selling the captives to foul merchants who came up into the Malachite Fortress from the endless tunnels of the Underdark.

"This must be ended," Arun said, his hand tightening around the haft of his hammer as he spoke.

"Yes," Ruphos said. He turned to the skulk.

"We cannot let him go," Mole said. "He'd probably go right to this slaver... where else could he go?" The skulk drew back and let out a hollow noise from the back of its throat.

"You promise," it said. "You swear."

"I know," Ruphos said. "And the followers of Helm keep their word. I will personally intervene on your behalf with the city authorities, but we must take you into custody until this is finished."

"You sure you just wouldn't deal with it now?" Arun said, hefting his hammer. But he didn't press it when Ruphos shook his head.

"So you want to go back up?" Zenna asked, divining where Ruphos was going with this.

The cleric nodded. "We must retreat, if only briefly. I know that time is short," he said, forestalling Arun's interjection, "and I will return with you to face this slaver and his minions, but if we go on as we are, with our resources depleted, battered and wounded, we will be slaughtered to no gain."

Arun stared at him for a lengthy interval, then finally nodded. "You speak the truth, priest." He turned to the skulk and roughly dragged it to its feet. "Okay, we're leaving, and you

keep quiet and don't try anything, skulk. Remember," he added, hefting his hammer, "all I need is an excuse. The priest wants to keep you alive, but I made no such promise."

The skulk whimpered but offered no resistance as they gathered up their gear and set out once again.

Chapter 23

A soft patter of rain, just a drizzle, really, could be heard against the sides of the house and the shuttered windows, the sound broken occasionally by a determined gust of wind that whistled past and departed on its way.

Only a faint, gray light made it through the narrow slats in the drawn shutters, but a single flame augmented that from a lamp atop one of the side tables, occasionally flickering as some small draft made it through the heavy boards.

That light shone on the six people gathered in the center of the chamber in Ghelve's Locks, standing in a circle near the partly-adjacent portal that led down to Jzadirune. Seven, if you counted the prisoner, the skulk kneeling on the floor under the watchful stare of Morgan, the undercleric of Helm.

"And so we returned here, but only to renew our supplies and possibly gain aid, before we head back to confront this slaver and his gang," Ruphos said. "Time is short, and the children might have already been taken beyond our reach."

Jenya Urikas nodded, the lamplight highlighting the determination written clearly on her features. "You have done well, Ruphos—all of you. When your message arrived, we came as quickly as we could, though not, I regret, quickly enough to give you more aid. We took Ghelve into custody; the locksmith, it seems, was no longer inclined to hide the truth, and he quickly admitted to us what he'd done."

"What will happen to him?" Mole asked.

"He will stand trial," Jenya said. "There were mitigating circumstances in his case, it seems, and clear coercion, but his actions still had very serious consequences. You will all be given a chance to speak, when he comes to judgment, but at the moment, we have a more pressing issue at hand."

"We'd better get going then, and be about this business," Arun said matter-of-factly. He looked better, since Jenya had healed him and the lingering injuries suffered by the other, but was still a sight with dried blood and grime caked on his armor and clothing.

"You've done the city a great service," Jenya said. "But this is a matter beyond the mandate I set for you. By nightfall I can have a fully armed patrol of the city Guard here, along with priests from the churches of Lathander and Tempus, in addition to our own clerics of Helm. We will launch a raid that will teach these... these *vermin* that would trade in children a lesson..."

“Jenya,” Ruphos interrupted, stepping forward. “I fear that we may not have even those hours. I was... I was reluctant to do this, at first, but I’ve become convinced that there is an urgency here, that the slavers may already be escaping with their captives while we speak. And if we return with an overwhelming force, this dwarf-creature and his followers may elect to kill their captives and flee into the Underdark before we can stop them. We have to return, and quickly...”

Jenya looked at her cleric, betraying a slight surprise in her expression before she schooled her features back to calm control. She nodded, taking his hand and bowing her head in respect.

Morgan, however, stepped forward as well. “Ruphos may be correct in his assessment, but you should send me, instead, Jenya,” he said. “Ruphos is not a warrior, and his spells are depleted.” Indeed, he looked impressive in his breastplate and greaves, standing several inches taller than Ruphos, his thick arms well-muscled, his heavy steel mace ready at his hip.

Jenya looked indecisive, but Zenna quickly broke in. “We—the four of us—have made a good team,” she said. “Ruphos should be there, at the end.”

Ruphos turned and looked at her in surprise. Morgan, on the other hand, did not bother to conceal his own feelings toward the tiefling wizard.

“Yeah, he’s one of us,” Mole added.

Ruphos smiled at her, then turned to Arun. The dwarf harrumphed, glancing deliberately to the side. Finally, though, he said, “Suppose it couldn’t hurt to have him with us, again.”

Jenya nodded. “Very well, then,” she said. Morgan opened his mouth to say something, but Jenya forestalled him with a raised hand. “Morgan, I need you to help raise support from the churches, while I go speak with the Council and the Guard. Take this wretch,” she said, indicating the skulk, “back to the temple, and see that he is securely held.”

“I swore an oath to him,” Ruphos said, frowning.

“I know,” Jenya said. “I promise he will not be harmed, until this is over and we can determine what to do with him.”

“So looks like it’s back into the maw of danger for us,” Mole said. But she was smiling as she said it.

Jenya, however, looked serious. “I am sending you four only to scout, and to see if you can find and locate the prisoners. If you run into trouble, don’t be afraid to retreat. The forces of the city will be following you as quickly as I can have them sent.”

She reached down to her belt pouch. “I wish I’d thought to bring more from the temple stores,” she said, “but take these, in any case.” She handed out several glass vials, healing potions, one for each of them. To Ruphos, she presented a slender wand of polished wood carved with hundreds of tiny etched symbols. “This wand’s spell is only of

the sort designed to treat light injuries, and is not fully charged, but use it to aid your cause.” The cleric nodded, and took the offered device.

Morgan came forward, and gave the younger priest a slight clout on the shoulder. “Good luck,” he said. “And watch your back.” The look he shot at Zenna lingered just long enough to not be subtle, then he returned and took up the skulk.

“Helm, shine the light of your guidance upon these brave travelers,” Jenya said, holding her holy symbol aloft briefly as she laid a blessing upon them. Each of the four felt the divine energy course through them, dispelling doubt and reinforcing their resolve.

“Good luck,” she said. “And be careful.”

The four companions nodded, and turned toward the secret door. But before they reached it, the red curtain leading to the front of the shop parted, and two men stepped into the room. Their appearance was a surprise, since none of them had heard the bell on the front door, or their footfalls as they entered the front of the shop.

They were tall men, clad in leather armor with long gray cloaks damp from the rain, their cowls up. They were armed, with slender swords at their belts and the protruding outlines of what might have been bows visible under their cloaks. Both were clean-shaven, with strong features that showed the signs of frequent exposure to the outdoors. One was black-haired, with penetrating brown eyes, while his companion, a few inches shorter and lean of figure, had reddish-brown hair with eyes as blue as mountain pools.

Chapter 24

Morgan reacted swiftly, his mace darting up into a ready position, his other hand holding firm to the arm of the skulk. Arun, too, lifted his hammer, his eyes narrowing as he regarded the newcomers.

“Peace,” the blue-eyed man said to them. “We are not enemies.” Their posture, however, was that of cats waiting to spring, either to attack or flee, and their hands did not wander far from the hilts of the swords at their belts.

Zenna, who’d been peering at the face beneath the cowl, stepped forward. “You’re that elf we saw earlier, coming out of this place,” she said.

“Half-elf, actually,” the man said, drawing back his hood to clearly reveal his angular features and ears that rose to narrow points. “Though I’ve often heard that I favor my father.”

“Who are you?” Morgan demanded.

The half-elf offered a slight bow. “I am Fellian Shard, and my companion, here, is Fario Ellegoth.”

Jenya stepped forward, making a slight gesture toward Morgan that was intended to be placating. "I am Jenya Urikas, cleric of Helm," she said to them.

Fellian nodded. "I know who you are, Lady, and your companions as well."

"Oh?" Mole asked. "How is it that you know us, and we've never seen you before? Other than earlier today, that is."

"Yes, perhaps you'd better start with the answers, elf," Arun growled, still not having lowered his hefty warhammer.

Fario's expression darkened, but Fellian shot him a glance, and the man subsided. "I confess that we have been monitoring your progress," Fellian said. "We share the same goals, I suspect... we, too, are investigating the disappearances, and are interested in bringing the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. We observed your visit to the orphanage, and obviously drew the same conclusions that led you to Ghelve. You apparently had better success in ferreting out the truth than we did, however," he said, including his head slightly toward the skulk prisoner.

"I don't like sneaks," Arun said, and Ruphos added, "Why didn't you just make yourselves known to us?"

"I apologize for our secrecy, but we are outsiders here, and were not certain who we could trust."

"What is your interest in this, if I might ask?" Zenna asked.

"A friend of ours was among those taken," Fario said. "A wizard named Elethor Ashstaff."

Jenya nodded. "I know of him. A fine man, he sometimes performed feats of magic at parties for the children of the leading families of the city. He disappeared just over two tendays ago."

Both half-elves nodded. "Our investigations were not fruitful, until we started observing you," Fellian said.

"Now that you have uncovered who is behind this, we would aid you, and perhaps find our comrade," Fario added.

"And we should trust you why, exactly?" Morgan said, at the same moment that Arun grumbled, "I don't trust either of..." The two men looked at each other, their expressions suggesting that they were surprised and not entirely pleased at being in such close agreement on any matter, let alone this one.

"Trust is something that must be earned, not casually granted," Fellian said. "But from what you said earlier, I suspect that you could use our aid."

"Perhaps... if you would allow me to cast a spell, to help discern the purity of your motivations?" Jenya suggested. The two half-elves shared a look, but finally Fellian

nodded. Jenya held aloft the silver symbol of her goddess, calling upon Helm's divine might. She closed her eyes, her lips moving soundlessly, and then fixed her stare firmly on both Fellian and Fario for a long minute. Neither half-elf flinched at her scrutiny, and finally she nodded.

"I sense no evil about them," she said. She turned to Ruphos. "But this is your mission, and I leave it to you to make the final decision."

Ruphos looked around at his companions, gauging their feelings. Finally he said, "Very well, you may come with us."

"Let's get moving, we've wasted enough time here," Arun growled, turning back toward the secret door.

And so the companions, now numbering six, returned to Jzadirune.

Chapter 25

With the information provided by the skulk, they were able to find the secret door without too much difficulty. It was located near the bottom of the twisting staircase that descended into Jzadirune from Ghelve's shop, and led to a short, blank corridor hidden within the stone. According to the skulk's directions, the secret passage provided access to the lift that descended into the Malachite Fortress. Whether it was guarded... well, the adventurers were too savvy to take anything for granted on that score.

"I miss Smashy," Mole said, as they moved into the corridor. Arun was still in the lead, but the half-elves were close behind, followed by the gnome and Zenna, with Ruphos again bringing up the rear. The cleric's torch was still the only light, but the half-elves were gifted with the low-light vision of their elvish parents, an ability that Mole shared as well, and of course Arun and Zenna needed no light at all. Fellian and Fario moved with a smooth grace, each seeming to complement the other, their short recurved bows ready with an arrow nocked, ready to be drawn and fired at a moment's notice. Arun could be heard to grumble every now and again as they followed him like twin shadows, but he did not offer any specific critique.

Zenna, for one, was glad to have them; although she hadn't been willing to admit it to the others, she'd been worried that the four of them alone would end up quickly in over their heads within the Malachite Fortress. Even the name seemed dark and foreboding, and the skulk's description of the slaver and his minions had been accompanied by genuine anxiety.

"The automaton was a useful ally," Ruphos said to Mole, "But we could not risk leaving it for the stalker, or any other hostile foe left in Jzadirune." With it already heavily damaged, it had only taken a pair of heavy blows from Arun's hammer, and they'd left the machine strewn in pieces in the lair of the creepers and their still-at-large leader.

The secret corridor was not lengthy, only about twenty feet long, and while they could not make out any obvious exit, the skulk had told them that they would find another hidden

door that opened onto the lift. Even as Ruphos closed the secret door to the stairs behind them, Arun started in that direction, the others close behind.

Arun went straight to the far wall and started feeling at the stone. Fellian gestured for the others to remain back a short distance. "Be wary, there might be a trap," he said. "Perhaps you should let Fario and I handle the search."

"Bah, I've worked with dozens of different kinds of secret doors; the dwarves damn near invented the things, you know. Don't be trying to tell a dwarf about stonework," Arun said, moving along the length of the wall slowly, probing and prodding along the stone, carefully examining every detail in the stone surface of the wall.

With a wry look, Fario walked up to a place near the center of the wall where the dwarf had just looked, and reached up to touch a small protrusion about four feet above the floor.

"Perhaps you need some elvish eyes," the half-elf said, venturing a slight grin that contrasted with the dwarf's scowl. A slab of stone about four feet across swung open in the wall beside the trigger, pivoting on its vertical axis, revealing a dark space beyond.

But the grin evaporated as a sudden grinding noise erupted beneath them, lasting only a split-second before the floor collapsed beneath their feet.

Arun fell like a stone, plummeting to the floor of the pit. The fall was not severe, only about ten feet, but as he hit he splashed into a mire of a thick, black, clinging goo, the substance coating the floor to a depth of a few inches. It was not enough to break his fall, but dangerous nonetheless, as became evident as the dwarf felt hot pain sizzle where the viscous substance touched his flesh.

Fario lunged out and grabbed hold of the bottom sill of the secret doorway, dropping his bow to fall into the muck below. Even as he fell against the wall of the pit, he shot out his other hand to meet Fellian's. Their hands locked together and held their grasp even as Fellian swung forward and crashed against the wall beneath Fario, the former half-elf's feet dangling just a few feet above the acidic sludge covering the floor of the pit.

Even as she heard the click, Mole leapt backward, clearing the edge of the pit by inches. She collided against Zenna, who with Ruphos had been beyond the edge of the pit, thanks to Fellian's earlier warning for them to stay back.

"Are you all right?" Zenna yelled down to Arun, who was trying to stand up. Mole put her crossbow down on the floor and slipped off her small pack, digging in it for her coil of rope.

"Argh, by Moradin's blasted beard, this stuff burns!" the dwarf cried. Still, he managed to stand and stagger to the edge of the pit under them, although there was no way for him to manage the sheer walls without help. On the far side, under the secret door, Fario continued to hold on with one hand, supporting both his weight and the weight of his friend, his face twisted into a grimace with the weight of his effort.

"Hold on!" Ruphos said to them, standing behind Mole as she found and dug out the rope.

Distracted as he was, he didn't see the shadowy forms that came into view on the far side of the portal, or the glint of steel that shone in the light of his torch.

Chapter 26

It was Zenna who first detected the danger, but too late to save them from harm.

"Look out!" she cried, hefting her crossbow.

A long shaft shot out from behind the door, flying across the pit to strike Ruphos in the shoulder. The javelin did not bite deep, his armor protecting him from serious harm, but the cleric cried out in pain and surprise, dodging back as he wrenched the head of the missile free.

Zenna fired her crossbow, but the shot glanced off of the wall just left of the door. The portal formed by the rotating secret door was a pair of slit openings, each about two feet wide and four feet high, giving whoever was behind them excellent cover. The companions on the far side of the pit caught a glimpse of a ferocious humanoid visage for a moment before another javelin came flying out, narrowly missing Zenna and caroming violently down the corridor behind them.

"I have it!" Mole cried, hurriedly unwinding the rope and tossing one end down to Arun. "Help me!" she yelled to Ruphos, offering the other end to him.

The dwarf had quickly realized what was happening, and ignoring the blazing pain that continued to sizzle up his legs he turned and hurled one of his light hammers up toward the opening. The missile shot up just a foot over the threshold where Fario held on, but they did not hear the sound of a successful impact, only the delayed thump that indicated the hammer had hit a wall somewhere beyond.

Zenna crouched down and reloaded, while Ruphos and Mole grasped onto the rope. "It's no good, he's too heavy!" Ruphos said, even before Arun had taken up the rope. "He'll pull us right in after him... we have to anchor it somewhere!"

"I'm open to suggestions!" Mole replied.

Fario, meanwhile, was slipping, his body stretched by the strain of holding he and Fellian up by one hand. The two half-elves shared a quick look, some unspoken communication passing between them in that instant, and Fellian let go. He only dropped a few feet, landing easily on the slippery surface, but the acidic slime quickly went to work on his boots, smoking where the splash of his short fall had landed it on his leggings.

Ruphos, thinking quickly, turned and dashed down the corridor back toward the first secret door. For a moment he stood there blankly, faced with a featureless stone surface, but then he remembered the location of the triggering stone and swung the rotating portal open. The gnomish door was counterweight to swing back shut when he released pressure, but before it could close again he'd wrapped the end of the rope around his

mace, and jammed it into the corner of the opening, where it was quickly wedged into place by the closing door.

“Go!” he cried back down the corridor.

The enemies behind the portal had not let up in their attack, although fortunately they had not apparently noticed the fingers hanging on at the base of the threshold. Another javelin shot out, this time aimed at Arun, thankfully glancing off of his armored torso without causing damage. A few seconds later a second shot out across at the far side of the pit, this one hitting Mole with a glancing hit that grazed her left leg.

“Ouch!” the gnome cried. She dove for her crossbow, hefting the loaded weapon and taking careful aim before firing. The bolt shot straight and true into one of the openings, where she was rewarded by a sudden cry of pain that turned into a bloody gurgle.

With Fellian’s weight removed, Fario grabbed onto the sill of the door with both hands and pulled himself up with a mighty heave. He was immediately faced with a heavily armored hobgoblin warrior, whose eyes widened with surprise as the half-elf rose up before him. The hobgoblin didn’t hesitate, eschewing the sword at his hip for the javelin that he already had in hand, thrusting the weapon like a spear at the half-elf. The javelin bit deep into his side, but Fario thrust forward anyway, tearing himself off the point and quickly drawing the shortsword from his belt. The hobgoblin backed away, trying to draw his own sword—and nearly stumbling over the body of his companion, Mole’s bolt lodged in its throat—but crumpled as Fario stabbed him in the gut, half the length of his short blade crunching through his armor into the organs underneath.

Arun had grabbed onto the rope, but hesitated as Fellian—already limping as the acid made short work of his boots—came up behind him. “Go!” he yelled, shoving the rope at him.

“You first, you’re hurt more!”

“Don’t be arguing, elf!” the dwarf roared, though the pain showed clearly in his face now as he all but dragged Fellian to the rope. The half-elf nimbly moved up the rope, although it was difficult given the current condition of his feet. Arun waited until he’d reached the lip of the pit, however, and Ruphos had pulled him over the edge, before he started up the rope. The rope had started to smoke where Fellian had touched it with his legs, but it held long enough for them the paladin to reach the relative safety of the top. Fario, meanwhile, had reappeared in the opening, waving to them that the way was now clear.

“Two dead hobgoblins,” he reported. “Well equipped, with heavy armor. It looks like this is the lift the skulk mentioned, there’s a wooden floor and a chain that connects with some sort of winch in the ceiling.”

“Good work,” Zenna said, “Especially since you were off your guard, climbing up.”

“I can’t take all the credit,” he replied. “Your markswoman there took out one, critical hit to the throat.”

“Well, he made me mad,” Mole said.

But their relief at winning past this difficult encounter quickly faded as they realized the difficulty of their current situation. All of them save Zenna were hurt, Arun seriously. His and Fellian’s boots were ruined, with only pitted leather left. Ruphos’s healing wand and Fellian’s own divine powers—the half-elf was a cleric of Shaundakul, as it happened—were able to treat their injuries, but of more pressing concern was how they were going to get across the pit.

“What about the rope?” Zenna suggested. “It should be long enough to make it across, and Fario can anchor it to something on that end...”

“The rope’s shot,” Arun broke in. “Between Fellian and I crawling up it with that stuff all over our legs, I’d not trust it to hold even the gnome here, not over that pit.”

“So what do we do?” Ruphos asked, tucking the wand back into his pouch. They were now restored somewhat, although Arun would be walking about on bare feet for the time being.

Mole drew out her map, the one that Ghelve had given them what seemed like days before. “Look, I’ll bet that the lift is this octagonal room here,” she said. “We should be able to get to it by going through these doors here, and here.”

“But we know those doors are trapped,” Zenna said.

Mole shrugged. “I don’t see another option.”

Arun hefted his hammer. “All right then,” he said. “Fario, you stay put, we’ll be there shortly. I’d stay away from the door, if I were you.” The half-elf nodded, and retreated back into the room, leaving the secret door propped slightly ajar.

Ruphos recovered his mace, and the companions set out once more.

Chapter 27

“Let’s try this way first,” Mole said, checking her map.

The passage in question was one of the side-branches of the skulk tunnels that they’d bypassed earlier. According to the map, it led back in the direction of the rooms that they wanted to get to, so Arun led them in that direction. The dwarf had insisted on maintaining his position of leadership at the front of the line, and Fellian did not further contest the issue. The half-elf moved close behind the dwarf, however, an arrow fitted to his bow.

The circular tunnel twisted and turned before straightening out once more and coming to an end beneath a steep shaft that led up to an opening in the ceiling about seven feet above them.

“Boost me up, I’ll lower the rope down to help the rest of you up,” Mole said. She’d rescued as much of her rope as wasn’t damaged by the acidic goo from the pit trap, leaving her with a segment about ten feet in length.

“I don’t like it, there might be something waiting for us up there,” Arun said.

“Well, unless you’re going to sprout wings, or can leap straight up seven feet...”

“Listen, you two,” Zenna broke in. “Whatever may be up there, it’s already heard you bickering, if it didn’t hear you coming fifty paces distant, what with all the clanking we’re making. Let’s lift Mole, but drop back down if you see anything dangerous, okay?”

Arun harrumphed, but he helped Fellian lift Mole up to the opening. The gnome nimbly leapt up into the opening, pulling herself through and disappearing from sight.

“Everything all right?” Zenna called up.

“Smells like skulk,” came the gnome’s voice, “but there’s no one here now. It’s just a little dead end-room, no obvious exists, but maybe one of those secret doors.”

“Lift me up,” Fellian said. “I’ll help her search.”

“We’ll all go,” Zenna said. “Arun, why don’t you come last, and we can all hold the rope to help you up, since you’re the heaviest.”

The dwarf grumbled some more at that, but helped each of them up in turn, then pulled himself up with the help of the rope. By the time they were all in the confines of the small chamber, Fellian had already located the secret door in the east wall, and they opened it to find the hexagonal room indicated on their map, just south of the lift. Unfortunately, that meant that there were still two of the trapped gnome-doors to navigate before they could reach Fario and the route down to the Malachite Fortress.

“I bet you’re wishing that you hadn’t destroyed Smashy now,” Mole said.

“Give it a rest, Mole,” Zenna said.

The room was mostly unremarkable, but what caught their attention immediately was a large, iron-bound chest sitting in the exact center of the chamber. Atop the chest was a small iron cage, inside which was a small brown rat. The rat, which had a white star-shaped patch of fur on its forehead, chattered excitedly as they entered the room, grasping the bars of its cage with its tiny paws.

“The locksmith’s familiar, I presume,” Zenna said.

“Ah, a treasure chest, allow me, this is my specialty,” Mole said, slinging her crossbow across her back and cracking her knuckles before starting forward. She’d barely gotten within ten paces of it, however, before the chest suddenly began to... move. A seam opened within its front, resolving into a gaping maw full of jagged teeth. Mole jumped back

in surprise, letting out a startled, “Eep!” The cage and its occupant bucked slightly at the chest-creature’s movements, although it remained fixed to its perch.

“On second thought, maybe you’d better handle it,” she said to the others.

Chapter 28

The gap-toothed mouth expanded until it crossed half the width of the chest, then it started speaking, a rough, gibbous sound that filled the confines of the chamber.

“What is it saying?” Ruphos asked, his mouth twisted into an expression of disgust.

Arun had hefted one of his throwing hammers the moment the chest had started moving, but he held his throw as he listened to the spew of gibberish coming from the chest. “It’s speaking Undercommon,” he finally said, lowering the hammer fractionally. “Or at least it’s trying to, its accent is... poor.”

“What is it saying?” Fellian asked, echoing Ruphos’s question. He, too, had his bow half-ready to fire, but the chest-monster seemed content to hold its position, not advancing any closer to them.

“It says that it doesn’t want to fight us,” the dwarf said, his expression clearly conveying his skepticism. “It claims to have been set here to guard the rat, but it doesn’t sound quite content with its current employers.”

“Maybe you should tell it that it’s now unemployed,” Zenna said.

“I don’t know, maybe we don’t want to tick it off,” Mole said. She’d unslung her crossbow, and now pointed it warily at the chest as it continued to gibber at them.

“What is it, exactly?” Fellian asked.

“It’s a mimic,” Arun said. “Aberrations, shapeshifters that are sometimes found in the deep ways of the Underdark. They can imitate just about any inanimate object, and they’re tough combatants to boot. It may not look it, but that thing weighs several thousand pounds, and you’ll feel it when it hits you.”

“All the more reason not to make it mad,” Mole added.

“Will it let us pass?” Zenna asked.

“Hold,” Arun said to them, listening to the creature’s continued babbling. He said something to it in Undercommon, and the mimic responded.

“It says that it was tasked with guarding the rat, not the entrance to the Fortress. But it’s hungry—apparently the skulks only feed it rats and spiders.”

“Yuck!” Mole said.

“It’ll let us take the rat, if we give it something tasty to eat.”

“I shudder to think what that thing might find tasty,” Fellian said.

“Well, there was those skulks we killed in the room with the floating lights,” Mole said. “It’s only been a few hours, they probably aren’t too ‘ripe’ yet.”

“So you wish to deal with this... thing, then?” Ruphos asked her.

“Well, I certainly don’t want to fight it,” the gnome replied. “And we should probably take the rat; with the skulks dead, it’ll starve to death, and it’s not like it did anything wrong.”

Arun frowned. “I do not sense evil from the creature.”

“Well then, let’s get it a meal and be on our way,” Fellian offered.

Arun said something to the mimic in Undercommon, but it reared back, its huge maw twisting in a clear expression of distaste, spitting out a response. “It doesn’t savor the idea of eating skulks,” the dwarf said. “Apparently they smell and taste rather... poor.”

Zenna raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I’d want a guard creature working for me that knows what I taste like.”

“How about those hobgoblins we fought earlier?” Mole suggested.

“Great, now I’m a waiter for an aberration,” Arun said, turning back to the creature. But the mimic seemed amenable to the idea, saying that it hadn’t eaten a hobgoblin before, and was willing to accept the opportunity.

“Well, now we just have to find a way past these doors,” Mole said, as they moved past the mimic—giving it a wide berth—and approached the circular door. The portal seemed malevolent, threatening, given what they knew about the gnomish doors and their tricky traps.

“So all of these little doors are trapped, then?” Fellian asked.

“Well, the skulks thought so,” Zenna replied. “We only tried two, and one shot out a cloud of acidic gas, and the second a blast of fire.”

“Yes, and we don’t have our special door-opener any more,” Mole pointed out. She moved ahead, and examined the door and its surrounding threshold. There was a runic mark on the door, which Mole said was a gnomish letter “R”. There was a small notch in the stone threshold to the left of the door, which Mole examined carefully before drawing back and turning back to them.

“It looks like this is a keyhole of sorts,” she said. “But we don’t have a key.”

“I’ve got a key,” Arun said, stepping forward with his warhammer readied.

Chapter 29

Arun put down his shield, and laid into the door with a mighty two-handed blow that shattered wood and echoed loudly throughout the chamber. The gnome's familiar, still imprisoned in its cage stuck to the back of the mimic, crouched down inside its prison, covering its ears with its paws.

Even as the noise of that first impact faded, twin puffs of rancid black smoke erupted out of nowhere directly in front of the door, flanking the paladin. The smoke dissolved to reveal a pair of huge rats, with ugly, matted fur that stank of rot, sharp, jagged teeth, and eyes that were pinpricks of red flame. The fiendish rats did not hesitate, instantly leaping at the dwarf's legs with snapping jaws.

"Blast!" Arun cursed, as the rats lunged at him. One failed to get a hold of him, but the second sank its teeth into his unprotected ankle, digging deeply as if the consecrated blood of the holy warrior further fueled its corrupted form.

Mole rushed forward and stabbed the rat with her sword, sliding the blade into its body just below the base of its skull. The rat convulsed and died, and Arun kicked it free with a spray of blood from his wounded ankle. The paladin turned toward his second foe, but before he could bring his hammer to bear an arrow from Fellian's bow streaked into it, skewering it.

Both rats dissolved into the same greasy smoke that had heralded their arrival, leaving only an ugly black scar on the stone floor to mark that they had ever been there at all.

Ruphos came forward, drawing out the healing wand, but Arun forestalled him. "Save your magic, priest," he said. "There's still a job to be done here."

No more evil rats appeared, and with Arun's strength behind his blows the door did not long withstand his assault. Soon they were through and into another short passage beyond, culminating in another door. Beyond this one, they knew from Mole's map, lay the lift and Furio. Mole tapped on the door, and got an answering tap in return.

"Stay back," she shouted through the door. "We're going to force the door."

Once more Arun went to work, wary of another trap. No summoned rats appeared, but as the door gave way, the wooden planks clattering free of the threshold, a field of darting streams of electrical energy filled the opening, causing their skin to tingle and their hair to stand on end even several paces away. On the far side, between the intermittent sparks, they could just make out the room beyond, and Fario standing a good distance back from the obviously dangerous portal.

"Well, now what?" Ruphos asked.

Fellian took on a distant look for a moment, then he nodded, as if answering some silent question. Through the electrical field, they could see Fario moving to the back of the far chamber, returning after a moment with a hefty shape. "Get back, quick!" Fellian said, and they all retreated moments before a limp form came crashing through the opening. With a

sizzle and the smell of roasted flesh the energy field discharged into the body of hobgoblin corpse, leaving only wisps of smoke rising from the body.

“Well, I hope the mimic likes his meals well-done,” Mole said, holding her nose.

* * * * *

A short while later, the companions, reunited once more, stood on the wooden lift, the creaking of the chain accompanied by the faint groaning of the wooden planks beneath them as they sank deeper into the mountain beneath Cauldron.

As they descended upon the lift, the stone of the shaft transitioned from the plain gray granite of Jzadirune to the glistening black sheet of malachite that presaged their ultimate destination. The six companions exchanged glances, their weapons at the ready, as the lift carried them deeper into the core of the mountain. Fario, having lost his bow in the acid pit, had taken one of the hobgoblin javelins as a temporary replacement.

Mole carried Starbrow, Keygan Ghelve’s familiar, which the mimic had handed over per the terms of their deal. The rat had made itself comfortable in her pack, occasionally sticking its head out through a gap in the cover flap to see what was going on. The others paid the creature no heed.

A door appeared, recessed into the south wall, and moments later the lift came to a halt. Above them the shaft rose up as high as they could see, the thick chain that supported the lift the only tenuous connection between them and the bright world above.

Arun was already walking to the door even before the lift had fully stopped. He glanced over his shoulder at the others. “Ready?”

Without waiting for a response, he opened the door.

Beyond the portal, which thankfully was of the familiar, non-trapped variety, they found themselves in a long hall, at least sixty feet in length. A pair of empty iron cages were suspended from the ceiling at opposite ends of the hall, dangling a good seven feet above the level of the floor. In the center of the room stood an unusually fashioned pedestal, an irregular construct that looked to be a misshapen lump of rough-hewn stone. Jutting from the pedestal were four jutting arms of stone, topped by crystalline points, pointing in the four main directions of the compass. The only other obvious exit was a door down toward the end of the hall in the east wall, near the second cage.

Warily the companions entered the room.

“I don’t like the look of that pillar,” Mole said, pointing at the squat stone column. Arun frowned, but didn’t say anything.

“We’ll check it out,” Fario said, gesturing to Fellian. The two half-elves started forward, but before they could draw near to the thing, Zenna lifted her crossbow and fired. The bolt hit the column squarely, the steel head shattering against the stone, the wooden shaft

snapping and falling to the ground a short distance away. The adventurers all turned and looked at Zenna in surprise.

“Why did you do that?” Ruphos asked.

His question was answered before Zenna could reply. The pillar shook, looking for a moment like it might crumble into pieces, but only for a second as it lurched into movement, lumbering forward awkwardly but inevitably toward them.

The half-elves shared a momentary look, then quickly launched their assault upon the strange creature. Fellian drew and fired in a single smooth motion, though his arrow, like Zenna’s, seemed to have no effect against the hard stone skin of the thing. Fario hurled his javelin, but the missile proved equally useless, glancing off of its armored skin.

“How are we supposed to hurt *that*?” Mole exclaimed, but Fario, heedless of the inefficacy of their initial attacks, drew his two swords with a practiced skill and charged toward the creature’s flank.

Even as he started ahead, the others were joining the attack. A shot from Mole’s crossbow struck truer than the others, hitting just below one of the spiky appendages that jutted from the creature’s torso and sending a fist-sized chunk of stone flying from its body. And a throwing hammer hit it a glancing blow just a heartbeat later, followed by the charging form of the dwarf as he rushed straight at it, drawing his warhammer out as he ran. Behind them came Ruphos, holding his mace with a dubious expression, as if doubting what their weapons could do against an adversary apparently fashioned from solid stone.

But those doubts did not stop them from attacking the creature, as it lumbered forward to meet them. Fario dodged its first clumsy but powerful swipe, and laid into it with his blades. His longsword struck a glancing blow that chipped away a few small pieces of stone, but his shortsword had no effect against its tough hide.

From the opposite side of the creature, Arun laid into the thing with his hammer, the full force of his charge behind his assault. His first stroke was errant, however, a powerful but misaimed blow that only glanced harmlessly off of the creature’s “head”. With a stream of curses in dwarven, the paladin recovered and continued with another attack.

A volley of missiles from the other adventurers streamed at the stone spike, but the extra caution needed to avoid hitting their comrades in melee cost them in terms of accuracy. Only Mole’s shot actually hit the creature, failing to penetrate its hide, while the shots from Zenna and Fellian narrowly missed and caromed down the length of the hall into darkness.

Ruphos, his mace in one hand and his torch in the other, circled the melee, trying to find an opening.

The creature was not idle as these attacks landed upon its stony frame. For some reason it seemed to draw back somewhat from Arun, causing another potent hammerstroke to sheer off stone instead of hitting with crushing force. But it did not restrain itself from assaulting Fario with violent force. The nimble half-elf dodged the first spinning arm, but the creature abruptly reversed direction and drove a second into his side, impaling him upon the

crystalline spike that tipped that appendage. Fario let out a gasp of pain and staggered back, somehow managing to keep standing even as blood poured from his side from the vicious wound.

Ruphos and Fellian were both moving quickly to help the injured Fario, but before they could reach him, the attention of the party was drawn to the door in the rear of the hall, as it swung ponderously open. A hulking figure trudged into the room, and the blocks of black stone that formed the floor seemed to tremble at its coming. It had the shape of a man, but stood over seven feet tall, its visage was ferocious and bestial, and its arms and legs were the size of tree trunks. It was clad in a fur garment that hung in tatters about it, and caked filth covered its body like a second skin. A falchion of huge proportions hung almost forgotten from one fat fist.

“Wait your turn!” Arun shouted at the newcomer. “We’re not done with this one yet!” He poked out at the stone spike with his hammer, not enough to hurt it, but trying to draw its attention away from the seriously injured half-elf.

The ogre regarded them all with a hard look. “More carrion for my larder. Very nice.”

It started toward the melee.

Chapter 30

Facing a deadly new foe in addition to the already dangerous one that they currently faced, the companions hastened to defend themselves.

The archers shifted their fire to the oncoming ogre as it lumbered down the hall toward them. Fellian, who’d been circling the raging melee with the stone spike to get to Fario, turned reluctantly from his stricken friend and fired a shaft from his shortbow down the length of the hall. The arrow hit, sticking in the rotten furs that covered its mangy hide, but it did not appear to phase the beast in the slightest as it picked up speed, running toward them. Zenna’s shot missed entirely, while Mole cursed as her bow misfired, the string jamming the bolt into the mechanism.

Arun slammed the stone spike again, yet once more his hammer failed to do more than jar the creature. He did finally get its attention, though, and the spike shifted toward him, its arms stabbing out toward him. On the far side of the melee, the wounded Fario, refusing to retreat, used that opening to attack the creature once more. Realizing that his twin-sword attacks had little chance of penetrating, he dropped his shortsword, and with both hands on the hilt of his longsword, drove the weapon with the full force he could muster into the body of the monster. The sword rang as it struck the thing’s stone skin, but after a moment of resistance it slid up to the length of its hilt into the elemental’s body. The stone spike quivered, a single plaintive sound issuing from deep within its frame, and then collapsed into a heap of rubble.

Even as their first foe fell, however, the ogre rushed to join the battle against the hard-pressed pair. Arun let out a deep growl that rumbled from his chest like a boulder rolling down a steep slope. He charged the ogre, his hammer raised high to smite the foul

creature. Fario, heedless of his own serious wounds, was just an instant behind him, just as eager to strike down this latest adversary. Behind him, Ruphos held his healing wand and bit his lip in frustration as the injured warrior charged out of his reach.

But the ogre seemed just as eager to meet its attackers, and as Arun charged it raised its falchion and brought the heavy weapon down in an inevitable downward arc toward the dwarf's head. However, the dwarf, was, like all of his race, used to dealing with foes bigger and stronger than himself. As the ogre slashed downward Arun hurled himself to the side, catching the powerful stroke on his heavy shield and deflecting it harmlessly aside. The dwarf's momentum carried him forward, and as he passed by the hulking ogre he slammed his hammer into its side with powerful force. The blow would have laid a hobgoblin soldier out on his back, gasping out the last moments of its life, but the ogre merely smiled down at him, fat gobs of slobber dripping from the uneven gaps in its ugly black teeth.

Fario rushed in from the far side of the creature, stabbing with his sword into the ogre's torso. His longsword cut through the ragged furs that covered its body, but the flesh underneath was tougher than boiled leather, and his thrust failed to penetrate. Fellian, shooting over the darting form of his friend, shot another arrow high into the ogre's chest, but like his first shot, it seemed to have little effect upon the massive creature.

Back on the far side of the hall, Mole yanked the jammed bolt out of her bow, but cursed as one end of the bowstring popped off of its mounting. In frustration she threw down the bow, drew her sword, and rushed forward. Zenna, who'd just finished reloading her own bow, saw her and cried out, "No, Mole!" But she too, ultimately, followed, moving around the body of the destroyed stone spike to line up a clear shot at the ogre.

"So, you're a tough one, eh?" Arun said, bringing his hammer around for another swing. The ogre moved faster this time, however, and it brought its falchion around in a low sweep that the dwarf couldn't dodge. He grunted in pain as heavy blade caught him in the side, the force of its impact only partially stopped by the metal scales that covered his torso. Even as the blade dug into his muscled torso his training and experience kicked in, and he spun with the blow and returned to a slightly wobbly defensive stance. The ogre chuckled and brought the blade up once more as it finished its follow-through, the arc of the falchion leaving a spattering of the paladin's blood behind it on the stone floor of the hall.

Ruphos rushed boldly forward, though his destination was not the ogre, but rather the injured Fario. He lifted the healing wand, a blue glow already forming around its head, and darted in with it thrust like a dagger to impart its magic to his stricken companion. Fario, his attentions taken up by the desperate struggle with the ogre, did not notice the cleric coming up behind him, but the ogre, turning from its powerful hit on the dwarf, did see him.

The two lunged at the half-elf as one, the falchion pounding through the swordsman's guard, batting his parry aside before digging a cruel gash in his exposed shoulder. But for the half-elf's quick dodge back, it would have been a lot worse, perhaps taking his head as well. Even so, with the loss of blood from his other injury, Fario staggered and crumpled. Even as he fell, the healing energies from Ruphos's wand closed his wounds and stabilized him, but that power was not enough to bring the crippled warrior back to consciousness.

All too aware of the massive adversary standing over them, Ruphos dropped his mace and his torch, grabbed onto the half-elf by his shoulders, and dragged him back out of the melee.

Unfortunately, he underestimated the ogre's reach.

"Ruphos, look out!" Mole cried, seeing what the cleric, intent on his task, hadn't.

The falchion clipped him lightly on the arm, almost a light brush at the fullest extent of the ogre's reach. That light contact, however, was from a steel edge backed by the considerable force of the ogre's mass, and the steel tore through the cleric's mail links covering the upper part of his bicep, slicing neatly through the flesh underneath. Ruphos cried out and fell over Fario's limp form, clutching at the wound that was pouring a runnel of hot blood down the length of his arm.

But after a moment he grimaced, pulling himself back up and grabbing hold of Fario once more with his good arm. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he pulled the unconscious fighter to safety.

The ogre took a step forward as if to pursue, ignoring the dwarf behind him as Arun landed yet another ineffectual blow on his fat, flabby torso. The stream of dwarven profanities continued apace, but the ogre ignored that too, lumbering after its retreating victims.

It drew up short, however, as Fellian leapt into the breach, his bow discarded and now replaced by his drawn longsword. The ogre slashed down at him as he rushed in, but the half-elf leapt forward into a roll that carried him under the path of the stroke. The edge of the falchion struck sparks on the hard black stone of the floor even as Fellian rolled back to his feet and thrust at the ogre's body with his sword. Unfortunately, he found the ogre's unnaturally tough hide as tough as his companions had, and the blow failed to penetrate.

The ogre lifted its weapon to strike this new foe down, but turned as a shrill voice drew its attention to the side.

"Hey, ugly! Sheesh, do you, like, *bathe* in your own filth, or what?"

"I cut you in half, little girl, then I bathe in your blood," the ogre said, slicing down at Mole as the gnome darted in from the flank. But Mole was quicker, easily avoiding the clumsy backstroke and dashing in to stab her sword into the monster's hairy leg. The blade sank only half its length into the thick limb, but it was quite clear from the ogre's reaction that it felt *that* attack.

"I crush you!" it shouted, rearing up before slamming the injured leg down on the gnome rogue. She wasn't there when the limb hit, however, having rolled out of the way, and as its foot slammed heavily into the ground, a new look of pain crossed the ogre's features.

"I see your brains are as defective as your sense of smell," piped the gnome's voice from below.

“Blast you blasted giant, go down!” roared Arun, attacking once more as the frustrated dwarf threw all caution aside and virtually hurled himself at the ogre. His hammer came up into its gut, but as the ogre spun around, still trying to find out where Mole had gone, it only smacked loudly but ineffectually against its fat belly. Almost carelessly it dropped one fat fist from the hilt of its falchion, and punched the dwarf in the face. Arun staggered drunkenly back, his head ringing from the force of the blow, but within moments his eyes cleared, and his expression became one of unadulterated fury.

“Oh, I’ll do you for that,” he said. Shrugging off his shield, he hefted his hammer with both hands, and with a dwarven battlecry rushed back into the fray.

But the ogre was already in trouble, confounded by the efforts of the two rogues that faced it. Fellian and Mole worked together without the need for open conversation, flanking the massive brute. Mole continued to taunt it, and luck was with her as the ogre missed with yet another potent but clumsy swing. That gave Fellian an opening; even though the half-elf lacked Fario’s strength and skill of arms, he was able to work his sword into a crease in the ogre’s bulbous torso and dig a nasty cut that spilled forth hot red blood across the black stone floor. The ogre, stung by that attack, turned to smite the half-elf, a foolish decision given the proven threat of Mole. The gnome wasn’t a warrior, and she barely came up to the ogre’s knee, but she leapt up and sank the entire length of her small sword into the back of the monster’s thigh.

It was already going down when Arun leapt up and bashed its skull in with a two-handed smite from his hammer.

“Eww,” Mole said, making a face as she gingerly tried to recover her sword from the dead ogre’s leg. The weapon was slick from the blood of the monster, and she needed Arun’s help to finally drag it free.

Zenna had gone to help Ruphos and Fario during the final moments of the battle, but the cleric had recovered enough to heal both himself and the half-elf fighter with his healing wand. Fellian drew out a scroll and went to help Arun, but drew back as the paladin threw down his hammer in disgust and walked away.

“What’s the matter?” Zenna asked. Mole had gone to recover her crossbow, but she paused to kick through the remnants of the stone spike, verifying that some precious item hadn’t been secreted on the body of the elemental thing.

“Blasted thing’s cursed!” the dwarf spat. “Couldn’t hit that blasted bastard for bloody blasted squat! Baargh!”

Fellian strode up, still holding the scroll. “That was no ordinary ogre,” he said. “I don’t know what manner of thing it was, but its skin was... unnaturally resilient, and it shrugged off hits that should have slain two such beasts. It is no failure to admit difficulty in fighting such a thing.”

The dwarf met the half-elf’s look with a square gaze. Finally he said, “Bah!” and went to recover his hammer. He grumbled something not quite clearly audible, but what sounded like a threat directed at the weapon should it continue in its failure to perform. He let Fellian

cast his spells of healing from his scroll, restoring much of the damage he'd suffered at the hands of the ogre.

With the elemental creature and the ogre both slain, the companions recovered the rest of their weapons and searched the rest of the hall. Fario spotted another secret door on the far end of the hall from where they had entered, but they let it be for the moment. The ogre smelled even worse in death than it had in life, so after a cursory examination to verify that it wasn't carrying anything of value, they gave the corpse a wide berth. Mole did find an iron key on a throng stuck through its belt, so she kept that.

They looked into the chamber from which the ogre had emerged, but didn't get any further than the door. The stench that roiled from beyond was an almost palpable thing, like a cloud that hung in the air and poured into their lungs with eager tendrils on every breath. The chamber beyond the door was a rectangular space perhaps twenty feet across and thirty feet wide, and every square foot of floor space, every corner, was jammed with refuse. It covered the floor, rising and falling in heaps like waves, forming mounds as high as a few feet in places. Mole, possessed of perhaps the most sensitive nose of all of them, staggered back, looking ill, but through it she still managed to point to a particular heap of filth on the far side of the room to their left.

"Ith that a cheth?" she asked, holding her nose.

Fellian peered at the indicated site. "Perhaps, it looks like some sort of rectangular object, under all that muck," he said. "I'm not going in there to see, though... feel free, if you wish."

Mole looked hopefully up at Ruphos, but the cleric shook his head. "We're not here for that," he told her. "We have to find the children."

"Well, drat," Mole said. But she still managed to look relieved when Fario pushed the heavy door shut.

With that, they turned to the secret door.

Chapter 31

The door, a foot-thick, rectangular panel set into the black stone of the wall, opened easily at Fario's nimble touch. Light and smoke spilled out over them, as they looked into the space beyond.

It was a chamber of considerable size, a square room perhaps forty feet on a side. The ceiling was a vaulted dome that rose up a good twenty feet or more above them. Directly under the apex of that dome, in the center of the room, stood an imposing nine foot statue of a dwarf warrior. Carved of black malachite, that stern-faced figure faced toward them, clad in armor and holding a double-bladed battleaxe haft-up with its blades touching the floor at its feet. Someone had draped a tangled mass of chains over the top of the statute, wrapped in numerous loops around its neck, torso, and arms.

In each of the four corners of the room rested a free-standing stone brazier of unusual make. Carved into the form of a xorn, those three-armed denizens of the Elemental Plane of Stone, each was topped by a mouth full of brightly glowing coals that issued a faint but constant stream of smoke into the chamber. Double doors were situated in the center of the walls to their left and right, the ones to the right secured with a heavy iron bar.

Although the wisps of stray smoke partially obscured the chamber, it was instantly obvious that the place was occupied. Standing by each set of doors stood a pair of heavily armored hobgoblin warriors, who spotted the companions almost immediately after the door opened. Drawing their swords, they rushed to attack.

Fario leaned forward, but before he could enter the room Arun pushed roughly past him, unapologetically placing himself a few paces on the far side of the door, shield and hammer prepared to meet the enemy charge. The elves were quick to follow, and as they entered, one of the hobgoblins barked a command, and one of the four broke off and ran toward the double doors to the south.

He almost made it before Fellian's arrow slammed into his back. The hobgoblin staggered forward, falling to his knees directly before the portal. For a moment he clung to consciousness, and even managed to drag himself to his feet, clutching the handle of the door. Then a bolt from Mole's crossbow caught him in the side, and he crumpled.

Arun met the hobgoblin charge with a clang and clatter of metal on metal. The first sword stroke he took on his shield, and the second glanced off of an armored shoulder, but the third got within his guard and drew a line of red across his upper bicep. The hobgoblins fought well together, moving to flank the dwarf, but Fario's quick arrival helped even the odds. Their initial counters were met by expert parries or were deflected by the heavy layers of banded armor worn by the hobgoblins, but they in turn were confounded by Arun's heavy shield and Fario's quick dodges.

But then the rest of the companions joined the battle, and the tide quickly turned. Fellian rushed in to flank Fario's opponent, and caught between the two half-elves the hobgoblin was quickly dispatched. Arun's two foes had caught him in a flanking move, but one found himself flanked in turn as Mole darted in behind him, her sword flashing at its legs. The hobgoblin was sufficiently aware to dodge that new attack, but the distraction was enough for Arun to bring his hammer up in a powerful smash that connected decisively with the side of its head.

The last hobgoblin gave ground in a fighting retreat, trying to make for the southern doors where its comrade already lay dead. As it retreated, Zenna shot at it with her crossbow, but her shot was deflected away by its armor. That protection could not, however, save it from the half-elves, who, unencumbered by such heavy garb, moved quickly to block its escape. The hobgoblin threw itself at Fario, trying to at least take one foe with it, but was run through by Fellian before it could land a blow.

Quiet returned to the chamber as the last hobgoblin crumpled. Fario and Fellian were quick to verify that each of their enemies was truly slain, finishing the task with a quick thrust when necessary. Meanwhile, Arun crossed to the unbarred double doors to the

south, dragging the body of the dead hobgoblin there out of the way and watching just in case the noise of the brief fracas had drawn the attention of more guards.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s more of them beyond those doors, since they were so keen on getting there,” Ruphos said.

“The leader ordered that one to get reinforcements,” Zenna confirmed, glancing at the statue briefly as she moved to where the others were gathering near the southern doors. Mole, however, lagged behind, her attention more fully drawn by the huge stone figure of the dwarf hero.

“You speak hobgoblin?” Ruphos asked in surprise.

“Goblinoid, actually,” Zenna replied. “The tongue is shared by goblins, hobgoblins, bugbears, and a few other races of similar bloodline. It was a useful tongue to know, where I was from.”

Ruphos’s expression showed that he was curious, and might have welcomed more explanation, but Zenna abruptly turned away, deliberately focusing her attention elsewhere—on the barred doors to the north, on the strange braziers in the corners, on the vaulted ceiling high above—anywhere but on the cleric.

Mole’s voice drew their attention back to the center of the room. “Those are gemstones, I think—the statue’s eyes, look!” Even as she finished, she’d already shrugged out of her backpack, placing it and her crossbow in a neat pile on the ground, and was heading for the base of the construct.

“Mole, just leave it be,” Zenna said, with a hint of exasperation in her voice. “We’re not here for that... look, watch out for those chains...” With her sharp vision, she could clearly make out the jagged hooks and sharp blades hooked in and among the links of the mess of chains that covered much of the upper half of the statue.

“Bah, I can climb around them,” she said, and in fact she was already halfway up the statue, working her way up the haft of its massive stone axe before grasping onto its forearms, careful to avoid the enfolding links of chain and the sharp cargoes attached to them. Arun, engaged in quiet conversation with the half-elves by the door, shot them an impatient look, but did not move to interfere.

“Mole, I don’t think you should do that,” Ruphos said tentatively. “I’ve got a bad feeling...”

“You worry too much,” she shot back, having reached a point well up atop the statue’s chest, her attention now on its face. Its eyes were shining orbs of pure black, the face of the gnome girl reflected in their depths in the smoky light from the braziers. Her dagger popped into her hand from its hidden sheath in her boot, and she leaned forward, a focused look on her face.

“Mole, look out!” Zenna screamed, a moment before the gnome cried out in pain and surprise. The mass of chains had shifted slightly, and with only that subtle warning, a strand of links untwined from one of the statue’s fat arms and shot out at Mole. The gnome,

intent on her prize, had not noticed the telltale motion that Zenna had seen, so she could not react as the length of chain slammed into her back. The barbs and hooks attached to the link dug into the chain links of her armor shirt, and her dagger fell from her grip as she slipped from her perch, falling end over end to clatter noisily against the stone floor eight feet below. The rogue would have followed a moment later, but even as she started to fall, another length of chain shot out from around the back of the statue, whipping around her torso and dragging her roughly against the hard stone. The mass of chains was now alive with movement, and new strands of hooked and bladed links were continuing to work themselves free while the bulk of it remained firmly anchored to the top half of the statue.

“Ow! Help, it’s got me... aaaaaahhhhh!”

Mole screamed again as the chains wrapped around her body tightened their grip, the sharp hooks and barbs piercing her clothes and digging into her flesh. She tried to reach for her sword, but couldn’t get to it through the terrible strands that pinned her body against the statue. Looking down, she saw Zenna and the others, concern for her written in fear across their faces, rushing toward the statue, but then there was only the pain. Twisting helpless in the firm grasp of the chains, she caught a glimpse of the face of the statue, looking down at her from above, and to her it seemed to be laughing at her, berating her for the foolishness that had gotten her into this mess.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she sobbed, and then the pain claimed her.

Chapter 32

“Mole!” Zenna cried again, feeling something wrench deep inside of her as she watched the animated chain-creature wrap around her friend, crushing and tearing her diminutive form.

The companions leapt into action with Zenna’s first shout of warning. Ruphos ran forward and leapt up atop the statue’s base, trying to reach the trapped gnome, but staggered as one of the strands of chain whipped out across his face. Blood erupted into the air as the jagged edges caught and tore the flesh across his jaw, and he fell back, dazed from the force of the impact. The young cleric, however, shook his head and with determination in his blood-streaked face he hefted his mace and waded in again. He smashed at the creature, but only struck sparks as his blow glanced off the links and smashed against the black malachite of the statue’s chest.

The half-elves were quick to act, charging together toward the statue, spreading out to come at it from both sides. Fellian fired an arrow, careful to avoid targeting any part of the thing near Mole, and while the steel arrowhead slammed full-force into a link of chain, shattering it, the rest of the creature seemed barely affected. Fario dodged a slashing strand of chain and hacked at it with his sword after it shot past. The result of his efforts was merely a notch on his masterwork blade, and he quite nearly lost his grip on the weapon.

Arun did not hesitate, rushing straight for the statue. The mass of chains had dragged Mole up near the head of the statue, out of the easy reach of the adventurers. The gnome’s struggles grew fainter as they watched, which seemed to drive the dwarf even

more strongly into action. As he ran he shrugged off his heavy shield, which clattered noisily to the floor, and hefted his hammer in both hands. With a cry to his stern god he leapt up and slammed the hammer two-handed square into the densest part of the mass of chains that he could reach. The entire network quivered with the force of the impact, and the statue itself seemed to shake. Mole let out a piteous moan as the chain-creature seemed to tighten its grip in retaliation, but the trapped girl fell limp, slipping into the grasp of unconsciousness.

Zenna rushed at the statue, frustration written clearly on her face, but Ruphos caught hold of her and drew her roughly back. "No, Zenna!"

"It's killing her!" she cried.

"You won't help her by joining her!" Ruphos shouted roughly, pushing her back before turning to rush back into the fray. Fellian had advanced to just outside the chain-thing's reach, and fired another arrow into its form, shattering another link of chain with a direct hit. Fario continued his assault from the far side of the statue, although his longsword wasn't well-suited to harming such a creature. The mass of chains had drawn itself up higher around the bulk of the statue, wrapped around its neck and barrel chest, clutching Mole like a child holding to a prized toy.

A visceral growl built in Arun's chest. A chain lashed across his arm, trying to grab hold of his hammer. He dropped the weapon before the chain could grab hold, and hurled himself forward at the statue. Another chain lashed him like a whip across the back and shoulders, but he shrugged off the pain of the impact. The dwarf hurled himself up with a surprising burst of strength and speed, and while he could not reach anywhere near Mole, he dug his hands into the mass of the construct. Ignoring the pain as sharp points tore into his thick hands, he pulled himself up bodily, planted his feet against the stone shield slung across the back of the statue, and *pulled*.

The animated mass of chains lashed out with a terrible and chaotic frenzy. A stray length caught Arun in the face, drawing a vicious gash across his forehead that trailed blood down in multiple streams through his eyes and into his beard. But the dwarf maintained his grip, his face tightening with the effort as his thick arms and legs strained with all of his strength against the metal links of the construct. On the other side of the statue, Fellian and Ruphos both attacked, the cleric sundering one of the chains anchoring the creature with a solid blow from his mace.

With a suddenness that caught them all off guard the chains suddenly gave way, the entire mass tumbling down upon the dwarf as both plummeted to the ground. Fario was there in an instant, ready to strike, but the chains had stopped moving, their animating force sundered by the damage wrought upon it. Zenna and Ruphos arrived just a heartbeat later, both quickly digging through the mess of links and hooks and sharp edges to try and free the small figure trapped in their embrace.

Mole wasn't moving, and her body was a mess of cuts and punctures, the hooks digging into her flesh, the chains drawn tight against her body in a fatal embrace. Tears fell down Zenna's face in a torrent as she pulled her friend free, heedless of the cuts to her own hands in the process.

“Mole, don’t,” she cried. “Don’t leave me, please...”

Ruphos had drawn out his wand, and as the tiefling pulled her friend into her embrace he activated its power, pouring healing energy into the ravaged body of the gnome girl. But she did not stir.

Fario helped Arun to his feet, the dwarf barely standing himself in the face of the battering he’d taken. The dwarf joined the others, standing around the kneeling woman and the friend she clutched to her.

“Is she...” Fario asked, unable to put it into words.

“Damn it!” Ruphos cursed, pouring more healing energy from the wand into the stricken rogue. But the girl remained limp, unmoving...

And then, her body trembled, and Mole stirred, gasping as she drank in a deep draught of air that turned into a wracking cough. Her eyes opened, blinking in confusion and the lingering memory of pain.

“Oh gods, that *hurt*,” she said weakly.

“Oh, Mole,” Zenna said, wiping the tears from her face.

“Thanks, guys,” she said, looking up at all of them, and the smiles that accompanied the multiple sighs of relief that came from the circle of her companions.

Chapter 33

“Now, promise me that you won’t do anything that stupid again!” Zenna said, still hovering protectively over her friend.

“I promise, as long as you promise to not let me!” Mole swore. The rogue looked much better now that Ruphos had fully restored her using the wand, although she was still pale and her gaze never quite made it back to the statue that loomed over all of them in the center of the room.

Battered by their struggle against the chain-monster, the companions had taken some time to rest and recover. Arun and Ruphos had consumed the potions give to them by Jenya, healing most of the damage they’d taken from the chain-monster’s attacks. Ruphos reported that the healing wand was nearly depleted of power, another reminder that they had to be especially careful from here on out.

Finishing their search of the room, Fellian uncovered another secret door, a panel in the wall opposite the one through which they’d entered. Leaving that for the moment, they elected to take a quick look behind the barred northern doors. Arun lifted the heavy bar, laying it carefully to the side before returning to face the thick portals.

“Clearly this was designed to keep *something* out,” Fellian commented.

“Careful,” Zenna cautioned. After what had just happened to Mole, no one offered a comment this time.

Arun pushed open one of the doors. They were thick, with several layers of thick planks reinforced with sturdy bands of iron. That, at least, explained why nothing had been drawn by the noise they’d made in the room. As soon as Arun was able to get the door open enough to see the dark space beyond, they could hear a whistling sound, a cavernous noise of air moving through vast spaces underground.

Ruphos’s torch cast a fitful glow in a radius just bright enough to indicate that the space beyond was much greater. They stood upon a broad stone ledge facing a gaping chasm, over which a stone bridge arced over to the far side. All around them was a great dark, with other faintly audible sounds in the distance that could have been anything.

“What is this place?” Ruphos breathed.

“The Underdark,” Arun said.

Most of them started at that, for most of the surface-dwellers of Faerûn had at least heard of that vast network deep under the sunlit surface of the world, a place full of terrible dangers and strange wonders in the legends and fables of those above. It was the home for some of the most powerful and mysterious races of the Realms; the drow, the duergar, the illithids, and others whose names were known only to sages.

“Are you certain?” Zenna asked. “I did not realize that we were that far underground.”

Arun looked up at her. “I know,” he said. “I can smell it in the air, *feel* it... all my people can. There are numerous places where the network connects to the surface world, like under the Great Rift where the holds of the gold dwarves lay.”

“We’ve heard stories,” Mole said. “None of them made it sound like a very nice place.”

“Indeed,” Arun said, his hand tightening noticeable on the haft of his great hammer.

“Let us return to the fortress,” Ruphos said, his voice tight. “Our goal does not lie within these tunnels.”

Grimly, they turned and retreated to the statue-chamber, closing and rebarring the heavy doors behind them. Next they made their way to the secret door, Fario opening it to reveal a short passage beyond that culminated in two plain wooden doors.

The half-elf warrior led the way, with Arun clunking along close behind. The nimble strides of the half-elf contrasted sharply with the heavy steps of the dwarf, but the effectiveness of both had been proven already on this mission. The others followed as they made their way to the doors. Fario listened at both, but shook his head.

“Let’s try this one,” Mole suggested, starting toward the right door. Arun, however, blocked her with his shield. The girl looked up at him with a frown.

“Look, I appreciate you saving my life and all, but you don’t have to coddle me.”

“No,” the dwarf replied. “But if there’s trouble behind that door, the elves and I should go in first.”

“He’s right, Mole,” Zenna said. “You don’t have to prove anything to us.”

Mole looked up at all of them, nodded—somewhat reluctantly, it seemed—and gave way.

Fario nodded to the dwarf, and opened the door.

Immediately a potent stench overwhelmed the companions, and they looked upon a dank chamber decorated in a disturbing fashion. Nooks had been carved into the walls, and were festooned with an array of polished skulls of various shapes and sizes. In between those grisly ornaments, poorly cured hides were stretched and fastened to the walls. The center of the room was dominated by a great chair apparently fashioned from bones, its high back surmounted by a great draconic skull. Behind this, in the far corner, they could see a nest of carrion and sprouting fungi, likely the source of the rank odor that filled the place.

“Disgusting,” Fario said.

“The quarters of the master of this place, perhaps?” Fellian suggested.

“In any case, he doesn’t seem to be at home,” Ruphos said. “We’d best press on.”

“We should check it out, make sure there’s nothing of importance here,” Mole said. She started forward, but again Arun forestalled her.

“We’ll come back if need be,” the dwarf said. “First things first.”

The gnome sighed, and fell in with the others as they moved to the second door. Once again Fario took up a position against the portal, checking to make sure that the others were ready before he pushed it open.

This room was both lit and occupied. Another of the iron cages dangled from the ceiling, this one containing a small, two-foot beetle with glands behind its eyes that shed a ruddy, reddish glow. The place was clearly a guardroom, with four beds about the perimeter and a table and benches in the center. A pair of hobgoblins sat at the table, eating and drinking, while another pair were sleeping in two of the beds. A single door in the far wall was the only obvious exit.

The hobgoblins looked up as the door opened, and quickly grabbed their weapons as they spotted the intruders.

“Brak-geddek!” one of the cried, as they leapt to the attack.

“Here we go again,” came Mole’s voice from within the knot of adventurers.

Chapter 34

Fario and Arun leapt through the doorway almost together, meeting the hobgoblins as they rose from their benches to attack. Fario darted forward, and in some unspoken harmony ducked just in time for Fellian’s arrow to slice over him and hit one of the hobgoblins in the shoulder. Unfortunately, the arrow failed to penetrate the warrior’s heavy armor, but it distracted it just enough for Fario to draw first blood, a quick slice to its leg from his longsword that scored through the layered banded armor.

Arun rushed at the second hobgoblin, which rushed around the table to meet him. The dwarf almost casually batted away its thrust with his shield, following with a punishing blow from his hammer that crumpled the hobgoblin’s breastplate, driving it roughly to the ground.

The dwarf turned to aid Fario, but the battle was already wrapping up. The two sleeping hobgoblins had stirred quickly once the melee had started, but they were slow to react, reaching for their weapons clumsily as they tried to shake off the haze of sleep. One managed to draw its sword just in time to take two hits from Zenna and Mole’s crossbows, collapsing back into its bed as it bled out its last moments. The second picked up a javelin and hurled it at the adventurers, narrowly missing Fellian. It reached for its sword, but dropped the weapon as the half-elf’s return shot lodged in the meat of its arm. It tried to pick up the scabbarded blade with its other hand, but came up short as Ruphos confronted it, his mace raised to strike.

“Surrender or die,” he commanded. The hobgoblin looked at the center of the room, where the last of its companions had just fallen to Fario’s sword, snarled, and complied.

* * * * *

“Tell it that it had better reveal where those children are, or there’ll be this to answer to,” Arun said, hefting his warhammer.

Zenna spoke to the hobgoblin in its own tongue, repeating Arun’s question. The hobgoblin snarled, uttered something, and spat. They’d pulled the arrow from its arm and allowed it to wrap the wound in an old shirt, but it was clearly still in a lot of pain. That clearly hadn’t overcome its sour attitude toward them, however.

“Enough of this!” Arun shouted, grabbing onto the hobgoblin by the throat and dragging it roughly to its feet. Ruphos took a step forward, but frowned, turning away but saying nothing as the dwarf hefted his hammer and ended it with a single punishing blow. The two half-elves regarded him with unreadable expressions.

“I don’t expect we’ll get much out of him now,” Fellian commented.

“Enough!” Arun repeated, his anger growing rather than easing now that the last enemy was dead. “We’ve wasted enough time here. Come on, let’s find those captives!”

Zenna shot a concerned look at Mole, but the gnome was already falling in behind the dwarf as he crossed to the far door and all but threw it open. Beyond it, rather than more enemies to crush, lay another long corridor, running along the edge of a deep chasm that dropped off to the left. The elves shared a look but took up their weapons and moved to follow.

Zenna looked at Ruphos, who still hadn't moved. "Are you all right?" she asked, touching his shoulder with her hand.

He looked at her and smiled sadly. "Sorry. This hasn't been easy for me... all of this."

"I don't think it has been, for any of us," she said. "Come, we'd better catch up to the others."

He hesitated. "Could I ask a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Would you lower your cowl for a moment? I'd like to look at you, the real you, for a moment."

She bit her lip. "There's no time..."

"Please, just for a moment."

She glanced at the door—the others had already gone—and nodded, pulling back her cowl. She flushed slightly at his stark gaze, but he only looked, and finally nodded.

"Thank you," he said. "And I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For judging when I had no right," he said. He took up his mace, and lifted his torch. "Let's go."

He hurried after the others, and Zenna followed him, lifting her cowl back into place as she departed.

* * * * *

The corridor south of the guardroom ran along the edge of a deep chasm to their left. A chill seemed to rise up from somewhere below, and a faint dampness hung in the air.

Across the chasm, perhaps thirty or forty feet across from them, rose a sheer cliff wall atop which stood the black stone walls of the Fortress. Ahead a stone bridge stretched across the gap, and some distance beyond that they could see windows high in the fortress wall overlooking the chasm, narrow slits through which a faint light could be seen.

Arun had headed straight ahead, toward the bridge, but instead of turning to cross it he instead turned right, to where a stone door was recessed into a short passage opposite the bridge. The corridor also continued ahead along the edge of the chasm for a good distance, ending in what looked like another door about forty feet beyond the bridge.

As Zenna and Ruphos hastened to rejoin their companions, the wizard glanced up at a tall dwarven statue set into the high wall to her right, facing outward toward the chasm. The statue, nine feet tall and fashioned out of white marble, depicted a female dwarven warrior, clad in plate armor and brandishing a dwarven urgosh. Another statue, of a similarly clad male warrior, stood on the opposite side of the bridge. Zenna stared at the statues in amazement; the stonework was incredible, and somehow these silent sentinels did not contain the foreboding that clung to the warrior statue they'd encounter earlier.

But there was no time for further reflection on the matter, as Arun was already opening the door.

The heavy stone door opened slowly, revealing yet another passage beyond. Arun grunted and started down the corridor, barely hesitating as Zenna caught up to him.

"Slow down, Arun. We're not going to help anyone if we rush into danger unprepared."

"I've had enough of tiptoeing around this place," the dwarf returned. But he waited until everyone was ready before he started down the passageway. Behind them, Ruphos eased the heavy door shut.

Ahead of them, the passageway split into two branches, heading to their left and right. Arun headed toward that intersection, but hesitated, the others coming to a halt behind him.

"What's the matter?" Mole asked.

"Something's not right here," the dwarf said. "The echoes are wrong..."

He didn't get a chance to elaborate, as a metallic grinding noise suddenly filled the corridor. Its source wasn't immediately evident, but it was close, and it seemed to come from somewhere *behind* the wall to their right.

Frowning, Mole reached out and touched the wall... and her hand passed through it as if it wasn't there.

"An illusion!" she said.

"Get back!" Arun shouted, heading toward her even as the noise grew louder. Mole's eyes widened and she stepped back, but not quickly enough as a metallic figure emerged from the wall, swinging a massive iron hammer that came crashing down toward her.

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The automaton had the look of a bulky, armored gnome, with a nasty pincer at the end of one metal arm and a huge iron hammer on the other that made Arun's weapon seem a toy by contrast. As it appeared through the illusory wall it attacked Mole, driving that weapon downward with great force.

At the last instant the gnome hopped back, out of the direct path of the hammer as it smashed into the floor with enough force to crack the hard black stone. Even though the move saved her life, the hammer's edge still clipped her with enough force to send her sprawling.

Even faced with such a strange and deadly foe, the companions did not hesitate. Fario and Fellian attacked as one, flanking the creature as they hacked at it with their swords. Fario eschewed his typical two-swords style for a single thrust from his longsword in an attempt to penetrate the thing's armor, but despite his best efforts his blade merely scratched off of the automaton's thick metal skin. Fellian fared no better, even though the metal monstrosity was turned partly away from him toward his companion.

Arun, partially blocked from the automaton by Fario, turned and ran through the illusory wall to come at it from behind. As he passed through the illusory barrier, though, he found himself face to face with a second automaton. This one was clearly damaged, with several rents in its metal skin, and instead of attacking immediately, it simply stood there, making a whirring noise and spinning its pincer arm in a continuous motion.

Arun didn't question his good fortune, instead hefting his hammer and launching himself at the thing. "There's one more in here!" he shouted, to warn his companions.

Those companions found themselves rather busy at that moment, so they could not immediately move to the aid of the dwarf. Zenna helped Mole up to her feet, pulling her out of the raging melee. Mole dug her healing potion out of her pouch, uncorking the vial and downing the precious fluid in a single gulp.

Ruphos joined the half-elves in attacking the automaton, smashing at it with his mace. His attack had no greater luck than theirs, however, clanging against its hard outer shell without effect.

"This thing's invulnerable!" he cried.

"Keep attacking! Find a weakness!" Fario shouted back.

The automaton turned toward him, as if drawn by his words. The thing's pincer arm shot out and snapped around his body, holding him fast within its iron grasp. Thus held, there was little that the half-elf could do as the huge hammer came up, poised to strike.

"No!" Fellian cried, knowing that there was nothing he could do. But then, before the killing blow landed, the automaton abruptly hesitated, a quiver passing through its metallic body as the heavy hammer head simply hung there in the air. The thing did not release its tight hold on Fario, however, and the elf's struggles seemed of little use against its solid grip.

Trying to capitalize on what they'd learned from the pulverizer above in Jzadirune, Zenna shouted a command in gnomish for the automaton to cease its attacks and release Fario. This one, however, did not respond, and suddenly its hesitation ended, and it lurched once more into motion, the hammer-arm drawing back.

"Helm, grant me your strength!" Ruphos cried, leaping forward once more, his weapon clutched tightly in both hands. To the surprise of everyone—perhaps including the cleric—the armored front of the construct buckled as the steel head of his mace crashed into it with a ringing crash of concussive force. The construct twisted awkwardly, and its grip loosened just enough for Fario to pull free of its vice-like pincer. The half-elf did not retreat, hefting his sword again in both hands as he assaulted it from the flank opposite Fellian. This time he drove his blade deep into one of the rents in its side opened by Ruphos's strike, and an angry clang of broken metal issued from somewhere deep inside its frame as the sword crunched in.

Mole, recovered from her injury, circled around the edges of the melee with the automaton, and darted through the illusory wall to check on Arun. She immediately saw the dwarf engaged with the second construct, the two apparently engaged in a titanic exchange of hammer-blows. Arun had landed a solid hit that had crushed one side of its armored shell, but the automaton had in turn shaken out of its mechanical funk to land a crushing blow to the dwarf's shield-arm. Mole could see that the dwarf was hurt, his shield hanging low instead of kept up in its usual protective stance before him. As she appeared the hammerer tried to catch the dwarf with its pincer-arm, but Arun was able to dodge back narrowly in time to avoid being caught.

"I'll help distract it!" Mole said, drawing her sword and rushing around the automaton's flank.

"No!" Arun cried, but it was too late; the gnome was already past it, tumbling quickly past it before it could react to her sudden appearance. She came up smoothly into a ready stance, poking at its backside with her sword. The feeble assault did no damage, but it certainly did get its attention; the automaton wheezed and with a grinding of metal gears it spun to face her. Before it could strike, however, Arun roared and came up behind it, bringing his hammer down in a powerful blow that crushed through the remnants of its armor and savaged the gearwork within. With a final clatter of noise, the battered construct leaned over and crashed heavily to the ground.

"That was foolish," Arun said, shaking his hammer at the gnome.

"Maybe, but it worked!" she returned. "Come on, the others are still fighting theirs!" Again, before he could do anything to stop her, she darted back through the illusory wall.

Arun followed, but his hammer wasn't needed. The automaton, perhaps damaged by the attacks from Ruphos and Fario, had managed only one tentative swing against Fario before freezing again, and by the time it shook free the three companions were able to do enough damage to destroy it. Mole reported that the second one had been destroyed as well, so the six companions stood there over the ruins of the first automaton, catching their breath.

“Those things were tough!” Ruphos exclaimed, checking Fario’s injuries. The grasp of the pincer-arm hadn’t hurt him seriously, though the outcome would have been quite different had its hammer connected with him.

“That was an impressive strike, priest,” the half-elf observed. “I thank you.”

Ruphos nodded. “It is a power granted by Helm, the feat of strength. Though I had never called upon it before.”

“Well, now you have,” Arun said. “Shall we see what these things were guarding?”

Chapter 36

“It’s a difficult decision,” Fellian said.

“Once more, we’re nearly out of resources,” Zenna said. “I don’t know if we can handle another big fight.”

“I came down here to get those children,” Arun growled. “And I’m not leaving without them.”

“But it not only them that we have to consider, now,” the tiefling mage pointed out.

The six companions stood in a circle, their expressions betraying that fact that they were all too aware of the multiple sets of eyes watching them from the far side of the room.

* * * * *

Less than an hour had passed since their battle with the hammerer automatons, enough time for their circumstances to change dramatically. The corridors beyond the illusory walls and the construct ambush had been a dead end, leading only to empty cells that showed no recent signs of occupancy. They had all begun to feel the sense of urgency that was driving Arun, a gnawing worry that lingered in the gut. Already they had seen horrors, enough to drive imaginings about the fate of the captive children, and the others that had been taken from Cauldron in recent tendays...

They wasted no time, returning to the passage that ran alongside the chasm, following it to the heavy door at its end. This time their eyes all drifted to the high walls of the fortress on the far side of the stone bridge, and the light that filtered from the narrow slits high in that wall. It was clear that this might be their ultimate destination, but after finding the empty cells none of them wanted to leave any possibilities unexamined behind them.

The door had led to another guardroom, occupied by a pair of less-than-vigilant hobgoblin guards. The adventurers were quick to take out their frustrations on these creatures, but the noise quickly brought reinforcements in the form of another pair of guards accompanied by a one-armed, black-skinned hobgoblin carrying a red-hot poker in his remaining hand. The battle that followed lasted a bit longer, and when it ended Fellian was limping heavily, a blow from the leader’s sword having penetrated his defenses.

Once more they had overcome foes, but this victory had only created new dilemmas for them.

The room that the hobgoblin reinforcements had come from was decorated as a grisly torture chamber, lit by an ugly glow that issued from a crude open-faced iron oven. Inside they had found a battered human woman who introduced herself as Coryston Pike, a resident of Cauldron who had been abducted from the city a few tendays ago. She was able to direct them to the cellblock adjacent to the guardroom, where they found four other ragged captives. When asked about the children, Coryston and the others said that they'd been taken to the "bazaar," the chamber across the bridge where the half-dwarf slaver Kazmojen conducted his nefarious dealings in the suffering unfortunates who had been stolen from the city above.

"We can't bring them into battle," Mole said quietly, shooting a glance back at the far side of the room, where the five freed captives were sitting on the bunks of the slain hobgoblin guards, watching their liberators with wary expressions. "They're not warriors—well, maybe that one."

"That one" was a man named Kryscar Endercott, who despite his starved condition and the obvious scars that covered his body paced impatiently before the other captives. The armor he'd taken from one of the hobgoblins was missized and hung over his frame awkwardly, but he clearly knew how to move with it, and the sword and javelin he'd taken fit into his hands with easy familiarity. Endercott's attitude was markedly different than that of the other prisoners, who were simple commoners caught up in terrible events through an accident of fate. He'd been a mercenary, or at least that's what he told them, and by the way he moved and handled weapons it was clear that he had at least some experience as a warrior. There's been a tense moment when he'd almost attacked them, before it became clear that they were here to free the prisoners. Even now, he seemed like a coiled spring, tense and ready to lash out at the slightest provocation.

"So what do we do?" Ruphos asked.

"We stop wasting time chatting about this," Arun said. "Those others said that this 'Kazmojen' is conducting a sale for the children, may already be delivering them to a buyer as we speak. I am going to stop him—you may come or stay with them as you wish." He started toward the door, a grim look etched into his face as if chiseled in stone.

"Arun," Zenna said, stepping forward and putting her hand on the dwarf's shoulder. The paladin glared at her, but did stop. "We're with you on this, but we can't just rush in. Those prisoners also said that the dwarf also had some sort of demon-hound with him, and more guards. We have to have a plan."

The dwarf harrumphed, but further debate was interrupted as Coryston Pike rose and crossed to where the companions were gathered. Endercott was right behind her, bringing that hint of danger that he carried around with him like a shadow. The injured woman looked much better than she had when they'd found her strapped into a chair in the torture chamber. Zenna had given her the last of the potions that Jenya had given them; Fellian had insisted, even though he'd been seriously hurt himself and his own remaining magic

had only barely been enough to stop the bleeding on his leg. Fortunately they'd found a few minor-strength healing potions on the hobgoblin torturer, but the half-elf cleric still looked wan and exhausted. Coryston, for her part, still had an obvious limp, but she'd told them that it was an old wound, suffered in a battle with a troll from her earlier adventuring days.

"For what it's worth, we understand your situation," Coryston said. She looked back at the other three captives, ignoring Endercott's smoldering look. "You have to rescue the children, at least you have to try. We will wait here for your return, and trust in your skill."

"I'm sorry that we just can't let you make a break for the surface," Mole said. "We've killed some of the guards, but there's still... stuff... up there, stuff that'd make quick work of you guys, alone."

"Yeah, well, I'm not staying anywhere, waiting for that halfbreed to come back and lock me up," Endercott said. "I'm going with you, and I'll see that bastard dead with my own eyes, and by my own hand, if necessary." His hand tightened around the grip of the hobgoblin javelin he'd appropriated, as if daring them to challenge his statement.

Coryston sighed but did not respond to the mercenary. "I will stay with them, then," she said. "I have some magic... not much, but it may be enough to offer some resistance if more guards return. It may also be of some help to you... if you are going to try to challenge Kazmojen in his lair, you may need the advantage of surprise."

* * * * *

"Bah, this is a stupid idea," Arun said, standing before the considerable iron-shod door on the far side of the stone bridge.

"Just let me do all the talking," Zenna said. "And be ready for my signal."

Arun grunted, but he didn't offer anything more of a critique. Zenna turned to the half-elves and nodded. The pair gulped down half of the contents of the vials each carried, and quickly faded from view. The invisibility potions would not last for long, but the companions had already discussed their strategy and would not be lingering here.

She glanced back at Ruphos, and Endercott standing beside him. They were clearly discernable even through the magical disguises they wore. Ruphos looked scared but determined, and the mercenary had the scowl that Zenna suspected was a more or less permanent feature on his face.

Using her own spell of *disguise self*, Ruphos's magical hat, and Coryston Pike's own magic, Ruphos, Endercott, Arun, and herself all wore the faces of hobgoblin warriors. Zenna had felt a twinge of envy at Coryston's talent; the woman, her magic derived from sorcery rather than the scholarly arts of the wizard, had been able to cast the spell of disguise repeatedly with little apparent effort, disguising herself in addition to Endercott and Arun before the companions had left.

"Ready?" she asked them.

“Let’s get this over with,” the mercenary spat, though Zenna could see that his hands were clenched tightly around the shaft of his javelin. Ruphos only nodded, as if he didn’t fully trust his own voice to offer agreement.

Zenna looked behind them at the shadow that she knew was Mole. Even with her darkvision, and knowing that she was there, she could barely see her friend, wrapped in her dark cloak in the lee of the stone railing of the bridge. Mole was their wild card, the whole of their reserves.

“All right then,” Arun said, and he reached up to pull open the heavy door.

Chapter 37

Light spilled out over them, as the door swung open.

The southern end of the Malachite Fortress was a single huge chamber, easily sixty feet across. Four thick stone pillars supported the ceiling a good twenty feet above. From their summits dangled four iron cages, each containing a captive fire beetle that shed a steady red glow that left deep shadows in numerous places about the edges of the room. To their left, tall double doors likely connected with the rest of the fortress, in the direction of the rooms they’d explored earlier, while on the opposite wall another, single door provided an additional exit. The southern end of the room, to their right, formed a platform raised five feet above the floor of the rest of the chamber, accessed by a broad stone staircase in the center of the room. Though they could not see the entire span of the platform from the entry, as they entered they could hear laughter coming from that direction, a deep, throaty sound that somehow seemed cold and menacing. That laugh was followed by a voice that made the laugh seem friendly by comparison.

“Ah, you drive a hard bargain, Pyllrak! But as always, it’s a pleasure doing business with you, in the end.”

Arun moved quickly forward, forcing Zenna to hurry to keep up. The double doors to their left were guarded by a pair of armored hobgoblin sentries who quickly turned toward them and raised their javelins warily. Once they saw that the newcomers were friends, not foes, they turned their attention back to the events transpiring at the summit of the stone steps. Arun barely paid them any heed, striding forward with the others close behind. As Zenna hurried along behind, Endercott pushed roughly past her, his javelin already up in a threatening posture, if not ready to cast. She couldn’t see the half-elves, of course, but she hoped that they were adjusting with her, moving ahead into the room.

No plan survives contact with the enemy, she thought grimly, remembering something that Mole’s uncle had told her once before, during one of his tales of the adventures he and his companions had had in their travels across the western regions of Faerûn. She glanced to her left, and saw that the two guards guarding the door had grown suspicious, although they had not yet moved from their vantage.

Arun stopped at the foot of the stairs, and as Zenna came up behind him she got her first good look at Kazmojen's slave bazaar.

The stairs culminated in a flat open space between two of the thick malachite pillars. A short distance beyond, near the far wall, a shorter pillar of black stone was driven into the ground. Attached to that pillar by heavy iron manacles were three wretched clumps that had to be the missing children.

Standing between them and the captives, however, at the top of the stairs, stood a squat, muscled monstrosity clad in black plate armor that could only be the half-dwarf Kazmojen. In one hand he held a dwarven urgrosh, that bastard combination of axe and spear, and in the other, he held a short length of chain that was secured to a neck-manacle holding the fourth child-slave, a young boy. The slaver was speaking with another dwarf, or at least part-dwarf, a man with skin the color of old ashes, clad in a simple robe with a fiery red beard that jutted from his face like a bed of needlethorns. To Zenna's eyes, there was something just... *wrong* with him, and suddenly she felt very cold inside as she realized that what she recognized was the same corruption that existed within herself. The bearded man, Pyllrak, clutched a small white coffer and smiled as Kazmojen yanked the chain and held the struggling boy up for examination.

Her eyes wide in horror, Zenna's attention was drawn to the side by a deep growl. There, slinking out of the shadows behind one of the pillars a few paces behind Kazmojen, appeared a terror beyond even that presented by the warped appearance of the evil dwarves.

It had the look of a great hound, at first, but only for the first moment's glance. Then one could make out the snarling, skeletal face, with bulging jaws and fiery red pinpricks for eyes. And instead of fur, long, wickedly barbed quills covered its body like a porcupine, shaking violently with every movement of the creature.

The creature's growls had alerted Kazmojen to their presence, and he released the chain, dropping the boy to the ground with a metallic clatter. "What is the meaning of this interruption?" he asked. They couldn't see his face, covered by the visor of his helm and lost in shadows, but the impatience was clear in his tone.

"We've come for those children, slaver," Arun growled, hefting his hammer.

"You're too late," Kazmojen replied. "These are no longer for sale." He nodded to the fiery-bearded dwarf, who glared at them through narrowed eyes that gleamed with a sickly yellow light.

Zenna glanced over her shoulder, and saw that one of the hobgoblins had opened the double doors, and two other guards were coming through to join the two already here. She bit her lip, sensing that this was about to turn ugly real fast.

"Enough chatter!" Endercott cried. "Die, bastard!" The mercenary hefted and hurled his javelin at Kazmojen in a sudden motion. The cast was true, but the dwarf almost casually lifted his urgrosh, deflecting the missile with the heavy axe-blade that tipped one end of the ungainly weapon.

“Attack!” Zenna cried, knowing that the advantage of surprise was already lost. She spun and fired her crossbow at the hobgoblins, but her shot missed wide and harmlessly shattered against the stone wall of the chamber. A moment later, though, one staggered and crumpled, clutching at the feathered end of a bolt jutting from its side.

Mole, hiding in the shadows by the nearby pillar, had added her voice to the fray.

The howler let out an unholy screech and bounded forward toward the stairs, but before it could charge a long javelin appeared out of thin air and caught it hard in the joint where its head met its shoulder. Fario materialized at the base of the stairs even as the abyssal creature cried out in pain, caught off guard by the half-elf’s sneak attack. Even as Fario’s missile struck an arrow shot out from a few paces distant toward Kazmojen, but was deflected by the slaver’s heavy armor of layered steel. Fellian appeared behind his companion, cursing as he reached for another arrow.

Arun let out a bellowing cry, and hurled one of his light hammers up the stairs at the same moment that the slaver hefted his urgrosh and roared a challenge. The howler bit down on the javelin and tore it from the bloody wound in its neck, while the hobgoblin guards on the far side of the room hefted their own javelins or drew their swords. The companions reached for weapons or reloaded their bows.

A raging battle was poised to explode.

Then the air above the stairs shimmered, and everything changed.

Chapter 38

The eyes of everyone in the room, friend and foe alike, were drawn upward as the distortion in the air solidified and took form, and a... *thing* appeared in the chamber.

It hovered in the air above them all, floating in defiance of gravity, a sphere six feet in diameter, with a rough gray skin the color and texture of stone. As it spun in the air, they could see that it possessed a single great eye just above a gaping maw full of long, pointed teeth, with ten more smaller eyes dangling at the end of writhing stalks atop its body.

Zenna felt her gut clench and her blood freeze as she realized what it was. *By the gods, a beholder*, she thought. She could feel her body shaking, frozen in terror. She felt rather than saw Arun tense beside her, and for a moment she thought that her death was here, that the dwarf was going to attack regardless of the appearance of the eye tyrant. But Arun, born of a race that knew well the aberrations of the Underdark, understood all too well the nature of the newcomer, and stood his ground.

The creature spun in place, taking in the whole situation in a single broad sweep. As its central eye passed over the companions, their magical disguises faded, revealing their true faces, and Zenna felt a tingle pass through her body. What the creature was thinking as it looked at them was impossible to guess; the beholder was just too alien.

Kazmojen and his minions had been taken by surprise as well, but now it looked up at the beholder with what looked, at least outwardly, with calm control. “What do **you** want?” he asked.

The beholder shifted its attention upon the slaver, but Zenna saw that several of the eyestalks continued to monitor them. No one else moved.

“I have come for Terrem Kharatys,” the creature said, its voice strong and dripping with power. “That boy should not have been taken from Cauldron. I intend to see that he is safely returned to his orphanage. You can keep the others. They are of no consequence. Come, Terrem—you will be safe with me.”

A pouch appeared out of thin air a few paces above the beholder, falling to land with a clink of metal on the stone floor at Kazmojen’s feet. The erstwhile buyer, Pyllrat, said nothing, having drawn back from the scene with the beholder’s appearance, watching the developing scene intently. Kazmojen himself drew back a step as the beholder dropped toward him, its eyestalks twisting as the different eyes regarded him in turn. The howler offered a growl of challenge, causing several of the eyestalks to snap toward it, but Kazmojen let out a harsh whistle, and the beast drew back. Terrem, the boy captive, huddled miserably in his chains, unable to do anything to alter his fate.

A pale blue ray lanced out from one of the eyestalks, hitting the boy squarely, surrounding him with a soft glow. Terrem lifted into the air, rising with the beholder as the two ascended toward the ceiling high above.

Arun shook himself and stepped forward, pointing his warhammer at the beholder. “Now wait just a minute here!” he shouted at it. The beholder turned to regard the companions, but even as it did, the creature—along with the boy—shimmered again and vanished.

For a moment everyone just stood there, trying to grasp the implications of what they had just seen, or just reveling in the fact that they yet drew breath. But Kazmojen shattered that momentary reverie, when he stepped forward, his urgosh raised.

“The deal is done!” he said, his voice cold. “Now, you die.”

Chapter 39

Arun did not hesitate. Hefting his hammer, and shouting a dwarven war-cry, he hurtled up the stairs. Kazmojen held his urgosh before him, letting his foe come to him, letting the paladin exert his precious energy rushing up the staircase.

As the dwarf paladin drew within range, the half-dwarf hefted his weapon and brought down the axe-blade in a descending arc toward Arun’s weapon-arm, the side not protected by his heavy shield. The monstrous dwarf had incredible reach, his arms unnaturally long and flexible. Even charging and off-balance, Arun was able to adjust to partially deflect the blow, but the heavy blade clipped the edge of his shield and crunched heavily into his armored side. Kazmojen’s steel crushed through the pounded scales of Arun’s armor,

already battered from what the paladin had gone through to get here, and Arun grunted in pain as the axe tore a gash in his side.

The paladin took the hit and continued forward, lifting his hammer and unleashing a powerful blow at the slaver's chest. "By Moradin's forge!" he cried, scoring a solid impact that drove Kazmojen a step backward despite his bulk and strength. The half-dwarf's heavy armor absorbed much of the impact, but it was clear from his wheeze of pain that he'd felt the force of that blow.

"Not bad, brother dwarf, but not nearly good enough!" he returned, immediately launching another series of attacks at his adversary, slicing with the axe and stabbing with the spear-end of his urgrosh.

The others had not been idle while the two champions had engaged in their all-out struggle, but they found themselves hard-pressed and unable to come immediately to the aid of their friend. Fario started up the stairs immediately in the wake of the dwarf, drawing his sword as he went, but had to dodge quickly to the side as the howler leapt down into their midst, its terrible quills lashing out around it as it came, keening a deep, horrible wail that echoed through the chamber. The fiendish monstrosity lunged at the half-elf, its powerful jaws snapping at him, but it caught only empty air as the half-elf darted backward, twisting his body out of its path. Fario slashed at it as he retreated, but his sword merely glanced harmlessly off the long quills that flowed backward from its head. The howler turned to face him, even as Endercott and Ruphos rushed up the steps to his aid.

In the tumult of battle, no one noticed when Pyllrat, the slaver-trader, retreated from the battle into the shadow of the nearby pillar, and faded from view. Nor did they mark the quick opening and closing of one of the side doors, less than a minute later. There were too many other things going on for either side to worry about someone *leaving* the battle.

The three hobgoblin guards came forward, and with her companions engaged with deadly foes behind them, Zenna knew that she had to buy them some time. One of the humanoids hurled his javelin at Fellian, scoring a glancing hit that dug through the soft leather protecting his hip, drawing blood and a gasp of pain from the half-elf. Fellian fired back, but his shot failed to penetrate the hobgoblin's banded mail. Grimacing as he yanked the javelin from his side, the cleric of Shaundakul dropped his bow and drew forth his sword.

Zenna focused her thoughts and drew upon the power of her magic. Her most powerful spells were all gone, cast during their excursion through Jzadirune and the Malachite Fortress, but she called upon a minor cantrip, straining inwardly to send its power out to the furthest extent of its range, just beyond the slightly-open double doors. Brows knitted in concentration, she directed the magic into the course she desired.

The noise was faint, at first, but it rapidly grew loud enough so that she could hear it clearly; the clank of armor, the tread of heavy boots, voices. A man's voice, strong and commanding, "Over here, men! We'll take care of the last of those hobgoblin scum!" It sounded like a good-sized group coming quickly closer... or at least Zenna hoped that it did, to the hobgoblins who were already turning back to the door, wary looks on their faces.

One of them barked a command, and another ran back to the doors, quickly drawing the open portal closed. There was no bar, but he slid his javelin through the two handles, forming an impromptu latch that would not stop a determined invader, but which might delay.

And with luck, delay any hobgoblin reinforcements, Zenna thought.

But that didn't do anything about the other two warriors, who were charging toward her and Fellian, their swords drawn.

Arun was a seasoned warrior, veteran of the skirmishes that his people fought in the trackless Underdark, traveler across much of Faerûn, and survivor of the trials that they'd encountered under Cauldron. But he quickly realized that this foe was stronger, tougher, and more skilled than him. He'd managed another solid hit against the half-dwarf, but in turn could feel his reflexes slowing as blood continued to seep from the two cuts that had gotten through his defenses. Kazmojen, on the other hand, seemed to be getting stronger with each passing moment, as if the wounds that Arun was inflicting were somehow imparting energy rather than injury to him. The slaver had given up his initial strategy of using both ends of his weapon against the paladin, instead focusing on all-out blows with the axe. Arun knew that only one more of those powerful strokes had to land solidly, and he was finished.

But he refused to retreat, grinding his teeth and launching another attack. He brought his hammer around in a powerful sweep, holding his shield up to absorb the inevitable counter. But Kazmojen didn't even bother to dodge, absorbing the impact to his side that should have crushed ribs and left him sprawling.

Should have, but didn't.

"That's your last chance, brother," the slaver said, swinging his axe in a downward stroke that came in from the paladin's unshielded right. Arun tried to lift the heavy shield to block, but his arms felt leaden, his reflexes slowed by the hurts he'd already taken. It was too late, he knew it even before the axe crushed into his shoulder, driving him down, driving a spike of pain through him.

I have failed you, Soul Forger, he thought, falling. Then everything went black.

Chapter 40

The howler lashed out about it, its long quills as threatening as its terrible jaws. Fario, Ruphos, and the mercenary Endercott faced off against it on the stairs, but being surrounded only seemed to drive it on to a more terrible fury. Ruphos bashed at its flank with his mace, but only got a quill stuck in his arm for his trouble. Fario stabbed at the creature, but again his stroke went awry.

Endercott screamed, a sound of repressed anger and frustration released as he lunged straight for the beast's head. His borrowed blade glanced off the howler's skull, slicing open a garish flap of flesh that hang back behind its ear like some sort of garish ornament,

revealing the stark white of bone beneath. The creature's howls doubled in intensity, a sound of pure rage that seemed loud enough to shatter the stone of the walls. It lunged at Endercott, a quill lodging in the man's side as it thrashed back and forth, following him as he tried uselessly to retreat, to get away from the monster's inexorable rush. Finally it lunged, quickly, its jaws closing with grim finality around the man's neck. The mercenary barely managed a scream that turned into a wet gurgle as the jaws clamped and the howler tore the man's throat out. Endercott went down, his body now just a limp corpse that flopped in a mess of blood and gore that settled at the foot of the stairs.

Fario rushed forward, too late to aid the mercenary, but able to take advantage of the creature's distraction as he slid his sword into its body from behind. Narrowly avoiding a quill that nearly pierced his exposed neck, Fario grimaced and thrust the blade deeper. The howler quivered abruptly, then exploded into a paroxysm of frenzied movement as its blood poured from the gash in its side. The half-elf and Ruphos drew back from the still-deadly forest of quills as the howler thrashed on the stairs, its black heart punctured by Fario's thrust. As it happened, Fario had retreated down the stairs, and Ruphos up. That would be a fateful cast of fate, for both men. But for the moment, Fario felt an echo of pain explode within his mind, and he quickly turned, knowing already what he would see.

The two hobgoblin warriors charged into battle, one meeting Fellian in a clash of swords, the other coming straight for the undefended Zenna. Zenna cried out in pain as the sword bit into her shoulder, cutting through her tunic and drawing a line of pain that spread through her body like a blaze of fire. She'd turned enough so that the gash was serious but not fatal, but as she staggered back the hobgoblin warrior followed her, an evil grin deepening on his face. The dagger in her hand seemed puny in comparison with the warrior's longsword, and the hobgoblin laughed as she slashed out at him, trying to keep him at bay.

"Perhaps I shall keep you alive for a little while," the hobgoblin said in its crude language, a tongue that Zenna understood, one of the many things she'd learned growing up among a community of adventurers.

It seems that she hadn't learned enough, though.

As the hobgoblin came at her again, though, a shadow tumbled into place behind it. The hobgoblin never even saw it, and did not know its danger until Mole's sword slid home into its back through one of the slats of its armor. The hobgoblin's sword fell from nerveless fingers, and it slumped slowly to the floor, bleeding out its last.

"Are you all right?" Mole asked. But Zenna's attention had turned toward the staircase, and she dashed off in that direction, clutching her bleeding shoulder, her friend just a step behind.

Fellian had never been a good swordsman, certainly not the equal of his companion Fario. His talents had always laid more in other directions, his faith, his agility, his good nature and buoyant personality. He still bore the marks of his lingering injury from their earlier battles, only partially healed by the potions they'd found. But he faced off bravely against the hobgoblin, meeting his sword in a series of quick exchanges that gave neither an advantage. He was used to fighting with his friend, the two using their skills to surround

foes and find weaknesses in their defenses. His faith granted him magic that bolstered their skills, gave them an added advantage.

But this time, he was alone, and his magic was depleted.

He gritted his teeth as the hobgoblin turned off a parry and caught him on the arm, slicing through his skin before the cleric could pull away. The wound wasn't serious, but it added to the tally of his hurts. He heard Zenna cry out and knew that the other warrior was attacking her, but knew that if he shifted his attention from this adversary, even for a moment, he would be dead.

The hobgoblin fainted, and Fellian caught the stroke easily with his sword. The real thrust came a moment later, but the half-elf had already anticipated and darted sideways, countering with a thrust that darted into his side. The hobgoblin's armor absorbed most of the impact of the attack, but the tip of Fellian's sword drew blood. The two combatants broke apart and recovered, each wary now of the other.

Unfortunately for the half-elf, the last guard, having secured the double doors against Zenna's illusory invaders, saw his chance and rushed to flank Fellian while his comrade pressed a new assault. Fellian saw what was about to happen and leapt at the foe before him. He caught the hobgoblin off-guard, and got inside his defense with a slash that caught him just under the jaw. The hobgoblin staggered and fell, but as he did he caught hold of the half-elf's sword with his arm, nearly knocking the weapon from his grasp. Fellian managed to recover, but the move cost him a precious few seconds. Seconds that cost him, for as he started to turn to face the second hobgoblin, he felt a sudden spasm of pain as a sword caught him square across the body. His own sword was knocked from his grasp as he sagged to the ground, bleeding.

As the howler thrashed out its last breaths, and Fario rushed to the aid of his stricken companion, Ruphos had turned to see Kazmojen strike down Arun. As the dwarf paladin went down, the half-dwarf slaver stepped forward to stand over his fallen foe, his bloody weapon lifted high in triumph. Then he lowered the spear-end of the urgrosh, ready to finish his helpless foe.

Ruphos Laro wasn't a man of great courage, or strength, or even particular skill with the simple weapon that he carried. He would have been the first to admit that among the companions that had delved into the Malachite Fortress, he was perhaps the least suited to face this enemy. Even Zenna had her magic, and an intelligence that he had seen shining in her like a candle's bright flame. He had his faith, a shield that had always been strong enough to sustain him, but which had been shrouded in doubt and fear since he had come into the dark places under Cauldron.

All of this was true, and yet he found himself charging up the stairs toward a foe that could only promise him death.

Kazmojen seemed oblivious to the arrival of this new foe, but as Ruphos neared striking distance, his mace already lifted to attack, the urgrosh swiped out in its deadly arc, propelled by those huge arms. Ruphos cried out as the blade crushed his arm, only the links of his chain shirt keeping the blow from taking off the limb just below his shoulder.

He should have gone down then, but he knew that if he did, Arun was dead. Somehow he could feel the slender thread of life that remained yet in the unconscious form at his feet, a thread that flowed out into the world and connected them all, himself, his friends, even this monstrosity before him. He knew that his friends would come, that they would have to bring this creature down or all die here, in this dark place far under the earth. He knew that he had to give them time.

Through the haze of pain he felt a sudden peace come over him. With his good arm, he lifted the mace and brought it down on the half-dwarf's armored head. The blow wasn't particularly strong, the flanged head of the weapon glancing off Kazmojen's helm, but it still had an effect, and pain clouded the slaver's eyes for a moment.

But only for a moment.

Kazmojen leaned forward, close enough so that Ruphos could smell the stale stink of blood and sweat from the other. "A fine day when I get to kill two champions of Good in one encounter," he hissed.

Ruphos brought his mace up to strike again, but Kazmojen knocked it aside with the axe-end of his urgrosh, and then, reversing the weapon, drove the spear-end through the priest, impaling him with a single mighty thrust.

Chapter 41

Time seemed to freeze for Zenna, staring up the staircase, her own wound forgotten as she watched Ruphos battling the half-dwarf slaver. The air seemed thick like water around her as she tried to run toward the scene that moved inexorably, inevitably, forward. She heard the continuing battle with the hobgoblins behind her, heard Mole call her name, but it meant nothing as she saw Ruphos lift his mace to strike, saw Kazmojen knock it away, saw the spear-end of the urgrosh come up...

"NO!" she screamed, helpless to stop it. When the spear drove through Ruphos, striking what could only have been a killing blow, she felt as though it were driving through her as well.

Fario, meanwhile, confronted his own difficulties. Upon the death of the howler he'd rushed to the aid of Fellian, too late to save his friend from being struck down by the last hobgoblin guard. The hobgoblin, encouraged perhaps by the triumphant roars of its master, or its victory over the half-elf cleric lying at its feet, refused to flee despite being outnumbered. It met Fario's rush with an attack that forced the fighter into a defensive stance. The two clashed blades noisily once, twice, three times, until finally Fario, driven by a realization that time was not on their side, drove forward, knocked the hobgoblin's sword aside, and thrust half of the length of his sword through his adversary's throat.

He crouched by Fellian, worry written on his face. The cleric was alive, but bleeding profusely from the wound in his side. A momentary indecision crossed Fario's features, but then he took on a look of intense concentration, pressing his fingers to his temples.

A few seconds later, Fellian vanished.

Fario rose and turned back to the stairs just in time to see Ruphos run through.

Kazmojen held Ruphos up, imprisoned on the shaft of his weapon, smiling as he watched the life drain from the cleric's eyes. Then he let urgrosh drop, placing his boot on the dead man's chest as he yanked the weapon free. He'd taken a beating, but his steps were still strong as he strode forward, and a renewed fury burned in his eyes as he looked down at the fallen form of his howler.

"For that, I will make each of you feel pain, before you die," he said.

Zenna just stood there on the steps, frozen, her eyes wide as she watched the slaver come slowly, almost carelessly, toward her. But then she felt Mole come up beside her, and her friend's presence seemed to make the fear drain away.

"We can run," Mole said, in gnomish.

Zenna looked down at her friend, the calm look on her young face. Zenna knew what she really meant, *You can run*. Mole had to know what she'd already recognized, that there was no way that the short-legged gnome would be able to outdistance the powerful dwarf, even clad in armor as he was.

Fario came up beside them, a look of determination on his face. For a moment a strange look crossed his face, as if a conflicting thought had suddenly crossed his mind, but then he shook his head, and his grim visage of determination returned.

"Come on then, slaver," he said, his bloody sword ready at his side. As he reached Zenna and Mole, he lowered his other hand, twisting it so that its contents were hidden from Kazmojen's view. In it, they could see a small vial.

Mole moved behind him, taking up position on his far side, palming the vial as she did so.

Kazmojen regarded the three of them coldly. "Your friends are dead, and I suspect that the dwarf was the fiercest that your little band had to offer. You cannot hope to defeat the likes of me. I have faced horrors of which you can only dream."

Zenna suspected that the dwarf was stalling for some reason, and she opened her mouth to say something, but Fario beat her to it. "Come on then, dwarf—or whatever you are. Your little doggie there was an interesting warm-up, but I'm ready for a bit of challenge."

Kazmojen fixed the half-elf with a dark stare, but he lifted his urgrosh and charged, surging forward in a seemingly inevitable rush. Fario drew his shortsword, but instead of rushing to meet the slaver, he dodged back, his blades slicing out in a dancing parry to cover his retreat. Kazmojen used his long arms to slash out at the fighter, nearly catching him despite his quick movements, but the half-elf was quick enough to avoid the opening rush.

Zenna and Mole both retreated quickly from the half-dwarf's charge, each knowing they could not hope to stand before him in open battle. Zenna fell back to where she had dropped her crossbow, willing her hands not to shake as she drew a bolt from her quiver and loaded the weapon. Mole, meanwhile, downed the rest of Fario's *invisibility* potion, and even as she faded from view was darting nimbly and silently down the steps after Kazmojen.

Fario continued to give ground, slashing at the slaver, scoring minor hits that failed to penetrate his heavy armor. In his defensive stance, Kazmojen failed to hit the nimble elf, but once again switched from a combination of axe-strokes and spear-thrusts from the different ends of his urgrosh and instead turned to an all-out assault with the axe.

"You can't escape me, elf!" he roared, and his words seemed true as he clipped Fario with a sweeping cut that tore a vicious gash in his side. "I'll tear you.... AARGH!"

Kazmojen cried out as Mole appeared directly behind him, the gnome holding her sword with both hands as she tried to drive it deeper into the slaver's body. The invisible rogue had found a gap in the half-dwarf's armor and exploited it, sliding her sharp sword through leather and cloth and flesh and muscle and into the soft organs underneath.

But Kazmojen was possessed of a monstrous fortitude, and he turned, realizing his mistake in dismissing this diminutive foe. He dropped the axe and reached for Mole with claws augmented by steel, his gauntlets tipped with jagged ends of sharpened metal.

A crossbow bolt ricocheted off his breastplate, causing him no harm but drawing his attention.

"Don't you touch her," Zenna snarled.

Kazmojen opened his mouth to shoot back a reply, but only another hiss of agony came forth as Fario came up from behind and buried his own elven-forged blade deep into the slaver's back. Kazmojen staggered around, fixing each of them with a hateful stare in turn, his mouth twisting in a snarl of contempt.

Then he fell to the cold stone floor, unmoving.

Chapter 42

"Mole! Are you all right?" Zenna shouted, rushing over to her friend. She herself felt faint, as blood continued to ooze from the wound in her shoulder.

Ironically, the gnome rogue was the only one of them who remained uninjured. They were all battered, with Fario wavering on his feet, but refusing to sheath his swords, keeping a wary eye about for any new threats. On seeing that Mole was all right, Zenna ran up the stairs, giving the still-twitching corpse of the howler a wide berth, knowing already what she would see.

Ruphos was dead, there was no doubting that. He lay in a heap, one side of his body lying over the motionless form of Arun, covered in blood. Arun... no, as Zenna reached for them, she caught the faintest hint of movement, the slightest swelling of the dwarf's torso. Her vision half-ruined by her tears, she checked the dwarf's body.

"Arun's alive!" she sobbed, her voice cracking. Somehow, whether through his own incredible fortitude or his patron god's intervention, he'd stabilized, though he was still unconscious and close to death.

Mole, who'd spent those few moments helping Fario stem his own bleeding wound with a bandage, turned to help her, but hesitated as she looked down at the body of Kazmojen. Had the slaver... there, again, there was no doubting it...

"He's still alive!" Mole cried, but the tone of her voice made it immediately clear that she was not talking about Arun, but their fallen adversary, who was stirring, his body heaving as it somehow crawled back toward life. Fario spun and quickly moved forward, but Mole was there first, stabbing the fallen dwarf repeatedly with her sword.

"Die!" she yelled, stabbing him in the neck, under the back edge of his helmet. "Die!" she repeated, thrusting her sword through whatever gap she could find.

"He must have some regenerative ability," Fario said, arriving to help drive the slaver back across the line into unconsciousness, closer to death.

"Well, how do we kill him for good?" Mole asked.

"Fire. Or acid." Mole was already digging into her pack, pulling out her last torch.

Zenna knelt over the body of her friend, her tears flowing freely now, feeling as helpless as she ever had before in the face of this final loss. She did not even have the power to help Arun, who could slide over the razor's edge into death at any moment. She heard her friends' shouts as they dealt with Kazmojen, but could not even will herself up to help them. She felt weak, a weakness that penetrated to her very bones.

A sound drew her attention. Looking up, she saw the three children still shackled to the pillar, staring at her with expressions that were dark and haunted. Seeing them allowed her to finally cut through the pain that held her in its grasp, and she slowly pulled herself to her feet.

A sickening stench of roasting flesh greeted her nostrils. Turning, she saw that Fario and Mole had finally taken care of Kazmojen for good, and a small pyre continued to smolder over his corpse. Mole still held her torch, in case it was needed. Zenna scanned the room, her gaze lingering briefly on the ravaged body of Endercott. They hadn't even gotten to know him, she thought.

"What happened to Fellian?"

Fario looked up at her, standing at the top of the stairs. "He is well," the fighter said. "He and I..."

He paused, and did not get to finish his statement as a loud thump drew their attention around. The double doors moved, the hobgoblin javelin jammed into their handles rattling as someone tried to force their way through from beyond. Whoever it was, it did not appear that they would allow that flimsy barrier to stop them, as the noise increased, and the javelin began to bend with the force upon it.

Fario shot her a questioning glance, but Zenna shook her head. "We can't leave Arun, or the children," she said.

The half-elf nodded, and bent to retrieve a discarded javelin before moving to join her. Mole recovered her crossbow and did the same, reloading as she went. For her part, Zenna reloaded her own weapon, a resigned look falling into place on her features.

The doors thumped, and the javelin cracked...

Chapter 43

"To be honest, we thought we were all dead," Mole said, the relief still clear in her voice as she chattered on.

"I'm sorry that we could not get there sooner," Jenya said. Three men clad in the uniforms of the City Watch passed by, nodding to the cleric in respect before continuing into the building behind them.

Around them, the city of Cauldron slept, the city engulfed in a night deepened with the thick cover of clouds above them. In front of Ghelve's Locks, however, a half-dozen torches and lamps burned brightly, and a number of curious townsfolk had gathered, kept back by the watchful cordon of guardsmen that had secured the area. Zenna, Mole, Fario, and Jenya stood in a close knot some distance back, the torchlight casting long shadows behind them on the street.

"Well, better you than a squad of hobgoblin warriors," Fario said. The half-elf had been healed, and looked well, although he seemed distracted.

"Are you sure Arun will be all right?" Mole asked.

Jenya nodded. "He was grievously injured, and very close to death when we found you, but he will be all right. My arts could not restore him fully after such a close brush with death, but we will be able to treat him, and the other freed captives, once Morgan and the others can get them to the temple."

Mole nodded, and glanced up at Zenna. The young woman looked like a shadow, shrouded in her dark cloak, her face lost in the shadows of her cowl. She had said almost nothing since Jenya, Morgan, and the forces of the other churches, along with a full platoon of the City Watch, had burst into the slave bazaar within the Malachite Fortress a few hours before. The forces from the city had taken control of the rest of the fortress, liberating the remaining slaves from the few remaining hobgoblins in Kazmojen's garrison. Mole, whose

sharp eyes could penetrate the shadows to see her friend's face, read the deep sadness etched therein, a sadness that she felt herself at the loss of Ruphos. The gnome, however, was concerned that her friend would not be able to handle what she had seen, once the full force of her emotions broke through the fragile shell of control that she'd put up around herself.

"Ruphos gave his life so that others could live," Jenya said, as if reading the gnome's mind. She focused her warm blue eyes on Zenna, and touched the taller woman on the shoulder. "Do not forget, he made the choice freely, Zenna. He did what he had to do."

There was a silence then, one that Fario finally broke by clearing his throat. "I am sorry, I must depart. I have to see to my companion."

Mole frowned—that was one mystery that had not yet been solved to her satisfaction—but Jenya nodded and took his hand. "We are thankful for your aid," she said. "I hope that we will have the chance to speak further, at a later time."

Fario nodded, and turned to Mole and Zenna. "I am sure we will meet again," the half-elf said, and before they could respond, he turned and vanished into the darkness.

"Well, that was rude," Mole said. "After all we've been through, that's the good-bye we get?"

"He has his own secrets," Zenna said, softly.

"You have had a difficult night," Jenya said. "For some of us, I suspect it will go on for some time, but you have earned your rest. The children and the other captives, and your friend, are being seen to. I was going to return to the church myself; come, and we'll see that you've someplace safe to rest."

The two women went with the cleric, walking down Lava Street, while above them the first glimmers of the coming dawn began to brighten the far horizon.

THE END OF "LIFE'S BAZAAR"

Book II: "Flood Season"

Chapter 44

A faint patter of rain sounded on the roof tiles as Zenna bent over the small desk, the only other sound the faint scritch, scritch, of her pen on the sheet of parchment before her.

It was dark in the cramped confines of the loft where the mage worked, the only light coming from a narrow slit of a window near the peak of the roof a few feet from the plank desk where Zenna sat. Zenna needed no lamp or candle for her work, of course, and in fact preferred the quiet solitude of the loft in the washed-out gray light of the rainy day. She

knew it would be louder later, when the inn's custom picked up, and louder still if Mole returned this evening, filled with stories about her day in the city.

Zenna sighed. She hadn't been a very good companion of late, she knew. Mole had urged her to go out into the city more, to explore all that Cauldron had to offer, to be social and to have fun. Zenna knew, of course, that Mole was worried about her, that she wasn't putting behind her the memories of what had happened in the dark places under the city. But she had to deal with her feelings in her own way, and Mole hadn't pressed the point too heavily, all too eager herself to go out into the city and delve into the mysteries that it had to offer.

She would find plenty of those, the tiefling woman thought. Cauldron had more than its share of secrets.

It had been a quiet tenday, all told. They'd spoken with Jenya once or twice since *that night*, but the interim leader of the church of Helm had been busy, and Zenna had felt uncomfortable around all of the Helmites, as if their very proximity reminded her of what had happened to Ruphos. Jenya had been as good as her word, granting her the magical hat that she now wore at all times, and adding a few healing potions to their reward as well. Mole had mentioned something about a separate reward for Arun, she recalled, but she hadn't been listening too intently and she had not seen the dwarf at all since they'd emerged from Kazmojen's stronghold.

Most of her news of events in the city were filtered through Mole, who was all too ready to chatter on endlessly at the end of each day. For all that they were now quartered in an inn, Zenna spent little time in the common room, preferring to bring her meals up to their little shared attic to eat. The loft wasn't actually in the main building of the Drunken Morkoth, instead situated above one of the long outbuildings behind the structure that were used as stables, workshops, quarters for staff, and general storage. Zenna liked the privacy, and Mole liked the easy access both to the inn and the adjacent alley that opened onto the street. Plus it was relatively cheap, and although they weren't quite poor, what with the money they'd found in Jzadirune, that was an important consideration for them as well the longer they remained in the city.

And that was another question that lingered unanswered, of course.

Zenna leaned back from the desk, rubbing at her eyes. She didn't want to think about it. She felt tired, had felt that way a lot over the last tenday. Mole said that she just needed to get out and do things, but even with the artificial means of disguise provided by the magical hat, she had little interest in mingling with others. Since returning from the tunnels under the city she'd felt increasingly hollow, empty, as if she'd left a part of her down there.

Why did she feel that way? It was not as though she had known Ruphos all that well, after all; they'd barely known each other a few days. And while they'd seen some terrible things down below, they'd also overcome a great evil, and brought most of the captives back up to safety. There was the matter of the boy, Terrem, and the beholder, but that mystery too remained unsolved. The day after their return she and Mole had gone with Jenya to the orphanage, only to find that the boy had been returned safely, just as the beholder had said. Gretchyn, the headmistress of the orphanage, hadn't been able to provide any

answers, reporting only that a dark-clad woman had returned the boy that same night, and Terrem wasn't able to provide anything more useful.

Zenna frowned. There was something more here, something deeper, more sinister, that none of them could see. Why had the beholder been so interested in the boy? Outwardly, there had been nothing to distinguish him from any of the other stolen children. Jenya hadn't been able to provide any insight, though she'd been noticeably troubled when they had told her about the beholder. Zenna knew little of such beings, except that they were possessed both of great power and great cunning.

She shook her head. The rain had eased off, and she could now hear the faint sounds from the adjacent inn, the bustle of the afternoon rush picking up. Enough time for idle speculation, she thought, reaching for her pen.

She bit off a curse as she looked down at the parchment. The last two characters she'd written were transposed, completely ruining the spell she'd been working on. Fortunately it hadn't been in her spellbook; she'd have lost a whole page to such a stupid mistake. Her magical powers had grown since they'd returned from underground; in the last tenday she'd added several new spells to her book, including a *dweomer* taken from a gnomish scroll that they'd found in the skulk treasure. The second spell on that parchment, however, that of *mirror image*, continued to vex her, taunting her just beyond her abilities, like a book placed on a shelf just above her reach. She could feel some of the new spells burning in her mind right now, imprinted upon her memory like a melody that lingered long after the minstrel stopped playing. She could call upon any of them right now, she knew, and the spell would be wiped clean from her mind, until she rested and studied its formula once more.

She glanced out the window, trying to judge the hour. Mole wouldn't likely be back for hours. They still took their evening meals together, though didn't spend much more time together than that, at least not over the last few days. She rose, careful not to bang her head against the sloping roof above, and reached for her cloak. Her gaze lingered on her pack and crossbow for a moment, but she finally decided to leave them; she was only going out into the city, not on another adventure. And if trouble did find her, she had her spells.

With that decision made, she headed down the narrow stairs and went out into the city.

The streets of Cauldron were slick with the day's rain, with puddles gathering wherever there was a slight dip in the pavement. The sky above was an unbroken bank of deep gray, promising more rain before nightfall. The air was clean, heavy with dampness, and Zenna's hair clung to the back of her head as she left the alley behind the Morkoth and started down Obsidian Street in the direction of the city's northern gate. She left her cowl down; with the magical hat, she no longer needed to hide her features from people. The streets were rather quiet, however, the citizenry of the town muted by a combination of the weather and the difficult times that they had faced over the last month. Zenna passed by a number of townsfolk who seemed primarily interested in minding their own business and hurrying about their errands before the rain started up again. That was fine with her; she was of a like mind.

The scrivener's shop was only a few blocks from the Drunken Morkoth, nestled into one corner of a large two-story building that also housed a printer, a leather-goods shop, and apartments above. The proprietor was a middle-aged woman named Leira, who knew Zenna from several past visits over the last few tendays. Her prices were fair, but blank scrolls and such were expensive, and Zenna self-consciously felt at her unhappily light purse as she entered the shop.

The front room of the shop was tiny, with only a counter, two chairs barely larger than stools, and a curtained doorway that led back into the workroom. The place smelled like paper, and inkstains decorated the old wood in more than a few places. Zenna could hear Leira whistling in the backroom, and as the tiny bell over the door tinkled she came out to greet her.

"Hello, Leira... I'm afraid I made a mistake on my last scroll, and I need a few more sheets of parchment... what's wrong?"

The older woman's smile had faded when she'd gotten a good look at her customer, and now her face grew pale. "Uh, um, nothing, let me get that for you." She turned and hurriedly retreated back to the workroom, the curtain swaying behind her.

Zenna frowned, wondering what was wrong with the woman. For a moment she felt a sudden twinge of panic and reached up, confirming that the magical hat was still in place. Had its power failed for some reason? She could still feel the stubby horns that jutted from her temples; the magic only concealed them, did not actually change her body in any way. But without a mirror, there was no way to know for sure what Leira had seen.

"You used the calfskin, as I recall," she said, returning with a small package. "Three sheets, six silver, please."

On her previous visits Leira had been chatty and friendly, asking questions and making suggestions for other products. But now she was clearly agitated, taking Zenna's money and waiting there as if eager for her to depart. Distracted, Zenna left, glancing back to see the woman watching her through the front window of the shop.

She walked down the street, staying in the shadow of the buildings. She passed by another shop, this one closed and empty, and paused by its window. The four panes of glass set into the frame were of poor quality, clouded and scratched, but there was just enough light for her to clearly see her own reflection in its surface.

She sucked in a startled breath.

Chapter 45

Zenna stared into a face that was her own, yet at the same time...

At first she thought it was just the way that the shadowy reflection showed in the bad glass. But then she saw that her cloak and the rest of her body was clearly outlined in the impromptu mirror, it was only her face that was... wrong.

The magic of the hat was still working, at least she could not see the horns that were nonetheless still there. But her skin... not just pale, it was somehow... *faded*, as if formed of a thin parchment that had been scraped once too many times. She touched her face; the skin was firm, solid, but to her eyes it looked almost insubstantial.

A sickening feeling caught her gut and squeezed. What was happening to her?

She looked down at her hands, and tugged off one of her thin leather gloves. Immediately she saw that the skin looked the same, worse even when looked at directly, rather than in the reflection of the glass. Her flesh was pale, and as she moved it she thought that she could almost see the ground below *through* the delicate fingers.

“No,” she said, feeling a rush of anxiety come over her. She’d felt sick, hollow, it was true, over the last few days, but this... It was as if she was slowly vanishing, fading until there would be nothing left of her at all, as if she’d never existed...

“What the...”

Zenna looked up, and saw that a man dressed in the simple clothes of a laborer had approached along the walk, drawing back in surprise as he got a good look at her. With a reflex born of long practice Zenna turned away, darting out into the street and rushing away from the man, pulling up her cowl to hide her features. The man shouted something after her, but she could not tell what it was over the sound of her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. As long as she could hear that sound, she thought, she was still alive. She stabbed her hand back into her glove, running down the street, dodging the occasional horse or wagon, avoiding the pedestrians along the walk to either side that looked out at her in surprise as she ran past.

She wasn’t really sure where she was running to, at first, but her course was taking her farther away from the Morkoth. Past the North Gate, she knew, further down Obsidian Street, was the Temple of Helm. She felt uncomfortable at the thought of returning there, but she remembered the way that her hand had looked just a few moments ago, and rushed on. Perhaps Jenya could do something to help her...

Something cold touched her face. It was starting to rain again.

“Watch it, woman!”

The teamster yelled out his warning as Zenna rushed blindly across an intersection, her cowl limiting her field of view. A two-horse team was drawing a wagon up one of the sloping streets that formed the spokes connecting the main boulevards that ringed the town. One of the horses reared as she shot past, startled by her sudden appearance. She narrowly avoided a hoof that lashed out at the air before her, and then she was past, curses from the driver following her. She turned to look back over her shoulder...

“Arg!”

One boot caught on an uneven flagstone in the street, and the other slid out from under her as it landed awkwardly on the slick stone. She was falling, her momentum carrying her forward, and then pain exploded through her body as she landed hard on the wet street. She felt a shocking cold as water seeped through her clothes, then a warm haze that fell over her like a blanket. For a moment the world seemed to spin out of control around her, then it started to fade, everything melding into a soft grayness that filled her senses.

No, I don't want to fade away! she screamed, but the sound only echoed hollowly in her own thoughts.

The last thing she was aware of was voices, distant and jumbled. One voice seemed to separate from that mass, its tone soft and comforting, but although she strained to make out the words, they slipped through her thoughts like water through her fingers.

Then she faded, and everything disappeared.

Chapter 46

Consciousness came gradually, the layers of gray that enfolded her falling away in stages. Around her the world took focus, with light, sound, smell, and sensation each returning slowly.

Zenna blinked, and looked around her. She was in a small but comfortable chamber that was crowded with an unusual array of furnishings and decorative enhancements. Plush carpets woven with complex patterns covered almost the entirety of the wooden floor, the colors blending well with the tapestries that hung from the walls intermittently between the many tall bookshelves crammed with volumes. That alone was remarkable—a collection of several hundred books was worth a small fortune—but Zenna's attention was further drawn to the odd knickknacks scattered on the bookshelves, the small end tables situated throughout the room, or even hanging from the ceiling from slender lengths of chain. These curios ranged from weapons of unusual make, carvings and statuettes fashioned from wood, clay, or metal, a small collection of odd skulls of various sizes, some colored glassware, small pots and vases, and a few other items that even Zenna could not readily identify at first glance. A stream of incense wafted up into the air from a small brass censer atop one of the small tables, filling the room with a faint smell of vanilla and lavender.

She was lying on a couch heavily decorated with embroidered pillows. Her body felt light, a little numb, but she felt a surge of relief that she could feel it at all. She lifted her arm—a motion that cost a fair amount of effort—and was relieved when her sleeve fell away to reveal solid, substantial flesh underneath.

A slight sound drew her attention around, behind her. There, sitting on a gilded perch before the room's only window, was a white owl. The bird was watching her with its wide golden eyes, but it gave no sign that it was disconcerted by her proximity or her movements.

Zenna rose, slowly, to a sitting position. She felt weak, but there were no other lingering effects of the sickness she'd had. Using the end of the couch as a prop, she rose, waiting

to see if her legs would support her. She looked at the owl, who was preening itself, apparently bored with her already. Behind it she could see through the window that it was still raining, the city a washed-out haze through the rain-streaked window. The window faced toward the center of the city, and was fairly high up, a few stories above ground level at least. She could see the roofs of buildings that dropped in huge steps toward the lake beyond.

“A fine view, is it not? Even on a dreary day like this one, I find it refreshing.”

The voice drew her around so suddenly that her legs nearly gave out under her. The speaker was a man in his later years, perhaps sixty, though still hale. He stood in one of the doorways that exited the room, clad in a simple robe of soft white cloth belted at the waist. His close-cropped hair and beard were a slate gray, a stark contrast to eyes that were the deep green of emeralds. He wore a pendant or amulet of some sort on a silver chain about his neck, but Zenna couldn't quite make out the sigil from where she was standing.

“The weakness will pass, in time,” he told her. “Your body experienced quite a shock.... and if you'd come to me an hour later, it might have been too late to restore you to this world.”

Zenna forced herself to remaining standing as she faced him, even though her legs seemed to want to take advantage of the adjacent couch. “Who are you, if I may ask, and what is this place?”

The man nodded. “I am Esbar Tolerathkas, and you are in my current domicile. Like you, Izandra, I am not a native of Cauldron, but I have been pleased to call it my home for the last year, and doubly fortunate that a friend was willing to rent me this fine apartment.”

“How did you know my name?” she asked.

Esbar came into the room, though he kept his distance from Zenna. “You said it, repeatedly, while you were ill,” he said. “I am Izandra,” you kept saying. “I'm afraid there wasn't much else, at least nothing coherent. You were quite sick.”

She didn't sense any duplicity from the man, but was still leery, her spells tingling in her mind as if anticipating being released. “I go by Zenna,” she told him.

Esbar nodded. “Zenna, then.”

“How did I get here?”

“A young man of my acquaintance found you, and brought you to me.”

“You... you healed me?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. I... I am sorry that I was a bother. I was heading for the Temple of Helm, when I fell. I...” she trailed off, as something occurred to her. She’d noticed that her cloak and belt—along with her dagger and spell components pouch—were piled neatly atop one of the nearby tables. Not quite within easy reach, but closer to her than to Esbar. But then she saw something else, jutting out from under the cloak...

“My friend has some... issues... with the clergy of Helm, or I am sure he would have taken you there. I believe it is fortunate that he brought you to me instead, though; I suspect even Jenya Urikas might have had some difficulties with the sickness you had... what’s wrong?”

Zenna had grown pale, as she realized that what she’d seen on the table was her *hat of disguise*, that her benefactor knew what she was, that he could see the betraying marks of her heritage right now. There was no way to conceal it, now, and she resisted the urge to turn away, to hide her face.

“I... I’d better go, my friends, they must be worried about me...”

His gaze was penetrating, but not harsh, as he regarded her intently. “I understand. But you are still weak, and it’s still raining. Let me call a coach. While we are waiting, we can enjoy a small meal, before you depart.”

Zenna swallowed, but nodded. Esbar watched her as she walked—gingerly—to the table and recovered her gear. The hat she simply tucked into a pocket of her cloak; no need to betray its function now, since it was too late to hide herself from this man.

“Come,” he said. “There’s hot soup and cider in the tea room.”

* * * * *

Esbar was a gracious host, though it became immediately clear that there was more to him than met the eye. The cider and soup was served by what Zenna recognized was an *unseen servant*, and when she finally got closer to him she saw that the amulet that he wore bore the design of a raised index finger surrounded by sparkles of light.

He noticed her attention and said, “Yes, I am a follower of the High One, Azuth. And I did recognize that you as well are a practitioner of the magic arts.” He made a gesture, and the pitcher of cider drifted off of the nearby trundle to refill both of their cups. Wisps of steam rose from the brown liquid, and Esbar blew on his before taking a sip. Zenna watched him warily, but she could not resist digging into the hot soup. She still felt empty inside, but now it was the familiar pangs of hunger, and not the shadowy emptiness that she’d felt before.

“Is that why you helped me?” she asked.

“Partly,” he said. He leaned back in his chair, cupping his mug in a wrinkled hand, letting its warmth seep into him. “I admit, I am not the philanthropic sort; I leave such things to the cult of Helm, and to the other gods of benevolent sort. Tell me, what do you know of Azuth?”

Zenna blinked at the unexpected question, then reluctantly put her spoon down into the empty bowl before her. "I know he's the god of magic," she said. "Or at least a god of magic; there's Mystara, after all. I haven't actually seen a temple dedicated to him, or even met one of his priests."

"You have now," the man said, with a hint of a smile. "Or rather a 'devotee'; we don't play the games of title and rank that many of the other churches of Faerûn play."

"Azuth was one of those gods who began existence as a mortal, walking this very world that we now share. Those who follow him venerate magic, of course, but do not seek power for its own sake. Rather, we study magic to understand it, to better understand reality, this world and others, and our place in the larger scheme of existence. An Azuthite practices the Art with calm and caution, placing each step with deliberation, lest he unleash destruction that even magic, for all its potential, cannot undo."

"But you're a priest, or devotee, or what have you," Zenna said. "You healed me with divine power; isn't that different from the power of the Weave?"

"Yes. And no. All magic is interrelated, Zenna. Just as all life is related. Perhaps, in time, you may come to understand that for yourself."

A small bell sounded from somewhere below. Esbar waved a hand, and his invisible helper began clearing the dishes from the table. He rose, and after a moment Zenna did as well, feeling rather better than she had when she'd first woken.

"The carriage will take you to where you are staying," he told her. "I hope that you will come and speak with me again, if you have the time."

"I'd like that," she said. He escorted her to the staircase that led down to the ground floor, three stories below. She hesitated there, and looked up at him.

"Can I ask you another question?"

He nodded. She could see that he knew what it was that she wanted to ask, but she had to anyway.

"When you took off my hat, you saw what... what I am. And yet you helped me anyway. And you haven't mentioned it at all during our conversation..."

"I wish I could say that I possessed a deeper understanding that allowed me to look beyond the narrow stereotypes of our culture," Esbar said. "But in all honesty, one of the first things that I did was to delve your aura."

"Oh," she said.

"You are an interesting person, Zenna, more so than I think you yourself realize. I do hope that we can continue our conversation at a later date."

She nodded, and left.

It wasn't until she reached the bottom of the stairs—a difficult journey in itself, in her still-weakened state—as she was reaching into the pocket of her cloak for her magical hat, that she found something there. She drew it out, revealing a silver disk a half-span across.

Thoughtfully, she placed the sigil of Azuth back into her pocket.

Chapter 47

Lines of morning sunlight streamed into the common room of the Drunken Morkoth, indicating a welcome break in the weather. The sprawling chamber with its dozens of tables was mostly empty at this hour, with a few local tradespeople taking their breakfast in liquid form at the bar, and a sprinkling of others enjoying a late breakfast. It was quiet, subdued, with little of the noise that characterized the place in the evenings.

Zenna sat alone in a quiet corner near a window, eating a bowl of hot oatmeal sprinkled liberally with brown sugar. There was a book open on the table beside her bowl, but she wasn't really reading it, her thoughts instead wandering over a variety of roads.

She liked these quiet mornings, where she could have time to think and read without the close air and isolation of her room. Since recovering from her illness she found that she preferred to be around people, even if she didn't interact with them directly. Somehow it was reassuring to have that connection with others, that background noise of the city and its inhabitants.

She finished the last of her morning meal and leaned back in her chair, letting out a deep breath. She felt better, had fully recovered from her ordeal, but while she'd enjoyed this quiet time the period of idleness was starting to grate on her. She admitted that despite having spent nearly two tendays in Cauldron that she still did not know the city well. Fortunately she had Mole, who no doubt by now knew most of the back alleys and interesting hidey holes of the city, and probably a good share of its inhabitants as well. Mole had been great about giving her the space that she needed to confront her personal legacies of Jzadirune and the Malachite Fortress, but now it was time to move on to the next challenge. Perhaps tonight, over dinner, they could talk about the subject that they'd danced around until now. What next?

Zenna sipped at her coffee. For a long time she'd been running *away* from something. She absently felt at her tunic, at the hard lump pinned to its interior. Uncomfortable at first, now the pin seemed a part of her, almost forgotten. Almost.

But Cauldron was half a world away from where she'd started, both in a literal and a figurative sense. Could she find a place for herself here? Would this be more than a temporary waystation in her wanderings? Mole hadn't revealed her views on the subject. The gnome was possessed of an insatiable curiosity, and while she seemed to enjoy the city, Zenna didn't know if that suggested that she might want to stay.

Another thing for them to talk about, it seemed.

Zenna's hand dropped to the pocket of her cloak, to the symbol she still carried with her. She hadn't gone back to speak to Esbar, although the mage-priest—"devotee," as he called himself—had sent her a book, a study on the philosophy of magic by the notable eastern mage Nes Tarlok. It had been an interesting read, and it opened new questions for her to ponder.

"Good morning," a voice said, startling her out of her thoughts. She looked up to see an elf standing over her.

He was clearly a moon elf, the most common variety of his race in Faerûn, at least that one would see in a civilized town. He was perhaps an inch or two shorter than Zenna, which made him fairly tall for his kind. His silken brown hair flowed down over his shoulders, tamed only by a thin leather band about his brow. He looked young, which meant that he was probably thrice her age, she thought. His eyes were deep and dark, the color of almonds, framed by brows that slanted just slightly beyond what you'd expect from a human. Those eyes caught her up, so much so that she swallowed her initial question, and that she didn't immediately notice the other details about him.

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not mean to interrupt your privacy. But I had wished to see you again, to make sure that you were well." He smiled, faintly, as if a secret had suddenly occurred to him that no one else but her shared.

Zenna frowned. While his features were unfamiliar, there was something in the elf's voice that was familiar, triggering a memory that she couldn't quite bring into focus. She belatedly noticed that he was clad in simple traveling clothes colored in a mix of greens and browns, with a chain shirt over his tunic and a trailing waterproof cloak over it all. A sword was belted at his hip, and she could tell by the way he carried himself that he knew how to use it.

Suddenly she realized that he was just standing there, waiting for her to reply. "I'm sorry," she said. "Have we met?"

He nodded, as if her answer was not unexpected. "I thought that you might not remember," he said. "You were quite ill, at the time."

Something flashed in her mind as a connection fell into place. "You were the one," she said. "The one who brought me to Esbar."

The elf nodded. "Dannel Ardan, at your service." He bowed slightly in the elven manner, a clipped, curt gesture of respect.

"Zenna."

She gestured for him to sit—it was the least she could do—and waited until he had done so before continuing. "I have not seen a great number of the Fair Folk here in Cauldron," she said. "Are you from the Forest of Mir?"

“A bit further afield, actually,” he said, but did not elaborate. Zenna, who had secrets of her own, did not press him, instead asking, “So, what brings you to Cauldron?”

“A bit of business,” he said, “and visiting some old friends. Esbar Tolerathkas, for one.”

“Fortunate for me,” she said. “And fortuitous that you encountered me when you did.”

“Indeed.”

“Coffee?”

“No, no thank you.”

He stared at her for a long moment, enough so that Zenna dropped her eyes, uncomfortable under that heavy gaze. The conversation didn't seem to be going anywhere, with the elf as reluctant as she to share any information about himself. She was trying to think of a way to politely extricate herself when a familiar voice piped, “Hey Zenna! Who's your friend?”

Zenna and the elf both turned to see Mole, who as always had crept up on them unawares. If Dannel was surprised by the sudden appearance, however, he gave no sign of it. “This is Dannel Ardan,” she said by way of introduction. “Dannel, this is Mole, my traveling companion.”

Mole beamed and offered her slight hand, which the elf shook briefly.

“Pleased to meet you,” the gnome said, as she leapt sprightly up into the remaining vacant chair. The table and chairs were built for people of larger size, so once she had sat down, all that Zenna could see of her was the upper half of her head. “You're a moon elf, right? Are you from the Western Heartlands, by any chance? I once knew this elf, he was an arcane archer, from Evereska. Never been there myself, but it sounds like a fascinating place, an entire elven city!”

Mole continued speaking, with Dannel managing to get the odd word in edgewise, but Zenna barely heard them. Suddenly she'd felt a surge of unease creep over her, a vague but powerful sensation that felt akin to nausea but penetrated deeper into her consciousness. Dannel and Mole seemed oblivious to it, whatever she was feeling, and as she looked around the common room she saw the other Cauldronites going about their business as well. Zenna tried to shake off the feeling, but every scrap of instinct that she possessed was warning her that something was terribly, dramatically... *wrong*.

What was going on?

She was jolted from her reverie as Dannel, in response to something that Mole had asked, drew an object out from under his cloak. It was a silver flute, in two foot-long segments that the elf fitted together into a single seamless whole. The elf raised the instrument to his lips, and a melody lifted from the device, notes of music that seemed to hang in the air and enfold the three of them in their grasp. The tune was soft, lilting, like water cascading over stones. The music of the flute banished the anxiety Zenna had felt, replacing it with a

sense of calm. Dannel's eyes were closed as he played on, and Zenna realized that everyone else in the common room had grown quiet as well, listening to the elf's performance.

And then he was done. Mole clapped, as did most of the others in the other part of the room. Dannel took the flute apart and replaced it in its sheath, looking at Zenna with a quiet intensity in his eyes.

"Hey, that was really good!" Mole said. "Could you teach it to me, sometime? I mean, it wouldn't be as good whistled, rather than played on the flute, of course, but I really liked the melody."

Dannel's intent gaze hadn't shifted, and once more Zenna wondered just who this elf was. Why did he act as though he knew her?

"Hey, Zenna, isn't that one of the clerics of Helm?"

Zenna looked up to where Mole was pointing, noting that Dannel had shifted as well, something flashing in his eyes for an instant before his veneer of self-control returned. The young woman who had just entered the Morkoth did look familiar, and her suspicion was confirmed a few moments later as the woman scanned the room, and headed immediately for their table once she had caught sight of them. She was distressed, clearly, and in fact looked to be on the brink of tears as she rushed, breathless, to their table.

"What's the matter, Illeywn?" Mole asked. Zenna nodded to herself; she'd forgotten the woman's name, but of course Mole would have remembered, as she was more interested in people in general.

"Jenya sent me to find you," the woman said, gasping a little to catch her breath. "She wants you to come to the Temple of Helm, immediately!" She shot a quick glance at Dannel, and frowned slightly.

"What is it, this time?" Zenna asked, perhaps a tad more dryly than was needed. The fact was, she was still a bit off guard due to the appearance and manner of the elf, and the strange feeling she'd felt before. Was Jenya's summons somehow related?

The cleric looked at Dannel again, but the elf's expression did not change from a neutral detachment. "Something has happened... it's Sarcem, he's in trouble. Please... I have two horses outside, I can bring you there in a few minutes, Jenya specifically asked for the two of you..."

Zenna was curious, but also wary; the last time that they had agreed to help the Church of Helm had ended in disaster in the dark chambers of the Malachite Fortress. She felt a sudden pang at the memory, a feeling amplified by the reminder offered by the familiar symbol that Illewyn wore around her neck. The same symbol Ruphos had worn...

"Sarcem—the High Priest?" Mole asked. "Of course, we'll go with you." She stood on her human-sized chair before dropping lightly to the ground. "There's just a thing or two I want to get from my room, first... I'll be back in a jiffy!" Before any of them could offer a

comment, the gnome was gone, darting out among the tables and chairs in the center of the room.

Zenna stood, and Dannel moved smoothly to match her motion. “Perhaps I might accompany you as well?” he asked. “While I do not know Sarcem Delasharn personally, I have heard a great deal of praiseful speech about him even in my brief time in Cauldron.”

Illewyn looked a bit flustered, uncertain how to reply, but Zenna stepped in. “I am sure that if Jenya needed more help, she would know to ask for it,” she said. “I’m certain that you understand.” She remembered what Esbar had said, about her benefactor having some “issues” with the church of Helm, and she was still somewhat suspicious of the elf’s motives.

But if the elf was put off by her refusal, he didn’t show it. “Of course,” he said. “I will take my leave of you, then. Extend my best wishes to the curate,” he said, with a slight bow at Illewyn, “and express my hopes to your friend,” returning his gaze to Zenna, “that perhaps I shall have occasion to teach her my song at a later date.”

“I will,” Zenna said. “And thank you again,” she added, as he turned to go. Dannel nodded, smiled that odd smile of his, and departed. Zenna watched him go, then turned to Illewyn.

“Well, I guess we’d better get going then. If I know Mole, she’s probably already waiting for us at the horses.”

Chapter 48

The Temple of Helm was as she remembered it, all hard edges and quiet dignity, with a certain majesty in the cavernous interior of its holy sanctum. But she also immediately sensed the tension in the air as soon as they had arrived. An acolyte had greeted them and took their horses to the stable in the courtyard beside the church, worry clear in her features. It was written as well on the faces of the other underclerics that they saw as Illewyn ushered them into not into the small structure that served as quarters and offices for the temple priests, but rather into the main church building itself.

That structure was mostly comprised of a single large hall of worship, with twin rows of wooden pews that could seat perhaps a hundred worshippers. Thick wooden beams supported the roof that rose to a peak some twenty feet above. Jenya Urikas was standing by the altar, and as she turned to greet them, Zenna could see the worry and concern she’d seen earlier reflected tenfold in the face of the woman who led the church of Helm in Cauldron in the absence of Sarcem Delasharn.

“Thank you for coming,” Jenya said, coming forward to greet them with an earnest clasp of their hands. Jenya was a slight, compact woman, nearly a half a foot shorter than Zenna, and at the moment she looked older than her thirty-one years. Her long brown hair, typically done up in a stylish design, now hung about her shoulders in disarray.

“What’s happened?” Mole asked.

"It's Sarcem," she said, forgetting about honorifics and titles in her agitation. "Not even an hour ago, as I was conducting the morning devotions, I received a *sending* from him." Without waiting for a response from them, she dug into the small pouch at her belt and thrust a scrap of paper at them. Zenna scanned it quickly, then handed it to Mole.

At Lucky Monkey. Have eight wands. Tavern's been attacked. Bandits led by barbaric apeman. Mortally wounded. Retreated to basement. They know we're here. Send assistance!

Sarcem? Is that you? hang on! Conserve your resources. I'll send out aid immediately. Send me another message when you can. But until then have...

"The second line is my reply," Jenya explained. "I didn't have time to think it out clearly, I wanted to tell him to 'have faith.'" She nervously chewed on a fingernail. It unnerved Zenna slightly, to see the normally cool and collected woman so distraught.

"The Lucky Monkey?" Mole asked.

"It's a wayside inn about a day's travel from here, along the north road, on the outskirts of the Forest of Mir."

"We came from the north, though we stayed to the foothills, rather than the forest," Mole said. She glanced down at the message again. "Apeman... that doesn't sound too good..."

"What are these wands he speaks of?" Zenna asked.

"Wands of *control water*," Jenya replied. "For years now, they have been an essential element in Cauldron's survival." She seemed to take some strength from finally doing something, even if it was just relating a story, and her voice grew stronger as she continued. "As you know, the depths of the volcano are filled with a great lake, one that penetrates far down into the interior of the mountain. There are natural drains down there in the depths, but during the rainy season, or 'flood season,' as we call it, the caldera collects more water than the lake can drain. This results in potentially dangerous floods that can devastate the lower levels of the city, if not properly handled."

"The churches of Cauldron responded to the danger by undertaking the creation of wands of *control water*. With the aid of these devices, the priests of the city have been able to keep the floodwaters at bay, protecting the city. But in recent years, the rains have been mild, and the churches, distracted by other matters, have turned from their responsibilities. Only Sarcem remained vigilant in calling for more preparation... but he alone could not manufacture all of the wands needed. As the rainy season approached in recent months, he decided to set out for Almraiven, to purchase more wands there. He's been gone nearly a month now, and I had no reason to worry... until now!"

"Please—I ask you, to help us once more. I was going to go myself, but... I know Sarcem would never forgive me if I abandoned my responsibility, left the church and the city without protection. My clergy is small, with young priests, few of whom are warriors. I have sent Morgan to rally the Guard, but getting even a squad released for action so far from the city will take time, and persuasion." She frowned, her displeasure at the reality of urban politics

clear. "It will take an entire day's hard ride to reach the Monkey, if the weather holds. I fear that if I wait for the Guard, help will not reach Sarcem until tomorrow... which may be too late for him.

"So you want us, just the two of us, to ride up there and see what's what?" Zenna asked, not bothering to hide her incredulity.

"I... I know it's a great deal to ask. But..." she lowered her head, "I don't know who else to ask."

"Hey, I think I know where I can find Arun," Mole said. "He'll go with us, I'm sure of it."

"If you could just go, see if Sarcem still... if he's all right," Jenya said. "If the bandits and this 'apeman' are still there, wait for Morgan and the Guards to arrive. I do not ask you to throw away your lives..."

That's almost the same as what she told us last time, Zenna thought. That's not how it worked out, though. She didn't say anything, however.

"C'mon, Zenna," Mole said, reading the look on her friend's face. "We can help, we can't just let these bandits get away with it."

"All right," Zenna said, after a moment.

"Great!" Mole said, clearly excited by the prospect of another adventure, even one as dangerous as this one promised to be. "I'll go see if I can find Arun, and meet you at the north gate!" She shot off like a crossbow bolt down the aisle, gone within moments.

Illewyn stepped forward. The cleric had stood there in the background during the whole exchange, but her face wore a mask of determination now. "Let me go with them, Jenya," she said. "They will need a cleric, particularly if Sarcem is seriously injured."

Jenya shook her head. "You are not a warrior, sister," she began, but seeing the resolve in the other woman's face, relented a moment later with a nod. "Very well. But remember, if danger still lurks at the Monkey, wait for Morgan..."

Illewyn nodded, a mix of excitement and fear flashing in her eyes. "I will gather my arms and armor," she said, before taking her leave.

"Come, I will have Malakar prepare fresh mounts for you. It's a long ride, but the road is clearly marked all the way down to the plains. And I will give you another cache of healing potions... in case."

Zenna nodded absently. "If you have an extra light crossbow, I could use one," she said. "I left mine at the Morkoth."

"We will see you fully equipped and on the road within the hour," Jenya said. Even as they stepped out of the church and into the courtyard, the cleric was already shouting orders, directing her underpriests to begin preparations. Those preparations went quickly, with a

scurry of activity surrounding Zenna as the young priests brought her a bow and case of bolts, a small padded satchel containing bandages, salves, and four precious healing potions, and saddlebags full of supplies. Zenna watched distractedly, her thoughts already going out to the long road and hard ride ahead, and alternately back to that strange feeling of dread she'd experienced earlier, in the inn.

She strongly doubted that the two were unconnected.

Chapter 49

Arun Goldenshield drained the last dregs of ale from his tall mug, wiping the foam from his jaw—his clean-shaven jaw—before dropping the stein noisily on the table before him. The tavernkeeper shot him an inquiring look from where he stood behind the bar, polishing the bottles and mugs lined up in neat rows on the shelving against the wall. Arun shook his head, and ran his fingers across his jaw. The stubble was starting to itch; it was time to shave again. The thick, full beard of the dwarven tavernkeeper seemed to mock him, but the man was a good enough chap. Shield dwarves and gold dwarves didn't always have the best of relations, but the tavernkeeper had come even farther from his own home than Arun had, and he showed respect to the symbol that the paladin wore about his neck. Respected the symbol, anyway, if not the man.

Arun harrumphed, refusing to indulge himself with self-pity. It had been a long tenday for him, after returning from the Malachite Fortress. Unlike Zenna he had not spent that time with regrets and soul searching; the line between Good and Evil had been clear down there, and he'd unleashed his share of righteous smiting of the latter in a cause that had been both honorable and just. The captives had been freed, and the corrupted half-dwarf behind it slain. Of course, he'd fallen before Kazmojen had been finally defeated, but at least he'd weakened him enough for his comrades to finish the job...

The paladin harrumphed again, his armor creaking as he adjusted himself. The metal plates fit him like a second skin, now, and he rarely left his room, even just to come down here for an ale or three, without it on. He admitted that the Helmites—or more accurately, whoever they'd hired out to do the work—had done a fine job with it. Kazmojen's armor had taken a pounding in their battle, and burned to boot when Mole and Fario roasted the regenerating brute, but it had been restored lovingly to service, and further etched with the design of the Soul Forger, right across the front of the breastplate. Arun had been rightfully honored when the clerics had presented him with it, and his old battle-scarred suit of scale armor had quickly found its way into the discard bin.

The tavernkeeper shot him another glance, followed by a not-so-subtle look at the single window high along one wall of the common room. Arun refused to rise to the bait. He knew it was early, that another whole day lay out there in wait. Dwarves had nothing against spending time in dark, crowded place under the earth, and he himself enjoyed time spent in prayer and contemplation, but even he had to admit that he was mostly hiding here, enjoying the company of fellow dwarves, strong drink and songs. No one knew him here. No one knew what he had done.

Abruptly he pushed the bench back from the table and rose. What was he doing here, anyway? There was no evil to be confronted in the dingy depths of a dwarven tavern. He harrumphed again, but his heart wasn't in it. Where else could he go?

He turned to head back to his room, but even as he left his table the outer door burst open, and Mole charged in, almost colliding with him in her rush.

* * * * *

The morning sunlight had been replaced by thick gray clouds that had gathered overhead as the companions gathered at the northern gate of the city. Not dark enough yet to promise more rain, they nonetheless encouraged them to haste as they rode through the massive stone arch that formed a tunnel through the thick city wall. The reinforced doors at each end of the tunnel were open, and the guards paid little heed to their progress as they rode through. Beyond the city lay a winding, sometimes steep road that would take them down the mountainside into the foothills beyond, and further yet into the plains that formed a narrow belt between the Alamir Mountains and the vast Forest of Mir. Near Cauldron, the foothills and the creeping edges of the wood came close together, enough so that the easy ride across the plains would be the shortest and easiest part of their ride. First, they had to get down from the mountains.

Zenna glanced back at Arun, who looked ill at ease on his horse. Mole said that the dwarf had readily agreed to accompany them, but he'd barely said five words to Zenna, and a storm having nothing to do with the inclement weather seemed to hang over the paladin. Still, she was glad to have him with them, going into a potentially dangerous situation like this one.

Illewyn, on the other hand, was an unknown quantity. The woman was in her mid twenties, fit enough if hinting slightly toward a pudginess that would probably grow more developed as youth retreated into middle age. Her shoulder-length black hair was tied neatly back into a knot, but even though she now wore a chain shirt over her clerical robes, and a light horseman's mace hung at her belt, she definitely did not radiate the martial air of a battle-priest. In some ways, she reminded Zenna of Ruphos, who similarly had been forced to take up a role for which he had not been prepared.

Mole was riding behind the cleric, chattering on about some random topic. Zenna didn't bother to listen in, instead turning her attention back to the road ahead.

As they reached the first bend in the road, the first of many as it switchbacked its way down the mountain upon which Cauldron perched, Zenna caught sight of a squat column formed at the next bend, a jumble of boulders stacked haphazardly in a pile. Beside that natural pillar there was a horse and rider, apparently waiting for them. A suspicion grew in her even before they drew close enough for her to identify the rider, who simply sat there on his mount, waiting without greeting or hail as they approached.

"Dannel," Zenna said, finally reining in a few paces away, the others close behind her.

The elf looked much the same as when he'd taken leave of them an hour before, although now he carried a considerable composite longbow across his lap, with a quiver packed full

of long shafts jutting out from behind his shoulder. His horse was a powerful roan, looking like a Shaar breed, perhaps, with its muscular shoulders and hindquarters. It snorted at the other horses, and it sounded like a challenge.

“What are you doing here?” Zenna asked, a hint of impatience creeping into her voice.

The elf lifted his palms, as if to place her at ease. “I was looking to get out of the city for a time, and would share the road with you, if you are willing.”

“Hey,” Mole began, but Zenna cut her off. “I think you’d better be straight with me, starting right now,” the tiefling said.

“You want I should tie this fellow around this pillar?” Arun growled. “He certainly looks stringy enough for a few knots to hold.”

“Peace, dwarf,” he said, but his eyes were like shards of glass, hard and edgy. But he shifted his gaze back to Zenna. “Very well, Zenna, I will be honest with you. There are two reasons that I wish to accompany you.”

“The first is as I said before. The urgency of your departure, your weapons and the manner that you carry them, and the presence of the cleric of Helm, tells me that the nature of the High Priest’s situation is serious. I meant what I said, I wish the cleric no ill, and if he is in danger, I would offer my aid to his cause.”

“And the second reason?” Zenna prodded.

“I’ve been asked to watch over you,” he said.

Zenna nodded to herself. So Esbar Tolerathkas had more than a passing interest in her, it seemed. Part of her felt a surge of fury at the presumption of it, setting a... a *guardian* over her, as if she was some possession to be monitored. But she also had to admit that the road ahead might be dangerous, if the threat was something that the High Priest of Helm could not handle.

“We ride swiftly,” she said. “You’ll have to keep up as best you can.”

He smiled at her, that same enigmatic smile as before, as she kicked her mount forward again. The others followed behind her, with Mole already engaged in a new conversation with the elf as he fell into the line. Arun brought up the rear, and Zenna could already hear what was sure to be a long day of grumbling begin from that direction.

She urged her horse into a canter, and they continued as quickly as was safe down the side of the mountain.

Chapter 50

The sun had already fallen below the horizon as the five riders approached their destination. The roadhouse was a looming shadow, framed by the tall trees of the forest

that stretched out before them as far as they could see to the north and south. The road that led past the inn was swallowed up by the wood within a hundred yards, a black tunnel that seemed to promise doom for anyone foolish enough to essay that route at night.

The roadhouse itself was a sprawling, two-story structure, nestled at the rear of a wide clearing along the forest's edge. As they drew nearer they could see that a side building stood adjacent to the main building, probably a stables or storehouse by the look of it. The windows on both the first and second stories were all shuttered, although faint glimmers of light from around the edges were a possible indicator that the building was still occupied.

The night was close about them, and deeply quiet. Their horses, winded from the long ride, breathed heavily as they approached at a walk.

"Did you see those baboons, on the road?" Mole asked.

Zenna glanced back at where the gnome was riding behind the priestess. "Baboons?"

"I saw them as well," Dannel added. "A pack of them, hiding in the brush about a mile back, just watching us as we went past. Quite unusual."

"It felt like they... I don't know," Mole said. "I didn't like it."

"Bah," Arun said, dismounting awkwardly, his legs stiff from the unaccustomed riding. The horse seemed just as pleased to be free of its burden, and nearly pulled its reins free from the dwarf's grip. Dannel quickly pulled up alongside the creature, and calmed it.

Zenna dismounted as well, and led her horse toward the roadhouse. With her darkvision she could clearly make out what appeared to be the front doors, and headed in that direction.

"Look at those!" Mole said, skipping ahead. She pointed at the various carvings set into the eaves and braces on the inn's exterior, depicting monkeys in various active poses. One monkey was trying to crawl out onto a leaning branch to grab a banana hanging over a sleeping tiger, while another across from it sat blissfully unaware on a flat rock while the poacher behind it was eaten by an ankheg. Mole ran along the front of the building, enjoying the various carvings, but Dannel brought their attention back to their current grim situation a moment later.

"Look there," he said, gesturing with his longbow. Zenna saw where he had pointed, could clearly see the fresh stains splattered against one of the front beams to the left of the doors. Her darkvision didn't allow her to distinguish colors, but she could guess what had made the stains.

Dannel came forward, and crouched in the dirt of the path that led to the doors. "Been a scuffle here," he said, probing the ground, his elven eyes allowing him to see the signs even in the near-darkness.

"Well, let's go in and get this over with," Arun said. His horse shied again, agitated. "Quiet, you blasted beast!" he growled at it.

"It's not you," Dannel said, observing all of the horses. "Something is setting them off."

"We'd better leave them somewhere," Zenna said. "Maybe the stables?"

They made their way over to the side building, passing around the edge of the roadhouse to the dark and silent structure. "I cannot see anything," Illewyn said, as the night continued to deepen. "Let me call upon the power of Helm to brighten our way."

"Hold a bit," Dannel suggested. "We don't want to give ourselves away, and a *light* spell will do that like a beacon, if anyone is watching."

So they continued in darkness, reaching the stables without incident. Arun, still fighting his reluctant horse with one hand, pulled open the heavy front doors of the stables with the other. Mole peeked inside, and after declaring the place clear, they moved inside. The stables were musty with the odors of animals, but there were no horses present, and no other signs of trouble. Dannel drew down some feed from an overhead bin into a long trough that connected to several of the stalls that ran down one side of the interior, and urged the horses into them. Their mounts were still agitated, but Dannel was able to persuade them to enter the stalls, and he made sure that they were well-secured before he rejoined the others.

"With all the noise them beasts are making, no doubt the whole place knows we're here," Arun grumbled.

"Well, it'll save you having to look all over for the bandits, Arun, if they come find *us*," Mole offered.

"They may not even be around here, still," Dannel said. "Most bandits don't wait around for the authorities to arrive; they strike quickly and fade away into the shadows."

"But they may not be expecting word to get out so quickly," Zenna said. "We should be ready for anything."

"A wise approach, in any situation," the elf replied.

"We should hurry," Illewyn said, clutching her mace tightly. "Sarcem may still need our help!" The way she said it, it was clear that the statement was as much a prayer as a suggestion.

"All right," Arun said, leading them back outside toward the roadhouse. Zenna saw another entrance on the side of the building facing the stables, but Arun was heading straight back toward the front doors, unlimbering his shield and heavy hammer as he went, moving deceptively quickly for someone of his stature and heavy burdens.

Zenna hurried after him. "Maybe we might want to be a little bit circumspect," she offered.

"Nothing wrong with a frontal assault," the dwarf replied, frowning. "Sneakin' about's not my style."

"If those bandits are still here, I have no doubt you'll get your chance to demonstrate your prowess," Zenna said. "But..."

"Shh," Mole said, having run ahead to the doors during the exchange. "Hear that?"

They quieted, and could hear what the sharp-eared gnome had; a muffled sound from inside, a series of crashes and clattering noises, punctuated by the odd sound of breaking glass.

"Sounds like someone's tearing up the place," Dannel said.

"We have to get in there!" Illewyn added.

"Well?" the dwarf said, looking impatiently at Zenna. The tiefling in turn nodded at Mole, who checked the door efficiently before testing it, pushing the handles and dropping to the ground to peer under the tiny space at the bottom.

"Locked," she said, "And I think there's something stacked up behind it, as well."

"A barricade, eh?" Arun said. "Well, I think I can take care of that." He hefted his hammer, and stepped forward.

"Wait a moment," Zenna said. "By the time we bludgeon through, everyone inside will be waiting on the far side. Mole?"

The gnome, who was thinking the same thing, nodded and ran along the face of the roadhouse to their left, the others quickly following behind. She paused a few dozen paces beyond the doors, under one of the heavy wooden shutters.

"Why this one?" Dannel asked.

"There's no light shining from around the edges," Mole explained. "Boost me up."

The window was only about six feet off of the ground, so the elf was easily able to lift the gnome up to reach the shutters. Mole stood on his shoulders while she examined the thick wooden planks covering the window underneath. They were fastened somehow from inside, but Mole drew out her dagger, working it into the narrow gap between the two planks and drawing it open enough to reveal the latching mechanism. She dug into one of her pouches and drew out a small metal tool, which in turn slipped through the gap and slid easily into the metal clasp that held the latch. A few seconds later, a faint click sounded, and Mole swung the shutters open.

"All right, hold on for a second," she said, sliding up the window and crawling inside. She disappeared into the darkened space, and was only gone for a few seconds before she returned to the window, leaning out over the sill toward them. She gestured for them to come nearer; from behind her, the muffled sound of laughter could briefly be heard from somewhere beyond.

"I'm in a private alcove set off from the common room of the inn by a curtain," she said. "There's a bunch of people in there, having a bit of a party. Bandits, by the look of them, all armed and armored. They're wearing these red sashes around their wrists, and they seem to be at least a little drunk."

"Was there any sign of Sarcem?" Illewyn asked. "He's an older man, balding, in a white clerical robe."

"No, I didn't see him," Mole said. "C'mon, get up here, we can take them by surprise."

Dannel nodded, but Arun looked up at the window dubiously. "I can't just hop up there," he said. "I'll go around to the main doors."

"They've got a pretty big barricade against them," Mole said. "It would take even you some time to bash through, and there may be more of them around, not to mention that 'apeman'."

"Come on, dwarf, we can get you up there, if we work together," Dannel said.

"I don't know, he's pretty heavy," Mole said from above. "Lots of ale, you know."

Arun's eyes narrowed under the brim of his helm. "Take my shield," he commanded, handing the heavy sheet of plate steel up to Mole. This was followed quickly by the dwarf's heavy warhammer, then he turned to Dannel. It was clear that he wasn't going to ask.

The elf grinned. "All right, girls, grab his legs, we just need to boost him to the sill." He stood before the window and formed a box with his hands, bending so that the dwarf could use him as a step to reach the window. The smile erased as Arun's weight settled on him, and even with Zenna and Illewyn adding their strength, the three of them were barely able to lift the dwarf high enough to reach the windowsill.

"Gods... dwarf... you... weigh... a hundredstone!" Dannel grunted, fighting to lift the dwarf higher. Arun grabbed the edges of the windowsill with his thick hands and started to pull himself up, while the three below added their strength from below. Slowly, the dwarf rose, until he'd managed to clamber halfway into the window, his head and shoulders through and his legs dangling out behind.

"Come on!" Mole hissed, glancing with concern at the curtain. The dwarf was making a fair amount of noise, although at least he was keeping his cursing under his breath.

Arun grunted and with a heave fell through the window, landing on the floor with a loud clatter of metal that seemed to fill the place with sound.

Mole was at the curtain in an instant, but even before she peeked around its edge, she could hear the voices change, followed by the sounds of activity and the familiar noise of weapons being drawn.

The bandits were coming.

Chapter 51

Dannel leapt up smoothly into the window, catching the sill and pulling himself through in a fluid motion. He quickly leaned back out and caught Zenna's hand, drawing her up after him. After helping the wizard through, he turned to assist the cleric, who'd grabbed onto the sill but who despite a determined effort couldn't quite pull herself up.

"They know we're here, they're coming!" Mole hissed, loading her crossbow while she peered out through the gap at the edge of the curtain. There could be no doubt, now, that intruders had gotten into the inn; Arun continued to clank and clatter as he awkwardly rose to his feet, immediately making for where his hammer and shield lay on the floor near the window.

"Hey, who's hidin' in there?" came a call from beyond the curtain.

"Lookie like we missed one!" added a second voice, obviously female, but no less menacing for that.

"Yeah, come out, we won'ts hurt ya," added another. By the laughter that they heard, it was clear that Mole's assessment about the intoxicated state of the bandits was accurate, but none of them were foolish enough to believe that this would make their foes any less dangerous.

"They think that we're from the inn, not from outside," Zenna whispered. "We can use this to our advantage, catch them by surprise..."

But Arun had evidently had enough with temporizing, for no sooner had he picked up his weapon and shield then he roared a dwarvish battle cry and burst through the curtain.

The common room of the Lucky Monkey was a sprawling interior space larger even than that of the Morkoth, with a long, curving bar facing the barricaded front doors that had to be at least thirty paces long. The tables and chairs that filled the room were in disarray, with a lot of the furniture turned over or scattered against the walls. But the most pressing matter was the cluster of armed figures approaching the alcove there the companions waited. There were six of the bandits in all, a mixture of men and women, all humans with hard looks on their faces. Four were clad in chainmail with heavy steel shields and longswords, with the other two bore studded leather armor, with slender rapiers in their hands and small bows slung across their backs. All wore the red sashes that Mole had noticed earlier, wrapped around their forearms.

Their reflexes softened by ale and harder drink, the bandits were caught momentarily off guard as the dwarf appeared and charged into their disordered ranks. Arun's hammer slammed into the armored chest of one of the warriors, driving him back several paces. But even intoxicated as they were, it quickly became clear that these foes were not mere novices unused to the press of battle. The warriors hefted their blades and assaulted the dwarf with powerful strokes that clanged loudly against Arun's shield and plate armor, while the two rogues darted in at his flanks, trying to find a gap in his defenses through which they could thrust their rapiers. Arun grunted as one sword glanced off of his helmet, opening a narrow gash in the side of his head. Another warrior, a woman who seemed a

bit more wobbly than the others, missed him entirely, swinging her sword in a fumbling attack that clipped one of the rogues in the shoulder before he could dodge out of the way.

“Watch your blade, fool!” the man hissed at her.

“Get out the way then, Alleybasher!” she retorted, trying to recenter herself for another attack as the storm of blades crashed about the dwarf.

“There’s plenty of dwarf to go around for all of you!” Arun roared, sweeping his hammer around in a broad arc, driving his foes back. He caught one of the fighters with a glancing blow to the arm that spoiled his attack, but grunted again in pain as one of the rogues, a red-haired woman with a scar ruining an otherwise pretty face, thrust her rapier into a gap in the armor covering his left hip.

But Arun’s companions had not been idle, and they rushed quickly to his aid as the battle swarmed around him. Mole, unable to get a clear shot into the swirling melee, dropped her bow and rushed forward, drawing her slender sword as she came. She targeted one of the fighters surrounding the dwarf, flanking him in turn as she stabbed at his exposed backside. Her sword failed to penetrate the chain links of his armor, but the attack did draw his attention, and he spun to face her.

“You should have picked on someone your own size, little gnome,” the man hissed, an evil smile crossing his features as he hefted his sword, several times the size of Mole’s diminutive weapon.

But before the warrior could attack, his eyes grew vacant and confused, his already alcohol-befuddled mind clouded by the power of Zenna’s *daze* spell. His sword lowered, its tip touching the ground as he held it slackly, and his shield dropped, leaving an opening that Mole was quick to exploit. Lunging inside the tall human’s reach, Mole slipped her sword up into his gut, forcing it through the chain mesh into the soft flesh and organs underneath. The daze gave way to pain too late to save the bandit, as he staggered and slumped to his knees, trying to hold in the blood pouring from the vicious wound.

“That cut you a bit down to size, eh?” Mole said, as she drew back, her blade red in her hand.

Back in the alcove, Dannel heaved and pulled Illewyn up through the window, stumbling a bit as the cleric tried to grab onto the threshold and make it into the room beyond. The sounds of battle spurred him on as he unslung his longbow and strung it with a practiced motion, drawing an arrow out from the quiver across his back and fitting it to the string. Darting out the far side of the curtain, opposite where Zenna looked out from behind its other side, he quickly sighted a target, drew, and fired. The shot looked good, but Dannel had overcompensated to avoid the risk of hitting Arun, and it glanced off of a bandit warrior’s greave, caroming harmlessly off to stick in the wall behind the bar.

Muttering an elvish curse, the elf ranger reached for another arrow.

Arun was finding himself hard-pressed as the bandits pressed their attack. Another blow caught him before he could block, the bandit’s longsword coming under his weapon arm

and hitting him solidly in the side. The stroke did not penetrate his heavy armor, but he nonetheless felt the force of the impact sting painfully against his ribs. The bandit warriors, even the women, were *strong*, and their drunkenness did nothing to interfere with the raw power of their chaotic swings. If one of those landed a lucky hit, he knew, he would be in trouble.

But the dwarf did not relent, even surrounded by foes. The one he had injured in his initial charge rushed forward again, screaming a battle cry, and Arun met him with a downward stroke from his hammer. Too late the fighter saw the danger, too late to avoid the impact as the hammer caught him squarely on the forehead. The thin metal foreplate of his open-faced helm provided little protection as the hammer hit with a sickening crunch, and the bandit flopped backward to land in a flailing heap upon the floor.

“Bastard!” cried another of the warriors, a homely young woman with close-cropped black hair, as the man went down. She lunged at Arun, but the dwarf brought his shield around, catching and deflecting the blow. But a moment later pain erupted again in his back as the rogues struck once more, and he felt the strength begin to slip from his limbs, flowing out of his body with the blood that seeped from his wounds.

“Blasted bloody sneaks!” Arun growled, knowing that he couldn’t turn to face that threat, not with several fighters still pressing the attack right in front of him. But he knew that another hit would finish him.

Mole saw the dwarf’s situation, and was already rushing to his aid. She tumbled around the edge of the battle behind one of the rogues, flanking her as she came smoothly back to her feet. The woman saw her coming and tried to adjust, bringing her rapier around into a defensive stance. But Mole was faster, using the momentum of her roll to power her thrust as she stabbed her sword deep into the woman’s leg. She screamed and fell backward, barely keeping her feet as she staggered back from the melee. Mole let her go, instead turning toward the second rogue, who had spun back from Arun and shifted to face her.

“You won’t find me such easy prey, little one,” he said, spinning the tip of his rapier through the air before lunging forward toward her.

The injured woman rogue fell against a nearby table, using it to support her weight as she hurriedly wrapped her sash around the bloody wound. Instead of fleeing the battle, she unslung her bow—a mistake, as it turned out, as Zenna’s crossbow bolt sank into her chest, dropping her.

Arun faced off against the two remaining fighters, holding them at bay with sweeps of his hammer, deflecting their attacks with his shield. The seriousness of their situation was beginning to set in through the haze of alcohol, but they also knew that their foe was grievously hurt, each step the dwarf made leaving a patter of blood in his wake. Near the double doors, another curtain fronting another of the private dining alcoves was flung open, and another pair of bandits lurched into the common room. The reason for the delay seemed pretty obvious as the man was still fastening the draws of his trousers as he entered the room, and the woman’s shirt was half-open, revealing a single white breast. Neither was armored, but their weapons were out, the man with a longsword and the woman with a rapier, and they quickly rushed toward the fray.

“Bria!” shouted the rogue facing Mole. “Get Tongueater!”

In response, the open-shirted woman veered away from the melee, making for one of the doors that exited the common room for other parts of the roadhouse. She only made a few steps, however, before a shaft streaked across the room, catching her hard in the side. Without armor to stop it, Dannel’s arrow bit deep, throwing her against the bar. She gritted her teeth and actually started to move forward again before a second arrow hit her squarely in the throat, ending the matter quite decisively.

“You’ll be joining the others soon enough,” the man threatening Mole said. With his attention on the gnome rogue, he didn’t see his companion go down, but his eyes darted left and right as he pressed her, and he was clearly aware that more of his side were down on the hardwood floor than of the enemy. But he pressed his attack nonetheless, thrusting at Mole’s head with a sudden lunge. Mole narrowly dodged the thrust, countering with a quick riposte that drew a shallow gash along the rogue’s forearm.

“Not bad,” he said, drawing back. “But I am still bigger, and faster.”

“Perhaps, but she’s not alone,” Zenna said, walking slowly up to the pair, holding her loaded crossbow pointed at the man’s heart. “Surrender, and we may spare your wretched life.”

The rogue glanced over to where the other newcomer had joined the fray, lunging at Arun’s flank while the dwarf continued to fight off the other two remaining fighters. He saw the woman lying dead by the bar, and his expression darkened. “I don’t know what she saw in that fool Pierto, but I had a soft spot for Bria, nonetheless,” he hissed. “You’ll pay for that, I swear it!”

He lashed out at Mole, and this time his rapier scored, penetrating the links of her chain shirt and stabbing into her shoulder. The gnome darted back, favoring the wounded side, even as Zenna fired. The rogue was expecting that, though, and the shot merely clipped him as he dodged to the side, bouncing off one of the metal studs set into his armor.

Facing now a third attacker, Arun found his situation even more serious, and his arms felt leaden as he tried to adjust. There was no way he could avoid being surrounded now, meaning that a flank attack would likely penetrate his defenses sooner rather than later. Indeed, as he deflected the newcomer’s first attack with his shield, the woman behind him lifted her sword, bringing it around in an arc that would intersect solidly with the back of the dwarf’s head...

“HALT!” cried Illewyn, her mace extended, her holy symbol held in her other hand. The word echoed with the force of divine power, and the swordswoman obeyed, her sword frozen in mid-stroke.

“Thanks, lass,” Arun called out, before shifting his full attention to the unarmored man who’d just struck at him. “Here’s a little lesson about assaulting a paladin of Moradin without puttin’ on your armor,” he said, before driving his warhammer with the full force of his strength behind it into the man’s torso. Pierto may have won over the Alleybasher Bria,

but he couldn't escape his due as the blow crushed his ribs and knocked him sprawling to the ground. Somehow the man remained both alive and conscious, and even managed to slowly get up, still holding his longsword.

Arun turned to the last warrior, just in time to take another hit that caught solidly on the crossbar of his helmet. The dwarf staggered, his head spinning.

Then he fell, landing hard on the floor in a clatter of metal armor.

Chapter 52

The bandits had taken heavy casualties, but there was still a lot of fight left in them. The unarmored one that Arun had bashed got up, critically injured but still able to hold his sword. He moved to join the man that had finally taken down Arun, and the woman warrior as she shook off the brief effects of Illewyn's spell. The cleric looked hopelessly outmatched as the three spread out and came toward her, their faces now grimly serious.

Just a few paces away, on the far side of the battlefield, Mole and Zenna faced off against a skilled rogue, member of the notorious Alleybasher gang. He'd taken a gash from Mole's sword, but in turn had inflicted a more serious wound on the gnome with his own weapon. Mole refused to retreat, however, even as a circle of blood continued to spread across her shirt where his rapier had bitten her.

The three fighters threatening Illewyn hesitated as Dannel stepped forward, another arrow drawn and ready to fire. "All right, which shall it be?" he said.

"You can't shoot us all," the injured man, Pierto, said. He'd drawn a potion vial out from a pocket of his shirt, and held it closely in one hand, his other keeping his sword up in a guard position.

"True," Dannel said. He shifted his aim and released in one smooth motion, the arrow slamming hard into Pierto's chest and knocking him backward roughly to the ground.

This time the fighter did not get up.

The other two hefted their swords and charged. Dannel dropped his bow and charged forward to meet them, his sword hissing out of his scabbard.

"Help the dwarf!" he shouted over his shoulder to Illewyn.

Zenna saw Arun go down, and the surviving fighters turn toward Illewyn and Dannel. She knew that they had to act quickly, that she and Mole could not draw out this confrontation with their adversary any longer. Lowering her empty crossbow, she stepped forward until she stood right behind Mole. The rogue, leery of Mole's speed despite his threats, eyed her warily, ready for an attack, and too late realized his mistake as Zenna uttered a string of magical syllables that echoed in the air momentarily before fading.

A stream of blinding colors shot from the fingertips of the wizard, catching the rogue squarely in the face. His senses overwhelmed by the display, he fell, unconscious.

“Help Dannel,” she said to Mole, grimly drawing out her dagger. She knew that the effects of the spell would last only a few seconds, and the only way to ensure that this foe did not return to the battle. Mole, understanding that as well, nodded and rushed to the elf’s aid.

Dannel met his opponents in a clash of steel on steel. The two remaining bandits knew that this battle would come down to this final confrontation, that they’d taken out the toughest foe, and they had to finish the others before they themselves fell. They could run, but they were veteran enough to know that turning away, lowering their guard, would likely only lead to their deaths against equally veteran opponents.

So they came at the elf with everything they had, spreading out so as to flank him. Dannel turned the first stroke, and the second, but he could only manage a weak counter that failed to do more than glance harmlessly off the other’s heavy mail. They drove him back toward the curtain, harrying him relentlessly.

“You are outmatched, elf,” the woman said, as they pressed him, launching more attacks. Adrenaline was cutting through some of the haze from the alcohol in their systems, and for all his speed Dannel was far less armored than his enemies.

“Perhaps,” he replied, as he parried another blow aimed for his throat. “But time is on my side, I think.”

The man on Dannel’s right sensed the danger a moment before Mole rushed up behind him, and he turned just in time to avoid the stroke aimed at his hamstring. Dannel slashed at him, doing no damage but forcing him back. The melee split into two separate battles, with Mole facing off against the male fighter while Dannel turned to the woman.

“See how quickly things change?” he said to her. “Maybe it would be a good idea to surrender, to turn yourself in and accept a fair trial for your crimes.”

“Never!” the woman hissed, lunging at him again. Dannel darted back, but couldn’t avoid a gash in his off arm that drew a red line across his bicep just above the elbow.

Zenna rose after wiping her dagger on the shirt of the man she’d just killed, grimly stabbing the knife back into its sheath. She hurried over to where Illewyn was still tending to Arun, relief flooding into her as she saw the dwarf stir under the blue glow that shone from the cleric’s fingers. She dug into her pouch and crouched beside the dwarf as his eyes blinked open, and lowered a vial to his lips.

“Drink this,” she commanded.

As life poured back into the battered dwarf’s body, he shot up, blood flying in droplets from his splattered armor. Illewyn and Zenna were nearly dragged down as well as they helped him; with his heavy armor, the dwarf was almost like a turtle knocked onto its back. Once afoot, if still wavering somewhat, Arun shrugged out of the grasp of the two women and charged toward the still-raging battle a few paces away. Not bothering to recover his heavy

warhammer, he drew out one of the light hammers from his belt, and rushed up behind the man fighting Mole. The gnome had thus far held her own, although she hadn't managed to hurt her armored foe, but things quickly turned for that combatant when Arun slammed the head of the hammer into the small of the warrior's back. Grunting in pain, the warrior was staggered and left completely open for the thrust of Mole's sword into his gut.

Zenna and Illewyn exchanged a look, then moved to help Dannel.

The last bandit was quick to realize that her situation had grown hopeless. "Tongueater will do for you and yours, elf!" she hissed, lunging at him in a clear feint before turning to flee. Dannel wasn't fooled, and he caught her with a low thrust that crunched through her armor and bit deeply into her thigh. The woman staggered but kept going, heading for one of the doors behind the bar. As she rounded the edge of the bar, Dannel still pressing her from behind, a bolt from Zenna's crossbow just missed her and shattered a nearly empty bottle on the shelving against the back wall. Even as the sound of the crash echoed, another missile spun almost lazily through the air toward the fleeing bandit, catching her in the back of the head even as she reached for the handle of the door. With a sickening snap as her spine cracked from the impact of Arun's hammer, the woman crumpled.

A belated quiet returned once more to the common room, which now had the look of an abattoir. The bodies of the eight bandits were scattered about the room, their blood gathered in messy pools and splattered both on the furnishings and on the bodies of the victors. Breathing heavily, the five adventurers from Cauldron stood and surveyed the results of their efforts.

Arun walked over to where his warhammer lay on the floor. As he bent to recover the weapon, Illewyn approached him, already beginning an incantation. The dwarf shook his head. "I'm fine. Save your prayers, priestess."

Zenna threw up her hands. "You stubborn fool! If you'd just waited earlier, I could have taken out most of them with my *color spray*. Now you won't take healing, just because you're too thick-headed to admit that you're hurt! Well, there's going to be more of those bandits, and that 'Tongueater' they mentioned, so you'd better just drop the bravado and start acting as though there's something besides rocks in that head of yours!"

Arun raised an eyebrow. "And I'd say that you can toss that dagger of yours, girl... your tongue is sharp enough!" But as he hefted his hammer, he let out a loud harrumph. "Fine then, cast your spells, but I'll not be slinking about when there's Evil to be crushed!"

A loud crash drew their attention to the far side of the room, beyond the barricade toward the eastern half of the long common room. There a raised alcove formed a stage of sorts, and they could see another armored figure there, leaning awkwardly against the wall. The figure, another female fighter equipped in similar fashion to the other thugs they'd just battle, had just knocked a chair down the steps of the stage, and as the companions reached for their weapons, she turned and half-ran, half-staggered to the adjacent stair well that led up to the second story of the inn. Arun was the only one to react in time, hurling his second hammer, but the missile was far wide and caromed harmlessly off the wall.

The dwarf had already started in that direction, but Zenna forestalled him. "Let's not rush into another ambush." She nodded to Illewyn, who cast her spell of healing on the clearly impatient dwarf.

"Maybe we should just wait here, prepare for their attack," Mole said. Arun snorted, making his thoughts on that suggestion known.

"There's too many ways into this room, too easy to get flanked or surrounded." Dannel said. The elf had recovered his bow, and handed the throwing hammer that had brained the last enemy fighter back to Arun. "We should be at full strength for the next confrontation, but likewise we should not give our enemies too much time to prepare, to get back on their guard." He drew out from his pouch a slender metal wand that resembled a long, skinny fork, and as they watched he sang to it, summoning a soft greenish glow that seeped from his hand into his body, healing the injuries he'd suffered in the battle.

Zenna gave Mole one of Jenya's healing potions, which the gnome quickly downed.

"While we're lounging about here, our enemies are getting stronger," Arun growled.

Zenna reloaded her crossbow, and glanced at each of the others, gauging their preparedness. "All right," she said. "Let's go."

With the dwarf in the lead, they crossed quickly to the stairs. Wary of an ambush, they made their way up the stairs to the second story of the Lucky Monkey.

They found themselves on a landing, with hallways providing access to guest rooms to the left and right. The landing met the hallways at an angle, with the halls running north and west into different wings of the roadhouse. Directly across from them the first door was standing open, revealing a compact room that had been obviously ransacked.

Arun grunted and moved forward into the hallway. Almost as soon as he stepped from the landing into the hall, the attack came.

Chapter 53

Arrows shot down the hall toward the dwarf from both directions, ricocheting off of his shield and plate armor. Even as he identified the archers, standing in open doorways a short length down the hall in both directions, armored fighters leapt into the open and charged, their longswords held before them like spears. There wasn't much space in the confines of the hall, but where Arun stood, at the intersection of the hall and landing, there was ample room for the defenders to come at him from both directions.

Rather than retreating, the dwarf paladin merely hefted his hammer and waited.

Behind him on the landing, Dannel took aim and fired. His first shot flew over Arun's shoulder and down the left hallway, but the woman thug saw it coming and brought her shield up in time to deflect it. With a visceral cry she hurled herself at Arun at the same time that the second warrior charged at him from behind. Arun held his ground, keeping his

back toward the landing and his companions so that he could look down both hallways and keep his guard up against both foes.

The narrow space was filled a moment later with the clash of steel on steel as the bandit warriors met Arun. The dwarf, with his superior armor, held his ground, but conversely there wasn't much room to bring his own hammer to bear against his foes. Behind him, Dannel managed a shot past the warrior on the left in the general direction of the bandit archer still back down the hall, but his arrow lodged in the wooden threshold of the doorway in which the rogue took cover.

Mole leapt forward, tumbling past Arun toward the right fork of the hall and the second warrior. Continuing into a second somersault she nearly slipped right past him to take up position at his back, but the warrior shifted and stopped her movement with a swift kick that caught her heavily in the side. The gnome cried out and fell back against the wall of the hallway, scrambling back to her feet as the man turned toward her, his sword poised to finish what he'd started.

Clucking her tongue in frustration, Zenna held her crossbow, trying in vain to line up a shot. Behind her Illewyn stood holding her mace, likewise unable to work her way into a position where she could add her support to the battle in the confined space. "This battlefield does not favor us!" the older woman said.

Zenna, unable to do anything more, silently agreed.

With a slight screech Mole ducked just in time to avoid the first cut from the swordsman, his heavy blade knocking a chip from the wall just inches above her head. She drew back, but cried out again as an arrow shot at her from further down the hall. The arrow hit the wall a foot in front of her face, but as it shot past the steel arrowhead glanced off her temple, opening a nasty gash that quickly spilled hot blood down the side of her face.

"Ow!" Mole said, regretting her decision to join in the melee.

Arun was aware of her plight, and he shifted his focus to the warrior on his right, driving him back with a solid blow that hit his shield with enough force to knock him back a pace. As the dwarf followed up he left his left flank open to attack from the woman thug, but Dannel leapt into the breach, hurdling the edge of the railing that warded the stairs, drawing his sword as he came. Elf and dwarf stood back to back as their attackers pressed in from both sides, seeking an opening.

Zenna took advantage of the brief opening to fire a crossbow bolt at the woman warrior, but once more the shot narrowly missed its target.

As the fighter threatening her turned his attention to Arun, Mole took advantage of the distraction to leap ahead and dart past him. The man kicked out at her once again, but this time she was able to slip around him. She couldn't turn to sneak attack him, though, for once clear she found herself facing the second bandit archer, who stepped out from his hidey-hole in one of the open doorways, dropping his bow and drawing his sword as he stepped forward to face her.

Grimacing, the gnome hefted her own diminutive blade and went to meet him.

The two hired blades were good, but Arun and Dannel fought together like veterans, moving with each other as they parried and counterattacked their foes. Dannel lacked the heavy protection of the dwarf, but he was nimble and the reflexes of the two fighters had clearly been affected by drink, much like their late comrades in the chamber below. Furthermore the woman was distracted by the bolts that Zenna continued to fire at her from across the landing. Hindered by the need to avoid hitting Dannel, Zenna wasn't able to score any hits, but each near-miss seemed to fluster the warrior a bit more, leaving her open to Dannel's thrusts. Within a few more exchanges both enemy fighters were bleeding, Dannel had taken only a slight gash to his off arm, and Arun wasn't even scratched.

Finally, as if triggered by some secret communication, both warriors lunged forward, their battle cries filling the passage, swords raised high to strike down their foes. Just as smoothly the two defenders adjusted, Arun deflecting the attack of his foe with shield, Dannel pivoting out of the way and turning the stroke with a high parry. Arun's hammer and Dannel's sword lashed out in tandem, the hammer crushing his foe's chest, the sword sliding into a gap in between broken mail links. Both bandits sagged backward, and fell.

"Nice work, elf," Arun offered. "But mine fell first."

"Um... I could still use a little help over here!" Mole exclaimed, still trading blows with her enemy toward the end of the rightmost hallway. On seeing the resolution of the main battle, however, the rogue darted backward, disengaging and disappearing into one of the guest rooms, the door slamming shut behind him. Mole let him go, pressing a square of cloth to the gash on the side of her forehead.

"The other archer fled as well," Dannel reported, "Along with the other fighter, the one we saw downstairs, I presume."

"They'll be back with reinforcements shortly, I'd wager," Zenna said. "Along with the apeman Sarcem described... Tongueater, I presume."

"So? I'm ready for a few more of this rabble," Arun said, kicking the corpse of the man he'd killed.

"These are no common bandits," Dannel said. "They're clearly mercenaries, with no small skill."

"He's right," Zenna said. "We don't know how many more of them are left."

"We cannot leave until we find Sarcem," Illewyn said, with determination.

"Um... look, I'm all for a drag-down brawl," Mole said. The gnome looked a sight, with the bloody cloth held to her head and favoring her ribs where the bandit thug had kicked her. "But we've lost the advantage of surprise, and if those bandits catch us in this hallway, we're going to get squished."

“You want to retreat, then,” Arun said, making the word sound a curse.

“We can watch the roadhouse from the woods, make sure that none of them escape,” Zenna said. “They don’t have horses, and we do, and we have reinforcements on the way. I have a bad feeling about this, if we stay.”

“If we don’t make up our minds soon, the decision will be made for us,” Dannel said. He’d taken up his bow again, and stood vantage on the left hallway, his keen elvish eyes alert for any signs of movement.

Arun and Zenna faced off, each meeting the other’s stare squarely. “We’ll finish this,” Zenna said. “On our own terms, not theirs.”

For a moment she thought that the dwarf was going to stalk off, willing to fight this battle even alone, but finally he nodded. “All right, we’ll do it your way.”

The decision made, the companions quickly returned back the way they had come, heading back to the stairs to the common room.

They’d barely reached the top of the stairs when a loud roar issued from directly below them.

They were too late.

Chapter 54

“All right then,” Arun said, hefting his hammer and turning toward the stairs.

“Wait!” Zenna whispered, grasping the dwarf’s shoulder. “Please, just this once, let’s not stumble blindly into danger!”

While the dwarf looked at her with a hard expression, Mole slipped between a gap in the banisters of the railing. “Do you hear that?” she asked, and bent head-first over the stairwell, dangling enough so that she could see into the room below. They could all hear what had alerted the gnome, now, a jumble of noises from downstairs that included voices, both male and female, mixed with hoots and barks that sent chills down their spines to hear them.

After just a few moments, Mole pulled herself back up, her face white.

“What is it?” Illewyn asked, careful to keep her voice low.

“Run!” Mole said.

A loud, clear voice sounded from below, laced with anger that bordered on rage. “Spread out... find them!” The hooting noises grew louder, accompanied by the crash of wood and glass.

Arun stood at the head of the stairs, looking momentarily uncertain.

“There’s too many,” Mole urged again. “More warriors, baboons, and the apeman...” She shuddered at the too-fresh memory of Tongueater’s terrible visage.

“We need to find someplace defensible... come on!” Dannel urged.

The elf darted back around the landing, leading them into the left branch hallway. The others followed, Arun bringing up the rear, frequently looking back to see if their enemies were chasing.

The hallway meandered across the main wing of the roadhouse, with occasional doors on both sides opening onto ransacked guest rooms. With the turns they quickly left the landing behind them, and finally the hall straightened and ended with a slightly larger room ahead.

The place was clearly intended to serve as a lounge for the upstairs guests, a haven for those who preferred someplace quieter than the boisterous common room below. A hearth sat empty and cold to their left, while to their right there was a heavy round table of sturdy oak flanked by five simple but comfortable-looking padded chairs. Two doors exited to the right, and they could just hear the patter of rain on the shuttered windows.

Arun turned to block the hallway, standing guard like a sentinel. “This is a good spot,” he said. “I’ve had enough of running away, dwarves don’t run away.”

Zenna’s reply was something not quite audible, issued under her breath as she and Mole hurried to the two doors. One opened onto a compact bath chamber, complete with a heavy wooden tub, while the other revealed a small bridge, open to the night air and the cold rain, crossing over the slanting roof to another door a half-dozen paces ahead.

Zenna pulled that door shut. “There’s no way to secure this door, it opens outward!” she exclaimed. There was a latch to hold the door shut, but it was just a flimsy piece of wood attached to the door by a leather cord. Below that was the handle, basically a foot-long bar of curved iron set into the door at its top and bottom.

“You just need to be a little creative,” Mole said, taking a quick look at the door before darting into the bath chamber. She returned a few seconds later with a wooden board, which she forced through the door handle and wedged against the doorframe, setting it firmly into place with a few taps from the hilt of her sword. “There,” she said. “It’s not a proper lock, but it’ll hold unless someone takes the door off its moorings.”

Meanwhile, Dannel had called to Arun, and the two had shifted the heavy table to block the hallway, tilting it so that its heavy top face sat in the mouth of the hall like a battlement. The round table was nearly big enough to block the entire exit, leaving small spaces around the edges that would serve as impromptu arrow slits. Illewyn helped by stacking a few of the chairs behind the table, filling in the gaps near the floor and adding to its weight as a barricade.

Even as they finished their work, the sound of animal hooting became audible down the hallway, followed by the familiar clink of metal and several all-too-human shouts, alerting their bandit enemies that the invaders of their stolen safehold had been found.

“They’re coming!” Arun warned, hefting one of his throwing hammers.

Chapter 55

The hallway was dark with shadows. Only just enough light filtered in through the one shuttered window in the hall and around the barrier to incrementally brighten the darkness. Outside, the downpour continued, its patter against the roof a faint but constant backdrop to the developing confrontation inside.

The first enemy to appear was a tall, lanky man clad in chainmail, his shield slung and carrying a torch in his off-hand, his longsword bare in the other. Upon sighting the barricade he let out a shout to his comrades, but instead of retreating back to the cover behind the bend in the hall, or pausing to unlimber his shield, he raised his sword and charged.

It was the last foolish decision that this particular warrior, a nasty, cruel-hearted wretch named Lakus, ever made.

Dannel’s first arrow hit him on the shoulder, by sheer bad luck striking the iron buckle of his baldric and glancing aside. The impact barely slowed the man, still infused with the false courage of alcohol, and he continued his rush into the death that awaited him. Dannel’s second shot caught him less than ten paces later, the steel arrowhead this time penetrating the mesh of steel links that protected him, stabbing several inches into his torso. Lakus felt the pain through his drunken haze, but it did not stop his rush. As he neared the barrier, another bolt came up from a narrow slit where the table curved away from the wall, the opening there mostly blocked by a chair jammed into the space. Mole’s shot caught the warrior in the leg, biting deeply into his thigh. Once again he wavered, but kept coming on, limping.

When Arun’s thrown hammer caught him in the face, though, he’d had enough.

Even as the first foe fell, an arrow slammed into the edge of the table, quivering with the force of the impact. A moment later a second streaked through a gap in the barricade, narrowly missing Dannel. A pair of bandit rogues had moved into position at the far end of the hallway, taking cover behind the bend in the hall on one side and an open doorway to a guestroom on the other. The guttering torch lying on the floor beside the fallen warrior served as the only illumination, casting a fitful glow over the scene. Unfortunately for the bandits, neither Dannel nor Mole needed more than that, as they returned fire. But with the bad light and the fact that both sides had good cover, no one scored a hit in the first exchange.

“Stalemate?” Mole asked, as she drew back to reload.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Arun replied, peering around the edge of the far side of the barricade, his warhammer at the ready.

Behind them, Illewyn, without a missile weapon, and unable to see clearly in near-darkness, reached out with a prayer, calling down the blessing of Helm upon the besieged companions.

Down the hall, the light of more torches appeared around the bend in the hallway. But instead of more warriors or Alleybashers appearing, the light revealed a group of three baboons, each nearly the size of a wolf, the source of the hooting and barking noises that erupted anew as the companions caught sight of them. That cacophony was echoed by a deeper, stronger cry that sounded from somewhere further down the hall, and as that sound faded, the creatures dashed down the hallway, their claws clacking against the hardwood floors as they came.

"Let them have it!" Dannel cried. He fired the opening shot, but his arrow narrowly missed as one of the baboons darted to the side, the long shaft bouncing up from the floor to carom harmlessly into the far wall where the hallway turned. He didn't bother to curse his ill luck, however, and was already drawing out another arrow as the others joined the barrage. Zenna had taken up position standing over Mole, and fired a bolt from her own bow that caught a baboon solidly on the shoulder. Mole took aim at the same one, hitting it in the leg. The baboon, seriously injured now, fell behind the other two, which hurled themselves forward at the barrier. One snarled and lunged at Mole through the gap near the base of the barricade, its claws drawing gashes in the wooden chair jammed into the opening as it tried to get to the gnome. Mole let out a small shriek despite herself, drawing back just as one long furry limb shot through and tried to grab her.

The second ape tried to clear the barrier entirely, leaping up, its claws seeking purchase on the lacquered edge of the table. But Arun was waiting for it, and his hammer smacked solidly into it before it could clear the obstacle. The ape, stunned by the blow, tried to get back up, but was too late as Dannel leaned over the edge of the table and fired an arrow into its side.

Zenna tried to hold the chair in place with her foot even as the baboon redoubled its efforts to slip through. Its jaws snapped at them, but its body was just too big to fit through the opening. It only managed to wedge itself into place, which cost it as Mole fired her bow point-blank into its furry hide. The baboon screamed and drew back, but Zenna stepped forward and fired again, hitting it with a meaty thunk that drove it to the ground, half-conscious and bleeding.

The third ape, with two bolts stuck in it, made it belatedly to the edge of the barrier. It scrambled up despite its wounds, but even before it cleared the edge of the table a dwarven arm lifted over the barrier, and the heavy hammer came down. Hammer met apish skull, and the creature slumped heavily to the ground.

Even as the furious but futile assault from the baboons ended, however, Dannel shouted and pointed down the hallway. There, another foe had stepped into view, bracketed by the torches carried by the pair of warriors who stood behind him.

He was a tall, powerfully-built figure, standing easily seven feet in height. He wore a vest of boiled leather set with fat metal studs, revealing muscular arms that were marked with scars and metal piercings. He bore a falchion, a heavy, ugly weapon that he scratched upon the floor as he moved. But most terrible was his face, the visage of a baboon, featuring garish colors that shone evilly in the torchlight, and massive jaws that sported long, uneven teeth.

“Time for you to die, meddlers,” he croaked, and he laughed a cruel, terrible laugh.

Tongueater had arrived.

Chapter 56

“Time for you to die, meddlers,” Tongueater croaked, his sick laugh sounding clearly even almost thirty feet down the hall.

“You first, monster!” Dannel yelled back, drawing and firing his longbow across the barrier.

The shot flew true, hitting the apeman squarely in the center of his chest. The arrow clearly penetrated his armor, but Tongueater merely reached down and plucked the missile free, tossing it aside. There was no blood.

“You’ll have to do better than that, fools,” he hissed. He reached into a pouch at his belt and drew forth a small vial. Turning to his remaining warriors, he ordered, “Kill them!” before uncorking and draining the elixir.

Arrows shot out at the companions, but once again the poor light and the strong barrier—combined perhaps with the lingering effects of too much pilfered ale—resulted in the shots flying wide or sticking harmlessly in the tabletop. The two warriors behind Tongueater rushed down the hall toward the barricade, holding torches and longswords in their hands.

Dannel, meanwhile, had turned away from his sniping position at the edge of the makeshift battlement, and was digging hurriedly in his pack.

“What are you doing?” Arun shouted at him. “We need your bow, elf!” He himself hurled his last throwing hammer down the hall at the charging warriors, but in his haste he missed his target. Zenna and Mole both fired their crossbows, but they too were mostly ineffective, with the gnome scoring a glancing hit that stabbed into the arm of the charging warrior on the left, a squat, pug-nosed woman.

Even as the two women tried to reload, their enemies reached the barrier. The pug-nosed woman lowered her shoulder and tried to push through the barrier on Zenna and Mole’s side. Her plain appearance belied a considerable strength, and the table slid a foot back as she drove forward, kicking out the chair jammed beneath it as she came. Zenna tried to push back against the table, but the woman thug saw her and lashed out with the arm holding her torch, hitting her across the face with her gauntlet and knocking her roughly against the adjacent wall.

Mole, however, had put the few seconds that her friend had bought to good use, lifting her bow and firing it point-blank into the woman's gut. The bolt penetrated the links of mail protecting her torso, and she cried out in pain as the shaft dug deep into her belly. With a snarl she hefted her sword and forced through the opening she'd made in the barricade, staying on her feet through sheer grit. But her eyes widened in surprise as Illewyn rushed forward from the shadows in the back of the room. The cleric's eyes shone in a mixture of anger and terror as she brought her mace down squarely in the center of the warrior's helmeted head, and with a solid crunch the woman sagged down to the floor, unconscious.

On the other side of the barricade, the other warrior, a blond-haired young man, tried likewise to force his way through the obstacle. Unfortunately for him, that side of the barrier was garrisoned by a rather querulous dwarf paladin, who was not going to let just any bandit fighter through. The thug, whose fair face belied the drunken, wastrel, and just plain mean story of his young life, let out a warcry as he hit the barrier, shoving his torch through the gap where the table curved from the wall. He didn't manage to push the table back like his female comrade on the far side had, and the flames of the torch did nothing to stop Arun, who knocked the brand aside with his shield before bringing his hammer down in an overhead strike that crushed the warrior's extended bicep. The warrior screamed as bone crunched under the impact. He tried to counter with a thrust of his sword, but his aim was poor, and the sword stabbed awkwardly into the edge of the table. Fortunately for him he had a moment of lucidity through the haze of pain that rushed into his body through his broken arm, and he drew back hastily before Arun could launch another assault over the barricade.

Even as the enemy fighters were driven back, a roar announced the arrival of Tongueater to the fray. Having consumed his potion, the ferocious apeman flew into a rage, bounding down the hall in an inexorable rush, the walls of the hallway seeming to shake with the force of his passage. Even as Illewyn struck down the first bandit fighter, and Arun drove back the second, the bandit leader crouched and sprung over the barricade, hurling his considerable body through the gap with amazing speed and strength. His roar filled the lounge as he landed heavily, shaking the floor even as he whipped around his falchion, ready for blood.

Arun answered its roar with a dwarven battle cry, surging at the monster from the side. His hammer swept out and caught him on the side, but instead of crushing his ribs the blow seemed to only lightly faze him. The half-orc, half-baboon monstrosity laughed as he ripped into Arun with his falchion. The heavy steel blade connected with the paladin's body, and while his armor held, keeping him from being carved into pieces, it was clear from the dwarf's grunt that the stroke had hurt.

Just a few paces away, Dannel rose, hefting his bow. He'd found what he was looking for in his pack, a cloth wrapping that had held four arrows. A gift from a silversmith for aid against orcs that had assaulted his wagon, the elf had never thought to use the arrow that he now fitted to his string as a weapon. But while he'd never faced one personally, he'd belatedly recognized their foe as a lycanthrope, and knew the tales that spoke of their one weakness.

The shot could barely miss at that range, and the silver-tipped shaft drove deep into the apeman's back. Tongueater roared again, this time in pain, and he spun to face the elf,

hatred burning in his eyes. An ordinary man would have been lying on the floor with such a wound... but the lycanthrope was no ordinary man.

Dannel did not retreat—there was nowhere to go—reaching for his second arrow even as Tongueater leapt at him. The elf nimbly dodged the vicious stroke of the falchion, but was caught by surprise as the apeman suddenly lunged at him, his vicious jaws snapping around the elf's shoulder. Dannel cried out as pain erupted through his body as the cruel jaws tightened, and it was only through a desperate effort that he was able to tear free.

The elf's companions rushed to his aid, trying to distract their enemy from his target. Arun pressed it again from behind, but once more his hammer, even backed by his considerable strength, had little effect upon the apeman. Mole drew her sword and charged him from the side, but she too found her thrust of little use, the sharp blade glancing off his preternaturally tough hide.

These attacks gave little respite to the beleaguered elf, but he pressed his attack regardless, dancing back a pace to give him room to draw and fire once more. Again his arrow bit into his target, catching the apeman high in the shoulder. Although the force of this shot was mostly absorbed by Tongueater's heavy leather vest, the additional hit drove the creature's rage even further. He leapt forward at Dannel, and this time there was no place for the elf to run to as he swept his falchion around in a mighty arc, driving it with the full force of his monstrous strength into the elf's body. The force of the blow tore through the elf's chain shirt, and the blade bit deep into his side, knocking him aside to fall in a crumpled heap a few feet away.

Chapter 57

Tongueater cackled madly as his foe collapsed, bleeding his life out from a terrible gash in his side. Even as Dannel landed on the hard wooden floor the apeman was turning to face Arun and Mole, whose attacks thus far had done little in the way of damage. "You next, dwarf," he said, leering as he hefted his falchion. The blade dripped crimson, droplets of Dannel's blood falling to splatter on the floor at the lycanthrope's feet.

Illewyn turned immediately toward the downed elf, but before she could go to his aid, a heavy dragging noise drew her attention back around to the barricade. One of the bandit rogues had taken advantage of the distraction from his leader's attack to close, and even as Illewyn lifted her mace he lunged at her, stabbing with his rapier. The cleric cried out and fell back, bleeding from the puncture wound in her chest.

Zenna knew that the priestess needed help, but she also knew that Dannel, if he wasn't already dead, would be so shortly. Dodging around the melee between the cleric and her attacker, she knelt at the fallen elf's side, already digging into the satchel at her side for the remaining healing potions she kept there.

But her heart froze as she felt a wetness there, and her fingers brushed shards of broken glass. Even before she looked into the bag, she knew what she would find.

“By Moradin’s beard!” Arun cried, calling upon the divine power of his patron in unleashing a terrific blow from his hammer that smacked squarely into Tongueater’s chest. The lycanthrope clearly felt that blow, but his inhuman constitution, combined with the froth of his rage, let him shrug off that hurt as well. Even with two arrows stuck in him, and the battering he’d taken from the dwarf, the apeman still seemed almost unstoppable. Mole took advantage of the dwarf’s attack to move into position behind the bandit leader, but once more her slashing sword failed to do more than scratch his unnaturally tough hide.

Tongueater ignored her, focusing instead on bringing down the dwarf.

Zenna felt tears form in her eyes, and angrily shook them away as she looked down at the dying elf. He was dying, she saw, blood pouring from his savaged side in a fountain, his lips flecked with blood as his last breaths slipped raggedly from his body. She looked around for succor; there was none, her companions engaged in their own life-or-death struggles. The potions she’d carried were destroyed, broken when the bandit had knocked her against the wall. She felt a sickening helplessness, the same that she’d felt when she’d seen Ruphos run through by Kazmojen...

A faint clink sounded through the raging sounds of battle all around her. She looked down to see that the icon she carried, the holy symbol of Azuth, had fallen from her pocket. She reached down, and everything around her seemed to slow down, the world around her frozen in an instant outside of time. Then she touched the amulet, and felt a surge of power flow through her, unlike anything that she’d felt before... and yet, somehow connected to the arcane powers that she’d channeled ever since she was a girl.

Blue light flared around her hand. Her eyes open in wonderment, she touched the hand to Dannel’s side, and watched as the bleeding stopped, and the terrible wound closed. He was still grievously hurt, but she had no doubt now that he would live.

Then her surroundings rushed back in around her, as she heard Mole’s scream.

The titanic struggle between Tongueater, Arun, and Mole had raged on while Zenna had fought to save Dannel’s life. The gnome cursed in frustration as the mighty lycanthrope ignored her feeble attacks; even with his focus on the dwarf, she was unable to find a weakness with her sneak attacks from behind. Arun stood his ground before the apeman’s assault, but it was clear once more that his foe outmatched him. Hammer and falchion exchanged strikes again, and Arun was driven back, hard pressed. Then Tongueater abruptly hurled himself forward, opening his massive jaws as wide as they could to snap down on the dwarf’s head.

Mole, unable to do anything to stop it, could only scream in frustration.

On the far edge of the battlefield, just a few short steps away, Illewyn found herself engaged in her own desperate struggle. Unable to break away from her attacker, a lanky, lean-faced young man with twin scars on his cheeks, she took another hit from that dancing rapier. She felt a coldness in her gut that reflected the hot burning pain she felt from the two wounds she’d taken. Her own counters had been easily parried by the rogue, who smiled a dark smile as he came at her again.

“Sorry, pretty lady, but I’m going to have to kill you now,” he said. He barked out a short laugh, savoring the fear he was inflicting upon his enemy.

That hesitation proved costly, as Illewyn stepped back and called upon the power of her patron. A light shone in her eyes for just an instant as the divine power of Helm entered her, and when it was gone her wounds had faded, and she stood strong and uninjured again.

“I will not be defeated by the likes of you,” she said in a clear voice. The rogue snarled, realizing his mistake, and leapt forward to the attack once more. But the cleric met him boldly, and this time her mace caught him squarely across the shoulders, driving *him* back this time.

As she heard Mole scream, Zenna looked up to see Tongueater leap onto Arun, snapping his massive jaws onto the dwarf’s head, looming over his smaller foe like a giant. Something snapped inside the tiefling, and she felt a guttural snarl escape her lips as she leapt up and threw herself at the lycanthrope’s back. Too many times had she watched, helpless, while her comrades were killed or injured by their enemies.

Now, at least, she had the power to do something about it.

The magic came quickly at her call, and as she laid her hands upon the apeman, shivers of electrical energy shot from her into Tongueater’s body. The apeman roared and straightened, Arun falling away before him as he released his hold on the dwarf. Twisting around, Tongueater didn’t hesitate, sweeping his falchion around in a deadly arc. Zenna knew it was coming, knew that she could not escape that stroke. Still, reflex had her diving to the side, and she did not cry out when pain exploded through her body.

“Zenna!” Mole cried out, as her friend went down. Her quick dive had probably saved her life, but as the falchion clipped her, and she fell to the ground, she slumped and did not get back up. Mole screamed and hurled herself at their enemy, this seemingly unstoppable foe, stabbing at him with her sword. Once more the stroke did nothing; she may as well have been hacking at a tree.

“Your turn now, little one,” he said. But Mole could see that the bandit leader was hurt, and hurt bad. His chest now heaved with exertion, and trails of dark blood ran down his body from his wounds. From between his legs, Mole saw a dark shadow rise back up off the ground, lifting his mighty hammer with both hands.

Tongueater sensed it too. He turned back toward the dwarf, the falchion coming back up, more slowly now, as the lycanthrope called upon a last reserve of strength to destroy these foes.

Too slowly.

Arun, his face bloody with the cuts torn open by the apeman’s teeth, cried out as he brought his hammer down in a last mighty stroke. Driven by his full strength, with everything that the battered dwarf had left in him, the head of the hammer sank into Tongueater’s chest with enough force to drive the powerful lycanthrope to his knees. A

loud crack filled the room, as the blow crushed through the creature's resistances and snapped his breastbone.

For a moment, Tongueater knelt there, staring into the dwarf's eyes with unconcealed hatred. His fingers dug at his pouch for another potion, but the vial fumbled from the bloody digits and fell to the floor.

"This isn't done," he hissed, his voice twisted into a gurgle. "The Masters will do for you..."

And then he slumped forward, dead.

Chapter 58

The aftermath of the battle with Tongueater and his bandit minions was a collection of close calls and quick recoveries. With the death of their leader, the last few surviving bandits had been quick to flee. The rogue fighting Illewyn didn't quite make it; as he darted back for the hallway he stumbled on the debris of the chair that had been part of the barricade, and by the time he got back up Arun's hammer was there to end it.

Zenna lived, and Illewyn was quick to restore her to consciousness using her divinely-granted healing. Dannel was brought around using the same method, and once conscious he used his own healing wand to restore all of them to health. Mole made a cursory search of Tongueater and the dead bandits, and found several more potions, several of which looked like healing elixirs. More remarkable was the leather pack that the apeman had worn as a pouch; Mole found to her delight that the item was an example of the magical bag known as *Heward's handy haversack*. The gnome quickly transferred the contents of her current pack into the bag, which barely made a dent in the enhanced capacity of the container.

The companions made their preparations in silence, the heavy weight of what had almost happened hanging over them like a shroud. All of them were quite aware that even one more bandit attacker might have turned the tide, and even a few seconds delay could have led to the deaths of both Zenna and Dannel.

Even though magical healing had restored her to full health, Zenna felt that sense of fate quite acutely. On top of this, her thoughts were troubled by the implications of what she had done to save Dannel. The holy symbol of Azuth was back within her pocket, and its now-familiar weight was a constant reminder of its presence. None of the others had seen what had happened; Dannel, the beneficiary of her actions, had been unconscious throughout, and as far as he knew, had been brought around by Illewyn.

How could this had happened? Everything that Zenna had learned had reinforced that divine and arcane magic were two entirely different things, one drawing from the power of the gods, the other tapping into the mystical energies of the Weave. Yet even as she had called upon what she presumed was the power of Azuth through the amulet, casting a spell no wizard could cast, she had felt a strange sense of familiarity, a link to that power that she channeled through the patterns that she stored in her mind through the mechanism of her memorized spells.

She resolved to speak once more with Esbar, upon their return to Cauldron. But there was no more time now for reflection, as the companions prepared once more to move out. None of them wanted to linger here, in this chamber now transformed into yet another gory battlefield. Already Zenna's nose wrinkled at the smells of death, as the forms of what had once been living, breathing men and women were now transformed into organic debris.

"We have to find Sarcem," Illewyn said as she straightened from treating Arun's injuries, her face betraying her exhaustion but her eyes shining with determination as she repeated her familiar mantra.

"Remain wary," Dannel said, as he tucked his healing wand back away and recovered his bow. "The remaining bandits will likely flee, given the death of their leader, but there may be holdouts who may yet be waiting in ambush."

"Bah, bring them on," Arun said. But despite his words, the dwarf's face too showed hints of weariness, and there was a shadow in them as he looked down one last time at the slain body of the lycanthrope.

The companions made their way back downstairs, following the route of the last few bandits who had fled from the battle at its conclusion. There were at least two, they calculated; the second archer who hadn't joined in the melee, and the warrior whose arm Arun had crushed with his hammer. Illewyn had recovered one of the torches dropped by the bandits, and the flickering light of brand sent long shadows ahead of them as they made their way back downstairs.

The common room was again as they had left it, although the stench of death now hung heavier in the chamber. A door in the eastern part of the room near the stairs that had been shut earlier was now open, so they headed in that direction. A hallway led beyond that opened onto a number of small rooms that had the look of offices and quarters for the staff that ran the roadhouse. They saw no signs of the bandits, save for the general destruction and looting that had characterized the rest of the place, so continued on to the end of the hall.

The last door opened onto the kitchen, a spacious room with several other exits. To their right were a pair of shuttered windows flanking a set of double doors that opened onto the night outside. The doors were slightly open, the locking mechanism clearly bashed open, and a small half-circle of wet from the storm outside had already formed in front of the opening. A staircase led up to the second story directly to their left as they entered, with a heavy iron stove standing against its base, while a massive hearth stood cold and empty in the opposite wall. A single lamp burned fitfully in a wall sconce, its flame dancing in the damp wind that blew in through the open doors, and another half-dozen lamps were burned out and unlit about the chamber.

To their left, a heavy table stood against one of the interior walls. Standing there was a woman in armor who was hurriedly transferring handfuls of coins from the tabletop into a fat burlap sack. Other coins were scattered across the floor, forming a trail of sorts to the open doors. As they entered she looked up and saw them. She dropped the sack, some of the coins falling to roll across the floor, and reached for the longsword at her hip.

“Give it up,” Arun said, stepping into the room. “Your leader’s dead, and so are the rest of your comrades.” Behind the dwarf, Dannel entered, an arrow to his bow and the string half-drawn, ready to fire at an instant’s notice.

For a long moment the woman warrior only looked at them in silence, her face torn between expressions of anger and fear. Then a scream from beyond the half-open outer doors broke the standoff, followed by a bestial roar and a tearing noise that sounded quite unpleasant indeed.

“What the...” Arun said, shifting his attention to the disturbance.

The woman bandit leapt into action, but instead of charging the companions she spun and fled, darting toward one of the doors in the far wall that led into another part of the roadhouse. Dannel lifted his bow and drew the arrow to his cheek, but held his fire as the woman disappeared. Zenna, standing behind him, noticed but did not say anything as they followed Arun into the room and toward the doors.

“Oh, no!” Illewyn cried, a sound that pushed the border between sanity and hysteria, drawing their attention around.

The priestess’s torch had illuminated what had looked like a mount or scone attached to the wall near the table. As the light drove back the shadows, however, it quickly became clear that the object was in fact a human head, severed and impaled on the wooden surface. Illewyn’s behavior revealed the identity of the grisly token, even before she sobbed the answer.

“Sarcem... Sarcem!” she cried, falling to her knees, her body shaking.

Mole and Zenna were at her side in an instant, offering what sympathy they could, while Dannel moved over to remove the impaled head from the wall. Before he could reach it, however, another roar sounded from outside, followed by what sounded like a patter of feet on the muddy ground, drawing nearer.

“I don’t think we’re done here yet,” Arun said to them, while he moved to the door with his hammer at the ready.

His words were proven true a heartbeat later. A drenched human appeared in the opening, staggering toward the sanctuary offered by the roadhouse, his face a rictus of pain as he clutched gashes in his side that oozed blood. Even as he spotted Arun a darker, bigger form rose up out of the rain behind the fleeing bandit, lunging for him from behind. The bandit reached for the doors even as the shadow struck, and he screamed as it tore into him, driving him forward. The bandit and his pursuer hit the doors, slamming them shut with incredible force, and behind them the companions could hear the sounds of rending flesh.

Then, a few minutes later, silence returned to the roadhouse kitchen, broken only by the faint sounds of the rain outside.

Chapter 59

After Arun related what he'd seen to the others, none of them were particularly interested in going outside, so they barricaded the door with the heavy table and continued their search. It appeared that the bandits had gathered their collected loot here after the attack, and posted the head of the fallen cleric as a trophy of their victory. True to his name, they found that the bandit leader had torn the tongue of the priest from his head. Illewyn was barely functioning, still consumed by her grief, so Dannel wrapped the head in a blanket and placed it in an out-of-the-way spot for them to return later for burial.

They left the remaining treasure for now, aside from a few small items that found their way into Mole's new magical backpack, and resumed their search. They didn't find any sign of the bandit woman that had fled from them earlier, but they did come across a window that had been forced open, its shutters clattering against the frame from the force of the wind.

"I hope for her sake that those... *things* weren't still out there," Mole said.

"She earned her fate when she chose to join in the assault upon this place," Arun said grimly, and they pressed on.

The rest of the roadhouse was quiet and dark. The storm outside continued unabated, and the wind picked up as the night drew on, crashing insistently against the shuttered windows. They found several lamps that had not been broken by the bandits, which they used to aid in their search. Other than Sarcem's head, they had not as yet found any other sign of the inn's staff and patrons.

"This storm doesn't bode well for Cauldron," Illewyn commented idly, the first words she'd said since they had found Sarcem's head. The cleric's eyes were red, and she moved with the listless steps of one who had not slept in days. "We have to find those wands..."

There was a brief scare when Dannel opened a door that led onto a central courtyard in the interior of the inn. Dark forms were visible in the landscaped garden, and they quickly turned toward the door, deep growls indicating their intent, white teeth flashing in the light of their lamps. The elf was quicker, though, slamming the door an instant before the first heavy body collided into it.

"Looks like Tongueater left a few of his friends behind," the elf noted. Looking through a nearby window, Zenna was unable to see anything remarkable in the small garden except for the five hill baboons, so they left the creatures to their rage and continued their search.

An hour later, they finally found the rest of Sarcem, in the cellar under the kitchen. The decapitated cleric's body lay in a bloody heap, surrounded by signs of battle. Apparently a last stand of sorts had occurred here. The cleric was still clad in his banded mail, the shiny metal plates now marked with blood and dirt, and his mace was lying on the floor, half-covered by his fallen frame. Mole checked the corpse, and shook her head, confirming what the others already knew they would find.

The wands were gone.

Illewyn slumped to her knees beside the body. She had no more tears left to cry, but her body sagged with the force of her grief. She reached out and touched the cleric's bloody hand, while Dannel covered the body with a spare cloak.

"Goodbye, my friend."

Mole was already searching the rest of the chamber, and had gravitated toward a narrow corridor that led off from the main cellar. "Look here," she said, holding up her lamp as she started down the corridor.

"Careful," Zenna said, moving to join her friend. "Stay together."

The hall progressed for some twenty feet or so. Two doors stood open on their left, with a third ahead at the end of the passage. Even before they drew near they could see what had drawn Mole's attention, for before the final door lay the bodies of three humans, dressed in similar fashion to the rogues that they'd faced earlier.

"It's cold," Mole said, with a shiver.

Zenna nodded. Warily, they continued down the corridor. Arun had joined them, while Dannel, half-supporting Illewyn, brought up the rear.

As they drew closer to the door, they could see that its construction was... *strange*. It looked almost as though the heavy planks had somehow melted, flowing outward from the center of the door to overlap the edges of the threshold into which the portal was set.

"That's not going to be easy to get open," Mole said.

"Why do we even care?" Dannel's voice came, from further back down the corridor.

"They obviously wanted to know what was behind it," Zenna said, gesturing at the three bodies lying on the floor. "This is strange... I cannot imagine that the owners of the roadhouse would have put a trap here, where anyone from above could wander down into it."

"What makes you think it was a trap?" the elf asked.

"Look at the bodies," Zenna said. And indeed, while a few minor cuts and scrapes could be seen on the corpses, there were no apparent injuries serious enough to have killed them. Their faces were pale, almost white, frozen in expressions of surprise and fear.

"I'll get it open," Arun said, starting forward.

"Wait," Mole said, quickly stepping in front of him. "This is my job, remember? As I recall, you don't really have much of a way with traps."

The dwarf grumbled, but didn't challenge her. Mole fixed him with a raised eyebrow until she was sure that he wasn't going to stop her, then she turned and started for the door.

“Be careful, Mole,” Zenna said.

Mole shot her a glance back that was dismissive, but as she turned back to the portal her face took on a look of intense concentration. Her breath formed a cloud before her as she neared the bodies. As she passed the open door to her left, she paused, holding up the lantern.

“There’s writing here,” she told them. “It says, ‘No open flames beyond this point.’”

“Maybe a gas trap,” Dannel suggested.

“They don’t look like they were burned,” Zenna replied. “Frozen, perhaps.”

“Maybe you’d better leave the lamp, Mole,” Dannel suggested. The gnome nodded, placing the lamp on the floor, before continuing to the door.

“There’s some sort of brownish gunk on the door and the walls near it,” she reported. “It... ahhh!”

“Mole!”

Chapter 60

“Mole!” Zenna cried. The gnome groaned and shook, her face becoming pale as she staggered back from the door. Arun was there in an instant to meet her, and he scooped her up and carried her back to where the others waited. She was a bit groggy, but still conscious, and she continued to shiver even as the others tended to her.

“What happened?” Zenna asked. “Are you all right?”

“Cold...” Mole said. “It felt like... it felt like the heat was being drained right out of my body...”

“This will help you,” Dannel said, drawing out his unusually-shaped wand and humming the melody that triggered its power. The blue glow from the device suffused into the body of the gnome, and some of the color returned to her pale features.

“Thanks,” she said, with a smile.

“We were more fortunate than those,” Arun said, with a gesture toward the slain rogues.

“We still need to get past that door,” Mole said.

“It’s too risky,” Zenna said. “We can’t even get near the door, without being affected by the cold. The next time, one of us might not be so fortunate.”

“It’s bearable, if you don’t get too close,” Mole said. “If we use a battering ram, I bet we could remove the door without being hurt.”

“A good idea,” Dannel said. “But what then, after it’s destroyed? The cold will still affect you as you move through the doorway. And we don’t know if the effect fills the room beyond.”

Illewyn came forward. She had spent the bulk of the encounter lurking in the background, but now something of her previous strength was reflected in her voice. “I can use the power of Helm to shelter one of us from the cold,” she said. “The power is not without limits, but it should allow someone to move through and investigate.”

“That might have been good to know, cleric, before Mole there risked herself,” Arun said dryly.

Illewyn’s expression said that the remark cut, but Zenna interjected, “We couldn’t have known what would happen... and what’s done is done. Let’s see if we can put Mole’s plan into action.” After a pause, she added, reluctantly, “It should be me who goes, once the door is removed. My... I have an inherent resistance to cold already, which should help protect me if the spell is insufficient.”

Arun looked at her with a raised eyebrow, but didn’t offer further comment.

They moved quickly, now that they had a plan. For a battering ram they dismantled one of the heavy tables from the common room above, lashing together a number of planks to form a compact shaft of wood almost a foot across and just over ten feet long. Arun found a heavy metal pot that they used to cap the ram. The whole was unwieldy and crude, but it would effectively transfer their combined strength against the door from a distance. Working together they dragged this unwieldy device back downstairs, and moved it into position. Dannel and Arun grabbed onto it from opposite sides, while Mole held on at the end, her meager weight serving as a counterbalance to keep the iron-tipped head up.

The door shivered as they rushed forward, slamming the ram heavily into it. Dannel and Arun’s breaths frosted in the air as they entered the cold end of the passageway, but the ram gave them sufficient distance to avoid taking damage from the brown mold. They repeated the action several times, until finally the warped boards began to snap. From there it was only a few more well-placed strikes until the entire door collapsed inward, revealing a dark chamber beyond.

The two men drew back, dropping the ram to the ground. “Blast, that’s cold!” Arun complained, rubbing his hands together vigorously.

“All right,” Zenna said. “Cast your spell upon me, Illewyn.”

“Bah,” Arun interjected. “I should be the one. If there’s trouble back there, I’m better equipped to handle it.”

“If I see anything, I’ll come right back, I promise,” Zenna said. “If there is anything in there, it would have to go through the cold zone to get to us.”

Arun harrumphed, but didn't say more as Illewyn cast her spell upon the tiefling. But even as Zenna felt the magical effect settle about her, Arun turned and charged down the passageway. He let out a growl as he passed through the open doorway, then he was through. Shaking her head, Zenna followed.

"Dwarves," she heard Mole say, behind her.

Zenna felt the cold descend about her as she neared the doorway, but steeled herself and strode through. The brown mold seemed larger than it had, and in her imagination she thought it almost pulsed as she passed before it, as if eager to drink the heat from her body. But the spell protected her, and she made it past the area of the growth, shivering but otherwise all right.

The room was unremarkable, its walls formed of rough-hewn stone. A round shaft that was probably a well was the only thing of note, the opening partially obscured by several ill-fitting boards. Zenna's darkvision allowed her to see quite clearly, and she made out the squat form of something lying behind the edge of the well, its identity not quite clear from this distance. Arun had seen it as well; he was already heading in that direction.

"Is everything all right in there?" Mole asked from back down the corridor.

"Fine," Zenna replied, moving to join Arun.

The dwarf reached it even as Zenna got a good look at the object—or rather the creature, for the recumbent form was that of a woman, apparently unconscious. Her skin was dark, blending in with the packed earth of the floor, while her hair starkly contrasted with long strands of pure white falling about her head and shoulders. Her hair partially obscured her features, but Zenna could see enough to indicate that the woman had at least some elvish blood in her heritage.

Arun sucked in a surprised breath. "Drow!" he hissed.

Almost reflexively, his hammer came up.

Chapter 61

Zenna saw the dwarf's movement, and quickly stepped in to intervene. "No!" she hissed, blocking him from the unconscious woman.

The dwarf's look could have etched stone. "You don't know what you're about, woman. Drow are dangerous, even when injured, and their hearts as black as..."

"As those of tieflings?" Zenna interrupted. In a flurry she drew back her cowl, and tugged the magical hat from her head. For a moment her visage flickered, and then her true face was revealed.

“You?” the dwarf asked in surprise. “You possess the blood of fiends...” For a moment his face betrayed a rare conflict of feelings, as he tried to sort out the implications of this revelation. Finally, his expression darkened. “Why did you not reveal this before, woman?”

Zenna sighed tiredly. “Have you never been judged for what you are on the outside, Arun? Is it how we look, or our heritage, that defines what we are... or our actions, our hearts, the truth that lies *inside*?”

The dwarf frowned, and turned slightly away from her.

“Arun... I am what I always was. I did not intend to deceive you. Concealing what I am has... it’s become second nature, I suppose. Most people are quick to rush to judgment, when they see the signs of my heritage. My father was luckier; he could pass as human, though there was always something ‘wrong’ with him that people could sense. But he did a lot of good, as well, and he ended up joining the Harpers. It didn’t make him a better father, but I suppose it means something in the larger scheme of the world...”

She trailed off, unable to think of anything else she could say.

Mole’s voice came to them again from the corridor. “Are you still all right in there?”

Zenna looked at Arun. “Are we all right, paladin?”

Arun fixed her with a hard stare, but finally nodded. “Aye,” he said. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean that the drow’s all right!”

Zenna nodded. “Well, it looks like she wasn’t with the bandits, anyway.” She turned back toward the open doorway. “We’re fine!” Zenna shouted back to the others. “We’ve found someone... she’s hurt.”

“Do you want me to come through?” Illewyn asked.

“Wait a moment,” Zenna returned. Returning her attention to Arun, she said, “Let me see what I can do. If she turns me into a newt or something, you have my permission to give her a good bashing.”

Ignoring the dwarf’s scowl, she knelt beside the unconscious woman. Her body heaved slightly with her breath, but she’d suffered several injuries—likely from the blades of the raiders—and her skin was chill to the touch. Zenna knew that Arun had the power to heal her, but doubted that the dwarf would be quick to help, out of pride if nothing else. She could call to Illewyn, but the cleric had already sacrificed her magical protection against the cold to help her; going through the doorway and the brown mold would be dangerous.

With a sigh, she reluctantly reached into her pocket for the holy symbol. Without consciously thinking about it, she turned her body slightly to conceal the motion from Arun. The amulet was cold in her hand, just a piece of carved metal...

But as she stared at it, the device seemed to grow larger in her vision, and she felt her thoughts drawing inward, focusing in a way similar to the meditation techniques she’d been

training in as a child. Somewhere deep in that place was her magic, the tendrils of energy that formed the Weave, accessed by the words and gestures that she stored in her mind. This was different, somehow, but again Zenna felt that same vague sense of commonality.

Blue fire blazed in her hand, wisps of soft light that dissolved into the skin of the injured woman. In response the woman stirred, her mouth opening as she drew a deep breath into her body. She heard the creak of metal as Arun shifted, no doubt readying himself to pound the drow into paste if she made any threatening gestures. Zenna could see her wounds closing, and she thought she could feel the woman's body grow warmer, as the healing touch of the magic—her magic—banished the cold that had gripped her.

Her eyes opened.

"I am not dead," she said, her voice a soft, melodic sound.

Zenna opened her mouth to speak, but Arun beat her to it.

"No, drow, and if you want to keep it that way, you'd better be quick to answer some questions."

Despite the dwarf's hostility, the woman nodded calmly, drawing herself up with Zenna's help to a sitting position. "I will do what I can." She looked around, taking them all in, the battered door, the dwarf's armor with the sigil of Moradin clearly etched into its surface. Her eyes lingered slightly on Zenna's face, and with a flush the wizardess realized that she hadn't lifted her cowl or put her magical hat back on after her confrontation with Arun.

"What's your name?" Zenna asked her.

"I am Shensen Tesseril. I maintain the shrine here, the small sanctuary to the Rider of the Winds."

"Shaundakul," Zenna said, and the woman nodded.

"What of the bandits?" she asked.

"Dead," Arun said. "Or at least most of them," he amended. "We got that half-monkey leader of theirs, though."

The drow woman shivered noticeably, and not from the cold—although it was cold in here, Zenna realized, though the chill did not touch her through her magical protection. She took off her cloak and wrapped it around Shensen, who nodded gratefully.

"What of the cleric?"

"He didn't make it, sadly," Zenna said.

"That is a great sadness, the loss of a valiant man of faith, but not what I meant. I am referring to the woman... the human creature with the hair of fire and the markings of the

Black Fist upon her. During the assault upon the Lucky Monkey, she gave commands to the were-creature and the other bandits.”

Zenna and Arun exchanged a look. “We saw no such cleric,” Zenna said.

“There was a fire dark and terrible burning within that one,” Shensen said. “In a way, she was more frightening than the monstrosity that slew the servant of Helm.”

“Why don’t you tell us what happened?” Zenna asked.

Shensen told the story briefly, but with enough detail for them to get a clear understanding of what had happened. The attack had come the previous night, late enough so that many of the roadhouse’s guests were already in their rooms. The attackers were skilled and well-equipped, a fact that Zenna could certainly attest to, and they made short work of the staff and those few patrons able to defend themselves. Shensen had been in the small shrine to Shaundakul when the attack had begun, and was drawn to the fighting by the noise of shouts and broken glass. She arrived to find Sarcem, the High Priest of Helm, rallying some of the survivors. The defenders were forced to take refuge in the cellar as more bandits converged on their position, and it was there that Tongueater and his warriors finally overcame them. Even as the were-baboon struck down Sarcem, Shensen fled into the cold-storage room, recovering the box of brown mold kept there. Already wounded, and with several bandits in pursuit, she was able to release the mold over the door to the well chamber and seal it with a *wood shape* spell before the chilling effects of the mold overcame her. She was barely able to crawl away from the range of the mold before passing out.

“And that is how you found me,” she concluded. “Have I answered your questions satisfactorily, master dwarf?”

“You haven’t mentioned what you’re doing here, a drow, in the surface world,” Arun pointed out.

“I am only half-drow, but I make no apologies for what I am. Would you suggest that I am to blame for the color of my skin, or the practices of those who share my bloodline? Certainly we are rare here, here under the sun and stars... but not unheard of, certainly.... much like your own people, perhaps? In any case, I understand your wariness, but I ask that you not offer judgment before you have come to know me.”

Arun grunted noncommittally. Zenna thought that Shensen’s words were much like her own, and suspected that Arun was feeling a bit conflicted at being told off twice in quick succession. She managed to hide a faint smile at the thought.

“We’d better get you out of here,” Zenna said. “Our companions are in the outer corridor, but we need to find a way to get through the mold.”

Shensen took a deep breath and stood. “I feel weak, but perhaps can make it through one last time.”

Zenna gave the drow woman one of the potions they'd taken off of Tongueater; restored further by the healing power of the draught, they turned to brave the mold once more. The growth had expanded somewhat from the heat it had drained off of their bodies, but dashing through they were all able to make it back to where the others waited. After some introductions, they returned to the ground floor of the roadhouse.

It was now closer to dawn than the preceding dusk. The companions pressed their search for a brief while, but they were all exhausted from the long travel and the ordeals they had faced here. Finally they decided to hole up and rest. They checked the shutters and doors one last time to be sure they were secure, set up a barricade near the staff quarters, set a schedule for watches, and collapsed into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter 62

The next morning came swiftly. The storm broke sometime during their rest, leaving scattered gray clouds strewn across the sky in its wake. The world outside had been reduced to greenery and mud, with some rock scattered in between for flavor. At least the beasts that had attacked the bandits the night before had departed; they found little more than the shredded remains of several of the rogues in the space outside the kitchen doors.

Their reinforcements from Cauldron had not yet arrived, so they gathered up their possessions, including the body and head of Sarcem, and prepared to depart. Their horses were still in the stable where they had left them the night before, which was a relief. Shensen elected to come with them rather than stay behind; while she stated her intent to rebuild the shrine at the Lucky Monkey, and help restore the roadhouse to working order, she said that she needed to first report to her superiors in Cauldron. Zenna offered to let the half-drow woman ride double with her, but Shensen spent most of the journey on foot, and proved quite able to meet their pace even with the rest of them mounted. The others seemed to accept her presence, distracted as they were by their own thoughts, but Zenna observed Dannel casting several covert but intent glances at Shensen during the trip. From what she understood of their culture, the moon elves had a deep abiding hostility toward the drow, although Dannel did not make any overtly hostile gestures toward the woman. They fastened Sarcem's body to Illewyn's mount, and Mole shifted to ride behind Dannel.

They met the column from Cauldron shortly after noon. The riders included a squad of armed and armored city watch, a full dozen with extra mounts. Riding at their head was a familiar face: Morgan, the cleric of Helm. The cleric reacted strongly to the news of Sarcem's death, and he did not even try to hide his emotions as Illewyn related what else had happened.

"I will ride back with you, and deliver Sarcem's body to Jenya personally," Morgan declared, when they had finished.

Illewyn shook her head. "No, Morgan. There's nothing that can be done now, and we can bring the news ourselves. The roadhouse must be secured; we left some nasty apes in the inner courtyard, and there were some other hostile beasts in the area as well. A few of the bandits may have escaped us as well, though I doubt they would linger behind there."

Morgan mastered himself with a bit of effort, but it was clear that he wasn't fully convinced. He made a gesture toward the side of the trail, away from the others. "We should not argue in front... of these people," he said. He didn't specify, but it was clear whom he meant by the way that his eyes settled first on Zenna, then on Arun.

But Illewyn didn't take the bait, nor did she move to follow him. "We must all cleave to our duty, now more than ever, Morgan."

The cleric reined in his mount, drawing the animal back a pace, and it was clear from his face that the words had stung. He brought his horse roughly around to face back down the road to the Lucky Monkey. "We ride on, lieutenant," he said, putting his words into action as he spurred his mount onward, the rest of the patrol falling in quickly behind him.

"That man has a lot of things going on inside him," Dannel commented.

"Yeah, what a jerk," Mole added.

"Morgan is... complicated," Illewyn said. "He's not all bad, but he tends to let his emotions catch him up and carry him headlong, rather than letting reason guide his steps."

"Aren't all men like that?" Mole asked, too innocently to be credible.

"He has suffered a great loss too," Shensen reminded them. "People respond to such in different ways. Perhaps the young man's anger is the only way he knows."

Perhaps, Zenna thought to herself as they set out again, starting up the steep and winding road that led back up to Cauldron. But Morgan had made it quite clear how he felt about her, and after all of their encounters she found herself reciprocating his feelings quite readily.

* * * * *

Cauldron was much as they had left it, if rather wetter. The city was in good spirits, with preparations for the annual Flood Festival in full swing, but as they rode down Obsidian Avenue toward the Temple of Helm Zenna could sense the undercurrent of unease that hung in the air. She supposed she understood the reason; living in a big bowl, one had to be worried that the storm that they'd just experienced was just a precursor of a wet winter to come. That, and with the memory of the recent abductions still fresh on the minds of most Cauldronites... Certainly once the news of what had happened at the Monkey became public knowledge, the nerves of the people would not likely be eased any.

As they arrived in town, with the sun already half-gone beyond the western horizon, Dannel left them. The elf dodged their queries, saying only that he would see them again in the coming days. With the duty of Sarcem's body still weighing upon them, they had no choice but to let him go on his way. Shensen left as well, thanking them for their help and promising to return after she reported what had happened at the Lucky Monkey to her superiors.

Zenna watched Dannel depart with hooded eyes, her feelings about the elf still mixed. There was no doubt that his role on their mission had been crucial, and he'd shed his blood freely for their cause, but there was something hidden about him that still worried at the tiefling's thoughts like an unscratchable mental itch.

Jenya received them instantly, dark circles under her eyes betraying her concern for the fate of their mission. She took the news of Sarcem's death stoically, drawing upon some inner reserve of strength. Illewyn offered what comfort she could, and she related what had happened. As the story drew on, the expression of the new High Priest of Helm darkened.

"We must find those wands," Jenya said. "This first storm is just a precursor, I can feel it. Without the wands of *control water*, half of the city might be destroyed in the floods."

"We will do what we can," Zenna promised. But as they departed, she didn't feel so certain. There weren't many leads, but they had the description provided by Shensen, of the woman cleric of Bane that had led the attack.

As they left the Temple, Zenna looked up at the clouds gathering once more in the darkening sky above. Flood season was here, and she suspected that they weren't done, not by a long shot.

Chapter 63

She still felt a similar feeling three days later. It was late afternoon, and the evening crowd was starting to filter into the Drunken Morkoth, although the noise level hadn't quite yet reached its full crescendo. Festival was still a few days away; although a few storms had blown through the mountains onto Cauldron, the rainfall hadn't yet matched that from that first heavy storm earlier in the tenday. But there was still a feeling of anxiety that hung over the community here, for word had filtered out among those with a care to listen that there would be no magical aid forthcoming should the flood waters rise this season.

Zenna, Mole, and Arun were seated at a semi-private booth in a back corner of the common room. Zenna glanced over at the dwarf, who'd taken on that same unreadable expression that she'd gotten used to on him. This was the first time she'd seen Arun since their return from the Lucky Monkey; while she had no idea where the dwarf disappeared to, Mole seemed to be able to produce him upon demand. Although she couldn't be sure, Zenna thought that Arun seemed a bit distracted.

"No Dannel?" Mole asked.

"No, I haven't seen him," Zenna replied. In truth, she hadn't really looked, had no idea where the elf would be found. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She had visited Ezbar shortly after returning to Cauldron, and had spent the better part of a morning speaking to him over scones and tea. While he hadn't been able to answer all of the questions she had, one thing, at least, had changed as a result of that visit. Unconsciously Zenna reached up and idly fingered the amulet that now hung openly on her chest. Ezbar had showed her how to gain some measure of control over the power she'd evidenced at the Lucky Monkey. A part of her still couldn't quite grasp that she was now a cleric. She didn't pray to Azuth,

really; using the meditation techniques Ezbar had suggested she'd been able to tap into that power she'd used for healing, and even now she could feel the stored power of several spells. She had not yet solved the mystery of the relationship between those spells and the arcane magics she had recorded in her spellbook. They were somehow similar, yet at the same time different and discrete.

Distracted, she realized that Mole was saying something. "What was that?" she asked.

Mole tisked. "You should pay attention... for most adventuring parties, this is the best part!" She lifted her backpack atop the table. She'd gotten quite attached to the magical haversack; Zenna could not remember seeing it out of the gnome's possession since they'd found it. Mole stood, allowing her to lean over the table, addressing her friends in a conspiratorial tone.

"All right," she said. She ruined the earlier effect by laughing. "Time to split the loot!"

"I have to admit that I already did some shopping," the gnome said. "For the good of the group, though. Bag, bolts."

Zenna couldn't help but smile as Mole addressed her backpack, but to her surprise the gnome immediately reached in and withdrew a pair of slender wooden cases, the sort used to store crossbow bolts. She would have to give the bag a second look; such a power would be quite useful, especially in the chaotic rush of a battle.

"I traded in one of those masterwork swords that the thugs had for some bolts," she said. "One box for you, one for me. They're the best that the fletcher makes, top quality, very expensive."

Zenna looked briefly in the box. The bolts looked ordinary enough; she shrugged and put them in her bag.

"What about the rest of the swords?" Zenna asked. She suspected that she already knew the answer, as Mole was wearing a new suit of finely crafted leather armor under her cloak. The gnome had complained that the chain shirt she'd found in Jzadirune was too heavy and constricting, despite the good quality of protection that it offered.

"Well, I sold them," Mole said. "There's this great magic shop, Zenna... you have to visit! It's called Skie's Treasury, and it's run by a gnome, and she has all kinds of great stuff for adventurers. She gives a discount to 'official' adventuring groups, but you have to sell her a lotta stuff first, and have a name. Anyway, I took the money from the extra swords and a few things I found at the Monkey and my share of the gold, and bought this magical armor. I know I should've waited to talk to you..."

"It's all right," Zenna said. "I don't think that any of us would begrudge you being as well-protected as possible." She looked over at Arun, but the dwarf didn't respond.

"Hey, thanks! This armor is great, at least until I can get my hands on a mithril shirt... Anyway, you should go with me next time, once we have all the gold and stuff sorted out.

There's a healing wand that might be a good investment, now that you're a cleric too and all..."

"Maybe we should divide the rest of the treasure, before it gets too crowded in here," Zenna suggested. She knew her friend, and suspected that they would be here until dawn, if she let Mole get a full head of steam.

"Oh, sure! Bag, potions." She drew out a number of potion vials, laying them out on the table.

"Most of these are healing," she said. "Three of the minor-strength ones, and four of the more potent ones. There's also this one," she said, indicating a vial full of a murky red liquid. "This was one of the ones we found on Tongueater. It makes you grow for a short time, if you drink it. Makes you stronger, I guess."

Zenna nodded; she was familiar with the spell. She for one was glad that they'd faced Tongueater in the narrow confines of the Monkey's hallways; the thought of an *enlarged* were-ape was not a pleasant one.

"Arun should take it," Mole said. "Since he's the front-rank fighter."

"Bah," the dwarf said, his first word of the meeting. "I have no need of such trickery."

"Oh, but imagine the looks on those evildoers' faces, when they see a giant dwarf charging toward them! They'd be scared to death for sure, and then you could pound them even better."

Arun looked hard at the gnome, as if weighing her words to see if they were mocking. Mole, to her credit, maintained an utterly convincing expression, and the paladin finally took the potion. Zenna, meanwhile, divided the healing potions, and they each took two, with the extra going back into Mole's bag for now.

"I'll just hold this one for Dannel, for now," Mole said. Illewyn had already rejected her share in any treasure, saying that the church of Helm had already benefited from help of the companions in defeating the killers of Sarcem. Zenna suspected that there was more to it than that; the cynical side of her knew that Jenya still wanted their help tracking down the mysterious woman cleric who'd been seen during the attack. She looked down at the plain gold ring that circled the third finger of her right hand. It wasn't a bribe, not quite; Jenya had given her Sarcem's ring out of thanks for their help.

Zenna felt a sour taste in her mouth. Had she always been this bitter?

"And there's the gold, of course. I included a share for Dannel, which I guess I'll hold onto until we see him again. I sold a few of the things we found at the Monkey, and added it to the tally."

"You know, some of that stuff probably belonged to people staying there, or to the owners," Zenna said.

Mole looked hurt. “Yes, but they were all killed! You saw me offer Shensen a share of the treasure on the way back to Cauldron, didn’t you? I even offered to make a donation for the families of those who were killed. And we didn’t take everything.” Of course, she didn’t add that some of the things had been too bulky to fit into even her magical backpack.

“I’m sorry, Mole. How much is there?”

“Well, split four ways, it’s seven hundred and thirty gold pieces each.”

Despite herself, Zenna stared, and she saw that Arun had taken a renewed interest as well. That was a small fortune! Almost without thinking she started calculating how many scrolls she could scribe with that amount of money, how many new spells she could add to her spellbook.

“Arun, you could give your share to charity, if you want to... I know paladins like to do that.” The dwarf harrumphed, but didn’t respond to Mole’s offer.

Mole reached for the bag again, but Zenna shook her head. “Maybe we’d better make this transaction in our room.”

Mole nodded, but even as Zenna started to get up, her attention was drawn to the front of the room, where a few newcomers had just entered the tavern.

There were four of them, and even across the room Zenna could see that there was something that set them apart from the common run of patrons, even at a place like the Morkoth. All four were young, likely about her age. They were dressed as adventurers, clad in the diverse raiment one came across in that profession, and even at a distance could see that their garments and gear were stylish and well-tailored. All looked to be human, two men and two women. Their leader appeared to be a tall, attractive woman who naturally drew the attention of the room toward her. As Zenna watched she searched the room in a sweeping gaze, finally settling on her. The woman nodded, and she smiled slightly. Zenna felt a cold sense of foreboding; the smile didn’t reach the woman’s eyes, and there was something in them that bespoke trouble.

The four adventurers headed toward their table.

Chapter 64

Mole continued to jabber on, oblivious to the four strangers who were clearly headed for their table. Zenna heard a growl from Arun—the dwarf, at least, had the wit to keep his senses alert.

The young woman drew up ten paces from their table, standing in the midst of a knot of a dozen round tables. Some of the guests had taken note of the newcomers, and glanced at them curiously. The woman basked in the attention, piquing the curiosity of the mob, letting her gaze travel across the room before turning back to Zenna and her friends. Her skin was flawless, a dark color perhaps a shade lighter than Arun’s, and her clothing was of sufficient style and quality that she would have had little quality fitting in with a gathering of

nobles. Looking down at her own tattered cloak, Zenna felt cheap and ugly. A rapier hung at her belt, and a lute was slung casually over her shoulder, perhaps indicating her profession.

“Ah, friends! Unless my eyes deceive me, we are in the presence of some notable souls! Are these not the very same heroes who freed the orphanage children from the clutches of those vile slavers that were defiling our town?”

One of her companions, a muscled woman with close cropped red hair and a breastplate, looked at them with a seemingly bored expression. “I don’t think so, Annah. By their clothes, they look like a couple of unemployed mercenaries to me.”

Annah chuckled. “Now, Cora, don’t be rude. I think that it is indeed them!”

Zenna frowned. The attention of everyone in the room had focused on the developing scene, now, and the buzz of conversation had grown silent. The wizardess noticed that all four of the young adventurers wore a badge on their garments, a brooch shaped in the form of a miniature shield, bearing the sigil of a pair of crossed swords surrounded by a cloud producing stylized bolts of lightning. The badges appeared to be fashioned out of solid silver.

Mole had finally turned her attention from the treasure and her bag, and turned to face the strangers. “Yes, that’s us all right,” she said cheerfully. “What can we do for you?”

Zenna groaned.

The one named Annah chuckled. “It should be us doing something for *you*, as heroes who have done such good for the citizens of Cauldron. Bartender, a round in honor of Cauldron’s newest heroes, courtesy of the Stormblades!”

Annah drew out a small pouch that clinked as she tossed it onto a nearby table. There was some activity as the inn’s staff rushed to meet a flurry of drink orders from patrons determined to enjoy this unexpected largess, but the attention of the room was still on the exchange between the two groups of adventurers.

One of the men leaned against a vacant chair, crossing his arms in front of his chest. His clothes were of equal quality to his companions’, but they hung awkwardly on his lean frame. His face was narrow and tweaked, his expression reminding them more of a weasel than anything else.

“Amazing that they were able to find the children, when no one else could,” he said to no one in particular, although his words carried easily throughout the tavern. “The City Guard, the churches, all manner of independent groups... no one could find them. I suppose it was a good thing that you came along when you did, appearing out of nowhere like you did.”

“Well, it wasn’t really that hard, once we put the clues together,” Mole said. “I’m sure that if we hadn’t agreed to help Jenya Urikas find the children, someone like you guys would have figured it out... eventually.”

Zenna nodded to herself. Mole had figured out what these “Stormblades” were up to, and was responding to their jab in the way she always did... by talking. The wizard glanced around the room, weighing the gathered audience, sensing that more was coming.

“Indeed, Todd doesn’t exaggerate the degree of our good fortune,” the last man said. He was a stark contrast to the unkempt Todd, tall and ruggedly handsome with a finely trimmed beard. Zenna could see that he wore an icon at his throat, possibly a holy symbol, although she could not quite make out the design at this distance.

“An ingenious plot by these scum, using the locksmith who created the town’s locks to gain access to private homes,” Cora said. “Wasn’t he a gnome?” she added, with a not-so-subtle look at Mole.

“I believe so,” Todd replied. “From what I’ve heard, there’s a whole gnome settlement under the city. But the slaver leader was a dark dwarf... much like that fellow over there.”

Twenty sets of eyes turned to regard Arun, who was watching with eyes that smoldered. Zenna suspected that they were losing control of the situation, though Mole’s cheerful expression hadn’t slipped and Arun didn’t move. Clearly the Stormblades were trying to provoke them, but to what end?

“You should be careful, boy, in applying labels when you don’t know what in the blazes you’re talking about,” Arun said. His voice was a deep growl, low enough so that the audience had to strain to hear. But Todd had heard it, by the way his expression changed.

Annah interjected before either he or the dwarf could comment further. “Friends!” she said, in such a way that it included everyone in the room. “Come, let us not argue! There is no denying that the children are safe, and the abductions have ceased! I’m sure these strangers can offer good reasons for how they, as outsiders to our city, unraveled the evil mystery that so vexed our city!”

The bearded young man nodded. “Indeed. We should not offer disrespect where it is not deserved. Tell us, ser dwarf, of this slaver, this dark example of your race.”

Cora, standing beside him with hands tucked into her swordbelt, added, “If he’s even a dwarf,” he said. “I’ve never heard of a dwarf who shaved his beard. Well, unless they’ve been dishonored and ejected from their clan, perhaps.”

Arun moved so quickly that Zenna didn’t have a chance to stop him. One minute he was seated at the back of the booth, and then the heavy table scraped aside and he was standing before them. A few patrons at tables nearby moved back reflexively at the sudden movement, giving the heavily armored and armed dwarf some space. The Stormblades made no obvious reaction, but it was clear to Zenna’s experienced eye that they too prepared, with hands falling to weapons hilts, postures changing slightly in anticipation of action. The mood in the room had changed, with that collective tension that existed before a situation exploded into chaos. The innkeeper made a quick movement, and one of the kitchen boys darted out the door into the streets of the city.

“Keep speaking, woman, if you want to earn a lesson in manners.”

Zenna pressed her fingers to her brow. She knew how it sounded to the crowd, the dwarf threatening a woman, even one dressed in armor and carrying a blade. These Stormblades were clearly locals, and they would gather the sympathy of the crowd if things turned ugly. A few more people rose from their chairs and moved backward.

“Touchy, eh dwarf? Perhaps a few barbs struck home?”

“Yeah, maybe you’d better explain a few things to the goodly people of our city, dwarf,” Todd hissed. “You’re a long way from the Great Rift. In fact, I heard that you beat up a guy in this very tavern, less than a tenday ago.” A few regulars nodded, remembering the event.

Annah shook her head sadly. “Indeed, the people of Cauldron deserve to know the truth,” she said, as if regretting how the encounter had turned. Zenna wasn’t fooled, but she was at a loss for how to disarm the situation. Annah lifted her gaze to fix on Zenna, and the tiefling thought she saw the slightest tweak of a smile on her face. “After all, a noble man of Helm, our own local cleric Ruphos Laro, gave his life to see those children free.”

Zenna felt as though she’d been punched in the gut. Mole’s forced grin evaporated, and Arun’s hands tightened into fists at his side. To be attacked with insinuation and innuendo was one thing, but to have Ruphos’s sacrifice tarnished...

Cora stepped forward to face Arun. “Well, dwarf?” she asked. “What do you have to say?”

Zenna tensed, suspecting that she knew what Arun’s response would be.

Chapter 65

“The truth!” a voice rang out, from the back of the tavern. “And a tale both wonderful and terrible it is!” The attention of everyone swiveled around as Dannel Ardan strode boldly into the tavern, his cloak flaring out behind him as he moved. The elf strode boldly up to an empty chair, and vaulted up onto it, staring out over the gathered crowd.

“I have heard the tale told from one who was there,” Dannel said. “Fighting against the forces of darkness that threatened our town!”

Annah tried to interject, but the crowd’s attention had shifted. Dannel did not hesitate, telling the tale of the battle against Kazmojen in a rapid-fire of descriptive narrative. All of them were present in the telling; herself, Mole, Arun, Ruphos, Fario, Fellian... even the rakish Kryscar Endercott, whose role was elevated into a brave and hopeless charge against the howler in Dannel’s telling. The beholder was not mentioned, but every other aspect of the battle was true to Zenna’s memory of those desperate minutes. His hands moved and cut with each sword-thrust, and when he described the heroic sacrifice of Ruphos to save Arun’s life, Zenna felt tears gather in her eyes. When he was done, and described the final cut that downed Kazmojen, a rousing cry went up from the gathered people.

“And so we do owe thanks to these brave people, my friends,” Dannel concluded, stepping down from the chair and grabbing an untended flagon. “To the heroes of Cauldron,” he said, lifting his drink.

“To the heroes!” came the cry.

Dannel drank deeply, then left the flagon and walked over to the companions. As he walked past the Stormblades, he seemed oblivious to the hostility barely disguised in their expressions.

“That was quite a timely arrival, Dannel,” Mole whispered.

The Stormblades looked to Annah. “A rousing story, elf,” she said, with the slightest nod. Zenna thought that the look in her eyes could cut glass. “Perhaps we will meet again, ‘heroes,’” she said. Then she turned and departed, the others following.

In their wake, the activity in the tavern returned to more or less normal.

“I think it might be prudent to depart now,” Dannel suggested.

“An excellent suggestion,” Zenna said, rising. They headed for the back exit that led to Zenna and Mole’s room above the adjunct building behind the Morkoth. Arun was the last to follow, the dwarf slowly unlocking his fists and his anger before turning to join his companions.

“Wow, I thought that we were going to have a brawl for sure,” Mole said, as they left the main building of the inn. Zenna thought she sounded a bit disappointed.

“What was that all about?” Zenna asked. “Who were those guys?”

“They’re a local adventuring company,” Dannel explained. “I haven’t heard that much about them, but from what I understand they’re all the children of local nobility.”

“Noble brats,” Arun commented.

“But why would they want to pick a fight with us?” Zenna asked, as they made their way into the long building that the inn used for storage and as quarters for a number of its staff. Mole and Zenna had been renting out one of the rooms at the end of the second story for a while now. While they could now afford something a bit more... comfortable, Zenna found that she didn’t mind the proximity to both the excitement of the inn and the main boulevards of the town.

“Maybe they’re just envious that you’ve stolen the spotlight,” the elf suggested. “Or maybe one of you did something to tick them off, without realizing it.”

“Well, if they come looking for trouble again, we’ll just sic Arun on them,” Mole said, unlocking the door to their room and ushering them inside. The room wasn’t large, with barely enough room to accommodate the four of them. There were only two chairs, so Mole leapt up onto one of the beds while Dannel remained standing by the door. Zenna lit

the lantern hanging from a nail hammered into the slanting ceiling, and took the seat by the desk before the room's sole window.

"Comfy," the elf observed.

"Oh, I've got some treasure for you, Dannel," Mole said, placing her haversack on the nightstand beside her bed.

"We were wondering where you'd gotten off to," Zenna said.

"Out and about," the elf responded. "Actually, I've been asking some questions, about our 'friend.'"

Zenna nodded. She knew who the elf was talking about.

"The cleric," Arun growled.

"Any luck?" Mole asked, tucking a pillow between her back and the wall to make herself more comfortable.

"Well, my subtle queries didn't lead anywhere," Dannel reported. "But I guess they prodded something loose, for this morning I found this slid under my door."

The elf produced a small, neatly folded scrap of parchment. With her curiosity, Mole was the first to reach him, and she took it, unfolding it and moving over to where the lantern's light was bright enough to read by.

"I know you're looking for the wands," Mole read. "I can help, for a price. If you're interested, come to the Lakeside Pavillion tonight at midnight. Bring 500 gold pieces and you'll walk away with the location of the wands. Bring backup, and you'll never find them."

There was a moment of silence, as Mole finished reading. Zenna finally broke the silence with a single word.

"Well."

"Trap," Arun said.

"No doubt it could be," Zenna noted. "Especially since that cleric has likely heard of our interest by now, and the identity of those who slew her raiders at the Lucky Monkey."

"The same thought occurred to me," Dannel said. "But it is the best... the only, lead we have thus far. I take it that the Helmites have not been able to come up with anything?"

Zenna shook her head. "No, though I have not spoken to Jenya or Illewyn since the day before yesterday."

"So you want to meet with this guy?" Mole asked. "Tonight? We'd better start getting ready, it's already starting to get dark."

“The message says that the... individual... will only make an appearance if I come alone.”

“If you’d intended to go alone, you would have just gone and done it, and maybe told us afterwards,” Zenna said wryly. “You don’t strike me as the sort of man who asks for permission—for anything.”

Dannel cracked an irreverent grin. “Am I that transparent, then?”

“So what’s your plan then, elf?” Arun growled, clearly impatient.

“Well, obviously I intend to meet with him; we should be able to get the Helmites to cover the cost of the information, if the informant turns out to be legitimate.”

“And if he’s not, and it is a trap?” Zenna asked.

“Well then...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, for at that moment a sudden, clear knock sounded at the door to the room.

Chapter 66

Arun’s chair creaked dangerously as the dwarf stood, his heavy warhammer seeming to leap into his hands. Dannel spun smoothly, his hand on the hilt of his sword, and even Mole had produced a knife from out of nowhere.

“Stormblades looking for more trouble?” Zenna asked no one in particular. Mole crept silently to the door and listened at it, finally shaking her head. Arun moved toward the door; his armor clanked noisily in the quiet of the room, and the floorboards creaked under his weight. Zenna shook her head; there was nothing to be done for it now, although the noise would likely have alerted whoever was beyond the door that someone was within.

Dannel moved into position on the far side of the portal, having to bend his head against the slope of the low roof. He didn’t draw his sword, but he was clearly ready for whatever might happen.

Mole glanced at each of them to verify that they were prepared, and then opened the door.

The narrow hall was unoccupied by Stormblades, or other obvious dangers. Standing before the door was a shadowy figure, whose face was revealed as the light from the room spilled over her familiar features.

"Shensen!" Mole exclaimed. "What a surprise!"

The half-drow woman entered the room, giving them a wary look as she observed their state of readiness. She looked rather more at ease than the last time they had seen her, and she now wore a clean robe of soft brown wool that flowed over her lithe body as she

moved. A leather satchel that bulged slightly with its contents hung from one shoulder. Dannel closed the door and moved back toward the center of the room, where he could stand straight, and Arun returned to his chair, grumbling something under his breath.

"What brings you to us, Shensen?" Zenna asked. "Do you have any news about what... what happened?"

Shensen shook her head, her long white hair falling about her shoulders like the surge from a waterfall. "My fellow followers of the Wandering God have been able to find out little more than what we already knew. We did uncover one interesting fact: the identity of the red-haired woman."

"The Banite?" Mole asked. "Who is she?"

"A former guardswoman named Triel Eldurast," Shensen explained. "From what we've heard, she was a bit of a taut bowstring, aggressive and ill-suited to discipline. Apparently there was an incident where she murdered a few of her fellow guards while on duty, then dropped out of sight. This happened almost a decade ago, so she's been all but forgotten by most people."

"Where did you get this information?" Dannel asked.

"I'm sorry," she replied. "We have some confidential sources that I cannot divulge, even to trusted allies such as yourselves."

"Bah, so much for trust, then," Arun said. "What you got is rumors and innuendo, then."

"Well, it's more information than we had," Zenna cautioned him. "Thank you for sharing it with us, Shensen."

"Hey, have you seen Fellian?" Mole asked. Like Shensen, Fellian was a follower of Shaundakul, and had fought with them against dire enemies in the recent past.

"I have not," Shensen. "Though I have heard that he is well. He and Fario have been tasked to a different mission."

Arun's frown mirrored Dannel's, but neither bothered to ask, already knowing that the followers of the Wandering God were closed-mouthed about the details of their activities in Cauldron. Likewise, Shensen did not ask them about their own leads, and none of the four felt inclined to volunteer any details of the note and their earlier discussion.

There was a brief and slightly awkward silence, then Mole asked, "So, Shensen, are you heading back to the Lucky Monkey?"

"Indeed. There is much work to be done, I fear, to repair the damage wrought by Tongueater and his cronies. I did wish, however, to express my gratitude to you one more time."

"Those rogues had it coming to them," Arun disclaimed.

"I have brought you a small token, a more substantial expression of the thanks of my association," she said. Opening the satchel, she produced a pair of leather boots.

"Footwear?" Dannel asked.

"These are magical boots," Shensen explained. "They add length to the wearer's stride, and enhance one's jumping ability as well."

Mole was quick to leap forward for a closer look. "Really?" Then she realized something, and her expression sank. "Oh, they're sized for big folk," she said. "Too bad."

Shensen shook her head. "As I said, they are magical. Try them on, perhaps you'll be surprised."

"Okay!" Mole took the boots and sat down right there on the floor, shedding her own footwear in a flash before shoving her feet into the boots. True to Shensen's words, the magical boots shrank down to fit her diminutive feet, forming a tight yet comfortable fit about her ankles. Mole shot up, testing her footing and twisting her body to examine them from a variety of angles.

"Oh," she said, looking up at her companions. "I guess they are for all of us..."

"You should take them," Zenna said. "You are the slowest of all of us, with your short legs; it makes sense."

"Aye, maybe now you can finally keep up!" Arun added.

With a small cry of glee Mole darted forward. There wasn't really anywhere to go in the small room, but as she reached the wall she leapt straight up, kicking off from the wall right where the slanting ceiling met it, five feet above the ground. Her body twisted smoothly in the air, and she tucked herself into a roll as she shot off the wall back toward the center of the room. She was headed right for the desk when Dannel quickly stepped in and caught her.

"Careful, there! Maybe you'd better wait to test them when we have a little more room."

"Most excellent!" Mole reported.

"A bouncing gnome, just what we need," Arun observed dryly.

"Thank you, Shensen," Zenna said.

"And I thank you. Perhaps we will meet again in the future." With a last bow to all of them, the half-drow woman turned and departed, closing the door behind her.

"A strange woman," Dannel observed, as he set Mole back down on her feet.

"Hiding something," Arun noted.

“Aren’t we all?” Zenna asked.

“True enough,” Dannel replied. He crossed to the wall where he’d left his bow. “It’s getting dark... we still have a lot to do.”

Chapter 67

The night was cold and dark, with a soft but steady rain that filled the great bowl of Cauldron, descending its streets and alleys to end up eventually by pouring into the black lake at its center. The night wind came and went in gusts, flapping the colorful awnings that had been set up along the city’s major thoroughfares in anticipation of the Flood Festival.

Down by the lakeshore, the streets were deserted, as anyone with even a lick of sense chose to stay indoors where it was warm and dry. Even the occasional patrols of the City Guard didn’t bother to come down here this night, departing their guardhouses only to conduct hurried sweeps of the higher streets along the rim of the bowl before returning to the laughter and dice that waited in heated chambers of old stone.

The Lakeshore Pavilion was just a vague shadow in the night, even to Zenna’s darkvision. From her vantage, she could see it silhouetted against the flat expanse of the lake, but could make out little more than that. Yet she dared not approach closer. Dannel had been specific on that, and Zenna had been forced to agree. They could not risk losing the only concrete lead they’d been able to uncover thus far, even if it meant risking a trap.

Mole would be closer, she knew, but in circumstances like this Mole was like a part of the night itself, finding the darkest part of the shadows and sliding into them like a sword sliding into its scabbard. Arun had been... a bit more difficult. Zenna smiled despite herself at the memory. Arun was smarter than his gruff manner and hard exterior suggested, she knew, and he’d ultimately bowed to the logic of the situation. The dwarf just wasn’t suited to an operation based on stealth and subtlety, like this one. But he’d made his displeasure known, before finally agreeing to wait for them at a quiet hole-in-the-wall tavern, one of the few still open at this hour, several blocks away.

The rain made a constant patter against her cloak. She was already soaked, the threadbare garment a poor substitute for her usual cloak, but despite the weather had insisted on going with her original idea to head out disguised. Anyone who happened to catch sight of her would see only a ragged wretch huddling in a doorway, a man well into middle age who’d clearly been ill-used by life. She was getting more used to the powers of her *hat of disguise*, and found that she could swiftly switch between personas with just a few moments of concentration. Under the battered cloak that formed the exterior of her disguise, her dagger and spell components were within easy reach.

The wind picked up again, filling her shelter with the sound of its coming. With her innate resistance to cold she wasn’t as poorly off as a true homeless person would be, but she was far from comfortable. But she forgot about her discomfort, as she saw a vague form break the familiar outline of the Pavillion, across the street and a half-block away, on the

very shore of the lake. The waters of the lake had risen up to surround the heavy wooden pilings that supported the structure, giving it the illusion of floating upon the water. A few of the buildings along the lakeshore had water lapping up against their very doorsteps, adding a sense of urgency to their mission. If they didn't find the wands of *control water*, flood season this year could be catastrophic for Cauldron.

She watched the Pavillion intently, cursing silently at her inability to see clearly what was happening. Inwardly she resolved to learn one of the spells that allowed one to better perceive events at a distance. The figure at the Pavillion had to be Dannel, but she could not tell if there was another person there with him. They'd agreed on a predetermined signal, a small display of colored light easily conjured with a *prestidigation* spell, but she knew that the reality was that Dannel was more or less on his own, if in fact the message was a trap. She didn't know where Mole was, but doubted that either of them would be able to get to Dannel quickly enough to aid him if an ambush was sprung.

She tensed as she caught a hint of movement from the direction of the Pavillion. Someone was coming down the street, in her direction. Reflexively she shrank deeper into the darkness of the doorway, but as the figure drew closer, she was able to see that it was Dannel. The elf was moving quickly, his boots splashing in several inches of water with each step. He spotted her, belatedly—even with his keen elvish eyes, he couldn't match her darkvision—and nodded.

Zenna rose, and clung to the lee of the buildings along the side of the street as she followed the elf away from the meeting place. She finally caught up to him as they rounded the corner that led up to the tavern where Arun waited.

"Well?" came a little voice just behind her. Zenna jumped about a foot into the air before she realized that it was Mole, virtually invisible in her dark cloak.

Dannel looked at both of them, the rain falling in runnels off the hood of his cloak and down his body. "I got it," he said. "I know where the wands are being held."

Chapter 68

Dawn was just a faint promise on the jagged horizon formed by the line of peaks that overshadowed Cauldron to the east. The rain had eased off sometime during the night, and a thick fog hung over the caldera, spilling out over the wall and spreading thick fingers down the outer slopes of the volcano.

The companions stood at the summit of the volcano, facing outward, the impassive thickness of the city wall behind them. They were a good distance away from the nearest gate; no road or track led down from here, just a rough and uneven slope that promised little but broken bones and treacherous slides.

"Here we go," Dannel said. A few feet away, Mole yawned.

Zenna felt tired as well. She hadn't slept much since their encounter at the Pavillion; none of them had, really, with the need to make preparations and knowing that once more they

would be thrust into mortal danger. It was a good thing that she'd already had a full complement of spells memorized; she doubted that she would have been able to get anything out of her spellbook after a night like this one. She could feel the spells tingling in her mind, an odd mixture of the spells from her book and the ones that had appeared in her thoughts with the meditative exercises that Esbar had taught her.

She glanced over at Illewyn. The young woman was resolute, her face tight in an expression that had not been part of her when Zenna had first met her, little more than a tenday ago. There had been little time to give Jenya more than a sketchy briefing of what they'd learned, but Illewyn had been quick to volunteer to accompany them. Admittedly the source and veracity of their information was still sketchy—Dannel hadn't been able to tell more than that his informant had been human—but it was still all they had to go on. And they had to assume that the information was good, that they would encounter Triel Eldurast and whatever allies she still possessed when they completed this trek.

“Let's get about this, then,” Arun growled.

They'd already worked out their roles, already knew each other's talents from their struggles together at the Lucky Monkey. Dannel led them down, the nimble elf directing them along the safest and most direct path. Behind him came Mole, hopping a bit with each step, and then Arun, the dwarf clanking slightly with the noise of his armor and weapons. Then Zenna, a shade in her dark cloak, and Illewyn bringing up the rear.

They made their way down the slope in silence, save for the noise of their gear and Arun's perpetual clatter. Only a few minutes after they'd started, Zenna looked back over her shoulder—the wall of the city was lost behind them, faded into the fog. It was as if they were in a world where everything was just a ghostly shadow of reality, even their own forms dark and indistinct. It was a morbid thought, especially given what she'd experienced with the Vanishing, so she pushed those thoughts aside with a shudder and forced herself to focus on the treacherous track. Behind her she heard a slight clatter and a muffled curse. Zenna belatedly realized that Illewyn had to be all but blind in these circumstances, so she quickly turned back to help the cleric.

It didn't take them much longer before Dannel brought them to a halt with a raised hand. The others gathered behind him. Zenna, with her darkvision, could clearly see what the keen-eyed elf had spotted, a low mound formed by a dozen massive boulders that jutted from the mountainside like a pimple.

“I'll go check it out,” he said. “Wait here.”

Arun grumbled, but even he didn't offer further complaint as the elf darted off into the shadowy mists. He was only gone for a minute, Zenna thought, before he returned, the news of his success written clearly on his face.

“There's a shaft that leads deeper into the mountain,” he said. “It would appear that our informant was correct, at least about that.”

“Let's hope that they aren't expecting guests,” Mole said.

Dannel directed them to the entrance. The shaft sloped steeply but appeared to be navigable; its walls were cylindrical and smooth. The passage was utterly and purely black.

“Lava tube, most like,” Arun said.

“Even you are going to need light down there, elf,” Illewyn said. “I will call *light* to brighten our way.”

“All right, but keep it shrouded,” Dannel said. “I’ll go on a bit ahead, check for ambushes or guards.”

“No offense, elf, but even with your vaunted eyes, you’re not going to be able to see nothing down there. I should go in the lead; my dwarven senses are suited to such work.” Arun started for the entrance, as if taking their assent for granted.

“No offense taken, ser dwarf,” Dannel returned, moving quickly to block him without seeming to do so. “But sound carries as well as light in the dark places under the earth, and you are rather... noisy... in that most impressive getup.”

It looked like an argument might be brewing, but Zenna surprised them both—and perhaps herself—by stepping in between them. “I’ll go ahead,” she said. “I have the benefit of both darkvision and stealth, as I do not wear armor.”

Both the elf and the dwarf looked at her with obvious disapproval. “If there is trouble down there...” Arun began.

“I’ll come right back and get you,” she promised.

The two shared a look, and Zenna felt a combination of prickly anger at their presumption of control over her, and a brief hope that they would press her, force her to back down from this crazy plan. She didn’t really want to be the first to go...

Finally, Dannel nodded. “Be careful,” he said.

They moved into the mouth of the tube. Zenna looked down at her hand, white and slender against the dark colors of her clothing. She concentrated for a moment, calling the power of her magical hat, and the hand darkened until it was nearly black in color. She knew that her face would likewise be darkened, and wouldn’t give her away if a light appeared below.

“Oh, that’s a nice trick,” Mole said in approval.

Zenna closed her eyes and called upon her magic. The words and gestures flowed easily, and she felt the power surge through her momentarily. Again she felt a brief confusion—this spell was scribed in her spellbook, but she had drawn upon it from some... *outside* source, had not committed it to memory the way she normally did. She shook her head. This was not the time for introspection. She felt the familiar tingle as the invisible *mage armor* settled about her.

Then she took a deep breath, and started into the tunnel.

Chapter 69

The darkness swallowed up Zenna before she'd taken a few paces. With her darkvision she could see quite clearly, of course, but there was still an oppressive sense to the tunnel, as though the surrounding rock were eager to crush her for her insolence at penetrating its fastness.

She made her way swiftly, the soft soles of her boots whisking faintly on the smooth floor of the tube. She touched the wall, and her fingers came away damp with condensation. The air from below was damp and stale, but she thought she could detect the faintest hint of a breeze. Behind her she could hear the sounds of the others as they started into the tube after her. Glancing back, she could see the faint glow that had to be Illewyn's magical *light*.

She hastened her pace. The shaft apparently led deep into the mountain, for she progressed for some time without any break or other variation in the tunnel. Finally, however, different sounds began to intrude upon her senses, sounds of air and water that hinted at a larger space up ahead. Warily, she pressed on.

The shaft finally emerged onto a broad shelf that overlooked a larger cavern, its borders far beyond the capabilities of her darkvision to measure. But directly in front of her was an incongruous sight that took a few moments for her to identify. It was a lift, a metal cage attached to cables that ran from somewhere below in the cavern into a plain structure of rough-worked stone that perched on the far side of the ledge to her left. A door provided access to the building.

After glancing around to make sure that she was alone on the ledge, she crept forward and looked out over the lip of the ledge. She could not see the bottom of the cavern below, but from the sounds and smells she guessed that there was a body of water beneath. Not surprising, given that Cauldron stood on the shores of a lake. From closer up she could see that the cage was designed to hold a number of passengers, and had a small gate in one side to allow access. There was no apparent way to move it from within, however; the mechanism had to be inside the building. She wasn't about to press on further without the others, however.

They arrived just a few minutes later, the clank of Arun's movements announcing them even before Illewyn's light spilled out over the ledge. The cleric held the light under her cloak, letting out just enough of a glow for her to see the ground ahead of her. To Zenna's eyes, adjusted to the darkness, that glow shone like a beacon. If there was anyone out and about in the cavern below...

Well. There was no helping that now, she thought.

Zenna gestured toward the door, and the companions gathered before the portal. Weapons were readied and everyone took up a position to give them a good vantage; having worked together before, the adventurers needed no discussion to prepare themselves. Dannel held an arrow to his bowstring with his left hand, and reached over the push open the portal with his right.

The door opened easily, despite its considerable appearance. Beyond was a compact chamber, maybe twenty feet square, dominated by the winch mechanism for the cage outside. Thick cables penetrated the wall overlooking the chasm, connected by an intricate gear mechanism to the heavy wheel that operated the system. There were a few long, flat boards piled up against one wall, and a door similar to the one through which they'd entered on the opposite wall.

The companions moved quickly into the chamber. Arun took a quick look at the winch mechanism, while Mole moved swiftly to the far door. Illewyn walked over to the far side of the winch mechanism, careful not to shine her light directly on the cable openings, and as she was looking around saw something on the wall that drew her attention.

Moving closer, she saw that it was a flat stone of some sort, sticking to the wall at about chest-height as if fixed with glue. Curious, she reached out to touch it...

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Dannel said from behind her, interrupting her with her hand just a scant foot from the stone.

"What?" she said, turning around, drawing her hand back hastily.

"I wouldn't touch that," he repeated. "I've seen devices like that one before... ordinary objects sticking to a flat surface like a lodestone on a metal sheet. Sometimes such things are enchanted with a spell that gives an alarm when someone touches them... or even moves by, in some cases."

"Well, we're lucky it's not the latter, this time," Zenna said. She cautiously approached the stone, and summoned a cantrip. Sure enough, the oblong rock began to glow, indicating that a magical aura was in fact placed upon it.

"Shhh," Mole said, directing their attention to the door. As they moved to join her, she whispered, "I think I hear voices."

"Now you're talking," Arun growled.

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"Do you think anyone heard that?" Illewyn asked, a few minutes later.

"Naw, the outer door was shut, and I doubt that much sound got out through those cable openings," Mole said authoritatively, as she reloaded her small crossbow.

Zenna turned her attention to the two bodies lying on the floor, watching Dannel search them quickly and efficiently. The two guards had not been alert, and one had gone down before they even really realized that they were under attack. The second had gotten his sword out and tried to bull rush his way past them, but Arun had placed himself in the man's path with grim finality, and his hammer had made short work of the guard's escape.

“We’re fortunate that they were lax in their duty, and that they hadn’t placed the alarm-stone in here, where one of them could get to it without coming through us,” Dannel observed as he rose and faced them. He held up two small vials, similar to the ones they’d found on the warriors at the Lucky Monkey, and which likely held healing draughts. He handed one to Mole, and offered the other to Arun; when the dwarf harrumphed and turned away, he smiled and instead gave the other potion to Zenna.

“No doubt there will be more of them further in,” Zenna said pragmatically, tucking the vial into her pouch.

“Well, it looks like we’ll have to ride down into the cavern to find out!” Mole said, clearly excited about the prospect of navigating down in the iron cage. By the looks on the faces of the others, it was likely that she was alone in that sentiment.

The guardroom was unremarkable save for a table and a few chairs, and an adjacent closet that contained a small stockpile of supplies. The companions returned to the winch chamber, giving the alarm stone a good berth just in case.

“So, how are we going to work this?” Zenna asked. “Even if the cage can support our combined weight, someone will have to work the winch.”

“I’ll stay and operate it,” Dannel offered.

“How will you get down, then?” Mole asked.

The elf’s smile was a bit rakish. “Don’t worry, I’ll manage it.”

“Just don’t jump off the cliff,” Zenna said. “While our experiences together have gone a long way toward convincing me that all men have heads full of rocks, I don’t think that landing on yours would do much for your conversational skills.”

Dannel laughed, even as Arun let out a loud harrumph.

The elf remained behind while the others returned to the ledge, and the waiting cage. They brought one of the long boards, which were obviously used as an aid to boarding the dangling conveyance. Mole hopped lightly over to the cage and quickly opened the grate, her steps barely affecting it. Illewyn looked far more unsteady as she crossed to the waiting opening, and Arun’s face was uncharacteristically tight as he approached the plank. Had the dwarf been possessed of a fair complexion, Zenna thought, he’d be deathly pale right now.

“Are you all right?” she asked, softly so that the others wouldn’t hear.

“I’m fine,” the dwarf said, and he started across the plank. His weight on the plank caused the cage to twist slightly, and he froze, a brief look of disquiet—not quite fear, as paladins were supposedly immune to that emotion—shooting through his eyes.

“Come on, you can do it!” Mole said. Illewyn was holding onto the bars at the far edge of the cage, her eyes tightly closed, and she offered no comment.

Arun growled and crossed over into the cage. The cage swayed back and forth as it settled with the new weight, and the dwarf joined the cleric inside, grasping the bars.

“Don’t look down,” Mole offered, trying to be helpful.

Zenna made it over to the cage without difficulty, and as she entered the cage Mole reached out and heaved the plank back over to the ledge. She let out a faint whistle—the signal they’d agreed upon—and the cage started down into the cavern.

It took a few minutes, and while the cage creaked some under their weight, soon Zenna could see their destination draw near as they approached the bottom of the cavern. Most of the cavern was apparently taken up by a vast underground lake, as she’d guessed earlier. But her attention was drawn to the far wall of the cavern, behind the lake, toward where the cage was descending.

The entire far end of the cavern was occupied by a massive citadel, apparently carved into the sheer rock of the cavern face. The structure bore an air of ancient permanence about it, and was formed of odd angles and bulbous domes that seemed to bulge out from the cliff like the eyes of a goggling fish. To Zenna the entire thing seemed alien and forbidding, and she felt a shudder as she imagined the fortress itself watching their descent.

Or maybe it wasn’t imagination.

“Is that a building there?” Mole asked. Zenna remembered that her friend lacked darkvision, and would only be able to see shadows in the gleam of Illewyn’s partially shielded light.

“No dwarf crafted that... or any other race I’ve encountered,” Arun said.

Zenna saw that they were approaching the floor of the cavern. The ropes of their conveyance vanished into a small structure separate from the citadel, but before they reached it, the cage began to scrape along the hard, uneven stone floor of the cavern. The waters of the underground lake came up almost to their position, lapping softly against a shore littered with broken shards of rock and tiny stones worn smooth by wind and water.

The cage scraped noisily for a few more feet, tilting awkwardly to the side, before it came to a halt. Evidently Dannel had adjudged that the device had reached the end of its course. Mole opened the cage door and the companions filtered out, staring about them at their new surroundings.

“What a fantastic place!” Mole exclaimed. “Illewyn, shine some more light over here!”

“Careful,” Zenna cautioned. “There are probably more guards.”

“No doubt they’ll have heard us coming, with all that racket,” Arun grumbled. He came forward, unlimbering his hammer and hefting it experimentally.

But no foes emerged from the citadel to trouble them. They observed a number of doors, flat heavy slabs of unadorned stone, along the front face of the fortress, and a few narrow slits that showed only blackness beyond. The front face of the complex stretched for a few hundred feet before them, with protruding cylinders and boxy squares layered upon each other as though the architect had sought to combine every style of construction into one medley. The small building housing the lower end of the lift assembly seemed fairly unremarkable, if more recent construction, so they turned their attention to the various entrances in the cliff face.

Zenna lingered back, glancing up at the twin cables of the lift, wondering how Dannel would manage the descent. Her question was answered a moment later as she perceived a shadow moving down the ropes, discernable a moment later as the elf, sliding down quickly on an object he'd slung over the cable and now held onto with both hands, his feet dangling below as he picked up speed. Dannel's mouth was open and his eyes were wide as he shot down the rope toward the watching wizard; belatedly Zenna realized that he was coming right for her and she quickly leapt out of the route of his descent. For an instant it looked as though Dannel would slam at full speed into the waiting cage, but at the last moment he let go and landed hard on the uneven ground, transferring his momentum into an awkward roll that carried him with a splash into the waters of the lake. Zenna was there in seconds to help him, as he rose and limped over to where the rest of them waited.

"Are you all right?" Mole asked.

"That was pretty reckless, elf," Arun said.

"Well, I had to get down one way or another," he said with a grin, although it turned into a grimace as he probed at his side. "Damned hilt caught me hard when I landed, and I think I may have twisted my ankle as well." Illewyn started forward, but the elf forestalled her. "Best save your talents, priestess; I'll use my wand."

Mole had picked up the object he'd used to slide down the rope; it was a spare leather baldric from one of the slain guards above. "I wouldn't mind trying that sometime," she said, tossing the belt into the lake.

Dannel winked at her as he straightened, the glow from his wand already fading into his body. "It was...interesting, although the landing part's a bit rough."

"Are we going to chat here all day, or be about our business?" Arun asked. "If you're quite ready, elf."

Dannel tucked his wand back into its pocket, and unlimbered his bow. "Lead on, dwarf."

They selected the nearest visible exit, and after checking their weapons and other gear once last time, Arun shouldered the heavy portal open and they entered the citadel.

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The stone door grated open on its pivot, revealing a quiet, dark space beyond.

They moved inside, Illewyn's light playing out over the spacious interior of what appeared to be a considerable entry hall. Thick columns of stone carved in flowing, twisting patterns rose up along the walls to buttress a domed ceiling a good forty feet above. Condensed moisture shone on the walls, and the entire place had a musty odor. A second exterior door was visible to their left, and several interior doors provided access to other parts of the complex, including a large set of double doors directly across from the entry. A long wooden table dominated the center of the room, ringed by functional wooden chairs.

"Looks like nobody's home," Dannel said.

"Don't bet on it," Arun offered.

"Which way?" Illewyn asked, holding the light aloft with one hand, and clutching her mace tightly with the other.

"We should try the side doors," Mole suggested. "See what we can find, without stirring up the whole place."

"A sound approach," Dannel said, and they moved together to the single door in the wall to their left. The portal was of similar construction as the exterior door, if not quite as thick or imposing. Arun was able to open it without difficulty, but what they saw beyond gave them pause.

The room was small, roughly square, with walls of plain unadorned stone and a single other door in the wall to their right. However, strung across the floor, maybe a hand's span above the surface of the stone, was a network of thin white cords. The cords formed a lattice, crossing and crisscrossing each other and forming little spaces of varying size between their matrix.

"Well, that's a trap, obviously," Dannel said, looking in. "Though I can't quite make out what it sets off..."

"Some sort of alarm, no doubt," Mole said. "I think I can make it through, though."

"Are you sure we want to risk it?" Zenna asked. "We can try another way."

"Well... maybe the trap means that there won't be as many guards this way," Mole said. "And there's no guarantee that the other ways won't be warded by other traps, less obvious than this one."

A sound of something heavy dragging across the floor drew their attention around. Arun was there, bringing one of the chairs from the table. Zenna was the first to see what he intended, and she quickly stepped in to intervene. "Um... I don't think that's a good idea..."

"Why risk one of us?" the dwarf said. "We set off the trap, go charging in, and even if an alarm is sounded, we're doing damage before there's time for the guards to react."

“While it will no doubt cause my honored ancestors to cry out to hear my agreement with a dwarf, I have to say, there might be something to his logic,” Dannel said. “No doubt the trap is obvious for a reason, and there may be a hidden danger to complement the obvious one.”

“Well, I say why risk it at all?” Zenna persisted. “When there are other options...”

As the others debated, Mole turned and looked into the room once more, examining the network of tripwires and the walls and ceiling. After one more glance over her shoulder to verify that the others weren’t looking, she nimbly hopped forward into the room and started across toward the door.

Illewyn happened to turn and spot the gnome’s action, and her startled exclamation drew the attention of the others around. “Mole!” Zenna hissed, darting to the doorframe with the others close behind. The gnome didn’t turn, her attention on her feet as they darted into the tight spaces between the wires, already halfway to her destination.

“Ah, the inevitable logic of chaos,” Dannel commented, an arrow held to his bowstring in readiness for a quick draw. “For a group with two practitioners of lawful faiths in its midst, we certainly do seem quite devoted to it.”

“Quiet, elf,” Arun said, still holding the chair.

Mole darted through the maze of wires, her magical boots lifting her in precise little hops that made her seem like she was bouncing across the room. The others held their collective breaths as she reached the door, which had a small open space before it that was devoid of the tripwires. With a grin, she turned and offered a low bow to the others.

“Careful, there may yet be something dangerous beyond,” Zenna cautioned.

“You worry too much,” Mole said, but her actions belied caution as she scanned the door for traps and then lowered her ear to the flat stone to listen. Satisfied, she reached up and tugged at the door’s handle.

Mole was strong for her size, but the door resisted her pull stubbornly. She grimaced and pulled harder... and the door suddenly sprang open, moving smoothly on its greased pivot. Caught off guard, she tried to adjust, and for a moment she teetered off balance...

...before stepping back into a mess of tripwires.

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The results were swift. The white cords drew taut and a few snapped, the sound followed immediately by a series of louder snaps that seemed to come from within the walls. The ceiling, lost in shadows a good ten feet above, seemed to shiver, and then a black mess detached and fell onto the floor below.

Mole saw it coming, and without hesitation leapt forward through the open door, into the unknown beyond.

The heavy curtain fell across the floor; it was a net, blackened to blend in with the dark ceiling, weighted with small iron bells in the strands that made a loud clatter as they fell against the hard stone floor. The sound was loud enough to carry some distance, allowing the trap to serve both as prison and alarm at once. But fortunately, none of them had been snared by it.

Whatever relief they might have felt was tempered by the fact that Mole was separated from them, and further dampened by the shouts of surprise that came from beyond the open door.

Dannel was the first to react, slipping forward into the room. He only got one pace in, however, for as he stepped on the net, the material of it adhered to his boot, dragging at him, forcing him to arrest his progress lest he get further entangled.

“It’s sticky!” he said in warning to the others.

Arun came forward, still holding the chair, thrusting it before him like a farmer driving a plow. The dwarf caught up the edge of the net and thrust it ahead of him, pushing it back and clearing a path for them to the door. Dannel was knocked off balance and barely kept his footing, wrenching himself free of the net to fall against the near wall. Arun continued to push the net, which bunched up around the legs of the chair like a dislodged carpet.

Zenna and Illewyn came after him, rushing toward the open door. The sound of steel clashing on steel, followed by a sharp exclamation of pain, clenched Zenna’s heart with fear for her friend, and she rounded the door to find herself staring into the face of a lanky, muscular young man perhaps a year or two older than she. The man was clad in the familiar armor of the mercenaries that they’d fought at the Lucky Monkey, and in his hand he clutched a fat ceramic flask.

Man and woman stared at each other in surprise for a moment, then he hefted the flask to throw, at the same instant that Zenna recognized what it was.

Instinct took over, and mystic phrases rolled off of Zenna’s tongue as the energy of a spell flooded through her. The power focused into a single word, which Zenna felt echo through her mind as she spoke it.

“Drop!”

The man hesitated as the power of the spell hit him like the force of a blow. In response, his hand opened, and the flask fell from his hand. Belatedly he realized what he’d done, and he made a desperate grab for it, but was too late as the container struck the hard stone and shattered.

Flames exploded as the volatile alchemist’s fire erupted upon contact with the air. Instantly the man’s lower torso was sheathed in fire, and he stared down in horror, too startled even to scream as he staggered backward. Zenna, too, stumbled backward, lifting

her hands to protect her face. Gobs of liquid flame caught on her cloak and trousers, eagerly claiming the fabric. Zenna could hear the sounds of confusion and melee mixed with the roar of the fire, the acrid tang of smoke, and the dancing shadows as the burning mixture consumed its fuel. But her attention was more immediately drawn to stamping out the flames before they captured her entire outfit. With her bare hand she smothered the little burning droplets, her innate resistance to fire thankfully protecting her from more than just minor burns. The flames died out, but she coughed as the smoke filling the room continued to grow denser. Confused, she looked around—and realized that the net had caught fire, and flames were even now spreading aggressively outward through the small antechamber.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Illewyn said, drawing her attention back up as the cleric grasped her arm. Zenna looked around, and realized that she and the cleric were alone in the room. With her head starting to swim, she staggered toward the door to the room where Mole—and presumably the others—had vanished.

She entered into the midst of a still-raging melee. The bodies of two guards lay bloody on the floor, including the charred figure of the man who’d been caught in the fire, one side of his face caved in by a blow from Arun’s hammer. Mole lay on her side on the ground, propping herself up on one elbow, blood from several wounds streaking her clothes. She was warding by Arun, who continued to exchange blows with another guard. Dannel fought the last defender by the only other door that exited the place, forcing the man to fight him rather than attempt flight. Zenna saw that the elf was favoring his side, where a patch of red indicated that at least one of the defenders’ thrusts had scored. Even as she watched the warrior made a desperate lunge at Dannel, forcing him back a pace, before turning and darting toward the door and escape.

She didn’t hesitate; calling upon a cantrip she clouded the mind of the enemy fighter for a few moments, dazing him long enough for Dannel to run him through with a deadly thrust of his sword. In the same heartbeat Arun laid into his foe with a mighty blow of his hammer, crushing his breastbone with an audible and ugly snap. Both brigands collapsed, gasping out their last moments upon the floor.

Zenna moved quickly to where Mole lay, followed a step later by Illewyn. “Are you all right?” Zenna asked, noticing that Mole had drawn out a potion vial.

“I will be in just a moment,” she said, uncorking the vial and downing its contents quickly. The magic worked as expected, and the gnome’s wounds closed immediately, allowing her to stand up, if still a bit groggily.

“That was pretty foolish, all around,” Zenna said sternly.

Mole flushed slightly. “Well...”

“At least we avoided the trap, and killed the guards without any of them getting an alarm out,” Dannel suggested.

“Others might have heard the clatter,” Illewyn said. She had closed the door to the net-chamber behind them, but wisps of smoke continued to drift in from around the jamb.

“Well, if they didn’t, no doubt someone will smell the smoke,” Zenna observed. “We should be quick.”

“For once, that’s something I can agree with,” Arun declared, leading them to the door. Mole paused only long enough to quickly search the bodies, an action that proved fruitful as they discovered several more healing potions that hadn’t benefited their previous owners. She also found a few more clay flasks of alchemist’s fire, which covertly made their way into her *handy haversack*. Zenna caught sight of the maneuver, however, and shook her head wryly.

The door led onto a small chamber with two other exits. The first was securely locked, and Mole’s efforts to work it open met with failure. Electing to leave it for the moment, rather than draw attention by attempting to force it, they turned to the other door. Beyond that portal lay a long hallway, extending to their left and right for as far as their light penetrated. A few more doors were visible in either direction.

Dannel bent to examine the floor briefly. “Some faint tracks this way,” he said, indicating the left passage. “Someone came through here wearing muddy boots.”

“All right then,” Arun said, leading them in that direction. The passage curved slightly to the right, then straightened and ran another forty feet or so before ending in a trio of closed doors.

They started in that direction, but hadn’t gotten very far when the door in the wall to their right at the end of the passage opened, and a small figure stepped into the corridor. He was a halfling, clad in a bright red cloak and with a serious expression fixed on his face. At first he didn’t notice the adventurers, apparently preoccupied by some other matter, but as he turned from the door he looked up and saw the quintet standing about twenty feet ahead of him. Instantly his expression changed, souring into a look of clear disapproval.

“What’s this?” he said. “How did you get in here?”

“We’ll be the one asking the questions, shorty,” Arun barked, even as Dannel chimed, “Lax guards.”

The halfling was clearly dissatisfied with both answers, but seemed disinclined to further parley. Moving quickly, he drew something out of a pouch at his waist, and started chanting a string of strange-sounding syllables.

“He’s spellcasting!” Zenna warned.

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Even as Zenna shouted her warning, Dannel was moving, lifting his bow and drawing back the arrow already fitted to the string. However, in his haste the arrow improbably slipped off the string, falling aside before the elf could react. Rather than going for the arrow, Dannel bit off an elvish curse and dug into his quiver for another shaft.

Arun likewise responded quickly, if not as swiftly as Dannel. However, his throw went wide, and the light hammer spun easily a full pace over the halfling's head, crashing into the door behind him.

Mole, who'd been lagging behind, hefted her crossbow and came forward even as Dannel fitted his second arrow to the string and drew. But the delay had given the halfling enough time, and he faded from view, shooting them one last hostile smirk as he vanished. Dannel's arrow sliced through the air where he'd been standing a moment later, but it hit nothing.

"Spread out, block the passage!" Zenna urged. "And watch those doors, don't let him get away!"

They moved forward, wary, in close ranks to keep the halfling from slipping past, weapons at the ready. But they were still a good fifteen feet from the doors when Mole paused, hearing a faint sound that seemed to come from up above.

"He's casting again!" Mole warned. She pointed her crossbow up in the direction of the sound, but held her fire, uncertain. How could he have gotten up there?

A loud voice filled the corridor, seeming to come from right where the five of them were standing. "INTRUDERS IN THE COMPLEX! TO ARMS!" The sound was so loud that it seemed as though a dozen men were shouting at the top of their lungs, and it continued uttering the same warning repeatedly, effectively covering any noise that the hidden wizard might make.

"We're in trouble!" Dannel shouted, trying to make himself heard over the din.

"Fall back!" Zenna warned.

But before they could retreat, the door in the far wall opened, revealing a rather irate-looking armored woman warrior, her sword ready in her hand. Light shone into the corridor from the room behind her, clearly outlining the forms of additional guards. Without hesitating, she hefted her sword and charged, shouting a battle cry that was lost in the continuing din from the halfling's spell.

Dannel drew and fired, and this time, didn't miss. His arrow caught the woman in an armored shoulder, penetrating the steel plate with a heavy crunch and jabbing into the muscled flesh beneath. She staggered but still came on, bringing up her shield in time to catch the bolt from Mole's crossbow. Behind her came a second warrior and a pair of rogues clad in the familiar style of the Alleybasher gang, drawing slender rapiers as they moved forward in tandem.

Arun held his ground to meet their charge, but even as he lifted his own shield to meet the overhead stroke from the injured woman, Zenna leaned over him and unleashed a *color spray* down the corridor.

In the close quarters, there was no chance that she could miss. The blazing colors swam over the woman warrior and the armored man a few paces behind her, and caught the two rogues as well. One, a young red-haired woman who'd shaved one side of her head bald, turned away in time to avoid the blast, but her companion caught the colors square in the face, and like the two warriors slumped unconscious to the ground. The woman rogue hesitated, clearly not liking the odds as they had just been recalculated.

"Nice work!" Mole yelled, as she reloaded her crossbow.

"Surrender or be slain!" Dannel shouted. Despite his slight frame, his words carried clearly even over the continued warning. Her response wasn't quite clear, but it was clear from her expression was the gist of her comment was. Dannel nodded and drew out another arrow, even as Arun hefted his hammer and stepped forward with a grim look on his face.

Zenna felt a sudden tingle of power, a stirring in the air that made strands of her hair rise up and stand on end. In horror she turned just as a jagged bolt of liquid energy exploded down the corridor. She threw herself back against the wall as the lightning bolt blasted through the middle of the corridor. Illewyn was hit square on by the bolt and screamed as she fell, her torso blackened where the bolt had seared through her. Arun, next in line, was also hit squarely, though the dwarf remained standing as the electrical discharge flowed through him. Dannel, on the far side of the passage, was narrowly missed by the bolt, which continued down the corridor in a blazing streak, sending tendrils of death into the fallen warriors as it went. It narrowly missed the still-standing rogue, who threw herself down to the floor, and finally blasted into the door at the far end of the passage, sundering it off its hinges.

Zenna turned to see the halfling, shorn of his invisibility, standing on the ceiling a good ten paces back down the corridor behind them. The halfling's figure was still shadowy and indistinct, as though some vestiges of his magical invisibility still clung to his form. Even as she fumbled for her crossbow, Mole—who had also dodged out of the path of the bolt—lifted her own bow and fired. The shot was true, but the halfling clearly had some sort of magical protection up, for the bolt jerked aside at the last instant.

Meanwhile, the door to the left of the passage had opened as well, discharging another trio of Alleybashers to the fray. Clearly these three had been resting, for their clothes and armor were clearly hastily donned, and sleep still lingered in their eyes. For all that they recovered quickly with the prospect of a battle taking place right in front of them, and they drew their rapiers, quickly joining their thus-far extremely lucky companion in rushing to attack.

Dannel drew and fired, grazing one of the rogues with a shot that drew a red gash along her side. He knew that the magic-user behind them was a significant threat, but he could also see that Arun, weakened by the lightning bolt, wouldn't stand long alone against four enemies. He grasped one last arrow and quickly fired, hitting the woman he'd just wounded with a more significant injury to the leg that definitely gave her cause for concern. Then he drew his sword and moved to support the dwarf.

Arun leapt over one of the fallen fighters—now charred from the passage of the lightning—and engaged the first pair of rogues. As in the Lucky Monkey, the Alleybashers moved

quickly and efficiently to coordinate their attacks, slipping around the dwarf to flank him. This time, however, the enemy was clearly not hindered by drink, and almost immediately one dug his rapier into a gap in Arun's armor, scoring a hit that was clearly serious. The dwarf, now in trouble, refused to budge, bringing his hammer around to strike back at his adversary. The hammer connected, but it was only a glancing hit that did little to hinder the canny rogue.

"We've got a problem here!" Mole yelled, as she reloaded her crossbow. The halfling wizard laughed, and with a wave of his hand conjured a series of magical bolts that darted unerringly to hit Mole and Zenna. The tiefling's body clenched as pain stabbed into her with the pair of impacts, but she forced her attention to the body of the woman lying in front of her. She knew that they had to deal with the wizard, but she'd seen the effects of the lightning bolt on Illewyn and knew that the cleric would die if she didn't intervene immediately.

Kneeling beside the fallen cleric, Zenna called upon the power of Azuth to stabilize her. The healing power flowed into the unconscious woman, who stirred as the positive energy drew her back from the brink of death.

Mole fired at the wizard again, this time getting through his defenses to score a minor gash as a bolt drew across his thigh. The halfling stamped one foot against the ceiling in fury, and began casting once more.

Arun fought on with an almost blind rage, laying about him with his heavy hammer, keeping his foes at bay through sheer effort. The one he'd hurt darted back to avoid another powerful stroke, and his friend on the other side just barely missed another opening that would have likely meant the end of the paladin. The rogue shifted to come in for another try, but was forced to dart back as Dannel leapt into the fray, slashing with a tight stroke that cut the Alleybasher in the cheek before he could get free. The man snarled, and faced off against the elf in the tight space of the corridor. To his side stood Arun, who continued to exchange blows with the other man, with neither able to deal a telling blow for the moment. Behind the two rogues the other two Alleybashers, unable for now to reach the melee in the crowded space, drew out their bows.

Having aided Illewyn, Zenna glanced up at the halfling, lost in his next no doubt deadly spell. Knowing that she didn't have time for her own casting, she swallowed her hesitation about drawing on her natural powers and called down a globe of darkness around the halfling's position. The cry of frustration that she heard told her that she'd interfered with whatever the enemy wizard had been about to unleash upon them. Streams of red fire emerged from the darkness, twin blasts that were aimed in the general direction of her and Mole, but without sight to guide them, both missed their targets. Zenna was quite glad of that, as one *scorching ray* seared the wall just a foot above where she crouched, close enough that she could feel the heat that quite possibly would have killed her, had it struck her dead-on.

The *ghost sound* summoned by him earlier called out one more warning and then ceased. As the deafening noise ended, the echo of the shout still ringing in Zenna's ears, she turned to see Arun and Dannel fighting for their lives against the Alleybasher rogues, while Illewyn had drawn herself up against the far wall of the corridor and was casting a spell to

channel further healing into her battered body. Mole held her loaded crossbow at the ready, in case the halfling presented himself again through the darkness.

Apparently, however, the enemy wizard had had enough of this impromptu confrontation. "Get Triel, you fools!" he shouted from somewhere still beyond Zenna's bubble of blackness.

The battle with the rogues was clearly turning, and they were quick to take their leader's advice to heart. As Arun's foe lunged once more at him, trying in vain to penetrate his defenses, the dwarf abruptly lurched forward, catching the Alleybasher off guard as Arun drove his hammer up into his jaw. The impact crushed the entire lower half of his face, and he crumpled backward. Behind him one of the women rogues shot him with her bow at point-blank range, but the arrow likewise skittered off of his armored form. Arun didn't hesitate, continuing his rush and slamming his hammer with bonecrushing force into the woman's midsection. Her face twisted in pain as she collapsed to the ground, trying in vain to suck in breath as her heart continued to pour blood into her savaged torso.

The last woman, the one who had avoided both the *color spray* and the *lightning bolt*, wasn't sticking around to press her luck. Like a flash she darted through the open door at the far end of the corridor, and was gone.

Arun turned to help Dannel, but the elf already had his situation well in hand. Before the dwarf could strike, the last Alleybasher slumped to the ground, clutching a deep puncture in his side.

Dannel offered the heavily wounded dwarf a healing potion, and this time the paladin did not refuse.

Zenna had likewise drawn out a healing draught, and as she drank it she felt the sting from the halfling's *magic missiles* ease and quickly fade away. She moved to help Illewyn up back to her feet; the cleric's divine magic had eased her hurts somewhat but she still looked a sight, with her white robes blackened and charred where the lightning bolt had struck her.

Mole's voice drew their attention back down the corridor, where the globe of blackness still hung over the upper two-thirds of the passageway, leaving a clear space a few feet high below. "Come on, he went this way!" she cried.

The others hurried in that direction. "What was that about not rushing headlong into danger?" Dannel offered to Zenna as an aside, as he slipped ahead of her, his bow again unlimbered with an arrow set to the string.

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"That little bugger's dangerous... we can't give him a chance to recover," Arun said, as he pounded down the hall, the top of his body vanishing as he passed through the globe of darkness.

They found Mole just around the bend in the corridor, leaning against the corridor wall with her crossbow loaded and ready. “He went into that second door on the left, there,” she said. “He didn’t see me, I don’t think. Did you see the way he was walking on the ceiling? That would be useful, I bet. I wonder if it’s a spell that does that, or if he has some sort of magical item that grants the power?”

“He’s very skilled—and dangerous,” Zenna said. “Those spells he fired off aren’t simple enchantments.”

“That’s not all,” Dannel pointed out. “One of those rogues got away, and it’s likely we’re going to be getting some more company right quick.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting we withdraw,” Arun said.

“Not at all, dwarf. But we’d best be expecting a bit more trouble... perhaps more than we can handle.”

“Maybe we should get moving, then?” Illewyn suggested.

Warily the companions headed down the corridor, past the door to the guardroom that they’d come through earlier. They reached the door that Mole had indicated, and after a quick look to ensure that all of them were ready, Arun drew it open.

They were immediately greeted by a rather unnerving sight; the room beyond the door was completely filled with spiderwebs. And these were not simple strands that one would expect to find in a long-neglected storeroom; the webs formed a blanket over the floor and ran up well along the walls, fashioned of strands that were closer to cables than thin strings. On the far side of the chamber they could see a natural-looking tunnel that extended further ahead, likewise choked with webs.

“You’re sure he went this way?” Zenna asked.

“Positive,” Mole returned.

“Well then, friends,” Dannel said. “Do we go in after him?” He probed the floor ahead tentatively with his boot. “It’s not sticky, a bit awkward, but I bet we could manage it.”

“Are you crazy?” Illewyn asked. “Do you *know* what lives in spiderwebs like these?”

“Of course,” Dannel replied. “I’m not saying it’s not a trap. But if that little halfling went in here, then there must be more to it than just a nest of giant spiders. Remember, we’re looking for some stolen items in here, in addition to this cult.”

“Maybe we can just burn ‘em out?” Mole suggested.

“I’m not sure if these webs will burn,” Dannel replied. “And if they do, we’re likely to destroy anything of value beyond... including, perhaps, those wands that we need to find.”

“Bah, all of this talking is a waste of time,” Arun said. He strode boldly into the room, the webs quivering madly as he progressed. He came to a halt about five paces in, shaking his foot with a look of disgust on his face.

“There’s a few sticky spots in here,” he cautioned.

“Best let me go ahead, and probe for a workable path,” Dannel suggested.

And with that, the companions moved ahead into yet another unknown danger.

Illewyn’s divinely-conjured light began to fade, so she paused to refresh the spell. As she was once again in the rear of the small company, long shadows darted ahead of the rest of the companions as they moved deeper into the webbed cavern. Dannel, probing ahead carefully with the heel of his bow, identified several other places where the webs were still possessed of their adhesive property, allowing them to avoid getting entangled further.

They passed a side corridor that broke off to the left, running back in the direction they had come. That passage was likewise choked with webbing, falling in strands that formed curtains of sorts across their field of vision. But they could see that a larger chamber opened up just ahead, so they pressed on in that direction.

The chamber was clearly of considerable size, although the presence of the interminable webbing made it seem smaller than it was. Illewyn’s light revealed another exit on the far side of the room to their left, but before they could explore further, skittering noises from within the dense networks of webs indicated that they were not alone.

Dannel spun, drew, and fired in a single fluid motion. His arrow struck a bulbous, huge spider hovering over the entrance of the room, its segmented body easily five feet across. It let out a mad scree as the arrow sank into its body, and it leapt from its perch to land in the webs adjacent to Arun. That proved to be an ill choice of destination, as the dwarf’s hammer landed solidly in the center of the spider’s head a moment later, crushing it instantly.

But their victory was short-lived, as Illewyn held up the light, revealing nearly a half-dozen other shapes moving closer through the webs.

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Numerous additional spiders scuttled forward to the attack, including a pair of hulking monsters that were each easily the size of a good-sized horse. The companions prepared to meet the assault, but before the two forces could join in battle, Illewyn stepped forward boldly, holding up her holy symbol with its shining glow of magical light driving back the shadows. It also more fully revealed their charging foes, three more of the medium-sized spiders in addition to the two larger specimens that skittled forth without hindrance through their maze of webs.

“Illewyn, what are you doing!” Zenna shouted in warning, but the cleric, caught up in the divine song of her god, paid no heed. A soft sound came from the young woman, words of

power that flowed through the room. The light flared and spread outward in a burst of soft blue that was gone so quickly that none of the other companions were quite sure it had existed at all. They could feel, however, the pulse of emotion that accompanied the cleric's spell, as their fears eased and their anxiety softened, replaced by a feeling of contentment and security.

The feeling clearly affected the hostile spiders as well, as they abruptly stopped, shaking slightly as they stood in place, their eight legs trembling on the strands of webbing, the light reflecting in their bulbous eyes as their sharp fangs snapped at the air. It was as if Illewyn had frozen them in place, death held at bay through the channeled power of her patron.

"Um, so they're not going to kill us?" Mole asked, looking out from behind the comfortable bulk of Arun, her crossbow loaded and ready in her hands.

"It would appear not," Dannel said, his own bow ready with a long shaft held against the string. "How long will the effect last?" he queried.

For a moment Illewyn just stood there, her back to them, the concentration evident just in the way she held herself rigid. "A few moments, no more," she said. "As long as I can maintain my concentration..."

"Bah, let 'em come then," Arun said, slapping the head of his hammer against the edge of his shield, letting out a ringing note of challenge. The spiders reared and hissed as the sound reverberated, but they remained rooted to their positions.

"Perhaps we can be a bit more... strategic," Zenna suggested.

Dannel glanced at her and nodded. "If we retreat to the corridor, we can keep them all from coming at us at once."

"Exactly my thought."

"I have the alchemist's fire," Mole reminded them.

"No!" Zenna replied, a bit too loudly, perhaps. "No," she repeated, "We don't want to get caught in our own conflagration..."

"Whatever you're doing, do it quickly," Illewyn said, the strain showing in her voice.

"All right," Dannel said. "Let's back it up then, slowly..."

They gave way, Arun holding his position until Illewyn had passed him, and then taking up a blocking position as they retreated back to the corridor. As they gave way Dannel started to hum a soft tune, a lilting melody that seemed oddly out of place in these circumstances, but which picked up until he added voice to the song. The words were in elvish, which none of them understood, but somehow the meaning of the song, offering reassurance in the face of mortal danger, made it through, easing them as the afterimage of Illewyn's spell had done earlier.

“Bah, a good dwarven war-song is what we need here,” Arun growled. But he didn’t ask the elf to stop as he took up position at the mouth of the corridor.

“The big one on the right,” Zenna said, lifting her own crossbow. The others nodded, preparing their own weapons.

Illewyn sagged slightly, lowering the holy symbol as its light flickered slightly for a moment.

The spiders surged forward, at the same instant that the companions unleashed their fire.

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Zenna cursed as her shot went wide, the bolt striking a dangling strand of webbing that dislodged it enough to narrowly miss her target. The others, however, were more accurate, with Mole’s shot catching the spider in its fat body just to the right of its maw, while Dannel’s arrow sank deeply into a black eye. Arun hurled a light hammer, which smacked it in the body just above the row of remaining eyes. Still it came on, its jaws glistening with venom as it sought out the flesh of those who had harmed it. Behind it the other spiders charged on in its wake, just as eager.

Arun growled out a challenge as he hefted his warhammer and set his shield to meet their rush.

The spider charged into him with enough force to drive even the sturdy dwarf back a step, and there was a moment of doubt as the dwarf’s footing nearly gave out on the tangled map of webbing. But the paladin kept his stance, and the spider’s fangs snapped in vain against the hard front of his shield. With a roar Arun countered with a powerful underhanded sweep of his hammer that came up into the creature’s head from below. Stunned by the force of the impact, the spider wavered... but somehow, despite the grievous wounds it had suffered, yet stood.

“Blast you, die already, you blasted vermin!” the dwarf shouted, bringing the hammer up to try and finish it before the spider could recover to attack again.

The second large spider couldn’t fit into the tight confines of the corridor, with its brother engaged with Arun in the narrow space. The smaller spiders—small being a relative term, since each was the size of a wolf—spread out and crawled up the walls to slip in around their larger cousin. One even skittered up a dangling length of web to the ceiling, clinging to the threads like a tightrope walker immune to the tug of gravity as it slipped into the corridor from above.

Dannel met the first medium spider to dart into the corridor with an arrow that sank almost to the fletching in its hairy body. The spider twitched spasmodically but then sprang forward, narrowly missing the elf to land in the midst of the companions. Mole let out a reflexive shriek and dodged back, falling into a cluster of webs that thankfully weren’t sticky enough to hold her. Zenna, standing right before the spider, held her ground as the wounded creature turned to face her, and calmly fired her crossbow directly into its head. The spider shuddered, and collapsed.

Illewyn, who'd also been caught off guard, could only hold her mace limply, looking at Zenna with an amazed look on her face while the tiefling reached for another bolt and reloaded.

The large spider recovered just as Arun smashed into it with another blow that knocked it backward, flying end-over-end to land in a tumbled heap of legs and mashed innards. Before he could even reset, however, the second large spider darted in with uncanny speed, stabbing its fangs into the dwarf's armored shoulder. Arun cried out as the spider's powerful bite crunched through plate, digging into the flesh beneath and pumping liquid death into his veins.

But the dwarf was made of stern stuff, and he quickly shook free and bashed the spider in the head with his hammer, driving it back enough to give him room to work.

Dannel fired as quickly as he could fit arrows to his bowstring, unleashing shots that bit spider flesh more often than not despite his haste. He hit the spider crawling in across the ceiling with a shot that staggered it, and before it could recover followed with a second that hit with enough impact to send it flying, narrowly missing Arun even as he struggled against the remaining large specimen. Two more medium spiders came scrambling around the edges of the corridor, along the walls. Dannel drew and fired a shot that slammed into the first spider's maw, *through* its body, and jutted out through its hindquarters, its momentum finally spent. The spider stiffened and dropped. The second twitched and leapt, forcing the elf to duck to narrowly avoid its leap. The spider landed right in front of Mole, who had pulled herself from the webs but thus far had been unable to get a clear shot at anything in the tight confines of the battle. She lifted her crossbow, but the spider lunged and bit at her before she could shoot, dragging a pair of gashes in her forearm with its fangs.

"Ow!" Mole yelled, darting back from the creature's reach before it could snare her again.

Zenna fired at the spider, but her shot merely glanced off of its leathery body. It turned to face her, but Illewyn leapt into the gap to challenge it, catching it with a glancing blow from her mace. The spider, clearly not impressed by the strike, lunged at the priestess's leg, but its fangs only caught the hem of her robe as she pulled abruptly back.

Mole, now brandishing her sword, leapt forward, her magical boots allowing her to spring up around the spider to flank it. The spider, still fixated on Illewyn, failed to react in time to save it as the gnome took advantage to slip her blade into a joint in the creature's body, slaying it.

Arun, meanwhile, had just finished a titanic struggle with the second of the larger spiders, crushing it with a final blow of his hammer. He was clearly weakened, though, with a second wound in his weapon arm where the spider's fangs had again penetrated through his protections. Even as the spider died, and the room grew quiet again, the dwarf sagged against the bewebbed wall, his hammer and shield leaden in his hands.

"Is everyone all right?" Zenna asked.

“Look out!” Dannel cried, reaching for another arrow. Before any of them could react, however, an object hurtled out of the darkness from the far exit. It was a net, fashioned of spiderwebs, that settled around the tired dwarf, pinning his arms and securing him against the wall. Arun struggled, but in his currently weakened condition could not break free.

The web-hurler was revealed a moment later as it moved forward into the room, shuffling into the edge of their light. It was a terrible thing, looking like nothing other than a cross between a spider and a man, walking upright while its bestial jaws clacked eagerly, shining with the telltale glister that marked poison. Behind it, a second creature was visible.

“We’re not done here yet!” Dannel cried, drawing his bow and sighting down the length of the shaft.

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Dannel’s shot hit the spider-man, although the missile caught the creature in the fleshy part of its shoulder, rather than square in its heart as the elf had intended. The beast, along with its companion still within the darkness of the far corridor, elected however to withdraw rather than advance into the room to attack. Mole fired her crossbow after them, but it was doubtful that she hit anything through the screening webs and darkness.

Keeping an eye on the exit where the two creatures had vanished, the companions turned to help Arun free himself from the enfolding webbing. The dwarf sputtered and protested as they cut him free, cursing as he tugged persistent strands from his face and the cracks and crevices of his armor. This was one case where not having a beard was proving an advantage, Zenna thought.

Illewyn moved forward and laid hands upon the dwarf, calling upon the power of Helm to purge some of the lingering effects of the spider venom from the dwarf’s body. Zenna suspected that the paladin was still weakened somewhat, but she knew that Arun would never admit to such. Still, the dwarf was at least somewhat gracious, nodding to the cleric in gratitude as he took up his hammer.

“Bah, I’m starting to think this is all just a big trap,” he growled, trying in vain to shake off some of the lingering threads that hung from his shield. “That blasted wizard might have doubled back on us... why would he come into this nest of vermin?”

Zenna nodded—it was a sound point—but Dannel, still focused on the far exit, another arrow fitted to his bow, shook his head. “Those creatures... ettercaps, they are called. They’re intelligent, not mindless hunters like the spiders. I suspect that the mage might have had an arrangement with them; it’s pushing the bounds of credibility to expect that this cult would lair in such close proximity to such creatures otherwise.”

“I can do no more against the bites of the spiders this day,” Illewyn reported. “We should be cautious.”

Zenna moved deeper into the room, away from the dark exit to their left, careful lest she step into one of the stickier areas of webbing. After waiting a moment to verify that no

more spiders were hiding in the tangle of webs in the rear of the room, she opened her mind to the power of the Weave, reciting the simple trigger phrases of a minor cantrip.

“What are you doing?” Mole asked her.

Zenna didn't respond at first, concentrating to focus the power of her spell as she scanned the room. The others turned to watch her as she finished her sweep. “I am checking for magical auras,” she said. “To see if our invisible friend was lurking nearby.”

“Ah, that's a good idea,” the gnome said. “Although I'm actually sort of glad he's not,” she said, rubbing her chest where the lingering memory of the halfling's *magic missiles* remained.

Zenna nodded, but her attention was drawn to a faint resonance that she detected with her spell. She started in that direction, pausing as she stepped into a patch of webs that tugged at her boot annoyingly.

“Careful, Zenna,” Dannel said, from where he was covering Arun. The dwarf had moved to the mouth of the corridor where the ettercaps had retreated, scanning for any ambushes. “There might be more little spiders in the webs.”

“Did you find something?” Mole said, hopping lightly across the strands of webbing to where Zenna had paused before an unsightly clump of tangled webs that formed a ball of sorts about a foot across.

“There's a magical aura coming from within there,” Zenna reported.

Mole needed no further encouragement; drawing her dagger she went to work on the bulb of webs. Her little cry of glee reported her success, and soon she was stuffing handfuls of coins into her magical haversack, pausing every now and again to bend and grab one that skittered away onto the carpet of webs.

“We can worry about the loot later,” Dannel persisted. “We can't give our enemy time to prepare.”

“I'll just be a second,” Mole insisted. She found something else in the cache and handed it absently to Zenna. It was a slender wand of polished wood; the tiefling examined it with fascination, sensing the magic pulsing within it even without the aid of her spell. Closing her eyes, she focused her perceptions upon it, trying to draw out the secret of its power.

“It's not like they don't already know we're here, and that we're coming,” the gnome went on. Having secured the treasure, she slipped her pack back on and took her crossbow again, traveling lightly in small hops across the sea of webs to where the others waited. Zenna followed behind, having tucked the wand into a pocket of her cloak.

Grimly, they pressed on.

The rough corridor continued for a few dozen paces before opening up into yet another natural cavern similarly choked with webbing. A wider entrance, perhaps opening onto

another chamber beyond, was visible on the far side of the place. While the entire room was covered in webs, they formed a more or less flat expanse in the center, like a intricate and plush carpet laid over the hard stone of the floor. Seeing no immediate foes, Arun started forward, before Dannel grasped him on the shoulder.

“If I were a canny defender, I would lay a trap in the center of this room, the easiest route of approach,” he warned.

The dwarf nodded, and the two split up, moving around the edges of the room, prodding ahead for any surprises. Zenna and Mole covered them with their crossbows, while Illewyn, who had not brought a missile weapon, held her mace tightly and muttered the words of a prayer.

The faintest stirring amidst the webs that curtained the far exit was their only warning.

“Incoming!” Mole cried in warning, at the same time that Dannel, who had seen it too, stepped back and drew his longbow. With his low-light vision he could clearly mark the ettercap half-hidden among the webs, but as he released his boot slid on a slick strand of webbing, and his shot went awry. A pair of web-nets shot out from the creatures’ vantage, targeting the elf and dwarf. Dannel, recovering quickly from his misstep, smoothly dodged back and avoided the cast.

Arun, predictably, was completely snared.

But the others were not idle during those moments, and both Mole and Zenna hit with shots that sank with a meaty thud into the body of one of the ettercaps, mere inches apart. The creature, already wounded by Dannel’s arrow earlier, released a ear-rattling screech and staggered backward, into the chamber beyond. The second creature, apparently eager to avoid a similar fate, joined it before the two women could reload. Dannel sent an arrow after it as it withdrew, but there was no indication that he scored a hit.

Illewyn had already moved to assist Arun, whose curses formed an unbroken string of syllables in Dwarven as he struggled to extricate himself for the second time from a prison of sticky webs. The paladin now looked quite a sight, with white strands covering his armor and shield, and pasted over his helm and dangling from his hair. He looked about ready to charge full on into the chamber where the ettercaps had disappeared, but once more Dannel forestalled him.

“Let me be,” Arun said. “I’ve got me a score to settle with them blasted bugs.”

“Let us not abandon caution,” Dannel said softly. “I sense that a dire confrontation looms ahead.”

He did not know just how right he was.

Wary of another ambush, the companions moved slowly to the exit. Arun in the lead, clanking slightly with every movement, Dannel with a ready arrow just behind, Zenna and Mole side by side with crossbows pointing in every direction at once, and Illewyn bringing up the rear.

The third and final chamber in the complex of webbed caverns was somewhat larger than the first two, with a ceiling that rose as high as twenty feet above the floor. Every nook and cranny was filled with webbing, tendrils of which dangled down from the uneven ceiling, stirring in the faintest hint of a breeze that likely drifted in through the web-choked cracks and crevices in the walls.

“You were fools to follow me here,” came a voice from somewhere across the room, its source impossible to discern with precision.

“Hand over the wands, and maybe we can talk,” Zenna offered.

“No, I don’t think so,” came the voice. “In fact, I think you’re quite about to die.”

Forms moved in the webs along the edges of the rooms, resolving into the outlines of the ettercaps they faced earlier. But then their attention was drawn to something... *big* that shifted high along the far wall, near the ceiling. As Illewyn came into the room, the light from her holy symbol drove back the shadows, revealing more details of the form.

Zenna drew in a startled breath, and she wasn’t the only one.

“By the gods,” Illewyn whispered, her face suddenly white.

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The thing was a bloated, sick monstrosity, a spider covered with no-doubt sharp spines that jutted from its body, huge jaws that slavered with poison-dripping fangs, and eyes that shone with the terrible gleam of intelligence.

But while the terrible spider held their attention for several heartbeats, the skittering of the ettercaps reminded them that they were not alone. Arun snarled and stepped forward onto the spongy mass of webs that covered the floor, drawing their attention to himself.

“Enough of stickin’ me with your blasted webs!” he shouted, and lifted a vial to his lips.

Almost immediately the dwarf began to surge and grow, *enlarging* until he had reached a height of nearly eight feet. Zenna swallowed, impressed with the effects of the draught they’d taken from Tongueater, and glad that Mole had pressed it upon the dwarf.

The dwarf’s dramatic action shook them from their reverie, and the companions launched into action. At ettercap, the one already bleeding from the hits they’d inflicted upon it, huddled now among the webs to their left, gathering a web to cast at them. Dannel saw it and fired, his arrow catching it square in the face, putting it down for good.

Illewyn called upon the power of Helm, shrouding them all with a *blessing*. Zenna scanned the shadows, the darkness of the chamber no match for her darkvision, but she could not see where the halfling wizard was hiding. Biting her lip in frustration, she took aim on the giant spider.

But she was surprised as Mole stepped ahead of her, clutching a fat object in one small hand. “Desperate situations call for desperate measures!” she cried, and hurled the flask of alchemist’s fire at the spider.

The missile arced through the air, but instead of hitting the spider square in the face as she’d intended, it glanced off one of the long spines that jutted from the top of its body, sticking in the webbing that surrounded it without breaking.

“Damn!” the gnome cursed.

The spider responded so quickly that they were all caught off guard. The spider’s jaws opened wide, and sharp projections shot out of its body across the room on long tentacles, like harpoons fired from the bow of a whaling vessel. Mole yelled and narrowly dodged one of the deadly fangs, which snapped at her and almost instantly began retracting back into the spider’s body.

The second harpoon-fang hit Illewyn squarely in the chest, driving her back roughly a pace as the sharp edges tore through the links of her chain shirt into her flesh. She cried out and staggered as the tentacle quickly drew taut, yanking her off her feet and pulling her roughly across the room.

“Illewyn!” Zenna cried. Without any spells that might be effective against the spider in her mental inventory, she could only aim her bow and fire. The missile sank into its fat body, but did not hinder the spider from drawing in its victim. Illewyn screamed as the spider pulled her closer, lifting her off of the ground and up into the air toward its perch. Gleaming fangs like sharp daggers had unfolded from within its widely-stretched jaws, snapping in eagerness to claim their prey.

Arun had started toward the terrible spider, his reach now easily enough to assail it from the ground, but two more ettercaps emerged from the webbing to assault him from both sides. The normally cautious creatures, drawn to a frenzy by the presence of their “god,” attacked heedless of concern for their personal safety. Arun made that cost them as the first lunged within his extended reach, bringing his hammer with its considerably-enhanced punch down on the ettercap’s shoulder. The blow staggered the creature, but Arun couldn’t adjust in time to stop the second monster as it leapt at him, snapping its sharp fangs at his hip. Fortunately for the dwarf, his armor held, and the ettercap was left to snarl in frustration as its envenomed fangs slipped off of the steel plate.

Even as he lifted his hammer to finish off the first creature, a shadow seemed to fall over the embattled dwarf. Looking up, his eyes widened in surprise as a dark form approached, slowly taking substance. It was a vague, indistinct form, but it embodied all of the fears and terrors that lurked in the dark corners of a man’s mind.

But such fears held no terror for the paladin, shielded by the iron dedication of his faith. Skaven’s *phantasmal killer* began to dissolve even before it touched the dwarf, finally shattering into a wisps of shadow and dream, harmless.

Hidden within his nook high along the wall, the halfling bit back a curse, belatedly realizing the true nature of his foe.

Zenna had only barely sensed the wizard's spell as a tickle upon the edges of her consciousness, but she realized that the wizard was still a deadly threat, as deadly as the spider that had assaulted Illewyn. She moved forward into the room, coming dangerously close to where Arun was still battling the ettercaps, scanning everywhere... there, a shadow barely distinct from the webs of shadow that filled the room, something not quite... right.

Zenna called upon the power of Azuth, challenging her power into that spot. "Approach," she said, the word reverberating with power.

Dannel, meanwhile, had also moved forward, drawing another shaft as he drew bead on the terrible harpoon spider. His first shot missed, sliding past it to stick in the morass of webs behind it, while the second hit a protruding spear of rock and glanced wide. Mole ran past him, heedless of her own safety, loading her crossbow as she came, trying to get under the creature.

Despite the cleric's struggles, the spider pulled Illewyn up to it, snapping at her with its terrible fangs. Illewyn cried out as the sharp points jabbed into her torso, injecting their venom into her body. She tried to tear free, but the spider held her tightly, wrapping its foremost limbs around her struggling form.

She managed to lift her mace, but as she stared into the unholy visage of the creature, she knew that she had little chance of doing enough damage to save herself.

Then her eyes drifted to the fat object hanging in the webs just over its body.

Skaven actually took a step before his disciplined mind cut through the force of Zenna's *command*, restoring order within his body. The halfling shifted his attention from the enlarged paladin beating up on the ettercaps to the woman who'd assaulted him with magic. He'd initially pegged her as a wizard, perhaps a sorceress, but the spell she'd hurled at him had been divine in origin. Normally he would have scoffed at the idea of an enemy spellcaster injuring him with magics of the mind, but this was twice now that she'd discomfited him, first with the *darkness* in the corridor, and now with this simple spell that had quite nearly had him...

The halfling wizard, still fairly secure in the shroud provided by his earlier consumed potion of hiding, cast a quick spell that sharpened his senses and focused his aim, and then he launched into one of the most powerful magics left in his repertoire. Whatever she was, the woman would pay the price for her attacks upon him.

Illewyn could feel her muscles stiffening and twitching, her limbs becoming leaden as they began to disregard the commands sent to them from her brain. She imagined that she could feel the spider's venom burning through her system like a wildfire, destroying the pitiful resistance put up by her body. When the spider thrust its fangs into her again, she could barely feel it.

One thing gave her focus as her body drifted out of her control; the white hot fire that was the presence of Helm's light within her. With a cry that was half desperation, half determination, she lunged forward awkwardly with her mace, striking not at the spider, but at the clay flask of alchemist's fire suspended in the webbing just above it. She could not even feel the force of impact as the iron head of her weapon smacked into the webs, slipping from her hand...

But she could see the white-hot flare that erupted before her, blossoming into an eager red flower that spread to engulf the entire upper body of the harpoon spider. The spider reared back and issued a terrible screech that echoed through the room. Illewyn, in a last desperate effort, the heat of fire burning through her poison-induced haze as liquid drops of flame settled on her robe, lifted her legs and kicked against the spider's face. She felt something give, and was falling. The ground wasn't that far below her, and padded with webs, but the cleric had taken enough of a beating already. As she hit, her head grazed something solid, and she lost consciousness.

Even as the flames spread, and Illewyn freed herself, the other companions continued their assault upon the spider and his allies. Arun slew the ettercap he'd already wounded with a powerful stroke that relocated its head about in the center of where its shoulders met. The second creature lunged at him again from behind, and this time secured a hold where it could stab its fangs into the joint where his armor folded at the knee. Arun roared in pain and anger, and shifted to face the second creature. The ettercap lifted its bloody jaws and snarled at the dwarf, who drove the *enlarged* haft of his hammer like a spear into the gaping hole of its face. The ettercap, choking on the shattered remnants of its fangs and its own blood, staggered back and slumped to the ground, dying.

Mole leapt into position under the spider as it assailed Illewyn, cursing as her boots took hold in a sticky patch of webbing. She didn't let it hinder her attack, however, shooting her crossbow up into the belly of the creature. The shot barely seemed to hinder it, however; not like the reaction it showed when Illewyn burst the flask of alchemist's fire upon it. Mole looked up at the blaze of flame in amazement, then belatedly realized that her current location placed her in a rather precarious position. Sliding her bow across her back, she went to work trying to free herself from the webs.

Dannel's unlucky streak finally came to an end. Even as Illewyn fell free, and the flaming spider withdrew, he fired a shot that smacked solidly into its body. The spider hissed at the elf, and showed that it still had a lot of fight left in it as it shot one of its harpoons at him. Dannel staggered as the sticky head of the tendril tore into his shoulder and stuck, threatening to draw him into the same fate that had befallen Illewyn. But instead of falling, the elf ran forward, keeping his footing as the spider reeled him in. He dropped his bow and drew his sword, and as he was drawn up into ring of fire that was spreading on and around the spider, he lifted the weapon and prepared to strike.

A beam of twisting black energy streamed from the darkness high along the cavern wall, extending greedily from its summoner to strike Zenna squarely in the chest and spill out around her in an enfolding embrace. The *enervation* only lasted for a few moments, but even as the shadow-lance faded, Zenna staggered from the impact of the negative power of the halfling wizard's spell. She realized with horror that she was... *diminished*, the clerical spells she had memorized wiped from her memory, along with some of the wizardly

potential that she had fought so hard to accumulate. She felt small, weak. She trembled as she realized how close she had come to having her very life force snuffed out by that dark ray, and for a long moment just stood there while battle raged around her, unable to stop herself from shaking.

Skaven chuckled to himself as he observed the effect of his spell—there wouldn't be any more trouble from *that* one—but he quickly sobered as he realized that the rest of the battle was turning against him and his allies. He had a few more offensive spells left, but he was all too aware of the spreading flames, and it really wasn't in his nature to fight to the last in a dangerous situation. Fighting back the urge to gloat a bit before withdrawing, he drew out a vial, consumed it, and dissolved into a small plume of mist that blended in with the thickening smoke as he slipped quietly from the chamber.

Mole slashed at the webs holding her with increasing concern. The alchemist's fire had set a considerable portion of the webbing along the wall and ceiling ablaze, and flaming strands were falling onto the floor around her, lighting smaller fires that were getting progressively hotter. Smoke was starting to fill the room as well, and she resisted the urge to cough—she had to free herself! She realized that she could just step out of her new magical boots, but she wasn't quite ready to go to that extreme... not just yet.

Dannel found himself drawn into the maelstrom of fire, but his full attention was on those snapping fangs and the black eyes above them. Finally, as the spider drew him up with one more solid jerk, he thrust, his sword sinking with a sick plop into the spider's gaping maw. The spider screamed and twisted to the side, losing its grip on the wall as its legs failed to find purchase on the fire-scorched rock. Dannel found himself falling with it, resigning himself to an uncomfortable landing.

At that moment Mole looked up, and her heart froze in her chest as she saw the spider, with flames still licking across its back and Dannel attached to its front, slip off the wall and start falling.

Straight toward where she was standing, still struggling to get free.

Chapter 79

Mole closed her eyes, resigning herself to her fate. Her last thought was, "What a way to go... crushed by an oversized bug!"

But that inglorious outcome never came. She felt rather than saw the hulking presence moving toward her, and heard the heavy sound of something heavy and solid slamming against metal, then crashing a heartbeat later into the ground a pace where she'd been standing. She opened her eyes to see first the dead spider, with Dannel grinning—grinning!—as he extricated himself from its still smoldering corpse, then up to see the still quite sizeable Arun standing over her, his now-massive shield raised protectively above them.

"We've got to get out of here," the dwarf rumbled.

Mole nodded, slashing the last strands of webbing free from her boots. It was easier, now, without the distraction of a spider the size of a warhorse about to fall on you...

Though she was loath to reject the dwarf's helpful protection from the spreading flames, she knew that others needed help as well. "Help Illewyn!" she urged, catching sight of the cleric lying in a nest of webs a few paces away.

The dwarf had seen her as well, and was already moving. Slinging his hammer across his back, his bent and gingerly picked up the priestess's limp form in a massive hand. Shafts of golden light shone from his hand as he poured healing power into the stricken priestess, easing her injuries and drawing her back from the brink of death. She remained unconscious, however, so the dwarf carried her carefully in the crook of his arm and turned back to Mole and Dannel.

The gnome had freed herself already, and she and Dannel were already making their way back to the exit. Zenna still stood there, a stricken look on her face, but she seemed otherwise unhurt as the five of them withdrew, coughing, from the smoke-filled chamber.

They made their way all the way back to the first large cavern. Smoke continued to hang in the air, but most of it seemed to be escaping through vents in the cavern complex. Dannel looked back down the corridor, wary of the flames pursuing them.

"She needs more healing," Arun said, laying the cleric down gently on the floor.

"I... I cannot," Zenna said. Mole looked at her in surprise—it looked like her friend, normally collected, was close to tears.

"Here, I've got a few extra potions, the good ones," Mole said. She took one and carefully poured one into the cleric's mouth, helping her as she coughed and recovered consciousness. Within moments, she was strong enough to rise, although her movements remained uncoordinated and awkward.

"The spider poison," Illewyn told them. "It will take time... aaah." She shifted, leaning into Mole as her legs threatened to give out under her.

"Did anyone see what happened to the wizard?" Dannel asked, returning to the center of the room.

"He got away," Zenna said, her voice flat.

"We're seriously weakened," the elf went on. "We have to consider retreat." The companions shared a look, and even Arun, himself still suffering from the effects of several poisonous bites, did not complain.

"Come on," the dwarf said. He turned to Illewyn, and again lifted the cleric, holding her against him in his still-massive arms.

“That draught... cough... will not last much longer,” Zenna said. And in fact, even as she finished speaking, Arun began to shrink back to his normal size. He put Illewyn down, and the cleric stood, leaning against his shoulder.

“It’s all right... I can walk.”

“Come,” Dannel said, leading them toward the exit. He’d recovered his bow, at least, and drew out another arrow as he directed them back the way they had come. He’d also found the cleric’s mace, and handed it back to her as they continued out of the smoke-filled cavern.

“Are you all right, Zenna?” Mole asked, worried at the listless look about her friend.

“I will be... at least, I hope so,” the tiefling replied. “Come, let’s get out of this place.”

They navigated the passage without difficulty, bruised and battered from their struggle against the harpoon spider and its allies. As they neared the door to the main corridor, however, Dannel held up his hand, bringing them to a halt.

“What is it, elf?” Arun asked.

“That door... didn’t we close it behind us?” Indeed, the heavy stone slab was now open.

“Maybe the halfling came back this way, left it open,” Mole suggested.

But that theory was dispelled a moment later, when they heard a mocking, feminine laughter come from just outside the door. A tall female figure stepped into the opening, her hair a blazing red like the flames in the spider’s lair. She was clad head to toe in spiked steel platemail, and she carried a heavy flail that likewise culminated in wicked spikes. A black hand was emblazoned prominently across her breastplate; the symbol of the dread god Bane.

“Well,” she said. “It would seem that you meddlers have gotten yourself into quite an unfortunate position. Now, it is time to grant you the reward that you have earned for interfering in my plans at the Lucky Monkey.”

Dannel lifted his bow, but the woman—the fell cleric Triel Eldurast, obviously—stepped smoothly to the side, out of their line of sight. They could all hear the sounds of metal on metal that betrayed the presence of others waiting in the hall outside, flanking the door.

“Uh oh,” Mole said.

Chapter 80

The companions choked as the smoke continued to thicken in the web-choked confines of the narrow corridor, a reminder that they were rapidly running out of choices.

“What do we do now?” Illewyn asked, her eyes wide with the hints of a growing panic.

“Bah, we can handle this wench and her lackeys,” Arun said, hefting his hammer.

Mole, meanwhile, crept forward, moving like a shadow until she neared the doorway. The corridor beyond was well-lit, and she gave the threshold a wide berth as she crouched low, and listened.

“There’s that other side passage,” Zenna suggested.

“I suspect that just connects to the other door we passed in the main corridor,” Dannel replied. “I don’t imagine that Triel would have been so audacious to appear to us, if she didn’t know that we were well and truly trapped.”

“Let’s get this over with, then,” Arun said, adjusting his helmet. “We remain here, with all this smoke, and those bandits won’t have to bother with killing us.”

“I agree,” Zenna said, a hint of her former fire returning as they confronted the hard reality of their situation. “But we need a plan.”

Mole had crept back to join them. “There’s a bunch of them on either side of the door,” she reported. “Most of them sound like they’re armored.”

“Waiting for us to come out,” Illewyn said grimly, her hands trembling from the tension, or from the lingering effects of the spider venom.

“Well then, let us give them what they want,” Dannel said.

* * * * *

On the far side of the doorway, flanked by her warriors, Triel Eldurast felt a conflict of emotions. On the one hand, fury at the damage already wrought to her plans caused her jaw to tighten almost painfully, her eyes burning like pits of coals lying in braziers. Her soldiers, mercenaries though they were, knew her moods and tried not to draw her attention, focusing on the dark opening where smoke continued to issue out in a soft haze. Triel had ordered the doors between here and the main cavern wedged open, and the resulting breeze kept the smoke from gathering too heavily, interfering with their effectiveness.

Her anger was complemented, however, with a fierce anticipation, an eagerness for the fray that would commence shortly. The smoke would drive the enemy out, and this corridor would turn into a storm of noise and pain and blood. She bit her lip, savoring the taste of her own blood in her mouth. Her lean, muscular body felt alive under the steel shell of her armor, and the haft of her flail felt as light as a wooden switch in her gauntleted hand.

Bane was with her; she could feel the dark power of her bond floating within her mind, awaiting only her call. Her soldiers were competent enough, if lazy and indulgent fools for the most part. She’d ordered contingents to guard both the entrance to the treasure vault and the main cavern, in case this intrusion was part of a larger assault. But thus far the reports were all negative. Skaven hadn’t reported; no doubt the intruders had chased him

into the lair of his beloved spiders, and perhaps they'd finished him there. Triel wasted little concern on the diminutive mage, either way. He'd been useful enough, but of course she hadn't been foolish enough to invest him with her full trust. No one had been worthy of that gift for years... perhaps, given what she had become, never would anyone again.

A noise drew her attention to the dark tunnel, and her soldiers tensed, hefting sword or drawing bow. They would have to depart, now that the secret of this lair was compromised, and her forces already dealt heavy losses by the intruders. The fury returned, and this time Triel let it surge through her like a tidal wave, exulting in the rush of battle.

The clank of metal announced the arrival of the dwarf a moment before he burst into the passage.

Chaos ensued.

Chapter 81

Arun burst into the corridor, his shield raised high before him. Arrows shot out from the corridor to either side, propelled from the bows of the Alleybashers who stood behind the shields of Triel's armored warriors. There was a pair of fighters to each side, with another pair of rogues behind; eight mercenaries in all. Triel stood to the right, flanked by her two toughs, clad in her spiked platemail with her silver flail held aloft in both hands, dark syllables issuing from her mouth as she called upon the power of her terrible patron.

Arun, of course, headed immediately in that direction. Arrows glanced off of his shield or the heavy plates that covered his back, but the dwarf's luck held and none of the initial attacks penetrated.

The armored thugs flanking Triel rushed to block the dwarf, while the two behind him down the left branch of the passageway moved forward to assault him from behind. Before they could reach him, however, the dwarf's allies burst into the fray. A tiny form shot out of the doorway like a stone rolling down a steep hill, still trailing cobwebs behind her. As Mole came out of her roll she twisted and hurled a ceramic flask into the oncoming fighters, catching one in the chest. The alchemist's fire exploded, covering the hapless thug in a cloak of fire. His companion, a hungry-faced woman, dodged to the side as hot splashes of the burning mixture splattered on her armor. Even as the burning warrior's screams filled the corridor, the woman raised her sword and rushed at Mole. She'd barely covered two paces, however, when a long shaft slammed into her side and tore through her armor, biting deep. Dannel stepped forward out of the tunnel into the corridor, already reaching for another arrow.

Behind him came Illewyn and Zenna. The two women had already taken a beating in earlier battles, but the companions knew that none of them could afford to hang back in this struggle. Zenna saw Arun facing off against five foes to the right, including the evil priestess of Bane. Triel was invoking her patron, clearly content to let her allies withstand the initial rush from the adventurers who had invaded her lair. Behind her stood two rogues who had already reloaded their bows, and were seeking new targets. One saw her and shouted something lost in the chaos of the battle, and without hesitation drew and fired.

The long shaft sliced narrowly through the melee between Arun and the two warriors facing him, and shot straight toward Zenna's face... only to be turned at the last instant by the magical *shield* she'd just invoked.

Releasing the breath that had frozen in her lungs, she lifted her new wand and invoked its power.

Hot flames exploded from the wand, blasting down the corridor in a bright orange cone. The *burning hands* engulfed Arun, but the dwarf, protected by Illewyn's *resist energy* spell, paid them no heed. The two warriors, not favored with such protection, cried out as the hot fire swept over them, and Triel, just behind them, let out a nasty curse as the flames reached their furthest extent, licking at her steel armor with their fading tongues.

Illewyn was the last to emerge from the tunnel. Her heart was pounding in her chest, seemingly loud enough to drown out the surrounding sounds of the fray. Despite her training in the arts of war as part of the instruction that all initiates into the church of Helm received, she felt completely overwhelmed at the chaos that swirled around her. To her left a man who'd been transformed into a pyre continued to scream as he tried in vain to pat out the flames covering his upper body, while right in front of her, a woman with an arrow jutting from her side tried to stab at Mole, who leapt nimbly back out of the way. To her right, the dwarf paladin exchanged blows with a pair of warriors, and behind him, the evil woman in spiked plate lifted her flail and called again on her dark god's intervention. The air was filled with smoke, and Illewyn felt as though her head was going to explode as everything swam in and out of focus.

She felt a sharp pain blaze across her temple, and staggered. Reaching up, she felt the hot blood pouring down her face from the gash a scant inch above her left eye. Turning, she saw the archer—who couldn't have been more than eighteen, if that—grin evilly at the results of his shot. His companion, a near giant of a woman missing most of her teeth, was already fitting an arrow to her bow as well, and took aim at Dannel.

Indecision flooded away, replaced by the cold calm of certainty as Illewyn felt the power of her god enter her. She called upon the potency of a spell, targeting the woman archer even as she drew the fletchings of her arrow back to her cheek.

The arrow remained there, frozen, as the woman stiffed, *held* by the power of Illewyn's spell.

Dannel fired his second arrow of the battle into the back of the woman threatening Mole, driving her forward to collapse against the wall. Without hesitating he drew and aimed again in a blur, shifting to target the Alleybasher aiming at him. He didn't know that the woman was no longer a threat, and with her frozen in place she could not avoid the shaft that sank deeply into her shoulder, knocking her back to fall hard to the ground, paralyzed and bleeding.

The remaining young archer, his allies stripped away in a matter of moments, didn't look quite so cocky all of a sudden.

On the far side of the battle, barely ten paces away from where these events transpired, Arun exchanged blows with a pair of armored men who loomed over him like giants. The dwarf fought with a fury as if possessed by a vengeful spirit, crashing powerful blows from his hammer into his foes' shields and armored forms. One already favored his side where an impact from that sledge had already gotten through his defenses. In turn, their blows seemed to glance off of the dwarf's armor like a dull chisel on solid marble. Despite the lingering effects of the spider and ettercap poison in his veins, he fought with tenacious determination, filled with the *divine favor* of his patron deity, the hard and grim dwarf god Moradin.

Zenna fired a second spread of *burning hands* into the melee. The hot flames roared over the combatants, cooking them just a bit more in their metal armor. The already-injured one drew back, raising his arm to shield his face from the flames. That gave Arun the opening he needed to pulverize him with an upward blow that hit him in the gut. The metal bands protecting him buckled, and the fighter collapsed, trying in vain to suck in breath with his shattered diaphragm. The other fighter, his armor lined with char from the two blasts of fire, sliced at Arun with his sword, but once more caught only the dwarf's shield.

But even as the first soldier fell, Triel stepped over him and joined the fray. Bolstered by the dread power of Bane, she swung her massive flail in a powerful two-handed swing that crushed into the shoulder of Arun's weapon-arm. The dwarf, solid as he was, grunted as pain shot through his body, and it was clear that only through a considerable effort was he able to keep his grip on his hammer.

Zenna raised her wand again, but cried out as an arrow shot through her *shield* and sank several inches into her shoulder. Sagging against the wall, she fought to retain consciousness, holding her hand against the bloody wound.

Dannel, meanwhile, continued his exchange of fire with the Alleybasher archers. The young man who was the only one left standing on their left flank lifted an arrow and took aim at the elf, but his hands trembled and the shot sliced the air two inches from the elf's ear.

"Your mistake, to engage in an archery duel with an elf," Dannel said, calmly drawing his own bow and firing. The longbow propelled the missile in a streak that sank into the youth's body. His armor slowed its progress, but not by much. The youth sagged against the wall, but remained standing, and reached for the small sword at his belt.

"Second mistake," Dannel added, as his second shot buried to the feathers in the man's throat a few seconds later. All too aware of the desperate sounds of metal striking metal behind him, he turned just in time to see one of the archers standing behind the enemy line shoot Zenna.

Illewyn fought through the red and gray haze of blood and smoke and focused her will once more upon their enemies. Wiping blood from her eyes, she pointed at the madwoman who was pounding at Arun with her flail, and issued a *command* backed by the power of divine Helm.

"Flee!"

Triel merely laughed. “Your little mind tricks will not work on me, Helmite!”

Mole had not been idle during those few moments since she'd tumbled into the corridor. Her sword was already bloody, used to end the struggles of the scorched warrior as the alchemist's fire burned out. Seeing Arun and Zenna hard-pressed, she spun and sprang back across the battlefield. The corridor was cramped and crowded with armored bodies and deadly weapons sweeping in wide arcs, but she didn't hesitate, hurling herself forward and tumbling into another roll propelled by the magical properties of her new boots. She caromed off the wall like a cannonball, coming up behind the toasted warrior assaulting Arun. The soldier, no novice, realized that he'd been flanked, but considering the dwarf the greater foe, did not adjust his stance. That choice cost him, as Mole slipped the length of her sword through a gap in his armor and into his back.

The entire melee had lasted perhaps fifteen seconds, and already several enemies were down, and most of the companions had not even been hurt. The enemy leader, however, now fully immersed in the raging tide of battle, did not relent. Uttering a fierce cry of exultation, the priestess of the Black Hand swept her flail down in another punishing blow that glanced painfully off the paladin's helmet, denting the rigid metal. Arun staggered, dazed by the assault, but managed to bring his shield up enough to meet the cleric's backswing. The woman's blows were backed by an almost inhuman strength, and there was no denying her skill at arms.

But the paladin too was driven, no stranger to the fray. Calling upon the name of the Soul Forger, he unleashed an all-out strike that pounded into the evil cleric's breastplate. Triel was driven back a step, but only that, and she was quick to come forward again.

“A fine strike, paladin... but not quite good enough!”

Flames washed over them as Zenna unleashed her third spray of *burning hands*, targeted on the cleric. Triel stood within the flames without flinching, looking like nothing less than a terrible demon from the Abyss as the orange tongues licked around the spiked flanges of her armor. If she was discomfited by the spell, she gave no indication, continuing her efforts to destroy the dwarf paladin through brute strength.

Mole, dodging back to avoid the edges of Zenna's spell, recognized as well that the evil priestess was the greatest threat. One of the rogues had dropped his bow and came at her with his shortsword, but she ignored him to move into flanking position against the cleric. She paid for that maneuver with a shallow but painful gash along her arm from the Alleybasher, but managed a weak blow against the cleric's hip that glanced off of her armor. Enough to get her attention, certainly.

“I'll get to you in a moment, you little creeping,” the cleric's voice hissed from within the spiked helm.

Zenna lifted the wand again, determined to unleash all of its stored spells if necessary to bring this almost inhuman adversary down. But before she could call upon its power, a second arrow sliced through the crowded melee and through her defenses, glancing off of

her skull just above her right ear. The tiefling fell against the wall, clinging to the cold stone, just barely hanging on to consciousness.

Dannel cursed as he missed the remaining archer, allowing the shot that crippled Zenna a heartbeat later. The elf took a step forward toward the injured woman, indecision gripping his gut like an iron fist. He reached for his wand of healing, but Illewyn was already moving, crossing to where Zenna hovered on the edges of the melee.

But then, the tide turned.

Arun growled out another challenge and swung his hammer low, crashing the heavy iron head into the evil cleric's hip. The impact had to hurt, but Triel only laughed, a manic laugh followed by action as she smashed her silver flail into the dwarf's body once, then again. The first hit knocked his shield aside and smashed his arm, while the second came down heavily onto the dwarf's chest with the force of a giant's club.

Arun was blasted back, knocked off his feet to land on his back. He struggled once, faintly, then lost consciousness.

Chapter 82

With their toughest combatant down, defeated by the insane, powerful Triel Eldurast, the already grim situation took a turn for the worse for the embattled companions.

As the woman stepped forward to stand over the body of the fallen paladin, Dannel fired another arrow at point-blank range. At that distance he could hardly miss, but the arrow turned even before it hit her heavy armor, deflected by the *shield of faith* that she had invoked at the start of the battle.

"My faith is strong, elf," she hissed. "Is yours?"

Zenna, still barely hanging on to consciousness, looked up at the domineering form of the enemy cleric. She had no spells left that could hurt this adversary, even if she could manage a casting in her condition. But she did not withdraw—what hope was there, to expect mercy from one such as this? She lifted the wand for one last blast of flame, but Triel saw her, and she knew that there was no chance of beating the blow from that flail that would end it. Even as the heavy weapon came up, Zenna knew that it meant her death.

But a sound drew her attention away from that grim specter, a sound both familiar and strange. The noise was Illewyn's cry as she hurled herself at the evil priestess. The lightly armored servant of Helm looked thin and fragile in contrast to her hulking, spiked foe, but as she lashed out with her mace she'd clearly caught Triel off-guard, managing a glancing blow that caromed off of her steel helm.

"Bravely done, Helmite," the evil cleric laughed. "But now it is time to die."

Triel lashed out with her flail, catching Illewyn with a merciless blow that savaged her side. The priestess cried out and staggered, but did not go down. The Banite priestess did not relent, hitting her again with a powerful overhand blow that might have taken her head off, had it connected squarely. As it was, even the glancing hit off of her metal-rimmed skullcap spun her around, blood spraying into the air as one of the flail's wicked edges tore flesh.

Zenna looked up, and saw for a single stark instant the deep brown eyes of Illewyn meeting hers as the cleric whipped around. The priestess's face was a mask of blood, but determination shone in her eyes, a commitment that Zenna remembered seeing before. The tiefling willed herself to speak, but nothing came from her lips as time seemed to slow around her.

Run... Zenna wanted to say. No, not again... She was aware of Dannel charging, dropping his bow as his sword sliced out of its scabbard, too late...

Illewyn smiled at Zenna, and stumbled back to face the cleric, invoking the power of Helm once more. His name was on her lips as the flail crashed into her face, crushing her skull.

Zenna looked up at the dark pit beyond the eyeslit of Triel's helm. "Two down," the priestess said. The cleric had taken a beating, however, and even as she turned to face Dannel's charge, she took one hand off her flail and reached into her belt pouch, withdrawing a slender wooden wand covered in magical symbols. Zenna tried to rouse herself for one last attack, but she'd lost too much blood. She found herself slipping, sliding down the wall to what would apparently be her final resting place.

Mole found herself hard-pressed indeed, unable to stop this foe that was wreaking disaster upon them. The second archer had drawn his sword and joined his companion, and now it was Mole that was flanked, caught between a wall of spiked metal in the form of Triel, and two agile rogues who knew how to take advantage. She could tumble free, she knew, and with her magical boots outdistance these foes, maybe even escape.

But she could not leave her companions behind.

Even as another sword struck home, tearing through her armor and gashing her right shoulder, she sprung clear, tumbling out of the immediate path of the darting swords. But rather than continue out of the melee, she turned and darted back in. She still held her sword, but her other hand had dug into her pouch, recovering the item she'd left there.

The gnome sprang into the air, her boots giving her enough of a boost that she easily cleared five feet above the ground. The two rogues looked up at her as she arced past them, past Triel...

And as she flew past, she slammed the flask of alchemist's fire squarely into the back of the cleric's neck.

Flames exploded in a hungry, surging blast. Mole was knocked roughly backward, her arms smoldering with fire, landing awkwardly a few feet down the passage. Fortunately for her, the two rogues were caught equally off guard, dodging back as wisps of liquid fire

splashed onto their garments. Triel, however, found herself in a far more unpleasant situation.

The alchemical substance poured through the crevices in her armor, searing the evil woman's flesh mercilessly. Triel screamed, twisting her body in a vain attempt to avoid the clinging flames. She dropped her flail, but clutched onto the wand in her hand like a lifeline. The wooden shaft began to glow with a soft blue light, offering the reassuring power of healing energy.

"No, I don't think so," Dannel said, ramming his sword into her body.

Triel stiffened. The wand and its promise of life fell from her hand. She reached up and managed to pull her helmet from her head; the heavy metal fell to the ground with a clatter, revealing her once-beautiful features scorched and ruined by the flames. With her other hand she reached out and clasped the elf on the shoulder, using him to hold her standing even as blood poured out over the elf's blade embedded in her gut.

"Go... to... hell..." she muttered, and fell, lifeless, to the ground.

Chapter 83

She came in fire and blood, as she often did, a black specter that hunted her mercilessly, pursuing her until there was no place left to hide. When she finally ran her to ground, catching up to her in a dead-end corridor, there was nothing she could do as she came on, burning, that mocking laughter taunting her weakness.

Bodies where there, she saw; she hadn't noticed them before. Familiar forms with familiar faces, now broken and ruined. She couldn't turn her eyes away from them, even as death came for her. The laughter filled her as the heavy silver flail came down toward her head...

"Aaahhhh!"

Zenna shot up out of her bed, shaking, the reality of her room removing the afterimage of the dream but doing nothing to ease the feelings that lingered in its wake. It wasn't the first time, and she feared that it would not be the last.

She rose, and crossed to the bedtable and the basin there. The water was cold and brackish, but she splashed her face with it, anyway. Mole's bed was vacant, undisturbed. She crossed to the small window and looked outside.

It was quiet and dark in that way you find in most cities just before dawn. The darkness held no menace for her, but it was foreboding, nonetheless, to see the busy streets of Cauldron deserted and empty.

She crossed not to her bed, but to the chair at her desk, and sat down. She ignored the lantern; she didn't need the light. She didn't think she could get back to sleep, but neither was she ready to face the day.

The service for Illewyn was today. She knew that she would have to go, but at the same time felt a dread at the prospect of confronting what had happened anew. She knew that she would face anger, even hatred; Morgan had flown into a rage when they'd first returned, and Zenna suspected that only Jenya's intervention had avoided a violent confrontation. She would have thought that they all would have had enough violence, with all that had happened...

They had been victorious again, but again the cost had been high. Zenna hadn't fallen apart this time as she had when Ruphos had died at the hands of Kazmojen, but the feelings were there, returning like a hated enemy thought forever gone only to return when you were least able to face him.

Her thoughts drifted back inevitably to the chaos of that day. She hadn't been conscious to witness the end of the battle with Triel and her minions, but Mole had filled in the details later. The death of their leader had stolen what will to fight had remained among the Alleybashers, who had beat a hasty retreat rather than remain to face Mole and Dannel. Dannel had expended the last of the energy of his healing wand restoring Zenna and Arun to consciousness, but there was nothing that he could have done for Illewyn. Mercifully the elf had quickly covered the ruined face of the cleric, but Zenna knew that the image would be burned into her memory for the remainder of her life. Even Arun seemed solemn, taking up the body of the priestess and they gathered their gear and departed the still nameless ruins under the city for the wind and the rain above.

Bruised and battered, covered with blood and grime, they had reported directly to Jenya, bearing their ill news and equally unpleasant burden. They'd found three of the wands of *control water* on the body of the evil priestess, along with a variety of other devices that responded positively to Zenna's *detect magic* spell. They were in no condition to return to the lava tube and the underground complex, however, so instead they returned to the Drunken Morkoth after turning the wands over to Jenya.

The next day, refreshed in body if not in mind, they returned to the Temple of Helm, only to find that the task they had begun had been completed by another. In the interval since their return, the news of what had happened had spread swiftly. Zenna had her suspicions about that, as she'd caught a glimpse of Morgan in the courtyard outside the cathedral, afterward, his look both smug and anguished with a dash of hatred that radiated out from him like a sickly stench. Jenya told them that the mayor had directly intervened, and had sent a patrol of armed mercenaries along with a group of local adventurers into the caverns that evening, to cleanse the place and find the rest of the wands.

Even before the High Priestess had told them the name of the adventuring company, Zenna had known instinctively who it was. Arun had been rather... disgruntled... at the news, she recalled.

The Stormblades and the mercenaries had found the complex mostly deserted, which didn't surprise Zenna. There was no sign of the remaining bandits, nor did they encounter the halfling mage who'd given the companions such trouble. They did find some undead creatures within a natural warren of tunnels and caverns in the farthest edges of the complex, including a terrible entity that had once been a gnoll. Several of the mercenaries were killed by this monstrosity, but the Stormblades emerged victorious with several more

of the wands and a considerable haul of treasure. When told the rough amount of the find, which ran to thousands of gold and other coins, Mole had lamented, "But that's **our** loot!" But the Stormblades had been quite canny, donating a considerable share of the treasure to the city, and so no one in positions of authority had raised any concerns about that resolution. Somehow the noble adventurers also managed to collect most of the credit for recovering the wands, even though they'd only found two to the companions' three.

Zenna sighed. She didn't mind that, although Dannel and Mole had been quite indignant. She didn't want accolades, or fame. *What do you want?* came a niggling thought in the back of her mind.

She looked at the window, where the faintest hints of dawn were just becoming visible.

At the moment, she just wished that she could get some sleep.

THE END OF "FLOOD SEASON"

The Shackled City III: "Zenith Trajectory"
Begun 10-5-03

Chapter 84

"Blast it!" Zenna said, leaning back from the desk against the plushly padded cushions of the weathered oak chair.

"Difficulty?" Dannel asked, from his perch in the cozy windowbox across the room.

The two adventurers were in the comfortable surroundings of Esbar Tolerathkas's study, in one of the more rarified neighborhoods of the city of Cauldron. The arcanist was not present, having departed on an extended visit to the city of Almraiven, but he'd allowed Zenna the use of his rented home during his absence, in exchange for keeping an eye on the place. Given the breadth of the man's library, and the facilities in his workroom, Zenna considered herself much the better for the exchange, and had spent a lot of time here in the last tenday.

She glanced over at the elf, who was holding both his silver flute and a small notebook balanced expertly in his lap. Dannel's relationship with the devotee of Azuth remained somewhat murky to her. Clearly the two were friends; and Dannel had all but told her that Esbar had set him to keep an eye on her. Whatever his motives, Dannel had proven himself repeatedly to be a boon companion, aiding them first against the brigands that had seized the Lucky Monkey, and again in the dark tunnels under the city where the cult led by Triel Eldurast had been based.

Zenna let out a sigh and pushed the parchment she'd been working on away. The scroll was covered with arcane formulas and notes in the quixotic language of magic, and while there was no actual spell scribed upon it, to one familiar with the Art it would hold an air of mystery and power.

“Just frustrated, I guess,” she said. “I feel like I’m stuck in a rut. I’ve mastered a number of spells... a great number, if you consider the power that Esbar’s meditative techniques have opened to me. But all fall within the lowest valences of magical power; for all my work, the more potent works may as well be in Netherese for all I can make of them.”

“They will come,” Dannel said simply. “Consider the progress you’ve made since arriving in Cauldron—how long has it been, a month, in total? I know mages who took years to get where you are now.”

Zenna nodded, but she didn’t look convinced, and her eyes stole back to the scroll.

“I don’t see why you are so preoccupied with power, anyway,” Dannel went on, closing his book and leaning back against the weathered wooden boards that framed the broad windows. “There’s much more to life, you know.”

Zenna’s gaze snapped back to the elf, and she said sharply, “I know that,” she said. “But it’s a fact of life in Faerûn, in case you haven’t noticed, that power is a necessity to survival. Life is hard, dangerous, and unforgiving to those who lack talent or dedication to improving themselves. Even if I wanted to forget that, what’s happened since I arrived in Cauldron has only served to drive that lesson home.”

Dannel regarded her with an expression that wasn’t quite pity—he knew her well enough to know that such would only fuel her rage. Instead, he nodded. “What you say is true. But it’s also true that life is beautiful, and wondrous, and full of mysteries that tickle the soul and challenge the spirit.”

And he lifted his flute to his lips, playing a soft tune that floated across the room, hanging in the air. Zenna had heard him play a number of times, but this melody was unfamiliar, evocative of joyous homecomings and the promise of friendships both old and new. Despite an unwillingness to let her guard down the song crept into her and softened her anger, awakening memories that she’d struggled to forget, of a home she had denied and people she’d cared about... but who had abandoned her. Those memories always left her with a bittersweet feeling, and uncertainties that she preferred not to revisit. Still, when the song ended, she felt as though a weight had been lifted from her, and she turned away, not wanting the elf to see how deeply she’d been affected.

Dannel complied in this little deception, making a show of gathering up his possessions, uncoupling the flute into its component pieces before sliding it back into its sheath. “We’d best be on our way,” he said. “We’ll be late for our meeting with Mole and Arun.”

He took up his longbow from its perch leaning into the adjacent corner, and rose. She watched him, still trying to sort out her own feelings. As he crossed to where she stood, near the exit to the landing that led downstairs, she said, “It’s too bad that life isn’t always like a song.”

He turned, and without warning, leaned in and kissed her.

Completely surprised, Zenna felt a million emotions warring with the immediate sensation of the elf's lips pressed against her, his arm firm against her side as he pulled her to him. At the same time she was indignant, shocked, amused, excited. Before she could decide how to react, it was over. He drew back, unapologetic, that familiar twinkle in his eye that she found both endearing and infuriating.

She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't settle on what to say, and nothing came out. She suddenly felt very self-conscious, and snapped her mouth shut, feeling awkward under his scrutiny.

"Well," she finally said.

"Well," he echoed, with a smile that demanded nothing, but also promised nothing. "We'd better get going, the others will be waiting for us."

And with that, he turned and left, waiting at the landing until she started to follow.

Chapter 85

"Sheesh, this place is depressing," Mole said. "Why spend so much time here, when there's a whole wide world full of interesting things just outside that door?"

Arun's only reply was a grunt, as he scooped up the remaining swaths of gravy from his plate with the heel of his biscuit. The dwarf was clad in a simple wool mantle, looking a bit out of place without the familiar presence of his steel armor about his frame. His hammer was at its accustomed place at his side, however.

"You know what? You're just a big grumpus," Mole said. Arun lifted an eyebrow but didn't respond to the bait, so Mole spun around on the bench and faced out into the room.

There wasn't much to see. The dwarven tavern, situated below the surface of the street outside, was plain and functional, with massive wooden beams supporting the low ceiling. The place was virtually empty, with only a pair of dwarven craftsmen over by the hearth and the tavernmaster behind the polished wooden bar, cleaning massive crockery mugs nearly as thick about as the gnome's body.

"Now that you're done, we'd better get going," Mole said, glancing over her shoulder at Arun. "Shouldn't keep the others waiting, especially since this errand is for your benefit."

She turned back and so didn't see Arun's reaction, if there was any. But she smiled to herself—she enjoyed baiting the dwarf, but at the same time thought warmly of the old curmudgeon. After all, she owed him her life.

The door to the steep stairwell leading up to the street opened, and a trio of dwarves entered the tavern. By their finery—neat but functional, like the tavern itself—they were likely merchants, gold dwarves by the deep earthen tone of their skin. Unlike Arun, all wore long, rich beards, that of the oldest streaked through with silver, and tied with a dozen small

golden bells that tinkled slightly with his movements. The elder merchant's eyes scanned the common room with approval before alighting upon the table where Mole and Arun sat.

"I thought this were a *dwarven* tavern," the merchant spat, in thickly accented Common.

Mole leaned back against the table. "Oh, my mother was half-dwarven," she chimed, sounding utterly credible despite the contrary evidence offered by her appearance.

The old gold dwarf regarded her doubtfully, but finally turned away and started toward the bar. "Dwarven ale," he said in his own tongue, pulling off leather gloves and slapping them down on a vacant table. "The strong stuff. Tis been a long road, and we could use a taste o' home."

The bartender nodded and started filling steins. One of the old merchant's companions had unslung his pack at the table chosen by the leader, but the other lingered a moment, staring at Arun with cold, beady eyes.

"Been livin' among humans long... takin' their likin' to the razor then?" he queried, his words thick, as though he chewed each one off a bit before spitting it out.

Arun met his gaze squarely. Though he didn't reply, his eyes were like cold iron, and when Mole glanced back, she saw that his hands were tight against the edge of the table, as though hanging on for dear life.

Sensing a difficult situation, Mole naturally decided to intervene.

"Welcome to Cauldron!" she said expansively, popping up and crossing to the dwarf, offering her hand. "I think you'll find the hospitality here much to your liking... there's something for everyone here!"

The dwarf ignored her, still staring at Arun. "Be that I know ye?" he growled. "Yer of the Rift, that's no doubt. Southern spur, the Electrum Deeps?"

Arun stood, the bench scraping back loudly against the floor. "Nay," he said. "Must have me mistaken for someone else, friend." He took up his hammer, and started around the table in the general direction of the door.

The dwarf merchant's companions came over to join him. "No, I be certain, now," he said. "Tough to be forgettin' the likes o' you, ye beardless coward."

Arun stopped as if poleaxed, his mouth tightening in barely suppressed rage.

Mole, who did not speak dwarven, did not understand what was being said, but she could read the tension that had gotten thick enough to cut with a knife. "Um... perhaps we'll just be going..." she hazarded.

But the dwarf merchant was having none of it, and in fact was clearly getting as angry as Arun. "Yer still gots the temerity to be wearin' that symbol, then?" he said, gesturing curtly

at the icon splayed across the paladin's chest—the hammer and anvil of Moradin, the chief deity of the dwarven pantheon.

The merchant's companions looked at their friend curiously. He reported, "This be Arun Goldenshield," he spat.

The old merchant nodded, the movement causing the bells in his beard to tinkle slightly. "Ah. I heard about the troubles in the Deeps." His eyes were sad, a contrast to the anger in those of his younger companion.

"I have no quarrel with you," Arun said, starting once more toward the door. Mole, familiar with the dwarf's mannerisms, could see that each step came only with difficulty, and she could sense the conflict within her friend.

The young merchant stepped before him, blocking his way. "Yes, flee, coward," he said. "And stay out of this place. This be a tavern for dwarves."

Arun did not respond, but Mole stepped forward, indignant. "Look, fella, I don't know what your problem is, but you should show at least a little respect. Arun is a great hero, a paladin of your head-honcho forger god, and he's slain many evil foes—I know, I was there. So lay off, eh?"

The dwarf merchant turned to her. "Your 'friend' should have told you the full story, seems like," he said, his Chondanthan accented but understandable. "Did he tell ye, that he's an exile, driven out from his people, never to return on pain of death? That his cowardice allowed enemies of the gold dwarven people to walk free, to threaten our wives and our children?"

Mole looked at Arun, whose face was a stone slate. "I trust my friend, and whatever he did, I know he had a good reason," she said with conviction.

"Bah," the merchant retorted. "He'll fit in well with you surfacers, with your weak stomachs and 'tolerant' ways. Get out of my sight... unless you want to do something about it, coward?"

For a moment Mole hoped that Arun would; she wanted to see this smug jerk taught some manners. The gray-bearded dwarf was hanging back, with that sad look still on his face, but the other young one—he seemed barely an adult, by the look of him—looked equally eager for a bit of trouble.

But Arun only turned away, and the dwarf laughed.

That was it for Mole. She stepped forward to confront the rude dwarf directly. Even though he was short even for his kind, he was broad, and muscular—easily several times Mole's weight, no doubt. He met her approach with a look of derision.

"Well? Get out, I said."

Mole responded with a single lengthy sentence. While she didn't speak dwarven, she'd picked up a few of its more creative curses, and in the sentence, she managed to insult the dwarf, his family, several of his more distant ancestors (one of whom, by implication, had apparently been a goblin), and finally that part of him about which most males are rather protective.

The dwarf responded rather predictably by flying into a rage, and reached out to grab the gnome with his thick, muscled fingers. His intent was clear in the look of fury blazed across his face.

His fingers closed upon empty air, however, as Mole darted forward under his reach, coming up alongside his left hip. She'd drawn a leather purse from the pouch at her belt—jangling with the weight of numerous coins—and as she passed the dwarf she smoothly spun and slammed the improvised bludgeon into the dwarf's side. The impact, hitting the dwarf off-guard, drew a grunt of pain from the merchant, who staggered awkwardly to the side. Already off balance due to his lunge, he stumbled and went down.

The dwarf's young companion came forward to help, but Mole suddenly sprung into the air, her magical boots carrying her up almost to the level of the rafters above. As the dwarf looked up at her with an almost comical look of surprise on his face, the gnome's boot shot out, catching him squarely across the bridge of his nose. The dwarf stumbled back and likewise fell, blood pouring from the broken appendage.

The old dwarf stood his ground, refusing to get involved. But the first dwarf, the one that she'd struck with the purse, was already getting back to his feet, and even as Mole heard him and turned to face him, he drew out a handaxe from his belt. The elder dwarf saw him and shouted something in dwarvish, but the younger merchant, his ego and body both bruised, his rage unslaked and demanding satisfaction, hurtled forward, the axe coming up threateningly.

But it was arrested as Arun stepped in, and captured the merchant's wrist in an iron grip.

"Enough," he said. The dwarf struggled for a moment, but then his eyes met the paladin's, and he saw something there that gave him pause. He shuddered, then nodded. The old man took him into custody and the two groups of combatants drew apart, each wary of the other.

"I think it's time that we left this place," Arun said, turning wearily and starting toward the stairs. Mole followed—after pausing to stick her tongue out at the fiery-tempered young dwarf merchant.

Chapter 86

Magma Avenue was fairly crowded on this morning, with dozens of Cauldronites taking advantage of the break in the storms of the last few tendays to catch up on errands and just general meandering out of doors. The sky above was a stark blue in between the scattered clouds, although the chill in the air sufficed to remind everyone that yes, it was still winter. Clouds hung in denser clusters over the mountains that overshadowed the city to the east,

a further reminder that the city would likely be facing more inclement weather before too long. But with the churches of the city equipped with the wands of *control water* recovered from the clutches of Triel Eldurast and her co-conspirators, the terror of flooding had been eased, at least for this season.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Arun said, as the gnome and dwarf made their way through the crowds. Magma Avenue was a fairly busy shopping district, and it seemed as though the residents of the city wanted to get a month’s worth of purchasing and selling into this one clear morning.

“Well, I was starting to get worried that I’d spend my entire stay in Cauldron without participating in a barroom brawl,” Mole said idly, drawing a harrumph that might have been amusement from the paladin.

They walked on in silence for a bit, then Mole asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Arun didn’t respond for several paces, and Mole didn’t push him. But finally he said, “It’s true what he said—I am a coward, at least by the traditions and laws of my people.”

“I can’t believe that,” she said earnestly. “If anything, you’re a bit *too* brave, a little crazy, even.”

Arun’s mouth cracked a smile, but it wasn’t in his voice as he continued. “I was accepted into the Order of the Hammer at a relatively young age,” he said. “I volunteered for pioneer duty—the cadres that scout the outermost tunnels, searching for threats.”

“One time there was an incursion by a tribe of goblins—almost a thousand of them—that had made their way up from the Underdark. They weren’t looking for trouble, were probably running from something bigger and meaner than they were. Which is mostly everything, in the Underdark.”

The dwarf paused as he looked off into the distance, seeing memories revisited in his thoughts. When he continued, there was a grimness in his tone. “I fought in a few skirmishes, and got separated from my patrol. I found myself in a side tunnel—cramped, but quiet. I was making my way back to one of the main tunnels when I came across a small cavern.”

“The place was crowded with goblins. Women, children... all noncombatants. The males were all off fighting off my kin, not that they would last long against battle-hardened dwarves. There must have been a hundred in that place. There was no way out, except through me.”

Mole looked up at him. “I thought your paladin code was pretty straightforward about such things; defenseless enemies and such.”

“Among humans, perhaps. Not among dwarves. A child goblin is still a goblin, who will grow up to become a goblin adult... evil and corrupted.”

“So what did you do?” Mole asked, though she thought she already knew the answer.

“I let them go,” he said.

“And your kin weren’t happy when they found out about it,” Mole said.

“No,” Arun said. “I submitted myself for judgment to the elders of our community. There were a few that were sympathetic to my plight, but there was little that they could do, given my oaths and the direct contravention of our laws. I was given a choice: I could be stripped of my station and my perquisites, including the right to bear arms and the right to pass on my family name, and live out my life as a miner or other unskilled laborer. Or I could accept exile.”

“It couldn’t have been an easy decision.”

“No, it was not.”

“Well... I know my opinion doesn’t count for a whole lot, but I think you’re the most honorable man I’ve ever met.”

The dwarf looked down at the gnome. “Thank you. And I think your opinion is more valuable than you give credit for.”

Mole smiled, then caught sight of something ahead through the crowd, further down the street. “Oh look, there’s Zenna and Dannel. I wonder if they’ve had as much excitement as we have, this morning.”

Mole whistled loudly, then waved as Dannel turned in their direction. Zenna seemed distracted, but that wasn’t an unusual state for her. *Head in the clouds, that girl*, Mole thought idly.

The two groups started toward each other, but Mole paused abruptly, a frown creasing her expression.

“Do you hear that?” she asked Arun. The dwarf looked around, curious. “What?”

“A rumbling... under the surface of the street...”

That was all the warning that they had, as a building along the north side of the street suddenly erupted in a shower of earth and stone, spraying shards of shattered brick out into the crowd. People started screaming and running even before a massive form took shape out of the cloud of pulverized dust and dirt that billowed out over the wreckage of what had, until moments ago, been the front of a non-descript warehouse.

It resembled a huge bug, although it stood upright, with a hard, chitinous shell covering its alien, multi-segmented form. Massive mandibles snapped experimentally at the air as it emerged from the cloud of debris, and it grasped onto the rough edges of the wall with powerful claws, tearing down more of the structure of the warehouse down around it as it drew itself up out of the tunnel it had burrowed up from somewhere below the city.

“Oh, dear,” Mole said, reaching for her crossbow.

Chapter 87

The street scene erupted into chaos as an umber hulk made a sudden appearance, tearing apart the front of a warehouse upon Magma Avenue.

The companions, no strangers to unexpected danger, were quick to react. Arun, of course, immediately charged, despite the fact that he was unarmored. Even without his second skin of steel, his booted feet pounded loudly on the cobbles of the street, and as he unlimbered his heavy warhammer, he made an impressive sight as he charged across the street toward the lumbering hulk.

Even as the dwarf charged forward into battle, Dannel strung his bow and drew a long steel-tipped shaft from his quiver. In a single smooth motion he drew, aimed, and released. The arrow sliced through the air a mere handspan above the heads of the fleeing townsfolk, clipping the umber hulk on the back of its armored skull. The arrow glanced off of the hard chitin that comprised its shell, but clearly the creature had felt it, as it spun ponderously about, staring out into the street with bulbous, multifaced eyes.

Mole unlimbered and loaded her crossbow with quick efficiency. But as she lifted the weapon to aim, she met the creature’s potent gaze. Suddenly, she couldn’t remember what she was doing here... oh, the sky was such a pretty color today! People were screaming all around her, and that sounded fun, so she started screaming too! Such great fun!

Zenna cursed inwardly—it hadn’t occurred to her to bring her own crossbow, not for a mere jaunt out into the city. She searched her mind for a spell that might be useful against such a monstrosity, but doubted that a mere *command* would have any effect on such a beast. Then she heard Mole’s screams over the noise of the crowd, and without hesitation headed in that direction.

“Zenna... wait!” Dannel shouted, uselessly.

Arun felt a wash of conflicting thoughts rush over him as he met the uncanny stare of the creature, but he shrugged off the *confusion* as he focused on this latest in the series of deadly adversaries that he’d confronted. The monster saw him coming, the sole individual on the street interested in approaching rather than fleeing, but it ignored him and instead started widening the hole it had made in the front wall of the warehouse, ripping boards from the building’s frame as though they were paper, and toppling most of the rest of the structure’s façade out into the street. The roof above groaned as its supports gave way, and it sagged awkwardly, likely only moments away from a collapse.

Arun let out a roar as he surged into the creature from behind, driving his hammer into its armored back. The strike barely seemed to faze the umber hulk, but the dwarf had finally gotten its attention, as it spun and lashed out at him with its massive claws. Arun paid the price for rushing into melee without the protection of his armor, as the claws that so easily penetrated wood and stone ripped deep gashes in his torso. Through a haze of pain, the

dwarf saw the hulk's head dart down, its mandibles snapping to take his head from his shoulders. The dwarf lurched backward just in time to avoid the unpleasant fate of decapitation, but could not fully avoid the jaws as one ridged mandible sliced along the side of his skull, drawing a red line that laid open his head to the bone.

Somehow the dwarf remained standing, but as blood fountained down his head and over his savaged body, it was clear that he was just about finished. A second arrow from Dannel sliced past, narrowly missing the hulk. The need to avoid hitting his friend had forced the elf to be conservative in his aim, and this time it had cost him.

Zenna pushed her way through a screaming crowd of people—most focused simply on exiting the immediate area, but some staggered about as if dazed, and she saw one man inexplicably beating on another with furious if mostly inaccurate blows, while his target just stood there, yelling something incoherent.

Madness...

She pushed past a pair of brightly dressed women who had the look of noble folk about them, and saw Mole. Her friend was just standing there, her loaded crossbow held limply at her side, a strange look on her face.

"Mole!" Zenna said, rushing toward her friend.

Mole looked up, smiled...

...raised her crossbow until the bolt was level with Zenna's chest, and fired.

Chapter 88

Arun quickly realized that facing the umber hulk head-on was only going to result in his rather messy demise. He staggered back, opening his mind to the divine power of Moradin, letting the healing energy of his bond to his patron surge through him, easing the pain of his injuries.

He underestimated the hulk's reach, however, as one of its gangly but powerful arms shot out, catching him across the face with a blow that knocked him roughly back into the rubble. Arun slumped down, blood oozing from the fresh cuts across his face.

The hulk let out a shriek as Dannel finally scored a solid hit, his arrow sinking deeply into one of the gaps in its armored shell where its limbs met its body. The creature turned again and with amazing speed burrowed back down into the ground, stirring up a cloud of dirt and dust that hung in the air briefly as it vanished from view.

Zenna twisted her body abruptly to the side, but Mole's bolt still sliced across her chest, tearing through her clothes and flesh before glancing off her breastbone. The impact, oblique though it was, still felt like she'd been punched in the chest by an ogre.

She looked down at Mole, and saw that the gnome had drawn her sword, and was spinning around, chanting something incoherent. She could hear the roars of the creature as well, and knew that Arun and Dannel would likely be needing her help right about now.

“Flee!” Zenna *commanded*. Obediently, Mole abruptly ceased what she was doing, and turned and ran, still screaming.

She’s probably the smart one, Zenna thought, before turning back to the battle—just in time to see Arun go down and the creature burrow back under the street.

It was immediately clear that the hulk wasn’t departing the scene, as the sidewalk in front of the ruined warehouse suddenly lurched and snapped, forming a jagged peak a few feet high. That pattern repeated itself as a wave of rising cobbles broke across the street, forming a corridor that clearly indicated the hulk’s progress underground. It was heading for the building across and a short distance up the street, right toward where Dannel was helping a few *confused* citizens get free of the area...

“Look out!” Zenna warned, and he nodded—he’d seen it coming as well. Not surprisingly, he kept on right what he was doing, even as the ridge of displaced street cobbles drew nearer to his position.

Zenna rushed over to where Arun sat bleeding up against a pile of rubble that had been the southeast corner of the warehouse a few minutes earlier. Bits of debris continued to sift down through the destruction, though thankfully the rest of the roof over this part of the building still held, sagging over them threateningly.

The dwarf opened his eyes as she knelt beside him. His face was a wreck, and a ghastly cut along the side of his head continued to ooze blood.

“Blasted bug,” Arun managed to mutter, blood dripping from his torn lips as they moved.

“You crazy dwarf,” she said, opening her mind to the power that she accessed through her meditations and unlocking of the mysteries that Esbar had opened for her. She felt it surge through her like a crashing wave, channeled from some other realm, through her, into the dwarf. The blue glow spread from her fingers into his wounds, undoing some of the damage. Stirring, the dwarf returned more fully to consciousness, though he was still grievously wounded.

The first thing he did was start looking around for his hammer, and tried to get up, his battered body still awkward and resistant to his mind’s commands.

“Hold still a moment,” Zenna tisked. “You’ll do no one any good if you rush back into battle, only to get knocked back down again.” She pressed a vial from her pouch into the dwarf’s bloody hand, and as the dwarf lifted it to his lips, Zenna continued to pour healing energy into him.

“You’re hurt too,” the dwarf said, looking much better as the combined flows of healing power restored much of his vigor. He was steady now as he lifted himself up, shaking off

fat droplets of blood from his sodden and shredded clothing, bending to recover his hammer from where it had fallen a few paces away.

“You won’t stand a chance without your armor,” Zenna said, ignoring his remark even though the gash in her chest blazed like fire. “Hold on just another few seconds.”

“That thing’s back again!” Arun protested, and Zenna could hear it too; a loud crash from across the street. The trail of dislodged street made by the hulk’s passage ran under a building about forty feet down and across the roadway, a single-story edifice equipped with brick facings, overhanging eaves, and heavy wooden shutters drawn across the half-dozen or so windows that she could see. She and Dannel had been walking in front of the place when this started; it was a moneychanger’s or some similar business.

Her guess was confirmed as they heard another crash, accompanied by the jingling sound of metal that carried quite clearly even over the chaos of the street. The street was mostly deserted by now, with a few stragglers still affected by the hulk’s *confusion*. Dannel was helping a few of them get their bearings and get clear of the moneychanger’s house, where no doubt the hulk was wreaking destruction inside.

Arun looked positively antsy as he waited impatiently for Zenna. The wizardess ignored him as she called one last time on the repository of divine power she accessed through her mind, channeling the power of Azuth into a protective field of *mage armor* that she laid upon the dwarf. She’d never cast the spell on another, but as the protective glow settled in upon him, fading quickly into invisibility, she felt a brief surge of elation.

“All right, go,” she said. The dwarf nodded and was gone, charging across the street, looking like nothing more than a madman charging toward the battle in his tattered clothes tainted with his own blood and dirty with stone dust and caked earth. She felt a momentary surge of fear as she looked across the street and couldn’t see Dannel, but then caught sight of him coming around the corner of the building, his bow loaded and ready in his hands. Apparently the chaos had finally drawn other attention, as well, as she saw several armed guardsmen carrying halberds making their way up the street toward their location.

She glanced down the street, but Mole was nowhere in sight. Sighing, she drew out her wand of *burning hands* and started after Arun.

The elf and dwarf were both converging on the side of the building facing the street when a series of loud noises issued from within, sounding as though the world itself was being torn asunder. The front of the moneychanger’s shop literally erupted, bricks and wooden planks alike showering out into the street, along with a smattering of silver and golden coins. Through the opening stepped the umber hulk, clearly ready for more battle.

Chapter 89

Hey! You’re running the wrong way, girl!

The little voice in Mole’s head drew her up short, and she stopped running, looking around the street in confusion. There were a few people around her, all moving in the same

direction that she had just been, but none of them seemed particularly interested in stopping to explain to her what was going on.

There was a battle, that... thing appeared, then...

Everything after that was a jumble, confused memories that seemed quite unlikely now. A particularly disturbing image leapt into her mind, of her shooting her best friend with her crossbow. She looked down, but her bow was gone, and her sword was missing from its scabbard. Did she throw her weapons away? She couldn't remember... but it was clear, from the noises of destruction coming down the street, that some bad business was still going on down there.

And her friends were probably right in the middle of it...

Grimly she started running back down the street, her magical boots carrying her in long strides back into the fray.

* * * * *

“Don't look directly at it... avoid its gaze!” Dannel cried in warning, as he and Arun—reinforced now by a quartet of city guardsmen—reengaged the rampaging umber hulk. The creature turned from its dismantling of the moneychanger's shop to face these interlopers that would interfere with its swath of destruction. The guardsmen were burly, muscular half-orcs, part of the cadre that the mayor had recently recruited to bolster the armed forces of the city in light of the recent disasters facing Cauldron. Two of the four guards heeded the elf's warning, averting their eyes in time, but the other two looked into the creature's multifaced orbs as its gaze swept over them. One screamed and leapt at the creature, sweeping with its halberd, while the second lowered his weapon and just stood there, a vacant look on his face.

Arun didn't look away either. “How am I supposed to bash it, if I cannot see it!” he shouted to Dannel, leaping forward to join the guardsmen in engaging the hostile creature. Its gaze swept over him again, but once more he fought off the deluge of confusing thoughts and images that threatened to temporarily unhinge his sanity.

The first guardsman, driven into a rage by the effects of the umber hulk's gaze, lunged at the creature, bringing down its halberd in an overhand chopping motion. The polearm managed to cut a shallow gash in the creature's shoulder, but the guardsman had little time to revel in his achievement as the hulk swept out one arm, grabbed the guard in its claw, and pulled him bodily up to its snapping jaws. The guard had just barely enough time to scream before the mandibles sank into the sides of his head, squashing his skull like an overripe melon.

“Die, bug!” Arun cried, leaping at the hulk from the side. The umber hulk almost casually swept out its other arm, forcing Arun to dodge to the side. Even with the protection of Zenna's *mage armor*, its claw dug heavily into the dwarf's side, knocking him roughly aside.

The creature let out a terrible keening howl as another arrow from Dannel's bow sank into its body, piercing its thick armor and digging into the meaty flesh underneath. The elf had

taken up position in a wagon left empty and unattended by its owner in the street in front of the shattered shop, and was firing arrows as quickly as he could lift them to his bowstring over the heads of his allies battling the creature.

The two remaining guards—aside from the one standing *confused*—poked at the creature with their halberds, trying to keep their eyes averted from its dangerous gaze while striking at its body. Not surprisingly, their attacks were ineffective.

Zenna was rushing across the street toward the battle when a faint sound over the din of combat brought her attention around. It sounded like a child's crying, and it took her a moment to determine the source: a third-story window of the inn across the street from the moneychanger's shop. Her eyes widened as she saw that the crying was from an infant child, half-wrapped in swaddling, balanced precariously on the windowsill overlooking the street, a good twenty feet below.

Caught by indecision, she glanced back at the ruined front of the shop, where the hulk was wreaking havoc upon the defenders, then up again at the struggling child.

Then, suddenly, the child slipped from the ledge and started to fall toward certain death below.

The hulk lashed out with its claws, striking both of the guards menacing it. Both men went down, one with its face now a ruin of deep gashes, the second knocked roughly into his *confused* comrade, sending both to the ground in a jumble of arms and legs and blood. The hulk did not have time to follow up on its triumph, however, as another arrow slammed into it just below its jaws, releasing a jet of blood as it sank deeply into its body.

The hulk screeched and crouched low, digging once more into the ground, but before it could disappear from sight again Arun charged into it from the side.

"Not again, beastie!" he cried, and brought his hammer down in a powerful two-handed stroke that landed squarely atop the umber hulk's head.

With a sick squash, the creature shuddered... and fell limp.

As the baby started to plummet, Zenna reached out desperately with her mind. The words of the spell flowed instinctively from her lips, and she focused on a dangling awning that fronted the display window of the bakery located in the front of the inn. The awning billowed out, filling with air as it stretched out over the cobbles of the street below. The baby impacted a moment later, landing in the middle of the awning like a stone dropped onto a down pillow. The baby's weight quickly dragged it down, but before it could fall from the awning Zenna was there, catching the child as it rolled from the awning into her waiting grasp.

The baby squirmed in her grasp as she looked back across the street. The child was ugly, with thick limbs and a pudgy nose. Dannel caught her eye and nodded, offering a reassuring wave. The ruined front of the moneychanger's shop had grown quiet, but she could see Arun doing something within the rubble, with no sign of the hulk. Then she

caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and saw Mole rushing up the street toward them.

She skidded to a halt in front of the ruined shop, looking at each of the companions in turn.

“So, what’d I miss?”

Chapter 90

“A representative of the Lord Mayor’s office will be in touch with you, probably tomorrow, if there’s anything else,” the guard sergeant said, in a tone that was friendly but with a manner that was all business.

A few people were coming back out onto the street, curiosity overcoming their earlier terror. It was remarkable that more people hadn’t been killed, Zenna remarked, as she surveyed the swath of destruction wrought by the umber hulk. The only death had been the mercenary guard whose head had been shredded by the hulk like a melon dropped into a harvester. Several of the other guards had been seriously injured, but the quick intervention of Zenna, drawing upon the power of Azuth, had saved their lives. Fortunately no one had been inside either the warehouse or the moneychanger’s shop when the attack had come, or the death toll might have been higher.

“Thank you, sergeant,” Dannel said. The man nodded, and turned back toward the excavation that was ongoing in the rubble of the moneychanger’s shop. About two dozen town guards were present, a mixture of the mostly-human veterans and the new half-orc mercenaries recently hired by the Mayor. The latter had sullen, hard looks about them, and they watched the gathered pedestrians as if expecting any or all of them to initiate an assault.

There were also four gnomes in the investigation group, two men and two women clad in functional robes of blue trimmed with white, marked with the seal of the city. Those four were obviously arcanists of some sort; Zenna had noticed several casting spells, mostly minor divinations as they scanned the scene for clues.

Arun stood with his arms crossed before his chest, his face a thunderhead, his body covered in blood and the tattered remnants of his clothes. He’d gotten an extra cloak from somewhere, obviously sized for a human, but paid it little heed as his dark eyes penetrated the scene.

“I don’t like it,” he said.

“What... the fact that a creature like this suddenly appeared in the middle of the city, or that we just happened to be here when it happened?” Dannel asked.

“Please,” Zenna said. “It’s not like anyone knew that we would be here today. Paranoia’s all well and good, but let’s not get excessive here.”

They turned as Mole suddenly appeared beside them, materializing out of the crowd along the street. “The warehouse and moneychanger’s shop were both owned by a guy named Maavu,” she said. “Merchant guy, very wealthy, wasn’t able to find out more, yet.”

“Perhaps this guy Maavu made a few enemies,” Dannel suggested.

“Perhaps,” Zenna replied. “In any case, standing around here’s not going to yield any answers. Let’s finish our errand, get Arun’s new armor, and head back to the Morkoth. I think we could all use a break, after... this.”

* * * * *

“So, any word?” Zenna asked.

The common room of the Drunken Morkoth was starting to get busy, with patrons continuing to issue into the place through the main doors outside. Outside the windows the city was cloaked in blackness, broken occasionally by the winking flames of streetlamps. With the weather as cold as it was, few people remained out on the streets at this hour, and those that were moved quickly, intent on reaching a destination somewhere around a roaring fire.

Zenna, Mole, and Arun occupied a semi-private booth in the rear of the common room, near one of the doors that led out onto the rear courtyard. Zenna and Mole, who lived in one of the guest rooms over the long building that abutted the back of the inn, had taken semi-permanent claim over this spot, which offered a good view of the near-constant activity of the common room while lending them a modicum of privacy.

“Maavu’s involved in a number of business ventures throughout the city,” Mole reported. “He owned half the buildings along that stretch of Magma Avenue, where the attack occurred. And get this—it’s just a rumor, but I heard it from several unrelated sources: the word about the city is that he left town in a big hurry this evening, riding a horse that had clouds for hooves.”

“Now, that’s pretty unusual,” Zenna noted.

Mole nodded in agreement. “I couldn’t find any specifics about why someone would want to sic a monster like that hulk on him. But I have a few more names, and can maybe do a little more digging tomorrow.”

Arun grunted something noncommittal. The dwarf looked more at ease clad once again in steel plate; which was to say, he wasn’t all that much at ease at all. His masterwork armor, enhanced by the arcane arts of the armorer that Skie the trader had recommended to them, now radiated a faint aura that Zenna, through her magical arts, could detect.

They looked up as Dannel entered the inn, quickly detecting them and cutting nimbly through the crowd to their booth.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to make it,” Zenna said dryly.

“Wouldn’t miss it!” the elf said with a grin. “The reason for my delay was an encounter I had with a striking young woman, while I was leaving Esbar’s place.”

Zenna’s look intensified a notch until it had an edge like a dagger.

“I’m surprised that you’re here at all, then,” Arun said, as he tore another hunk off of the loaf of bread before them on the table, not bothering with the tub of butter before stuffing the bulk of it into his mouth.

Dannel shot the dwarf a look that clearly said, *you’re not helping*, before turning back to Zenna. “It’s not like that. She said that she wanted to arrange a business dinner with us, all of us, tomorrow evening at sundown. Said it would be profitable.” He tossed a small white card onto the table, which Mole grabbed before it had settled to a stop. The card was covered with the precise lines of quality calligraphy.

“Cusp of Sunrise/Obsidian Avenue Northwest,” Mole read. “Hey, I know that place... lots of nobles and such hang out there. Very swanky.”

“You’d think we’d have had enough to do with nobles of late,” Zenna said, not shifting her impaling stare from Dannel.

“I think there’s more to it than that,” Dannel said. “It strains credulity to believe that what happened today and this invitation are unrelated.”

“Maybe our reputation proceeds us,” Mole offered.

“Perhaps,” the elf said. “But I’ve got a strange feeling about this... and I’ve learned to trust my feelings.”

Zenna rolled her eyes obviously. “Well, at least it’s a free meal.”

Chapter 91

The Cusp of Sunrise was a considerable, cross-shaped building covered in ivy, with a great central tower that rose as high as the city walls. As they drew nearer, they could see an engraved sign upon the ironbound door that said, “C.o.S.—Members Only.” The faint sounds of laughter and music could be heard from within over the background noise of the city.

“Looks like this is the place!” Mole exclaimed, hopping up the stairs to knock firmly on the heavy oaken door.

The door opened promptly, revealing an older gentleman clad in simple but exceptionally cut garments, with graying hair that had been trained until not a single strand seemed out of place. He looked down at the four adventurers with a featureless expression that seemed clearly well-schooled. “Yes?”

“We’re here for a meeting with Celeste,” Dannel said.

The man raised an eyebrow, but didn't speak nor move from his position until the elf proffered the card that the woman had given him. He scanned it and nodded to himself. "Ah, the umber hulk people," he told them. "I am Renjin. Come inside, if you please."

He proceeded them into a marble foyer that would have served in itself as a comfortable home for a family of four. An elaborately woven carpet that was probably worth more than most of the homes in the city was sprawled across the center of the foyer, beneath a many-armed chandelier that shone with what was probably genuine gold, rather than just gilding. Three tall arches offered access to different wings of the structure, but Renjin again held up their progress as he took up a blocking position beside a large mahogany desk that had a look of great age about it—as well as a buffed shine that was so perfect that it could likely serve as a mirror in a pinch.

"Was there something else?" Dannel asked.

The butler seemed nonplussed. "The members of the Cusp of Sunrise are accustomed to a certain... decorum... in their guests, sir."

Zenna took a good look at herself and her companions, and understood immediately what the man was getting at. They'd all had enough time to have most of their clothes repaired after their multiple delvings into places that were Terribly Dangerous. But standing there, clad in armor and with weapons and fat pouches dangling off of them every which way, they looked like nothing else than what they were. Adventurers. The Stormblades could pull off making that look good, but for the four of them...

Arun opened his mouth to say something that would no doubt be devastating to their cause, but Dannel stepped in smoothly. "I am sure that we will conduct ourselves with the utmost in restraint, Renjin, and do nothing to upset the sensibilities of your guests." The elf smiled but shot a not-quite-covert look at Arun, and reluctantly—so it seemed to Zenna—subsided.

Renjin wasn't quite satisfied, though. "There are no stags to be hunted in the Great Library, sir," he added, with a look at Dannel's bow.

The elf nodded, and with a sudden snap of his wrist launched the bow across the foyer, to settle perfectly onto a rack sparsely populated with a few outdoor coats and cloaks. "Try to make sure it doesn't wander off," he couldn't resist adding as a jab, appreciating the offended look that flashed briefly across the butler's smooth façade.

Zenna glanced back at Mole, and started slightly in surprise. Somehow the gnome's weapons, even her crossbow, had vanished, and she now wore a pair of earrings set with chips of blue lapis, complemented by a silver necklace that bore a trio of wedge-cut moonstones. And while she wasn't one hundred percent sure, Zenna thought that the blouse her diminutive friend was wearing—a flowing V-cut of soft blue silk—wasn't the same one she'd seen on her when they'd left the Morkoth... and how had she managed *that!*

Mole met her incredulous look and merely smiled, offering a clearly disingenuous shrug.

Well fine then, Zenna thought to herself, after all, she could play games as well...

Zenna briefly concentrated upon her magical hat. When she turned around, her appearance had subtly but noticeably changed. Her red hair was no longer tucked haphazardly under the simple cap that was the natural form of the *hat of disguise*, but now neatly caught up in an ivory comb studded with bands of shining platinum. Her features were highlighted with just enough makeup to avoid drawing attention to it—that was a lesson that her stepmother had given her—while her often-repaired tunic was now silk, like Mole's, with the repaired rents now appearing as decorative designs in thread-of-gold. Even her component pouches looked stylish, trimmed with ermine and the occasional gold buckle.

Dannel slipped a glance at her, then forgot himself and stared. Even Renjin was clearly taken aback for a moment, but he recovered quickly and turned to Arun. Even before the man could open his mouth, the dwarf was already shaking his head.

“Don't even think about it,” he said. “This hammer and my armor are sacred articles of my faith, signs of my devotion to the All-Father. I'd sooner mash your head down into your gut than hand either over to the likes of you.” As he finished, he tightened his grip on the haft of his hammer, as if contemplating whether to go ahead with his own suggestion.

Renjin huffed slightly, as if dealing with uncouth dwarves was just a part of his many burdens, then turned and gestured toward the far archway. “Miss Celeste will join you in the Great Library,” he said dismissively.

As they moved past, Zenna whispered to Arun, “Quite diplomatic of you.”

Arun harrumphed.

The Great Library was impressive, Zenna had to admit, as they stepped from the foyer into the huge, vaulted chamber. The room appeared to comprise the entirety of the tower that they'd seen from outside, with walls twelve feet high topped by a dome that rose to a vaulted height easily forty feet above their heads. Long, narrow windows punctuated the dome near its base, filling the room with slivers of light that were augmented by at least a dozen bright brass lamps hanging on chains about the perimeter of the room. A long bar with dozens if not hundreds of bottles in organized rows on shelves behind it ran inconspicuously along the edge of the room to their left, and tall bookshelves accompanied by metal-frame ladders mounted to the wall on rollers ran around the entire circumference of the chamber. The spacious interior of the room was filled with comfortable-looking padded chairs, small tables where a number of well-dressed patrons were gaming with dice, and even a harpsichord sitting alone to one side. The room was filled to about half its apparent occupancy with a representative sample of Faerûn's races and genders, all clad in expensive raiment that made Zenna feel her even illusion-enhanced appearance to be shabby and cheap by contrast. A few glanced up at them as they entered with mild curiosity, but most remained focused on their conversations or games, not deigning to notice them.

“Didn’t think a little town like this one could support so much foppery,” Arun growled. At least he had the presence of mind to keep his voice low, she thought, as the dwarf sauntered over to the nearest chair that was at least a dozen paces from any of the gathered nobles, and sat down, the chair creaking alarmingly as it adjusted to his considerable armor-enhanced weight. The look on his face made it clear that he welcomed no idle chatter.

Dannel moved gracefully to another chair, and drew out his flute, assembling it in a practiced motion. He didn’t play to draw attention, but rather began testing out a few complex melodies quietly. Zenna recognized that by attempting *not* to draw focus to himself, he was already doing so, and in fact a few nobles moved closer, to better hear what he was doing.

She sighed, feeling torn and undecided, feelings that she had never been comfortable with. She and Dannel had not spoken of what had happened at Esbar’s place that morning, before the battle with the umber hulk attack. Clearly the elf was comfortable with what had happened between them, his kissing her, just a lark, perhaps. The elf was clearly comfortable around women, she’d seen that already. No doubt she was just the last in a long line that he’d set his eyes upon for a casual dalliance...

Zenna felt herself coloring and a growing surge of anger that threatened to strip away her reason. Blast the man! Blast all men! She spun and moved away, nearly trampling a surprised young noble who swallowed his complaint when he saw the look on her face. Zenna instead turned her attention to the bookshelves, walking around the perimeter of the room examining the titles—or at least pretending to, until she was able to master her unpredictable and raging emotions.

Mole, of course, seemed blissfully unaware of the various subtexts going on around her, and headed directly for the gaming tables.

It looked like all three tables were playing the same game, a dice-tossing affair that used small metal dice of a variety of shapes. The only difference seemed to be the stakes; gold coins at one table, platinum at the next, and what looked like small platinum bars at the last. Her gaze lingered at that one; she knew enough about precious metals to estimate that the small piles of bars beside the players at that table had to be worth over a thousand gold pieces!

She gravitated to the “gold” table, where four players were playing. They included a young human male, an elderly elven woman, a balding human male with one eye covered with a gem-studded patch, and a halfling man clad in a fur cloak that looked to contain the skins of a good half-dozen assorted creatures. The halfling and the young human nodded at her in greeting as she approached. There was a long padded bench a short distance back from the table for spectators, so she hopped up there to get a better look.

It didn’t take her long to figure out what was going on; apparently chatter was a big part of the game and the nobles seemed welcoming enough of a potential new player. The game was called “gemsnatcher,” and the young man—Evrans Durst, his name was—explained the rules in between his tosses. It seemed that the game started with everyone rolling the pyramidal dice, the one with four sides. Once a player rolled a “one” on that die, they

graduated up to the next larger size for the next toss. This continued until someone made it up to the largest die, a fat, nearly spherical bronze slug nearly the size of a sling bullet. When that die, which Mole guessed had about 20 facets, was cast, then everyone who didn't roll a "one" in that toss had to pay the caster of the bronze die that number of coins showing on its face. "And then you buy the table a round from your winnings!" Durst editorialized with a sweeping gesture—apparently he'd already consumed a number of such victory toasts.

"The purchase of libations is strictly optional," the elvish woman, a good-natured matron named Talia Emberleaf, added.

The game concluded with Talia rolling a "four" on the big die. Evran, who'd gotten up to the twelve-sided die quickly before rolling ten straight throws without a one, cursed but smiled as he handed over the coins desultorily. Mole realized that none of these four really worried about the money; just the jewelry that each wore was probably worth at least a hundred times the total stakes at the table.

The older man stood. "I have an errand in the city... you may have my table, madam," he said, with a nod to Mole. The halfling also rose. "Alas, I must also depart," he said, nodding to each of them before sliding his coins into his purse and exiting.

"Well blast it, it's bad luck to play gemsnatcher with less than four," Evran said. "Perhaps one of your friends would join us, Mole?"

Mole glanced over at where Dannel was playing, Arun was scowling, and Zenna was trying to ignore the lot of them, her nose in a book. "Um..."

"If you need a fourth, I would be willing to play a round," someone said. Mole jumped slightly—she hadn't heard the newcomer come up from behind her. She felt a nasty twinge as she recognized the voice, which was confirmed a moment later as he walked around her, sliding easily into the vacant seat.

"Vanderboren," Evran said, his tone indicating that he bore the young rake little affection. If Todd Vanderboren cared, he didn't show it, laying out a small pile of golden coins in front of him with a sweep of his hand. Mole glanced around the room, to see if any of the other Stormblades had entered, but apparently Vanderboren was alone. His face twisted into an expression just short of a leer—his face really did resemble a rat's, or maybe a weasel's, Mole thought—before his hand shot out and swept up the dice left by one of the departing players.

"Feeling lucky today?" he asked, even his voice sounding like a sneer, his eyes on Mole.

Chapter 92

"Oh, I always feel lucky," Mole said lightly, forcing herself to be at ease. It wasn't as though the Stormblade was going to try anything here! Her friends hadn't noticed his arrival yet, but he was definitely alone, at least for the moment. He wore his rapier, and his Stormblade sigil hung askew at a collar that showed stains on the expensive fabric.

Vanderboren always had the look of a man who didn't pay attention to how he appeared, so long as everything was of the finest quality and expense.

"Let us play," Talia said, taking up her 4-sided die.

The four dice clattered into the velvet circle that was etched into the center of the table, an arena where the little blocks of metal did battle. Each was of a different construction, so each player's die was clearly distinguishable from the others.

The little pyramids did not have an actual top face, so the numbers were scribed around the base where it landed. In the first toss, Evran and Talia both got a one, while Todd and Mole rolled fours. The two nobles replaced the pyramids for cubes for the second toss.

"I heard that there was some action on Magma Avenue yesterday," Todd said, as he took up his pyramid die. He scowled as the second toss in a one for Mole, who joined Evran and Talia with the six-sided cube. His own die showed a two.

"Yes, the umber hulk," Evran said, grinning as his third toss showed another one. He upgraded to the diamond-shaped eight-sider. Todd also rolled a one and upgraded, while the women rolled higher numbers on this cast, no help to them.

"I have heard that the creature's sudden appearance may have been magical in nature," Talia said. "The city's Magical Threats team has been looking into the matter."

"Well, if we want more information, why don't we just go to the source?" Todd said. They made another toss, but no ones came up when the dice stopped tumbling. "You and your friends were there, were you not?" he said to Mole.

"Yes, we fought the creature," Mole said. She watched Todd carefully as they made another toss. Even before Todd's die settled to the felt cover of the table, a single pip showing on its top face, her suspicion was confirmed; the Stormblade was trying to influence the roll of the die by the way he held and cast it. She recognized the tactic, as she'd been doing something of the sort herself almost by reflex, having played more than a few dice games in her day. Evran and Talia appeared completely oblivious to the tactic, however.

Evran was looking over at Dannel and Arun, an interested look on his face. "You were the ones that battled the creature?" he asked. "I heard it took the head off a guardsman in one bite."

"We're just lucky that our brave heroes were there to put a stop to the creature's rampage," Todd said, his voice like a slithering snake, the title a mocking slur. "Funny how you four always seem to be right there, whenever something terrible happens in the city."

"You are holding up the game," Talia said, hefting her palm with the die inside. Once more Evran scored a one, upgrading to the ten-sided die, while the others got nothing. To Mole's sharp eyes it looked like Todd was eschewing subtlety and all but dropping the die on the table, trying to get that one.

“I don’t think my friend the paladin found it funny,” Mole said. “He charged into battle with it even though he wasn’t wearing his armor at the time—one doesn’t expect a deadly melee in the midst of a leisurely walk through the city!—and it nearly tore him apart. Luckily he’s not the sort to chatter about when it’s time for action.”

Todd glared, and lifted his die as they prepared for another cast. Mole interrupted them, however, and held up her hand.

“You know, it may be silly of me, but can we use a cup for all four dice? I love the sound that the dice make when they clatter together before the roll, makes me feel lucky.”

The hostility in Todd’s stare deepened, but he didn’t respond; he was smart enough to know that any complaints would only make the implication in Mole’s words worse. Evran and Talia were quick to voice approval for the plan, each stealing a quick glance at Todd as they placed their dice into a leather cup that the young nobleman produced from the storage drawer under the table.

The next cast was a push, with no one rolling a one. They paused for a moment then as a waiter came around to take drink orders. Mole ordered something fruity that Talia recommended, while Evran and Todd’s beverages were of a more basic purpose. The waiter nodded, took their orders and empty cups, and departed silently.

Todd leaned back, tilting his chair back precariously on two legs as he scanned the room. “It seems like the Cusp just doesn’t have the same aura it used to,” he offered. “Used to be, you could expect a certain... refinement when you came here.”

Mole almost had to bite back a laugh. In a way, Vanderboren had an almost refreshing lack of subtlety, she thought. She remembered the way that he and his friends had looked at them in their first encounter, in the Drunken Morkoth, and sobered.

Evran did not restrain himself. “I know exactly what you mean,” he replied, his own gaze fixed squarely on Todd.

“Roll,” the Stormblade said, lunging forward to all but hurl his die into the cup. It was Talia’s turn to shake the cup, and her toss revealed another one for Evran, who upgraded to the twelve-sided die, the last one before the bronze dodecahedron.

“Ah, luck favors me tonight!” the young nobleman chortled. But on the next toss he rolled a three, while Talia’s one allowed her to upgrade to the eight-sider. Now she and Todd were tied with eight sides, while Mole still had six and Evran twelve.

“Speaking of treasure,” Todd said, although they hadn’t been talking about it at all as far as Mole could recall, “did you hear, the Stormblades found a cache in the tunnels under the city? After what happened yesterday with the umber hulk, the Mayor asked us to close an opening to the Underdark that had been found in the tunnels under the city. Seems the place had been used by the slavers connected with those abductions we’d had some trouble with last month. ‘The Malachite Fortress,’ I think they call it. Anyway, closing the tunnel was easy enough, but afterwards we were poking around a bit, and found a hidden cache... gold, silver, jewels... the ill-gotten gains of the slavers.”

Mole felt sick—not another missed treasure! Talia raised an eyebrow and asked, “And what will you and your little crew do with this newfound largess?”

“Oh, you know Annah, and her good heart—she insisted that we make a donation to the orphanage, and to the families of those who had suffered at the hands of Kazmojen and his evil allies. Those poor children... they’ve suffered enough, I think.”

His voice was so thick with false sincerity that the knot in Mole’s stomach threatened to boil over into bile. She refused to let him successfully bait her, however, so she simply said, “Oh, is it my toss?”

The next two rounds came up without any ones. As the cup passed to Todd, he twirled it in his hand and said, “This game grows tiresome. Shall we raise the bet, say, to ten times face value?”

“The rules for this table are clear,” Talia said sternly. “Let us continue the game.”

“Ah, so rare to find individuals of stout heart in these troubled times,” Todd said, shooting the dice onto the table. When they settled, Talia had another one, bringing her up to the ten-sided die. The next toss resulted in a one for Mole, and she swapped out for the eight-sider.

“Blah, this is just like last game,” Ezran complained, as he rolled yet another false roll on his next play, a five. “Get stuck on the twelve-sider...”

“You still have the lead,” Talia said, “and the odds of rolling a one on the twelve are rather longer than on the smaller die.” The elfess’s distinguished façade cracked into a smile, however, when on the next toss she achieved a one, upgrading her to the twelve. Her pleasure was drowned out by Todd, however, who loudly declared, “FINALLY!” as he moved up to the ten-sider. Now Mole was alone in last place, on the eight-sided dice, as the cup passed to her.

“Looks like your luck has deserted you today,” Todd chortled. “Might want to be careful, bad luck tends to come in streaks.”

Mole shot him a venomous look despite herself, and rolled. In fact it seemed as though bad luck had descended upon the table, for the next five tosses were all pushes, with no ones deigning to appear. Evran grew cross as his twelve-sider produced a twelve and three elevens in those five tosses, although the arrival of his drink brightened his spirits somewhat. Mole didn’t see the point of his anger, since any result not a one was the same in the rules of the game, but she supposed she could see the mental effect of rolling a number far from the desired objective.

Todd drained his liquor noisily and belched. “All right, let’s get this game over with,” he said, taking the cup and making his toss. And in fact, his ten-sided die showed a one. Now three players had the twelve, and Mole had the eight.

“What say you to a little side wager?” he said to Mole, leaning over the table until she could smell the alcohol on his breath. “If I go up on the next toss, you’re mine, for a night.”

Evran looked shocked, and even Talia betrayed clear disgust at the suggestion. Mole, however, had gained control of herself, and only wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“I’m tempted to agree, if only that I could demand that you bathe, if I should win. But sadly, I promised my parents that I wouldn’t lay with vermin, so I must decline your bold offer.”

Evran chortled. Talia said, “Let us finish this game. I suddenly find myself quite tired of the present company.” She took up the cup, and rolled. Her die came up with a one, and she took up the bronze twenty-sider. The others placed their dice into the cup, and without bothering to pass the cup to Todd the elf woman went ahead and made the final toss. There were no ones, and Talia’s fifteen marked the settlement of the wager. Mole and Evran counted out fifteen gold, while Todd ungraciously shoved a pile of coins in her direction.

“And now, I think I will adjourn,” Talia said, standing. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mole. I hope we may resume our acquaintance under better circumstances.”

The Stormblade stood as well. “One final wager,” he said, leaning over the table, leering down at Mole, his voice thick. “If you are not too cowardly to refuse.”

“Well, as long as it doesn’t involve... *touching*... you,” Mole suggested.

“No, you’ve missed that chance, my little dear, though... who can say, in the future?” He reached down and took up the twenty-sided die. “I propose this. One toss each. High toss wins, winner collects the face value... times one hundred gold.”

Evran started, and a few others who had heard the declaration turned toward the game. Todd sneered down at Mole, as if awaiting her rejection of his offer.

Mole hesitated, genuinely uncertain. She wanted nothing more than to show up the weasely noble brat, but the possible sums involved in this wager were considerable. She could cover the bet, most likely—though she might have to lose her new earrings or necklace if he threw high—but was it worth it, really? She imagined that she could hear Zenna’s voice, berating her for even considering the reckless...

“We accept,” Zenna said, her voice cutting through Mole’s musings. Mole looked up to see all of her friends standing around the gamers at the table, along with about a dozen other nobles. The games at the other tables had come to a temporary halt, as everyone watched to see how this showdown would conclude. Mole thought it was silly, actually—the table with the platinum bars had far larger wagers than this one! But she felt a surge of excitement as she stood atop her chair (she hated all these big folk looming over her) and nodded.

Vanderboren hefted the heavy bronze die. Too late Mole realized that she should have required the dice cup as the nobleman launched the die onto the table with a snap of his wrist. It bounced off the raised edge of the center gamespace, then spun to a stop.

Revealing a seventeen.

Todd Vanderboren smiled, but there was nothing pleasant in it.

“Your roll.”

[Story Note: just FYI, I played out the entire game using an online random number generator (including the final wager, which will be concluded in the next post). I skipped a few inconclusive rounds at the end of the gemsnatcher game where no ones were rolled, but other than that I did not change **any** of the dice results. I adjudicated the attempts to affect the roll as a Sleight of Hand vs. DC25, with success allowing a reroll of that particular cast. Since Mole had a far greater modifier (+9, including her bluff synergy) than Todd (+5), going to the dice cup may have actually hurt her chances more, but he hit the 20 on the skill check and rerolled a one on the 5th round, so who’s to say...]

Chapter 93

Mole took up the bronze die, which felt unnaturally heavy in her small hand. She looked up at the gathered onlookers, including her friends. Zenna met her gaze and smiled, and nodded, sending the message, *Whatever happens, we’re in this together.*

Mole cast the die. When it settled to a stop, the crowd let out a cheer. The number showing on the die’s top face was clear.

Twenty.

Todd Vanderboren looked down at the table in disbelief.

“I believe that’s two thousand gold pieces,” Mole said.

The young man looked taken aback for the first time since they’d encountered him. “I... I do not have that much on me...”

“I am sure that the club will be happy to advance the funds, in your name,” came a voice from beyond the circle of onlookers. Everyone turned to see Celeste, the woman who had contacted Dannel yesterday, standing near the main entrance of the chamber. “After all, we all know the Vanderboren name... and that they honor their debts.”

Todd snarled, but there was nothing he could do but agree. A member of the club staff brought Mole a stack of the platinum bars on a tray, twenty of them. He was a bit surprised when Mole bade him bend low, and within a few seconds tucked all of them into her magical haversack. Todd remained only long enough to slash his name onto a receipt provided by the club, then slunk quickly out of the place through the far exit.

“I have to say, I’m quite pleased that I came when I did,” Celeste told them, once the nobles had returned to their activities and the four adventurers had moved to greet their hostess.

“That young man has an ill favor about him.” She frowned briefly, looking toward the arch where the nobleman had departed, but quickly shifted her gaze back to the adventurers, a warm smile returning to her face. “Come. You haven’t eaten already? Well then, I am certain you will enjoy the fare offered by the Cusp.”

She led them to one of the side wings of the structure, to a private dining room set off from the main corridor by a short hall and a stout wooden door. At Celeste’s urging the companions sat around the room’s primary feature, an oval table of considerable size that had been carved with various designs of leaves and vines about its perimeter. The chairs were plushly padded and of various sizes to comfortably accommodate all of them, and the table was already set with cutlery and dinnerware that shone brightly with the reflected light of the room’s several glimmering lamps.

“Wow, this is some nice stuff,” Mole commented as she seated herself, holding up a crystal goblet that caught the light and spread a rainbow of colors onto the linen tablecloth.

“Please, enjoy yourselves, and do not hesitate to notify the waitstaff if you require anything,” Celeste said. She waved her hand, and as if summoned magically by her gesture, a quartet of servers in the white and gold livery of the Cusp appeared from a subtle side door, laden with platters of appetizers and chilled bottles of wine.

For a moment the adventurers admired the foodstuffs that were placed before them. Mole sampled the vintage and declared it excellent. Finally, as the servers retreated back through the side door, Zenna turned and asked, “So, Celeste, why have you...”

But the woman was gone, as if the air itself had swallowed her up.

“Perhaps she means to speak to us after we have dined,” Dannel suggested, taking a fair helping of thin breads and cheeses from a nearby platter.

“I hope they intend to have real food after this,” Arun said, dubiously examining a plate containing a variety of sliced fruits.

“It’s called a ‘first course,’ friend dwarf,” Dannel said, deftly spiriting the fruit plate out from under the dwarf’s doubtful gaze. “You should try a few of these, they won’t kill you.”

“I’ll take my chances against umber hulks and giant spiders,” the dwarf muttered under his breath.

But Arun’s fears were misplaced, for the appetizers were only the first in a series of courses that included simmering onion soup accompanied by fat slabs of black bread, a quartet of roast pheasants drowned in spicy mushrooms, a lamb haunch that sizzled in its own juices as it was brought out, a fair dozen selections of vegetables prepared in a variety of ways, and a breaded stuffing fat with chips of fresh bacon and pine nuts. When the plates were finally taken away, Arun leaned back in his chair contentedly, belching loudly.

“You men and your noises,” Mole said chidingly. The gnome had consumed as much as any of her larger companions, and more than a few choice selections had somehow made their way into one of the side pouches of her haversack for later snacking.

“I hope you saved room for desert,” came Celeste’s voice from the far end of the table. They all turned to look at the slender woman—she had returned as silently as she had departed, though there was nothing untoward in her manner. “The caramel custard is superb.”

“We’re really quite stuffed,” Dannel said, “But our curiosity remains unslaked; perhaps you could now tell us why you’ve asked us here?”

“Of course. If you’d come with me, please, I will show you.” She gestured back toward the hallway door. Mole lingered behind, a slightly wistful look on her face.

“Caramel custard?”

Chapter 94

Celeste led them to another small private room, this one even more remotely situated at the end of a lengthy side-hall. As she held the door the four adventurers entered to find themselves facing an aged dwarf. In truth, the dwarf was venerable, his body a thin shell, his beard a sea of white that descended almost to his knees. It seemed as though the chain in which he was seated was the only thing keeping him upright at all, but they could just see the hints of silvery mail peeking out from under his robe and beard, hinting at a past more storied than the wretched condition in which he now found himself.

Arun nodded in deference to the elderly dwarf, who watched them under furrowed white brows as the four entered, with Celeste closing the door behind them. As the young woman turned to face the seated elder, he spoke, his voice like a stone slab being dragged across gravel. “These are the four of whom you spoke, Celeste?”

“Yes,” she said. Turning to the companions, she said, “Allow me to introduce Davked Splintershield.”

Dannel nodded, “I have heard the name,” he said. “Yours was the clan that occupied the hold under the city, the Malachite Fortress.”

Zenna betrayed her surprise as she shared a look with her companions. Although Dannel had not yet been with them then, she, Mole, and Arun had first-hand knowledge of that place, and the memories were not pleasant.

As if reading her thoughts, the old dwarf nodded, his dark eyes penetrating. “Yes, yes. It was a dark day, when we were forced to leave.”

“I had heard something about an expedition to the Underdark,” Dannel said.

The old dwarf’s expression clouded for a moment, and his eyes flashed, as if remembering something unpleasant. “Aye. My son, Zenith Splintershield, he thought he could defeat the horrors of the Underdark alone. And he is the source of my current suffering, though indirectly.”

“Your son? How is that?” Mole asked.

“Nay, I should not blame the boy,” the old dwarf said. “It is my own hubris that led me to this pass.” He sagged in the chair, air hissing from his tired lungs like from a punctured bladder.

“I was not a pleasant man, in my days of vigor and energy,” he said, when he could finally continue. “My greed and my pride blinded me to what was important, drove away my sons, which broke the heart of my wife. She tried to instruct me to my errors, but I ignored her. Finally the wench, on her deathbed, issued a curse in the name of the dwarven gods. It held that unless I reconciled with my sons, the life would bleed out from me, stealing what remained of my vigor much as I had stolen the love that had once existed between the members of my clan.”

“I ask for no absolution for what I was or what I did,” he said to them. He coughed, a sick sound that rattled in his chest. “But I am committed to spending what remains of my existence to righting the wrong that I perpetuated. I have met with my other sons, have begged their forgiveness, and had it granted. But Zenith...” he trailed off, his head sagging until his chin touched his chest, as if speaking the very name drew out what strength was left to him.

“Can’t you be healed?” Mole asked.

“I wish it could. Even the most powerful clerics of my faith have been unable to reverse what Marta wrought. Perhaps the gods found her words fitting—I cannot argue with her sentiment.”

“And Zenith’s fate?” Dannel asked.

“I pleaded with the boy not to abandon the Malachite Fortress,” Davked said. “Told him that his quest was a fool’s errand. But he was willful... and my own failings did not help. But I have consulted wizard and cleric alike, and their spells have revealed that my son yet lives, held captive in the Underdark.”

“The Underdark is not a place to visit lightly,” Zenna said. “Trust me, I know this.” She looked at Mole; the gnome had heard the same tales, told to them by their elder friends and relatives back home. Tales of god-dragons and dark dwarves, of terrible aberrations and things best left unmentioned.

“Held captive by whom?” Arun asked.

Davked was wrought by a fit of coughing, and was unable to reply. Celeste stepped forward, and said, “The kuo-toa have him, in a fortress known as Bhal-Hamatugn.”

“So you want us to go into the Underdark, and recover your son for you,” Zenna said, her voice betraying her doubts about the endeavor.

The old dwarf nodded. "Yes. I will pay you well; my clan still has wealth and I will have little need for it where I will be going, all too soon. Four thousand in gold, or six thousand in arms and armor from the forges of my people, if you prefer. Plus Celeste here will sponsor your membership in the Cusp, and pay the annual fee... that's worth a thousand right there."

Zenna managed to keep her features neutral. "A fair sum, but our affairs keep us busy..." she offered noncommittally.

Mole lunged forward, "Now, let's not be hasty..."

Zenna ignored her friend, and instead shifted her gaze to Celeste. "Tell me, what is your stake in this matter?"

Celeste seemed nonplussed at the direct question. "Davked and his kin are friends of mine, and I would see this curse lifted," she said simply.

"Say we accept," Dannel said. "How would we find this place, this 'Bhal-Hamatugn'?"

Celeste replied, "Unfortunately, a local group of adventurers who call themselves the Stormblades—perhaps you have heard of them, that fellow Vanderboren is one of them—recently collapsed the tunnels that connect to the Underdark under the city. However, there is another access point to the north of here, near the hut of a hermit known as Crazy Jared. I can give you map that will lead you there."

"I do not seek your aid lightly, and understand that this matter involves great danger and personal risk," Davked said. "But I have not much time left to me, even without this damned curse rushing me along toward the grave. All I have left to me is my honor, and it demands that I right the wrongs that I caused, before I take them with me to my eternal rest."

"I know something about honor," Arun said. "And the price that it can demand," he added, in an undertone. "Very well, I will lend my hammer to your cause, old dwarf."

Zenna tried to hide a grimace. As usual, no planning, no discussion—just precipitous action.

She wasn't really surprised when Mole quickly offered her support as well. But she was a bit surprised when Dannel added his assent. "It would do me good to get out from these walls for a time," he said.

All eyes turned to her. *As if I have a choice, now*, she seethed inwardly. But she didn't express that thought, instead saying, "It would seem that we are in agreement."

The old dwarf nodded, a satisfied look in his eyes.

Chapter 95

Zenna was cold, and she knew that if she could feel the icy bite of the wind through the protection afforded by her demonic heritage, then the others had to be freezing. But they offered no complaint, trudging across the mountain trails as the hours passed slowly but inexorably.

The weather had been hit or miss over the last few days. For every hour of clear skies it seemed they had been faced with an hour of frozen downpour, with apparently no middle ground in between. At least it hadn't been cold enough to snow, although the higher peaks to their right were already draped in a white shroud that seemed to dip closer to them the further north they marched.

Dannel's wilderness skills were a godsend, and thus far he'd found them a dry and secure shelter every night of their travel, as well as enough food and fuel so that they'd barely had to dip into their iron rations. Even with the spacious boost provided by Mole's magical backpack, which was now packed full of gear and supplies, Zenna was concerned that the Underdark might tax their resources.

The sudden clatter of metal directly ahead drew her out of her reverie. Arun was down, having slipped on a muddy patch of stone, part of a jagged bulge of rock that rose up out of the ground directly across their path. They were making their way through a high meadow at the moment, but even here there was more barren stone than grassy earth. Their trail led them to obstacles that had to be surmounted at least a dozen times each day. Mole reached the dwarf before Zenna could, but Arun refused her offered help, lifting himself clumsily to his feet with yet more clanking and clattering.

If there's anything hostile in these mountains, it'll hear us coming a dozen miles distant, Zenna thought to herself. Thus far, however, their luck had held, and they had encountered nothing more threatening than a large mountain cat that had growled at them a few times from the safety of a nearby outcropping before withdrawing.

Arun returned to the stone ridge, clambering awkwardly up the slick stones using his hands as well as his feet, while Mole surmounted the barrier in a few magically-enhanced hops. Zenna fell somewhere in between, climbing up the rocks carefully and methodically until she reached the summit of the ridge. It wasn't all that high, perhaps fifteen feet above the level of the meadow at its highest point, giving her an unobstructed view of what looked like an endless sequence of ridges, valleys, and hills stretching ahead of her as far as she could see. Dannel had insisted that they were following the trail indicated on the map, but Zenna had to admit that the mountains all looked alike to her eyes.

She saw Dannel up ahead, the elf returning from one of his frequent scouts. With all the coming and going he did, he had to be covering twice the distance that the rest of them were in a given day, but she had to admit that the ranger was now in his element, more at home among the stark mountain landscape than in the civilized confines of Cauldron. Dannel had kept all of their spirits up, singing songs or playing his flute at their camps each night. Even Arun had let up on his criticisms; the dwarf had seemed quiet of late, Zenna mused, even more so than was usual for him. Mole had shared with her what had transpired between them in the dwarven tavern and afterward, shedding some light on the

complex machinations in the mind of their friend. Perhaps she understood better what drove the man, she thought.

“I think that we may have some company up ahead,” Dannel reported, once they’d joined him back on the meadow floor. “I detected a faint smell of woodsmoke on the breeze when the wind shifted a short while ago, although I did not see any signs of habitation up ahead.”

“You think?” Arun interjected. “Bah—what’s the use of all them elfy skills of yours, if you cannot be certain? Let me go on up ahead, and I’ll smoke ‘em out, if there be anything hostile waiting for us along the trail.”

Dannel laughed. “I am sure that any foe would depart in haste at your coming, ser paladin! But I doubt it’s an ambush, else they wouldn’t have had a fire burning where it could be detected by anyone approaching. Best to be cautious, though, then to blunder into trouble.”

There was no denying that advice, so they continued on their way, passing out of the far edge of the meadow and into a long ravine that followed the course of what was probably a watershed, waiting patiently for the spring thaw to channel a deluge of water into the lowlands. At the moment there was only a trickling spring winding its way through the hills. Dannel said that the ravine offered a shortcut around a line of rough terrain to the north; they would be able to circumvent that obstacle and rejoin their general course without giving up too much in the way of time.

They hadn’t gone very far along the twisting course of the ravine, however, when Mole raised her hand. “Do you hear that?” she asked.

Zenna listened, and a faint noise, barely distinguishable from the background noise of the wind through the hills, reached her ears. “What is it?” she asked.

“Trouble,” Dannel reported, stringing his bow and drawing out a long shaft from his quiver. “Come!”

The elf led them quickly down the length of the ravine toward the source of the noise, moving swiftly and stealthily across the rocks. Arun fell behind, and Zenna suspected that this was a deliberate ploy on Dannel’s part, so that the noisy passage of the dwarf wouldn’t provide undue warning to whoever or whatever lay ahead. Mole, hopping from boulder to boulder using the magical powers of her boots, had no difficulty keeping up, but Zenna wasn’t quite so adept and found the distance between her and the elf slowly widening.

They reached a bend in the course of the ravine, and just like that the sounds grew more distinct, even as their source became obvious.

A battle raged before them, situated within a small campsite constructed at the bend in the streambed. Scattered about were the ruins of a heavy canvas tent, a shattered frame of what might have been a mining sluice, and a slain mule, its slashed body lying awkwardly across the course of the stream, forming an impromptu dam. A dwarf was fighting off a strange creature shaped almost like a gaunt, violet-skinned hound, with a pair of tentacles tipped with sharp ridges jutting from its shoulders. As Zenna’s eyes widened in surprise,

she saw the creature shimmer and shift, its outline twisting as it seemed to travel back and forth a few paces without actually moving.

Dannel had already drawn his bow and fired, aiming at the hindquarters of the beast so as not to threaten the embattled dwarf. His shot was accurate, but the shot passed through empty air as the monster shifted again a pace to the left.

The dwarf appeared to be having similar difficulties. "Stand still, ye blasted beastie, so I can smack ye!" he roared. He was wielding a long-handled spade like a battleaxe, but the creature's constant shifting was making it difficult for him to land a blow. It, however, had no such hindrance, and it lashed out at the dwarf, scoring a painful blow across his torso that drove him back roughly.

"Right! I'll do yer for that one!" the dwarf yelled, jabbing upward with the shovel, catching the creature under the jaw as it snapped at him with its massive teeth. This time the blow connected, and the displacer beast hissed in sudden pain. It drew back reflexively, but clearly the attack had only momentarily discomfited the creature.

"Come on, we've got to help him!" Mole shouted, springing forward toward the melee.

"Mole, no!" Zenna cried in warning, but of course it was already too late. She drew out her magical wand of *burning hands*, but held back, first calling upon her magic to protect herself with *mage armor*. Prudently. Unlike her heedless friends...

Even as Dannel nocked and drew his second arrow, she could hear the clanking announcing Arun's approach. For once, she found the noise very reassuring. But at the same time, she became aware of another noise, coming from further down the ravine...

"Watch out, there's another one!" she warned, unslinging her crossbow from across her back.

Dannel's second shot was equally ineffective, foiled again by the displacement properties of the creature. The elf cursed and started forward, his bow in one hand while he drew his sword with the other.

The dwarf cried out as the displacer beast savaged him, taking multiple hits to his body and only narrowly avoiding a snap of its jaws that would have turned his throat into red shreds. He refused to go down, however, even with blood splattering on the rocks about him with every movement. Mole reached the battle and leapt forward with a sudden heave. She had targeted the creature's back, but was prepared when its form shifted and she landed a pace away from its new location. Continuing the momentum of her charge, she thrust her sword into its side, drawing a howl of pain from it as the blade bit deeply through real flesh and muscle.

Enraged, the displacer beast turned to face this new threat.

Zenna moved toward the melee in Dannel's wake, loading her crossbow as she went. She looked nervously to her right, where the stream bent again around a rough outcropping of jumbled boulders. As if summoned by her gaze, a second creature suddenly materialized

atop the heap, carried there by a single great leap from the space beyond. In dawning horror she realized that its tentacles and jaws alike were dripping with crimson, fresh blood that dripped from it in fat gobs.

The creature let out a great roar, and immediately leapt into the fray.

Charging right toward her.

Chapter 96

The companions, coming to the aid of a dwarf caught in a dire struggle against a pair of displacer beasts, found themselves engaged in yet another violent melee.

Zenna held her ground against the charge of the second displacer beast, although her legs felt like gel and her entire body shook with fear. The magic came at her call, however, and a blaze of colors engulfed the creature. Its displacement power was not enough to move it from the path of her spell, and it hurtled forward blindly, the momentum of its charge carrying it ahead. Zenna spun and leapt to the side, but something heavy crashed into her, and she went flying, landing hard in the rocks, pain jabbing into her side from the force of the impact.

Mole dodged the first lashing tentacle that slammed down toward her, grimacing as the blow snapped the rock she'd been standing on in two. Suddenly her brave charge to aid the poor hapless dwarf didn't seem quite so reasonable as it had a few moments ago. That decision seemed even more ill-favored a heartbeat later, as the displacer beast's huge jaws snapped forward, catching her on the shoulder and lifting her painfully into the air. She found herself flying—and not in the good way—before something hard smashed into her back, and she could feel her flesh tearing as the sharp ridges of the beast's tentacle ravaged her cloak and armor. For a moment a flash of fear punched through her... *oh no, not my magical pack!* Then pain penetrated thought, and everything broke apart as she landed head-first in the wooden wreckage of the sluice.

Dannel's let out a harsh cry and rushed into the beast that had so battered his friend, stabbing with his slender sword. In close quarters his blow struck more truly than his arrows earlier, although he cut only into the beast's shoulder, and not its heart as he had intended. The creature snarled and lunged at him, but abruptly staggered as the dwarf smashed his spade two-handed into the back of its skull. The displacer beast stood there a moment quivering, uttered a plaintive cry, and collapsed.

The second creature shook off the effects of Zenna's *color spray* just in time to see Arun charging right for it. The beast lashed out with its tentacles, but they glanced off of the dwarf's shield or the bright plates of his heavy armor. The beast's form continued to shift, but Arun had judged its true location based on the source of those strikes, and when the hammer came down it connected with solid flesh.

That made it mad.

Zenna shook her head, trying to clear it of the fuzziness born of the pain that continued to shoot through her battered body like jolts of electricity. She felt something jar her boot, and looked up to see the displacer beast all but on top of her, snarling at it battled with Arun.

Without hesitation, she opened her mind to her magic, calling upon the words of a spell. The creature apparently didn't hear her over the noise of its clashes with the paladin, who deflected another tentacle strike with his shield before taking a punishing stroke that glanced off of the side of his helmet. Zenna could feel her skin crinkling with the magical power she'd called as she reached out for the hind leg of the displacer beast. Her hand passed through it, but as she swept outward, she felt her fingers brush against rough skin, and she released the power of her spell.

The displacer beast roared as the electrical energy from Zenna's *shocking grasp* tore through it. Snarling, it made the mistake of rounding on the mage, who drew back in alarm as the tentacles lashed out at her. One caught her on the arm and tore away a long strip of flesh, while the second snapped across her back, driving her roughly down into the rocks. Zenna crumpled, lying there unconscious and bleeding.

The creature had removed that threat, but its assault had left it vulnerable to the assault from the dwarf. Arun charged right into the side of the creature, bringing his hammer down in a deadly arc. Again the dwarf was able to strike through the displacement effect, and the beast staggered as its spine snapped with an ugly crack. Its tentacles flailing aimlessly, it fell backward and spent out the remainder of its existence thrashing about among the rocks.

Arun was quick to reach Zenna's side, and calling upon the divine power of Moradin stabilized her.

The battle had been brief but bloody. Two of the companions had gone down, and the battered dwarf was barely standing. Still, he managed to make his way to a bundle laid out among the ruins of his camp, and from within it he drew out a massive single-bladed axe and a fat leather pouch. From the latter, he drew out a small vial and quaffed it. Despite the blood caked onto his garments from the rents in his tough hide, the dwarf regarded them calmly, leaning slightly upon the axe, his hands slick with blood as they tightened on the shaft of the weapon.

Dannel had brought Mole around with a dose of healing energy from his wand, and now handed her a potion as she gingerly propped herself back up. Ignoring the dwarf, he rushed over to Zenna, his concern written on her face as he used more healing to bring her back to consciousness.

Arun, the side of his own face bloody where a swipe of a tentacle had caught him, turned to the dwarf.

"Well met," the paladin offered.

"Well met yerself," the dwarf replied, spitting a gob that was more blood than saliva against the rocks.

“Don’t mind him, he’s always like that,” Mole said, dusting herself off as she rose and stepped in between the two dwarves. “I’m Mole, he’s Arun, the elf is Dannel, and his girlfriend over there is Zenna.”

“Balthazar Hodge,” the dwarf replied, though he didn’t offer his hand or make any other gesture of greeting. “Call me Hodge.”

“Hodge? That doesn’t sound like a dwarven name,” Mole opined.

“That’s cause I’m really a fairy elf princess,” the dwarf spat. “HAR!” he roared, his laughter more than a little jarring.

“That’s a good one!” Mole enthusiastically offered. She glanced back and saw that Dannel was helping Zenna carefully to her feet. “So, you a miner or something?” she asked, glancing about the ruins of the camp.

“Gotta check on me helpers,” the dwarf said, hefting his axe as he headed down the ravine toward the bend around which the second creature had appeared. Mole and the others followed.

The rest of the campsite was in worse condition than the first area. A second mule lay dead, along with more battered equipment and another tent. Worst of all was the battered remains of a pair of humans, clearly dead even before Zenna moved to examine the bodies.

“I’m sorry about your friends,” Dannel said.

“Don’t be,” the dwarf said, spitting noisily again. “Said ‘ey could handle ‘emselves, ‘ey did. Guess ‘ey was wrong.”

“If we hadn’t come along, looks like you would have had a bit more than you could handle yourself,” Arun said, clearly offended by the dwarf’s casual dismissal of his comrades’ death.

The dwarf shook his head in derision. “Dem beasties would nay be gotten de best o’ me, if’n I’d ‘ad a chance to get me fingers on ol’ Betsy here.” He patted the smooth steel flange of his axe, and spat. “What I deserve, I reckon, trustin’ to de likes of these to be keepin’ watch. Like as not ‘ey were watchin’ a bottle, ‘stead of their duty.”

“What language is he speaking?” Zenna whispered covertly to Dannel, who shrugged, as if the idiosyncrasies of dwarves was just another of those things beyond his understanding or control.

“Your axe is named Betsy?” Mole asked, fascinated by the strange dwarf and his unusual manner.

“Ay, she is! After a girl I knew once... now there was a wench, oy! But this Betsy be a mite easier to ‘andle, she be! HAR!”

The dwarf walked out into the ruined camp, occasionally stopping to poke at something with his axe. Arun moved over to the two slain humans, and after righting their bodies as best he could, started gathering stones for a cairn. Zenna quickly moved to help him, although she could barely move rocks that the dwarf lifted easily in one hand.

“There weren’t any others of your party?” Dannel asked.

“Nay, elf, just me an’ Daric an’ Morse, here.” He paused over the slain mule. “Best pair o’ mules I ever owned, too,” he lamented. “Blasted bloody bleeding bastards!” he roared, shaking his axe in the general direction of the dead displacer beasts.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Mole asked, glancing over to make sure that Zenna was fully involved in helping Arun, and therefore not likely to overhear the conversation. “Back to Cauldron?”

“Total bleeding loss,” Hodge was saying, scratching his thick hair with a hand crusted with dirt and blood—mostly his, of the latter. Belatedly he seemed to realize that he’d been asked a question, for he turned and regarded the gnome. Weighing the question, he finally spit. “Back to that cess-hole? Not blasted likely. No...” He regarded the gnome thoughtfully, and ran an appraising glance over her companions as well. “Yer all treasure hunters or somesuch? There ain’t much out thisaways, but stones and dirt.”

“Oh, no,” Mole said cheerfully. “We’re—”

“We’d best be making our way onward,” Dannel said, interrupting as he came up behind the two of them, his sword cleaned and sheathed and his bow ready again for any further sign of trouble. “There are other menaces in these mountains, and they may be drawn to this place by the smell of smoke and blood.”

“Right,” Hodge said, fixing the elf with a canny look. “Travelin’ north, are ye? I was thinkin’ of headin’ that way meself, maybe try my luck on the far side of these rocks, along the Lake.”

Dannel opened his mouth to say something, but Mole quickly said, “Wonderful, why don’t you travel with us, then! Strength in numbers, of course, and if we meet anything else that’s nasty you can use Betsy to teach them whatfor!”

“Just so,” Hodge said. “Lemme gather a few things.”

As he trudged off, Zenna came up, rubbing her slender hands together. “Guess what, Zenna?” Mole said. “Hodge is going to go with us!”

Zenna looked at Dannel with an expression that might have been accusatory. “Another dwarf. Wonderful,” she said dryly.

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The “secret” of their mission lasted the better part of an hour. Mole, delighted to find someone who hadn’t heard all of the tales of their adventures, chattered non-stop, her magical boots allowing her to easily pace the trudging steps of their new companion. At first Zenna thought that the dwarf might go into a berserk rage after a few hours of this, but Hodge seemed to mostly ignore the gnome, occasionally punctuating his steps with a grunt or a fat gob of spittle. Furthermore, when Hodge mentioned something to Arun the paladin—naturally—responded with complete and stark honesty about their destination. Zenna thought that news that they intended to travel into the Underdark would have cured their fellow traveler of any inclination to accompany them further, but if anything it seemed to strengthen his resolve to match his course to theirs.

She sighed. Well, he’d learn soon enough what sort of trouble the four of them always seemed to get into.

That night, in camp, Zenna caught Mole unloading a gob of spit into the fire, when she thought no one was looking. The gnome didn’t pull it off very well, leaving most of the spittle on the front of her cloak, but Zenna had no doubt that her friend would quickly master all of Hodge’s bad habits.

The dwarf was... disgusting, yes, that was the one and only word for his behavior, Zenna thought. What was worse, he seemed either oblivious or completely unconcerned as to the effects of his behavior upon his traveling companions. He stank, he spat constantly, he swore at the faintest provocation, and he seemed to take a perverse delight at tweaking Arun in his fastidiousness and piety. Zenna shook her head—to think of the gold dwarf in those terms! By contrast to Hodge, however, Arun was like a virginal monk of Ilmater.

This was all Dannel’s fault. Zenna wasn’t quite able to work out the exact logic of that conclusion, but it was nonetheless quite fixed in her thoughts. The elf furthermore seemed to treat the entire situation with amusement, probably taking pleasure in her discomfort with the whole situation. Who had invited *him*, anyway?

Two days after their battle with the displacer beasts and meeting with Hodge, they found themselves approaching their immediate destination. Dannel, who had been carrying the map given to them by Celeste, led them up a trail that switchbacked up a ridge that gave onto a broad alpine plateau. A cold wind blew constantly down out of the mountains, and while the plateau contained knots of evergreens and sere mountain grasses that had persisted despite the winter, the landscape as a whole was stark and bracing. Boulders lay strewn about as though dropped by careless giants, and wide stretches of land were marked by nothing more than scattered stones and bare granite worn smooth by the unceasing wind. Behind them they could see the sprawling expanse of the Almraiven Vale, stretching north from the coast between the rising mountain range and the implacable Forest of Mir. Ahead lay the fog-shrouded peaks of the Alamirs, and beyond that, the Lake of Steam.

“Quite a view,” Dannel said, standing at the summit of the trail, staring out over the vista as he waited for the others to join him at the top.

“What’s that, now?” Arun said, huffing slightly as he cleared the crest and looked out over the plateau. Despite his dwarven fortitude, he was still burdened with more weight than all of the others, what with his heavy armor, shield, and hammers. He also insisted on carrying one of the two heavy wool tents that they bore with them, even though the bulging pack he bore gave him the almost outrageous appearance of a two-legged pack mule.

“Our current destination, I would presume,” Dannel said.

As the remainder of the party gathered at the summit, they could all clearly distinguish what the dwarf had spotted. It was a crude dwelling, a wooden structure surrounded by a barrier of tanned hides stretched from wooden pilings that formed the appearance of a wall without the substance. The place was clearly in poor repair, although a faint line of smoke rising from the building hinted at current occupancy.

“Why’dja bring us ‘ere?” Hodge piped up, for once not venturing spittle in the unpredictably shifting winds to punctuate his statement.

“Someone dwells here with information that we need,” Dannel started to explain, but Hodge interrupted him with a grunt.

“Bah, yer wantin’ to chat with that loonie? Waste o’ bleedin’ time, that feller’s crazier than a bunch o’ drunken elves at Midsummer. No offense,” he added, with a desultory glance at Dannel.

“None taken,” the elf said, rolling his eyes.

“You can be on your way at any time,” Arun said to the other dwarf, adjusting his pack as he turned toward the crude structure where Crazy Jared dwelled.

“Neh, this should be interestin’,” Hodge said, falling in with them as the adventurers started across the plateau.

The plateau wasn’t very far across, perhaps a half-mile, and the predominance of at least relatively flat terrain made for easy going. Other than the wind, there was a strange quiet over the mountains, which tickled the caution of the five veterans. Hodge paused to wind his massive crossbow, an action which drew querying looks but no question. A few steps later Mole unlimbered her own crossbow and loaded it, followed quickly by Zenna. They could all feel it, a sense of vague anticipation that belied the harmless appearance of the mountaintop dwelling.

They were perhaps one hundred yards away from the structure when a loud crash from somewhere within stopped them in their tracks. A disheveled figure clad in a chaotic mantle that swirled in the wind rushed out of the hut. From their current distance they could only see that he was an older man, and that he clutched what appeared to be a silver rod in both hands as he ran. He spotted them, and came running toward them, shouting something that was lost on the wind.

“What the...” Dannel began.

He didn't get a chance to finish his thought, for at that moment a hulking form rose up into the air behind the hut. It hung there for a moment, its wings outstretched, catching the air and the pale afternoon light... a dragon, its body not much larger than a horse, but dramatic nonetheless as it swept forward and landed on the roof of the building. They could hear the sound of the impact across the field separating them from the beast, punctuated a moment later as the dragon lifted its head and unleashed a terrible roar that seemed to shake the very mountain beneath their feet. Then it crouched and hurled itself into the air once more, its wings spreading to capture the wind even as its head came down, its jaws opening wide to disgorge a stream of liquid fire onto the hut. The eager flames poured over it like a pitcher of water dumped upon a stone, and in seconds the place was engulfed in fire.

"By the gods," Zenna breathed. The others, unable to even speak, simply watched in stunned amazement.

Then, shaking them out of their reverie, the yells of the fleeing hermit—Jared, no doubt—came to them. The dragon, still hanging there in the sky thirty feet above the burning shack, lifted its head and fixed them with a baleful stare. Its powerful wings pumped, lifting the creature higher and toward them.

"Run!" Zenna cried, even as the companions reached for their weapons.

As the dragon swept toward them, the old man, a speck against the looming bulk of the monstrosity overhead, shouted at them again. "Onward, my knights! For Anduria!" As he lifted the silver rod, there was a gleaming flash of light, and in that instant his tattered robe became a golden mantle trimmed in fur, a shimmering crown laid lightly upon his head, a trailing length of crimson fabric fluttering in the wind behind him.

"Scatter!" Dannel cried in warning, the dragon's intent clear as it lifted higher off of the ground, peaking with another powerful stroke of its wings before streaking down in a lunging glide toward them, its jaws already opening with the promise of death.

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A few missiles shot up at the diving dragon, shafts from Dannel's powerful longbow and the crossbows of the others. Zenna lifted her own weapon with trembling hands, the small device of wood and metal seeming pathetic against the terrible majesty of the dragon. It filled her vision as she aimed and fired, but the bolt, caught in the gusts of wind that swirled over the plateau, spun harmlessly astray, missing the dragon by a good ten feet. A few of the other shots at least hit it, although the darts seemed of little use against the thick hide of the beast.

Then it dove, and fire filled the world.

Zenna saw Mole leaping into a roll, then everything was pain. Her heritage provided her with some small protection against fire, but it was nothing against this heat. As a child, she had amused herself and startled the other children by grasping burning brands from the hearth, letting the flames play harmless across her hands and forearms. But now she

burned, screaming as the hot flames crinkled her flesh and scored her body. She was falling, falling...

Dannel's heart froze in his chest as the dragon's breath engulfed Zenna. He was just outside the radius of the blast, but the wave of heat from the point of impact struck him with the force of a blow. He ignored that, however, rushing blindly into the ring of carnage where the land itself was scorched to black where the breath weapon had impacted. She was there, still smoldering, her cloak burned back from her shoulders, her flesh blackened...

He started toward her, but was jostled aside by Arun, who bent down and scooped up the unconscious tiefling. The dwarf's armor was likewise blasted and scorched, and wisps of steam rose from the gaps in his helm, but the dwarf ignored his own hurts and focused on the crippled woman, pouring lifesaving healing energy drawn from his sacred bond to Moradin into her.

"She lives, elf, but we'll all die if we don't find some shelter from that monster!"

The hard words shook Dannel from his fear, and he looked up to see that the dragon was indeed turning for another pass, almost leisurely twisting around the edge of the plateau in a wide arc. Dannel scanned the landscape, taking in their entire surroundings in a single glance, before pointing at a knobby cluster of boulders that formed a little maze of rock off to one side of the plateau. "There!" he yelled, pointing with his bow. Without hesitation Arun started off in that direction, Zenna's limp form cradled against his body. Hodge, his entire right side heavily burned as well, ran after him, and quickly passed the more burdened paladin as he ran for the promise of cover.

"Go!" Dannel shouted to Mole, who was reloading her crossbow. The dragon had now realigned its course, and was coming in again across the plateau. "Go!"

"What about you?" the gnome yelled.

"I'll draw its attention!"

"But—"

"GO!" the elf shouted. Reluctantly, Mole complied, her magical boots carrying her in long strides across the barren rock.

"Fight bravely, my knights!" Jared was shouting, waving his rod as though it were indeed a kingly standard. "Hold the line against the terror of the Beast!"

Dannel ignored him, drawing the feathers of his arrow to his cheek as the dragon dove again. The creature seemed intent on destroying the largest group of foes, ignoring both the crazy illusionist and the solitary elf apparently bent on suicide.

Well. He would have to convince the beast that he was a threat.

As the dragon bore down on him, Dannel released his hold on the taut string, driving his arrow like a knife through the swirling winds. The arrow vanished into the dragon's maw, already open in preparation of another devastating blast of fire. The dragon shook its head and roared in fury, the smooth arc of its dive interrupted by the stinging pain of the hit. It broke off, its wings beating to carry it back up into the air, but as its momentum carried it over Dannel, it snapped its head back momentarily and unleashed a gout of flame.

The nimble elf launched himself to the side, but could not fully escape the force of the flames that struck him hard across the back. Searing tongues of flame caressed his back and sent tendrils of pain across his shoulders and neck as he hurled forward and came up into a roll. He dug at his hip quiver for another arrow, but the dragon had already drawn away, gaining altitude again.

"Wonderfully done, noble archer!" Jared shouted in approval. The madman had closed to within thirty feet, his noble raiment swirling around his body. "That will teach yonder drake to trifle with my subjects!"

But Dannel wasn't convinced for a moment that the dragon was finished with them. His suspicion was confirmed a moment later when the beast began another broad turn over the edge of the plateau.

"Get to cover, old man!" Dannel said, all but driving the "king" in the direction of the boulders where the others had taken cover.

"I say, this is not a way to treat your sovereign!" Jared declaimed, but he did start moving, perhaps a bit more quickly than was required by the demands of gravitas.

Dannel paused to call upon the potency of a minor spell, the words of a song filling the air with the momentary tingle of magic. The enchantment, that of *expeditious retreat*, added to his speed, allowing him to move with fleetness across the plateau. He deliberately went wide of the hermit, hoping that the dragon would target the one who had caused it the most injury thus far.

The dragon's course, however, was slow and deliberate, giving them ample time to reach the shelter of the boulder field. The scattered boulders rose up like a dozen stubby fingers clutching skyward, with numerous cracks and crevices offering cover and concealment.

"Over here, elf!" Arun shouted, drawing Dannel around to a leaning rock that sheltered the paladin, gnome, and the ravaged form of Zenna. To Dannel's immense relief Zenna was moving about under her own power, although she still looked terrible, with half of her hair burned off to reveal blackened skin beneath. She'd lost her magical hat, and Dannel could see the white of her horns jutting from the front of her skull, contrasting jarringly with the red and black of her flame-ravaged skin.

"Where's Hodge?" Dannel asked, looking around for the other dwarf.

Arun gestured with a sharp nod, and Dannel turned to see Hodge crouched under another leaning boulder about ten paces distant. Upon meeting the elf's gaze, the dwarf straightened some, his expression darkening.

"I'm not as ready to die as the lot o'yer," he almost snarled, rubbing his face with his arm. But Dannel could see that he held to his heavy crossbow as if it were a lifeline, and that the fat steel head of the bolt quivered slightly.

"Here it comes again!" Mole warned.

"That crazy fool," Arun growled, looking around the edges of his cover to see Jared, still garbed in his illusory resplendence, approaching their bastion. The dragon seemed to fill the sky behind him, though he was still a good distance off. The dwarven paladin leapt out of cover long enough to grab the surprised madman, all but hurling him into a crevice in the lee of two jutting boulders.

Zenna started to get up, but Dannel quickly forestalled her. "Stay under cover," he ordered.

"I can fight," she said, her voice raspy.

"I know," he said. "But stay under cover, and let us draw its attention. Strike when it doesn't see you... that goes for you, too, Mole."

"Yessir, captain," Mole said with a salute, but it was clear from her expression that her gaiety was forced.

The sound of the wind grew louder for a moment, announcing the arrival of the dragon a moment before a hot wash of heat brushed over them. The flames struck at the front of their redoubt, licking around the stones but failing to do any real damage to the concealed adventurers. As the dragon arced off of its dive, a few missiles shot out after it. A throwing hammer rose up out of the cluster of boulders, but bounded off of the dragon's chest without doing damage. Mole's shot stuck in its hindquarters, but Dannel's arrow glanced off an armored scale. Hodge didn't even lift his bow, and Arun turned on him as he returned to where the rest of them hid.

"If you're not even going to shoot that, give it to me," the paladin said.

"Stay away from me," the dwarven miner growled.

"It's coming back," Mole's voice rose up from somewhere. "Looks like... uh oh, it's going to land!"

"Stand fast, my warriors—" Jared began, but Arun cut him off. "Just shut up and stay hidden," the dwarf commanded.

The hermit stood, exposing himself alarmingly to attack. "I'll not be spoken to in that manner, ser," he said, with a loud harrumph. "But nor will I allow some... some *beast* to waylay my kingdom!"

"Oh, for the love of..." Dannel said, darting around his covering boulder to get to the old man.

Even as he caught sight of Crazy Jared, though, Dannel looked up to see the broad outline of the dragon descending upon them. Jared saw it as well as the shadow of the creature fell over them, but instead of retreating in terror he lifted his arms dramatically, and pointed his rod at the drake.

“Be gone, foul creature!” he cried, and unleashed a loud screech that sounded like fingernails being drawn across a flat slab of slate. The companions covered their ears at the sound, but the dragon, its claws outstretched as it descended, roared and shook its head violently. The action caused it to miss its intended perch, and it pumped its wings to avoid an awkward landing among the uneven stones. As it pulled around its tail lashed out at where Jared stood, but Dannel leapt at the man, dragging both of them down back into the crevice moments before the tail struck the spot he’d been standing with enough force to crack the weathered stone.

“T’would appear that the creature has a resistance to my powers,” the old man said, as he struggled feebly in Dannel’s grasp.

“You think so?” the elf opined, trying to disengage himself while keeping his grip on his bow.

A few more missiles shot out at the creature from the hiding places of the companions as the dragon settled to a landing at the edge of the boulder field, again scoring minor hits at best. The dragon let out another terrible roar as it crept forward, scanning the nooks and crannies among the stony debris for signs of its victims. Its sibilant hiss crept over them like a promise of death, as it pulled itself up onto the nearest of the boulders with its powerful claws.

“Enough—I’m not stickin’ around here to be dragon-food!” Hodge yelled, and he broke from cover, lumbering away from the concealing boulders toward the edge of the plateau.

“Hodge, no!” Zenna cried, but there was nothing that she could do to stop the dwarf. The dragon was instantly drawn by the noise and movement, and leapt nimbly over the entire cluster of boulders, its wings pumping to help carry it over the obstacle. Its rear claws dug in upon landing, scoring the stone as it propelled itself forward with great speed.

Overtaking the fleeing dwarf in a matter of heartbeats.

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The companions were unable to intervene as the dragon leapt forward after the fleeing dwarf miner. Hodge could feel the impact of the dragon as it landed running, the very ground shaking beneath it, and his face was livid with terror as he glanced back over his shoulder, his legs pumping furiously in a violent yet futile effort to escape. He finally spun and fired his crossbow with a cry that was part anger, part fear, and part desperation, but the missile only glanced off the dragon’s scaled neck as its head shot down at its prey, its jaws snapping open to reveal row upon row of jagged teeth the size of daggers.

Hodge tried to twist away, but the edge of the dragon's jaws closed on his shoulder, tearing chain links, leather, and flesh as it dragged him roughly to the side in a broad arc. The dwarf's empty crossbow went flying uselessly away, and the struggling dwarf left behind a trail of scraped dirt spattered with blood for a full ten feet before he finally broke free, flopping to the ground in a bloody mess. The dragon quickly recovered to face the seriously injured dwarf, who feebly clutched at his axe as he struggled to rise to face the terrible beast's renewed assault.

"Hold on, brave warrior, help is on the way!" came Jared's voice from the shelter of the redoubt. A stirring battle chant spread out over the battlefield in old Chondanthan, the rousing cadences inspiring even though the archaic language of the verses that were lost over the sounds of the wind and the violence of the battle.

Dannel leapt up into a firing position in a raised notch between two boulders, his arrow coming back even as he settled into place. But even as he drew the arrow to his cheek, the flame-scorched bowstring snapped. The arrow went flying off into the rocks, and the elf slipped back, off-balance, only narrowly averting a fall into the gap between the looming stones.

From deeper in the rocks came another bolt. Mole's shot was more fortuitous than her companion's, and stuck between a gap in the scales in the dragon's back between its wings. The tiny bolt did little apparent damage, however, and did not distract the dragon from its immediate target. The dragon placed its hind legs solidly on the broken ground, rearing up and spreading its wings until it loomed over Hodge's battered and burned form like an angel of death. The dwarf, now holding his axe in a bloody hand, swiped at it as if the weak blow could keep it at bay, but the edge of the axe merely glanced harmlessly off the drake's torso; it was doubtful that the creature even felt it.

But even as the dragon let out a triumphant roar, an echoing sound came from its flank. The dragon's head came around even as Arun charged into the fray, his shield high in one hand and his heavy warhammer raised to strike in the other. The dwarf's battle cry echoed across the plateau as he crashed into the dragon with the force of a battering ram. Even the dwarf's considerable bulk could not actually drive the beast backward, but as he brought his hammer down and crushed it solidly into the dragon's chest, it was clear that the beast felt *that* blow.

But the dragon was not the sort of creature that could be felled by a single hit, and it was more than capable of defending itself.

Without further hesitation, the dragon unleashed a devastating assault upon the paladin. Already weakened by the blast of fire he'd absorbed earlier, the dwarf was hard-pressed to withstand the attacks that seemed to come from every direction at once. He saw the jaws snapping down and was able to bring his shield up in time to absorb an impact that nearly sent him sprawling. But that left his sides vulnerable, and claws with tips like forged iron savaged him, crushing into his flanks with incredible force. Although the magical plate armor covering his torso held, the sheer strength of the dragon and the concussive effects of the blows slammed through his body, juggling his organs like loose stones in an earthquake. One claw found a gap where his breastplate met the backplate of his armor,

and when it drew back the long ivory tip was red with the paladin's blood. Arun cried out again, this time in pain, as he staggered back.

The dragon would have been quick to press its advantage, but a scrabbling to its side drew its attention momentarily. Hodge had finally regained his footing, and now stumbled away from the melee, fumbling at his belt pouch for the reassuring touch of a vial of healing elixir. The dragon, in an almost contemptuous gesture, slashed out at the fleeing dwarf with its long tail. The scaled member caught Hodge across the back like a whip, and he went down like a sack of potatoes dropped roughly to the floor.

The dragon emitted a hiss of triumph and turned its attention back to the paladin. The distraction had lasted all of two seconds, perhaps.

But in that instant, the madman, Jared, had clambered atop a boulder that jutted precariously from the field of debris. Still clad in his illusory splendor, he lifted his arms broadly into the air, the silver rod shining even though the sun was obscured by the gray clouds above.

"Fell monster!" he cried, his voice echoing in a way that seemed uncanny coming from his slender frame. "The very earth of my realm rejects your blemish upon its soil!"

He gestured, and light flared from his fingertips, momentarily casting long shadows from the gathered boulders about his perch. And then, even as the dragon roared again in challenge, the ground around the hillock rumbled in answer. As the companions watched in amazement, a patch of boulders shuddered and rose up out of the debris field, taking on a humanoid form as the heavy stones spun and cluttered together, given consistency by an animating force from beyond drawn here by the madman's magic.

Or at least that's how it seemed. Zenna was the first to notice the inconsistencies; once she could look away from the dominating aspect of the elemental, she saw that the bits of dirt that fell from its form vanished before they hit the ground, and that as it moved forward, the hillock behind it was still as whole as it had been before, undisturbed by the removal of the boulders of its frame.

An illusion, she thought, glancing up at the grinning madman atop his perch with a reevaluating look. But a skilled one, for that.

Had the dragon been older, it would have ignored the vision, even forgetting the inconsistencies that had alerted Zenna. But Gottrod was still young for its kind, and in its blood rage of battle it turned from the smaller creatures that had managed only minor stings against it to face this new adversary. But as it leapt forward the companions could see that it moved noticeably more sluggishly than in its initial rush; collectively those small wounds were beginning to take their toll on the seemingly invincible creature.

Too late the dragon realized its mistake, recognizing the figment for what it was even as the elemental lifted its boulder-arms to strike. The dragon hissed and looked up at Jared, who was still loudly pontificating upon the subject of the drake's imminent demise.

The dragon's eyes narrowed, and its jaws opened wide as it sucked in a deep breath.

Then everything went dark.

Dannel used the distraction provided by Jared's illusion to good effect, quickly drawing out a spare bowstring from his pouch and bracing himself against one of the boulders to restrung the weapon. When he saw the dragon's look at the madman, however, he knew what was coming even before the drake's jaw opened wide.

"Get down!" he cried, already moving even as the sphere of *darkness* conjured by Zenna obscured the beast's vision. A sound like a great bellows being pumped filled his ears, rivaling the pounding of his heart in his chest as he anticipated the death that was coming. He hurled forward, catching the edge of Jared's cloak, pulling them down for a second time into cover.

Fire roared all around them as the dragon breathed. Partly shielded by the jutting boulder, the elf nonetheless felt his skin crinkle as the fire washed over it. His head swam, and he felt his consciousness dangling by a slender thread.

Then the flames and smoke cleared away enough for him to see, and he saw Jared, pressed close to him, the old man's eyes shining with a surprising lucidity. The madman's skin was red and blistered, and good portion of his robe was charred, but he'd gotten off better than Dannel. There was little doubt of what would have happened had the full force of the dragon's breath had caught him while exposed atop the stones, however.

"Good work, lad," he said, clasping the elf's shoulder, helping him rise.

The dragon roared again, this time in frustration as it backed up out of the radius of the *darkness*. Right into Arun's charge, as the dwarf came up behind it, narrowly dodging the blind sweep of its tail. With its incredible senses the dragon wasn't truly blind even in the darkness, but again its relative inexperience was costing it precious seconds that the companions used to good advantage. With a cry to his divine patron, Arun unleashed a potent blow that caught the dragon solidly in the hindquarters. The paladin got revenge for his earlier wounds as he *smote evil*, channeling divine power through the wound into the very essence of the drake.

Gottrod was enraged, but through that its native intelligence still lurked, and despite the braggadocio and pride of the creature, it was quickly realizing the danger of its situation. While it didn't doubt its ability to tear this troublesome dwarf to pieces, there were still multiple spellcasters hidden in the rocks, and archers—that point confirmed a moment later as another crossbow bolt lanced out of concealment, stabbing painfully into the meat of its shoulder.

It wasn't fleeing, no—it could retreat, gauge the situation, and then return to blast these foes from above with fiery waves of hot flame. The dragon reared and pumped its powerful wings, lifting off into the air with a blast of downward wind that lifted a cloud of dust in its wake. Arun tried to close with it for a final blow, but the dragon pulled away before he could get close enough to strike. The dwarf shook his hammer and shouted a curse at it that was lost in the noise of its passage.

The dragon rose up over the field of boulders, already fifty feet above the ground and gaining altitude. It didn't see the elf who rose up out of his position of cover, bracing himself and drawing his heavy bow back smoothly. The shaft shot out as the dragon passed, and for a moment it seemed as though the arrow just vanished into its bulk as the creature—still potent and terrible despite its wounds—lifted away into the sky.

It continued for another hundred yards, seemingly unaffected, but with each mighty pump of its wings, a great gout of blood poured from its nicked heart into its body cavity. Finally the creature seemed to just... *shudder* in the air, hanging there for a moment two hundred feet above the plateau.

Then, inexorably, it fell.

Chapter 100

Zenna sat on the ground in a miserable heap, wrapped in the scorched remnants of her cloak, rocking back and forth slightly, though the wind had died as though the dragon's passing had stolen it away.

"Zenna," Dannel said softly, coming over to where she sat on the cold earth, a good distance from the others.

"Leave me alone," she said, turning away, betraying the source of her misery as she tried to tug up her cowl to conceal her features. The battered threads had taken too much abuse, however, and the hood came off in her hand, the last few strands tearing away as she tugged on them. Disconsolate, she tossed the fabric away.

"Zenna," the elf said, a bit more firmly. "You have to get up. The others need you."

She looked up at him, her eyes wet with the tears that she only held back through concerted effort. *No, I cannot show weakness, not to him...*

"I need you."

His words broke through her resolution, and she let out a sob as the tears released down her cheeks. But after a moment, she restored control, and as her face darkened. "Don't mock me... I don't have a mirror handy, but I can imagine how I look right now." Magical healing had restored her body, but it couldn't replace the hair that had been burned away from half of her head, nor could it make the regrown skin look natural, the pinkish patches of fresh growth forming splotches where they intersected with paler, unblemished skin, where an accidental placement of an article of clothing had provided protection.

She met his gaze with a cold look. "Get used to it, the hat's gone, so you'll have to face the real me from here on." Unable to maintain the challenge in her stare, she abruptly looked away.

He came forward, knelt in front of her. She tried to shy away, but he grabbed her by the arms, a little too roughly, perhaps, forcing her to look at him. What she saw in his eyes, though, when she could finally meet them, wasn't anger, but warmth.

"It was always the real you," he told her. "The person that I care about, Zenna."

He reached up, and she didn't shy away as he gently touched the side of her face. Then he pulled her forward—or she fell forward, it wasn't quite clear—and they held each other close.

Not far distant, amidst a patch of soil churned up by the claws of the dragon, Arun helped Hodge to his feet. The dwarf looked a sight worse than Zenna, although it was difficult to discern what was the result of the dragon's assault and what was part of his normally disheveled appearance. Arun offered him a second vial of healing elixir—he'd had to pour the first down the unconscious dwarf's throat, as he'd spent all of his divinely granted healing energy restoring Zenna to consciousness earlier. It was his last healing potion, but he offered it freely, despite the numerous wounds he himself had suffered.

Hodge could see how battered the paladin was, however, and shook his head. "I've got a healin' draught or two left me," he said. "You should tend to yer friends, or to yerself."

Arun nodded, and downed the contents of the vial without further comment. The two dwarves just stood there, silent. Hodge looked around him at the far edge of the plain around the edges of the boulder field, as if confirming what he'd seen earlier. The body of the dragon was a low mound, and from a distance might have been a hummock of turf and rocks, or something equally innocuous. Only he knew better. They all knew better.

"Sure it dead, eh?" the dwarf finally ventured.

"Mole's checking it out," Arun said, "But the way it fell..." Hodge's eyes widened slightly at that, but Arun's faith in his diminutive companion was clear in his voice, and the shield dwarf found yet another preconception disintegrating in his mind.

"Yeh..." he said. "Look..."

"There is no need to explain yourself," the paladin said. "You could not have known the danger of accompanying us, for we ourselves did not know what to expect. Facing a dragon's not exactly a common undertaking."

"Yeh, well, you 'andled 'er right enough," Hodge said. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen..." he once again trailed off, as though searching for words that he couldn't quite find.

"Well, I guess we'd better talk to that madman," Arun said. They looked at where Crazy Jared was standing alone near the base of the boulder mound, mumbling something to himself. "Normally I'd leave that to the elf, but it looks like he's got his hands full right about now."

He turned, but Hodge forestalled him. "Wait. Can... can I ask yer somepin?"

“Ask.”

“All that stuff yer were sayin’ earlier... when I was talkin’ ‘bout treasure, and yer was goin’ on ‘bout honor and the gods and helpin’ that dwarf hero find ‘is son and all that stuff... yer really believe all that... I guess what I’m sayin’...” He shrugged. “I don’t rightly know what I’m sayin’. Just when I saw you rush that dragon... I ain’t never seen the likes o’ that, anyway.”

Arun nodded, and for the first time the hard look toward the other dwarf softened. “I don’t pretend to have all the answers, friend. I can only say what I believe, and the Code that gives me... gives me meaning to my life. It didn’t always, and there was a time when I doubted...” He turned, his gaze lingering on Dannel and Zenna. “But I found some friends who helped me find my way back to the path of truth... *my* truth, perhaps, but a good one, I think.”

Hodge nodded, and there was nothing mocking in his eyes this time as he regarded the paladin solemnly. “Well then, I be guessin’ we shouldn’t keep the wacko waitin’ then, eh?”

Mole approached the fallen carcass of the dragon, savoring the feelings that swirled in her as she neared the great beast. A dragon. A real live—well, not anymore—dragon! In all her dreams of adventure, she’d never imagined that she’d meet up with one of the fantastic beasts of legend and bard’s tale. Her uncle, of course, had battled several in his career, and she’d always relished those accounts, stories of drama and hang-onto-your-seat thrill that he’d told in that cutting style of his. She’d read his book, too, even before she was old enough to read, her little fingers tracing over the sketches of her uncle and his friends, of wondrous places and terrible creatures, crafted from recollections of long years spent on the roads of Faerûn’s Wild West.

She swelled with pride as she noticed one of her bolts jutting from between two scales on the creature’s hindquarters. She’d gotten a few hits in, she thought, though it was really Dannel’s bow and Arun’s hammer that had brought the mighty beast down. Well, she’d gotten through the battle without a scratch, and that was something...

She checked the dragon—a bit more perfunctorily than she’d have liked, but her friends were waiting—and returned toward the shelter of the boulder field. She wiped her hands on her breeches; she’d taken a few mementoes from the carcass to tuck into her magical backpack, and dragonblood was sticky. Her magical boots carried her across the plateau in great strides, but as she passed the flame-blackened area where the dragon had initially attacked, she paused. She bent over and uncovered a small object almost indistinguishable from the blackened scrub.

Ah. Zenna’s hat. It was a little charred, but she hefted it experimentally, and nodded to herself. It still *felt* magical, but Mole had to admit that her inexpert evaluation wasn’t necessarily as accurate as Zenna’s *detect magic* spell.

She tucked the hat into her pocket, and rushed back to rejoin her companions.

Chapter 101

The five travelers formed a half-circle behind Jared as the madman led them back to the charred remains of his dwelling.

Zenna looked to be collected and in control once again—her features now restored to their normal appearance, thanks to Mole’s return of her magical hat to her—but there was still a stiffness to her motion and demeanor that revealed the strain that yet suffused her. Dannel walked near her, his own concern written clearly in his dark amber eyes.

Jared seemed nonplussed by the destruction of his modest living quarters. Indeed, as he walked, he exclaimed, “A good bit of damage done by that rampaging beast, but do not despair—we shall rebuild, better than before!”

“If yer thinkin’ I’ll be laborin’ here to build a new house fer a crazy, yer dafter ‘an I thought,” Hodge grumbled, but his voice wasn’t loud enough to carry to where the “king” strode at their van.

“Um... your majesty...” Dannel began.

“Behold, the peaceful land of Anduria!” Jared said with a flourish, lifting his arms wide as he turned once again to face him. As he did so, his thin fingers twisted a pattern in the air, and the liquid syllables of magic poured from his lips.

Zenna tensed for a moment as she recognized the sounds and gestures as spellcasting, but then forced herself to relax. This man, though clearly mentally sick, had not offered them any threat, and in fact had managed to aid them somewhat against the dragon. “Another illusion,” she muttered, more to herself than to her friends, although Mole heard her.

Even as she spoke the landscape was transformed. Where the sparse and rocky plateau had stretched was now an expansive landscape of vibrant growth and bright color. The thorny and scraggly brush of before was replaced by flowering bushes and squat trees laden with fruit of a dozen varieties. The illusion was so complete that even the smells of the flowers could be detected by the companions, although the overall effect was ruined somewhat by the resumption of the previous landscape at the edges of the plateau, outside the limits of the spell.

Jared, however, seemed oblivious to such distinctions, or even to the fact that his own magic had conjured the illusion. “Tis it not a beauteous place?” he said wistfully.

“Indeed, sire,” Dannel said, coming forward before any of the others could offer commentary. “No other place rivals it in reputation. And so we have come, not only to look upon such marvels, but to protect it from the dangers that threaten it.”

“Smooth,” Arun commented.

“Yes, and you fought bravely,” Jared said. “And we shall not forget your bold defense of our royal person, ser knight—a great estate in the western marches of the realm shall surely be yours, for the service done to your liege this day!”

“Oh, I want one too!” Mole said, coming forward.

“Your Grace is... generous,” Dannel replied, with a deep bow. “But first we must confront the danger that yet lingers. The dragon,” he said, indicating the fallen creature, in case the madman hadn’t clearly marked its nature, “is but the leading force of an invading force, bent on conquering this land!”

“I knew it!” Jared exclaimed. “The treacherous demon-queen of Kheltos plans anew to overthrow Anduria! Long have I suspected that she survived our last confrontation, and still seeks to destroy our fair land! I must raise the army, to defend the borders!”

“Um... sire,” Dannel interrupted, “My... knights... and I are prepared to go and do battle against this foe, but require some direction. The enemy is cunning, and this time are coming up from an access point to the Underdark, which is located near here...”

Jared nodded. “The Pit of the Seven Jaws. Of course, I should have guessed.”

“Seven jaws?” Mole said. “I don’t think I like the sound of that...”

“A guardian of some sort?” Zenna ventured.

“Have your squire fetch pen and ink, and I will prepare a map, to guide you, noble knight,” Jared said. “I am certain with your prowess, any defenses possessed by the foe shall be breached!”

“I don’t doubt it, sire,” Dannel said. Zenna procured a sheet of parchment, an old pen, and a vial of ink from her bag, and handed them to the madman, who quickly bent over a rock and started making quick sketches on the parchment. In a matter of minutes, he’d prepared a drawing, which he handed to Dannel. The elf examined the map—it appeared fairly clear, actually, although most of the landmarks were keyed with names that were presumably sites within “Anduria.”

“We’d best get a good start then,” Dannel said, rolling up the map for safe storage in his pouch, then taking up his bow. “Will you be... all right, here, sire?”

The old man nodded. “Fear not for me, sir knight! I have considerable forces left to me... if Kheltos thinks to catch Anduria unaware, she shall be quite surprised when she strikes!”

“He’ll be well enough, elf,” Arun said, as the adventurers turned away. “He’s been up here quite some time, looks like, and for all the apparent difficulties he has with reality, his magic is clearly potent.”

“Powerful indeed,” Zenna remarked, casting a last look back at the old man, who regarded them with a beaming look full of confidence.

Mole had lingered behind a moment, and as the others started away, she leaned in and said, conspiratorially, “Are you *really* crazy?”

The old man knelt so that their faces were on the same level. Matching her tone, he said, “What a bold question to ask of your sovereign! But you’re not the first to make such an assertion—I suspect there was a bit of over-familiarity earlier in my family tree, if you get my meaning—so I will answer. Are not all of us who walk the byways of this wondrous world at least a bit crazy? I say I am crazier than some, and saner than the demon queen of Kheltos, may she ever be stymied in her foul plots!”

With a wink, he rose. Mole smiled, and with a quick bow, she hurried to rejoin the others.

“Well?” Zenna asked, when the gnome had rejoined them. “What’s the verdict?”

“Undecided,” Mole said, glancing back at the solitary man standing on the bluff, the wind tugging at his clothes, now again ragged and threadbare.

* * * * *

They pressed on for the remainder of that day, putting a number of miles between them and their battle with the dragon, and after an uneventful night camped in a sheltered hollow they continued on their trek. For once the weather seemed to favor them, although the icy wind continued to blow down out of the peaks to their right. Dannel had little difficulty following the landmarks sketched on their map, and held them true to their course as they made their way steadily northward. They had only one encounter, with a trio of bugbear hunters heading down out of the mountains to the lowlands, moving perpendicular to the adventurers’ line of march. The hulking goblinoids spotted the travelers from Cauldron but were not eager for a confrontation, and the two groups gave each other a wide berth before continuing on their way. Since the bugbears didn’t seem to be heading in the direction of Jared’s hut or any other known settlements, the companions let them be. The two dwarves weren’t especially happy about that, for different reasons; Arun expressed concern that the bugbears might be part of a larger company intent on trouble in the region, while Hodge suggested that the three would circle around to follow them, and slit their throats when they paused to camp for the night.

“There’s no need to seek out trouble, when enough of it finds us as it is,” Dannel said, as they made their way back along the trail. Holding up the map to catch the light of the cloud-obscured sun, he added, “And I think that we’ll reach our destination before nightfall, in any case. Even if there are more of them, they’d be foolish to follow us into the Underdark.”

“Aye, an’ what does that say about us then?” Hodge grumbled, but he did not offer further dissent as they continued their trek.

True to the elf’s words, the faint light of the fading sun still hung tenuously over the mountains when they found themselves clambering up another ridge to another broad shelf that jutted out from the range like a server holding a tray. Dannel identified this as the final marker on his map, and strung his bow, the others copying his action as they prepared their own weapons. This plateau slanted down toward its far end, and in that direction, they

quickly encountered a gaping square pit that sank down into darkness where the weak light of the closing day did not penetrate.

Warily, they closed to the crumbling edges of the pit. A rank odor from below assailed their nostrils, and they could see that a narrow metal staircase had been anchored into the sides of the pit, descending around its perimeter into the darkness below.

“That’s a stink I remember,” Arun said. “Strange, I once thought that the surface had an ill odor, when first I came up from the deeper realms of the Rift.”

“Time plays odd tricks with memory,” Zenna said, stepping forward near the edge so that she could look down into the pit.

“Careful,” Dannel cautioned. “That edge looks non too sturdy.”

Zenna shot him a glance that had a slight edge, but she was clearly watching her steps as she cast one more look below and then drew back. “It looks to be about sixty feet down,” she said. The stair runs around the perimeter, and there appears to be landings at each corner. I can’t be sure, but I think there’s an opening of some sort at the bottom, a deep crevice in the stone.”

“What about the seven jaws?” Mole asked.

“We’ll find out, I suppose,” Arun said. “I’ll take the lead, but keep your distance and ware your steps. I dislike the looks of that stair.”

“Stay close to me,” Dannel told Zenna and Mole. “If we should fall, I have a spell that can slow our descent, that requires only a split second to call into being.”

Arun started down, his heavy boots clinking softly on the metal surface of the stairs. Hodge and Dannel exchanged a look, and then, with a fair amount of grumbling, the dwarf started down next. The others followed after a few moments, remaining close to the edge of the pit. All held their bows at the ready, save for Arun, whose heavy warhammer balanced prepared in his muscled fist, ready to unleash fury at the slightest hint of danger. The metal stairs creaked slightly under their weight, but held.

In the darkness of the crevice below, something stirred.

Chapter 102

Metal creaked, the wind blew across the lip of the pit, and tension floated heavily in the air as the companions made their way down into the shadowy darkness. Arun reached the first corner landing and started down the second flight of stairs, the others following slowly behind.

A sound alerted them, movement in the darkness within the fissure, deep enough to be out of the line of sight even of those with darkvision. Something heavy, scraping on stone. Then a sibilant hiss, a sound that filled the pit like a sinister caress.

The companions readied their weapons.

Something moved into view, crossing the boundary between total blackness and mere shadows. A long, reptilian head, shaped like a dagger, jaws filled with sharp teeth, the whole perched atop a long, twisting neck, like a snake.

“Another drake!” Hodge warned, backing up against the false security of the pit wall, lifting his crossbow.

But Dannel, who had realized the true significance of the title of this place, given to them by Jared, recognized with horror the true nature of the foe. “Back!” he warned them. “Back up, get up!”

The elf’s discovery was understood by all of them a heartbeat later, as the creature came forward into view. Another head appeared, and then another, until a twisting nest of long necks and deadly heads had appeared. The heads—seven of them, in all—were attached to a fat, powerful body, propelled forward by short, muscular legs. It was long, with much of its bulk still trailing back into the fissure. The beast was a dark gray tinged with purple, with streaks of starker violet trailing up its necks and marking the bony forehead of each head.

“Hydra!” Dannel shouted, putting a name to the beast.

“Well, don’t just stand there, put a hurt on it!” Arun yelled, starting down the stairs toward the creature.

“No!” Dannel shouted, but the warning came too late. Even as the companions launched their missiles at the creature, a volley of bolts stabbing down from the bows of Mole, Zenna, and Hodge, the hydra’s heads came up toward the descending dwarf. Arun was still too high up for its jaws to reach him, surely, but then, as the others watched in horror, several reptilian maws opened wide, and gouts of white ice blasted from the depths of the creature’s belly into the dwarf. The paladin, caught in the multiple blasts, staggered backward against the wall, his armor and shield now tinged white where ice had condensed on the metal surfaces.

“Arun!” Mole cried.

Dannel fired his bow, knowing even as he did that the shot was wasted. Indeed, even as his arrow slammed into the hydra’s body, one of the earlier wounds—from the massive size of the bolt jutting from the wound, from Hodge’s bow—healed, the thick shaft pushed harmlessly free as the tear closed itself.

“It’s regenerating!” Zenna said, recognizing what Dannel had already known would happen.

“Back up, now!” Dannel said. “The creature’s too big for those stairs, it won’t be able to follow us up!”

“I’ll get Arun!” Mole said, already darting nimbly down the steps toward the first landing.

But Hodge was already moving. Frozen by fear by the creature's appearance, and chilled by the backblast of its frosty breath against Arun, he'd nonetheless scored a hit in the initial volley. Even before Dannel's words his legs were already starting him on their course back up the stairs, but he hesitated, turned back to where the hydra was continuing toward Arun, most of its body now out of the fissure. Gods... it was *huge*, larger even than the dragon they'd battled before. As he watched the hydra unleashed another frost blast from another head, chilling the already frozen paladin further. Arun was still conscious, trying to shake free from the ice coating his compact frame, still trying to reach the creature to attack. The heads were almost just below him, now, and if he charged to the next landing, they would be able to meet him.

And tear him to pieces.

Hodge was surprised to find himself charging down, toward Arun. Frost exploded around him, and for a moment of stark terror he found himself blind, stumbling down a stair where one false step would lead to a quick and messy death. But then he was beside Arun, and he grabbed the paladin on the arm.

"We've got to get back up!" he shouted.

Through his pain and rage, the paladin nodded. With relief Hodge started trudging back up the steps, Arun close behind. Another frost blast followed them, but they'd reached the first landing by this point, and most of the cold was blocked by the metal framework of the staircase. The hydra's heads hissed at them as they withdrew, snapping as a few more crossbow bolts from the other companions above harassed the creature. Finally, frustrated at the escape of its supper, the creature turned and with surprising adroitness returned to the shelter of the fissure. Within ten seconds, it was out of sight, and quiet returned to the pit.

Arun and Hodge reached the top, where the others waited. Both dwarves found the nearest open spot and dropped to the ground, breathing heavily, Arun shivering from the cold blasts that had chilled him to the bone.

"You're frozen nigh to death," Zenna said, her role as healer taking over as she knelt beside the ailing paladin. She took the healing wand she'd recovered from Triel Eldurast, and used it to treat the dwarf, restoring color to his pale skin and sending soothing warmth through his body.

"There's not much power left in this," Zenna said, holding up the wand for a moment before tucking it back into its pocket. Dannel, meanwhile, had used his own wand of *cure light wounds* to attend to Hodge, although the second dwarf had not suffered to the same degree as Arun.

"Not all foes can be bashed head-on," the elf said chidingly, as Arun, much recovered, pulled himself back to his feet. Arun shot him a hard look, but then grudgingly nodded.

"So now what are we going to do?" Mole asked. "Find another way?"

“I know of no other route into the Underdark,” Dannel said. “At least not for hundreds of miles.”

“That thing’s just going to wait for us down there, and we can’t attack it unless it comes out of the fissure,” Zenna said. “It seemed to regenerate very quickly the damage we inflicted upon it.”

“What if we cut the heads off?” Hodge suggested. “Seems like that’s where most of the danger be, if’n you ask me.”

“That would work, if you had fire or acid handy,” Dannel said. “But risky. Hydras have the ability to regrow lost heads; in fact, if you sever one and do not quickly seal the stump, two heads may regrow where one once was.”

“Well, blasted bloody damn!” Hodge exclaimed. “How we s’posed to beat such a thing?”

“I admit, I do not know,” Dannel said. “I doubt we could do enough damage from range to the body quickly enough to overcome its natural regeneration. And if we closed to melee, down there, it would quickly tear us apart. Those jaws are strong, like a dragon’s bite.”

The companions stood there, glum at their prospects. Mole, however, had taken off her magical backpack, and was trying to lift something bulky from inside. Zenna noticed her, and turned toward her.

“What are you doing?”

“Well,” Mole said, grunting with a bit of effort as she lifted a small cask—that should have been enough to fill the entire backpack by itself, had it not been magical—free and laid it on the ground. “That thing breathes frost, so I’d imagine that it doesn’t much like fire.”

Zenna wrinkled her forehead, not understanding, but Dannel had recognized the cask, heavily crusted with heavy sealant that oozed out from between the gaps in the wood. “Lamp oil?” he asked.

Mole grinned sheepishly. “Well...”

“No.” Zenna said. “Mole, tell me that you haven’t been carrying...”

“What?” Hodge said, looking at the cask curiously.

“Well, it worked so well when we were fighting the cult under Cauldron.”

“Mole...” Zenna said, stern disapproval in her voice.

“I’d consider ourselves quite fortunate that our friend here wasn’t caught in one of the breath attacks from that dragon,” Dannel said.

“What?” Hodge repeated, a confused look on his face.

Mole shrugged. "Okay, so it's alchemist's fire."

Chapter 103

Arun walked boldly down the stairs. Each step rang loudly against the metal stairs, echoing off the tight confines of the pit wall. Those steps had the sound of finality to them, and they did not slow or falter as the paladin descended into darkness.

By the time he had reached the first landing, that sound had been joined by another, a lilting melody that contrasting jarringly with the sonorous dirge of the metallic footsteps. Dannel's song was one of hope and bravery, and while none of those present could understand the words in elvish, the sentiment shone through, lifting their spirits.

The fissure remained dark and quiet. Too quiet.

Arun reached the first landing, and without hesitation, continued toward the second. He slowed only briefly, as he reached the slippery place where the cryohydra's snowy blasts had scored. The metal of the stairs was still coated with ice, but the sure-footed dwarf soon made his way past.

He reached the second landing. He was now within reach of the hydra's jaws from below, if it came out into the open.

"Well?" he roared. "You coming out to get your comeuppance, or have you decided to slink off like the snake you are?"

Quiet.

From the lip of the pit above, Mole flipped a coin down into the abyss. The coin, enchanted earlier by Dannel's *light* spell, glowed brightly as it descended, and as it landed with a loud metallic clatter, bouncing a few feet into the air a few times before settling, it cast its bright radiance into the fissure.

Illuminating the hydra, crouched low in the opening, poised to charge.

The companions had barely registered the appearance of the beast when it roared and rushed forward, its jaws snapping angrily at the air. Arun, caught off guard by the hydra's sudden appearance, nonetheless stood his ground as the creature exploded into the open and rose up to its full height, several toothy maws already probing at the paladin's vantage. A blast of cold washed over him, but he held his ground, bolstered by the *divine favor* of his patron that he'd invoked upon his first step back onto the stairs. He hefted his weapon—not his own familiar warhammer, but Dannel's masterwork longsword, borrowed against this particular purpose.

The hydra had to move into position for all of its heads to be able to threaten Arun, and the dwarf's careful positioning meant that it gave him some cover against assault from below. The hydra, however, did not hesitate, rearing up as it leapt to the attack.

“Now, Hodge!” Dannel cried. A stream of curses erupted from the far side of the pit, where sounds of heavy straining emerged from the brush that screened the pit edge.

A pair of draconic heads shot forward at Arun. The dwarf caught one on his shield, but the force of the impact was like a hit from a ram, driving him back a step. The second bit tore at his other arm, threatening momentarily to disarm him before he could pull his wrist free from its grip. His heavy bracer protected him from a crippling wound, but blood trailed from his hand as he lifted his sword to strike.

And strike he did, bringing the sword down with the full force of his strength on the exposed neck of the head that had just bitten him. The maneuver opened him to another bite, as a third head snaked in and caught him in the leg, but he shrugged off the pain as he sawed the sharp steel edge across the gash he’d opened. The hydra drew back in pain as the crippled head went flying, landing in a sick mess of blood on the edge of the platform.

But the severed stump was already beginning to twist and pulse...

Zenna abruptly appeared on the edge of the first platform, her cloak of *invisibility* falling from her as she incanted the words of a new spell, one she’d mastered in long nights of studying the formulae in her spellbook in camp, long after the others had already gone to sleep. She’d first seen it cast when the evil halfling mage Sarcem had hurled it at her, and now her careful preparation paid off as the coruscating energy of a *scorching ray* erupted from her fingers, flaring over the front of the hydra. The flames deeply seared the creature, cauterizing the stump Arun had made, ensuring that for now, at least, only six heads would threaten them.

But the hydra responded quickly, and a pair of heads swiveled toward her, and unleashed two blasts of icy cold in quick succession.

Zenna dodged back, but could not fully avoid the frozen breath. Her heritage protected her to some degree, but still she felt the bitter cold cut through her clothes and chill her to the bone. She stumbled back until she felt the hard surface of the wall against her, and barely kept her footing as she fought off unconsciousness.

With a hearty cry Hodge appeared, half-lifting, half-pushing an awkward burden. As he reached the edge of the pit he hurled it forward, nearly going over after it, until Mole caught his arm and dragged him back. The burden, which looked some bulky objects wrapped in a spare cloak, plummeted down into the pit. For a moment it looked like the missile would clip the edge of the platform where Arun stood, and the friends held their breath, but then it narrowly overshot that obstacle, and slammed heavily into the body of the hydra.

The hydra sagged as the projectile sank into its body with a meaty plop. The small boulders they’d wrapped into the cloak were heavy, but their primary purpose was to crush the small cask laid in the center, on impact...

Fire rushed outward in an eager rage over the entire upper body of the hydra. It screamed and thrashed, trying to escape flames that could not be extinguished by normal means. It barely noticed the stings as Mole and Dannel sent arrows into it, but the flames found the wounds, and seared them. Its heads twisted and tangled, and it fired blasts of cold in

random directions, trying unsuccessfully to recover enough to douse the flames that covered it.

Arun had started forward again to try and get another shot at an exposed neck, but he had to recoil as a pair of frost blasts bracketed his position. The icy blasts laid a layer of frost on the metal, and now the underlying supports creaked alarmingly, as the pounding that they had sustained finally began to overcome their structural integrity.

“Oh, da—”

He didn't get a chance to finish his thought, as the entire platform came loose, tumbling—along with the dwarf—to the floor of the pit.

Onto the thrashing form of the burning hydra.

Chapter 104

This was easier than I thought it would be, Zenna thought, staring out into the darkness ahead.

Only it wasn't really dark, not truly. Traces of phosphorant lichens crossed the walls of the great cavern, shedding just enough light for her to clearly make out the distinguishing features of this place. And it hadn't really been that easy, either... but it made her feel better to think so, to place the challenges they'd faced getting her against the difficulties that no doubt faced them now, directly ahead.

The hydra... now that had been tough, although chance had favored them in their second confrontation with the creature. The wreckage of the falling staircase had crushed the creature, ending its struggles against the combined damage unleashed upon it by the companions. Whether it would have survived without that inadvertent intervention, she couldn't be certain.

She felt rather than heard Dannel sidle up behind her, his footsteps like whispers on the uneven stone. The elf had impressed her with his skills in this dark place, almost as much as the ability of the dwarves with their uncanny knack for anticipating the dangers in these dark realms under the ground. Arun, she knew, had had to confront a fair amount of emotional baggage in returning here, to the depths of the Underdark. But the paladin seemed steadfast, as undaunted as when they'd pulled him out of the wreckage piled onto the carcass of the hydra. Dannel had intervened quickly, leaping into the chasm even as the reverberations of the collapse had faded, using his *feather fall* spell to ease him into a soft landing on the edges of the jagged mass of debris. He'd found Arun quickly, still struggling to free himself despite the pair of steel joists jutting from deep punctures in his side and hip. Once he'd helped the dwarf free himself and treated the most serious of his wounds, the others had made their way down to join them, descending on a rope Mole produced from her magical haversack.

Even before they explored the fissure, they'd gotten a quick reminder of what lay ahead for them. A corpse, half-encased in ice. Zenna had known what it was even before Arun confirmed it, with a dark growl.

"Drow elf."

It was impossible to discern much from the body of the frozen elf, but the chain links of the armor shirt he wore had been mithral, and glowed in response to Zenna's *detect magic* spell. Dannel wore that shirt now, the bright silvery links concealed by the darker colors of his tunic, letting him better fade into the shadows. Zenna hoped that the added protection of the magical mailshirt would help keep him safe, here in the realms of shadow.

It had taken them the better part of two days to get here, long hours descending ever-deeper into the mantle of Abeir-Toril. Zenna suspected that they haven't covered more than ten miles or so in raw distance from the fissure, but with all the twists and turns, ascents and descents over the uneven ground, she figured that they had probably walked at least twice that. They'd had two encounters in that time, although they'd happened so fast that she hadn't even had a chance to cast a spell. No, she corrected herself mentally, she had used a *scorching ray* to finish that troll, but by the time she'd reached the battle the creature was already down, with three of Dannel's arrows stuck in its torso, one leg bent at a weird angle from a blow of Arun's hammer, and half its side torn open by Hodge's axe. Zenna had arrived to see its terrible wounds already beginning to knit as the creature's regenerative properties begun to take hold, but her spell had put an end to that, turning the creature into a pyre. Dannel's new armor had proven its worth, keeping the creature from getting a rending hold on him, but his arm had borne deep gashes where one claw had momentarily gotten a grip on him. They were fortunate that the creature had been alone, Zenna mused; trolls were deadly foes at best.

The other encounter had come and gone even quicker. They'd been crossing a small cavern, a bubble in the rock that was bisected by the tunnel, when a trio of huge bats had detached from the darkness of the cavern roof and swept down toward them. This time Zenna was the first to spot the danger, and called out a warning to the others even as she'd fumbled with the string to her crossbow. She didn't get a shot off; the bats dove with a shriek, lunged at them with nasty bites that failed to connect with any of their targets, and then streaked off down the corridor. They hadn't come back, and they left one of their number bleeding out its life on the stones.

Two encounters, potentially deadly, but thus far no serious injuries. Too easy.

And now they were here, the tunnel opening onto the edge of a vast cavern. Below, the surface of the cavern was flat; too flat, Zenna thought, thinking that maybe the dark sheet that glistened slightly in the faint luminescence was the surface of an underground lake. The air here was thick and moist, bolstering that supposition. But most of their attention was drawn to the structure on the far side of the cavern, excavated from the cliff opposite. The most prominent feature was a bulbous construction that jutted out into the cavern proper, a building that to Zenna's eyes had the look of some great and terrible fish. Its eyes and mouth were dark circles that hinted at deeper spaces beyond them.

"Bhal-Hamatugn, I would presume," Dannel said.

“I’m not looking forward to taking a swim anytime soon,” Arun commented. “How we going to get across?”

“Let’s go down and take a look,” Zenna suggested.

They made their way slowly down the steep slope from where the tunnel entered the cavern, careful not to dislodge any loose stones or make any other loud noises that might give away their position. Zenna figured it was a useless effort; when they’d entered here Mole had been carrying her small miner’s lamp, and although she’d shuttered it once they’d seen that a cavern lay ahead, no doubt anything hostile in the fish-fortress had seen its flicker across the darkness of the cavern. Carrying light sources down here was all but guaranteed to ensure that any threats would see them before they were seen, but there was no alternative; Dannel and Mole both had excellent night-vision, but unlike Zenna and the dwarves, could not see in total blackness.

They made their way down to the floor of the cavern without incident. The glossy flat surface was indeed a lake, stretching entirely across the width of the cavern. Down here their view was obscured somewhat by a faint mist that hung above the surface of the water, and the complex on the far side of the lake was just a vague shadow superimposed against the sheer cliff beyond. The occasional sound of dripping water was the only sound, punctuated every now and again by a faint splash that might have been caused by anything.

“Cheerful place,” Mole said dryly.

“I dinna s’pose yer got a boat in that pack o’ yers,” Hodge queried.

“No, sorry,” the gnome said with a shrug.

“I can swim across and take a look,” Dannel suggested.

“You’re daft, elf, but there’s no doubting your courage,” Arun said. “These lakes tend to have nasty things living in them, and they don’t take kindly to outsiders making a disturbance.”

“Well, what’s your idea then?”

Zenna quieted them with a sudden, “Shh—look!”

They all turned to the lake, staring out through the mists and what Zenna indicated with a pointed finger. A dark shadow emerged from the swirling wisps of fog, taking form and resolving into a tall, gaunt, humanoid figure directing a long canoe across the lake toward them. It bore an oar in one hand, and a spear in the other, held aloft like a pinion missing its standard.

“What in all the hells be ‘at?” Hodge said, his loaded crossbow held readied in his hands.

Even with their sharp vision, Mole and Dannel couldn't define anything more than a shadow in the poor light. But Arun squinted into the murk, and as the strange boatman drew nearer he spat. "Goggler," he said. "Kuo-toa."

As if his statement had triggered the creature to action, the creature lowered its hands, letting its spear drop, and the paddle drag idly through the water in the wake of the angular craft. They could all see it, now, a cross between a fish and a man, with huge, bulbous eyes and a gaping mouth that seemed to suck at the air, the folds of flesh at its throat distending with each heavy breath. It sat there, watching them, for a long moment.

"Well, should we say something?" Mole whispered.

"It don' look friendly to me. Best give it a bolt, just to be safe," Hodge suggested, not taking his eyes from the creature.

It croaked something at them in a wet, guttural language, punctuated by clicks like the sound of bubbles popping.

"What's it saying?" Mole asked.

"It's Undercommon," Arun reported, his feelings about the creature evident in his tone and expression, even half-hidden by the faceplate of his helm. "It said something about the 'Eye of Darkness,' or somesuch, and offered to take us through it."

"Could be a trap," Hodge said.

"Well, of course it's a trap, silly," Mole said. "But still, better to be ambushed in a boat than swimming with your gear, I say."

"How 'bout we shoot it, then take the boat?" the dwarf returned.

"I suppose it didn't occur to you that maybe it understands what we're saying, that maybe these things have excellent hearing, and that the building over there—let alone this lake—may have a hundred of them watching us even as we speak?" Zenna hissed, the words coming out of the side of her mouth as she kept her eyes on the kuo-toa boatman. The creature just sat there, watching them, its alien expression inscrutable.

Dannel had silently stepped forward, until he stood on the very edge of the lake, the water sloshing softly against the leather of his boots.

"Now, what's that elf doin'?" Hodge asked.

As the others watched, Dannel began to sing, softly at first, his voice forming the outlines of a melody, wordless, the notes floating out across the water. The kuo-toa watched him intently, and seemed to tense for a moment, before sagging slightly, its body growing limp.

The song faded. Dannel beckoned, and the creature took up its paddle, driving the canoe toward them with several swift strokes. It drew the craft to a halt at the very edge of the lake, and croaked out something to them in greeting.

“It wants us to come with it,” Arun reported. “Is there a reason we should be trusting it, now, elf?”

Dannel turned to his companions, so that his body sheltered him from direct view from the kuo-toa. Quietly, he said, “I have set a charm upon the creature, so it will temporarily consider me a friend and ally. We must be careful, though; any hostile action upon it will disrupt the magic.” His eyes focused on Hodge as he spoke the final words.

“Bah,” the dwarf said. “Mark my words, it be leadin’ us into a trap.”

“Well, why don’t we ask it?” the elf replied, with a nod toward Arun.

The companions turned as one, and focused their attention upon the kuo-toa.

Chapter 105

Silence enfolded them, broken only by the soft, rhythmic splash of the kuo-toa’s oar into the flat surface of the lake. The mists formed a thick barrier all around them that pressed in close with clammy fingers against their flesh; it was as if the Underdark, the cavern, the very world about them had vanished, replaced only by a featureless, cold, wet void.

“Yer all as crazy as this goggler,” Hodge growled, his thick brows furrowed as he tried in vain to penetrate the murk.

The kuo-toa let out a croak that sounded uncannily loud in the surrounding quiet.

Their interrogation of the creature had yielded little of use, even with the prod of Dannel’s *charm* spell. Hodge’s judgment seemed to be accurate when it came to the kuo-toa’s state of mind, for it spoke in rambling, confused statements that Arun could make little sense of. When asked about Zenith Spintershield, the kuo-toa had replied, “I glimpse Zenith amid the great darkness, but he glimpses things beyond the dark where it is darker still. Dark than dark, yes. And I see what lies where Zenith sees, in the dark. The cold, wet dark. It’s dark, dark where I see Zenith. Are you from the dark?” When prodded about the number of guards in the complex, the kuo-toa returned with, “The children of the Sea Mother wait in the dark, wait, yes, many eyes, unblinking in the cold darkness, ever watching for her return.” When asked about who was in charge of the outpost, the kuo-toa’s answers got even more rambling, referring alternatively to someone named “Margh-Michto,” who sounded like a priest of sorts, and to someone else named “Dhorlot,” who the kuo-toa described as “the father of the sacred brood, the holy children of the Sea Mother, whose spawn will stand at Her side as the chosen.”

Well, at least there was one hopeful side to it, as Zenna had noted, “If they’re all as disoriented as this one is, maybe we won’t have such a tough time of it after all.”

“Spell or no, I’d not trust that one as far as I could toss him,” Hodge had added.

Their brief and mostly fruitless discussion had yielded little of concrete use, and they were ultimately left with the same unpleasant choices they'd faced before the creature had arrived. They'd elected finally to press on across the lake, using the boat and their guide while Dannel's spell retained its efficacy. The elf warned them that he could not guarantee that the spell would work again once this casting faded, but he reassured them that it would retain its hold upon the mind of their captive for at least a few more hours yet.

So now they steered a course across the lake toward the fish-shaped dome they'd seen earlier, from their vantage on the far side of the cavern. The kuo-toa seemed to have no difficulty guiding them through the mists, and soon they saw a dark form loom up out of the mists ahead of them. It was a stone pillar, its uneven shape truncated by a jagged line six feet above its base, the whole jutting at a slight angle from the edge of a stone platform that extended out over the edge of the water. As the canoe drew up to the platform, they could see that stairs rose up from it in a steep ascent. The mists thinned, and they could see that the staircase vanished into a gaping maw, the main entrance to the kuo-toa outpost. The resemblance of the structure to a giant fish was even more pronounced from this angle, and the dark mouth looked particularly forbidding when it seemed poised to swallow them up. The dark orbs of the fish's "eyes" gaped higher up, and each of the companions could feel the prickly feeling of being watched by those lifeless cavities.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they had sentries up there, watching," Arun said under his breath as their guide fastened the canoe to the pillar.

"Just act natural, like we belong here, friends coming for a visit," Dannel replied covertly.

"Comin' fer dinner, more like... as the main course," Hodge grumbled, taking up the rear as they started up the stairs. Their guide started babbling animatedly, gesturing wildly with its rubbery, webbed hands to punctuate its croaking statements.

"Canna yer shut that thing up?" Hodge asked.

"What's it saying, Arun?" Zenna asked.

"Gibberish," the paladin responded, "More babble about the 'Eye in the Dark'." The dwarf scanned the darkness around them, alert for any signs of trouble.

"I don't like the look that that fish is giving me," Mole said, staring up at the dark eyeholes that loomed above them as they drew nearer to the gaping mouth.

"You sure about this?" Zenna asked Dannel, quietly, as they came to stand in the black entry, the uneven stone ring of the building's mouth dripping fat droplets of water onto the steps, as the moisture in the air condensed upon the exterior stone.

The elf looked at her. Zenna of course could see his expression clearly, even in the half-light that filtered in from the cavern, but she realized that to him, her face had to be a vague shadow. Impelled by a sudden instinct, she reached out, touched his arm, trying to offer him some assurance, that she was in fact real, not just a shadowy illusion created by this place of evil and blackness.

"It's what we came here to do," Dannel said, finally.

"Well, let's be about it, then," Arun said decisively, stepping forward to take the lead, the clank of his mail resounding slightly against the stone tunnel that continued to rise beyond the fish's mouth.

"Wait a moment," the elf said, reaching into his pouch. "This damp is wreaking havoc with my bowstring, I'll need to swap out a new one."

"You and Mole will need light," Zenna added, as the elf changed out the string on his weapon.

"Got it covered," the gnome said, producing her miner's lamp once again from her magical backpack, and lighting it with a few strokes of flint on steel. As the warm glow of light spread from the wick, it shed a reassuring radiance on the pale skin of their collective faces. It also glistened on the wet skin of the kuo-toa, who croaked agitatedly at the bright flicker. In the real light of a flame, the creature looked even more a monstrosity, at home in this alien place of cold damp stone.

"It doesn't like the light," Arun said.

"Tell it that we need the light to make our way to the Eye," Dannel said, testing his new string before nocking an arrow to it and holding it ready to draw in his fist.

The kuo-toa quieted, and they made their way slowly up the staircase to a landing up above. The walls around them were curved, and it was as if they were indeed in the throat of a giant fish. Water was all around them, glistening on the walls and forming puddles wherever slight dips occurred in the floor. Narrow passages led off from the landing to their left and right, and directly in front of them, on the far side of the landing, stood a pair of massive stone doors. The doors were decorated in an undersea motif, and bore a carving depicting a lobster-headed woman devouring various other creatures.

"I *really* don't like the looks of her," Mole said, but she was already heading toward the doors.

"That's their Sea Mother," Arun said, "She's a real bi—" He caught himself, glancing back at the kuo-toa, but the creature seemed to have forgotten that they were there, staring at the doors with a look of fanatical devotion upon its face.

"Maybe we'd better go another way," Dannel suggested, "before heading right in the front door."

"I'll just take a quick look," Mole said. "We should know what to expect, no?" She reached the massive doors, against which she looked like a tiny child.

"You'll never get them open," Arun said, moving forward to join her.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Zenna said, with a sidelong look at the kuo-toa. It started suddenly, as if shaken from a dream back into awareness of its surroundings. Animated by the sight of two outsiders approaching the sacred doors, it croaked something, agitated...

Mole reached out, and placed her hand upon the door...

A pulse of raw sonic energy erupted in the hallway. Zenna felt something pop in her head, and felt a stinging pain bite hard somewhere deep inside her skull. Staggering from a sudden dizziness, she shook her head to clear it. Looking up, she saw that Mole was down on the ground, blood seeping from her nose and ears, pale, unmoving. A few paces away Arun was slumped against the wall of the corridor, groaning, stunned.

“Mole!” Zenna cried, rushing forward toward her downed friend. Dannel was only a step behind her, already drawing out his wand of healing.

Behind them, the kuo-toa had fallen to its knees, and now it emitted a loud, keening wail, almost painful in the wake of the sonic blast of the trap that Mole had triggered. “Shut that blasted thing up!” Zenna shouted, as she fell forward to kneel at Mole’s side. Her friend’s face was stained with trails of blood, and she didn’t respond as Zenna tugged at her, shook her. “Mole, you have to wake up,” the tiefling urged, her voice thick with emotion. “You can’t die on me, not after all we’ve been through...”

Hodge came up behind the wailing kuo-toa, and with a mighty two-handed stroke brought his axe down hard onto the creature’s spine. The kuo-toa went down hard, its limbs flailing, but to the dwarf’s amazement immediately started trying to get back up, even though its back had surely been crushed by the sheer force of the blow. Hodge recovered quickly, though, and before the kuo-toa could flop back to its feet, he slammed Betsy down onto the side of its neck, dropping it with a gush of turgid black blood that sprayed all over the damp stone around them.

“Mole!” Zenna cried, holding her friend against her, shaking. She was only vaguely aware of Dannel’s voice, shouting at her.

“Damn it, Zenna, let me heal her! She’s alive, listen to me, she’s alive, but we have to help her now!”

The words finally broke through, and Zenna pulled back to see the blue glow of healing around Mole’s face as Dannel poured healing energy into her. “She... she’s not breathing...” she said, faltering.

“Help me, then!” Dannel said, focusing his amber eyes upon the tiefling. “Use your power, Zenna, help Mole find her way back!”

Zenna nodded, anger and shame merging inside herself—how could she have let herself come apart so, when her friend needed her? She opened her mind to the power she’d come to know inside of her, felt that torrent of life-giving energy that was the gift of... Azuth? Esbar Tolerathkas? Her own heritage, some spark that lay deep within her? She still didn’t know the answer to that one, but she knew that she had to trust the power, to open herself to it, in order to bring her friend back from the brink.

She shook as a sudden jolt of positive energy flowed through her into her friend, more raw and pure than she'd felt when she'd cast healing spells before. Mole stirred, and her mouth opened as she drew in a huge, hungry breath of air, before coughing, flecks of blood staining her lips.

"Ow..." the gnome said, finally, when she could speak.

"Mole..." Zenna said, her tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

Dannel rose to tend to Arun, who'd slumped down against the wall, only half-conscious from the backblast of the sonic glyph. But even as the elf lifted his wand to help the paladin, his keen ears picked up the sounds of croaking, coming from one of the side passages back at the landing.

Hodge had heard it too. "We got company comin'," he said, lifting his bloody axe.

And thus, with two members of their company barely clinging to life, Bhal-Hamatugn roused, and prepared a cold-blooded welcome for the intruders from the surface who had come to disturb its halls.

Chapter 106

"What in the blasted... what happened?" Arun said, shaking his head to clear it as Dannel continued to use his healing wand upon the injured paladin.

It's a good thing we weren't all standing in front of those doors when that glyph hit, the elf thought to himself. From the damage he'd seen Mole and Arun absorb, he doubted that he and Zenna would have even survived the full force of the blast.

"We've got trouble," the elf said simply. "Best prepare for a fight."

The dwarf nodded, and invoked the power of his patron, calling upon the divine power of his god to further heal his wounds and restore the strength he would need in the upcoming confrontation.

"Here they come, sounds like a lot o' 'em," Hodge warned, moving into position beside one of the side passages. They could all here it, the sounds of angry goggling coming from the stirred garrison of the outpost.

"Zenna," Dannel said, glancing over at his shoulder to where the tiefling continued to help Mole, using her potent healing wand now to channel more life-giving positive energy into her. The rogue was slow to get up, her body literally shaky after the force of the sonic blast that had nearly killed her, but Dannel knew that they didn't have time to readjust to the situation.

"We are ready," Zenna replied, getting to her feet.

“Use that wand to heal Arun,” the elf commanded, moving to join Hodge. The dwarf looked up and saw him coming, and nodded as the sound of footsteps splashing through the puddles in the corridor reached them.

The dwarf roared as the first kuo-toa stepped into view, the fish-creature clad in a web-harness and sporting a tiny crossbow in one hand, and a steel rapier in the other. Hodge chopped at it with Betsy, but the kuo-toa, surprisingly quick for a creature of its gangliness and awkward form, darted nimbly to the side, avoiding the stroke. A second creature exploded from the passage behind it, tumbling past the dwarf and taking up a position beyond him, threatening his flank. It lifted its rapier to strike, but let out a sudden cry as Dannel fired an arrow into it at point-blank range, the shaft sinking deep with a meaty plop into its side.

“More coming!” he warned, drawing out another shaft from his quiver even as the injured kuo-toa shifted to face him.

True to his warning, more of the fish-men continued to pour out of the passageway, moving swiftly to attack the intruders. Two more joined in assaulting the hard-pressed Hodge, who was soon sporting a pair of deep punctures that spilled red blood down his arm and torso. The dwarf’s light armor was insufficient to deflect the thrusts from the sharp rapiers carried by the kuo-toa, and they fought together with merciless efficiency, flanking him to open up devastating sneak attacks that found the holes in his defenses. He refused to give way, however, cutting deep into the torso of one of his attackers with Betsy.

Several other kuo-toa swept around the dwarf and came at Dannel, who dropped his first foe with a second arrow but then had to draw his sword as three others pressed him in close combat, tumbling forward to lunge at him with their rapiers. Giving ground he avoided being flanked in that initial rush, but there was only so far he could go, with the heavy stone doors—and his injured companions—behind him. The sound of metal ringing on metal filled the corridor as his longsword clashed off one thrusting rapier after another, the elf barely keeping himself intact as he fought off his foes.

Hodge and Dannel barely withstood that initial rush, but it was enough to give their friends time to join in the fray.

Arun, his injuries mostly restored by the various healing spells expended upon him, most notably a charge from Zenna’s wand of *cure serious wounds*, charged boldly into the fray. Seeing Hodge in more serious trouble than Dannel, at least for the moment, he moved to help the surrounded dwarf, launching himself at the one flanking him from behind. His hammer, backed by his own considerable strength and the *divine favor* of Moradin, came up in a potent sweep that crushed into the kuo-toa from the backside, driving it roughly away from Hodge. The kuo-toa fell but bounced up again almost as quickly, hurling itself at the paladin with a lunge aimed at the open slit in the front of his helm. Arun ducked the blow, which slid harmlessly off of the hard steel of his helmet, and responded with a crushing strike that caved in one side of the fish-man’s body, knocking it once more to the ground.

That time it didn’t get back up.

Mole, despite still feeling a bit unsteady, drew her own sword and rushed forward into the melee. Dannel's foes had finally managed to flank him, and one stabbed him deep in the hip as it tumbled past, forcing him to half-fall against the nearby wall, only narrowly parrying another thrust from another attacker. It was clear that the elf would not be able to stand against these foes for long. But Mole turned the flanker into the flanker, as she came up behind the kuo-toa, and thrust her small sword to the hilt into its back. The kuo-toa stiffened, and fell, a vital organ pierced by the canny rogue's attack.

Zenna, meanwhile, had turned from healing Arun to call up a magical *shield*, to complement the *mage armor* she'd conjured earlier. She then targeted one of Dannel's foes with a *daze* spell, but the kuo-toa shook off the effect. Drawing out her wand of *burning hands*, she moved closer to the melee, looking for a clear angle where she could use it without roasting her friends.

She didn't see the final guard, who'd emerged from the passage unable to find a clear space to fit into the raging melee. It spotted her, though, clearly a magic-user from the translucent shield of blue energy that hung in the air in front of her, and lifted its small bow to fire. The dart flew truly through the crowded battleground in the corridor, but was turned at the last instant by Zenna's magical defenses.

"I was wonderin' when you'd see fit to join the fun!" Hodge roared to Arun, slamming his axe into the side of the kuo-toa he'd already wounded, dropping it to the ground in a bloody mess. His remaining attacker didn't retreat, though, and the one that had shot at Zenna moved quickly forward to fill the gap, the two thrusting at the dwarf with their rapiers anew. Hodge managed to block the first with his shield, but the second avoided that barrier and stabbed deep into his side, penetrating through the steel links of his chain shirt. The dwarf groaned and sagged backward against the wall, the two kuo-toa pressing him hard.

Arun saw that his ally was in trouble, and quickly moved to help him. He aimed a mighty blow at one of the kuo-toa battling Hodge that missed, but drew the attention of the foe toward him.

Dannel narrowly dodged another vicious cut from a kuo-toa blade, and slashed at it with a weak slash that only resulted in a light cut along its arm. Even though Mole's presence had removed the danger of being flanked, the two kuo-toa were still dangerous adversaries, a fact that was proven as the second attacker stabbed him hard in the shoulder. Dannel growled and yanked himself free from the wicked tip of the kuo-toa blade, will alone now keeping him standing.

Zenna, calling upon her magic, fired a blast of liquid flame into the head of one of the two creatures attacking the elf. The *scorching ray* roasted it in the heartbeats that the flames splashed over the kuo-toa, and when the bright ray faded into wisps of smoke, the fish-man fell, dead. Mole rushed forward to engage the other remaining creature, which began to draw back, realizing that it was outmatched.

The two dwarves continued to fight in unison against the two remaining guards on the far flank, holding their ground despite their injuries. Hodge was now covered in trails of his own blood that had run down under his armor to his breeches, and continued to fight on despite the red droplets that sprayed from him with each sudden movement. It was clear

that he was weakening, however, and his adversary continued to try and find a way through his weaving axe and shield for a lethal finishing strike. Its fellow, which had turned to face Arun, similarly pressed its assault, but while it managed to dodge another potent blow from the paladin's hammer, its own attacks were blunted by the strong layers of the dwarf's magical plate armor.

As the sound of metal clanging on metal, mingled with the cries of the adventurers and the goggling of the fish-men, filled the corridor, Zenna suddenly became aware of another sound, the noise of stone grinding on stone...

Her eyes widened in horror as she turned around to see the great stone portals behind them slowly opening, the slimy hands of more kuo-toa already visible around the edge of the jam as the gap between them grew steadily wider.

Chapter 107

The heavy portals swung open, discharging another company of guards, armed like the first cadre with small hand crossbows and drawn rapiers. As they spotted Zenna two lifted their bows and fired, while several others rushed forward, blades raised to attack. Behind them could be seen the shadowy form of another kuo-toa, clad in the bizarre raiment of a lesser priest, called whips in the terminology of the fish-men.

The two darts glanced off of the potent magical defenses that Zenna had raised, but she didn't even notice, already lost in the casting of another spell. Even as the two foremost kuo-toa rushed at her, a blaze of colored light erupted from her fingertips, engulfing the fish-creatures and extending fully to the gap in the door, spilling through to catch up the two archers in the effect. As the *color spray* faded the all four kuo-toa warriors stood there stunned by the sensory overload of the spell, temporarily blinded, but Zenna could hear the angry croaking from the priest, no doubt exhorting its followers to renew the attack. From somewhere beyond her field of vision, she heard other kuo-toa voices, answering the whip's call.

"There's more of them!" Zenna cried, backing up. Calling upon her innate powers, she drew down a sphere of *darkness* upon the doorway, hoping to gain them just a few seconds' more time.

The rest of the battle in the corridor was rapidly drawing to a close, with the companions victorious but heavily battered. Arun had finally knocked down his adversary with a solid blow to the creature's fishy head, and together he and Hodge were putting the finish to their last foe, the kuo-toa already down and struggling with futility to get up and away. The last one facing Mole and Dannel had also tried to flee, but didn't get very far before Mole's blade had sliced through its hamstring, bringing it down for a final killing thrust.

Dannel looked like he could barely stand, but he turned at Zenna's warning, and sheathed his sword as he took up his longbow again. "We've got to retreat!" he urged. "Back to the boat."

None of the others offered dissent; while Arun hadn't taken any more damage in the melee, Hodge was pale beneath the layer of whiskers covering his face, pressing his arm against his side in an attempt to staunch the oozing flow of blood from one of his several wounds. But he offered no complaint as they made their way painfully down the stairs. Dannel brought up the rear, and fired an arrow over his shoulder at one of the warriors that Zenna had stunned, and which was already beginning to recover. The fish-man took the hit hard, and floundered, but was clearly not going to be taken out of the fight by one shot.

Mole came up beside him, already digging into her magical pack for something. "Go!" Dannel urged, already backing down the stairs, but the gnome ignored him as the haversack produced her objective, a fat quart-sized ceramic flask.

"Not again!" the elf said, but the gnome only offered a mischievous grin as she slammed the flask down at the head of the stairs. The impact released a long slick of thick black grease, that splayed out over the wet stones like dark fingers grasping the rock.

"Okay, let's go," the gnome said, darting down the steps with long, sure-footed strides, reaching the bottom in advance of the elf thanks to her magical boots.

Evil croaking sounds issued from the mouth of the massive fish-temple as they made their way back down to the stone dock. Arun and Hodge had already clambered onto the boat, and Zenna was helping to hold it steady as Mole and Dannel caught up to them and boarded. They had only the one oar left by the kuo-toa boatman, but Hodge supplemented it with powerful if awkward strokes from his axe. Even as they turned back into the mists they heard the loud cry of a kuo-toa—the priest, it looked like—as it appeared in the dark opening of the fish-mouth. Dannel, sitting in the prow of the craft in a half-crouch, quickly drew and fired, but with the movement of the canoe the arrow missed well to the left, shattering on the hard stone.

"Damn ye, elf, quit rockin' the boat, it be unsteady enough to start with!" Hodge cursed.

More kuo-toa forms appeared around the priest, and soon small darts were landing around them as the canoe made its way into the mists. One plinked off of Arun's shoulder plate, while a second stabbed into the side of the canoe, a few inches from Mole's thigh. The gnome was twisting around, trying to get a good look at their attackers through the mists.

"Did any of them slip on the grease? I can't see!"

But then the mists swallowed them up, and once more the world around them was lost to shadow.

"We're not safe yet," Dannel urged them. "Remember, kuo-toa can swim as easily as you or I walk on solid ground."

"I'm rowin' as fast as I can, elf!" Hodge sputtered, and it was true, although his face seemed almost like a death mask now, and his breath rattled in his throat with every stroke of his axe.

“Let me help you,” Zenna said, reaching around Arun to touch the wounded dwarf with her wand. The healing energy coursed into him, and as the blue glow faded Hodge exclaimed, “Ah, now that’s better ‘an even a mug of stout!”

Zenna turned back to the front of the boat. “You’re barely standing yourself, Dannel,” she said, offering the wand.

“I’ve got it,” the elf said, drawing out his own wand of minor healing, humming the musical notes that activated its power. Soon the bleeding from his own wounds had stopped, although Zenna could tell that he was still more than a bit unsteady from the lost blood.

Fine, if he wants to be stubborn, let him, she thought, stabbing the wand back into its pocket with perhaps more force than was exactly necessary. Inwardly, she was worried; she could sense that the healing wand was all but depleted, and her own spells had been nearly all expended in the brief but desperate struggle. She glanced over at Mole, who had produced an oblong object from her backpack, and was now using it as an improvised oar to help the dwarves drive the boat forward across the lake. Her efforts were probably of little help to their muscular strokes, but she was still helping, adding her incremental efforts to the survival of the group.

Odd, to have had to come to a place like this, to find a group of people to whom I actually belong, she thought. Other images popped unbidden into her mind, thoughts of a home she’d once had and people she’d once loved... and now? She squashed such musings ruthlessly, forcing herself to focus on the immediate danger. Dannel was right, while they were out of sight of their foes for the moment, it would be foolish to assume that the kuo-toa would not pursue them, or that other dangers did not exist here in the depths of the Underdark.

Dannel leapt out of the boat with such abruptness that Zenna started, before realizing that they had arrived at the far shore of the lake. The elf helped them pull the canoe up onto the rocky shoreline, and they quickly disembarked. Hodge had actually started up the slope a few paces back toward the tunnel entrance, before Dannel called him back.

“Don’t forget the canoe.”

Hodge looked at him with incredulity. “What? Yer not meanin’ what I think yer meanin’?”

Dannel opened his mouth to speak, but Arun beat him to it. “He’s right, we’re not done here, and we’ll be needing the boat when we come back.”

“In case yer hadn’t noticed, them things cleaned up on us!” Hodge said. “And they’ll be waitin’ fer ya, when yer be comin’ back!”

“I gave my word,” Arun said simply, taking up the rear of the canoe, while Dannel lifted the front. They started up the slope, with Mole and Zenna watching for any signs of danger.

“Cheer up!” Mole said, as she passed the dwarf. “At least we’re all still alive this time!”

“Yer all daft,” the dwarf grumbled, but he followed after them, glancing back occasionally at the still lake behind them. Belatedly something occurred to him. “What do yer mean, ‘this time?’” he asked, rushing to catch up to the others.

Chapter 108

They returned to a small cavern they’d passed on their route to Bhal-Hamatugn, about a mile distant from the city. The place was little more than a widening of the tunnel, a small bubble in the rock, but it featured a stony overhang that could be easily defended by someone perched up above. Exhausted from the battle and their hurried flight, the companions forced the difficult ascent with the aid of Mole’s rope, dragging the canoe up after them. They lacked the resources for a fire, but Mole’s magical bag provided a variety of carefully packed foodstuffs, so they were at least able to enjoy a satisfying repast. Mole turned her lamp down to where a bare flicker of flame clung to the wick, and the darkness settled around them until it was nearly total.

“How are we doing for supplies?” Zenna asked, with a nod at the pack.

“Fair,” Mole said. “Enough for the hike back, plus a day or two extra, if we don’t splurge.” She shot Hodge a look as she said it, and the dwarf paused in the midst of devouring a flat corn cake the size of a dinner plate.

“Well, at least there’s plenty of water down here,” Zenna offered.

The five of them sat in silence in the darkness for a moment, weary to the point of collapse, but unwilling to rest until they had settled at least the outline of their intent.

“We’re going to need to refine our tactics,” Zenna suggested finally.

Arun turned to her. “Just keep supporting us with your healing and spells,” the dwarf said. “Leave the tactics to us warriors.”

Zenna just looked at him in disbelief. A mental image flashed in her mind, a composite of the dozens of times that the paladin had charged blindly into danger, often against foes that far outnumbered them. The irony was so thick that her mouth had opened to offer a stinging retort, but then she heard a familiar voice in her mind. Advice, once given by her stepmother, long ago.

The trick to handling men, she’d told her, isn’t so much that they have to be in charge all the time. They just have to think they’re in charge. Give them that illusion, and it won’t matter that you are pursuing the sensible course from behind their backs...

“Well, at least there be a sight fewer o’ them than there were before,” Hodge offered.

“I don’t know about that,” Dannel replied. “That one with the shield, he had the look of a cleric, what they call ‘whips’. I’m sure that he was able to stabilize at least some of the fallen; we may see some of them again on our next visit.”

“Yer never got nothin’ good to say ‘bout nothin’, do yer?”

“I believe in being realistic,” the elf said.

“You do not have to come with us,” Zenna said. “If you prefer, wait here until we return; this site is readily defensible.”

Hodge shot a quick glance at Arun before responding. “And miss my share of the treasure? I dinna say I’d not go, but nay do I be wantin’ to throw me life away,” he growled.

“Enough then,” Arun said. “We are resolute; the decision is made. Take your rest. I will stand first watch.” The paladin rose and crossed to the edge of the overhang, perched fifteen feet above the floor of the main tunnel below. The others drew out their blankets and tried to find someplace comfortable on the hard stone. In their current state of exhaustion, it wasn’t long before they all drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The cavern was much as she remembered it, so much so that she felt a profound sense of *deja vu*, even the sound of Arun dipping the oar into the water echoing off of her memories of the earlier trip. The mists were as thick and cloying, and seemed even more malicious this time, hiding what might be empty space ahead, or a score of *kuo-toa* warriors waiting for them. They would find out, soon enough...

“It’s quiet,” Dannel’s voice drifted back to her, from the bow of the canoe. “Too quiet.”

Arun lifted the oar, and a pure silence descended upon them. Zenna felt a vague uneasiness suffuse her, edged by a growing fear. Dark shapes flashed by them in the water beneath the canoe. Zenna’s eyes widened in alarm...

The water around them erupted in noise and spray, as rubbery hands grasped onto the sides of the canoe. Zenna heard a scream—Mole’s voice—as the canoe tilted dangerously, and she fought to retain her balance as more hands clasped onto the sides and pulled or pushed. She saw Arun bring his hammer down onto the head of one of the *kuo-toa*, but even as it sank beneath the surface of the lake, the boat lurched deeper and both dwarves went tumbling over the side, hitting the water with a loud splash. Zenna reached out for Hodge, who was the closest to her, but even as she tried to grab his outstretched hand, a pair of rubbery hands closed over his face, and he vanished beneath the water.

Then the canoe went over, and she found herself in the water. The weight of her pouches and clothing weighed her down, threatening to drag her under, but by flailing out violently with her hands and feet, she found that she could just keep her head above water. She wasn’t a strong swimmer, even in the best of circumstances, and as she cast around desperately for the canoe, having gotten all turned around in the chaos, she knew that she would never be able to reach either shore.

Then she saw a dark head crest the surface of the water, coming toward her. There was nothing she could do, as the *kuo-toa* came closer, closer...

“Zenna!”

Chapter 109

“Zenna!”

The tiefling shot up, her breath frozen in her lungs like the water she'd drunk in on being knocked from the canoe...

She looked around, disoriented. She was on the outcropping, her blanket gathered in a pile around her legs, Dannel crouched over her, a look of concern on his face.

It was just a dream. A dream. Relief flooded her, and she began to shake.

“You were having a nightmare,” Dannel said, softly. He took her into his arms, and while Zenna hated showing him this weakness, she was inwardly grateful for his reassuring presence.

“We... we were in the boat, heading back across the lake,” she said into his shoulder, wishing that her voice was more even than it was. “They swam up from below, they overturned the canoe, we all... we all...”

“Shhh,” he said, caressing her hair. “It was just a dream.”

She drew back enough to clearly meet his eyes. “A warning. They'll be waiting for us, Dannel.”

The elf nodded. “I know. But what else can we do? There's no other way; the lake fills the entire floor of the cavern, and the walls to either side are sheer cliffs.”

“There has to be another way,” Zenna said.

Her dream had faded enough for her to recover an awareness of her surroundings. Mole and Hodge were still asleep, and Arun was still perched at the edge of the outcropping. “How long has it been?” she asked the elf, unable to gauge the passing of time her in the depths beneath the world above.

“Six or seven hours, I think,” he replied.

Zenna rose, adjusting her clothes and settling her cloak more comfortably about her shoulders. She still felt a chill, but whether it was due to the cold air of these tunnels, or the aftereffects of her dream, she couldn't be certain.

“You need some rest as well, Arun,” she said, kneeling beside him on the cold stone.

The dwarf did not immediately reply, and Zenna realized that his eyes were closed, his mouth moving slightly in silent words. She realized that he was probably praying to his

god, in a way that she never truly did, to her more enigmatic patron. She moved to get up and back away, to leave the paladin his privacy, but he turned and looked at her.

“You do not have to go.”

“I don’t wish to intrude upon your prayers.”

“You are not intruding. You are troubled; I heard your distress earlier.”

“It was just a dream. Dark dreams, for a dark place.”

“Yes,” Arun said. “Dark, true... but the Underdark can also be a place of beauty, of wonders hidden forever from the light of the world above. My people, the dwarves of the Rift, spend much time in these depths; many among my folk never visit the surface, or only very rarely.”

“But there are so many terrible things that dwell down here. The drow, mind flayers, duergar, aberrations, grimlocks, others...”

“Is that truly different from the world above? Some of the dangers above wear nicer faces, but there is just as much evil there as there is here.”

Zenna nodded, acknowledging the justice of the remark.

“You are worried about our return to Bhal-Hamatugn,” Arun finally stated. Zenna nodded. “I feel it as well.”

“They will be waiting for us,” she said. “There’s something more going on here, something beyond which we came here for. I’ve felt it ever since we spoke to that insane boatman. I fear that we may be walking into a trap.”

“Then we shall have to do something that they do not expect,” the dwarf said. He nodded to himself, as if coming to a decision. “And I shall have to accept the legacy of my heritage.”

“What do you mean?”

But Arun refused to elaborate, asking that she leave him to conclude his prayers. The others were already stirring, so Zenna turned back to help prepare the “morning” meal and strike their camp for travel. For the most part, that involved tucking items back into Mole’s magical backpack for storage; the carrying capacity of the magical haversack was truly impressive.

We’ll be in trouble if we manage to lose that, she thought. *Gods, you’re cheerful this morning,* she added to herself, ruefully.

The companions prepared to depart. Arun joined them as they were readying to leave, accepting his rations without comment and eating quickly before taking up his hammer and

shield. Using Mole's rope once again, they lowered the canoe to the tunnel floor before descending themselves. In a matter of minutes, they were on their way again.

Back to Bhal-Hamatugn.

Chapter 110

The journey back to the cavern was uneventful, and before too long they stood at the entrance to the huge cavern where Bhal-Hamatugn was situated. The place was as they had left it, and while they could make out the outlines of the fortress through the omnipresent mists, there was no indicator of anyone or anything moving about.

"Well, here we are again," Dannel said simply. The five of them remained crouched in the tunnel, concealed from casual view by the stones that framed the uneven entrance to the Underdark passageway.

"If they've got any kind of watch at all, they'll see us making our way down to the lake," Zenna said. "And with the mists blocking our view at the level of the cavern floor, they could slip into the lake and assault the canoe at any point, without us being able to see them coming."

Dannel nodded, and sighed. "Again, if you have an alternative plan, I'd be happy to hear it," he said.

Arun rose. "Give me a moment," he said. Before any of the others could comment, he turned and walked a short distance back down the tunnel. Reaching a flat spot a stone's throw distant, he knelt, removing his helmet and placing his hammer shaft-down on the stone before him. Holding the hammer with both hands to balance it, he pressed his forehead to its cold metal head.

"Great All-father," he said, his voice a low rumble, not carrying more than a few paces away, "your servant calls upon your aid. We face a potent evil, here in the deep places..."

"What's he doing?" Mole asked, as she and the others watched him from the mouth of the tunnel.

"Praying, I think," Dannel said.

"Oh? Does that help?" the gnome asked. "I'd offer one to Garl, but he'd probably be just as likely to sink the canoe, for a laugh."

"Hsst!" Zenna said. "Something's coming!" She pointed down the tunnel, where she'd caught sight of a dark form that had seemingly seeped out of the very stones of the tunnel wall, and now approached Arun.

"I can't see it!" Dannel said, but he set an arrow to his bowstring anyway. He considered a *light* cantrip, but even as the thought appeared he glanced over his shoulder at the kuo-toa cavern; the spell would give away their position like a beacon.

“What in the blazes!” Hodge said. He’d raised his crossbow, but the loaded bolt had fallen free, making a small noise as the steel head hit the stone floor and clattered about.

The words of a spell came to Zenna’s mind, but even as she considered which magic to hurl at the newcomer, realization washed over her. She held up a hand to forestall the others. “Wait,” she said, stepping forward toward Arun.

“Zenna!” Dannel said, in alarm.

They followed her as she approached. The dark shadow had moved to a position directly above the paladin, who now slowly rose up, looking up in amazement. As they drew nearer, they could see that the creature was a massive lizard, its limbs articulated in slender but muscular claws that gripped the wall of the tunnel, holding it in place as if the sheer surface were a floor. Its scaled hide was flawless, burnished with a faintly golden sheen that was lost in the darkness of the tunnel, and there was an intelligence in the dark golden orbs of its eyes. A ridge across its back formed a sort of saddle, and it looked strong enough to support any of them with ease. It regarded Arun with clear deference, awaiting his command.

“Arun...” Zenna said, staring up in wonder at the giant lizard. “Where did this come from?”

“Moradin sent him,” the paladin replied. “The Sacred Creepers are rarely sent to any but the most devoted and powerful members of my order, the champions of the Deep Halls. I... I did not believe that one would come to me, but our need was great...”

Zenna laid a hand on the dwarf’s armored shoulder. “It does not surprise me,” she said softly. “I know of no greater champion against evil, and no man of greater conviction.”

Arun laid a hand upon the celestial lizard’s flank, and its long forked tongue darted out to caress his bare face.

“With your ally, we can come at Bhal-Hamatugn in a way that our foes are not expecting, perhaps,” Dannel offered.

Arun nodded in agreement. But Hodge shook his head.

“Well, it be nice to have a pack animal, but how’s that thing gonna help us get across the lake...” His eyes widened in sudden realization. “Nay, yer don’t be thinkin’...” The dwarf paled. “Yer all touched, yer are!”

“Oh, this’ll be fun!” Mole said, hopping up into the air in her excitement.

Chapter 111

“Well, so far so good,” Dannel whispered. “That wasn’t so bad, eh?”

Zenna shook her head. "I'll wait until Hodge and Mole make it over before I rest easily," she replied. "And then we still have to get inside, without alerting the whole place."

"You worry too much," he said with a grin. The elf crept forward, slowly, careful to keep his profile low against the damp stone. Zenna kept her position, close against a looming stone projection that slanted up fifteen feet above her, while Arun remained yet further back, far from any of the edges that promised only a precipitous fall at the slightest careless step.

The three of them were perched atop the massive back of the stone "fish" that comprised the main structure of Bhal-Hamatugh. Behind them the stone of the temple structure merged with the steep slant of the cavern's cliff wall. Elaborate stonework that had no doubt been striking at one point was now muted, worn down by centuries of action of wind and water, and coated with a thin layer of slick muck. The air was thick with moisture, and a hundred smells that warred with each other with every breath, until the nose was overwhelmed by them.

Zenna glanced up, but it was hopeless; her darkvision couldn't penetrate farther than a good sixty feet or so, and the faint illumination cast by the glowing lichens that coated the cavern walls was insufficient to reveal what she was looking for. At least that same darkness would protect Mole and Hodge from the watchful eyes of the kuo-toa.

At least she hoped so.

Dannel crept slowly back to her. "See anything?" she asked.

"Still quiet," the elf replied. "I didn't see any obvious guards, but it's damned hard to see anything in this murk, and the mists climb almost to the mouth of the fish."

She reminded herself that his vision, despite his keen elven senses, was only as good as the light that was available. She opened her mouth to say something else, but abruptly caught sight of a shadow that had shifted along the ceiling of the cavern above. "There!" she hissed.

* * * * *

Balthazar Hodge wasn't having a very fun time; in fact, he was about as terrified as he could ever remember being before. Dangling upside down, lashed to the back of a giant lizard, the floor VERY far down below. His experience wasn't improved by the fact that that damned gnomish girl strapped in behind him seemed to be having the time of her life.

"There they are," came Mole's voice over his shoulder, even her whisper sounding her enthusiasm clearly. She—blast it—leaned forward against the straps, twisting her body around his frame to get a better view.

"Bloody blazes, stop yer shiftin', the beastie will lose its grip!" he warned, barely catching himself before the words came out in an undignified shriek.

“Oh, don’t worry, she’s very good at climbing... and don’t forget, Clinger made it across and back twice already! Hey, do you think Arun will mind, that I named her? Clinger just seems so appropriate...”

But Hodge was unable to reply, forced to spend all of his effort just to keep from losing his morning meal as the lizard started down the far side of the cavern, toward the roof of the massive structure where the others were already waiting.

The sure-footed mount continued down the cliff face without hesitation, managing a constant pace despite the heavy and shifting burden upon its back. Hodge, tied in place by ropes slung around the creature, found himself looking straight down at the roof of the temple structure below. For a moment the dwarf felt a strange twisting sensation, as if the cavern were spinning around him, then he felt a lurch as something pressed against his back, seemingly intent on pushing him out of his precarious perch.

It was Mole, trying to get a better view around the considerable bulk of the dwarf. Hodge opened his mouth to speak, but his words froze in his throat as the lizard abruptly shifted, turning to work its way around a sudden gap in the cliff face. Hodge tried to hold onto something, anything, his hyperactive senses *certain* that the ropes were giving way...

His sudden movement caused his axe, Betsy, to slip out of the looped length of leather cord that held it at his side. Mole offered a warning, and made a precarious grab for it that nearly caused Hodge’s heart to stop beating in his chest. As she hung there, on his shoulder, he realized that she wasn’t roped in, that she was simply balancing on his back as the lizard continued down the cliff face!

The axe tumbled away into the darkness, plummeting toward the ground below. A loud clang echoed through the chamber, as the waraxe impacted hard against the side of the kuo-toan building, followed a few heartbeats later by another rattle as it settled onto the uneven stones of the cavern floor.

Almost immediately, a pair of kuo-toa emerged from the mouth of the great stone fish, looking around warily, loaded hand-crossbows clutched in one hand, their slender rapiers in the other. For a few seconds everything was still. The kuo-toa started in the direction of the cavern where the axe had finally come to rest, but their attention was drawn upward by a sudden exclamation.

All of the shifting and abuse to the makeshift harness of rope holding the passengers in place across the back of the giant lizard had taken its toll. Even as they neared the relative safety of the curving roof of the fish-building, a length of rope shifted, and Hodge slipped free with an unavoidable cry of alarm. Mole, clinging to his back, let out a, “whoah!” as the two of them slid from the back of the lizard into the back void beneath them.

Chapter 112

Mole made a desperate grab for something, anything, to arrest their fall, but the remaining ropes, twisting with the movements of the lizard, escaped her grasp. They started falling... but abruptly Mole found herself jerked to a rough halt. Instinct rather than conscious

thought had her clutch onto the straps of Hodge's armor, even though it felt as though her arms were being ripped from her sockets as the full weight of the dwarf snapped down onto them.

Hanging freely in space, a dwarf dangling beneath her, Mole looked up to see the giant lizard's face directly above her, its jaws locked onto her magical backpack. She thought she saw remonstrance in its eyes, but she couldn't be sure.

"Nice catch, Clinger!" she said. "Don't let go!" From below a string of expletives sounded from Hodge, whose feet kicked uselessly out over the void. Mole knew that she couldn't hold him for long; gods, the dwarf was *heavy*!

As if matters weren't already complicated enough, a small crossbow bolt shattered against the cliff face behind her, a pace from her head. There were kuo-toa below, shooting at them!

"Great," she said dryly, echoing Zenna's tone perfectly. She looked down at the roof below, trying to judge the distance remaining; it looked to be about fifty feet, she guessed.

The two kuo-toa, goggling animatedly in their strange language, reloaded their small crossbows. But even as one lifted its weapon, taking aim at the subterranean lizard holding onto the two intruders this time, an arrow slammed into its shoulder. Croaking out in pain, the fish-man dropped its bow and staggered. The other fired its weapon at the archer now visible atop the sacred temple, then the two moved quickly to take cover behind some nearby rocks. They continued croaking loudly, the sound no doubt clearly audible to the rest of the kuo-toa force still within the structure.

"Dannel!" Zenna said, drawing the elf's attention from the two kuo-toa who'd taken cover, back up to where Mole and Hodge were dangling from the mouth of the giant lizard precariously clinging to the cliff wall above them. The cliff face actually sloped back as it neared the cavern floor, so that the two adventurers couldn't even try to grab onto the uneven surface of the stone. Arun stood there, helpless to do anything to aid his friends.

Suddenly, with a sound of tearing fabric, Mole and Hodge broke free and tumbled down.

Dannel reacted instantly, lifting his hand even as he sang out the melodic resonances of a spell. The potent energies of the *feather fall* enchantment enfolded the two falling adventurers, and their precipitous descent slowed to a gentle drift. Hodge, falling back-first toward the ground, didn't immediately recognize the change, and he bumped awkwardly against the sloping summit of the kuo-toa temple, tumbling down the side of the building in a jumble of arms, legs, and assorted equipment. Fortunately the spell's power remained in effect until he hit the ground, but even so he landed in heap, dazed and more than a bit confused.

"That weren't so bad as I thought," he finally managed to say, as he staggered to his feet, just in time to see a company of kuo-toa emerge from the building and start around to his location.

Mole landed only moments after Hodge, but she'd gotten her bearings far quicker, and she was able to dig the toes of her boots onto the slimy slanting surface and avoid falling any further. She cautiously pulled herself up to where Arun waited, the paladin helping her as soon as he could get to her without risking going over the edge himself. Once secure, she immediately shrugged off her backpack, her face falling as her suspicions were confirmed. The main compartment of the haversack was torn where the lizard had bitten it; the compartment was now empty, its magic sundered by the destruction of its integrity. She held onto a momentary hope that the side compartments had at least survived, but she could tell from the weight of the pack that it had lost all of its magical potency, even before she checked.

Well, damn it all, she thought. Looking up, she thought to offer a complaint to Arun about the general unfairness of the universe, only to belatedly realize that a battle was still going on.

Two more kuo-toa had clambered out of the lake, joining the pair already in cover among the rocks below. Those two apparently did not have hand crossbows with them, but they drew rapiers and rushed forward to where a stream of dwarven profanity indicated where Hodge was getting his bearings. The dwarf saw them coming, and finally spotting the resting place of his axe, rushed toward it. The kuo-toa, however, moved to intercept, and the dwarf was forced to draw his dagger as the pair moved to flank him. Before they could launch their assault, however, the first staggered and went down, two long shafts stuck in its back. Zenna had unlimbered her crossbow, and added her fire to Dannel's precise and deadly shots. The tiefling cried out in pain, however, as a small dart stabbed into her thigh.

"Protect yourself!" the elf said, shifting his aim back to the pair hiding in the rocks. Below, Hodge let out a roar and charged into the kuo-toa still facing him, stabbing his blade into the creature's bloated gut.

Zenna cursed as she drew out the dart and tossed it, slick with her blood, aside. She was mostly angry with herself; in the excitement and drama of returning here and embarking upon the giant lizard, she'd forgotten to cast *mage armor* upon herself. She rectified that now, and as the familiar glow settled about her person, fading quickly to invisibility, she glanced down at the mouth of the fish, partially obstructed by the bulging front of the structure.

"More of them!" she cried in warning, as she spotted a clutch of kuo-toa disgorged from the dark entry of the temple. There were at least a half-dozen, and Zenna saw that three of them were clad in the clearly distinguishable garb of lesser clerics, with metal armor fashioned to the odd configuration of their forms, and carrying hefty morningstars and large wooden shields that seemed to glisten in the faint light that shone throughout the cavern.

Dannel had seen them as well, and even as he drew his bow for another shot he shifted his aim to the right, letting an arrow fly at the newcomers. The shaft caught a kuo-toa warrior in the shoulder, the impact spinning it around until it landed in an awkward crouch. But the elf's efforts were answered immediately by a flurry of shots from kuo-toa hand crossbows. The nimble elf darted back, the slant of the building giving him at least a modicum of cover from below, but one dart nonetheless caught in the mail links protecting his upper arm, puncturing his flesh.

And then the three priests linked hands. The foremost lifted his hand and pointed at Dannel in a gesture of denunciation... and a jagged bolt of liquid energy shot from the tip of the digit in a lashing arc that sliced across the elf's torso. Dannel cried out and fell hard on his back, wisps of smoke rising from his body where the *lightning bolt* had struck. Zenna, just a few paces behind him, was caught on the edges of the blast, but her own innate resistance to electricity, as well as the fact that Dannel had absorbed much of the energy of the bolt, protected her from serious injury.

"Dannel!" Zenna exclaimed, crouching beside him.

"Ow..." he said, slowly getting up.

Arun, without a reliable missile weapon to use against the kuo-toa below, and in his heavy armor unable to move across the vaulted roof of the building without risking a hard slide to the broken floor below, found himself frustrated as the battle raged on. He'd hurled one of his light hammers at the kuo-toa threatening Hodge, but even that simple movement had nearly caused him to lose his footing on the slick stone, and the missile caromed harmlessly off into the darkness over the lake before vanishing from sight. He gestured urgently to his new companion, the giant lizard moving swiftly down the cavern wall now that it had been relieved of its awkward burdens. The celestial reptile had barely crossed the threshold from cliff to structure when Arun met it, determination writ clearly upon the hard lines of his face.

"Take me down there," he commanded, tucking his hammer into his belt as he swung up across the back of the giant lizard.

As soon as she'd realized that her services were required in a more martial aspect, Mole had immediately reached for her crossbow. Unfortunately it was at that moment that she remembered that she'd placed it into her haversack, so that it wouldn't bump her while she was riding on the back of Clinger. Glancing down at the target-rich environment below, she considered her holdout knife, but she'd seen Arun throw his hammer away and she really liked that knife... Undecided for several long seconds, her decision was finally made for her when she saw Arun clambering onto the back of the giant subterranean lizard, which immediately made a swift beeline for the front of the building. *That was too good an opportunity to pass up*, she thought, as she ran after them, her boots carrying her on a half-hop, half-slide course across the slick dorsal crest of the "fish."

Hodge, bleeding from a gash above one eye where the kuo-toa's rapier had cut him, grunted as he punched his dagger deep into the chest of the creature. Already well-savaged by two other wounds, it sagged to the ground, where the dwarf gave it another stab or two for good measure. Victorious, he kicked his foe's corpse on the way past it to recover his waraxe, pausing only to stick the bloody dagger back into his belt.

"Ah, Betsy, don't go runnin' off like that on me again," he said to the weapon, before turning back to the melee. One of the kuo-toa that had taken cover beyond the rocks earlier had emerged around the edge of a boulder, holding its rapier tentatively. That was enough for Hodge, who lifted the axe and rushed forward once more into battle.

Having recovered his footing, and bolstered by healing magic from Zenna, Dannel moved cautiously along the crest of the kuo-toa temple, sending arrows down into the ranks of their foes, using as much cover as the building could give him to the darts that continued to slice up from below. The whips did not unleash another lightning bolt, but they were also neutralizing much of the elf's effectiveness; their shields served as quite effective protection from his arrows, while potent healing spells read from scrolls restored the wounds suffered when his shafts did hit. Zenna, with most of her own spells effective only at close range, added fire from her own crossbow, but even the masterwork bolts that Mole had bought for her earlier were not enough for her to penetrate the effective armor worn by the kuo-toa priests. The kuo-toa clerics continued to incant spells to their evil patron goddess, bolstering their allies or adding magical protections to themselves as the battle raged on. Thus far, none of the seven kuo-toa of the reinforcing group had been permanently removed from the battle.

But they hadn't faced Arun yet.

Chapter 113

Arun Goldenshield, filled with the *divine favor* of his god Moradin, rode his celestial mount down the front face of the massive fish-structure, his hammer held aloft in one hand, his shield protecting the other. Somehow he maintained his perch upon the tilting back of the lizard as it clambered rapidly down the slick stone face; it was as if dwarf and steed were one creature, promising death to any who would face it. Darts rose up to meet them from the tiny bows of the kuo-toa guards, but they either glanced off of the dwarf's heavy armor, or from the thick hide of the celestial lizard.

It was an impressive sight, and if no one initially noticed the gnome hanging for dear life onto one of the ropes slung across the flanks of the lizard, they could perhaps be forgiven the oversight.

While the clerics screamed in anger, or perhaps encouragement to their warriors—the kuo-toa tongue sounded like nothing less than a frog being strangled to death, so it was impossible to tell—the four warriors flanking them drew their rapiers and rushed forward to meet the descending paladin. The first abruptly stopped, an arrow and crossbow bolt jutting from its chest a few inches apart, and fell limply backward to the ground. The second leapt over the body of its comrade and lunged at the giant lizard; the beast was quicker, though, and as it darted forward it snapped up the fish-man's arm in its powerful jaws, jerking it wildly back and forth while the kuo-toa croaked in pain. The other two warriors did not hesitate, moving to flank the lizard and assault it from the sides, but that plan faltered when the dwarven rider brought his hammer down in a powerful blow that caught one of the warriors on the chest and drove it roughly back. The one on the other side pressed its attack despite the losses its side had just taken, stabbing its rapier into the side of the giant lizard in an attack that drew a bright trail of celestial ichor from the wound. The lizard released its current victim with a shake of its head and turned to face this new attacker, but before it could attack, the kuo-toa slumped to its knees. As it fell, it turned to reveal Mole hanging from its back, her small sword sunk to its hilt in the creature's fat torso.

"Nobody messes with my friends," she said with a smile at Clinger.

Arun directed his mount back toward the clerics, but before they could resume their charge, another *lightning bolt* erupted from the leader of the triad, lancing mercilessly into the lizard and its rider. But the paladin shrugged off the pain of the blast, and despite its wounds the lizard carried him forward in a swift rush that took him into the midst of the gathered whips. The kuo-toa warrior that he'd injured earlier and the one that the lizard had bitten were both still active and dangerous, but before they could move to pursue the dwarf and aid the priests, one went down with another of Dannel's arrows sunk to the feathers in its thigh, while the other was forced to turn to deal with Mole as the gnome stabbed at it with her tiny sword.

On the far flank of the battle, Hodge continued battling against the kuo-toa warriors that had taken cover in the rocks. Both of the remaining kuo-toa warriors were injured now, one with a deep gash from Betsy, the other still hindered by the arrow stuck in its shoulder, but they continued to press their attacks against the dwarf with an almost insane fury. The fish-men flanked the dwarf, who soon found himself hard-pressed as they worked in tandem to seek out the holes in his defenses.

Arun grunted as a whip slammed its morningstar into his armored thigh, the force of the blow augmented by the *bull's strength* that it had conjured earlier. He countered with a strong swing of his own, but before he could land his blow the kuo-toa brought up its heavy shield. The hammer impacted the solid surface with a muted thwack, but to Arun's surprise the hammer remained securely affixed to the shield. The dwarf nearly lost his grip on the weapon as the kuo-toa drew back, trying to take its prize from the paladin, and for a moment the two engaged in a vicious tug-of-war, the stakes clear as the other two priests rushed into the fray, their own weapons lashing out at the dwarf and his mount.

Zenna cursed as yet another shot from her crossbow went awry. With the need to avoid hitting her friends, she was forced to be conservative in her choice of targets, and thus far she'd squandered five bolts to only two hits. If she could only get down to the ground below, she could employ her spells... but one glance at the long descent from their perch was enough to dissuade her from trying anything foolish. As she tugged at the string of her bow back into firing position once more, she glanced over at Dannel. The elf had seemingly become one with his bow, drawing and firing with a smooth efficiency. He managed several shots to her one, and even with such rapid shots, was managing to score hits with a greater frequency. Even as the tiefling slid another bolt into the long groove of her crossbow, the elf managed to slide another shot neatly into the chaotic melee that raged around Arun, and one of the clerics drew back in pain, a shaft jutting awkwardly from the side of its bulbous throat.

Hodge cried out as a rapier slid several inches into his side, punching a nasty hole through steel links, leather, cloth, and into the flesh beneath. With a defiant roar he tore himself free of the weapon before the fish-man could work it deeper, trailing blood as he regained a defensive stance a few paces away. The kuo-toa, sensing that their foe was nearly defeated, eagerly rushed forward, spreading out to flank the dwarf again and open up another devastating sneak attack. Hodge did not give ground, but he seemed barely able to stand, holding his wounded side and breathing in hard, labored gasps. His axe hung limply at his side, its deadly edge no longer as threatening without a strong arm to wield it.

Then, suddenly, as the first kuo-toa came into reach, he sprang up, Betsy seeming to jump into his hand as he brought the axe up in a violent arc. The kuo-toa was unable to react in time as the blade of the axe drew a deep line across its throat, and it crumpled, its head flopping back on what was left of its spine. The second kuo-toa came up short, staring down at bleeding and battered foe, who now spat out a challenge through blood-flecked lips.

“A’right then, yer turn, fish-face,” he grunted, taking a meaningful step forward. The kuo-toa met his gaze squarely, then its huge eyes drifted to the bloody axe. For a moment it seemed to hesitate, and then it spun around and darted into the lake, disappearing with only a tiny splash.

“Yah, I thought so,” the dwarf said, staggering forward a pace or two before slumping to the ground and promptly passing out.

“Hodge is down!” Zenna cried out from above. She followed that warning by uttering a particularly nasty and likely biologically impossible suggestion in orcish that she’d picked up in her travels, as another shot glanced harmlessly off of a whip’s shield. Dannel likewise missed as the three enemy clerics swarmed onto Arun and the giant lizard. The lizard bit one of the enemy priests, but suffered a nasty blow to its head in response. The spikes of the whip’s weapon drew open wicked gashes along the side of the lizard’s head, oozing bright celestial ichor that fell in fat drops onto the wet stone at its feet. At the same moment, Arun finally lost his tug-of-war with the kuo-toa holding his weapon hostage with its adhesive shield, as a second priest joined in the struggle. The first whip pulled away its shield with the hammer stuck to it, while the second grabbed onto the paladin and dragged him roughly off of the lizard’s back and to the ground.

For a moment the paladin disappeared from view, ringed by the kuo-toa priests and the battered and struggling lizard. An already-bloody morningstar was lifted high and came down, ringing as it struck metal. But then an opening appeared as one of the kuo-toa staggered back, turning to reveal half its jaw crushed into a bloody mess. Arun exploded out of the gap, his second light hammer clutched in his fist, laying about him with mighty swings backed by the full force of his strength and the divine potency of his patron. The second kuo-toa tried to crush his skull from behind, but before the blow landed the dwarf spun and drove his hammer with a meaty plop into the fish-man’s gut. The creature, its organs merged into a jumbled stew from the force of the blow, crumpled and collapsed in a flopping heap.

Even as Arun turned to face the other priest, it fell, an arrow jutting from its back. The paladin spun to aid his ally, but the lizard had things well in hand, and was busy crushing the head of the last whip in its powerful jaws. Similarly, Mole had dealt with her foe, the wounded kuo-toa unable to connect with the nimble gnome before falling to several well-placed thrusts from her smaller blade.

Quiet belatedly returned to the cavern as the rush of combat ended, and the companions stood amidst the ruin of the kuo-toa defenders.

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The companions, knowing that more enemies could emerge from the giant fish at any moment, did not waste any time in idle contemplation of their victory. Mole rushed over to where Hodge had fallen, and was able to bind his wounds. Arun sent his mount up to retrieve Zenna and Dannel before moving to help the stricken dwarf, channeling enough healing power into him to restore him to consciousness. The companions gathered at the base of the giant structure in the narrow band of uneven ground between the wall and the lake, a short distance from the gaping mouth of the structure. Arun had managed to recover his warhammer, although he'd had to nearly destroy the kuo-toa's shield to do so; even now bits of wood and sticky goop dangled from the head of the weapon. Magical healing had restored them to nearly full health; Hodge still looked a bit unsteady, but at least part of that was due to the numerous draughts he'd taken from a flask he'd produced from an inner pocket upon being restored to consciousness.

After helping Zenna and Dannel down from the roof of the building, Arun had dismissed his battered celestial companion. The lizard nodded its head in an almost human-like gesture of respect, before turning and vanishing into the uneven rocks that lined the floor of the cavern.

"Bye Clinger!" Mole said in farewell.

"Well... that could have gone better," Dannel began.

"Our resources are already heavily depleted," Zenna added. "My healing wand is now fully discharged, and I'd wager Dannel's is not far behind." At the elf's confirming nod, she went on, "And unless one of you is holding out, we're completely out of healing potions."

"If we retreat and come back later, they'll just have a chance to restore their defenses again," Arun said. "We must press on."

"In any case, unless yer plannin' to swim, there be only one way t'go," Hodge pointed out.

"Um..." Mole said.

Four sets of eyes turned to her. "What is it?" Zenna asked.

"Well... it's the backpack, you see..." she drew the ruin of her magical haversack out from behind her back, so that all of them could clearly see the damage to the fabric.

"Ah, it would seem our situation has grown yet more complex," Dannel observed.

"No more food?" Hodge asked.

"Not only that," Dannel said. "Our extra bandages, blankets, and traveling gear, such as rope and lamp oil, were in there. And the spare quivers for myself and the women." He looked meaningfully at his own quiver, where barely a half-dozen arrows remained waiting.

“Well, you got a sword,” Arun said plainly. “If there’s nothing else to be said, let us be about our business.”

“A moment,” Zenna said. “Let us see what we can salvage from them before we press on.”

Arun growled impatiently, but did not protest as they examined the bodies of the fallen kuo-toa. In fact, he took an interest as Zenna examined the bodies of the clerics, and announced that their heavy armor produced a magical aura. She also found a few potions and scrolls, but most of what the whips had possessed had been consumed in the battle. Mole appropriated a hand crossbow and quiver of bolts from one of the slain warriors, the little weapon looking small even in her diminutive hands.

“Come over here,” Arun said to Hodge, kneeling beside one of the slain clerics.

“What?” the dwarf said, suspicion clear on his face, confirmed a moment later as Arun started peeling armor plates from the carcass of the slain fish-man. “Yer not thinkin’ I be wearin’ that stinkin’ junk!”

“It’s better than you getting hacked up in every single engagement,” the paladin said, his voice brooking no argument. “And that shirt you currently call armor is barely more than tattered links; I’m surprised it even keeps together on your torso, given how you maintain it.”

“Bah, I dinna ask yer advice!” the dwarf snorted, eying the banded mail dubiously.

Arun looked up and fixed the other dwarf with a hard stare. “We may need you to hold the line with me, in there,” he said.

Hodge ran his bloody fingers through the nest of mud-caked hair that covered his head. The fringe on the top was more mud than hair, it looked like. “That’ll never fit me,” he finally said.

“It’ll fit, with a few adjustments,” Arun insisted.

A few minutes later, the party set out again, prepared as best they could against the dangers that still lurked inside the kuo-toa stronghold. At least no further guards had emerged from the place; none of the companions, however, took this to mean that their foes had been overcome.

Hodge had taken on a look of sufferance as he clanked alongside Arun toward the dark opening. True to his word, Arun had fitted the armor to the dwarf well, given the lack of tools and time, but the magical suit accommodated Hodge poorly in contrast to a truly fitted covering. But for now, it would have to do.

“So, what do you think about ‘Clinger’?” Mole asked, trudging alongside Arun, her magical boots lifting her in neat little hops that brought her eye-to-eye with the dwarf for a flicker with each step.

"I think you'd better go on ahead and check for traps," the paladin grumbled, suspecting that he'd somehow managed to lose another battle even before he'd been aware of the engagement.

The gnome and elf slipped silently ahead of the column, with the dwarves forming a line ten paces ahead, and Zenna warily bringing up the rear. There was no need for excess stealth now that their foes knew they were coming, so Dannel hummed the words of a minor cantrip, conjuring a magical *light* to brighten their way.

Entering the structure, they reached the landing at the head of the stairs without incident. The great stone doors ahead of them had been closed once more, although there was no way of telling by casual observation whether the defensive ward that had nearly killed Mole and Arun the last time had been reset.

"Maybe we should avoid the front door this time," Mole suggested.

The companions took one of the side passages, and quickly found themselves in a long hallway whose function was immediately clear. Heavy iron grates set deep into the surrounding stone fronted a series of cells that ran along the length of the hall. Their arrival had been instantly detected, and a pair of figures in two separate cells appeared immediately at the bars, begging for release. One was a short, thin-faced human clad in tattered rags, while the second was a halfling, dressed in the remnants of what might have once been expensive and fashionable robes, but were now little better than the shreds worn by the other.

"Set me free, for the love of mercy!"

"Hurry, please... the kuo-toa may come at any instant!"

"Who are you?" Mole asked, stepping forward.

"I am White-Eye," the human said, at the same time that the halfling replied, "I am Cherrit. I was taken by the kuo-toa..."

"Liar!" White-Eye exclaimed. "Don't listen to him, he was working with them, working with the gogglers!"

"Don't believe him!" Cherrit said. "That two-faced orcspawn, he sold out another prisoner from my caravan to the kuo-toa, we were planning an escape, and he betrayed us!"

"Liar, liar!" the human snarled, extending a hairy fist through the bars as if he could reach the halfling's cell through force of will alone.

"Shut up, both of you," Arun said, quietly but with an iron force behind the words that subdued both captives. "Your noise will bring more of those sea-spawn down on us, and I'll give either or both of you a rap on the noggin if you don't control yourselves."

"Obviously one of them... or perhaps both... are lying," Zenna observed. "Although it's clear that neither of them are Zenith Splintershield."

“We don’t have time for this,” the paladin said. “For the moment, the safest place for both of you is in these cells. We’ll come back for you, once we’ve dealt with the kuo-toa.”

Both prisoners started to protest. “No, please!” the human said, while the halfling responded, “And what if they kill you?”

“Then you’re no worse off than you are now,” Dannel said.

Another narrow tunnel led off from the prison area, and the companions headed in that direction. Continued protests and denunciations followed them from both of the prisoners, their hostility for each other and desire to be freed apparently overriding their worry about alerting their jailers.

“Should’ve shut them both up,” Hodge muttered, as they started down the cramped corridor, forced to shift their marching order to single file.

“Whatever their crimes, we cannot leave them to the kuo-toa,” Arun said. “But they would have likely killed each other, without restraint, and we cannot spare someone to watch over them. We will come back once we have time to deal with them.”

The tunnel twisted and gave way to a narrow set of steep stairs, slick with condensed moisture. Dannel, in the lead, led them slowly forward, his bow loaded and ready to draw at the first sign of a threat.

At the foot of the stairs the corridor continued straight for a short distance before opening onto a small chamber. The air was heavy with damp, and the chamber had an oppressive air to it even before Dannel’s light revealed to them its contents.

“Torture chamber,” Mole said, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Indeed, the gnome’s assessment seemed borne out by the grim décor, and the various implements of torment set along the walls. The ground slanted downward slightly toward the center of the room, where a wide pool of collected water partitioned the room into two halves. Another corridor similar to the one by which they had entered was apparent on the far side of the chamber.

“Empty,” Mole proclaimed, walking to the edge of the pool. She tested the water by prodding it with the blade of her sword. “Hmm... this looks like it might get pretty deep in the middle. I may have to beg a ride from one of you tall folk...”

Arun continued to regard the apparently empty chamber with suspicion. “There is a great evil in this place,” he said.

“Even I ken see that,” Hodge said with a shudder.

“No,” Arun said. “Something darker...”

Even as he spoke, the water stirred on the far side of the pool, and Mole leapt back in alarm. The companions readied their weapons as a humanoid form rose up out of the water. It was impossible to tell what it was, or had been; strands of tattered cloth streaked with mud and mildew trailed from its body, and most of its flesh had rotted away, leaving only ugly decay and stark bone that jutted incongruously from beneath the ragged coverings that seemed to be the only thing holding it together. Twin pinpoints of red light burned within the cavernous interior of its head, fixing each of them as it rose up out of the water.

Zenna felt a cold terror sweep over her as that unholy stare sent a spike of bottomless fear into the very depths of her soul. The foul appearance of the mummy threatened to unhinge her self-control, but even as she felt her muscles turning to jelly she fought back, her body shaking as she enforced the iron discipline she'd learned over the years upon herself. With a sudden sigh she tore herself free from the terrible despair spawned by the mummy's appearance.

But as she glanced at her friends, she felt the cold tingle of fear return. Mole, Dannel, and Hodge all seemed frozen, their bodies captive to the mummy's fear, and while Arun stepped forward to face the creature, he seemed to Zenna's eyes to be a lonely stalwart in the face of the unholy terror of the undead monstrosity.

The mummy came toward them.

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The water rose to the mummy's hips as it waded through the pool, but it barely seemed to slow the creature as it drove mercilessly onward toward them. Arun met it at the edge of the pool, bringing it around in a wide arc that culminated in a powerful blow to the creature's side. The blow would have likely crippled a living foe, but the mummy seemed to shrug it off, its rotted carcass absorbing the blow like a fist hitting a side of beef. The mummy responded with a powerful cross that caught Arun solidly across the face, knocking him roughly backward with the sheer force of the impact.

Zenna, driven beyond fear by the appearance of the creature, sought desperately for the words of a spell. She remembered her wand, but even as she reached for it, something else occurred to her, a memory of something that Esbar Tolerathkas had told her... or had it been her step-mother? Even as the source of the thought scrabbled away from her, her fingers closed on the symbol, etched in silver, that she wore on a clasp about her neck.

Her divine spells came to her through focused thought and meditation, although deep down, she'd always understood that their final source was something... *other*, a tangible entity unlike the vague and permeating essence of the Weave. Azuth... she'd never thought of him as a "patron," even as she used that power to work miracles such as bringing a dying friend back from the brink. But she called upon that power now, channeling it through the symbol, holding it boldly before her. Although the dim light cast by Dannel's spell remained the only illumination in the chamber, to her eyes the symbol of Azuth glowed like a beacon, driving back the shadows.

“Back!” she yelled, willing the undead abomination to obey.

But the mummy only turned from Arun, fixed its sinister stare upon her, and lunged forward. The invisible glow failed and faded as the mummy came upon her, too fast for her to do anything but scream as it lashed out with one withered and twisted hand. Stars exploded around her as the blow knocked her roughly back, and she stumbled, barely able to keep from collapsing to the ground.

The mummy followed, intent on destroying this pathetic cleric that had dared to challenge it.

But before the creature could strike again, another foe stepped forward to block it. Dannel, finally able to shake off the grim effects of the creature’s power out of fury at its assault upon Zenna, drew his sword and brought it around to hack at the creature’s outstretched arm. Chips of bone flew from the impact, although the assault appeared to do little to slow or hinder the creature as it raised its other arm and turned toward the elf. Behind it, Arun rushed once more into the fray, but once again his powerful blow to the small of the mummy’s back seemed harmlessly absorbed by its unnaturally tough hide. Snarling in frustration, Arun tossed his shield aside and took up the hammer with both hands, intent on overcoming its defenses through sheer strength.

“Zenna!” Dannel cried, his distraction nearly costing him as the mummy lunged for his throat with both claw-like hands. The elf dodged backward, nearly falling as he stumbled against Mole. The gnome was still shaking off the effects of the mummy’s despair, and Dannel caught her up, dragging her free of the melee. The mummy followed, and would have caught them, but for Arun surging in again, his hammer raised again to attack.

“Face ME!” he said, bringing down the hammer in an incredible two-handed strike, *smiting* the mummy. The undead monster clearly felt **that** attack, though it still seemed nigh-unstoppable as it spun to face the dwarf. Its claws tore at his arms as he pulled back his hammer, but the dwarf’s bracers protected him from damage, and he was able to draw free before the mummy could get a clean grip on him.

“Help Zenna!” Dannel said to Mole, putting the rogue down a few paces away before turning back toward the melee.

But Zenna had already recovered, and even as the elf turned away from Mole she stepped forward boldly, words of power flowing from her lips. The mummy heard and turned toward her, just in time to absorb a *scorching ray* that flared over its withered body like a dragon’s deadly breath. The mummy screeched as its upper body turned into a pyre, but it kept coming, staggering toward Zenna, its arms outstretched with its burning fingers clutching at air as they sought to rend her flesh. The tiefling darted back in alarm, but before it could reach her Dannel ducked in and swept his sword around low, catching the mummy solidly on one leg and knocking it off-balance. Before it could recover, Arun’s hammer had arrived with its own message for the creature’s spine, and it went down, flames still spreading across its body.

It tried to get up, but never made it.

Hodge finally “unfroze,” staring at the scorched carcass of the mummy with a look combining shame and disgust. Arun clasped the dwarf’s shoulder. “There is no shame in it; the effect was magical, and affected Mole and the elf as well.”

“It dinna affect yer,” the dwarf replied.

“My faith was my shield, but that is not to say that I did not feel the terror of its gaze.”

Dannel, meanwhile, came over to Zenna. “That wound looks bad,” he said, examining her face, drawing out his magical wand. The tiefling was pale, her skin cracked and bleeding where the mummy had struck her.

The elf sang to his wand, calling upon its power, but frowned as the healing glow failed to do anything to Zenna’s injury.

“Arun,” he said.

“What’s the matter?” Zenna asked, noticing the change in Dannel’s expression.

“Nothing, I’d just like Arun to take a look at it,” the elf said.

“I... I feel weak,” Zenna said. “I think that creature hit me harder than I thought; maybe I should sit down for a moment...” There were no chairs or other convenient objects on this side of the room, so Dannel made a pad out of his cloak and helped the tiefling sit down.

Arun came over and examined Zenna, frowning as he looked at the wound.

“What is it?” Zenna asked.

“Your skin is starting to crack, around the injury,” he said. He took off his gauntlets and touched his thick hands to the woman’s face. Zenna felt a sudden surge of energy pass through her at the dwarf’s touch, as a sensation like being dipped in a cold mountain stream spread throughout her body. But a moment later the sensation abruptly faded, and she felt suddenly ill. Leaning over, she was barely able to keep from losing the contents of her stomach upon the wet stone.

“Zenna!” Mole exclaimed, worry in her voice.

“What... what’s happening to me...” the tiefling said, her voice tight.

Arun looked to Dannel, and shook his head.

The elf nodded. His expression was that of a man who’d just been stabbed in the gut.

“Dannel,” Zenna said, pulling herself back up to a sitting position, using Mole for support. “Tell me.”

Reluctantly, he met her gaze. “You have contracted mummy rot.”

Chapter 116

For a moment, a cold silence hung over the five adventurers gathered in the dank underground chamber.

“Well, how do we cure her?” Mole said. “I thought you paladins could cure disease?”

“The power of the curse overlays the sickness, and resists my efforts to purge the disease from her,” Arun said. “Until we remove the curse, I cannot heal her.”

“Well, how do we remove the curse, then?” the gnome persisted.

“A powerful cleric could do it, or a wizard of yet greater talent,” Dannel explained.

“In other words, none of us here,” Zenna said. “Help me up.”

“You need to save your strength,” Dannel began, but the tiefling cut him off.

“Why? Don’t think I don’t understand what you’ve told me, Dannel... I know enough to know that what you’ve pronounced is in all likelihood a death sentence.”

“No!” Mole exclaimed. “No, we’ll find a way! We should go back to Cauldron... Jenya can treat you!”

Dannel and Arun both nodded. “Yes, the high priestess most likely could purge you of the infection,” Dannel said. “We should head back immediately,” the dwarf added.

But Zenna shook her head. “No. Don’t get me wrong,” she added, holding up a hand to forestall their replies. “I have no wish to die. But we’re nearly a tenday from Cauldron, and I know enough about sickness to know that my chances of surviving that march are slender. No, we should finish what we came here to do... These kuo-toa are led by a powerful priest, if you’ll remember; perhaps they may have something, a potion, a scroll, that can help us.”

“Zenna,” Dannel began.

“We finish our search, find Zenith Splintershield, and then we’ll head back,” she said firmly. “Another hour isn’t going to make a difference, either way.”

“I am not without skill in healing, and I can pray for spells that can mitigate the worst effects of the disease, give us time,” Arun said. “Do not abandon hope, never abandon hope.”

Zenna nodded, her face already marked with splotches around the ugly wound, her expression grim.

“Let’s get this done then,” Hodge said, boldly trudging forward through the pool to the far side. The others followed, Mole making the trip astride Arun’s back. There was no levity, even from Mole; once they had gathered safely on the far side of the pool, they set out again in single file down the far corridor, Dannel again in the lead.

After a few dozen paces the corridor turned left, progressing only a short distance before turning left and heading back parallel to their original course. The passageway ended a few paces later in a flat stone wall fronted by a small puddle of water and greenish mulch. It only took Dannel a few moments to determine that the apparent barrier was in fact a portal, a stone door cleverly recessed and built to look like a normal wall.

"I expect it's less obvious on the far side," he told the others. "Not much sense in building a corridor that goes nowhere."

"Nor do builders create secret doors, unless there's a reason," Zenna pointed out.

Dannel nodded, and turned back to the door. He and Mole quickly scanned the door for traps or triggers, the elf looking high, the gnome low. He then handed the small stone that contained his *light* spell back to Zenna, who closed her fingers around it until only a faint sliver of light shone to illuminate the door.

Dannel nodded at Mole, and carefully pressed against the edge of the portal. For a moment the heavy stone resisted, and then with a slight sucking sound it slid outward. Light and noise spilled into the corridor; the former a soft, greenish glow that seemed almost unreal in its composition, and the latter an uneven, rhythmic chanting that the companions now clearly recognized as kuo-toan.

"Shhh," Mole whispered to them, then she darted through the crack before any of them could move to stop her.

Zenna caught herself before she exclaimed a warning, throwing up her hands in frustration.

Dannel edged forward to the opening, so that he could peer into the room beyond. The space, even from his limited field of vision, had a feeling of great size about it. Huge pillars at least five paces thick supported a platform directly above them, that appeared to occupy a good portion of this side of the chamber. The center of the room was filled with a wide pool of green water of indeterminate depth, out of which rose stone steps that ascended to the top of the platform. The chanting seemed to be coming from above, atop the platform.

Mole had closed to the edge of the platform, moving slowly to avoid splashing in the many puddles that dotted the floor. She left Dannel's line of sight for a moment that stretched into a long minute. The elf was about to head out after her when she reappeared, gesturing up toward the platform with two fingers held up.

The elf nodded, and drew back.

"Looks like a pair of clerics," he told the others. "We'd best be careful, though; this room is huge and looks like it could be some sort of temple or gathering place."

"Let's be about it, then," Arun said.

The elf looked at the heavily-armored dwarves dubiously. "You wouldn't get ten paces before alerting them," he said. "The floor of the chamber is half-flooded, in any case. Let

Mole and I get into position; we can ambush them, and you can rush in once we've engaged them."

"Me as well," Zenna said. "I'm not wearing armor; I can be at least relatively quiet, and you may need my spells."

The elf nodded, and turned back to the narrow opening. Mole had vanished again, but Dannel knew that she'd be in position. Aware of Zenna's presence behind him, he crept along the edge of the room until he was out from under the looming presence of the platform above. He continued in the shadows along the perimeter of the chamber until he could get a clear look at what they faced.

The platform was dominated by a huge stone statue, rising some thirty feet above its surface into the shadows that gathered in the chamber's vaulted ceiling. The statue was of a female humanoid form, with claws for hands and a crustacean abomination for a head. The room had to fill the entire interior of the great stone fish, Dannel realized. He could sense the power in this place, a faintly malevolent aura that clung to him like the water soaking his skin. High above, several balconies ran around the edges of the room, but they appeared to be unoccupied as far as he could determine.

Standing on that platform was the source of the chanting, a pair of kuo-toa priests. They wore ceremonial robes in a sickly olive draped over their bodies, but even the bulky garments were not enough to fully conceal the obvious metal armor that they wore beneath. High above the ground level, a balcony ran around the edges of the room.

Dannel gestured for Zenna to take up a position where he'd concealed himself, then he moved ahead to a spot near a narrow stone staircase that led up to the lowest of the circling balconies. There was still no sign of Mole, but Dannel knew she was out there, somewhere, likely in a position where she'd get into the maximum amount of trouble.

A loud clank drew his attention around. Arun had appeared in the doorway, waiting. Dannel glanced up at the kuo-toa clerics, but apparently they hadn't heard the sound; at least their chanting and abasement before the fell statue continued unimpeded.

Enough stalling, he thought. He drew out one of his few remaining arrows, fitted it to his bow, carefully sighted down its length, and released.

The shaft flew true and impacted with a metallic thud, the steel head punching through armor and into the clammy flesh of the fish-man. The kuo-toa staggered forward against the statue. Its companion let out an angry croak and spun, only to cry out as a tiny dart embedded itself deeply in the gap where the plates of its armor overlapped at its hip. Dannel stifled a groan as Mole popped up from her place of concealment—a shadowy spot on the flight of stairs that led up to the platform, perhaps three steps from the summit.

Zenna, too distant for her remaining spells to be of assistance, fired her crossbow at the cleric that Dannel had wounded. Her aim was off, however, and the bolt caromed off of one stone foot of the statue. The injured whip shrieked in rage at the desecration, and both of them turned toward Mole, reaching for the morningstars hanging at their belts.

The grinding of stone, the creak of metal, and loud splashing announced the arrival of the dwarves. Arun and Hodge rushed forward from the secret door toward the base of the stairs, the gathered water slowing them some as they charged toward the battle.

Mole held her ground, awaiting the rush of the priests—at least she had that much sense in her, Dannel thought as he reached for another arrow. But instead of charging, the one that Mole had shot stepped over to where its companion stood, lifting a soggy limb to touch its companion. Mole recognized what they were about at the same instant that Dannel did, and the gnome leapt aside as a forked *lightning bolt* sliced out at her. The arc of energy narrowly missed her as she tucked into a roll and came back up to her feet, narrowly missing tumbling off of the platform entirely. Dannel's second shot caught the cleric squarely in the chest a moment later, and the creature crumpled, now seriously hurt.

The second whip dug into the leather pouch dangling from its side, unrolling a scroll. It began croaking out the words of a spell, but whether the magic was designed to aid itself or its crippled ally, or to strike out at the adventurers, would remain unknown as a gleaming steel knife punched through the parchment, jabbing several inches into the kuo-toa's throat. The gathering magic from the sundered scroll fragmented as the cleric reached out and pulled Mole's blade free, slick with its fetid blood. The kuo-toa croaked something and turned toward the rear of the platform, where a pair of doors exited the chamber behind the statue, but it only managed a few steps before a heavy bolt from Hodge's crossbow caught it squarely in the back of the skull, and it fell to the ground, its limbs flopping as its body came gradually to learn that it was dead.

Arun clambered up the stairs in a noisy progression, Hodge a short distance behind him after he'd swapped out his heavy crossbow for his trusty Betsy. Mole, seeing that neither cleric was getting back up, turned to await them at the top of the stairs, after flashing a "thumbs up" to Dannel and Zenna.

The elf started toward the stairs himself, but hesitated as he saw a tall shadow move in the darkness behind the statue...

"Look out!" he cried in warning, but was too late as a cloud of terrible, roiling blackness erupted at the edge of the platform, engulfing both Arun and Mole and obscuring them from sight.

Mole screamed.

Chapter 117

Mole screamed as the world went dark around her, and the *unholy blight* tore at her senses. The innate goodness of her heart increased her suffering now, as the foulness of the evil spell sought out the bright places in her soul, searing them with its dank corruption.

But then, just when she thought that she could not bear another instant, the spell ended and the black cloud faded. Still sick from the *blight*, she saw the kuo-toa cleric who had cast the spell. The creature was huge, nearly seven feet in height, and covered with a

second skin of silvery metal plate armor that glistened wetly in the cold moisture of the temple. It carried a massive staff with a nasty-looking pincer on one end.

Beside her, Arun, looking equally ravaged by the terrible spell, nonetheless trod bravely forward, hefting his hammer as he confronted the foul high priest.

“You die now, monster,” he said, lifting his heavy hammer and pointing it like a spear at the cleric’s chest.

And to Mole’s surprise, the cleric retreated, back to the stone portal that stood ajar behind the lobster-woman statue. Not surprisingly, Arun followed.

“Come on guys, he’s getting away!” Mole yelled down to the others, before starting after Arun. Fighting down the roiling sensation in her gut that still threatened to overcome her, she tucked her little crossbow into her belt—she’d never bring down a monster like that cleric with *that!*—and drew out her slender sword. Dannel, rushing up the stairs, shouted something after her, but the words were lost in the acoustics of the chamber and the pounding of her blood in her ears. The kuo-toa high priest—Margh-Michto, she remembered, the name given him by the kuo-toa they’d spoken to before—darted through the half-open portal into a smaller chamber beyond. Arun followed him at a deliberate pace, his armored body clanking loudly with each step.

“Um... Arun, maybe we’d best wait for the others...”

But it didn’t look like the paladin was stopping, and she didn’t want to miss the trouble that was no doubt waiting for him in the priest’s lair, so she hastened her pace, catching up to the dwarf even as he strode boldly through the stone threshold.

Mole took in the features of the room in an instant; the grim carvings on the walls, the relatively low ceiling, the two inches of water that covered the slightly sunken floor. There were other exits, stone doors in the walls to the left and right, but Mole didn’t really have time to examine them, for the kuo-toa high priest was **there**, as in **right on top of them**, driving forward to slam the heavy door shut behind them. Arun responded quickly, slamming his hammer into the fish-man’s side, but Margh-Michto’s heavy armor was fashioned of mithral, and it absorbed most of the force of the impact. The stone door clanged as it slammed shut—or mostly shut, Mole amended; it was jammed slightly open by something stuck in the threshold.

Even so, she didn’t think it was a good idea to give the cleric time for more tricks, so she quickly skirted around Arun to come upon the kuo-toa from behind.

But before she could get into position, Margh-Michto stepped back, and uttered a terrible and harsh croak replete with evil power. Arun, recognizing that the priest was calling upon another spell, lifted his hammer and rushed forward to strike, but even as the weapon began its downward arc, the kuo-toa finished his dread magic. The power of the priest’s fell patron flowed at the command of her servant, drawing upon elemental energies to shape their surroundings to his will.

And in a flash, the room was suddenly filled to the ceiling with water.

Chapter 118

Dannel ran across the platform toward the dark doorway at full speed, Hodge and Zenna somewhere behind him. Arun disappeared after the fleeing cleric, Mole only a step behind, and even as his mind formed the expectation he saw the door slam shut.

Damn it, people, how many times do you have to walk into an ambush! he thought even as he leapt forward, knowing that he would be too late. At the last instant, though, impelled as much by instinct as by conscious thought, he stabbed his sword forward into the closing gap a spare instant before the heavy stone door clanged noisily against the metal. Dannel imagined that he could sense the steel snapping under the force, but the masterwork blade held, and the door was pinned slightly open.

The elf, suspecting what the slamming door had in store for his friends, lowered his shoulder against the door to thrust it back open. The stone yielded, or started to, but then, suddenly, it slammed back hard again against his sword with almost enough force to knock him down, followed a heartbeat later by a sharp wedge of water that poured through the narrow slot between the door and the jam like a knife, soaking him and sending a sharp jolt of cold through his body.

“Arun! Mole!” he yelled, knowing that they would not be able to hear him.

Mole found the transition from a room that was mostly air and slightly water to the reverse to be an entirely unpleasant experience. Her body, loaded with her clothes and pouches, wasn't sure if it wanted to float or sink, and for a moment she felt disoriented, her breath burning in her chest as her lungs craved for the reassurance of fresh air. She was barely able to keep enough presence of mind to retain her grip on her sword; yes, she'd need that—and with her magical boots boosting her, she kicked off of the floor and rose upward to where a small pocket of air remained between the water filling the chamber and the low ceiling. She took a sweet breath as her head crested the surface, then the weight of her sodden garments pulled her back under.

Then she remembered Arun.

She couldn't see the dwarf, whose heavy armor meant that he would not be making any easy swims up for a breath of air. But she could sense the shadowy figure that slid, even clad in plate, effortlessly through the changed environment toward the paladin. Arun sensed the coming of the cleric as well, but his limbs moved leadenly through the water, unable to stop the cleric as it slid past him, touching him with a slimy hand as it passed. Pain exploded from the touch, and red misted the waters around the dwarf as blood erupted from his nose and ears. The dwarf dropped his now-useless hammer and tried to grab the cleric as it swam past, but he may have been trying to grapple a waterfall, as the kuo-toa slipped free from his grasp and slid away.

Mole tried to follow its path, but quickly lost it in the murky blackness of the water.

We're in trouble, she thought.

A mere few paces distant, on the far side of the door, the rest of the companions tried unsuccessfully to aid their hard-pressed companions. Dannel tried again unsuccessfully to force the door, only managing to fall as the continuing deluge of water turned the already slick stone of the platform into an almost impossible slide. The elf pulled himself up by grabbing onto the hilt of his sword, still jutting awkwardly from the door jam, embedded in the rushing flow of water.

“Out o’ the way!” came a booming dwarven voice. Hodge rushed in, the water parting around him as he came, and with an angry roar he jammed the head of his axe into the narrow gap. Barely keeping his place against the onrushing flow, he worked the blade deeper into the thin opening, until several inches of the steel were wedged into place.

“Open!” he yelled at the door, bracing himself and pulling, using the axe as a lever to force the door.

Dannel pulled himself up enough to grab onto the haft of the axe with the dwarf, the two of them pulling with all their might. The door opened a finger’s span wider, releasing even more water in a torrent through the opening. The elf and dwarf clung together to the handle of the axe, gasping for breaths as the water rushed over them, focusing all of their will upon their effort.

Zenna, a few paces further back, was unable to do anything but watch, her own powers useless against this challenge. Suddenly, though, an idea came to her, and she started forward toward the two working at the door. She barely made it two paces, however, before she slipped on the wet stone, falling painfully to her knees.

Arun could feel the flow of water around him, and had a general idea of where the door was behind him. His chest burned with the lack of air, but of greater concern was the evil cleric lurking in the waters nearby. With his darkvision he could vaguely make out the presence of Maugh-Michto in the murky water, but even moreso the foul evil of the creature burned within his senses like a beacon. There... coming, again. The paladin tensed himself, unsure how he could battle an adversary adapted to this environment that alone would kill him even without outside intervention.

This time, however, the kuo-toa cleric stopped its rush short, instead thrusting a spear-like object at the dwarf’s neck. Realizing what was coming, but again too slow against the press of water to react, Arun could only bring his hands up to claw at the heavy grasp of the pincer staff as it closed heavily around his throat.

Chapter 119

Zenna forced herself back to her feet, trying to ignore the shooting pains that shot up her legs from her bruised knees. She stumbled forward, slipping again on the slick stone as she neared the source of the outpouring water. Nearly going down again, she threw herself up against Dannel’s back to balance herself. Water coursed around her ankles, and for a moment she hung on to the elf for dear life, as she tried to place her boots more or less solidly against the floor.

“Get back, Zenna!” Dannel urged, the words hissed between clenched teeth as he and the dwarf futilely worked the axe wedged into the door.

Ignoring him, Zenna drew herself up. With spray flashing in her face, and her clothes soaking up the water, she focused her concentration, and with one hand clutched to Dannel’s shoulder to steady herself, passed the other before her in a complex pattern while she uttered the words of a spell.

Despite the various distractions, her concentration held for the crucial instants of the spell, and as she finished the enchantment a glowing blue globe appeared before her, a magical *shield*. The translucent plane of force tilted upward at the wizard’s command, deflecting the sheet of water jetting outward from the slit in the doorframe, passing above the three adventurers in a sheet and forming a cloak of water at their backs as it fell to the stone of the platform a few paces behind.

“All right, give it a heave!” Dannel yelled in encouragement, as he and Hodge renewed their efforts at the door.

Slowly, incrementally, the gap widened.

Although she hadn’t been attacked, Mole could sense that Arun was in trouble, and she knew that the evil cleric would deal with her as soon as the more dire threat was neutralized. Springing up for another breath, she twisted and kicked off from the ceiling, propelling herself in the general direction of where she guessed the kuo-toa to be. Abruptly she sensed movement in front of her, and a vague shadow materialized in the water before her. For a moment she hesitated, worried that she’d confused her position so drastically that she’d come up on Arun, instead of Margh-Michto.

Finally, with a mental shrug, and a fleeting thought, *Oh well, we’re dead anyway, I guess*, she kicked forward and stabbed her little sword into what she hoped was the head of the kuo-toa priest.

The blade jerked in her hand as she hit something hard, but the sudden thrashing ahead of her indicated that her thrust had had some effect. She tried to kick away, back up to the surface for another breath, but before she could put some distance between her and her enemy a webbed hand grasped tightly onto her ankle, drawing her down. Pain exploded from the touch, a terrible, sick pain that drove up her leg into her body like needles under her flesh. She cried out, but the water muted the sound, and water poured into her throat, choking her.

Suddenly everything began to fade, as the pain began to give way to the soft gray of unconsciousness.

Arun struggled against the pinning grasp of the metal claw around his neck, trying to free himself even as his lungs felt like to burst and the powerful grip of the high priest on the far end of the pincer staff pushed him further back. His arms felt leaden, and his struggles grew weaker as his strength flowed out of him like the water holding him in its cold

embrace. At that moment, he knew he was dead, and he felt only a forlorn sense of regret, of choices not taken, words not said.

Even as those thoughts formed in his mind, however, something changed. The water around him was moving, swirling, drawing it backward with him in the direction of the door. He felt the grip on the staff loosen slightly, the hard pressure that had driven him toward the ground easing, and with a sudden desperate surge Arun yanked back, tearing free of the staff's grip with a painful jerk. He tried to rise, knowing that he'd never reach the surface of the water as laden as he was, but to his surprise, as he stood, the current helping to draw him up, he momentarily crested the surface, his face breaking into open air. He barely had time to draw a fraction of a breath, however, before the tumult of the water drew him back under again, and he was fighting to regain his footing once more. But that momentary respite had given him hope, and now he was fighting with all of his typical vigor, clawing back toward the faintest sliver of life.

As the narrow gap of the door widened to a hand's space in width, the spray of water became a torrent that washed over the three adventurers. Zenna's shield deflected a good portion of it from their upper bodies, but it still felt as though an angry giant was grabbing at their legs, trying to pull them down and away into the rush of water. Hodge's face was tight, his jaw locked, his muscles taut like iron cords as they continued to hold the door open. But without a proper fulcrum, there was only so much that could be done with the axe, and it looked like the gap was as large as it was going to get.

"Hold it a second longer!" Dannel cried, thrusting himself into the gap. Hodge grunted and held his ground against the deluge, as the elf pulled himself bodily against the rush of outpouring water into the opening. Grasping onto the lintel and the edge of the door, almost entirely submerged in the flood, he pushed. The escaping water to some extent countered the pressure on the far side holding the door shut, and he was able to draw the gap open another few inches, pulling his body into it to function as a brace and give him more leverage to push. Water swirled all around him, and as the wedge opened Hodge's axe and Dannel's sword were both carried free, washed away by the flood. The dwarf, without the axe to hang onto, was likewise cast backwards across the platform, tangled up with Zenna as the two flailed in confusion within the rushing waters. The elf held on, unable to even draw breath as the water rushed over him, knowing that the lives of his companions depended on hanging on, for just a bit longer!

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the flood began to ease, and Dannel realized that he could breathe. Standing up, water continuing to rush out around his legs, he saw that most of the room had drained out. His bow and sword were both gone along with Hodge's axe, presumably somewhere in the pool that now covered the entire floor of the outer chamber below. His feet were more than a bit unsteady as he pulled himself forward into the room that they'd gone through so much trouble to reach.

Arun was there, near the door, still conscious but clearly battered, his throat oozing blood, lying on his side. But the elf's attention was drawn to the kuo-toa high priest, who was even now getting to his own feet. As he rose, Dannel's gaze shifted to the limp form lying in a heap at his feet, half-submerged in a puddle of dank water.

Mole.

Chapter 120

“Mole!” Dannel cried. The elf started forward, but came up short as Margh-Michto turned to face him, the evil priest bleeding slightly from a gash in the side of its neck, but otherwise quite intact—and dangerous.

It was at that point that Dannel remembered that he didn’t have a weapon.

A clank of metal behind him startled him, before he remembered Arun. The dwarf paladin drew himself up in cumbersome motions to his feet, pausing only to close his fingers around the haft of his warhammer, pressed up against the base of the door where the rushing waters had cast it. The kuo-toa regarded them with clear hatred in its eyes as the battered paladin stepped forward, sagging a bit with each stride. His shield had been torn away in the chaos of the flooded chamber, and he held his weapon tightly in both hands.

“I believe you were about to die,” Arun said, lifting his weapon with a clear effort, pointing its head at the chest of Margh-Michto.

The kuo-toa cleric let out a roar and came forward to meet them, calling upon the power of its fell goddess. It did... *something* to Arun, calling down a curse upon the holy warrior, but the dwarf’s innate resistances and the dedication of his calling allowed him to shrug off the baleful effect of the spell. The dwarf, in turn, lashed out with his hammer, striking the kuo-toa a two-handed blow to the side that it clearly felt, even through its nearly invincible armor.

Dannel knew that he could do little against the creature unarmed, but he also knew that despite his initial success, Arun couldn’t take much more of a beating. He cast about for a weapon, and his eyes alighted upon the creature’s staff, torn free by the escaping waters and now lying apart toward the far side of the room. Dannel was there quickly, and scooping up the weapon darted toward the melee. The weapon was ungainly and awkward, and he didn’t even bother with the pincer-construction at its business end, instead holding the blunt end like a quarterstaff as he came at Margh-Michto from the kuo-toa’s flank. He thrust the improvised weapon at the creature’s side, trying to force it back from Mole unmoving form.

The evil high priest refused to give ground, taking the blow against its side and turning to the paladin. Calling upon its patron yet again, it called upon the dark energies of a spell and reached out to touch the paladin. Arun did not flinch, even when dark energies ripped into him, pushing him even closer to the brink between life and death. He took the full force of the *inflict wounds* spell—thankfully, the cleric’s greater magics had been expended, and the spell was only of lesser effect—and with a roar brought his hammer down in a two-handed, overhead strike that sank with a mighty plop into the moist skin of the cleric’s head. The blow struck with such force that the flanges of the mithral half-helm it wore over its ungainly skull were driven deep into its shoulders, and the remaining contents of its head squished outward around the edges of the impact, one bulbous eye popping with a sick sucking sound.

The evil cleric, clearly dying, remained standing for a full second, a terrible sound coming from the compressed slit of its jaw. To his horror, Dannel realized that the sound was laughter, a sound that persisted even as the creature collapsed in a heap on the floor.

A moment later, Arun joined him, the dwarf finally pushed beyond even his remarkable endurance by the abuse he'd suffered, slipping down into unconsciousness.

Zenna appeared in the doorway, a sight with her clothes soaked and torn about her, her face a pale death's-mask. Dannel was already crouching beside Mole, singing a magical song infused with urgency, his wand of healing already glowing blue in resonance with the tune.

"She's not breathing..." he said, turning her over to reveal a face that was white, still.

Zenna half-ran, half staggered over to her friend. She pulled one of the kuo-toa scrolls she'd confiscated earlier from her pouch; falling to her knees with a splash beside the fallen gnome, she read the words scribed therein, calling upon the power stored upon the parchment. The source of that power had originally been the dark goddess whose servants had caused the suffering she now battled, but the healing energy nonetheless responded at her call, and she focused it into the small, frail form now lying before her.

Mole stirred, and her mouth opened as she sucked in a gasp of air, before coughing out a flood of gray water upon the stones. Dannel held her, helped her as she cleared her drowned lungs.

"Help Arun," he told her.

She nodded and turned to the paladin. She did not have much of her own power left to her, but she called upon what she could through the muddled and exhausted frame of her mind, channeling positive energy into the paladin.

Hodge appeared in the doorway. "Check the other clerics we battled, they might have more scrolls," Dannel told him. The dwarf took in the scene inside the chamber in a weary look, and nodded.

"Oh man, oh man," Mole said, finally recovered enough to speak, looking utterly miserable.

"Arun, I expect to go rushing off blindly into a trap," Zenna said, as she emptied the last of her divine magic into the paladin, who stirred groggily. "But I expect you to be more careful, Mole!" The worry and strain written on her face, however, took some of the sting off of her words.

"Zenna, it wasn't her fault," Dannel said, gently, continuing his soft melody, the soft blue glow flowing into Mole's body until the nimbus around the forked end of the wand faded. Zenna saw it too, and didn't have to ask the elf what it portended. That was that; no more magical healing.

Meanwhile, outside, Hodge rifled the corpses of the two dead kuo-toa priests they'd battled earlier out on the platform in the temple chamber. He'd come across Dannel's longbow,

precariously balanced on the edge of the platform near the stairs where the rushing waters had deposited it. The floor of the room was now a small lake, one that no doubt contained his precious axe, Betsy. *Yeah, that was fair*, he thought, *the elf's pansy bow stays up here, while my axe is washed away down there....* With a grunt, he picked up the longbow and turned to the bodies. He found a scroll on one and pocketed it; crossing to the second, he bent to examine its pouches but was distracted by a faint crack followed by a hissing sound that came from the air above him, before the ugly statue of the lobster-woman.

The dwarf's eyes widened in amazement, and his mouth fell open as he regarded a strange and wondrous sight. There, hanging in the air twenty feet above him, was a woman—or at least a creature with the look of a woman. Her features were exotic, her olive skin offset by the brilliant red of her hair, which flowed down in a wave over her shoulders and down her back. Throngs of leather covered her body in a less-than-decent fashion that caused even the vulgar dwarf to color slightly. Wings of long white feathers speckled in red spots the color of blood jutted from her back, but she was not using them to keep her aloft; she just... *floated* there, hanging in space.

The newcomer looked down at him. “That’s it? I’m brought here for a single filthy *dwarf*?”

“Hey, this dwarf’s more than enough man fer ya, lady...” Hodge began, but he trailed off as he saw... something... in the flying woman’s eyes that gave him pause. It was only then that he noticed that the woman was carrying a huge longbow, which she loaded with an arrow from the quiver at her hip, and in a smooth, effortless motion drew and aimed down at him. As the head of the arrow touched the shaft of the bow, it burst into eager red flames, which cast an unholy glow upon the sinister features of the woman, their flicker reflected in the dark orbs of her eyes.

“Um... on second thought...”

Chapter 121

Dannel helped Mole to her feet, the gnome looking rather unsteady still even after Dannel’s magical healing. Arun was even slower to rise, the dwarf looking like a man who’d been beaten within an inch of his life, and then smacked on some more for good measure.

Hodge’s cry of pain and alarm drew their attention toward the half-open door. While Arun bent down to recover his hammer yet again, Dannel gestured for Zenna to stay with their injured companions while he ran toward the door. He reached it just as Hodge burst through, a smoldering arrow jutting from a puncture in one of his shoulder-plates, his expression one of alarm as he turned and pushed the heavy door shut.

“What is it?” Dannel asked.

“Demon... woman... very bad...” the dwarf panted. He slammed the door shut, and leaned himself against it, wincing as the action aggravated the wound in his shoulder. “Here, take this,” he said, handing the elf his bow. The elf took the weapon and tested the string—still sound, though it would have to be changed after the soaking they’d taken.

Suddenly a small crack and a familiar hiss sounded in the far corner of the room.

“Oh, damn,” Hodge said.

They all turned to regard the strange woman, hovering a foot above the floor, her majestic height causing her head to nearly brush the ceiling above. She regarded them with a haughty and terrible expression, and naught but cold death burned in her dark eyes.

Dannel didn't need encouragement, as he immediately drew an arrow and fired.

The woman turned smoothly out of the path of the arrow, but it nonetheless punched through one feathered wing as it sliced past, causing the woman's face to flicker slightly in what might have been pain, but which Dannel feared was more irritation. She regarded him coldly and flicked the hand not carrying her bow at him in a desultory gesture.

Instantly a cloying, familiar cloud of roiling chaotic energy erupted around Dannel and Hodge. The elf felt a terrible rending sensation inside him as the *unholy blight* ripped into him, and Hodge's curses a pace away said that the dwarf was suffering as well.

Zenna's breath froze in her chest as she saw her friends swallowed up in the roiling cloud, but she realized that the creature—an outsider of some sort, she calculated—had made a small mistake. By focusing the *blight* on Dannel, she, Arun, and Mole had been just outside of its effects. She had no doubt that neither Arun nor Mole, seriously hurt as they were, would be able to withstand such an assault. As she regarded the woman, she doubted their ability to triumph against such a foe. Even were they not depleted and injured as they were, she knew that the creature's resistances would make her spells all but useless, and that their weapons would likely also be of little use.

The others may have felt likewise, but such despair did not hinder Arun, who hefted his hammer and charged. The outsider saw him coming and drew out an arrow, but even as she pulled the string back the dwarf rushed into her in an awkward but powerful rush, his armored shoulder slamming into her hip even as he propelled his hammer into her gut. The blow should have crippled her, unarmored as she was, but the woman was only flung lightly backward, and she effortlessly kicked off from the corner wall, drifting into the center of the room.

“You'll pay for that tickle, dwarf!” she hissed, in a manner that indicated that she could deliver on the threat.

Another arrow from Dannel's clipped her on the shoulder as she turned, a shot that should have sunk deep only drawing a slight trickle of black ichor as it glanced off her unnaturally tough hide. Hodge was charging as well, his dagger looking pathetically underwhelming in his hand, and even the pale Mole started forward, looking for a way to flank this deadly adversary.

The woman, surrounded by her adversaries, suddenly flickered, and in a slight puff of greasy brown smoke reeking of sulfur, vanished from sight.

“She's gone?” Mole asked timorously.

“Don’t bet on it,” Dannel said, clutching his side as he fought through the lingering nausea brought on by the *blight*.

“Our weapons barely scratched ‘er,” Hodge said, grimacing as he yanked the arrow from the wound in his shoulder. Arun did not comment, only sagging back weakly, barely able to stand.

“Did you find any scrolls?” Zenna demanded, knowing that time was likely not on their side, as she crossed to where the others stood gathered. Hodge nodded, handing over the rolled parchment he’d found earlier.

Zenna took the scroll and unrolled it, glancing at the contents. “Spread out,” she said to them. “Clumped up like this, one more *blight* will take us all down.” Her voice held the tone of command, sounding unfamiliar even to her, but the others nodded and complied, glancing warily at all corners of the spacious chamber, where the devil-woman might appear at any moment. “Wait, Arun,” Zenna said, reading the words off the scroll and touching the battered dwarf on the shoulder. The healing spell was only of average potency, though stronger than the curatives she herself wielded. The dwarf in turn sank to one knee and offered a prayer to his patron, Moradin, sanctifying himself against the inevitable confrontation that would follow.

Mole, meanwhile, had moved to check one of the side exits. “An anteroom, here,” she said. “Smaller than here, less room for her to ‘port around in.”

“Also less room to avoid those spells of hers,” Dannel observed. “I think we should stay here, but spread out, as Zenna suggested. If and when she appears, all attack with whatever you’ve got.”

“We don’t got a lot right now,” Hodge grunted, favoring his shoulder as he reloaded his heavy crossbow.

Zenna unrolled the last scroll she’d taken from the kuo-toa earlier, in the aftermath of their battle against the priests and warriors outside, in front of the temple. This spell was an enchantment to boost one’s endurance. It would not last long, she knew, but she suspected that the woman-outsider would not wait indefinitely to resume her assault.

She was right. Even as she laid the *bear’s endurance* upon Arun, the air shimmered in the center of the chamber with the now-familiar crack and hissing sound, and the woman reappeared, a blazing arrow already fitted to her bow.

Chapter 122

The companions turned to reengage the erinyes as she *teleported* back into the chamber, ready for battle.

Rather than fire, however, she turned instantly toward Arun, and unleashed a lengthy coil of rope at her hip opposite her quiver. The rope unwound like a whip, but its head seemed

almost sentient as it twisted toward the dwarf, seeking him out. Arun had little chance of avoiding the probing rope, but even as it closed to within arm's length, Mole leapt out into the middle of the room, intercepting the untangling coil by landing on it in mid-length. The rope shot out and met its fullest extension a foot from the dwarf's face, and then recoiled upon the diminutive figure that had interrupted its mission. Mole yelled as she went down in a tangle of rope and limbs, trying ineffectually to cut at the thick strands with her sword.

Dannel reached into his quiver, and drew out an arrow—his last arrow, one of the missiles forged in silver as a gift for aid rendered long ago. The silver arrow, more of a token than a weapon, long kept in his quiver as an emergency ever since the adventurers had come up against the deadly lycanthrope Tongueater a few months ago. But without his sword, he lacked any other alternatives as he drew the unusual arrow to his cheek and released.

The silver arrow streaked into the side of the devil, hitting squarely but only barely piercing the skin. The arrow hung there in her side as the erinyes turned, plucking the arrow casually from her side as she fixed Dannel with a hard stare.

“Foolish elf,” she said. “Allow me to demonstrate the craft of a *true* archer.”

Even as she finished speaking she drew and fired, the arrow bursting into flame as it streaked across the room toward him. Dannel tried to dodge, but the shot was true, catching him squarely in the chest. His armor absorbed some of the force of the impact, but nevertheless three inches of sharp steel forged in the dark pits of the Hells sank into his body, and flames erupted from the point of impact, searing him with their terrible fingers.

Pain replaced all other sensation, continuing to ravage him even as he fell, until only pain and darkness was left.

“No!” Zenna screamed, turning to the demon, rage engulfing her in a torrent, replacing her fear and indecision. She spoke a word of magic, and vanished from sight as a cloak of *invisibility* settled about her. Beside her, Arun had already charged, his hammer lifted high, but as he rushed across the chamber one of the coils of rope snaked across his ankle, and he stumbled, falling hard to the ground.

Hodge, meanwhile, had finished loading his heavy bow, and took quick aim and fired. But his shot was ineffective, striking the devil on the hip and bouncing harmlessly from her unholy flesh.

“You, I think, I will save for last,” she said, casting an idle glance at Hodge.

Hodge spluttered, threw down his crossbow, and drew his dagger. He hesitated, however, as the devil met his gaze and laughed.

Zenna felt something tear within her as the world around her was swallowed in a red haze. Dannel was down, a long shaft jutting from his pierced chest. Mole's struggles grew weaker as the animated rope tightened its grip around her. Hodge stood transfixed, holding his dagger that looked tiny in contrast to the majestic evil of the devil. Arun scrambled to his feet... Arun, their only real chance, now...

Abruptly Zenna ran forward. Tiny splashes on the floor revealed her steps, but she didn't care. She only knew that she had to *do* something. She only had her *color spray* and *shocking grasp* spells... pathetic cantrips, against such a creature. She knew even without trying that her wand of *burning hands* would have no effect upon it.

The erinyes turned to her, drawing back slightly, not in any way a retreat, but rather just to let her squarely face the charging wizard. "Little wizard, you think to hide yourself from me?"

Zenna did not cease her rush. The words of a spell came to her lips, and she called down a blinding spray of colors that washed over the hovering outsider.

When the *color spray* faded, however, the erinyes was completely unfazed.

"Really, is that the best you can do?" she said. Almost casually she drew out another arrow, pulled it back, and let fly. Time seemed to freeze around Zenna, with only her, the arrow, and the devil in the entire world. She stared at the arrow that grew until it seemed to fill her vision, and then she was flying backward.

Mercifully, the blackness claimed her.

Chapter 123

Awareness came with the song. It filled her, carried her stirring consciousness along with its melody, pulling her out of the blackness into a brightness that was painful at first. She recoiled, but the song would not release her. Finally she found the brightness give way to a confused medley of vague colors and blurred images. The song was still there, a comforting presence, holding her in its embrace.

"She's coming around," came a voice through the song, a familiar voice that she couldn't quite place.

The song stopped, leaving behind a sense of sadness and loss. "Zenna," came another voice. "Zenna, come back to us," it said, insistent. Feeling a bit of annoyance—why couldn't they just leave her alone?—she stirred through the veil of gray that still separated her from the voices, and opened her eyes.

She was lying on her back, supported by a soft object beneath her. She was cold, and wet; the sensations brought memories of the kuo-toa temple and their grim battles inside. She looked up and saw Dannel, holding her against him, cradling her head in his lap. Mole was standing beside him, and as she turned her head—a mistake, that, as her vision swam out of focus for a moment—she caught sight of Hodge in another part of the room.

"Arun?" she managed to ask.

"Here," came the familiar voice, and with an effort she turned to see the dwarf, with a look more tired and worn than she could ever remember seeing on the face of the holy warrior.

“Arun was able to heal you,” Dannel said. “At least a little.”

“It wasn’t easy,” the paladin said. “That damned curse still has you in its grasp, and it resists my every effort. I admit I have fully depleted my powers, and I wasn’t sure even that would be enough to bring you back to consciousness.”

“At least you’re alive,” Mole pointed out. To Zenna’s eyes, even her friend seemed unnaturally grim, her clothes ragged from the treatment they’d suffered of late, although at least they seemed dry.

Dry? Zenna thought. She tried to get up, but found it was an impossibility even before Dannel placed his hand firmly on her shoulder to restrain her. “How long?” she asked.

Her companions shared a look that did not go unnoticed by the tiefling. “We’ve been here the better part of a day, I think,” Dannel said.

Zenna looked around as best she could from her limited vantage. It seemed like they were still in the kuo-toa temple; at least the floor was dry, which meant that at least they had left the high priest’s quarters. An odd blue flame flickered in a crude bowl that dangled from the ceiling by a rusted iron chain. She suddenly remembered something. “The demon?”

“Gone,” Dannel said. “Or at least, it teleported away, and didn’t come back.”

“After it put Dannel and you down, Arun really laid into it,” Mole said. “After it vanished, Hodge was able to help me get free of that damned rope, then we were able to stabilize you and Dannel.

“We cannot stay here,” Zenna said, but even as she spoke the words, she saw the look that passed between the others. “There’s something else you’re not telling me.”

Arun looked to Dannel, and for some reason, that made her angry. Gathering her will, she forced herself up to a sitting position, ignoring both Dannel’s attempt to restrain her and the resistance of her own body. She thought she did a fairly good job of it, trying to conceal the way that the movement caused the room to spin dangerously around her, and the pounding in her head that felt like a pack of dwarf miners excavating a vein of gold.

Dannel and Arun’s little game of looks—clearly neither of them wanted to share whatever bad news they were keeping—finally frustrated the wizard, and she turned to Mole. “Tell me,” she said, firmly.

“Well... you see, there’s this dragon...”

* * * * *

As the others filled her in on what had happened, Zenna considered that perhaps it would have been better to remain unconscious, unaware of what was transpiring around them.

Angrily she shook off such sentiments; they were going to need to focus all of their efforts to survive this situation, and there was no time for idle whims or the indulgence of self-pity.

Her body hurt and her head throbbed, but she wasn't going to let that stop her either. Caught up in her own musings, she failed to notice the concerned looks from the others, but if she had, she would have thrown them back in their faces. They were all beaten and bruised, and all had the same things at stake. Success was life, failure a nasty and unpleasant death.

After they'd fought off the devil—and there was no way to confirm that she was in fact gone for good, but no sense worrying about it, if she came back they were finished in any case—those of them left standing had tended to Zenna and Dannel as Mole had described. There was no healing magic left to them, to the best that could be done was to carefully bind their wounds and place them in a dry place, wrapped in what was left of their cloaks. They'd retired to one of the antechambers off of the hall where they'd battled Margh-Michto; the floors seemed slightly higher there and the floors of the side chamber were clear of standing water. Again they'd lamented the loss of the supplies in Mole's magical backpack, but there was nothing to be done for that now either.

They'd quickly searched both of the rooms adjoining the priest's chamber, to see if anything useful could be found there. The rooms contained a number of moldering scrolls and books in cubbies excavated in the walls, but most fell apart at their touch and none of it made any sense to them in any case. Mole had found some treasure in heavy ceramic pots present in both chambers; already paranoid from earlier experience, she used the cleric's pincer staff to force the lids open. This precaution proved quite valuable when magical *glyphs* exploded at the rough treatment, sending out painful blasts of sonic energy. Thankfully Mole was able to avoid the worst of the effects thanks to the added distance provided by the staff, but it was still a close call. The treasure included a small fortune in coins and precious items, but even Mole could not draw much enthusiasm for the find, given the grave nature of their situation.

Their situation grew yet graver when Hodge and Arun ventured out onto the platform to verify that no further dangers lurked out in the temple, and to evaluate the chances of recovering the weapons that they'd lost in the flood earlier. The place seemed quiet as they strode out onto the platform, but the paladin caught sight of movement in the shadows at the far end of the chamber. His shouted warning came even as a dark form lifted from the shallow waters covering the entire chamber floor, rising into the vast open space of the temple center upon the beat of powerful black wings.

Even Arun wasn't foolish enough to linger, and he trailed Hodge only by a pace as the two dwarves rushed back into the priest's chamber. Mole, who'd been tending to the unconscious Zenna, looked up as they returned, and instantly gauged the situation by the looks on their faces.

"What is it?" she asked.

"D...dd...dragon!" Hodge spat, clinging to that narrow line between mere fear and outright panic. Arun looked grim but moved with quick efficiency, reaching over and grabbing the dirk from Hodge's belt. In a smooth motion he jammed the dagger into the narrow crack of the door, wedging it deeply into place with a solid blow from his hammer.

"That won't hold it long," the paladin said. "Move quickly!"

His words shook Hodge to action, and the second dwarf rushed to where he'd left his pack. Trailing profanities, he started digging for something, even as Mole rushed over to Arun. The gnome had recovered Zenna's dagger, and brought Margh-Michto's lengthy pincer staff with her as well, the forked end trailing behind her as she dragged the cumbersome device. Arun worked swiftly, wedging the jagged pincers of the staff into the narrow space between the foot of the door and the uneven surface of the floor, stepping back to force them into place with another blow from his hammer. Then he shifted and struck the staff a foot below the joint with the pincers, breaking the length of the staff off in his hand.

Even as he hefted the staff, the door shuddered with a solid impact from without. The crude wedges held, but Arun was quick to take the second dagger from Mole's hand and hammer it into place higher up in the lintel, reinforcing his work.

The door thrummed once more, then grew quiet.

"The other door!" Mole exclaimed, already rushing in that direction, Arun a few paces behind. Hodge emerged from the antechamber bearing a number of iron wedges, miner's spikes. But before any of them could reach the second door that led out onto the platform outside, it swung roughly open, revealing the head of the dragon on its long, sinuous neck.

Chapter 124

"Well, I know you managed to overcome it, somehow, or we wouldn't be having this conversation," Zenna observed.

"Sheesh, will you let me finish the story?" Mole said, returning to her narrative.

* * * * *

Its hide was as black as night, its head angular and malicious, with twin horns jutting from its forehead and jaws lined liberally with razor-sharp teeth. Its head swiveled back and forth as it scanned the chamber for its enemies, but they missed Mole, who had darted reflexively into the shadows where the wall met the floor, the dragon's field of view partially blocked by the opening of the door. The dragon did catch sight of Arun and Hodge, however, and opened its jaws in an angry roar.

Before it could move more fully into the chamber, however, Mole, using her magical boots to cast her into the air in a broad leap, sprang up from behind the door, her sword slicing upward in a fast arc that caught the dragon off guard. In the instant that the gnome sprang past, the dragon's neck jerked up, revealing a shallow but nonetheless bleeding gash a foot beneath the base of its skull.

The dragon had immediately turned toward the gnome, who landed with a splash and tumbled forward. For a terrible instant Mole looked upon the full rage of the creature, and saw death glistening in the ebon orbs of its eyes. But then it was knocked to the side as Arun impacted the door, thrusting it closed. The dragon, caught off guard, with only its head and neck thrust through the door, was at first caught off balance, and it drew

reflexively back, its head clearing the door a moment before it slammed shut hard. Hodge, sending a plume of water up around him with every splashing step, arrived with a spike that Arun slammed into the doorjam with a quick blow from his hammer. The door thrummed with the impact of the dragon a moment later, and the spike slipped out half its length as the door trembled. But both dwarves hurled themselves against the narrow portal, setting another spike and driving the first one back into place. The door continued to pound, for the better part of a minute, but held, the inexorable equation of leverage versus force working out in favor of the companions. A fizzing spray of angry green droplets emerged from under the thin crack at the base of the door, acid that sizzled and bubbled as it hit the water, but the construction of the door in its heavy stone threshold meant that the dragon's breath could not reach the spikes set into the jam on this side.

"And thus we reached a stalemate," Mole said, concluding her account of the battle. "We reinforced both doors with everything we had, but there haven't been any more attempts to force entry that we can detect. It's still out there, though, waiting for us... or at least it was a few hours ago."

"How do you know that?" Zenna asked.

"I used that potion we found, remember? In the ruins where we battled Triel Eldurast, under Cauldron. It gives the power of seeing things over a distance. It worked great, but that dragon was still sitting out there on one of the higher balconies, watching. I think it sensed me watching it, for it stirred and made an awful roar—the kind that doesn't sound like it was very pleased with the situation, or planning on leaving anytime soon."

"At least there haven't been any more kuo-toa," Zenna said. She tried to walk, and was able to manage a few steps before she reached the edge of a great stone basin set into the center of the floor. It offered a welcome respite. The basin was filled with several feet of water, and as she stared into it, the blue light of the magical flame glistening off its surface, she felt as though she could just sink into it, all of her problems falling away...

"Zenna!"

Dannel's voice of concern shook her out of her reverie, and she straightened, drawing away from the elf's reassuring hands. She wanted to lose herself in his embrace, but knew that if she let her guard down, even for a moment, she would collapse.

She turned to where the others had laid her pack, against the wall. Grateful that she was able to make it without falling, she knelt and undid the clasps, revealing her spellbook—carefully wrapped in oilcloth—nestled inside.

"It's gonna be tough," Hodge growled. "Betsy's out there in the water somewheres, the elf ain't go no more arrows, and half our knives are stuck in them doors."

Zenna looked up at her friends. They were all beaten down, ragged and exhausted. She remembered that she hadn't eaten in over a day, and her stomach rumbled. It was almost comical, through the haze of pain and stiffness that suffused her body. But there was no choice, except to give up, and that was no choice at all.

She reached up to her throat, to the symbol that hung there around her neck, her finger tracing the one cut there in silver. “I need some time,” she told the others. “Then we’ll have to see about that dragon.”

Chapter 125

The sound of metal striking metal throbbed dully throughout the huge temple chamber, muted by the slab of stone blocking its transmission.

But Dhorlot heard it.

The sound echoed once again, and then the heavy stone portal scraped slowly open, revealing a dark chamber beyond.

That was fine. Dhorlot did not fear the darkness. Dhorlot, called “the dragon-father” by the kuo-toa, was the darkness, was death as he lifted his body smoothly from its perch on the edge of the balcony high above, and glided out into the vast internal space of the chamber. Though it was sacrilege to the fish-men—and who cared, most of them were dead now, along with that puffed-up fool Margh-Michto—the drake spread its wings to arrest its flight and settled onto the shoulder of the massive statue of Blibdoolpoolp.

The doorway was quiet. No doubt the invaders were lurking inside, waiting for him to rush in again, hoping to ambush him. Well, he would show them a surprise or two...

And then a tiny figure walked into the open out of the doorway.

The dragon’s eyes narrowed as he recognized the gnome who had cut him. The gash in his sinuous neck was a scratch, a trifle, but it still hurt, and it throbbed a bit as he adjusted his position on his perch atop the statue, as if to remind him of the indignity wrought upon his majestic person.

The gnome walked calmly out onto the platform, blissfully unaware of the death that waited directly above her. She put her hands on her hips, surveying the shadowy depths of the cavernous temple chamber. Finally, she spoke, her voice echoing in the vast confines of the place.

“Well then, run off have you, mister dragon? Can’t say I blame you! There’s still plenty of this to go around!” She drew out her tiny sword, and waved it in an elaborate flourish. “We killed a red drake that was, dare I say, somewhat bigger and meaner than you on the way here. Far better for you to play the coward!”

Dhorlot’s eyes narrowed, though he did not make the slightest noise to give away his position as he leaned downward, his hind claws holding him steady on his perch, his long neck twisting until his dagger-shaped head was directly above the puny gnome with her insane threats. His jaws opened wide, and a sibilant hiss came from deep within his body. The gnome did not hear, already continuing her diatribe with another series of threats and insults, culminating with a rather provocative ditty about the ancestry of dragons that was accompanied by a little dance, her hips shaking in a twisting pattern.

The song was cut off as a gout of acid engulfed the gnome, obscuring her from view momentarily in a spray of greenish droplets that splashed up as the dragon's breath hit the solid stone of the platform. For a heartbeat the loud splash and hiss of the acid obscured all other sound, then a terrible scream erupted from where the gnome had been, a cry that quickly drained away into nothing. When the back blast from the spray had settled enough to see, there was nothing left but an unpleasant pile of smoking detritus where a vibrant, living creature had been moments before.

A shadow shifted in the depths of the doorway, and something shot up at the dragon. Dhorlot felt an annoying pinprick of pain as a heavy quarrel stabbed into its thick, muscular torso. He considered blanketing the doorway in darkness, but he'd already spent over a day waiting these intruders out, and did not want to give them a chance to barricade themselves in the high priest's former chambers again. Already hungry, the dragon was also impatient, still too young to have developed the long view of time common among the elders of his race.

Plus, he wanted them to see the death that was coming for them.

The dragon leapt from the shoulder of the statue, spreading his wings to catch the air and slow his descent. He landed heavily on the platform, his claws sending up tendrils of wispy smoke as they splashed in the remnants of acid that had lingered on the damp stone in the aftermath of its breath attack. In the shadows of the chamber beyond the doorway, there was a flicker of movement, but no one immediately moved to slam and barricade the door. And now, it was too late.

Dhorlot, the Dragon-Father, had come to kill.

[Author's note: I downgraded Dhorlot one age category, from Young Adult to Juvenile. A Young Adult black dragon would wipe the floor with this party even if they were at full strength. For some reason the builders of this mod seemed obsessed with putting in CR9+ encounters throughout Bhal-Hamatugn, even though the default party is supposed to be 7th level at this point.]

Chapter 126

"I do NOT sound like that!" Mole whispered, indignant.

Zenna, lost in the intense concentration required to maintain both her *silent image* and the accompanying *ghost sound* cantrip, did not respond. But Dannel, standing in the shadows directly beside the door out to the platform, turned and lifted one finger to his lips in warning.

They watched as the illusory Mole offered her challenge to the dragon, and Mole had to stifle another complaint as Zenna embellished her figment's challenge with the crude song and swaying dance. But they all started in surprise when the illusion was engulfed with a

spray of acid that swallowed it up, splattering fat drops of acid that reached as far as the doorway where the companions huddled, crouched, waiting and watching in the shadows.

“He’s up above, on the statue!” Hodge hissed, his hands tight on the haft of his weapon. With Betsy missing, he carried the heavy shaft of the high priest’s broken pincer staff, its ends shorn in iron plate by Arun, now a crude but functional quarterstaff.

Dannel slipped into the narrow gap of the doorway, keeping his thin body close to the reassuring presence of the stone portal. He carried Hodge’s huge crossbow cradled in his hands, and even as he stepped momentarily out of the darkness of the chamber he raised the heavy weapon, sighted, and fired, drawing back into the room a moment after the quarrel left the weapon. He handed the empty bow to Hodge. They didn’t really expect to have time to reload the cumbersome weapon, but Hodge nonetheless took up his crank and started drawing back the thick string. Dannel, meanwhile, had drawn up a second weapon from where it dangled from his belt; Zenna’s light crossbow, with a bolt already slotted into the firing channel. It was a matter of a few seconds to ready the bow for firing.

A loud thump announced the arrival of the dragon outside. Even though they’d expected it, the sudden appearance of the dragon outside the narrow slit of the door sent a sudden tremor of fear through all of them. Fortunately this drake was not of an age yet to inspire the supernatural terror for which dragons were known; nonetheless, each of them felt a moment of hopelessness in the face of the considerable danger that confronted them. Dhorlot was not an especially huge specimen, clearly still in that nebulous border zone between adolescence and adulthood, but all of the adventurers knew that size, in this case, meant little. This was a dragon, a member of the species known above all in the Forgotten Realms for its ferocity and durability.

But the companions, battered as they were, were also experienced veterans, and the moment’s hesitation was just that, a moment that was quickly replaced by the execution of the plan that they’d developed earlier.

“Now!” Arun shouted, hefting his warhammer. The dwarf started toward the door, but was not the first to exit; that was the golden-scaled form of Clinger, the paladin’s otherworldly mount. Called once more from the celestial realms where it resided, its wounds healed by its rejuvenative time there, the giant lizard charged into the dragon. Though the two creatures were of like size, the dragon’s wings and long tail gave him an edge, and Dhorlot’s superior mass was evident from the first collision. The celestial lizard smote the black drake, seizing his throat with a powerful bite, trying to bring the dragon down with an incapacitating hold in the first rush. But Dhorlot, even relatively young though he was, was still far too powerful to fall to such a ploy, and within moments had both torn free from the bite and seized the lizard in his muscular foreclaws.

But before the dragon could counter the charge of its adversary, Arun and Hodge were out of the doorway, and launching their own attacks upon the dragon. The two dwarves split and came at the creature from the sides. Hodge thrust his staff at his flank like a spear, but the dragon’s struggles caused the weapon to glance harmlessly off his hide. His skin was corded and thick like boiled leather armor, and even though it hadn’t taken on the hardness of steel plate that would come with age, it was still incredibly resistant to physical assault. On the far side, Arun’s attack did not even connect, as the dragon’s tail lashed out

unexpectedly, forcing the paladin off-balance even as he was hefting his hammer for a powerful blow.

The rest of the companions were not idle, each with a role that had been set in the discussion that had followed Zenna's reawaking an hour earlier. Dannel stepped into the doorway again and fired Zenna's light crossbow, biting off a curse as the dragon's movements caused the shot he'd targeted at his head to narrowly miss and shoot off into the darkness. Mole darted out beside him like a shadow, her magical boots carrying her in great strides as she broke to the left, circumventing the base of the massive statue to approach the melee from the rear.

Zenna's body felt leaden as she stepped up behind Dannel, taking his place as he leaned to the side and reached for a fresh bolt. After refreshing her spells she'd laid as much healing as she could bring to bear on her friends, but with the mummy's curse still holding its iron grip on her, she herself could not benefit from the divine power she channeled. She tried to call upon the words of a spell, and for a moment she felt a surge of panic as exhaustion overcame her, driving the trigger phrases and gestures required to tap the stored energy from her mind. Taking a deep breath, and clasping the silver amulet at her throat, she focused what was left of her strength and tried again.

The dragon responded to the attacks upon him with a terrible fury. He directed most of the force of his assault upon the lizard grappling with him, ripping deeply into its golden hide with his vicious claws. The lizard, motivated by its hatred of all things evil, tried to press its attack, but the onslaught gave the dragon enough room for his head to strike down on his sinuous neck, his jaws seizing the lizard's shoulder and literally tearing it free, hurling it across the platform. The dragon roared in triumph as his foe tried to rise, but failed, slumping wearily to the hard stone, bright celestial ichor flowing freely from its deep wounds. The two dwarves tried to press their attacks again, but the dragon buffeted them with his wings, driving them back.

Zenna completed her spell, calling forth a coruscating beam of flame that erupted from the palm of her outstretched left hand. The *scorching ray* flared over the dragon's chest, drawing from him a roar of pain as the heat of the flames penetrated his thick hide. The dragon, his eyes full of rage, started toward the tiefling standing unsteadily in the narrow doorway, but before he could close to attack the wizard's allies threw themselves at the dragon in a furious all-out assault. Hodge cursed as his blow again glanced harmlessly off the dragon's shoulder, but this time Arun's powerful stroke hit true, slamming into the dragon's body with enough force to draw an audible crack as bone gave way before the hammer's iron head. Even as the dragon drew back reflexively, nearly trampling Hodge underfoot, a tiny form darted in from behind, finding a very... vulnerable spot in the dragon's anatomy, and sinking a foot of very sharp steel into it.

Dhorlot felt pain everywhere as his enemies drove their attacks home. He knew that he had made a mistake by letting himself get surrounded, but his desire to crush them was now replaced by a profound desire to get away, to preserve his own life against these foes who had already proven themselves extremely dangerous.

Flapping its wings to give him a moment's space from his attackers, the dragon called down a cloying cloud of *darkness* upon his own position, cloaking him from view and

hopefully blinding his foes. Then he spun, feeling a reassuring impact as his tail hit something small and sent it flying. A sharp stinging pain penetrated his body a foot behind his right wing, but he ignored it and with a mighty leap, his wings beating powerfully, ascended into the air toward the far balcony. He did not head toward the low doors at the far end of the gathered waters, toward his lair; no, Dhorlot was set on complete flight, to return later once these invaders had retired from Bhal-Hamatugn. The dragon flew toward the middle balcony, and the main exit from the kuo-toa temple out into the myriad passages of the Underdark.

But even as the dragon arced painfully down toward the balcony, his lower claws extended to brace himself for a hard landing, Dannel emerged from the darkness at the edge of the platform. The elf lifted Zenna's bow, and with an instinctive motion born of skill and practice, squeezed the trigger and fired. The bolt lanced through the air as the dragon, unaware of the danger, landed on the balcony and pushed at the heavy stone doors that formed the exit. He didn't even feel the impact at first, as the bolt poked neatly through his hide, disappearing into the thick frame of his body. But Dhorlot immediately realized that something was wrong, as he heaved the doors open with his powerful claws. Air gurgled in his lung as fiery blood poured in through the rent opened by the crossbow bolt. The dragon, finally realizing what was happening, turned around in desperation, unwilling to accept the reality of his death even as the world around him grew hazy and indistinct. Finally, almost anticlimactically, he sank slowly down to the ground on the edge of the balcony, a final snort sliding from his nostrils before he quivered once and fell still.

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Zenna felt a rush of panic surge against the bulwarks of her mental discipline as she stood within the darkness, the chaos of sounds raging around her. She heard the noise of battle as her companions struggled against the dragon; felt the rush of wind as it lifted into the air; sensed the slight shift in the currents in the room as it flew away from the platform, toward the far end of the room. Her senses seemed to grow sharper, until she almost imagined that she could smell the water glistening on the stone walls of the high priest's chamber from where she stood in the threshold of the great door. She knew that she should take cover, but was unwilling to move, to bestir herself in any way that would shatter this moment, this feeling of false security in a bubble of chaos.

She heard the clank of metal that would be Arun and Hodge, moving in the darkness, and the loud click of Dannel's borrowed crossbow. Then a dull thud from across the room, a faint sound heavy with meaning.

"What the blazes is happening?" Arun's voice came from the dark.

For a long moment, there was silence, and Zenna could hear only the pounding of her pulse within her ears. Finally, Dannel's voice cut through the quiet.

"It's dead."

Zenna felt a flood of relief, the sensation almost unbalancing her as exhaustion rushed in to replace the eager tension of battle. She needed a task to keep herself on the positive side

of that brink, and crept forward to her right, guided by a faint wheeze that ultimately led her to the ravaged form of Clinger, Arun's celestial mount. She bent to touch the giant lizard's mangled hide, her fingers touching slick wetness from the ichor that oozed yet from its wounds. The creature managed a faint groan at her touch, but nothing more. She closed her eyes and called upon a prayer of healing; only a weak osiron, with most of her spells already depleted in healing her companions before the confrontation with the dragon. But the flow of blood from the lizard's many wounds eased, and the creature seemed to rest easier, its breathing growing even and regular.

"Thank you," Arun said.

Zenna looked up, belatedly realizing that she could see again, that the magical *darkness* created by the dragon had faded. The paladin looked a sight, his armor dirty with the blood of enemies both old and fresh, the face beneath his helm weary with the strain of constant battle. She glanced behind him, and saw only Dannel on the platform, the elf walking slowly back toward them.

"Where's Mole?" she asked, her voice thick with concern.

"The dragon knocked her into the water below, when it took flight," Arun said. "Hodge is helping her; she appears to be all right."

Zenna nodded. Even if she wanted to, she doubted that she could have gotten up without help, and she didn't want Arun to see how seriously the disease that she'd contracted from the mummy had weakened her.

But Dannel could tell, she realized, as she saw the look in the elf's eyes. Behind him, Mole, dripping wet, and Hodge ascended the stairs back up to the platform.

"I can nay believe it," Hodge said. "I thought we were deaders for sure, when that drake landed outside the door." He turned to Zenna. "Maybe there be somethin' to those 'tactics' o' yours after all."

Zenna looked at Arun, but the paladin's face only betrayed the faintest hint of what might have been a smile before he turned to his crippled mount.

"Return to the warmth and safety of your den," he said, laying a hand on the giant lizard's head. The creature's eyes opened slightly, then it faded into wisps of gray smoke that sank into the stone of the platform.

"Well, that was... interesting," Mole said. "This dragon-killing stuff isn't nearly as bad as uncle Cal made it out to be."

Zenna laughed despite herself, but the mirth was short-lived, as she took in their battered state.

"I'm hungry enough to eat a dragon," Hodge said, with a meaningful look up to the balcony across from the platform.

“And how would you cook it?” Mole said. “You’re not going to find anything that you can burn in this wet place...”

“I’m hungry enough to eat ‘er raw,” the dwarf replied.

As the two continued their banter, Dannel looked down at Zenna. Dark circles hung under the elf’s eyes. “We’re done,” he said simply. “Zenith or no Zenith...”

“No,” Zenna said, and with the word drew up enough strength from within to stand, hoping that it wasn’t too obvious how much she took out of her to do so.

“Lass,” Arun began.

“No, Arun,” Zenna said, but there was warmth in her tone to match her determination. “No, we’ve paid too much already to turn away yet. Let’s finish what we came here to do.” She looked up at the elf. “Please.”

For a moment the two looked at each other, then Dannel finally nodded. “All right. But I don’t know what we can do, if any more threats present themselves.”

“We holed up in that swamp of a room for o’er a day,” Hodge said. “Mebbe that drake was the last o’em.”

“Perhaps,” Dannel said, but his tone was doubtful.

“I say we go up there,” Mole said, pointing to the highest of the balconies, a good twenty feet above where the dragon lay, any maybe fifty feet above the water-logged floor of the temple below them.

“Oh? Why?” Dannel asked.

“Because we haven’t gone there yet, and the dragon was perched up there before, like it was guarding something.”

“Well, that be as good a reason as any,” Arun said. “Let’s move out.”

“Eh, I ain’t leavin’ without ol’ Betsy,” Hodge said. “An’ I don’t know if elfie there wants his blade back, but me axe ain’t gunna lie in some fish-man’s tidepool to rust.”

“Great, more swimming,” Mole groaned.

* * * * *

It took the better part of an hour to find Hodge’s axe in the two feet of murky water covering the floor of the chamber, by which point they were all soaked and dirty with lichens and muck. Dannel’s sword never did turn up, and the elf did not insist that they prolong their search any further for the weapon. Instead he took the quarterstaff from Hodge, keeping Zenna’s crossbow as a backup.

The companions made their way carefully up the slick stairs to the upper balcony. As they reached the top, they could see that a door was visible in the wall directly above the exit below. An obstacle confronted them as they saw that there were gaps in the balcony flanking the door, with each section bridged by a retractable apparatus of rope and leather that was set up on the far side from their approach. This was remedied as Mole, working in conjunction with the dwarves, was hurled across the gap to the far side to extend the bridge to allow them to pass.

They readied their weapons and magic, but found only an empty corridor beyond the portal, and a larger space further in. Where the temple was dim and shadowy, this room was utterly black, making it impossible for Dannel and Mole to see, but the elf remedied that by casting a *light* cantrip upon one of the ends of his staff. A quick look around found two exits, stone doors leading off to the left and right from the entry. They picked left at random, and continued to the door, Mole scanning it quickly for any traps or other hazards.

At Arun's insistence the door scraped open to reveal a still-larger room beyond. The ceiling curved slightly, indicating that they were near the summit of the great structure, the back of the giant stone fish. The walls were designed with frescoes that appeared to depict masses of kuo-toa descending into a great hole in the ground. Pillars flanked another portal on the far end of the room, and as the place lacked anything else of interest, they started in that direction.

Zenna, bringing up the rear, did not hear the almost silent scrape of cloth on stone directly above her, nor did she feel the black eyes that followed her progress across the room with a cold intensity. Silently steel slid from the embrace of a scabbard, reflecting an ugly greenish tinge in the light cast by Dannel's staff.

Chapter 128

The faint sound of cloth on stone went unheard as the dark shadow hanging from the ceiling above Zenna paced her, the faintest gleam from the daggers it held muted in the edges of the glow cast by Dannel's shining staff.

A fat drop of green liquid gathered at the end of one of the knives, hung for a second, and then fell to splatter on the floor a half-pace behind Zenna's booted right foot. Zenna, fixed on the far door like the rest of her companions, was not aware of the faint sound, but Mole, her sharp gnomish senses alert, turned.

"Did you hear..." Her eyes widened as she saw, too late, the dark form that leapt down from above. "Look out!"

Instinct augmented by the magical boost provided by her boots carried her forward, and she collided with Zenna a moment before the dark shadow landed in a catlike stance a foot behind where she'd been standing. The mage fell heavily to the side, an ugly sound of ripping cloth following her as the assassin's dagger tore through her trailing cloak. The creature, amorphous in a dark, hooded garment that covered its body, snarled and turned its anger upon the gnome. Mole cried out as its knife dug deeply into her shoulder, and she spun about from the force of the blow, trying to regain her balance.

“Mole!” Zenna cried.

The assassin dropped the bloody dagger and drew out another from the row belted at its hip. Zenna could see that the new weapon glistened heavily with poison. Familiar yells indicated that the others had belatedly become aware of the ambush and were turning to attack, but the creature moved fast, too fast...

The power came almost instinctively, the blast of colors from her hand flying into the face of the assassin even as it lunged toward her with the deadly blade. The assassin staggered, only momentarily stunned by the *color spray*, but even those few seconds were time it suddenly did not have to spare.

Dannel let out an uncharacteristic roar of anger as he swept the iron-shod staff out in a low arc, taking the creature’s legs out from under it and knocking it roughly to the floor. Zenna crawled backward away from it as Arun and Hodge joined in the battle. Even prone and dazed, and by all appearances helpless, the creature seemed unnaturally quick, squirming out of the descending path of Arun’s hammer a split second before the weapon hit the floor with a heavy crash. But it could not avoid Hodge, who was coming around from the other side.

“All right Betsy, time for payback!” the dwarf yelled, striking the creature with a heavy blow to the side. Its robe tore open, revealing a layer of dark hide armor and the sickly mottled green flesh of a kuo-toa.

“Nother goggler!” Hodge reported, raising his axe for another blow.

But the creature, even bleeding from the deep gash in its side, was quick to recover. In a sudden flurry of movement, it twisted back up to its feet. The others continued to strike at it, Dannel cracking one end of his staff into its shoulder, while Arun laid a more precise blow into its torso. The impact from the latter drove it roughly backward, but it managed to keep its footing, and used the opportunity to spin and dart for the still-open door behind them.

Only its first step carried it into Mole, who’d slipped around behind it.

The gnome held her ground with determination, and as the kuo-toa collided with her, both went down in a tangle of legs and blades. The assassin quickly slipped free, bringing one foot up with a snap into Mole’s face that knocked her roughly onto her back. Then it was up again, heading for the door and escape. Dannel nearly caught it before it could get up, but the blow from his staff narrowly missed it.

As it reached the door, however, a blast of fire from Zenna’s hand caught it squarely in the back. The *searing ray* drew a line of flames from the small of its back up to the base of its skull, ripping through robe, armor, and the flesh beneath. The kuo-toa tumbled forward, screaming. It tried to get up one last time, but this time the heavy iron-shot end of the staff came down once more on its spine, ending its struggles for good.

Dannel dragged it back into the room, and pushed the heavy door shut, while the others gathered around it. “Mole, are you all right?” Zenna asked.

The gnome looked pale. “There was poison on that blade, but I think I’ll survive. Gnomes are tougher than we look.” She shifted her arm to better get at the gash, and apply a bandage. “Ow, ow, ow,” she said, as Zenna knelt beside her to help clean and treat the wound.

“I’ll be able to help you more tomorrow,” Zenna promised, casting another minor healing osiron upon her friend to help staunch the bleeding.

“Ow’d he get up there?” Hodge said, looking up at the ceiling.

“Magic, I’d guess,” Dannel said, examining the corpse. In addition to the poisoned daggers, which he gave a wide berth, he saw that the creature was wearing simple cloth slippers over its scaly feet—not a common sort of footgear in a place like this.

“If I’m not mistaken, I believe we’ll find that these are *slippers of spider climbing*,” he told them.

“A useful spell,” Zenna said. “I wasn’t aware that it was commonly placed into an item, but it makes sense.” She shuddered, thinking of what would have happened if Mole hadn’t come to her aid.

Mole had seemingly recovered some with the news of the magical slippers, her eyes gleaming as she no doubt considered the many possibilities offered by such an item.

“Dibs?” she said, looking up at Dannel.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to wear them over your magical boots, Mole,” the elf said.

“Oh, yeah,” Mole said, her face falling precipitously. The elf shot the others a covert grin over the gnome, as she clearly battled the conflicting desires in her mind. “Well, I guess you’d better take them, then.”

“They wouldn’t long survive the treatment I’ve been giving my boots in this place,” the elf said, placing the magical slippers in his pouch.

“If you’re quite finished, there’s still a mission awaiting our attention,” Arun said, turning back to the door.

As they set out again, Dannel turned to Zenna. “Have your skills grown more potent? I thought you could only cast the *scorching ray* once per day.”

“In anticipation of the battle with the dragon, I memorized another in place of my *invisibility* spell,” the tiefling explained. “I hope I don’t regret having used it.”

“Given... your current state... you’d better keep back.”

"I don't think anywhere's safe in this place," she said, with a meaningful look back at the doorway where the body of the slain assassin lay.

They reached the double doors, and after another scan for traps by Mole, the dwarves pushed the heavy portals open. As they slid slowly apart, a knife of light from Dannel's staff shone into the room beyond, widening until a long wedge of illumination formed through which they could make out the details of another chamber.

What greeted them was a sight out of a nightmare.

The room was spacious, easily thirty feet across and maybe twice that in depth. A twin row of pillars buttressed the ceiling, forming a corridor down the center of the room. Dangling from the ceiling between those pillars were several ranks of corpses secured to the ceiling by their ankles. The desiccated bodies were of various races, but all had had the tops of their heads sheared off, revealing gaping black holes in the interior of their skulls. Worst of all, the bodies seemed to shift slightly, as if there were some invisible breeze through the place, and a faint moan seemed to come from their ranks, as if the dead were whispering amongst themselves at the coming of the newcomers.

The central aisle culminated in a mighty throne, fashioned from what looked like stretched pelts, but which, given the disfigurement of the dangling corpses, might have been something far worse. The throne of scalps was flanked by a pair of standards, each bearing the image of an axe-bearing dwarf standing upside-down.

Seated in the throne was a dwarf, clad in full plate armor, and a helm that hung low over his eyes. A massive dwarvish waraxe sat close to his right hand, propped up against the throne, and in his left hand he clutched a small glass globe, in which a faint silvery light bounced. The dwarf did not stir at their entry, and only the slight shifting of his chest gave clue that he lived at all.

The companions had found Zenith Splintershield.

Chapter 129

"Okay, what's wrong with him?" Mole asked, her voice sounding a bit too loud in the sepulchre surroundings of the chamber.

"Evil... this place is full of it," Arun growled, his fist tight on the haft of his hammer.

"Them standards... hangin' 'em upside down is a flat-out slap o' dishonor," Hodge added. The dwarf's face was pale, his eyes flicking frequently to the swaying corpses above.

"Zenith Splintershield!" Dannel said, stepping forward. The elf swept the space before him with his staff, driving back the shadows.

At the mention of his name, the dwarf stirred, lifting his head enough to look out at the intruders, but he still make no move to bestir himself.

“The rantings of that boatman make more sense, now,” Zenna said. “He’s not a prisoner... it’s almost like he’s...”

“Their high priest?” Mole asked.

“You’re coming with us,” Arun said with finality. “Your friends, if that’s what they were, have been destroyed, and your kin wants you to return.”

The dwarf’s cracked lips twisted into a mocking grin. When he spoke, his words were a hollow croak, eerily reminiscent of the language of the kuo-toa. “The many eyes of the orb see everything in their web. Soon they will see you as well.”

“He’s lost ‘is marbles,” Hodge said.

“We don’t wish to fight you,” Arun said. “But you are coming with us.”

The dwarf shifted, his armor creaking with the sound of inevitability. Slowly, he rose, his axe coming into his hand as he stood.

“Can’t we ever get through a situation without bloodshed?” Zenna asked no one in particular, as the companions readied their weapons, alert to any offensive motions from the dwarf.

Zenith turned to Zenna and met her eyes with a cold stare. “You will taste the bitter fruit of betrayal from one you love,” he said, his voice empty of emotion.

Zenna paled slightly, but she managed a dark comment, saying, “That’s the story of my life. Tell me something new.”

The dwarf did not respond, only drawing back his free hand and hurling the glowing sphere in his hand toward the south wall. The companions, close to the arc of the missile, drew back in alarm, but Mole burst forward, and with a magically-enhanced boost from her boots, she leapt up and caught the object before it could impact its target. Flipping in mid-air after the catch, she landed softly on her feet, cradling the object in the nook of her elbow.

“Nice catch,” Dannel said idly. He confronted the dwarf, and began to sing, a soft, lilting melody that filled the room with its light notes and blended harmonies. Zenna could feel the magic in the song, the web that the elf attempted to wrap around the dwarf, but the dark powers latent in this place broke up the sound, and even before the bard allowed the song to fade, the tiefling could see that the *charm* had failed to take hold.

Zenith took a single step forward, his boots slamming on the hard stone with cold finality. The huge axe came up into an easy battle grip.

“That’s a defensive stance,” Hodge cautioned. “He’s a defender.”

Arun nodded, recognizing the same thing. He gestured with his hammer, and the two dwarves moved to slowly flank the mad dwarven warrior. Zenith did not acknowledge them, and in fact his stare was vacant, unfocused—but the axe in his hand did not waver.

Mole, meanwhile, had vanished from view.

“This is crazy,” Zenna said. “If he won’t come with us quietly, then let’s fill him full of crossbow bolts until he decides to change his outlook.”

“That won’t work against an armored dwarven defender,” Arun said, moving into position across from Hodge, with the dwarf between them. Zenith still hadn’t moved, but none of them were willing to believe that there would be no risk in apprehending him.

“Well, it’s worth a try, still,” Dannel said, lifting his crossbow and firing.

The bolt flew true toward the dwarf’s chest, but suddenly he shifted, moving so quickly that his fist seemed a blur as he drew up his axe across his body. The steel-tipped bolt glanced off of the thick shaft of the weapon and shot up to the right, missing the dwarf’s head by about two inches.

“Okay, the hard way, then,” Dannel said.

“Let’s see if he can dodge a spray of fire,” Zenna said, but Dannel forestalled her with an arm across her path.

“Stay back,” he said firmly, handing her the bow and quiver, and taking up his quarterstaff. Zenna shot him a hard look, but her own weariness and the realization that he was right froze her retort in her throat. Instead, she turned herself to reloading the bow.

Arun and Hodge exchanged a meaningful look, and charged.

Zenith seemed oblivious to the rush of the pair of armored dwarves, but at the last moment he twisted, taking a glancing hit from Arun that slid off of the thick plates of his armor, and catching Hodge’s blow on the haft of his waraxe, deflecting the stroke wide to the right. In the same motion, before Hodge could even begin to react, the dwarven defender brought the head of his axe about in a sudden snapping motion that had strength behind it despite the shortness of the swing. Hodge cried out as the weapon dug into his shoulder, splitting the ill-fitting bands of his stolen armor and drawing a jet of blood that sprayed into the air as he staggered back.

“Get back, Hodge!” Arun yelled, as he drove his hammer into Zenith’s side in a hasty follow-up blow that seemed to have little if any effect.

Hodge hesitated, but at the command in Arun’s voice, withdrew, barely managing to keep his feet.

Zenith did not pursue the crippled dwarf, instead spinning smoothly about to face Arun. But even as he sliced out with his axe to attack the paladin, the gold dwarf’s allies joined the fray. Dannel charged with his staff, the bright light at its end distracting Zenith enough for him to land a glancing blow that caromed off of the side of the dwarven warrior’s helm. And a shadow emerged behind the embattled dwarf, materializing into the form of a gnome that stabbed her tiny sword into the leg-joint of Zenith’s heavy armor. The blow should have

taken him down, but Zenith did not waver from his stance, his legs placed onto the stone like tree trunks rooted deeply in the earth.

Zenith's attacks continued unabated, oblivious to the damage that he was taking. His attack at Arun caught the paladin's shield, driving him back a step but doing no damage. But even as Mole darted in for another strike, the defender reversed his stroke and jammed the haft of his weapon backward.

"Mole, no!" Arun warned, but he was too late as the end of the axe's shaft, dressed in a jagged spike of iron, blasted into the gnome's face. Mole was flung backward, her jaw shattered, and while she clung somehow to consciousness, she was clearly out of the fight, barely able to crawl away from the melee.

"You'll pay for that, you bastard!" Dannel yelled, snapping the staff around in an attack designed to trip up the defender. The staff connected with the dwarf's injured knee, but it may as well have struck the bole of a tree, for all the effect it seemed to have. Zenith looked up at the elf.

"Your soul will be forfeit at the Smoking Eye," he rasped, before subsiding back into silence.

Arun pressed his attack, launching a series of powerful blows at their mad adversary. The dwarf took each hit stoically, betraying no feeling even when one blow broke through his defenses and battered his breastplate with enough force to dent the steel. He only lifted his axe to counter...

But suddenly a cloak fluttered down from above, landing across his face, blinding him.

Zenna fashioned a grim smile as she relinquished her concentration on her *mage hand*, and started to circle around the melee to get to Mole. She had only a single minor healing osiron left to her, but she had to do what she could...

Zenith swept out his axe in a massive blind arc that forced both Arun and Dannel to dodge back. He reached up and drew the cloak from his head in a rough yank. His foes pressed their attack, but the defender was quick to respond, deflecting Dannel's thrust easily and taking little damage from a strike from Arun that glanced off of one of his curving shoulder plates. A heavy bolt punched through the air a pace behind him; Hodge cursed as his aim, conservative due to the need to avoid hitting his allies, proved of little result.

Dannel and Arun continued their attacks, but suddenly the defender lashed out in an unpredictable and intense assault. Dannel overextended himself as a lunge from the staff shot two feet past Zenith's head, and paid for it as the defender jammed the head of his axe into the elf's chest. The blow did not cut through the mithral links of Dannel's armor, but the force of it was enough to knock him from his feet, landing hard a pace removed on his back, stunned. Even as Arun roared and laid into him yet again, the dwarf twisted and used his entire body as the fulcrum around which the path of his deadly axe spun. Arun tried to bring his shield around to intercept, but he'd taken just too much of a beating in the last two days, his battered muscles slow to respond to the threat. The axe crushed his side, crunching through armor and tearing the flesh beneath. Arun cried out and went

down to his knees, his hammer slipping from suddenly weak fingers as blood seeped from the nasty wound.

Zenith looked down at his fallen foe. "You will be forced to pay a heavy price for choices made," he intoned.

The bloody axe came up for a killing blow.

Chapter 130

"No!" Zenna cried, from where she knelt over the prostrate form of Mole. The gnome had finally slipped from consciousness, but Zenna had stabilized her with her last healing spell. She lacked the power to stop the apparently indefatigable dwarven defender as he lifted his axe to strike the final blow against Arun, however, and her gut clenched as she remembered scenes like this one, where she'd been unable to stop the death of a friend.

A harsh battle cry tore her attention from the devastating tableau. Hodge, his armor caked with flesh blood from the wound in his shoulder, had discarded his heavy bow and shield, and now charged forward, his axe lifted high in both hands. He barreled into the dwarven defender, his axe and body both colliding with Zenith, and he actually managed to lift one of the dwarf's feet from the ground from the force of his impact. But the master warrior's imbalance was purely temporary, and as he reset his feet his twisted to face his already direly wounded foe.

Even through his incredible stamina and awesome effectiveness, it was clear, however, that Zenith's endurance was not unlimited. Blood flecked his lips as he turned to face Hodge, and despite the iron strength of his limbs it could be seen that he moved now with a certain jerkiness, the combined tally of his injuries beginning to take hold.

But Hodge had suffered even greater hurts, and as he tried to bring Betsy about for another attack, he stumbled. His stroke went awry, and he could do nothing as Zenith calmly drove his axe down in a terrible arc squarely into the center of Hodge's chest.

The dwarven miner glanced down at his chest, then shifted his eyes to Arun. The paladin, helpless and barely clinging to consciousness, met his gaze.

Hodge nodded, smiled, and then fell backward and died.

Zenith stood over the broken forms of his enemies, his face impassive. He shifted his feet, and as he slipped out of his defensive stance, he tottered and collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Chapter 131

Zenna floated in a sea of unbroken gray. It surrounded her, broken occasionally by vivid ranges of color that she avoided, knowing that they meant pain and discomfort. But she

kept being drawn back, tugged insistently into those realms of awareness for brief spaces, only to sag yet deeper back into the gray.

Memories floated through the haze, their sharpness contrasting jarringly with the blank emptiness around her.

Arun stands over the broken body of Hodge, his face chiseled like a mountain. “No,” he says, a single word fixed with certainty.

Zenith Splintershield. Arun wants to leave him. Dannel reminds him of his oath.

Dreams. Nightmares. Back when sleep was still sleep, before the gray came and carried her off.

Vague images from Bhal-Hamatugn, past mingled with present as they retrace their steps from the dark place.

They take her magical hat. Dannel is insistent; she does not have the strength to fight him in any case. At this point she can barely walk unassisted. “We have to know the truth of how fast the disease is progressing,” he says. They don’t have to tell her; she can see the truth in their eyes. The memory grows fuzzy, and she slips off into the gray...

A single sensation; fresh air blowing over the mountains. “We made it,” says a voice, young, feminine, familiar. “We still have to get back to Cauldron,” says another voice. “She’s fading, quickly...”

She feels a floating sensation, her body empty and hollow. She looks up to see warm amber eyes, lined with sadness. They look down and see her. “Hold on, Zenna,” he says. The voice—familiar, soft, its sound accompanying her down into the gray.

She wakes and feels as though the ground beneath her is rolling, moving. She cannot manage to open her eyes, but under her fingertips, she can feel soft scales, warm to the touch.

She looks up into the face of a bearded man, his hair a deep gray, his face lined, clad in expensive raiment that seems both out of place and somehow fitting. “I am sorry. There is nothing I can do for her,” the man says, his eyes sad. She knows him? His name floats away as she sinks back down into the gray.

A cold shiver slips through her, pulling her back with a suddenness that makes her groan. She sees Arun, pouring life-restoring energy into her, fighting the curse that holds her captive. He fails more often than not, but each day he tries anew, trying to give her enough life to survive, just a little longer...

Another moment of lucidity. Her eyes open to see gray clouds above. She is able to shift her head enough to see Arun, bowed under the weight of a heavy burden wrapped in plain wool. The world bounces slightly... she is not walking, she is being carried. She thinks to ask a question, but before she can translate the thought into action, the gray rushes up and catches her again.

A voice. "Hold on, Zenna. We're almost back to Cauldron, just hold on."

A face in the gray. "I'm disappointed, Zenna. I thought you were stronger than this. I thought you were a fighter."

I'm sorry, father...

The gray swallows her...

Chapter 132

"Hold on, Zenna. We're almost back to Cauldron, just hold on."

Mole thought she saw a flicker of movement on her friend's face, and leaned in worriedly. Zenna looked terrible. Her face was an ugly landscape of red lumps and mottled splotches, and her skin had sunk inward until it seemed to barely hang upon her skull. Her breath rattled in her throat like an animal in a trap, clawing its way free. The gnome knew that Arun had done all that he could, channeling divine power into her each day, even though only a dribble made it through the mummy's curse that ensnared her.

She looked over at Arun. The paladin sat slumped, his face lowered, his body heaving as he sucked in one tired breath after another. Arun had been inexhaustible, but it was clear that even he was approaching his limit. Every day he had called his ally, the celestial lizard that Mole had stylized Clinger, to bear Zenna and the wrapped body of Hodge. The lizard remained with them for the better part of the day, but even after it returned to its celestial abode, to await the next calling, they pressed on, with Dannel and their captive carrying Zenna on a stretcher while Arun bore alone the considerable weight of Hodge. They had all felt the inexorable press of time, each hour bringing Zenna that much closer to death. Their food had been whatever roots and greenery Dannel was able to find and pronounce safe; their rest was a few hours grabbed here or there in the middle of the trail. At least Crazy Jared had been able to provision them with some meat and vegetables, which had given them some added strength, for as long as it had lasted. Mole's stomach grumbled at the memory.

Her feet throbbed in her boots, but she knew better than to take them off. She unslung her water bottle, and tried to get Zenna to swallow a few drops. It was a mostly futile gesture.

A faint rustle along the trail indicated the return of Dannel. The elf looked as worn down as the rest of them, but an almost frightening determination gleamed in his eyes.

"The trail ahead is clear," he told them. "We have to keep moving."

Mole shot a covert glance at Arun, who had not responded. "It'll be dark in an hour," she said, "and with the skies this overcast, even our eyes won't be able to see."

Dannel nodded wearily. "I know, but we have to get as far as we can before the full depth of the night," he told her. "We're still at least two days out from Cauldron, and..."

He didn't have to finish. Looking down at Zenna, she understood what he meant.

Dannel looked over at Arun. "We may have to leave him, Arun. We can secure the body somewhere safe, come back for him after..."

Arun pulled himself up with a clear effort. He wore only a half-shirt of light chain links over a fragmented tunic and faded breeches, the whole overlaid with a woolen overcloak that was more holes than cloth. He'd discarded his magical armor almost casually once it had become clear that they would have to carry Hodge's body back to Cauldron. At Mole's insistence they had packed the armor as well as the captured mithral plate formerly worn by Margh-Michto; she'd wrapped both in cloth and they placed the bundle upon Clinger's harness before the lizard was dismissed each day.

Mole rose as well, and walked over to where Zenith sat.

The former dwarven hero had been her charge since they had departed Bhal-Hamatugn. Drawn back from the brink of death by their healing skill—although Arun had refused to use his healing powers upon him—Zenith had been quiescent since their initial battle. The dwarf accepted all commands mutely, moving when prodded and continuing until halted. He had not spoken a word since the battle, and had not made a threatening gesture even when confronted with Arun's anger. Faced with the demands of practicality they'd used him as their pack mule, carrying the stretcher holding Zenna when Clinger was not available, bearing Arun's packed armor when the lizard was present.

The dwarf paladin crossed to where Hodge's body lay. They'd wrapped the fallen dwarf as best they could, but a strong odor hung about the body nonetheless.

"Arun..."

"*Raise dead* only works within a set period of time," the paladin said, without lifting his eyes from preparing the corpse for travel.

At least let Zenith carry him for a time," Mole suggested. "Dannel and I can manage Zenna's stretcher."

"That one is not touching him," Arun said. His feet scuffing on the assorted rocks that littered the trail, he moved to the front rank.

"Let's go."

They marched until well into the night, until it was so dark that Dannel and Mole stumbled with every second step. Finally even Arun was finished, collapsing on the side of the trail, Hodge's body falling in a heap. They rested there, husbanding their strength for the next day's hard march.

They resumed their journey before dawn, and by the time that the sky had brightened enough beneath the gray pall to clearly distinguish the trail, they had already covered the better part of a mile over the rough terrain. It was clear that the sun was not going to break

the clouds for yet another day, although at least it wasn't raining or snowing. At midmorning they paused briefly and Arun called upon his mount. Quickly they conducted the now-familiar daily ritual of swapping out their burdens. Zenna's condition was such that even the gentle rolling of the lizard's motion might be too much for her, so Dannel insisted on carrying her on the stretcher, Arun taking the rear of the pallet after he'd lashed Hodge to Clinger's back. The lizard obeyed without complaint, and soon they were moving again, making the best time they could over the difficult terrain.

They were tired, and focused on their burdens, so perhaps it was understandable that they didn't notice the danger until it was too late.

Chapter 133

It was Clinger who drew their attention, issuing a sibilant hiss that drew their attention up and down the trail.

The path ahead twisted up between a field of boulders before heading up a series of switchbacks to the crest of a rise ahead. A number cloaked figures had emerged from the boulders, and regarded them with hard, greedy eyes.

They were human men, for the most part, although one broad-shouldered brute looked like he had more than a splash of orcish blood in his veins. There were eight in total, and they all shared a hunted look about them, with unkempt beards and garments that bore dirt and wear in roughly equal proportions. They were armed; their weapons, a collection of various poking and cutting implements, seemed entirely functional. Two of them, remaining back among the rocks with higher vantages, carried loaded crossbows. The "armor" worn by the newcomers was a diverse medley of hides and shaped pieces of boiled leather. One, a long-limbed fellow who was missing part of his left ear, actually wore a shirt of mail links, and it was he who addressed the companions.

"Hail and well met!" he exclaimed, waving and offering a friendly smile that belied the hard looks of his fellows.

"Well met," Dannel offered. He carefully laid Zenna's stretcher down in a flat space beside the trail, but made no threatening move toward the crossbow—unloaded, unfortunately—at his hip. He had left the cumbersome quarterstaff he'd used against Zenith in Bhal-Hamatugn, but had since equipped himself with a rapier taken from a fallen kuo-toa.

"It would seem that you have run afoul of the dangers of the mountains," the man said companionably. "I am Torlan, and this crew are my band of Guardians." He indicated the sweep of his fellows with a wide brush of his hand. "You are headed back to Cauldron, then?"

"Indeed," Dannel said, his voice pleasant. "Our friend has taken seriously ill from a nasty malady; you may wish to have your friends keep their distance, lest they catch sick."

"That is terrible news, and I hope that you find aid in Cauldron; the clerics there can treat many illnesses, if one has the coin."

"I thank you for your concern, and wish you good day; we must continue to make haste." The elf shot a quick sidelong glance at his companions; Arun's expression looked like it could break stone, while Mole was nowhere to be seen.

"That there's the ugliest horse I ever did see," one of the men said, to the snicker of his neighbor, a rat-faced man carrying a hook-ended military pick. Torlan silenced them both with a hard look, before turning back to Dannel and his friends.

"Of course, I know you have no time for idle chatter. However, I must ask your tolerance for one more moment; my Guardians have worked hard to keep the high trails clear, and our expenses are significant in this venture. I am afraid that I am compelled to ask a toll, of travelers, to subsidize these efforts."

Arun muttered something unpleasant, but Dannel only smiled and nodded. "A worthy goal, although as you can see, we are not wealthy travelers by any means. What is the tally of this fee?"

"We would not want to interfere with your ability to seek treatment for your friend," Torlan said with a nod of magnanimity. "We will take a mere twenty gold coins for the toll... and that nice suit of silvery mail links that you bear. Such will greatly aid our efforts at keeping the peace. Why, just a few months back, three of my men were harshly murdered on one of the lower trails."

"Sadly, I regret..."

The elf was interrupted as Arun stepped forward. "Enough of this garbage," he said. "We do not have time for this." He held up his hammer, its heavy iron head pointed at Torlan. "Move yourselves out of our way, or you will be moved."

There were a few sneers and harsh comments from the gathered men, but Torlan's smile only deepened, though his eyes gleamed with a nasty light. "You might want to reconsider, ser dwarf. That's quite a smasher you've got there, but I must admit, Olog here has a certain fondness for cutting up dwarves." He indicated the half-orc, who unlimbered a massive two-handed greataxe.

Arun did not falter, even though both crossbowmen had now drawn a bead on him. "Last chance," he said.

One of the crossbowmen suddenly screamed, jerking roughly back, twisting around in a circle. Everyone turned in that direction, and as the man turned, they could see the feathered end of a tiny crossbow bolt jutting from his left eye.

The attention of the bandits was drawn back to the companions as Arun bowled forward, his warhammer clutched tightly in both hands. The half-orc Olog roared his own challenge and rushed ahead to meet him. The huge axe came up above the bandit's head, the thick muscles of his arms corded with amassed strength, but before he could strike the dwarven paladin leapt up and delivered an incredible blow to the brute's chest. The hammer, backed by the entire strength of the dwarf as well as by the divinely sanctioned justice of a

smite evil, crushed the half-orc and drove him back three paces, to land in a heap across the trail.

For a long moment, everyone just looked at the corpse.

The silence was shattered as the second crossbowman aimed and fired. The bolt stabbed into Arun's shoulder, piercing deeply through the damaged links of his chain shirt.

"At him, boys!" Torlan yelled, drawing his own sword.

The bandits, their ardor for violence diminished somewhat, rushed the dwarf. Four of them charged at his front and flanks, stabbing and cutting. For a moment, the dwarf was obscured behind the ring of attackers.

But then Dannel leapt into the fray, followed but a heartbeat later by Clinger. The elf ran one man through with a thrust from his rapier, the bandit collapsing as Dannel withdrew his blade from his lung. Clinger took down another, seizing the man's thigh with his powerful bite, and knocking him roughly aside with a shake of his wedge-shaped head.

The second crossbowman quickly reloaded, but before he could take aim at another target he felt a sharp pain in his throat as another tiny bolt from the still-unseen Mole pierced him. He clutched at the wound and fell.

Arun, virtually unarmored, took a few hits but in turn unleashed a storm of death. One man stabbed him with his rapier but paid for it with his life, as the warhammer crashed into the side of his skull. The second turned to run but barely got one foot down before the hammer caught him in the small of his back, snapping his spine and knocking him down to flop out the last moments of his life in the dirt.

And then the battle was over. They looked up to see Torlan's departing form, already a good fifty paces down the trail and running fast.

Arun paused only long enough to yank the crossbow bolt from his shoulder. "All right, let's go," he said.

Chapter 134

The enveloping folds of the gray split open, and Zenna was immersed in light, painful in its intensity. She tried to draw back, but was propelled forward despite her resistance, until colors began to emerge within the radiance, vague forms that only gradually took on substance.

"She will recover, but it will take some time," a voice said. Jenya Urikas, Zenna realized, the fog that had hung over her thoughts now gone and replaced with clarity of memory. All that she had experienced since they had left Bhal-Hamatugn was still vague, like a dream, but at least she remembered who she was and all that had happened before.

Zenna blinked, looking around. She was in the small chapel in the rear of the Temple of Helm, in Cauldron. In addition to Jenya, her companions were there, tired but with triumphant expressions on their faces.

“Hodge?” she asked.

“He will recover,” Jenya said. “He was returned just in time for me to *raise* him, using one of the scrolls that Sarcem had prepared, before his death.”

“What about Zenith?” Zenna asked.

“We returned him to his kinsman,” Dannel reported. “I’ll fill you in on all of the details later.”

Zenna tried to get up, but Jenya’s firm hand restrained her. “You came very close to death,” she said, her voice warm. “You need to rest, and recover your strength.”

Zenna nodded, and fell back on the cushioned bier upon which she lay. They had made it. This mission had brought them all to the brink of destruction several times, and she knew it would take some time for her to recover from her own ordeal. But they were alive, and for now, that was enough.

THE END OF “ZENITH TRAJECTORY”

The Shackled City IV: “The Demonskar Legacy”
Begun 4-21-04

Chapter 135

Zenna woke to warm morning sunlight streaming in through the large bay windows to the left of the bed. The sounds of activity were just audible through the thick leaded panes, enough to tell her that the city of Cauldron was gearing up to face the day. It was Tenth Day, a day of rest and fun, and she remembered that she’d made plans to visit the markets with Mole later.

She stretched languidly, enjoying the sensations of her body. Finally, she rose, grabbing her new cloak from the chair beside the bed to offer some warmth against the chill of the morning. Spring had arrived in Cauldron, but the city *was* situated in the mountains, and the mornings in particular were still fairly chilly.

She looked back down at the bed, at Dannel lying there, still asleep. She smiled, her mind drifting back to pleasurable memories. She still wasn’t entirely sure which of them had made the first move last night, but after that initial moment, it had definitely been mutual. She remembered being nervous before, for this had been her first time being with a man, but Dannel had been gentle, and once she’d been swept up in the emotions of the moment, all fears had faded to the background...

Careful to tread quietly, so as not to awaken the sleeping elf, she crossed to the outer chamber, closing the door softly behind her. Their clothes were scattered about the floor—they had not started the evening in the bedchamber—so she gathered a few things up and laid them on the wide expanse of the desk, careful not to disturb the small heap of scrollcases she'd laid there. She grinned wryly at a fleeting thought—what if Esbar had returned last night? The adept of Azuth had given her free rights to his home in Cauldron while he was away, but she doubted that his mandate extended to what she and Dannel had been up to last night. Or perhaps it would; Esbar was a man of wisdom and understanding, and no doubt he himself had been young once. The thought made her smile.

Her gaze lingered on the leather scroll cases, bound together by a threaded leather cord. The scrolls contained an important store of lore, new spells that she'd purchased with her share of the reward from the elder Splintershield for the return of his son, Zenith. Idly she wondered if his kinsmen had been able to help the dwarf, who'd clearly been driven into insanity by his time spent wandering the Underdark, and as a captive of the kuo-toa of Bhal-Hamatugn. In all honesty, she hadn't spent much thought on Zenith, after they'd brought him back to Cauldron.

Celeste and Davked Splintershield had proven as good as their word, granting them a generous reward in the form of gold coins or dwarf-crafted arms and armor. Zenna had spent her share on the new spells, a pair of new wands from the well-stocked shelves of Skie's Treasury, and some other components that might be useful in her researches. She had a few ideas about useful magical items that she could craft for herself and her companions, and the facilities in Esbar Tolerathkas's well-stocked laboratory would prove most useful in this regard. Mole had been able to procure the mithral shirt she'd long desired, while Dannel acquired a new sword to replace the one that he had lost in Bhal-Hamatugn. Only Arun had not acquired new gear, instead giving his share of the reward to the church of Helm to offset the cost of the magic used to *raise* his friend Hodge from the death he'd suffered at the hands of the insane Zenith Splintershield in the Underdark temple of the kuo-toa.

Zenna turned and caught sight of her magical hat lying on the low table near the windowbench. Instinctively she reached for it, but then hesitated, finally lowering her hand and leaving the hat where it lay. Later, when she went out, she would have to don it once more, but for now, she would allow her true self to show freely, to a man who accepted her for who and what she was. The feeling was liberating, in a way.

But her smile faded quickly, for the thought reminded her of something else. Turning and returning quickly to the desk, she found her blouse, instantly feeling the reassuring solidity of her pin tucked neatly inside. She doffed her cloak long enough to slip into the garment, feeling a familiar sense of relief at the feeling of the cold metal against her skin. Last night she hadn't thought about it, the first time in quite some time that it hadn't occurred to her when removing her garments. For nearly a year now she'd worn it, even in her sleep, relying upon the defense that it offered from scrying or other forms of magical tracking. She'd pressured Mole to wear hers as well, when it was clear that the gnome was less rigorous about relying upon its protection. Well, she'd been careless last night, but just because she was in love was no reason to stop being cautious.

She paused, her mouth falling open. Well, that thought had caught her off guard. In love? Well, Dannel was a true friend, and last night had certainly been great, but... love?

To distract herself from these complicated thoughts, she busied herself with straightening Dannel's garments into a neat pile on the desk. As she lifted his tunic, something fell out from the inner edge of the collar, landing on the floor with a faint clatter. She looked down, and her breath froze in her chest.

Even before she bent low, she knew what it was. Tears blurred her vision as her fingers closed on it, and as she stood, she slumped against the desk, her muscles suddenly weak.

Remembered words sounded in her head, spoken by Zenith Splintershield to her in a dark chamber in Bhal-Hamatugn.

"You will taste the bitter fruit of betrayal from one you love..."

She fell to the ground, sobbing, and the object she'd found slipped from her hand to the ground. It was a small silver pin, identical to the one she wore covertly against her skin.

A silver harp.

Chapter 136

"Zenna, what's wrong?"

Zenna looked up to see Dannel standing in the doorway to the bedroom. The elf was clad only in his breeches, his long hair hanging loosely down across his shoulders, a look of concern on his face. As she wiped away her tears, her sadness was replaced by a burning anger that started as a flame in her gut, but rapidly built to a raging torrent as she pulled herself up, picking up the silver pin as she did so.

"What's wrong? You bastard!"

She hurled the pin at him, a bit disgruntled when his hand snapped out and caught it smoothly. At the very least she'd hoped for maybe an eye.

Dannel looked down at the object in his hand. "Zenna, please, I can explain..."

"I don't want to hear your explanation!" she screamed. "What, are you going to try and tell me it was all just a coincidence? That you just happened to be a Harper, that you just *happened* to be in Cauldron, that you just HAPPENED to 'run into' me on the road? Do you think I'm an idiot? No, what am I saying? Of course I'm an idiot, I never suspected anything, just let you LIE to me, SPY on me!"

"Zenna, listen to me! Yes, I admit it, your parents asked me to look after you, but they didn't send me to spy on you! I was already here on my own business, and they send a request through Esbar..."

“So they knew we were here all along,” she said, her words dripping venom. “So I was just fooling myself, the whole time.”

“Your parents care a great deal about you,” Dannel said. “Your mother—“

Zenna cut him off. “My mother is dead,” she said. “As for my father and his wife, if they’d truly cared, they would have actually *been* parents, rather than spending all their time running around the west! They would have been there, and my mother might still be alive.”

“Zenna,” Dannel said, his voice firm. “Zenna, I don’t know the entire story, but I do know that your parents—“ he emphasized the word, “they are responsible for a great deal of good. With great power often comes a weighty duty to use it in the causes in which one believes.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Zenna said. “I left because I wanted to live my own life. And I will, without their interference—or anyone else’s.”

The elf stepped closer to her, until less than a pace separated them. “Zenna—I love you.”

She looked up at him, and her eyes were cold. “I may not know much about love, but I do know that it’s based on trust. You lied to me, and that cannot be undone.”

She spun away from him, and took up her breeches from the table, quickly sliding into them.

“Zenna, I’m sorry... I didn’t mean for things to happen this way, but I am not lying about my feelings for you...”

She shoved her feet roughly into her boots, painfully jamming one of her left toes. The feeling was almost welcome to her, nothing compared to the pain she was feeling inside. She took up her scrollcases and a few other things, thrusting them into her pack beside the desk.

Dannel moved around to block her. “Zenna, I’m not going to let you leave until we talk this through. I didn’t fight to bring you back from Bhal-Hamatugn to lose you now.”

She stood before him, and it was a long moment before she lifted her head to face him. “I am not yours to be won or lost,” she said. “I do not want to ever see you again. And if you see my ‘parents’, be sure to tell them the same.”

“Zenna—“

She started toward the door. Dannel moved to block her, but she suddenly issued a string of harsh syllables, and the elf abruptly froze, a look of startlement on his face.

“Goodbye, Dannel,” she said. She did not look at him again as she crossed to the door to the landing, pausing only to settle her magical hat upon her head before departing. On the landing, as the door slammed shut behind her, she stood for a moment, the tears pouring down her face, fighting a wave of grief and regret that threatened to overwhelm her.

But only for a moment. Finally she regained control of herself, fighting back the dark emotions with the hard self-discipline that she'd schooled in herself since she'd been a child, alone and different.

Alone.

Finally, she walked down the stairs, without looking back.

Chapter 137

In the city of Cauldron, situated high on the western shoulder of the Alomir Mountains, spring slowly gave way to summer, leaving behind the rough storms and accompanying rains of the annual flood season. Activity along the city's boulevards, extending in concentric circles around the caldera's central lake, continued to build, and the sounds of business and trade extended until well in the evenings, when those noises were replaced by circles of light and sound surrounding the city's numerous inns and taverns.

But the bustle of activity in Cauldron overlaid a growing tension, and stirrings of discontent, among the city's population of nearly four thousand inhabitants. Rumor and report had merged to give most of the residents of the city at least a partial overview of the tumultuous events of the past two seasons. It had started with the kidnappings, and the ultimate downfall of a slaving ring operating in an abandoned dwarven stronghold under the city. Then there had been the revelation of an evil cult operating in an old ruin within the volcano; while they too had been overcome and scattered, their operations had led to the death of Sarcem Delasharn, the former high priest of the Temple of Helm. These two events would have been bad enough, but then there had been an attack by an umber hulk in one of the mercantile districts of the city. While the beast had been slain, several buildings had been destroyed in the rampage.

It was a time of uncertainty, as the Cauldronites wondered where the next disaster would strike. The administration of the city had taken action, but the results had only further fueled the tensions within the city. Following the umber hulk attack, mayor Navalant had initiated a new tax, a serious levy that had been almost universally reviled almost from its inception by the business interests of the city. The common populace might have accepted it in the name of security, except that the collection of the tax was accompanied by large increases in the numbers of mercenary guardsmen retained by the city to "maintain the peace." The majority of these new guards were outsiders, mostly tough and grim looking half-orc veterans who were soon marching the streets in numbers. Although there were no serious incidents between this new force and the citizens of the city, the sudden appearance of what amounted to a small army in the streets of Cauldron stirred more than a few resentments among many of the long-time residents of the city.

Clarese Calloran, better known to her friends and the people of Cauldron by her chosen name Mole, understood the reasons for the unsettled air in the city. She'd only lived in Cauldron for a few months now, with a considerable amount of that time spent under or away from the city proper, but as a central participant in many of the recent troubles, she was in a good position to have a particular insight. Furthermore, she'd made it a point to

get to know the town, talking to people and exploring the diverse offerings of the place. She'd even spent some time amidst the seedier side of Cauldron, a fact of which her current companions were unaware. Not that anyone who knew her would be surprised, really.

So as Mole sat casually against the frontage of a shop watching the traffic go by, she observed the faces and conversations of the city folk, gauging the sentiments of the people from their behaviors. It was a skill that she was fairly good at, although more often than not she'd still take actions that got her into trouble. To the gnome that wasn't a problem; if asked she would have said that a life without at least a good dollop of trouble in it would be insufferably dull.

The gnome looked unassuming, sitting there; just a few inches over three feet tall, clad in well-made but unassuming clothes with a light cotton jacket pulled over her torso. A small sword that would have served as a dagger for a human male hung at her hip, but that wasn't uncommon here on the frontier. Of course, casual observation would not have revealed the magical shirt of mithral links that she wore under her tunic, or the fact that the functional leather boots she wore likewise bore a potent magical enhancement.

Mole felt a flash of annoyance as she looked down the street. Zenna was late for their meeting. It wasn't so much that she was eager for shopping; in fact, with only about forty gold coins left in her pouch, she doubted that she would be able to find anything worthwhile to buy. Mole was oblivious to the fact that the sum represented more than the average unskilled laborer could reasonably expect to earn in a year; she was used to handling goodly sums of cash now, and considered her current total as placing her on the brink of poverty. The fact that she'd spend several thousand gold pieces in the last few tendays was a matter of little concern to that calculation; tomorrow had always been of more pressing interest than yesterday when the gnome was concerned.

She was still a bit piqued that she'd been unable to buy a replacement for her destroyed magical backpack. Skie, she knew, had had another *handy haversack* in her inventory, and when Mole had found out that it had been purchased by one of the Stormblades not two days before they had returned from Bhal-Hamatugn, she'd seethed for the better part of a day. Skie had offered a small *bag of holding* as an alternative purchase, and Mole had quickly accepted. She'd felt some lingering guilt afterward; the pieces of jewelry she'd sold to buy the bag had technically been "party loot", found in the private chambers of the kuo-toa high priest Margh-Michto. But the unpleasant sensation quickly faded when Mole had realized that the bag was actually a "party purchase", since the experience of the *haversack* had clearly shown that such an item was for the benefit of all. Her conscience mollified, Mole had immediately started buying a variety of useful products to fill her new purchase.

No, she wasn't upset at Zenna being late because of the shopping, but rather because the crowd of passers-by were increasingly headed in one direction, where something interesting seemed to be developing. That way lay the city hall, she knew, and the faces of the people passing by now seemed increasingly agitated, even outright angry.

She knew what that meant. Trouble.

And she didn't want to miss it.

She was about to abandon her post when she caught sight of two familiar faces advancing through the crowd. She leapt up onto the bench where she'd been sitting and waved to catch the attention of Arun and Hodge. The two didn't see her, so she sprang into the street—surprising a young teamster who hadn't expected to see a gnome manage an eight-foot standing leap—and darted through the crowd toward them.

She made barely a sound as she crossed to where the two dwarves were walking, approaching them undetected from behind.

“Bah, I'm not sayin' it be a poor weapon, but it ain't me Betsy,” Hodge was saying.

“Dannel and Zenna both insist that it's magical, and more effective than your old axe,” Arun said. “I'm sorry that we neglected to bring your old weapon, but we had other matters on our minds at the time, you being dead and all.”

“Bragh!” Hodge snorted.

Mole smiled. This wasn't a new subject between the two; Hodge was referencing his new waraxe, of late the weapon of Zenith Splintershield that had been used to such devastating effect against them. Davked had not referenced it when they'd returned the mad dwarf to his father, so they'd kept the weapon to replace Hodge's lost blade.

“Well, if you feel so strongly about it, you can return to Bhal-Hamatugn to recover it,” Arun suggested.

“It just needs a name!” Mole said, enjoying the way Hodge jumped into the air when she appeared suddenly between them.

“Blast, girl! Yer gotta stop sneakin' up on a man like that!”

“Hey, is it my fault that you pay no heed to your surroundings?” Mole asked.

Hodge's only reply was a curse in dwarvish that Mole duly noted for future use. “Oh, I know!” she said.

“What now?” Arun asked.

“Marjorie. That's a great name! I had a cat named Marjorie once.”

Hodge shot a deadly serious look at Arun, and said, in dwarvish, “I imagine that there be a torment in the Hells, where they lock yer in a sealed room with a gaggle o' chatterin' gnomes fer all eternity.”

Arun looked back, his expression equally grave, and responded in the same tongue, “I'm not sure I'd wish that on even the worst sinner, friend.”

Mole, for her part, interjected the dwarvish curse that Hodge had just used, accompanied by another juicy one that she'd learned from Lok a few years back. Boy, her mother had been upset when she'd whipped *that* one out at a family dinner...

"That's no way fer a lady to be speakin'," Hodge said.

"I agree completely," Mole said, with all gravity. "Say, where are we going, anyway?"

"Word is that the town merchants are organizing a protest this morning, in the square in front of the town hall," Arun said.

"Aye, the not be likin' those new taxes," Hodge said. "Nor all them half-orcs that been wanderin' 'bout o' late."

"Interesting," Mole replied absently, her attention already distracted by the sight up ahead.

The square before the angular, three-story complex that comprised Cauldron's town hall was already nearly full of town residents, with several hundred people milling about. As the three adventurers reached the edge of the gathering, they spotted an individual standing on a small platform, haranguing the crowd. The listeners seemed receptive, and as they watched the speaker finished saying something, drawing a number of cheers from his audience.

"Let's go over there," Mole said. Before the dwarves could respond, she was gone, blending into the crowd.

Chapter 138

Arun glanced over at Hodge, who shrugged. "We'd better keep an eye on her," the paladin said. "I don't like the looks of this, though."

"Mobs 'ave a way o' turnin' ugly," the other dwarf replied. "Tho' this lot 'as the look o' a bunch o' merchies."

Indeed the dwarf's assessment seemed true; most of those gathered had the look of merchants or craftsmen, with a smattering of those less well-off scattered into the mix. Overall a rather genteel crowd, but that didn't reassure Arun as he made his way toward the speaker's platform. Members of the crowd took one look at him, resplendent in his silvery mithral plate armor, and gave way for him.

The speaker was a well-dressed human male in his forties, with a neatly trimmed beard and piercing brown eyes that held the crowd in their grasp as he spoke. "Friends! Can you not see what is happening here? Our coffers are drained, and our hard-earned bread is going to a ragged band of outlander half-orcs!"

Arun managed not to start as Mole materialized next to him. "His name's Maavu Arlinal," she told him.

“Why does that name seem familiar?”

“It was his warehouse that was destroyed by that rampaging umber hulk, that we killed.”

Arun nodded, giving the man a more intensive scrutiny. He seemed to be a skilled speaker, his tone growing more strident as he spoke, and punctuating his words with emotive gestures.

“And I tell you, friends, that the administration of this city is corrupt! Why, I will tell you true, that Alec Tercival, a righteous and holy servant of Helm, has offered a challenge at arms to that dog Tereson Skellerang. Why has this challenge not been publicized? Where is the response of the city leaders to these charges? I think we *know* where our hard-earned money is going, friends!”

While the crowd roared its approval, Mole glanced up at the dwarves. “Tercival... didn’t Jenya mention him... isn’t he one of their paladins?”

Arun directed her attention back toward the crowd. “Looks like this Maavu character’s provoked a reaction with his words.”

Mole jumped into the air to try and get a look at what the dwarf had seen. A knot of armed guardsmen had issued from the main gate of the town hall, led by a bearded man of middle age in a half-helm and hauberk of heavy chain links reinforced by plate greaves. Behind him were a half-dozen half-orcs, each standing nearly a head taller than most of the people in the crowd. The crowd greeted the latter with a chorus of boos and hisses, but drew back as the guards bullied their way through the gathered townsfolk to the base of the platform.

“Maavu Arlinal, by the authority of Tereson Skellerang, I must place you under arrest!” the guard leader said, his voice determined despite the hostility directed at him by the crowd.

A youth pressed his way forward through the crowd. “Let’s teach these bastards a lesson!” he cried, steel gleaming in his hand as he suddenly drew a knife and thrust at one of the guardsmen from the side.

A roar rose up from the crowd, as the youth’s precipitous action unleashed the gathered fury of the crowd. The sea of protesters surged against the suddenly hard-pressed warriors, who were quickly forced back into a circle. Several were bleeding from wounds sustained in the initial rush; although few of the gathered protestors had weapons, they were quick to hurl small stones, foodstuffs, or whatever else was at hand. The warriors used the butts of their halberds to keep the mob away from them, and a number of protestors were quickly laid out on the cobblestones, stunned and bruised. One stepped into the sweep of a blade as its half-orc user thrust the haft of the weapon into the face of a young man in the tailored jacket of a scribe; both men went down, the scribe’s jaw broken, the other clutching a gash that stretched across his shoulder and cut down to the bone.

The leader of the guardsmen drew out a potion and tried to drink it, only to suffer from a fierce assault from a ring of townsmen that pressed in against him from all sides. One struck the bottle with a brass-weighted cane, shattering it. Several punches struck his body, doing little damage through the armor he wore, but someone managed to strike a

glancing blow to the side of his head with a length of wood. Though his helm protected him from a fractured skull, it was clear that the ferocity of the assault had staggered him, and he fought for balance as angry hands clawed at him.

He did not, however, reach for the sword at his hip.

“We best clear out o’ ‘ere,” Hodge began, but as he turned he saw that Arun had already dove forward into the crowd, moving people easily with powerful thrusts of his shield and his weapon-hand. The dwarf sighed and followed. A man waving an improvised club fashioned from a fence-post stepped into his view, and for some reason he identified the dwarf as an enemy, swinging his weapon wildly at him. Hodge caught the blow easily on his shield, and countered with a solid punch from a mailed fist that knocked the attacker into two others nearby, swaying a moment before he slumped to the cobblestones, unconscious.

“Watch who yer jostlin’,” the dwarf said, trying to make out Arun in the chaotic melee. The paladin, of course, had made for the thick of the riot, heading directly for the embattled guards.

Maavu, atop the podium, tried to restore order with shouted admonitions to the crowd, but it was clear that the situation was rapidly growing out of hand. The youth with the knife, along with a few others who had drawn weapons and attacked in the initial surge, had vanished from view, slipping away in the first moments of chaos. The merchant, who was more than he appeared at first glance, realized that he’d been set up; that the situation had been manipulated to his disadvantage. Drawing back, he drew out a scroll from the pouch at his waist, opening the tight parchment roll to reveal the neat lines of runic text within. Without hesitation, the merchant began to read the words of magic scribed upon the scroll.

He could not see the individual who stood behind a narrow window within the slender tower that rose above the Town Hall, who watched the scene with great intensity. Nor could he sense the magic that was worked there, or the brief wrenching of the border between worlds that took place in a tiny room behind the slit, unobserved by anyone.

Except for one person in the crowd, who took note of an odd feeling, glancing up across the square before the roiling of the crowd around her drew her attention back to the immediate scene.

Arun’s voice boomed through the mob as the dwarf reached the edge of the melee between the protestors and the guardsmen. Maddened people drew back from the dwarf, whose magical armor seemed to glow despite the clouds that blocked the afternoon sun in the sky above. Clad head to toe in mithral plate, with a large shield of polished steel and his massive hammer at his waist, the dwarf was clearly not someone to be trifled with. He swept his shield and drove back two men who did not take the hint, continuing their attack on the guards leader, knocking one roughly to the ground and driving the second back far enough for the dwarf to steady the battered guardsman.

“Get your men back!” the dwarf roared, all but carrying the man into the ring of half-orcs. The six had formed a ring of open space, the commoners in the crowd having learned that entering the reach of those halberds was foolish. All six were battered and smeared with

hurled foodstuffs and assorted filth, but at least twice as many protesters had taken wounds ranging from minor to serious from hafts and blades, and two men lay on the stones, bleeding and unconscious.

“There’s too many!” shouted one of the guards, and in fact it looked as though a sea of humanity separated them from the security of the Town Hall, sixty paces across the square. A paving stone hurtled out from the crowd, glancing off of a half-orc skull, staggering the unlucky mercenary.

“Back then!” Arun yelled, gesturing toward the end of a row of shops that jutted out into the square along Obsidian Avenue, the nearest wall only twenty paces distant. The guard lieutenant quickly took the hint and directed his men in that direction, driving back the scattered protestors with desultory thrusts of their halberds. One of the mercenaries took up his injured comrade and followed, while Arun warded their rear, blocking the progress of the crowd with his mere presence.

“Why do you aid them?” yelled one of the protestors, a man in his mid-fifties. “They take our coin, and now our blood as well!” The cry was echoed by a dozen others, but they wisely did not move to challenge the dwarf.

“Blood given for blood is never a fair trade,” Arun said simply. He came forward, and the foremost among the crowd drew back slightly in alarm. One of the protestors was pushed roughly aside as Hodge belatedly arrived, and the second dwarf joined his friend.

“Yer crazy, yer know that,” Hodge said.

Arun did not reply, instead bending to touch one of the bleeding men lying on the cobbles. A healing glow issued from his fingertips into the wounded man, who stirred, clutching his head as he groaned.

“Go,” the paladin said. “Go from here, all of you,” he said, louder, to the men and women who watched him in amazement. “There is nothing for you here, now.”

A few of the gathered crowd obeyed, filtering away toward the edges of the swirling mob. The guardsmen had pushed through to the relative shelter of the nearest shop, although objects were still being hurled at them from the crowd, and there were still at least a hundred and fifty people in the square before the Town Hall, hurling invectives as well as objects at the guards warding the main entrance to that structure.

“Yer canna stop all o’ them,” Hodge said.

Arun opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by a cry from the direction of the speaker’s platform behind him.

“Arun! We need you, now!”

Chapter 139

When the guardsmen had arrived, Mole had quickly worked herself deeper into the crowd closer to the pedestal, giving her a clearer vantage of what was going on. She thought she recognized the young man with the knife, as well as a few of the other provocateurs who started the attack on the guards. They were rakes, associates of the Last Laugh, the leading thieves' guild of Cauldron. While not personally affiliated with that organization, Mole had met a number of its members, and had even dined with a few of them at some of the seedier locales in the town. They were a tight-lipped lot, at least when it came to their brotherhood, but the gnome had clearly discerned that the Last Laugh were intricately tied into the storm of events brewing within Cauldron.

As the crowd came alive, however, provoked to assault and violence by the actions of those agents, Mole quickly had to turn her thoughts to avoiding getting trampled by the mob. She twisted and tumbled her way to the edge of the speakers' platform, its solidity giving her some respite from the surge of angry people.

She saw Maavu cast a spell from a scroll, and then draw a potion from the same pouch at his waist. But even as the merchant uncorked the vial and drew it to his lips, she felt a sudden chill pass over her. A... *thing* materialized before the man, an amorphous cloud with a vaguely humanoid form, hanging in the air with twin wisps of red flame for eyes. The merchant tried to draw back, but the thing lashed out at him with a rough tentacle of its own foggy substance. The vial exploded as it struck, and Maavu's expensive cloak and tunic tore open, scoring the flesh beneath.

The merchant cried out, and leapt down from the platform to the crowd below. The nearby townsfolk that saw the creature cried out and fled, while several others just stood there, transfixed with horror at the sight of the creature. Maavu was moving quickly, although he was forced to dart and dodge around both groups of people as he sought escape. The merchant was fast, almost unnaturally so, likely enhanced somehow by the spell he'd cast earlier.

Unfortunately, the creature was even faster.

Maavu perhaps sensed its rush, for he turned just in time to meet the creature streaking down out of the sky toward it. The hapless merchant dodged aside from its first lancing attack, but even as the first *wind scythe* sliced past a second one was forming, tearing across the man's torso and leaving an ugly red gash in its wake.

Then the creature promptly vanished once more, cloaked again in *invisibility*.

Maavu drew back a step, and called upon a spell. A glittering field of glowing motes erupted into being in front of the wizard, hanging in the air and outlining the form of the invisible creature clearly. The wizard paid for his action, however, as the creature darted at him again, slashing him painfully across the body once more.

Mole drew back, her eyes flashing with the afterimages of the *glitterdust* that had exploded in her face as she'd rushed to the aid of the merchant. Fortunately she'd resisted being blinded, but it took her a moment to readjust and find the creature again within the field of

sparkling motes. Grimly she held her sword, uncertain if such a creature could be harmed by a mundane weapon, but unwilling to allow the poor merchant to be torn to pieces while she watched.

But before she could attack, a ray of fire sliced through the crowd, tearing into the fabric of the creature. Whatever its resistance to weapons, the thing was clearly hurt by fire, as it roiled and drew back from the assault. Mole turned to see Zenna standing there, twenty paces away, a look of intense concentration on her face.

Needing no further impetus to action, Mole leapt forward. Her sword sliced through the cloudy form, meeting resistance and tearing a small portion of its substance with the passage of her blade. The thing turned on her, and for a moment, as those baleful eyes of flame fell upon her, she felt her breath freeze in her throat.

Her arms felt leaden, and refused to obey her commands as the creature menaced her. She felt a cold terror as it came closer, extending a tendril of fog toward her half-open mouth.

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Mole could not move as the breathdrinker extended a tendril of its own substance toward her. She felt an icy chill as the fog caressed her lips and nostrils, probing inside.

Then she was jerked roughly backward, falling on the stones. She saw Zenna step into the place where she'd been standing, a wand in her hands. She fired a spray of roiling flames into the creature, a fan of *burning hands* that seared the edges of the fog, but did little to stop it. The creature did not press its attack, however, instead turning back to face the critically injured Maavu.

"Arun! We need you, now!" Zenna cried, the shout lost in the chaos of the still-roiling crowd.

Maavu had used the few moments of respite to raise some magical defenses, and quaff a potion that healed some of the wounds he had taken. Realizing that he could not flee against the speed of the creature, he turned to face it even as it surged once more to the attack. For a fleeting instant his defenses held; then a final cutting slash of cohesive fog tore through his shields and into his chest, a critical hit that scored to the ribs beneath cloth and flesh. With a groan, the merchant staggered backward and slumped to the stones, blood oozing from the wound.

The creature darted forward to finish its assignment, but before it could reach the merchant an *acid arrow* sizzled squarely into the middle of its form. The breathdrinker spun to face Zenna, who now held a second wand, a faint wisp of smoke lifting from its tip.

"Come on then," Zenna said, a sudden and unexpected vehemence in her voice as she spat the words at the creature.

Come it did, surging toward her in a deadly rush. Zenna held her ground, her *mage armor* absorbing its first strike, her jaw tightening around a gasp of pain as its second cut deeply into her side.

A loud noise, a clatter of metal combined with a dwarven battle cry, drew her attention to the side.

“You had your chance,” she told the creature, which seemed unconcerned, forming another wind-scythe in preparation of another assault upon the wizard.

Before the creature could attack, however, Arun appeared from around the platform, charging headlong into the fray, his hammer clutched in a ready position. The breathdrinker shifted but did not avoid the hammer as it tore into its otherworldly substance.

And tore through it, the wisps of fog reforming in the hammer’s wake, nearly unaffected by the blow.

“It’s only harmed by magic!” Zenna exclaimed. She punctuated her point by firing another *acid arrow* into it, the fat droplets of searing green disintegrating the wisps of cloud as the two interacted.

As if on cue, Hodge appeared from the opposite side of the platform, charging forward with his axe raised in an echo of Arun’s rush just moments ago. The breathdrinker, perhaps sensing that this battle was lost, turned and dove toward Maavu, intent upon finishing its task. It had nearly reached the wizard when the charging dwarf caught up to it, driving his axe—late of Zenith Splintershield’s possession—through it. The effect was markedly different than Arun’s assault, and as the axe sundered its form the creature let out a hollow shriek before it disintegrated into wisps of nothingness.

Zenna quickly moved to help the crippled merchant, while Arun tended to Mole. They could still hear the noise of the crowd in the square, although the immediate area around them had grown suddenly quiet.

“You know, maybe this axe isn’t so bad after all,” Hodge said, examining his new weapon.

Zenna poured the potent energies of a *cure moderate wounds* spell into Maavu, and helped the wizard/merchant to his feet.

“Thank you, my dear,” the man said. “Though I fear that this is only the opening sally by my foes.”

“And whom exactly are they?” Zenna asked.

“I am afraid I cannot linger to discuss the matter,” Maavu replied. “But come to Redgorge, to the Redhead Miner’s Inn... speak the word “mortar” and they will let you in. Alec Tercival will be there, and I am certain that will wish to talk to you of the threat...”

“Wait,” Zenna said. But the man had already taken up another potion vial, and before she could do anything to stop him, he quaffed it. Almost immediately his body began to

dissolve into the shape of a cloud of mist eerily similar to the form of the breathdrinker. Then it rose quickly into the sky, where it vanished amidst the rooftops of the town.

Cries of pain drew their attention back toward the Town Hall. The mob was definitely breaking up, with people fleeing out of the square along the three main avenues out from the intersection.

“What’s happenin’?” Hodge asked.

“The Town Guard is firing into the crowd,” Zenna said.

“Why, those bastards,” Arun said. He started in that direction, but Zenna held his shoulder.

“I have to put a stop to it,” the paladin said.

“The riot is over,” Zenna said. “This battle is already lost; help the injured, if you must, but it would be best if we left this place quickly.” She glanced up at the sky where Maavu had disappeared. “I will meet you at the Morkoth, later; there are things to discuss.” Without waiting for a reply, she stepped back, incanted briefly, and vanished from sight.

“Girl’s getting’ a bit hoity,” Hodge grumbled. “Tho’ she do have a point ‘bout not hangin’ ‘round ‘ere, me thinks.”

Mole, leaning against Arun, finally stirred herself, shaking off the linger effects of the breathdrinker’s gaze. Sheathing her sword, she tossed up her hands, and exclaimed, “Would someone please tell me what is going on?”

Arun and Hodge exchanged a look. They had no easy answers for her.

Meanwhile, the square emptied out, as the protestors fled the violence of the mercenaries of the Town Guard. Or at least most fled; a half-dozen bodies remained sprawled in bloody heaps on the broken cobbles, reminders of a bad day in Cauldron.

Chapter 141

“A cloud of anger and mistrust hangs over our city. There is something happening here, a shadow that deepens with each coming day...”

Jenya Urikas, High Priest of Helm in Cauldron, turned back to face the companions gathered in the forepart of the chapel dedicated to her deity. At this time of day, with the last rays of the setting sun slanting through the narrow windows high along the walls, the place was empty save for the priestess and her guests.

“I’m sorry, I have grown maudlin in my advancing years.” The priestess forced a smile. Jenya’s curly brown-and-gray hair framed a face that will still rather youthful, but it was clear that the responsibilities of her new position, gained following the murder of Sarcem Delasharn, had taken their toll on her. A number of her friends and colleagues had died in recent months, their lives spent facing the myriad troubles that confronted the town.

“The mayor has announced that the new taxes will not be collected for three months,” Zenna said. That news, still spreading through the city, had taken the edge off some of the tension following that afternoon’s riot, but there was still an understandable sense of anger and fear that roiled just beneath the surface in Cauldron.

“That’s of little concern to the families of the men and women who lost their lives in the square today,” Arun said.

“True,” Jenya said. “I have already spoken to the heads of the other churches, about starting a collection for those who lost loved ones.” She shifted her gaze to Arun. “From what I have heard, the number of dead would have been higher, but for a pair of dwarves clad in resplendent mail, who remained in the square, tending the wounded, defying the Guard.”

“What of Maavu, and Alec Tercival?” Mole asked.

The priestess sighed. “Alec and I were close friends. We served as initiates together, back at a time when both of us were younger and full of the vigor and idealism that drives the inexperienced. He’s a good man, but this challenge... it is unlike him.”

“The buzz about the city is that the mayor has declared the challenge null and void, that Alec is under the influence of ‘outside forces’.”

“I have not seen him in some time, and grow concerned,” Jenya admitted. “Whatever has happened to him, it seems he has gotten embroiled in the heart of the politics that grip our troubled city.”

“He’s a nobleman, isn’t he?” Mole asked. “From what I’ve heard, only a member of the leading families can even offer this sort of challenge, according to the city Charter.”

Jenya nodded. “The Tercival name was once revered as belonging to one of the great clans of Cauldron’s history,” she said. “Unfortunately for Alec, he came along at a time when his house was facing serious reversals, and his father ended up losing his ancestral estate in the settlement of various debts that the family had incurred. After his father’s death, Alec took service to the Church, but one of his prime motivations has always been to rebuilt the pride and repute of his name.”

“What of Maavu?” Arun asked.

“Maavu Arlinal is a member of an organization that calls itself ‘the Chisel’. They were initially organized a long time ago in the town of Redgorge, to the south. Their members are skilled craftsmen and merchants who often possess other talents as well; their founder, I believe, was a powerful wizard.”

“And what is this group’s agenda?” Arun asked.

“I cannot say, for certain. The Chisel has historically been an organization shrouded in secrecy, conducting their activities behind closed doors. Only a few of their members are

even publicly known. I do know that they have been critical of the city's current administration, however, and it is likely they were the instigators of today's protest."

"Well, it seems that if we want more information, we shall have to go make a visit... after all, we were invited," Zenna said.

"Very well," Arun said. "If it will help us identify the source of the darkness growing in this town, so that we can uncloak and eradicate it."

"I will send Morgan with you, as my representative," Jenya said.

Zenna's expression betrayed her feelings, and Mole said, "No offense, Jenya, but I think we'd be better off without that windbag."

"I know he can be... difficult..." Jenya said, "but he's a skilled warrior and priest, and despite his rough exterior, he's true of heart. You may need his aid."

Arun regarded the priestess intently. "Is there something else you would share with us, lass?"

Jenya had the grace to flush slightly. "I... yes, I am sorry. In times such as these, my instinct is to keep my secrets close, but you are friends, and true ones."

She turned back to the altar at the end of the chapel atop a low dais, a broad slab of gray marble covered with a pristine cloth of white linen. Atop it, attached to the wall behind the altar, was a box fashioned of dressed stone reinforced with bands of polished steel. Around it burned six white candles in sconces set into the wall, above which hung a standard in blue and gray cloth depicting the upraised gauntlet that was the symbol of Helm's order.

She placed her hand upon the box, but did not open it. "This contains the *Star of Justice*, the most holy relic of our church."

"I remember," Zenna said. "It allows you to cast the *divination* spell, as I recall."

The priestess nodded. "When I heard of this challenge, I invoked its power to learn of Alec's fate."

"And what did you learn?" Alec asked.

Jenya hugged her arms close to her body, and looked up into empty space. When she spoke, her words were thick with the memory of her communion with her patron.

*"Late on the path of justice,
Trapped between glass and stone,
He weeps where many can see him,
But he can see only himself."*

"What does it mean?" Mole asked.

“These sorts of divine revelations are usually cryptic,” Zenna said. “Remember the rhyme we learned when we were seeking the lost children.”

“Ah, yes,” Mole said. “Yeah, that was a puzzler, but I guess it all made sense in hindsight.”

“I do not know either,” Jenya said. “But I think it is clear that Alec is in great danger. Whatever you can do to find him...”

“We are already in your debt, Jenya,” Arun said. “We will do what we can.”

“Well, when we be hittin’ the road?” Hodge queried. “An’ what about the elf, he comin’?”

“Dannel will not be joining us,” Zenna said. The others looked at her curiously, but she ignored the questions in their eyes. “And if you feel that... Morgan’s presence is necessary, then he may accompany us. There is little sense in delaying,” she went on. “We may as well set out in the morning.”

“We’ll need to secure horses, and supplies,” Mole pointed out.

“The church can assist with that,” Jenya said. “We have a relationship with one of the teamsters’ guilds, and frequently lease mounts for our various needs.”

“Hodge and I’ll get the gear we need,” Arun said.

“Very well. I will send Morgan to the Morkoth—you are still staying there, yes?—tomorrow morning.”

“Fine,” Zenna said, already turning to leave. The others, surprised at her brusqueness, said their goodbyes to Jenya, before following her out into the courtyard and the street beyond.

In their distraction, and the gathering shadows of the evening, none of them noticed the cloaked figure who intently watched their going from the depths of a nearby alley.

Chapter 142

“So, do you want to talk about it?” Mole asked.

The companions were walking quickly from the Temple of Helm toward the Drunken Morkoth, where they had rooms they’d been occupying on a semi-permanent basis for the last several months. As night descended upon the city, Ash Street was fairly quiet, with occasional people headed home after a day’s labors, or toward Lava Avenue and the various taverns there that catered toward the crowd that saw nightfall as an opportunity to throw off the restrictive shackles of the working day.

Arun and Hodge walked back a short distance behind Mole and Zenna. Mole almost had to run to keep up with the taller woman’s pace, but her magical boots made that little difficulty.

Normally Zenna subconsciously slowed her pace to match Mole's, but tonight the tiefling seemed intent on returning to the inn as rapidly as possible, with no small talk.

Zenna had not responded, and Mole started to ask again, only to be cut off with a hard, "No."

"Look, I know men are crazy and all," she began, shooting a glance back at Arun and Hodge to make sure that they were out of range of hearing. The two dwarves, their deliberate, armored steps much slower than Zenna's brisk walk, were now just shadows a half-block back. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em, yadda yadda ya. But Dannel's an important part of our group, we need him—"

"Not anymore," Zenna said. She looked down at her friend without breaking stride, and smiled wistfully. "We got along all right before, didn't we? Just you and me, all those miles on that long road..."

"Well, sure. But here... well, it's clear that we're stirred up in a whole big mess of trouble. And... well, he did save your life..."

"It's done and over," Zenna said, turning back to the street ahead. Suddenly, she stopped, so abruptly that Mole had to turn around and come back several paces to join her.

"What is it?"

"Do you smell smoke?"

Mole tested the air. "Yeah. And look, down by the lake. That looks like the glow of a fire, over there, over the back of those shops..."

The clank of metal announced the arrival of the dwarves. "What's the matter?" Arun asked.

The two women shared a look. "Trouble," Mole said.

* * * * *

The four companions hurried in the direction of the fire. Even as they drew near to Lava Street, the lowest of the four concentric roads that encircled the city's central lake, they could hear cries and shouts that indicated the source of the fire.

They emerged from one of the sloped connecting alleys that linked the city's four main avenues around the crater to a scene of chaos. Before them stretched the calm black waters of the lake that filled the center of the caldera. Reflected in the surface of that quiet body were the dancing flames roaring out from the windows and eaves of a waterfront inn, a rambling two-story structure named Mintua's Board.

A number of half-orc mercenaries were gathered before the inn, hurling bucketfuls of water onto the flames in what seemed to be a fruitless gesture.

The companions rushed closer, in time to see a despondent-looking man clutching his head with his hands as he stared at the flames. "Me inn!" he cried. He turned to one of the half-orcs, a hulking brute with a patch over one eye. "Them's burnin' me in, you gots to stop them!"

The half-orc clutched the man by the throat of his torn and soot-stained jerkin, lifting him off his feet. "Demons of fire inside! They burn us! Weapons do nothing!" he screamed, shoving a hunk of metal that looked like it might have once been a weapon into the terrified man's face.

Arun rushed into the courtyard before the inn. "Is there anyone left inside?" he shouted, already starting toward the main entry, wreathed in fire and smoke.

"Arun, no!" Zenna yelled. But before anyone else could respond or take action, a burst of flame exploded from the doorway. Arun drew back, shielding his face, as the flames solidified into a humanoid form, easily sixteen feet tall, a figure shaped of living flames.

The half-orcs drew back in horror, but the fire-creature was faster as it lunged and caught up one in a fist of flame that wrapped around its throat, lifting it into the air. Its mottled gray-green flesh turned black and its screams choked off into gasps of agony that in turn died with the mercenary, falling back into a smoldering heap upon the cobblestones of the courtyard.

The elemental turned toward Arun.

Chapter 143

Arun Goldenshield had confronted dozens of terrible creatures in his career as a warrior in service to Moradin. As a paladin of his faith, he was reinforced against fear. That was not to say that he did not feel that emotion at all; a man who stood in the heat of battle and faced death without any trepidation was not of sound mind. But his faith was the bulwark that allowed him to control the instinct that told him to flee for his life, and the fear that came with the hot rush of the flame over him as the elemental turned to face him was washed away beneath an iron skin of hard resolve.

With a roar he lunged at the creature, delivering a powerful overhead blow with his hammer. The heavy iron head splashed into the flaming "body" of the creature, meeting only a partial resistance as it passed through the flames and finally clanged hard against the flagstones beneath. Arun instantly realized that the creature was resistant if not immune to non-magical attacks, but he stood his ground and unleashed another blow, putting more of his strength into a swing that unfortunately passed harmlessly through empty air as the creature flowed and reformed a pace to the side. The thing moved with an uncanny speed and grace, its body surging like a bonfire splashed with oil.

The elemental lashed at Arun with fingers of flame that blasted into him with the force of steel whips. The dwarf lifted his shield to absorb the first blow, feeling the heat that rushed around the edges of the metal barrier like a gust from a blast furnace. A second blow followed the first, and Arun was driven back a step, his arm scorched by the heat passing

through the shield, his eyes watering as smoke and ash were driven into them by the ferocity of the creature's attack.

Arun's companions, of course, were not idle in those moments, and rushed quickly to the aid of their friend. However, even as Hodge charged, Mole yelled a warning, as a great gout of flame surged out from an upper window, taking form and substance after it crashed to the cobbles in the middle of the courtyard, sprouting arms and legs of eager red fire. It regarded those gathered with contempt in its twin eyes, spots of white-hot anger within the amorphous flames of its body.

The half-orcs had clearly had enough of this situation, and most fled from the scene, some clutching smoldering wounds where they had been stung by the terrible attacks from the elementals. Two of the mercenaries who had been close to the building found their route of escape blocked by the arrival of the second creature, and they turned toward the low wall that separated the courtyard from the property of the adjacent building, yelling in alarm as the elemental surged toward them.

"Bah, savin' a lot o' half-orcs... what be the world comin' to!" Hodge roared, as he lunged at the elemental from behind. The magically-enhanced steel tore through the fabric of the creature, and it instantly turned on the dwarf, driving him back with several powerful blows. One solid blast of flame set the upper body of the dwarf on fire, and he fell to the ground, trying to roll out the burning flames that seared his exposed flesh greedily.

Mole had moved to flank the creature threatening Arun, staying close to the edge of the building despite the heat and tendrils of flame rising from within. As she passed under a window opening onto the common room, however, she heard a cry from within. For a moment she looked with indecision at the two embattled dwarves facing the huge elemental monsters, then finally darted toward the door, disappearing into the thick gouts of smoke issuing from within the dying structure.

Zenna, meanwhile, held her ground twenty paces away at the rear of the courtyard, calmly firing bolt after bolt from her wand of *acid arrows*. Her first had soundly impacted the one fighting Arun high in its flaming body, the acid unleashing an ugly black cloud as it struck. Upon seeing Hodge get into trouble she fired her second at his foe, drawing its attention from the burning dwarf. The elemental turned from the escaping half-orcs and the injured dwarf and started toward her, crossing the courtyard in a rush of eager flame.

But as it passed, Hodge roared and leapt up once again, tearing through its body with his magical axe. The creature arrested its rush and turned once more on the dwarf, beating him down with powerful blows backed with the rush of hot flame.

Arun, meanwhile, was likewise taking a pounding from his adversary. He'd managed to connect with a powerful attack that had hurt it despite its resistance to mundane weapons, but most of his blows passed through it harmlessly. The dwarf had no such resistance to its assault, although fortunately his magical armor and shield had held up for the most part against the ferocity of its attack. His breaths were coming in agonized gasps of searing air, however, and he was nearly blind from the smoke that poured from the interior of the ravaged inn. A loud crash as part of the inn collapsed sent another blast of heat and

smoke into him, and he considered retreat, drawing the elemental after him, to where he could fight it in clearer air.

But things suddenly got worse, as he heard Zenna's voice cut through the roar of the flames, behind him.

"Mole's gone in there!"

A moment later, Arun heard a dwarvish cry that drew his attention to his left. There, he saw the second elemental lay a titanic blow into Hodge. The dwarf stumbled back, blinded, his face blackened by the flames that continued to flicker from his burning beard as he fell to the ground and lost consciousness.

Chapter 144

Arun did not hesitate. Having just sacrificed greatly to see Hodge returned to life, he was not about to see the dwarf die again while he stood by unable to help. He turned away from his current foe and set out at a full run toward the creature menacing Hodge. The paladin barely felt the blow that slammed down across his back, searing the flesh of his neck and shoulders through his armor. He tossed his shield aside and took up his hammer in both hands, bringing it down in a two-handed strike into the thickest part of the elemental. The blow tore through its resistances, sundering it into wisps of flickering flame that fought to regain cohesion for a moment before whisking out of existence.

Arun turned around just in time to take an all-out pounding from the second elemental.

Mole meanwhile, found herself regarding an interior that to her mind probably had more than a passing resemblance to the Nine Hells. The common room of the inn was a raging inferno, with a river of liquid flame roaring across the ceiling, and the curtains and tablecloths separate pyres around the room's perimeter. For once she was grateful for her diminutive size, for she was below the worst of the smoke filling the room, but her eyes quickly began to water and sting as smoke filled them.

She heard the cry for help again, faintly, coming from what she guessed was the kitchen. Another person, without her gnomish ears, probably wouldn't have heard it at all... but at the moment, Mole's racial pride was overshadowed by a much more practical and immediate concern of finding whoever it was before the building collapsed onto her.

She started quickly toward the kitchen, but hesitated as the ceiling over the bar—very near to the kitchen door—sagged with an audible groan.

Oh, damn...

As so often occurred with the young gnome, instinctive action trumped deliberate thought, and she leapt forward, her magical boots once again giving her an added boost as she tucked into a roll and dove through the half-open doorway into the kitchen even as the ceiling above buckled and collapsed. Burning timbers and other debris showered down in

her wake, narrowly missing the gnome as she continued her roll and recovered her feet, tamping the burning embers that had caught upon her cloak with her soot-stained hands.

So much for the way out, Mole thought, quickly taking in her new surroundings.

The kitchen was even worse off than the common room, with an entire wall already well ablaze and at least a half-dozen other small fires busy around the perimeter. There had already been a partial collapse, she saw, with burning beams blocking a narrow stair that had once led up to the second story of the inn. The collapse not only blocked the stairs, but also the rear exit.

So she was trapped as well. Wonderful. She looked around the room, seeking opportunities, but the only alternative that appeared to be available were a trio of tiny windows set high in the wall above the long table that fronted the entirety of the side wall to her left. The “windows” were really just squares of thick glass barely a pace across that appeared to be set firmly into the surrounding wall, gleaming with the reflected glow of the flames that occupied the chamber.

A sound from the direction of the ruined stair drew her attention back in that direction. She hurried over to find a diminutive figure half-visible under the debris, his lower body trapped under a heavy beam. In the thick smoke it took her a moment to realize that the poor unfortunate was a gnome, younger even than she was by the look of it. He was clad in the simple tunic of a stableboy or kitchen helper, and as she approached, he looked up at her with eyes that were wide with fear.

“Help me!” he said, choking as smoke filled his lungs at the effort of speaking.

Mole quickly darted to the boy’s side. He tried to speak again, but the effort was too great, and he sagged down, gasping for breath.

“Don’t try to move,” Mole said, examining the collapse with an expert eye.

She quickly saw that dragging him out was going to require brute strength; the debris around him could be pulled free, but the heavy beam pinning his legs would have to be lifted in order for the boy to squirm out of the wreckage. She gave it a test push only to confirm her suspicions; it was well and securely wedged. She could have sawed through it, if she’d had a saw and ten minutes of uninterrupted time.

“I have to get someone to help,” she told the boy. “I’ll be right back.”

With surprising strength, he reached out and grabbed onto her jacket. “Please don’t leave me!” he sobbed.

“I’ll be back,” she said. “I promise. My name’s Mole. What’s yours?”

“Bally,” the boy said.

Mole felt a stab of feeling in her gut. *Ballander*. A common enough gnome name, but meaningful to her for a more specific reason, for it was also the name of her uncle, the man

whose life had inspired her to the career of the adventurer. Hearing the name made her realize how much she missed him, and (albeit to a lesser degree) the other members of her family. Forcing aside memories inappropriate to this circumstance, she forced a smile at the scared youngster. “All right, Bally, I need you to be brave. I have a friend who can lift that beam and get you out, but I need to go get him. He’s right outside, I’ll just go get him and be right back, okay?”

The boy nodded, but his fear was clear in his eyes as he released her. With what she hoped was a reassuring smile she drew back and turned toward the windows.

Okay, this’ll be tricky...

She looked around and quickly found what she wanted. She grabbed the heavy iron pot, and without hesitation charged across the room. She felt a rush of heat as she ran past a fire raging through a wooden storage locker, then she leapt onto a chair, and with a mighty boost from her magical boots jumped through one of the windows, using the pot as a battering ram to smash it clear from its mountings. Her arms jarred painfully with the impact, and she felt a sharp stab of pain as a shard of glass cut the back of her hand, but her momentum carried her through and she flipped to land on her feet—awkwardly, but intact—on the packed earth outside the side of the inn.

She had barely regained her balance before she was off and running toward the front of the inn.

She rounded the edge of the building and emerged into the courtyard just in time to see the remaining elemental lay into Arun with a mighty blow that knocked him backward to stumble to his knees.

Chapter 145

Arun thought he could feel his skin crisping from the heat of the fire elemental as he was knocked back roughly off his feet, stumbling back a pace before staggering to his knees. For a moment, all he could sense was the roar of flames, and his vision swam as his grasp on consciousness wavered. He knew, however, that if he faltered, then his friends were lost.

Not bloody likely! he thought, forcing himself to his feet and calling upon the divine energies of his patron at the same time. Healing power flowed through him, although his movements still brought pain where the eager flames had scorched his flesh.

“Come on then!” he roared in challenge at the elemental. But rather than rushing forward to match strength with the creature—a strategy that had already proven faulty—he slowly paced to the side, drawing it after him, and away from Hodge. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Zenna was moving to help the fallen dwarf, and nodded to himself in satisfaction.

But as the elemental’s assault slammed into him again, hitting with the force of a battering ram against his shield, he knew that the situation was still grim; one more solid hit that got through his defenses would be enough to end it.

Mole did not hesitate, drawing her sword and rushing to Arun's aid. Her normal tactic in this situation would be to flank the foe, using its distraction to find a vulnerable spot to strike. But against a blazing, roughly humanoid-shaped sheet of fire, she had no idea where to begin. Blindly she lashed out at the thickest part of the flames that comprised its "body", but as her sword passed through its form she felt hot pain sear her fingers and rush up her arm. Drawing back, she lost her grip on her sword, which fell through the creature to land in the scorched earth of the courtyard.

Well, duh, it burns, it's made of fire you fool! she berated herself. The creature had not even bothered to turn, focusing its attention on the more dangerous dwarf that confronted it.

As she tried to think of something that she could do to it, she spotted a tall figure moving into the courtyard. At first she thought it was one of the mercenaries, having finally found some courage to return, but then she saw that while this half-orc was armed and armored, its raiment was distinctly different than that of the mercenary guardsmen. He wore a surcoat over his breastplate that bore the sigil of a flaming sword, and while the hilt of a monstrous two-handed sword jutted up from above one shoulder, he wielded instead a slender wand, which he pointed not at the elemental, but at the softly surging waters of the lake at the far edge of the street.

Mole quickly realized what the wand was—she should know, they'd sacrificed a lot to find several of them—and her guess was confirmed a moment later as a wave of solid water rose up above the edge of the lake, spilling out in a broad wedge that swept across the street and into the courtyard. Zenna, holding the injured Hodge in her lap, lowered her body to protect the dwarf as the wave crested over her, leaving her sodden but doing no serious damage. The wave continued into Arun, who held his ground, and then hit the elemental in an explosion of steam that rose with an angry hiss into the air. Mole, lacking Arun's solidity, was driven backward by the force of the onrushing water in a jumble until she hit the wall of the inn with enough force to knock the air from her lungs. The wave lacked enough force or height to actually penetrate far into the inn, but the smoldering flames around the perimeter of the courtyard were instantly drenched by the surge of water.

As the wave retreated, Mole was able to regain her footing with some difficulty. There was still at least two feet of water gathered in the courtyard, held there by the magical power wielded by the half-orc cleric through the wand of *control water*. The wave had broken around the looming structure of the inn, and steam rose from within the structure as water found its way into the building and met the flames burning within. The whole made for a powerful tableau, with water, steam, and flames forming a single union of elemental chaos.

The elemental, its body wreathed in steam, made a final swipe at Arun, but it was clear that the wave had devastated the creature and sundered its fragile connection to this plane. The dwarf struck low with his hammer, creating a surge of water that splashed over the upper body of the elemental, and with one last eruption of steam that hissed into the night air it collapsed and dissolved.

Arun turned to help Zenna, who was lifting Hodge's head above the level of the water with some difficulty. Mole had to fight through the swirling water to reach them, but

determination drove her quickly even as she stumbled awkwardly on debris hidden under the surface of the water.

“Arun! You have to help me... there’s someone trapped inside, a boy...”

The dwarf glanced over his shoulder and nodded, giving Hodge a final boost to his feet before turning back toward the inn. Hodge was conscious now, bolstered by Zenna’s healing, but it was clear that the dwarf was in no condition to contribute more to this crisis. The waters were beginning to retreat now, and Mole found herself unable to progress toward the front opening wreathed in a mix of black smoke and white steam. Arun finally reached her and pulled her up, and the two pushed against the water tugging at their legs with insistency as they rushed to the aid of the trapped boy inside the inn.

But before they could reach the door, there was a loud crash, and as Mole watched in wide-eyed horror, the second story of the inn sagged and came crashing down onto the weakened common room and kitchen below. Flames roared into the sky, and smoke and burning embers billowed out into the courtyard, threatening to blind the heroes still struggling there. Instinctively Mole started forward again, although there was clearly no chance of hope. Arun held her back, his own face grim as they watched what was left of Minuta’s Board consume itself in flames.

Behind them, the cleric of Tempus and others started tending to the injured, and worked to keep the fire contained to the stricken inn. Once it was clear that Mole wasn’t going to go rushing into the building, Arun released her, and turned to offer assistance. Through it all, the gnome just stood there, watching the burning inn through tears that filled her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Bally,” she whispered.

Chapter 146

The mood was somber among the small company as the sun rose over the eastern mountains to illuminate the narrow track that they pursued southward from Cauldron. Already the city was only visible as a black line behind them that formed a smooth contrast to the rough edges of the surrounding peaks. The morning was cold, but not bracingly so, and as the sun warmed the trail cloaks were opened and the heavier coats worn by some of the company were shorn. The trail formed a winding line that descended from the volcanic peak upon which Cauldron was perched, down into a maze of smaller peaks, ravines, and valleys that undulated in a rocky wave that continued until one reached the shores of the Shining Sea. They knew that in one of those valleys, perched along the shore of the Red River, they would find their current destination, the village of Redgorge.

The only sound was the jingle of harness and the occasional snort from one of the sure-footed mountain horses that had been provided them with the aid of the connections of the church of Helm. None of them felt much like conversation. The two dwarves wore grimly serious looks and rode at the head of their small column. Mole, who’d barely spoken since their departure, looked dejected, her usual irrepressible demeanor weighed down by the memory of what had happened the previous night. Zenna would have normally spoken to

her friend, but the tiefling was distracted by her own concerns, and had sunk into a depression marked by cold indifference to anything but immediate practicalities.

This indifference certainly extended to their newest member, who rose alone at the rear of the column. Morgan Ahlendraal cut an imposing figure atop his charger, of six feet and twelve stone, the latter of which was more muscle than idle bulk. His features were still youthful and angular, with a shock of orderly black hair and a carefully trimmed beard contained to his strong jaw. He might have been considered attractive, but for a certain coldness in his eyes, and the way that his lips pursed in a reflexive expression of contempt whenever he saw something that did not meet his approval. It seemed that few things failed to fall into that category.

Zenna had spared the man little attention when he had arrived at the Morkoth that morning to greet them, as punctual as she had expected, with every detail of his person in perfect order despite the early armor. At least he looked competent, with a carefully polished suit of plate armor, a large steel shield emblazoned with the sigil of his faith, and a large sword slung across his back. He looked more like the classic image of the crusading knight than a typical cleric, but Zenna knew that the former were common in the ranks of the clergy of the god whose followers stylized him The Watcher.

Morgan had said little to them, though his demeanor made it quite clear that his acceptance of Jenya's mission to join them in search of Alec Tercival was not a course of action that he embarked upon out of choice.

Zenna bristled at the man, and his distate for her was obvious, but at the moment she could not work up the motivation to care. Inside she felt a gaping emptiness that seemed to threaten to swallow her up, and she fought it by retreating into the shell of self-discipline and self-denial that she'd crafted for herself in the years growing up in a world where she perceived herself to be alone. There, in the shroud of emotional nullity forged in her mind, she felt safe. There, the pain could not reach her.

Only now, it wasn't working very well.

She was drawn back into the moment by the sound of conversation ahead of her. Looking up, she saw that the dwarves had called a halt. Kicking her mount forward, she edged her way up along the trail to join them, Mole and Morgan following belatedly behind.

Up ahead was a bend in the trail, where the treacherous path they'd been following downward for the last hour widened slightly as it curved back around to another long descent. The elbow was in the lee of a steep slope that was nearly a cliff, rising some eighty feet above. Several huge boulders had fallen from that rise over time, and the space showed signs of having served in the past as a campsite, despite the hazard of future deposits from above.

When Zenna saw the reason for their pause, her mouth tightened, and she offered a scowl that was a fair imitation of Morgan's.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep the edge out of her voice.

Dannel rode the same dun-colored mare on which they'd encountered him in another roadside meeting a few months before. That time they'd been hurrying to the Lucky Monkey to find Sarcem Delasharn, and they'd found only death.

Before the elf could respond, Zenna had already continued, "I thought I made it clear... before..."

The elf's expression betrayed nothing. "I am still a member of this company," he said. "Whatever your sentiment toward me, Zenna, I have still fought and sacrificed with all of you, and will continue to do so until the whole decides otherwise."

Zenna glared at him.

"I have not been idle," the elf went on, ignoring her hard look. "I have uncovered information that may be of use in tracking down the whereabouts of Alec Tercival."

"How do you know about our mission?" Zenna asked. "Been spying again, have you?"

He ignored the vehemence in her words, and looked to the others. "What say you?" he asked. "Is my company still valued among you?"

Arun glanced at Zenna, who looked about to explode with fury. But the dwarf only said, "You have been a true ally, and I will not stand in your way."

Hodge added, "Aye, yer prancin' about be a bit annoyin', but yer a decen' shot with that bow, and yer don't run away when things turn ugly."

The elf looked to Mole, and in his eyes she saw empathy, and understanding. "And you, Mole?"

The gnome nodded, a thin tear descending down her cheek. "Of course you're still one of us, Dannel," she said.

The elf nodded. "I do not know you, cleric," he said, with a nod toward Morgan.

The priest looked at Zenna. "The half-demon doesn't care for your company, elf," he said. "That alone is enough reason to vote for your presence."

Dannel's jaw tightened, and Zenna flinched as if struck, but neither said anything. Dannel twitched his reins, and moved his mount closer to Zenna's as if to say something to her, but she angrily kicked her animal forward along the trail.

"Let's be on our way, then," she said, anger burning in her voice. "I want to reach this damned village before nightfall."

She cantered ahead at a pace that was nearly reckless, and the others had no choice but to follow.

Chapter 147

The village of Redgorge was situated at a bend in the Red River where it descended from the lower reaches of the Alomir Mountains before turning over a series of cataracts and resuming its course to the Shining Sea. The place had an aura of ancient glory about it, primarily evidenced in the massive walls of shining black basalt that rose nearly as high as those that guarded its larger neighbor, Cauldron. From the high trail that led down out of the mountains, travelers could see the several dozen stone structures huddled securely within those walls, as well as the massive cliffs on the eastern side of the village, across the river, where red clay had been quarried and shipped down the river to the sea for centuries since the village's initial founding.

But it quickly became clear that Redgorge was well past its days of glory. For one thing, the mighty walls that shielded it were in a state of advanced decay, with several breaches around the perimeter, including a twenty-foot gap through which a new road had been blazoned. And many of the structures inside the walls mirrored that decrepitude, with several of them overgrown with vegetation and otherwise showing signs of long abandonment.

The small company from Cauldron approached the village warily, but nothing stirred to threaten them as they approached the village. The walls loomed over them like sentinels as they drew near, but there were no sentries or other guardians that they could detect. With night approaching, the black bastions took on a menacing tone as they approached the nearest open breach in the walls.

The village itself was quiet, although not utterly deserted; a number of people were visible in the streets, going about their business as they wrapped up their activities for the day. A number of curious looks were fired in their direction, but no one moved to hinder them, and they were able to quickly get directions to The Redheaded Miner. The inn was difficult to miss, in fact, a sprawling structure that was mostly stone, with an added wing of wooden construction on the west face a sign of relative prosperity. A stableboy clad in a simple tunic of brown homespun came out to claim their horses, and after a few adjustments to their gear—keeping weapons and spell components close at hand had become an instinct, by now—they went inside.

The common room of the inn appeared to take up the entire front space of the structure, and the bustle within contrasted with the quiet outside. It seemed as though the people of Redgorge preferred to end their days early, and as they watched a veritable mountain of a man behind the bar, his long reddish hair tied back into two ponytails, laid out a spread of various snacks in deep wooden bowls upon the bar.

“Arr now, ‘elp yerselves, nobody’ll go hungry while Mikimax runs this place!”

A dozen villagers gathered quickly about the bar, and the boisterous innkeeper was soon put to work filling a number of drink orders. Hodge had reflexively started in that direction, but Zenna held him up with a hand on his shoulder.

“Remember why we’re here,” she said.

“Aye,” the dwarf replied, “But me belly’s so empty it be scrapin’ me spine, and it’ll harm our quest not to have it filled!”

“Let him go,” Dannel said. “We’re all tired and hungry, and we’ll be better able to deal with the Chisel rested and fed.” The elf kept his voice low, and as he spoke he unslung his bow and removed his pack and cloak, hanging the latter two objects on one of the dozen or so hooks that stood beside the door before heading into the room after Hodge. The others, after attending to their own gear, followed him.

Zenna turned and strode angrily into a less-densely occupied part of the common area to their right, away from the centrally-located bar. How had everything gotten so out of control? Here they were on yet another mission with little in the way of direction or purpose, blundering from one danger into another. With her lover—*ex-lover*, she corrected herself sternly—as well as a man who openly despised her, a holy crusader whose idea of “tactics” was to yell loudly and charge, a man for whom “bathing” was an abstract concept, and finally a gnome who would no doubt stick her head into a dragon’s mouth if she thought that there was something interesting to see inside.

At the last thought, Zenna couldn’t help but smile, and she allowed herself to let the rancor go, and turned from her feelings to focus on their current predicament.

She became aware of a man sitting in the shadows on the far side of the fireplace, clad in a cloak of finely-tailored wool that looked rather expensively cut. He was still in that nebulous boundary-zone between youth and middle age, and there was a bit of a rakish look to him, with a black beard trimmed short and moderately long hair drawn back into a tail at his back. His profession became evident as he shifted to reveal a small hand-harp held against the side of his body, and he played a soft melody upon it that filled the space between them, but did little to counter the din coming from the crowd at the busy bar on the far side of the room.

Zenna felt a pang as the music reminded her of Dannel, but she squashed it with an angry thought. He finished his peace, and looked up at her, as if expecting comment. “You play well,” she told him.

“I am gratified, lady,” he said with a nod. “When first you entered, before you smiled, I sensed a storm descending upon me, and I thought perhaps I’d somehow unknowingly acquired another critic. I am pleased to see that I am mistaken.”

“You’re rather forthright in speaking to a stranger,” she said, slightly annoyed.

The man smiled, and offered another nod that drew a frown from the tiefling, uncertain if its tenor was slightly mocking. “That is why they call me the Honest Minstrel, lady,” he said.

Zenna started to turn, but there was something in the man’s look that held her there. He shot a glance at the bar, where Zenna’s companions had joined the crowd in securing food and drink. Zenna saw that Mole, despite being smaller than anyone else in the place, had somehow managed to liberate a pair of mugs and a plate of sweetloaves that she balanced in the crook of her elbow as she made her way toward her.

The bard strummed an idle tune on his instrument as Zenna turned back to face him. "Tell me," he said, "What can bind with water, sand, and lime?"

Zenna's ambivalence evaporated as she immediately made a connection. Serious now, she stepped forward. "Mortar," she said.

Chapter 148

The man who called himself "the Honest Minstrel" led the companions down a dusty staircase that descended off a narrow side-corridor adjacent to the inn's kitchens, down to a door of solid-looking oak heavily banded with iron. The noise from the common room, not more than twenty paces distant, was almost completely muted, and as they descended the only other sound was the sound of Hodge finishing the last of the sausage links he'd purloined from Mikimax's spread. The last of the fat links vanished into the dwarf's beard with a thick slurp. Zenna turned and shot him a hard look, but the dwarf merely shrugged and belched loudly.

The door opened to reveal a spacious subterranean chamber, with a look more suited to a lord's hall than an inn cellar. Great pillars of smooth stone supported the weight of the inn above, and between those bastions was an open space dominated by a great ovoid table around which a dozen high-backed chairs were situated. Seated at one of those chairs was a man, clad in a workingman's tunic of clean linen reinforced with leather patches. He was older than any of them, perhaps fifty, though he still had an air of vitality about him, and his muscled hands seemed as though they needed only tools in them to make them complete. He looked up and smiled at them as they entered, although there was something in his eyes, hooded.

"Good evening," he said to them. "I am Oliron Masht, known in this body as the Foreman. Please come in, make yourselves comfortable; we will begin once the others arrive."

"What of Alec Tercival? And the merchant, Maavu?" Arun asked.

"All of your questions will be answered as best we are able," Masht said. "It will not be long now."

The Honest Minstrel crossed the room and poured himself a glass of wine from the decanter on a sideboard butted up against the far wall of the chamber. He did not offer any such hospitality to the others, and when he returned to the table to speak to the Foreman, his soft tone and body language indicated that the conversation was not open to outside participants. An awkward silence resulted at the far end of the table, where the companions gathered. Mole, typically the catalyst for chatter, was still feeling out of sorts, and Zenna almost laughed at the various scowls on the faces of the men.

What keeps us together? she thought. Unable to simply sit still and wait, she turned and walked toward the one of the side walls that looked interesting. Although the lighting was poor, with her darkvision she could clearly discern the artistic displays that had been carved into the wall in relief. Upon closer examination she could see the quality of the work, depicting a series of scenes in sequence across the wall from left to right. A tall, robed

figure, carved in profile with a noble cast to his features was prominently featured in most of them. A *wizard*, Zenna thought, examining one scene where the man was depicted raising the massive walls that shielded Redgorge. In other scenes, the figure was shown with a winged woman who was offering him a quarterstaff wreathed in symbolic flames; defending the city against a horde of terrible, monstrous creatures; now holding the staff boldly as he faced a huge dog-headed, four-armed demon; and finally vanishing into a mountain that hovered protectively over the town below.

“Surabar Spellmason,” a voice said, interrupting her contemplation of the artwork and drawing her attention back to the table. It was Masht who had spoken, his eyes aglow with an inner fire as he regarded her. Belatedly she realized that the far door had opened, and that two newcomers had joined the company; Mikimax the innkeep and a familiar face: Maavu. Of Alec Tercival, there was no sign. “The founder of our order,” Masht went on, “who dedicated the Chisel to working for the greater Good of the region.” The way he said it, there was no mistaking the capital; the word clearly had a greater meaning to the man.

And to his listeners. Maavu looked chagrined for a moment, an expression that he quickly mastered before heading forward toward the table, while Mikimax nodded solemnly, as if acknowledging a blessing.

Maavu pulled out a chair and seated himself near the middle of the table, straddling the invisible line that seemed to separate the Foreman and Honest Minstrel at one end, and the adventurers at the other. Mikimax, true to his role as innkeeper, crossed to the sideboard and secured the decanter there, along with a half-dozen slender glasses for those gathered at the table.

“I am so pleased that you elected to come,” Maavu said with sincerity at the companions. “I fear that I did not get a chance to adequately thank you for your intervention on my behalf... before.”

“Any further news?” the Foreman asked him.

“Nothing new,” Maavu said. “Our foe bides its time, it would seem...”

“Perhaps not,” the Honest Minstrel began, but was interrupted as Morgan asked bluntly, “Our foe?”

The Foreman sighed. “A force of chaos and evil stirs in Cauldron,” he said. “We have been tracking its development for quite some time, although the actual source of danger has remained cloaked in the shadows, not revealing its true nature. Maavu, by forcing the issue, has not helped matters... you stand to make the Chisel into a scapegoat for the people of Cauldron.”

The Honest Minstrel snickered. “I sense the hand of the Last Laugh at work in that business. Face it Maavu, they suckered you, nothing else!”

Maavu bristled at the comment and turned to face the bard. “Better dead than slaves! A wandering strummer like you should know!”

“Peddler! You count lives like money! No difference to you, eh?”

Maavu opened his mouth to retort, but was interrupted as the Foreman slammed his palm into the surface of the table. “Enough! We have enough difficulties without squabbling like children. Ekaym, you were about to say something earlier, about events in Cauldron?”

The Honest Minstrel grimaced. “Aye. My sources tell me that Skellerang has plans to move a force from the city garrison to Redgorge, to secure and search the town.”

The companions exchanged a look as the gathered members of the Chisel reacted with incredulity—even Masht’s calm façade betraying more than a hint of anger before he schooled his features to stony control.

“This does not bode well,” Mikimax rumbled. “The people will resist Skellerang’s half-orcs... at least some will.”

“I cannot believe that the Lord Mayor would allow such,” Morgan said.

“There is much that I likewise would not have believed, a year past,” Masht said wearily. “But many things have changed.”

The wizened craftsman turned to Maavu. “Alec will have to publicly renounce his challenge, to forestall this action,” he said.

“Agreed,” Maavu said, looking deflated.

“Well, that settles that,” Arun said. “Now be time for the question we brought here: where is the paladin of Helm?”

The four members of the Chisel exchanged a meaningful look. Finally their eyes settled on Maavu. The wizard-merchant looked stricken.

“We don’t know.”

Dannel cleared his throat, drawing their attention to him. For the first time since the gathering had begun, he spoke.

“I believe that I may have an answer to that question.”

Chapter 149

Mole closed the door softly behind her. She didn’t want to wake Zenna; her friend had been sleeping poorly of late and she suspected that the tiefling would need every bit of rest she could grasp before what they had waiting for them tomorrow.

The gnome was tired as well, but she was too keyed up to rest. The hallway was dark, with only a tiny slit of a window at the far end, but her gnomish eyes enabled her to navigate its length without difficulty until she came to the landing where diffuse firelight from below

allowed her to see more clearly. The floorboards beneath her feet were old and had creaked earlier when her friends had retired for the night; under her light feet, however, they made not a sound.

After making a reflexive check for threats—a habit she could not easily break now, even here—she went downstairs to the common room. At this hour, in that nebulous zone between when the latest reveler departed and the earliest laborer rose, all was quiet. Flickering flames were visible in one of the hearths; the innkeeper Mikimax had built up the fire and left it to burn the night to warm the inn through the network of chimney ducts that rose up through the upper stories of the building. The room was deserted; no, she saw, there was one person there, sitting in a comfortable armchair in the shadows beyond the fire. She couldn't clearly make him out, but she had a good guess as to whom it might be.

She walked over to him, and as he looked up her guess was confirmed. Dannel greeted her with a nod, and indicated another chair across from him. She took the seat and sat there, looking at the fire. For a long moment neither of them spoke.

"A long day tomorrow," he finally said. "You should get some sleep."

Mole shrugged. She knew that the elf, like all of those of his race, did not need sleep as most races knew it, instead restoring his mind each night with a meditative trance. But she knew Dannel well enough to know that he was troubled, and she wondered if he'd been able to complete his meditations this night.

"She doesn't hate you, you know. She was just taken by surprise."

The elf nodded again, and for a moment, just a moment, he let his frustration show on his face. "I cannot suppose I blame her," he said.

"She feels as though everyone she's ever loved has let her down."

"You haven't."

The gnome fidgeted in her seat. She looked at Dannel, who simply met her gaze, waiting for her to say what she had to say.

"Well..."

The elf waited.

"I just didn't think it was right. It wasn't... I mean, I know that you may think I have a looser sense of the concept of personal property than some, and that's fine, but it's just... well, it wasn't *right*. I didn't earn it..."

"I understand," Dannel said. "How did you manage to fool Zenna? Surely she would have noticed that you were no longer carrying the pin."

Mole managed to look a bit sheepish. "I had a duplicate copy made, while we were in Tethyr. Zenna never thought to cast *detect magic* on it, I guess."

Dannel nodded.

“You won’t tell Zenna?”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

Mole looked back at the stairs before leaning forward in her chair to narrow the gap between them. “Good. Because if she found out it was my fault that you...that they... found us, she’d... well, she wouldn’t be happy.”

“Whatever Zenna thinks, your families don’t want to control you. They are just concerned.”

“Yes. Well.”

The gnome sat back, and a few more minutes passed in silence. Finally, Mole leaned forward again, and asked, “May I see the plate again?”

In response the elf drew out a flat, heavy object from the pack sitting beside his chair. The firelight gleamed brightly on it; it was a square plate of silver, perhaps a foot across, etched with a finely etched but archaic design on one side, and a crude map scraped into the other. They hadn’t been able to make much sense of the etching, which appeared to depict a six-armed creature overseeing some sort of construction project with what appeared to be humanoid slaves as laborers. But the map, which had accompanying runes marked upon it in the Giant tongue, had proven more useful.

The plate had been purchased by Dannel at a shop in Cauldron, just two days ago. While the rest of the companions had pursued their meeting with Jenya Urikas, the elf had conducted his own investigation. It turned out that Alec Tercival had sold a number of items won on his various expeditions in the region to the halfling owner of a local curio shop. The plate had been a recent sale, and Dannel surmised that it might give them a clue as to where the paladin had been of late.

Last night he had shown the plate to the leaders of the Chisel, and they had confirmed his suspicions. Maavu told them that Alec had spent some time in the jungles to the southwest of Redgorge, in a dangerous region known as the Demonskar. This locale, which was given a wide berth by most travelers, featured prominently in the legends of the town and its magic-using founder. Apparently a powerful and terrible demon had lived in the region centuries ago, leading an army of his dread kind against the early settlers of Redgorge. Surabar Spellmason had finally defeated the demon with the aid of a celestial ally named Nidrama, raising the walls whose remnants still surrounded the town today. Maavu couldn’t say exactly what the paladin had been up to in that area, but Masht noted that there was a statue of a headless demon located several hours’ travel down the Red River; a landmark that had been identified upon the crude map scratched onto the silver plate.

It wasn’t much of a lead, but with no one knowing the current location of the paladin, it was all that they had to go on.

Mole examined the design on the etched side of the plate. As before, the strange sigils and unusual depictions there made little sense to her. She didn't like the look of the six-armed creature, though.

She handed the heavy plate back to Dannel.

"What do you think, of them?" Mole asked.

She didn't have to clarify of whom she was speaking; the enigma that was the Chisel had weighed heavily upon all of them, after their meeting. After the official gathering had closed Masht had asked them to join him in a walk along the summit of the bastions that surrounded the town. He had not spoken further of their mission or of Cauldron, instead talking to them of the natural wonders of the region, and of the struggles of Redgorge's history. She still remembered something he had said at the end, as he had stared out over the darkened jungle canopy that stretched out before them to the west and south.

"Surabar's spells raised this wall in seven days. But his guidance has failed to build a righteous society in as many centuries."

The thought stayed with her as she took her leave of Dannel, returning to her room to try and grab a few hours of sleep before the coming of the dawn.

Chapter 150

The next morning there were a number of yawns and groans all around, as the companions set out with the coming of the day, replacing their mounts with a small rowboat provided by the leaders of the Chisel. Both dwarves regarded the craft dubiously, and upon first seeing it Hodge absolutely refused to embark in, "that heap o' driftwood," but ultimately they gathered their supplies and set out down the Red River.

"It's just a little water," Mole chided Hodge, but Arun's response was serious.

"Easy for a gnome, or a human for that matter," the paladin said. "Unencumbered, you float. But if you were denser than water, and clad in heavy armor to boot, you'd likely react in the same way."

But the boat proved sturdy enough, although it was a bit crowded with the six of them and all of their gear, and with the swift current descending down from the cataracts above Redgorge they had soon left the black basalt walls of the town behind them. The river led them into the dense jungle that extended for several leagues below the mountains. While this jungle was nothing in contrast to the mighty Forest of Mir, extending in a belt ranging hundreds of north along the Marching Mountains to the border of Tethyr, the companions were nevertheless awed by the looming presence of the densely arranged trees and the overall impression of teeming life that surrounded them.

Of course, some were more awed than others.

“Damned bloody blasted bugs!” Hodge yelled, snapping at his neck in an awkward motion that threatened to overturn the entire boat.

“For the last time, hold, dwarf!” Morgan complained, steadying the craft with his oar. The boat had come with two oars, and they had taken turns propelling the craft and keeping it clear of obstacles as the morning deepened. In truth, though, the current did most of the work for them, although they had to be mindful of shoals and other unexpected dangers along the fast-moving river.

Long shafts of sunshine slanted down upon the river through the gap in the trees above. At places the canopies of the trees leaned out over the river, forming a vaulted corridor of sorts with a long slash of blue between them overhead. Zenna spent the morning huddled deep within the shelter of her cloak, quietly miserable in the stern of the small craft. Mole passed the first hour dispensing various and sometimes contradictory nautical advice until Hodge threatened to hurl her overboard; while the exchange of dwarven profanities had been temporarily amusing, she soon got tired and passed out in a small space in the back of the craft near their piled packs of supplies. While Mole had taken care to see that they had everything that they might need in her *bag of holding*, after what had happened in Bhal-Hamatugn none of them begrudged being extra prepared this time out.

The morning passed slowly, and as the sun rose the heat grew, despite the earliness of the season, until it hung over them like a thick cloak of hot dampness. Masht had told them that the decapitated statue indicated on the silver plate was located about four hours’ passage down the river. At times they could feel eyes watching them from the fastness of the jungle to either side, but other than an occasional quiver in the dense undergrowth, or a sudden splash in the water ahead of them, there were no other indications of potential threats. Still, the companions had gone through too much together to let down their guard, especially in a region unknown to any of them.

Finally, as the sun neared its zenith in the sky above them, Dannel in the prow caught sight of a clearing in the jungle ahead on the right bank of the river. As they drew nearer they could see that the clearing formed a wedge that penetrated into the jungle for about fifty yards. A few pieces of broken stone that were yet too regular in their placement and form to be natural were visible, shrouded in tangled weeds and clinging vines that found purchase in their pocked and worn surfaces. Toward the rear of the clearing they could make out the looming figure of what had to be the statue marked on the plate; despite the distance they could see that the considerable monument reflected no human model.

Zenna shuddered. “There is a darkness gathered here,” she said. The others glanced back at her, but she did not elaborate. Morgan looked about to respond, but he apparently thought better of it, and instead turned to face the jungle, his lips pursed, his jaw tight.

The dwarves happened to be working the oars at the time, and they started directing the boat out of the main channel toward the muddy shoreline that fronted the clearing. What they lacked in nautical skill they nearly made up for in strength and determination, and the small craft was soon arcing toward its destination.

None of them detected the danger that lurked behind the wall of tangled growth at the far edge of the clearing. The first warning they had were the long shafts that shot out from the brush, sunlight gleaming from the heads of jagged iron as they slammed into the intruders.

“Ambush!” someone yelled.

Chapter 151

“Ambush!” Dannel cried, his warning punctuated a moment later by a cry of pain as a long arrow grazed his arm, the rough-edged head tearing a bloody gash as it passed.

“I think we know that!” Hodge yelled, growling his own quiet challenge as an arrow hit one of the banded plates covering his torso with enough force to dent the metal. “Close yer yap and shoot them already!” he urged. The dwarf reached for his crossbow, but then thought better of it and instead bent himself to his oar, paddling for all he was worth.

“Aye, close to land!” Arun shouted from the other side of the boat, the paladin already working his own oar. “We’re sitting ducks out here!”

Several more arrows shot through the air. One caught Morgan a glancing blow to the neck that was thankfully mostly deflected by his gorget; the cleric had drawn attention to himself when he rose to peer out toward the jungle, as if altitude could give his vision the power to penetrate the dense jungle growth. Even if he could see them, however, he lacked the power to respond; the javelins he carried could faintly carry all of the way to the thicket that shrouded their enemies. A heartbeat later another missile sliced down the length of the boat right through the space between all of them, missing several of the companions by mere inches before zipping out to finally fall into the water fifty paces behind their craft. Clearly whoever the archers were, they were using powerful bows.

“Get down, you fool, you’ll tip the boat,” Zenna said to the cleric. Closing her eyes for a moment to steady herself, she opened her mind to her magic, calling up a protective *shield* before her in defense.

Mole, beside her at the stern of the craft, stirred. “Are we there yet?” she asked, bleary-eyed.

Dannel had strung his bow, and was sending careful shafts into the jungle where the arrows were originating. While he could not clearly see their foes, his sharp eyes marked where the enemy arrows emerged from the jungle, and despite the slight swaying of the boat, his arrows more often than not struck within a hand’s span of where the shot had originated.

Unfortunately, his prominent position at the prow of the boat made him a prime target, and several more arrows struck him. The force of two shots was largely absorbed by the links of magical chain armor forged of mithral that covered his body, although the impacts still drew solid grunts from the elf. A third arrow, however, slammed into his thigh with a meaty thunk, the shaft penetrating so far that the bloody steel head was just visible out the back side of the limb. Biting off a cry of pain, Dannel slumped down on the forward seat of the boat, clutching onto the wale in order to keep from falling over the side.

Slowly but steadily, the boat drew nearer to the shore.

Morgan stepped forward, between the dwarves, and drew up the elf with his muscled hands. Dannel grimaced in pain at the sudden movement, and the boat shook with the motion, but the cleric kept his footing and turned, depositing the elf behind him and holding him upright between the straining (and cursing, in one case) dwarves.

“Be steadfast, archer,” he said, but gave no other warning as he reached down and thrust the arrow in Dannel’s leg deeper, drawing another cry of agony from the elf. The thrust forced the bloody head fully out of his leg, enough for the cleric to grab it and snap it off with a ruthless twist of his fist. More arrows continued to fly out in a more or less steady stream from various positions of cover—it seemed that the archers were moving about, now—although the rowboat had closed to within fifty feet of the shore. Froth rose up from both sides of the boat as Arun and Hodge drove their oars into the water with violent strokes, putting their full weight into each downward thrust. An arrow connected with the cleric’s right shoulder, penetrating the steel armor there, but Morgan ignored the wound as he drew the remainder of the arrow from Dannel’s leg and called upon the power of his god to help the stricken elf. Blue fire flared from his fingers, bloody around Dannel’s savaged leg, and the elf gasped as healing energy poured into him.

Morgan reached down and grabbed Dannel’s longbow, shoving it into the elf’s hands even as he turned and lifted his shield to form a bulwark at the front of the boat. An arrow clanged off of the front of the shield even as he moved, adding urgency to the maneuver. “Keep firing!” he ordered. He spoke more, words that none of them but Arun and Zenna recognized, words in the shining Celestial language, words of invocation to his god.

Zenna had reinforced her defenses, adding a layer of *mage armor* to the *shield* that she’d conjured earlier. She loaded her crossbow, but to her eyes the threshold of the forest looked like an unbroken sea of green and brown; she could not identify a target to shoot. Their foes had no such difficulty, evidenced a moment later as another arrow erupted from the undergrowth and sped across the clearing and to the boat. The arrow punched through Zenna’s *shield* as though the barrier were a mere illusion, vanishing into the darkness of the tiefling’s hood. A tight cry came from within, and Zenna fell backward hard against the rear wale of the boat.

Mole, who’d been sniping ineffectually from her position of relative cover behind her friends and the piled supplies, was at her side in an instant. “Zenna!” She drew back the tiefling’s hood, afraid of what she’d see, but Zenna seemed merely stunned, a thin line of red trickling down her temple. Her magical hat hung askew, and there was a hole in the back of her hood where the arrow had exited, but she seemed otherwise intact.

“Are you all right?” she asked, as her friend pulled herself up.

“I... I think it hit one of my horns,” Zenna said, wincing as she probed at the shallow gash with her fingers.

The boat lurched as its bottom finally scraped muddy soil. Morgan, standing at the prow, leapt the final intervening foot to stable land, his shield raised high as he continued to

absorb hits from the withering barrage coming from the jungle. Despite his heavy armor and shield he bled now from two serious hits, a puncture in his right leg an inch above the knee to add to the deep wound in his shoulder. Several other arrows that hadn't quite penetrated through his armor jutted from his body, and he had the look of a pincushion as he rushed forward, not waiting for the dwarves who transitioned cumbersomely from the boat to solid ground. Dannel, meanwhile, continued his own barrage, and while he could still not clearly mark his targets, at least one cry of pain from behind the line of greenery indicated a likely hit.

Zenna looked up to see Morgan charging into the center of the clearing, not waiting for the dwarves. The sun caught full on his steel armor, setting him ablaze with reflected light, and he looked... magnificent, a god striding forth to do battle against evil. Eschewing the javelins he carried, he drew his sword as he ran, four feet of bright steel that shone with a golden nimbus of light. Zenna swallowed, and for a moment she forgot that she hated him, this man whose faith was both powerful and blind at the same time.

A volley of arrows knifed out from the underbrush, pattering off the holy knight's armor with loud pings of impact. All of the hidden archers were focusing on the cleric now, but even as another iron head found a weak point in his armor, jamming two inches into his torso below his right armpit, he continued his rush. The man cried out, a holy word of power, and his form seemed to swell... no, Zenna realized, he really was growing, recognizing the spell he had used, and then he was standing twelve feet tall, looming over them like a giant. She could feel the ground tremble beneath his boots as he charged, and she hoped that their attackers were as impressed as she was by the transformation.

"Gods, he's crazier than Arun," Mole said from beside her. Zenna turned her head, and nodded in agreement.

"Are you going to fire that thing?" the gnome asked. Zenna looked down at her lap, and realized that she'd forgotten about the crossbow, sitting ignored throughout the battle. She hadn't even cast a spell. Angry with herself, she turned to extracting herself from the precariously grounded boat, while behind her Mole aimed and snapped off a quick shot toward the jungle.

Morgan reached the wall of growth separating the clearing from the forest, and without hesitation crashed through the bushes to where the enemy fire had originated. Behind him came the dwarves, pounding belatedly across the muddy clearing, while Dannel came more deliberately, an arrow half-drawn and ready to fire.

There was some thrashing from beyond the bushes, then Morgan's head reappeared from above a thicket, still twelve feet above the forest floor.

"They're gone," the cleric reported. "Some bloodstains, a few broken arrows, that's it."

A hush fell over the clearing, as a relative peace returned to the jungle.

Chapter 152

“Ugly sucker, even without its head.”

Mole’s expression was almost comically serious as she stared up at the headless statue of the demon, but Zenna could not disagree. She did not recognize the monstrosity that was depicted in the rough-hewn carving, which even shortened stood a good nine feet tall above the chipped stone platform on which it rested. It had four arms and a muscled body, but time and the harsh environment of the jungle had removed all other details from the statue. Dannel had found its head nearby, a worn slab of stone that had a vague dog-like look to it.

“Well, the elf has found the trail, and there’s only so much day left to us. We’d best be on our way,” Arun said.

Zenna turned away from the statue, feeling a shiver despite the damp heat of the jungle. Not that the heat bothered her, really; her mixed heritage would make this journey much easier for her than for her companions, particularly those clad in heavy armor. She made a mental note to take a spell of *create water* in addition to the purification spell she already possessed, the next time she meditated.

She caught sight of Morgan, standing by the edge of the forest. If the heat gave him any difficulty, he refused to show it. The cleric had returned to normal size shortly after the end of the battle, and had quickly treated the wounds he had suffered using scrolls scribed with healing spells. He seemed to be husbanding his own reservoir of power, a strategy that Zenna acknowledged; they had no idea what might be waiting for them in the jungle, and she doubted that whoever had ambushed them would simply give up and let them pass unmolested. She and Dannel had used a few charges from their own healing wands to treat the injuries suffered by the others; even if Morgan hadn’t had there wherewithal to help himself, she wasn’t sure he would have accepted her assistance anyway.

On that dour thought, she walked over to join the others as they set out down the trail.

Within ten minutes, she’d mentally revised that definition of their route. “Trail” was only a loose approximation of the winding, tortuous path that wound roughly northward into the jungle, the entire route choked with dense growth that encroached from both sides. Clearly at least some traffic came though here; they could see occasional signs of damage to the brush and Dannel occasionally pointed out the prints of some unidentified creature or another.

They had to pause for brief rests frequently. The dwarves, in particular, were soon drenched in sweat, and Zenna had to chide them frequently to drink often from the waterskins they all carried. In the damp heat their supply of water was depleted quickly, with both dwarves running dry only a few hours into the trek, but Dannel was able to find a stream easily and with a *purify* spell from Zenna they were able to restore their caches and press on.

Throughout the hike, they could feel the jungle’s teeming life all around them, pressing in as though the forest itself were sentient and resented their intrusion. Bird calls, animal

cries, and the omnipresent buzz of insects were only the most common noises they heard; many sounds that rose from deeper in the forest beyond the trail could not easily be identified. By the time that the diffuse light drifting down from the dense canopy above began to grow dim, they were all exhausted and rather ragged from nearly six hours of difficult travel.

“I thought you dwarves were supposed to have stamina,” Morgan snapped, during one of their breaks. The cleric seemed as unaffected by the heat as he’d appeared earlier, despite the fact that his armor and gear had to be a huge burden upon him.

“Bragh,” Hodge said, pausing to suck in a breath in between gulps from his waterskin. “The day I let a puny manling walk me into the ground...” He spat noisily. “Put me up agin yet on a mountain trail, I’ll show you stamina. But this damned place,” he said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, “if this wet be gettin’ any thicker, we’ll be swimmin’, not walkin’!”

The cleric chuckled, and Zenna belatedly realized that she should have anticipated this problem, that her clerical spells could help both dwarves withstand the heat—as Morgan had no doubt already done, she now understood. But before she could make the offer, the cleric was already speaking.

“On the morrow I will ask Helm to extend his blessings to you two,” he said. “So that you can keep up.”

Hodge bristled, and looked about to retort with a curse, but Arun silenced him by standing up and hefting his pack. “Let us be on our way, then,” he said. “It will be dark soon, and we should find a secure place to camp.”

“I’d just take a slight breeze,” Mole said.

They pushed on down the trail as the shadows gradually deepened. The map on the silver plate bore no key to scale, so the short distance between the river and the first landmark, an apparent cave marked as, “Home,” could have been a few miles or a few leagues. They were a bit concerned about meeting the creator of the map, but Dannel pointed out that the fact that Alec had sold the plate suggested that said owner was likely no longer around to complain.

And then, so suddenly that they were upon it almost before they realized it, the trail emerged onto another clearing.

The clearing stretched out before them wasn’t large, perhaps fifty paces across, and was situated against the base of a hillock that rose from the jungle floor like a camel’s hump. The ground slanted slightly down toward the point where clearing and hill met, and visible there at that intersection of the two they could just make out a dark opening that could possibly be a cave.

“Are those what I think they are?” Mole asked, drawing their attention to the sloping, uneven ground leading down to the cave. The others could see what she had spotted, occasional white objects scattered, half-buried in the tortured earth of the slope.

“Bones,” Arun said, grimly.

“Well, we know Alec made it back from here, anyway, right?” Mole asked, starting forward.

Her first step into the clearing was accompanied by a loud sound that originated somewhere in the forest behind them. It sounded as though something were tearing the very fabric of the jungle asunder, a great ripping and crashing noise that was growing louder. Fast.

“Something’s coming,” Morgan said needlessly.

“Yer tryin’ to cap the elf’s rep for statin’ the obvious, eh?” Hodge said, sparing a look at the quiver of fat bolts at his hip before settling on his axe.

Morgan opened his mouth to reply, but Zenna cut him off. “The question is, do we face it in the open, or in the jungle?”

“I’d rather see what I’m facing, and have room to maneuver,” Arun said, already moving out into the open space.

Dannel, meanwhile, had dug into his pouch and had produced a pair of silk slippers, which he quickly switched out for his narrow boots. “I’ll take a look,” he said, picking the nearest tree and darting nimbly up its trunk through the power of his *slippers of spider climbing*.

Mole watched him ascend with a sigh of regret.

“Zenna, Mole, get behind us,” Arun said, as he, Hodge, and Morgan spread out in a concave line facing the jungle’s edge. Zenna nodded and moved away from the loud crashing sound, which was getting close enough for her to see vines, bushes, and smaller trees shuddering from the passage of whatever was approaching. Through a gap in the foliage she caught a glimpse of something bulky, and *big*.

Mole, of course, had vanished somewhere.

“Here it comes!” Dannel’s voice came down from above.

“Still the champ!” Hodge growled.

“What is it?” Morgan shouted up, drawing back one arm, a javelin ready to throw.

“It’s...” the elf trailed off, uncertain. Zenna saw him draw back his bow, and fire into the undergrowth.

Then a thick wall of brush ten feet to the left of the trailhead parted, and it appeared, coming at them in a full charge.

Chapter 153

It was huge, easily ten feet tall at the shoulder, and it had to weigh thousands of pounds. Zenna couldn't identify it at first... it looked almost like a giant ape at first glance, but its body was proportioned to walk on four limbs rather than two, and its head was narrow and knobby, with tiny beady eyes flanking a massive snout. Its mouth wasn't that big for its body, but with the creature's sheer size it looked quite adequate to take off a head or arm with a single bite.

Zenna had never seen a giant sloth, and the first meeting wasn't going to be a pleasant one.

The battle cries of her companions shocked her back from study into action. Arun and Morgan had both hurled their missiles, but the cleric's javelin and the dwarf's hammer seemed to have little or no effect as they glanced off of the creature's thick hide. Hodge stepped forward, his axe raised, but the dwarf looked almost comically tiny in contrast to the creature as it loomed over him. Hodge rushed toward one limb as thick as a tree trunk, but the creature sensed him coming and lashed out at him with a sweep of one forelimb. The sloth's huge claws scooped the dwarf up like a shovel, and almost casually sent him flying awkwardly away. Hodge landed hard fifteen paces distant, coming slowly to his feet, a bit unsteady.

The creature had scored first, but now it was exposed, with the companions able to pour damage into it from all directions. Dannel's arrows lanced down into its back, punching through the thick hide, seeking something vital. Zenna raised her fist and poured a *scorching ray* into it; or rather tried to, for inexplicably the shaft of coruscating fire lanced through empty air two feet above the creature's head, doing no damage.

"Damn!" Zenna cursed.

"Keep trying!" Arun yelled in encouragement, as he and Morgan closed to battle the beast. The dwarf narrowly dodged a clawed limb that slammed into the ground where he'd been standing a moment before, and he managed a counter than glanced off of the limb, doing little damage but drawing the creature's attention to him. Morgan rushed it from the side, thrusting his sword into the gap where the creature's arm its torso. The creature's height made it difficult for the cleric to stab his weapon overly deeply into its body, but it was clear that the attack had made an impression by the way that the creature roared and turned to face the cleric. Morgan stood his ground, but before he could manage to strike again the creature caught him up a scoop of its claws, dragging the struggling cleric up to its head. The cleric of Helm was too large to fit into the sloth's gullet, but its powerful jaws snapped down on his torso with enough force to bend the bands of metal armor that protected his gut. Morgan cried out as the jaws crushed him with the force of a vise, but through his pain he managed to bring his sword up, stabbing awkwardly toward one of the beady eyes. His stroke went awry, but nonetheless opened a bloody gash along the side of its skull. In response the sloth shook its head violently, releasing its grip on the cleric and hurtling him roughly aside as it had done to Hodge earlier.

The sloth had taken a beating, its fine brown pelt now marked with various red trails of blood from the wounds inflicted upon it by the companions. Zenna had turned to help

Hodge, but the dwarf was able to pick himself up where he'd fallen, and shrugged off the tiefling's offered aid, instead casting about for his axe, and on finding where it had fallen hefting it and rushing back into the fray. Arun continued to pound at it even as it savaged Morgan, but good fortune seemed to have deserted the paladin, as his heavy blows either missed the creature or fell obliquely and harmlessly on the creature's thick hide.

Mole appeared in her usual manner, darting from concealment to unleash a devastating sneak attack from behind. Augmented by her magical boots and her own nimbleness, she shot between the sloth's hind legs and leapt upward, kicking off against the creature's knee to accelerate her momentum up into its belly. Her sword flickered and vanished into its gut, and for a moment she hung there, suspended from the hilt. Then her weight drew it out, along with a jet of rich red blood from a punctured organ, and she fell, coming down into a smooth roll that carried her forward.

Right in front of the creature.

Which promptly roared, scooped her up, and popped her into its mouth. Mole barely had enough time to open her mouth to scream...

And then it swallowed her.

Chapter 154

"Mole!" Zenna cried, watching in horror as the giant sloth consumed her friend. For a moment an unnatural quiet hung over the clearing...

"GET THAT THING, NOW!" Arun roared, putting his own words into action as he leapt forward, tossing his shield aside to strike two-handed at the creature. He avoided the front of the creature, knowing that Mole was somewhere inside its gullet, instead taking aim at one of its front legs. The sloth, slower now that the loss of blood was having an effect, started to turn, but it could not react in time to stop the hammer that came down on its front right limb, right at the joint. There was a sickening crack, and the sloth sagged, keening in sudden pain.

From the opposite side Morgan rushed back into the fray, his sword shining in his hand as he raised it high, driving it deep into the creature's side.

Hodge rushed it from the rear, bringing his axe around in a mighty blow that nearly severed one of its hind legs.

The sloth reared up, clearly in agony now, tottering on its ruined limbs. Suddenly an arrow sprouted from the base of its skull, the black feathered shaft quivering as a shudder passed through the creature.

Then, as the companions drew back, it hissed and fell.

"Hurry... cut it open!" Zenna cried, rushing in even as the dead sloth's bulk settled to the ground.

“Where?” Hodge said, examining the body of the creature with a look of disgust in his face.

The question was answered for them a moment later, as an inch of steel suddenly jutted from a spot in the creature’s belly, twisting slightly as it tried to work a wider hole.

“There!” Zenna said, but the others were already there. “Careful, don’t cut her!” she added, as Morgan and Hodge used their blades to slice open the creature’s belly. It only took them a few moments to widen the hole enough to reveal Mole. The gnome looked rather the worse for wear, her skin blotched where the stomach acids of the creature had scored it, her entire body covered in digestive juices and gore. But she was able to flash them a wry grin as they helped her out from the creature.

“Well, now I know how an apple feels like!”

Dannel, having made his way back down from his treetop perch, jogged over to them. “Everyone all right?” he asked.

“More or less,” Mole said, holding her arms out from her body as she examined herself with a deep frown on her face. “I may need a bath, though.”

“It’ll be dark soon,” Arun said. “We need healing, food, and rest, in that order. And it seems as though there’s a ready shelter at hand.” With his hammer, he pointed toward the nearby cave at the foot of the slope.

“That place has an ill look about it,” Morgan said, a trace of uneasiness in his voice.

“True enough,” the paladin said. “But unless you’d rather camp out in the jungle, it’s our only option.

“I’m going to go look for a stream,” Mole said, starting toward the forest.

“No wandering off alone,” Dannel said. “I’ll go with you, and we can look for some wood that’ll burn as well.”

“Yer ain’t hot enough already?” Hodge asked.

“I was thinking more of dinner,” the elf said, with a nod toward the sloth.

The dwarf grinned. “Ah, in that case, I’ll go with ye as well. Yer others can get our new digs set up, all domestic-like.”

Zenna rolled her eyes, but she, Morgan, and Arun started toward the cave, while the others returned to the forest. “Watch yourself... those archers may still be about,” Arun cautioned.”

“We won’t go far,” Dannel promised.

And the twilight shadows deepened, as night settled down over the jungle. The moon was new, Selûne's glow temporarily absent from the sky, and the stars seemed tentative this night, faint glimmers in an expanse of pure black.

The cave wasn't especially spacious, and it stank of rotting hides among other unpleasant odors that were thankfully not fresh. But it was defensible, and given the two hostile encounters they'd already had since entering the jungle, the complaints against the accommodations were not that vociferous. They cooked slabs of sloth meet on kebobs that Dannel fashioned from spent arrows, and enjoyed a filling repast. Mole produced a bulging aleskin from her *bag of holding*, and for a time they were able to banish their internal rivalries and the complex feelings feeding the tension within the group, and simply be companions, enjoying a life of adventure and shared challenges overcome. Even Morgan was brought to smile by a joke Mole told, although his eyes still avoided Zenna, shrouded in her cloak at the edge of the firelight, far from both the cleric and from Dannel. The elf did not press the matter, and after the meal he drew out his silver flute, and played a few melodies that evoked feelings of camaraderie and victory after long struggle, through which was woven a faintly sad undertone that told a story of loss and regret. The others listened in silence as the elf wrought his music, and when it was done, Zenna turned away to conceal the tears that had gathered in her eyes.

The brief interlude passed quickly, though, with the realization that further dangers awaited them tomorrow in the jungle. After a brief discussion to include Morgan in their usual watch schedule, they banked their fire and retired to catch what sleep they could before while the night remained.

Chapter 155

Mole's eyes popped open as she woke suddenly, the lingering shreds of a dream of rushing flames hovering for a moment on the edges of her mind before dissolving. It was still late, or rather early, she supposed. She was hot, her shirt sodden with sweat and clinging to her lithe body. She'd already stood her watch, and she knew that she needed some more sleep, but she rose from her bedroll, reflexively grabbing both her magical boots and her swordbelt. She found her waterskin in the darkness by memory, and took a deep drink that did little to banish the stale taste in her mouth.

Silent as a mouse, she made her way across the sleeping forms of her friends to the cave exit. There was a shadowy form visible there, leaning against the rock face beside the gap. It shifted slightly as she approached, the rasp of metal on metal telling her that the guardian was Morgan.

Again she was tempted to return to her bedroll, but instead she walked over to where the cleric was keeping watch.

"Hot night, eh?" she said, her voice a whisper just loud enough for him to hear, but not to wake her sleeping friends.

"Aye," he said, though as before he showed little sign of discomfiture. *Magic spell*, the gnome thought, remembering the conversation between him and the dwarves earlier.

“Thanks,” she said. “For earlier, helping me when that... whatever it was, decided to make a snack out of me.”

The cleric nodded. His eyes shifted back toward the hillside in a sweeping glance that was probably supposed to be a hint, but which Mole of course pointedly ignored. The gnome chose a rock adjacent to the cleric’s perch and hopped up beside him.

“So, what’s your problem with Zenna? I mean, you’re a paladin of Helm. Aren’t you guys supposed to be tolerant, you know, your code, and such?”

The cleric sucked in a breath, and for a moment Mole was glad that she couldn’t clearly see his expression. Finally he let out something that Mole thought might have been intended to be a chuckle—although it was clearly forced. His voice, when he spoke, was clearly serious.

“I might ask you a similar question. You seem a goodly person, though a bit scattered... why then, do you choose to travel in the company of a demonspawn?”

Mole’s eyes narrowed, but managed a casual shrug. “Oh, it’s not so bad. But Orcus keeps hitting on me at the family reunions. And Lolth always puts spider pieces in the spinach dip, yeuck, I can tell you.”

Morgan turned away again. “You mock me,” he said, his voice flat.

“Well, yeah, but you deserved it,” she said. “Now why don’t you tell me the real reason? None of the other clerics of Helm that we’ve dealt with have had this problem.”

“Yes, and what happened to them?” he asked.

“Funny,” she said. “I thought you were actually fairly bright, but your prejudices would have to be pretty blind indeed to suggest that our actions, or lack thereof, had anything to do with the deaths of Ruphos, Illewyn, and Sarcem. I never knew the high priest, but I definitely counted the first two as my friends, and I mourn their deaths.”

She considered storming off, but something kept her sitting there, while the cleric sat beside her as rigid and silent as a statue.

Finally, after several minutes, he spoke.

“I was never supposed to become a priest,” he said, his voice distant, his gaze fixed on some distant point in that borderland where the night sky met the jungle canopy. “I was the eldest, I was to inherit my family’s estate, the wealth that my father and his line had accumulated, a good name and a favorable marriage.”

“My life was easy, the demands of who I was simple enough, my purse always full. I spent my educational years in a mélange of free spending, carousing with friends, enjoying a sequence of women.”

Mole glanced up dubiously, but didn't interrupt.

"The cult had existed as rumor for some time, but we paid little heed to it; a story to frighten children. Secret churches and dark rituals were phenomena of places like Almraiven and Calimport, not in the quiet belt of rural communities that exists in the shadow of the Marching Mountains. To this day, I do not know why they took an interest in my family."

The cleric's voice grew distant; it was as if he'd forgotten that she was there. "At first I thought it was mere fate that had brought me home at that day, at that time. Had I waited a day, I doubt the involvement of the cult would have ever been known."

"I heard the screams as I rode into the main courtyard of the estate. They had gathered everyone, my parents, the domestics, the field laborers... even the family dogs, in the plaza. They did not bother to hide their features... the indicators of their heritage varied from case to case, horns on one, hooves on another, black claws on a third. Tiedflings, a dozen of them, at least..."

"Their demons set upon me and my companions before I even knew they were there. Dretch, least of their kind, but I did not know that then. The fiends tore my horse out from under me, while their tiedfling masters called down globes of utter *darkness* to confound us. Claws raked my skin, though I was able to fight free, to flee, while my companions were torn apart behind me."

"They spent some time looking for me, but I knew the estate better than they, and I was able to find a hiding place. They left..."

"Everyone was dead, murdered. Most of them had been tortured. The grass in the plaza was more red than green..."

He trailed off, and after a moment started slightly, as if coming out of a dream. Then he turned to look at Mole. In the darkness his eyes were like black pits, empty.

"It is time for the dwarf's watch."

And he rose, leaving her alone without a further word.

Chapter 156

The remaining hours before the dawn passed all too quickly. Mole felt as though she'd just laid her head back down when she awoke to the sound of activity within the confines of the cave. Dannel had built the fire back up again from the remains of last night, and the smell of roasted sloth kebobs—and more importantly, hot coffee—drew her back up fully into the realm of wakefulness to face the day. Hodge, who'd taken the last watch, had retreated back into the mouth of the cave, splitting his attention between the slope outside and the meal that Arun was turning over the flames.

As she stretched and pulled on her boots and armor, she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye. The back of the cave was littered with bones, white shards shattered

into segments ranging from a few inches to over a foot in length, but among them was something incongruous, something that had drawn her special sense for detecting that which was out of the ordinary.

She walked over in that direction, careful not to step on any of the sharp pieces of bone that jutted upward. The thing that had drawn her eye looked similar to the bone fragments, but it was a wand, a smooth device of polished ivory. She drew it up and examined it.

“What have you found?” Zenna asked.

Mole took the wand over to her friend. She handed it to her in a way that made the symbol carved into its base clearly visible. The others had turned their attention to the scene now, curious.

Zenna held the wand in her slender fingers. She spoke the words of a minor cantrip, focusing a thread of magical energy into the device.

“It is depleted,” she said. “It was a healing wand, I believe. And by this carving—a gauntlet that I believe we are all familiar with—I can infer that its former owner was the man we seek.”

Morgan asked for the wand, and Zenna handed it over to him. “Well, we already suspected he’d been here, because of the silver plate,” Dannel said.

“At least it’s another clue that we are on the right track,” Zenna said. For a moment the two actually looked at each other, before Zenna turned away and busied herself rolling her bedroll and packing the rest of her gear into her light traveling pack.

Dannel sighed and moved toward the cave entrance. “I’m going to take a quick look around, make sure the trail’s clear,” he said.

“Don’t go far, and watch yourself,” Arun said without looking up from his efforts at the fire.

“Save me a kebob,” the elf said as he left.

“No promises, elf,” Hodge replied.

Mole was equally eager as she grabbed a loose piece of rag and used it to lift the small iron coffeepot from the fire. “Ah,” she said, sniffing the thick aroma coming from the spout of the pot. “So, what do you think we’ll find...”

She was interrupted as Dannel suddenly darted back into the cave. The others, seeing the look on the elf’s face, were quick to grab their weapons.

“What is it?” Hodge asked.

“There’s a good number of gnolls out there in the forest, waiting in ambush,” Dannel replied.

“Did they see you?” Morgan asked.

The elf nodded.

Frowning, Mole put the coffeepot back down. “So much for breakfast,” she grumbled.

Chapter 157

“Well, we’d best get this over with, then,” Arun said, taking the kebobs off the fire before rising and walking to where his armor was neatly piled beside his bedroll.

“Wait!” Zenna said. “I need time to prepare... I haven’t had time to memorize all of my spells yet.”

“I’d suggest you hurry then,” Morgan said, already buckling his breastplate into place across his broad chest. Hodge, already in his armor, was peering out of the cave mouth, but there was nothing moving out on the slope. Beyond, the jungle fringe hid completely whatever lay in wait.

Zenna bit back a retort, and retreated to the rear of the cave, drawing her spellbook out of her pack.

“Now that they know that we know that they’re out there, I doubt they’ll wait,” Dannel said, testing his bowstring as he gathered up his spare quivers, making sure that none of his gear impeded his movements.

As if in response to his comment, Hodge yelled, “Incomin’!”

The companions turned toward the cave entrance, in time to see a bulging, cumbersome object about the size of a human head land on the slope and bounce down to the edge of the cave mouth. It was a bundle of vegetable matter, burning, with unpleasant plumes of noxious gray smoke rising from it.

“Ugh!” Mole cried, holding her nose. “That smells worse than your cooking, Hodge!”

“They want to smoke us out of here!” Dannel said. As the elf spoke two more of the ungainly objects hurtled down the slope, fired from the cover of the adjacent jungle at the far end of the clearing. One caught in a crevice halfway down the slope and stopped, but the other landed even deeper in the cave, only a foot from where Hodge stood.

“Bah!” the dwarf said, the interjection followed by several hacking coughs as he got a good whiff of the odorous smoke. He unlimbered his axe and swung at the ball with the flat of his blade, intending to knock it back toward where it had come.

That was his intent, anyway. But as he struck the globe, it burst open in a puff of gray smoke that filled the entry of the cave, scattering bits of burning debris all around.

“Damn it, dwarf! You aid their cause!” came Morgan’s voice from the gray.

Hodge's reply was a colorful string of obscenities, but Arun's voice cut through the chaos. "All right, everyone, OUT, NOW!"

As the companions staggered out of the obscured interior of the cave, choking from the nasty vapors still seeping from the burning globes, they stepped into morning sunshine so bright that it almost blinded them—yet another advantage to their foes. A half-dozen armored gnolls were gathered at the edge of the forest trails near the top of the slope, their hyena-like features ferocious and cruel as they regarded the men and women below them. They hefted their weapons, massive pole-axes with jagged iron heads forming crescents, with sharp spear-heads at the summit of their shafts. Upon spotting the companions emerging from the cave, they barked a challenge to battle, forming a ragged line at the far side of the clearing.

Arun had already started up the hill, moving slowly but steadily across the uneven slope. Morgan, not to be undone, was only a pace behind him, drawing his glowing sword as he charged.

Dannel emerged from the smoke and quickly scanned the battlefield. "Watch out!" he cried. "They're waiting for us, it's probably a trap!"

The twang of bowstrings and the whisper of darting arrows filled the air an instant later, as concealed archers in the brush flanking the line of halberdiers opened fire. Morgan and Arun both took hits, the powerful bows of the gnoll archers penetrating their armor to dig the steel heads of their missiles into their flesh. The injuries had to be painful, but neither man interrupted his stride, continuing their headlong rush forward.

Hodge coughed and spat as he steadied himself against the uneven stones flanking the cave entrance. Seeing that his warrior comrades had left him behind, he lifted his axe and started trudging after them. Behind him, a pebble clattered down the hill above the cave, landing a pace behind the dwarf. Hodge didn't notice, slowly picking up speed as he started up the slope.

But Dannel heard the pebble, and he spun just as an arrow knifed through the air where he'd been standing. Looking up, he saw a pair of gnoll archers in positions atop the hill above the cave, settled in rocky cover a good thirty feet above them. The position—*damn, I should have seen that last night*, the elf thought—gave the two snipers a commanding angle of the battlefield. The second archer took aim at Hodge, and fired even as Dannel shouted a warning to the dwarf.

Hodge had no time to react, and the arrow slammed hard into the space between his shoulder blades, penetrating his armor and driving the head several inches into his torso. The critical hit drove the doughty dwarf to his knees, and he coughed again, spitting up a gob of bright red blood that splattered on the rocky soil before him.

But he did not fall. Instead, the dwarf pulled himself to his feet, swaying unsteadily for a moment before he started once more up the hill, never looking back.

Morgan grunted as another arrow glanced off of his shield with enough force to dent the thin steel plate covering its wooden frame. Ahead he saw the line of gnoll halberdiers shift their formation, forming a half-circle around the charging dwarf paladin, their weapons coming down to absorb the dwarf's rush. Arun didn't hesitate, but as he charged Morgan heard the dwarf utter a cry of battle. The words were in a language that the cleric did not speak, but he did recognize the flow of divine energy that flowed into the dwarf, who seemed to swell as the *divine favor* of Moradin entered him.

Morgan lifted his sword and called upon his own patron in the crystalline syllables of the Celestial tongue. Helm answered his call, and the cleric once more felt his heart sing as the world around him shrank, the seven-foot gnoll warriors becoming puny as he *enlarged* once more to a height of twelve feet. The morning sun blazed on his polished armor, transforming the cleric into a shining angel of destruction.

Arun crashed into the ring of blades, knocking two aside with his shield and deflecting a third with the haft of his warhammer. A spearhead glanced off of his helmet, opening a gash at his temple, but the wound was not serious. Then he was inside the reach of the long weapons, and he went to work.

Morgan rushed to the aid of the dwarf, biting off a curse of anger and pain as another arrow from the jungle ahead found him, tearing through his arm just above the greave. "Cowards!" he yelled in that direction, easily deflecting the overhead chop from the halberd of the gnoll warrior who'd turned to face him, bringing his own weapon down in a blow that clove the beast-man's shoulder down almost to its breastbone.

The gnoll crumpled, and Morgan shouted a cry of praise and triumph to his god.

Fifty paces distant, at the base of the hill, Dannel exchanged another pair of shots with the snipers in their secure positions above, darting back into cover as his shot glanced off of a boulder sheltering one of the gnoll archers. The rock overhanging the cave entrance jutted outward slightly, and in the cover thusly offered Zenna and Mole took shelter, pressed up against the cave wall.

"We've got to deal with these two, get up there and help the others," Zenna said. Her eyes were tearing from the lingering wisps of smoke.

"Make me invisible," Mole suggested. "The slope's not quite vertical, I think I can make it."

Zenna nodded and cast her spell, and the gnome vanished.

"Any more ideas?" Dannel asked her. "I think my luck's about used up." He lifted a fold of his cloak, revealing the puncture caused by the most recent arrow from above.

"Too bad it didn't hit your thick skull, that's your least vulnerable spot," she said.

"Ah, at least we're talking again, eh?" he replied, with a grin.

Zenna bit off a retort. This wasn't the time. "Draw their fire," she said. "I have a spell that should take care of one of them."

The elf nodded, and leapt out of his position of cover, dropping into a roll that ended with him coming into a crouch, his bow drawn. An arrow stabbed into the ground behind him, but even as he fired a second sank deep into his thigh.

Zenna stepped out from her position of concealment. She had none of her usual protections in place; she hadn't had the chance to renew her spells she'd used the day before. But even though one of the gnolls saw her and pointed, they couldn't reload quickly enough to defeat her magic.

She called upon the spell, drawing upon that strange power that wasn't quite magic, but was an eldritch combination of energy from within her and without. She pointed at the nearest archer, nodding to herself in satisfaction as it froze, its bow half-drawn.

She ducked back into the cave entrance, but not fast enough to escape another arrow that clipped the edge of the rock surface and scored a bright line of pain across her back. She cried out, falling back against the cave wall.

"Zenna!"

"I'm all right! Get back into cover, you fool!"

But Dannel held his ground, drawing and firing in a blur of motion. His first shot caught the enemy archer in the shoulder, causing it to drop the arrow he'd just drawn, and as he reached for another, a second shot clipped his arm, drawing blood as it passed.

Doubly wounded, the gnoll could have dropped into full cover, but it did not, instead drawing another arrow and taking aim on the injured elf. But before it could release, pain exploded through its belly, and it staggered backward. Too late it caught sight of the gnome who'd suddenly appeared at its feet.

"That's the down side of picking fights with folks smaller than you. Sometimes they're tougher than they look."

The gnoll reached for its axe, but its fingers, suddenly weak, fumbled uselessly on the handle. It tried to get up, but the gnome pressed her advantage, and soon it was over.

Arun's hammer rang out as he crushed the breastplate of a gnoll, knocking it roughly back to flop in a tangled heap on the ground. Half of the original six were down, but even as the remaining three drew back to give them room to use their cumbersome weapons against the dwarf and cleric, the brush shook and a trio of sleek, muscular gnolls darted out from cover and rushed the armored pair from behind. These three weren't as heavily armored as the others, but they moved with great speed and agility over the broken ground, and they bore battleaxes of obvious quality that cleft the air in anticipatory swathes as they joined in the attack.

Arun saw them coming out of the corner of his eye. "Back to back!" he said, rushing again at the surviving halberdiers.

Morgan moved to cover him, his enhanced size giving him reach and allowing him to strike one of the onrushing gnolls before they could get close enough to attack. He put all of his strength into the blow, but the gnoll leapt smoothly aside a heartbeat before the blade would have impacted, coming up into a smooth roll as his companions flanked the cleric. Morgan deflected the first attack with a swing of his shield, but the second drove his axe into the cleric's flank, crushing plate and releasing a jet of bright red blood from a deep gash.

The third gnoll was distracted from his rush by Hodge, who was still having a bit of difficulty, but who'd finally reached the battle through simple dogged persistence.

"Fight me, yeh... pant... bastard," he said, lifting his axe wearily.

The gnoll obliged him, coming at him in a violent rush so sudden that the dwarf barely got his shield up in time to absorb the first stroke of the axe. He tried to counter, but the gnoll was too fast, dodging back out of the way of his stroke. It drew back and snarled, its jaws twisting in what might have been a grim smile. His back felt as though it was on fire, and he could feel blood from the wound running down his spine.

"I'm not through yet," he growled, as much to convince himself as the gnoll.

The two combatants came at each other again, passing too close to evade, instead focusing on all-out assault. The edge of Hodge's axe tore a gash in the gnoll's side, but in return its stroke crushed the armor covering his shoulder, sending a steel wedge of pain down into his body. The dwarf staggered back, holding onto consciousness by only a slim margin. The gnoll, sensing victory, barked out a laugh and lifted its axe for a final strike.

The arrow sliced by so close that Hodge felt a wind pluck at his ear. The missile buried itself to the feathers in the gnoll's gut, staggering it. But it wasn't dead yet, either.

Morgan groaned as he felt a muscle in his leg tear, keeping his feet through grim determination as his two adversaries hewed at him mercilessly. The cleric had learned the hard way that these foes were too quick for the powerful but clumsy strokes he'd used to drop the first warrior, and now he was fencing with them, stabbing with short, aimed thrusts, while using his sword and shield to turn their attacks. One of the gnolls was hurt bad, a deep puncture in its shoulder, but it continued to press its attack, forcing the cleric to split his attention between the two of them, leaving him open to their attacks.

Arun took a solid hit to his side that he ignored as he barreled within the reach of the gnoll directly in front of him. The gnoll dropped his pole-arm and unlimbered an axe, but it had no chance to use the weapon before Arun caved its side in with a powerful swing of his hammer. The other two halberdiers, flanking him, swung their weapons in great arcs with their considerable strength behind the blows, hoping to crush through the dwarf's armor and mangle the muscled flesh beneath.

It was a ferocious attack, but the halberds were the product of gnoll forges, the steel of dubious quality. The dwarf's full plate armor, by contrast, was mithral, reinforced by skeins of magic. The hits were loud and the force of the blows battered the dwarf back a step, but

even as the gnolls drew back their weapons for another strike Arun roared and rushed at the closest, his hammer coming down in a powerful and deadly arc toward its head.

Just five paces away, Morgan cried out as one of his opponents crushed his knee with a potent swing of its axe. His knee-guard saved the limb, but the leg nonetheless buckled, and the cleric fell. Even as he toppled, however, he lunged out and drove the length of his blade into the chest of the wounded gnoll that had struck him down. His sword stuck in the creature's chest and was torn from his hand as it fell backward, but it didn't matter, Morgan thought grimly before he handed hard and pain drove away all else. He tried to push himself up, knowing that the second gnoll would be approaching, its axe lifted to finish him, but his arms felt like lead weights, and would not respond to his commands.

"Helm..." he said, blood flecking his lips as he forced out the syllables, "Accept my sacrifice..."

A bark of pain interrupted him, and with a final heave he pushed himself over. Standing over him was his enemy, but instead of pressing its attack, it was clutching at its face, its axe forgotten at its side. As it turned, Morgan saw that half of its face had been ruined, sizzling as flesh continued to melt from its skull. Only one eye was still able to see, and through a haze of pain it focused on the helpless priest. With a roar of agony, it lifted its weapon...

"Halt."

The creature froze, trembling. Morgan recognized the word as a divine *command*, knew that its power would only hold the creature for a few seconds. He tried to call upon Helm, to draw upon His healing power, but the world around him was swimming in a red haze, and the words faltered on the edges of consciousness on which he teetered.

The gnoll suddenly cried out and went down, seemingly for no reason, until Morgan caught sight of a small figure that stepped into view beside his prone form.

"You don't look so good," Mole said. "Zenna!"

No, he thought, as the gnome drifted out of focus. *No, not her...*

The thought was the last cogent one he felt, as he tottered off the brink and fell into unconsciousness.

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Zenna ducked her head and slapped at the air as a bug the size of her fist flittered past, its interest in her inconclusive as it survived her barrage and continued on its way. She bit off a curse and saw Dannel's grin as he looked back at her from the head of their column. She fired off a look that bespoke grim consequences if he so much as commented, and he turned and continued down the trail.

The trail had been just as rough today as it had been on the day before when they'd first headed inland from the river. At least there were clear signs that others had come before, although the indicators of traffic that Dannel pointed out were far from reassuring. The gnolls that they'd encountered were clearly part of a larger group that frequented this region, but thankfully they had not encountered any more following that morning's battle at the cave.

She looked back covertly at Morgan, bringing up the rear of the column. The heat and arduous nature of the trek was starting to have some effect on him, she saw. Or perhaps it was the aftereffect of his injuries suffered that morning. She'd stabilized him and brought him back to consciousness with a minor healing spell, expecting no thanks and receiving none. He'd treated the rest of his wounds with his own resources, but Zenna knew from experience that being pummeled to the edge of death's door and returning was draining, no matter the benefits of healing magic.

They'd all been hurt in the brief melee, except for Mole. Hodge and Arun were both seriously wounded, and it had taken a number of charges from the healing wands that she and Dannel carried to bring them back to full health. The wand of acid arrows that she'd bought at Skie's back in Cauldron was likewise almost depleted, with at most two or three charges left in the device.

They were making as good a time as could be expected through the difficult terrain. Morgan had protected the two dwarves as well as himself with *endure elements*, and Zenna had prepared a similar spell for Mole as well. Dannel... well, the elf hadn't asked, and she certainly wasn't going to offer. Unfortunately the heat didn't seem to be affecting him all that much, and she was denied the satisfaction of watching him sweat.

She looked up at the sky, or rather at the thick shroud of forest canopy high above. It was starting to get dark, she thought. Her body felt like she'd been walking for days since they last rested; while the heat did not touch her, the arduousness of the trail had taken its toll upon her.

Dannel, up ahead, apparently agreed, calling a halt and coming back to address them. "There's a big tree that's fallen across the trail, up ahead," he told them. "It looks like it might be a secure place to set camp for the night."

"Hopefully more secure than last night's camp!" Mole piped in.

The men quickly and efficiently established a secure camp in the hollow below the fallen log, while Mole drew out various packages of preserved foodstuffs and began preparing the evening meal. Zenna cleared a small space that wasn't too overrun by the omnipresent bugs and sank down wearily after dropping her pack down close where she could reach it. She did not feel guilty for relying on the others to do the work of preparing the camp; they would need to have her well rested on the morrow in order to recover her spells, and while she had a certain durability to her, physically she just wasn't as well suited to carrying hefty burdens over long distances. The fact that her backpack weighed less than Arun's hammer, let alone the heavy shield and suit of full plate that he wore, was all a matter of relativity.

The night descended upon them with a startling rapidity, and it was clear that the day's hike had made an impact upon all of them, for there was little small talk as they ate their meal swiftly and retired to their bedrolls. Arun took the first watch, his keen dwarven eyes able to pierce the deep darkness of the forest floor without difficulty. They were starting to get used to the constant noises of the jungle around them, but were all still alert for the subtle differences that could indicate a more serious threat. They were all cognizant of the fact that they were outsiders here, and there were almost certainly numerous entities in this place besides the gnolls who would treat them as interlopers and respond appropriately.

Despite her exhaustion, Zenna found herself unable to sleep. After spending the better part of an hour tossing in her bedroll, she rose to a sitting position and looked around her. The darkness held no mysteries for her alien senses, and she could clearly see Arun, sitting like a stone on the edge of their camp. For all that her heritage protected her from feeling the full force of the heat, her tunic clung to her body, damp with moisture. This entire place was like a steam bath, she thought as she rose, calculating how long it would take until all of their clothes simply rotted on their bodies.

She walked over to Arun; the dwarf acknowledged her with a nod but did not shift his attention from the jungle depths all around them.

"You should get some rest," he said, his voice soft so as not to wake the others.

"I will, in a few minutes," Zenna said, although at the moment she felt as though she would never be able to sleep again. Everything had an odd tinge to it, unreal, a world of grayness in her darkvision contrasting to the vibrant colors that surrounded them in the daylight. The jungle felt like a living thing, every leaf and branch a claw turned against them. It was a morbid thought, and one that she tried to dismiss.

Arun's presence did not help dispel the dark perception of their surroundings. She knew that the paladin was a good man at heart, a devoted foe against all things evil and dark in the world, his stoic silence seemed almost to reinforce the feeling she felt building in the surrounding jungle. Normally she respected, even welcomed, his taciturn demeanor, but tonight she needed some talk, anything to drive back the ominous presence in the forest.

"Your path has taken some odd twists since you met us, has it not, Arun?"

The dwarf grunted, and his shoulders twisted slightly in what Zenna presumed was a shrug. "My road lies wherever evil is thick," he said.

"Do you ever miss... your homeland?"

The dwarf nodded. "The deep places are a part of us, in the soul of my people. Though I may be far from the great halls of the *gul-dennar*, those you call the golden dwarves, each time I close my eyes I can still see the majesty of those long, vaulted chambers, hewn from the living rock by generation upon generation of dwarvenkin. They say that every stone in every chamber and corridor in the dwarven halls of the the Rift sings with the heart of the dwarf who first drew its form out of the rock."

Zenna thought she detected a note of regret in the dwarf's voice as he finished, but at the same time she was moved by the obvious passion in his voice. She was used to seeing that side of him in his actions in battle, but it was a further refinement of her perceptions of him to hear him speak of his home in this way. She knew that he was an exile, though the details of his story were still nebulous to her; she made a mental note to ask Mole if she'd spoken more with Arun about his past.

"What of you, magi? Does your heart hold room for dreams of your home?"

Even though she'd suspected the question was coming, she wasn't sure how to respond. In the light of day, settled in herself, she would have had her answer ready, but here, with just the two of them together here, she felt some old feelings she'd long since banished from her heart stir inside her. Under Arun's calm, deep look, she somehow could not crush those feelings as she so often had. She cleared her throat, softly...

And as she looked up, froze.

There was *something* there, in the forest, not far from them, drawing closer. Unlike the vague presence that she'd felt suffusing the wood in an ambiguous sense of menace, this one was clearly something tangible, although her eyes seemed to slide off the details of its form as it drifted closer. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but no sound came from her lips as the potency of the thing that approached swept over her like a wave.

Arun sensed it too, and rose in a sudden jerk, before a look of wonder crossed his features and his hammer fell forgotten to his side.

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It was a woman, clad in a gown of shimmering white, possessed of an unearthly beauty that momentarily caught Zenna and Arun up in its grasp. As she drew near to them, her feet seeming to barely brush the ground as she walked, a soft white light spread outward from her, transforming the sinister gray jungle night into a warm glow of bright greens and earthy browns. Her eyes blazed with ancient power and knowledge, but there was also a look of melancholy about her, Zenna thought, as she pushed through her initial shock and regained control of herself.

"Who... who are you?" she asked.

"I am one with the Light," she said, her voice like a joyous melody, brushing over their senses like a caress. "My name, such as you mortals use them, is Nidrama."

"A celestial," Arun breathed.

She nodded to him. "Hail to thee, servant of the Forger." And to Zenna, "And to thee, shadowed one. I offer my respect to you for the deeds wrought by you and your companions... the recovery of the children of Cauldron, holding back the floods, defending the city against rampaging monsters."

“So you have been watching us,” Zenna said. She glanced over her shoulder at their companions, but the others were still asleep, their faces limned in the soft glow coming from Nidrama.

“Powerful forces of chaos and evil are afoot. I dare not remain here long lest my presence attract the attention of those forces. Yet I could not sit by and watch you march into danger without warning you. The Lord of the Demonskar knows of your approach, and even now his minions prepare for your arrival. They shall use deceit and treachery against you, just as they have done with Alek Tercival before you. You must remain resolute; Alek Tercival must be saved.”

“I have no aid to offer you but knowledge. In ages past, I provided to Surabar Spellmason a powerful weapon to assist him in his conflict with the Lord of the Demonskar. This was *Alakast*, a quarterstaff infused with an undying hatred of the fiends of the outer rifts. Unfortunately, *Alakast* was stolen centuries ago, ripped from Spellmason's tomb by a grave robber. Yet do not despair, for it is fated that *Alakast* should be wielded again against the Lord of Demonskar. It has found its way to you, and all that needs be done is for you to claim it. Seek *Alakast* in the lair of my false sisters, beyond the watchful eyes of the north.”

“That is all that I am at liberty to say... I wish you well in your travails, heroes, and never lose sight of your goals.”

The celestial rose slowly up into the air, until she was hovering three feet above the jungle floor. “Wait!” Zenna said, a dozen questions bursting into her mind, but even as the word echoed around her, Nidrama was gone.

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“I am not saying that she was false,” Morgan said. “I am merely suggesting that... whatever she was, she may have... altered... your perceptions.”

Zenna shook her head, but did not respond; she'd already made her feelings known in their discussion earlier that morning. Arun, however, was not so reluctant.

“She was a celestial,” he said with finality, ending the argument that they'd had since that morning in their camp, when Zenna and Arun had shared the news of Nidrama's visit with the others.

Morgan subsided, but Zenna could tell that he still bore doubts. Zenna thought that she understood his feelings; the cleric's initial reaction to the news had betrayed a deep disappointment, that a heavenly being would choose to appear to others in the group, rather than to him. To her, in particular. In the face of this rejection, perhaps it was easier to deny the reality of what had happened, to suggest that somehow the visit by the celestial was a false vision, something to confound and mislead them.

On the other hand, they could not afford to reject the warning brought by the deva. With a confirmation that Alek Tercival might indeed lie at the end of this road, they also had to deal with the threat confronted by this “Lord of the Demonskar” she had referenced. A major

demon of some sort, Zenna surmised, from the clues Nidrama had given and from what she knew of the history of this place. She knew something of such things, from the tales of her father and his companions. And she carried the blood of demons in her veins...

She shook her head, angry at herself for allowing such thoughts to creep into the disciplined corridors of her mind. No, she would need control, with what lie ahead.

The trail had begun to rise shortly after they'd departed their camp that morning, although it was still negotiable without undue hazard. By midmorning they began to notice ruins shrouded by the jungle, nothing more than a few stone blocks or shattered flagstones overgrown with weeds and other growth. Everything was crumbling with great age. Arun examined the remnants of an ancient pillar, and frowned, although he did not share his thoughts with the others.

"What's that?" Mole asked, drawing their attention up ahead.

The trail moved up a steady incline to a clearing, the far side of which was a rough-edged cliff perhaps thirty feet in height. Above them, beyond the cliffs, they could see the jagged outline of a high ridge through the jungle canopy; the outer rim of the Demonskar.

But what drew their focus was a large, dark opening, perhaps twenty feet across, in the cliff wall. Too regular to be natural, the opening was almost perfectly round, like a giant sewer pipe that had been broken off in some cataclysm.

"The round cave," Dannel said, drawing their thoughts back to the silver plate he carried.

"And beyond, Vaprak's Voice," Mole added, remembering the rest of the crudely etched map.

"This 'Vaprak' don't sound like no friendly sort," Hodge grunted.

"He is the god of the ogres, and no, he's not friendly," Zenna told him.

For a moment, they stood there, drawing in their courage as they faced the dark opening that progressed who knew how far into the earth.

"That doesn't look very appealing," Mole finally said.

"Well, it isn't going to get any easier by us standing here," Arun finally said, starting toward the tunnel.

"Wait!" Zenna hissed. The others all turned toward her in alarm.

"What is it?" Dannel asked, an arrow already fitted to his bow.

"Shhh... cannot you feel it?" They looked around, but could not see what had alerted the tiefling. "We are not alone here."

In response, a harsh, guttural laughter sounded from the forest edge, near the mouth of the huge pipe. It was echoed a moment later by another, deeper rumbling from *within* the dark opening, the hollow tunnel building and distorting the sound until it shook their souls to hear it.

Morgan's glowing sword slid from its scabbard with an expectant hiss. "A welcoming party," he said.

"There!" Zenna said, pointing.

They turned to see what she had seen, as its cloak of *invisibility* slid off from it like a slick of oil, revealing a monstrosity perched atop the jutting edge of the pipe, twenty feet above them. It had the look of a giant ape, but even before they heard the sick laughter that rumbled in its chest, they knew that what they looked upon was no natural creature. Its body was a knot of muscles and jutting edges of bone, and its black claws that clutched the pipe were rivaled only by the long teeth that protruded from its over-sized jaws. Its eyes were pinpricks of red light that flared malevolently as they stared down at the companions.

The demon laughed once more, and then attacked.

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Even as the bar-igura demon cackled its monstrous laugh, Dannel drew, aimed, and fired. The steel-tipped arrow found its target, knifing through the giant ape-demon.

The creature was unaffected; the arrow had simply vanished into it without a trace.

Zenna was the first to realize what had happened. "It's an illusion," she warned. "Remember the noises—in the forest!"

The companions looked around for the inevitable assault, but before they could act the world around them was plunged into shadowy darkness. Voices filled the darkness, calling out, seeking direction, and again it was Zenna, who was all too used to the power of the *darkness* spell, who cut through the din with a warning. "Spread out... get outside of the radius of the spell!"

She heard the clink of metal and the trod of footsteps that indicated that the others were moving, but over that she could discern the clear voice of Morgan, calling upon the power of his god. She did not speak Celestial, but she could see the results a moment later as a brilliant shine of *daylight* exploded from his uplifted sword, banishing the darkness and filling the clearing with its radiant glow. The light revealed the companions spread out in a ring, facing outward as they had each sought their own way out of the darkness.

Unfortunately it also revealed a trio of bar-igura demons, already closing in on them with great loping strides.

The ape-demons had been drawn to the loudest of them, and two hurled themselves at Arun and Hodge, leaping upon the dwarves to rend with claws and bite. The third was

making a beeline for Morgan, although it drew back as the bright light erupted out from his sword, snarling as the holy light burned its eyes.

The cleric saw it, and turned to face the demon, lowering the sword until it pointed toward its chest. "Prepare to be sent back to the pits of the Abyss, demon!" he shouted.

Arun barely had time to lift his hammer before a demon leapt onto him, its weight threatening to bear him to the ground beneath it. With a dwarvish cry he drove it back with his shield, giving himself enough room to wield his hammer. Pain shot up from his hip where the demon's claw had slammed into him with crushing force, but the demon's other attacks had been turned by his magical armor and shield. But his elation turned into concern as his hammer glanced harmlessly off the magical hide of the bar-Igura, the creature's unholy laughs reinforcing the futility of the attack.

Hodge, on the other hand, had a magical weapon, but he also was less fortunate in the face of the second demon's rush. A claw clipped the side of his head, opening a bloody gash across his temple, and as he tried to raise his shield the bar-Igura tore his arm aside and bit down on his exposed shoulder. Hodge cried out in pain, and tried to chop at it with his axe, managing only a feeble blow that failed to penetrate its hide.

Zenna realized that her spells would be of little use against these foes; the same resistances to elemental energy that she possessed would be shared by them, only in greater potency. Instead she ran to where Dannel was trying to take aim on the demon savaging Hodge. The elf looked up at her in puzzlement, but she ignored him and reached out to touch his bow, drawing upon her power as she did so.

"That might help," she said.

Dannel nodded and took aim, releasing a shot that caught the demon high in the shoulder. The arrow, imparted with magical power through the bow by the agency of Zenna's *magic weapon* spell, sank into the demon's hide. The bar-Igura roared in pain, but the attack only made it redouble the violence of its assault upon Hodge.

Morgan took advantage of his adversary's pause to call upon Helm once more, *enlarging* himself to twelve feet in height. He took a step toward the demon, but it grinned as it called upon its own fell power, stripping away the cleric's spells, causing him to shrink back to his normal size, and the brilliant light upon his blade to fade to its normal pale glow. Barking out a foul laugh, it charged toward the priest.

Arun, recognizing that he had little chance against his foe with his mundane warhammer, held his ground against another vicious all-out assault from the demon. He shrugged off painful blows that tore skin and bruised muscle beneath his armor, but he avoided the creature's powerful grasp, and drove it back again with a powerful shove of his shield. Rather than pressing his advantage with another attack, however, he stepped back and called upon the power of Moradin, asking his patron to *bless* his hammer. He felt the divine surge of energy pass through him into the weapon, but before he could attack the demon was on him again, biting and clawing.

Hodge found himself hard-pressed, unable to find a moment's respite against the demon's ferocious assault. He felt his body weaken as it ripped at him again with its claws and bite, tearing another gash along the side of his jaw, one black claw narrowly missing his eye. He stumbled back, knowing that another hit would finish him, but to his surprise the demon suddenly roared and drew itself up to its full height, clutching at its back.

Mole had entered the fray, giving the dwarf the opportunity to stagger back, blood oozing from his several wounds. Unfortunately for her, the noble gesture drew the demon's full ire upon her, and its claws seemed huge as they reached down for her diminutive form.

"Back off!" Zenna yelled at it, firing a brilliant spray of colors into its face. She could feel the demon's innate resistance fighting her spell, but was gratified as she saw it hesitate, momentarily confused by the *color spray*. But she knew that the spell would only stun it for a few seconds... and she had no further magic with which to hinder it.

That was okay for Mole, who fearlessly darted in and stabbed it again with her tiny sword, knowing full well what would happen when it recovered.

Morgan met the demon in a violent charge. The holy knight's sword sang as it cleaved the air, biting deeply into the side of the bar-Igura, drawing great orbs of black ichor that steamed as they hit the ground, instantly charring the surrounding vegetation into ash. The demon countered with its own furious assault, but the cleric's magical armor absorbed most of the strikes, leaving him virtually unscathed.

Arun took another hit from a claw that drove pain through his armor, but now, as he lifted the hammer infused with the power of his god, the demon looked in his eyes and knew fear. The hammer slammed into its shoulder with the force of an avalanche, snapping bones and driving the demon backward. Heavily wounded, it yet had fight left in it, and it snarled as it leapt up and charged him again, seeking either its own destruction or the utter annihilation of the man who dared to stand before it.

Mole cried out as the demon seized her in its claws, grabbing her and thrusting her into its huge, gaping maw. The rogue managed to twist in its grasp, however, and instead of chomping down on gnome flesh, its jaws closed on empty air as Mole kicked off its nose and broke free, somersaulting in the air to land on her feet. She was hurt, though, and without the advantage of surprise, there was little she could hope to do to it with her non-magical and tiny sword.

But before the demon could rush forward and tear her to pieces, it staggered as a long arrow slammed into its side. The demon spun, its face a rictus of fury, but before it could respond to the attack a second arrow found its throat, sinking to the feathers in the demon's neck. Black ichor ran in a torrent from the wound down the creature's chest, dripping through its matted black fur, causing its body to glisten in the bright morning light. It let out a cough, and then, slowly, toppled backward.

Morgan's blade still shone brightly despite the black demonic blood that now marked most of its length. The demon had turned to brute force to overwhelm this foe, but the cleric's shield always seemed there to turn a claw, and the snapping jaws were met again and

again by a sweep of the shining sword. Finally, the demon darted back and called upon its power, seeking to lay some terrible spell upon the priest.

But the power, whatever its nature, faltered against the grim will of the Helmite, and as he strode forward the mighty sword came down once more, and ended it.

Arun's breath burned in his chest as the demon pressed its attack again. The two combatants exchanged blows that drove through hide and armor alike, but neither faltered in the face of destruction. The demon drove the paladin back with a blow that crushed the dwarf's weapon arm, threatening his grip on his weapon. As Arun drew back to regain control of the hammer, the bar-Igura howled and leapt atop him, its jaws opening in a huge arc to enfold his face and rip it from his torso.

But the paladin stood his ground, and as the gaping maw drew down upon its target, Arun drove the hammer with his full strength into the fetid opening. The demon choked as teeth exploded and the hammer's broad head crushed its throat, but the sound drew off into a gurgle as the force of its charge combined with the dwarf's strength drove the weapon up through its head and into the tangled mess of corruption that served as its brain.

Relative quiet returned to the clearing as the companions drew together, facing the bodies of the three slain demons, the only sound the soft chants of healing spells. Morgan was the first to turn toward the dark opening of the pipe, after calling upon the power of Helm to purge his wounds and wiping the demon-blood off of his sword with an old rag.

"Let us be about this, then," he said, leading them into the darkness, the light of his sword showing them the way.

Chapter 162

Zenna woke with a sense of clarity that was so stark, it was nearly painful. It was a sensation directed inward rather than outward; in fact she did not at first register the switch from subconscious to conscious perception, or that she was lying in her bedroll, looking up at the curving surface of the ancient pipe above her.

Excitement pulsed in her veins as awareness filled her. *Yes, it's so simple*, she thought. The clear meaning of what Esbar Tolerathkas had tried to tell her had suddenly become fully evident to her... that the two powers she wielded, the arcane lyrics of magic contained in her spellbook, and the divine rituals she drew upon through her meditations... two sides of the same coin, anchored together in the oneness that was her being, her perception...

She finally looked to the side, saw Hodge keeping watch, a short distance away. That meant that there were at least a few hours of rest left, but despite the weariness of her physical body, her mental side was too flush with anticipation for sleep to reclaim her. Instead she lay there, running down corridors in her mind that had been shadowy, unknown before, but which now gleamed brightly with the shining light of revelation.

Finally, silently, she rose. Leaving her spellbook for now, she instead knelt and began her meditations. Her suspicions were confirmed as new avenues of power opened up before her.

Zenna had taken the first step down the path of the mystic theurge.

* * * * *

No hostile creatures emerged to threaten them during their rest in the dark fastness of the underground tunnel-pipe. Nonetheless, their rest was uneasy, due in no small part to the noise.

They had first detected the sound the previous day, on their second hour of trudging through the dark passage of the pipe. The pipe seemed to descend into the very depths of the earth, occasionally branching into side-corridors that they avoided, following the crude markings on the silver plate map. The sound was faint at first, a whistling through the corridors from very far away. It came and went with regularity, lasting a few minutes each time, and each time it grew just a bit louder, as they pressed on through the subterranean tunnels.

“Vaprak’s Voice, I’d presume,” Dannel had commented, upon one incidence of the sound.

“He doesn’t sound like he’s happy we’re visiting,” Mole had replied.

By the time they’d paused to set camp, the sound was a constant presence, loud enough to force them to raise their voices to speak when it came. They adapted to it, though, weariness giving them the ability to sleep through the disturbing phenomenon.

The next day they pressed onward, with Morgan’s sword drawn to give those without darkvision sufficient light to see by. The sound continued to grow louder as they progressed, until they could not speak at all during the minutes it filled the pipe with its echo. Finally, they saw a light up ahead, a pinprick in the distance that grew larger as they approached, until it was clear that they’d reached the end of the tunnel.

Just as they reached the opening, the loud wailing sound started up again, and for a full minute they huddled in the sides of the tunnel, barraged by the full force of Vaprak’s Voice. It was clear that the sound originated in the movement of winds through the pipes, and the large canyon that stretched out before them, but that did not reduce the supernatural horror inherent in the terrible cacophony. Mole, with her sensitive gnomish ears, was the worst affected, and she huddled against the side of the corridor for almost a minute after the sound faded, clutching her ears.

“Mole, maybe it would be best if you plugged up your ears with something,” Zenna suggested.

“No, it’s all right, I can handle it,” Mole replied. “I don’t want the first warning we have of bad guys creeping up on us to be a sword stuck through someone’s gut.”

She moved up to the lip of the pipe, joining Dannel and Morgan who were already scanning what lay ahead. The dwarves, who both seemed a bit more cautious of heights, remained a short distance back from the uneven edge.

The pipe opened at the edge of a long, broad canyon that stretched out ahead of them in wide terraces that generally rose up to a crest far in the distance. The terraces were like steps sized for titans, promising a difficult course if they were to progress in that direction. The pipe jutted from a cliff wall some forty feet above the canyon floor; a narrow, treacherous path led down along the cliff to their right. Almost directly below them they could see a pool full of thick, bubbling liquid. Noxious fumes rose from the pool, making them light-headed even this far up.

“Ugh, for once I am not grateful for having the gnomish gift of good hearing and smelling,” Mole said, holding her nose.

“That path doesn’t look all too safe,” Dannel said. “We’d better get a rope, and take our time.”

“The paladin may be in dire danger,” Morgan reminded him. “We cannot afford excessive delay.”

“Well, if you slip and fall into the pool, you won’t be helping him much,” Dannel said plainly. The point was too sensible to argue, so the cleric subsided.

It took them nearly a half-hour to navigate the difficult path down to the canyon floor, but their caution was rewarded as several of them stumbled and would have taken the quick way down but for the guide rope that Dannel and Mole strung along the route, attaching it to sturdier boulders along the way. The Voice came and went again during their trip, but they simply waited it out, continuing once the winds had died down. There was a loud whistle from the pool below during their descent, but it was apparently another trick of sound, for nothing hostile emerged to trouble them.

With the noise, stench, and the need to focus on their descent, none of them noticed the small creature that crept out of the pool and flew up toward the western wall of the canyon opposite them.

Dannel reached the bottom of the steeply descending path first, and after securing the rope to a nearby pillar of rock, he slipped out into the canyon, scanning the area for any signs of danger.

“Ah,” he said to himself almost immediately, drawing back to await the others.

Once they had all gathered safely, and Mole had reclaimed her rope, the elf reported what he’d seen.

“It looks like our foes may be expecting guests after all,” he told them, directing their attention to the far side of the canyon. There was a breach in the cliff walls there, a crevice that ran several dozen yards into the rock beyond. There, at the point where the breach began to narrow, they could see a huge iron portcullis blocking a corridor that appeared to

lead deeper into the mountain beyond. The massive construct stood nearly twenty feet tall and eight feet wide, and while it did not look to be of exceptional quality in its manufacture, its sheer bulk made it a considerable obstacle.

Warily, the companions crossed the canyon, staying close to the cliff walls when they could, until they had reached the entrance of the breach.

“No guards,” Hodge said, looking around as though he expected enemies to burst from the stones at any moment.

“None that we can see,” Morgan corrected him.

“Look,” Mole said, drawing their attention upward. “There’s a little hold up there.”

They saw that she was right; a small opening, maybe a pace across, was visible a short distance above the top of the portcullis.

“A spy-hole,” Dannel suggested, drawing back the arrow he held in his bow, as if testing the potential for a shot.

“Well, if there’s bad guys beyond there, they already know we’re here,” Mole said, with a slight undertone of excitement that Zenna immediately recognized as a sign that the gnome had a plan brewing. Her suspicion was confirmed a moment later as Mole went on, “I suppose there’s only one way for us to find out...”

The elf caught on quickly too; he’d been around Mole long enough to know her ways. Shaking his head slightly, he opened his pouch and pulled out the magical slippers he carried therein. Mole was already taking off her boots.

“Just a quick look,” Zenna cautioned sternly. “Don’t risk yourself; we won’t be able to help you if there’s trouble.”

Mole put on a long-suffering look and nodded. “Yes, Mother. Don’t worry, I’ll just take a look, maybe see if there’s a counterweight for the portcullis.” Her eyes brightened, as though something had just occurred to her. “You know, I’d probably have a much better chance, if I was invisible...”

Zenna had to work to conceal her grin as she focused her thoughts on the incantation needed to invoke the spell.

With the others waiting in at least slight cover amidst a pile of boulders near the canyon wall, the invisible rogue *spider climbed* her way up the rugged cliff face. The surface was uneven and dangerous with loose stones half-buried in the sheer ascent, but Mole was light and a veteran climber, and the magical slippers she’d borrowed from Dannel made the climb a matter of child’s play for her. Soon she’d reached the small opening, which on close examination looked a bit snug even for her. Luckily she was fairly good at getting through small spaces, so after making sure her gear was secured and out of the way she crawled through.

And looked up into the face of trouble.

Oh, dear, she thought.

Chapter 163

“There’s three of them, in a little room up above, and there’s a balcony on the far side that overlooks the corridor below, beyond the portcullis. There’s a winch on the wall, but it looks like it would take all of you men working together to even budge it.”

The six of them had withdrawn a short distance back down the canyon, so that they would out of the direct line of sight from the portcullis and the spy-hole above. Though it seemed doubtful now that the hole was used as a vantage by the guards.

After all, for them it was at ankle-level.

“Three hill giants,” Arun said. “That will be... difficult.”

“We’ve come too far to give up now,” Morgan said softly.

“I wasn’t suggesting we give up,” Arun replied, his own voice level.

“If you men can hold off comparing the size of your egos for a moment, I need to think,” Zenna said.

“I’d wager that there’s more guardians down the corridor, at ground level,” Dannel said. “Otherwise the giants wouldn’t be a sufficient deterrent, as you could sunder the portcullis and simply run through until the angle of the corridor cut off their line of fire. There may even be an additional barrier further on.”

“I don’t like it,” Hodge growled. “It be far too neat—giants, ‘specially them hill brutes, ain’t known fer their strategizin’, and certainly not fer buildin’ fancy-all forts.”

“Agreed,” Dannel said. “There must be someone—or something—behind them, calling the shots.”

“Well then, we must fight through the rabble until we can reach the leader, and destroy him,” Morgan said, his hand tightening on the grip of his sword.

“One thing at a time,” Arun said. “The portcullis, and the giants above.”

“I could deal with one, maybe two,” Mole said with gravity. “But not three at once, no way.”

“You!” Hodge snorted. “Yer might be able ter pop a boil on the foot o’ one, with that little sticker o’ yers, but ‘e’s just as like to step on yer by mistake!”

“My sword was sufficient against the dragon in Bhal-Hamatugn, and that demon that was tearing you to pieces yesterday,” Mole said, putting her hands on her hips and facing the dwarf with an indignant expression.

“Well, she does have you there,” Dannel said, nudging the dwarf with a grin.

Hodge glared at the elf, then at Mole, then threw up his arms and turned away. “Gnomes!” he said, gruffly, but there was an undercurrent of something else that was not unfriendly in his voice.

“And let us not forget who brought this vital intelligence to the group,” Mole added.

“We are grateful for your aid, small one,” Morgan said respectfully. “And your sword will be welcome in the forthcoming battle.”

“Any ideas?” Dannel asked, looking at Zenna.

Zenna shook her head. “I’m afraid my powers don’t offer an easy answer for this situation,” she admitted. She fixed him with a stare, waiting for him to make a jibe at the expense of her honesty, but he only nodded.

Arun rose and lifted his hammer. “Then we do things the plain, old-fashioned way—full-on frontal assault.” Morgan nodded, in full agreement.

Gods help us, Zenna thought, shaking her head.

Chapter 164

They made their way cautiously back to the breach in the canyon wall, weapons in hand, all of their senses alert for any sign of danger. They knew that even if their enemies were not yet aware of their presence, a wager none of them would have taken, they soon would be.

Up close, the portcullis looked even more imposing than it had earlier. “That’s not gunna come down easy,” Hodge said.

“But it will come down,” Arun said, stepping forward, hefting his hammer.

“If you will let the blessing of Helm aid your efforts?” Morgan said, coming forward to stand beside him. Arun nodded, and the cleric called upon his patron, infusing the dwarf with strength and *enlarging* him until he stood nearly ten feet in height, his hammer transformed into a huge maul.

Dannel, having reclaimed his magic slippers from Mole, darted up the side of the cliff, finding a sheltered position in a rough niche in the rock where he could fire arrows into the corridor beyond the portcullis from relative security. The others drew back, but not far, covering their companion as he stepped up to the iron grille.

“Moradin, grant your servant the strength to prevail against evil,” Arun whispered in dwarvish. Already bolstered by Morgan’s spells, he felt a thrill of power as the *divine favor* of his patron came at his call.

The dwarf laid aside his shield, and took up his hammer with both hands.

The sound of the impact echoed throughout the canyon.

Zenna glanced around the edge of the boulder behind which she’d taken cover to see that the first blow had told upon the barrier, with a visible dent in one of the iron bars. But the dwarf did not stop with one blow. His arms were a blur as he rained assault upon assault against the portcullis, until the noise coming from the portcullis rivaled the blast of Vaparak’s Voice. The thought reminded her of something. *Damn, we should have waited until the winds sounded!* But it was too late to remedy that mistake now, and she doubted anyway that anything within a mile could have failed to hear the sound of Arun’s pounding upon the portcullis.

In the interval between blows she heard deep voices, coming from above. The giants, she realized. Not speaking their language, she did not know what they were saying, but she could tell that they were agitated. And no wonder, with a ten-foot dwarf laying waste to their outer defenses.

Arun lowered his hammer. The portcullis was a ruin, battered into a wreck of twisted metal, and the dwarf reached out and levered it aside, forming an opening wide enough even for him in his augmented size, if just barely.

Then Zenna caught sight of huge forms moving in the corridor beyond, approaching the barrier. Arun saw them as well, she saw, and he quickly recovered his hammer.

No, don’t charge! she thought, knowing that the giants above were waiting to pulverize an opponent entering the corridor with boulders from above.

The dwarf apparently recognized the same thing, and he held his ground, even moving back a pace to force their enemies to wedge through the remains of the portcullis, and to give him room to more effectively wield his hammer. Morgan and Hodge had moved out of cover to support the dwarf. Mole had disappeared somewhere, and Zenna belatedly followed the others, keeping an eye on the small opening above in case the giants were somehow able to mount an attack from that unlikely quarter.

Dannel opened fire from his high perch, sending arrows into the dark tunnel. The lumbering figures continued their approach, and as they entered the light, the companions saw what confronted them. They stood a good thirteen feet tall, clad in mangy, filthy hides, bearing massive morningstars and huge javelins.

And they had two heads.

Ettins, five of them, and the canyon walls shook with their coming.

Chapter 165

The lead ettin saw the mangled barrier and the huge dwarf behind it, and hesitated. While the two-headed giants were not cowardly creatures, within their dim minds they knew that they were not as powerful as true giants, and they preferred to attack from ambush rather than rushing headlong into battle with a difficult adversary.

Arun was having none of it, however. "Come on then, you blasted cowards!" he shouted, his words filling the tunnel. His challenge was accompanied by a withering barrage of missiles from his friends, several of which struck the lead creature.

The ettins could not easily retreat, motivated by fear of their masters, and so they charged, their terrible morningstars blasting shards of rock from the sides of the tunnel as they moved single-file through the relatively narrow passage.

The first ettin crashed into the remnants of the portcullis, pushing it aside with a powerful sweep of its massive left arm. As it forced through the barrier, its right arm, independently controlled by its second head, lifted its morningstar to pulverize Arun with a violent overhead blow.

That blow never landed, however. As the ettin pushed through the gap in the portcullis and straightened to its full height, an arrow vanished into the right side of its hairy, muscled chest, followed a moment later by a hurled javelin that pierced its left side. The wounds stung it, but even as it began its attack against Arun, the paladin's massive hammer came around in a powerful two-handed arc that connected mightily with the creature's side a foot above its waist. The ettin absorbed the blow, its own counterstroke falling uselessly aside. It tried to recover, but Arun's blow, driven by his enhanced strength and own skill, had done too much damage to the interior of the monster. It stumbled, and fell back hard, both heads gasping out its last as it clutched at its ruined side.

But the doom of their comrade gave the other four creatures time to full enter the fray. The heavy, ruined gate came crashing down as two ettins struck it, and Arun had to retreat to avoid being crushed under its falling bulk. Morgan and Hodge, their missile weapons now discarded in favor of sword and axe, rushed in to try and pin them in the relatively narrow opening, to hold the last two at bay and to make it more awkward for them to use their giant weapons. But the ettins were double the height and many times the weight of the defending warriors, and the two were forced inexorably back as they withstood the powerful swings from those heavy morningstars.

Dannel's bow sang as he fired arrow after arrow from his perch, just above the reach of the ettins. Some of his arrows stuck in the mangy hides that the ettins wore as armor, but the sheer volume of his barrage meant that many more would score hits. He targeted the creature on the right, the one facing Hodge, shooting an arrow into its thick arm a moment after it blasted the dwarf with a powerful blow. Hodge had caught the impact of the spiked ball on his shield, but it was clear from the way that he staggered backward several steps that he'd nonetheless felt it.

Zenna had loaded her crossbow, but she knew that the small weapon would have little effect against creatures of this size. Instead she called upon her magic, speaking the

words that evoked a coruscating *searing ray* that erupted in a bright shaft of flame that she directed at the ettin facing Hodge. She aimed high at its chest to avoid jeopardizing the dwarf. The creature was huge and slow, so there was virtually no chance that she could miss.

Except that she did. The line of flame went high, slicing through the air *between* the creature's heads. The ettin was startled but unharmed by the display, and it only took a moment before it refocused on Hodge, lifting both morningstars to strike again, ignoring another arrow that poked painfully into its shoulder.

But the arrows and the missed spell had distracted the giant for a moment, long enough for Hodge to recover. And even as it looked down at him again, it was too slow to react as Hodge ran in, and with a nasty curse took the ettin's leg off at the knee with a single powerful swing of his axe. The ettin fell, stumbling into its fellow, who in turn was finding itself equally hard pressed.

As Arun had dodged back to avoid the falling grate, Morgan did not hesitate to fill the gap, although the ettin stood more than twice his height. A heavy morningstar ball came down with a crushing blow that glanced off his shoulder, sending a sharp stab of pain through the cleric's torso. But Morgan was once again lost in the glorious song of Helm's might, and ran in close enough to thrust his sword into the creature's belly. The thick layers of hide that the giant wore turned what would have been a disemboweling thrust into a mere scratch, but it was clear from its twin roars that the thrust was painful nonetheless. The cleric stood his ground as the creature unleashed both of its arms in a pair of attacks that battered him, but when both spiked balls had rebounded from their hits the cleric *still* stood, battered but determined.

"You've had yours, giant, now feel the fury of Helm's justice!"

The ettin didn't like the feel of Helm's justice, but he was even more concerned by the giant dwarf who rushed back into the fray, bringing with him that massive hammer.

The last two ettins found themselves momentarily blocked from entering the melee due to the confines of the narrow crevice and the violence of the melee wrought and wrought upon their companions ahead. They carried heavy spears, javelins the size of lances that they hurled at the nearest target they could see. In the case of the one of the left, that was Dannel, dangling from the cliff above. Fortunately for the elf the ettin was anything but agile, and both spears missed, one bouncing off of the cliff face a pace from where Dannel had positioned himself. The elf saw the giant, and with his companions doing well against the front two, he shifted his aim to return fire. Dannel's assault proved far more effective than that of the giant, and soon the creature had two arrows stuck in its chest, trailing blood.

The last giant was close enough to see Zenna's fire pass above it, harmless but yet a warning of what might be coming. It lifted a javelin to fire at her, but its comrade before it was blocking its line of sight. Then Hodge's attack took off its leg, and as it fell, the ettin took advantage of the opening to throw.

Zenna had not forgotten to raise her defenses, however, and while the throw was unusually accurate, at the last moment it was turned by the layered defense of her *shield* and *mage armor*.

The ettin, frustrated, stepped forward to do battle, but it failed to mark the tiny form that had crept into the tunnel from outside. It paid for that oversight a moment later, as its next step shot an explosion of pain up through its foot, through its leg, into its body. Mole had rolled unseen into its path, carefully judging its stride, extending her arm and holding her sword point-up, its hilt braced against the floor, right where the massive foot was descending. The ettin hopped back in pain, the sword stuck to the crossbar in its foot, trying to avoid putting weight on the injured member. It never saw Mole, who quietly retreated back into a position of cover just outside of the tunnel entrance, already reaching for her crossbow.

It was increasingly clear how this battle was going to end. Even as Hodge finished the one he'd de-limbed, Morgan sank his sword to the hilt in the one that he and Arun faced, and it crumpled. The two still in the corridor, one still trying to get at the tiny steel barb sunk into its foot, realized that the speed with which the first three of their fellows had been dispatched boded ill for them, and they started to fall back. Morgan started after them, but Arun drew them up short, pointing with his hammer up at the balcony that they could not see from this angle, but which knew was above, and the giants that no doubt were waiting for them to show themselves.

"We just let them get away then?" the cleric asked angrily.

In answer Arun only glanced at his companions, who were continuing the assault in their own way. Dannel put his fourth arrow into the ettin he'd been targeting, but as it moved out of sight further down the corridor he turned his aim onto the one still hobbling behind it, adding insult to injury as he sank a shot into the calf of its unwounded leg. Mole and Zenna were both adding their own fire, although it wasn't clear if any of their shots scored hits.

The cleric looked like he might defy them all and rush off in pursuit anyway, but Arun placed his huge hand upon the man's shoulder. "The battle is far from over, priest. You are seriously injured, and Hodge as well. Let us take advantage of these few moments, while we have them."

Recognizing the wisdom of the dwarf's words, Morgan finally nodded. They withdrew a short distance back to their position of cover, where spell and wand again offered soothing relief from the injuries of battle. The spell of growth affecting Arun wore off, and he returned to his normal size. Dannel had returned from his perch atop the cliffs, but he continued to keep a close eye on the tunnel mouth.

Their healing power, wielded by Zenna, Dannel, and Morgan, was potent, and it took less than a minute for them to treat the party's injuries.

"Well, now what?" Mole asked. "One of them giants still has my sword stuck in his foot, and I want it back."

The companions shared a look.

“As our esteemed knight would remind us, we’ve come this far,” Dannel said. He’d reloaded his quiver from the spare he kept slung across his back, and now tested his bowstring, making sure it was ready for resumed hostilities.

“Them giants’ probably still up there, waitin’ for us to make a move,”

“I’m sure they are,” Zenna said. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

They turned to her. “So, you have a plan?” Mole said.

The wizard shrugged. “Well, they may be strong... but the way I look at it, you can’t hit what you can’t see.”

And she smiled knowingly.

Chapter 166

For the third time, the companions returned to the dark corridor leading into the cliffs.

They were quiet, but Zenna knew that their passage would not go unnoticed, not with three armored men in the company. But that wouldn’t matter, if her plan worked. The only concern was being cut off, since her stratagem only provided a way in, not a route back...

Well, if it came to that they would confront it when it happened. The others had agreed, and were set on pressing their advantage, to face the unknown together.

The dark tunnel was quiet, as they moved into position. Zenna turned and tapped Arun’s shoulder; the dwarf nodded. She didn’t bother to confirm with Morgan; as long as he waited for her signal, she couldn’t have cared less what he did.

She waited for what she knew was coming. A minute passed, slow and heavy. Someone behind her shifted, a faint sound of metal clattering on metal disturbing the stillness. When she finally heard it, the rising moan that indicated the latest resumption of Vaprak’s Voice, she began casting her spells.

A loud roaring echo to the windy sound of the Voice rose up above them. Zenna hoped that between the noise in the tunnels and her *ghost sound*, the giants above wouldn’t have a chance of hearing them.

Now, to make sure they don’t see us, she thought, calling upon her second spell.

The upper half of the corridor became filled with a dark, cloying mist, within which drifted sinister forms and shapes, huge claws forming and dissolving a terrible thread of motion. Even though she knew it was an illusion, she felt a grim shudder at the impression of what she had wrought, and hoped that the giants responded in kind.

She felt Arun issue a command, and Clinger, the paladin’s giant celestial lizard mount, started quickly forward. Zenna was strapped into the saddle behind Arun, facing backward.

The motion of the beast jostled her, but her iron focus was not disrupted, her concentration upon the spell absolute. Behind them came the others, moving swiftly down the corridors under the cover of the illusion.

A boulder appeared through the illusory mist, bouncing blindly off the walls, narrowly missing them. Arun gave a command and the lizard clambered up the wall, moving as easily on the sheer surface as it did on the solid floor below. Zenna swallowed at the disequilibrium but maintained her focus, and the mists held, growing even more ominous as Zenna had points of light that resembled eyes appear in the fog and move upward toward where the giants held their vigil. A cry of alarm in giantish was a reward for her efforts, but the mage was too focused upon the spell to notice.

Another boulder caromed down the passage, fortunately hitting no one. And then they were through, out of the line of fire from the balcony, emerging into a large, circular chamber. The place was of odd construction, its ceiling a great dome, the entire room resembling a sphere that had been cut in half. The walls were carved to resemble flowing liquid, and were done with such quality that the place maintained the illusion of water flowing down from above, even after all this time. A large construct easily ten feet high and fifteen feet across dominated the center of the room, a jumble of smooth swirls and jutting lines, the only element even remotely distinguishable being several slanted chairs, each flanked by triple arm-rests, that protruded from the overall formation. The room was lit by diffuse glowing panels set into the ceiling and floor, and had two exits in addition to the corridor they had just traversed, a smooth passageway exiting from the opposite wall, and a set of sheer panels that had the look of doors to their right.

But despite the odd wonders of the chamber, there was no time to examine the place in more detail, as the room was also occupied. The two injured ettins were present, one involved in pulling out arrows that jutted painfully from its chest; the second lying on its rear trying unsuccessfully to get its thick fingers on the tiny hilt of Mole's blade sticking from its foot.

The ettins were both seriously wounded, but of more concern was the hulking hill giant that stood before the doors to their right. The giant was shorter than the ettins, standing perhaps eleven feet in height, but his arms were like tree trunks, knotted with muscle, and the huge club it carried looked quite sufficiently deadly.

"Dismount!" Arun commanded. Zenna's concentration had already begun to slip, but their companions were right behind them, already out of the zone of danger from the giant guard post behind them. She let go of the spell and leapt down, barely letting go of Clinger's back before the lizard leapt into a powerful charge, headed right for the hill giant.

The ettin with the arrow wounds quickly rose, grabbing its morningstars, only to cry out as another arrow sped from Dannel's bow to strike it almost on top of the wound from the arrow it had just pulled out.

Morgan yelled a violent invocation to Helm as he entered the room, his sword blazing in his hand. "Your time has come, you godless hulks!"

Hodge, trailing behind slightly, entered the room and dodged aside just as another boulder rolled into the room from down the corridor, finally glancing off of the base of the sculpture in the room's center. Apparently the giants behind them weren't giving up just yet, even though they could no longer directly target them, instead angling their shots to bounce up the passageway. They hadn't hit anything yet, but Zenna knew that if one of those heavy rocks connected with someone, that person would be very sorry.

But she was secure, out of the way of the corridor mouth, and while they had won surprise it was clear that the advantage wouldn't last long. Even injured, she knew that the ettins were not foes to be underestimated. Therefore, as the one Dannel had injured rose and started toward them, she drew out her wand of *acid arrows* and fired a blast that caught it in the chest just below its left head, sizzling as it burned at the creature's flesh.

Unfortunately it also got the giant's attention, and it started right for her.

The second ettin dug at its bloody heel for another futile moment, and then with a frustrated growl drug itself up, using the wall as a prop as it hobbled toward the hill giant and the developing melee. Clinger's charge had carried Arun into range before it could prepare an attack, but its reach gave it an advantage as it swept its club around reflexively. Fortunately the dwarf had recovered his shield earlier, but even so the impact knocked him back and nearly drove him off his mount's back. But the dwarf was made of stern stuff, and he recovered in time to deliver a powerful blow to the giant's gut that staggered it. Clinger joined in the fun by locking its jaws on the giant's leg just above the knee, drawing from it a grunt of pain.

The giant, however, was a tough foe in its own right, and it quickly countered, tearing the lizard free and delivering a punishing blow to the side of its head with its club.

Morgan then joined the fray, the warrior of Helm canny enough to assault the giant from the flank, placing it between himself and Arun and his mount. The giant reacted slowly, bringing its club around in a sweep that the cleric ducked, before leaping in to thrust in with his sword. His luck failed him, however, and his foot slid in a patch of fresh blood that one of the ettins had dropped earlier, and his stroke went awry. Fortunately he recovered in time to dodge another swing from the club that would have spread his brains across the floor of the chamber, had it connected with full force. As it was it clipped the edge of his helmet, sending stars flaring through his vision for a moment.

Hodge saw the injured ettin heading toward Zenna, and he fired his heavy crossbow at it. The bolt punched into its belly, clearly hurting it, although now, fixed on its target, it was not going to stop short of death. Dannel obliged it, sending arrow after arrow into it until a final shot pierced its heart, and it fell to the ground two paces before Zenna's feet.

The other ettin hobbled into a position where it could get at Arun, but before it could attack it felt a sudden sting. Looking down, it saw a torrent of blood issuing from a small tear under its left armpit. Surprised at the sudden weakness it felt, it sought its enemy, expecting another knight or fierce dwarf. What it was instead was a tiny gnome, backpedaling as she reloaded her crossbow.

Furious, the ettin started after her.

Arun and Clinger redoubled their assault upon the giant, drawing its attention away from the momentarily stunned Morgan. Clinger, despite the grievous wound it had suffered, bit down again on a meaty giant thigh, while Arun, all but standing on the lizard's back now, rained blow after blow upon its torso. The giant's thick hide absorbed some of the blows, but the dwarf only added more power to his strikes, and finally there was a loud crack as a rib gave way under an impact. The giant responded with its own assault, but Arun was of a race that was expert at fighting these huge creatures, and with perfect timing he threw himself backward across Clinger's back, narrowly missing the club that swept empty air above him. He raised himself up to attack again before the giant could recover the momentum of its swing, but to his surprise the giant lashed out with the haft of the weapon, hitting Clinger again and knocking both mount and rider sprawling.

No sooner had the dwarf hit the ground, though, than he was up again, rushing at the giant with his hammer held high.

Mole retreated before the ettin's advance, its injury allowing her to remain ahead of it, even though it gained ground. But then, as it lurched suddenly forward to strike, she bounded away in a sudden burst of speed, courtesy of her magical boots. Realizing it had been tricked, the ettin roared out a curse.

A futile one, as it turned out a moment later, when Dannel's arrows started slamming into its body.

The hill giant was a powerful foe, but the combined strength of the adventurers was just too much for it. Even as Hodge entered the battle, with Morgan on one side and Arun coming again on the other, the giant tried to turn away, to head back toward the double doors and escape.

It got all of one giant-sized stride.

The companions gathered, breathing heavily after the brief but violent melee. Arun dismissed his seriously injured mount back to its celestial home to recover from its wounds, and Morgan used one of his few remaining spells to heal himself, drawing upon Helm's power yet again to restore himself to full health after the punishing blow he'd taken from the giant.

"Don't forget, there's more of them," Zenna warned. The others turned to the doors, wary of reinforcements, but when they came, they arrived via the corridor in the far wall.

And they weren't at all what the six adventurers had expected to find.

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Zenna saw them first, and offered a warning to her companions. "Look out," she said, but as they entered the chamber from the corridor to the west, she could not think of anything else to say, no further description that could do better than what the six of them could see with their own eyes.

There were three of them, clad in bright robes, with soft wings of voluminous white feathers arcing behind their backs. They were women, tall and stately, their features visages of beauty fashioned in glistening alabaster. They carried silver trumpets, the instruments so slender and graceful as to seem fragile. Their eyes, fixed on the companions, spoke volumes of knowledge and wisdom. When one spoke, her voice filled the room with the sound of a clarion song.

“You have done well, mortal heroes. You have defeated the giants, who have held us captive, dimming the glow of our eternal light. For the nobility of your deed, you have earned the right to drink the elixir of the gods.”

As she finished speaking Zenna belatedly noticed that another of the women bore a golden chalice, a squat, heavy object that sloshed slightly with a silvery liquid inside.

Morgan had stepped forward, his worn features shaped in an expression of awe. “I... we... we accept your gift, wondrous ones, scions of heaven...”

“Hold a moment,” Arun said behind him. Everyone, including the three archons, turned to look at him. “That’s all very well and good; we’re happy to help a couple o’ ladies in need, of course. But answer me one simple question. If you’re angels of heaven, why is that you REEK OF PURE EVIL TAINT?”

His last shouted words echoed through the chamber. The angels fixed the dwarf with a cold stare. One spoke to Morgan. “Lies! The dwarf has clearly fallen from the Light... you have clearly seen the bright purity of Heaven, golden knight... Surely you can see truth?”

Morgan’s expression had changed, although he was still half-turned from Zenna, facing the archons, and she couldn’t see his eyes. But there was a tightness in his voice as he lifted his head and addressed them once more.

“I once thought that I did, yes. But I have learned that evil often wears a pleasing face...”

And he spoke a command of power, invoking the pure light of Helm. His invocation cut through the magic surrounding the angels, shearing through the power of their disguise, and their forms shifted, the brilliant white and soft glow fading away.

What replaced them were creatures out of a nightmare. Still female, but three ancient hags, their flesh putrescent green, their skin the consistency of diseased bark. Their faces were permanently twisted into expressions of pure malice, and they cackled as they regarded the companions.

“You might have enjoyed your service to us, foolish child... but so be it!”

Their answer came immediately. Zenna lifted her magical wand, releasing an *acid arrow* that splashed onto the chest of the closest hag. The creature screamed. The one beside her also cried out as an arrow from Dannel’s bow bit into her shoulder. The hag’s thick hide absorbed most of the force of the attack, but she still snarled a curse at the elf, who calmly drew another arrow out of his quiver.

Arun and Hodge immediately leapt forward to the attack, rushing around Morgan, who was still recovering from the revelation unleashed by his *dispel magic* spell. But even as the dwarves lifted their weapons to strike down the hags, they let loose their dark powers upon the heroes.

Arun felt the full power of a hag's gaze settle on him, and felt a wave of nausea and weakness flare over him. He clutched to the source of his strength, his commitment to the god he served, and the power of the *eyebite* passed, leaving behind only a burning rage to strike down these foul creatures.

Unfortunately, the others lacked the dwarf's strength of will. The second hag hurled a wave of screaming, chaotic mental energy into the midst of her foes, scattering their minds with *confusion*. Dannel and Zenna were too far back to be affected, and Morgan and Arun both resisted the effects of the spell, but Hodge suddenly halted in mid-charge, his mind clouded by the hag's evil power, and Mole abruptly lowered her crossbow, her head spinning as she slumped down to sit on the floor.

With their enemies already reeling, the third hag focused her attention upon Morgan. The cleric withstood her gaze and met it with a cold stare of fury, but even as he lifted his sword, he felt a sinuous finger force its way into his mind. He tried to fight it, but the hag was too strong for him, and the last thing he remembered was a sinister cackle that seemed to echo within the corridors of his own mind.

"Yes, my pretty one," the hag laughed. "Yes, now you are mine." Morgan turned, his glowing sword coming up again as he shifted to face his erstwhile companions. She grimaced again as the acid Zenna had cast upon her continued to smoke and burn, eating away at her hide. She turned to look at the tiefling, and Morgan's gaze shifted to follow her own.

"Kill the wizard for me, sweetling," the hag commanded.

And Morgan lifted his sword, and charged toward Zenna, his eyes vacant pools that promised only death.

Chapter 168

With half of their number already under the sway of the foul hags, the situation suddenly looked grim for the companions from Cauldron.

To Arun Goldenshield, however, his mandate was clear. The creatures before him were evil, corrupt to a depth he'd rarely felt since he had taken the oaths of service, and had gained a sensitivity to such things. And so he leapt at the nearest hag, bringing his hammer down in a powerful *smite* backed by the full force of his strength.

He hit the hag squarely in the chest.

And nothing happened.

The blow would have knocked a man back ten feet, to gasp out his last seconds in agony. But the hag simply laughed, and held up a hand mockingly to the dwarf. Arun could see that she wore a thin silver ring, tarnished and greasy.

“My pretty protects me, foolish dwarf!” she cackled. Before he could adjust to strike again, she suddenly reached out and grasped his face with both of her clammy hands. Arun drew back in disgust, but as he did so, he could feel his strength leaving him, drawn out by the fell power of the hag’s touch.

“I will leave you a feeble husk, paladin,” she promised. “Then you shall be *my* plaything, not the toy of some dour smelly dwarf god!”

Zenna watched with horror as Morgan charged straight toward her, his massive sword lifted high above his head. Having seen him fight, she knew that she would have no chance against his strength and skill, that he would cut her down... She felt a sharp mental prod from without, a clear attack from the hags that she angrily drove out with a concerted effort of will. *You may be able to convert that shallow fool, but you won’t get into my mind!* she thought, knowing that the hags couldn’t hear, but letting the thought steady her as she calmly reached into herself and drew out the power of her magic.

For all her contempt of him, she could feel the power of Morgan’s will, even subjugated as it was to the domination of the hags, and it was considerable. Only desperation, she suspected, gave her the power to batter through his mental defenses, and lay her spell upon him.

The cleric halted in mid-charge, quivering unsteadily, his muscles twitching as his mind tried to shake off the power of her *hold person* spell.

“Zenna!” Dannel cried, turning toward her after firing off an arrow that bounced harmlessly from a hag’s armored hide.

“I cannot hold him!” she cried, seeing the effort in Morgan’s face, and even more feeling the force of his will gathering.

The elf dropped his bow and ran toward the priest, drawing his sword as he came. Morgan could do nothing to stop him, could not even turn as Dannel knocked off his helmet with his left hand, and with his right brought the hilt of his sword down into the back of the cleric’s skull.

The spell holding him snapped with the knight’s consciousness, and Morgan collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Damn, that actually felt good,” the elf said softly, before reversing his sword and rushing toward the hags.

Sitting on the floor in the midst of a battleground, Mole found herself unable to grasp the myriad and shifting thoughts that flowed through her mind. Noise barraged her from all around, familiar voices that *seemed* important, but whose significance she couldn’t quite

sort out from the babble in her head. Something caught her eye, and she looked up to see the looming silver sculpture, the alien table with its odd angles and uncomfortable lines.

You have to climb that, came a voice in her mind.

Grinning, she got up and rushed to comply.

Hodge, meanwhile, had started to wander off in the general direction of the west corridor, the passage from which the hags had emerged. As he passed near one of the hags, however, a sudden look of pure rage exploded on his face, and lifting his axe he charged toward the creature. The hag met him with a look of equal ferocity on her face, and the two combatants exchanged powerful blows. His axe managed a shallow cut that drew a look of surprise from the haggard creature, but she in turn tore into him with her claws, opening painful gashes on his arms and torso.

He lifted the axe to strike again, but as abruptly as it had come the rage disappeared, and he found himself beclouded again by the hag's *confusion* spell.

Cackling to herself, the hag reached for his face.

Having learned the hard way of the durability of his foe, Arun shifted from an all-out attack to a careful assault seeking vulnerabilities in this dangerous adversary. He feinted another powerful swing, and when the hag reached out an arm to touch him again, turned his stroke and brought the hammer up to squarely strike the hag's arm just below the elbow. The awkward blow would have snapped the arm of any normal person, but while the hag's thick skin and iron bones absorbed most of the impact, the way she painfully drew back told him that his blow had hurt it some.

But *some* wasn't going to be *enough*, he knew.

Dannel charged toward the hag threatening Hodge, his magical sword flashing in the artificial light of the chamber. As he came, he lifted his voice in song, driving back the fell cackling of the hags and reinforcing his comrades with the stirring confidence of his melody. The hag saw him coming and turned to meet him, but even as she reached for him with her claws his sword flashed, and she drew back, bleeding from a gash in her side.

"Oh, you will pay for that, elf!" she hissed.

Dannel's response was to sing louder, offering a chorus that promised the triumph of light over shadow as he leapt into another series of feints and thrusts, forcing the hag onto the defensive.

With Morgan at least temporarily out of the picture, Zenna lifted her wand once more. She could still feel a thin tendril of stored energy within it, but knew even as she called upon its power she knew that it was for the last time. The acid arrow struck the lead hag on the hip, the eager magical substance burning through her ragged shift instantly and savaging the ugly flesh beneath. The hag shot Zenna a look of pure hatred. "Sisters! Join with me!"

Zenna wasn't sure what that meant, but she didn't like the sound of it. She started running toward the hags, knowing she stood little chance against them in melee, but without any spells left with which she could hope to affect them from a distance. But if she could get close enough for a *color spray* or *shocking grasp*... a thin hope indeed, but in this desperate confrontation, with half of them already out of the fight, even a thin chance was better than none at all.

The two hags flanking the leader turned toward the one who had spoken, and Zenna felt a tingle on her skin as magical power was drawn through the chamber into the combined force of the hag covey. The lead hag laughed—

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The hags drew upon the combined power of their covey, seeking to unleash a power that would turn the battle decisively and finally in their favor. The lead hag laughed as dark energies flowed at her beckoning...

And then Arun brought his hammer around in an arc, catching his distracted foe solidly at the base of her neck. The hag screeched and flopped to the ground. The lead hag turned to him and let out a scream that seemed pulled from the very pits of darkness and suffering as the unity of the covey was broken.

"No!" she cried.

"Yes," Arun replied simply, bringing up the hammer again.

The hag vanished, followed a few moments later by the other one.

Zenna heard a fluttering of wings nearby. *Another foe*, she thought.

The voice of one of the hags sounded from the far corridor. "Get the last of those fool giants down here!" it commanded. The flapping of wings moved across the room—Dannel took a swung at the invisible form, and missed—and the double doors slid silently open as whatever it was escaped. As it fled Zenna cast a minor spell, casting about for magical auras.

"Are they still here?" Dannel asked, crossing the room to recover his bow. Arun, after making sure the hag he'd struck down was really dead, cautiously approached Hodge, who was sitting on the floor, muttering a babble of curses under his breath. Mole had disappeared, but after looking around the room Zenna finally saw her, perched atop the sculpture in the center of the room.

"They're gone, for now," Zenna said. Morgan, she saw, was starting to stir; Dannel saw as well and shot Zenna a querying look.

"If the spell was what I think it is, she's still got him," she said. That was enough for the elf, who put him down again with another sharp blow.

"We've got to get out of here, now," he said, just loud enough so that Zenna and Arun both heard. "We cannot take on more giants, not like this." He turned toward the sculpture. "Mole, come down from there!"

Arun came over, leading Hodge. The dwarf seemed quiescent for now, but still hadn't fully recovered his senses. Mole suddenly turned and leapt off of the sculpture, plummeting face first toward the ground fifteen feet below. Zenna let out a startled screech, and Dannel only barely managed to catch her, setting her down on the ground unharmed. The gnome shook her head.

"What just happened?" she asked.

Hodge, too, was coming around; Zenna recognized it by the fact that his curses took on a definite clarity and passion directed toward the departed hags.

"We've got to get out of here," Dannel repeated.

"What 'bout him?" Hodge said, gesturing toward the fallen cleric.

"Bring him," Dannel said. The dwarves shared a look and grabbed the cleric. It took the two of them to lift him enough to drag, heavy as he was with his armor.

"Bring his sword, too," Dannel reminded them. "He'll need it, when we come back."

Hodge was puffing as he and Arun struggled to drag the priest toward the exit corridor. "Yer know, yer could help a bit," he suggested, along with something else under his breath that wasn't quite audible. Zenna reached down and picked up the sword. "What do you have in mind, Dannel?" she asked.

"Rear guard," he said. "Carrying him you'll never outrun those giants, if they decide to come after us."

"But—"

"There's no time to talk about it!" he said. "No go!"

Even as he spoke, the elf darted up along the wall, using his magical slippers to scale the sheer surface effortlessly.

"Mole, come on!" Zenna said, from the corridor.

"I think I'd better hang back and make sure he doesn't get his head smooshed," the gnome said casually, standing by the base of the sculpture. "You go on, we'll follow." She grinned. "Don't worry, I can outrun them."

Even as she turned back to the tunnel, to see Hodge and Arun barely halfway down its length toward the ruined gate, she felt a rumble that she knew was the heavy tread of giant footprints, drawing nearer. She looked back toward the corridor, knowing as well that the hags could return at any moment, that the foul things were far from beaten.

She felt torn inside, looking at the man she'd loved and hated, and her best friend, then back up the tunnel at the retreating dwarves. Lingered here herself would accomplish nothing, she knew, and the dwarves would need help when they reached the steep slope at the far end of the canyon.

With a last look back, she turned and ran down the corridor. When she heard a giant's roar behind her, she did not falter, but kept running.

Chapter 170

A last bright surge of late afternoon sunlight flared over the lip of the Demonskar, illuminating the dark shadow of a figure standing at the edge of the ancient pipe, looking down over the canyon below. Zenna stared at the shadowy figure, watching him even as the sun faded and night descended with startling rapidity over them.

She felt torn inside, twisted around by all that had happened. It was not a feeling she enjoyed; her entire existence had been built around the need for control. Even if it was just an illusion.

Movement at her side drew her attention around. Her mouth tightened as she looked down at Morgan, tightly bound, gagged and blindfolded with gobs of wax stuffed into his ears. They'd removed his armor, and his clothes were dirty with mud and blood, much of it his own.

Getting him up here had been an ordeal. With one of her last remaining spells she'd been able to restore some of the strength Arun had lost to the hags' foul touch, but even so the slope had been difficult enough when they'd been coming down with ropes and without the burden of an unconscious, armored man.

The cleric shifted a bit, and subsided. Earlier, before they'd fully bound him with Mole's ropes, he'd made an all-out effort to break free, forcing Arun to bloody his face with several punishing punches before he'd quieted enough for them to secure him.

Zenna rubbed her forehead, where a headache had taken up what felt like a permanent residence. This was a complication that they didn't need.

The spell that the hag had used to subjugate Morgan's will to her own was not one that she could herself cast—only truly powerful mages could—but she knew something of it. She'd suspected that the hag would be able to control him from a distance, a suspicion that seemed to be borne out in the way he had shammed remaining unconscious, until he had tried to escape. Any doubt that might have remained in their minds was eradicated a short while thereafter, when he had addressed them.

"You're not going to get out of here alive," he had told them. "You will share the fate of that fool manling who came before you, yes. The Demon knows that you are here, and He will be coming for you, shortly..."

He'd laughed until they'd gagged him, and after that they'd covered his eyes and ears, per Zenna's suggestion. She wasn't exactly sure how much information that the hag would be able to draw from him, but by the way he'd looked at them, and by his laugh... she preferred to err on the side of caution.

"How long's 'e goin' to be like that?" Hodge had asked, after the initial fracas shortly after they'd gotten him up to the pipe.

"I don't know, for sure," she'd responded. "Days... maybe as much as a tenday."

"We don't have a tenday," Arun had said.

"Can ye break the spell?" Hodge had asked.

Again, Zenna could only shake her head.

Hodge had suggested tossing the cleric into the boiling pool at the base of the canyon below the pipe, and while Zenna had known that the dwarf was joking—or at least mostly joking—she'd felt keenly the difficulty of their situation. Dannel and Mole had returned safely, the elf favoring his shoulder where a giant's boulder had clipped him during their retreat, and the giants and the hags had not ventured an action against them in the two hours since they'd fled the complex at Vaparak's Voice. Knowing that their foes had the ability to cloak themselves in *invisibility*, Mole had laid simple snares and tell-tales on the path leading up to the pipe, but those rudimentary preparations left Zenna with little sense of security. If their enemies wanted to counterattack, they would find a way. At least they'd hear the giants coming—that is, if they didn't wait until the Voice was blowing...

"Rest easy, lass," Arun said, coming over to her. "There's naught we can do about it now, but gather our strength. Tomorrow, we'll do what we can."

"And if they come tonight?"

"Then we're saved a trip back down," the dwarf replied simply.

Zenna laughed despite herself. But then something else weighed in upon her, something triggered by Morgan's words earlier. "Do you think that he was... I mean, do you believe that Alek Tercival's dead, that this has all been for nothing?"

The dwarf's stare was intense. "He may be dead, but that doesn't make this journey meaningless. Evil festers in isolated places such as this one, but it is never content to remain apart. It seeks always to spread, to take hold where it can, to undermine the bulwarks of good and dig itself into the cracks that exist even in the most upright societies. Thus it falls upon those that can, to seek it out, and destroy it before it can grow to full fruition."

Zenna felt a sudden stab of feeling inside of her. Her father had said something very similar to her, not so long ago. She turned away, unable to speak.

Arun clasped her shoulder. “Get some sleep, if you can. We’ll need you on the morrow, especially with the Helmite... indisposed.” With a sound that might have almost been a chuckle, he returned to where he’d laid his bedroll out a short distance away. When she looked over at him again, amazingly, he was asleep. Hodge, who’d eaten a double ration of food and then collapsed in a heap about an hour ago, was already fast asleep, a coarse snore drifting up from his prone form.

Zenna laid out her own bedroll. They would let her sleep uninterrupted, she knew, so that she would have the focus to regain her spells the next morning. The others would watch, sacrificing their own rest for her. She closed her eyes, doubting her ability to sleep through the confused thoughts dancing through her mind, but somehow sleep crept up and claimed her.

Chapter 171

That same evening, in a dimly lit chamber deep within the fastness of Vaprak’s Voice, another discussion was taking place.

“The covey is sundered! We are undone!”

“Oh, do shut up, Olomasta. You always had a flair for drama. Has Kymzo reported back yet?”

The hag subsided into a chair and looked up at her sister, and nodded. “They have taken shelter in the pipe, near the overlook. But they will be back, Tribata, and we only have three giants left to guard us... and with our sister slain, we can no longer come together, to access the powers of the covey!”

Tribata’s mouth twisted in disapproval. “All that you say is true. And I’d only credit two giants to our cause; Dugobras may defend himself and his forge, but he won’t stir beyond for our sakes.”

Olomasta twisted her hands in a gesture of agitation. “What of the nerra? Will he help us?”

Tribata shook her head, and leaned in closer to her sister, her voice cast lower. “I spoke to him briefly—he is content to watch the *Mirror*, along with several of his kin. I will not press him, for if he senses that we are no longer in a position to command power, he will turn on us.”

Olomasta’s hand-wringing intensified. “Then what are we to do?”

“We are not without resources.”

“Your prize? You still control him?”

“Yes. And tomorrow, I will perhaps claim another.”

“But... why haven’t they removed the spell?”

Tribata's smile was an evil thing. "I do not believe they can. That one, the spell-caster... there was something odd about her, but did you observe how she only used magical wands during the battle, and did not engage us with her own spells? I suspect—and this is confirmed by what the giants told us—that she is little more than a talented apprentice."

"But those others... they killed the giants so easily..."

"Yes. The dwarves may cause difficulty, their natures resist our magic, and that one, that foul little thing that killed Sminelpa, I believe he is consecrated to a god, which will further enhance his resistance. But again, we are not without resources..."

"You mean..."

"Yes. After all, this concerns Him as well, does it not? Summon Kyzmo here to us. Tell him I have a message for him to deliver..."

And her cackle filled the room, sick with the promise of more blood to come.

Chapter 172

Zenna stirred to the bright glow of morning visible in the mouth of the pipe off in the distance, her nostrils full of the smell of roasting meat. Her body was a bit stiff from sleeping on the hard stone floor of the pipe, her mind was clear, the horrors of the day before faded a bit into the amorphous terrain of memory. That lasted as long as it took to sit up and see Morgan, still lying bound where they'd left them the night before.

"He'll need food and water," she said to her companions, stretching her muscles in an effort to take out some of the lingering kinks.

"Fed 'im earlier," Hodge said, stirring a few slabs of sloth meat in a small iron pot over an equally diminutive fire. There wasn't much more than scrub growth out in the canyon, anything larger smothered by the noxious gases that were given off by the pool below. But Dannel, using his magical slippers to walk along the canyon walls, had found enough dried brush to support a small fire. Hodge added a generous portion of ground pepper to the meat, which they'd salted and stored in Mole's bag of holding. Zenna wondered if the stuff would even be edible, once the dwarf had finished with it.

The familiar whistle of Vaprak's Voice began again, building quickly into the loud roar that seemed to shake the pipe with its passage. To her surprise, Zenna realized that she'd completely toned it out the night before, and had managed to sleep a full night through that cacophony. She was surprised that her hearing wasn't damaged; another benefit of her otherworldly heritage, perhaps?

During the blowing of the winds, they could not converse, so she knelt down across from the dwarf. Mole, she saw, was in her bedroll, but Dannel and Arun were absent.

When the noise had trailed off, she asked, "Where are Arun and Dannel?"

Hodge pointed toward the exit of the pipe. “They went ta take a quick looksee, just a few minutes ago, a’fore yer woke. Ah, here they be comin’ now.”

Zenna looked up to see the pair silhouetted in the nimbus of light in the mouth of the pipe. Dannel remained near the mouth, keeping a close watch, but Arun returned to their small camp. Mole, she saw, was stirring; the gnome had fashioned wax plugs for her ears from an old candle so that she could sleep over the noise of the Voice.

“Anything?” Zenna asked.

“Quiet,” Arun said. “Real quiet.”

“Hey!” Mole said, coming over to the fire. She snatched the little bag of pepper just as Hodge was about to add another dash of the spice to his creation. “A little goes a long way, you know!”

“Bah, yer all have no sense o’ flavor,” the dwarf complained.

“Is that the last of the meat?” Arun asked. The other dwarf nodded.

“How are we on supplies?” Zenna asked.

“There’s still one more sack of ground meal in the *bag of holding*, some potatoes and carrots, and about a half-pound of coffee, and another pound of the mixed nuts...”

“Ate those,” Hodge interrupted. Mole shot him a glare before continuing.

“As I was saying... a few spices, some salt—if we find another edible animal, we can preserve it—and I had some raisins in there, if *someone* hasn’t found them and eaten them...”

“Mole,” Zenna interrupted. “How many days’ worth of food do we have left?”

“Oh. Well, if we can keep Hodge out of the *bag of holding*, maybe three days.”

“We’ll be all right,” Arun said. “The elf can help us find edible foodstuffs in the jungle, if it comes to that.”

Zenna looked up at the paladin with surprise. Praise between the dwarves and elf hadn’t been overly generous, but she realized that they had all come to rely upon each other, and that their relationship had developed into mutual respect. It was a gratifying feeling, but still didn’t remove the sense of anticipation as they prepared to head once more into danger.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” Mole asked cheerfully. “We go in, beat up the bad guys, and take their stuff, right?”

“Aye! That sounds ‘bout right!” Hodge agreed.

“We will need to be wary of the magic of those hags,” Arun said, with a meaningful glance toward the captive Morgan.

They all turned toward Zenna, but the tiefling found herself distracted. There was something odd... a feeling that tickled on the edges of her perceptions...

Her eyes widened slightly as realization hit. “We’re being watched,” she said.

Even as the others reached for their weapons, there was a sizzle in the air, and two... *things* materialized at the opposite edges of their camp. The light from the pipe mouth barely illuminated their dark forms, but Zenna needed no such augmentation to clearly discern them. They were about the size of a full-grown human, gaunt almost to the point of being skeletal, their faces twisted into a permanent snarl of hatred. Their weapons were vicious claws and teeth that protruded from their angular jaws, and their black bodies were covered with a slick ooze that possessed the color of congealed blood.

Zenna knew what they were immediately. Demons. But even as she opened her mouth to issue a warning, both the creatures and her friends leapt to the attack.

Chapter 173

Faced with sudden assault by a pair of babau demons that had *teleported* in to interrupt their breakfast, the companions quickly reached for their weapons.

Even as Zenna shouted a warning to her companions and tried to rise, the nearest babau leapt at her, exploding out of its crouch like an uncoiling spring. Pain exploded across her face as it raked her with its claws; it was incredibly strong, and she was flung backward, narrowly avoiding falling into their fire.

The babau could not press its advantage as Arun charged into it. He brought his hammer solidly into its chest, driving it back a step, but the creature only shot him a sinister grin.

“Resistant...” Zenna groaned as she tried to pull herself up, her voice wet with blood from the deep gashes in her cheek and jaw.

Hodge leapt up so quickly that the frying pan went flying, but the dwarf’s concerns were on other matters than breakfast as he lifted his magical axe and charged at the second demon. The demon snarled at him, but instead of rushing forward to meet the dwarf, it turned suddenly to the side. Hodge’s stroke missed it entirely, as the demon charged toward the prone form of Morgan.

The cleric, still gagged and blindfolded, was apparently unaware of the threat as the demon reached down for him with its razor-sharp claws. But instead of tearing the unarmored priest to shreds with its raking slashes, it only cut the bonds holding him, opening one small gash his bicep where a claw cut too deep. For a moment the cleric just lay there, the trickle of blood oozing from the fresh wound adding to the tally of old cuts and scars crossing his body, but then he stirred into action, tearing off the remaining restraints and reaching up to pull off the blindfold covering his face.

“Bragh! Die, demon!” Hodge yelled, tearing into the babau’s back with his axe even as the creature turned to face him. This time he connected with it, but even the magical axe seemed to do little to the creature, and as he drew the weapon back he saw that some of the red gunk covering its body had stuck to the blade, which hissed with the potency of a strong acid.

The blow had clearly drawn the creature’s attention, however, and it lunged for the dwarf with its claws. It failed to see the tiny figure that rolled into place behind it, but it felt the thrust of Mole’s sword as it cut deeply into a tendon in its exposed leg. The demon screamed and spun on the gnome, aborting its assault upon Hodge. Before she could react it had grabbed her, its claws tearing painfully into her sides as it lifted her toward its slathering jaws.

Zenna felt a sense of helplessness as she watched Arun battling the other demon; few of the spells that she had remaining could hope to harm the thing, and the two combatants were too closely intertwined to risk a *color spray*. She turned to see Morgan rise, the cleric tearing off his gag as he drew back from the battle raging between the other demon and Mole and Hodge. Morgan was casting around with his eyes, clearly looking for something. Then, the cleric’s gaze met hers in a look that was pure venom. For a moment, Zenna thought that the *dominated* knight would rush her, to kill her with his bare hands if need be, but then he turned and ran full-out down the corridor.

Straight toward Dannel, who was running at full speed in the opposite direction, toward the melee. He already had an arrow fitted to his bow, and as he saw the cleric he drew and took aim, but hesitated short of releasing his shot. Morgan did not stop, and Dannel had to leap to the side in order to avoid being overrun. With one last look back at the fleeing priest, the elf turned back toward the melee.

As the babau’s claws raked his armor, Arun knew that he would need help to overcome this foe. His first blow had landed solidly but had hurt it little if at all. Holding his shield up in an effort to forestall the demon’s attacks, he called upon the power of Moradin. Pain erupted in his leg as the demon dragged his shield aside and clawed through his defenses, but through an effort of will his concentration held, and he felt the divine potency of his patron flow through him into his warhammer, transforming it into a weapon of Good. With a loud roar, he lifted the weapon and drove it into the demon’s body once more, gratified this time as it screamed in pain, staggering backward with a hiss of ugly black smoke rising from the point where the hammer’s head had struck.

Arun pursued it, bringing the hammer around again in a wide arc that intersected with its torso just above its left hip. Again the blow told, but the hammer had also begun to smoke, coated now in the caustic red gel that covered the demon’s foul body. As Arun drew the weapon back again, the wooden shaft shivered, and the heavy iron head fell to the ground in a loud clatter.

Encouraged by this development, the demon snarled and hurled itself bodily at its disarmed foe.

On the far flank of the battle, a mere five paces distant, Mole's eyes widened in fear as the demon drew her struggling body into its maw. An arrow from Dannel's bow sliced into the melee and stuck in the demon's body, but the missile may as well have struck an iron wall for all the damage it wrought to the abyssal creature. The gnome suddenly twisted her body up, lifting her legs and body up over the snapping jaws that narrowly missed tearing her in two. She followed the maneuver with a thrust of her sword that dug painfully into the demon's maw as it opened again. The demon let out a terrible scream of pain and released its grip on the nimble rogue, who twisted enough to land on her feet, her sword smoking in her hand.

Frustrated, Hodge tossed his shield aside and took up the waraxe with both hands, driving it down into the demon's back with his full strength. The blow was powerful but unfortunately inaccurate, glancing off of the heavily armored dorsal ridge of the demon. His curses, while colorful, proved equally ineffective, and it didn't bother to turn, instead reaching down again for Mole, the only foe who had managed to hurt it thus far.

Arun held his ground even as sharp wedges of pain shot through his body where the demon's claws scored him, penetrating through the gaps in his armor below his breastplate, tearing the chain links covering him there as though they were fashioned of flimsy wire rather than gleaming mithral. He reached for one of his light hammers, knowing that he had little chance of hurting it even with his full strength behind the blows.

"Arun!" Zenna cried, drawing his attention to the side. The tiefling rushed into the battle, holding Morgan's bastard sword in its scabbard. She had taken custody of it in their flight from Vaprak's Voice, and had kept it among her gear upon returning here and disarming the cleric. Morgan had looked for it on being freed from his bonds, but he'd failed to see it, half-concealed under Zenna's bedroll.

The demon snarled and lashed out at her as she drew near. She took a solid hit on her shoulder and cried out, trailing blood freely from three deep gashes that tore long rents in her tunic. But she held her ground until Arun's hand tightened around the hilt of the sword, and he drew its gleaming length free from the leather scabbard. Arun released his grip on his shield, and took up the sword in both hands. The demon, its beady eyes annoyed by the bright light shining from the sword, snarled and reached for the dwarf once more, but its charge died as Arun brought the sword around in a glittering arc, backed by his full strength, that intersected the demon's neck and took its head off of its shoulders.

Arrows thudded into the second demon's body, not harming it but distracting its attention, even as Hodge continued to rain down blows on its back. While neither assault inflicted serious hurts on the creature, they nonetheless provided openings that Mole continued to exploit, slamming her slender blade into tiny gaps in its defenses, piercing even its demonic resistances and drawing flows of black ichor that were beginning to coagulate into a pool of steaming demon blood at its feet. Mole bled from numerous injuries inflicted by the demon's claws, and her face was twisted in pain, but she held her ground, facing its full fury with stoic determination.

Finally the demon, seeing the fate of its comrade, let out a final screech and with a sudden twisting of reality *teleported* out of the pipe to safety.

Chapter 174

The companions sagged as the adrenaline of battle faded. Wary of another assault, they quickly tended their injuries and their weapons. Arun's hammer was ruined, while Mole's sword was pitted and of little more use. And Hodge's feelings were quickly made evident to all of them.

"Me axe!" he yelled. "Look what the bastards did ta me axe!"

Arun examined the weapon with a critical eye. The acidic goo had etched the sharp edge of the blade, and even pitted a small hole entirely through the surface, but the damage was relatively minor.

"I can repair it once we get back to Cauldron," he said, handing the axe back. "Until then, it will have to suffice."

The dwarf's mood did not improve when he discovered that the pan containing his hard-earned breakfast had been upturned in the melee, depositing the sloth steaks into the fire.

"Someone's gunna pay," he said, and he went and sat down by the mouth of the pipe, a thunderhead in his expression.

"I need some time to recover my spells," Zenna said. She'd healed her wounds, but she still looked a mess, with dried blood caked on her face and down her arm. But in her own way, she reflected a determination that mirrored that on the vulgar dwarf.

"Well, now they have the cleric, too," Arun said.

"I might have been able to bring him down without killing him," Dannel said. "But as beat up as he was..."

"It wasn't an accusation," the dwarf said simply. "In your place, I would have done the same. He is not in control of his actions."

"Yeah, he's a jerk, but at least he's OUR jerk," Mole added. "Say, Arun, you wouldn't happen to be able to do anything about this, could you?" She handed the dwarf her sword, but he only took one look and shook his head, returning the weapon to her. Glumly, the gnome tossed the pitted sword into the remains of their fire.

"What? No backup in the *bag of holding*?" Dannel asked her.

Mole shook her head. The elf knelt down beside her.

"Cheer up, Mole. As usual, we're outnumbered, with few weapons and supplies, and basically trapped in a distant place confronted with a deadly enemy that can attack us at will. In other words, it's an adventure!"

The gnome looked up at him, and after a moment grinned.

Arun came over to them. "What say you, dwarf?" Dannel asked.

The paladin's face was limned in the bright light from Morgan's sword as he lifted the blade to a ready position, and its gleam shone in his dark eyes. "We finish this," he said.

* * * * *

In their shadowed chamber, the hag sisters Tribata and Olomasta stood waiting.

"He comes," Tribata said.

The two creatures watched as the sound of footsteps became audible in the corridor. They grew louder, until a figure appeared in the doorway.

"Come forward, manling," Tribata commanded.

"It is a risk," Olomasta said, following her sister as she descended from the platform to meet him. "He may shrug off the magic, if we push him."

"No, I don't think so," Tribata said. She remained on the lower steps, looking down at the battered man who came to stand before her. "Not if we lead him in a direction that he already wants to go." She lifted her hand from under the cover of her dark cloak, revealing that she carried a golden chalice in her hand.

"Drink," she said, offering the cup to Morgan.

As the cleric drank the offered elixir, Tribata's eyes shone with anticipation. Finally, the man had drained the contents of the chalice, and she turned to her sister.

"Begin your preparations."

As Olomasta hurried off to comply, the elder hag turned her gaze back to Morgan.

"We have little time, my little manling, and there is much for you to tell me, if we are to prepare a proper welcome for your friends."

Morgan simply stood there, unable to do anything but obey.

Chapter 175

A short while later, the companions stood once more at the entrance to the complex of tunnels and chambers at Vaprak's Voice. The bodies of the ettins that they had slain here the day before were gone, although dried blood still slaked the canyon floor, and the ruin of the portcullis had been removed. Nothing now stood in their way to entry.

"If you lend me the slippers again, I'll go check on the guardroom above," Mole suggested.

“I’ll go,” Dannel replied, moving swiftly up the cliff face. Finally he reached the narrow opening, and cautiously peered inside, finally inserting his entire head into the opening.

“Wouldn’t catch me doin’ that,” Hodge said.

The elf quickly descended to rejoin them. “Empty,” he reported.

“Maybe they all ran off,” Mole offered hopefully.

The others all looked at her, and she shrugged.

“Come on,” Arun said. He was mounted upon his giant lizard, which he’d called back from its celestial home upon their breaking camp. He still bore Morgan’s bastard sword, and he’d lent his magical shield to Hodge. They’d left all their excess gear, along with Morgan’s armor and shield, in a sheltered niche in the stones near the mouth of the pipe.

The paladin led them into the dark crevice and into the complex beyond. They tensed as they passed under the balcony of the guard post above, but Dannel’s report proved accurate, and no assault came upon them from that quarter. The complex was eerily quiet as they pushed on to the hemispherical chamber with the odd chair-sculpture in the center. Again the place was empty, with only trails of blood remaining as a reminder of the desperate struggle that had taken place here the day before.

“They came from that direction, originally,” Dannel said, indicating the corridor in the far wall. They headed that way, leaving the sliding double doors to their right alone after a wary glance.

The corridor led them still deeper into the complex, opening again after approximately thirty paces into a rectangular chamber. This one was clearly different from the last, however, in its décor; the most dominant feature was a quartet of tall pillars that rose up to nearly touch the vaulted ceiling above. They had the look of white marble, carved into the shape of flowing liquid. Each supported a large bulb of glass or crystal at its apex, within which constantly bubbling liquid could be seen. This liquid drained down through some interior channel to the base of each pillar, where it poured in an endless stream into a small basin there. The basins in turn had an opening that disgorged the liquid into channels that ran into the center of the room, where the substance gathered in a larger basin that was carved into the floor. A soft but constant noise of gurgling liquid was the only sound in the place. The same diffuse light from ceiling panels clearly lit the entirety of the chamber.

“What in the hells...” Hodge muttered.

“Remember, they offered us a drink before,” Dannel reminded them.

“Nobody touch nothin’,” Arun said. There were two of the sliding-door exits in the side walls, but even as he directed Clinger toward the one to their right, one of them slid open. Zenna thought she heard something; a flap of wings and a faint titter that might have been laughter.

“Something comes,” the paladin said, drawing his mount back toward the center of the room, to give them both more room to maneuver.

“Zenna?” Mole asked.

“We have to wait,” the tiefling said. “The spells will only last a matter of minutes, and we must be certain it’s them...”

Their attention was drawn back to the corridor, where the pale light from above shone on long white bones. Four creatures stepped awkwardly into the room. They had a roughly humanoid shape, but with six arms apiece, and they looked... *stretched*, as if someone had taken a short human and tugged on his bones until he was seven feet tall. Zenna’s thoughts immediately flashed back to the silver plate, and the six-armed figure depicted on the etched scene upon it.

But her musings were interrupted, as the skeletons immediately moved to the attack.

Chapter 176

The six-armed skeletons each stood seven feet in height, each limb ending in a bony claw that reached for the companions in anticipation as they crossed the room toward them. They moved deceptively fast for their size and the fact that they were dead, and the leading pair were upon Arun before he could effectively react. One clawed the dwarf across the face, scoring a minor hit, while the second dug a claw into Clinger’s thick hide, drawing a bright line of celestial ichor from the wound.

The dwarf stood atop the lizard’s back, holding aloft one of his small hammers. “Begone, creatures of darkness!” he shouted, and the hammer erupted in light in his fist. Both skeletons recoiled from that momentary flash, but they stood their ground, resisting the power of Arun’s divine invocation.

Even as the first pair stood before the paladin’s power, the others came on, launching attacks on the others. Dannel’s first arrow glanced off a slender rib, doing little or no damage, and he barely had time for another before a skeleton was on him, forcing him to duck under its sweeping claws.

“Blunt weapons!” Zenna yelled, retreating even as another of the skeletons threatened her. Despite the evidence of Arun’s failure, she attempted to channel her own power against them, but the effort felt puny even to her, and the creatures did not pay any heed to the attempt.

“We’re not exactly carrying a wide assortment!” Dannel shouted back, giving ground around one of the pillars, drawing his foe after him. He had his sword out now, and was looking for an opening with which to use it.

Mole fired her crossbow at the skeleton threatening Zenna, but the tiny bolt did little damage and the creatures lacked the usual weaknesses that she could exploit in a living foe. The skeleton paid her no heed, instead focusing on the tiefling. Zenna darted back

into the corridor leading back toward the entrance, the skeleton's claw glancing harmlessly off the protection of her *mage armor*.

Hodge rushed up at one of the two skeletons menacing Arun, chopping at its leg with his axe. Bone chips went flying as the axe bit deep, but in turn he drew a flurry of attacks from several of its arms, bludgeoning and scratching at the dwarf's body. His shield absorbed several of the attacks, but still the dwarf found himself bleeding from several cuts as the skeleton lifted its arms for another attack.

The last skeleton continued its assault upon Arun with sweeps of its claws that scraped uselessly against his heavily armored body. The preponderance of limbs actually hindered it, and it was only able to effectively utilize four at once as weapons. Eschewing the relatively small hammer he carried, Arun instead laid into the skeleton with a powerful two-handed swing of Morgan's sword, cleaving into the skeleton's body and sundering a half-dozen ribs from its torso. Clinger helped by clamping onto one of the skeleton's legs with its powerful bite, and as its arms converged to attack Arun swept the sword around again in a potent backswing, taking one of its arms off at the elbow.

Unfortunately it still had five more limbs with which to attack.

Zenna found herself running back the way they had come, the skeleton close behind her. She had powerful spells burning in her memory, but was loathe to use up her strongest magic now, not while deadlier adversaries lurked further ahead. It didn't look like the skeleton was going to leave her much choice, however. She shot a wave of *burning hands* from her wand down the corridor after her, but her only reward was a claw that she only narrowly avoided, leaving several slightly bleeding scratches on her temple as a reminder.

She ran back into the room with the giant table-sculpture, looking for an opportunity, the skeleton right behind her.

Dannel led his adversary on a chase around the room, running up on the walls when necessary, using the pillars to slow its progress. His sword darted out in occasional strikes, although it wasn't able to do much in the way of damage to the skeleton. In turn he'd taken several hits from its sweeping claws, although thus far nothing serious had gotten past his armor.

Hodge, on the other hand, was finding himself in difficulty again. Standing toe-to-toe with the skeleton was proving a flawed strategy, for even though the powerful strokes of his axe were doing damage, for each swing of his the skeleton got off four attacks of his own. Hodge's face was now marked by a number of painful scratches, and several other bruises covered his body beneath his armor. Fortunately the skeleton, while imposing, wasn't especially strong, and none of the injuries he'd taken thus far were life-threatening. But the sheer volume of hits he'd taken were beginning to have a cumulative effect.

But the dwarf, stubborn to the last, refused to give ground.

A loud clatter of bones sounded the first casualty of the battle, as Arun's foe collapsed in a mangled heap. The dwarf, still mounted, turned Clinger and charged the skeleton facing Hodge from behind, hurling one of his hammers as he came. The missile collided into the

spine of the skeleton, cracking the great bones, causing the creature to teeter unsteadily. That gave Hodge the opening he needed, and he brought his waraxe up in a powerful arc that slammed hard into its pelvis, shattering bones with the force of the impact. The skeleton fell, shattering into its component bones upon striking the hard floor.

Hodge sagged back and wiped his face, drawing blood across his features in a garish mask. "Better... go... help... the elf..." he panted.

Arun drew a potion vial out of his pouch and tossed it down to his friend. "Drink that," he commanded, before turning Clinger toward the next opponent. The skeleton was already coming his way, actually, as Dannel had led it on a full circuit around the room, and was even now rounding the final pillar, drawing the skeleton after him.

The paladin looked around, realizing that the final skeleton was missing, as well as Zenna and Mole. He felt a momentary indecision, but then grimaced. *First things first*, he thought, urging his mount once more into battle.

Zenna raced around the perimeter of the huge chair/table sculpture in the vastness of the entrance chamber. Behind her the skeleton kept pace. The skeleton did not even notice the gnome bounding along almost silently behind it. Knowing her crossbow was of little use against such a thing, the gnome thought hard for an alternative. Inspiration finally struck like a hammerblow, and she smiled as she reached into her *bag of holding*. Her magical boots sent her off like a dart, and she easily caught up to the skeleton, darting between its legs and back before it could react. It started to turn, but Mole had already reached her destination, looping the other end of her rope around a protrusion from the sculpture and securing it in an instant with a simple hoist knot.

"Nah, yah!" she yelled up at the skeleton, backing up toward the corridor mouth. Zenna, she saw, had already retreated in that direction.

The skeleton, mindless and with a singular purpose, started toward them, only to stumble as the rope tied to its ankle snagged. It lurched forward, off balance, and finally clattered to the floor. Flames washed over it, as Zenna fired another blast of *burning hands* from her wand.

"Ah, you'll burn the rope," Mole warned. "C'mon, let's go get the guys with the big muscles to finish this one off."

They retreated down the corridor and returned to the pillar room in time to witness the destruction of the last skeleton by Arun, Dannel, and Clinger. Hodge was seriously hurt, so Zenna tended to him, using the power of her healing wand. *Not many charges left in that one, either*, she thought, but there was nothing to be done for that now. Mole told the paladin and elf about the one they'd trapped in the last room, and they quickly departed to finish that matter, rejoining them just a few moments later.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Dannel opined.

"They threw them at us to force us to deplete our strength," Zenna said. "We'll have to face the two that Arun *turned* again, and remember there's still two giants left as well."

“Well, Mole and I hurt them a bit yesterday,” the elf reminded her.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Zenna said. “We may not be the only ones who have access to healing potions and wands, you know.”

“Always the optimist,” Dannel replied. “Heck, why don’t we just surrender now?”

“Well, some of us have to be *realists* first...”

“Um, guys?” Mole interrupted. “Bad giants, ugly hags, rude cleric, remember?”

“Yeah, c’mon, I wanna chop somepin that dies when yer hit it,” Hodge grouched. He still looked a nightmare, but none of them suggested washing up in the alien fountains that continued to pour their contents into the central basin in the middle of the room. Instead he drew a tiny flask from an inner pocket and drew a swallow from it.

“Hey, you were holding out on us!” Mole said, as he tucked the flask back into its hiding place.

“Emergency supplies,” the dwarf responded. “Them healin’ wands and potions kin only put so much back, ye know.”

“Come on,” Arun said. He’d treated his and his mount’s wounds with his own healing powers, and now the companions, mostly intact, headed toward the door from which the skeletons had issued. The doors slid open silently at their approach, revealing a long corridor beyond that quickly swallowed them up, the doors closing as quietly as they had opened once they were all past.

“Hold up a second.”

Mole’s voice drew them all to a halt, the sound of Clinger’s heavy breathing echoing unnaturally loud in the confines of the corridor. Behind them, Zenna could hear the faint vibration of Vaprak’s Voice building in the distance, though sound was muted through the door behind them.

“What?” Hodge asked. “Yer see somethin’?”

“Like I could see anything over this hulk,” she said, but she patted Clinger with affection as she said it. “No, this is more of a smell, and it ain’t that nice.”

“Go ahead,” Zenna said. “Be careful.”

The gnome grinned and crept forward, virtually invisible, a tiny shape shrouded in a dark cloak. She’d turned the talent of avoiding detection into nearly an art form. Her armor was enchanted to muffle the sounds of movement, and she made barely a whisper on the odd stone of the corridor floor as she slipped onward.

Another sliding door became visible ahead at the end of the corridor. She suspected that it would open automatically once she drew near, but also knew that it would instantly alert whoever or whatever lay beyond.

For a moment she was undecided, but then she shrugged slightly. *Well, you're a scout, aren't you? Scouts scout. So scout, scout.*

That settled, she crept forward. Belatedly she thought about going back to borrow Dannel's slippers; that way she could come in *above* the door and take a quick peek from above when they opened. Whoever was beyond wouldn't be expecting that. Or heck, she could just have Zenna make her *invisible*...

She was about to turn back when the door suddenly slid aside.

Oh well, she thought. Then she looked through at the room beyond, and in the next instant was running back to the others, all thought of stealth abandoned, her heart pounding in her chest.

Behind her, the door slid shut once again.

Chapter 177

The chamber seemed smaller than it actually was, as it was divided into two levels, with the rear of the chamber eight feet higher than the forepart, with a curving stone stair to the right of the initial entry providing access to the higher level. Thick pillars of white stone further reinforced the illusion of a confined space, rising to join buttresses that supported another vaulted ceiling high above. The familiar light panels provided illumination, but several had apparently failed, leaving a partial pattern that left various areas of the room steeped in shadow.

The room's solitary inhabitant stood on the edge of the platform, looking down at the door below. He did not stir as the door slid open, nor did he respond as the adventurers entered.

The companions drew in a collective gasp as they saw what Mole had seen, earlier.

Morgan's muscular torso was bare, his flesh covered with crude markings hastily painted in black ink and red ochre. While clearly applied in haste, the designs contained a medley of sigils, words, and pictures that were both obscene and profane. The cleric's face was covered by a black hood cinched tightly around his neck, with two holes cut for eyes; his only other garment was a loincloth girded about his hips. He bore a wicked-looking club in both hands, a heavy piece of black iron nearly five feet in length.

"Welcome," a voice rasped from somewhere atop the platform. From elsewhere came an evil cackle. "So pleased you could join us," the first voice continued.

"What have you done to him?" Zenna demanded. Reflections of herself shifted around her; *mirror images* that masked her true location.

“We’ve shown him his true path, dearie,” came the voice. Zenna resisted the urge to look down at Mole, who was standing behind Hodge. The three warriors, Arun, Hodge, and Dannel, formed a half-circle in front of the two women. But Zenna knew that the true danger here wasn’t mere physical assault, but the magical powers of the hags.

“And now you will pay, for the death of our sister,” the other voice said. “You were fools to return to this place...”

“Kill them!” the first hag crooned.

The sound of the footfall was close, and heavy, echoing across the floor to their left. It was followed almost instantly by another, to their right. From the way the floor shook at the steps, it was clear to all of them what their source had to be, even if there was nothing at all there that they could see. Without hesitation Arun, now dismounted, rushed to the left, while Clinger and Hodge both charged to the right. Both dwarves were alert to the sound of the heavy footfalls that approached them, but they could not fully adjust to the *invisible* giants that suddenly materialized before them as they swung their heavy clubs at their diminutive foes. Arun managed to dodge aside at the last instant, and partially deflected the powerful blow with his borrowed sword, but Hodge was less fortunate, and he took a punishing blow across his breastplate that laid him out on his back, gasping for breath.

“Is that... the best yer got?” he choked out, pulling himself back to his feet. The celestial lizard gave him a moment’s respite as it seized the giant’s ankle in its powerful jaws, crushing it in a painful grip.

Zenna knew that the dwarves would not be able to stand long alone against a pair of giants, but she knew that another attack was forthcoming. And indeed, the air around Morgan suddenly seemed to shimmer, and the two hags appeared flanking the cleric, their faces twisted in a sinister expression of utter hatred, their fingers pointing at the companions.

Zenna felt a twisting in her gut as one of the hag’s gazes fixed upon her. She felt a sudden panic well up within her, and a wave of nausea that threatened to overbear her. She knew that if she gave into the hag’s power, even for an instant, she would be lost, and possibly with her all of them. She reached down into herself, drawing upon an inner reserve of fortitude, and with a shudder the power of the *eyebite* faded.

She felt a grim thrill of satisfaction as the hag snarled in anger.

The other hag focused her attention upon Hodge. “You cannot resist my will, dwarf,” she said with a cackle, as she snared his mind with the same power of *domination* that she’d used before to such great effect upon Morgan.

Indeed, she was correct. But even as the hag attempted to exercise her control through the mental link, she found herself blocked by the protective aura placed upon the dwarf moments ago, just before they’d entered the room.

“That one,” Zenna growled, calling upon her magic in a flaming blast of power. The *scorching ray* twisted into the hag, but even as the fiery magic struck her, it faded into wisps of nothingness.

“Your petty spells cannot harm the likes of me, apprentice!” the hag laughed. “But my pretty can do more, much more!”

And with that she pointed again, and Morgan leapt off the edge of the platform, landing squarely on the floor before them with a sound of finality as he hefted the ugly metal club.

Chapter 178

Facing two hill giants, the evil hags, and their former ally, once again the situation looked grave for the adventurers from Cauldron.

The song filled Dannel as it always seemed to, now, as he lifted his bow and took aim down the length of a long shaft. He could not keep it in, and his lips parted in a pure note of focused joy as he let the arrow fly. The missile slammed into the hag’s shoulder, drawing a cry of pain from her as it drove her back. He reloaded and drew again, lost in total focus upon the bow and the song, and even as the hag recovered he struck her again, piercing her side this time with the second shaft. But the hag was a supernatural being, infused with the darker powers of faerie, and despite the two grievous wounds she was still clearly far from beaten.

Arun did not hold anything back, laying into the giant with a two-handed *smite* that sent the huge creature rocking backward, pain exploding from the deep wound in its side. The giant lifted his club to strike again, but before he could swing the paladin slid six inches of steel into his groin, and the giant stiffened in agony. In desperation the giant smashed his club down into the dwarf with everything it had, the full power of its strength and weight behind the blow.

The club struck the ground with enough force to crack one of the floor tiles. But the dwarf, trained from youth in the tactics of fighting giants, had shifted out of the path of the club as it had come down, and stood unharmed.

The giant looked down into the eyes of the paladin, and saw death.

The other giant was finding itself pressed as well. It pounded Clinger with several powerful blows of its club, but the celestial lizard refused to release its hold upon the giant’s ankle. Hodge rushed back to help it, opening a foot-long gash in its other leg with his axe. The giant shifted back to the dwarf and struck him solidly in the shoulder, again knocking him roughly about, but even though it was clear that the dwarf could not absorb many more hits like that, still he lifted his axe and came in again. The giant poked the club at the dwarf’s face, but Hodge too was a dwarf of dwarves, and he easily ducked the desultory attack, coming up in a roll that ended with his axe coming up into the giant’s thigh.

The giant roared in pain, its legs now twin channels of agony running in parallel up into its body. It lifted its club again, but even as it shifted its weight it felt an explosion of pain in its

lower back. It felt as though a spear of flames had been thrust into its spine, and as it staggered, the sensation grew as it lost its balance and plummeted forward, falling to its knees and only barely catching itself from falling on its face. It saw the dwarf and his damnable axe coming again, and tried to grab him, but again the dwarf was too quick and his fingers closed only on air.

As the giant fell, Mole let go of its belt and fell smoothly to the floor. She looked at her bloody knife with amazement and smiled to herself.

It's not how big it is, it's where you put it, she thought. But then, leaving the crippled giant to Hodge to finish, she turned and headed swiftly to the stairs that led up to the platform.

But even as the dwarves battled for their lives against the giants, Zenna's attentions were focused on the cleric who started toward her, the club coming up menacingly.

"You don't have to do this, Morgan," she said. "You can fight them!"

But the cleric did not respond. Zenna hurled a spell at him, to *hold* him again, but this time her magic slid off the focused shield of the cleric's will.

This time, he would not be denied the vengeance he had desired, ever since he had met her.

She saw Dannel turn toward them. "No!" she cried. "You know what you have to do!"

She saw the pain in the elf's eyes, but also saw the acceptance, knew that the key to their victory lay in overcoming the hags, in breaking the spell that held Morgan captive.

Leaving her to face the wrath of the *dominated* cleric alone.

Chapter 179

The elf continued his barrage, trying to force arrows through the terrible defenses of the hag. The other hag shifted the dark power of her gaze to fall upon him, and for a moment he felt that same surge of evil that had threatened Zenna. But Zenna had also laid a protective ward upon him as well, and after a moment the agony of the *eyebite* faded from him as well. He drew yet another arrow, sighting at the injured hag... and she vanished, drawing down once more a cloak of protective *invisibility*. Instinctively he fired his arrow, but the hag must have moved swiftly, for it only passed through empty air.

He shifted his aim toward the second creature, but felt a redoubling of the earlier evil assault upon him as the hag focused upon him yet again with the fell power of her spell. This time his defenses failed to hold, and his bow fell from nerveless fingers as he fell back, waves of pain and nausea washing over him, the hag's cackles echoing through his mind.

Zenna drew back as Morgan whipped his club through one of the *mirror images*, the glamour vanishing as though popped by the force of the blow. She had no more spells to

hold him or sway his mind; she'd used up the bulk of her clerical powers on *protection from evil* spells for her allies.

Still, she was not without resources. She fired off a *color spray* into his face, a brilliant barrage that had left tough foes stunned and vulnerable.

But even as the colors faded, he was attacking again. This time a pair of images vanished before his fury, and the cold eyes on the other side of the black mask promised death.

So be it, then, she thought.

Even as the cleric lifted his weapon to strike her down, she unleashed her second *scorching ray* at point-blank range into his chest. His skin blackened and crisped where the ray tore into him, but the man did not cry out, nor did he falter, though the wound had to be incredibly painful. Instead he lashed out again, and this time his club clipped a solid form, tearing through her *shield* and her *mage armor* and striking painfully against her shoulder. She fell back against the nearby wall. The club came in again, but once again, distracted by the last remaining image, which continued to shift around her, he missed and drove the club heavily into the wall a foot from her face.

Not hesitating, she reached out and grabbed the club, releasing a powerful jolt of electrical energy through the metal weapon into the cleric. The *shocking grasp* tore into him like a raging flood, and he stiffened, dropping the heavy weapon from charred fingers.

But driven by a combined fury that originated both within him and from outside, the cleric surged at her again before she could pull herself up, and his powerful fingers locked onto her throat, driving her back into the wall.

Even at that moment, as the dwarves finished off the two giants, and Dannel succumbed to the fell power of the hags, Mole reached the top of the platform, her cloak drawn close around her, a dark shadow amongst the confusion of the battle. She saw the one hag, but while she could see bloodstains on the floor where Dannel had shot the other, she could not see it. That was the leader, she knew, the one that had *dominated* Morgan, the key to this confrontation. *But where is she*, she thought, suspecting that she knew the answer. She heard a flapping sound in the air above, among the pillars, but when she looked up she saw nothing there either.

"Damn you, Kymzo," she heard a voice say quietly, so close that she almost jumped up and gave away her position. She crouched lower in the lee of the stairs, and focused her senses out over the platform.

There. A droplet appeared in mid-air, falling to the floor, smeared a moment later by a passing foot. Heading for one of the two doors that exited the chamber from the platform.

Mole was off like a shot, crouched low to the ground.

"Come sister, we must flee this place..."

The voice, coming from thin air, gave Mole her target, and she leapt. Belatedly the consequences for a mistimed attack flashed through her mind, and then she was hanging on the hag's back, to all outside observers dangling there in mid-air three feet off the ground.

The hag hissed in anger, and Mole could feel powerful claws tearing at her arms and face. But the hiss had been what she was waiting for, and it guided her as she tore with the knife. The hiss turned into a broken gurgle as the hag staggered and fell, Mole following her down, driving the knife again and again into her throat. It was like trying to stab a tree, the hag's thick skin like bark, but the initial surprise assault had done its work, combined with Dannel's arrows jutting from its gnarled body. Splotches of blood appeared on the floor beneath her, and then the hag appeared, quivering as it bled out the last of its life upon the stone tiles of the floor.

Mole drew herself up and looked up at the other hag, who had turned to see the death of her sister. She was a sight, blood covering her sleeves and splattered on her face, the knife in her hand a mess of gore. She lifted her arm and pointed at the hag with the knife.

"You're next."

The hag turned *invisible* and fled.

Zenna saw flashes of light flare across her vision as Morgan squeezed, cutting off the flow of air and blood through her neck. She struggled against his grip, which felt like iron, but he was too strong.

"I... I didn't kill your family," she gasped. Mole had told her the whole tale of woe, but it didn't seem to matter now, as the cleric strangled her.

Dimly she heard the cry of the hag, somewhere beyond the face of the man whose hate-filled visage dominated her vision. But then, as she looked up into his eyes, she saw the spell that had controlled him snap, sensed the iron bonds of control that the hag had established over his mind and body shatter with its death.

But the hatred was still there, and the pressure around her throat hadn't eased. If anything, it grew stronger, infused with the madness that now burned through the narrow slits in the black fabric.

Consciousness faded, and the black embraced her.

Chapter 180

"GET OFF!"

Arun grappled Morgan's arms and heaved, trying to break the cleric's grip on Zenna, but the man's hands were knotted around the unconscious woman's neck, and his arms were like iron bars, rigid and unyielding. The dwarf didn't hesitate, bringing his sword up and

slamming the hilt into the cleric's face, shattering his jaw. Morgan went limp, flying backward to land semi-conscious on the hard stone tiles of the floor.

The paladin knelt by the unmoving woman, and found that she was not breathing. His powers of healing were somewhat depleted from their earlier encounters, but he drew deeply upon his reservoir and channeled positive energy, the gift of his god, into her.

She did not stir.

"Zenna!"

Dannel staggered forward, all but falling at her side. He had his healing wand out, but ignored it as he drew upon a pure song of grief and love that poured out of him, into her. Sparkles of blue light formed in the air between them, borne on the notes of the song, vanishing into her body.

Her body arched as she drew in a sudden, desperate gasp of air, then she started choking, feeling at the tender flesh of her throat that was already beginning to bruise.

"Hold still," Dannel said. "Let the magic do its work."

She nodded, forcing herself to breathe calmly through her nose until the urge to gasp faded and she could breathe normally. An ugly necklace of purple welts remained where Morgan's fingers had pressed, however. She rose, the elf helping her stand. The room was quiet again, with the massive bodies of the giants flanking them in the center of the room.

The companions gathered around the figure lying on the floor. Morgan, still groggy, pulled himself up until he knelt there in their midst, his eyes lowered, blood still oozing from the cracked and burned flesh tight across his chest where Zenna had hit him with her spell. He reached up and tore the hood from his head, revealing a face that was a mask of blood and suffering.

"Kill me cleanly," he said, his words slurred due to his damaged jaw. "I do not deserve mercy, but still I ask it, a clean, quick death."

"I think we've had enough killing here," Arun said, softly.

"You were under the control of the hags' magic," Dannel added. "There is no fault, no shame in it." He shuddered at the remembered power of the *eyebite* to which he had succumbed.

Morgan's gaze did not waver, fixed upon Zenna. "I have failed," he said, his voice thick with emotion. His body shook, and they could see the despair flowing out from him like waves of heat from a roaring fire.

Dannel's voice was soothing, although Zenna could see that it struck the man like a spearpoint. "Morgan, you are still needed..."

His stare remained fixed on Zenna. “Tell them!” he commanded. “Tell them, that they may hold their false pity!”

Zenna stepped forward. She did not have the quiet nobility of Arun, or the smooth presence of Dannel, but there was still something that shone in her eyes when she took them all in with her gaze, before focusing back on the fallen cleric.

“Yes, you have failed,” Zenna said. “You have failed us, and we have failed you.” Morgan opened his mouth to speak, but Zenna kept on talking over him. “And perhaps you have failed in your compact to your god and your church; that is a matter for you and your oaths to resolve. But mark this, priest. This is not a game, here. We are in a struggle for our lives, and the defeat of one foe does not necessarily mean that the danger is past. We are a team, here—“ she indicated her companions with a wide sweep of her hand—“and we have to rely upon each other, if we hope to complete our mission here. Remember the paladin, and the lives that will be lost in Cauldron and Redgorge if we do not return with him, or at least word of his fate.”

Her gaze intensified, and for a moment it was as if the two of them, wizard and cleric, were the only people in the room. “I offer you no forgiveness, nor do I proffer pity, Morgan of Helm. But nor do I release you from the oaths you swore to us, when you became a member of this company. Oaths perhaps not in the language of ritual and tradition, sworn on an altar in a church, but oaths nonetheless. You are not finished here, Morgan Ahlendraal, and I do not release you.” The last words were almost a whisper, but she could see the force with which they struck him.

The cleric rose. His face was an iron mask, but Zenna knew him well enough to see the storm of turmoil that lay behind that barrier. He could barely stand. Zenna knew that there was one thing more that needed to be done. She stepped forward.

“You must ask,” she said, and she saw that he flinched. Would her words be enough?

“The elf...” he rasped.

“No. From me. You must ask, cleric of Helm, if your honor is truly more than just words and inflated pride.”

Morgan sagged, and for a moment Zenna thought that he would collapse. But then his eyes came back up to meet hers, and while there was no peace there—there would not be, not for some time, if ever, she knew—there was at least a return of the old determination that she’d come to know there.

“Heal me... please...” he said.

Chapter 181

They were running out of healing magic, Zenna thought, as she replaced her healing wand back in its pocket sewn into the lining her belt pouch. As far as she knew, they were completely done with the healing potions they’d brought with them from Cauldron, and after

treating the injuries they all suffered—well, except for Mole, she'd hadn't been scratched—the stored energies in her wand were nearly depleted.

Still, they were going to push on. What else could they do? They'd defeated the hags, at least—though Mole had told them that the last one had escaped—and now they had to confirm the grim outcome of Alek Tercival's fate with which the hags had tormented them.

Morgan had not been able to help them with that; the channel of mental contact established by the hag's dark magic had only been one-way, and while he'd been able to perceive what was happening, as a helpless observer in his own body, he could not tell them if their taunts had been based in truth. He did report that he hadn't seen any more giants, although the mystery of the flapping wings that Zenna and Mole had both heard was revealed as the cleric told them of a small imp-like creature, which had served the hags as a spy and messenger.

"They spoke of someone named Nabthatoron," he told them. "From their words and tone, I gathered that he was someone of great power in this region."

"The demon," Dannel said, and Zenna had nodded.

But there was nothing for it but to continue.

They retreated out of the complex, but only temporarily, to recover Morgan's armor and shield. Arun had dismissed his companion again following the battle, so they all walked together, their sounds of their footsteps echoing hollowly off the walls of the canyon. The cleric had accompanied them stiffly, his pain not entirely physical. He'd tried to wash off the sigils painted onto his body by the hags, but even though he was able to blur some of them beyond recognition, scrubbing his torso with a lye cake provided from Mole's bag, Zenna knew that they would likely remain intact, inside of him, for some time to come.

They ate a somber meal, and drank deeply from their waterskins, and then gathered up their weapons and returned to the complex. Arun had offered Morgan his sword back, but the knight refused. Instead he took up the blackened iron club that the hags had given him. Zenna suspected that there was some overwrought meaning in the gesture from the man's point of view, but she didn't feel like debating it with him. She too was tired, eager for this journey to end, whether the outcome was for good or for ill.

They returned to the complex, still wary, but nothing emerged from the quiet halls to challenge them this time. They returned to the room where they'd battled the hags, and climbed to the top of the platform. The chamber smelt of blood and death, and they knew that in the warm, damp climate, rot would soon follow. They gave the corpse of the dead hag a wide berth and headed toward one of the sliding doors.

The door slid aside at their approach to reveal another corridor, ten feet wide with a vaulted ceiling fifteen feet above. The corridor deposited them in another room, a relatively compact chamber roughly thirty feet square.

"Home sweet home," Mole said.

Indeed the place had the look of a residence, and even before one looked at the three beds arranged against the far wall it was evident that this was the demesne of the hags. A series of golden baboon masks were hung along the north wall, and rich carpets and tapestries covered the floor and walls. Several skeins of fine yarn were laid out around chairs to their left, suggesting that at least some of the designs in the place were the product of the chamber's former owners. A chest to their left in the corner completed the décor.

"It's sad," Dannel said, examining one of the tapestries with a critical eye. "Some of this stuff is really good, actually, and yet it came from minds steeped so in evil."

"Bah," Hodge said, but the dwarf fidgeted, unable to think of anything further to say.

"They chose their fate," Arun said, closing the matter, at least in his mind.

Mole had made a beeline for the chest. "Well now, what do we have here?" she said, flexing her fingers before examining the lock.

"Careful, there might be traps," Zenna said.

Mole shot her a look—*well, duh*—before returning to her work. But her examination did not find any obvious dangers, and it appeared that the chest was unlocked as well. Apparently the hags had been confident in their ability to repel intruders in their lair.

Mole opened the chest, revealing an assortment of neatly stacked items of value. With a small cry of glee she began digging through them, cataloguing each and placing them on a nearby carpet.

"Good stuff," Hodge said, picking out a golden armband. "All this," he added, indicating the contents of the chamber, "Worth more 'an a few coppers, me thinks."

Mole nodded seriously. "Yeah, but how are we going to lug it all out of here?"

Morgan cleared his throat tentatively. "It is clear that Alek Tercival is not here," he offered, but it was clear that he still lacked his old fire, for he did not press the matter, and the others ignored him.

Mole found a scroll and unrolled it, giving its contents a quick scan. "Here, Zenna, this is for you," she said.

Arun was watching them from nearby, and took interest in a number of securely stoppered vials that Mole next drew from the chest. "Healing potions?" he asked. Mole opened one, took a sniff and a tiny taste, and nodded. "Those will be useful," the paladin said.

Zenna, meanwhile, had examined the scroll. It was clearly arcane, although the complex formulae were beyond her. She cast a *read magic* cantrip, and sucked in a startled breath. There were some powerful spells here! She felt a tingle as she looked over the spell titles... *prying eyes, greater dispel, sequester...*

Dannel, meanwhile, had turned to examine the rest of the room. “I saw a mask like these in Cauldron,” he said, noting the baboon masks affixed to the walls. In the halfling’s shop, Alek Tercival had brought it back, sold it to him.”

Zenna and Morgan both turned to him. “I wonder if he got it here?” the tiefling asked.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps they are remnants of some larger ancient civilization, with artifacts like these scattered throughout the area.”

“Okay, I think that’s all of it!” Mole said. She indicated the spread of treasure. In addition to a small bag of gold coins, there was a set of assorted silver dishes, a plain copper chain necklace set with small brass orbs, four potions, and a light mace with a handle crafted out of bone. “Zenna, what’s magical?”

The tiefling returned to that side of the room and cast another cantrip, scanning the items. “The necklace, the potions, and the mace,” she said.

“Ah,” Mole said. She took up the mace, her small hands barely fitting around the thick haft. “Well, this isn’t as good as my sword, but it might do a bit more damage than that little knife of mine. If no one minds?”

Hodge took up the necklace and shrugged it over his head and thick beard. He looked down at it, his eyes widening in surprise. “This be gold!” he said in surprise.

Dannel came over and examined it closely. “Interesting,” he said. “I have seen the like once before only... a necklace of missiles. These orbs can be hurled at a foe, and explode in a magical *fireball*. A potent device, but one must be careful, lest an orb be detonated by mistake.”

Hodge quickly—and carefully—removed the necklace, shoving it at the elf. “Bah, I only wanted honest metal and a nice gem or two!”

Mole was already packing some of the silver dishes into her *bag of holding*. She looked wistfully around, as if regretting the treasure that they would not be able to carry out of here.

Zenna’s gaze had returned to the baboon masks. They were well done, and seemed to be watching their movements. She shuddered, but the feeling brought back a memory, of something she had been told earlier...

“Arun,” she said. “Does it seem like those masks are watching us?”

The dwarf looked at her in confusion, but then a realization hit. “The celestial’s message.”

Mole looked up, interested again. “What?”

“The celestial who spoke to us, told us of a great treasure, in the lair of her ‘false sisters,’ ‘beyond the watchful eyes of the north.’”

The gnome bounced up and ran over to that wall. “Damn, too heavy,” she said, examining one of the masks. “I wonder if we could scrape some of the gold off though...”

“Mole,” Zenna said.

“Yes, yes,” she replied, searching the wall behind the masks. “Hello, what have we here...”

She pressed something, and a small part of the wall folded out, revealing a hidden compartment beyond. She reached in and drew out a long object shrouded in silk.

“Cool!” she said, drawing back the covering to reveal a thick quarterstaff, fashioned from a wood so pale as to be almost white in coloration. She swung it through the air, and it almost seemed to thrum eagerly in her hand.

“Give it to Morgan,” Zenna said. “He needs a decent weapon.”

The cleric shook his head, and swallowed. “It is a gift of the gods...” he said. “A holy weapon, I cannot...”

With impatience written on her face, Zenna walked over to Mole, took the staff, and thrust it into Morgan’s hands. “We don’t have time for this foolishness,” she said. “We have a man to find.”

Over Mole’s protests, they quickly gathered what they could of the remaining treasure, shared out the healing potions, and turned to leave. Two pairs of eyes, one gnomish, one dwarvish, lingered on the wealth remaining behind, but soon the room was empty once more, the smooth door sliding shut behind the departing adventurers.

They returned to the large outer room and chose the other exit, which led to a virtually identical corridor, ending in another door.

The door swished open to reveal another small chamber. The room’s dominant feature was set into the opposite wall, a giant pentagram set into the wall. The interior of the pentagram was a glistening wall, almost as if a pool of water were somehow being kept within in defiance of gravity. Shadows flickered in that surface that might have been a distorted reflection, or might have been distinct images of something deep beyond.

Facing the pentagram was a large chair, an angular construction of white stone. The chair was situated in the midst of a circular carving in the floor, within which there were evenly spaced designs, a set of five small pentagrams that were each laid in a different colored tile.

Seated in the chair was a man, his back to them, his head tilted as if in rest—or dead, perhaps.

Mole, faced with a situation almost guaranteed to prod her curiosity, was the first into the room, giving the carving in the floor a wide berth as she circled the room to get a look at the

seated figure. The others were more cautious, but they followed her, with Morgan, Arun, and Hodge moving to the right, and Zenna and Dannel following Mole around to the left.

The seated figure was clad in the familiar raiment of a knight of Helm. Morgan confirmed their suspicion, speaking his name.

“Alek Tercival.”

The man stirred at the sound of his name, lifting his head, looking as though he'd just come out of a deep sleep. “Yes,” he said, and it was as if the word had been drawn from a deep place within him.

“Brother,” Morgan said, his voice thick, “We have come far to find you.”

The paladin smiled. “Your timing is precipitous, friend. For a great evil is descending upon the land, and the time fast approaches when the forces of Light and those of the Dark will be tested one against the other.”

Zenna felt a twinge of uncertainty as the man spoke, a vague sense of unease. Using Dannel's body to shield her movements, she cast a minor cantrip, focusing upon the man seated in the chair.

“How did you get here? What about the hags?” Dannel asked.

The paladin smiled, a sad, deep smile. “They ensnared with their fell magic, friend. In my pride I sought to defeat their evil alone... but they were too strong for me, and I fell into their power. But now you have come to save me, and together we can confront the evil that stirs in Cauldron...”

“Aye,” Arun said. “It's past time we left this place behind.”

“What is this?” Mole said, looking up at the great pentagram.

“It is called the *Starry Mirror*,” Alek replied. “It is a gateway between worlds, created by a civilization now long-lost to legend.”

Zenna leaned forward over Dannel's shoulder, so that her lips were close to his ear. “There's illusion magic at work here,” she whispered.

The elf nodded. Turning to the seated man, he spoke.

“A great many people have been very worried about you, Sir Tercival. Above all, your close friend, the current High Priestess of the Temple of Helm in Cauldron. Surely you recall her name?”

The others looked at Dannel in surprise, but Zenna kept her eyes on the seated paladin. The man laughed. “Very well then,” he said, rising from the chair to stand before them.

Mole had been keeping an eye on the *Starry Mirror*, so she detected the shimmering as the mirror's surface distended and *something* passed through into the room behind them.

"Something's coming through!" she yelled in warning, even as the form of Alek Tercival fell off of the man before them like water flowing from an upended pitcher. What remained was a thin, amorphous figure of a man, his body a smooth, reflective surface that shone like quicksilver. He lifted a sword that looked like a single great shard of reflective glass, and their combined looks of horror were reflected in that plane as he lifted it over his head in a promise of blood to be shed.

Chapter 182

Arun wasn't possessed of the fastest reflexes among them, but nor was he one to hesitate when a clear enemy presented itself. Thus, even as the creature released its magical disguise to take its true form, and hefted its mirror-like sword, the dwarf growled and charged, swinging his sword at its body.

The bastard sword clove into its torso, releasing a sound that resembled the noise of shattering glass. Its "blood" was dozens of tiny shards that tinkled as they struck the stone floor, before dissolving into silvery globules that formed tiny bubbles at their feet.

The rest of them turned to face four more of the creatures, slightly smaller versions of the one Arun had struck, but which each carried *two* of the wicked-looking shard-blades. They moved with the smoothness of liquid as they entered the room and swept ahead to the attack, spreading out to flank their foes. Morgan cried out as one slashed him with his sword, tearing through a gap in his armor and slicing a deep gash in his muscled side. A piece of the sword seemed to sheer off with the hit, jutting from the wound, which fountained bright red blood.

Too close to effectively use his bow, Dannel drew his sword, pushing Zenna behind him as he faced another of the creatures. The monster facing him held both of its blades in a ready position, but instead of attacking, its form suddenly *shifted*, and several identical images of itself formed out of it, blurring and distorting its location in a way that the companions were already familiar with, from their exposure to Zenna's magic.

The others, including the one Arun had injured, likewise conjured up *mirror images*, except for the one that had chosen instead to press its assault upon Morgan.

The cleric, in turn, lifted *Alakast* with both hands, and driving the long white shaft down, smashed it through the body of his foe. The creature's chest exploded with the force of the impact, and it crumpled in a shower of broken glass that soon became a hundred tiny globes of liquid scattered across the floor.

Morgan looked down at his handiwork in amazement, surprised with the strength that had filled his muscles with the attack.

But the rest of the nerra pressed their assault, the *mirror images* concealing their movements as they darted in among the companions. Hodge cursed as his axe clove

through an image, and Dannel likewise thrust harmlessly through another on the opposite flank. Mole dodged nimbly through a swarm of blades, some real, some duplicative, although she was unable to successfully counter with the still-awkward oversized mace she bore.

Before the stone chair, Arun and imposter Alek faced off with full fury, trading blows. The dwarf's assault was stronger, but the *mirror images* turned the favor to the nerra, as two powerful strokes of the sword clove through empty figments. Its attack, on the other hand, managed a glancing blow on the side of the dwarf's helmet, the uncannily sharp mirror shard shivering and driving an inch-long segment into the dwarf's temple. Arun ignored the blood pouring from the wound, lifting his sword to strike again. Two illusory images yet remained, forming a *mélange* of three enemies who shifted and separated in a blur.

"Your false friends won't hide you for long," the dwarf growled.

Zenna twisted around Dannel and fired a spray of *burning hands* into the ranks of the nerra. Mole was on the edge of the effect, but Zenna trusted to her friend's nimbleness to help her avoid the blast. Mole did tumble out of the way, but as the flames hit the lead creature, there was a flare of light and suddenly a wave of heat as the fan of fire surged *back* into the faces of Dannel and Zenna. The tiefling was not harmed, her innate resistance protecting her, but Dannel drew back in alarm, his face scorched some by the spell.

"Hey, watch it!" he cautioned.

"They have some sort of reflective spell resistance!" she returned.

"Looks like we do it the old fashioned way then!"

He parried a slash from a darting shard that turned out to be real, but before he could riposte, one of the nerra drew its arms close to its body and... *shuddered*. A spray of razor-sharp shards erupted from its body, lancing into the elf and tiefling. Dannel staggered back, bleeding from a number of cuts, and Zenna was scarcely better off, clutching at a painful, bleeding cut from a shard that had only narrowly missed her eye. What was worse, the shards stuck in the wounds they caused, digging deeper into their flesh and widening the wounds as they went.

Seeing the injuries wrought upon his allies, Morgan waded boldly into the midst of the nerra and their false images, swinging *Alakast* in a powerful, sweeping arc. Images popped and vanished as the magical staff swept through them, and one of the nerra went flying as the weapon clipped its shoulder, blasting shards of its body free in an explosive rush.

Hodge managed for once to avoid being hit, his shield darting back and forth to absorb repeated blows from the two shard-swords wielded by the nerra facing him. He'd stayed close to the wall, and Morgan's charge had removed the threat of being flanked, so he was able to keep all of the various images surrounding his foe safely in front of him. Conversely, however, his own strikes were notably ineffectual, although he did manage to destroy another image, leaving a mere three shifting forms facing him.

As Morgan knocked back the nerra closest to her, Mole turned to help Dannel and Zenna. The creature ignored her—*ah, your mistake*, she thought—and thrust its weapons at the elf, scoring a long bleeding gash in Dannel's right leg. But Dannel held his ground, and while his own counter punctured an image, that made it easier for Mole as she brought her new mace squarely into the back of the nerra. The blow wasn't especially powerful, but was perfectly placed, and with a loud glassine snap the creature collapsed forward, shattering as it hit the hard stone floor.

Arun's foe was now giving ground, the dwarf following him step for step, his sword tearing through the last remaining *mirror images*. Desperate, the nerra thrust his sword at the paladin's face, but Arun batted the thrust aside, and with a mighty two-handed stroke shattered the creature in twain.

The battle quickly ended. The last surviving nerra tried to retreat to the mirror, but with Hodge and Morgan right behind them, and Dannel and Mole converging from the other flank, they were cut down, the last shattering into its component shards within a pace of the opalescent surface.

"Damn," Morgan said, pausing to draw a length of shard out of the vicious wound in his side, pressing his hand against the blood that continued to well from the deep gash.

"We have to treat those cuts quickly, before you bleed to death," Zenna said, drawing out her wand. Dannel followed with his own device, and after painfully drawing out the wounding shards, the two of them quickly closed the bleeding wounds that Zenna, Dannel, and Morgan had suffered in the brief but violent melee.

"What were those things?" Mole asked no one in particular.

"I don't know, but they were nasty," Dannel said, feeling his leg to verify that he'd fully stopped the seeping blood from the wound.

"I dunna believe it," Hodge said.

"What is it?" Mole asked him. The dwarf was examining himself, looking for something.

The dwarf spat and grinned. "We made it through a battle, and I ain't bleedin' out!"

The others couldn't help but laugh.

With the guardians of the mirror defeated, the companions turned to examine their prize.

The *Starry Mirror* was a plane of rippling translucence imprisoned within the barrier of the pentagram threshold. Mole walked right up to it, drawing a cautionary warning from Zenna. The gnome looked back her with a grin and a slight shrug, as if to suggest, *Hey, it's my nature*, then she turned back to examination of the portal.

"Look, there's stuff in there," she said, drawing their attention toward the shifting patterns that drifted in and out of focus through the blurry surface.

They all stepped closer, wary of another intrusion by more of the mirror-creatures, until they could make out what Mole had seen. There were a number of images floating within the surface of the mirror, mostly small chambers fashioned from slab rock with unobtrusive features. But in one...

"The paladin!" Dannel said, pointing to a form in the depths of the mirror. The others followed his direction to see the armored figure that had to be Alek Tercival, slumped in the corner of a rocky vault, his blonde hair hanging down about his temples in a chaotic tumble, his face turned away from them, a glowing sword laying on the dusty stone at his feet. And then the image drifted out of focus and was gone.

"Are you certain it was him?" Zenna asked.

"It was him," Morgan said. "I saw the symbol of Helm, on his shield."

"*Trapped between glass and stone,*" Mole said.

"Eh? What?" Hodge asked.

"One of the lines in Jenya's *divination*, Mole explained. The rest of it went, "*He weeps where many can see him, But he can see only himself.*"

"How do we get him out of there?" Dannel asked. "Alek Tercival!" he shouted into the mirror, but there was no reply.

Arun cautiously reached out and probed the surface of the mirror with his sword. The blade sank into the shimmering pool, and was drawn out unaffected a moment later.

"We already know it's a portal," Mole said. "Those creatures came out of it, earlier. But there were other places than the vault with the paladin in those images. How do we know which destination we will get?"

"There's only one way to find out," Morgan said, squaring his shoulders toward the mirror.

"Wait," Zenna said. "I bet there's a pattern in these colored sigils..."

But the cleric did not hesitate, striding boldly into the mirror, vanishing into its depths.

"Well, now what do we do?" Mole asked.

"There's Alek Tercival, again," Dannel said, pointing toward a particular spot in the *Starry Mirror*. "I don't see Morgan, however."

"Like as nay he stepp'd into the flamin' pits o' Hades," Hodge grumbled.

Arun looked up at Zenna. "The knight has presented us with a difficult choice," he said.

The tiefling nodded. "Yes. He had his faith..." *Is that enough?* she added, in her own thoughts.

"If we go through, we should go through together," Dannel said.

"Yer all crazy," Hodge said. "But I ain't stayin' here in this demon-damned place alone."

"Wait," Zenna said, turning back to the ring of six colored tiles in the floor. Drawing out her notebook and a well-worn quill, she quickly noted down the order and placement of the design. The others watched her as she carefully slid the quill back into its holder, and rejoined them.

"All right?" Dannel said, looking at all of them.

Mole grinned, and looked as though she was barely keeping herself from hopping in anticipation.

"Yer all crazy," Hodge repeated, under his breath. But when Arun looked at him, the dwarf nodded.

The five stepped forward, into the *Starry Mirror*, and vanished.

Chapter 183

Zenna looked around at her new surroundings. Her first thought was of Morgan.

What have you gotten us into now, priest?

The room was small, fashioned of seamless blocks of perfectly smooth stone. There was a decided yellowish tint to the diffuse light that seemed to shine from everywhere at once. The only feature were the five portals set into each of the room's five walls.

There was no sign of the others. She was alone. As far as she could tell, she'd just materialized in the center of the room.

She studied the five portals. Each had an opening shrouded in vague mists that bore a slight coloration. They matched the colors on the floor of the chamber of the *Starry Mirror*, she realized.

There has to be a pattern here, she thought.

"Zenna?"

The voice was Dannel's, and it sounded faint, distant, as if echoing through a dozen twisting tunnels to reach her.

"I'm here!" she shouted.

"It looks like we're all in different rooms," the elf replied.

“I told yer this be foolish!” Hodge’s distant yell came.

“Morgan? Are you there?” Mole’s voice came.

There was a delay of a few seconds, then they all could hear the cleric’s words. “Yes, I am here as well. I am... sorry. I have tried several portals, but they all lead back to these rooms.”

“Maybe we can meet up,” Dannel suggested. “What color rooms are you all in?”

They discussed the situation further, but from what they revealed, and what Morgan told him of his own experiments, it seemed as though each of their rooms were unique and apart from the others. Morgan had started in a blue room, and had left a coin lying on the floor. Later, when he returned through another blue portal, the place was again empty.

“An endless maze,” Mole said.

“There must be a pattern,” Zenna insisted. “Alek found it, even if by accident.”

“With six colors, the number of permutations is very, very high,” Dannel reminded her. “We could be here for some time.”

Zenna considered it intently. “Perhaps not. I wrote down the color pattern from the exterior room, remember?”

She read off the colors in order, and they decided to follow the order, stepping through the proper sequence of portals. But the experiment failed, and they found themselves in empty rooms again, no closer to an exit.

“What about magic?” Arun asked.

“The entire complex radiates magic,” Zenna said, having already thought to use *detect magic*. “But I have no spell that can give us an easy answer.”

“What about you, Morgan?” Dannel asked. But the cleric had grown silent, and did not respond.

“Well, if anyone else has any ideas...” the elf began.

A distant sound of metal crashing on stone became audible to all of them. It took Zenna only a moment to figure out the source.

“Hodge, I don’t think that bashing down the walls will be a solution.”

The dwarf’s voice was tinged with a bit of exertion. “Well, blast! I’ll be damned if I’m gunna be trapped in here fer’ever now! What kind o’ crazies would build a place like this?”

Dannel said something dry in response, but Zenna barely heard him. Her mind was whirling, following something Hodge had said...

“Dannel,” she finally interrupted. “You still have that silver plate, right?”

A pause. “Yes, it’s right here. Did you have an idea?”

“Those six-armed skeletons, that odd chair-sculpture... I think that the creature on the plate is the race that build the Voice, at least the complex where we found the hags and the mirror.”

Dannel’s voice came back marked with excitement. “Yes, and there’s a five-sided figure here, and some markings!”

“What are the markings, again?”

The elf described them, a series of ovals with dots or bars beneath them.” Zenna drew out her notebook again, and wrote them down as he spoke. For a long minute she studied them.

“Zenna?” Mole asked.

“I think I have something,” she said. “These symbols could be numbers... if I had a guess, I’d say they form a sequence: four, five, six, one, two, three.”

“All well and good,” Arun said. “But what does it mean?”

But Zenna had already turned to the notes she’d taken in the room with the *Starry Mirror*. “The ring in the floor,” she told them. “It forms a progression; from the carving it was clear that there was one intended route around the circle.”

“Ah, and the numbers tell you which color to choose,” Dannel said. “Brilliant, Zenna!”

“This is all just theory,” Morgan said.

“Well, I can think of one way to test it,” Mole said. “Zenna, I’m in an orange room. What door do I choose?”

Zenna read her the correct pattern, using the numbers and the color-circle. Mole’s voice followed as she walked through the path of doors, and finally her voice came to them, excited. “I’m in a room with only one exit! I can see the vault, and Alek!”

“Great job!” Dannel said. “Zenna, you have the key, you’ll have to walk us each through...”

As the others followed her directions, the echoing voices of her companions disappeared, one by one. Finally, she was alone. Taking a deep breath, Zenna followed the pattern herself, passing through empty rooms and selecting the right portal in the order that she had deciphered from Dannel’s silver plate.

Finally, she reached the last one. She could see the vault, her friends visible together on the far side. Pausing to take a deep breath, she stepped through...

Chapter 184

After directing the others through the maze, Zenna was the last to step through the final portal, passing through another mirror-doorway into the small stone vault where Alek Tercival was imprisoned.

Morgan and Dannel were crouched over the paladin, with Arun and Hodge close enough behind to block a clear view. Instead, she turned her attention to the rest of the vault.

The place was fairly cramped, a cube of empty space perhaps fifteen feet on each side, surrounded by seamless heavy stones. A heavy iron door, its frame marred by hundreds of shallow gouges—no doubt inflicted by Alek, in his desire to escape—was the only means of exit apart from the mirror-doorway. She turned back to the portal, knowing already what she would find, even before Mole said it.

“The portal’s one-way only from this side. No going back,” the gnome said. She went to take a look at the door, but Zenna could already see that it was similar to the slab portals in Vaparak’s Voice, with no keyhole or other apparently mechanism that might grant them easy egress. Well, if it came to that, she figured that Arun and Hodge would be able to figure out a way to force it open.

She walked over to where she could get a clearer look at their reason for coming. Morgan was speaking to the paladin, but he seemed insensitive to their presence, and when Zenna got a clear look at his face, she saw that his eyes were vague and distant, lost in some private abyss. The paladin was older than most of them, maybe thirty, and while he was still ruggedly handsome, it was clear that he’d suffered a great deal of abuse. How he’d survived here, without food and water, Zenna had no idea. In fact, if it wasn’t for a small crack visible at the base of the iron door, she suspected he would have suffocated. Even so, with seven of them now here, she wondered whether that vent alone would suffice.

“How long have you been here?” Dannel prodded, to no avail.

Morgan placed his hand on the paladin’s shoulder. “We have come for you, brother. We have slain the evil hags and their servants, and will find a way to get you out of here. Do not fear, your shadowed journey has come to an end.”

“Bah, he’s gone daft,” Hodge said. Morgan looked up and shot him a dark look, but Arun drew his cohort aside. “We’d better take a look at that door,” he said to his fellow dwarf.

Morgan, however, did not give up on his colleague, fighting to reach through whatever trauma had disengaged his conscious mind. Zenna, looking around the bleak emptiness of the vault, thought she could understand the root causes of his despair; all that he’d believed in had come crashing down around him, leaving him bereft of the lifeline that had anchored his life. How long had he spent in this place, sealed in, awaiting death?

The cleric had taken up Alakast, and placed it standing on the floor between them. He took up the paladin’s limp hands, and drawing off the man’s gauntlets wrapped them around the smooth white bore of the blessed weapon. “An angel has guided us to this ancient

weapon,” he said, earnestly, his hands embracing Alek’s, holding them to the staff. “Feel the power within it, a power that also flows within your veins, my friend...”

Alek Tercival’s eyes seemed to flicker, and he blinked. “Angels... my angels... they... they...”

“Yes, what is it, my friend?” Morgan encouraged him.

The paladin’s body was wracked by a terrible sob. “They betrayed me! The three archons... my angels... they told me I was worthy! Their false promises were a test... and I failed!”

“Angels, hah,” Hodge snorted. Dannel elbowed him.

“I understand,” Morgan said, and although Zenna could not see his face, she could hear the depth of pain in the cleric’s voice.

“We have to get out of here,” Mole said, softly so that her words would not disturb the fragile connection between Morgan and Alek. “And that door’s not coming off unless forced.”

Arun had already taken up position at the door, running his thick fingers along the cracks in the threshold. “I’ll need a lever,” he said.

“I left all me tools behind,” Hodge said. “Me pry-bar would’a made short work o’ that door, gods be damned!”

Morgan and Alek both turned to look at the dwarf, the cleric’s face disapproving, the paladin’s stricken.

“Um... yeah, I think I gots a spike or two in ‘ere...” the dwarf said, digging in his pack.

“So, the ha—um, angels, they sent you into the portal maze?” Dannel said to Alek.

But the paladin’s gaze had fallen back to the white shaft between his hands. He ran his calloused, weather-cracked fingers up its smooth surface. “When the final cage is shackled, the burning doom shall rise,” he said, his voice so low that they had to lean in to hear him.

“What’s that?” Mole asked. She’d been “helping” with the door, and turned to make sure she hadn’t missed something interesting.

Dannel looked at Zenna. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

Zenna shook her head, but she felt a strong sense of unease, along with a tickle at the edge of her memory. Something...

A loud banging noise made her jump, and Alek Tercival drew back, his hands leaping from the bore of the staff as if burned by it. The sound was Arun, driving a spike into the frame

of the door with one of his light hammers, while Hodge, using his dagger as a wedge, tried to widen the gap below it.

Morgan was still talking earnestly to Alek in a low voice, but it appeared as though the paladin had withdrawn inside himself again.

The noise redoubled as the dwarves intensified their efforts upon the door, driving larger the crack in the threshold, then using their larger weapons to lever the portal open further. Finally Arun was able to get his fingers into the crack, and he and Hodge combined their strength to slide the door into its jam, the metal protesting loudly with each inch.

Mole, of course, hopped through the instant that the opening was wide enough to accommodate her. Behind the door was a steep staircase that led upward; they could see light that appeared to be natural daylight filtering down from above. The fresh air was hot, and dry.

The dwarves finished open the door, and recovering their weapons, started up the stairs. The others followed behind, Dannel helping Morgan lift Alek to his feet. The paladin complied woodenly, but leaned heavily against Morgan as the cleric directed him toward the stairs. Dannel took up Alek's glowing sword from the floor of the vault, and slid it back into the paladin's scabbard. Zenna was the last to leave, taking one last look about the vault before following them up the steps.

They emerged into a larger chamber at the top of the stairs. Four thick stone pillars supported a vaulted ceiling almost twenty feet high above them. The opposite wall was breached, leading outdoors, and a wide landscape of rolling sand dunes that extended as far as they could see. A pile of sand gathered by the wind had collected at the base of the opening, spreading out across the floor of the room. A bleached skeleton lay on the floor, its lower body buried under the sand, a rusted pick-axe lying beside one outstretched hand.

"This doesn't look like anywhere near Cauldron that I'm aware of," Dannel said, regarding the vista through the gap in the wall. The others had already moved out into the room; Mole standing near the doorway, the dwarves a short distance behind her, near the skeletal remains at the edge of the pile of sand.

Zenna stepped out from the staircase into the room, but suddenly felt an oppressive feeling descend over her. It was a feeling she recognized, as her eyes were drawn to a high corner of the chamber. *Something's scrying us...*

She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but before she could speak, there was a loud noise directly to her left, a sudden bang accompanied by an eruption of noxious wisps of cloying gray smoke that appeared out of nothingness. The gray pall persisted only for a heartbeat, dissolving to reveal a monstrosity.

Zenna's eyes lifted up... and up... to look into the face of the horror that loomed over her. It was huge, easily fifteen feet tall, its body roughly humanoid, a pastiche of bulging musculature and bony ridges. It had four arms, two massive limbs that ended in pincers big enough to slice her in twain, with two small arms with articulated hands that jutted from its chest. And its face... its face was a horror, looking at first glance like that of a hound, but

with huge, slathering jaws, and eyes that burned red with a fearsome, malevolent intelligence.

The demon regarded them with a look of hateful contempt. “No, you shall not have him,” it said.

Chapter 185

Nabthatoron, the glabrezu lord of the Demonskar, had arrived to take matters into his own hands.

Zenna felt her gut clench with sick horror as she looked up into the utterly alien face of the demon. Her legs barely responding to her commands, she stumbled backward, unable to break away from that unholy stare. Almost casually, the demon swung one massive pincer-claw at her. The movement broke the spell of immobility, and she dodged back just as the pincer closed on where her neck had been a moment earlier. Still, the edge of the claw clipped her body with the force of a battering ram, and she was knocked roughly sprawling, rolling to a stop before one of the pillars on the far side of the room, her entire body throbbing in a medley of shooting pains.

Dannel fitted an arrow to his bow and without hesitation fired. The long shaft struck true, hitting the demon in the chest between its two protruding short arms, but the arrow’s tip barely penetrated its thick hide, and the impact appeared to cause it no damage.

“Puny,” the demon hissed. It spoke a word of power, and chaos filled the room.

A storm of multicolored, flashing, darting energy exploded throughout the chamber. Zenna, struggling to get up, felt a brief twisting sensation as her equilibrium faltered under the force of the demon’s *chaos hammer*, but she focused her will and it soon faded.

Unfortunately, Morgan, Alek, and Arun, each dedicated to the precepts of Law, were not so resistant to the dark power’s effects.

Alek and Morgan both screamed as the chaos storm tore through them, overwhelming their senses. The two men stumbled apart, each fighting just to stay standing. A few paces away, Arun gritted his teeth and weathered the worst effects of the blast. Beside him, Hodge grunted but likewise the *hammer* washed over him without the dramatic effects it’d had upon the Helmites. Dannel and Mole were unaffected, and the gnome had already started moving around the perimeter of the room, looking for an opening—although her hands shook when she looked up at the demon, and she wondered what her pathetic little mace could do to such a thing.

But she was who she was, and doubt did not arrest her progress.

As the power unleashed by the demon cleared—it had only lasted a few heartbeats—Alek Tercival screamed and drew his sword. The holy blade flared in his hand with golden light, as if eager to engage this adversary. The paladin headed directly for the demon, though his steps were jerky and uncertain, and his limbs moved as though leaden weights had

been attached to them. The demon saw how heavily his spell had affected the man, and laughed, a vile, mocking sound that rumbled within its massive body like an earthquake.

Morgan and Arun also moved forward, the cleric also *slowed* from the lingering effects of the *hammer*. Arun roared a challenge and an invocation to his god as he charged, but the demon's attention was focused upon Alek Tercival.

"Your soul will be mine, foolish manling," he said.

Alek raised his sword to attack, but before he could strike the demon's massive pincers came down and tore into him. One clipped him on the shoulder, driving him down with the force of an avalanche, though he somehow kept to his feet, his eyes burning with a combination of fury and madness.

"Beware the Unseen Mark!" he cried. "Beware the eyes that kill!"

"Beware the wrath of the lord of Demonskar," the glabrezu replied, grabbing the paladin around the torso with his other pincer, and lifting him up into the air.

Alek screamed as the demon tightened its grip, crushing his body.

Chapter 186

As the demon lifted Alek into the air, crushing him with its pincers and tearing at him with its claws, the paladin's rescuers rallied desperately in an effort to somehow destroy this dark knight of the Abyss. The glabrezu seemed an implacable and invincible adversary, filling the vault with its massive and terrible form, but they all knew that they had to stop it, or none of them would leave this place alive.

Zenna used the pillar against which she'd been thrown to pull herself up. She staggered over to where Dannel stood, a grim look on his face as he drew out another arrow that seemed useless against the abyssal resistances of the demon.

"Zenna, get back!" Dannel said. He fumbled his arrow as Zenna stumbled into him, but as he turned to support her she laid her hand upon his quiver, and called upon her power. Dannel, no stranger to magic, looked down at the container on his hip as she channeled a complex stream of divine energy into the long shafts—not so numerous, now—in the container, *aligning* them, infusing them with the power of Good, anathema to such things as the demon.

"Shoot true," she said, backing away from him.

The elf nodded, and drew out one of the enchanted shafts. He felt the song stir in him again, and without conscious thought drew his own magic through the melody filling him and focused it upon the arrow. The melee across the room was pure chaos, the demon holding Alek in its grasp, Arun and Morgan attacking it to either side, but as the song drew focus everything seemed to slow down, and he calmly aimed his arrow and released.

The shaft sped true, striking the demon in its chest once again, but this time the missile sank deep into its body. The demon let out a roar of pain.

The elf reached for another arrow.

Alek, pinned by the demon's grasp, still somehow managed to lift his sword, still shining brightly in his hand. Nonsensical syllables continued to issue from his mouth, as if drawn from him by some power beyond his ability to control. "By treachery and deceit shall the true Lord fall and the false Lord rule!" he cried. But as the demon's claws rent his body, tearing through his armor as though it were parchment, he could not manage to gain enough leverage to strike.

Morgan, however, lifted *Alakast*, and with a cry to Helm, slammed it down into the demon's torso.

The staff flared in his hand, and when it struck the demon a potent sound like air being sucked out of a vacuum filled the vault. The demon roared again in pain, and turned its dark gaze upon the cleric.

"That staff... *Alakast*, it cannot be!" Then its already cruel features twisted into a visage of pure fury. "I will rend you, human! But first, bid farewell to your friend!"

Arun slammed his sword into its leg from the opposite side, but the demon paid the attack no heed, the powerful stroke sliding off of the limb without harming it. Instead, it lifted the claw bearing the struggling Alek, drawing the paladin up over its head, until he nearly brushed the ceiling of the vault. Then, as the others could do nothing but watch in horror, the muscles in its arm clenched, and Alek Tercival screamed as armor plate and the bones beneath crunched and collapsed. Blood fountained from the man's mouth as a final gurgling noise issued from his crushed lungs, and then the demon hurled him across the room, a discarded piece of meat, no longer a threat.

The paladin's sword fell, tumbling end over end to clatter on the floor, its light, it seemed, now faded and dull.

Chapter 187

Morgan lifted *Alakast* to strike again, but his actions were still *slowed* from the aftereffects of the *chaos hammer*, and the demon responded faster.

Ignoring the other companions, who thus far had not greatly hurt it, the demon reached down with its other pincer-claw for the cleric. With his reflexes already impaired the knight of Helm had no chance to evade the attack, and the glabrezu easily caught him up, lifting him into its body where its smaller claws could rend him, and his slavering jaws bite at his flesh. Those jaws caught his arm, crushing the limb through his armor, and he nearly dropped *Alakast*. But the cleric, bleeding from his wounds, his breath crushed from his body by the demon's fell strength, nonetheless refused to surrender. Drawing upon a strength that had been augmented by the *amaranth elixir*, the same beverage given him by the hags that had weakened his will and helped hold him to their service, he jammed the

magical staff into the joint of the demon's pincer. The glabrezu loosened its grip as the staff drove painfully into the joint, and Morgan fell free, landing on the hard stone with a hard jolt. Battered to the edge of consciousness, his legs gave out and he fell prone, gasping for breath.

Thus far the battle had only lasted moments, and already two of them were down, one almost certainly dead.

Mole had moved around the perimeter of the chamber, coming up on the demon from the side. She was confident that it hadn't seen her. If she'd known how sharp the senses of demons were, honed by centuries in the unforgiving cesspot of constant betrayal that was the Abyss, she might have hesitated, but the fact was, Nabtharon saw her and dismissed her, a puny threat compared to the warriors of Helm and the blessed weapons that they carried.

And in fact, it seemed as though the demon's assessment was correct, for Mole's first attack, a leaping blow at the back of its knee with her mace, did not even draw its attention. She considered climbing the wall, to give her a shot at its head, but the surface was smooth, with few cracks to offer a viable ascent. She drew out her small crossbow, and took a shot at one of its eyes, but the bolt merely grazed an ear, not even sticking in the thick hide. The demon didn't even acknowledge that she was there.

Biting her lip in frustration, she tried to think of something to do.

Hodge had recovered swiftly from the fell chaos power of the demon, but he hadn't followed Arun into melee. As he looked up at it, he felt a horror fill him that he hadn't experienced since they had fought the dragon, back in the mountains north of Cauldron. His knees buckled, and it was only through an effort of will that he kept himself from falling to the floor, to hide from the monstrous and alien majesty of this terrible thing.

It's just another monster! he growled at himself, in his thoughts. *Attack! Attack!*

But he could not, he could only watch in horror as it caught up Alek, crushed him, and tossed his corpse casually across the room. A splatter of something struck his cheek, and he slowly lifted a finger to touch it. His fingers came back wet with blood.

The knight's blood.

Like Mole, Arun was likewise frustrated, as another powerful blow glanced harmlessly off the demon's thigh. Its hide was like steel plate, and his sword was unable to penetrate its resistances, even with his strength behind the blows. He felt a grim chuckle within his mind, and he knew that the demon was exulting in his ineffectiveness, knew that he was next, once it had finished off Morgan. He lifted Morgan's heavy sword above his head, knowing that it was hopeless, determined nonetheless to go down swinging.

Then the sound of the clatter of metal on stone reached him over the sound of battle, and he turned to see Alek's sword lying there, a few paces away.

Calling to him.

Dannel continued firing arrows into the demon, the enchanted missiles digging into its torso. Several had failed to penetrate its hide, but still black ichor drained from three deep punctures in its body, and it could no longer afford to ignore him. Even as it dropped Morgan, and Dannel took aim for yet another shot, it extended a long arm—the one splashed with the blood of Alek Tercival—and swept it across the vault. Too late Dannel realized that the thing's reach extended all the way to where he stood, and the claw cuffed him a mighty blow that knocked him flying sideways. For a moment he felt himself being drive inexorably toward one of the pillars, but he managed to disengage himself from the claw and tumble free a spare moment before the claw slammed into the pillar with enough force to crack the massive stone. The elf rolled back, his side throbbing where the demon had hit him, but he already had another arrow in his hand, fitting it to his bow, the song filling him once more.

Zenna, meanwhile, had crawled to where Morgan lay, his body heaving as he tried to fight through the pain and rise to face the demon again on his feet. The demon could have crushed her, but Dannel's painful sacrifice bought her the few seconds she needed to reach him, and to pour one of her last remaining divine spells into his shattered frame. Morgan's gaze met hers, and he nodded, using *Alakast* as a prop to draw himself up, turning back to face the death embodied in the demon's ageless and purely evil gaze.

Nabthatoron had been hurt, but in turn he'd dished out incredible punishment among them, killing Alek, critically injuring Morgan, and inflicting serious blows upon Zenna and Dannel. And the demon knew that few of his enemies could hurt him; the dwarves had thus far proven utterly ineffective, the gnome with her puny attacks had yet to scratch him, while the piddling tiefling woman had yet to demonstrate any usefulness at all, save for putting that damned knight back on his feet again. Nabthatoron looked once more at the weapon once wielded by his nemesis, and felt his rage build once more. There was also a faint undercurrent of fear, but among these foes was no Surabar Spellmason, of that it was certain.

No. This would end right now.

The demon's massive claws came up once more, to end it.

Everything seemed to happen at once.

Dannel released an arrow that stabbed through the air, knifing into the thick bicep of one of the demon's huge arms. The wound wasn't serious, but it added to the demon's tally.

Arun leapt for Alek's fallen sword. The demon saw him, instantly realized the threat, and brought a huge claw down to strike. The claw slammed across Arun's back like a sledgehammer, and the dwarf was blasted down to one knee. For a moment, there seemed to be no way that his spine could be intact, after such a blow.

And yet, somehow, inexplicably, the dwarf got up. He lunged for the sword, which almost seemed to spring into his hand, and he brought it up even as the other pincer came down toward his head. With a dwarven cry of battle, invoking the name of his patron god, Arun

brought the holy sword around in a glittering arc, the shining steel intersecting with the descending limb.

There was a clarion note, like a tuning fork being struck, that filled the vault with a momentary sound of peace. Then the demon's roar shattered that idyll, and it fell back.

Leaving a great, oozing claw lying on the ground at the paladin's feet.

"I AM NOT FINISHED WITH YOU!" the demon roared, and then, suddenly, it vanished, leaving a faint miasma of ugly gray smoke in its wake.

The companions just stood there for a moment, overwhelmed by what had just happened.

They had won.

Chapter 188

They were victorious, but the cost had been great.

Zenna was the first to reach the body of Alek Tercival. His body was slaked in blood, running down from his mouth to cover his jaw and throat, and oozing from the great wounds torn in his body by the demon's claws. Worst of all was his chest, distended by the crushing pressure of the demon's pincer.

But as she looked down at him, his eyes suddenly opened.

Zenna jumped in surprise. Then she was kneeling beside him, casting a healing spell, to save the life that was inexplicably still trapped in this battered body.

Alek's mouth opened. For a moment only blood hissed out, but then, he spoke, his voice warped by pain and the agony wrought upon his body.

"There is naught for you in Cauldron, heroes! To return is to enter your own graves and bring doom upon all that you love! Seek the sign of the smoking eye if you wish to save them all!"

And with that, he fell back, dead. Zenna knelt there, stunned. Her spell had dissolved without effect; it was as if he'd already been dead...

She felt the presence of her friends behind her. Looking up, she saw them, battered, weary.

Except Mole, she didn't appear to be hurt at all.

"It may come back," Dannel said, still wary.

“No, I don’t think so,” Zenna said, not sure how she knew, but feeling a strong sense of conviction as she spoke the words. “But I think it was right, we will face that demon again at some point.”

Morgan, barely able to stand himself, even with Zenna’s earlier healing spell, looked down at the body of Alek Tercival, his face a stone mask.

“I’m sorry,” Zenna said, and there was real pity in her voice.

The knight nodded, and turned back toward the center of the room.

Mole had returned to the doorway that looked out over the desert. The others slowly gravitated toward her, standing behind her, looking out over the bleak landscape. There was nothing as far as they could see, save for the rolling dunes. No vegetation, no sign of habitation by any living creature.

“Where are we?” Mole asked, and none of them had an answer for her.

THE END OF “THE DEMONSKAR LEGACY”

The Shackled City V: “Test of the Smoking Eye”
Begun 6-24-04

Chapter 189

Kaurophon’s life had been cursed with an unending string of bad luck.

Or at least that was how *he* tended to see it. While it was true that the vicissitudes of fortune had often barraged him with unpleasantries, Kaurophon lacked sufficient distance from his situation to recognize that many of his misadventures were rooted in his own poor choices. He was canny, and possessed of a personal presence that was nothing short of overwhelming. When he put his mind to it, he could be charming, and utterly persuasive, even when evidence was not upon his side.

Unfortunately, he was also petty, conniving, greedy, and selfish.

Kaurophon’s situation was complicated by an accident of birth that placed him in an unenviable position. A product of mixed bloodlines, he drew perhaps from the worst of both. Had he been more fortunate in his early surroundings, he might have someday overcome those failings inherent to his personality, but from his youngest years he was surrounded by violence and ruthless struggles for survival that instilled in him a simple creed.

Take what you need, and damned be all the rest.

His innate talents allowed him to survive when others might have been crushed utterly in similar circumstances, and as he developed to adolescence the marginal talents that were

the gift of his father's blood expanded into a genuine talent for sorcery. For all his other failings, Kaurophon turned to the development of his powers with due diligence, and by the time he had reached the tender age of twenty years, he had already mastered spells that many human mages spent the bulk of their adult lives pursuing.

Of course, for him, these abilities were just a stepping stone, toward the greater powers upon which he had already fixed his avarice.

Now older, though perhaps not wiser, the object of his current fixation was before him. The power that he'd spent a good part of the last several years pursuing was almost within his grasp, and as he stared into the image suspended in the depths of his *scrying* mirror, he felt a tingle of anticipation.

Soon...

Then the words of a dying man threw all of his carefully wrought plans askew. Thinking quickly, he turned from his mirror and hastily gathered up several of the items he had prepared for just such an opportunity. Belatedly he returned to the mirror, and carefully inserted it into his *bag of holding*. He didn't often take the device from his laboratory, as it was expensive and not especially durable, but with his objective drawing close to his grasp, he wasn't going to let it slip away through lack of preparation.

His arrangements complete, he unrolled a scroll, and started to read. For an instant he felt a twinge of uncertainty, remembering the omnipresence of his bad luck, but he shook off the feeling and completed his spell, and vanished, leaving the laboratory empty behind him.

* * * * *

Half a world away, in a small vault of weathered stone situated in the depths of a vast desert, several other individuals were also musing on the question of luck.

"What are we going to do now?" Morgan asked. "We could be a thousand leagues from Cauldron.... If we're even still on Toril!"

"Calm down," Zenna said. She looked up as Mole and Dannel reappeared at the only exit, an uneven gap in wall of the vault that led outside. It might have once been a doorway, but wind and sand had widened it, whatever seal or portal that might have once been there either buried or decayed through time. "Anything?" the tiefling asked.

"It's open desert as far as the eye can see in every direction," the elf reported. He'd used his magical slippers to climb up the outer wall of the vault, giving him a good vista over the surrounding area.

"We don't even know which direction in which to start," Morgan pointed out.

"I be more worried with what be in the gnome's bag," Hodge said, the first words he'd contributed to the conversation since the battle's end. "Or what may be in it, as it be."

Zenna turned to the dwarf. "If need be, Morgan can create magical food to sustain us," she said.

But the cleric shook his head. "I have sundered myself from Helm by my weakness," he said, his voice cold. "I must seek atonement, before I may seek his blessings anew."

"Look, Morgan, I thought we had discussed this..."

"This has nothing to do with my covenant with you," Morgan interjected. "This matter is between myself and my god."

And with that he turned and walked away. For a long moment an awkward silence filled the space between them.

"So what yer sayin', then, is that don't got any food, right?" Hodge finally said.

"We'll face what comes when it comes," Arun interjected. "For now we must attend to matters of the moment." He glanced down at Alek's body. The fallen paladin's upper body had been covered with his tattered cloak, which still bore the faded sigil of Helm's armored hand.

"Come, help me with him," Arun said, and together the companions lifted the body and headed outside to bury the lost knight of Helm.

Chapter 190

Kaurophon felt a wash of hot, dry air surge over him as he materialized at his destination. The hot weather did not trouble him; he'd been to far more inhospitable places than this one. He turned to see the sheer stone wall of the desert structure rising behind him, its edges worn smooth by long centuries of abrasion from the harsh winds that occasionally swept across the desert.

The doorway would be on the opposite side, he knew, and there he would find those he'd come to seek. But first, he needed to complete the last of his preparations. He began by casting a minor spell that slightly modified his appearance, including one fairly subtle but very important change to his attire. Then, he drew out a small bit of something from one of the pouches at his waist—a powder that glittered in the bright afternoon sunlight—and spread it carefully in a circle around his feet, muttering an incantation as he did so. That done, he unrolled a scroll, and after scanning its contents, began to read.

The scroll had not come cheaply, and the spell was technically beyond his powers, but he'd often used such in the past without mishap. This time, however, his bad luck intervened, and as he read the final line, a stray thought popped into his mind, a tickle of the power he hoped to achieve once this course of action had been completed. He crushed the thought and refocused his mind on the task, but the damage had been done, and he translocated the two syllables in the last word, switching them. He realized instantly what he'd done, but it was too late; the spell had been cast.

The air shimmered around him, and three babau demons appeared, called by the powerful summoning spell on the scroll.

Unfortunately, rather than awaiting his commands, they instantly attacked.

* * * * *

“Did you hear that?” Mole asked.

Zenna shook her head, her attention focused on Arun, who stood over the slight mound that marked Alek Tercival’s grave. Digging a grave in the sand had been difficult, but they’d found some loose stone in the vault that they used to stack a cairn over the site, which hopefully would offer some protection against the elements.

Not that it mattered, really, she thought. Alek’s soul, the core of what he was, had already moved on to a different reality, and while she respected the rituals and forms that were used to treat the bodies of the dead, she didn’t really see the point.

Morgan stood a few steps back from her, his attention on the ritual, but not truly a part of it. The cleric—fallen cleric, she amended, if that was truly how he saw himself—would have preferred to take the body back to Cauldron, she suspected, but at the moment they had the far greater problem of getting themselves back to civilized lands intact.

Arun spoke a benediction over the man, his words plain but sincere. Zenna listened but didn’t really hear the words, for now she’d heard the same thing that Mole had, a faint, bestial cry that seemed to be coming from behind the vault structure...

“Something’s coming!” Dannel said, shattering the ritual entirely, hefting his bow as they all turned toward the source of the sound. Then they could see it, a humanoid form wrapped in a flapping robe of gray cloth, rushing around the edge of the building toward them. He was being pursued by a trio of forms already familiar to them, tearing at his flesh with their claws, trying to bear him down by a relentless assault. Several deep gashes in his arms and torso were already visible, drawing streaks of blood down the length of his robe.

“Help me!” the figure cried, as he caught sight of them.

“Demons!” Morgan cried, and all hell broke loose.

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Dannel immediately fired an arrow at one of the demons, but Zenna’s *align weapon* spell had already faded, and the missile, while accurate, failed to pierce the babau’s tough hide. The attack certainly drew its attention, however, and the demon turned and charged toward the companions, leaving its two fellows the task of tearing the hapless robed man to pieces.

The robed man proved himself not totally helpless, however, as he pointed a wand at one of the demons attacking him and spoke a word of magic. Teal-colored bolts of liquid energy spat from the wand into the chest of the demon, blasting black pits into its ugly gray

flesh. The demon roared in pain and rage, and redoubled its assault, digging great bleeding gashes in the man's sides with its claws.

Morgan rushed to his aid, brandishing *Alakast* above his head as if the staff were a two-handed sword. The sand slowed his steps, but his charge still carried him close enough for him to swing the staff into the back of the demon that the magic-user had just injured. *Alakast* struck with the force of a sledgehammer, and the demon collapsed, its spine snapped, to vanish in a cloud of sickly black vapors.

Arun and Hodge trudged through the sand to reach the charging demon before it could reach Dannel and Zenna. Their short dwarven legs had particular difficulty in the sliding sand, but the demon saw them coming and veered to meet them, snarling out a challenge. Hodge lifted his axe, but hesitated; his weapon had been damaged in their last confrontation with babau, and Arun's hammer destroyed. Dare he risk his prized axe again?

But Arun demonstrated no such quandary, meeting the demon with a powerful swing of *Alek's holy sword*. The blade clove deeply into its shoulder, and its left arm fell limp, the tendons and muscles anchoring it torn asunder by the power of the blow. Still it hacked at the dwarf with its other claw and its vicious bite, managing a glancing hit against the paladin's helmet with its claw that staggered him briefly.

Arun's determination finally made up Hodge's mind, and he charged at it from its wounded side, swinging his axe. The danger posed by its caustic skin coating was moot in this case, however, as the demon dodged back, and the stroke missed entirely.

Dannel, realizing that his arrows were useless, sang a battle song to inspire his companions. Zenna, with most of her spells depleted, likewise lacked an effective counter, so she started toward the melee between Morgan, the last demon, and the injured spellcaster, to lend healing aid if needed.

Mole, of course, had disappeared somewhere.

The third demon ignored the foe that had struck down its ally so easily, and in an almost blind fury assailed the robed man in a last attempt to bring him down. The man cried out as the claws dug deeply, but then it was driven back by another blow from *Alakast*, and Morgan stepped in to defend the grievously injured magic-user. The man staggered backwards and nearly fell, and Zenna quickly rushed to his aid, burning one of her last remaining spells to fuel a *cure light wounds*. The man looked up at her, nodding gratefully.

The demons fought to the last, but facing Morgan and Arun, each armed with a weapon deadly to their kind, both creatures soon joined their ally, their bodies dissolving upon their death.

"Summoned creatures," Zenna said to herself, seeing them disappear.

"Yes," the injured man said. He pulled himself up, grimacing as his wounds protested the treatment. "It would seem that you have enemies here."

“Who are you?” This from Morgan, who after scanning the horizon for more threats, returned to them, *Alakast* shining in the bright afternoon light.

“I am Kaurophon,” he told them. “And I will tell you my tale in full, heroes.”

“You’d better tell it in the vault,” Arun said. “The wind’s starting to pick up.”

The seven returned to the shelter, while the gusting winds obliterated all signs that they had ever been there at all, save for the rocky cairn close in the lee of the looming stone structure.

Chapter 192

Back in the shelter of the vault, the companions gathered around their unusual visitor, with Dannel remaining by the entrance to keep watch. Zenna loaned Kaurophon a relatively clean cloth and a half-full waterskin, so that he could cleanse his wounds and some of the desert dust from his weather-worn features.

The delay offered her an excuse to study the stranger. He looked to be about forty, thin and wiry, though certainly not frail. His eyes were a penetrating blue, and the wispy hair drifting about his head was so pale that it was more white than blonde. His robe, she saw with surprise, bore a sigil on the front, a stylized drawing of a half-skull with a plume of smoke rising from its eye socket.

The others had seen it too, she realized, as Morgan, who’d paced impatiently throughout the stranger’s ablutions, came forward and boldly confronted the wizard. “I think you’d better tell us why you’re here, and why you bear that symbol on your robes.”

Kaurophon looked down at his garment with some surprise, as if reminded about something he’d forgotten about. “The Smoking Eye is why I have come,” he said, leaning back against the pillar behind him. “Do you mind if I sit?” he asked. “The journey here has been... difficult, even leaving aside the unpleasant welcome.”

“I am a sorcerer, a weaver of magics of some small talent,” he told them. “If our relationship is to dwell on a sound footing, I must also share with you a secret about myself of which I am not proud. I am an entity of mixed heritage, a stranger to this mundane realm. I bear the blood of fiends, and am the product of an unnatural liaison between outsider and mortal.” He lowered his head, as though the admission had wearied him further.

Zenna glanced at Arun, who’d shifted noticeably at the man’s revelation, his hand coming to rest on the hilt of the sword at his belt. Morgan, too, had reacted, his body tensing in what she’d come to learn was a sign that he was agitated by something.

“I tell you this so that you will know my desire to be frank and truthful with you, but also so that you may take what I am to tell you within its proper context.”

“For many years I was an orphan among the planes, traveling from world to world, seeking something... some sense of belonging. In these searches, I came across a place called Occipitus. Its current location is in that dark torus, the lacing of planes known as the Abyss.”

“So you admit trafficking with the nether powers?” Morgan said, pacing once again with nervous energy. Arun’s hand, Zenna saw now, was openly wrapped around the hilt of his sword. “One who comes and goes freely from the Abyss is not someone with whom I would have any dealings.” The cleric shifted slightly, turning his body away from the robed figure, punctuating his statement with his body-language.

“He hasn’t yet told us about the Smoking Eye yet,” Mole said. “It cannot be coincidence that he appears right after Alek gives us that message, with his dying breath.”

Morgan looked down at the sorcerer. “Get on with it then, demonspawn.” Zenna grimaced, having felt the cleric’s ire toward those of fiendish ancestry.

Kaurophon, however, merely nodded deferentially. “I appreciate your forbearance,” he said. “All will be made clear, I promise you.”

“It is true that Occipitus lies in the Abyss,” he told them. “But it was not always so. The layer was formed during an invasion of the celestial realms, an eon past. The demonic forces that penetrated in a raving horde into the higher planes were repulsed, but in the process the location of their intrusion was tainted, and as the demonic force was cast out, a portion of Celestia was torn away, to coalesce into what is now Occipitus.”

“I know a little of planar cosmology,” Zenna acknowledged. “I have heard of such things happening in the past, reorientations of entire realms by such cataclysmic events.”

Kaurophon nodded to her. “Indeed,” he said. “Occipitus was tainted by the demonic incursion and by its new proximity to the ‘nether realms,’ as the holy man of Helm has noted. But it also bore strong remnants of its original origins. The two ultimately blended into an odd juxtaposition of reality, though the darkness gradually subsumed the light, over the millennia.”

“Occipitus eventually fell under the rulership of a powerful entity known as Adimarchus, also a creature of multiplanar origin, though I fear you would simply call him a ‘demon’. He was a powerful being, and for centuries held sway over this new realm, shaping it gradually in his image.”

“This dinna sound like a place I’d want ta visit,” Hodge grumbled. He hadn’t spoken loudly, but Kaurophon heard him.

“No, ser dwarf, and in the days of Adimarchus’s rule, I would have most fervently agreed with you. But at some point, years past, the powerful lord of Occipitus disappeared from view. The tales of his departure vary—some say he was destroyed in a confrontation with one of the greater powers, such as Prince Graz’zt. Others report that he left voluntarily, in search of a new, greater realm to conquer. The evidence is uncertain, but it was

immediately clear that Adimarchus had left behind a contingency to ensure that rulership of the plane would not fall to one whom he did not find worthy.”

“This contingency is known as the Test of the Smoking Eye.”

There was a momentary silence as the companions absorbed this information, each in their own way. Seeing that he’d drawn his audience into the tale, Kaurophon continued.

“The test was created by Adimarchus to grant dominion over Occipitus to one with both power and insight, as well as a certain philosophy of rule. I have spent time on the plane. It is dangerous, of course—for all its initial origins, the plane is effectively still part of the Abyss!—but the faint tendrils of celestial influence that remain make it a place that most demons find unpleasant, and it is relatively quiet compared to other Abyssal layers.”

“What is the nature of this test?” Arun asked.

“It is a series of challenges prepared by Adimarchus,” Kaurophon replied. “I have learned that each challenge provides the clues needed to reach the next. The first challenge is located in a ruined celestial cathedral, and involves a choice of two foes—a bebilith demon and a guardinal celestial—one of which must be slain to advance. I was not able to defeat the demon alone, so I could not progress further in the test.”

Morgan cut him off with a slash of his hand. “And so you seek our aid, so that you can overcome the challenge and become ruler of this land? Do you think us so simple that we would aid you, demon?”

Zenna was looking at Kaurophon, so she saw his eyes narrow, and the bright eyes grow intense. But after a moment, he relaxed. “Your verbal darts are not undeserved, perhaps. I am of a sort that your kind find anathema.” He shifted his gaze, and looked meaningfully upon Zenna before turning back to regard the rest of them. Slowly, his face twisting slightly in pain as his movement reopened some of his wounds, he drew himself up to face them again. “I ask only that you hear me out, and judge me not on your preconceptions, but on the value of my words, and my actions.”

“Your kind are expert at shaping your words to trick and deceive,” Morgan said, but he subsided, allowing Kaurophon to continue. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with feeling.

“I ask you not for your trust, for you barely know me, but I would wish that you understand my motivation. Long have I searched for a place, but only recently have I come to understand that what I truly want, what I truly need, is a way to reconcile the dark and the light that dwell within me. I would have you come with me to Occipitus, to complete the Test of the Smoking Eye. I seek this not for my own glory; in fact, I would have it that one of you, rather than myself, complete the final test, and ascend to rule Occipitus.” He looked again at Zenna. “For the nature of this plane is such that it may be bent to the heart of he who holds suzerainty over its realm. Through the stewardship of one dedicated to the precepts of Good, it is my belief that Occipitus may be redeemed, and its lingering currents of Light strengthened over the current power of the Dark that holds sway there.”

“You would have us rely solely upon your word, to embark upon this quest?” Morgan asked, but his tone was even, and Zenna thought she detected some uncertainty in him. It was something new in the man, born of his recent travails, and she couldn’t be sure of her reading of him now. It had been easier, she thought, when his personality had been more one-dimensional.

“No,” he said. He reached into his pouch, and drew out a tightly rolled scroll. Two scrolls, Zenna saw, as he unrolled them and separated them. Even as he handed one to her, and offered the other to Morgan, she could see that they were covered with the runes of magic. Divine magic, she saw, as she examined the scroll. Then she sucked in a breath. Momentarily forgetting the rest of them, she cast a cantrip to verify that the magic contained in the scroll was real.

“This is a potent spell indeed,” she said.

“What is it?” Mole said, hopping slightly to get a better look at the writing.

Morgan, too, was looking at his scroll intently. “It is a spell of *plane shift*, he said. It allows for the caster, as well as those he touches, to travel through the barrier that separates the planes.”

“Both spells are oriented to this reality, your Forgotten Realms,” Kaurophon said. “So you would be able to return whenever you wished. I am afraid I must keep the means of getting to Occipitus to myself... I hope that you can understand my motivation.”

“This spell is well beyond my abilities,” Zenna admitted. “But I could probably manage it, from a scroll. It looks genuine,” she told the others.

Morgan looked uncertain. “I will not use such magic, without knowing its source.”

“I purchased the scrolls from the church of Oghma, in Calimport. They bear the mark of that faith at the bottom of the text.”

“I have a question,” Zenna said. “Why us?”

Kaurophon nodded, as he’d anticipated the question. “When it became clear that I would require allies in my quest, I embarked upon various divinations in an effort to clarify the road I would need to take. Such aid was difficult to procure and murky in its revelations, but one such seeking revealed to me that a holy man, a prophet, would be able to guide my path truly. I was greatly encouraged and sought about locating this man. My search drew me here, to your Realms, where I have spent nearly the last half-year trying to track down this, my only lead. Sadly, though, my pursuit ended too late... as I finally located him with my magic just in time to watch his death.”

“Alek Tercival,” Zenna said.

“I did not even know his name. But I heard his final words to you, and immediately came here, using a spell of transportation from another scroll. I lack another, and therefore cannot return to my laboratory. My path, too, likes in one direction... ahead, to Occipitus.”

“Why the urgency?” Arun asked. “If you had identified us, wouldn’t it have made more sense to contact us in a less precipitous fashion?”

“I believe that time is becoming a factor. Throughout my search here I have continued to monitor events in Occipitus, and I believe that others have learned of the test and are seeking to complete it. Two such rivals I have specific knowledge of—a succubus and a renegade rakshasa. If they succeed, either of them, then it will be too late, and they will gain dominion over Occipitus, and shape it to their whim.”

“So you would have us accompany you to this plane, pass this ‘test’, and gain control of the plane? Then what?” Zenna asked.

“Then you could do as you see fit, returning here to your world, or whatever you saw fit,” Kaurophon said. “I want only to end the division there, and it is my hope to see the plane restored, someday, to a true state.”

Zenna glanced at her friends. Even though they tried to hide their feelings, she knew them all well by now, enough to gauge their sentiments. Their feelings ranged from indecision to obvious reluctance.

“We’ll need to discuss this,” she said.

“Of course.” The sorcerer bowed, and walked over to the far side of the vault, near the tunnel that led back down to the underground chamber where they’d found Alek.

Chapter 193

“Well?” Zenna asked, once Kaurophon had gotten out of earshot.

“Well what?” Hodge asked. “It be insane, and that’s all there be to it.”

“Ah, come on,” Mole said. “Haven’t you ever wanted to visit the Outer Planes? My uncle Cal told me stories... he visited the Abyss once, did you know?” Her eyes glimmered with what could have been curiosity, the thrill of adventure, or madness—or maybe all three.

“I want to visit *one* plane, and that be Moradin’s Forge. An’ I ain’t in no hurry to be goin’ there again either!”

“Arun?” Zenna asked.

The paladin wore a thoughtful look. “He bears taint,” the dwarf said.

“Well, that’s obvious,” Morgan interrupted, but Arun forestalled him with a raised palm.

“It’s there, true, but the man is not as steeped in it as some. It could be that his two sides are warring, as he said, or he could be masking his aura in some fashion.”

“Even if he is lying about his motivations, we also have to consider these rivals of which he spoke,” Zenna noted. “If either of them secures control of the plane, then it definitely will be lost to evil.”

Hodge smacked his hand into his fist. “What business of that be ours?”

Zenna’s reply was soft, almost under her breath. “Those who follow the Path of Light are not always allowed the luxury of choosing their own battles.”

Morgan flinched as though he’d been struck. He knew the words she’d quoted, although they were not spoken by his patron, but by the god Torm, the divine being incarnated as a man in the Time of Troubles. Torm and Helm were rivals, but shared many of the same precepts of faith, and both stood strong against the forces of the Dark. She knew that Morgan knew the words, and kept them to his heart, but she did not know the extent to which they now ruled in a heart sundered by his own sufferings.

“But can a mere man always know where the path lies?” he whispered.

“There’s one other thing,” Mole pointed out. Zenna suspected that she’d already hopped merrily onto the Lets All Go To The Abyss bandwagon. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re stuck somewhere in the middle of an apparently endless desert, without supplies. If we do go with Kaurophon, we can always use one of his scrolls to zip back to Cauldron, if things go bad.”

“A caution,” Zenna insisted. “The spell is not an exact means of travel. You appear anywhere from a few miles to a few hundred miles from your destination.”

“So you could pop in o’er the bloomin’ Shinin’ Sea!” Hodge exclaimed.

“Yes, that is correct,” Zenna said. “Although you can target an area more inland, to mitigate that possibility.”

“Have I pointed out that yer all a bunch o’ ravin’ lunatics lately!”

Morgan’s head had dropped until his forehead was nearly touching the shining white shaft of *Alakast*, held upright in both of his fists before him, its base touching the floor at his feet. Finally he looked up, and there was a clarity in his expression that Zenna found reminiscent of his “old” self.

“So our options are thus: remain here, and slowly starve to death, or travel on a mission to a realm of great evil, to pursue a quest that may end in our destruction, or may redeem a plane for good.”

“I am only one of six, but I say that the road lies forward, not back.”

“Me too!” Mole said instantly, her hand shooting up.

Hodge looked almost beseechingly at his mentor, but Arun’s gaze was fixed on the knight of Helm. “Very well,” Arun said. “But we must be vigilant.”

"I may know something about vigilance," Morgan said with what was almost a chuckle, as he touched the sigil on the holy symbol at his throat.

"Zenna?" Mole asked.

She had helped prod this along, she knew, but had her own misgivings. How could she not, she thought... given that they were for all intents and purposes going to be traveling to the place where her own dark side had its origins? And yet, like her father before her, she felt a grim fascination with what she would find... and a part of her needed to confront what it was, what was inside of her, part of her being.

She nodded.

They all turned to look at Hodge, whose face had twisted into a grimace. "Well, I guess me choice is made fer me, since I ain't gunna stay here in this godsforsaken sandbox an' starve. Though I ain't gunna stray far from yer two that got them scrolls, mark me!"

And with that he strode off, though only a short distance.

"There's one more," Mole said, but Dannel, whose sharp elven ears had listened in on both exchanges from his position watching the exit, had already made his decision, and he nodded as Zenna's eyes met his own.

"Then we're decided!" Mole said, her obvious excitement failing to ease the anxiety clearly visible in the faces of the others. Even as she ran across the vault to fetch Kaurophon, they struggled with the reality of what they were doing, and where they were going.

The Abyss.

A realm of nightmares.

Chapter 194

For all that she was now as much a cleric as she was a wizard, Zenna did not think of herself as very religious. But when she got her first look at Occipitus, her first thought was, *By all the gods...*

The place was utterly alien, rushing in to assault their senses from the moment that Kaurophon's *plane shift* spell ended.

They were on a great open plain. Visible in the distance was a great line of black mountains that formed a curving line across the horizon. Turning, Zenna saw that the mountains appeared to encircle the entire plain, forming a great bowl that had to be hundreds of miles across.

Above, the sky was a sea of roaring flames, a flowing red conflagration that swirled only a few hundred feet above them. Prominent in that ember sky were cohesive eddies of living

fire, maybe a dozen paces across, that danced in the maelstrom, occasionally dipping down from the higher reaches to flirt with the more open sky below, as if considering dropping down to the ground below.

Belatedly she realized that the plain was flat, that the reason that she could see so far was due to the fact that there was no curvature to the world beneath her feet. And thus she could clearly mark the white mountain in the exact center of Occipitus, an unnaturally-shaped mound that Zenna was quick to identify.

A giant skull, lying on its side. And out of the dark, empty shadow of its eyesocket, a steady stream of ugly gray smoke streamed. As she watched, one of the fiery plasms erupted from that fissure, rising slowly up to join the others in the flaming sky above.

She looked down, at the ground beneath her feet. The soil was spongy, and textured strangely. Not soil at all, she realized, her stomach twisting with understanding. *Like flesh...*

To turn her mind from that disgusting thought, she lifted her gaze and took another look at their immediate surroundings. There were few terrain features of note close by, just some pale pillars that jutted from the landscape like the rib bones of some huge creature that had fallen and been partially absorbed into the landscape.

Hodge was right beside her, and she could hear his reaction to Occipitus. "Oh, great, just bloody flaming dark-double-damned great. Bloody bloomin' fantastic. 'Oy, let's take a little outin' to the bloody Abyss, eh?' Damned demon bloody damned..."

She saw Morgan sink down to one knee, and stepped toward him with concern. Arun, too, she saw was experiencing difficulty, his face pale, though he fought to conceal his discomfort. The cleric extended a hand as if to block her, and grimly pulled himself to his feet. "I am all right," he said. "It passes..."

"What happened?"

"This... this place. Chaos... taint... It is... overwhelming."

"Arun?"

The paladin grimaced. "It is powerful, but it can be borne."

She looked around at her other companions, but while they all seemed uncomfortable as they adjusted to their surroundings, they did not seem as affected as Morgan and Arun. She looked over at Kaurophon. Their guide was also scanning their surroundings, getting his bearings, she thought. Finally, he turned to them.

"What are those things?" Mole said, pointing to one of the drifting clouds of fire.

"Plasms," the sorcerer replied. "Very dangerous, and the reason why flying is not practical here. If you see one drifting down too close to the ground, best run away as fast as you can."

“That giant skull,” Dannel asked. “Is that the location of the test?”

“It may be part of it,” Kaurophon admitted. “The central plain is... not hospitable. But our immediate destination is the ruined cathedral of which I spoke, which lies in an area of celestial ruins about a hundred miles north of here.”

“And your magic cannot transport us there directly, I presume,” Morgan said.

The sorcerer shook his head. “I am afraid we will have to walk.”

“Walk a hunnerd miles, w’out food?” Hodge said.

“I thought dwarves were stout folk,” Morgan retorted. Hodge’s face turned red with anger, but Kaurophon quickly interjected.

“The landscape here is not friendly, but there are resources here for the clever traveler. Fiendish bison, for example, which may be used as provender.”

“Demon steak. Great.”

“We should get going,” Dannel suggested. “I presume there is no cycle of day and night here, Kaurophon?”

“No. In that, at least, Occipitus is constant.”

They gathered themselves, and started north, their footsteps making only the slightest noise on the spongy surface of the plane.

Chapter 195

Zenna leaned against a pillar that still bore faint markings in Celestial. She was tired, but she suspected that the exhaustion that suffused her to her very bones was not just due to the long hike. Occipitus... *wore* on you, and she wondered again, not for the first time, and Kaurophon’s revelation that he’d spent a fair amount of time here. What did that do to a person... or did his partly fiendish nature protect him? What might it do to her, whose ancestry was also rooted to the dark planes?

For all her complaints, she knew that the others felt it worse. Especially Arun and Morgan. The paladin withstood it stoically, but Morgan... Morgan had grown irritable and cantankerous, alternating between moody outbursts and periods of long, sullen silence. She saw that he now carried *Alakast* like a standard, both of his hands wrapped around the pale wood so tightly that his hands were nearly as white as the staff. His face had grown pale to match, his features tight and drawn, looking unnatural under the flaming red glow of the burning sky above.

Mole trudged up to her, plopping herself down on an uneven shelf of shattered white marble beside her. “Are we having fun yet?” she opined. Zenna forced a smile. Her

friend, if anything, seemed immune to the weighty impact of Occipitus, although her upbeat attitude had been somewhat muted by the sheer overwhelming force of their surroundings. But likewise her curiosity had been fully unleashed in this strange place, and she eagerly absorbed both the wonders and the horrors that they had encountered over their journey.

The last four days, since their arrival here, had not been easy. Kaurophon had told them that the outlying edges of the plain were scarcely populated, but that hadn't stopped them from encountering a demon on the first day, just a few hours after they had set out. It had come up on them from ahead along their course of march, flying low to avoid the plasms, a terrible combination of humanoid and vulture. A vrock, Kaurophon had called it. It had obviously seen them, and despite being outnumbered, it let out a nasty screech and dove straight for them. Dannel struck it with an arrow as it dove, but its demonic resistances clearly protected it from harm. The rest of them readied their weapons to meet its diving rush. Kaurophon cast several protective spells upon himself, and laid a spell upon Arun to bolster his stamina.

That was about all she remembered of that encounter. Just before the demon reached them, it let out a terrible screech, and she vaguely remembered falling, stunned. Afterward, Dannel had told her that the battle had been brief; Arun and Morgan had both laid into it with their powerful weapons, and rather than remain the demon had elected to *teleport* away to recover from its wounds.

After that, she resolved to meditate on magics that would prove effective against demons.

The next day they'd had another encounter, with a giant lion that had likewise bounded across the plain upon detecting them. This one did not retreat until Arun had cut its head off with a powerful stroke of his sword, and afterwards her healing talents were needed to help Dannel and Hodge, both of whom had been injured in the brief but bloody battle.

Later that same day—although by now, it was getting difficult for her to separate time into those units, without a day or night to mark the passage of days—they had encountered a small herd of the fiendish bison that Kaurophon had mentioned. The creatures looked much like the ones Zenna had seen in her travels across the vast eastern plains of Tethyr... except that their hides were mottled and ugly with diseased gray splotches, and their eyes shone with a bright malevolence. Instead of retreating at their approach, the bison had pawed the ground and snorted angrily. Finally, without warning, they had surged toward them, in a stampede that shook the ground beneath their feet.

"Run!" Dannel had yelled. "Take shelter among those columns!" he'd added, identifying another of the bleached-pillar formations nearby. "I'll draw them off!"

The elf augmented his speed with an *expeditious retreat* spell, and firing arrows to draw the attention of the herd, he drew them in a wide circle that ultimately brought them back to where the companions had taken shelter. The twenty bison made a fearsome sight, but they weren't overly intelligent, and they weren't much of a threat to the companions behind the cover of the thick stone pillars. When the herd finally broke off and fled, they'd left half of their number behind, lying in heaps across the barren landscape.

Hodge and Mole had initially been excited at the prospect of a real meal, but the meat of the bison had been tough as rawhide, and suffused with an oily taste that had left it barely palatable. The only fuel they'd been able to find were the long, twisting strands of fibrous material that jutted from the plain at uneven intervals, and that burned fitfully, releasing clouds of noxious gray smoke that caused violent coughing when inhaled.

Still, with their own stocks depleted, "demon steaks" was all that they had, and so they made the best of it, Mole salting some of the meat to carry with them as they departed. At least with her ability to create water, they wouldn't die of thirst...

Zenna's thoughts were drawn back to the present by the sounds of shouting nearby. She rose, Mole only a step behind her, and found Dannel and Morgan facing off, arguing about something.

"Bah, it's truth and you know it, elf! I'll not take it back, not for all your threats!"

"You're walking a thin line, priest," Dannel replied, and there was iron in his voice.

"I walk where I care to, elf," Morgan spat back. "You can have your little fiending, if you wish..."

Zenna suddenly felt cold. They were arguing about *her*, she knew it as sure as she knew her own name. Dannel saw her and flinched, but Morgan, unaware of her presence, opened his mouth to say something else stupid and hurtful, no doubt. Rushing forward, she hurried to forestall him.

"Idiots!" she said, letting her fury fuel her words. "Do we not have a difficult enough time in this place, without you fighting like spoiled boys! Are you fool enough not to see what this place is doing to you?"

Arun and Hodge were approaching, Kaurophon walking in their company. The dwarves had demonstrated their endurance over the long march, but their short legs meant that they had to work harder to keep up with the rest of them, and they'd gone from leading to bringing up the rear. Kaurophon seemed content to blend into the background, and often hours passed without Zenna even noticing that he was there.

"What's going on?" Arun demanded.

"Nothing," Morgan said, his anger fading, though his lips remained tight in an expression of barely-contained contempt as he strode away.

"We draw near to the cathedral," Kaurophon said. "We should be able to see it soon, I think."

"Not soon enough," Dannel said. He too turned away, walking forward but not quite in the direction that Morgan had gone.

"Men," Mole said softly, but Zenna could hear the sadness in her voice. She couldn't blame her friend; everything had grown so complicated...

Trying to ignore the protests of her tired muscles, and the aching in her tired heart, she joined the others as the companions resumed their march.

Chapter 196

The cathedral rose out of the ruined expanse before them, a shattered remnant that still bore enough of its former grandeur to hint at what once had been. The entry, a recessed archway of cracked white marble, contained a pair of heavy doors of patterned stone.

“Well, here we are,” Dannel said, testing his bowstring. He’d replenished his store of arrows from Alek Tercival’s quiver back in the vault, but even so his remaining supply was dwindling, a few more used up in each encounter, and it did not look like they would encounter a fletcher anytime soon.

“And this first test lies inside?” Morgan asked. He frowned, examining the designs etched into the stone, designs that still seemed incongruous in this alien setting.

“Yes,” Kaurophon replied. “There are chambers under the place, that contain the trial.”

“Anything inside we should know about?” Arun asked.

“No, the cathedral itself is empty,” Kaurophon said.

“Very well then, let’s get about it,” the paladin replied, moving to the doors. The one on the left opened easily at his prodding, but the one on the right ground against the floor, resisting his efforts. Finally he gave up on it and pushed the left door open fully so they could enter.

Beyond the doors lay a wide foyer. The place was scattered with odd clusters of rubble, and while most of the ceiling was intact, there were sufficient cracks to allow the ruddy crimson glow of the fiery sky above to enter. The floor was slightly off-kilter, as though the entire building lay upon its foundations at a gentle but noticeable slant. In the center of the floor was a great open pit, about ten feet square, descending deep out of sight. Across from them lay another set of doors nearly identical to the ones through which they’d entered.

“I do not recall that pit being here before,” Kaurophon said.

Zenna frowned; there was something odd here, something she couldn’t quite place. She stood there in the doorway, as Morgan and Arun moved forward around the edge of the pit.

“Ewww, do you smell that?” Mole said.

Zenna cast a minor cantrip, enabling her to sense magical auras. She scanned the room, noting immediately the pale glow surrounding the pit. But there was a stronger aura, drawing her attention upward, to the ceiling...

Too late, she saw the danger, as the magical shrouds of *invisibility* fell from the two creatures hovering near the ceiling. They were horrible things, an unholy combination of a giant spider, grafted to the upper body of a dark elf. She opened her mouth to scream.

But the driders were already launching their attack. A dense explosion of sticky, clinging *webs* filled the foyer, snaring them around the legs, tugging at their arms. Zenna's gaze was held by the malevolent look of the second drider, magically floating in a far corner of the ceiling above, its eight legs positioning it against the touching walls. Dannel yanked an arm free from a cloying strand and lifted his bow, but before he could fire the creature pointed at him, and unleashed a jagged bolt of lightning that darted down from its corner into the elf. For all that the webs were wrapped around his lower body, Dannel still managed to twist out of the path of the bolt, although tendrils of energy scored him as it passed.

Zenna, however, standing right behind him, cried out as the *lightning bolt* caught her squarely in the center of her torso. Her innate resistance to electrical energy did not obviate the burning pain that erupted from her body from the point of impact, and she felt her muscles quivering uncontrollably, only barely able to keep from collapsing.

Despite the entangling effects of the *web*, the companions were quick to respond to the drider ambush. Arun threw one of his light hammers at one, while Morgan unlimbered one of the javelins he'd been carrying around unused all this time, and hurled it at the same foe. Unfortunately the obscuring *webs*, clinging insistently to the warriors' arms, impaired their accuracy, and both missiles missed their targets.

Dannel, however, would not be hindered by a few spiderwebs, and his first arrow sank meatily into the spider-body of the drider that had cast the *lightning bolt* at them. The creature snarled at them in pain, uttering a curse in its own speech that sounded unnaturally like the screech of a wounded beast.

Kaurophon, standing slightly ahead of Zenna, opposite Dannel, focused his concentration and cast a spell. As he vanished, Zenna's first thought was that he'd turned himself *invisible*, but then she saw that the webs that had held him had collapsed, that he was truly gone.

Great, she thought. *Why am I not surprised?*

Of course, getting out of this situation suddenly looked like a really good idea, as the driders started casting spells again. She elected to go for defense, conjuring a magical *shield* canted upward toward the driders.

The driders unleashed their second round of spells, reversing their initial volley as the lightning-caster added to the entangling mesh surrounding them with another *web*, while the second shot its own *lightning bolt*. The target was again Dannel, who seemed most able to threaten the floating driders with his bow. Again the elf avoided the worst of the blast, but again Zenna was blasted by the follow-through, the left leg of her breeches turning black as the bolt mercilessly scorched the limb beneath.

"Zenna, get back!" Dannel cried, drawing another arrow.

Have you not noticed the webs, you fool! she thought, but she bit back the words, not wanting to distract him from the important task of putting arrows in their enemies. She was standing in the open doorway, only a few feet from cover, but the webbing held her fast, and with her limited strength there was no way she would be able to pull herself free.

There was another option, she thought, remembering her wand of *burning hands*, but with the webs wrapped around their bodies, the cure might in this case be worse than the disease...

Arun let out a curse as his second hammer missed. Morgan's second javelin scored a glancing hit on one of the creatures, but now both warriors were without missiles, unable to effectively harm the two driders.

Hodge let out a few general-purpose curses as he fought the clinging webs to load his heavy crossbow. He finally managed to lift the weapon and fire, but several strands of webbing had fouled the bolt, and the shot veered pathetically wide.

"Somebody get these damned blasted webs off us!" the dwarf demanded.

"I can burn them off, but it'll hurt you as well!" Zenna said.

"Do it!" Arun's cry came back to her.

Grimacing, Zenna reached for her wand. But before she could unleash its power, the dense lacing of webs shimmered, and vanished.

"Right! Good job!" Hodge said.

"But I didn't do anything!" Zenna protested. She realized what had happened, and even as she drew back out of the now-clear doorway, she saw Kaurophon standing outside. The sorcerer nodded to her, and she felt a momentary twinge of guilt at judging him prematurely earlier.

But first things first, and they were still in a lot of trouble here. Unfortunately the driders had been outside of the range of Kaurophon's *dispel*, and from their secure position they continued their spell assault upon the companions.

Mole had been quiet in the initial moments of battle, but again that was by design. First she'd tried to slip free of the double-nest of webbing, but when that failed she focused instead on remaining undetected and loaded her small crossbow. When the webs were *dispelled* by Kaurophon she moved quickly into the shadows, moving until she was almost directly under one of the driders.

Then she shot her bolt right up into its abdomen.

The drider didn't like that one bit. The creature twisted its body so that it could look down at her, and then fired a trio of *magic missiles* at her. She tried to dodge, knowing it wouldn't work, and stifled a cry as the three glowing darts stabbed painfully into her body.

Dannel continued his barrage, firing arrow after arrow into his target. The drider now looked like a pincushion, with multiple feathered shafts jutting from its body. The thing hissed at him, like a serpent. It lifted a slender black arm as if to hurl another spell at him, but it hesitated, perhaps doubting that a continued exchange of lightning bolts for arrows would work in its favor. It could not know that Dannel was laboring, his chest and arms burning where needles of electricity had stabbed into them. The elf, lost in the song of battle that he poured into his missiles, revealed nothing save grim efficiency, one with his bow.

So instead the spider-thing summoned another spell, and vanished.

Dannel had already drawn out another arrow, and as the drider disappeared he closed his eyes, drawing the feathers of the long shaft back to his cheek. He listened, and in the purity of the song he heard the clatter of its feet along the stone, as it skittered along the border of wall and ceiling. Almost reflexively, he loosed, opening his eyes to see the arrow stab into nothingness, almost its entire length vanishing from view. There was a loud, almost painful screech, and moments later a loud concussion as the drider fell, becoming visible as it convulsed for a moment amidst the rubble, finally falling still.

Upon regaining his freedom from the webs, Arun leapt forward, seeing one of his hammers lying upon the floor. He seized it up, and with a powerful snap of his wrist sent it flying up into the body of the drider who had just blasted Mole.

The drider was now injured from several wounds, and with the death of its fellow the tide of the battle had shifted decidedly against it. The ghastly creature, however, did not yield, nor seek quarter. It did shuffle across the ceiling, its *levitation* power holding it upside-down against the cracked ceiling of the foyer. Its movement took it to a position almost directly above the exit doors, indicating a possible intent to seek escape.

Dannel was blocking the exit, however, and he quickly shifted his aim to this adversary, bending backward to give him an angle to shoot. Before he could fire, however, the drider pointed at him, unleashing a coruscating beam of deep violet that struck the elf and splayed over his body in a nimbus of fey light. The effect was instantly obvious, as the elf staggered, greatly weakened by the *ray of enfeeblement*.

The drider started down the wall toward the doors, but it had to contend with Morgan, who lifted *Alakast* above his head and charged at it. The drider hissed and drew out a pair of slender steel daggers from sheaths strapped around its torso, but the fallen knight's longer weapon allowed him to inflict a punishing blow to its chest before it could move into position to strike. Blood fountained from its jaws as the staff's impact drove a rib into its internal organs. All thoughts of battle replaced by an instinct to survival, the creature released its spell of *levitation*, all but falling onto the ground in an awkward clutter, its bulk knocking Dannel roughly aside. It turned toward the open doors, startling Zenna and Kaurophon with the suddenness of its appearance. Before it could seek freedom and escape, however, it felt the bite of Hodge's axe, cleaving deeply into its bulbous spider-body. The creature sagged against the doors, dying, until finally another series of bloody strokes from the gathered warriors put a final end to it.

Hodge and Morgan drew the dead creature aside, out of the doorway, so that the two magic-users could enter. Hodge grimaced as the thick, sticky gore from its wounds clung to his hands, sticking in his beard.

“Gads, that’s foul!” he said, trying to wipe the gunk from his beard, and mostly managing to bury it deeper in that filthy nest.

“Are you all right?” Zenna asked Dannel.

The elf nodded. “Weak...” he said, tiredly, sagging under the weight of his armor and equipment. “Need... a few minutes... spell... temporary...”

“I thought you said that this place was empty,” Morgan said, shooting a hard look at Kaurophon.

The sorcerer looked apologetic. “It was, the last time I was here,” he said. “This place, it bears a strong celestial... ‘echo’, I guess, I guess, would be the best word. Most fiends avoid it, from my experience, unless they have a strong reason not to.”

“He aided us greatly by dispelling those webs,” Zenna said.

Morgan turned away, dropping the matter. He took out a rag from his pack, and started cleansing from *Alakast* the patters of drider gore that had marred its smooth length during the battle. Dannel used healing wand to treat his injuries, and after a few minutes indicated that he was feeling better, the effects of the drider’s enfeebling spell wearing off. Arun led them to the doors on the far side of the foyer, which appeared to lead into the main part of the cathedral.

At the dwarf’s insistent push the doors swung open. Beyond lay a great hall, nearly a hundred feet in length. Here the damage they’d seen earlier was even more pronounced, with great gaps in the ceiling that showed the bright burning sky above. Rubble choked off great areas of the room, forming jagged mounds. About halfway down the hall the chamber narrowed, with doors offering onto side chambers, but at its far end it opened again to a broader space. There was a stone statue there, a good ten feet tall, of a dusky gray stone that contrasted with the white everywhere else, but it was too far distant for them to clearly identify.

They scanned the chamber cautiously, but there was nothing threatening evident, at least not that they could see from the shelter of the doorway. The rubble could have concealed anything.

Afterwards, Zenna would wonder why none of them had thought to look up as they entered, especially after what had just transpired with the driders.

Arun entered first, followed by Morgan. The rest of them had just started into the room, when a lithe, female form swooped down from above, landing directly before Morgan. Startled by the suddenness of its appearance, they could not react in time to stop it from lunging at the knight of Helm. She was an amber-skinned beauty, if one could ignore the great bat-wings, the claws, and the tiny horns that jutted from her head. She carried a

slender spear, but did not hold it in the manner of a weapon. Morgan's eyes widened, caught off guard by the startling juxtaposition of loveliness and horror. But instead of tearing into him with its slender claws, the demon-woman grasped his head with both of her hands, and sank into him with a deep, penetrating kiss.

"Hey!" Mole said, shattering the spell of surprise. "Hands off our cleric, demon!"

They started to Morgan's aid, but suddenly a violent wall of roaring flames rose up from the floor, drawing a line twenty-feet tall across the room, driving them back with the searing heat of the flames.

Separating Arun and Morgan—and the succubus—from the rest of them.

Chapter 197

Morgan reeled, stunned. The kiss had nothing of love in it; it was a taking, violent, and he could feel the life energy escaping from him, leaving him diminished.

Unfortunately, he felt as though his will was lost in the flood, and as the succubus drew back, her eyes glistening terribly, he knew that he was in her power. He felt a surge of desire course through him like a flood. He knew it was false, hated himself for it, but he could not resist. *Alakast* fell from fingers that had suddenly grown soft, and the staff clattered harmlessly on the bare stone floor at his feet.

"Get off of him, demon bitch," Arun snarled, his sword a gleaming shaft of steel in his fist.

"Protect me, lover!" the succubus said to Morgan. Her sibilant voice tickled at his consciousness, and he felt compelled to obey. But his muscles felt stiff, reluctant. He looked down for his weapon, and the staff seemed far away, as if he had suddenly become thirty feet tall, looking down from a lofty height.

Arun was faster.

The succubus screamed in alarm as the dwarf charged her. She tried to dodge behind Morgan, but the holy sword lashed out, the full force of the dwarf's strength behind the blow. He *smote* her, the sword cleaving into her torso squarely, and her scream halted as the sword tore *through* her tainted body, and the two halves, upper and lower, flopped to the ground below.

Surprisingly, there was very little blood.

"Naugh!" came a loud, angry voice from the far side of the cathedral, by the statue. Arun and Morgan, the latter still somewhat unsteady, turned to see a terrible, flaming creature emerge from behind the statue. It had the body of a serpent, but with muscular arms jutting from its torso, and a face that, while bestial in its visage, showed clearly the look of intelligence. It slid forward, upright, carrying a longspear its hands, its body surrounded with tongues of flame, the air around it distorted by the heat radiating off of its form.

Arun took one look at it and charged. Morgan, fighting through his own disorientation, reached down and recovered *Alakast*. Behind him, the *wall of fire* shimmered and disappeared, removed by Kaurophon's magic.

Suddenly, their surroundings... *changed*.

Zenna's nature had partially protected her from the *wall of fire*, but the others, she saw, were not so fortunate. Hodge looked as though he would charge right through the roaring flames, but the intensity of the roaring barrier drove him back, patting furiously at his smoking beard. Kaurophon, she saw, also appeared to be little affected by the flames, and as she watched, he called upon his magic, sundering the tendrils of magical power that maintained the spell. He was powerful, she knew, noting his calm control in a chaotic situation, his focus upon the energies that he was manipulating.

When the flames ceased, she stepped forward. She saw the dead succubus, Morgan and Arun, and the huge flame salamander. But she started as there was a faint flash, and everything around her changed. No, not everything... the combatants were still there, both her allies and their enemies, but the cathedral...

The cathedral was as it had been, when it was whole. The walls and ceiling were fully intact, shining with a benign white glow. White feathers drifted idly through the air, and a song, faint but distinct, filled her with an overwhelming sense of peace and contentment. The statue at the far end of the cathedral was likewise different, the blunt stone shape replaced by a glimmering marble statue of such beauty, she felt her breath catch in her throat...

And then it was gone, back to the way it had been, ruined, desecrated. The transition was so jarring that it was almost painful, and she felt a profound sense of loss.

"Did you just see that..." Mole asked.

"Yes, but we don't have time to talk about it now!" Dannel said. He'd drawn out an arrow, and he took aim at the salamander.

But the fiery creature beat him to the attack, pointing at them. A small dot of flame darted from his fingertips, streaking down the length of the cathedral. Zenna watched it come, frozen, knowing what was going to happen, unable to stop it.

The world exploded in fire.

Chapter 198

The *fireball* lasted only an instant, but when the roaring flames faded, the devastating effects of the blast became evident.

Zenna lay on her side, pain flashing through her body. She forced herself to move, even though every slight adjustment sent fresh jolts from her blackened flesh through her already

savaged nerves. She'd been at the center of the blast, and this time her natural protection had availed her little against the power of the flames.

She drew herself up and looked for the others. Morgan was lying on his face, the armor across the back of his body scorched terribly, as she knew was the flesh beneath. But the knight drew himself up in what had to be agony, reaching out, taking his staff into his hands. Rushing into battle like that was suicide, she knew... but he went anyway, limping slightly.

Hodge was little better off; the dwarf's beard had been partially burned away, along with his thick brows. But he too was already stumbling forward, and for a moment Zenna felt a stab of pride, that *these* men were her companions, men who would simply not accept defeat.

Mole and Dannel looked far better off, having rolled with the force of the blast, although Dannel too looked more than a bit scorched, his fair features marked with the red glow of fresh burns. She glanced up and saw that Kaurophon had drawn back; his robes were not marked, but she could see the slight blackening of his exposed hand, a sign that he had not escaped the flames unscathed earlier.

Okay, the battle's not over, girl! she thought, drawing herself up. She was not going to rush into battle tottering on the brink of consciousness, though, and paused to call upon a potent healing spell, letting the positive energy wash away some of the pain of her wounds. She was far from "okay," but it would have to do for now.

She hurried after Hodge and Morgan, hoping to do some good before they got themselves killed.

Arun's charge had carried him beyond the radius of the *fireball*. But the salamander, seeing him coming, calmly set its spear to receive his charge, the steel head of the weapon, glowing red with heat, pointed unerringly at the dwarf's chest. Arun was too experienced to rush blindly in and impale himself on that deadly point, so he drew up, lifting his shield and moving in cautiously.

The salamander was fast, though. It adjusted to his shift in speed and approach, and the paladin felt an explosion of pain as the spearhead drove into his shoulder, penetrating his armor and searing through him like a wedge of liquid flame. He tore himself away from the spear before the salamander could drive it through him, knocking the shaft of the weapon aside with his sword. *Damn, that thing's strong!* he thought, realizing grimly that he was outmatched by this foe.

But he'd seen the *fireball* that had streaked past him to blast into his companions, had felt the fierce roar of its burst, and he knew enough about magic to know that his friends would not be able to take another shot like that one. He knew also that the other warriors, Morgan and Hodge, were behind him, wounded. The salamander would tear them to pieces, he thought, even without having to resort to another magical attack.

And so the dwarf lunged forward, feeling the heat radiating from the salamander scorch his face. The creature seemed taken aback by the ferocity of his assault, and it hissed in pain

as Arun's holy sword clove into its torso, release a steaming cloud of ichor that filled the air with a sickly stench.

It drew back slightly, to give it room to wield its huge spear, shifting its grip before driving it down into the dwarf.

And as it tore into him with a violent storm of blows, tearing through his defenses as if they were nothing, he knew he'd been right.

Chapter 199

Morgan was sometimes brave to the point of recklessness, but despite what Zenna thought, he was no fool. As he rushed toward the salamander he drew out one of the small vials that they'd won in Vaprak's Voice, doffing the cap and downing the contents in a single draught. The powerful healing potion eased his wounds, but he knew that he was far from at his best. He could also feel the lingering effects of the succubus's kiss, the weakness from the life energy she'd drawn out of him.

But what he had left would have to do.

Hodge half-ran, half-hobbled forward, a few paces behind the taller human. His face felt as though it had been cut by a thousand tiny pixies with daggers dipped in salt. Looking upon the salamander, he saw a creature beyond his comprehension. A year ago, he'd have run, no question. But now, he'd been changed somehow, had undergone a transformation into someone or something new. Whatever it was, it seemed to involve him charging into sudden death repeatedly... But each time he'd come out alive, and he knew the reason, knew it in the form of the man who'd rushed alone ahead of them against a terrible foe, greater than all of them.

And so he ran once more at Death.

"Hodge, wait!"

Zenna's voice drew him around. To be honest, he'd been nearly about to collapse anyway, and he fought not to show her how weak he was as she ran toward him.

"Canna wait, girl!" she said, gesturing with his axe at the salamander.

"Go then," she said, touching her hand to his scorched face. It was a tender gesture, one that caught him off-guard, but he understood an instant later as healing energy poured into him. Feeling restored, he nodded at her, and ran toward the fray.

The salamander's long body shook as an arrow caught it in the shoulder. Arun could see, however, that Dannel's shot hadn't penetrated far, and even as the missile stopped quivering its long wooden shaft was consumed in a blast of flame. The shot was followed by a series of pale blue darts, *magic missiles* that smoked briefly as each was absorbed by the burning monster.

Dannel came walking deliberately down the center aisle of the cathedral hall, drawing and firing as he came. His second shot narrowly missed as the salamander reared up and laid into Arun, slashing him across the body with its spear. Although designed as a thrusting weapon, the spear nonetheless tore through his layered armor, opening a gash in his belly that was instantly cauterized by the heat of the steel.

Arun grimaced but did not cry out. But the salamander struck again, tearing the dwarf's helmet from his head by another expert slice from the spear that left him a smoking, three-inch gash in his temple that laid the white bone of his skull out bare. Arun staggered, and suddenly the salamander swung its body around with surprising quickness, slamming its tail into his chest. The dwarf went flying, and landed a few feet away on his back, smoke rising from him, unconscious or dead.

"Arun!" Zenna cried, already starting toward the dwarf. But her allies—friends, too, of the fallen man—responded to the defeat of the paladin not with fear, but with rage, rushing forward into a blind assault upon the salamander.

Morgan ducked a powerful sweep of the spear as he entered the deadly radius of the salamander's reach. By some miracle the steel head failed to connect with his head, although he could feel the heat as it passed inches above him. He swarmed in, driving *Alakast* ahead in a sweeping arc. The staff, created to destroy evil outsiders, seemed to sing as it carved the air, striking the creature with a reverberating bang. The salamander, clearly hurt by the blow, let out a foul curse in its alien language, its eyes promising death to the warrior as it recentered itself and drew its spear back for another combination assault. It paid no heed at all to Hodge, whose rush, though brave, ended in a wide swing that missed its torso entirely. Another arrow slammed into its body, but it likewise ignored that assault, focused entirely upon the knight of Helm.

Morgan, knowing what was coming, stood his ground.

The spear came down in violent fury. He somehow caught the first thrust on *Alakast*, narrowly deflecting the weapon. But with an almost insane speed the salamander drew the long spear back and stabbed again, and this time the cleric could not withstand it. Pain blossomed in his chest as the spear drove through his armor and into his lung, and he was falling, backward, his lifeblood pouring down over his body from the terrible wound, even as it smoked and bubbled from the heat. He looked up at the monster, which as an almost casual afterthought swept its tail out at Hodge, knocking the doughty dwarf to his knees.

They were done, he thought, defeated.

Consciousness, mercifully, fled.

Chapter 200

Seeing the salamander destroy her friends, one after another, Zenna felt her heart freeze in her chest. The thing was wounded, seriously it seemed, but with their three warriors all dead or dying—no, she saw, Hodge somehow still clung to consciousness, kneeling almost at its "feet"—how could they withstand its power?

Even as that thought filled her mind, she was rushing forward, inexplicably, to try and save one of them. To her own surprise she ran toward Morgan, who was closer, true, as Arun lay nearly on the far side of the creature, as well a thousand leagues away. She'd watched the cleric struck down, and knew that she only had a few seconds to do anything, if it was not already too late.

But she underestimated the salamander's reach. She saw too late the glowing red spearhead, threw herself forward as pain exploded across her shoulder and back.

Strangely, it was not as bad as she'd thought. She was lying on the ground—could not remember how, there was a gap of a second or two between when she'd seen the descending spear and now. She could not see the salamander, but knew it was close, perhaps already lifting the spear to end her life. But she saw Morgan, lying on the ground just a few feet ahead of her, looking at her, the light in his eyes already fading, blood covering his lips.

She would never know why she did it, why she chose to save him, of all people, instead of herself. But she reached out, and as she touched him, life flowed from her fingertips, and she knew that he would live.

For a heartbeat, at least... before the salamander killed them both.

But the salamander was having its own difficulties. Three arrows now jutted from its body, and it turned from its spear-work to deal with the elf. Safely thirty feet away, Dannel was out of the immediate reach of the spear, but as the creature lifted a hand to point at him, the flames building in its grasp, he knew that this time, dodging aside would not be enough to save him.

Then a tiny form darted out from the shadow of the rubble along the edges of the great hall. The salamander saw her, but like so many foes before it, deemed her a lesser threat than the other foes that had already hurt it. Indeed Mole looked puny in contrast to the deadly monster as she ran up, holding her little mace. But then, to everyone's surprise, especially including the salamander, she bounded up into the air, landing *atop Hodge's back*, and using the startled dwarf as a springboard, arced out in an unbelievable leap. The salamander twisted around, but too late, now, and as the gnome passed it, she drove her mace with the full force of her tiny body and the inertia of her leap into the side of its head.

There was a loud crack.

Mole cried out, dropping her weapon as the searing heat of the monster passed through it into her hand. She landed in a smooth roll, however, and her knife came out as she regained her feet.

It wasn't necessary. The salamander gyrated in place, unsteady, its deadly spear falling from its hands. Then another arrow slammed into it, sinking six inches into its chest.

The monster tottered, and fell in a smoking heap.

Chapter 201

They spent the better part of a full day in the cathedral, tending their wounds and slowly recovering their strength.

Morgan and Arun had both come close to death, only the quick application of a potion from Mole drawing the paladin back. Zenna recovered consciousness, thanks to Dannel's own healing bard song, and she was able to summon enough divine magic to bring all of them back far enough to be safe from the lingering temptation of death.

They secured the cathedral as best they could, and rested.

Mole explored the side rooms, finding a few valuables of celestial origin in one. Morgan frowned at her when he saw her examining an ancient oil painting of a winged celestial, but he didn't say anything. The other room contained a welter of animated books, flying tomes that launched themselves at her threateningly, but she was able to close the door before any of them reached her.

They had secured some other treasure as well; both of the spears they'd taken from the succubus and the salamander radiated strong magic. Zenna took custody of the shorter weapon that the succubus had carried, for now; although she did not look very threatening with it, perhaps it might give a careless foe pause. Morgan refused the long spear, so Hodge carried it, though he looked a bit foolish lugging around the cumbersome weapon. It grew cool after the salamander's death, indicating that the heat it bore was simply transferred through the metal haft, but Zenna insisted that the enchantment upon the blade was considerable, so they were not foolish enough to simply leave it.

They slept at the far end of the cathedral, away from the statue. The stone monolith was carved into the shape of a huge, bloated, roughly man-shaped figure with a head vaguely like that of a ram, clutching a massive mace with a skull for a head against its breast. It was disquieting, and none of them wanted to spend much time near it.

On the far side of the statue, they found a staircase that descended into darkness under the cathedral. The location of the first test, according to Kaurophon, but none of them wanted to consider such right now.

They didn't speak much of their confrontation with the salamander; well, all but Mole, who happily chattered about her triumphant defeat of the monster. Finally even patient Arun sent her off to "search for hidden treasure".

They rested, and slowly regained their strength. They had little healing left, just a few potions and a handful of charges in their wands, and Zenna insisted on husbanding those resources. The occasional shifts of their environment—Kaurophon called them "flashbacks"—were disorienting, but preferable to the wilds outside the cathedral, and Zenna even discovered that their healing powers were augmented during those brief interludes, facilitating their recovery.

They had almost nothing left in the way of supplies. Mole had brought some of the bison-meat, which was nearly rotten, in her magical bag. Zenna *purified* it with her magic, and they found some old wood and tattered parchments to serve as fuel to cook it, but the meal was poor, and they ate mechanically, without pleasure.

Finally, their bodies restored, if not their souls, they returned to the stairs.

Kaurophon left them at the threshold of the staircase. "There is a ward here, that I cannot pass," he told them. "It bars one of my ancestry."

For a moment, Zenna was afraid that she would be restrained as well, but only felt a faint tingle against her skin as she moved onto the staircase.

"I thought you said that you'd failed at the first test," Morgan said, his voice tinged with a hint of anger. "You said that there were two doors, a demon behind one, and a celestial behind the other, and that the tester has to kill once to win past."

"That is true, I promise you," the sorcerer assured them. "My knowledge of the first test is not first-hand, I admit, but I assure you, it is accurate!"

"What, did you get another band of gullible fools to essay this far before us, only to be destroyed by the test?" the knight asked, his voice rising almost to a shout.

Kaurophon vehemently denied the charge, and offered as a gesture of goodwill the loan of his *wand of magic missiles* to Zenna, to use in the first test. Zenna took the device, but saw that Morgan was not convinced; in fact the cleric's eyes shone with the same distrust that he'd evidenced on their first meeting. Even though she had saved his life several times now, she wasn't sure if he still felt that way about her now. Did he still consider her little better than the sorcerer? Or even better than the fiends they were battling in this place?

Ultimately they had to press on; they had come too far to turn back now, in Zenna's estimation. In any case, their resolve to keep a wary eye on their "patron" had been redoubled, for all he'd proved helpful to their cause thus far. Over the course of their journey, Zenna had covertly used her magic to scan the sorcerer, and she knew that he carried a variety of objects of power, ranging from minor to considerably potent. They would be fools to trust him blindly, and yet there was a part of her that wanted to believe his claims, needed to believe because of the implications that Kaurophon's quest held for her own mixed heritage, and the meaning of who and what she was.

They made their way down the stairs, alert for any sign of danger. Dannel conjured up a magical *light* to brighten their steps, although Arun's glowing sword made that more a convenience than a necessity. Morgan had the poorest dark vision of all of them, so the elf placed the spell atop *Alakast*, transforming in the staff into a beacon that guided them forward. As they descended, the walls changed from the faded white marble of the cathedral to a dense gray stone, slightly slick with condensation.

The stairs gave way onto a bottle-shaped vault, the entry at its neck, carved from the stone in smooth lines. The two doors they'd expected were evident, one to each side, but their

attention was drawn to the elaborate desk situated between them, at the far side of the room.

The desk was carefully crafted from a dark, almost black wood, and looked quite heavy. A few random artifacts were positioned on its surface; some papers, a quill and ink dispenser, a few aged tomes, and some glass objects that were not immediately identifiable. But of more immediate import was the figure seated behind the desk, who looked up as they entered.

It had once been a man, perhaps. Whatever it was, it was clearly dead, its flesh desiccated and sunken, clinging to its bones under a layer of funerary wrappings bound tightly about its limbs and torso. It wore plate armor fashioned in an archaic style. Its head was a terrible mask, a skull covered by dried skin, its eyes points of fire that fixed them with grim immediacy.

“Undead,” Morgan said, his hands tightening around *Alakast*. For a moment she thought that the cleric would rush blindly into battle with the creature, for all that it had made no threatening gesture toward them, but then, with an effort, he mastered himself. The mummy regarded them without concern for a long moment, and then it spoke.

“Adimarchus, Most Potent Ruler of Occipitus, bids you welcome to the Test of the Smoking Eye. If you are here, then Occipitus lies fallow, without a strong hand to guide its development. Know then that you are pretender to Adimarchus’s throne. If you are worthy, step forward and undertake the Test of Judgement.”

A withered hand pointed to the door on their left. “Behind that door lies Thatnak the bebilith.” Gesturing to the other door, he went on, “Behind that door lies Halalia the avoral guardinal. Choose one door, slay the occupant behind it, then pass through the door on the other side. I will meet you there.” With that, the creature waved its hand, and vanished.

For a moment the five stood there in silence. “Well, thus far, it’s as Kaurophon said,” Mole observed. “But which door do we choose?”

“I am not going to slay a celestial to pass some demon’s game,” Arun declared. “However, destroying a demon does have its appeal to me. Come on.” He started toward the left door.

“Wait!” Zenna warned. “We have the advantage of being forewarned, for once. Let us not waste the opportunity.”

The suggestion was too reasonable to refuse, so they made their preparations. Zenna considered going back up to Kaurophon, to beg a few spell protections from him, but ultimately rejected the idea. The others were already too on edge when it came to him; no sense in provoking another confrontation between them.

So she handled the preparations herself. She’d adjusted her spell selections somewhat earlier, and she hoped that they would prove effective against whatever lay beyond the door. Kaurophon had mentioned the *bebilith*, but the word had no meaning for her.

If she'd known its significance, then she might have been less willing to pass the door.

When they were ready, Arun opened the door. The portal led to a broad platform, nearly thirty feet square. To their right, the chamber opened out onto a great chasm, crossed by several oddly-fashioned bridges of wood and rope. The bridges twisted and turned over the chasm, attached to dozens of mountings from both above and below, and connected with another ledge barely visible on the far side.

The area on and above the bridges were choked with thick webs. A big, heavy shape, amorphous in Zenna's darkvision, hung in those webs, filling her with a sense of foreboding. The mystery of its identity was quickly revealed, as Morgan stepped forward, boldly presenting *Alakast*, shining the light at its tip out over the chasm. The shadows withdrew, revealing the dark shape. It seemed to fold outward as Zenna watched, long, slender legs reaching out to the surrounding webs, drawing out the body beneath.

It was a spider, but unlike any spider that Zenna had ever seen. It was horrible, massive, maybe fourteen feet from where one leg touched to its opposite, with fangs like huge scimitars. Its body was all plates and edges, as if it were clad in armor.

For a heartbeat the demon and the companions confronted each other. Then, as the companions reached for their weapons, the bebilith rushed forward to meet them.

The first part of the Test of the Smoking Eye had begun.

Chapter 202

The bebilith's target was clear from the start; it made a bee-line toward Morgan, who, true to form, stood his ground before its rush.

"Come on, demon!" he cried, brandishing *Alakast*.

Arun likewise moved forward to intercept, his holy sword glowing brightly. The demon saw the dwarf and his blade. The radiance of the blessed blade seemed to give it pause, and it hesitated in its rush long enough to hurl a compact bundle of webs at the paladin. For all his strength, the dwarf was far from agile, and the sticky bundle caught up his legs, snaring him and binding him to the floor.

"Blast!" he yelled, trying in vain to snap the strands, which held him like steel cords.

Dannel started firing arrows, his quiver already augmented by Zenna's spell, the *aligned* missiles tearing through the demon's defenses. But his initial shots fared poorly, and he scored only one hit, the others glancing off of the demon's thick hide-plates.

Likewise, Hodge thrust at it with his new long spear. The weapon that had inflicted so much damage upon them in the hands of the salamander proved ineffectual here, scratching one of its abdomen-plates but doing no real damage.

The demon resumed its charge, and ignoring Hodge barreled forward onto the platform, seeking its target in the form of the armored knight of Helm. Morgan met it boldly, but as he lifted *Alakast* to strike the demon lunged in at him with surprising quickness, stabbing its long fangs into his shoulders. The cleric cried out as the vicious pincers penetrated his armor, injecting foul toxins into his bloodstream. But Morgan was made of stern stuff, and he drove *Alakast* into its head, drawing a chittering refrain from the slavering gap of its mouth.

Now it was *really* mad.

Mole moved to aid Arun, slicing at the webs holding him with her knife. But the tiny weapon was too small to be very effective. Still, Arun saw the efficacy of the strategy, and turned from trying to break free through brute strength to hewing at the webs with his sword. Slowly, the strands began to part from his efforts.

Zenna added her own efforts to Dannel's barrage, firing a volley of *magic missiles* from Kaurophon's wand. The bolts stung the spider-demon, but the thing was so huge, so imposing, she knew that it would likely take a lot of punishment to bring down.

All they could do was keep up their efforts, she thought, unleashing another series of blasts.

The bebilith was in a rage, now. Another thrust from Hodge did nothing, but the blow from *Alakast* had hurt it. It lunged again, striking with its foremost limbs at the knight, drawing him up to its foul jaws, the vicious hooks on its legs tearing at the man's armor. The magical steel groaned before the demon's strength, bending and twisting like a tin can being torn open by a determined child. The fangs darted in again, and Morgan's cry was one of anguish, now, blood pouring down his body from the deep punctures. Once again he was nearly on the brink of destruction, helpless in the grasp of an enemy.

But somehow, the former cleric hung on, and his face twisted into a mask of grim determination as he lifted *Alakast* once more.

With a dwarven roar of triumph Arun finally tore free of the sticky webbing, and charged headlong at the demon. Even as it reveled in the destruction of Morgan it sensed him coming, and another armored leg shot down to greet his arrival. Arun took the stabbing thrust on his shield, and before the arachnid fiend could draw it back he sliced out with his sword, the holy blade sundering the limb from its body.

The bebilith drew back in pain, unbalanced. An arrow slammed into its face, just below one of its eight bulbous eyes, and as its grip on Morgan loosened, the knight drove the end of *Alakast* into one of those gleaming, unblinking orbs. Now in real distress, the demon reared backward, revealing its less-protected underside. Now finally Hodge was able to add his mark to the tally of damage, thrusting his spear deep into it, driving it backward, until it lost its balance on the edge of the precipice, and fell screeching into the void.

Morgan, his body ravaged, his armor peeled away from his torso, wavered, and collapsed.

Chapter 203

“Hurry, he needs healing, or the venom in his bloodstream may yet kill him,” Zenna said.

She laid another healing spell upon him, while Dannel and Arun held his arms, adding their own power to the seriously injured knight. His wounds closed, but Morgan’s body trembled, fighting off the deadly spider poison. Zenna had held a spell of restoration in reserve, and that had been the first spell she’d cast, but she suspected that the healing power she possessed was like a droplet in the face of the raging flood of the bebilith’s powerful poison.

This place... it's one nightmare after another, she thought.

Morgan began to stir. Weakly, he opened his eyes. He saw Zenna, bending over him.

“Again... again you pull me back,” he said, blood flaking his lips. He was weak, very weak, but he insisted on drawing himself up, to a seated position.

“Well, that’s one suit of armor that won’t see much more use,” he said, fingering a bent plate.

“I may be able to repair it,” Arun said. “Difficult, though, without a proper forge.”

“We can pack it in Mole’s bag, bring it back with us,” Zenna said. “But right now, I think we’d better move forward. Can you walk?”

Morgan nodded, but he required Arun’s assistance to stand, and wavered even with *Alakast* to steady himself.

“You know, priest, you’re one crazy warrior,” Arun said. But his voice was warm, and he clasped the knight on his shoulder.

Morgan, uncharacteristically, grinned. “You know, dwarf, I think you may be right.” Summoning his strength, he drew apart from Arun’s supporting arm, and walked away under his own power, leaning heavily on his staff.

“I can help you more tomorrow,” Zenna said.

“Don’t worry,” Morgan said. “I’m fine, I can keep up.”

“Still, maybe you’d better leave the insane frontal assaults to Arun for a day or two,” Dannel suggested.

With the bebilith destroyed, it was a fairly simple matter to make their way across one of the bridges, Mole going ahead to check for traps. On the far platform they found another door, and passed into another chamber beyond. There was another door to their right, presumably to the other chamber of the Test, but again they saw the mummy, waiting for them as it had promised. Once more Morgan tensed upon seeing it, but again the undead creature made no hostile move toward them. Looking around, Zenna saw that the chamber was decorated with frescoes showing a black-feathered angel doing battle with hordes of

demons and devils. Where the wall met the ceiling of the chamber, a single sentence was carved in a repeating pattern around the entire perimeter of the room. The words were clearly legible to Zenna, although they did not look like the common speech: KNOW WHO MADE YOU. A dais was visible on the far side of the room, upon which lay a lantern attached to a four-foot pole by a short chain. Glowing red sigils floated in mid-air about the dais, although Zenna could not decipher their meaning without closer examination.

The mummy strode up to the dais, stepping through the glowing runes, and took up the lantern. Crossing the room toward them, it addressed them. "Heed the words of Adimarchus," it said. "You have passed the Test of Judgment. Attend to the wisdom of Adimarchus! Always deal with rivals first, and enemies second. This lantern shall guide you to the second test: the Test of Resolve."

It extended its arms to Zenna, who took the lantern. It was heavy, and its narrow beam of light pointed north, back toward the chamber of the bebilith. And with that, the mummy vanished, in a flash of light.

"Well," Dannel said. "It seems we made the right choice, but for the wrong reasons."

Zenna was having difficulty juggling the spear and the heavy lantern. "Would you like me to carry one of those?" Dannel asked her.

At first she shook her head, but then she realized that they most likely had more days of walking ahead of them. "Thank you," she said, offering him the spear.

Mole had poked around the dais a bit, but other than the glowing runes, which didn't seem to do anything, there didn't seem to be anything else of note in the place. "Well, we'd better get back up to Kaurophon, I guess," she suggested.

"Be ready for anything," Morgan added. "Now that we have this lantern, he may decide that we are no longer necessary."

"Let 'im try something," Hodge growled, the threat apparent in the way he gripped his spear.

"Perhaps it would be better if we left him behind us, at this point?" the cleric said.

"I don't think so," Zenna said. "He knows this place well, well enough to follow us wherever we go, I suspect. Don't forget that he has the power to *scry*, and I wouldn't be surprised if he was carrying a focus on him; all you'd really need is a good-quality mirror. And his knowledge may prove useful to us yet. Better to keep him with us, where we can keep an eye on him."

Morgan clearly didn't like it, but ultimately he nodded. Just the effort of standing here, talking, was obviously wearying him.

"Let's get back up to the cathedral," Zenna said, not unkindly. "We could all use more rest."

"Not yet," Arun said. "There's one more thing that we need to do first."

Zenna turned toward the dwarf, curious.

* * * * *

Author's Note: so at this point, Morgan has -1 negative level (from the succubus), 6 CON (from the bebilith's poison), no clerical spells, and mostly ruined armor. You'd think that this is as bad as it can get for the fallen cleric, eh? ;)

Chapter 204

The chamber was smaller than the one where the bebilith had waited. The only feature of note was a faintly glowing circle inscribed in the floor, laid with silvery runes that seemed to pulse slightly, and rippled with apparent movement when one turned one's gaze away, and saw them out of the corner of one's eye.

Standing within the circle was a seven-foot tall humanoid creature, an odd cross between a bird and a man. It watched them intently with penetrating eyes set in a face resembling that of a hawk, complete to the angular beak and pale feathers that covered its body. Great wings rose out from its torso where arms would have been on a human, but while it was at rest, as now, they folded against its body, revealing small hands at their ends that seemed fully articulated, folded together in a contemplative gesture that was somewhat at odds with the fierce look of the creature.

Its beak opened, and it spoke, something soft and melodic.

Morgan's face was transformed by the words, and he half-fell to his knees, bowing before the creature. He responded in the same language.

"What's it sayin'?" Hodge asked.

"It is a celestial," Arun said, "No doubt imprisoned here by Adimarchus."

The hawk-man spoke something else again, clearly addressed at Morgan. Before the cleric could respond, however, Arun strode boldly forward, until he stood at the edge of the circle.

"Careful, Arun!" Zenna cautioned.

The dwarf stared intently at the creature, which withstood his gaze with equanimity. Then, as if satisfied, the dwarf extended a booted foot and smeared one of the runes forming the circle.

The glow instantly faded, and the avoral stepped free from the circle. It turned to Arun, and bowed to him.

“I thank you for my freedom, dwarf,” it said, speaking common in a clear and unaccented voice that seemed strange, coming from that beak.

“I’ll not tolerate one such as you being held captive,” the paladin said simply, inclining his head in respect.

“No... no, one consecrated to the Soul Forger would not,” it replied, offering another bow before turning to the rest of them.

“Long have I been trapped in this place, conjured and bound by the dark powers that rule this pit. I had not expected to see wayfarers from the Material Plane here, in the Abyss. What transpires, above?”

They updated the avoral on what had happened, including the departure of Adimarchus and how they had been drawn to this place to match themselves against the evil forces seeking to gain control of Occipitus. The celestial listened carefully, and nodded thoughtfully when they were finished.

“You have embarked upon a dangerous quest, mortals. I will offer what aid I can, but I cannot in good conscience join you in a mission so torn with ambiguities. I would warn you, though, to be wary, and to watch this sorcerer of which you speak with great care.”

“Oh, we intend to,” Arun said.

With the avoral in their company, they returned to the cathedral. Kaurophon was not pleased to see the avian creature, Zenna thought, although he hid his feelings well. The celestial, on the other hand, utterly ignored him. Once the sorcerer learned of the success against the first test, however, he perked up, showing great interest as they described what had happened.

“Then we have a clear path to the second test!” he exclaimed. “Come, we must be on our way immediately!”

“Hold yer horses,” Hodge said. “The priest’s sick, and we can all use a breather ere we start marchin’ back an’ forth across this gods-forsaken pit—no offense, birdie.”

“None taken,” the avoral said, a hint of amusement in its voice.

Kaurophon protested, but he could not sway them; the companions were united in their desire to avoid blundering into danger again unprepared. So they set camp once more in the cathedral, and rested. The avoral proved a boon companion, telling them tales of Celestia and the other higher realms, tales that inspired them in this dark place. His very presence helped keep some of the darkness of the plane at bay, and they had a peaceful sleep for the first time in days.

In the “morning” they prepared to set out once more. Arun did what he could to patch up the knight’s damaged armor, using the limited tools available to him; although it still provided far less protection than it had when whole, it was better than no protection at all. Arun and Zenna both cast spells of restoration upon Morgan, and he looked much better

afterwards, though still somewhat pale. Taking their leave of the celestial, they set out on a course that roughly continued their earlier path to the place, following the long beam of the magical lantern.

Ahead, somewhere in the distance, lay the second part of the Test of the Smoking Eye.

Chapter 205

Zenna cast a long, sweeping glance across the vast plain that surrounded them in all directions. Due to the flat nature of Occipitus, they could see clearly all the way to the surrounding mountains that held the flatlands in their grasp, and the omnipresent skull-mountain that issued smoke and plasms in an unceasing trickle. That long vista gave the place an illusion of compactness, but having walked over a goodly part of the plane since their arrival, she knew first-hand how big this region was.

It was their third “day” since their departure from the cathedral. They counted the passage of time by the number of sleeping-breaks they took, an inexact measure at best. At least the soft, slightly spongy ground and flatness of the plain made their travel very efficient, and they covered many miles in each long march. They had come across another herd of evil bison, who had responded with much the same aggressiveness as the first group. This time there had been no convenient barrier to shelter behind, but there were only fifteen in this herd, and their weapons made short work of the fierce creatures. Dannel had taken a hard hit this time, butted almost senseless by one of the charging beasts, but healing had been quickly forthcoming, and none of the others had been seriously injured in the brief clash.

Occipitus’s sheer... *presence* continued to weigh upon them, and there had been occasional scenes of conflict on the long trek, but for the most part, they had settled down to a grim equilibrium, marching forward along the path indicated by the lantern.

Occasionally she transferred the device to Dannel, or Arun, or even Mole, but for the most part she bore the glowing lamp herself. Kaurophon did not offer to bear it, perhaps knowing that they would have refused him had he offered. In covert moments, away from the sorcerer, they agreed to always keep at least two of them in proximity to the lamp at all times, and to avoid leaving it unguarded for even a moment. Zenna had shared enough of what she’d learned about Kaurophon, especially his ability to *dimension door*, so that they could all be on guard against betrayal.

Still, oddly, for all that she found herself liking the quixotic outsider. Kaurophon had a strong presence about him, and his manner was always observant and often friendly. He kept himself apart from them for the most part, recognizing their suspicion of him, but there were times when he told them tales of the varied wonders of the Outer Realms, spoken vividly enough to give Zenna the impression that she’d actually visited some of these places.

She felt stronger now, more comfortable in herself. At the cathedral, during their rests, she focused her thoughts and continued her meditations, extending what she had learned and accommodating it to the altered realities of this place. She felt her consciousness

expanding, and felt new avenues of power open to her explorations. She regretted the lack of access to new wizard spells, and the inks, quills, and other supplies to add them to her spellbook. But she could feel the divine magic at her command grow stronger.

“Something’s coming up behind us,” Dannel said, stirring her again from her thoughts. They all turned to look back, staring across the plain. Zenna thought she saw a speck in the distance, along their line of march.

“What is it?” Mole asked, sheltering her eyes with her hand, staring out over the distance.

Dannel didn’t respond for several long seconds. When he finally spoke, however, his words brought a familiar feeling of anticipation, mingled with dread.

“The vulture-demon, it’s back. And this time, it looks like it’s brought a friend along with it.”

Chapter 206

The two vrock demons flew rapidly closer, their wings beating powerfully as they sped over the landscape, close to the ground to avoid drawing the attentions of the plasms above.

The companions prepared themselves. Kaurophon cast several spells, putting his defenses in place, and laid an enchantment upon Arun to enhance his already-considerable stamina.

Zenna renewed her *mage armor*, bolstered it with a *shield*, and then turned toward Dannel. He’d drawn out an arrow, and was judging the distance toward the demons. They were still fairly far off, but growing rapidly nearer.

“Hold a moment,” Zenna said. She looked in his quiver; there were six arrows left inside, not counting the one he’d just drawn. “Put it back.”

He replaced the arrow, and she cast an *align weapon* spell upon them, drawing into them the power of good, anathema to the demons. “Make them count,” she said, drawing back. The elf nodded, and drew his arrow again.

The elf fired the first shot, his arrow lancing through the air, cutting the distance between them and the low-flying demons. One of them squawked, seeing it coming, and its fellow twisted to the side, the arrow knifing harmlessly between them. Dannel frowned and took aim for a second shot, altering his aim slightly. Beside him Hodge and Mole also opened fire with their crossbows, although there was little chance of doing damage with mundane weapons.

Again the demons dodged, but this time Dannel had adjusted, and the demon, fooled by the slight change in arc, darted to the same side only to have the arrow punch through its wing. The *aligned* missile hurt it, and it let out a loud, angry cry. Both demons started pounding their wings, gaining some altitude, presumably in preparation of a diving attack. Hodge and Mole’s shots both missed, and the dwarf dropped his crossbow, focusing instead on lifting his heavy spear into position to brace for their rush.

The demons, after the speed of their initial approach, now seemed content to move gradually into position. Now about thirty feet above the ground, they both suddenly seemed to shimmer, and numerous shifting images sprung out into the air around them. More missiles rose up to meet them, Zenna adding a cautious shot from her own crossbow, holding her other spells in reserve for the moment. She was rewarded by connecting with a *mirror image*, causing it to vanish. But still several remained around each demon.

One of the demons abruptly spread its wings wide to their full extension, and offered a loud, shrill cry. The ground beneath it began to shift and twist, a foul black cloud gathering out of the spongy turf. It took but seconds to form and then dissipate, leaving behind a pack of small, fat, slavering demons.

“Dretches!” Morgan warned them. Lesser demons, but there were nearly a dozen, and they immediately started rushing toward the companions.

The vrock rose up yet higher, fifty, sixty, seventy feet high, now at risk from the roiling plasms above. But they only remained there a moment, hanging at apogee eighty feet above them, before winging over and diving at them. They screeched as a spell from below interrupted their defenses, and the *mirror images* dissolved, revealing their true locations. Zenna glanced around her, but saw no sign of Kaurophon. *Invisible*, she thought, adding that bit of knowledge to what she knew of his powers.

As if he'd been waiting for that moment, Dannel lifted his bow and fired, the arrow slicing up into the gut of the demon he'd wounded before. The demon let out a cry of pain, but continued its dive, taking aim at the elf with its outstretched talons.

“Remember the stunning screech!” Zenna warned, but it was too late to do anything about it. The demons had timed their dive to coincide with their summoned dretches meeting them, and battle was joined.

“I'll hold the dretches!” Morgan cried, and he rushed out from their defensive ring to meet the small horde, *Alakast* lifted to attack. He drove the magical staff almost literally *through* one of the small demons, which erupted into a noxious heap of bone, gore, and black goo that quickly dissolved into nothingness. A second demon leapt at his arm, but he jammed the staff quickly back into its face, and it too fell, the putrid mess that passed for its brains leaking out from the gaps in its sundered skull.

Two were down almost immediately, but the other nine swarmed on Morgan from all sides, tearing with their ugly claws and biting with their protruding teeth.

The rest of the companions could offer little immediate aid, for the vrock were upon them. Hodge kept his spear aimed at the first as it descended, and although it tried to veer aside at the last instant, the canny dwarf shifted in time to drive the magical shaft through an extended wing. The vrock tore free and landed hard on the ground, immediately turning at the dwarf in a furious rage.

The second vrock assaulted Dannel, who drew his sword while keeping his bow close in his other hand. A claw clipped him across the shoulder, drawing long gashes down his arm

even through his shirt of mail. He pulled free and lifted his sword, but too late realized that the weapon had almost no chance of harming the creature. Instead he stabbed it into the ground at his feet, and darted backward, trying to gain room to use his bow.

Arun roared one of his battle-invocations to Moradin as he laid into the demon threatening Hodge from behind. His holy blade tore through its thick hide, releasing a jet of black ichor, drawing an ear-shattering shriek from the creature. The other demon took up that cry and redoubled its force, their fury echoing across the plain.

The companions, their senses overwhelmed by that terrible sound, reeled. Even Arun, with his incredible fortitude, was momentarily overcome by that fell screech.

Morgan reeled, stunned by the vrock screech, and the demons facing him exploited that fact mercilessly. His armor, already ravaged by the bebilith, now had to withstand tearing claws and biting teeth, seeking gaps. Bloody wounds appeared in his arms and legs, and one demon even grabbed hold of *Alakast*, its nearly-mindless expression twisting in pain from the very touch of the weapon, as it tried to pull the staff from his grasp.

That crude attempt to disarm him finally shook him from his daze. A flare of rage seemed to flow out of the weapon into him, and he swept the weapon in a violent arc, driving the demons back. Two fell, their bloated heads laid open by blows from the staff, but the others barely hesitated, leaping at him again.

The vrocks had not wasted the momentary advantage provided by their stunning screeches. The one that Arun had wounded in the paladin's initial assault turned upon him, and unleashed a flurry of attacks upon him. It pumped its wings and lifted itself a few feet above the ground, so that its hind legs as well as its forelimbs could rake him with their claws. The dwarf's armor kept him from being torn apart, but even so a claw tore several gashes in his jaw, while another crunched heavily into his hip, driving pain even through the armored plate protecting him there. Finally the creature darted its vulpine beak at his exposed face, but he managed to recover enough to lift his shield, deflecting the powerful blow.

The second vrock continued its attack upon the stunned Dannel. Like its fellow it flew up to unleash a full assault upon him. Without the ability to dodge, the hapless elf had no chance. By sheer chance one claw missed, turned by the chain links of his armor, but the other three all dug painfully into his flesh, and when it darted its beak down to finish him, only the fact that he was already falling kept the demon from taking half of his head off. The elf went down hard, blood gushing from the wounds in his arms, body, and face.

The companions were nearly overcome... but in that moment of near-defeat, a power filled them, a pulse of energy that flowed into the veins like a bracing mountain torrent. Their bodies responded, moving with great speed, and they took the attack back to their enemies.

Morgan laid about him with *Alakast*, and every time he struck, a demon went down. One of the dretch tried to *scare* the knight, but the spell faltered against the man's mental focus, and the staff tore through them like a scythe cutting through a swath of ripened wheat. Soon the demons were intent only upon flight, but none got more than a few paces away

before the white wood found them, and sent them back to the pits where they had originated.

Arun held nothing back, driving his sword into the body of the demon with thundering force, *smiting* it with the divine power at his command. The demon reeled before the dwarf, humbled by his strength and skill, and it fell back, its body covered in its own blood. It came to the belated realization that coming to the aid of its comrade against these outsiders had been a bad, bad idea, and it drew back from the dwarf, preparing to call upon its power to *teleport* from this place of death—its death, if it didn't flee.

It never saw Hodge come up behind it, or the descending axe, until it was too late.

The demon saw that its crippled foe still stirred, although with the amount of blood jetting from his wounds, death would not be long coming. Even though it had foes remaining, however, it could not resist the killing stroke, and it flapped forward, a talon poised to strike.

Flames washed over it, knocking the vrock off-balance. Even though it was resistant to fire, these flames still hurt it, scorching its flesh, sending a tendril of hot pain through its hide before they flickered and died. The vrock turned, furious, to see a woman, unarmored, facing it only about fifteen feet away.

"Face me, coward," she snarled at it.

The demon grinned, knowing that if the *scorching ray* was the best she had, she would soon be joining her dying friend. It launched itself at her, a claw tearing at her head.

Zenna felt pain blossom through her skull as she was knocked roughly backward, the vrock ripping through all of her vaunted magical defenses as though they were not even there. It would tear her to pieces, she knew, but she had no choice; she'd seen it move to finish off Dannel, and could not let that happen.

The demon let out a sudden cry of pain, and while Zenna hadn't seen the source of its distress, she knew what it had to be. *Mole!* she thought, and indeed there was her friend, visible as the demon turned in mid-air, the gnome dangling from her knife buried deep in the back of its leathery thigh. The demon snarled and lashed out with its claws, scoring the rogue deeply, forcing her to drop off and roll away, bleeding.

The demon turned back toward Zenna, but now there was a dwarf standing there, holding a sword that burned its eyes painfully with its bright glow.

"You die, demon," the dwarf said.

The vrock's anger, and perhaps its success versus the first few foes, overrode its caution, and it lunged at the dwarf, its claws tearing and slashing.

It was its last mistake.

A few moments later the companions gathered over the broken bodies of their enemies. The dretch had dissolved into greasy black stains on the ground, but the vrocks lay in

bloody heaps, bones jutting from their broken bodies. Zenna had run over to Dannel, stabilizing him with her magic, and he was slowly coming around.

It had been a close call. Dannel had been very close to death, and Arun and Morgan both bore serious wounds. But they were still alive, and all too soon they were marching forward again, leaving another bloody battlefield behind them to mark their passage.

Chapter 207

“The Plain of Cysts,” Kaurophon said. “The site of an ancient battlefield between celestials and demons, cast down with the rest of Occipitus when the plane was torn from the celestial realms.”

“Wonderful,” Zenna said. The light of the magical lantern shone directly ahead, into the battlefield.

“What’s in those?” Mole asked, pointing at the nearest of the objects that gave the region its name.

The cyst was a grayish globule perhaps five feet in length, hugging the ground like the cocoon of some huge caterpillar. A black tube was visible protruding from one end of the cyst, sinking into the ground beneath. There were hundreds of them, spread out around the battlefield, as far as they could see.

“The remains of the celestials who fell here,” the sorcerer said. “Some demons say that as the plane absorbs their essences, it becomes more hostile to their kind.”

“So Occipitus is just... sucking them up? That’s disgusting,” Mole said, even as she edged closer to the cyst to get a better view.

“Leave the fallen be,” Arun said. “Our way lies forward, then. Would you like me to carry the beacon?”

Zenna shook her head. “I can keep it. Something tells me that we might need your sword, in there.”

The dwarf nodded, and they started forward, into the ancient battlefield. The companions formed a wedge around Zenna, the magical lantern clearly identifying their path ahead. They passed numerous cysts, including a few that were several times the size of the first, almost as if they were giant pale boulders rising out of the plain. Abruptly the lantern twisted on its pole, its light now shining to their right, perpendicular to their original course.

“That’s odd,” Dannel said. “So we’re supposed to change course, just like that?”

“Apparently so,” Zenna replied. “I don’t understand it any better than you do.”

They moved onward, but they’d only gone a few dozen paces when Dannel raised his hand in caution.

“What is it?” Zenna whispered, stopping.

“I heard something... just ahead, behind those big cysts.”

Warily, the elf started forward, while the rest of them silently drew weapons, prepared spells, and waited. But the elf had gotten barely ten feet ahead of them when there was a bright flash, and they found themselves standing at the entrance to the field of cysts, back where they had started.

“What was that?” Morgan asked, looking around in confusion.

“A part of the challenge, I would presume,” Zenna said. “Apparently there’s some property to the plain that removes intruders.” She glanced at Kaurophon with a questioning look.

“I have heard of no such property,” the sorcerer said. “But I admit I have not spent much time in this particular place here myself.”

“Well, how are we supposed to get through?” Mole asked. “The lantern is shining forward again.”

“Perhaps we can go around it?” Arun suggested.

Zenna shook her head. “I may be wrong, but I’d wager that whatever we’re supposed to find is in there somewhere.”

“I agree,” Dannel said. “So we just need to figure out what triggered the teleportation.”

“Maybe it was that what yer heard, elf,” Hodge said.

“Perhaps. Let us try again.”

They entered the plain again, quickly retracing their steps to where they’d reached before. Once again, they heard the faint sounds of activity ahead, although they could not see what it was through all the obstructing cysts.

“Maybe we’re supposed to stay together,” Dannel suggested. They all moved forward, cautiously. The lantern shifted again, drawing them around another tight turn to the right. They had to be heading back along their initial route, Zenna thought, wondering if there was a logic to this maze, or if it was just a random course, indecipherable to one not bearing the lantern. Given what she knew of demons, she suspected the latter.

Then they moved far enough around a series of cysts to see what had alerted them. Not far off the “path” stood a small group of humans, gathered around an opened cyst. All were lean and muscular, their flesh marked with tattoos inked in colorful patterns of red and violet. Three were men, clad in flowing robes gathered in at their calves and forearms with leather cords, while the fourth was a woman, clad in plate armor, with an odd symbol bearing a fierce female visage cast in gold fixed across the brow of her open-faced helm. They looked up as the companions drew near, and Zenna felt a twinge of revulsion as she

saw the corpse lying at their feet. It was mostly dismembered now, its head and spinal column torn from the body, but enough remained, particularly the blood-stained white wings crushed beneath its body, to identify what it had been.

“Whut valud, nass talath ‘ar phaland Wee Jas?” the woman said, her voice stilted and formal, each syllable clearly fashioned.

Zenna looked at Dannel, but the elf only shrugged. “I’ve never heard the like,” he said.

“We don’t know what you’re saying,” Zenna said. She saw that the travelers were tense, and several of the men were slowly reaching for the daggers at their belts.

“Lesset tarun chakkar noth,” the woman said, making a slashing gesture with her hand to punctuate her statement.

“We do not mean to intrude upon your ritual,” Kaurophon said, his voice even, reassuring. He gestured toward the left, along their path, indicating that they would move on.

And then, there was a flash. Zenna had almost forgotten about the teleportation, but she wasn’t surprised to find themselves back on the edge of the plain once again.

But this time, they weren’t alone. The strangers were here as well, and they clearly weren’t happy about it. The woman let out a trill that sent a chill down her back, and as she lifted her spear, her three fellows leapt to the attack, daggers hissing from the sheaths at their belts.

Chapter 208

Caught off-guard by another involuntary teleportation, the companions found themselves attacked by another group of odd planar travelers.

The lightly-armored men seemed insane, charging into battle with daggers against foes with the advantage of both superior gear and superior numbers. But they moved incredibly fast, and even as Morgan lifted *Alakast* to strike, two flanked him, stabbing him with their daggers. Both blows found openings in his armor, and the cleric staggered. Zenna saw the greasy slickness on the knives as they struck, and shouted out a warning to her companions. “Poison!”

But her friends were already responding to the attack. Arun shifted to avoid being flanked by the last rogue, who’d tried to put the dwarf between himself and one of the pair assaulting Morgan. The rogue’s blade glanced harmlessly off of the dwarf’s armored torso, but Arun’s counter tore mercilessly through his robes, slicing through the layer of studded leather armor beneath and digging deeply into his body.

The armored woman, meanwhile, began uttering words that Zenna recognized as a clerical spell. She did not recognize the language, but recognized the familiar flows of divine energy, a spell of protection that settled around the woman.

“We should deal with the spellcaster,” Kaurophon, standing beside her, suggested.

Zenna didn't respond, having already come to that conclusion herself. Lifting her hand, she drew upon her own magic, speaking the words that triggered her *scorching ray* spell. The flaming blast seared into the woman, drawing a cry of pain from her.

Hodge was standing in the middle of the melee, too close to effectively use his spear. Dropping the long weapon, he unlimbered his trusty axe, and hurled himself at one of the two rogues threatening Morgan. The man dodged back, narrowly avoiding the dwarf's first attack, but his evasion left him open to a solid blow from *Alakast*, which cracked him on the shoulder.

Arun's foe tried to hold his ground, tumbling again to the flank, but the dwarf simply adjusted, slicing him again with a powerful blow that staggered him. Seriously wounded now, he saw but could not avoid being flanked in turn as Mole rolled behind him, and cracked her mace solidly into his back. With a groan, the man slumped to the ground, dying.

The enemy cleric tried to call upon another spell, but even as she began her invocation two attacks poured into her; an arrow from Dannel's bow and a quintet of glimmering *magic missiles* from Kaurophon's wand. Her concentration broken, she staggered backward, shouting a command to her allies even as she dug in the pouch at her waist for a scroll.

The two rogues drew back, taking up defensive positions around the cleric.

“Should we finish ‘em?” Hodge said, lifting his axe.

“No, let them go,” Zenna said. “This was largely a misunderstanding, I suspect, anyway.”

The woman unrolled her scroll and read the words upon it, and the three strangers shimmered and disappeared.

“That was a mistake,” Morgan said, grimacing as his body fought against the lingering effects of the poison on the rogues' daggers. “They were clearly enemies, and may return with more forces later.”

“I don't think so,” Zenna said. “And in any case, we'll find plenty of fights here without looking for more trouble.” She stepped over to the injured knight, to heal him.

But Morgan turned away. “I'm fine,” he said. “Let's get this over with.” Without waiting for her, he started down the familiar path again into the Plain of Cysts.

“What about him?” Dannel said, glancing down at the last rogue.

“Dead,” Mole said, checking his body. “It's too bad... the first real people we've seen since coming to this place, too.” She looked down at the dead man sadly, but that didn't stop her from taking his dagger and a few other things she found on his body.

“I guess they'll know better ‘an to attack strangers, next time,” Hodge said.

“Where’s that blasted knight headed?” Arun said. “Without the lantern, he’s going to get himself lost.”

“Maybe he’s already lost,” Zenna said, too softly for the others to hear, as they hurried back into the maze, to catch up to the diminishing form of the injured knight of Helm.

Chapter 209

“I think we have to keep moving, that stopping our progress triggers the teleportation,” Zenna said.

They were deeper into the field of cysts now, a few turns beyond where they’d initially encountered the strange and hostile planar travelers. The path continued to shift, turning occasionally to a perpendicular course to their left or right, sometimes doubling back on itself. The lantern allowed them to follow the route without error, but they couldn’t see any landmark that it might be leading them toward.

“You may be right,” Dannel said. “It would fit the pattern of what we’ve experienced thus far.”

Mole had drifted off of the “path”, and was heading toward one of the cysts. “Careful, Mole,” Dannel cautioned. “We should stay together.”

“There’s something here,” she said, pointing toward the cyst. Looking in that direction, they could see that there was in fact a faint glow coming from within.

“What’cha got, girl?” Hodge asked. “An enemy?” He lifted his spear at the thought, orienting the weapon in the general direction of the cyst. “Or maybe some loot, eh?”

The gnome was now standing over the cyst. “It’s a glowing sword!” she said excitedly. “Magic, no doubt.”

“We cannot stop,” Kaurophon said. “Already we have been delayed too long, here; we cannot keep retracing our steps.”

“Hey, it looks like there may be some other stuff in here, too,” Mole said.

Zenna had slowed her steps, but she was still being carried past Mole and the cyst. “We cannot stop, Mole.”

The gnome shook her head. “Well, I’ve been stopped, and I haven’t vanished yet. Go on, slowly, and I’ll catch up once I get this open.” She drew her knife, and started hacking at the cyst.

“Mole!” Zenna said, but the gnome had chosen to ignore her.

"I like this not, looting the dead," Arun said, frowning. "Though I detect no specific taint here, save for the general aura of the plane."

"Well, if it is a celestial weapon, then its former owner clearly has no use for it, and we can put it to better use than letting Occipitus slowly absorb it," Dannel said.

"It's too tough!" Mole's voice came back to them. "I need help—Hodge, how about that axe of yours?"

"I'll go," Dannel said, trotting back to her.

Zenna watched for the flash that would send them back to the start of the path, but nothing happened. Finally the elf and gnome came running back, carrying their prizes.

"What did you find?" Zenna asked, curious despite herself.

Dannel held up the sword, a sleek hand-and-a-half weapon with a glimmering white blade, marked with runes in what Zenna recognized was the celestial language. For all his earlier focus upon completing the challenge here, Morgan was clearly drawn to the weapon, and he stared at it in amazement as Dannel hefted it, its radiance clean and reassuring as it drove back the sickly red glow that shone everywhere upon Occipitus.

The knight swallowed. "This is a holy blade," he said.

"Go ahead, take it," Arun said. They were still moving forward, though their pace had slowed as they examined the sword. The path bent again to the left, and Zenna absently led them around the bend. Distracted, she didn't see the pile of debris that rose up out of the plain maybe a hundred yards ahead, which they were now approaching.

Morgan shook his head, clearly still mired in his own doubts, and his hasty oath to refuse the chosen weapon of his deity until he'd redeemed himself in the eyes of his god.

"Arun has proven the utility of such a weapon, priest," Dannel said. "You should take it... you'd put it to better use than any of us."

Slowly Morgan nodded, and took the sword gingerly, as though afraid that it might bite him. Once in his hand, though, it looked as though it belonged there.

"Here... take *Alakast*," he said, handing the staff to Dannel. "You are nearly out of arrows, in any case." Dannel accepted the weapon.

"We also found a cloak, and a set of bracers," Mole said eagerly. "Zenna, you want to check them out?"

But before Zenna could answer, a chattering noise drew their attention back toward the path ahead. There, behind one of the larger cysts, they could see a long, slender limb jutting out from cover. Its owner rose up from behind the cyst... a horror of a thing, resembling a giant spider, about the size of a warhorse, with multisegmented legs that extended outward in a spread that had to be six or seven paces across. Its body was oddly segmented, as if a

deranged craftsman had built it out of black iron plates, and the four slender, multi-jointed pincers flanking its mouth were surmounted by a row of four strange, multifaceted eyes, each glowing slightly in a different color, and mounted in such a way that they could twist to face nearly any angle around the creature. Taken it all it was bizarre, alien, and utterly frightening.

“Another spider-demon!” Morgan exclaimed.

“Nay,” Kaurophon said. “A retriever!”

“Whatever it be, it be trouble!” Hodge yelled, clutching his spear with the head pointed in the direction of the monster.

The companions hesitated, reluctant to blindly charge at the creature. Zenna knew that if they stopped, they would be returned to the start of the path again, but faced with this thing, she thought that it might not be a bad option.

The thing let out a loud metallic screech, and one of its colored eyes flashed. A bolt of jagged electrical energy surged from the eye, blasting into Zenna’s chest. The tiefling was knocked off her feet by the force of the impact, and she felt everything around her spin as pain radiated out through her body from where the bolt had struck her. She heard her comrades shouting, and then, belatedly, the white flash came.

They were back at the beginning, once again. Zenna listened for the sound of the creature that would indicate that it had teleported with them, but the area around them was quiet, and her companions, while wary, looked calm. Arun knelt beside her, and gently touched her face, filling her with healing energy. She nodded gratefully, pulling herself up to a sitting position.

“Gods, that thing packed a wallop,” she said.

“You might try ducking, next time,” Dannel said lightly, but it was clear from his expression that he was concerned for her.

“How we s’posed to get past that thing?” Hodge said.

“The same way we got past everything else,” Morgan said grimly, tightening his grip on his new sword.

“You’ll get your chance,” Mole exclaimed, looking out across the field of cysts. “It’s coming!”

Chapter 210

“Kaurophon!” Dannel said. “You knew what that thing was... how do we beat it?”

“I presume you hack it to pieces,” the sorcerer said, speaking a word of magic and disappearing from view.

“Not very helpful, eh?” Hodge said, setting his spear with hands that trembled slightly. They could all see it, now, making a beeline though the plain, stepping over cysts that blocked its path as it rushed rapidly toward them.

Zenna stood, grimacing as the motion sent a new surge of pain through her body, despite Arun’s earlier healing. She rushed over to Hodge, laying her hands upon the head of his spear, *aligning* the weapon.

“Thanks,” the dwarf said.

“Zenna, get back behind us,” Arun said. “You won’t survive another one of those blasts.”

Nodding, Zenna retreated. Mole had vanished—no, there she was, crouched in the lee of one of the nearer cysts, out of the direct line of sight of the oncoming retriever. Kaurophon was likewise *invisible*, but she suspected he was somewhere close, probably laying additional magical protections upon himself.

Dannel drew out an arrow from his quiver; his last one. Carefully he fitted it to his bow, and pulled the heavy string back until the fletchings brushed his cheek. The demon was now just over a hundred and fifty feet distant, and closing fast. The song filled him, and he knew even before he released that the shot would be perfect. It sliced through the air, slamming squarely into the face of the demon. The sound of the impact was a clear note, a clang that reached them over the ancient battlefield, but the damage, if any, was superficial.

The thing drew closer, and released a scintillating bolt of pure white from another of its eyes. Dannel followed his own earlier advice and ducked, but the edge of the ray still grazed his side, and white crystals of frost formed along his shoulder and bicep as he spun around, dropping his now-useless bow.

“Draw it to us!” Morgan shouted, hurling a javelin. At a hundred feet of distance, the cast was improbable at best, but he nearly struck it anyway, the head of the weapon sticking in the ground a pace from its body. Arun’s throwing hammers were well out of range, but the paladin had taken up Hodge’s crossbow during its rush, and released a shot that clanged against its metallic body.

“Stand fast, warrior,” Kaurophon’s voice whispered in Morgan’s ear, and the knight felt energy flowing into him, fortifying his stamina.

“Here it comes!” Hodge yelled, as the demon launched into another frenzied rush, heading straight for Dannel. Arun and Morgan surged to meet it, but its speed was such that it barreled right past them to lunge at the elf, lifting a leg to stab down at him. Dannel threw himself to the side, but the leg still sliced through his cloak and tore at the mail-links protecting his torso. The edge of the limb was serrated like a bent saw, and even though the elf’s roll helped him move through the worst effects of the blow, he was trailing blood as he regained his footing, *Alakast* held in a defensive position before him.

Morgan and Arun each yelled a cry of battle as they rushed the demon. Arun’s blow came first, but the dwarf put too much power into the swing, which unfortunately only glanced off

of its armored body. Morgan, recognizing the durability of the creature, focused on a spot that looked vulnerable—the joint where its head met its abdomen. The holy sword clanged into it with violent force, and a seam opened, releasing a nasty, pungent gel that bubbled down about its frame.

The demon instantly turned upon Morgan, and fired a green beam into his chest. The fallen cleric staggered and cried out, and looked down with horror as the splaying beam spread out across his torso.

And where it touched, his armor, and the skin beneath, started to turn gray and stiff.

Slowly turning him to stone.

Chapter 211

Morgan cried out, unable to resist the terrible transformation that threatened to destroy him.

And in that cry, he spoke a name that he had not used since before coming here, a name that he'd left behind in shame and guilt.

“Helm!” he shouted.

Drawing upon a reservoir of fortitude deep within him, and the anchor of that name, the knight roared and twisted away from the creature and that fell ray. The eye-beam flickered out, and after a tense moment of uncertainty, Morgan felt his skin returning to normal.

“Destroy it, now!” Arun yelled.

The companions, knowing full well the potency of the demon, assaulted it with everything they had. Hodge drew up his spear and charged it from the flank, slamming the head of his weapon deep into its armored side. Mole came up from behind, but even though her mace struck a thick leg solidly, it didn't seem to have much effect upon the creature. But it felt it when Dannel drove *Alakast* into its head, and it staggered.

But it was not finished just yet.

The retriever lashed out with vicious strokes of its blade-limbs, tearing fierce wounds in those it struck, hurting Dannel, Arun, and Morgan. Dannel went down, hurt bad, blood gushing from his bleeding leg. Morgan, already wounded in the battle with the rogues earlier, fell back, clutching at his gashed and bleeding side. The demon lunged at him before he could escape its reach, lashing its pincer-fangs around him and drawing him roughly up into the air, securely held in its bite. Morgan screamed once and crumpled as the creature crushed him, drawing him into unconsciousness and toward death.

Arun lifted his sword and immediately rushed again at the demon, which was turning back toward the cyst-field, as if intent now upon retreat with its captive. But the last gem-eye, a brilliant red ruby, swiveled and flashed, blasting a stream of fire into the dwarf's chest. The

dwarf staggered back from the force of the blast, and it was clear that the flames had hurt him, hurt him bad.

But it would take a lot more than that to stop Arun Goldenshield.

The dwarf roared an invocation to Moradin as he leapt inside the reach of the demon's stabbing limbs, under Morgan's dangling legs, and drove his sword straight up into its body. The demon convulsed, twitching, stumbling as Hodge drew his spear out and stabbed it in again, this time into the joint directly behind its head. It screeched and finally fell, still holding Morgan tightly in its grasp.

Arun was there in a flash, prying the crippled knight free, stabilizing him with a trickle of healing energy, until his reservoir of divine power was empty. Zenna had already tended to Dannel, but the elf was still very pale.

The dwarf stood, gingerly, his own body blackened and battered. "I think," he said, sucking in a deep breath, "I think, that maybe, we should rest a bit, before heading back in."

No one disagreed.

Chapter 212

They were getting close, Zenna thought; she could feel it.

Slowly, each step deliberate along the path illuminated by the magical lantern, she walked onward. Her new cloak flapped against her legs as she walked. It was a bit large for her, but she didn't begrudge that in exchange for the benefits of its magical protection. Both she and Kaurophon had examined it during their last rest, and it radiated a potent, if unspecific, abjuration effect. With some time and a decent laboratory she could no doubt pinpoint its precise protective spell, but for now, the others had agreed that she should wear it.

"Need yer to keep standin' to keep them healin' spells comin'," Hodge had commented.

Neither of them had been able to decipher the function of the bracers they had found, except to confirm that they were in fact magical. For now, they rested secure in Mole's *bag of holding*.

They were getting a bit spread out, and she considered stopping, letting them teleport back to the start of the invisible maze. But when she looked back, Mole and Dannel were returning from their excursion to the heap of debris where the retriever had made its lair. Mole had the look of someone who'd just found a treat hidden under her dinner plate, and Dannel was carrying something heavy... a suit of armor?

"Good news!" the elf said, as he rejoined them. "This suit of plate is in almost perfect condition... and it looks right about your size, Morgan!"

"We also found a lot of gold, and this dagger," Mole added, holding up the weapon gingerly by a bit of cloth wrapped around its hilt.

"What's wrong with it?" Hodge asked.

"It doesn't... well, *feel* right," the gnome replied. "But it's clearly magical, it even gives off a bit of a glow when you draw it."

"Bah, it's just a knife," the dwarf said. "Give it 'ere."

But Arun blocked him with an outstretched hand. "It is evil... I can feel the Taint seeping from it even from here," he said. "Discard it."

Mole's interest in her find was not diminished by the dwarf's revelation; if anything, she seemed more intent upon it. "Really? Evil? But... if we toss it, maybe a demon will find it, and use it against something good."

The paladin frowned. "You raise a good point. Then keep it for now, until we return to Faerûn, where we can see about destroying it. But don't carry it on your person."

"Arun's right," Zenna said. They were all still walking forward, but the discussion over the demon's treasure had slowed the others, until she was now a good ten paces ahead of them. "Wrap it up and keep it buried in your *bag of holding*, and don't play with it; such weapons can sometimes have an ill effect upon their users."

"Perhaps you should take custody of it," Morgan said, looking up from where he was examining the armor, taking the pieces from Dannel's grasp.

"What do you mean by that?" Zenna returned, her eyes narrowing.

"Just that you are a spell-weaver; you would best know how to deal with any ill effects it might produce."

"Maybe Arun should take it," Kaurophon suggested. Zenna jumped slightly; as he often did, the sorcerer had a way of fading into the background, and she'd almost forgotten he was there. "As a soldier of the Light, he may best be able to resist the call of the Dark."

"I've packed it away," Mole said. "Don't worry, I promise I won't look at it again until we get back home."

"Home," Hodge said, wistfully. "We be a long ways off."

The beam of light from the lantern turned again to the left, and Zenna, walking forward ahead of the rest of them, abruptly vanished without warning.

"Zenna!" Dannel shouted, running forward. As soon as he reached the point where Zenna had disappeared, he, too, vanished.

"An invisible portal," Kaurophon suggested. "Teleportation."

“Or a trap,” Hodge said. “Fer all we know it’s dropped ‘em off the edge o’ this crazy world.”

“Only one way to find out for sure,” Arun said, already clanking forward. The others followed close behind. One by one, they stepped over the invisible threshold and faded from sight.

And appeared someplace different, Zenna and Dannel already there waiting for them. They were not alone; another desiccated mummy stood there, clad like the others in resplendent ritual armor that jarred incongruously with the shrunken remnants of its flesh. Their surroundings were rather different as well, the familiar emptiness of the plain replaced by a forest of tall, slender brown stalks, forming a dense but not impenetrable thicket all around them.

The mummy shifted its attention from Zenna to the others as they appeared, and lifted its hands, showing that it bore no weapons.

“Heed the words of Adimarchus,” it intoned, in the same deep sepulchral voice they had heard from the first mummy, if this was not indeed the same creature. “You have passed the Test of Resolve. Attend to the wisdom of Adimarchus! Let neither riches nor weaponry, neither allies nor enemies, tempt you from your course. Instead, spread such distractions before your rivals. The lantern shall guide you to the final test: the Test of Sacrifice. Your ascension to the throne of Adimarchus draws nigh!”

Having delivered its message, it waved its hand and disappeared.

“Charming fellow, this Adimarchus,” Dannel said.

“Well,” Arun said, “It looks like we’d better...”

He was interrupted by a loud crashing noise almost directly behind them. Zenna spun just in time to see a huge, four-armed ape, with reddish-brown fur, reach out towards her with claws outstretched...

Chapter 213

Caught off guard by the sudden appearance of the giant mutant ape, Zenna screamed.

“Back, monster!” Morgan yelled, stepping in between her and the creature, driving his sword down into its chest. The fiendish nature of the ape was revealed in the way that the holy sword blazed as it struck, opening a massive gash in its torso, black blood pouring down its body. The ape, critically wounded, nonetheless reached for the knight with all four of its claws, only to stagger to the ground as one of its legs crumpled under its weight. As it fell, it revealed Mole standing behind it. The gnome casually flicked her mace end over end, the hilt snapping with a satisfying crack into her palm.

“The bigger they are,” she said, with a smirk.

They drew back from the still-thrashing ape, only to hear loud roars from deeper in the thicket, from where the creature had appeared.

“More of them!” Dannel said.

“Again with the obvious!” Hodge said, trying with some difficulty to set his spear with all of the intervening strands rising up around them.

“Battle-wedge!” Morgan cried. “Spellcasters in the rear, warriors to the front!”

They barely had time to shift their formation when two more of the huge girallons appeared, charging full-on toward them.

A bright *scorching ray* of flames exploded over the chest of the first creature. The girallon’s fiendish resistances absorbed some of the force of the blast, but only some, and it roared in pain as it rushed toward her.

But Arun and Morgan were in its path. The ape’s long reach gave it first stroke, and it pounded Morgan with enough force to stagger the knight. But then the two warriors were surging forward to attack, their holy blades tearing into it with violent force. The creature wailed as blood exploded from the violent rents in its torso, and when a series of magical bolts seared into it from an *invisible* Kaurophon, it fell.

The second girallon all but impaled itself on Hodge’s spear. Still it managed to stagger forward, smashing the dwarf across the temple with a claw. The dwarf’s helm saved him from a crushed skull, but as he spun around, unsteady, blood was visible trailing down the side of his head. He released the spear and drew out his heavy axe, leaping forward to drive the weapon into its left knee. The axe bit deep, and the girallon went down, screaming. Before it could rise Dannel was there, driving *Alakast* into its face, and with a sickening crack the creature fell back, still.

“Quite a welcome,” came the sorcerer’s voice from nearby.

“We got lucky, that they attacked so readily, and without any benefit of tactics,” Arun said. “If they’d survived long enough to get those claws into us...”

He didn’t have to finish his thought.

Morgan cleaned his blade on one of the girallon’s hides, before slipping it back into its scabbard. Dannel came over to him, holding up his wand, and after a brief hesitation the knight nodded, accepting the healing energy. After that, he treated Hodge.

“That’s it for the wand,” he said when he was done, tossing the depleted wand into his pack.

“How are we set for potions?” Zenna asked.

A quick survey found that they only had a pair of healing draughts left to them. The companions shared a grim look, but their faces also revealed hard lines of determination.

Zenna thought of the scroll in her pouch, the option out that she'd carried since they'd agreed to come here. But they had come this far, and she knew that her friends would stay the course until there was no other alternative but to retreat.

"Here, Dannel," she said, unslinging her crossbow and quiver. "You're far more effective than I am with these."

The elf accepted the weapons silently.

"Ew, look!" Mole said, drawing their attention back to the slain apes.

They turned to see that several of the fibrous tendrils had snaked around the corpses of the apes, slowly tightening their grasp upon them. The companions drew back in alarm, but none of the tendrils seemed to be approaching them.

"I hate this place," Hodge said.

"Let's get out of here," Arun said gruffly.

Turning, they started walking in the direction indicated by the lantern.

Chapter 214

Zenna figured where the lantern was leading them even before the fibrous forest began to thin out, depositing them back out onto the plain.

There, directly ahead of them in the center of Occipitus, lay the great skull. Streamers of flame, smoke, and the occasional bulbous plasm rose from the uppermost eye socket. The skull lay in the center of a blasted landscape that was sparse even for this place, and it seemed to stare balefully at them, waiting.

"Why am I not surprised?" Arun said, sounding tired. The sheer weight of Occipitus upon the psyche had to be having an effect upon him, she thought.

There was nothing to be done but to set out walking. A long day passed, with them slowly drawing closer to the skull, although by the time they finally broke to rest Zenna thought that the mound looked little nearer than it had when they had started. They encountered nothing, not the slightest stirring of life as far as they could see. It was as if the entire plane had fallen into a deep somnolence, with even the ever-dancing plasms in the sky above seeming to drift sleepily on their random courses.

They were tired and hungry, but Zenna was finally able to ease the latter problem. Their stores of buffalo meat had rotted to the point where even Zenna's *purify* spell could not make it edible, and they discarded the remainder soon after leaving the fibrous forest. Mole turned out her *bag of holding*, but only found a few loose grains and other scraps of food that did little to assuage their hunger. Zenna knew that whatever tests waited at the skull would demand the most of them, and that they could not afford to be weak from incipient starvation. So after that rest, while preparing her spells, she focused her

meditations upon their need, finally nodding as a trickle of divine energy echoed in her mind.

The food she conjured with the *create food and water* spell was gray and bland, and it bore the same faintly rancid taint that everything in this place possessed, but that didn't stop any of them from eating their fill. Even with Hodge and Mole each eating enough for two people there was still a lot left, which Mole carefully packed up and stored in her *bag of holding*.

"Well, I mighta preferred a side o' beef and a keg o' ale, but damned if that didn't hit the spot," Hodge finally said. "But why didn't yer magic us up a meal before, when we was chokin' down that damned fiend-cow meat?"

"My powers have only recently augmented to the point where I can draw upon the third valence of divine energy," Zenna explained. At Hodge's blank look, she added, "I couldn't cast that spell before."

She didn't see the thoughtful look that Kaurophon wore as he considered this new development.

"Let's get moving," Morgan prodded. In his new armor, and with the holy bastard sword slung across his back, he looked again the vision of a veteran knight, although dark circles still hung under his eyes, and the muscles of his jaw were constantly tight, giving him the tense look of a hunted man.

The second day seemed to go much easier, with plenty of food to sustain them, and no obstacles to bar their way. They encountered a number of shallow pools, thin cuts like ulcers in the spongy ground, filled with a noxious, thick red fluid that looked and smelled like fresh blood. They gave those a wide berth, but they began to appear with more frequency as they drew nearer to the skull.

"Another day, maybe two," Morgan estimated, as they began to flag, and started looking for another place to set up a camp. It didn't take long; everyplace they looked seemed pretty much the same as the others, except that they wanted a spot well away from any of the bubbling ulcer pools.

"Well, elf, you going to lend a hand, or are you just going to stare at that skull?" Morgan said, as he laid out his ragged bedroll, and started undoing the straps on his breastplate.

But Zenna saw Dannel's body suddenly tense. "What is it?" she asked.

"Something's coming," he reported. "Flying this way."

The companions leapt up, reached for their weapons, and stared out at the distance. It took them a moment to see the tiny speck that the elf had spotted, but after a minute or two there was no doubting that he was right, that whatever it was, it was coming right for them.

Kaurophon's soft voice sounded behind them, casting spell after spell in anticipation. Zenna followed his lead, summoning both her *mage armor* and a *shield*.

Whatever it was, it was flying fast, maybe eighty feet above the plain, high enough to give it a clear vantage over the surrounding area, but not high enough to draw the plasms. Finally, while it was still little more than an amorphous black shape to most of them, Dannel's sharp eyes identified the enemy.

"It's a dragon," he said. "A big one."

Chapter 215

A large black dragon shot forward on beats of its powerful wings across the plain of ulcers, flying like an arrow toward the small group of adventurers.

Hodge, fumbling with the winch he used to load his heavy crossbow, exclaimed, "What is it with yer people an' dragons?" His voice was tense, expressing the fear that they all felt even now, despite their experience, as the creature of countless legends and tales made real drew steadily nearer.

"We'll need to bring it down to the ground, to have a chance," Dannel said, his voice calm, Zenna's crossbow cradled lightly in his hands. His words, even and in control, helped Zenna master the panic she felt fluttering in her gut.

It's just a dragon, she thought. *We've killed those before*. "Spread out," she warned them. "So it cannot get more than one of us at a time with its breath weapon."

There was no cover, nowhere to hide.

"Well, now we know why there aren't any beasts out here on the plains," Morgan said, clutching his javelin tightly, though it looked as though the dragon was maintaining its altitude rather than diving toward them, which made even a strong cast unlikely to score a hit.

Zenna noticed something as it drew nearer. "It has spells up," she warned, seeing the tell-tale glow of a magical *shield*.

"Leave that to me," came Kaurophon's voice. The sorcerer, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Thinking that perhaps he had the right idea, Zenna paused to cast an *invisibility* spell upon herself as well.

Now that it was closer, they could all see it clearly, a sleek, graceful shape, with long horns jutting from its head, and wings that clutched the air and drove it forward. It wasn't as large as she'd first thought, Zenna saw, with its body proper maybe nine feet long, with its long neck and tail, not to mention its broad wings, adding an illusion of size.

Still, it didn't help ease the sudden rush of dragonfear that washed over her like a wave as it approached, gliding eighty feet above them, unleashing a roar that echoed over the plain. Zenna drew upon her well-honed discipline and the fear subsided, but she heard the cries

of despair from several of her companions, and knew that the dragon's fearful presence was having an effect.

But that didn't stop them from pressing their attack.

Missiles rose up into the air as the dragon flew over them; bolts from Dannel, Mole, and Hodge, and a hurled javelin from Morgan. Zenna felt a brief moment of satisfaction as its *shield* wavered and faltered—Kaurophon's early contribution to the battle—but even so the majority of the shots either missed the creature entirely, or stuck harmlessly in its hide. She thought that Hodge's shot may have penetrated, a suspicion confirmed a moment later as the dragon's head turned, seeking out the dwarf. Hodge tried to run, but could not escape as the dragon's jaws opened, releasing a great gob of sizzling green acid. Hodge roared in pain as the acid splashed into the soft turf just behind him, splattering his body with the caustic gunk.

The dragon continued past and began a broad turn. As it began to draw away a small bead of flame rose up to meet it, exploding into a blazing *fireball* that engulfed the dragon. The beast flew out of the flames still intact, but Zenna thought it wobbled slightly, affected by the blast.

"All right!" Mole yelled. "Nice shot, Kaurophon!"

Indeed, Zenna thought. Another power he didn't bother to share with us before...

"It's coming around again!" Dannel said, watching as the dragon swung about in a leisurely arc.

"I'm all right... gah!" Hodge said, as Arun helped him up, healing some of the damage he'd taken. Zenna started toward the injured dwarf, but was captivated as the dragon finished its turn and started toward them again, its jaws opening again expectantly. Zenna noticed that it had renewed its *shield*.

"We need to bring it lower!" Dannel said.

"Here!" Hodge said, shoving his crossbow and a bolt into Arun's hands, before pushing off and staggering out of the way, so that the two of them would not be caught together in another blast of acid. But there was no time to reload the weapon, as the dragon flew straight at them for another attack.

Zenna concentrated on the sky above. Calling upon her magic, she focused her thoughts on the swirling plasms...

A fat, amorphous plasm descended from the sky toward the approaching dragon. The creature saw it and instantly changed course, turning to the side and accelerating downward to avoid the threat. Once it got closer it quickly recognized that the plasm was merely an illusion, but it was too late to change its course now. As it flew over the companions for a second time, it searched the battlefield, looking for the invisible spellcaster who was proving such an annoyance. Zenna realized what it was doing and

held her breath in fear, hoping that the dragon could not detect the sound of her heart pounding in her chest.

Several things happened at once. Another bolt from Mole and Morgan's second javelin both struck its body and glanced off. Dannel had tugged a small object from the necklace at his throat and hurled it at the dragon. The sphere from his *necklace of missiles* struck the dragon on its shoulder, exploding into a small *fireball* that buffeted it roughly backward. But even as Dannel hurled his missile, the dragon unleashed another line of acid. It seemed to be a miss, landing far away from any of them, but then they heard Kaurophon's scream of pain, and saw droplets of red mixing with the smoking green of the acid upon the turf.

But in the moment before he was struck, Kaurophon had also managed another attack. Streaming strands of adhesive *webs* appeared directly ahead of the dragon's path. Without stable anchors, they quickly started to collapse in upon themselves, but then the dragon flew into their midst, and they snared on its wings, entangling them.

Dragonflight is not merely a product of flapping wings and physical strength; the mass of the creatures is too much for even their great wings to effectively lift. But likewise the magic that infused the drake could not alone keep it aloft, and although its strength and bulk instantly snapped dozens of the entangling strands, the dragon nonetheless could not avoid plummeting awkwardly to the ground. It managed to spread its wings enough to guide its fall, landing upon its hind legs with enough force that the companions, nearly a hundred feet away, could feel the ground tremble beneath them.

The dragon was injured, but still dangerous, and it turned toward the companions with a surging rage, tearing away the last strands of webbing clinging to it with an angry snap of its wings. Arun and Morgan were already charging toward it, and it moved forward to greet them, preparing its deadly claws and bite, its wings and tail, all its weapons ready to destroy.

Zenna was running toward it too, as her *scorching ray* had a much shorter range than the *fireballs* hurled by the others. *I need to learn that spell*, she thought to herself. She saw that the dragon and the two warriors were rushing toward each other, and added a mental shout, *Let it come to you! Don't charge into its full attack!*

To her surprise, as if they'd heard her, Arun and Morgan abruptly stopped their charge, and spread out to flank the dragon's stampede.

The dragon didn't hesitate, choosing Morgan as its target, spreading its wings to help carry it in a blazing leap that carried it over the final thirty feet that separated them. Its jaws snapped down in a powerful bite that would have torn the knight's head from his shoulders, had it caught its target. But even though Morgan dodged back, the dragon's wedge-shaped head slammed into his chest with the force of a battering ram, and he spun violently back, nearly losing his footing, his shining breastplate dented where one of the dragon's horns had struck him.

Dannel ran toward the battle as well, but instead of rushing straight at the dragon, he came on in a wide arc to approach it from its rear flank. He was moving incredibly swiftly—his

own preparations for the battle had included an *expeditious retreat* spell—and as he drew near, he tossed aside the spent crossbow, lifting *Alakast* in both hands.

Hodge, likewise, cautiously approached the dragon from the opposite direction. His spear gave him a long reach, but despite Arun's healing his entire back felt aflame, and he knew all too well that he was not invincible. Still, the sight of Morgan and Arun rushing to meet the creature gave him courage, and he pressed forward, the spearhead bouncing slightly with each long stride.

Morgan held his ground against the dragon's rush, stepping forward to swing his sword at its darting neck. The dragon's *shield* rose up to block the descending stroke, and his blade flashed aside, utterly ineffectual.

But the knight's assault gave Arun a chance to strike at its body without the benefit of the *shield*, and the dwarf's stroke sliced deep into its flesh, the holy power within the blade eagerly cutting into the tainted fabric of the dragon.

The dragon instantly turned on this new adversary, unleashing a full assault upon him. Arun wrenched himself from the grasping claws, leaving glistening red on their dagger-like tips, and he stumbled as a wing buffeted him across the brow. Finally the dragon's tail lashed around its body like a whip, stinging the dwarf solidly across his face. Blood spurted from his broken nose, and his face was a gory mask as he somehow regained his balance and lifted his sword in challenge.

"IS THAT THE BEST YOU GOT?" he screamed.

In response, the dragon roared, and opened its jaws wide to finish him.

Chapter 216

A steaming hiss came from the dragon's jaws as the dragon reared up before him, and Arun knew that a jet of acid was about to end his life.

But the dwarf's companions had not been idle since their initial rush, and now they descended upon the creature with a violent fury.

Dannel and Hodge came at it from opposite flanks. Dannel leapt over a sweep of its tail as it swung back from striking Arun, and he thrust *Alakast* into the joint where its hind leg met its body, stabbing with it like a spear. Unfortunately, the dragon's incredibly tough hide foiled the stroke, and the dragon, though both fearsome and evil, was not an outsider, and therefore not vulnerable to the staff's special power.

On the far side, however, Hodge met with more success, puncturing the dragon's hide with a thrust of his spear. The wound was not serious, but it was another tally upon the stamina of the dragon, which was clearly beginning to show the effects of its wounds.

A flare of red-hot flame washed over the head of the dragon, as Zenna unleashed her *scorching ray*. But instead of searing it, the flames flickered and died, their potency weakened by the magical resistances possessed by the creature.

Damn! she thought, noting clearly that while her own magic had failed to harm it, Kaurophon's spells had penetrated its defenses earlier. At that moment, she took little solace in the fact that her path as a mystic theurge gave her increased flexibility with her magic, at a cost in terms of potency.

With the dragon momentarily distracted by the attacks upon it, Arun slashed at it again with his sword, but with the shift of the dragon's attention so too did its *shield* come around, and the dwarf's assault was turned harmlessly aside. Now it was the dragon's turn, and Arun drew back, lifting his shield...

Acid blasted into him like water from a sundered dam. For an instant he was lost behind the flood, which flared out around the shield, forming a dense cloud of liquid and smoke that splayed out on the blasted landscape, turning it black wherever it landed. Then it was over, and as the smoke cleared, each of the companions started in horror.

Arun still stood, somehow, although his shield was gone, with bits of metal that had once been part of it smoking as they clung to his flesh where they had been seared into place. The dwarf's left arm was a ruin, the bones of his fingers jutting out of his melted flesh. Streams of melted mithral ran like drops of water across his helm and greaves, his armor having barely held up against the deluge, protecting the vulnerable flesh beneath. It was clear that he hung onto consciousness by only the thinnest of margins, and his face was a mask of pain.

"Go... to... hell!" he croaked, lifting his sword again in defiance of the inevitable.

The dragon's eyes widened slightly, perhaps, surprised that this foe somehow still stood in the face of everything it threw at him.

While it knew that even one more attack would end the resistance of this stubborn enemy, the dragon was starting to realize that it was in trouble. Blows slid off of its armored hide, but more got through, and pain tore through its body mercilessly. Morgan cut into its shoulder with a two-handed strike from his holy sword, releasing a searing jet of glistening black blood, and as it turned toward him a bone in its left forelimb abruptly and unexpectedly snapped, Mole's tiny figure tumbling away as she made her voice felt in the melee. The dragon drew back, the dwarf's defiance forgotten as it focused now upon escape. Fortunately it was still faster than these humanoids, and even though it felt another stabbing pain in its side as it burst from the circle of foes around it, it was clear, and lifting into the air with a powerful if painful leap.

And then the world around it was fire, and it was falling, falling...

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The dragon was dead, falling to the ground with a loud thump, but the companions barely spared it a look, intent upon more immediate concerns.

“Arun!” Zenna cried, rushing over to him as he slumped to the ground, his ruined hand clutching at the air. Dannel quickly joined her, the melody of his healing song already issuing from his lips.

Zenna channeled her most potent remaining divine spell into healing magic, and the dwarf’s ragged breathing eased as the soft blue glow faded into him. Skin reformed over his fingers, but they remained stiff and unnatural, the damage done to them incapable of being healed without a greater intervention that they lacked here. As she worked Dannel pried the burned scraps of metal from his ruined shield from his exposed flesh, channeling his own healing into the blackened scars beneath.

Arun’s eyes remained fixed on her throughout their efforts. “Help me up,” he said to them.

“Arun...”

“Help me,” he commanded. It took both of them to assist him back to his feet.

“Are you all right?” Zenna asked Hodge, who’d come to stand behind them. The other dwarf nodded in response, though it was clear that he was still in a lot of pain.

“Help... me...” came a voice from behind them.

Zenna turned and looked up, and sucked in a breath.

Kaurophon looked better off than Arun, but the difference was not great. The sorcerer’s robes had been burned away in great swathes, revealing a sickly, mottled gray flesh underneath. He limped heavily, and she saw that each step left a footprint of blood in his wake.

Zenna walked over to him. “Hurry, woman!” the sorcerer hissed, pain clouding his normally even tone.

“Arun was more seriously hurt,” she said, increasing her pace, laying her hands upon him and summoning one of her remaining spells to ease his suffering. Kaurophon let out a deep breath as the healing spell took effect.

“My injuries still pain me,” he said. “Give me one of the healing potions, or a more potent curative, if you possess it.”

Zenna shook her head. “I will do what I can for you, but we must preserve our remaining potions against what lies ahead.” She started to concentrate on another minor healing spell, but the sorcerer’s angry retort cut her off.

“Without my aid, the dragon would have slain you, all of you!”

“We all fought together, and we all risked our lives,” Morgan said, coming to stand behind her. “Or perhaps you are starting to forget that, now that we draw near to our goal?”

With an obvious effort, Kaurophon mastered himself. He nodded to both of them. “Of course, forgive me,” he said. “It is only that my wounds... I am not accustomed to having the skin burned from my bones. I apologize for my outburst.”

“I will do what I can,” Zenna said, channeling more healing into him. “I will be able to do more tomorrow, after we rest.”

The sorcerer nodded.

Dannel had helped Arun wrap his damaged arm in cloth, Zenna saw. With nothing else to do here—even Mole did not suggest wasting time searching for the dragon’s lair—they gathered up their gear and set out once again.

At one point, Zenna glanced back at Kaurophon, and wasn’t all that surprised to see his robes intact once more, his body whole. She knew it was an illusion... and yet, could not forget the mottled, uneven flesh she’d seen beneath the ravaged robes, or the violence in his words. Had she seen the true man beneath his careful façade? Or had it just been the pain of his injuries, as he’d claimed?

With the fiery sky burning uninterrupted above them, they continued their journey toward the great skull, and the final Test of the Smoking Eye.

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It took the better part of a day to finally reach the skull. As they drew nearer, it became clear that the skull was huge, hundreds of feet in height, dominating the plains. The lantern continued to focus directly at its base, making it increasingly likely that whatever the nature of the third test, it lay somewhere within the huge construct. Above them, plasms roiled as they rose from the opening of the skull’s eye socket and drifted up into the sky above to join their brethren.

The ground near the base of the skull was bleached and lifeless, and instead of its usual springiness it crunched under their feet. White dust rose in a slight cloud with each step, but thankfully Occipitus lacked wind, so their approach was not limited as they reached the base of the huge mound and started around to the left, following the slender beam of light projected from the magical lantern.

“I cannot tell if this is stone or...” Arun said, running a hand along the pocked and weathered surface of the skull.

“Nothin’ here be natural,” Hodge growled.

Morgan had taken the lead, and none of them begrudged the knight the privilege. His face looked tight, his skin sunk against his skull, dark shadows gathered under his eyes. Zenna

wondered if they all looked like that, bearing the mark of Occipitus clearly upon them. Of course, she could alter her appearance as she chose, with her magical hat, but it could not hide the reality beneath. She knew that her own frame was lean, every ounce of fat she'd been carrying burned away by the scanty food and hard exertion that they'd all experienced since coming here.

They spent the next quarter hour trudging around the base of the massive formation. Its sides near the base were sheer and almost vertical, making an exterior ascent a very dicey proposition. Fortunately, the lantern seemed to indicate an alternative, continuing to guide them around the skull, rather than inside it.

Finally, their course revealed a large ulcer pool ahead, in a depression that directly abutted the chalky white cliff of the skull. Lying on the ground directly in front of the pool, impaled by several spears, was a man.

"What in the name of the gods..." Dannel exclaimed, echoed by similar sentiments by several of the others.

They moved quickly ahead, wary for any signs of ambush. As they drew nearer, they could see that the staked victim was not a man at all, but an unusual creature that defied clear classification. Its faded gray wings were those of a celestial, but its lean, muscular body was marred with hundreds of intricate scars, obscene designs and fell runes hacked into its flesh by an obviously twisted mind. The spears holding it were thrust through its wings, pinning it, but it was clear that the creature had also suffered recent tortures, with fresh blood running down its body from numerous cuts and gashes in its naked torso.

As they drew nearer, the creature struggled against its restraints for a moment in a futile gesture to free itself, before sagging, unconscious.

"Saureya!" Kaurophon exclaimed, once he'd drawn close enough to see the dying figure's face.

"You know him?" Zenna asked.

"He's a fallen celestial... once a servant of Adimarchus!" the sorcerer explained.

"In a moment, he's going to be a corpse," Mole said, noting the blood oozing from his body, the faint trembling of his chest as his breath rattled in his throat.

Arun had already moved over to his side. With a heave he pulled the wickedly barbed spears out of the ground.

"Careful," Zenna said. "He may be dangerous."

"Fallen or not, I'll not leave a creature to die like this," Arun said, bending to channel enough divine energy into the celestial to stabilize him.

Morgan drew his sword, the pale light from the blade, highlighting the crannies of his face, giving him a sepulchral look. "If he is hostile, I will send him back to the pits," the knight intoned.

Saureya stirred, his eyes opening slowly. He looked up at them, and then, slowly, ignoring the blood that jetted from barely-healed injuries at his motions, stood.

"Interesting," he said.

"That's all yer have ta say, after we save yer life?" Hodge asked. "No thank ye?"

"Thank ye," the fallen celestial said. There was no life in his words, and barely a flicker of interest as he looked over them. "Greetings, Kaurophon," he said, when he saw the sorcerer.

And then he turned to leave.

"Wait!" Dannel said, moving quickly to block his path. "We have questions. Who are you, and what happened to you?"

The fallen celestial regarded the elf for a moment, as if weighing his decision to answer. "I am Saureya," he said. "As for... that," he said, gesturing to the discarded spears and the blood smeared over the cracked ground, "That was the work of a rakshasa and a fire giant, who are trying to complete the Test of the Smoking Eye."

"The Test!" Kaurophon exclaimed. "Have they gone inside the skull, then? How long?"

"Oh, not long, I'd imagine, or I'd have been dead when you encountered me."

"What is the final test?" Morgan asked.

"That I'll not reveal." At Morgan's darkening expression, Saureya continued, "And don't think that you can coerce me to tell you, either. I've been worked by masters of the torturer's art, well beyond whatever persuasions you could master. The rakshasa was a crude amateur, by contrast."

"We're not going to torture you," Arun said. "We just want information about what we're facing."

"Ah," Saureya replied. "Well, I will tell you this. The test has a flaw."

"A flaw?" Dannel asked. Zenna looked at Kaurophon, but the sorcerer's attention was fixed entirely upon the celestial.

"Yes. I helped Adimarchus design the Test, you understand. He did not want a native of the Abyss to succeed him as ruler of Occipitus, so he built in the restrictions to the first Test. But you don't actually have to complete the steps in order, to overcome the challenge. Really, all you need is to confront the final Test; the difficulty is in finding it."

“Inside, I would presume,” Arun said. He pointed to Zenna’s lantern, which had swiveled to direct its light straight into the bloody waters of the pool.

“We have to swim through that? Ewwww,” Mole said.

Saureya nodded. “I’d suggest you get to it, unless you all want to grow whiskers, once the rakshasa passes the Test.”

“What do you mean?” Zenna said.

“Oh, you don’t know?” Saureya said, with a notable glance at Kaurophon. “Whoever passes the Test and succeeds Adimarchus will have the power to shape Occipitus to his—or her—will. Places like this, islands of reality that don’t really fit in either to the higher or lower realms, are mutable. Over time, who knows what outcome will be revealed?”

“What happened to Adimarchus?” Arun asked.

The fallen celestial shrugged. “He left. I’m not really certain of his fate. Maybe he ran afoul of one of his demonic rivals; he and Prince Graz’zt were engaged in some covert clashes over the centuries. Or maybe he had some private agenda of his own to fulfill; Adimarchus was never one to be very revealing about his intentions.”

“And what of you, celestial?” Morgan asked. “You bear marks of great evil, and you seem barely to care what happens to you.”

“I don’t care. And do not lay your claims of shallow morality upon such as me. Coming from you, especially, I find them galling.”

Morgan’s sword came up fractionally, but Zenna stepped forward to stand between them. “What now, then?” she asked.

Saureya fixed her with a gaze that for a moment swallowed her up in its depths. So much was there... and for the briefest instant, she thought she felt some shred of understanding as to the depths of suffering that this being had experienced. Without even realizing what she was doing, she reached out, and her fingers brushed against the defaced copper skin of his chest. Saureya watched her without emotion, but deep inside, where only she could see, he flinched at her touch.

“I do not know,” he said, and for a moment she did not understand, only belatedly returning to the present, and remembering that she had asked him a question.

“It is never too late to change one’s path, even in the last instant, so long as the spark flares,” she told him. It was something that her mother—step-mother, she corrected herself, without rancor, this time—had told her once.

“Perhaps,” he said. He turned around, and without another look at them strode away, out into the shadowless plains of Occipitus.

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“I am not certain that we should have let him go,” Morgan said, as they watched him depart.

“He will not hinder us further,” Zenna said with confidence. “I won’t say the same though for the two he mentioned, however.”

“A giant I understand,” Hodge said. “But what be this ‘rak-shaw’?”

“Rakshasa are feline humanoids, magical outsiders, masters of deceit and illusion,” Kaurophon said. “They are resistant to most weapons and spells. Very smart. Very dangerous.”

“Why’d I know I warn’t gonna like it, a’fore I asked,” the dwarf grumbled.

“If they’ve found the way to the final Test, we must stop them!” the sorcerer persisted.

Mole had examined the bubbling ulcer pool. “Well, there’s a dark opening back there that could be a tunnel,” she reported. “But that’s stuff’s caustic all right... we swim, we’re going to pay a price.”

“We’ve paid the price already,” Morgan said. “And we’re still paying it.”

There was an awkward moment of silence. Zenna wondered how firm the knight’s grip on sanity was. But then she laughed inwardly. How crazy were all of them, given what they had done and seen since coming here?

Arun broke the pause by walking over to the edge of the pool. “I’m going in,” he said, and without waiting for a response stepped into the pool. The weight of his armor pulled him down under the edge of the fluid quickly, and all they could see was the dark shadow of his form as it moved swiftly to the dark opening and disappeared from sight.

The dwarf’s example fortified them against their own fears, and ten minutes later found themselves in a long, twisting tunnel that rose steadily upward. The caustic fluid in the ulcer pool had seared their skin, as Mole had predicted, but they hadn’t spent enough time in it to do serious damage. Zenna conjured up enough water for them to at least wash off some of the acidic gunk that clung to them on escaping the pool. Still, as she looked around, she thought that they resembled horrible ghouls, drenched in the blood of their victims, clad in the rags of what had once been noble garments.

Okay, get a hold, girl, and lighten up a bit, she thought, hugging her arms close against her body. But it was impossible to banish dark thoughts in this place, especially here, knowing where they were.

They started up, the light from the lantern illuminating their way. The corridor twisted back on itself in a great spiral, and soon Zenna’s thighs were burning with the effort of the ascent. They were all tired, but none called for a rest, eager at least to be done with the trial ahead of them. Kaurophon seemed reenergized, and the passion that burned in his

eyes was at least a bit contagious, as they began to hope that perhaps the end of the Test of the Smoking Eye was drawing near.

Dannel had moved to take the lead once again, moving along the inner wall of the spiral, a shadow at the edge of the ray of light cast by the lantern. The heavy iron of the lamp weighed heavily against Zenna's arms, but by now, it almost felt like a part of her, just an inconvenient extension of her arms. The light suddenly shone across Dannel's back, and belatedly she realized that he's stopped, that all of them had.

"Ahead," the elf whispered, his voice just loud enough to carry to those behind him.

Zenna could see a flicker of light, and a long, vague shadow splayed against the curving wall to their left. She thought she heard voices, and a moment later a sound of metal grinding against metal, a sound she knew all too well from time spent accompanying armored men.

Dannel started moving back toward them. "Now we just need a plan..." Arun began.

"Mawr!"

The loud feline cry echoed down the corridor from around the bend. The amorphous shadow shifted, grew suddenly huge, and the clank of metal became a cacophony. Zenna heard soft words, and although she did not understand the language used, she knew instantly what they signified. She glanced over at Kaurophon, and saw that he, too, recognized them.

"Spellcasting!" she warned.

"They know we're here," Dannel said, unnecessarily.

"Well, let's be about this, then," Arun said, lifting his sword and stepping forward.

"Wait!" Zenna hissed. "What about the plan?"

"You're just giving them more time to prepare," Morgan said, his own sword shedding a bright wedge of light across the curving walls of the tunnel as he drew it from its scabbard.

"We can deal with their spells!" she insisted, fixing Kaurophon with a stare, until the sorcerer nodded, reluctantly she thought. "But these foes are too great for us to simply rush in and hope for the best!"

"What would you suggest?" Morgan said scathingly. "That we cower here until they are content to come down here and attack?"

"Damn it..."

"Um... guys?" Mole interjected. "I think they're coming..."

The tunnel shook, pulsing with the heavy footsteps of an approaching foe descending toward them.

* * * * *

The giant rounded the corner first. Even though she knew what was coming, Zenna felt a stab of anxiety despite herself.

This creature made the hill giants and ettins they'd faced earlier seem puny by comparison. It was only—*only!*—about twelve feet tall, but by the way the corridor shook with its steps it had to weigh many thousands of pounds. Unlike the ungainly forms of the hill giants its body was broad and powerful, and it wore actual armor, black steel half-plate that covered its body like a second skin. It carried a huge sword half again as tall as she was, and its visage was fierce, its bright red hair flowing around its skull like a burning flame. Even without a *detect magic*, Zenna could sense the power radiating from it, recognized the signs in the way it carried itself, the unnatural speed with which it moved toward them.

The warriors stepped forward to meet it, forming a line to block the corridor against its rush. Zenna knew that her *scorching ray* would have no effect upon it, and she'd already conjured her wards and protections. Dannel had her crossbow, and the elf snapped off a shot at the giant's first appearance, the quarrel sticking almost pathetically in its arm, little more than a splinter. The other missiles that struck it—a javelin, a hammer, another bolt from Mole—either bounced off its armor or grazed its skin, doing little in the way of real damage.

And then there was no time for anything else, as it charged straight at them.

Zenna glanced over at Kaurophon, not surprised to see that the sorcerer had taken shelter again in *invisibility*. *A good idea*, she thought, but before she could cast the spell, the giant struck their line with a loud crash of clashing arms. Hodge's spear, set against its charge, stabbed through the plates covering its side, finally drawing blood, but the force of its rush knocked the dwarf backward roughly. Zenna saw a pale nimbus flare about the giant, and immediately saw its movements slow slightly, and she knew that Kaurophon had kept his unspoken promise to slice away the spells that bolstered the giant's power.

But the loss of its magical enhancements seemed not to hinder it in the least as it continued its charge. Morgan stepped forward to bar its path, but the giant simply strode *through* the knight, his holy sword glancing harmlessly off one of the giant's greaves as it knocked him prone with enough force to blast the air from his lungs.

And then, before she could react, he was *right there*, looming over her, his huge sword already beginning its inescapable downward path. She could not even manage a scream as the sword clove through her, striking the ground with enough force to tear a huge gash in the soft stone.

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The sight of the giant slamming his huge sword through her shook Zenna into action. Even as the *mirror image* of her vanished, she staggered back, trying to grab the trigger words to the spells bouncing about in her startled mind.

Her allies were already attacking the giant, trying to draw its attention from her. Dannel drove *Alakast* into the base of its spine, but the giant was not an outsider, and the impact did not seem to faze it through the thick layers of plate and leather covering its body. But it could ignore Arun so carelessly, as the dwarf hewed at a massive leg like a lumberjack assaulting a stubborn bole. His holy sword shone brightly as his stroke rang off the giant's greave, splitting the black iron and slicing open a foot-long gash in the meaty thigh underneath. The giant roared in pain, and turned from the shifting images that remained around Zenna to sweep his massive sword around toward Arun. The sword caught Arun in the side, and while the mithral armor held, saving the paladin from being hewn in twain, it was clear from the way he favored his side that ribs had been bruised if not broken by the terrible impact. The giant did not hesitate to follow up his advantage, lifting his sword for another powerful overhead strike, and it was only by throwing himself to the side at the last minute that Arun avoided a second hit that might have taken him out of the fight for good. Again the sword ripped into the ground, and a tremor shook the tunnel, ignored by the combatants intent upon the desperate melee.

Let alone for a handful of seconds, Zenna's mental discipline reasserted itself and she completed her spell. "Drop!" she *commanded* it, the word echoing off the narrow confines of the tunnel, worming into the subconscious of the giant. It had a strong will, Zenna could feel, but her magical studies had focused upon enchantments, and her own strength of mind was not inconsiderable. The giant shook his head, but his fist loosened its grip, and the heavy sword clattered to the ground.

A small form darted into the melee, unnoticed by almost everyone until it hopped up onto the giant's knee, balancing for a moment upon his kneeplate before lunging up and grabbing onto one of the thin plates that surrounded his hips in a broad skirt. Mole hung onto the plate with one hand, her knife bare in the other as she swung up into the crevice between its legs, disappearing from view for a moment as she darted in between the long slats.

The giant roared, a fierce, angry sound that filled the corridor. It slapped down violently at the gnome as she reappeared from between vertical plates of armor, her knife dripping blood drawn from a quite private location on the giant's anatomy. Mole went flying, impacted roughly by the edge of the giant's palm, but she was able to roll with the impact and tumbled in a series of somersaults that carried her almost to the side of the tunnel fifteen feet away.

Morgan had pulled himself to his feet, and now ran at the giant, drawing its attention with a loud cry of battle. It grunted as the knight's sword drove through its armor and tore into its gut, the glowing steel flaring sparks as it tore the black steel of its mail. The giant drew back a step, freeing itself from the sword, but instead of bending to recover his weapon he simply reached out and closed his fist over the knight's arm, crushing it in his incredible grip and lifting him off his feet. Arun was already maneuvering for another attack, but with a

snap of his wrist the giant hurled his captive roughly to the side, slamming Morgan into the dwarven paladin and knocking them both down in a sprawl of arms and legs.

Zenna saw the giant's movements subtly accelerate, and realized that the rakshasa had replaced his magical enhancement upon the seemingly invincible ebon warrior. The feline humanoid had not yet shown himself, and Zenna assumed that he, too, was likely nearby, cloaked in *invisibility*.

She was about to belatedly follow the same course herself when a rumbling noise from behind drew her attention around. Her eyes widened as she saw a massive wave coming toward them; the stone floor, walls, and even ceiling were... *flowing* toward them in a potent pulse, like ripples in a rug that someone had grasped at the end and roughly shaken.

Then the wave struck, and all conscious thought was replaced by chaos as everything was flying out of control all around her.

Chapter 221

The world was flying around her... no, *she* was flying, picked up by the peristaltic wave rippling down the corridor and tossed roughly forward. Her eyes widened in surprise as she went flying past the giant, who size and bulk allowed him to weather the pulse as it passed, narrowly missing an armored elbow that jutted out into her path. Then she was falling again, and she barely managed to get her feet out under her again before she hit the ground in the wake of the wave, and rolled, coming to a stop a good fifteen feet from where she's started, now on the *opposite* side of the giant from where she's started.

She looked around in confusion. The shape of the battlefield had changed. The wave had passed, but everyone had been shaken by its passage, and almost everyone was down, a few feet or further from where they had started. The giant was up, and looking for his sword, which had been jostled now almost ten feet away from it. Arun was standing as well, and as the giant started toward its weapon the dwarf charged him again, his sword forming a bright arc of light in his hands as he came.

But the giant, his reflexes enhanced by the *haste* spell, was ready for him. He turned to face the dwarf, and met his charge with a fist that slammed into the side of his helm with enough force to dent the metal. Arun staggered, seriously injured by the blow, but stubbornly refused to stop, stepping forward and tearing another gash in the giant's leg with a powerful sweep of his sword. Blood was now pouring down the mangled limb from the two deep cuts, but Arun in turn paid the price for his attack as the giant's other fist came around and slammed with a meaty thunk into his face. The dwarf went down like a sack of potatoes, struck unconscious by the sheer force of the blow.

The giant turned back toward its sword. The other companions were already rising on unsteady feet, trying to shake off the effects of the tunnel wave, and quickly leapt to the attack. Zenna cast another spell, firing off a *color spray* into the giant's face, but luck was not with her this time, and the huge warrior shrugged off the effect. He ignored a feeble thrust from Hodge's spear, which glanced harmlessly off of his breastplate, and bent to reach for the hilt of his sword.

Once again a tiny figure shot out from the shadows. Mole leapt up onto the giant's outstretched arm, and even as the giant reared back in surprise, ran up the extended limb to its shoulder. The giant tried to swat at her with its other hand, but the nimble gnome darted forward and under the stroke, and as she ran across the top edge of his breastplate, she flicked her knife into his left eye.

The giant screamed in pain, and staggered violently, dropping Mole to the ground to roll out of the dangerous and chaotic stomping of his feet as he clutched at the hilt of the knife jutting from the ruin of his eye. The giant never even saw Dannel and Morgan run forward, but it felt the consequences as first Dannel drove *Alakast* into his already blood-slicked knee with enough force to shatter the bone beneath the joint. Then Morgan stepped forward, and with a shouted cry to his god slid four feet of holy steel up through the gap at the base of his breastplate into his chest cavity and the soft organs beneath.

The sound that the giant made when he fell was catastrophic, echoing up and down the tunnel.

Zenna watched the giant fall, but even as she felt a thrill of excitement flush through her, knew that another dangerous enemy still lurked for them. But even as she started to turn around pain exploded through her head, and she staggered, lights flaring in glorious bursts across her vision. *Danger!* screamed a voice in her head, but she was unable to clear her mind in time to react before a second impact caught her solidly, and she toppled forward. The tunnel floor rose up to meet her again, this time embracing her in merciful unconsciousness by the time she struck the stone.

Chapter 222

Dannel turned in time to see Zenna struck, and his cry drew the attention of the others around. He could not help her as she crumpled unconscious—*gods, let her be only unconscious!* he thought—but at least he could do something about the figure that became visible behind her.

It looked like a cross between a tiger and a man, with a fierce feline visage complete to a powerful set of jaws full of sharp teeth. An intense intellect shone in its eyes, but there was also a corruption there, a passion for dark things and raw power. It held a lantern similar to Zenna's, its edge smeared with blood from where it had struck Zenna down with the improvised weapon.

"You may have struck him down," it hissed at them, "But you will not stop me from achieving my goal!"

Its response was an angry roar of battle as Morgan charged toward the rakshasa. The tiger-man stood his ground, but as the holy sword struck a light flared around it, indicating that it had magical wards upon its person. Even so, the knight's blow penetrated and should have cut deep... only the rakshasa's hide absorbed most of the force of the stroke, and only a faint blackened streak from the holy energy of the sword marked its fur as it spun back and recovered its equilibrium.

“You cannot defeat me... flee this place, weak human!”

The words carried the force of a *suggestion* spell, but Morgan had been driven beyond the point where even magical compulsion could sway him, and he came on again in an all-out assault. This time the holy sword drew blood, though the wound still did not look serious, but the rakshasa’s confidence seemed shaken by the fierceness of this attack, and the rage that burned like a fire in the eyes of the man who swung that blazing sword with total abandon.

Hodge and Dannel, meanwhile, had rushed to the assistance of Arun and Zenna, respectively. Hodge was no cleric, but he knew that Arun had been carrying one of their last remaining healing potions, and he quickly found it in the paladin’s pouch, trickling the precious fluid down his friend’s throat. Dannel relied upon the power in his bard song to achieve the same result, drawing Zenna slowly back into consciousness with the healing power infused in the melody.

But even as Hodge started to help Arun back to his feet, the dwarven cohort saw another wave rippling up the tunnel toward them. “Watch out, ‘ere come another one!” he shouted, trying to stabilize Arun before the surge running up through the ground reached them.

This wave was not as forceful as the first, but it still wrought havoc in its wake. The dwarves, holding to each other, kept their footing, but Dannel found himself torn from Zenna, the elf knocked roughly to his back while Zenna was thrust semi-conscious twenty feet down the passage. Both the rakshasa and Morgan were likewise knocked roughly prone, but Mole, who’d been moving around to flank the melee between the two, did a back-flip that carried her over the cresting surge to land lightly on her feet.

The rakshasa and knight both clambered awkwardly to their feet, each staring at the other in a gaze that shared an equal portion of hatred on both sides. The tunnel-wave had separated them, and before Morgan could charge forward again, the rakshasa spoke a word of power and disappeared...

Or rather, *started* to disappear, for a moment after he flickered out of sight, he suddenly materialized again, a look of confusion on his face.

Arun thrust his sword into Hodge’s fist. “Go, join the attack!” he yelled.

“Yer can barely stand!”

“Go!” the paladin retreated, thrusting the other dwarf forward to punctuate his statement. Hodge obeyed, glancing back once before turning and rushing to catch up to the ongoing battle, the holy sword blazing brightly in his hand.

The rakshasa spotted both Hodge and Mole moving to join the battle, and while it could not see the enemy mage who was counter-spelling its own magic, it knew it was outmatched by these foes. Thus far its potent resistances had protected it from serious harm, but the holy weapon carried by its foe hurt it, and it knew that its defenses could not protect it for long.

It avoided the knight's initial rush, abetted by the fact that Morgan was still launching an all-out attack, powerful swings lacking any finesse whatsoever in an effort to cut through the tough outsider's resistance to physical attacks. It retreated and drew out a scroll, but before it could begin reading the magical words scribed upon it, a third wave rolled down the tunnel. Once again the combatants were knocked prone, driven a few paces down the length of the twisting passageway by the force of the pulse.

Zenna had regained awareness, and clung precariously to it despite the battering she was taking from the tunnel waves. She found that staying prone helped her to weather them better, and she called upon her clerical powers to channel positive energy through her body, clearing the stabbing pain from her head and steadying her grip on consciousness.

The rakshasa stood once more, but was forced to retreat again as Mole flanked it, trying to drive it back toward Morgan. It slipped around her, ignoring the ineffectual blow from her mace, and once clear began reading the scroll again.

But once again, a *dispel* sliced into the fragile lattice of gathering magical power, and the rakshasa snarled in frustration as the assault disrupted the strands of energy that would have carried it from this place, to escape.

With an angry cry it lifted its weapon, the magical lantern that served effectively as a flail, and rushed at Morgan. The two weapons clanged off of each other in a noisy cacophony. Another pulse rippled through the tunnel around them, but this time it was weaker, and they only fell back a moment to steady themselves before the two combatants met again in another violent exchange. Morgan took a solid hit across the shoulder that drove him back a step, but in turn the rakshasa suffered a cut across its body that was a real injury, now, bright red blood pouring from the cut to clot in its mottled fur.

Then Mole and Hodge arrived belatedly, and surrounded, the feline outsider was quickly overwhelmed.

The companions gathered again, fighting to keep their footing as the pulsing waves continued to roil through the corridor at regular intervals, each just a few seconds after the other.

"We can't stay here!" Morgan exclaimed. He'd taken up the rakshasa's magical lantern, which appeared to be similar to the one that Zenna carried, its shaft of light paralleling hers in pointing up the tunnel ahead.

"We're not ready for another battle!" Dannel noted, gesturing to Zenna and Arun, both of whom bore serious injuries despite the healing they'd received.

"I can fight, if need be," Arun said, taking his sword back from Hodge. He'd used up some of his daily reservoir of divine magic to steady himself, although he still looked battered.

"Forward, then!" Morgan said, cursing as another pulse knocked him roughly to his knees.

Alternating staggering with running as the waves passed, the companions rushed up the tunnel. The peristaltic pulses slowly began to fade, but it was a good twenty or thirty minutes before they were finally able to slump to a more stabled ground, exhausted.

“Hey, I think I still see the rakshasa,” Mole said. As her companions hastily drew weapons and looked back down the corridor in alarm, she quickly amended, “No, I mean the body. I think the tunnel waves pushed it up after us.”

Morgan sheathed his sword with a grunt. “If that was an attempt at humor, little one, I think we can do without.”

“Hey, that wasn’t a joke, honest! But hey, have you heard the one where an elf wizard, a dwarf fighter, and a halfling rogue all walk into a bar...”

“Hsst,” Dannel interrupted. “Do you hear that?”

They all drew quiet—even Mole, reluctantly—and listened. The noise was only dimly audible, an irregular pounding noise that drifted down from around the bend of the tunnel up ahead.

“That doesn’t sound promising,” Arun noted.

“Prolly some’pin else that wants to kill us,” Hodge grumbled.

Zenna noticed something else. “Where’s Kaurophon?”

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“I knew that he could not be trusted,” Morgan said, while Zenna cast a cantrip to scan the area around them for magical auras.

“Now that we got ‘im this far, ‘e’s takin’ the gold fer ‘imself,” Hodge said.

“Gold?” Mole asked.

“Yer knows what I mean.”

“I’m detecting something,” Zenna said, drawing their attention toward the tunnel ahead.

A figure appeared, materializing from the darkness as he dismissed his *invisibility*. It was the familiar figure of Kaurophon, and he regarded them with a calm expression upon his face, despite the intensity of the attention directed at him by his companions.

“Where did you go?” Morgan demanded.

“I heard the noise, and went up to investigate,” the sorcerer replied.

“Without us? Figured you’d take a quick look, see if you still needed us to help you pass the Test, eh?”

Kaurophon shook his head. “I am here,” he said. “Still you doubt my sincerity? I suppose I cannot blame you, you being what you are, and I being what I am. But does not your own creed proclaim the worth of deeds? Did you not overcome that dragon, the giant, and the rakshasa? Or perhaps, in the intensity of the fray, you did not observe the flames engulfing the drake, or the magical enhancements slide off of the giant, or the rakshasa’s spells foiled, allowing you to ply your blade without interference.”

“I value deeds,” Morgan said, “But I also know that what looks like sacrifice can in fact be self-serving. I ‘observed’, for instance, the fact that you turn yourself invisible at the start of almost every battle, and when we are all bruised and bleeding, more often than not you are still fully intact.”

“Ah, so it is my blood that you want, then?” he said. He pulled back his robes from his legs, revealing gray limbs scarred with acid burns, healed now, but still bearing the marks of the dragon’s breath. “I bled my blood, knight of Helm. Or do you want more? Shall I lay open my veins for you? Will you trust me more, when I am lying dead at your feet?”

“I do not think I shall trust you even then,” Morgan snarled.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Arun said, stepping in between them. “In the future, leave the scouting to our scout,” the dwarf said firmly to the sorcerer. “We will have more need of your magic ahead, I suspect.”

Kaurophon nodded, and stepped to the side of the tunnel.

“Well, since you did scout, what did you see up ahead?” Mole asked.

“There is a chamber up ahead, at the top of the tunnel,” Kaurophon replied. “A spacious hemisphere, with a large stone throne situated in the center. There is a large creature in the room, apparently engaged in smashing the walls of the room.”

“What manner o’ creature?” Hodge said, his eyes narrowing.

“I could not identify it clearly, as the throne blocked my view of it, and I deemed it more practical to come back here and notify you, rather than risking engaging the thing upon my own. But it had the shape of an elemental or golem, rather than a living being, and it seemed quite mindlessly set upon its task.”

“Maybe we can get around it without a fight,” Mole suggested.

“Bets?” Hodge asked.

“All right, let’s get going then,” Morgan said. “Don’t wander off,” he added, with a glare at Kaurophon.

“Hold a moment, Arun,” Zenna said. She cast a potent healing spell upon him, but even though the paladin nodded gratefully, she could see that he was still hurting. For that matter, she herself didn’t feel all that steady on her own feet, although the pain from the blows she’d taken from the rakshasa had faded to a dull ache. They’d only had one encounter in the skull thus far, and already her healing magic was nearly depleted.

But both of them kept up as the company moved cautiously up the tunnel. The pounding noise grew louder until they saw the corridor widen into a chamber up ahead.

“There it is,” Kaurophon breathed.

They could all see it, a huge, hulking form, partly shielded by the massive stone throne in the center of the room. It was mindlessly engrossed in delivering punishing blows to the far wall of the chamber, each one filling the place with an echoing noise that was still fading when the next one started. Near it, Zenna marked a shadow that looked like it might be an exit, the only one evident in the room. The floor of the chamber was covered in a ruin of broken pottery and some uneven lumps that could have been anything.

“What is it?” Mole asked, hopping up to try to get a better view.

“It’s a clay golem,” Morgan said. “I have seen one, once before, in the Sanctum of Helm in Almraiven.”

“The creation of a powerful cleric,” Kaurophon said, nodding. “But this one has slipped beyond the control of whomever built it.”

“Once they go berserk, there’s no way to stop them short of destroying them,” Morgan said.

“Weaknesses?” Arun asked.

The knight shook his head. “Few. Resistant to weapons, all but immune to magic, and furthermore, the wounds caused by them are very, very difficult to heal.”

“Wonderful,” Arun said. “Well, any ideas?”

“I could try to distract it,” Mole began...

But whatever strategy she’d been about to suggest was made moot, as Hodge, moving up to get a better look, stepped upon a stray shard of pottery, which crunched loudly under his boot.

The golem instantly turned from the wall, and started lumbering toward them.

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“Spread out!” Arun shouted, as the warriors moved forward into the room to meet the charging golem. The golem moved slowly, ponderously, enabling the companions to meet

its charge on their own terms. Energy infused them as Kaurophon ensorcelled them with the potency of a *haste* spell.

With the reach granted by his spear Hodge was able to strike first. The magical spearhead sank into the thick clay of its body, but the thing kept right on coming, and a moment later the weapon passed harmlessly out of its torso, trailing a few sundered clods that fell to the ground. The golem swung a massive fist around, catching the dwarf with a solid blow to the shoulder that spun him roughly around with the force of the impact.

But Hodge's allies were quick to join the fray, attacking the golem from all sides before it could pummel the dwarf into submission. Seeing Morgan's earlier words proven in the relative ineffectiveness of Hodge's attack, Arun and Morgan both launched powerful attacks with their holy blades. But whatever the motivation of the golem's initial creator, the creature itself bore no taint, and the swords were merely normal implements against it. More clods of clay fell from its body to splatter on the ground, but they were only a small part of its form. Dannel struck at it with *Alakast* as it turned to face the two holy knights, but the blow did not even faze it, and it lashed out with its meaty fists. Arun, his reflexes enhanced by Kaurophon's spell, dodged enough to avoid a stroke that merely clanged against his armor, but Morgan was hit with enough force to drive the priest back two steps, coughing as he fought to regain the wind that had been knocked from his lungs.

"They can barely hurt it... we have to do something!" Zenna urged. For once, Kaurophon had remained visible, standing beside her in the entrance of the chamber. Her own remaining spells would be of no use directly against it, and she did not have any other spells that could assist her friends.

"If the dwarf had not blundered, drawing its attention, I may have been able to lay a few more wards upon the fighters," the sorcerer replied, his voice its usual even calm. "But as it is, there is naught more to do than wait, and hope that they are up to the task."

Zenna turned on him. "I won't accept that. You have more resources than you let on... and if that thing defeats us... well, you don't know what trials lie further on; you may never see the Test of the Smoking Eye beaten!"

He looked at her, a long, weighing look. Finally, he turned back toward the battle—Morgan had just taken another punishing hit, and now looked nearly ready to fall. Mole darted into the melee, trying to draw the golem's attention away from the stricken cleric, but the construct was immune to her sneak attacks, and it paid her no heed.

"Your logic is inescapable," the sorcerer said, as he drew a scroll out of his pouch—a *bag of holding*, Zenna suspected—and read the spell stored upon the parchment.

A bright green ray darted from Kaurophon's fingertips as the writing on the scroll flared in an echo of color. Zenna sucked in a surprised breath; if that spell was what she thought it was, it was a potent enchantment indeed. The ray struck the golem in the chest, and it seemed to stiffen, tiny cracks of green flowing through its body. But that was it; no dramatic explosion, no collapse, not even a visible wound.

"Attack it, now, fools!" Kaurophon exclaimed.

The ring of warriors complied. Dannel's slam again was useless, but this time Hodge's thrust rang on something hard, and a gob of clay the size of his head came free when he drew back the spear. Arun carved an equal segment from its thigh with a stroke of his sword.

But it was Morgan who came rushing in, all pretense at defense abandoned, his sword, held above his head with both hands tight around the haft. The golem lifted its arms to smite this human that looked puny in contrast to it, but before it could strike the sword descended in a gleaming arc, driving down into the construct's chest, cleaving apart not only the packed clay of its body but the fundamental magic that held it together. The thing let out a sound, like a sigh, and then it seemed to split down the middle, falling into piles of shattered clods that lay still upon the floor.

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"But we cannot stop now! We are close, I can feel it!"

Kaurophon's urging met mostly sullen looks from his companions. Morgan didn't even bother to get up, sitting on the floor wearily with his back up against the amorphous stone throne in the center of the room, facing the rubble that had been the insane golem.

"We're battered, sorcerer," Arun said. "We need to rest, and restore our healing powers."

"But you said that the injuries from the golem were untreatable..." Kaurophon persisted. The earlier words from the knight of Helm seemed to be borne out, as Zenna had tried a few healing osirons upon Hodge and Morgan—just about all the divine magic she had left—upon the conclusion of the battle, and while the spells soothed the earlier wounds the two had suffered, the pain from the injuries they'd taken from the golem lingered, unaffected by her magic.

"We rest," Arun said, turning away and decisively ending the conversation.

For a moment Kaurophon looked like he would say something else, but finally he lowered his arms to his sides and released a tight breath.

"Look, you want to go on ahead, feel free," Dannel told him. Morgan looked up at that, and Zenna saw his hand steal to the hilt of the sword lying beside him. It was almost a reflex, now, she thought. "You have the power to turn invisible, to transport yourself through a *dimension door*... we can't stop you. But remember that every test thus far has been accompanied by a deadly adversary, and there's no reason to assume that this one, if it is the final test, will be any different. There's no sense at all in rushing blindly ahead now, to be destroyed because we grew impatient at the end."

Kaurophon nodded. "Your words ring with truth. Very well, we shall restore our strength... I only hope that our delay does not give another rival a chance at completing the Test."

With that final shot, which none of them bothered to respond to, he moved to another part of the room and started drawing his bedding from his *bag of holding*. But Zenna, who was watching him closely, saw that his eyes had lingered on the dark exit on the far side of the room. When she looked away her gaze met Dannel's briefly, and the elf nodded. He'd seen it too, and a silent communication passed between them, to continue their vigilance on their guide.

They rested their bodies, but the sense of anticipation they all felt combined with the cumulative weight that Occipitus had upon them to give their minds and souls little real respite. Zenna fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, waking later feeling more tired than before. There was no sense of time here, and she'd almost stopped associating periods of time with day or night in her mind. There was just motion, and rest. No real sense of security, not anywhere, here.

But she went about her business, focusing her tired mind upon the discipline required to study her spellbook and complete her meditations. They'd eaten the last of the food she'd conjured before their rest, and she debated whether to prepare another creation spell, or focus instead on more healing magic.

Finally she went ahead and created more food for all of them. They were all ragged and weak from their trials here, and she thought they would all need their strength to face whatever lay ahead.

She and Arun performed what healing they could manage, leaving as much as possible in reserve for the upcoming test. The wounds suffered by Morgan and Hodge in the battle against the golem still refused to respond to their treatments, but both warriors simply accepted the pain, gathering their weapons and strapping themselves back into their armor without complaint. Well, without much complaint, anyway; at least Hodge kept his grumbling to a relatively low murmur, so that Zenna could not make out the specific curses that he was using.

Once they had all prepared themselves, and Mole had packed away the rest of the food in her magical bag, they continued forward.

The dark tunnel quickly gave way to a steep set of stairs that curved back in upon itself, rising up higher into the skull. Zenna calculated that they had to be at least halfway up to the summit of the great mound, but at least the throbbing in her legs had subsided to a dull ache that she could almost ignore. Finally the stair turned back once more and deposited them into a large cavern.

The place had a rough, unfinished look to it, although its shape was altogether too uncluttered to be a wholly natural construction. Nearly a dozen small tunnels branched off of the main chamber, twisting rapidly into shadow. The place was dominated by a startling sight; a blazing nexus of black flames, a conflagration that burned without an obvious source of fuel, a good three paces across and at least that high. The black fire gave off an eerie light that cast an unnatural radiance on the cavern walls, and somehow, it did not seem to cast shadows. Instead the light appeared to be *absorbed* by every surface it touched, giving it a unhealthy sheen. Zenna tore her gaze away from the nexus and stared

at her companions, seeing their faces appear sunken and hollow, the light transforming their healthy visages into ghoulish, necrotic flesh.

Dannel looked at her and cried out, his song conjuring a bright nimbus of *light* around the white shaft of *Alakast*. The light flickered and faltered against the unceasing radiance of the nexus, but was bolstered by the twin lights of the holy blades wielded by Morgan and Arun, as they drew their swords and held them boldly aloft.

“This be not natural!” Hodge exclaimed.

“I thought I was the one who stated the obvious,” Dannel replied, trying unsuccessfully to keep the tension from his voice.

Zenna’s gaze returned to the nexus. She could sense the strands of power that flowed into and out of the flames, and as she stared into the swirling black conflagration, she thought she saw something there, an outline within the black...

But before she could clearly identify whatever it was, her focus was broken as a hollow burst of sound and energy erupted before the nexus. The disruption was gone in a heartbeat, but in its wake a pair of giant wasps had appeared out of nowhere, seven-foot bodies hovering on flashing wings.

Wherever they had come from, the wasps instantly buzzed forward to attack.

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Faced with a clear enemy, the companions rushed into the chamber to meet the darting giant wasps.

The vermin were fast, and struck first, diving down at the warriors and stabbing at them with the long stingers that jutted from their abdomens. One thrust glanced off of a shoulder plate of Morgan’s armor, while the second avoided Hodge’s spear and narrowly missed taking the dwarf’s left eye. Hodge dropped his weapon and tried to shield his face, the stinger glancing off of the side of his helm, leaving a dripping trail of venom.

The wasps’ assault was fierce, but they faced veteran warriors who knew how to coordinate their attacks. Arun came to the aid of Hodge, drawing the wasp’s attention with a potent swipe of his holy sword while the latter dwarf unlimbered his huge axe. The blessed blade tore deeply into the wasp’s body, and its body seemed to deflate as the holy energies infused in the weapon tore mercilessly into its fiendish essence. It only took a single powerful stroke from Hodge to end it, the dying creature flopping to the ground before it dissolved into a streamer of noxious black smoke.

The second wasp came under similar heavy assault from Morgan and Dannel. The elf’s thrust with *Alakast* failed to connect, but Morgan laid into it with a heavy blow that sheared off half of its abdomen. Black ichor fell from the wound to sizzle on the stone floor at their feet, but unfortunately the stinger remained intact, and despite being crippled the wasp did

not retreat, lunging at the knight and managing to drive the tip of its weapon into the man's forearm just above his greave.

Farther back in the room, the air sizzled and hissed again, and a trio of hellish black hounds materialized.

"In the nexus!" Zenna warned. "Something's summoning these creatures!" She fired a *scorching ray* at the nebulous outline she'd identified within the twisting black flames, but although the ray seemed to strike true, she could not tell if it had had any effect at all.

Arun had started toward the hell hounds, but at Zenna's shout he diverted toward the nexus. The paladin reached the edge of the black flames but could go no further, staggering backward as eager tongues of the unholy fire reached out and painfully caressed his flesh. He could not get close enough to strike, and thought that he heard laughter from within the nexus.

Then flames washed over him, as the hell hounds unleashed their fiery breath upon him.

Morgan dispatched the wasp with another powerful swing of his sword that bisected the creature. Even as it began to dissolve, he was rushing to aid Arun, but before he could reach the embattled dwarf another disturbance behind him—close to where Zenna stood near the cavern entrance—resolved into a trio of massive, twisting centipedes, each at least ten feet in length.

"Go!" Dannel urged the knight, turning to aid the tiefling. "We have to destroy the source!"

Unable to get at the spellcaster hiding within the protective shield of the nexus, Arun turned toward the more immediate foes. The hell hounds leapt at him, their huge jaws snapping at his arms and legs in an attempt to drag him down and tear him to pieces.

Unfortunately for them, they underestimated the strength of a dwarf paladin.

The first hound went down with its head staved in, its skull split apart by a critical hit from the dwarf's sword. A second hound leapt over the dissolving corpse in time to absorb Arun's backswing, the sword tearing a foot-long gash in its shoulder, driving it roughly aside.

Into Hodge's chopping blow, which severed its spine.

The third hound managed to seize Arun's injured arm in its jaws, but before it could get a good grip the dwarf ripped the limb free, turning to bring his sword to bear once more.

Zenna had just enough time to get her *mirror images* up before the centipedes attacked. The mindless vermin had difficulty getting through the layered defenses she'd prepared, although she felt a hot stab of pain as a drop of venom splashed on her thigh, the bite narrowly defeated by her *mage armor*.

"Kaurophon!" she cried, although she could not see the *invisible* sorcerer. "We have to get that spellcaster out of the nexus!"

Kaurophon had not spent the first few moments of the battle idle. He'd turned himself *invisible* immediately, of course, although he suspected from the potency of the conjurations being worked that the spellcaster could likely detect him anyway. He drew himself away from the developing melees, careful not to do anything—yet—to focus the unidentified foe's attention upon him. He saw Mole circle around before him, trying to keep to the shadows, and moved in her wake. Even before he saw Arun attempt to penetrate the nexus and fail, he knew that simple mundane means would not suffice here. It might not affect *him*—he could feel its pulsating power resonate to the demonic side of his nature—but that did not mean that he was about to move in to face the spellcaster alone. Nor did he want to highlight to his allies the difference separating him from them; they already had more than enough suspicion of him to threaten his objective.

While he studied the nexus and the spells coming from within he added to his magical defenses, adding wards from his reservoir of spells almost without conscious thought.

Arun let out a roar as he drove the hell hound roughly backward with a thrust of his injured arm, giving him enough space to bring his sword around. The sword caught the infernal canine solidly across the side of its head, cutting to the bone and ruining one eye. The creature did not relent, surging at the dwarf again. Hodge circled around and slashed at its body, seeking another killing blow like he'd managed earlier, but this time his blow was poorly aimed and it glanced off its thick hide without doing damage.

Arun heard Morgan approaching and glanced over at him. "The spear!" he said, indicating Hodge's discarded weapon. The knight followed his gaze and nodded, turning to pick up the magical longsword before returning his focus to the nexus.

Even as he did so, the air rippled again, and a quartet of giant scorpions, each roughly the size of a man, materialized near him.

Zenna fought back a cry of pain as sharp fangs stabbed deep into her leg. She could feel the sting of poison that flushed through the wound into her bloodstream, and her muscles started to twitch uncontrollably as the venom worked its fell potency upon her. She pulled away from the centipede, trying to clear enough for her remaining two *mirror images* to confound the huge bug.

Dannel tried to reach her, but he had his own hands full with his own adversary. *Alakast* had been quite effective against the creatures, and he'd destroyed the first centipede with a pair of well-placed thrusts. But a second centipede had turned to face him, blocking him from Zenna with its long, twisting body, biting him in the side and slowing his reflexes with its poison. The thing quivered, damaged by another blow from the enchanted staff, but it continued pressing the elf, who narrowly avoided another lunging bite.

"Hold on, Zenna!" he cried in encouragement, as he struck it again.

"I can handle it!" she returned, reaching out to touch the centipede, unleashing a painful *shocking grasp*.

Kaurophon clucked as his bad luck reasserted itself. He could almost feel the enemy spellcaster's latest conjuration spell falter before his counterspell, but at the last moment his *dispel* faltered, and the giant scorpions appeared near Morgan. He suspected that the nexus was fueling the conjurer's magic in some way, and turned his thoughts to a way of getting it out of the black flames.

Unfortunately for him, his attempt to interfere with the unseen enemy's spells had drawn its attention. The sorcerer felt a twinge of dread as the shape in the flames shifted to face him. He felt a power rising from within the nexus, and then a roiling, terrible cloud of pure darkness erupted around him, tearing at him with tendrils of negative energy.

Kaurophon nearly laughed. Of all the spells that could have been hurled at him, an *unholy blight* was probably the least effective! His choice of allies had served him yet again, as the enemy had judged his nature based on the company he kept...

Still, he thought, as the *blight* dissipated, he could not afford to be *too* confident. But an idea had occurred to him, how to draw the enemy out of the nexus, into the blades of his allies.

"Blasted bugs!" Hodge cursed, as a scorpion tried to seize him in its considerable claws. The vermin was strong, but not strong enough to grapple the dwarf, who took its entire claw off with a powerful chop of his axe. Likewise Arun, having finally put down the hell hound, slew the second scorpion with a powerful thrust of his sword. The two dwarves fought together well, keeping the scorpions back, out of Morgan's path as he made his way toward the nexus, charging with his spear at the ready.

The magical steel head of the spear disappeared into the flames, striking square at the center of the shadowy form inside. A sound of metal striking metal echoed from within the nexus, and at that moment, as the dark figure stumbled back, off balance, one of the scorpions threatening Arun was suddenly hurled across the chamber by some invisible force. The vermin shot into the nexus like a stone kicked by a giant boot, colliding with the spellcaster, knocking him roughly backward, stumbling out of the flames to fall prone just a pace outside of the radius of the black fire.

The enemy was clad in plate armor in an archaic style, covered with ancient runes of secret power. Its head and hands were naked bone, that of a skeleton. As its head came up, it fixed Morgan with a terrible stare from twin points of dread fire within its cavernous eye sockets, hatred burning in those fiery orbs.

Even though Morgan no longer called himself a cleric of Helm, still he instantly recognized this foe. "A lich!" he breathed, fighting the doubt and terror that threatened to unman him at its dread stare, dropping the spear to draw his holy blade once more from its scabbard.

The lich pulled itself up, its armor clanking emptily about its skeletal form at its movements. It carried a slender wand of bone, its head surrounded by a red nimbus of light that promised pain and suffering. It evaluated the situation about it in a glance—clearly outnumbered, its summoned allies clearly on the losing end of the still-raging melee scattered throughout the chamber—and turned back toward the shelter of the nexus. The flames reached for him, as if to welcome his return.

But the undead thing did not reach its shelter. Even as it took its first step, a small form tumbled into its path, tripping it up, tangling herself in its bony limbs. The lich fell, but responded quickly, digging its bony fingers into Mole's hair, pulling her away from its body. The gnome screamed at the evil touch, her body stiffening, and she fell away, blue trails marring her skin where the lich's fingers had touched.

The lich stood again, but staggered as Morgan laid into it. The unholy creature, infused with the dread power of unlife, withstood a blow that would have torn a mortal enemy into pieces. But the lich was now just a step from the dark power of the nexus, promising recovery and succor.

"You cannot defeat me holy knight, not here," it said, its voice an empty dirge sounding within the caverns of its empty skull.

It stepped toward the flames, but even as the dark fires started to envelop it, Arun came running around the far edge of the nexus, a giant scorpion right behind him still trying to grapple him with its claws. The lich released an evil screech and fixed its dark gaze upon the paladin, but Arun merely shouted a dwarvish invocation to his god and swung his sword. The blessed steel struck ancient bone with powerful force, and the latter gave way. As its skull disintegrated, the holy sword tore through the unholy glow of its eyes, unleashing a blinding flare of light that for a moment made the nexus pale in contrast.

When that momentary brilliance faded, the lich was gone, leaving behind an empty suit of armor and the other trinkets it had carried.

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With the lich destroyed, the companions made short work of the remaining summoned creatures. Within a few moments they were alone again, drawing back to the edges of the chamber to put as much distance as possible between them and the continuing surge of power represented by the black nexus.

"A deadly foe," Morgan said, sliding his sword back into its sheath.

Zenna bent over Mole. For a moment she didn't detect any breathing, and a feeling of cold terror washed over her, but then she felt the slight flutter of her friend's pulse. "How is she?" Arun and Dannel both asked, at nearly the same instant.

"She's paralyzed. I can help her, but I will have to recover my spells first."

Kaurophon had reappeared, and several of them looked up at him. "You know my arguments, and I know yours," he said with a shrug. "I will defer to your judgment."

"Several of us have been poisoned," Dannel said. "You yourself can barely stand, Zenna."

"I do not have any more restoration spells, but I will include some in my meditations," Zenna said. He was right; her body felt stiff and awkward, but she forced herself to stand

straight, ignoring the painful tingling she felt in her limbs. "Arun can help with that as well." The dwarf nodded in acknowledgement.

"Armor's good stuff," Hodge said. He'd dragged the lich's possessions back from the edge of the nexus, and was examining them with a critical eye. In addition to the armor and the bone wand, he found an amulet, a pearl the size of a marble on a silver chain, and a pouch that contained a tightly wound scroll.

"Another *plane shift*," Morgan reported, after examining the scroll.

"For an out of the way place like this, there sure are quite a number of planar travelers here," Zenna commented. She looked around for Kaurophon, but the sorcerer had wandered off a short distance, examining the perimeter of the room.

"What do you think?" she asked her friends, softly.

"You know what I think," Morgan growled. "He cannot be trusted."

"We would not have gotten this far without him," Dannel pointed out. "He drove the lich out of the nexus, in case you did not see."

"I saw," Morgan replied. "Yet another power that he did not see fit to reveal to us before."

"We may still need him," Zenna said. "And in any case, I'd rather have him somewhere we can see him."

"Agreed," Arun said. The paladin knelt over Mole, gently covering her with a blanket, his hand glowing with a soft blue light as he laid his palm across the ugly gray scars left by the lich's touch.

Zenna healed the injuries they'd suffered in the battle with the lich. Less than an hour had passed since their last rest, and she didn't think she'd be able to sleep so soon, but no sooner had she laid her head down upon her bedroll she fell once more into the black oblivion of a deep slumber.

* * * * *

Dark shadows swarmed around her, taking on form briefly as they passed close by, almost recognizable. Strangely, she was not afraid; although surrounded by blackness, somehow this place seemed familiar, almost welcome. A few of the shadows were frightening horrors, faces from her past that had brought suffering and pain to her and those she cared about. But even they did not penetrate the cloak of nullity around her emotions; they were dead and gone, unable to harm her now, even in this place of dreams.

The landscape of shadow shifted, and she found herself looking at Cauldron. The city was familiar, but far away, as if she were in a great dark tunnel. She could feel the pulse of life that filled the city, and the whisper of voices, a soft, almost inaudible compendium of the lives that were crowded into the volcano town. A story in each voice, all blending together into an unending tapestry.

There was something here she was supposed to see; she felt it with a certitude that filled her very being. But the vista of the city was somehow more unreal than the vague shadows she had sensed earlier. There was something underlying it all, a presence just beyond the edges of her perceptions, a sinister force that she couldn't quite reach...

"Zenna."

Dannel's voice, and his soft touch upon her cheek, drew her instantly back into wakefulness. For a moment her muscles wouldn't respond to her commands, and she felt a rush of fear that she too had become paralyzed, but finally she forced her sluggish body to obey her orders and she pulled herself up to a sitting position.

Belatedly she sensed that something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked.

"Kaurophon is gone."

Chapter 228

"I knew all along he could not be trusted," Morgan spat. "He gave us ample reason to mistrust him. We should have destroyed him when we had the chance."

"Now that's a bit far," Dannel began. "We all agreed—"

"I dinna agree wit' nothin'!" Hodge said. "I told yer all that yer were crazy, when yer first talked o' comin' to this place!"

"Enough," Arun said, the single word cutting through the argument. "What's done is done. It is time to finish this."

"Good," Morgan said. "But mark my words, the next time I see that sorcerer, he's going to feel the touch of my blade." His gaze was fixed on Zenna as he spoke, but the tiefling ignored him, as she'd ignored the rest of the argument; her attention was on the small motionless form wrapped in a blanket at her feet. She knelt, drawing upon the tendrils of power that she accessed through her mental deliberations. She felt that same momentary surge of awe that she always did, in that moment where she reached outside herself, and drew upon that deep well of power that thrummed just below the surface of reality, linking all worlds with its currents of energy.

Mole stirred, her groan drawing everyone's attention to her.

"How do you feel?" Dannel asked.

"Weak," she managed. "Anybody got something to eat?"

It took the better part of an hour to get ready. Zenna and Arun prepared spells to purge the remaining poisons from their bloodstream, and they treated the lingering injuries that they'd had left over from the prior day's battle. Zenna altered her spell selection subtly,

suspecting that a confrontation with their former ally might be close at hand. The others checked weapons and armor, spoke quietly of meaningless things, or in the case of Morgan, paced impatiently before the twisting stair that marked their path forward.

Finally they were prepared.

The staircase ascended in a tight spiral much like the one they had traversed to get to the nexus room; this second stair, however, was much longer. Onward they trudged, forming a long string that moved slowly but steadily upward, step by step. By the time that they neared the top, with another large chamber visible above, Zenna's impression was that there was no way that they could still be inside the skull, but that could have just been an illusion fostered by her tired muscles.

"Careful now," Dannel's voice came back down to them, softly, as he led them out from the stair into the chamber beyond. Zenna paused at the landing to cast a few spells, but a few moments later joined her companions. She was *invisible*, her soft boots making barely a whisper on the stone floor.

The room was a vast circle, easily fifty feet across, a huge bubble in the stone. A large round opening was visible in the ceiling above them, and Zenna realized that they had to be behind the eye socket of the skull. A thick, raging pillar of burning plasma rose from a point a few feet above the ground on the far side of the room, ascending to the opening. From that geyser, the familiar plasms took form and rose out from the eye, beginning their journey to the eternally burning sky above.

Someone was here, standing in the center of the room, and for a moment Zenna thought it was Kaurophon. Her companions apparently agreed, by the way they readied their weapons. But then the creature shifted and faced them, and they could see that it was another mummy, its gilded armor glimmering with a bright red glow reflected from the plasma geyser.

"Spread out," Arun cautioned, as they moved slowly forward, alert for an ambush.

The mummy lifted a hand in greeting. "Adimarchus, Most Potent Ruler of Occiptus, bids you welcome to the Final Test of the Smoking Eye," he intoned. "A worthy successor to the throne of Adimarchus must complete only one more task. To rule Occipitus—to grasp its power and use it for good or ill—means to sacrifice everything you hold dear. The final test is this: sacrifice an ally to the plasma, and Occipitus is yours!"

"Simple, isn't it?" came a voice from elsewhere in the room. Over the noise of the roaring geyser, and the cavernous acoustics of the chamber, it was difficult to place its source with any precision. The identity of the speaker, however, was completely evident.

Kaurophon.

"You always intended to betray us," Dannel said, scanning the shadows, Zenna's crossbow loaded in his hands, *Alakast* slung across his back by a leather cord. "All your fine words... just empty lies."

“I honestly did not know what to expect, nor do I wish you any particular ill,” came the sorcerer’s distorted voice. Zenna continued scanning the room, using her just-cast *detect magic* to try and locate sorcerer by the various spells he no doubt had folded upon himself. As she swept the room, she detected various auras, but upon closer examination none of them seemed to reflect the potencies she’d expected to find, given what she knew of Kaurophon’s magic.

“We can still settle this without violence,” Arun said, although the way Morgan, standing ten feet to the right of him, carried himself, it was clear that the knight was only waiting for a clear target before unleashing a storm of death with his shining sword.

“Unfortunately that is not possible. You heard the proctor; one of you, at least, must be sacrificed, for me to ascend to Adimarchus’s place.”

Morgan suddenly lunged and swept his sword out at empty air; his sword cutting through nothing. But even as he recovered, Zenna realized what she had missed. She turned her attention back to the aura that she’d detected and skipped over, the glow surrounding the one obvious figure before them...

“The mummy!” she yelled. “He’s standing by the mummy!”

They all turned toward the silent guardian, but before Zenna could do anything else a wave of utter cold blasted over her, transforming her world to white pain.

Chapter 229

The *cone of cold* was perfectly placed for maximum effect, catching up Arun, Morgan, and Zenna in the blast. Mole was on the edge of the spell but darted like a shot out of its freezing path, coming up in a roll with her crossbow already seeking out a target.

Morgan’s exposed skin was blue, and frost caked the joints in his armor, with tiny icicles falling to the ground with a faint tinkle as he stepped forward, his muscles stiffened into near immobility. For a moment it seemed that somehow, impossibly, he would still attack, but he’d taken too much punishment from the golem, wounds that could not be healed. He managed two steps before he toppled over, his armor clattering loudly as he impacted the floor.

Arun had taken the full force of the blast as well, but despite the obvious damage he’d suffered, the paladin drew upon his incredible fortitude and rushed forward toward the mummy. He’d seen the point where the *cone of cold* had originated, just beside the mummy, and rushed toward it with his sword trailing bits of ice that dropped from the blade as he ran. The mummy ignored him, but his stroke met only empty air—the sorcerer had already moved aside.

Dannel too had seen the blast, and even as his friends were engulfed by the *cone of cold* he lifted his crossbow and fired. His bolt hit something, but glanced off instead of penetrating to cause damage. Rather than bothering to reload, he dropped the bow and started running forward, unlimbering *Alakast*.

As awareness of her surroundings returned in the wake of the *cone of cold*, Zenna teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. She'd thought that her innate resistances and her magic would have given her at least some protection against Kaurophon's spells, but the sorcerer's power was greater than even she had imagined. She felt a momentary tendril of despair that she crushed ruthlessly. She called upon a potent healing spell, letting the positive energy bring warmth back into her body, and started running forward.

And as she ran ahead, Kaurophon appeared, twenty-five feet away, moving back around the perimeter of the room near the geyser, revealed by the *invisibility purge* that she had cast upon entering the room. He was moving fast; too fast, suggesting *haste*. A magical *shield* was hovering before him, and Zenna could see the faint shifting of his outline that indicated that he also had a *displacement* spell up.

More surprises, she thought, figuring that he probably had a few other buffing spells in place in addition to his obvious wards. Unfortunately she'd had to sacrifice her *dispel* for the *invisibility purge* spell, although she suspected that she'd have had little chance of affecting him with the former in any case.

The sorcerer instantly realized what had happened, and turned to face them. "Cleverly done!" he exclaimed. He began casting a spell. A dart from Mole's crossbow bounced harmlessly off of his *shield*, and he did not flinch as Hodge came running at him, his spear lowered to skewer him. Zenna was not surprised when the spear passed harmlessly through him; the dwarf had been fooled by the *displacement*. Dannel and Arun were close behind, but before they could reach him Kaurophon completed his spell and disappeared.

"Is he still here?" Arun asked, sweeping his head around.

"No, my purge is still active—he must have teleported out," Zenna said, even as she knelt beside Morgan. "But he's somewhere close," she said. She cast her last *cure moderate wounds* on the knight, who started to stir, his body still shaking from the blast of cold he'd suffered.

"Where could he have gone?" Mole asked, as she reloaded her crossbow.

"The stairs!" Dannel exclaimed.

"No..." Zenna said, even as the elf darted back toward the entrance of the room. "No, he'll probably just transport back in..." Knowing that her *purge* only covered a fraction of the room, she elected to remain in the center, casting another *detect magic* to begin sweeping the room in a slow turn. At the stair, Dannel had done likewise, conjuring the same spell with his magical song, watching the stairs for the sorcerer's return.

Morgan groaned and stood. Zenna ignored him, focused intently upon her scan, so he recovered his sword and stepped away, toward Arun.

"Stay spread out," the dwarf cautioned.

Hodge moved back toward the entrance, giving the mummy—which continued to watch them impassively, not interfering in the Test—a wide berth.

“Maybe he’ll wait, until our spells expire, until we let down our guard,” Mole suggested.

“No,” Zenna said. “He has to act now, lest we complete the Test ourselves.”

“But we wouldn’t—“

“It doesn’t matter, not to him,” Zenna interjected, cutting her off. “He doesn’t think like that. I should have seen it, before, but I wanted to believe that he could be better than that...” She trailed off, her brow furrowing as her scan detected an aura...

And then a brought shower of glittering motes exploded around her. She was nearly blinded for an instant, but her vision cleared to reveal tracers of the *glitterdust* covering her, outlining her invisible form.

“Zenna, are you all right?” Dannel asked.

She’d lost her concentration upon her *detect magic*, but she remembered where she’d detected the aura earlier. “There!” she said, pointing at a location along the wall. She’d been the only one caught in Kaurophon’s spell, and while no permanent harm had been done to her, he’d successfully pinpointed her location...

She felt a sharp pang stab through her, as a *dispel magic* slammed into her with a force that felt like a punch. Her spells dissolved; the *invisibility*, *shield*, and *mage armor* she’d conjured upon entering the room.

And more importantly, her *invisibility purge*, their only means of defeating the sorcerer’s *invisibility*.

Chapter 230

With their primary method for defeating his *greater invisibility* gone, the tactical advantage shifted from the companions to Kaurophon. The sorcerer had clearly spent as much time studying them as they had spent watching him; now he used that information to good advantage.

And he had lots of spells left.

Dannel, Hodge, Arun, and Morgan rushed in at the position that Zenna had indicated, forming a collapsing half-circle in an attempt to pin down the *invisible* sorcerer. Dannel lunged at a soft voice, as Kaurophon began yet another spell, and finally was rewarded by a solid contact as *Alakast* penetrated the sorcerer’s layered defenses and scored a solid hit. Kaurophon’s mixed heritage served him ill here as the staff’s bane power did what it was created to do, and he staggered back, hissing in pain. Arun and Hodge were there quickly, but Kaurophon maintained his concentration, and finished his spell, opening a *dimension door* that took him out of the closing circle.

“He’s gone again!” Arun said, as Hodge swept the area with the shaft of his spear.

“No...” Zenna said, even as she heard a soft voice behind her.

“It is only fitting that you should be my sacrifice,” he said. “You, who are closest among these to what I am...”

“He’s here!” Zenna cried out, knowing that the others would not get there in time.

A powerful surge of magic struck her, stronger than anything she’d ever felt before. She felt it closing around her body like some great invisible fist. Instinct took over, and she hurled her will against the spell. All of her mental discipline, all of the painstaking discoveries she’d made in becoming what she was, all of it flashed in a fraction of a heartbeat against the full force of Kaurophon’s power.

And then, the spell was gone, failed.

“Perhaps I underestimated you,” came the voice. But I suppose another of weaker will shall suffice...”

A cry turned her attention around, behind her. Her eyes widened in horror as she saw Mole hurled into the air, flung across the room by Kaurophon’s magic...

Directly toward the plasma geyser.

Mole screamed.

Chapter 231

While the sensation of being hurled by *telekinesis* across a room was interesting to say the least, the sight of the plasma geyser rushing up at her was definitely unappealing. A scream filled the air—her senses were too busy for her to realize it was hers—as death drew nearer.

She twisted her body, snapping her torso to the side, trying to alter the inexorable course of her passage. It wasn’t enough; but at the last moment something hard slammed into her body, and she was jerked roughly to the side. Pain jolted through her side where she’d been hit, but it was nothing compared to the searing wave of heat that scorched her side as she narrowly passed along the fringes of the plasma geyser.

But then she was through, and she somehow managed enough presence of mind to flip and land gently on her feet, using a few forward somersaults to eat up her forward momentum.

Glancing back, she saw the object that had struck her, saving her life.

A small hammer.

Zenna had already turned back toward Kaurophon, and her own power coursed through her frame at her command. The bright surge of a *color spray* washed over him, the lights parting around the empty bubble where the invisible sorcerer stood.

“Surely you did not expect that such a puny spell would affect me,” he said.

“I didn’t mean for it to affect you,” she replied. “I meant for it to show them where you are.”

The sorcerer turned and dodged back, but was too late to avoid fully the assaults focused on his position. Hodge’s spear again thrust through emptiness, and Dannel’s probe with *Alakast* slid off of the sorcerer’s *shield*.

Morgan let out a desperate cry from deep within him as his holy blade cut the air in a broad arc. For a moment it looked like he, too, would miss his target, but then the edge of the sword unleashed a spray of red as the sword bit deeply into the body of the half-fiend whose actions had opened this entire course of events, the man whose misguided passion had drawn them into this place of shadow and evil. Kaurophon screamed, and they could see the droplets of blood that fell upon the ground smear as he landed upon them.

“It ends here,” Morgan said, bringing up his sword with the blade pointing straight down, both hands wrapped tight around the hilt.

Kaurophon let out a pathetic sob and reached for the amulet at his throat. There was a flare of light and a faint sucking sound. The sword descended, but only struck empty stone.

“He may still be nearby!” Dannel said, turning to scan the room.

“No,” Zenna said, sagging wearily to the floor. “That was a *plane shift*. He’s gone, truly, and won’t be back anytime soon.”

“It be over, then,” Hodge said, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

“No, not yet,” Morgan said softly. His stare was fixed at a point across the room, drawing their attention around as they followed the path set by his eyes.

Toward the pulsing geyser of liquid flame.

“Then our road ends here, at least,” Arun said. “For none of us will make the choice that Kaurophon was willing to make.” He said it firmly, as if defining a fundamental truth for all of them.

“No,” Morgan said, stepping forward. The knight wore a strange expression, a look that combined wonderment with determination.

“There will be no sacrifice today,” Dannel said, echoing Arun’s words, stepping protectively in front of Zenna. But the knight ignored both of them, and continued walking toward the geyser.

Zenna was the first to realize what he intended. “What are you doing?” she said, rushing around Dannel to block his advance upon the geyser. Morgan did not stop until she was directly before him, and when he met her gaze, she saw something she’d never seen before in his eyes.

“Kaurophon was right about one thing,” he said. “Whoever completes this Test will have power—too great a power, the power to reshape an entire reality. We cannot just leave it here, for Kaurophon or another like him to seize it.”

“Maybe there’s some way we can destroy the geyser,” Mole suggested.

“No... no, the power gathered here represents the power of this entire place. Can you feel it, any of you? There is a deep current of Taint here in this place, the darkness that lies over this entire plane magnified and concentrated a thousand times over. It sickens me, and is almost irresistible, here. But there is also an undercurrent... Kaurophon did not lie about that, either. There is a fragment of what Occipitus once was, the power of Good...”

Arun looked around, as if seeing the chamber anew, and nodded, but did not speak.

“The cathedral,” Zenna said. “And the bodies on the plain of cysts.”

“Yes, and currents deeper yet,” Morgan said. “That is why the sacrifice must be made, and that slender thread given a chance to flourish, for the original destiny of this place to have its opportunity to emerge anew.”

“But how can you be certain,” Zenna asked. “Would you surrender everything—perhaps even your soul—on such a tenuous hope?”

Morgan smiled, and for the first time since she had known him, it was an entirely genuine gesture. “I *know*,” he said, and she was surprised to see tears in his eyes. “I know, because I hear *his* voice again... I can hear Helm speaking to me...”

“Morgan...” Dannel said.

“You cannot dissuade me, any of you, from what I know must be done. You were right, Zenna. I came with you for a purpose, but it was not to free Alek Tercival. I know now that I was wrong about that, and about a lot of things.”

He reached out and laid a hand upon her cheek. She felt a soft flush as the glow of healing energy spread from his fingers into her, easing her own hurts and suffering.

“I am sorry,” he said. “For everything.”

The others gathered around him, but he did not look back. He walked toward the geyser, and as he went he unslung his sword, letting it fall to the ground with a clatter. Then came his shield, his pack, and the pouch containing its precious scroll of *plane shift*. Finally it was just him, standing there clad in his resplendent armor, the raging column outlining his body.

Then the cleric of Helm stepped forward, and was consumed by the wild torrent.

Chapter 232

For a long minute they just stood there, watching, silent.

Finally Mole spoke. "Is that it?" she asked. "He's just... gone?"

Zenna lowered her eyes. "I don't know," she said. "I honestly don't know."

"Should we wait here, then?" Dannel asked.

"There is no need," came a voice, from the fire.

They turned to see Morgan step from the geyser, falling from the embrace of the pillar to drift softly several feet to the ground. His armor was gone, his body covered only with a shimmering white tunic. His skin was a clean white, the accumulated dirt and blood that they all wore from their travails in Occipitus scoured away. Most alarming was the fact that his left eye was gone, replaced by a bright point of fire that danced within the socket.

"Morgan?" Mole asked.

The man smiled. "I am still Morgan Ahlendraal," he told them. "And I am something else as well, though the full knowledge of what that is has yet to be fully revealed to me. But I have begun a journey, a new road that may end in something new not only for this place, but for all of us."

"Speak clear man," Hodge growled. "What do this mean fer us?"

"It means that the dark road has come to an end," Morgan said. "I must remain here, to explore what my own new destiny has in store for me... but for you, my friends, it is time to return to your home. Cauldron waits, and I fear that she will have need of you sooner, rather than later."

"Are you certain, Morgan?" Zenna asked. "To remain here, alone?"

He nodded. "As certain as I have ever been in my life, Zenna. And I will not be alone. Already we have met some allies here; the avoral, perhaps even Saureya, someday. And there are others, whose presence I can now feel upon the sadness that is Occipitus. You will hear from me again... this, I promise."

"Good luck, knight," Arun said.

"Aye," Hodge said. "I'll be glad to leave the stink o' this place behind. No offense," he added, with a nod to Morgan.

"So I wonder what's been going on in our absence?" Mole asked.

Dannel and Arun gathered up Morgan's discarded possessions—he had no need of them now, he insisted—and they gathered again in the center of the room. Zenna unrolled one of their scrolls of *plane shift*.

“Are you all ready?”

“Take us home, Zenna,” Dannel said.

Zenna read the words scribed upon the parchment, and the air around them shimmered briefly... and then they were gone.

THE END OF “TEST OF THE SMOKING EYE”

The Shackled City: Interlude
Begun 7-23-04

Chapter 233

Jenya Urikas stood on the eastern balcony of the Temple of Helm, and felt the weight of the world heavily upon her shoulders.

She was still young, in her late twenties, but she felt much older. The events of the past months had aged her prematurely, had forced her into a position of responsibility years—decades, perhaps—before she'd expected to ascend to such heights.

The fact that she'd taken such eventual advancement as a given testified to the innate self-confidence that lay deep within the woman, a sentiment reinforced by the strength of her faith. Helm's favor had been extended to her during these months of crisis, and despite the days of strain she often spent hours alone in seclusion in her private chapel, exulting in the glories bestowed upon her by her divine patron. There was a glow about her, now, and if she could not fully see how others perceived her, she could sense the deference that was given to her. Even if it was reluctant, in some cases.

She sighed. Despite the power she now wielded, the questions that confronted her were becoming more difficult, not easier, to answer. And she had to face those questions largely alone, now. She'd lost good friends, too many good friends, of late. Ruphos Laro... Illewyn Lannertes, Sarcem Delasharn, Morgan Ahlendraal, Alek Tercival. The list was long, and she feared it would get longer before the year was out. She had only a handful of staff left to her, mostly acolytes with little in the way of experience or power.

One of the first things she'd tried when the power was granted to her was to attempt a *resurrection* of her predecessor as High Priest, Sarcem Delasharn. She hadn't been surprised, not truly, that his spirit had refused to return from its well-earned place at the side of the Vigilant One. Still, she'd felt a guilty regret, a moment of self-pity, for it meant that she would have to rely on herself to forge ahead, to provide the leadership that both her church and the entire city of Cauldron so sorely needed now.

So many friends lost... At least she had some sense of resolution regarding Alek and Morgan. Morgan had departed in the company of a group of adventurers—friends—to seek the lost paladin, whose sudden disappearance had contributed to a political crisis in the city. As the tendays had passed, turning into months, she'd begun to lose hope. Her attempts at magical detection and divination revealed nothing; it was as if the expedition had simply vanished from the face of Faerûn. She'd accepted the reality of their loss, and shed her tears in private. The tension over Alek's challenge to the city leadership was defused when the merchant Maavu Arlental made a public apology, paying a hefty fine for the damage wrought during the riot that his words had helped spawn. Soon the population had moved onto other topics, though a haze of discontent hung over Cauldron, kept under control by the heavily armed guards who now held the city under a state of virtual martial law.

Finally, a little over a tenday ago, she'd received a surprise. A *sending* from Zenna, one of the adventurers she'd sent with Morgan. Jenya hadn't even been aware that the tiefling woman had possessed such power, but the short message seemed to imply that much had transpired since their last meeting. Alek was dead, and Morgan... well, Zenna had revealed that he lived, but even though there hadn't been enough detail in the message to elaborate, Jenya sensed that there was more to it than that. The adventurers were in Saradush (another mystery!) and would be returning to Cauldron as soon as they could make the journey. In her short response to the *sending* Jenya had urged haste. Things were coming to a head in Cauldron, she could sense it, although the exact form and shape of the threat was still nebulous, buried deep within the city, shielded even from the shining sight that was her gift from Helm.

A sound, a soft clink of metal, drew her attention around.

"I apologize for disturbing your meditations, priestess," came a deep voice. Its owner, an armored woman, stepped out from the stairwell onto the balcony.

She was a dwarf, a foot shorter than Jenya, although she was probably twice the priestess's weight. Few would have called her attractive, with plain features, a splayed nose that looked to have been broken a few times, and more than one scar visible on her weathered skin. Her hair was the color of obsidian, cut short against her scalp to better fit under the full helm she carried under the crook of one arm. She was clad from neck to boots in a suit of full plate armor that was of odd manufacture, fashioned out of a dull gray metal that seemed to have hints of violet in it when viewed from the corner of one's eye. The hilt of a bastard sword, the chosen weapon of Helm, jutted from over her left shoulder, and the end of a small bow was visible over the right.

"Templar," Jenya said, with a nod. "Welcome to Cauldron. How was your journey?"

"Long," the dwarf woman said, coming out onto the balcony. She glanced out over the city, absorbing the vista with a grunt, and then dismissing it.

"You have just arrived?" The coating of dust on her armor seemed to prove the question even before she answered.

“Aye. They’d warned me that things had gotten bad here, but it would seem that matters have gotten quite out of hand in Cauldron. I saw a bloody ogre in the street on my way here, and nearly clove the damned thing in twain before I was informed that it was part of the City Watch.”

“I have tried to impart the seriousness of the situation in my reports, Templar,” Jenya said.

“Yes, yes,” she said dismissively, waving her hand. “I read them. You’ve lost a lot of clerics lately, it seems.”

Jenya bristled at the implied critique. “We’ve done the best we can with limited resources. And I’m glad at least that the church in Almraiven has finally elected to send aid. How many priests did you bring with you?”

“Just me,” the dwarf replied. She now turned and walked to the edge of the balcony, her armor clanking softly about her person. She removed her gauntlets and tucked them into her belt, revealing thick, muscular hands that looked as though they could have snapped Jenya in two without exerting much effort.

“Oh, don’t worry,” the dwarf continued. “I’m not here to take your church away from you, priestess. I was sent to find the evil that dwells in this place, and destroy it.”

“That has been my goal as well, Templar,” Jenya said.

The dwarf gave her an appraising stare. “Well, I can see you’re Favored, that’s plain enough. I’ve never been one to second-guess the Vigilant One, blessed be his blade. And I don’t suppose it’s been easy at that, keeping a church together in a place like this.”

“No, it hasn’t,” Jenya said, almost to herself.

The dwarf nodded. “Very well then. I imagine you’ve got some vacant acolyte quarters in the rectory; I’ll just move my gear in there, after I’ve tended to my horse.”

Jenya flushed slightly. “I can make quarters available in the higher orders...”

The dwarf cut her off. “Not necessary. Never did like all that fanciness. In fact, I’d prefer it if you kept my visit as quiet as possible. Never can keep the acolytes from gossiping, of course, but you know what I mean.”

“Of course, Templar.”

“And you may call me Beorna, in private, priestess.”

Jenya nodded. She already knew the woman’s name, knew a fair amount about her, in fact. Most of the higher clergy of Helm in the southlands had heard of her, and more than a few in more distant lands as well. Beorna of Helm—she was an orphan, and if she’d had a surname, she never used it now. The dwarf was a true knight, sanctified to the ranks of the Order Templar within the church within two years of reaching her majority. She’d crafted

her life in service to the church that had taken her in, and brought her back from whatever abyss she been tossed into as a child.

“I will, Beorna. And call me Jenya, in private.”

Beorna nodded, and without further farewell, turned and departed, the clank of her armored form fading as she made her way back down the stairs into the temple.

Chapter 234

“We’re getting close, don’t you think, Zenna?” Mole asked. “I think some of these hills are starting to look familiar.”

Zenna, her head deep in her cowl to protect her from the sun, shrugged. To her eyes, the hills surrounding them looked the same as the hills they’d seen every day over the last tenday. And probably the hills over the next tenday would look the same, she grumbled inwardly. In all honesty she knew that Dannel was setting a brisk pace, but at times it felt as though they would never reach Cauldron.

At least this time they were traveling faster, and in more comfort, than the first time she and Mole had come alone along this long road, less than a year ago. They had horses, now; and a pony for Mole that the gnome found absolutely delightful. She’d mastered a potent new spell, and each night used it to conjure up a *secure shelter* to protect them from the elements and wandering creatures that made their way either down from the Alamirs or up from the Forest of Mir. Mole’s *bag of holding* contained ample foodstuffs, supplemented by Dannel’s hunting, and if both of those sources ran dry, she could always conjure up more supplies with her magic.

Yes, travel was much easier, now...

But she still felt a vague sense of unease that grew stronger with each league that they drew closer to Cauldron. A lot of time had passed; more than they’d realized, when they’d first reappeared on the soil of Faerûn, a little over two tendays past. Zenna’s mind wandered back to that arrival, and the tumultuous events that had followed...

* * * * *

At first, they had no idea *where* they were.

The mountains that surrounded them could have been anywhere on Faerûn; Zenna explained that the margin of error of a *plane shift* was anywhere from a few dozen to a few hundred miles from the intended destination.

“So realistically we’re looking at the Alamirs, or the Marching Mountains... maybe the Omlarandins,” Dannel had reported.

“It’s pretty warm,” Mole observed. “We’re probably not that high up. It’s still early summer, but some mountains keep snow on them year-round, in the higher elevations.”

“The Alamirs ain’t that high,” Hodge said. He looked around suspiciously, as if the land itself was hiding secrets. “Yer sure this be Faerûn?”

“Certain,” Zenna said. “Come on, let’s see if we can find a trail out of here.”

They started out in a broad ravine that didn’t give them much of a view, but by late afternoon they crested a ridge that gave them a good vista of the surrounding area. To their east they could see a broad sea, while to the north the mountains gave way to expansive plains. Dannel was the first to identify where they were.

“Were in the northern spur of the Alamirs,” he reported. “That’s the Lake of Steam to the east, and Tethyr to the west.”

“Long way from Cauldron,” Hodge said.

“Well, it’s not going to get any closer standing here,” Zenna said irritably.

“We’re not blaming you for the misfire,” Arun told her.

Zenna nodded. “I know. It’s just that... well, we’ve been away for a while now.”

“I’m sure Cauldron has managed to get by without us,” Dannel said. “I don’t know if there are any settlements around here, but if we head northwest, we should exit the range and enter the plains of Tethyr in a few days. The best road to Cauldron from here is the one that leads down from Saradush, but may be a few tendays, walking.”

They discussed many things on the walk; Cauldron, their adventures both here and at Occipitus, and myriad other random topics that companions share on long journeys. The first day they did not cover much ground, all of them still tired from their trials in the Abyss, but that night they got a good rest, and with the morning’s sun and the cool wind blowing across the peaks they felt restored. Zenna conjured more food to sustain them, and Arun began treating the cursed wound Hodge had suffered in the battle with the clay golem. The injury resisted treatment, but Arun was persistent, and eventually the paladin’s dedication overcame the injury.

The next day they found trouble; or rather, it found them.

It was still early, maybe an hour short of noon. They were moving gradually down through a maze of twisting canyons and ravines, covering perhaps two miles of actual distance for every mile they drew closer to the plain. But without Dannel to guide them, it probably would have been closer to three or four miles per mile of progress. The sun was shining, the breeze was cool, and there was plenty of water at the streams they passed to drink and wash, so there were little complaints. In hindsight, they were perhaps lulled a bit by the ease and beauty of it all, after a tenday in the harsh landscape of Occipitus.

Actually, they could be considered lucky, in that the orcs were just as surprised as the adventurers were, when each side rounded the bend in a canyon to find the other just a few dozen yards away.

Arrows and spears filled the air, accompanied by the sound of battle cries. There were over twenty orcs in the party, and they attacked fearlessly, confident in their overwhelming numbers.

That sentiment wavered somewhat when they ran into the charging front of Arun and Hodge.

Less than a minute later, the surviving orcs were retreating back into the mountains. Only about a half-dozen made it, but the companions knew that even one would have been enough to bring help. In all, they'd suffered only a few minor wounds, which Zenna quickly healed.

Dannel rose from an orc corpse, slinging the dead creature's quiver over his shoulder, and taking up its bow. His own custom-made bow had taken too much of a beating in their long trek through the jungles of the Demonskar and the fiery expanse of Occipitus, and he'd discarded it soon after running out of ammunition there.

"We'd better find someplace defensible," he said.

Chapter 235

Kavorek had been enjoying a pair of wenches when the scout returned. Every warrior in the tribe knew that interrupting his interludes was a risky prospect, so he knew immediately that the matter was urgent. He let the scout get off with a cuff that broke a few teeth, then tossed the wenches out and grabbed his breastplate and axe before stepping out into his antechamber to receive the report.

It was brief and to the point. Kavorek might have suspected exaggeration, but he accurately read the fear in the survivors of the clash, and he was far too canny to make the mistake of underestimating travelers that would brave the northern Alamirs, even in summer.

Well, no matter. Now that the intrusion had been made, and his warriors killed, a response was necessary. And even if these flatlanders were tough; well, his troops needed a bit of a blooding, before the raiding season began.

And just maybe, these travelers might have a bit of loot themselves, to make it worthwhile.

"The fists have assembled, Great One," his second, Av'chek, said with a bow. The action was a bit above himself, Kavorek thought; the assembly was his to call, not the province of a subordinate. But he let it go, already feeling his blood begin to surge at the approach of the hunt.

Taking up his axe, he left the cave to stand upon the ledge at the end of the canyon.

Before him the canyon stretched like a dagger thrust into the mountains. The mouths of a hundred caves were visible, some screened by tacked furs, here or there the faded colors

of woven cloth stolen from some flatland merchant or farmer. But the war-leader's attention was focused on the gathered warriors that filled the canyon. Not a great host, but all one hundred and seventy seven orcs were fierce, skilled hunters. As he appeared, they lifted their weapons in salute; morningstars, war axes, clubs, swords, spears, bows. And at the forefront, the hammer of his army: six huge ogres, clad in breastplates of dull black metal, their visages masked by great black helms fashioned in the shape of a tusked skull. They were tough even for their kind, barbarians he'd recruited from the Omlarandins to the north.

Kavorek shifted his attention briefly to the shamans gathered to his left. The leader of them was a scarred old witchdoctor named Uk'bek, who nodded deferentially, dipping his sacred totem staff. Kavorek knew that the shamans resented his leadership over them, but he also knew that they feared his power, and the sheer might of his ogres.

The huge orog stepped forward to the very lip of the edge. "Enemies have entered our lands, brothers!" he cried, his booming voice filling the canyon and reverberating off its walls. "It is time for the hunt!"

As the orcs and ogres uttered a cry that shook the stones of the canyon, Kavorek lifted his huge axe above his head. The blade caught the sunlight and blazed brightly, and suddenly erupted into actual flames, their ruddy light forming an unholy nimbus around the figure of the armored orog, driving his warriors into an even greater frenzy that promised death and blood to come.

Chapter 236

"They're coming," Mole said, jumping down from the house-sized boulder where she'd been looking out over the trail behind them.

"Damn," Dannel said. "How many?"

"I only saw a few, but it sounds like a lot of them."

"Bah," Hodge said, turning and hefting his spear. "Let 'em come, they're just rabble. Kill a few, and the rest will turn tail and run, sure enough."

"We're too exposed here," Dannel said. "Orcs are stupid and not known for their discipline, but they'll circle around us and overwhelm our flanks here, sure enough."

"So yer sayin' that we should tuck our tails and run from them? Good strategy for elves, mebbe, but *dwarves* don't be runnin' from no blasted bloomin' orcs!"

"This isn't the time for a stupid argument!" Zenna said. She looked at Arun.

The paladin nodded. "I'm sure there will be plenty of orcs to go around," he said. "Find us a good spot, elf, but you'd better make it quick."

Dannel led them quickly down a trail that was little more than an old animal path. Soon they could all hear the sounds of pursuit; the orcs were not bothering to hide their approach, and the noise behind them drew steadily louder.

Finally the trail passed through a low defile that narrowed to maybe four paces across before opening onto a broad plateau. The dominating feature here was a rocky outcropping perhaps eighty paces across, its summit a good thirty feet above the surrounding terrain. Only one side was sheer enough to actually be called a cliff, but the other slopes were steep enough to offer a real hindrance to anyone seeking its summit, and rocky enough to provide good cover. A ring of maybe fifteen huge boulders formed a circle at the top of the tor, like a jeweled crown on the brow of some great king.

“A respectable fortress,” Arun offered.

“Why not just fight here?” Hodge asked, pointing to the defile. “Arun and me could hold a hunnert orcs here, while the rest of you cast yer spells and fire yer bows over our heads.”

Dannel pointed up, to the cliffs to either side, their tops about fifty feet up. “It would only take a few up there to roll boulders down on you, and that would be that. There’s too many approaches, and I’d bet that these orcs know every back trail and hidden path in these mountains. They can surround us there, but at least we can see every approach, they can’t get above us, and we can defend from all directions.”

“Of course, that doesn’t mean we need to just let them walk through this nice narrow space unopposed,” Mole said, darting into the rocks, gone in a flash.

“Be careful!” Zenna cried after her, knowing it was useless; Mole was Mole, that’s all there was to it.

“I’ll keep an eye out for them as well,” Dannel said, pulling out his magical slippers and putting them on. “The rest of you had better get over there and get into position.”

“Why don’t we all wait ‘ere, take a few down before fallin’ back?” Hodge suggested.

“Because they’d run us down before we reached the outcropping,” Arun answered for him. “Come on, let’s get going.”

No sooner had they reached the outcropping, and started up its surface, than they heard Dannel’s cry of alarm. The elf had descended the cliff and was running toward them at great speed, augmented by an *expeditious retreat*.

“What is it?” Arun yelled.

“There’s a big party coming along a trail that runs up along the tops of the cliffs!” he said. “And more approaching by the defile... they’ll be here in five minutes!”

“Mole!” Zenna yelled. “Get back here!”

“I tried to warn her, but she didn’t show herself,” Dannel said.

“Blasted fool gnome,” Hodge grumbled.

“She can handle herself,” Arun said. “We’d better get into position.”

The four companions scaled the rocky slope, all too aware of the growing intensity of the cries that sounded throughout the mountains behind them.

Chapter 237

Mole thought she had found a perfect position from which to lay an ambush.

She lay crouched in a narrow crevice in one of the cliffs overlooking the defile. From her position she was invisible from below *and* above, and her cover include a protruding boulder almost as big as she was that she rapidly discovered could be worked loose without much effort. From where she was she could look out over the approaches of the defile, and if she retreated to the crevice there was a relatively easy and secure route back up to the top of the cliff behind her. From there, she was sure she could circle around the plateau without exposing herself to too much fire from any archers that weren’t actually standing atop the cliffs.

Dannel’s warning was the first catch in her plan, but she was still sure that she could do more damage from here than in cover with the others, so she held her ground as the elf retreated. She had one holdout, a potion of *invisibility* that she’d picked up somewhere on Occipitus, so she was confident that she’d be able to get out of a sticky situation. She had a great location, multiple weapons at hand, a clear avenue of escape, and the potion for emergencies. Everything was set.

She loaded her crossbow and gathered about a dozen stones the size of her head that would prove effective missiles against anyone traveling through the defile.

But the second catch in her plan was the sight of the charging rank of orcs running up the trail toward the defile. They weren’t being cautious, they weren’t checking for traps, they weren’t doing anything but charging ahead, and there were a lot of them. Somehow she figured that dropping a rock on the head of one wasn’t going to faze the next fifty. Or, she thought, swallowing as the line of orcs exploding from the mountains onto the trail grew longer, the next fifty after that.

And then she saw the first ogre.

So much for the perfect plan.

An arrow shattered against a boulder right where Zenna had just had her hand an instant ago. The tiefling darted into the lee of the stone, shading her eyes against the afternoon sun just beginning to descend over the mountains to the east. The archers moving along the clifftops were easy to spot, dark shapes outlined brightly by the long rays of the afternoon sun. She knew that orcs were sensitive to bright light, and the archers were probably firing blindly at their positions, but that would be little solace if one of their long

shafts found its mark. More arrows were falling, now, their steel heads clinking angrily against the stone as they impacted.

Dannel, on the other hand, was not hoping for lucky shots. He'd laid out one of the orc quivers he'd captured on a boulder in front of him, and with methodical efficiency drew and fired. As Zenna watched in amazement—the orcs were five hundred feet away!—the first arrow slammed into the chest of an orc archer, dropping it. Even as it fell, Dannel's third arrow snapped from his bow with a twang that sounded like a clear musical note. Zenna followed its path in fascination as it rose high into the air, a bright gleam as the sunlight caught the steel head, then descended... falling from the sky...

Landing in the throat of an orc archer. Even as it fell, she realized that his second shot had scored a hit as well, and an orc was staggering back, the feathered shaft jutting from its thigh.

"I've never seen anyone shoot like that," she said. "Not even my father can use a bow like that."

Dannel grinned, drawing another three arrows from the quiver. The remaining orc archers apparently had drawn a similar conclusion, for they were taking cover, finding what shelter they could among the bare rocks strewn along the ridge.

"My father would have killed all three," he said, before turning to take aim for his second flight.

Zenna didn't have a chance to respond, for a loud roar sounded from the defile.

The rest of the orcs were on their way.

A few paces below her, Arun and Hodge had taken up a position near the summit, giving them a broad command of the front approach up the face of the tor. Hodge had laid down his spear, and was winding his heavy crossbow, the trusty weapon he'd lugged across hundreds of miles both on this world and in the Abyss. Arun did not have a missile weapon, but he stood his ground stoically, awaiting the enemy. With Hodge's help he'd strapped Morgan's magical shield to his injured arm, one of his light hammers ready to throw in his other hand.

A crash and a loud cry of pain sounded from the direction of the defile, and Zenna grinned despite herself. Then another arrow landed a few feet away, and she realized that she had her own defenses to attend to. Focusing her thoughts, she began summoning her magic.

In the crowded confines of the defile, Mole could hardly miss. Although there was a brief unpleasant moment when she pushed the boulder free, nearly going over with it before she caught herself, the heavy stone tumbled down into the narrow space and crushed the head of a charging orc with a very satisfying smack. As a bonus, the stone then tumbled to the side as the orc fell, landing on the calf of a second orc and smashing the bone, crippling it.

Even as the orcs shouted in pain and rage she was tossing her other ammunition down at them, picking up the smaller stones in both hands and hurling them down at the orcs. One

orc looked up in time to take fifteen pounds of rock on the center of its face, and went down in a thrashing heap.

The charge had stalled, but the orcs were quick, very quick, to respond. Arrows and spears blasted Mole's position, but she was well-protected by the jutting rocks and her magical armor. One orc archer got lucky and hit her on the arm as she hurled another stone, but her armor absorbed most of the force of the impact, and she quickly worked the nasty barbed head of the arrow free of the wound, grimacing against the pain.

She peeked out from her shelter long enough to see that the ogres had reached the entrance to the defile, and she started thinking that it might be a good time to retreat. Then she saw an ugly orc covered with tattoos and fetishes, clad in a hide shirt decorated with equal garishness, and she felt a sudden sinking feeling as it pointed at her, shouting a word that was no doubt the trigger to some unpleasant spell.

Chapter 238

Dannel continued his barrage against the orc archers along the ridge of cliffs that surrounded the plateau. At that extreme range, and hindered by the bright light of the late afternoon sun, they had yet to score a hit. But even though most of them had sought out cover, the elf continued to score hits. But even though almost a half-dozen of them had been taken out by his shots, there were easily twice that number left along the ridge, and it was clear that many times more that number were coming through the defile.

Zenna watched the entrance of the defile intensely, wishing she could see what was happening. She had a spell that could allow her to see across the intervening distance, but it would take a long time to cast, minutes that they just didn't have. Already the first orcs had emerged onto the plateau, and they were spreading out, some pausing to fire arrows uselessly at the dug-in companions.

Mole twisted back deeper into the crevice, trying to stay as clear as possible of the sticky strands that had penetrated back into her avenue of retreat. The shaman had conjured up a *web* that had effectively defeated her ambush, forming a lattice that filled the defile from the tops of the cliffs down to about twenty feet above the ground. Orcs now poured through the tunnel thus formed, the hulking ogres close behind, the noise of their progress echoing against the cliffs.

The companions watched as the orc horde poured out onto the open plain from the defile. Clearly they already had orders from their commanders, for instead of rushing straight at the companions atop their impromptu fortress, they spread out to both sides, forming a ring whose obvious purpose was to surround the defenders, to prevent them from escape. One or two fell here and there, a bolt jutting from one orc's side, a long arrow stuck through the eye of another. But by the time that the ogres appeared the ring was nearly complete, and behind them came a huge, muscular orc clad in a black steel breastplate, holding aloft a huge axe with a head surrounded by angry red flames.

"That's the leader," Dannel said.

“Yer daft, elf,” Hodge growled. “Of course that’s the damned leader! What gave it away, the bloody flamin’ bloomin’ gods-damned flamin’ axe?”

“Get ready,” Arun said simply, and Hodge turned to reloading his heavy bow.

Behind the war leader Zenna saw several other figures, clad in hides and dark cloaks, that she figured were shamans. Those had to be watched carefully, she thought.

The din of the orcs filled the plateau, resounding off of the surrounding cliffs. *Damn, there’s over a hundred and fifty of them!* Zenna thought grimly, surveying the gathered army that surrounded them. They’d fought demons and survived, and orcs were individually no big threat, but so many...

“We don’t want them to wait,” Arun said calmly. “We want to provoke them to attack now, while the sun’s in their eyes.”

“One provocation, coming right up,” Dannel said. He bent his bow, and death began to spread again among the orcs. He focused on the front ranks of the encircling ring, but sent a shaft almost incidentally toward the shamans. Zenna observed that the arrow was turned at the last instant, confirming her suspicion that those orcs were magic-users. They were too far to see clearly, but she suspected that they were using their spells to prepare the orc leaders for battle.

Well, she could deal with that, if need be.

“Come on then, you cowards!” Arun yelled, his stentorian voice overshadowing the raucous cries of the nearest orcs. His holy sword was a bright shaft in his hand, gathering up the rays of the setting sun and reflecting them outward in a brilliant radiance.

Zenna cast a minor spell, and a loud crashing noise echoed over the plateau. It was followed by a rhythmic sound, a deep, challenging shout. She didn’t know much of the guttural orcish tongue, but Lok had taught her a few curses, insults that would get the blood of the fiercest orc warrior boiling, and those words now sounded through the power of her *ghost sound* cantrip, taunting the gathered army.

The orcs, already raging, were driven over the edge. In a violent surge they came rushing forward, weapons aloft, shouting out a cry of doom and battle.

Chapter 239

Zenna loaded her last crossbow bolt and fired at the onrushing horde. She scored a hit, the orc falling back to vanish into the ranks around it, but then there was no time to think, only to fight against the surging tide.

They’d taken up positions so that Zenna was on the side of the tor that was nearly vertical, an almost sheer thirty-foot wall. That cliff channeled the assault toward the opposite side of the bluff, but there were numerous workable assents, including a comparatively gentle slope up the front that was wide enough for twenty orcs to come up it at once. It became

more narrow at the top, where the ring of boulders formed a defensive wall around the summit.

It was there that Arun and Hodge stood waiting. Missiles glanced off of their armor, but thus far neither dwarf had taken a serious injury from the attacks from below. Both knew that this would change, once their foes closed to melee range.

Arun brained one orc with one of his light hammers, knocking the warrior into several of its peers struggling up the slope behind it. The positioning of the outcropping was such that the orcs were charging into the setting sun, nearly blinding them, but that barely seemed to faze them. They knew that enemies were at the top of the hill, waiting, and they would find them by touch and smell, if their eyes failed them.

Dannel, on the other hand, had a clear shot down the hill. Every arrow he fired seemed to find an orc chest, or throat, or face. He'd already discarded his first quiver, and was well into the inventory of missiles in the second. At close range now he was truly devastating, and for a moment the orc rush faltered in the face of those shafts of death.

But he was only one elf, and they were many orcs.

"Here come the ogres!" Arun warned, even as he dodged an orc spear and drove his holy sword into its chest. The orc wailed and fell back, even as Arun turned and impaled another that had managed to slip up the flank of the hill, trying to get behind the dwarven defenders.

Then the crashing wave struck, and both dwarves were surrounded by a storm of blades, the boulders at their backs the only thing keeping them aloft against the raging tide.

Zenna stood from her position of shelter and moved to the far side of the hill. A dozen orcs were visible, climbing the steep slope. One spotted her and let out a cry, and the others soon echoed it, eagerly rushing forward to claim apparently easy prey.

She disabused them of the notion with a *color spray* that blasted into them. Several orcs were knocked unconscious, and tumbled down the hill, their bodies crashing into the rocks until they came to a stop near its base.

But the others came on. One reached the summit and rushed at her, confused by the shifting *mirror images* that surrounded her. Finally it cut at one, but its choice was unlucky and an empty image vanished at its stroke. Three others clambered up behind it, eager to overwhelm her by sheer numbers, but before they could strike she unleashed a spray of *burning hands* from her wand that engulfed all four. Two staggered back, their flesh crisp and smoldering, but the other two pressed their assault, driving her back. Behind them, other orcs continued their ascent.

On the other flank, the slope was equally tricky, but another dozen and more orcs were pressing from that direction. One cried out an alarm as a lithe form appeared atop the boulders, looking down at them. Dannel's bow sang, and orcs fell, clutching at the arrows jutting from their bodies as they slid down the hill. Several archers at the base of the hill

took shots at the elf, but just as quickly as he appeared he'd vanished again, dropping back behind the boulders.

Meanwhile, the wave of orcs rebounded from an implacable force; the two dwarves. They were outnumbered twenty, thirty, forty to one; there was no way they could have stood before the onrushing tide, but somehow they did. Hodge stabbed an orc through the chest with his spear, and drew it out to catch a second in the gut. The spear was wrenched from his hand as the orc fell, but then five more had closed to strike, assaulting him from all sides with greataxes and equally huge blades. He brought his shield up, and took the hits. On his other side orcish blades clanged against his magical armor, driving him back against the stone. Arun had laid a ward of protection upon his friend, against the evil that filled these creatures like a cancer, and that protected him, and none of the initial attacks penetrated his defenses. But even so, for a moment it looked as though he would go down from the sheer weight of the charge.

Then his fist closed around the hilt of his axe, and the weapon swept out in a broad arc. Two orcs fell, the first with its face laid open to the skull, the second clutching at the bloody stump where its arm had been.

Seven feet away, Arun stood his ground. He'd infused himself with the power of Moradin, and against his strength, the orcs found themselves unable to stand. His sword pained their eyes even more than the sun, and every time it cut, they bled. Two burly orcs leapt at him, hoping to grapple him and drag him down, but he tore himself free easily, driving his shield into the face of one orc with enough force to shatter bone, and crushing the other's skull with the hilt of his sword.

But even as he repelled the grapple, another pair of orcs that had managed the flank clambered up atop the boulder at his back. One raised its maul to strike the still-unaware dwarf in the back of his skull, but before it could deliver the punishing blow a shadow shifted within the ring of stones. The orc's companion shouted a warning, but it was too late as a large form exploded upward from a shadowy crevice between two boulders that seemed barely large enough to contain its bulk. The orc tried to shift its attack to strike down this new adversary, but Clinger was too fast, seizing the orc in his powerful jaws, crushing its body. The second orc stumbled backward and tried to get away, but the celestial lizard dropped his first victim and sprang after it, taking it down before it got ten steps distant.

A wall of bodies had risen around the two dwarves, and for a heartbeat the assault faltered, the orcs stunned even in their fury at the ferocity of the defense.

But then, behind them, came a reassuring cadence, a thump of heavy bootprints against the stone.

The ogres had arrived.

Chapter 240

“Thus far, your spell-weaving has done little to impress me,” Kavorek said, regarding the shamans with thinly veiled contempt.

Uk’bek drew himself up to confront the war-leader. “We have laid our most potent wards upon you and your ogres, Great One! The foe will not stand against your charge!”

“Thus far they seem to be standing well enough,” the orog said, turning toward the battle. He nodded to the first of his brutes, and the creatures started forward. Kavorek intended to join them, but a cry drew his attention around.

Uk’bek was clutching at his back, twisting around, his acolytes rushing about him in confusion. Kavorek saw that a small crossbow bolt jutted from his back, perfectly positioned for maximum effect.

“Ambush behind us!” one of the lesser adepts cried, darting for cover behind some nearby rocks.

“Oh, Gruumsh’s balls,” he cursed, tempted to strike the idiot down and be done with him. No doubt the hidden archer was the same one who’d conducted the ambush, and he suspected that there was only one foe up on the cliffs, perhaps two. He caught the attention of some of the archers still up there, and pointed toward the sniper’s approximate location with a slash of his hand.

The archers nodded, and a half-dozen hurried in that direction.

“Stay here then, and pray for victory,” Kavorek said, before turning his back on the shamans in disgust and starting after his ogres toward the battle. The adepts were incompetent for the most part, but as the orog exulted in his enhanced strength and stamina as he ran across the field of battle toward his foe.

Zenna felt a stabbing pain in her side as one of her remaining foes caught her with a glancing blow that managed to cut through both her *shield* and her *mage armor*. Grimacing, she blasted both with another *burning hands*, and the orcs collapsed, their flesh blackened by the flames. She could see that other orcs were pushing up the slope, however, and would be upon her in moments.

Zenna retreated into the ring. She met Dannel, who tossed aside his second quiver—empty, now.

“There’s more coming behind me!” she warned.

“Yeah, me too,” he said, dropping the orc bow and taking up *Alakast*. “Go help Arun and Hodge. Those ogres are coming and they look tough.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll hold your backs.”

“There’s too many...”

“Go. Trust me,” he added, with a wink.

Reluctantly, she did as he said.

The elf turned to see several orcs already appear through the gaps in the ring of boulders. They were cautious, now, willing to wait for numbers before coming at him.

Dannel laughed, and let the song fill him. As the melody washed through his body, bringing his magic with it, he felt his body... *change* subtly, his skin growing tough and leathery, his facing reforming into a reptilian visage.

“All right, whenever you’re ready,” he hissed, facing them now with the form and features—and the natural armor—of one of the lizardfolk.

The first ogre charged up the steep ascent, heedless of the orcs it trampled in its rush. The others were close behind it, and the ground shook at their coming. The orcs gave way, forming a cheering corridor around the charge, eager to watch these enemies that had blooded them so destroyed. The ogres carried massive two-handed swords nearly as big as they were, and as they came ahead they flew into a violent rage. One stumbled on the loose rock and fell, delaying it for a few moments, but the other five formed a wedge that drove straight toward the waiting dwarves.

And then, suddenly, the upper slope was shrouded in murky *darkness*.

Some of the orcs cried out in superstitious fury, but the ogres, blind in their rage, paid barely any heed, rushing into the shadowed zone heedlessly. They knew where the enemy was, and would not be denied the death and destruction they had been promised.

Unfortunately, that upper slope was littered with orc corpses and loose rocks. A loud crash echoed from within the darkness, and then another, as charging ogres stumbled and fell.

The lead ogre let out a resounding roar of pure guttural fury as it exploded from the darkness and saw Arun standing before it. It brought its sword up to strike down the paladin. There seemed no way it could miss...

And yet, somehow, it did, the heavy blade crashing down into the rocks less than a hand’s span from the dwarf. For the two dwarves there was no mystery, for the warriors of their kind, whether a shield dwarf of the North or a gold dwarf of the Great Rift, all share that special skill and training that allows them to avoid the powerful yet clumsy attacks of giants. Arun came up under its guard, stepping forward and drawing his holy sword in a brilliant arc across the ogre’s gut, sundering its armor and *smiting* it with the pure holy energy of his divine patron. The ogre staggered back, its entrails draining from the massive gash drawn across its lower body, and it toppled slowly backward like a great oak felled by the skill of a veteran lumberjack.

Two more ogres emerged from the darkness, slightly disoriented, but quick to spot the two dwarves. Hodge had recovered his spear, and stabbed one in the torso, driving the weapon deep into its body. The ogre roared in pain but quickly countered, smashing Hodge's shield to splinters and catching him on the shoulder with the tip of its blade. The dwarf's armor plate held, but the blow nonetheless staggered him.

But that didn't stop him from dropping the spear and hefting his axe, and rushing at the ogre. It tried to bring its sword to bear again, but the dwarven miner-turned-warrior was faster. He didn't even bother to go for its body, sweeping the axe low and taking off one of the ogre's legs at the knee.

The ogre fell, but Hodge didn't have time to finish it off, as the last few ogres had already recovered from their falls, and were coming forward cautiously through the darkness, their huge forms reduced to amorphous blobs in the shadowy depths of Zenna's spell. The dwarf rubbed at his wounded shoulder; he knew that he couldn't take many more hits like that. And there were still all those orcs on the far side of the darkness...

"All right, come on already!" he yelled, brandishing his bloody axe, careful to move out of the reach of the still-thrashing ogre he'd crippled. To his right, Arun stepped forward to join him, limping slightly. He'd taken out his second ogre in much the same manner as the first, although that one had managed a crushing blow against his thigh that his armor had only barely held against.

Even as another ogre materialized from the shadows, a bright lance of coruscating flames shot down over the heads of the dwarves, flaring over the giant brute's body. The ogre cried out in pain, but did not falter. Hodge glanced over his shoulder and saw Zenna standing between the boulders, the familiar glowing *shield* before her, bright nimbi of magical energy outlining her hands as she worked her magic. Hodge had never been all that impressed with her spell-working (although he certainly had come to appreciate her healing talents), but at that moment she had the look of some avenging spirit, wrapped in shadow, the very powers of the universe coming at her call.

But that instant was all the time he had for such musings, as the ogre was joined by the last two of their kin, and as they emerged from the darkness they hurled themselves at their enemies in a final violent rush.

Chapter 241

Dannel stood in the center of the ring of stones that circled the summit of the tor, watching as more orcs filtered in between the gaps in the looming boulders. There were at least twenty now, and they drew courage from their numbers, for despite the death he'd already unleashed upon them, ultimately he was only one enemy. And Dannel had no illusions about his fighting prowess, even with *Alakast* at hand and his defenses augmented with the lizardfolk form he'd borrowed with his *alter self* spell.

So he had to even the odds a bit.

He reached up and grasped the necklace he'd worn since they'd found it in the hag lair in Vaparak's Voice in the Demonskar, snapping one of the golden globes from its setting. He hurled the tiny sphere at the largest group of orcs, six of them standing in a cluster around one of the openings in the boulder ring. Even as the sphere exploded into a blazing *fireball*, incinerating all six orcs, he charged at the survivors nearest to the blast, laying about him with *Alakast*. The orcs, caught off guard by the *fireball* and the suddenness of his assault, drew back. A few thrust at him with their spears or swung their swords and axes at him, but his armor turned most of the blows, and the one blade that gashed across his exposed bicep failed to penetrate his thick new hide. In turn that orc's sword went flying a moment later as *Alakast* crushed its arm, snapping the bone, and even as another tried to attack him from behind the staff swept around in a deadly arc that collided powerfully with its head, knocking it off its feet.

Dannel had taken the initiative, but the remaining orcs were not craven goblins, to run screaming when confronted with a tough foe. They still had numbers on him, and as they rushed at the darting and spinning elf, attacking from all directions, their attacks began to have an effect. It took all of his effort just to keep them at bay, but even as he continued to land violent blows with *Alakast*, soon runnels of bright red blood decorated his arms and legs, and a spreading splotch appeared on his left shoulder, where a spearhead had torn through his defenses.

And still more orcs trickled into the melee, as the creatures continued to press the flanks.

Not so far away at that same moment, Mole was finding her own situation growing equally grim. She'd stuck that head shaman good earlier, and by the continued exclamations she heard from the below she figured he was finding the poison she'd swiped from that follower of "Wee Jas" in Occipitus to be most unpleasant. But the orc commander had seen her, and now a half-dozen orcs were pursuing her. Her arm hurt where another arrow had hit her... stupid dumb luck! She muttered a curse she'd picked up from Hodge. The arrow had been doubly unfortunate for her in that she'd been carrying her potion in that hand, and when hit she'd dropped it to shatter on the rocks at her feet. So her holdout was gone, and her hiding place revealed. Now she was running along the ridgeline at the summit of the cliffs, six orcs chasing her, and arrows still knifing past her from the other surviving archers back near the defile. Luckily they were too far away to have much of a chance of hitting her, but as she'd already proven, luck was a fickle ally...

Proven again as she leapt over a slight rise to reveal that the ridge came to an abrupt end just ahead, with nothing but a sheer fifty-foot drop to a rocky ground below. She skittered to a halt, inches from the edge. Her magical boots and nimbleness had allowed her to gain a lead over the pursuing orcs, but as they saw her suddenly stop they redoubled their efforts, clearly eager to do unpleasant things to her with those various weapons they carried.

Great swords smashed stone and clattered against magical armor plate as a huge melee raged at the summit of the rocky slope. Less than thirty seconds had passed since Zenna had called down the *darkness*, and yet each tick seemed an eternity in the chaos of the melee. Hodge cried out as a ogre sword crunched into his side, and he fell back, nearly finished. Zenna, standing just a few feet behind him, almost within the the ogre's reach

herself, calmly blasted the already wounded ogre with a second *scorching ray*, and it fell, its face charred and blackened.

And Arun. Arun Goldenshield, Divine Champion of Moradin, stood his ground as two ogres laid into him with all of their considerable strength behind the blows. He took hits, and narrowly dodged others, but throughout it he did not falter, and when his blade swept it brought Death. The first ogre was already bleeding from a deep gash in its thigh, and as it lifted its sword to strike again Arun lunged in and sank three feet of blessed steel into its body, stabbing up through its gut into the vital organs above. The ogre spat blood and crumpled, falling across the body of the first ogre he'd killed earlier. The second ogre shouted a cry of frustration and disbelief and drove its sword down two-handed into the paladin's back, hoping to somehow defeat this little creature that would just not die. The ogre had killed armored men before, but somehow the metal plates held and the sword slid off, slamming into the ground with enough force to split the stone. The paladin turned, and the ogre saw the promise of death in the dark eyes beneath that silvered helm. Arun stepped forward and unleashed a full attack.

Seconds later, the last ogre went down.

Zenna was quick to reach Hodge's side, pouring healing energy into the stricken dwarf. More shapes were materializing within the *darkness*, smaller forms, but many, many more. Knowing that the orcs would be worse off in the light, she dismissed the spell and stood, looking down the slope.

There had to be at least sixty orcs there, with a huge brute at their forefront, a giant of an orc with a massive axe with a head surrounded with flame. The orcs did not charge forward; shielding their light-sensitive eyes from the last rays of the setting sun, they looked with dismay at the hacked and burned corpses of their mighty ogres, and the three foes that yet stood before them. Four foes, as Clinger rose from the rocks behind them, a limp orc still dangling from his jaws.

Arun stepped onto the pile of ogres he'd killed, standing on the top creature's chest. He was injured, but he channeled Moradin's power into himself, and his sword did not tremble as he swept it over the gathered orcs, before it settled on their leader.

"If it is blood and destruction you seek, orcs, then you shall find it here!"

Kavorek stepped forward. He'd lost here today, he knew. Even if his orcs could still prove victorious, the base of his power had been sundered, and the tribe had been decimated. If that idiot Uk'bek survived—and his kind usually did—then his shamans would no doubt make arrangements that would see him quietly killed at some point when he wasn't expecting it.

So he basically had two choices. He could retreat, lose face, and depart this particular band of orcs, striking out to seek a new opportunity elsewhere. He'd had to do that before, and while there were always risks involved, he was confident that he would survive and adapt.

On the other hand, there was personal honor, and defeat of this foe. The dwarves had to be injured, and that spellcasting woman had clearly used up some of her resources already. And there were more of his orcs atop the tor behind them; he could hear the ongoing sounds of battle.

Kavorek was an unusual creature, part orc, part ogre, gifted with an intelligence unusual among either race.

But ultimately, he was what he was.

Lifting his axe, he roared a challenge, and charged.

Behind him, his orcs came on in a wave.

Chapter 242

Dannel staggered as another axe clipped his side. His armor held, but he felt the pain slam through his body like a hammer. He'd already broken a rib, he suspected.

There were orcs all around him, over a dozen now, although he'd killed at least that many with his *fireball* and *Alakast*. At least there didn't seem to be any more coming; though that was small enough comfort with the current contingent apparently enough to finish him off.

He swept *Alakast* around in a broad arc, and the orcs fell back for a moment. They could see that he was weakening, though, and no sooner had he finished his sweep than they were rushing in again, weapons seeking his flesh.

But he'd gotten what he wanted, an instant's respite. He smiled, a grim smile, as he lifted his prize—the last missile from his necklace—and slammed it into the ground at his feet.

Even as he lifted his weapon and roared his challenge of battle, Kavorek felt his magical augmentations slide off of him. He fixed the spell-woman with a hateful look, but spared her no further attention; his focus was on the dwarven knight, who likewise had fixed his attention upon his greatest foe. The dwarf was no fool, rushing ahead to meet him and be overwhelmed from all sides; the two dwarves and the woman calmly retreated so that the boulders were again at their backs.

The orcs surged ahead. A number hurled spears or light axes before them, but those were easily turned by the shields of the dwarves and the magical defenses of the woman. The dwarven knight stood at the forefront, awaiting him, and Kavorek felt the song of battle fill him as he outdistanced his troops, leaping forward to smite the dwarf with a powerful, inexorable assault.

The blow crunched into the dwarf's armor with crushing force. The plate held, but Kavorek knew he'd hurt his foe. He laughed, the insane sound of the battle-mad warrior, and brought his weapon up to attack again.

And met the eyes of the spell-woman.

And froze.

It was as if ice had been poured into his veins. His body stiffened, his muscles refusing to obey him. He could do nothing, even as inside his mind he raged and screamed. He could only watch as the dwarven knight lifted his sword, and with a single powerful stroke took the mighty orog's head clean off his shoulders.

Behind him, the orc charge faltered at the ease with which their battle-champion, the orog who had led them to victory in dozens of raids, was dispatched. Behind the stones, they watched as a blazing *fireball* rose up, accompanied by the screams of their fellows as they burned. They looked again at the bloody corpses of six ogres, once armored titans, and at the gathered bodies of dozens of their own.

Then the woman raised her hands, and a fell mist rose up out of the stones. Cloying, red, it roiled and burned, holding them with a superstitious awe. When a demonic face began to take shape within the living fog, looking over the host with a hungry look, they'd had enough. They broke, fleeing, their bloodlust replaced with a desire for escape.

Atop the cliffs, Mole watched them go. She bent to clean her knife on the dirty coat of one of the dead orcs. She looked at the bodies around her speculatively. Six orcs, six bodies. On reaching the cliff, she'd hidden among the rocks there, pretending that she'd jumped off. The orcs had bought it, and the first two were dead before they even realized otherwise. Then she was jumping and darting and tumbling among them, avoiding their clumsy attacks, springing in to attack and then dodging back out before they could counter. They'd chased after her, and a few had even managed to hit her, but her magical chain shirt had held against all of the blows. Her mace had killed three, and when the last one had turned to flee, her knife had found its back.

She shook her head in amazement. She remembered orcs as being a bit tougher than this.

Back on the tor, Zenna returned to the interior of the ring of stones. Blackened orc bodies were everywhere. She finally found Dannel half-buried under an orc whose face had been staved in—clearly the work of *Alakast*. He was still in his altered form, and for a moment her heart clasped tightly in her chest as she thought he was dead. But then he groaned as she pulled him free, and moments later a healing spell brought him back to consciousness.

“You're a great big stupid idiot,” she said, through her tears.

His form shimmered and returned to its normal features. He reached up with a slender hand marred with dried blood, and touched the tiny droplets before they could fall free. “I do love you, Zenna,” he said.

She shook, the tears redoubling, and he took her in his embrace. Behind them, the last rays of light from the fading sun disappeared as the golden orb fell below the horizon. The two dwarves stood there, silent, watching as the day slowly gave way to night.

Chapter 243

“Look!” Mole shouted, leaping up onto her feet on the saddle of her pony, pointing at the horizon to the south. The pony, used to her antics, merely kept plodding on. “Cauldron!”

Zenna, drawn back into the present by her friend’s shout, stared into the distance. Although she would not have seen it without Mole’s direction, she could now make out the dark line that was the black malachite walls of the town, still miles distant.

A rush of conflicting emotions came over her as she looked upon the faraway city. Odd, that she and Mole had only lived there for half a year, not even that, really, considering the various expeditions out of the city they’d been on, and much of that time had been spent dealing with nearly constant threats to their lives. Yet somehow the place had crept into their hearts, and there was a part of her, at least, that considered Cauldron home. They’d made enemies, it was true, but also friends, allies who had helped them before, and who could be called upon again if the need arose.

And it probably would, she thought, remembering the tumultuous state of the city when they’d left.

They hadn’t found out just how long they’d been gone until days after leaving the mountains. They’d seen the signs before then, of course; the weather was a dead giveaway. But she supposed none of them had truly wanted to believe, until the people in that isolated Tethyrian village they’d stopped at had confirmed it.

By her counting, they’d spent a tenday in Redgorge and the jungles near the Demonskar, and maybe another tenday in Occipitus. The time spent in the latter locale was more difficult to quantify, but certainly not much greater than her estimate.

Only they’d learned that four months had passed here, on Faerûn.

When she’d finally thought about it, it made sense, in an odd way. Her studies of the planes had revealed that the passage of time was a mutable quantity in some places away from the Prime. The others took some more convincing, but ultimately they all had to confront the reality of what had happened.

“We need to get back to Cauldron,” Arun had said.

“If it even still be there,” Hodge opined.

But then, on the borders of Tethyr, they’d had to confront a choice. The southern road along the Alamirs was a long and difficult one, and they were in need of both weapons and supplies. Their clothes and armor were in terrible shape, the former in tatters and the latter battered. They had wealth—Mole had seen that little of value over the course of their journeys had escaped her *bag of holding*—but it would do them no good here. Zenna had gained access to new powers, but some of that potential was not usable without the spells she wanted to add to her spellbook.

Ultimately she'd been able to prevail upon the others to agree to a diversion, to the Tethyrian city of Saradush. It took them the better part of a tenday to reach the city, but part of the logic of the trip would be the availability of good horses that would speed their return to Cauldron.

After spending so much time in the relatively small city of Cauldron, Saradush was a boiling jumble of people and activity. Summer lent a frenetic activity to the place, although the stifling heat of the afternoon put something of a damper on the otherwise constant bustle of its markets. With Mole and Dannel taking the lead, they found willing buyers for the various items they'd acquired in their recent adventures, and plenty of others eager to relieve them of that wealth.

Zenna's first priority was to gain new spells for her book, and she quickly secured new scrolls and the inks and other ingredients needed to transfer them. She met several powerful mages with whom she spent hours in conversation and discussion, and even another priest of Azuth, a half-elven woman who seemed impressed by her rapid rise to power at such a relatively young age. The days passed quickly, too quickly, and despite the eagerness of her friends to be on their way another tenday passed before she was ready to depart. Even then she often looked over the additional scrolls she carried, powerful magics they'd found at Vaprak's Voice, spells that she could not yet cast, but which someday, she was confident she would be able to grasp.

But the others had not spent their time idly. One of the first things they'd accomplished was the restoration of Arun's crippled hand. Poorer by a donation of nearly a thousand gold pieces to the temple of Lathander, they departed with a two-handed paladin.

Even with that cost, and the thousands of gold that Zenna was using to buy and transcribe new spells, they still had a fair amount of coin to spend. They had a number of extra weapons that they sold for decent profits, including the wounding spear they'd taken from the succubus, Morgan's old bastard sword, and the two magical lanterns. Although the primary purpose of those last items was now meaningless, they still bore a potent aura, and functioned quite well as magical flails. Arun did not forget about the evil-tainted dagger that Mole had taken, and he insisted that they destroy rather than sell that item. The paladin also insisted upon keeping the extra holy sword that they carried, stating that he would much rather prefer to see it conferred upon a group that would put it to proper use—such as the Temple of Helm in Cauldron—rather than trading it in a marketplace like just another magical trinket.

Mole grumbled a bit at the coin lost by such niceties, but even so they had a considerable cache to spend. Dannel found via a few covert inquiries a dealer who possessed a fabulous weapon, a magical bow that imparted electrical energy to each missile it fired. The cost was extravagant, but after witnessing the elf's marksmanship against the orcs, they all agreed to pitch in part of their shares to enable the purchase. They also applied the full pressure of the group to force Arun to acquire a non-magical bow. The paladin grumbled about dwarves and "elvish weapons," but Zenna's logic was ultimately too straightforward: they often engaged enemies at a distance, and the ability to hurt a foe at range was too useful an ability to snub. The dwarf ultimately gave in, and although his shots were nowhere near as smooth or as accurate as Dannel's, he surprised them all with his ability to drive arrows *through* practice targets.

Mole acquired a new rapier and some magical gloves that enhanced her agility somewhat. Hodge got a new shield, and finally, they all agreed to collectively finance the recharging of their healing wands, an essential purchase for people in their line of work. Arun spent time repairing their weapons, and he modified the ornate plate armor they'd taken from the slain lich into a form suitable for Hodge to wear. The dwarf complained at first about having a yet heavier burden, but he soon adjusted, and they sold his old battered suit of banded armor and used the proceeds to acquire the fine horses that they now rode.

Zenna and Dannel's relationship had slipped back into a more or less stable *détente*. The others, Mole in particular, was frustrated by the inability of their friends to overcome the gap that still remained between them, given their obvious feelings for each other. But Zenna still had her own issues, and one of the first things Dannel had done on reaching Saradush was to disappear for the better part of a day and a half. He didn't share with them what he'd been up to, and Zenna immediately suspected that he'd been contacting his friends in the Harpers. The incident renewed the chill between them, but at least there was no open conflict, and each took it as a given that the other would be present when they rode south again.

So much had happened, and they didn't really know what to expect, now that they had made it back. Upon realizing her most recent rise in power Zenna had prepared a *sending* to notify Jenya that they were alive and returning, but the response had been too brief to really convey anything meaningful. Zenna watched the black walls draw nearer, and wondered what challenges would lie ahead.

NEXT: "SECRETS OF THE SOUL PILLARS"

The Shackled City

Book VI: "Secrets of the Soul Pillars"

Begun 7-28-04

Chapter 244

Two men met in a darkened room. The only illumination came from a struggling candle in a golden censer laid atop a small stone table decorated with a rich red velvet cloth. The light was not strong enough to reveal more of the chamber, but neither of the two men required additional light to see. They knew each other, that was clear by the way they carried themselves, but there was also a tension between them.

Each man radiated power, but otherwise they seemed total opposites. One was tall, broad of shoulder and muscular, if somewhat bulging about his gut. He was clad in plate armor that was clearly well-crafted, by the way it fit about him like a second skin. The other was slight and was clad in very expensively cut fabrics, and there was at least a pound of gold laid about him as decoration, and the stones on the rings he wore on his fingers were the kind that could feed and house a man comfortably for a year. He looked to be of half-elvish

ancestry, and he moved with a subtle grace, as if each step he took had been thought over and prepared at some earlier time in advance.

The armored man overwhelmed the other fellow in physical presence, but the faint light caused the beads of sweat on his brow to glisten, and when the dandy turned, the pale light seemed to catch in his eyes, glimmering as ten tiny motes that danced merrily within those cold orbs.

“Those troublesome adventurers have returned to Cauldron,” the half-elf said.

“Yes... yes, I had heard that,” the armored man replied. “They have active dealings with Urikas at the Temple of Helm, and we have been watching them for some time.”

“They have grown beyond themselves, too quickly,” the other replied. “Matters rapidly approach a critical phase. They must be dealt with, now.”

The armored man seemed to stumble over his words slightly. “But... Embril Aloustinai, she is not here...”

The half-elf pursed his lips slightly. “Yes, I know that. In her absence, you will have to provide leadership, like Iverson.”

“Yes, of course, my lord Vhalantru... but...”

The smaller man strode around the armored figure, almost casually. “Your organization has benefited greatly from our arrangement, cleric. This does not seem like too much to ask... is it?”

He'd suddenly come to a stop behind the armored man, but Iverson did not turn. “No, my lord. I will see to it personally.”

“Excellent.” The half-elf resumed his strides and soon faced the other again. “I knew those fools would be trouble, when I first saw them in Kazmojen's bazaar.”

The other man did not respond.

The half-elf laughed. “They have come far fast, those outlanders. But it is time for their adventuring careers to come to a sudden, and painful, end...”

Chapter 245

The sky was an ochre tapestry quickly darkening toward black when Zenna spotted the familiar gables of “The Drunken Morkoth” come into view around the bend in the avenue ahead. There were still a good number of people in the street, but the activity was muted, the citizens of the town exuding that generalized sense of anxiety and evasion that Zenna had felt like a palpable wave since she'd returned to the city.

“Patrol,” Dannel said quietly, beside her.

Zenna saw them coming, and also noted the way that the commoners moved quickly to get out of the way of the heavily armed band of the Watch as it made its way down the avenue. Zenna felt a momentary flashback of memory at the sight of the armored half-orc mercenaries that made up the bulk of the patrol; they were a bit too reminiscent of the orcs they had battled in the northern Alamirs for comfort. At least this wasn't one of the "special" patrols; she remembered vividly how Arun had nearly had a fit when they'd seen an ogre serving in the Watch.

Yes, things had changed in Cauldron.

But as they reached the Morkoth, and entered the expansive common room through the wide double doors, some of the oppressiveness they'd felt out in the street slipped away. To be sure, the crowd was somewhat more muted than it had once been, but here was warmth, and conversation, and even the music of a fiddler in a back corner that was all but drowned out by the general din of the place. There were maybe fifty people here now, but as Zenna scanned the room, she didn't see Mole or the dwarves.

"They're probably in the back room," Dannel said, leading her past the bar toward the low archway that opened onto the quieter chamber in the back of the inn.

Zenna and Mole had once let a room in the loft above the adjacent secondary building behind the Morkoth, but the owner had understandably rented it out to someone else in the months of their absence. The adventurers had since found rooms elsewhere in the city. It hadn't been hard; a good number of people were leaving Cauldron, and with the obvious tension here Zenna expected to see more of an exodus with the end of summer.

The situation with Alek and Maavu had blown over, but the overall level of stress was still high in the city. While some of the tax increases that had spawned the riots had been eased, they'd been replaced by a series of smaller levies that had been implemented gradually. All of it was supposedly to support "security", in the form of the mercenaries that had largely taken over the duties of the existing Watch. There was a big camp of them outside the city, Zenna had learned, and from what she'd heard it seemed to get a little bigger with each passing tenday.

Jenya had briefed them on the situation in the city, their first day back. Things had been mostly quiet in Cauldron, although there was a fair amount of grumbling, and occasional outbreaks of violence that were put down ruthlessly by the new Watch. At least monsters had stopped appearing in the city, although rumors continued to weave tales of terrible creatures that moved around in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike.

It had been three days now, and they were starting to get a feel for the city again. Or rather, Mole and Dannel were; they reported to the others what they found when they gathered for supper each night at the Morkoth. Arun and Hodge spent much of their time at a dwarven tavern on Obsidian Avenue, although Mole had told Zenna that she'd heard that the dwarves were also helping out at the Lantern Street Orphanage, and doing some other small jobs of building repair in some of the poorer neighborhoods of the city. Zenna managed to establish a relationship with Vortimax Weer, an arcanist who ran Weer's Elixirs, a small potion shop on Obsidian Avenue. In exchange for a few spells, and one of

the scrolls she'd found in Vaprak's Voice, the mage had agreed to lend her the use of his laboratory, to pursue some of the projects she'd been tossing around in her head of late. She'd already managed one successful creation, a vial filled with a silvery gel that could temporarily infuse a weapon with the properties of alchemical silver. The stuff would be very useful if they encountered another monstrosity like Tongueater, the were-baboon who'd taken over the Lucky Monkey soon after their arrival in Cauldron. She'd given the *silversheen* to Dannel, and was toying with a few ideas for some elixirs that could help Mole. Assuming she had the time to work on them; for some reason she'd felt a sense of anticipation building since she'd gotten up this morning, as if something important was coming, something that she couldn't quite yet identify.

She frowned, and thought back to the words of the *divination* that she and Jenya had performed together yesterday evening. The two of them had combined their powers in an attempt to pierce the veil that Zenna was convinced concealed something that linked all of the recent events together... the abductions and the beholder, the attack on the Lucky Monkey, the cult of Triel Eldurast, the umber hulk rampage, and the troubles with Alek Tercival and the Chisel. Nidrama had spoken of great forces of evil and chaos, and Alek had warned them not to return to Cauldron, before his death. It was all part of a puzzle, and it confounded Zenna that she could not solve it.

Their *divination* had revealed the following verse, in response to Zenna's question, "Who or what is behind the troubles facing Cauldron?"

*Cages above and bones below
Death the door and magic the key
Knives but dust and souls the prize*

"Ah, there they are," Dannel said, drawing her out of her thoughts, gesturing toward a booth in one of the curtained alcoves that lined the back room of the inn.

But even as Zenna turned in that direction, someone bumped into her, and as she turned to apologize she found herself looking at Annah Taskerhill.

Chapter 246

For a moment, Zenna was too surprised to do anything but stare. The young, beautiful noblewoman was the leader of the Stormblades, a rival band of adventurers who'd been a thorn in the collective sides of her and her companions since shortly after they'd arrived in Cauldron. They'd had a few ugly confrontations with members of the Stormblades, and the noble brats had taken credit—and a good percentage of the treasure—from some of the notable deeds they'd performed, such as breaking up the slaving ring of the half-dwarf Kazmojen and recovering magical wands of *control water* from the cult of Triel Eldurast.

But it did not look as though the recent months had been friendly to Annah Taskerhill. She was still attractive and exotic, her dark skin smooth and unblemished, her features formed as if cast by an inspired sculptor. But her eyes were troubled, and darker circles hung under them, wrinkles that Zenna knew all too well, the marks left by stress, loss, and pain. She was dressed in the same style that Zenna remembered—expensive fabrics,

fashionably cut, in all, rich—but she noticed a few small unmended tears and other slight blemishes that contrasted jarringly with the unnaturally perfect appearance that the bard had worn on their last meeting.

The noblewoman recovered first. “Ah. I’d heard you were back in town,” she said, her voice flat and without emotion, although Zenna thought she saw a hint of the fire she’d remembered in her eyes. “I thought maybe you’d all died, but Cara insisted you’d abandoned Cauldron, and gone onto greener pastures.”

“No, we’re still here,” Zenna said.

Dannel stepped forward, forming a tight triangle between them. “I have heard that things have gone badly for you of late.”

Annah bristled. “If you’re referring to Todd’s death, yes, that counts as ‘gone badly.’ But you’d be making a mistake, if you were to count the Stormblades out so quickly.”

Todd... ah yes, that jerk, Zenna thought. Todd Vanderboren had reminded her of nothing more than a weasel, and their last meeting at the Cusp of Sunrise had been an acrimonious one. Mole had gotten two thousand gold pieces out of him there, she remembered, gambling for high stakes in a dramatic game of gemsnatcher.

But she held her tongue, and Dannel was quick to reply, “No, I didn’t mean it that way,” he said soothingly, in that annoying way he had of making your anger drain away like water through a sieve. “I only meant... well, we’ve come to understand how important some things are, and how you don’t really appreciate them until you lose them.”

Annah looked at him in surprise, but then nodded. Zenna could sense the barrier still between them, but was surprised to find herself feeling sympathetic toward the woman as she turned away.

“I have to go,” she said, heading back for the front room.

“Hey, did I miss something?” Mole said, coming over to join them. “The dwarves didn’t wait—oh, was that Annah Taskerhill?”

“Come on, or there won’t be any food left at all,” Dannel said, directing the two women toward the long booth where the dwarves were already seated.

The back room was mostly empty, with most of the inn’s guests apparently preferring the more dynamic environment of the main room at the front. A few of the other patrons eating at the booths scattered along the walls shot them curious looks as they passed, but the air of tension hanging over Cauldron had inculcated in most people a strong interest in focusing on their own business, and although Zenna thought that she recognized a few faces, no one offered so much as a greeting.

Arun, however, gave them a wave and a nod, and gestured for them to take places at the open end of the booth. Hodge, who was flanked by a pair of tall steins on his left and a platter piled with the bones from what looked like a whole family of birds on his right,

spared them a grunt as he continued stuffing bits of meat from his current project into his mouth. From the accumulation already present on his beard and his jacket, Zenna figured that he'd already been at it for quite some time.

"Nice of you to wait for us," Dannel said dryly. Hodge's reply was garbled over a mouthful of meat, but Zenna knew him well enough to guess at the content.

"Dwarves," Mole said, hopping up onto a bench in an adjacent, vacant booth. "I just can't do anything with these boys, and the gods know I've tried."

Zenna saw that both dwarves were wearing their armor, and Hodge's new axe was propped up against the wall within easy reach. She hadn't seen him without the weapon since they'd won it from the orog chief, and while he hadn't named it so far as she'd heard, Mole had already provided at least a dozen suggestions.

"Expecting trouble?" she asked, as she took a seat at the far end of the booth from the noisome dwarf.

Arun nodded grimly. "This city's on edge," he replied. "And I don't care if they're lawfully deputized or not, so long as half-orcs and ogres are walking the streets, I'll keep my weapons close at hand."

"Defying the law? How un-paladinlike of you, Arun," Dannel said. "There may be hope for you yet, my friend."

"A law that begets evil is the antithesis of justice," the paladin replied. "And I am sensing much evil in Cauldron since our return."

"Well, what I'm sensing now is the absence of a waitress," Dannel replied lightly. "While yon dwarf's antics have a way of reducing the appetite, I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast, and even 'prancing elves' need to eat."

"Mra'ap ar'll 'ak yer a froofy sarad," Hodge said, over a mouthful of food.

Zenna glanced over at Mole, and saw that the gnome had turned her attention from the light-hearted exchange out toward the front room. She followed her friend's gaze, and saw a stirring of some sort in the front room. The angle through the arched exit didn't give much of a view of the common beyond the edge of the bar, but there was something... an odd lull in the din, followed by a couple of surprised exclamations a few moments later.

A figure appeared under the low lintel, his head nearly scraping the weathered wooden arch. He was a half-orc, and at first glance Zenna thought he was one of the many mercenary soldiers who were ubiquitous in Cauldron now. But even before the man reached for the massive sword slung across his back, Zenna sensed something wrong. It took her a few heartbeats to register the discordant element.

The man was absolutely silent; he made no noise when he walked, and the sword slid from his scabbard without even the faintest whisper of sound. When he leapt forward, his heavy boot landed on the smooth floorboards without noise. Behind him, Zenna caught a glimpse

of a slender woman, clad in studded leather armor with a billowing cloak spreading in her wake as she followed the warrior into the room.

“Ambush!” Zenna cried, an instant after Mole shouted a similar warning. Even as the others looked up from their conversation to see the intruders, Zenna opened her mouth to speak the words of a spell, knowing she was too late.

She managed one word before the charging warrior drew near enough for the magical *silence* surrounding him to envelop them, and her magic fled.

Chapter 247

A clinical part of Zenna’s mind recorded the details, even as her spell dissipated and her heart pounded in her chest at the brutish hulk charging them. He was moving incredibly fast, too fast, and a faint glow surrounded him. She suspected that at least one enhancing spell, and probably more, had been placed upon him.

The plates and mugs on the table started sliding downward as Arun lifted the table. Hodge’s exclamation was silent, the dwarf’s mouth moving soundlessly, Mole leaping back to hit the floor with a roll, Dannel lifting *Alakast*...

The sword came crashing down, and with horror Zenna realized that it was coming for her. She tried to duck down beneath the edge of the booth, but the blade tore into the seat behind her and kept going, and she felt pain explode in her back as it slashed through her clothes and bit deep into her flesh. She tried to roll with the hit, but only staggered awkwardly from the booth, trying to get away, but there was nowhere to go.

She looked up and saw the woman pointing at her. Her eyes fixed on a silver icon that she’d worn concealed under her cloak, visible now that she was moving quickly. A silver skull...

Pain struck her again like a wave as a bolt of searing, white-hot light erupted from the woman’s outstretched hand, slamming into her with the force of a hurled brick. She staggered back against the adjacent booth, knocking the table ajar, her thoughts jumbled with the ferocity of the attacks against her.

But she was sufficiently aware to see the streak of red flame that appeared from thin air, flashing across the room to strike her in the shoulder. Her cloak helped deflect the *scorching ray*, but even as her mind registered the attack from an *invisible* mage, a second bolt shot solidly into her chest, and she fell back into the booth, consciousness fleeing from her in a torrent.

Dannel watched with horror as the assassins—three, he realized, reaching the same conclusion as Zenna about the hidden mage—focused their attacks on Zenna, taking her down with a combination of powerful attacks. These foes were powerful and well-prepared, but he and his friends were experienced veterans, and they were quick to respond.

Even as the elf vaulted the sundered partition that separated their booth from the adjacent one, leaping to Zenna's aid, Arun hurled their table into the attacking half-orc. The huge sword struck the table solidly, smashing it with a single blow, but behind it came the dwarves, lashing out with their weapons. Arun's sword slammed into the torso of the half-orc, cutting through the chain links of the mailshirt he wore, the holy power of the sword flaring as it found evil to destroy. The warrior dodged back, but only a step as he sought to recover for another attack, but that maneuver did not foil Hodge, whose axe burst into eager flame as he brought it around in a wide arc, catching the would-be slayer solidly in the side.

But the half-orc seemed possessed of a considerable fortitude, and he lifted the sword with incredible quickness, ready to fight on.

A slight form darted under Hodge's swing and rolled between the half-orc's legs, coming up out of her tumble with her rapier already darting into the warrior's back. The half-orc stiffened and let out a silent cry as the length of Mole's new weapon vanished under the trailing edge of his mailshirt, reappearing a moment later drenched in his blood.

Dannel bent over Zenna's blasted and bleeding form. He was frustrated by his inability to magically heal her wounds, as neither his bardic powers nor his healing wand would function in the area of magical *silence*. He had to rely on basic first aid, tearing a strip from Zenna's torn shirt and using it in an attempt to staunch the bleeding from the deep gash that the half-orc had torn in her back with his sword.

The enemy spellcasters, on the other hand, did not appear to be hindered by the magical silence in the least. The woman, holding a slender black wand in her left hand, darted nimbly forward toward Mole. The gnome saw her coming and turned to face her, but the woman was faster, extending a slender hand to touch the rogue lightly on the shoulder.

Mole stiffened and staggered back, her mouth opening to release a spray of blood as the *inflict serious wounds* spell from the priestess tore mercilessly through her insides.

Even as the gnome suffered, a pale violet ray appeared out of thin air, narrowly missing the injured half-orc before it struck Arun. The *ray of enfeeblement* poured dark energies into the paladin, and his movements became leaden, the very weight of his armor and weapons bearing him down as his strength faded.

Despite being weakened, Arun continued to press his attacks. But with his strength drained from him, his attacks were far less effective, and he managed only one glancing impact that barely cut through the warrior's armor.

Seeing the paladin's difficulty, Hodge surged forward with an all-out attack intended to take out this foe once and for all. As he shifted his position, however, he trod heavily upon one of the large metal steins that had been upon their table. Losing his balance, he fell heavily to the side, his axe falling from his hands as he splayed across the hardwood floor.

Dannel looked across the crowded battleground and felt a cold chill. These enemies fought together with a grim precision, and they seemed to know exactly how to counter their own tactics. He felt rather than heard Zenna cough as blood from her wound fouled her insides,

and fear gripped his heart as he felt her slipping away from him, despite his efforts to stabilize her.

Together, they had faced dragons, demons, and terrible foes. But he could not escape a grim, unmistakable fact.

They were being beaten.

Chapter 248

Confronted with an effective ambush by skilled assassins, his friends taking a beating at their hands, Dannel reached for *Alakast*. He knew, however, that if he left Zenna, it was very likely that that woman he loved, the woman he'd been charged with protecting, would bleed to death here in the back room of an inn in Cauldron.

And then he saw a familiar face at the entrance of the room, as Annah Taskerhill stepped into view.

The noblewoman's eyes widened in surprise, but the bard too was an experienced adventurer, and she quickly evaluated the situation. She spread her hands and opened her mouth wide, and unleashed a discordant shriek that tore through the room.

The sound was more than a scream, it contained the force of a *dispel magic* spell that pulsed through the room and warred with the spells that surrounded the assassins. Each bore many enchantments, and the spell, unfocused as it was, could not affect them all, but the results were still dramatic as the *silence* collapsed, and the sounds of battle filled the confined space. At the same instant, the air in the middle of the room shimmered and a lean, lanky man clad in a loose gray robe appeared, turning to face this new threat.

Dannel did not hesitate, unleashing his healing song, pouring magical power into Zenna's stricken body. She jerked as the positive energy flowed into her with a torrent, dragging her back to consciousness.

"What..." she mumbled.

"You're badly hurt," he told her, interrupting the song only long enough to grab his wand from its pouch. "Heal yourself."

"Take out the paladin!" the enemy wizard said, lifting his hand and firing a pair of *scorching rays* into Annah Taskerhill. The bard managed to dodge partly out of the way of the first blast, but the second caught her solidly in the torso, and she fell back out of the doorway, her fine clothes smoldering where the magical flames had struck her.

The half-orc tried to obey the command, laying into Arun with a series of potent blows. Arun deflected one stroke with his smaller blade, and grunted as a second landed heavily on his shoulder with enough force to slightly dent the mithral plate.

“Enough, assassin,” the dwarf said, gritting his teeth as he tried to fight through the magical weakness that had stolen over him.

Even as the warrior of Moradin raised his holy blade to strike, the priestess stepped back and invoked the dark power of her grim god. A storm of negative energy swept through the room, an *unholy blight* that tore mercilessly through the chamber. Two commoners who’d been hiding under their table during the violent battle had their lives snuffed out by the dark power of the spell, and the companions—particularly those whose hearts clove truest to the path of good—suffered as well as the fell wave washed over them. The assassins, dedicated to selfishness and evil, felt nothing but a fell exultation, and as the cloud dissipated they readied themselves for a final attack that would overcome their targets, and earn their pay.

They had come close. But not close enough.

Arun roared out a dwarvish cry of rage and battle as he thrust the full length of his sword into the half-orc’s chest. The warrior cried out, his huge sword falling from his suddenly limp fingers to clatter on the floor.

Belting out a loud string of profanities in both dwarvish and the common speech, Hodge pulled himself up off the floor and picked up his axe, charging toward the priestess. She dodged back out of his way, but was unable to avoid Mole, who tumbled into place behind her, stinging her with a deep thrust of her rapier into the meaty muscle of her left leg. The assassin limped back, trying to keep both of her enemies in front of her.

“Kemock! We must flee!”

Arun leapt over the body of the half-orc as he fell, and rushed toward the sorcerer. But before he could reach him, Kemock unleashed his most powerful spell. A *cone of cold* slammed into them with the force of a hundred winters, filling the room with icy death.

Dannel threw himself over Zenna’s still-ravaged body, shielding her from the worst effects of the blast. When the spell had ended, however, both were clutched together in a frozen embrace, unmoving.

Mole and her adversary had both been at the edges of the spell’s effect, and both evaded it easily. Hodge, however, lacked their speed and agility, and he staggered as frost coated his squat frame, driving through his clothes to chill his flesh.

And Arun, already heavily wounded... Arun was caught with the full force of the *cone*. For several seconds he was lost in the roiling pulse of cold, completely shrouded in its power, blasted backward by its force.

“Taste frozen death, holy warrior,” the man mocked, exulting in his power.

But his smile vanished as the storm ended... and a gleaming steel blade came crashing down, slashing through his shoulder and driving magical steel deep into his torso. Kemock staggered backward, a bright line of red gushing down over his robe. The sorcerer snarled

and called upon his *greater invisibility* spell to cloak him once again, but even as he spoke the words of power a voice sounded behind him.

“A useful spell. But it will not save you now, assassin.”

He felt the touch that sent a surge through his body, countering his magic, matching the arcane currents exactly and disrupting them. He turned to see the dark-skinned woman there, and hissed, “I will destroy you, bitch!”

“I don’t think so,” Arun said, and that was the last thing that Kemoch Brage heard before the paladin’s sword ended his life.

The woman found herself hard-pressed as well. Facing both Mole and Hodge, sporting several wounds, she finally abandoned the fight, turning and running toward the exit. Hodge swung at her with his axe as she fled, but he narrowly missed. Annah, focused on the sorcerer, turned to late to be able to hinder her escape, and while Arun took a few steps after her, Mole’s voice drew him around.

“Arun! It’s Zenna and Dannel... come quickly!”

Chapter 249

“You saved our lives,” Dannel said to Annah, still shivering even as Zenna continued to cast healing spells upon him.

Both had come to the very edge of death, before Arun’s healing powers had drawn them back from the brink. Only Zenna’s innate resistance to cold, and Dannel’s selfless sacrifice had saved her life, and it had quite nearly cost him his own in the bargain. She was quick to tell him that once she’d been revived, but the scolding was not fierce, and it was clear from the way her eyes shone that she knew just how close both of them had come.

The bard shrugged. Zenna had offered to heal her, but she’d declined, using her own bardic powers to treat the burns she’d suffered from the sorcerer’s fiery blasts.

“I may not be a shining scion of Good,” she said, “but I have no patience for assassins, especially ones that try to trash my favorite inn.”

“Those three knew a lot about us,” Zenna said. “They knew our abilities, and how to neutralize our tactics.” She coughed, her own body slow to recover from the beating it had taken, despite the healing that Arun, Dannel and she herself had channeled into her.

“Stupid to attack us ‘ere, all together,” Hodge said. “Ida waited ‘til we was alone, or sleepin’, or somesuch,” he said.

“This was no casual assault,” Annah said. “They had a number of powerful spells layered on them, spells that my *dispel* slid right off of.”

Zenna nodded. "She's right, this was coordinated by someone more powerful, and they *had* to attack us quickly, together, before all of the spells wore off," she said. "It was an all-or-nothing ambush."

"They will learn soon enough that their effort failed, if they do not know already," Arun said. "When that woman reports their failure, they may try again."

Loud shouts from the front room drew their attention around. Mole was standing near the archway, and she looked through and reported back. "Looks like the Watch, finally," she said.

"Let me do the talking," Annah offered, as a patrol of muscular half-orcs led by a tall human lieutenant of the Watch entered the room.

They followed her advice, and after an hour of questions, with the occasional threat inserted for flavor, they found themselves out in the street again. The Morkoth had been closed for the rest of the night, and a few patrons lingered on the street, talking about the attack in small, quiet groups. The companions could sense the covert attention focused upon them, and Zenna felt particularly exposed here, where eyes could be watching them from any of a hundred hiding places.

"I must be going, to speak to my friends," Annah said.

"Our thanks, again," Dannel said.

"It would seem that I was in the wrong place at the right time," she replied, turning away. Zenna, however, forestalled her.

"Wait, a moment."

"Yes?"

"What happened to Todd Vanderboren?"

The other woman's face clouded for a moment. "We were ambushed in the tunnels under the city. We were sent to investigate reports that band of kuo-toa had come up close to the surface, and were threatening the city. A wizard attacked us... in hindsight, he seemed to be quite knowledgeable about our tactics. He struck us with several lightning bolts before we even knew he was there... Todd was too slow, and was killed. The rest of us barely escaped with his body and our lives."

The companions shared a look, and Annah looked thoughtful. "Do you think there is a connection between this attack and the ambush on us?"

"I don't know what to think anymore," Zenna said. "But I'd watch yourself."

"You as well."

“One last question,” Zenna said. “You said you were ‘sent’. Who hired you, to investigate these tunnels?”

Annah’s expression darkened. “Ike Iverson. The second-in-command at the church of Kelemvor.”

* * * * *

“What interest would the church of Kelemvor have in killing adventurers?” Mole asked a short time later, as the companions made their way down Obsidian Avenue. “Half the town worships there, or at least pays the monthly tithe.”

“Yeah, everybody dies,” Hodge said. “So they be guaranteed business from ever’body, at least once.”

“I don’t know,” Zenna said. “I find myself saying that an awful lot since we got back here, and I don’t like it.”

“The matter bears investigating,” Dannel said. “But first we need to talk to Jenya, and see what she can tell us.”

Darkness had fallen over the city, and the streetlamps were mere pale, flickering orbs that turned the familiar street into a netherworld of shadows and mystery. The curfew that had been placed over the city after the tax riots had been eased, but there were few people on the streets, and the patrols of the Watch shot them hard looks as they passed.

“I think it would be a good idea if we all took quarters together, at least for the moment,” Zenna suggested. “I have a spell that can give warning if someone else tries to break in while we sleep.”

“Bloody hells, let’s just find us a vacant lot and sleep in yer magic house,” Hodge said.

“I could ask around, see if I can find out who wants us dead,” Mole suggested.

“Well, let’s see, shall we?” Zenna said. “There’s the survivors of that slaver operation we broke up. The Last Laugh, though we haven’t heard anything from them for a while. The cultists we defeated in the ruins under the city. The kuo-toa. That demon that almost killed us. Kaurophon. Did I miss anyone?”

“Oh, don’t forget that one of the hags got away,” Mole added helpfully. “Oh, and that beholder we saw, in Kazmojen’s bazaar.”

“Beholder?” Hodge asked.

“Sounds like you all were getting in way over your heads long before I came along,” Dannel said.

“Let’s focus on the current threat, shall we?” Zenna said. “Maybe Jenya will be able to tell us something.” She gestured ahead, where the tall cupola of the church of Helm was just becoming visible around the bend.

The wide front doors of the church were closed, and the lantern that often shone above them as a welcome to worshippers was unlit, leaving the recessed nave of the entry dark. The companions, frequent guests of the clergy of the Vigilant One, turned instead to the narrow gate that led to the courtyard beside the main temple building, and provided access to the low buildings that made up the rest of the complex. A soft light shone through the shutters of the rectory, indicating that at least *someone* was up and about at this hour.

The gate creaked slightly as they opened it and stepped through, but a moment later a familiar hiss interrupted them—the sound of a sword being drawn.

“Hold it right there, and nobody loses an arm,” came a rough voice behind them.

Chapter 250

“We’re friends, don’t attack,” Zenna said, turning to see who had threatened them.

It was a dwarf, a powerfully built woman clad in a simple robe of soft homespun. The plain garment was that of a religious petitioner, an appearance reinforced by the symbol of Helm stitched in black threads across the chest, but no one would have mistaken this figure for a humble pilgrim. Her arms were corded with muscle, and she held a bastard sword one-handed with the point toward them, and the blade did not quiver in the slightest.

Arun did not flinch at the sword whose point was held a mere two hands from his face. “Adamantine, impressive,” he said, eying the long shaft.

“This ain’t a smithy, and these ain’t working hours,” she said. “What is your business here?”

“We’re here to see Jenya,” Dannel said.

“High Priestess didn’t say anything about no visitors.”

“Look, lady,” Hodge said, sidling forward toward her, until the blade shifted expertly, its point about an inch shy of plunging into his beard. “Um... that is...” His hand tightened around the haft of his axe, and flickers of flame began to appear around its head.

“Hodge!” Dannel said. “We mean no disrespect, madam,” the elf said. “I can assure you, we are long-standing friends of the High Priestess. I can only assume that you are a recent arrival, or you would know who we are.”

“Oh, I know who you are,” the dwarf said, with a wry grin. The sword came up with a snap to lay against her broad shoulder. “Come on then, into the church with you, enough of this damned sneaking around. I’ll go see if the High Priestess is still awake, but if she’d not, damned if you’re not coming back in the morning, no matter how urgent your business is.”

They followed her instructions, even Mole caught short of a snappy comeback by the abrupt nature of the dwarven woman.

* * * * *

“And so we came here,” Dannel concluded, his voice echoing slightly off of the cavernous interior of the temple.

“The woman escaped,” Mole said.

Jenya Urikas paced across the floor in front of the great altar of Helm, her slippers padding silently on the huge blocks of white marble. She wore a troubled expression, and looked tired.

“And the woman was a cleric, you said?”

Zenna nodded. “She wore a skull icon, although I could not see more details.”

Jenya nodded. “Probably Cyric or Vesharoon. Either one introduces a new level of trouble for us, I fear.”

“I think that they were just hired assassins,” Dannel said. “And at least two of them won’t be giving us any more trouble, at least.”

“And the guard took away the bodies?”

“Yes. Though they weren’t much help, otherwise.”

“Stupid,” the dwarven woman—Beorna, she’d been introduced as—spat. She stood behind the High Priestess almost protectively, her arms folded in front of her chest. “If we still had access to them, we might have been able to figure out who sent them. Given how this town’s run, I’d not be surprised if they haven’t already been fed to that damned Watch of theirs.”

“Well, given that we’d just fought a major battle, we figured that picking a fight with the city authorities might be a bit much,” the elf replied dryly.

“And we might have an idea of who sent them,” Zenna said. She quickly summarized what they’d learned from Annah Taskerhill.

“The church of Kelemvor?” Jenya said, ceasing her pacing and sitting down on one of the pews in the front of the church.

“You don’t seem surprised at the suggestion,” Arun said.

“Over the last year, we’ve had... difficulties... with the clergy of the Lord of the Dead.”

“Difficulties?” Dannel asked.

“Embril Aloustinai—the leader of Kelemvor’s church here in Cauldron—“

“I’ve heard of her,” Zenna interrupted. By all reports, she was a mystic theurge like Zenna, one of the rare spellcasters who combined the arcane and divine paths.

Jenya nodded, not disturbed at the interruption, although Beorna frowned. “She’s always been an elusive figure,” the high priestess went on. “But in the last year, the higher ranks of the church have gotten more secretive, while at the same time gaining a larger share of influence over the city government. My sources suggest that Aloustinai is a key figure in the higher circles of power in Cauldron, and that she has the ear of the Lord Mayor.”

“During the crisis last year, with Sarcem’s murder and the theft of the wands of *control water*, Aloustinai offered nothing in the way of aid, despite the fact that she was then one of the only clerics in the town capable of creating the devices. And since then there’s been a clash between her order and Kristof Jurgenson, prior of the small church of Lathander located near the Hall of the Dead. The Kelemvorites have been constructing a great new spire atop their already-considerable cathedral, and Kristof charged that Aloustinai had deliberately designed her spire to block the rays of the morning sun from the House of the Morninglord.”

Beorna’s scowl deepened. “Sounds pretty petty, if you ask me,” she snorted.

“So what happened?” Mole asked.

“Nothing; Kristof’s tiny congregation lacks both wealth and power, and Aloustinai runs in the noble circles with the powerful. But the whole affair helped confirm the impression of arrogance and heedlessness of the leadership of the church of Kelemvor.”

“Although perhaps,” Dannel said softly, “some are dissatisfied at the increase of their position, as their own power and prestige has suffered... some setbacks recently.”

As his words provoked a momentary silence, Beorna stepped forward with a menacing look. “I don’t think I favor your implication, elf,” she began, her arms coming down to her sides, her hands tightening into fists.

Jenya forstalled her with a firm sweep of her hand. “No, he has the right to speak his mind,” she said. Turning to Dannel, she said, “It is true that there is some history here, and it may be clouding my judgment. But given what you’ve told me, it would be reasonable to seek out more information, and find your own answers.”

“We’d hoped you could assist us in that effort,” Zenna said. “Perhaps a *commune*...”

Jenya nodded, although it seemed that the gesture was accompanied with some reluctance. “I attempted such a communion with Helm shortly after I rose to this position, and had granted the power needed for such an act. I received little in the way of helpful information...”

“Maybe you did not know the proper questions to ask,” Zenna suggested.

“I will seek again, but I will need time to prepare for the ritual, at least a full day. In the meantime, you should stay here, under the protection of the church. I will have quarters prepared in the acolytes’ quarters in the rectory; goodness knows we’ve not been able to gain new recruits in recent months. ”

“And tomorrow, we’ll go pay a visit to the Temple of Kelemvor,” Arun said.

“From what I hear, Aloustinai has been away from Cauldron for the last tenday,” Jenya said. “But Ike Iverson, her second, should be there. I will send Beorna with you, as my representative.”

The dwarven woman shifted. “High Priestess...”

“I know your concern,” Jenya said. “But I think that this errand may be consistent with your mandate.” The dwarf woman nodded.

“It’s settled, then,” Jenya went on. “Come, I will see to your quarters.”

But Arun forestalled her. “There’s one other matter I wanted to speak to you about, priestess.”

The others turned to face him. “Yes, Arun?” Jenya asked.

Arun turned to Mole, who nodded, withdrawing a long, slender object wrapped in soft cloth from her *bag of holding*. Arun took the weapon from the gnome and held it out before him. Jenya, curious, drew back the cloth to reveal a weathered hilt—the hilt of the holy bastard sword they’d found on the Plain of Cysts on Occipitus.

“Morgan used this blade,” Arun said, “But he urged us to bring it back with us... he believed that we would have greater need of it than he.”

Jenya took the blade, a bit awkwardly, for it was nearly as tall as she was, and heavy for a sword of its size. The sword slid easily from the fine leather scabbard they’d had made for it in Saradush, revealing a blade that blazed with a pure white radiance.

“It’s... beautiful,” Jenya said.

Arun cleared his throat. “It is a holy sword, priestess. We have the weapons we need, and you have given much to defend this town from shadow... I grant it to you, to use as you see fit.”

Jenya looked surprised, and even Beorna was taken aback, although her eyes remained fixed on the impressive sword. But the dwarf woman finally realized that Jenya had turned to face her, and she lowered her head in deference.

“Templar... I bestow this gift upon you, then, that you might wield it in the service of your mandate.”

Beorna's head came up. "I accept, and swear to wield this blade with honor in the service of the Vigilant One."

Chapter 251

The morning was bright and crisp, with the morning sun already a blazing white ball in a sky of cloudless blue. It looked to be a glorious late summer day, although the occasional breeze coming down off the mountains hinted at the approach of autumn.

The companions, accompanied by Beorna, walked down Obsidian Way around the broad outermost curve of the bowl of the town. Below them to their right the city sloped down in concentric rings to the still waters of the central lake. The lake was visible occasionally in the breaks in the rows of buildings made by the steep alleys that led down to the lower avenues that ran in tighter circles around the interior of the caldera. Ahead their destination was clearly visible beyond similar breaks in the line of buildings. The tall spire of the Temple of Kelemvor was a landmark visible from most sites throughout the town.

Zenna absently adjusted her new bracers, thin silver guards more ornamental than defensive. She hadn't gotten quite used to them, and they chafed where her wrists met her hands. Still, given the power they possessed, she would learn to adjust.

Last night, after Jenya had shown them to the room that they would share, Mole had opened her *bag of holding* to reveal a surprising collection of magical goodies that she'd pilfered from the bodies of the two slain assassins. Zenna didn't know how she'd managed such a thorough looting in the handful of moments between the battle's end and the arrival of the Watch, who'd taken the bodies of the villains into custody pending their investigation. Her mouth tightened. No doubt that "investigation" would end up in a dusty file folder somewhere, while some politically connected guard officer would be wearing the half-orc assassin's armor and carrying around his magical sword before too long. She wouldn't have been surprised if they even cleaned the bloodstains out of the sorcerer's robe and sold it...

But in the meantime, she and Mole had examined their prizes. They hadn't found anything revealing clues about the assassins' identities or their employers—not that Zenna had expected to find such—but they had been exceptionally well equipped. In addition to a few healing potions, they found matching pairs of rings and amulets with minor protective properties; a pair of gauntlets that enhanced one's strength; the bracers she now wore, which surrounded their wearer with a defensive aura; and finally a cloak that seemed to reinforce the physical presence, the charisma, of its wearer. That morning over breakfast they'd apportioned out the new items among the group. The dwarf templar had been absent from that gathering, although Jenya had stepped in briefly to greet them. They met Beorna again at the main gate, looking impatient to be about their business.

Beorna had changed since their last meeting, clad now in a suit of adamantine full plate fitted to her like a second skin, the symbol of her god featured prominently upon her breastplate. Her new sword was slung across her back, twin to the adamantine blade she'd already carried. Zenna wondered at this woman. She seemed to radiate a devotion to her chosen faith that the tiefling had seen in many of the servants of the Vigilant One

she'd known. At the same time, however, there was a sort of somber depth to her, deeper currents that Zenna could not read. As a woman who herself had long kept shields up around her private emotions, Zenna was quick to recognize the same in others.

Beorna walked in the company of the two dwarves, not *quite* ignoring the others, but not attracting idle conversation from them, either.

"So, axeman," she said to Hodge, as they made their way down the avenue. "Last night... would you truly have lifted that weapon of yours against me?"

Hodge shot her a hard look under shaggy brows; clearly the vulgar miner was taken a bit aback by the woman, and hadn't quite figured out how to deal with her. "I nae be wantin' to kill a woman dwarf..."

Beorna snorted. "Well then, you really are as dumb as you look. A woman'll slide steel into your intestines as fast as any man, faster if you're too mooney-eyed to notice she's carrying a blade."

"I don' raise me axe unless I be meanin' to use it," Hodge said, trying to recoup something from the exchange. "An' you or anyone else give me reason, then they get a taste o' the blade." He lifted the heavy axe, and its head burst into flame.

"Strong words," she said. "A potent weapon, to make one wonder at the steel of the man who bears it." She gave him an appraising look that caused him to flush at her scrutiny. "Tis a pity that you have not mastered the art of bathing. As for the rest, we shall see."

She turned her gaze toward Arun, who'd feigned disinterest in the conversation. "And what of Golden Boy?" she asked, speaking to Hodge, although her voice had been pitched to carry clearly. "I was not aware that they were now accepting beardless youths into the Order of the Hammer." Though her words were biting, her tone was light, and she'd looked at Arun differently since the exchange with the holy sword the previous night.

Arun's look was hard, but he did not reply.

"Cat got your tongue, boy?" she said, with a broad grin that seemed slightly salacious.

"Arun's slain giants, demons, and even a few dragons," Mole said, piping into the conversation.

"Oh?" Beorna responded, with a raised eyebrow. "An impressive list." Chuckling as if remembering some private joke, she turned her attention back ahead to the road.

"And what of yourself, Templar?" Zenna asked. "What great deeds should we know of from your résumé, if we are to accept you into our company?"

Beorna did not turn nor shift her stride, and for a moment Zenna thought she was ignoring her. But then the dwarven woman said, "I walk the path of Justice," she said. "That is all you need know of me."

Dannel glanced over at her and shrugged, as if to say, *Not so different from all the other Helmites we've known, is she?*

A commotion in the crowd drew her attention to the left side of the street. They were nearing one of the massive gates in the city wall, one of four that each gave onto a narrow road that wound its way down the side of the volcano, each heading in a different direction into the surrounding lands.

There was a definite motion in the group of people moving along the street, away from the direction of the gates. And a moment later, she realized why.

There was a massive creature standing there, coming forward toward them. He—assuming it *was* a he—stood easily nine feet tall, with muscles corded like tree trunks. He was humanoid in form, but his face was unlike anything that could even be remotely called human; the shape of his features were clearly draconic, and a pair of massive horns with a slight curve jutted from the sides of his head. Instead of scales, black fur covered his exposed skin, creating an odd juxtaposition that hinted at a mixed racial ancestry. He was clad in a shirt of chain links pulled tight over the vast spread of his chest, and he carried a length of chain that trailed a huge, spiked ball that scratched noisily on the cobbles in his wake.

Zenna's first thought was to wonder how this... *thing* had gotten through the gates of the town unhindered by the guards.

Her second thought was that it was coming straight toward them.

There was a slight stir of activity as the companions readied themselves for a confrontation. The monstrous stranger came forward until he stood before them, dominating the street about twenty paces distant.

"Of course, the one time we need the Watch around, they're nowhere to be found," Dannel said dryly.

"This smacks of a set-up," Zenna returned quietly, and the elf nodded.

Mole, never one to pass up the opportunity to look trouble in the eye—although she barely came up to its knee in this case—stepped forward, but before she could utter a no-doubt creative and provocative greeting, Beorna had eclipsed her.

"Ho now, what's this?" the dwarf said. "I don't know who or what you are, ugly, but you'd best be moving along." She rapped the shoulder plate of her armor with the blade of her sword, and then gestured with it down the street.

The giant beast peered at them intently. When it spoke, its voice was a bellow that rebounded off the fronts of the buildings that faced the street.

"Did you kill the dragon-father?"

Hodge's face was limned in the red glow of the flames that engulfed the head of his axe. "Well now, that's a tough one... we've killed a fair num'er o' drakes, it true... could yer be a bit more specific, now?"

Zenna bit back a curse. She glanced at Beorna, but the dwarven priestess wasn't even bothering to hide her mirth at Hodge's comment. *Dwarves!* She stepped forward quickly, lamenting the lack of anyone in her group who possessed any skill at diplomacy whatsoever.

"Careful, Zenna!" Dannel whispered, but he didn't otherwise act to hinder her. Well, *that* was something at least, but as she looked up at the giant hulk looming over them, a part of her wished that he'd made an effort to stop her.

"We seek no trouble with you, mighty one," she said, raising her hands to show that they were empty, drawing the monstrous warrior's attention to her. As she did, she twisted her hands subtly in the gestures that triggered one of her spells. "We respect your power," she went on, bowing her head, her cowl concealing her face momentarily as she quietly uttered the arcane incantation that summoned the magic. "What is your name, great warrior?"

The dragon-kin looked at her with suspicion, the links of his huge spiked chain rattling slightly with the movements of his fists. "I am Zarik Dhor," he said, his chest swelling with pride. "Dhorlot the Black was my father."

Currents of power flowed out from her into him, carrying a powerful enchantment designed to snare his mind and bind him to her. But as the spell took hold, it slid from a will that to Zenna felt like a solid wall, fashioned of granite blocks. She drove at the wall, abandoning subtlety, but each mental thrust simply glided from the considerable discipline of his mind.

But she got a reaction. The dragon-man's eyes widened as he realized that he was under attack, and with a mighty roar he leapt forward with surprising quickness, the chain snapping forward with blinding speed. There was no time for Zenna to duck or dodge, and the heavy iron sphere at the end of the chain slammed into her with colossal force, knocking her roughly backward to land hard on the smooth stone cobbles of the street.

Chapter 252

True to form, the companions found themselves confronted with another dire foe out for their blood.

But this time, the setting was a very public one, smack dab in the middle of one of Cauldron's busier streets. Nearby townsfolk screamed and scattered, leaving the six adventurers to face the rage of the half-dragon, half-minotaur warrior named Zarik Dhor alone.

The huge warrior was an imposing adversary, but the companions had faced down tougher foes, and been thrust into deadlier confrontations and survived. Even as Zenna went down, and Dhor whipped his lethal chain up around his head in a rushing arc, the dwarves rushed to attack. Beorna lifted her sword and called upon the power of Helm, invoking her

patron's *divine favor* to guide her strokes in the melee. Arun and Hodge didn't bother with such niceties, leaping forward to directly assail the huge monster. The chain, however, gave it an incredible reach, and before they could close to striking range it swept the weapon down into both of them. Hodge grunted and staggered as the heavy ball clipped his shoulder, and Arun took an equally devastating hit a few seconds later as it clanged into his shield with enough force to dent the magically reinforced steel.

But the dwarves were made of stern stuff, and they pressed their attack. Hodge thrust his spear at Dhor's chest, but underneath the chain links of his armor the draconic minotaur was possessed of an incredibly thick hide, combining the gifts of both sides of his ancestry. The thrust had no apparent effect.

Arun darted in and slashed with his holy blade at one of Dhor's muscular thighs. His chain armor did not reach so low, but even so the paladin's powerful stroke only barely injured the giant warrior, drawing a shallow gash across the limb. Dhor held his ground, altering the swirling circle forged by his spiked chain to bring the heavy head to bear at the enemy at his feet.

Mole darted in to Zenna's side. "Are you all right?" she asked, as the tiefling slowly pulled herself up, clutching at her wounded chest.

"I will be," she said, forcing the words out through clenched teeth. "Go, help them!" she urged her friend, staggering back out of the range of the melee and the long reach of that spiked chain. Dannel watched her with concern, but thankfully he did not rush in to aid her; better by far that he continued doing what he was doing, in this case firing arrow after arrow in a rapid blur into the hulking form of Zarik Dhor. Zenna thought she heard the stirrings of a melody as she neared the elf, the twanging of his bowstring a musical sound followed by the siren song of each arrow as it sliced through the air toward its target.

Shaking her head to clear it of such fancies, she turned and summoned the words of one of her spells through the pain that still knifed insistently through her battered body. There would be time for healing later; right now they had to deal with the threat.

And Zarik Dhor seemed indefatigable, a deadly foe that continued to lay about him with powerful swings of his chain. Hodge rushed in with his axe raised to deliver a strong blow to the half-dragon's side, but the heavy ball came crashing down, and the dwarf folded, struck with a critical hit that sent him to the ground. Seeing his friend struck down, Arun lunged with his sword, this time aiming for the thick mass of the huge warrior's torso. But again Dhor demonstrated his blinding speed, and the chain came down in a deadly sequence of blows, the warrior snapping the chain in a vigorous action that sent the ball pounding down repeatedly into the paladin. The first blow came in low, tangling Arun's legs in the chain and flinging him roughly onto his back. Then, before he could recover, Dhor snapped the spiked ball back down, slamming it into Arun's body with incredible force. There seemed to be no way that even Arun could absorb such punishment, but still Dhor attacked again, twisting his wrists and whirling the chain around once more, driving the iron head down toward the paladin's head.

Somehow, the battered dwarf found the breath and the energy to roll out of the way, and the chain slammed into the cobbles scant inches behind him, crushing several paving stones into rubble.

Beorna's yell announced her arrival to the fray, the sunlight gleaming dully on the long length of her adamantine sword. But Dhor had still more surprises, and as she charged he swept out his chain in a wide arc that skittered across the cobblestones. The armored dwarf was unable to evade the chain as it snaked around her ankles, and as Dhor drew his weapon up with a rough jerk she joined Arun, falling facedown on the street.

Zenna focused her mind through the pain, and drew upon the energies of a spell. Her *scorching ray* extended in a twisting blast of fire that arced over the battlefield into the upper body of the draconic warrior. Tough as he was, he appeared to lack any particular resistance to fire. Zenna, lost in the depths of her concentration, drew deeper upon her reservoir of energy, and through the sheer force of her will maintained the spell, launching a second ray of flame into him. She'd never managed two blasts from the same spell before, and exulted in her power as the second ray of flame drew a black line across Dhor's muscled body.

But even though she was out of the reach of the spiked chain, Dhor had another surprise in store. The half-dragon opened his great jaws wide, and as Zenna's eyes widened in realization, he unleashed a great gout of acid that shot unerringly toward her.

Chapter 253

Zenna hurled herself aside, but even as she moved, her cloak billowing out behind her, she felt the first fat globules of acid impact her side, followed instantly by a burning sizzle of hot pain. The magic of her cloak had helped her avoid the full force of the blast, but that was of little consolation at the moment as Dhor's acid tore mercilessly through the sleeve of her tunic and seared the white flesh beneath. Big yellow drops had landed on her side, each a white-hot point of fire as they wrought their deadly work. Her lungs were seared as she drew in the poisonous vapors from the acid, and mercifully the pain eased as she fell into unconsciousness.

Dannel was quick to rush to her aid, but at the moment the entire group appeared to be in quite dire straits. Hodge was out of the fight, and both Arun and Beorna were down, while the wounds that Dhor had suffered seemed puny, and appeared to have slowed the massive warrior little as he whirled the chain in a great circle above his head.

"All you die!" he roared, and it seemed that the very walls of the buildings on Obsidian Avenue shook with his pronouncement.

"Not so fast," Beorna said, pulling herself up, her armor clanking slightly at her movements.

"Aaaarrgh!" Dhor screamed, whipping his chain about his head once more, driving it to an almost insane velocity, before swinging it down at Beorna.

The dwarf woman made no move to avoid the blow. It slammed into her with colossal force, sounding a loud ringing noise as iron hit adamantine.

Beorna was unmoved.

“That the best you got, ugly?” she shouted, lifting her sword and running forward. To her right, Arun was getting back up as well; his movements drew Dhor’s attention and the chain swept around again, slamming into his body, driving him back down to his knees. The paladin had taken three solid hits now, and even with his incredible fortitude it was clear that he could not take another.

But he got up.

A nimble form tumbled into the deadly radius of the spiked chain, approaching Dhor from behind. Mole had circled around the melee, moving at the fast pace augmented by her boots, and now she somersaulted forward, coming up into a springing leap that carried her up onto Dhor’s back. Her rapier drove unerringly into her chosen spot, sinking in and out of the warrior’s torso so quickly that at first it looked as though she’d missed. By the way that the half-dragon reared up and roared in pain, however, it was quickly clear that she’d accomplished her objective.

Beorna laid into Dhor with a mighty two-handed stroke of her sword. The holy blade tore through mail links and leathery hide as though neither were there, savaging the organs beneath. Red blood and garish entrails showed through the three-foot gash in the giant warrior’s belly, and he staggered back, droplets of blood now flecking the space before his jaws as he drew in labored breaths.

But the half-dragon, driven on by his rage, did not go down. He lifted the spiked chain again, seeking to drive it into his foes without finesse, now, crushing them through brute strength.

An arrow slammed into his chest, followed within four heartbeats by another. Dannel having healed Zenna with his bardic powers, bringing her back to the edge of consciousness, had resumed his barrage.

Zarik Dhor began to feel the cold hand of death tighten around him. His wounds were dire, and he could feel the blood pumping out of his body through the red haze of his rage. He felt that he was already dead, only his hatred and passion for revenge keeping him standing now, and that was already bleeding out of him along with the substance of his life. But before he would go, he would take at least one of these enemies, the slayers of Dhorlot, with him.

Looking down, fighting to focus his eyes through the blood and the fog that had descended upon his vision, he searched for the one that had been described to him, the dwarven knight with the silvery armor and the sword of light.

He saw him just as the sword was thrust to the hilt into his body.

Chapter 254

Beorna looked down at the carcass of Zarik Dhor. Blood and grime slaked the dark surface of her mail, and sweat damped her thick hair down against her scalp. "Tis a shame," she said. "He was a worthy adversary."

"He damn blasted pounded us all into next week!" Hodge said, spitting loudly as Arun helped him up. "I kin stand," he said, though his spittle left a red spot on the cobbles, and he seemed more than a bit unsteady as he bent to recover his axe. "Me head still feels like a bunch o' gnomes are 'avin' a party in there," he grumbled.

"I don't think that this fellow's appearance was a mere coincidence," Dannel said.

"Well, he does look kinda like that black dragon we killed in Bhal-Hamatugn," Mole said, looking up from where she was giving the corpse a good looting.

A number of people had reappeared on the street, and were casting cautious but curious looks at the slain warrior. Zenna looked down the street. "I think that a patrol of the Watch is coming," she said.

"Convenient timing, as always," Dannel said with disgust.

The patrol was led by a familiar face, a sergeant named Skylar Krewis who they'd helped escape a riot in front of the town hall a few months back. Surrounded with a motley band of hard-eyed mercenaries that in some cases seemed more orc than human, it was reassuring to see him at least nominally in charge.

"Why am I not surprised to see the lot of you in the middle of trouble again?" Krewis said, as he caught sight of them.

"If the lot of you were doing your jobs properly, this brute would've never gotten into the city," Beorna said.

A few of the half-orcs muttered darkly, but the sergeant kept a grip on his temper. "Times are difficult for all of us, priestess," he told her. Turning back to the others, he said, "Now, who would like to tell me what happened here?"

Dannel served as spokesman, delivering a summary of their encounter with Zarik Dhor. A few locals had appeared, corroborating his account for the most part. In the meantime the half-orcs gathered around the body, exchanging crass comments amongst themselves and generally ignoring the proceedings.

In the end there was no reason to hold them, so after sending a townsman to fetch a heavy cart to carry off the corpse, Krewis bid them go. "Be careful," he told them. "Trouble seems to follow in your wake."

"We're getting used to it," Arun replied. The companions moved off, Mole's attention focused on her *bag of holding*, where she'd tucked her latest finds.

“He had a lot of money on him,” she reported once they’d moved off a short distance from the guards. “Gold coins, Calimshite mint, most still pretty shiny.”

“A payoff?” Arun asked.

“Perhaps,” Dannel replied. “It seems he had his own reasons for wanting us dead, but it does stretch the bounds of coincidence that he’d just appear like that.”

“But no one knew that we would be there this morning, except the priests at the temple,” Zenna noted.

“None of them would aid one such as that,” Beorna said.

“I’m not suggesting they did,” Zenna said. “But it’s clear that whoever our foes are, they have the ability to track our movements.”

“Well then, let’s be about our business,” Beorna replied. “We still have some answers to get from this Ike character.”

Zenna shook her head. “We’re too battered; Hodge and Arun are still seriously hurt, and you took a good pounding as well, priestess. We should withdraw, and restore our strength before pressing ahead with our mission.”

Beorna snorted. “Bah, that tussle was barely a warm-up.” She turned to the dwarves with a critical eye. “You boys can’t take much punishment, eh? Come on, Beorna’ll make it all better, and maybe we can actually get something done here, rather than waiting for the next bad guy to show up and try to kill the lot of you.”

“We can press on,” Arun said. “Only a fool would head into a dangerous situation injured, but we have healing magic of our own.”

“We just replenished our wands and stock of potions,” Zenna insisted. “We should not waste them needlessly.”

“Just stay back and let us dwarves handle any problems, seer,” Beorna said to her. “Clearly your approach to... ‘negotiation’ could use a bit of polish, eh?”

As opposed to rushing in and hacking everything to bits, and getting stomped in the process! Zenna thought, but she held her tongue. Instead she replied, “As you wish, then. I will do what I can, but do not complain if you find ourselves depleted in the next encounter.”

“Bah, those Kelemvites are no warriors,” Beorna said. “If they offer any trouble, we’ll be able to handle it.”

Those would be fateful words, as it turned out.

Chapter 255

For all her earlier protests, Zenna dug deeply into her reservoir of power to treat the injuries they'd suffered in their brief but violent confrontation with Zarik Dhor. She also expended a good half-dozen charges from her recently recharged wand of *cure moderate wounds*. *At this point, we're going to qualify for a bulk discount*, she thought grimly. At least Beorna could heal herself.

When she'd gotten to Hodge, she'd been surprised to find the dwarf in better shape than she'd expected. It turned out that the dwarf had made an investment of his own in Saradush: an iron flask nearly a quart in size, which the enterprising miner had filled to the brim with *cure light wounds* potions. Or at least mostly with potions; Zenna thought she smelled something else from the flask. But while there might be something vaguely sacrilegious in the idea of cutting healing potions with strong whiskey, as long as the dwarf's concoction worked, preserving her own limited supply of healing, she was willing to accept it. And if the dwarf's steps were a bit more unsteady after his "treatment," at least he wasn't going to bleed to death.

Thus fortified, the companions continued their way down Obsidian Avenue toward their destination.

Up close, the Church of Kelemvor was even more impressive than it had been from a distance. The structure was fashioned of gray volcanic stone, but there were no obvious seams in the stone, and the overall shape of the building had too many curves to be entirely natural. Atop the great dome of the first level—itsself a good fifty feet in height—rose the tall cylinder that culminated in the great, slender spire that formed a point that was the highest spot in Cauldron.

Magic, Zenna thought.

"No honest hands made that," Arun confirmed, a moment later.

"Let us be about this then," Beorna said, starting toward the great double doors, each fifteen feet high and six feet across, that fronted the street. Zenna felt a strong feeling of unease as they approached the temple; in all the place was too quiet for even a weekday morning, the grounds around the temple sterile and empty, although the gardens that fronted the structure on its north side were pristine and meticulously trimmed. But it was as if the building emitted an invisible aura that kept the townsfolk at bay. Even the avenue in the general area was virtually unpopulated, with just a handful of pedestrians and a single horse-drawn cart visible nearby.

Beorna reached the double doors and pushed; the heavy door swung open easily at her pressure. With a half-glance to ensure that the others were following, she headed inside.

For all their travels and diverse experiences, the interior of the temple gave them pause. The place was huge. This single chamber, the central nave of the great cathedral where worshippers gathered to offer their prayers to the Eternal Judger, seemed to encompass the entire radius of the great cylinder that made up the bulk of the temple structure. The chamber seemed architecturally impossible, a dome over a hundred feet across, with the

great spire atop its apex rising above even its considerable height. A narrow metal staircase curved up along the wall to their right, offering an apparent access to that spire and whatever chambers lay above.

The place could have accommodated hundreds of worshippers without difficulty, but the place was uncannily silent. Their footsteps sounded eerily loud on the marble floor, the center of which was designed into a massive mosaic depicting the scales of Kelemvor that was nearly sixty feet across. Tall windows of colored glass set high in the walls around the perimeter of the dome filled the center of the room with glorious light, drawing the eye to that design. Below the windows the walls had been covered with cloth hangings dyed in soft, unobtrusive colors, pale whites and grays that seemed to enfold and reassure. In the shadows along the edges of the room dozens of wooden pews had been pushed back to the walls, leaving the center of the chamber unobstructed. A set of double doors easily twenty feet across—it seemed nothing was of small scale in this place—was visible in the far wall, standing open to reveal a raised dais with an grand altar of some sort upon its surface.

The companions could not help but gape a bit as they looked about the place. Even the Moontower in Iriaebor could not compete with the quiet majesty of this temple, Zenna thought, and she could feel the constant thrum of power that seemed to reside in the very stones of the structure.

Beorna seemed less impressed, and was already walking out into the room when Dannel stopped her with a warning.

“Someone’s there,” Dannel said, drawing their attention back to the open doors and the dais beyond.

They all saw him as he stepped into the light, a tall human clad in a robe that did not fully conceal the hard lines of armor underneath. He had a sour look to him, as though everything he looked upon evoked disfavor.

“We’ve been expecting you,” he said, his nasal, pinched voice nonetheless filling the vast interior of the temple. Behind him, other figures appeared at the doors, armed men who resolved into grim-faced half-orc warriors, clad in full plate with shields and huge waraxes. They spread out before the priest, eight in all.

“Seems you can’t turn around in this town without tripping over an orc,” Beorna said, calmly drawing her sword.

“Priest of Kelemvor!” Dannel said. “We do not come seeking violence... we wish only to speak with Ike Iverson, on behalf of Jenya Urikas of Helm...”

But he never got a chance to finish, for two other forms appeared in the sanctuary behind the altar stone. They filled the doorway behind the cleric, and even though the doorway was ten feet tall, they had to duck as they stepped through.

“Stone giants!” Hodge exclaimed.

“Don’t do this!” Dannel shouted, but the intent of the others was clear even before the giants lifted their arms and hurled boulders at the companions.

Chapter 256

Although they had not come seeking a fight, the companions found one nonetheless as the great domed cathedral of Kelemvor exploded into the chaos of battle.

The boulders thrown by the giants hurtled into the companions like balls fired at a line of waiting tenpins. One narrowly missed Beorna, who had calmly lowered the tip of her blade to the marble floor, sinking to one knee as she pressed her forehead against the crossguard. The boulder caromed off of the ground and nearly took Hodge’s head off, the dwarf’s curses resounding loudly in the chamber as the miner-turned-warrior fumbled with his spear.

The second boulder struck Dannel in the hip, the glancing impact still enough to knock the elf backward, spinning full around before he was able to stabilize. Gritting his teeth against the pain, the Harper arcane archer said, “So be it,” and lifted his bow, opening his mind to the song of power that bound him to the weapon, and the long shafts that carried death to his enemies.

The half-orcs rushed forward, moving together like veterans, their ferocious cries of battle filling the cathedral more strongly than any choral hymn could have done. That song was a melody of violence, and the half-man, half-orc brutes slavered at the anticipation of it, the clash of blades and the screams of pain that were part and parcel of the dirge of war.

That song was interrupted briefly by a roar of flame as Zenna hurled a *fireball* into their midst, the brilliant orange burst engulfing the giants, the cleric, and most of the warriors. When the flames had faded none of them had gone down, but all sported burns, many of which were serious.

“Destroy the wizard!” the cleric commanded the giants, followed by the mystic words that invoked a divine spell. But even as his protective ward settled about him, the robed priest staggered back as an arrow slammed deep into his shoulder. He barely managed to lift his shield to deflect the second shot from Dannel’s bow. The giants each withdrew a second boulder from the huge sacks slung across their hips, and lifting them in both hands hurled them at Zenna. The tiefling did not have time to cast another spell or dodge, and both boulders struck her. Fortunately both hits were just glancing impacts, one grazing her left shoulder, and the other smashing her leg, but the impacts were still devastating, and she was knocked roughly prone.

Their damage done, the giants lifted their clubs and followed in the wake of the half-orc warriors.

Arun and Hodge moved forward to intercept the charge of the half-orc veterans. Hodge set his spear, and looked over his shoulder at Beorna, who had not moved from her position of devotion. “Yer want to join the battle or not, woman!” he yelled, but he then had to turn his attention to the enemy as the half-orcs rushed into them. The lead warrior tried to turn

aside the point of Hodge's spear with his shield, but the canny dwarf eased the spearhead under the half-orc's guard, the warrior's own momentum driving him against the enchanted steel. The half-orc screamed in pain, but Hodge had to drop the weapon and unlimber his axe as another pair of warriors leapt in and attacked him, forcing him back before the ferocity of their assault. Fortunately his new heavy armor protected him from the worst of the initial attacks, although one blow managed to crush his left wrist painfully even through the protective bracer he wore.

Just a few paces away, guarding his friend's flank, Arun met several other warriors. The dwarf took the first stroke from a waraxe on his shield, but even as the second glanced off the edge of the barrier, striking his breastplate, the third was moving to flank him, abandoning his charge to gain the advantage of position.

Zenna pulled herself painfully to her feet in time to see the last pair of warriors moving around the flank of the bulwark formed by Hodge and Arun. Seeing a relatively soft target in front of them, one gestured to his fellow, and both ignored Beorna to come running at her.

Swallowing back her fear, she waited until they were nearly on top of her, before unleashing a *color spray*. For a moment she feared that they would resist the spell overcoming her with their axes before she could escape... but then the blazing lights faded enough for her to see both warriors, stunned by the blast.

But the respite would only be momentary, she knew, already retreating to give her more room.

Mole had been darting to help Arun and Hodge, but when she saw Zenna threatened she changed her course to aid her friend. Knowing Zenna's tactics, she recognized her preparations and waited for the *color spray* to temporarily incapacitate her enemies before she rushed in. The stunned half-orc could not defend himself as she slid her rapier into his body through a tiny gap in his armor. The brute groaned as blood fountained out of the deep thrust, but as his head cleared he turned on her, his ferocious expression promising revenge for the injury. His fellow recovered a moment later, and took a step after Zenna, before his attention was drawn by a sudden movement to his left.

That movement came from Beorna. Lost in the devotions to her god, she now drew upon the power of Helm to aid her. First, she began to grow, her body expanding under the familiar effects of an *enlarge person* spell. Then, even as she reached a height of ten feet, looming over even the considerable bulk of the half-orcs, she drew the *divine power* of her patron into her. For a moment she seemed to glow, the bright light of Helm shining about her.

She moved straight forward, toward the embattled dwarves and the warriors facing them, and behind them, the approaching giants.

Hodge and Arun laid about them with their weapons, returning the assaults of the mercenaries with deadly force. Hodge delivered a crushing blow with his flaming axe that drove one of his enemies back two steps, but the half-orcs were as heavily armored as the two dwarves, and appeared to be possessed of an equal stamina. Arun seemed intent on

countering with a sheer volume of attacks, his holy sword slashing about him as though it was a light dagger, and while the half-orcs tried to deflect those strokes with their shields, the paladin seemed to find the smallest gaps in their defenses more often than not.

Both dwarves fought with bravery and tenacity, but outnumbered six to two, it seemed as though even that might not be enough.

The cleric, meanwhile, was finding it difficult to conjure up his spells. Every time he launched into a new incantation, arrows struck, punching through his heavy armor as if it were cheap leather. He'd managed a potent curative that had eased the burning pains from the *fireball*, but as another arrow sank into his thigh, he began to fear that this confrontation might prove disastrous.

Darting back into the shelter of the doorway, he pulled a scroll from his pouch and began to read.

Pursued by one of the half-orcs, Zenna was quickly running out of room to retreat. But she was not lacking for options, conjuring up a spell that struck just as the half-orc was lifting his axe to cut her down. The *hold* took effect, freezing him with a ferocious look on his face that was belied by the fear that suddenly shone in his eyes as she calmly stepped forward, sparks already starting to dance around her outstretched hand.

Mole, meanwhile, found herself outmatched by her foe. Rolling with a cut from his axe that she wasn't quite fast enough to dodge, she shifted from an attack posture—her rapier wasn't likely to hurt him much, now that the advantage of surprise was lost—and started a twisting, tumbling defense. The half-orc swung at her again, narrowly missing, and a counter a few moments later came nowhere near her as she tumbled around him in a tight loop, feinting with her rapier in attacks designed to confound rather than to harm.

Buying her time.

Beorna arrived at the line of battle at the same time as the giants, the three huge foes standing over the melee between the other two dwarves and the half-orcs, the latter groups like children in contrast to the titans behind. The giants lashed at her with their clubs. The templar dodged the first stroke, but the second landed heavily on her arm, drawing a grunt of pain from her.

Then she lifted her sword, and returned the favor. Her blade came crashing down onto the first giant's chest, slicing through the thick, oily hides he wore easily, digging a deep furrow in his torso. Even as the giant staggered, blood pouring from the violent wound, she shifted from her backswing and stepped in again, driving the length of the blade into the giant's body, sliding it into the narrow gap between two of his ribs. The giant gurgled in pain and fell backward... and collapsed onto the polished marble, pouring out the last of its life through the two huge holes in its body.

For a moment, the intensity of the melee eased, as both sides sensed that the battle had taken a decisive turn. But the half-orcs continued to press the assault even in the face of this deadly new adversary, redoubling their efforts to cut through the armor of the dwarven defenders.

Arun took hits that drew blood even through his magical armor, but the only result seemed to be to drive the paladin into a greater fury of battle. He sliced out with his sword, cutting under a half-orc's helm to sever the throat beneath, and even as the warrior fell he continued his swing into the next one, crushing his side in a blaze of holy light that drove him back, whimpering. Hodge, too, finally took down one of his enemies, his flaming axe sundering his breastplate and smiting him down to the ground.

"Stand still!" Mole's opponent growled in frustration, as the gnome nimbly avoided another attack. The half-orc was a skilled combatant, though, and he adjusted, stepping to the side just as Mole tumbled into reach. Lifting his axe to strike, he suddenly staggered, turning to reveal a long arrow stuck deep into his back. A moment later a second shaft hit, burying itself in the half-orc's throat, and the warrior crumpled. Mole saluted Dannel, and after a quick look to confirm that Zenna's adversary was down, leapt into a somersault that carried her quickly toward the rapidly-diminishing line of foes facing the dwarves.

The half-orcs had been paid well, but never had they faced a trio of foes like this. Hodge was hurting now, his breath coming in gasps as blood trickled out from the gaps in his armor where half-orc axes had struck. But as Beorna dispatched the second giant much as she had the first, and turned her attentions to the remaining warriors, their heart for the fight evaporated. The survivors drew back, another falling as Arun's blade crushed armor plate, and finally turned to all-out flight.

Meanwhile, the cleric emerged from his position of cover, his wounds mostly healed, now surrounded by a shifting field of *mirror images*. He'd readied a *dispel* to remove the enchantments boosting Beorna, but as he saw his second giant go down, and his hired warriors fleeing, he abandoned that tactic. Instead, he started running toward the stairs.

"Escaping cleric!" Mole shouted.

"I see him," Dannel said, lifting his bow and taking aim.

Chapter 257

"That cleric really wanted to get up those stairs," Mole observed, tugging another pair of iron-studded gauntlets from one of the dead warriors. The two dead giants had proved disappointing for treasure, but the warriors had glowed brightly to Zenna's *detect magic* spell, a veritable treasure trove of magical goodies.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he has friends up there," Dannel commented, reloading his quiver from the spare he kept in his pack. The cleric had headed up the stairs with single-minded determination, and had nearly gotten to the door on the landing thirty feet above the floor; fortunately for them his heavy armor had slowed him enough for the ranged attacks from those below—primarily Dannel's arrows—to bring him down.

"Then that is where we shall go," Beorna said, already moving toward the stairs, her boots thumping loudly on the marble floor, blood from the bodies scattered in the center of the room leaving a red splat with each step. Still *enlarged*, she made an impressive sight.

“Wait!” Zenna said, resisting the urge to add *you fool!* “We’ve taken a beating, and we need to heal and recover.”

“Evil does not wait for the hand of justice to descend,” she said, but she paused at the foot of the stairs. “Any foes up there have no doubt heard the sounds of the fray. Already the High Priest is likely preparing for our arrival, and our delay only strengthens his hand.”

“Iverson’s not the High Priest,” Zenna said absently, but she was already focused on helping her injured friends, and herself. She saw Hodge take out his jug and quickly walked over to him. “Let me,” she said, and she laid a hand upon him, drawing upon a potent healing spell. She’d initially reserved that slot for a *discern lies* spell for their interview with Iverson, but from this encounter the intentions of the church of Kelemvor were now clear.

“It still makes no sense,” Dannel said, sliding his own healing wand back into its pouch after treating his own injuries. “Why would the most powerful and prestigious church in Cauldron do this, hire assassins to kill us?”

“Church o’ death,” Hodge said, as if that explained it. The dwarf sucked in a breath as Zenna’s *cure critical wounds* flowed through him with the shock of a glacial pool, closing his multiple wounds and driving the pain and weakness of his injuries from him. “Aye, that’s the stuff!” he said, favoring Zenna with a broad smile. That didn’t stop him from taking a covert swig from his “jug o’ healin’,” though, Zenna observed when he thought she wasn’t looking.

“The Kelemvorites are not evil,” Zenna said. “They take their duties as guides in the transitions between worlds seriously, but while they venerate death, they hate those who practice it without discernment.”

“Well, these are clearly evil,” Arun said, walking to join Beorna. She greeted him with a faint nod.

“You fought well, Forger-knight,” she said simply.

“And you, warrior-maiden of the Hand,” he replied.

She raised an eyebrow at the appellation, but did not reply, instead turning toward the stairs. They creaked a bit under the weight of her *enlarged* form, but they held.

Zenna looked down at Mole. “Here we go again.” The gnome’s only response was a grin, and the speed with which she dashed after the others, still tucking loose items she’d collected into her *bag*, testified to her eagerness to see what dangers lay ahead.

With a sigh, Zenna threw up her hands and followed. Given enough time, she could have used her powers of *clairvoyance* to scan the interior of the spire above and see what, if anything, awaited them there, but as it was the impatience of her companions would not allow for such cautious—and reasonable—tactics. She only hoped that their haste would not get them killed.

Well, she wasn't going to be a target again. Pausing to summon a spell, she felt a sudden backlash of power that caused her to miss a step, and nearly fall before she regained her balance.

"What is it?" Dannel asked.

"Be warned, this entire place is protected with a ward," she said. "It appears that no *invisibility* magic will function in here."

The elf shrugged. "Well, it's not like we're going to be surprising anyone anyway, not with them," he said, gesturing toward the dwarves who were nearly at the top of the stairs.

True enough, Zenna thought, but she still didn't like it as they hurried to catch up to the others.

The door at the top of the stairs led to small chambers that looked like personal quarters for the higher-ranking clergy of the temple. On seeing that they were empty, the companions gave them a cursory look—in Mole's case, "cursory" involving the transfer a several items to her *bag of holding*—before continuing up a second stair that continued up into the spire above the temple fane.

As they made their way up the narrow steps, Beorna's hulking form blocking the view ahead, Zenna felt a cold chill creep up over her. She looked up at Arun, and saw that he was affected by it, as well.

"There is a deep taint here," the paladin said.

Zenna cast a spell, conjuring a potent protective aura around her that extended to those nearest on the stair. "If you can, stay close to me," she said. "My spell will provide some protection against evil."

Several of the others cast spells as well. Beorna laid several protective wards upon herself, then turned and touched Arun, adding some protection to him as well. Thus fortified, they pressed on.

"Do you smell that?" Mole asked softly. Zenna took a deep sniff, and regretted it as the stench of rot filled her nostrils. She fought the urge to gag.

"Undead," Dannel said.

"The followers of Kelemvor abhor the undead," Zenna said, but her words were not convincing even to herself. It was obvious to all of them that a deep evil had taken root in this place, and while none of them—well, none except for Beorna, Arun, and probably Mole—were eager to proceed, they swallowed their fears and pressed on.

Finally the stairs opened onto a chamber ahead; they had to be inside the spire now, a good sixty feet or more above the level of the street below. The interior of the spire was a single great hollow chamber, rising nearly a hundred feet above them. Other than a small,

low platform in the center of the floor, the chamber was empty of either furniture or decoration. The place was mostly dark, with only a few tiny slits providing illumination. But Dannel's and Mole's sensitive eyes adjusted quickly, allowing them to see what the others, with their darkvision, had already detected.

The room was occupied. Five hulking forms stood arrayed around the central dais; giants, Zenna thought, until one turned and she saw that its features were bestial, its face dominated by a set of huge jaws. Then she realized that the sickly waft of decay came from them, and as she saw them shift awkwardly she realized what they were. Zombies, among the least of the undead, but these were huge and no doubt far more dangerous than their man-sized equivalents.

But then she saw the two forms atop the dais, and realized that there were far greater threats here, waiting for them. One was a vague outline of darkness that hovered a foot above the smooth surface of the platform, an undead wraith, a creature of shadow whose very touch was death. The second Zenna recognized instantly as a fiend, although she could not identify the exact species. It was a bony creature that at first glance appeared to be a skeleton, a gaunt thing vaguely humanoid in form, but with an oversized, distended skull, and a long tail that jutted up over its back and above its head, tipped with a wicked stinger that was no doubt infused with some deadly venom.

There was no sign of Ike Iverson, but Zenna had a feeling that the cleric had to be around somewhere. She looked up into the shadowy heights above them, but the top of the spire was a jumble of struts and structural supports, a tangled jumble even with her darksight to pierce the shadows. She spotted something dangling down from the pinnacle of the spire, a long, black object that hung there like some fiendish chrysalis. As her gaze lingered in that direction, she felt a sudden, terrible feeling wash over her, a sense of foreboding that almost threatened to overwhelm her.

Beorna had already stepped forward, her gleaming blade lifted high above her head in both hands in a symbol of defiance. "Prepare for your destruction, fiends!" she roared, in challenge.

But before she or the rest of them could take further action, a spiraling column of liquid fire tore down from the heights above and slammed into them with the force of divine retribution.

Chapter 258

Zenna felt the backblast of heat, intermixed with divine power, as the spillover from the *flame strike* poured into the stairwell where she and Dannel were standing. Her magical defenses, combined with her innate resistance to fire, had helped her resist much of the effect, and Dannel had dodged quickly back, likewise avoiding the full force of the flames. The dwarves, in the van, had taken the full force of the blast. But as the flames cleared she could see that Arun and Beorna appeared to be only slightly wounded, and Hodge, while his upper body was charred, was already reaching for his jug for a bit of restoration. Even as she watched, the templar lifted one hand and unleashed a blast of *searing light* that

sank into the undead form of the wraith. Mole, of course, had tumbled out of the radius of the blast and had vanished somewhere along the perimeter of the chamber.

The five hulking gray render zombies started toward them, while the wraith sank into the platform, disappearing from view. The bone devil chattered something in its Infernal language, but seemed content to hold its ground for the moment, no doubt preparing some dread power from the hells to unleash upon them.

“Look!” Dannel hissed, drawing Zenna’s attention up toward the ceiling high above. Where the elf had seen only a shifting shadow, Zenna could clearly identify the figure hovering there above them, near the black object she’d seen earlier. It was a man, clad in full plate armor, surrounded by a bevy of *mirror images*, sparking with the aura of protective wards. Zenna realized that this had to be Iverson, and that he’d just become visible with the unleashing of his potent blast of divine fire.

Dannel was already lifting his bow to fire. Beorna and Arun stepped forward to face the oncoming zombies. Hodge took a deep swallow from his jug and then dithered, reaching for his crossbow before eschewing it for his long spear.

Zenna felt as though time froze around her, as her thoughts raced through the options available to her. She still had most of her spells left, even after the confrontations with Zarik Dhor and the lesser priest below, but she knew that Iverson was a powerful cleric, obviously prepared for them, and that he no doubt had other fell magics at his call. The physical foes she entrusted to her allies, but she knew she had to do something to deal with him...

She had a *dispel* remaining, but doubted that her power could pierce the stronger potency of the high priest’s magic. For a moment she thought of Kaurophon, who had mastered her so easily, and doubt filled her.

Then Iverson began to incant again, and she just did it, just hurled her spell at him the way a desperate man might throw his knife at a charging swordsman.

That part of her that was sensitive to the Weave could feel the energies of her spell impact the layered wards that Iverson had conjured around him. Her heart froze in her chest as she felt the spell sliding from each of his wards like water striking glass. He was literally armored in magic, and her own puny abilities paled in contrast to the level of skill he commanded.

But then, just as she was about to give up, the last threads of her spell found something pliable, a current of energy that extended outward from the man, into the very air around him. As the *dispel* snapped those strands, Iverson’s *air walk* spell ended.

The enemy cleric fell fifty feet to the floor below, landing in a quite satisfactory cacophony of metal and pain just beside the room’s central platform.

Ike Iverson got up slowly, clearly hurting, although Zenna knew too much to mark him out of the fight just yet. “The cleric!” she cried, alerting her friends to the danger.

But Arun and Beorna had their own difficulties. The shambling render zombies were slow and cumbersome, but they were strong, a fact proven as one slammed a meaty claw into Beorna's side. They seemed to focus more on her, her *enlarged* size making her a more obvious target. Arun intercepted one as it was about to seize her from behind, tearing a huge gash in its leg with a powerful swing of his sword.

Beorna seemed more than able to handle herself even against the remaining four renders, at first; her blade, backed by the full force of her augmented strength, tore incredible wounds that even the already dead renders could not ignore. One fell back after taking a pair of hits that laid its body cavity open, one arm dangling uselessly from nearly severed tendons. But the undead life force that powered it was likewise strong, and it slowly recovered and came forward again, reaching for its living foe's flesh with its remaining claw. The others pounded at her repeatedly, but her armor, fashioned from one of the most durable metals known on Faerûn, held against their assaults.

Hodge finally started forward, but before he could reach his friends a shimmering white wall of solid ice appeared directly in front of him. The *wall of ice* divided the chamber in twain, with Zenna, Hodge, and Dannel on one side, and Beorna and Arun on the other.

With all of the bad guys on their side of the wall.

And if that wasn't bad enough, shadowy arms rose out of the floor at Beorna's feet, followed a moment later by the body of the wraith. As it plunged its claws through her armor into her body, the templar screamed, her very life force riven from her body by the sinister touch of the undead monstrosity.

Chapter 259

Zenna, Dannel, and Hodge heard the templar's scream, and knew that they had to get through or around that *wall of ice*, and quickly.

Dannel didn't hesitate, turning to the wall behind him, and using his *slippers of spider climbing* to run *up* the wall. He quickly gained enough height to see over the fifteen-foot high wall, and through the raging melee in the center of the room, took aim at his target.

Beorna stabbed her sword through the wraith at her feet, but her sword passed harmlessly through it to clang loudly against the floor below. She tried to draw upon the power of Helm, but in this place, consecrated to darkness, the bright light of her patron seemed like a mere trickle, barely enough for the undead swarming around her to even notice.

And then a cold wave of death descended over her, and for the first time she felt a tremor of involuntary fear.

Arun felt the cold touch as well, and he was in a position to see its source: the cleric Iverson, unleashing a powerful burst of negative energy. Several of the wounded zombies glowed briefly with a pale red light, their wounds knitting shut, and the priest himself seemed fortified, his own hurts eased by his spell. Arun had no idea how that could be, unless the man himself was undead, but he had more immediate concerns. His route to

the cleric was blocked by the surging zombies, and anyway, an ally beside him was in danger.

He turned and lunged forward at the wraith, taking a hit from the render behind him but shrugging it off. The undead creature screeched, a terrible, hollow sound as Arun's sword tore through the fabric of its being. It started to sink back into the floor, but Arun followed his initial swing with a low sweep of his sword that bisected the glowing red points of its eyes, and with a final whisper it disintegrated into wisps of fading blackness.

Beorna looked down at him. "Thank you," she said.

Arun nodded. "Let's get that cleric!" he urged.

Meanwhile, unseen by the cleric or his undead servitors, Mole had circled around the edge of the chamber, nearly invisible in the shadows. On Iverson's fall she'd adjusted her course and now came at him from behind, her dark cloak trailing behind her, her soft boots making barely a whisper on the stone floor.

Iverson, already preparing another spell, did not detect her.

But the bone devil turned, and she looked up in horror as it fixed her with its terrible, evil gaze. Then it was gone, and the chamber around her was replaced by the interior of a hemispherical *wall of ice*, shutting her off from the battle. Rendered all but harmless, she hacked at the thick ice in vain.

Then something occurred to her, and she reached for her *bag of holding*.

The initial wall of ice blocking off the stairs suddenly began to glow brightly at a single point along its length. The ice retreated as Zenna's *scorching rays* blasted through it, providing an opening that Hodge leapt through, his flaming axe bright in his hands, shivering as he passed through the thick plane of frozen air that remained in the breach in the ice wall. Zenna followed, although she remained on her side of the wall, and she began once again to work her magic.

Iverson took an involuntary step back as an arrow from Dannel's bow slammed into his shoulder. His *mirror images* had served their purpose, absorbing most of the elf's shots thus far, and his armor, reinforced with a *shield of faith*, had taken care of the others until this one had wormed its way through. He was not hurt seriously, though, and his *mass inflict* spell had restored most of the damage he'd taken in the fall earlier.

In the space between heartbeats he called upon a quickened *divine favor* to prepare him for melee, and then unleashed a *destruction* upon the priestess of Helm who was thus far holding up well against the battering his undead were working upon her.

A vortex of unholy fire gathered, surging as it swept up Beorna in its eager grasp.

Chapter 260

“Helm’s glory!” Beorna said, lifting up her holy sword in both hands, as the dark flames of *destruction* engulfed her. For a moment, the shining warrior was lost in the black storm, but then the flames froze, caught in a surge of light that shone from her body in a fleeting instant. The flames fell, disintegrating into nothingness as they struck the ground, leaving the templar unharmed.

“Impossible!” Iverson said.

“Nothing is impossible when a god shelters you with his hand,” Beorna pronounced. She stepped toward Iverson, ignoring the pounding she took from the zombie renders that continued to press her. The creature she’d wounded before shambled forward to block her path to the cleric, slamming her across the face with a massive claw. Beorna snarled and laid into the zombie with a powerful stroke that sundered its decrepit form, driving it to the ground. Another claw tore at her shoulder from behind, but with her backstroke she cut deep into the limb of the zombie attacking her, nearly severing the arm from its body.

Zenna aided her efforts by casting a *haste* spell, centered on the dwarves.

Iverson did not waste the momentary respite he’d gained through his servants, and began preparing another spell. Before he could summon the power, though, another arrow slammed into his arm, driving a hot jab of pain through him as a jolt of electricity flowed from the missile into his body. Snarling, he turned to the devil.

“Deal with that elf!” he commanded.

The osyluth bowed and lifted a few feet into the air before vanishing.

Arun’s sword sliced through the leg of one of the zombies, severing the limb and sending the creature falling awkwardly aside. Another render reached for him as he started toward Iverson, but Hodge ran at it and clove it with his axe, drawing its attention from the paladin.

Even as Arun tried to reach Iverson, the cleric released his spell. A shimmering surrounded Beorna, stripping away each of her magical protections as the priest’s *dispel* sundered them. She returned to her regular size, her muscles slumping as her *endurance* and *strength* spells evaporated, and the full force of the loss she’d suffered earlier at the touch of the wraith hit her. Also lost was her *shield of faith* and *divine favor*, as well as the *haste* she’d just gotten from Zenna. The zombies, as if sensing her sudden weakness, tore at her with renewed fervor even as she tried to hack her way through them with her holy blade. She was showing the signs of her wounds now, slowing under the continued assault.

From behind the cleric, the hemisphere of ice that held Mole captive began to glow. A bright spot appeared that grew suddenly white-hot with the familiar shine of burning alchemist’s fire as a round opening appeared in the side of the frozen prison. No sooner had it appeared than Mole dove through it, somersaulting to land on her feet, her rapier at the ready in her hand.

“Ta da!” she announced, to no one in particular. Iverson acknowledged her with a glance, then returned his attention to Arun, who appeared around the edge of the melee between Beorna and the zombies, charging at the cleric with his holy sword raised to strike. Iverson seemed unconcerned, his sword still sheathed at his belt. Arun did not hesitate, leaping in to *smite* the unholy priest.

But even as Arun prepared to strike, the cleric lunged forward quickly, laying a slender finger upon the dwarf’s breastplate. The action left him completely open now to attack, but Arun was suddenly in no position to deliver the blow. The paladin’s face became a rictus of agony as the dark energies of Iverson’s *harm* spell tore mercilessly through him. Driven to the brink of death, Arun somehow managed to stay standing, although his entire body quivered with pain and weakness, and runnels of bright red blood began to appear at the crevices of his armor, running down his legs to gather in small puddles at his feet.

“Now, paladin, we shall see,” the dark cleric said, laughing.

Even as Arun had begun his charge, Dannel had drawn another arrow out of his quiver and prepared for yet another shot at Iverson. He’d seen the devil vanish, but had been too far distant to hear the cleric’s command to him, even his keen elvish ears not able to overcome the sounds of the melee that still raged in the center of the room. But even as he took aim down the long shaft of his arrow, a faint stirring above him gave him warning.

Looking up, he saw the bone devil, hovering in the air barely ten feet above him, an evil grin on its inhuman features.

Dannel knew from hard experience that even the arrows magically enhanced by his song would be unlikely to hurt the fiend that loomed over him. Fortunately, he had another weapon that could, but even as he dropped his bow and reached for *Alakast*, the devil surged down at him, reaching for him with its claws even as its long stinger darted over its shoulder, stabbing several inches into Dannel’s body.

The elf stiffened as poison coursed into his body, and as the devil’s claws tore at him he felt his connection to the wall through his magical slippers tearing. Pain exploded across his torso, and then he was falling, the ground rushing quickly up to meet him.

Chapter 261

Dannel’s body felt like it was a single raging sea of pain, but he was still conscious. He still clutched his staff with the fingers of his left hand, which had clenched around the white shaft so tightly that he felt it even through the pain. Rolling over onto his back, he looked up to see the devil dropping straight toward him.

Oh, crap!

Desperation and adrenaline briefly overcame his pain, and he was able to get *Alakast* up enough to strike it a glancing blow on the shoulder, using the devil’s downward momentum to add to the effectiveness of the blow. The osyluth shrieked in pain as the weapon, created to destroy creatures such as it, unleashed its destructive power into it. But Dannel

paid for his effort a moment later as the devil lunged and snared his arm in its powerful jaws, crushing the limb and snapping its head to the side to slam the elf into the wall with enough force to knock him unconscious. The staff fell from his hands, harmless now. The devil smiled, its stinger dancing eagerly as it rose up over the elf...

“GET AWAY FROM HIM!” Zenna cried, leaping at the devil from behind. The osyluth turned, its stinger snapping out... to vanish through one of the *mirror images* that she had conjured in defense. She stabbed a short wand into the devil’s side, the bone device she’d won in their clash with the lich in the skull mountain on Occipitus. The wand unleashed a sharp red jolt of energy that overcame the devil’s magical resistance to open a splay of ugly red wounds in its body, running out from the point of impact like cracks on a pane of glass.

The devil hissed in pain, but Zenna knew she’d gotten lucky with the wand, and that the initiative had now passed to the terrible fiend.

Arun, staggering backward, called upon the divine power of Moradin to heal his wounds. Iverson, calmly following, had still not drawn his sword, but he had already proven that he needed no greater weapon than his touch, and the dark power of whatever god—clearly not Kelemvor—that he worshipped.

One of the massive zombies clattered to the floor, its body riven by huge gashes, the unholy life force that animated it failing. Over its body staggered Beorna, her breath coming in huge gasps, her face haggard and pale. But the sword in her hand still glowed with pure light as she lifted it and pointed the blade at Iverson.

“Back... off... priest...” she said.

Iverson shrugged, lifted his hand, and called upon his dark power once more.

The dark power of the *mass inflict wounds* spread outward in a wave. The priest’s own wounds knitted shut, and Arun crumpled, dying. Beorna’s face twisted in anguish, although she did not fall, and some distance away Hodge, still fighting the last of the zombies, let out a stream of expletives as the wave impacted him.

“Aaaaaaaa!”

Mole’s inarticulate yell drew Iverson’s attention around. The wiry gnome, bleeding from her nose and ears, tumbled at the surprised priest, tangling herself in his feet, applying leverage to the back of his left knee as he turned. Iverson, caught off balance, fell forward, landing prone.

“Die! Die!” Mole shouted, stabbing her little knife into a gap in the man’s armor. The tiny blade did little in the way of damage, and Iverson quickly recovered. He turned onto his side, and reaching down grasped Mole by the throat, unleashing a powerful surge of negative energy into her. Blood gushed out of Mole’s mouth as the spell ravaged her insides, and her eyes swept back in her head as she lost consciousness. With a look of contempt, the cleric tossed her aside.

Zenna dodged back as the devil came at her again. She only had two *mirror images* left, now, and she bore gashes along her side where its claws had already successfully found her. The stinger waited, poised to strike once her protective distractions were depleted. She knew that Dannel was dying, that he needed her, but she also knew that if she paused to heal the elf, the devil would tear her to pieces.

She turned and ran toward the fallen elf. The devil was quick to move to intercept, but instead of forcing past it toward Dannel, she turned to the side, where *Alakast* lay. Bending down, she took up the weapon, staggering as hot breath followed by angry pain erupted in her side, as the devil tore into her shoulder with its protruding jaws.

Who am you kidding! a voice sounded deep in her mind as she fell back against the nearby wall, turning to face the devil. *You're no fighter!*

But then she caught sight of Dannel, lying there, blood smeared across his face.

Almost blindly, she thrust *Alakast* at the devil.

A sharp sound like a miniature thunderclap stunned her. When she regained enough control of her senses to realize what was happening, she saw the devil standing there, a great hole burned in its chest where the staff had struck. For a moment, she felt a giddy, desperate hope that she'd killed it.

But then the devil lifted its eyes to meet hers, and it moved, coming forward again, the stinger hovering eagerly in wait.

She'd given her best shot, and it hadn't stopped it. She saw her death, and knew with a grim inevitability that there was nothing that she could do to avert it.

Chapter 262

The devil seemed to savor Zenna's expectation of death, but instead of moving to finish her, it inexplicably held its ground.

A voice that she instinctively knew was the devil's sounded in her mind. *"You are not to be killed,"* it said.

Confused, Zenna just stared at it, unable to even think. But when it turned from her and took a step toward Dannel, her indecision evaporated, and she quickly moved to block it, bringing up *Alakast* again.

"If you try to hurt him, either I'll kill you, or you'll have to kill me," she said.

The devil regarded her silently for a few seconds; to Zenna the interval seemed like an eternity. Then it smiled, a grim, sardonic expression that seemed horrific on such an alien face.

And then it vanished.

Ike Iverson stood, ignoring the faint twinge where the gnome had managed to get a puny attack through his defenses. He'd been hurt, but his various *inflict* spells had poured new life into him. That was a gift of the darkness to which he'd sold his soul, a trade that he'd never regretted, in that it had given him the power that he'd always craved.

And now he relished that power, as his foes finally began to fall around him. The paladin had gone down, the dwarven woman—though she'd annoyingly defied his most potent spell—was battered to the brink of defeat, and that gnome had merely been an annoying distraction. And he was confident that the devil would deal with the elf; while he was a skilled archer, Iverson knew he was far less of a threat in close combat.

But even as he rose, a gleaming silver blade appeared before him, a sword that floated in mid-air, darting toward him as though wielded by an invisible swordsman. Iverson simply let his layered defenses absorb the first stroke, more annoyed than threatened.

“A *spiritual weapon*? A minor annoyance...”

But as he saw the dwarf woman helping the paladin to his feet, the bright glow of healing energy still shining around her hands, he realized that he might not be done here just yet.

“He said you were trouble,” Iverson said, finally drawing his long bastard sword from its sheath. Almost as an afterthought, he *dispelled* Beorna's *spiritual weapon*, and the force-sword winked out of existence.

“Who?” Arun said. “Who pulls your strings, cleric?”

But Iverson's only response was, “Let us finish this, then.”

The priest's initial concern was that the dwarves would try to flank him, but the two actually gave way before his approach. The woman's reservoir must have been running dry; the paladin still looked barely able to stand despite the healing he'd received. And for all *her* earlier bravado, the woman warrior—templar, he now realized—seemed small and hesitant. The paladin said a few words to her in a guttural language; dwarvish, Iverson realized, though he did not speak the tongue.

“Not so bold now, are we?” he said, with a laugh. With a sudden movement he hurled a spell at the paladin, hoping to end it quickly, but he wasn't especially surprised that the dwarf resisted his magic. Tough creatures, those dwarves... a pity that their durability so rarely survived the transition to undeath.

The templar channeled a few more dribblets of positive energy into herself. The paladin just stood there, a slightly vacant look on his face. Iverson waved his sword in front of him to distract them, while drawing upon his most potent valence of spell energy into another deadly *inflict wounds* spell. With a grim smile, he started forward....

Movement behind him drew his attention in time for him to receive the charge from the giant golden-skinned lizard that had appeared seemingly from nowhere. Iverson snarled as the creature tried to bite his arm, and he stabbed a finger into its body, pouring the terrible

energies of his spell into the creature. *Forgot about the damned celestial mount*, the cleric berated himself. The entire temple was protected with an *unhallow* spell laid by Aloustinai herself, but paladins *called* their pets, which got around the inability of good creatures to be summoned inside its precincts. Still, from the way that the creature shook and trembled at the negative energy pouring through it, it wouldn't last very long. Perhaps it could even be captured, and turned to his use...

A jolt of pain that stabbed through his back reminded him that he still had living enemies to deal with. Iverson turned, the lizard still trying in vain to get a grasp on him, to see the paladin dwarf lift his sword for another strike. Iverson met the swing with his own blade, turning it aside.

"My power runs deep," the cleric said, taunting him. "I have plenty left for your destruction!"

They exchanged another series of blows, and Iverson took another hit that sent pain surging through him. "Your sword is potent," he said. Ignoring the lizard, which still had not managed to hit him, he defensively cast another *inflict* spell, catching the paladin on the arm when he launched another attack. Arun's body stiffened and he nearly dropped his weapon, and he stumbled back. Iverson sensed that he'd partially resisted the spell, but even so the dwarf was right back on the edge of unconsciousness once more, with only a gentle nudge to push him over. And this time, he would not be coming back.

But then he realized that he'd lost track of the other dwarf, the templar.

Even as he turned, the dwarf woman appeared at the edge of his vision slit, leaping at him with her sword blazing. Again the assault faltered against his layered defenses. He lashed out at her, driving her back, his sword tearing through her battered armor to add a shallow gash to her tally of wounds.

"I am not so bad with the blade, either," he laughed. The lizard, working persistently at him, finally managed to grab hold of his leg with enough of a grip to cause pain, and he absently reached down to finish off that annoyance.

Pain—real pain, this time—exploded through his lower back. Staggering forward, he looked down to see that gnome, that ANNOYING GNOME!—with her little toy rapier in her hand, its length slick with his blood. "I thought I killed you!" he snarled.

"No, sorry," she said. "I'm pretty tough to kill, actually."

"Well, then I will make certain of the job!" he yelled. He unleashed his reserve, a quickened *inflict serious wounds* that healed most of the damage he'd suffered. Then, turning to face his enemies, all of which were nearly dead—had to be!—he called upon the dark power of his patron yet again.

But before he could strike, a bright light filled his eyes. Within that glow, a painful nimbus that drove into his eyes like twin nails, came a pair of holy blades. They struck his defenses and parted them, slamming into his body with the full force of two *smites* behind them. In disbelief he staggered back, not even feeling pain as he looked down to see huge

rents in his torso, his sundered organs visible beneath a sea of blood and bone and ruined tissue.

“No...” he said, calling a spell that evaporated, the magic just outside his reach. “No, it cannot be... I was promised...”

Then he slumped to the ground, dead.

For a few heartbeats, the three companions stood there, looking down at his body. Iverson’s assessment of their condition had been not far off the mark, and their own wounds left them barely able to stand. Then a loud crash drew their attention back to the center of the room. Hodge stood there as the last render zombie slowly twitched and fell still. The dwarf was drenched in blood and gore, much of it his own. Behind him they could see Zenna and Dannel standing at the breach in the *wall of ice*, too badly hurt to push through the opening, the elf leaning heavily upon *Alakast* to keep him upright.

Hodge looked around at the scene of carnage around him. “Aye, now that were a battle,” he said. He reached for his jug, but before he could grasp it, his eyes rolled up into his head and he toppled over onto his back.

Chapter 263

“So what in the ‘ells is that blasted thing?”

None of the gathered companions had an answer for Hodge. Standing in the private chapel of the High Priest of Helm, the current holder of that title frowned as she stared down at the focus on their interest.

The object that they’ taken from the cathedral of Kelemvor lay on a flat stone table covered with a white cloth. It was a cage, just about large enough for a man, decorated with unholy motifs—skulls, bones, and dark runes that seemed to move when the viewer started to look away. It was made of metal, but that was all they could discern of its manufacture from casual observation; even the dwarves were confounded in identifying the alloys. Despite its solid appearance, it weighed no more than about fifty pounds. They’d had little trouble bringing it here, wrapping it in one of the tapestries that had adorned the walls of the temple of Kelemvor, but none of them felt at ease being in the same room with the device.

“I cannot answer you, dwarf,” Jenya said. “But it is a magical item of incredible power... and infused with the pure essence of blackest evil.” She rubbed her head, which probably still ached with the surge of power she’d been hit with when she’d used divination magic upon it earlier. Zenna understood; her own *detect magic* had almost overloaded her senses, but had confirmed that the cage radiated a powerful aura of abjuration, conjuration, and necromancy magic.

“I am more concerned with this,” Dannel said, stepping back over to the altar, where he recovered another of the items they’d found. This article was less imposing than the cage; a collection of papers they’d found in a secret drawer in Embril Aloustina’s quarters in the temple. Her room had been richly decorated but devoid of personal effects and other

valuables, suggesting that she'd planned to be away for quite some time, when she'd departed Cauldron some months back.

Dannel took the last page in the papers, and read a passage that they'd already heard once before.

High Priestess,

As many have heard me say, the cages alone will not allow the completion of the ritual. What more is needed I cannot say, as so I continue to explore the mysteries of the soul pillars at great peril. The guardian grows ever more restless, and the insanity that lies frozen in Karran-Kural is beginning to stir.

My price has doubled.

-F.

"So this Karran-Kural place may be a hideout for these... cultists? We still don't even know exactly what we're dealing with, here," Arun said.

"We have little more than a name, and a place," Zenna said. "Those papers refer to a 'Fetor Abradius,' probably the 'F' who signed that last note. It sounds like he was conducting research into a ritual of some sort, something that probably involved that," she indicated the odd cage, "or others like it."

"You think there's more of them?" Mole said.

"Well, the note used the plural," Zenna replied.

"Bah, 'ow er we s'posed to find this bastard, w' just a few scribbles and this 'ere hunk o' metal?" Hodge said.

Zenna looked to Jenya. "I've prepared my *commune*, and will do my best to get some answers," the priestess said.

The door opened suddenly, and they turned around to see Beorna walking heavily into the room. She'd stolen a few moments to towel off her armor, but she still looked a sight, her short hair sticky with sweat and blood, her clothes ragged from the beating they'd taken over the course of what had been a quite busy day.

"How has the situation developed, templar?" Jenya asked.

"The city authorities are up in arms, of course," the dwarf replied. "The evidence that the Kelemvorites were up to no good was pretty hard to refute; hells, just the bodies of those undead monstrosities alone made a damn near irresistible case. I think you'll need to talk to Skellerang again yourself, though; the man looked right about to pop a blood vessel when I spoke to him."

Zenna smiled to herself ruefully; she could imagine how that conversation had gone. From all accounts Skellerang, the leader of the Watch, was close-minded, arrogant, and utterly full of himself.

Oh yeah, she could imagine how that conversation had gone.

“There haven’t been any inquiries about... that, have there?” Dannel asked, gesturing at the cage.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Beorna said. “But whoever Iverson was working with, I’d wager *they* know, by now.”

It was not a wager that any of them would venture to take.

“So what now?” Mole asked.

“You should stay here again tonight,” Jenya said. “When the sun sets I will *commune* with Helm... but not here,” she said, looking down with disgust at the cage.

“What should we do with that, High Priestess?” Beorna asked.

“For now, put in the sanctum.” At Beorna’s frown she added, “I know, I know, but it is the most secure place in the temple, and is warded from divination magic as well. As you said, our enemies likely know of our involvement, but we shall not make it easy for them.”

“Guards?”

Jenya lowered her head, a sad look weighing down her features. Zenna realized that she hadn’t seen the young woman, who had been so forceful and inherently optimistic when they’d first met, smile in quite some time. But for all the pressure on her, Jenya Urikas was still that strong woman at heart. “No,” she said. “Alert the acolytes, but I’ll not put them in the path of danger if I can help it. I will see to the defenses of the church myself.”

Zenna stepped forward. “If I may, High Priestess, I might be able to offer some suggestions, in terms of the questions you will ask in your *commune*.”

Beorna’s frown grew even deeper, if that was possible, but Jenya quickly nodded. “I appreciate your counsel, Zenna. Come to my quarters in an hour, and I will prepare some tea.”

“I could use a bath,” Arun said. He looked tired, as well, but there was nothing of surrender in the paladin’s bearing; to Zenna, he was as he had always been, a rock, the foundation upon which their company rooted their strength.

“Eh, I could use a drink o’ three,” Hodge said.

“Thought you might,” Beorna said. She drew out a half-gallon jug of thick, clouded glass from her pack, and tossed it to the dwarf. Hodge dropped his axe and barely caught the missile, turning the jug over to reveal dwarvish runes on a slap of paper affixed to the front.

“Gutbuster Fifteen!” Hodge exclaimed. “Woman, I could kiss yer!”

Beorna smiled. "Maybe... if you were ten years younger, thirty pounds lighter about the gut, and doused in the lake first!"

The exchange added a needed moment of levity, and the companions all laughed heartily before the cage dragged them back into the depth of the moment.

"I'm going to go to Skie's," Mole said. "Trade in some of our excess swag, see if there's any new rumors on the street." She started toward the door, but Zenna stopped her.

"Don't go alone," she said. "Remember, those assassins found us once..."

Mole shrugged. "All right, 'mom,' I'll take Dannel. Satisfied?"

The elf smiled as he joined her, but the look he and Zenna shared was full of meaning. *Be careful*, each seemed to say.

Beorna glanced over at Hodge, who'd already taken a deep swallow from the jug. "All right, Golden Boy, your friend's not going to be much good for anything in a few minutes, so help me get this hunk of junk into the Sanctum." She grabbed onto the cage and lifted it from the table, waiting for Arun to take the rear end of it before starting toward the chapel exit.

"Wait," Zenna said. She grabbed the tablecloth and draped it over the cage, hiding the terrible thing from view.

Chapter 264

Afternoon turned quickly to evening, and evening deepened even faster into night. Over the town of Cauldron, a preternatural hush descended, even the usual night sounds muted as its citizens retreated to their homes and rooms to await the coming of another troubled day.

Mole and Dannel returned shortly after sunset. The gnome was all excitement, and quickly found the others—at least some of them; Zenna was still in seclusion with Jenya, and Hodge had already passed out—to share her news.

"Great news!" she said to Beorna and Arun. "Since we've been such great customers, Skie has signed our company up for her 'Adventurer's Discount'. We get special deals on magic items, and special bids on new items that come into stock!"

"Don't forget the name," Dannel prodded her with a smile.

"Oh, right! We also get the name of our adventuring company on the panel in front of her shop; she's got a whole stone porch covered with them!" She paused, a wide grin on her face.

"And?" Arun finally asked.

"And so we need to come up with a name for us! For our company!"

The paladin rubbed at his temples. “Mole. We just got back from a ten-day’s holiday in the Abyss. We’re in the midst of a town cursed by unholy dangers and hidden evil. We’ve just uncovered a plot that had risen to the highest levels of the most popular church in town. We just finished a day of desperate battles, and most likely tomorrow will be just as intense, if Jenya’s divination is successful. Assassins that want us dead are in all likelihood still out there, and no doubt the evil intelligence that came up with that cage now has an interest in us as well.”

Mole listened patiently throughout Arun’s diatribe. When he’d finished, she just stood there, blankly, before turning to Beorna. “So, Beorna, what do *you* think we should be called? I kinda think ‘Mole’s Crusaders’ has a nice sound to it, don’t you agree?”

Arun glanced over at Hodge, for the moment envying him his unconsciousness.

Seeing that her audience wasn’t quite prepared for the momentous duty of selecting a name for their adventuring company, Mole turned to the items she’d bought for them at Skie’s. Her *bag of holding* had picked up a surprising quantity of loot for a single day of trouble, and she had tried to buy something for everyone in the group.

Dannel already bore his prize, a magical quiver that contained an extradimensional space that could hold several times the typical quantity of arrows. Given their difficulties in finding a fletcher on Occipitus, it seemed a useful thing to have.

Mole had bought herself a small magical dagger, a weapon superior to her tiny knife, but otherwise of the size that a human would use to cut bread. She’d also acquired a small rust-colored sack that Skie had been delighted to demonstrate for her; the bag contained a tiny furry ball that could be hurled from the bag to become a real live animal. The animals only lasted a short time, and they weren’t *truly* real, she knew, but the device was just too fascinating to pass up, especially at the discounted rate.

Perhaps feeling a bit guilty at buying two things for herself, Mole had splurged on items for the others. For Hodge she’d bought a pair of heavy winter boots, enchanted with magic that protected their wearer from cold weather. For Arun, she’d gotten several vials filled with potions that offered various enhancements useful in battle. And for Zenna, knowing her friend’s constant obsession with magic, Skie had provided a select choice of potent arcane scrolls, for addition to her spellbook.

The gnome turned to Beorna, a guilty expression suddenly appearing on her face. “I am sorry, Beorna... I forgot to get you something. A share of the treasure is properly yours...”

“Don’t worry, Mole,” the dwarf woman replied. “Doing good can be its own reward. And besides, I have already gotten several items; this ring, and the cloak and amulet that your fellow priest will not be needing anymore.”

“Oh, okay then!” Mole said cheerfully.

“Any rumors on the street about today’s activities?” Arun asked.

Dannel responded for her. “No, it’s surprisingly quiet,” the elf said. “It can’t be a secret that something’s wrong, not with half the Watch going in and out of the temple of Kelemvor all afternoon.”

“These people are cowed,” Beorna said. “They have been humbled into huddling like cravens in their homes, and not asking questions that might have unpleasant answers.”

Dannel frowned. “They’re good people, at heart. The folk of Cauldron have suffered greatly in the last year, however. Anyone would be changed some, under such conditions.”

“Well, that is what I am here to change,” the templar replied simply.

The door down the hall opened, and Mole darted off to share her tales with Zenna. Dannel followed, after a nod to the two dwarves.

“You travel with interesting companions, Golden Boy,” Beorna said, when they had left.

“My name is Arun.”

“Well, what do you know, you can speak to me after all,” she said. “For a moment, I feared that your tongue tied into knots at the appearance of one of your own kind.”

Arun glanced at Hodge.

“Aye, yes, he’s your friend, and a stout fellow he is, although I’d prefer it if he bathed at least *once* a year. But that’s not what I’m getting at. You’re an odd fellow, Arun Goldenshield... a puzzle, and I don’t generally like puzzles that I cannot figure out.”

“I am what you see before you,” the paladin said simply.

“Aye, and I saw what manner of man you are, this day.”

“I do what I feel that I must.”

“A philosophy that I share. But beyond that simple answer lies deeper truths, I suspect.”

He looked at her. “Is that not always the case?”

She nodded, and for a long moment they sat there, silent. Finally, she rose.

“We shall have another long day tomorrow, and my bed seems preferable to the floor,” she said, indicating Hodge’s snoring figure with a nod.

Arun stood, out of politeness. The slightly archaic gesture seemed to amuse the dwarf woman. But when she turned to him again, for a final farewell, her expression was serious.

“Would you like to join me?”

It was generally held that the dark-skinned gold dwarves could not flush the way that fair-skinned folk could, but at that question Arun made a fair effort. "We have known each other for barely a full day!" he finally managed.

Beorna shrugged, and smiled. "So? We are holy warriors, but not humans, with their silly vows of chastity and asceticism. My faith does not require that of me, and neither does yours, from what I know of the Soul Forger's code. Today we strode into the gates of fire and destruction and emerged, still drawing breath. Tomorrow we return to the jaws of battle, and may die. Who can say?"

"I said before that I didn't understand you, Arun, but maybe I do. I've walked a solitary path all my life... an outsider even among those I called my brothers and sisters. Our path, it's demanding of even the strongest soul... and it can be lonely, too."

For just a moment, she let her defenses down, and he could see inside, to the depths that she kept bottled away under her tough outer shell. It was very familiar, for it was a reflection of what he himself had kept buried ever since he'd been banished from his people, with only his honor to keep him company. Since coming here to Cauldron, he'd found the warmth of friendship, but Beorna's words reminded him that there was more, something he'd nearly allowed himself to forget.

He came to her, and his smile was deep.

Chapter 265

Their first attempt to reach Karran-Kural ended in failure.

Jenya's *commune* had been at least partially successful, as it had revealed that the place was linked to both the cage they'd captured and the greater danger threatening Cauldron. In response to a question to the celestial agent of Helm contacted via her spell, she'd learned that Karran-Kural was beneath Cauldron, somewhere in the structure of the volcano, and that evil still dwelled there.

The companions quickly decided to seek out this place, and hopefully find more answers. Jenya promised to continue her divinatory efforts, to try and prove the veil of shadow that covered the conspiracy that had included the church of Kelemvor in its ranks.

Although they only had a name, and a general location from the *commune*, again magic stepped in to offer a solution. Jenya had prayed to her god for a powerful location spell named *find the path*, which should have guided them directly to Karran-Kural.

Perhaps it would have. But they'd only barely entered one of the dozens of old lava tubes that tunneled under the caldera when they reached a tunnel entirely flooded with cold, clear water.

"Looks like we're going to need to take a swim," Dannel had commented.

Hodge had reacted with more vigor. "In that? We ain't fishes, elf! This Kural place could be a mile under that, fer all we know!"

But Dannel had looked to Zenna, and she nodded. "We'll try again tomorrow," she said. "But first, there's someone we should talk to, someone who may be able to help..."

* * * * *

The grove was quiet, even somber, a respite from the sounds of activity at the nearby docks and shops on the lake. Once a park, the small haven had become overgrown and fecund, with thick tangles of brush choking the once pleasant walking paths, and the trees forming an interlacing canopy that left a deep shade under their expansive boughs.

There were no signs of other visitors. It was as if the grove were in a different world entirely, with an invisible boundary separating it from the rest of the city.

"Beautiful... but also sad," Dannel said, fingering a drooping flower that protruded out from a bush that nodded out over the path.

"This friend o' yers, she lives out 'ere in the open?" Hodge said, regarding the vegetation dubiously. He rubbed his nose, stifling a sneeze. "Gah! Flowers." He swept out his axe, removing several of the offending blossoms in a single sweep.

As if in response, the wall of brush stirred, then thrashed wildly with sudden motion. The companions drew back as a dark shadow appeared in the bushes, which parted to reveal a huge, ferocious-looking bestial face, with beady eyes and dark brown fur. Its body was huge; the whole of the creature had to be at least ten feet long. It snarled, its huge jaws opening to reveal a copious quantity of pointed teeth.

"Umm... nice doggy," Hodge said, weakly.

Chapter 266

The companions drew their weapons as they faced a giant dire wolverine, trying not to provoke the creature that looked as though it could handle Hodge with a single bite.

"Bristle!" came a voice from further down the path. The wolverine turned its head in that direction, and then subsided, drawing back a pace and lowering its head with a final threatening growl at the companions.

A slender figure stepped onto the trail from behind a gnarled old tree. She was elvish, or at least partly so, with dusky gray skin and long, straight white hair that cascaded down across her shoulders and down her back. She was clad in a soft green tunic that blended in with her surroundings, over earthen brown breeches that culminated in a pair of soft leather boots.

"Shensen," Zenna said. "It's good to see you again."

The half-drow druidess nodded. "I see you have found some new friends."

"As have you," Dannel said, with a nod to the wolverine, who continued to watch them intently, as if still hoping that these strangers would be someone that he could devour.

Zenna introduced Beorna and Hodge to Shensen Tesseril, who the group had first encountered in the cellar of the Lucky Monkey, a roadhouse near Cauldron that had been taken over by bandits. Since then she had spent a fair amount of her time here in the town, choosing as her place of dwelling this abandoned grove.

"Come," Shensen said. "I know a nice quiet place where we can talk."

She led them to a pleasant hillock covered in bright green grass with a clear view of the lake, surrounded by a dozen trees that all but shrouded it from the surrounding city. Bristle, the wolverine, followed them but remained on the edge of the hillock, fading back into the bushes until only his face was just visible.

"It's surprising to see a creature such as that in the midst of a town," Arun said.

"I found Bristle on one of the game-trails on the outer slope of the volcano," Shensen said. "He was seriously injured, near death when I found him. I helped him, and brought him back here to recover. Only now he's gotten comfortable, and he doesn't seem to want to leave," she added, with a grin.

"I'm surprised that the Watch allowed him into the town," Beorna said.

Shensen's eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief. "There are ways into the town besides the four gates."

"Yeah, it seems lately that they'll let just about anything in, anyway," Mole added dryly.

"You have a strong connection to the natural landscape, Shensen," Zenna said. "Have you felt anything... unusual, of late?"

The druid pulled her knees close against her chest, and looked out over the lake. "You mean besides the general undercurrent of fear that pervades Cauldron? Yes. The natural currents of this place are in flux; there is something disturbing building in and around the town, something unnatural."

"What is it?" Arun asked.

"I cannot say, for certain. For one, there is something dwelling in the lake, a shadowy creature. The fishermen have been uneasy; a lot of dead fish have risen to the surface, their bodies black and rotting. I have explored the upper levels of the lake, but even I know better than to plumb the lightless depths alone..."

"Great. Another monster, that's all we need," Hodge said.

“I will speak to Jenya about it,” Zenna promised. “But for the moment, we have had our own dealings with shadows...”

She shared their recent encounters, culminating with an overview of the revelations they’d had regarding Karran-Kural. “We believe that whatever’s going on there deep under the city, it’s connected with all of the recent troubles.”

“We sure could use your help getting down there,” Mole added. “What with all your druid magic and stuff.”

Shensen looked thoughtful. “Well, I would as soon see the evil in the city uncovered and destroyed as any of you,” she finally said. “And I am still indebted to you, for your bravery at the Lucky Monkey.”

She stood up; Zenna observed that the grass where she’d been sitting sprang up easily, as if her weight had made no impression upon the hill at all. “Very well,” she said. “Where is the entrance to this tunnel of which you spoke?”

“It’s on the northeastern face of the caldera’s outer rim, about a half-mile down from the town wall,” Dannel said.

“I assume that this adventure is one that you would prefer goes unnoticed?” At their nods, she went on, “Then I will meet you there, an hour after sunset.”

“In the meantime, we’ll go back to the Temple of Helm, and see if Jenya is ready to try again with her spell,” Zenna replied. “And I too need to ready what magic I can, to aid in this difficult journey.”

The druid escorted them back to the edge of the grove. As the noise and bustle of the town returned around them, Zenna looked back to see Shensen wave once, then vanish back into the brush, the dense vegetation swallowing her up into its embrace.

Chapter 267

The cavern was cold and dark, filled almost to the brim with water, the only noise an occasional drip that sounded overly loud in the confined space.

A flicker of light disturbed the stillness of this place, far from the benevolent light of the sun. The light came from under the surface of the water, and it slowly drew nearer, twisting and shifting position, as if struggling to escape from its liquid prison.

The light had only just grown bright enough to cast faint glimmering reflections on the slick walls above the water when something emerged from the pool. A long, twisting tentacle snaked out of the water, grasping onto a nearby rock. Several other followed, slender lengths of pale, translucent flesh with pink suckers running along their undersides. Once enough had attached, they drew the mass of their owner out of the water, a bulbous figure with great, unblinking eyes.

The octopus sat there on the edge of the pool for a long moment, then its form began to shift and distend, growing taller, the tentacles sinking back into its body. The transformation lasted only a few seconds, and when it was done Shensen Tesseril stood there, shaking off a few stray droplets of water that clung to her long hair.

She reached down into the icy water, helping a sodden Dannel up onto the ledge. The elf bore the light, a magical *continual flame* set onto a small piece of wood that he'd strapped to his armor across his chest. Mole sprang up out of the water a moment later, a wide grin on her face. Zenna arrived a minute after that. The dwarves were the last to arrive. Their heavy armor had made passage through the flooded tunnels difficult, but it had also served as a useful anchor in several places, when sudden rushes of rapid current had threatened to fling some of them into alternate passages against their will.

Hodge burst the plane of water and spat out a big gout of water, splashing all of them as they helped haul him up onto the ledge. "Bragh!" he roared. "Blasted water! It ain't natural!"

"Okay, now that we've alerted every living thing within five miles that we're here," Dannel said, drawing his new magical quiver out of a sealed oilcloth bag, one of several that they'd purchased to protect their equipment from water damage. The quiver served him in much the same way as Mole's magical bag, storing not only his arrows within its extradimensional space, but his bow and *Alakast* as well. The others had had to take more precautions to secure their gear, but at least their magical weapons and armor weren't susceptible to rust.

"Hey, look at it this way, you get to do it all again on the way back up!" Mole said with a coy smile.

Hodge's sudden look of realization was priceless.

"We should start a fire, and dry ourselves off," Arun suggested. "We don't want to freeze when those cold-protection spells wear off." His breath made a plume in front of his face, confirming the low temperature in the cavern.

"They'll last a full twenty-four hours," Shensen reassured him.

"I can already feel Jenya's direction spell fading," Zenna said. "I hope that wherever 'here' is, it's where we're supposed to be."

"Where does the spell point now?" Dannel asked.

Zenna pointed toward the only choice that was apparent to them, a dark tunnel that extended away from the water's edge.

"Let's be about this, then," Beorna said, drawing her holy blade out of its scabbard. "Plenty of time to rest when we're dead."

"Cheerful prospect," Dannel said, following the dwarves as they started down the passage.

They didn't get very far before the passage ended in a huge, sheer wall of frozen ice. A narrow tunnel had been hacked in the wall, revealing another corridor beyond.

"This was done with tools," Arun said, examining the gap.

"The air is colder beyond," Dannel added.

"I'll go check it out," Mole offered, hopping into the opening.

"Mole, wait!" Zenna said, but she was already gone.

"Gnomes," Hodge said, clutching his axe tightly. He'd left his spear behind for this one, unwilling to deal with the large, cumbersome weapon in the flooded tunnels.

After a long, tense minute, Mole reappeared. "There's another passage further down," she said. "It's lit, and cold, and..."

"What?" Dannel asked.

"You guys need to see it for yourselves," the gnome replied. "It's... weird."

Chapter 268

Weird was an understatement, Zenna thought, when they'd all negotiated the bore through the ice wall and joined Mole in the corridor on the far side.

The tunnel here was cold, far colder even than on the other side of the ice wall, just fifteen feet or so away. Their breathing sent out plumes of white that hung in the air for a few seconds before dissipating, and they all knew that without the spells that protected them against the cold, they would all soon be freezing. The moisture still clinging to them from their swim quickly began to freeze, tiny bits of ice dropping from them to clink softly on the smooth stone at their feet.

They passed a mangled wreckage of iron bars, covered with frost. It took a moment to realize that the thing had once been a portcullis, a barrier now removed by some great force. Mole said that there were no traps remaining now upon it, and they pushed cautiously through the large gap into a narrower tunnel beyond.

About twenty feet beyond the ruined portcullis, they came to a set of large iron double doors, likewise rimed with frost. The portals looked sound, frozen in place, but one was slightly open, the gap large enough for them to negotiate without having to free the portals further. A soft blue light shone from the area beyond. As they drew near, Zenna could see that the doors were engraved with runes and sigils. They were difficult to make out, but the looked somehow familiar...

"Okay, you gotta see this," Mole said from beyond the doors, drawing her attention forward. Leaving the doors behind, she slipped through the join the rest of the companions.

The passage beyond the doors was completely smooth and square, ten feet wide and ten feet high. Small square plates that looked like iron were set into the ceiling at even intervals; they produced the diffuse bluish radiance that they'd seen earlier. In here it was even colder, and they shivered even through the magical protection of Shensen's warding spells.

But the odd construction of the tunnel was nothing in comparison to the crystal coffins.

Mole led them to the first, set into the floor at the edge of the passageway. Its surface was smooth, like glass, with a greenish tinge. But resting inside...

The creature was vaguely humanoid, in the way that an orc was vaguely like a human. The crystal distorted the light slightly, making the details of its form nebulous, that distortion adding to its menace. It was tall and lean, its flesh a pale green through the vista of the coffin, its body apparently perfectly preserved. Its face was bony and angular, as if a sculptor had begun work depicting a man and given up halfway through his work. Six arms protruded from its torso, and as she saw those Zenna's mind traveled back, to a place that suddenly seemed not unlike this one in its sterile décor...

"Vaprak's Voice," Dannel said, echoing her thoughts with his words. "The skeletons we fought."

"And that weird chair-sculpture thing," Mole added. "Built for six-armed people..."

"But what the 'ells are they?" Hodge asked, sidling up to the second coffin to get a better look at another of the creatures, a short distance further down the passage.

None of them had any answer.

"Well, they're long past..." Beorna began.

"Bloody criminy!" Hodge exclaimed, stumbling as he fell back quickly from the second coffin, his axe bursting into ready flame as he lifted the weapon.

"What is it?" Arun asked, scanning the hall for danger.

"That... thing!" Hodge said. "It moved!"

Mole looked up at the dwarf dubiously, then walked over to the coffin. She gave its resident a quick examination, then rapped on the top of the crystal. "Seems pretty dead to me," she said.

"I saw it!" the dwarf insisted.

"Either way, we should tread carefully," Dannel suggested. "Whatever they are, we already know that their workings are dangerous." The elf moved a short distance further into the passage, and bent to examine the floor. "There are faint marks here," he said. "Others have come this way before us."

“There is a door at the end of the passage,” Shensen said, coming up to stand beside the elf. “Shall we?”

They passed another half-dozen of the crystal coffins. Dannel had placed his *continual flame* into a pocket, leaving the strange ambient illumination to brighten their way. The blue glow from the ceiling panels glinted oddly off their metal gear, and the effects of the lighting in combination with the plumes of their breath gave them a grim appearance, their skin looking as pale as the dead.

The corridor ended in another set of iron doors. These had not been conveniently left open for them, so after Mole and Zenna had given them a cursory examination for mundane or magical hazards, Beorna and Arun went to work. A few blows from Arun’s hammer helped loosen the ice that had sealed the doors—the others cringed at the noise, but there was nothing to be done—and then the two dwarves, pushing side-by-side, pushed one of the doors open, the metal scraping on the floor as it resisted their efforts.

The room beyond the doors was apparently spherical, although two vertical walls of ice partitioned off two spaces in the rear of the chamber, making the place seem smaller than it was. There was a pillar of ice erected across from them, near the center of the room, but their view of it was obstructed by the dozens of strands of ice that extended across the room. These strands, each maybe an inch thick, connected the walls, ceiling, and floor, forming an intricate latticework. They did not block movement through the room entirely, but there were enough of them so that any sort of rapid progress through the chamber would be difficult.

“Those shouldn’t exist,” Zenna said, examining the closest of the strands. “That much ice, over that distance, it should break.” She began casting a cantrip, to delve more deeply into the nature of the place.

“This place is steeped in taint,” Arun growled. He too began to focus, scanning the chamber for the evil that his paladin’s gifts detected.

Beorna’s holy sword slid from its scabbard, and she spoke the words of a benediction, summoning the blessing of Helm.

Mole, naturally, stepped over to where she could touch one of the ice strands. “Ow!” she exclaimed, drawing back, shaking her injured hand.

“What is it?” Dannel asked.

“It... burned...” Her hand was white where the strand had inflicted a surge of magical energy upon her.

“Don’t touch ‘em,” Hodge said. “Right.” He lifted his magical axe, and flames burst eagerly upon the metal surface.

Zenna and Arun both started as one and turned toward the ice pillar.

“There!” Arun said, pointing with his holy sword, at the same moment that Zenna exclaimed, “It’s an illusion!”

But even as the two warned their companions, a tall figure emerged from the illusory pillar. Standing nearly twelve feet tall, the creature was a hideous insectoid monstrosity, with a malevolent intelligence shining in its bulbous red eyes. It bore a spear with a jagged blue steel head, and a nimbus of roiling black energy surrounded it like a dark halo. It did not hesitate, and as soon as it had appeared it extended a slender hand, chittering a word of power.

Unleashing a powerful *cone of cold* into the faces of the companions.

Chapter 269

The companions had been hit with the devastating icy blasts of *cones of cold* before. The ice devil’s power was considerable, but so to had the seven heroes gathered here been toughened in the forge of constant struggle, and they withstood the force of the terrible blast. Mole easily dodged aside from the spread of the cone, and Dannel dodged back behind the shelter of the doors, avoiding most of its force as well. Zenna turned away, her magical cloak helping to absorb some of its energy, while Shensen, who’d warded herself against cold upon entering the complex, took almost no damage from it at all.

The dwarves, on the other hand, arranged in a neat row in the front rank, absorbed the full force of the blast, and remained standing only through sheer stubbornness and dogged fortitude.

But even as the three dwarves shook frost from their blasted frames, it was clear that the tactical situation still favored the devil. Several of the proven-dangerous ice strands blocked the companions from its position, and while it might have been possible to dodge them, that would give the devil free rein to unleash more spells upon them, or strike at them with its spear while they were trying to reach it.

But Zenna made that question academic, as she turned back around, a cascade of tiny icicles falling from her cloak at the movement, and unleashed a *fireball* into the room.

The whoosh of heat exploded over the companions in a wave as the flames hungrily filled the open space of the room, engulfing the devil momentarily. When the blast cleared, the devil stood unharmed, its infernal resistances easily proof against the spell. But the ice lattice had been shattered, the strands of dark power melted, and the two flanking walls of ice had been partially melted as well, although neither had yet been fully breached.

The devil drew back slightly, as if given pause by this display of power.

Dannel’s first arrow struck it solidly on the torso. The arrow failed to penetrate, and glanced harmlessly off its body, but it drew back slightly as the jolt of electrical energy generated by Dannel’s bow seared into it. But the injury was only pathetically slight. The elf was already drawing his second arrow, but it was already obvious that the fiend was insanely tough, its chitinous hide thicker and more durable than even steel plate armor.

Beorna called upon the power of Helm, infusing herself with her patron's *divine power*. Thus fortified, she hefted her sword above her head and closed with the fiend, careful to remain out of the reach of its spear until she could find an opening to strike.

Arun's reaction was even more straightforward; instead of pausing to cast a spell he hurled himself straight toward this adversary. The devil was quick to react, and as the dwarf closed its spear sliced out, catching the paladin on the shoulder. The spear, infused with the frozen power of the devil, sent a deep chill through Arun's body, but he grunted and fought through the numbness threatening to catch him up, and swept his holy blade at the devil's narrow torso. The stroke was powerful, but as the blade intersected the dark field of energy surrounding its body it was turned, meeting a resistance born in evil magic.

Hodge lagged behind the other warriors for a moment, the seriously injured dwarf pausing to grasp his jug of healing liqueur with hands that shook from penetrating cold. Thus it was that he was caught on the far side of the *wall of ice* that the devil conjured, adding another thick divider that separated the room in two.

With the devil, Beorna, and Arun alone on the other side.

Chapter 270

Things suddenly looked bleak for Arun and Beorna, trapped alone in a prison of ice with a fierce gelugon. The dwarves, though tough, had already taken a beating, while the ice devil had been barely scratched.

But neither dwarf hesitated to consider the grim nature of their situation. Taking for granted that their allies would hurry to their aid, both dwarves stepped forward and unleashed a full series of attacks upon the devil, leaving nothing back.

"Blasted thing's tough!" Beorna grunted, as her first attack glanced off of the same dark shield that had foiled Arun. But her second swing found a narrow opening that she exploited, driving her holy blade through its defenses and opening a shallow gash in its thick hide. Ugly black ichor spilled from the wound, smoking as the liquid hit the frozen air.

Arun unleashed everything he had, trying again to *smite* the devil with a powerful blow. His sword tore through its shield and into its body, cutting a swath across its body just under its left arm. He followed with another series of rapid strikes, but the devil was quick to recover, and none of his other attacks penetrated its defenses.

Only a few heartbeats had passed since it had separated itself and these two foes from the others, but already it seemed that the devil was having second thoughts about its tactics. Rather than attack, it let out an inhuman screech, and with a faint flicker of white light it vanished.

"Gone already?" Beorna asked, slicing her sword through the space it had occupied to verify that it had not merely made itself *invisible*.

"I doubt it," Arun said, already looking around for a reappearance.

The wall of ice behind them began to glow, the barrier melting before the force of several *scorching rays* from Zenna. As an opening appeared, Dannel asked, "Are you two all right?"

"The beastie didn't like what we had to offer," Beorna said. "But it may be back for more, on terms more to its liking." The templar paused to cast a healing spell upon herself, easing some of the injury it had suffered from the *cone of cold*.

"Should we retreat?" Dannel asked. "Face it in the outer hall?"

"Might as well just line up for another *cone of cold*," Shensen suggested. "At least in the chamber, we have room to maneuver."

"All right, we're coming through," Zenna said. "But careful, the area around the breach is still deathly cold; do not dally."

Soon the companions had gathered again in the chamber. They spread out, alert for further signs of the devil. Spells were cast, wounds treated, wards laid.

Seconds ticked by with agonizing slowness; barely thirty seconds had passed in all since they devil had first appeared.

Mole yelled a warning from beside one of the other walls of ice, partially melted by Zenna's *fireball*. "I see something moving back there!" she shouted.

"I'll open us a winder," Hodge growled, lifting his flaming axe.

"Ready, everyone!" Zenna said, casting one last spell.

"It's gone!" Mole reported, peering through the translucent *wall*.

A faint sound was their only warning, but it was enough for Dannel's sensitive ears. The elf looked up...

The devil was there, crouching against the apex of the ceiling twenty feet above, defying gravity through the use of some sort of magic. Even as Dannel shouted a warning to his companions, and lifted his bow to fire, the gelugon made a gesture and spoke infernal words of arcane power. The air around the devil seemed to ripple, and then a storm of huge oblong hailstones began to plummet down upon the companions below.

Chapter 271

"I'm starting to get a little tired of this thing!" Beorna yelled, holding up her arm to protect her face as the driving hailstones of the *ice storm* pounded her, glancing off of the solid adamantine plates of her armor. All of them were blasted by cold and the hard impacts of

the stones; even Mole's speed and agility were of no use, as the hailstones seemed to be everywhere at once.

Zenna staggered backward as a hailstone clipped her on the shoulder; her innate resistance to cold protected her from some of the power of the devil's spell, but that proved of little help against the physical impacts. She looked up to see Dannel standing his ground a few paces away, trying to ignore the hits that drove painfully into him, sending arrows up through the storm at the devil. A screech from above told of a hit; in the brief interlude since the devil had teleported away Zenna had *aligned* his arrows, and now his shots had a more telling impact. But the devil's black shield protected it from most of their attacks, and even those that got through that outer barrier had to content with its unnaturally thick hide.

"We have to disrupt its magic!" Shensen shouted. Zenna had had the same thought, but she knew her own abilities—and limitations—too well to hope that her powers could foil the potent magic of the fiend.

Still, she had to try, and she wasn't alone; her companions likewise unleashed their most powerful spells and other attacks upon the creature. Beorna spoke a word of *dismissal*; the clarion tone of that spell momentarily sang through the chamber with bright energy, but the devil resisted it, and the spell dissipated without effect. Similarly Zenna's *dispel* faltered without effect, and while Shensen's effort a moment later had a slightly greater impact, its *unholy aura* fading, the magic that kept it aloft continued to function, and a few moments later the devil simply restored its protective shield, gesturing almost contemptuously at them as it worked its magic anew.

Arun had unlimbered his large but infrequently used bow, and was fitting an arrow to the string when Zenna shouted, "Arun! Use Dannel's arrows!" The dwarf nodded, recognizing her intent, and joined the elf, who continued his barrage, his magical quiver producing the *aligned* arrows in a steady stream upon demand. Zenna was about to cast a *haste* spell, but seeing how badly Dannel was hurt, she instead stepped up to him and unleashed a powerful healing spell into his nearly-frozen body.

Her aid came not a moment too soon, for the devil, hurt now by several of the arrows from Dannel's persistent barrage, chattered out an inarticulate statement of rage and lowered its spear toward them, diving toward the floor. For an instant Zenna thought that the devil intended to simply impale Dannel with the force of its descent, but then, cleverly, it arrested its dive a good nine or ten feet above them. She recognized instantly its strategy; that distance was just outside of the effective reach of the dwarven warriors, while its own long limbs and spear would allow it to strike effortlessly in return. And in proof its first thrust tore deeply into Dannel's shoulder. Without Zenna's healing he would have been crippled or killed by that strike, and even as it was he staggered back in pain, half-frozen blood trickling out from the wound, his nimble motions *slowed* by the devil's numbing chill.

Zenna looked up into the fiend's glowing eyes, and felt a cold terror surge over her. An aura of *fear* radiated out from it, engulfing those closest to it. For a moment, it felt as though sheer panic would overwhelm her senses...

But only for a moment. Even without her own formidable mental discipline to consider, she and the others had a lifeline in their midst, a bulwark that fortified them all against the devil's fear. Arun radiated a sense of calm, of courage that reinforced them against the fear. The dwarf drew back his bow and fired, and while the missile glanced harmlessly from the devil's *unholy aura*, just the sheer act of resistance seemed to bolster them all, and drive them to press their attacks.

Hodge, thankfully out of the radius of the fear aura, had winched a bolt into place in his heavy crossbow, and now he fired as well. His shot, however, was no more effective.

Beorna unleashed a ray of *searing light* at the devil, but cursed as the beam of energy struck the *unholy aura* and dissipated.

"Keep at it!" Zenna urged, casting her *haste* spell now, canceling the power that had numbed Dannel, and enhancing the speed of her friends. The devil's long, slender tail struck out at her with sudden speed, but she had not neglected her own defenses. The devil's attack impacted the layered protections of two magical shields, one arcane, the other divine, and was turned by the barest of margins.

But its attack upon her was just a feint, as it turned the full force of its efforts on Arun. The spear darted down once, twice, and yet again, driving through the dwarf's armor with the first powerful thrust, knocking the bow roughly from his hands as the second clipped his arm and tore through his greave. Arun staggered, but it was not yet done, keening as it suddenly flipped in mid-air, its alien head snapping down to deliver a powerful bite that might have decapitated him, had it not been for the protection of his mithral helm. Even with that moderate protection, though, he was hurt bad, and he fell back, reaching for his shield and sword.

"Hands off him!" Beorna shouted at the demon. Calling upon Helm's power once more, the templar *enlarged*, her body seeming to swell with divine fury as she lifted her sword in challenge.

A moment later, the air above the gelugon flickered in a shimmer of light and air. The companions tensed, fearing some new devilry, but as the distortion took on form, an amorphous, nearly invisible vortex of moving air, it drove down into the devil from behind, slamming at it with powerful slams of concentrated air. The elemental did not harm it seriously, but the devil was caught off-balance, and was driven down almost to the floor, within reach of the companions' weapons.

Mole had been waiting for just such an opportunity. With the devil's attention more than a bit distracted, she ran in and leapt at its back, hoping to land a sneak attack. Unfortunately her tiny weapon was little able to penetrate its thick hide, and she landed in a soft roll, darting back to await another chance.

Thus far, the gelugon seemed nearly invincible, taking everything that the companions could throw at it, its innate resistances and the dark mantle of power with which it had cloaked itself absorbing their best efforts. But slowly, it was taking hurts, injuries from blessed weapons that even its phenomenal regenerative powers could not restore. But while it was possessed of a fierce diabolical intelligence, the devil had been driven half-

insane by centuries of confinement to this place, trapped by the eldritch arts of the spellweavers who had passed centuries ago, leaving their guardian to languish in solitude. Only once before in recent memory had its prison been disturbed, and that time its foes had retreated and bypassed it, mocking it in its captivity. Now, faced with enemies who shone with goodness, carrying hated weapons of light, an overwhelming surge of anger filled it, and it unleashed the full force of its hatred upon them, seeking vengeance upon the only convenient outlet it had had in five hundred years.

An arrow stabbed into its shoulder, breaking through the red haze of its fury with pain. The archer was that damned elf, and almost without thinking the devil pointed and unleashed another *cone of cold* that engulfed him. The elf was fast, but when the force of the blast dissipated, he was satisfyingly on his back, covered in a rime of white frost.

Unfortunately for the fiend, the attack had only taken down one of its foes, and it was still within their reach. The elemental continued to pound on it from above, mostly ineffectually, although its assault made it almost impossible for the devil to regain altitude. Zenna rushed to Dannel's side, while Arun slashed at it with his sword, managing to add another gash in its right leg to its overall tally of injuries.

Hodge lifted his axe and came at it from the side, but as he entered the radius of its *fear* aura he stumbled back, his eyes widening in sudden horror. Unable to resist that dark power even with the countering effects of Arun's aura of courage, the dwarf fighter dropped his weapon and ran, screaming.

But then, Beorna came forward.

Her sword, blazing with holy light, was a good seven feet long now, enlarged with the rest of her by her earlier invocation. She used her extended reach to good advantage, driving the weapon down in a powerful two-handed arc that the devil saw coming too late. The edge of the sword intersected with its neck, and with a final truncated screech the gelugon's head went flying, the dark energy surrounding it vanishing with a jarring suddenness as its body crashed down lifelessly to the ground.

Chapter 272

It took them the better part of an hour to recover and get ready to move out again. The devil had been a fierce adversary, and nearly all of them bore wounds, although Mole and Shensen were comparatively uninjured in comparison to the rest of them. Zenna and Beorna used their healing spells to restore nearly all of the injuries they'd suffered, with minor potions and a few charges from their wands making up the difference. Dannel had been most seriously hurt, nearly slain by the second *cone of cold*, and he continued to shiver for some time even after Zenna had treated his wounds. They recovered Hodge, the dwarf's glare daring them to make a comment on his inglorious retreat, and for the moment they agreed to quietly drop the matter.

Although Mole's semi-covert giggling whenever she looked at the dwarf suggested that the story would be recited later in more detail.

The *wall of ice* conjured by the gelugon vanished shortly after its death, but the other two appeared to be more durable, permanent in nature. Sparing their spells for later use, they relied upon their weapons, in particular Hodge's flaming axe, to open breaches in both. They had to wait for some time for the field of magical cold around each opening to fade, after which they explored the spaces beyond. Both walls warded exit corridors, but the one on the left culminated in a total collapse after only about twenty feet. The other one led to doors, which in turn deposited them into a corridor that led off in several directions. There were more of the crystal coffins here, several of which were occupied by more of the six-armed sepulchral residents.

They headed right, giving those glassine cairns a wide berth. This part of the complex seemed to be in poor repair, with more partial collapses evident here and there, although the corridor they were in seemed secure and intact. The light panels continued to issue their radiance, and nothing living stirred in reaction to their footsteps.

The corridor ended in an intersection, with another large iron door to their right. The corridor continued to their left, while directly ahead of them a wide staircase descended a short distance before ending in a total collapse.

"Let's check out this door," Mole said, giving the portal a quick but thorough examination. Upon pronouncing it clean, the dwarves went to work, forcing it open with a fair amount of effort.

Beyond the door was another chamber, slightly smaller than the one where they'd battled the devil. The ceiling was lower, about fifteen feet, lit by the ubiquitous metal panels. Their attention was immediately drawn to the chamber's sole feature of note, a massive iron statue of an unidentifiable humanoid, a faceless figure a good twelve feet in height. Its "hands" were fashioned into forbidding bludgeons, and it was covered in a thick layer of frost that obscured any details of its craftsmanship.

"Big 'un," Hodge commented, as they stepped warily into the room, their weapons at the ready.

"I bet it's a golem," Mole said.

A moment later, as if her words had triggered it, the statue shifted, and with a grating sound of metal protesting against its movement, the construct took a ponderous step forward.

"Sometimes, I hate being right all the time," the gnome sighed.

Chapter 273

Faced with a hulking iron golem guardian, the companions gamely surged forward to meet it.

Dannel's arrows were first to strike; the missiles shattered harmlessly against its body, but with each impact a pulse of electrical energy sizzled through its metal body. The golem reacted noticeably to the assault, its movements becoming jerkier and slower.

“Keep shooting it!” Zenna encouraged. “The electricity is *slowing* it!” She could offer little more than verbal support, however, as she knew that her remaining spells, mostly enchantments, would have no effect upon it. Instead she cast her second *haste* spell, bolstering her companions.

Arun and Hodge rushed forward to meet it, but their weapons clanged harmless off of its iron hide. Beorna paused a moment, drawing out her adamantine sword and calling again upon Helm’s intervention to enhance her battle prowess. Shensen, likewise, cast a spell, moving forward to do battle with the massive construct. Though taller than the dwarves, she looked far more fragile, without even the benefit of armor to protect her. She moved with a smooth, willowy grace, however, a stark contrast to the awkward but powerful movements of the golem.

The golem delivered a crushing blow that slammed mightily into Hodge’s chest. Even *slowed*, the punch drove the unfortunate dwarf backwards several paces, and his face turned red as his lungs fought to recover the air that had been blasted out of him. Arun tried to distract the golem back toward him, but again his attack was completely ineffectual. Dannel continued to impact it with arrows, but most of his shots bounced cleanly off of it, not even sticking long enough to impart their electrical shocks.

Beorna rushed forward with a loud cry of battle, her sword raised high. The golem stepped forward to follow its initial attack on Hodge, but she intercepted it, bringing her blade down solidly upon its leg. The enchanted iron of its construction gave way before the awesome durability of adamantine, one of the strongest metals known on Faerûn. The blow opened a crack in the limb, and hot steam issued from the wound.

Clearly injured, the golem turned its attention to the templar. She tried to dodge back from its attack, but the edge of the bludgeon still caught her painfully on the edge of arm, spinning her around with the force of the blow.

Shensen, moving around the fringe of the battle, took advantage of its distraction to lunge in, her hand surrounded by a pale green glow. But whatever rudimentary intelligence drove the golem detected her coming, and it turned, bringing its other arm around in a broad sweep. Shensen leapt over it, but the edge of the hammer that replaced its hand impacted heavily on her ankle. The druid managed to recover, rolling with the impact and catching her weight on her hands, somersaulting forward to land painfully on her feet. Favoring her injured ankle, she darted into a crouch and reached out to touch the golem’s leg.

At her touch, a patch of brown began to spread outward across the golem’s thick leg. Her *rusting grasp* crept slowly out across the limb, bringing corrosion, undermining the integrity of the construct.

But the golem was a tough foe. Ignoring the still futile assaults from the other warriors, it turned to focus its efforts upon the injured druid. Shensen did not retreat, though she faded into a defensive crouch, still favoring her ankle.

Beorna continued to hack at it, but after the effectiveness of her initial attack fortune seemed to have deserted her. Though her attacks were powerful, she seemed unable to land a solid blow, her sword striking at an angle and bouncing off of the golem's thick hide.

Mole, coming up behind the golem, tried to distract it, but the golem had no critical points that she could sneak attack, and her tiny weapons had no chance of harming it. Hodge, recovering from his initial injury, launched an all-out attack upon it with his axe, but he over-compensated, and he managed only a glancing hit that failed to distract it from the embattled druid.

Shensen tensed as the golem twisted, its massive arm coming down to pulverize her. She bent to leap aside, but at that moment her ankle buckled, and the quick jump she'd intended became a half-fall, half-stagger. The golem's fist slammed into her with a solid thump, and she went flying backward six paces to land unmoving on the hard floor.

Chapter 274

"Face me, you bastard!" Beorna yelled, slamming her sword ineffectually again into the golem's lower body. The construct granted the templar her wish, turning from the defeated Shensen to lay into her with a solid punch that she simply absorbed, gritting her teeth against the pain as even adamantine plate buckled under the force of the impact.

"Is... that... the... best... you got?" she shouted, swinging her sword again, this time hitting it on the joint of its elbow as it drew back its arm, releasing another jet of hot steam as her sword managed to crack its frame once more.

Zenna ran over and knelt at Shensen's side, relieved that the woman still drew breath. Clearing her mind of the chaos of battle that raged just a short distance away, she focused upon her power, channeling life-giving positive energy into the battered woman.

Slowly, Shensen stirred, groaning.

"Beorna! Fall back!" Arun shouted as the golem struck her again, driving her to one knee.

"Like hell!" she returned, standing with a scream of rage and pain, smiting the golem with another two-handed swing that unfortunately did not appear to have any effect. Arun, realizing that his attacks could not harm this thing, moved toward her, intending to *lay on hands* to help the embattled templar. But his shift took him too near the golem's legs, and one suddenly shifted, slamming into his side without enough force to knock him down.

Gritting his teeth, the paladin looked up to see the huge foot coming right down toward his body.

"Help me... up..." Shensen said, her face contracting as she battled the pain that continued to stab through her body, despite Zenna's healing.

"You're still too hurt..." Zenna began, but the determination in the druid's eyes silenced her, and she complied. Shensen closed her eyes and touched the torc she wore, a necklace

fashioned from the branches of several kinds of trees and bushes interwoven into a green disc. Zenna thought she smelled the fresh odor of pine needles as a soft glow spread outward through the druid's body, and when she stood she seemed whole, even her ankle supporting her weight without protest.

"Thank you," Shensen said. Then she turned and ran straight toward the golem again.

A hand reached in and grabbed Arun, dragging him out from under the descending foot a moment before it slammed down into the floor. Beorna smiled as she pulled the paladin up beside her, but her movements were pained, and her body heaved with each breath she took.

"Not a time... to be fallin' down on the job!" she said.

"Look out!" Arun warned. The two dwarves split apart as the golem swung at them again. Beorna swung her sword, and a piece of the golem's fist was actually cut free from its body by her stroke. But an instant later the smoking remnant slammed into her, knocking her roughly backward.

The templar had taken just too much punishment, and although she managed to lift her sword, a moment later she fell back and toppled to the floor.

Arun immediately rushed to help her, but the golem had paid no heed to his attacks thus far, and he wondered how he could possibly keep the thing from crushing her.

But then he saw Shensen, charging in from the flank. The golem shifted almost exactly as before, but this time the druid ducked low under its sweeping arm, springing up to leap at its side. Her hand, fully extended before her, struck it solidly just under its armpit, and she hung there for a heartbeat before falling back, landing smoothly on her feet and darting back into a ready crouch.

The golem creaked and turned again, even as another patch of brown spread through its torso. At its sudden movement its shoulder buckled, and a huge rent appeared as the weight of its arm began to tear the joint that Shensen's touch had weakened. The golem staggered, steam pouring out of its body, and as the companions drew hastily back, Arun and Hodge together dragging Beorna, it teetered and collapsed in a smoking heap.

Chapter 275

Following the battle with the golem, the companions quickly decided that they needed to retreat and rest, to recover from the beating they'd taken in their two encounters thus far in Karran-Kural. In the rear of the chamber they found a shaft, a perfectly smooth cylindrical opening that appeared to provide access to some lower level of the complex, but despite Mole's curiosity even the gnome had to admit that they were in no shape for further exploration.

They retraced their steps all the way back to the outer ice wall, and set up camp at the edge of the pool that gave access to the flooded tunnels. Shensen transformed herself into

the shape of an octopus again and returned to the water long enough to catch a half-dozen fish. Planning ahead, Mole had brought a compact package full of charcoal pieces in her *bag of holding*, so they were able to warm themselves and cook their repast at the same time.

“Now, this be more like it,” Hodge said after picking one of the fish clean, leaning back against the rocks and letting out a large belch. To Shensen, he said, “Yer all right, lady, fer a drow.”

Zenna elbowed him, but the druid only laughed. “I am pleased to be able to rise to your high standards, ser dwarf.”

“So, what do you think we’ll find on the next level?” Mole asked.

“Whatever it is, it’s something that someone really doesn’t want others to find,” Beorna commented. “Ice devils and iron golems just don’t randomly appear. Those were guardians, and tough ones.” With that statement she kicked off her boots and leaned back against a sloping rock, and within a few moments was asleep.

It was a sobering thought, and it followed them as they set watches and prepared for rest. Zenna cast a spell that would alert them if any foes approached, but their sleep passed without interruption, and soon they were readying themselves once more for battle, talking about tactics over a cold breakfast of rations from Mole’s ever-useful bag.

“Whatever’s down here, it seems to be ready and waiting for us,” Beorna said. “So my suggestion is this: quit mincing around. We command both considerable fighting strength and potent magic. So we buff up to the gills, and head straight in.”

“Scouting ahead isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Zenna said. “Trust me—we’ve walked into enough traps and ambushes to know better.”

“I’m not saying walk in blindly,” Beorna persisted. “But we go in ready for trouble, and when it appears, we hit it with everything we got, and take it down.”

They could agree on that, at least, and so it was with a renewed sense of purpose that they returned to Karran-Kural. They still had a good twelve hours or so left on their *endure elements* spells, so the icy chill that greeted them again as they reentered the complex was just an annoyance, rather than a life-threatening affair. Per Beorna’s suggestion the spellcasters had shared out the various longer-lasting protections they’d possessed. Shensen had protected Beorna with a ward that turned her flesh a chalky gray color, the *stoneskin* giving her a potent resistance to physical attacks.

They soon had retraced their steps to the shaft leading down. The light from the ceiling panels was bright enough to reveal that the shaft’s bottom was only about twenty feet below, and that it opened onto another larger space below.

“We’ll need rope,” Dannel suggested, but Mole was already removing her coil of good silk rope from her bag.

“Getting up will be harder than getting down,” Shensen pointed out. “Especially for the dwarves.”

“Yer sayin’ I ken nay climb a rope as good as an elf?” Hodge bristled.

“Not at all, but neither are we carrying fifty or so pounds of metal on our persons, as are all of you.”

“When it comes to it, we’ll manage,” Arun assured her. “I have a friend who may be able to help in this sort of situation.” He took one end of the rope, and attached it to the arm of the iron golem nearby.

“Well, looks like we’ll need a scout,” Mole said. With a mischievous look on her face, she edged over to the rim of the shaft... and jumped in.

Without the rope.

“Mole!” Zenna said, hurrying to the shaft in time to see her friend falling, kicking off against the sides of the shaft to slow her descent. When she reached the bottom she tucked into a roll and tumbled out of view.

“One of these days, that girl’s going to jump headfirst into a dragon’s mouth,” Beorna observed.

“Oh, she already has,” Zenna replied.

“Anything?” Dannel called down the shaft, his *feather fall* spell at his lips to leap to Mole’s aid if needed.

Mole’s face reappeared below. “All clear,” she reported. “Come on down.”

With the aid of the rope, the descent was easy enough, and soon they had all reached the bottom of the shaft safely. The room below was almost entirely collapsed, frost-rimed rubble forming an impenetrable wall around them, but there was an intact door that led out into another corridor.

As they moved out into the passage, Beorna paused to touch Arun briefly. A tremor of power passed between them. “A ward, to keep you safe,” she said, with a faint smile. Before any of the others could notice their delay, she turned and took up a lead position in the new tunnel.

The lower level was quiet but held a certain heavy air to it, as though they could consciously feel the weight of the thousands of tons of rock above them. The omnipresent cold was here as well, but the air was dry, and the stone floor at their feet was free of ice and easy to navigate.

They reached an intersection. To their right the corridor was truncated by another collapse, while directly ahead of them the passage continued for a short distance before culminating in another iron door. But to their left, they could see another ice lattice a short distance

ahead, all but blocking the passage. The tunnel was narrow, and they would have to go single-file, in that direction.

“Well, thus far we’ve had bad luck with doors,” Dannel said, looking down the passage. “Zenna?”

“I’d rather save my fireball for an enemy, rather than clearing a passage.”

“I have a spell that can help, but it may not reach the upper part of the lattice,” Shensen said. “We taller folk might have to duck.”

“Ah, just stand back and let me do it,” Hodge grumbled, holding aloft his axe, calling forth the burning flames that surrounded its head.

They started cautiously down the corridor, with the dwarf in the lead. They found that his weapon could burn away the strands without injuring him, so they slowly made their way forward. Zenna, stationed near the rear of the column, tried to stay close to those ahead so that they could benefit from the *magic circle against evil* that she’d cast upon their reentry to the complex. She was acutely conscious of the rapid passage of minutes since they’d returned to Karran-Kural, but even though she knew that their warding spells were of limited duration, she knew from experience that being hasty could have an even greater cost.

Finally, Hodge had cleared a way through most of the obstructing strands within reach, and the rest of the corridor stretched unobstructed before them. They could see that another door marked the end of the passage not too far ahead.

Mole slipped ahead of Hodge to take the lead. “You’d better let me check ahead,” she said. “No offense, but you wouldn’t see a trap if its maker outlined it in red chalk and put a sign over it.”

“Bah!” Hodge said, but he offered no other complaint.

Mole turned toward the door just in time to see it swing inward. Standing there, in the doorway, was a tall human dressed in thick robes lined with rich fur. His profession was instantly obvious by the shifting *mirror images* that came into view with him, darting in and about his true location in a confusing shimmer.

“Wizard!” Mole cried, in case one of her friends hadn’t seen him.

The man pointed toward them, and Mole opened her mouth to shout another warning, but before she could a sizzling, empowered *lightning bolt* slammed down the length of the tunnel.

And then, even before the first had fully discharged, the screams of pain from the companions still echoing through the haze of burned flesh and stinging ozone, he laughed and added a second, quickened *bolt* on top of the first.

Chapter 276

The adventurers had encountered Fetor Abradius, and in the crowded confines of the narrow tunnel they fell victim to the same deadly stratagem that had undone the Stormblades.

The twin *lightning bolts* were absolutely deadly. Mole had instantly thrown herself prone, avoiding both blasts, but the others were not so lucky. Hodge went down, his beard charred, his face edged with black where the bolts had seared his flesh. Behind him, Beorna took the full force of the first, *empowered* bolt, and only the fact that she staggered and fell to the side saved her from being finished by the second. Arun fared only slightly better, his incredible stamina preserving him, but it was clear that he too was hurt bad. And the bolts kept going, through the dwarves, into the rear ranks. Zenna's magic circle bolstered her innate defenses, allowing her to weather the first bolt, but the second passed through Arun and impacted her squarely in the chest, knocking her back into Dannel. The elf, barely conscious, held onto her as she blacked out. Finally Sensen, in the rear of the company, was able to avoid the full force of the still-potent bolts, but was likewise seriously hurt.

The wizard, meanwhile, had stepped to the side, out of their line of sight.

Another one of those, and we're finished, Mole thought to herself, springing up lightly to her feet. She'd taken in the effects of the bolts upon her friends in a single glance, and knew that she was the only one able, at the moment, to offer a counter to the deadly mage. But charging forward to meet him alone didn't seem very appealing, even to her often-reckless inclinations.

Then an idea flickered into fruition in her mind, and despite the circumstances a wide smile appeared on her face. She reached into the bag tucked into her belt, kept close at hand for the opportunity she'd been waiting for since she's bought it. She grabbed the small furry object held inside, and with a smooth snap of her wrist tossed it forward, into the open doorway. The little ball suddenly swelled into a snorting, snarling boar, four feet long, which instantly turned to the left and started attacking.

Even as she drank in the glories of her new magic item, Mole was rushing forward to join her newfound ally. She threw in a forward flip to carry her over the boar, landing on her feet a few paces into the room.

Ignoring her own wounds, Beorna was quick to kneel at Hodge's side. The dwarf fighter looked an utter mess, but he still drew breath, though each gasp rattled in his throat as he fell closer toward death. The templar did not hesitate, pouring her most potent healing spell into him, and his eyes popped wide open in surprise as the torrent of positive energy scoured through his body.

Arun, seeing that his friend was in good hands, pushed past them, careful not to disrupt the priestess's concentration. Despite his own wounds, he made his way toward the doorway, drawing his holy sword as he came.

“Zenna!” Dannel cried, holding her up, uncertain if she still lived. Desperately he called upon his healing song, channeling its energy into her, when she stirred, faintly, he felt a deluge of relief. Behind him, Shensen healed herself, then turned to the elf.

“You’re both hurt bad,” she said. “Fall back, I’ll help the others deal with the arcanist.”

Dannel nodded, but Zenna shook her head weakly. “No, we’ve got to help the others,” she said.

“You’ll not help them by getting yourself killed,” he told her. “Another blast like that will finish both of us!”

Reluctantly, she let him drag her back down the corridor to the intersection.

Mole drew her rapier as she landed on her feet, and looked up at the wizard. The man had a hateful look to him, and he sneered as he looked at her. “Is that the best you can do?” he said, with a contemptuous sneer at the boar. The summoned animal tried to gore him, but it only managed to pierce an *image*.

“Okay, I’m sure you’ve got a million spells protecting you, but I’m going to kill you anyway,” Mole said, threatening him with her admittedly tiny rapier.

But the wizard only laughed, and turned back into the doorway, ignoring both her and her boar to deal with the greater threats posed by her companions. He found himself facing Arun, the dwarf just a few paces away. Arun lifted his sword and charged, but Abradius pointed and spoke words of mystical power, summoning a spell. Darts of liquid energy blasted from his fingertips into Arun, each one driving through his armor and searing the flesh beneath. Five bolts stabbed true, and then, even as the dwarf grimaced in pain, another five exploded into him. There was no way that even Arun, already devastated by the twin *lightning bolts*, hit now by ten *magic missiles*, could withstand such an assault.

And yet, somehow, impossibly, the dwarf remained standing, hovering on the brink of destruction.

“Aaaaarrrrgggg!” Mole yelled, charging at the wizard, leaping into a cartwheel that caught even the veteran wizard off guard. The images shifted around him, trying to confound her, but through blind luck she leapt up and stabbed in a sudden thrust that found real flesh. Abradius cursed and staggered backward, clutching at the deep wound that spread crimson across the chest of his robes.

“You’ll pay for that!” he hissed at her.

Arun knew that he was in bad shape, and that another spell from the wizard would likely kill him. But he also knew that if he delayed, even for the few seconds needed to heal himself, the wizard might instead kill Mole. Grimly he started forward, feeling the wet trails of blood pouring down his body. But before he could pass through the doors, a familiar voice sounded behind him, and a familiar touch poured life into his battered body.

“Go,” Beorna said. “Kick some ass.”

Abradius had been hurt, but the wizard still had surprises left, which he proved by reaching out and roughly grasping Mole by the shoulder. A hungry red glow flared between them, and Mole screamed as she felt her very life being torn from her. Even worse, that energy was absorbed greedily by the wizard, and she watched the wound she had inflicted swiftly close. Abradius laughed and released her, seeming even stronger than he had been before.

Arun appeared in the doorway, followed a pace later by Shensen. The paladin immediately laid into the mage with his sword, but the blow impacted an *image*. Even as it vanished, several others shifted forward to take its place, making the wizard's true position almost impossible to discern.

Shensen helped cut down those odds by hurling a pair of tiny shuriken, the steel throwing stars spinning through the air at him. The first passed harmlessly through an *image*, disrupting it, but the second hit something solid, and all of the images suddenly sported the star, jutting from his bicep.

"Bah!" he said, pulling out the weapon and dropping it to the floor. But he quickly began to feel the effects of Shensen's "surprise", as the scorpion venom she'd coated her stars with began to creep into his system.

Shrugging off the pain of his *vampiric touch*, Mole moved to flank the wizard. The boar continued to attack with dogged persistence, despite the fact that it hadn't hit anything yet, but Abradius was starting to run out of *mirror images*. Mole missed cleanly, though, her thrust not connecting with anything at all, real or illusory, and she spat one of her favorite Hodge-curses in response.

The odds were turning against the wizard, but he held his ground, summoning the power of another spell. A wave of mental energy swept over them, trying to cloud their minds with a cloying *confusion*. Shensen's mental discipline was far too great for even Abradius's expert magic to overcome, and Arun, fortified by his divine calling, was likewise just able to resist.

Unfortunately, Mole's will had never been her strong point. Suddenly overcome by the barrage of conflicting mental images, she lowered her weapon and began babbling incoherently.

But the wizard paid for that a moment later, as Arun tore into him. There were not enough images now to foil the paladin, and this time the holy sword cut flesh, the wizard falling back as he clutched the deep gash in his side. Behind him, Shensen began casting a spell, and behind her, Beorna and Hodge appeared, both still hurt but fortified by the templar's healing powers.

"This isn't over!" the wizard shrieked. "The secrets of the soul pillars are mine, and mine alone!" The companions rushed at him, weapons raised to strike, but Abradius spoke another word of power, and reality shifted around him, and he vanished, transported away by a *dimension door*.

“Damn,” Hodge said, slumping back against the wall, wiping his blackened forehead with the back of his hand.

Chapter 277

Arun and Beorna grappled Mole—normally a difficult task, but made easier due to her *confusion*—and held her until the power of Abradius’s spell had faded. The companions gathered in the circular chamber where the mage had waited, healing their injuries and discussing their next course.

“That was close... too close,” Dannel commented. “Those lightning bolts nearly killed several of us, and that was just the first few seconds of the battle.”

“We fell prey to the same ambush that caught the Stormblades,” Zenna said. “He was waiting for us in a confined space, where we could not avoid the bolts. He was powerful... his spells were improved through the use of metamagic, a talent well beyond what I can manage with my own magic.”

“What do you think he meant by the ‘soul pillars’?” Mole asked.

“What we’re here to find, I’d presume,” Arun said.

“What do you make of this?” Shensen said, drawing their attention to the center of the room.

They gathered to examine the only distinct feature in the room, a patch of what looked like black ice that covered the floor in a roughly circular outline about eight feet across. Dannel bent to examine the floor, his skilled eye noticing faint scuffs where the others only saw gray stone. “I’d say our wizard friend spent a good deal of time standing here,” he told them.

Zenna came over, and cast a spell, focusing on the ice for some moments. “It’s a divination device,” she finally reported. “Let me see if I can discern its operation...”

She closed her eyes, her brow furrowing in concentration. Flickering images began to appear *within* the ice, finally coming into focus with a startling rapidity.

They could see the evil loremaster, Feto Abradius, standing in a darkened chamber. Before him, in the shadows, a pair of slender pillars rose out of a great pit in the floor to ascend high above, out of their field of view. For some reason, even through the shadowy image of the magical viewer, those pillars filled each of them with a sinister feeling of dread. Hodge muttered a curse, and Beorna added a whispered prayer to Helm, her hands tightening on the hilt of her sword.

Something stirred in the shadows, a long, sinuous form. Then Abradius spun suddenly, snarling as he looked directly at them. The companions drew back in alarm, but then the mage waved his hand, and the ice went black once more.

“Well, I guess he doesn’t like being spied upon,” Dannel commented.

“So much for him fleeing the scene,” Beorna said. “And more importantly, we know he’s gathering reinforcements. Whatever that... *thing* was, I didn’t like the looks of it.”

“Should we retreat?” Dannel asked.

Arun shook his head. “He knows we’re here, and we’d never get out of the complex before he could attack us, if that is his goal.”

“And even if he did allow us to retreat and recover our strength, the next time we meet him he’d have those same spells ready again, or something even more nasty,” Zenna said.

“Well then, let’s be about this while our wards persist,” Beorna said simply, leading them out of the room back into the corridor.

They returned to the intersection, and the iron door there. Beorna started toward it, but Zenna held her up. “Wait,” she said. “Each door we’ve opened thus far has concealed an enemy. And for all we know, the wizard’s ambush lies beyond this one. Maybe, just this one, we should be prepared.”

“What do you propose, Zenna?” Arun asked.

“Give me some time,” she said. “I know that the minutes are precious, but in this case, I think the knowledge we may gain may be worth the cost.”

She knelt before the doors, and began an intricate casting. The others waited—some, like Beorna, clearly impatient—as she wove a complex divination spell. Finally, she lifted her hands to her forehead and raised her head, her eyes shut. Almost immediately she jerked back, and quickly stood, letting the spell dissipate.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Dannel asked.

Zenna looked at the door as if she thought the portal itself would animate and attack. “Behind that door, another chamber filled with an ice lattice. And waiting in the middle of it... another fiend.”

“What kind?” Arun asked.

“I did not recognize the species,” she said. “It was big, fat and bloated with some sort of greenish sludge covering its form. I think it sensed something, because it started turning toward me, and so I quickly broke the spell.”

“Well then,” Beorna said, and her voice held a surprising degree of satisfaction as she lifted her sword to her shoulder.

Chapter 278

The kebular demodand Olarithusk wasn't a very happy fiend. Ripped from a grim but ultimately satisfying existence as the Subcommanding Warder for Block Fifteen-Four Sixty-Six, he'd been called to this uncomfortable place and *bound*, compelled to sit here in this ugly chamber and serve as a guardian. He knew the identity of those who had bound him, and he was even sympathetic to their goals, but his cooperation had not been petitioned, his aid not sought voluntarily. No, he'd been yanked from his duties on Carceri, dragged here and forced to service. If he ever found out who'd given these mortals his truename...

Olarithusk wasn't even sure what it was he was guarding, and the brusque way that his captors had all but ignored him since he'd been held here was... annoying. He hadn't been here long by the standards of his kind, but he thought of *his* prisoners back on Carceri and the torments that they would be missing in his absence, and seethed.

He thought he sensed a magical viewing, but by the time he'd turned around, it was gone. Blasted wizards, keeping an eye on him. Oh, he'd love to have one of them in his cellblock for a few hours...

The demodand was savoring that thought when the door to his chamber abruptly burst open, revealing an armored dwarf female. Before he could react, the female dodged out of the way, revealing other mortals behind, weapons at the ready.

Intruders! Olarithusk thought. *Finally!*

Pain shot through his body as arrows slammed into him, piercing his resistances and his thick hide alike to stab deep into his flabby torso. Well, that was all right. Pain was something that Olarithusk was accustomed to. The arrows were followed by a bead of flame that blossomed around him into a fireball. The ice lattice surrounding him shattered, releasing their intertwined energies in a cold flash, but that didn't bother him either. For Olarithusk was immune to both fire and cold.

Let's give the mortals some pain to enjoy! he thought, conjuring up an *acid fog* in the space around the door. The thick, greenish vapors engulfed the mortals quite satisfactorily, and while he couldn't see it, Olarithusk imagined their thin, weak flesh puckering and running as the acid burned through it.

But then the still-expanding cloud shimmered, and vanished from view.

Blasted wizards, Olarithusk thought. *Very well,* he thought, clenching his huge fists in anticipation of doing this the "old fashioned" way.

But more of the arrows knifed out of the corridor, and while his thick hide turned a few, more stabbed deep. He could feel the goodness infused in the shafts as each drove into him, and for a moment his fury was tinged with a sudden hint of fear.

For that, if nothing else, he would make these mortals suffer.

But the barrage of missiles did not stop... *how many of them are there?* Olarithusk thought. *Invisibility* was starting to look like a really good alternative to attack... but before he could summon the comforting shroud, the dwarf woman was charging, her sword glowing brightly in her fists. The woman, and especially the sword, virtually *reeked* in goodness, and the kebluar hesitated, for all that he dominated the dwarf with his physical presence.

That moment cost it. For Beorna, infused with both the *divine power* and *divine favor* of her patron—not to mention a few other useful buffs—drove forward, and at the last instant brought her sword down in a glimmering arc, slicing down through the demodand's body, opening a gash seven feet in length from its breastbone down to its groin.

The fiend... *deflated*, its bloated body collapsing as its life poured out from the terrible wound.

Beorna stood there for a moment, covered in the steaming, acidic ichor of the demodand, looking down at her foe. Then she lifted her hands in triumph, holding her sword high above her head.

“By Helm!”

Chapter 279

The companions did not waste any time savoring their relatively easy victory. After checking the room for further threats, and healing the minor acid burns suffered in the brief exchange with the demodand, the adventurers gathered before the door on the far side of the chamber. As usual, Mole and Zenna each examined it for dangers of a mundane and magical nature, respectively, and then Arun dragged the heavy portal open, revealing another corridor beyond.

This passage only progressed a short distance, perhaps ten feet, before reaching another intersection. Corridors branched off from the right and left, and continued forward a short distance before ending in another iron door, this one partially open to reveal blackness beyond. The passages were tight, each only about five feet across.

“I don't like it,” Dannel said. “More narrow tunnels. This would be a good place for an ambush; too many hiding places for our friend the wizard...”

Beorna started to push past him. “Only one way to find out...”

“If that last battle taught us anything, it's the advantage of scouting ahead,” Zenna began. “It would be foolish now to return to blindly stumbling forward...”

“Wait!” Mole said. “I've got an idea!”

The templar looked at her dubiously, but Mole's eagerness was evident as she reached into her *bag of tricks* again. She drew out the fuzzy ball, and tossed it out into the corridor. The magical object grew into the form of a sleek, muscular wolf, who turned and looked at the gnome expectantly.

“Go check and see if there’s an ambush!” she said, pointing down the hallway. The magical wolf probably did not understand her speech, but it apparently apprehended the gist of what she wanted, for it turned and padded off toward the intersection.

“I’m not sure I approve of this,” Shensen said with a frown.

The wolf interrupted whatever response Mole would have made, for it abruptly stopped right at the point where the passages intertwined. Its gaze was fixed on the half-open doorway, and it growled, clearly sensing something there.

A dark shadow moved in the depths beyond the open door. Zenna had just enough time to shout out a warning—“Enemy magic!”—before the walls, floor... even the threshold of the doorway separating the room from the corridor distended and shifted, and dozens of long, rubbery tentacles exploded from the bare rock, eagerly lunging out at them, entwining themselves around the surprised companions.

Chapter 280

“Fall back, into the room!” Dannel cried, darting back out of the reach of the *black tentacles*, before seeing that a pair of the long tendrils had caught Zenna around the waist, and were even now beginning to tighten their grip painfully. The elf turned around to help, but hesitated; at least a dozen tentacles filled the space between them, and he knew that he would be of little help to her if he managed to get himself entangled as well.

Mole and Shensen were also ensnared, but both were able to slip free and dart back out of the radius of the spell. The three dwarves made up in strength what they lacked in nimbleness, but as the tentacles converged on them they had to fight for each step. Hodge was caught by a tentacle that snaked around his ankle, threatening to trip him up, but Beorna, who was nearby, grabbed him by the arm and helped him pull himself free. The dwarven woman, still infused with power from her buffing spells, shrugged off the tentacles that tried to ensnare her, snarling with frustration as she joined the others in retreat.

Arun was also able to fight free, and he moved to help Zenna. She was well and truly caught, the tentacles lifting her a pace into the air as they crushed the breath from her body. The paladin had already learned that his sword was of little use against the tentacles, so he sheathed the weapon, slung his shield, and simply grasped onto the pair holding her, drawing them apart just enough for the tiefling to slip free. With Arun protecting her retreat from the tentacles trying to snare her anew, the pair fell back until the last of the tentacles were left behind them.

But even as the companions withdrew to relative safety, their strength suddenly seemed to drain from their bodies. Their armor and weapons suddenly felt several times heavier, their limbs leaden and unresponsive. Zenna, already staggered from her clash with the tentacles, sagged and nearly fell, her strength barely enough to keep her upright.

“What be happenin’?” Hodge exclaimed, slumping to one knee as the weight of his armor, weapons, and gear threatened to overbear him. Some of the others unshouldered their packs, trying to lighten their loads.

“It’s another spell,” Zenna gasped out.

“Well, do somepin’ about it!” the dwarf replied, staggering back from the danger zone near the tentacles.

Zenna was about to reply that she could not, when the tentacles suddenly vanished, evaporating into air as if they had never been. The companions turned back toward the door, readying themselves for whatever threat might approach with the cessation of the spell. Zenna spoke the words of a spell, and became *invisible*, while the others readied weapons or spells in anticipation of battle.

A skittering sound accompanied by a sibilant hiss became audible through the open door, followed a moment later by the familiar clank of heavy armor. A man stepped through the portal, a heavily armed and armored figure equipped with a massive greataxe. His unnatural origin was instantly visible, for his armor had been designed to allow for the vestigial wings that jutted from his back, and the foot-long ebon horns that jutted from his temples.

The fiendish warrior was imposing enough, but on his heels came another entity, a grim monstrosity that Zenna knew instinctively was responsible for the *black tentacles* and the *waves of exhaustion*. It had the look of a giant serpent, but without skin, muscles, or organs; it was a creature of bones alone, a skeleton. Their gazes were drawn upward, to the head that reared up above as soon as it had cleared the threshold of the door. That head had belonged to no snake; it was vaguely humanoid, but with great flanges of bone on the sides of the skull, framing deep eye sockets in which bright points of blue flame burned with evil malevolence. Somehow in its presence the deep cold of Karran-Kural grew even deeper, as the undead thing radiated an aura of frozen death.

“More lackeys of the wizard, eh?” Arun said, unsheathing his sword, letting its bright radiance play over them, drawing the attention of their foes.

The bone naga reared, lifting its evil skull even higher above them, until it nearly brushed the ceiling fifteen feet above. It released a foul keening, a bitter noise that assaulted their senses, an unnatural sound that seemed to coalesce into ripples in the air that took on substance, solidity. Those waves of energy formed into an impermeable barrier of force, bisecting the chamber in two.

With Arun, Beorna, and Zenna on one side with the two enemies, and the other adventurers trapped on the far side, unable to help them.

Chapter 281

Separated by a *wall of force*, the divided companions confronted a pair of terrible foes.

The fiendish warrior rushed forward, bringing his axe around in a wide arc designed to take Beorna's head from her shoulders. The templar stood her ground and shifted her body to take the hit on her armor. The adamantine plate held even against the magical sharpness of the evil fighter's blade, but she felt the force of the impact nonetheless, a hard wedge of pain driving through her body. The man—an orc, Beorna realized, as she saw the sinister features through the slit of his helm—was incredibly strong, and unlike her, not affected by magical exhaustion. What was worse, the blow had landed a foot from where she'd expected it; that and the faint shimmering around the warrior's body spoke of a magical ward about him, a *displacement* that would make it difficult to score a telling hit in return.

Arun's muscles seemed intent on defying him as he started to the templar's aid, but a reassuring warmth suddenly flowed through him, dispelling his weariness. Zenna's whispered voice sounded close to his ear, "I will assist her... you must defeat the naga! Its magic is the greater threat!"

Arun nodded, and reluctantly turned away from Beorna to charge the undead creature. It too was clearly protected by magical defenses; a glowing translucent *shield* hovered in the air before it, and its position also seemed to shift slightly as it moved, betraying the presence of another *displacement* spell. None of that stopped Arun, of course, and he rushed boldly at the bone naga. His sword clove the air in a wide arc, tearing through the *shield*, and although it struck empty air as it hit the apparent location of the creature, an instant later it slammed into hard bone. The naga keened, a terrible, high-pitched sound that seemed loud enough to shatter glass. Arun tried to follow-up his advantage with another assault, but the naga spoke the words of a spell, and a glowing hand of force, five feet across, appeared between them. The *forceful hand* immediately thrust the dwarf backward, driving him back ten feet despite his efforts to brace himself against its pressure.

Dannel grimaced in frustration as he could only watch his friends engage the naga and the fiendish warrior. "We have to find a way through, to help them!" he said.

Hodge grunted as a full-strength blow from his axe glanced harmlessly off of the *wall of force*. "If yer have any ideas, I'd love to 'ear 'em!" he shouted.

Mole had run along the entire length of the wall, looking for the slightest gap anywhere, from the floor to the ceiling. "There's no way through!" she said.

Dannel turned to Shensen, but the druid seemed to have withdrawn from them, lost in the casting-trance of a spell. Finally the vacant, distant look in her eyes faded, and she gestured to the ground at her feet, which seemed to rumble ominously.

A figure rose up out of the hard stone, a roughly humanoid form that continued to grow until its head touched the ceiling fifteen feet above. As the others looked on in amazement, Shensen spoke to it in a harsh, gravelly language, pointing toward the far end of the room and the battle there.

The elemental turned, and sank back into the floor at the base of the *wall of force*.

"Shensen..." Dannel began.

"I know," she said, rushing to the point where her summoned ally had disappeared. "Be ready..." She knelt and touched the stone, running her hand along it in a long swath that paralleled the perfect smoothness of the *wall of force*. She touched her necklace, and spoke words in a tongue similar to that she'd used with the elemental, Dannel thought.

Once more the stone obeyed her call. The floor where she had touched buckled, twisting outward on both sides of the wall. Dannel saw what she was doing, and even as the opening appeared beneath the *wall* he was running toward it, his bow at the ready.

Mole, naturally, beat him to it, and darted through to the other side.

Beorna grunted in frustration as her blows glanced harmlessly off the heavy black plates of her foe's armor. Her *divine power* had left her, the blessings of Helm but temporary in their duration, and with her strength drained, her attacks felt feeble and ineffective. The warrior, on the other hand, seemed possessed of an inexhaustible fortitude, and as he lifted his axe for another assault, Beorna braced herself for some more pain.

But before he could strike, the warrior hesitated.

"We are not your enemy, brave warrior," Beorna heard from behind him, a familiar voice from over his shoulder. "The wizard and the naga have both betrayed you... they are your true foes."

The warrior turned as Zenna became visible. The templar acknowledged the gutsiness of the ploy; if the spell failed, there was nothing stopping him from chopping her into two with that cleaver of his. But even though she could not see his face, Beorna saw the axe come down, and knew that the *charm* had been successful.

Zenna reached up and drew back her cowl, revealing her own features twisted into a ferocious, demonic leer, her flesh a bright red, her horns and teeth ebon mirrors to the features of the fiendish warrior. "I am one of you!" she hissed. "Use your strength to destroy your true foes!"

The warrior turned to his ally, and with a terrible roar rushed at the naga, his axe raised in challenge. The naga turned from Arun to face the charge, and as its first stroke passed through air, fooled by its *displacement*, the undead creature cast another spell. The warrior's axe came down again, and he looked around, confused, as the naga's *dispel* returned him to his senses.

"Well, at least he lost his wards," Zenna began, reaching out to *restore* Beorna. But before she could touch the templar, a green flash filled her vision, and her body exploded into a haze of pain. She felt as though every part of her body was trying to come apart, and as the green glow brightened, she could feel her death clasp down tightly around her.

Chapter 282

Beorna saw the green beam stab from the doorway, past the naga and the warrior, and impact Zenna squarely in the back. She knew the source, and shouted a warning to the

others. "The wizard!" But she was helpless to assist Zenna as the green glow pulsed over her, too quickly for her to stop it with a *dispel*.

It lasted all of a second, and in that time Zenna fought for her life. Her own innate fortitude, reinforced by her wards and resistances, warred against the pulse of Fetor Abradius's *disintegrate* spell. A scream was dragged from her body as the ray tore through her, but when it faded, after that long second, she was still there.

Still there, but weakened and damaged. She staggered back, half-caught by Beorna, who steadied her. "Are you all right?"

Zenna nodded, and tore herself free, nearly falling to the ground. "GO!" she yelled.

Arun fought against the *forceful hand*, but though he was able to stand his ground, and avoid being pushed back further, he could not draw any nearer to the naga. The undead monstrosity reared up, no doubt preparing to cast yet another terrible spell, when suddenly the ground below it buckled. Slabs of stone rose up out of the ground, resolving into the powerful arms of Shensen's elemental. The naga twisted and tried to break free, blasting a spell into it. But Shensen's magic held, and the naga screeched its terrible cry again as a massive stone fist crushed into its skeletal form. The elemental grappled it, and for a moment the two titanic creatures struggled in a raging melee. The fiendish warrior swung at the elemental with his axe, knocking several head-sized chunks of rock free from its leg, but then Beorna laid into his back with a vicious two-handed stroke of her sword, driving him down to his knees with a single mighty blow.

A sinuous ray of black energy appeared from the shadows of the doorway, stabbing into the naga, filling it with dark energies that healed its injuries and redoubled its strength. But Abradius's aid came at a price, as Dannel leapt up from the breach in the base of the *wall of force* with his bow fully drawn. Despite his lingering exhaustion his accuracy was still true, and a cry of pain rewarded his first shot as it knifed into the narrow opening, finding its target.

Mole was already moving toward the melee, looking for a spot where she could make a contribution without being squashed. Shensen came out through the gap below the *wall of force* on Dannel's heels, already beginning a new spell, while Hodge, the last to squeeze through, promptly got stuck in the narrow opening.

The naga, still twisting in the elemental's grasp, bent its head around on its long neck and fired a series of *scorching rays* point-blank into its tormenter. The elemental began to crumble as the fiery blasts played across its body, but it tenaciously maintained its grasp until a series of energy bolts appeared through the doorway, blasting into its already battered body. The elemental crumbled, falling into a heap of scattered stones.

Unable to get around the *forceful hand*, Arun finally just let out a dwarvish battle cry and hurled himself with his full strength against it. Step by step he pushed forward until the elemental's demise dropped the naga, and its gyrations brought it within reach. Calling upon the power of Moradin to guide his hand, he brought up his blade, and with a resounding roar *smote* the creature.

The naga screamed as the holy blade blasted into it once more, blasting fragments of bone from the interlocked segments of vertebrae that comprised its body. Still deadly dangerous, bolstered by Abradius's *enervation* ray of moments ago, it unleashed a powerful *cone of cold* directly into the paladin's face.

But the dwarf, protected by wards, and beyond that a stamina beyond the ken of most men, simply shook off the terrible, numbing frost, and struck again.

Behind the naga, meanwhile, Beorna stepped over the twitching body of the fiendish warrior—his head lay a few paces further distant—and joined in the assault, laying into the undead creature from behind. Her first swing was foiled by its still-potent *displacement*, but she stood her ground, and adjusted for a second strike.

A shaft of white lightning darted down from the ceiling, slamming into the naga. Shensen held her hand aloft, drawing upon her power to *call lightning* once more, watching the doorway for another sign of the wizard. Beside her, Dannel was doing the same, but when Abradius did not present himself for another attack, he unleashed his shot at the naga. The shot glanced off its head, doing little damage, but sending a small surge of electrical energy through it that added to its tally of injuries.

The naga tried one last gambit, rising into the air above its foes, out of the reach of the dwarves with their holy blades. It conjured its favorite *black tentacles* again to confound its foes, the long tendrils rising out of the floor grabbing and snaring the adventurers. Zenna was caught up instantly once more, and the dwarves had to dedicate their efforts to fighting off their grasp, unable to reach the naga ten feet above their heads.

Dannel and Shensen were caught as well. The elf dropped his bow as one tentacle wrapped around and crushed his arm, but the druid ignored the pain of their constricting grasp, all of her attention fixed upon the naga above.

Another bright line of electricity flashed from the ceiling, striking the naga directly below the base of its skull. Again Shensen was able to penetrate its resistance, the bolt of lightning running up and down the length of its body, driving up into its skull. The spell would have barely discomfited it when whole, but the naga had already taken a pounding. Blue flashes of light stabbed through its skull, exploding out from the gaping openings, and then the creature fell, a lifeless hulk that was quickly ensnared by the mindless, grabbing *black tentacles*.

Beorna and Arun helped the others free themselves from the tentacles, and the companions withdrew to the very edge of the *wall of force*, the only corner of the room not covered with the twisting black filaments. Hodge continued spitting curses until Shensen and Arun helped pull him free from the narrow opening under the wall, and they cowered back just out of reach of the tentacles, which continued to gyrate and twist probingly in their direction.

"Well, now that was a fight!" Beorna said, casting a healing spell to restore some of the color to Arun's frost-blasted skin. "That warrior was nothing special, but that demon-snake put up a struggle!"

Zenna suddenly sat up. “Where’s Mole?”

Indeed, there was no sign of the gnome, or of the wizard Feto Abradius.

Chapter 283

The raging cadence of the battle in the large chamber behind her grew strangely quiet as Mole somersaulted across the threshold, landing in an easy crouch in the lee of the half-open door in the corridor beyond.

She’d half-expected to find the wizard there waiting for her, but the loremaster had retreated to the intersection of the three corridors. He was surrounded by a shifting dance of *mirror images*, and although he was half-turned away from her, some sixth sense must have warned him of her presence, for he turned toward her as she appeared.

“Ah, the little rogue has come to chase me down again. What, no little animal helper, this time?”

“You’re not the first to underestimate me, Abradius. And my friends will be along in a few moments, once they’ve finished mopping up your ugly pals back there.”

The wizard sneered. “Come then, little one. Shall we dance?”

Abradius launched some sort of spell, but she must have resisted it, for nothing happened. She was already moving toward him, leaping in a slashing cartwheel that culminated in a springing leap, her dagger flashing out toward his throat. The loremaster had seen that move before, but he didn’t move, and too late Mole realized her mistake as she passed through an *image*, which popped as she impacted it.

“Nice try, little fool!” he said, reaching out and grabbing her on the shoulder. Mole cried out and staggered back, breaking the contact too late to escape the draw on her life force as the wizard’s *vampiric touch* worked its deadly effect upon her again.

She tumbled back out of reach, her side feeling like it was on fire. The wizard regarded her with a confident smile. “The taste of your life... quite satisfying. Perhaps I will keep you alive once I have dealt with the others, penned in a little cage in my laboratory, where I may... sample... you at my whim...”

“Save the pep talk, wizard. Time is running out for you...”

“Yes, yes, your friends, I know.” Without taking his eyes off her, he gestured vaguely toward the door. “Have you considered, perhaps, that they may have their hands quite full? You see, I’ve known Xail far longer than you have, my little sweet... and he has quite a few surprises in store...”

A loud crash and a chattering roar, accompanied by inarticulate cries from her friends, sounded from beyond the door. Mole took advantage of the momentary distraction to reach again into her *bag of tricks*, but before she could take out the animal-ball, a sea of

black tentacles erupted from the floor and walls. Abradius, in the middle of a spell, was taken by surprise, and four of the tentacles lashed around him, tangling his arms and body and lifting him a foot into the air. The wizard cursed, but he was clearly not strong enough to break free on his own from the ensnaring spell.

A tentacle tried to grasp Mole's body, but she easily slipped free and darted back out of their range. "Well, well," she said with a nasty grin, as she unloaded her crossbow and calmly loaded a bolt into the mechanism.

Abradius twisted enough to face her. "Enjoy your temporary victory," he snarled. "You have made an enemy today..."

"For a few seconds, anyway," Mole interjected, as she lifted her loaded weapon and took aim.

"The guardian will destroy you! The pillars will not reveal their secrets to you!" Mole tightened her grip on the trigger of her bow, but even as the bowstring snapped taut, the wizard spoke a word of power, and vanished from the grasp of the tentacles. Mole looked for her bolt, but did not see it in the obscuring tangle of writhing tendrils.

"Well, maybe I gave him something to think about, anyway," she said, looking unsuccessfully for a viable route through the tentacles. There didn't seem to be one, but on the other hand, the sounds of the battle in the far room seemed to have eased off some. That could have meant one of two things, and as curiosity and concern overcame caution she was about to brave the spell when a voice came to her through the doorway.

"Mole? Are you all right?"

"Just fine, Dannel!" she yelled back. Belatedly, she looked around, in case the loud noise drew anything yucky to investigate, but the corridor behind her was quiet, as was the rest of the place other than the squishy sound made by the tentacles. Even so, the wizard's final words made the place suddenly seem even more spooky, so she summoned another creature—a wolverine, this time, she observed with delight—to keep her company.

"Just wait until the spell runs its course!" Zenna yelled to her.

"Okay!" Mole yelled back. She looked around. In the odd blue light, everything looked... bad.

For once absent of curiosity to do some exploring, she sat down against the wall, and rubbed the wolverine under its chin.

"So, know any good stories?"

Chapter 284

The *black tentacles* faded away in about a minute, so the companions quickly rejoined Mole and exchanged the usual barrage of healing magic. Zenna found that her new wand

was already nearly half-depleted, but she didn't begrudge its use, not here, with the series of deadly threats that they'd already confronted. Mole shared Abradius's final words about another guardian, presumably something deadlier than what they'd faced thus far. Their resources were already considerably depleted, and most of them were still suffering from exhaustion as a result of the naga's spell. But they were also wary of the wizard returning again with reinforcements, so they elected to press on cautiously, ready to withdraw if they encountered something beyond their abilities.

Zenna marveled at that; for all that their percentage of dwarven crazy-bravery was increasing, their tactics were almost approaching something resembling common sense.

The corridors were silent as they moved cautiously forward, deeper into the complex.

They entered a room that was mostly a huge, deep pit, its bottom beyond the range of their sight. A catwalk ran around the perimeter, and in the center of the pit a pair of pale pillars rose out of the darkness up to the ceiling high above them. The pillars were carved with the faint outlines of faces, each different, twisted into expressions of torment. That alone was disturbing enough, but when they stared at the pillars, the faces seemed to... *move*, writhing in frozen agony.

"Foul witchery!" Arun said, holding his sword up as if its light could banish the terrible sight.

"I take it these are the 'soul pillars'," Mole suggested.

"I don't know," Dannel said, casting wary glances both up at the ceiling and down into the pit. "I don't see a guardian..."

Zenna stared at the pillars with a fixed gaze, so intent that she jumped slightly when Arun grasped her arm. "Come on," he said. "Let us complete our search."

They passed through a long, narrow tunnel lined with iron doors. The doors warded empty cells with deep holes in the floors, approximately the size of the glass coffins they'd seen up on the upper level. These gaps were all empty, although in a few of the small rooms they found some frozen supplies, carefully packed containers of food and water most likely left by the loremaster and his allies earlier.

Pressing on, they found a pair of rooms that clearly showed the mark of the wizard. One room was empty save for an intricate summoning diagram etched on the floor. Zenna confirmed that it was probably used for conjuring extra-planar creatures; each of them had their own ideas about the exact sort of outsider that one such as Feto Abradius would summon. They left that room and investigated the other, a small room outfitted as a bedchamber. The most interesting thing there was a cache of papers they found in one of the drawers in Abradius's desk. Zenna had hoped to uncover the mage's spellbook, but apparently Abradius kept that essential artifact with him. But the papers nonetheless contained a number of interesting secrets.

They were written in the same hand as the note they'd found earlier, and outlined the searches by Abradius and his allies—a brief scrawl referred to "Cagewrights"—for information here in Karran-Kural. Zenna remembered the evil cage that now rested in the

vault of the Temple of Helm, and shuddered. There were other references to the “guardian” that Abradius had mentioned to Helm, but no details that she could find about the nature of the creature. Apparently Abradius had established a relationship with it, whatever it was, and in exchange for information about the outside world—gathered from the scrying crystal, presumably—it had granted him access to the soul pillars. Zenna felt as though there was something just beneath her perceptions here, something about the purpose and intent of these “Cagewrights” that she just couldn’t quite discern from the admittedly rambling and disjointed notes of Abradius.

Her frustration must have been evident in her face. “We’ll take them with us,” Dannel said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe Jenya can help us decipher their meaning.”

“The Striders include someone who may be of use as well,” Shensen said. “Meerthan is very knowledgeable about such things.”

Zenna saw that the others had already secured the room, with the door wedged slightly open to release the smoke from the little fire that Mole and Dannel had built. She must have spent longer than she thought reading through the notes. She rubbed her temples, where the genesis of a headache was just beginning to take hold.

“I’ll keep looking for more information,” she began, but Dannel forestalled her, taking the papers and putting them down on the desk.

“Later,” he told her. “For now, you need rest—we all do. Look at you; you can barely stand. We’re all worn out, exhausted from that spell.”

“I call dibs on the bed!” Mole said, jumping onto Abradius’s cot.

Their rest passed uneventfully, although Zenna felt uneasy when she woke from a deep sleep. She did not detect any magical auras, in particular a scrying sensor, so she tried to put her fears into the back of her mind. The next “morning” they gathered again for a meal provided out of the stores in Mole’s magical bag. Shensen and Zenna restored their protections against the dire cold of Karran-Kural, and they prepared their usual array of wards to be cast as soon as they were ready to move out and continue their explorations.

They had passed one more long corridor adjacent to the wizard’s rooms, and after reading his notes, they had a strong suspicion that its terminus was their final destination. Moving cautiously forward in single file, they finally came to another door ahead.

They were all on edge. A heady sense of anticipation hung in the air. This time, it was Beorna who first turned to Zenna, who nodded and slipped to the fore, kneeling before the doors as she cleared her mind to cast her *clairvoyance* spell.

The others watched as Zenna went through the complicated and lengthy ritual of casting the spell, the only sound her soft incantation and the occasional creak of armor as one of the dwarves shifted slightly.

Finally, she looked up, her eyes closed, facing the door. Again she lifted her hands to her forehead, turning slowly in a broad arc. And sucked in a startled gasp.

“What is it?” Beorna asked, her hands tightening on the hilt of her sword.

“The Pillars,” she breathed, continuing her scan. “Five of them... much larger than the others... I can feel the power from out here...”

“What about the guardian?” Arun asked.

“I do not see anything... Wait...” she said, turning in a broader arc.

She was nearly facing them when her eyes suddenly burst open, and she fell back, trembling, her hands clawing the air.

“Zenna!” Dannel exclaimed. “What is it?”

She landed against the iron door, and rebounded from it as if scalded. “Retreat! Back to the main corridor!”

“What is it?” Beorna repeated, facing the door as if it would grow fangs and attack them.

“Back, now!” Zenna said, all but pushing the dwarves ahead of her.

Her terror was contagious as they withdrew, although Arun and Beorna remained calm as they warded their retreat from behind. Zenna did not let them stop until they had returned to Abradius’s quarters, and shut the door behind them. She leaned against it, shaking. Dannel put his arms around her, and she accepted the solace, leaning back into him.

“Well?” Hodge finally said.

Zenna sucked in a deep breath. “Dragon,” she said.

“Bah! That it? You had me goin’, girl,” Hodge replied. “Why, how many o’ those ha’ we killed now, Arun? Three? Four?”

But none of the others responded, their eyes on Zenna’s grim face. “No,” she said. “It not like any of the others...”

“I don’t think I’m going to like this...” Mole said, but there was something eager in her fear, as she sat on the very edge of the wizard’s desk chair.

“It was clinging to the wall, above the door. Waiting for us. It detected my sensor...” Again, she shuddered, collecting herself with another deep breath before continuing.

“It’s undead. A skeleton, but intelligent. It had spells... I saw a *shield* up before it, and in its eyes... power...”

“A dracolich,” Beorna said. The word sounded through the room with the finality of the last nail being driven into a coffin.

Chapter 285

“A draco-what?” Hodge said.

“A dracolich,” Zenna said. “Undead. Immortal. Virtually invincible; even if you kill it, their spirits live on in a magical phylactery, and can take over another body, and rise again.”

“Uncle Cal’s tales, the Reaching Wood,” Mole said, and Zenna glanced at her and nodded.

“I have heard of such things,” Shensen said, her face troubled. “They are abominations, raised through eldritch magic, or through the activities of mad groups such as the Cult of the Dragon.”

“Okay, I get the idea. So why ain’t we dead?” Hodge asked.

“Abradius said it was a guardian,” Dannel said. “It may be trapped here, compelled to remain as a guardian of the Soul Pillars.”

“How big?” Beorna asked.

“I don’t know...” Zenna said. “Big. Huge. It was difficult to see.”

“Well, physically it wouldn’t be able to fit through that tiny corridor,” Beorna said.

“So then,” Hodge said. “It can’t get out. So what’s the problem? We got the wizzerd, we kin just leave.”

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple, Hodge,” Dannel said.

The dwarf shook his head. “Nay. It never be.” Tossing his axe onto the desk, he stepped over to the cot and settled heavily onto it, drawing out a flask from his pouch.

Beorna stepped in front of the door, drawing their attention to her. “This thing is a horror beyond imagining,” she said. “If it were to be released, it could destroy Cauldron, and wreak havoc on the surrounding region. Here, with it confined, and with forewarning, we may have a chance.”

Hodge muttered something that wasn’t quite audible. Beorna glanced over at him, and then shifted her gaze to Shensen.

“I fear that this enemy is beyond anything any of us have faced before. Together, we may defeat it. But I understand if... if you feel that you cannot continue.”

Shensen nodded. “I stand with you.”

Hodge looked up. “Hey, I dinna say nothin’ about backin’ down!”

“My uncle and his friends killed one, once,” Mole said. “And I bet we’re at least as tough now as they were, then.” Her grin betrayed her own eagerness, although Zenna thought that her legs would buckle under her, if Dannel loosened his arms around her body.

Beorna turned back to Zenna. “Could you tell what manner of dragon it had been, in life? If we know its type, we can prepare wards against its breath attack.”

Zenna’s brow furrowed in concentration, but she finally shook her head. “I... I’m not sure,” she said. “I only got a brief look; it seemed like it was mostly a skeleton.”

The templar frowned. “The more we know, the better our chances against it.”

Zenna nodded. Drawing upon a reserve of strength, she squeezed Dannel in thanks and then stepped away from him. She crossed over to the desk, leaning against it as she turned to face them.

“There may be an answer,” she said. “Abradius’s notes... I believe that they held enough information for me to delve into the lesser pillars, the ones we encountered earlier in the pit chamber. Abradius mentioned secrets, of mysteries and lore possessed by the spirits trapped inside them. I may be able to use them to get the information we need about the guardian.”

“Those pillars were suffused with taint,” Arun said. “An evil like that is not easily tamed, even for a good purpose.”

“And that taint may spread to those who seek to touch it,” Beorna echoed.

“I can ward myself,” Zenna said. “If you have a better idea...”

“I do,” Beorna said. “I may implore Helm for guidance, seek a *divination* that may help us.”

Zenna nodded; she herself had access to the same spell. “That may work,” she said, “Although as you know, even such revelations are usually murky.”

“Better to risk that, than blindly risk your very soul.”

“Very well.”

So once more they rested, ate, and kept a vigilant watch. Karran-Kural was silent, although each of the companions thought they could feel the malevolent presence of the guardian even through dozens of yards of stone separating them from the dracolich. Could it sense them, here? It knew that *someone* was there, that much was certain from Zenna’s viewing. How many centuries had the creature lived... no, “existed” might be a better word, for the grim unlife of such a thing was wholly unlike their mortal lives. How many foes had it faced and overcome? How much life-knowledge existed in the spark of its brain?

Later, Beorna knelt on the hard stones of the floor, lost in prayer. She invoked the power of Helm, and finally lifted her head, and spoke words in a deep voice not entirely her own.

*In the depths, the guardian of the pillars waits
The drake eternal, yet bound by ancient lore
He brings the storm, stealing breath, stealing life
Yet the secrets he guards may mean life for many*

“Cryptic, as always,” Arun commented.

“You’d think that as a god, Helm could be a little more plain-spoken,” Mole said.

“Well, it reinforces the importance of beating the creature, if we didn’t already have enough reason,” Dannel said. “But it doesn’t tell us what we wanted to know.”

“Yet I think the clue we need is there,” Zenna said. “Stealing breath, stealing life... That suggests poison gas.”

“A green, then,” Shensen said.

“The same kind Uncle Cal and the others fought,” Mole said.

Zenna nodded. She remembered the tale. Remembered also that some of their allies didn’t survive that fight.

“Let us make our preparations,” she said.

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The door opened slowly, the frost-rimed iron resisting before finally swinging fully open with a loud creak.

The chamber of the Soul Pillars was exactly as Zenna had described it to the others. The place was huge, maybe a hundred feet across, a circular chamber bored deep down into the depths of Toril. A broad, ten-foot catwalk spread out along the near wall, while a bridge fashioned apparently of solid ice led out over the chasm, toward the five massive pillars that stood in an irregular collection in the center of the chamber. Frozen air whistled up from someplace deep below, and the ceiling above was lost in shadow. The faint glow from the ceiling panels behind them was the only illumination; this place seemed somehow more suited to darkness.

The companions had prepared for an immediate attack upon opening the door, but when the cavern appeared empty, they were quick to put their plans into action. Zenna spoke a word of command, and a small winged imp, a four-foot creature wreathed in wisps of flames, flew out into the chamber. It went reluctantly, it seemed, sputtering curses in its own language, but that was fine from Zenna’s perspective; the creature’s role was primarily to serve as bait.

The mephit was followed a few moments later by a pair of sleek dire bats, each with a copious fifteen-foot wingspan, that materialized in the air above. The bats glided out across the room; one started to dive toward the mephit, but a spoken command from

Shensen, who'd prepared the ability to *speak with animals*, sent it back out on its gliding course around the perimeter of the room.

The companions filed through the doorway, spreading out into a broad half-circle centered on the door. Dannel tossed his stick bearing the *continual flame* forward, out onto the ice bridge, its flickering light casting deep shadows around the perimeter of the room. For good measure, he'd cast a *light* spell on the peak of the steel skullcap he customarily wore, to ensure enough light for him and Mole to fight by.

Zenna and Arun were at the center of the circle, the dwarf protecting the tiefling with his body. They were the anchor, important for the paladin's ability to protect the others from fear, and the positive influence of Zenna's *magic circle against evil*. The others were heavily warded as well, and as Shensen stepped through the threshold, already casting another spell, Beorna clashed her sword against the hard stone floor, sounding a ringing note of their arrival.

"Well, come on, drake! We haven't got all day!"

Even as her words sounded throughout the chamber, the templar invoked the power of Helm, and began to grow in size. This had been one of the disputes in their plan, for while being *enlarge* enhanced her strength and reach, it would make it difficult for her to retreat, if things turned out poorly.

Mole had fearlessly darted forward to the edge of the platform, and thus was the first to detect the danger. "From below!" she shouted, dropping back as a rush of air arose from the chasm. "Incoming!"

The mephit chittered and flapped its wings madly, gaining altitude. The bats swept around the far side of the room, giving the Soul Pillars a wide berth, and headed back toward the entrance where the companions stood in a soft bubble of light against the dark.

And then, Vittris Bale arrived.

The dracolich surged out of the chasm, spreading wings that no longer bore flesh to bear it aloft, the sheer force of its hatred of life, the undying power that animated it, now powering its flight. It rose up over them, a huge monstrosity, its wingspan nearly thirty feet across, a skeletal horror whose eyes burned with a cold blue flame.

The dracolich's huge jaws opened, and it unleashed a fury of poison upon them with the force of a driving gale.

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The toxic gas breathed by the dracolich was corrosive, capable of burning the flesh and searing the lungs of any living thing. And its transition to undeath had not weakened the power of Vittris Bale's breath weapon in the least. If anything, the dracolich's breath had the force of a tempest, driving into the companions with the impact of a powerful storm.

But the companions, armed with forewarning, were prepared, and when the noxious cloud cleared, they were all but unharmed. Mole and Zenna had been knocked down by the force of the blast, but none of them had suffered from the effects of the gas, the *protection from acid* spells that each of them had received holding up—thus far. A cold surge of fear swept over them as the full force of the dracolich's presence hit them, but the companions, veterans and bolstered against such terrors by Arun's stalwart influence, were able to control their fear enough to stand fast before the beast.

The adventurers counterattacked, laying into the undead dragon with everything they had. The plan had been to wait for Zenna to attempt to bring down its magical defenses with a *dispel*, but with her prone, they did not hesitate. Dannel's arrows knifed out at it, but the ancient creature's frame was incredibly durable, and none of his initial volley hit. Beorna and Shensen unleashed spells, the dwarf blasting it with a *searing light*, the druid adding a *flame strike* that coursed down from above into its body. But the dracolich's spell resistance was too powerful, and both spells dissolved as they struck it.

Zenna pulled herself up, and staggering back to regain her footing on the slick stone, she finally managed to fire off her *dispel*. White light flared briefly around the dracolich's body, as its *shield* and *mage armor* dissolved. But even without those protections, Vittris Bale's body was still nigh-invincible, a fact proven as Hodge's heavy bolt and Mole's much smaller missile both bounced harmlessly off it.

Perhaps ironically, it was Zenna's tiny, *summoned* mephit that inflicted the first damage upon the dracolich, breathing a small gout of fire upon it from behind. But the damage was minimal, and Vittris Bale, confident in its might and the security of its defenses, surged down onto the ice bridge, its skeletal claws finding solid purchase on the slick surface.

As the dracolich's dread gaze swept over them, the companions fought another kind of fear, this time an icy numbness that spread through their muscles, threatening to steal their ability to react, to fight back against the skeletal horror. Again, bolstered by magic and the protective aura of Zenna's spell, the companions were mostly able to fight off the effects of the creature's gaze. But Mole, blasted outside of the radius of Zenna's spell by the dracolich's breath, looked up into the creature's burning eyes and knew terror, and she huddled there against the wall, unable to do anything but shake uncontrollably. And Dannel, likewise, was affected, his drawn arrow falling from his hands as Bale's sinister power crept through his body.

Arun stepped forward to meet the creature, stepping boldly into its reach to swing at its leg as it landed. The dracolich snapped its head out and caught him up in its powerful jaws. Its touch was infused with the fierce chill of the grave, but Arun had been protected against that as well, and he was able to jerk free before it could lift him off his feet. The paralytic numbness of the lich's touch was nothing against his enhanced stamina, and his blow, guided by the *divine favor* of Moradin, bit deep into its skull as he *smote* the undead drake. Vittris Bale felt a sharp pain that penetrated even through the emotionless halo of its undead existence, and drew back, a wide crack gaping with blue fire along the side of its massive skull.

The dire bats flashed down from above, keening with sonic pulses just beyond the edges of mundane hearing as they attacked the dracolich. Its fell presence affected them as

powerfully as the half-drow woman they served, but driven by the power of her call, they nonetheless pressed their attacks. But both bats were buffeted back as the dracolich reared from Arun's attack, and they had to pound their wings furiously as they swept away, gaining altitude for another pass.

Zenna, careful of the dracolich's long reach, cast a spell upon Dannel. The elf nodded gratefully as the paralyzing terror left him, and he ran along the catwalk to the side, seeking an angle for an effective shot.

The dracolich had taken one serious hit, but its fury was now unleashed in full upon its enemies. The creature's rage at its centuries of captivity found fruition now in the assault it unleashed upon these intruders that had dared to intrude upon its confined realm. It spread its attacks upon the nearest foes, hoping to paralyze at least a few of them with the creeping effects of its frozen touch.

But unfortunately for Vittris Bale, it faced dwarves this day.

Arun staggered as another deadly snap of the dracolich's jaws nearly tore his sword—and the arm with it—from his body. The creature's claws tore at his armor, opening wide rents, the blood freezing as soon as it pulsed from the wounds. Beorna, her heavy stride sounding loudly on the stones, was struck by a pair of lashes from the dracolich's wings, buffeting her with the force of a giant's punch. But Shensen had warded her again with *stoneskin*, and the wounds were relatively minor. The creature's tail snaked out and smashed into Hodge even as the dwarf rushed forward with his burning axe, slamming him back to land heavily on his rear.

Their luck, fortified with divine protections and magical augmentations, held. None of the dwarves succumbed to the icy paralysis of the dracolich's evil touch.

But Arun, even with his enhanced stamina, had clearly taken a beating. His breath plumed out in great white gout as he fought for air, and his swordarm was a red mess, cut almost to the bone by the creature's great teeth. The paladin's face was a mask of determination, however, and no doubt or hesitation shone in his eyes. He would stand his ground, and only his death or the death of his adversary would change that equation.

The dwarves attacked. Beorna swept her sword around in a brilliant arc, crushing the blade into the dracolich's body. Arun, half her size, could not match her reach, but he managed an aggressive swing that smashed several of the creature's ribs. Hodge got up and ran forward, but as he reached the edge of the ice he lost his footing, and slid forward precariously close to the edge. The dracolich shifted its footing under the assault from the paladin and templar, and as hard bones of its right foot slammed into him Hodge went flying backward, sliding back along the way he had come. For a single heartbeat he leaned out over the chasm, his eyes widening as he beheld a long, long drop... and then he was clear, and he rolled to a stop, clutching his side where the beast had inadvertently slammed him.

The others kept up their attacks as well, and the dracolich was now showing clear signs of the damage wrought upon its skeletal form. Dannel finally got a telling shot through, his arrow caroming off its skull, and Shensen raised her hand, calling down a *lightning bolt* that

blasted through its spell resistance. Zenna's *scorching rays*, however, failed to do so, and as she looked around she saw Mole, lying helpless, and ran to her friend's assistance.

Vittris Bale was not accustomed to fearing for its existence; it took immortality as a matter of course, as much a curse as a blessing. Now that it faced defeat, however, it found that it craved the continuation of what passed for its "life", miserable and empty though it was. It had battered one of the dwarves near to the point of death, and the two others were injured, but it knew that it would not win if it continued this head-on confrontation.

The dracolich lurched to the side, and fell off of the ice-bridge, plummeting into the chasm below.

"Is... it... gone?" Hodge said, pulling himself back up to his feet.

Beorna and Arun's gazes met, and both shook their head, the same thought running through their minds.

No...

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At a cry from Shensen, the summoned dire bats dove into the darkness where the dracolich had disappeared. "We don't have long," the druid said, running over to lay a healing spell upon Hodge, then immediately launching into another casting.

"We'll be ready," Beorna said. She'd burned most of her spell slots for the various protections and wards they'd prepared, but she used one of her reserve spells to fuel a *cure critical wounds* spell for Arun, kneeling beside him. The paladin, in turn, healed her, *laying hands* upon her face... it was an odd, tender gesture, made strange by the fact that Arun seemed a child in the grasp of the *enlarged* templar.

Mole had shaken off the effects of the dracolich's paralyzing gaze, and despite the danger she moved immediately once more to the lip of the catwalk, staring out into the darkness with a look that combined excitement and terror.

Zenna commanded the mephit to also delve into the chasm, and with a dark look and a chattering protest he complied, his tiny wings flapping as his flame-wreathed figure descended into the darkness. The companions watched as the creature descended, a bright point in a well of shadows.

A loud screech echoed up from below. The companions shared a look.

"Well, that's the giant bats, I'd imagine," Mole said. "Oh, the mephit disappeared!" she added, a moment later.

"The *summoning* spell only brings the creature here for a short time," Zenna acknowledged.

The loose hairs framing Mole's face fluttered wildly upward as another powerful gust rose up from below. "I think he's coming back!" she said.

"Prepare yourselves!" Beorna cautioned. Her *divine power* spell had faded, and while she'd prepared a second one, she had just used its power to heal Arun. She laid another healing spell upon the paladin, restoring him nearly to full health, before stepping back, her sword raised in a guard position.

"Mole, get back!" Zenna warned, casting her second *haste* spell to renew the waning magic on her companions.

Shensen completed a summoning of her own, and a sleek, muscular griffon appeared on the catwalk beside her. She spoke to the creature, and with a powerful spring it leapt into the air, its wings beating fiercely as it let out a harsh avian screech that echoed throughout the cavern.

A dark shadow swept up out of the darkness. Vittris Bale ascended in a rush, half-flying, half-running up the smooth wall of the bore, the Soul Pillars and the darkness obscuring its form, transforming it into a malevolent shadow that was almost more menacing than the natural appearance of the creature. The darkness seemed to cling to it as it entered the pale radius of their light, and with her darkvision Zenna could just discern that it had restored its magical defenses, including a jumble of *mirror images* that darted in and around its form.

"Shensen!" she cried.

"I'm on it!" the druid responded.

The griffon dove toward the dragon as it rose up, but Vittris Bale turned its head up and unleashed a blast of corrosive gas that engulfed the summoned creature. The griffon, buffeted by the force of the undead drake's tempest breath, was hurled roughly back. Its wings scored by the acidic vapors, it dropped out of sight below, still trying to recover.

The companions were already attacking, launching missiles and spells at the dracolich. Shensen hurled her own *dispel* at it, and was mostly successful, as the *mirror images* and *shield* vanished. But the faint haze of its *mage armor* remained intact, and the *spider climb* spell it had cast was clearly still potent as well, as it clambered yet higher along the far wall, carrying itself to a position well above them before it pushed off, spreading wings that could no longer catch the wind out of reflexive habit as it swept across the room toward them.

Arrows and bolts glanced harmlessly off its body as it flew toward them. Despite being battered in the initial confrontation, with great rents hacked in its form by the holy weapons of the dwarves, the creature was still imposing, magnificent in its sheer destructive potential. It flew through a *fireball* from Zenna unharmed, its spell resistance shielding it from the vivid blast of flames. Its flight was taking it directly toward Dannel, out on the left wing of the catwalk, but the elf stood his ground, calmly drawing another arrow, aiming, and releasing in a single practiced motion. The missile slammed into the undulating column of the dracolich's spine, penetrating its defenses to blast away a fist-sized chip of ancient bone from its frame.

But the wound was just another minor mark on its tally, and it did not stop Vittris Bale from its target. The dracolich spread its wings and slammed hard into the wall fifteen feet above Dannel, its skeletal claws splaying out to grasp the frozen stone, the magic of its *spider climb* spell taking hold to affix the mighty creature in place. Even as Dannel turned the dracolich's sinuous neck snapped down, and while Dannel tried to hurl himself aside, Bale's jaws clamped down on his torso, dragging him roughly into the air.

"Dannel!" Zenna cried, a cold terror gripping her chest even as the methodical part of her brain recognized the way that the elf stiffened, paralyzed by the creature's touch, unable to fight back or free himself. She dared not hurl another *fireball* at it, not with Dannel so vulnerable in its grasp, and in desperation launched a pair of *scorching rays* at it, praying that they would penetrate its resistance and harm it, and save the elf.

But both streams of fire flared out when they struck the ancient drake.

The dwarves tried to help, although the dracolich had cannily positioned itself just out of even Beorna's extended reach. The templar conjured a glowing *spiritual weapon*, a sword of white flame that rose to attack the dracolich, but its initial swing failed to penetrate its defenses. Arun rushed directly beneath it, daring it to attack him, but he was too late to seize Dannel as the creature lifted him higher in its massive jaws.

And then, as the companions watched in horror, unable to stop it, Vittris Bale tossed the paralyzed elf out into the chasm.

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For a split second, Dannel Ardan seemed to hang there in the air, as time froze in a single dramatic moment. Then gravity overcame the momentum of the dracolich's throw, and the helpless elf plummeted down toward his death far below.

Zenna could do nothing but stare as the man she loved—yes, still loved!—fell. But then, a flash of movement shattered that terrible moment. It was the druid, Shensen, leaping into the chasm, diving off the edge of the catwalk as if she were plunging into a lake, rather than the black depths of darkness and whatever lay below. She fell toward Dannel like a dart, and as they reached the edges of her darkvision first he, than her, disappeared as suddenly as if they'd been plunged into a pool of black ink.

And then she could only pray that whatever Shensen planned through that desperate maneuver would work, as the harsh reality of the ongoing battle with Vittris Bale dragged her back into the moment.

The dracolich roared a terrible challenge at them as their attacks continued to lash out at it without effect. For a second time Beorna's animated divine sword clashed harmlessly off its body, and a bolt from Hodge's heavy bow was likewise ineffective. But Mole finally made her presence known as she ran forward along the curve of the wall, careful to avoid staring directly at the drake, and hurled a sealed clay flask up at the wall where it was

perched above them. The flask shattered on impact, releasing a blossoming orange flower of alchemist's fire that splattered in burning gobs onto the dragon's legs.

Bale lunged down again, this time intent upon seizing Arun. But the dwarf had readied himself for just such a strike, and as the dracolich's jaws snapped down the dwarf sliced out with his sword, cleaving through the undead creature's already-damaged lower jaw. Bone fragments shattered with the impact, and although it still slammed into Arun with the force of a battering ram, driving him back several steps, it seemed clear that the dwarf had come out better in the exchange. As the creature's head reared back up on its long neck, the lower part of its skull came away, falling to the ground fifteen feet below, shattering on the hard stone.

But the dracolich fought on, and it stepped back another pace as Beorna joined Arun. The paladin hurled one of his light hammers up at the creature, but the weapon bounced harmlessly off one of its ribs without causing damage.

"How in the hells are we supposed to stop it!" Hodge exclaimed, cursing as he worked the winch of his heavy crossbow.

"Just keep attacking!" Zenna urged, though the same exact thought had been whispering in her own mind, warring with her dread over Dannel's fate, both threatening to overcome her will and send her fleeing down the tunnel toward escape.

But she overcame her fear, and stood her ground. She launched her second—and final—*fireball* at the creature, but was not surprised to see it unaffected when the flames and smoke cleared. She cursed her limited spellbook; the most powerful spells in it were useless against an undead foe, but she had not had the time or the resources to add to her store of magic. At times it felt like they had all been running a race over the last few months, with one crisis after another sucking them up into a vortex of never-ending struggle against evil. Would that struggle end here? The dwarves were tough fighters, but their ability to hurt a distant foe was far less than their effectiveness at close quarters, and it seemed that the dracolich had recognized that fact.

Vittris Bale, however, *could* deal death at range, and its ruined jaw was not an impediment to the effectiveness of its breath weapon. Once more the roiling cloud of white vapors spilled out over them, engulfing all three dwarves and Zenna. Zenna tried to hold her breath, but she could feel her skin burning as the cloud poured over her, and realized with horror that this second blast had overloaded the remaining power of her *protection from elements* spell.

The next one was going to *hurt*, if they gave the dracolich the chance to recharge its breath for another attack. But given that it had taken everything they could throw at it, how were they going to stop it?

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An avian cry drew Zenna's attention to the side, and she turned toward the chasm to see a huge eagle rise up into view. For a moment she thought that she'd lost her senses, but

then, as the mighty bird lifted higher on the beats of its powerful wings, she saw that in its claws, clutched tightly...

“Dannel!” she cried in relief. The giant eagle, or more accurately the *wild shaped* Shensen, came forward and dropped the elf lightly to the ground at Zenna’s feet, then lifted into the air again with another loud screech, winging over toward the dracolich.

Arun, unable to reach the dracolich, had not spent the last moments in vain. Even as its breath blasted over him he focused his thoughts and sent out a call for aid. And that call was answered, as a familiar reptilian figure appeared, clambering over the edge of the catwalk, a calm intelligence shining in its amber eyes as it took in the situation, and approached Arun, waiting to be commanded. The paladin leapt smoothly into place atop Clinger’s back, loosing his shield and grasping onto the harness there with his off-hand, holding his sword aloft in challenge as the celestial lizard started toward the wall.

Beorna’s *spiritual weapon* finally scored a hit, as Helm’s Blade drove solidly through the bones of one wing, smashing the entire limb and sending a clatter of loose bones falling toward the ground below. The templar, lacking another spell that could harm it, drew out her bow, and was sending huge arrows up at it, trying to find a weak spot where the missiles could do damage.

Shensen flew past, just out of the dracolich’s reach, and let out a loud screech. A bolt of lightning lanced down from above, drawn by the power of the druid’s still-active *call lightning storm* spell. The bolt lanced through the weakened drake’s spell resistance, sending a bright flare through the unholy light the shone within the depths of its damaged skull.

Turning away from the ineffective barrage from below, and the mounted dwarf just beginning to essay the slick vertical wall, the dracolich leapt into the air after her.

“Shensen, look out!” Mole yelled.

The eagle darted around the Soul Pillars, slicing between them in a tight acrobatic turn. But although Vittris Bale was less agile in the air, the dracolich was surprisingly fast, and in its centuries of captivity it had come to know this place very, very well. The eagle emerged into the open air to find the undead dragon looming over it, Bale’s claws extended toward her.

The companions could only watch, their missiles passing around or through the skeletal dragon’s fleshless body without harming it, as the eagle turned and floated up into the dracolich’s waiting embrace. Even as its claws pierced her, tearing at her adopted body, she released a final furious cry. At that call a last bolt of liquid energy stabbed down from above, striking the dracolich solidly in the skull. Vittris Bale let out a terrible scream, a cry of torment and suffering that went beyond mere pain, and then with a bright flash of white light its skull exploded.

The draconic body, trailing smoke and lingering sparks of light, plummeted into the darkness below, the giant eagle still trapped in its embrace.

One by one, the companions—including Dannel, who'd come to slowly from Zenna's *cure critical wounds* spell—gathered at the edge of the catwalk and stared into the black abyss below. They had won, but again the cost had been high.

“Shensen...”

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They found her body, returned to its natural form, among the shattered bones of the dracolich on the uneven stones at the bottom of the shaft. Arun traveled down on Clinger to recover her body and confirmed that the dracolich was truly destroyed. Mole and Zenna went with him, not only to help him search, but to see if the dracolich's phylactery could be found.

The cavern floor was a jumble of piled stones, a haphazard, treacherous mess, slick with centuries of accumulated ice. But Zenna's *detect magic* spell proved up to the task, and they soon found a deep crevice where Mole was able to recover a fair amount of treasure stockpiled by the dracolich. Much of it, she said upon examination, looked to be fairly recent acquisitions, suggesting that Abradius or his associates had bestowed it upon the dracolich as a bribe for access to the Soul Pillars. Why an undead dragon trapped in a cavern for hundreds of years would have need of such valuables was beyond Zenna, but she was aware of the avarice of dragonkind—an attribute that apparently transcended such creatures' mortal lives.

They carefully wrapped the slain druid's body for transport. “A glorious sacrifice,” Beorna commented. “Confronted with a superior foe, she took her enemy with her. Truly a heart of great valor resided within her.”

“She risked her life without thought to save me,” Dannel said.

“Jenya should be able to *raise* her,” Zenna said. “We'll bring her back with us.” She didn't add, *After we finish our business here*, but she didn't have to. Even with the dracolich's menace destroyed, they could all sense the lingering evil in this place, given substance in the shadowy forms of the five Soul Pillars.

“I still do not like this,” Arun said. “Those... things... should be destroyed.”

“I do not believe we have the power to do that,” Zenna told him. “They are ancient, and the power within...”

“Evil power,” the dwarf returned.

“We need the knowledge held here. Or have you forgotten the last line of Beorna's *divination*?”

The dwarf did not respond, but his feelings were clear on his face. Beorna, too, frowned, but she would not openly question the apparent mandate of Helm in this matter.

Before they turned to the *Pillars*, they examined the objects that Zenna and Mole had recovered. Most prominent was a bastard sword of unblemished, shining steel, crafted in an archaic style that could very well have been a thousand years old. There was a silver amulet that radiated transmutation magic, which Zenna judged to be of similar nature to those they already possessed, that enhanced the health and fortitude of the wearer. There were a number of items of platinum jewelry set with precious gems, including several rings, a scepter, and a crown. They seemed to be a matching set, and Zenna figured that they were probably stolen, finding their way here through the activities of the still-nebulous “Cagewrights”. There was also a fair amount of coinage of mints both recent and ancient, all of which was sorted and placed in small sacks into Mole’s *bag of holding*.

But most disturbing was a small jeweled box, which seemed to flicker with a faint inner light when glanced at out of the corner of one’s eye, but which seemed unremarkable when viewed directly. Arun pronounced it as filled with a resounding taint, while Zenna’s *direct magic* immediately gave her a splitting headache.

“I’d say we’ve found our dragon’s phylactery,” she said, recoiling from the box.

That was enough for Beorna, who with a resounding blow from her holy sword sundered the box into a thousand tiny pieces.

“So much for that,” she said.

Mole started to collect the pieces, which included a fair number of good-sized gems, but Dannel forestalled her. “We’d better keep that separate from the other treasure, and take them to Jenya for divine cleansing, just in case.”

With all of the preliminaries resolved, there was nothing left but their final errand here. Slowly they each turned to face the looming pillars.

Zenna stepped forward, alone. With the others watching intently, she stepped out onto the bridge of ice, moving forward the power that, she hoped, held answers to the questions that had brought them here.

Chapter 292

A web of shadows enveloped her. Within that darkness ran currents of being, the warped essences of once-living things that were drawn to her, whispering secrets of lore and madness that filled her, threatened to drag her down with them. It was only through a supreme effort of will that she remained afloat in that sea, keeping the essence of who she was, *what* she was, intact.

The souls seemed to accommodate themselves to her presence, surrounding her, caressing the disembodied form of her spirit-self in a way that was profoundly disturbing. She probed through the endless web, seeking the specific information that she wanted, trying to focus the disordered chaos to her need.

And then, so suddenly that it sent a tremor of shock through her even through the numb reality of this place, the living black parted, thrusting her into an empty void of nullity. In that space, vacant of anything save her own thoughts, she felt a brief flare of panic. Was she trapped here? No... she could feel the slender thread that connected her to the other reality, the place where her body waited, along with her friends...

Then she realized that she was not alone. There was a presence here, surrounding her... belatedly she realized that all of this, the gray emptiness, it *was* this... what? She could not put it into mundane words of description. But this was what she had been seeking, she knew. Now that she had attuned herself to it, she could sense the currents of power here.

Tenuously, she extended a probe to meet it.

Awareness exploded through her... too much... she could not contain it, and she drew back, her consciousness threatening to come apart under the barrage. Conscious though was driven away by it, and that part of her that was still *Izandra*... clung desperately to the slender lifeline back, buffeted mercilessly by the sudden storm. There was no gravity in this place, no “down”, yet she knew she was falling...

falling...

Zenna’s eyes popped open to reveal the familiar outlines of her room. The only sound was the hard rasp of her breathing, her heart slamming like a hammer inside her chest. She instantly realized that the experience had been a dream, another reflection of what had happened back in Karran-Kural...

She knew from experience that she would not be able to sleep more than night, so she got up, pulling a light robe from the bedpost to wrap around her slender frame. It was the deep of the night, and even the mundane sounds of the predawn hours in Cauldron that drifted in through the open window were muted. It was as if the entire city was wrapped in an enfolding blanket, collectively waiting for the return of the light to stir.

Mole’s bed was vacant; not a surprise. The gnome’s curiosity was insatiable, and she saw sleep as an unfortunate necessity, when there were new things waiting to be discovered. She’d spent a fair amount of time with Dannel pursuing leads in the city, and Zenna suspected that not a good percentage of that time was spent dealing with less-than-savory figures, courting danger. That was just the way she was, and the fact that people still wanted them dead—and others who didn’t fit into the category of “people” as well—could not change that.

She looked at the books lying upon her desk, but did not go to them. She just sat there, on the edge of the bed, staring out in the darkness that held no secrets for her. *Unlike the world outside that door*, she thought.

They’d taken a victory with them from Karran-Kural, but more, too. Zenna’s power had continued to grow, opening up new valences of both arcane and divine power. Even though she’d long sought exactly that, she was surprised at the speed with which she was rising, and in times of introspection felt far, far older than her still-youthful body belied. But

introspection was also a rare thing of late, as events continued to surge forward at a desperate rate.

Cauldron was under siege. There were no armies of men, no beasts in the jungles threatening, but the danger was there nonetheless. The knowledge they'd brought back was vague, fragmentary; the scrolls of the evidently mad wizard Abradius, the scraps that Zenna had been able to delve from her brief communion with the Soul Pillars. Perhaps if she returned, spent more time delving into those secrets, they could connect more of the pieces... but even that brief communion had been enough to show her that the end of that road was insanity...

They'd sealed Karran-Kural behind them as best they could. Shensen's druidic powers might have been able to do a better job of it, but the fact was that they'd really lacked the power to destroy the pillars themselves. But from what she'd learned, the Cagewrights had already gotten what they needed from the ancient citadel.

The Cages. They were key, though they did not know exactly how, of yet. The Shackleborn. Another term without meaning, a scrap of knowledge, the piece of a jigsaw puzzle where they did not even know the shape of the final design. One thing, however, was clear, at least to Zenna; she felt it to the core of her being.

The plans of the Cagewrights would involve the utter transformation of Cauldron, and everyone in it.

And somehow, it was up to them to stop it.

Something came together in her thoughts. Rising from the bed, she crossed to the table where she'd left her things. She dressed quickly, needing no light to find every item in her inventory, to verify that every pouch, every scroll, every wand was in its proper place. Once readied she turned to the books, and slid them into their proper places in the light pack that she wore under her cloak. The cloak came last, falling off her shoulders around her body like a black shroud.

Only then, when fully prepared, did she hesitate. Finally she turned to the desk, and taking a quill and a small fragment of parchment she quickly scribed a note, folding the message over to write Mole's name on the back of the paper. She slid the note under the edge of the inkwell to hold it shut, and then stepped back, straightening.

She took a deep breath. A tiny whisper in her mind told her that this was foolish. But if there was ever a time for precipitous action, this was it.

She spoke a brief incantation, and vanished from her room, and from Cauldron.

THE END OF "SECRETS OF THE SOUL PILLARS"

Chapter 293

Dannel felt some of the stress that had accompanied him as a nearly constant companion ease from his shoulders as he entered the relative quiet of the grove. This place, so near to the bustle of the town, indeed seemed like a different world entirely. It was a shame that more of the townsfolk didn't come here, he thought.

This day there was a cool breeze off the lake rustling through the dense, overgrown brush that formed a low wall to either side of the twisting path. The sun was already well on its way to touching the curving black line formed by the hulking wall that ran around the entire circumference of the volcanic caldera in which the city of Cauldron rested. The elf walked down the path, making no effort to conceal the noise of his passage; indeed, he began to whistle the melody of an elvish song of traveling as he penetrated deeper into the grove.

When the bushes ahead began inevitably to shake, he stood his ground, trying not to look worried. It became somewhat harder, when they parted to reveal a snub head with jaws big enough to take off his head in a single bite.

"Hello, Bristle," he said. "I'm just here to see Shensen."

As the dire wolverine peered at him, he wondered just how "tame" the druid's animal companion was. But finally the thing leaned in to give him a good sniff, then, as if satisfied, it turned and disappeared back into the brush. "Disappeared," that is, if you considered the noise of the passage of an eighteen-hundred pound animal through dense bushes to be unremarkable.

Dannel did not follow the creature; he already knew his destination, knew where he would find Shensen.

The hillock was as he remembered, a grassy knoll surrounded by trees, topped by a single lonely blueleaf whose boughs spread out over its slopes like protecting arms. She was there, her back to him, watching the sunset. His booted feet made barely a whisper as he walked through the grass, but she knew he was there nonetheless.

"Hello, Dannel," she said, without turning. "I told Bristle I didn't want to see anybody; damn but that beast has a stubborn streak a league across."

"Maybe he knows you need a little company now and again," he said, sitting down next to her, facing in the same direction as she. "We all do, you know. Even hermit-druids."

He shot a covert glance at her, thought he saw the faintest hint of a smile.

"Why did you come today?" she asked, finally.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing," he said. "What you went through... it's not easy, for all that veteran adventurers like to make an almost cavalier reference to *resurrection*."

She shuddered. "You cannot understand."

He touched her shoulder, lightly. "I'm afraid I can."

She looked at him then, delving into his eyes with hers. Her eyes were a bright blue, the color of the lake under the full sun. "You were *raised*?" she asked.

"Yes," he admitted. "It was ten years ago; I had only just become a Harper." Her eyes widened slightly; that in itself was an uncommon admission. That society was known for keeping close counsel and weaving secrets; it was said that by the time you knew you were dealing with a Harper, they likely had already attached a few strings to you.

"What happened?" she asked. "If you want to talk about it."

"I was shot in the back with a Zhent crossbow," he said. "It was my own damned fault," he said quickly. "I dismissed someone as harmless who turned out to be anything but. Fortunately I had friends close by, so the Zhents did not have time to dispose of the body. Still, it was not something that I would want to go through again, understand."

She nodded. "Why did you decide... to come back?"

"It wasn't an easy decision," he said. "For all of the emphasis upon the power of the cleric... or druid," he added, "very few people talk about the agency of the soul. Ultimately, even in that, we have choice..."

"Not everyone does," she said, turning back to the sunset. "People die every day across the Realms... thousands, more. Not everyone is lucky enough to know a High Priest."

"I've thought about that often. For all that our clerics have dominion over life and death... whether they follow the path of good, evil, or the balance, order or chaos... for all that, the ultimate power to draw someone back across the veil is rare. And I think that's a good thing."

"Oh?"

"Consider our lives," he said. "We know that our time here is transitory, but we also know that our souls will continue after our physical bodies end, that we will have... something... waiting for us after this life. And yet we fear death. Why?"

"It is because life is precious to us, because of that very fact that we cannot easily tread that boundary between realities. Whatever our beliefs, whatever our causes, or struggles, we know that every moment here is vital, and ultimately limited. Thus it's a terrible, terrible mistake to waste any of it."

"I had no idea you were a philosopher as well as an archer," she said.

“Most bards I’ve met are a little of both,” he replied with a smile. “Although in some cases the philosophy can be a simple one, such as ‘wine, women, and song,’ or somesuch.”

“I’ve heard of worse approaches to life,” she said, her own mood lightening. She turned back toward the setting sun. “I’ve always loved this part of the day,” she said. “I do not know how my people, the drow, have managed to live, cutting themselves off from this beauty.”

“Many who live up here on the surface cut themselves off from it as well,” he said. “Maybe we can help at least a few remember, what it means to enjoy a sunset, in peace.”

She turned to him. “How is Zenna?” she asked.

Dannel lowered his head. “She is... she has had a difficult time.”

“We all have, of late,” she said. “If... if you love her, you cannot let her use that as an excuse.”

The elf chuckled wryly. “She doesn’t need excuses to be mad at me.”

“What are you going to do now?”

It was one of those questions that could go in a few directions, and Dannel clearly chose one in his response. “We’re not certain. Mole and I have continued to try to track down leads on these ‘Cagewrights’, while Jenya has been talking to the heads of the other churches, trying to learn what they can via divine means. But the gods have not been wholly forthcoming with hard info, it seems.”

“Helping those that help themselves,” she said.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“This is my favorite part,” she said, turning back as the sunlight touched the horizon of the wall. The golden orb seemed to flare brightly, as if resisting its decline, and the inevitable return of night.

The two sat there, silent, for some time, sharing a quiet moment in a chaotic time.

Chapter 294

“She’s gone to Saradush.”

“Saradush? Alone?” Arun asked.

Hodge snorted. “Hoy, that’s two ‘unnerd bloomin’ miles! What, the girl grew wings now?”

“Close,” Mole said. “She’s mastered teleportation, apparently.”

“Let me see the note, Mole,” Dannel said. His face was already a thundercloud, but the storm deepened as he scanned the short message. “That fool!” he exclaimed. “That fool girl! As if we weren’t being hunted by assassins... you know, it isn’t just the good guys who have access to *scrying* magic, or magical means of transportation...”

“She says she knows what she’s doing,” Mole said. “She’ll take precautions...”

“Bah! That’s what the man on the bridge of glass says...”

“Well, she has already gone,” Arun said. “Cursing it cannot make it not so.”

“She took some of the remaining jewels with her,” Mole said.

“May’ap she decided she’s ‘ad enough o’ this madness, thinkin’ it’d be a good time to up and get out’a this asylum,” Hodge said. “Might not be such a bad ideer at that now, mind yer.”

“No, Zenna would never abandon us like that,” Mole said, with firm sincerity.

“She ain’t been actin’ quite right o’ late, that girl,” Hodge persisted. “Even fer her. Ever since we came back from that damned ice-locker, and them pillers...”

“No, I agree with Mole,” Arun said. “Zenna knows what is at stake here, and has given us no reason to mistrust her motives. We shall have to trust, eh?” The last statement was made with the paladin staring at the elf, and Dannel finally nodded, reluctantly.

“C’mon Dannel, you said you’d go with me to Weer’s,” Mole said. Although they’d agreed to stay together in pairs, at least, when going out into the city, that cautionary stricture had already been disobeyed more than once by both the elf and the gnome. But both, it seemed, needed a friend now, and Mole’s own concern was not hidden well as the two left.

“I’m goin’ fer a breath o’ air,” Hodge said. Arun turned a hard look at him—the paladin was *not* as relaxed on the issue of splitting up in the town—but the dwarf only shook his head. “Quit cher worryin’, I’m only goin’ o’ver to the stables. Them new fawns o’ yers seem far too dainty entire, and if yer goin’ to let ‘em stick ‘round ‘ere, they’s goin’ need to know the hilt o’ a blade from the sticker.”

Arun nodded. “A wise precaution. I will come join you shortly.”

The older dwarf winked and put on a knowing look. “Aye, I get yer meanin’, friend. Goin’ to get yerself a quick one ‘ere supper, eh?”

Arun’s look was cold enough to cut iron, but the other dwarf only laughed the louder as he turned to go. As he was leaving, he paused in the doorway. “Tell yer missus that if the two o’ yer are goin’ to bring in any new ‘recruits,’ try and get at least a few dwarves, eh? An’ a looker o’ two wouldn’t be amiss nay no how, eh?”

Arun waited until the other dwarf had left, then he let his hard look loosen into a smile. There was no changing Hodge, but the man was a boon companion, and loyal, and that was enough for Arun Goldenshield.

“That man is a boor,” came a voice from behind him, in the other doorway. “He’s loud, obnoxious, odorous, and overly fond of the drink. But damned if he can’t swing an axe, and that counts for a lot in our line of work, I’d say.”

Arun’s smile deepened as he turned around to see Beorna standing there, regarding him with a quizzical look on her face.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, wipe that silly grin off your face, then. We’ve got another recruit, another of them boys who wants to slay dragons and fight off evil; it’ll have to be with his forehead, ‘cause I’m not sure I’d trust him even with a blunt weapon. Come on, you’re the one they always ask about, and so it’s your duty; I’m no nursemaid...”

“How many is that now? Sixteen? At least Jenya doesn’t have to worry now about her church being understaffed.”

“Well at least they can muck stables and slap whitewash,” she agreed. “Well, come on then; I want to get this new one settled before supper, if he isn’t just here to mooch a meal before he disappears, like that half-elf kid.”

Arun nodded, but the templar’s point wasn’t really serious; in fact, of the recent initiates, only that one she’d mentioned had proven less than true in his desire to serve. They were a diverse lot, men and women of almost all the civilized races, mostly young, although one old fellow who had to be pushing fifty had appeared at the gate of the temple one afternoon, offering his skill to “that brown dwarf that’s been cleanin’ up this here town.” Jenya had been surprised, but after the first few of the new volunteers had been given quarters in the nearly empty temple rectory, she’d told the paladin that it made sense, in a way. The people of Cauldron had been through a lot in the last year, and there were many who felt that they needed to do something, to strike back in the only ways they could. And so they found themselves drawn to the front lines of the battle against the darkness spreading through the city, drawn to the place where people of reputation were fighting back.

Arun started toward the waiting templar, but before he reached it a commotion drew him around. Mole burst into the room—for someone who could be utterly silent when she wanted to, she could make a lot of noise—followed by Dannel, and behind him a third figure partially obscured in by the doorway. From the look on his friends’ faces—Mole eager, Dannel worried—Arun knew that their sudden return likely meant trouble.

“Hey Arun, look who we ran into!” Mole exclaimed, as their companion entered the room.

It had been over six months since he'd last seen Fario Ellegoth, and at first glance it did not appear that the intervening time had been friendly to him. The half-elf had a haunted look to his face, his smooth, lean features pinched and tight with layered worries. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days, and the paladin could see that he was highly agitated.

"What's happened?" he said. He shot a quick glance at Beorna, who nodded. "I'll get our weapons," she said, turning quickly and departing.

"I need your help," Fario said. "Fellian's been taken."

Chapter 295

Night came quickly to Cauldron, as the sun vanished below the artificial horizon of the city's walls and the cold evening breeze down off the mountains urged people into homes and taverns to escape the deepening dark. With all of the troubles facing the people of the town in the last year, the night had taken on a sinister cast for many honest folk, and the omnipresent clomp of booted feet and the clank of armor from the patrols of the Watch did little to instill a sense of security. While there was no curfew in place at the moment, strictly speaking, the streets quickly became all but deserted after the setting of the sun, and even those who left the taverns and inns late did not linger, walking quickly home to close and bar their doors to await the return of the dawn.

But this night, there were at least a few folk who were out and about, engaged in a business that was of the sort to end in blood and violence. In a dark alleyway just off Lava Avenue, Dannel eased out of the deep shadows just long enough to peer up and down the street, before sliding noiselessly back into cover.

"Where is that girl?" Arun muttered.

"I cannot wait anymore," Fario said, starting to get up. Beorna grabbed him by the shoulder, and pressed him back down, a bit more roughly than perhaps was absolutely necessary.

"Charging in isn't going to help your friend, and it may get him killed," she said.

"She's right," Dannel said. "They'll be on the lookout for a rescue."

"They're... *torturing* him," Fario said, desperation thick in his voice.

"Meerthan is still giving you information through the link?" Arun asked. The half-elf nodded, his suffering clear in his expression.

"You people are being loud enough to wake the dead, let alone the Watch," Mole hissed, materializing in the mouth of the alley.

"What did you find?" Arun asked.

“The place is like a fortress,” she said. “Volcanic rock for walls, solid all the way around. They’ve bricked up all the first floor windows, and the ones on the second story are all sealed with reinforced shutters... and not the kind you buy at the hardware store, either.”

“We don’t have time to waste...” Fario began.

“We’ll find a way in,” Dannel said.

“Well, it would be easier if we had Shensen, she could create an opening right in the wall...” Mole suggested.

“Meerthan sent another messenger to find her, but she wasn’t at the grove,” Fario said.

“We’ll have to make do, then,” Beorna said. “What’s the best approach, Mole? The least likely to be watched.”

“There weren’t any windows on the back side. There’s not much back there, just an old stableyard, sheltered from the street. If there was a back entrance, they’ve sealed it. No other exits at all, save for the front doors.”

“All right,” Arun said. “Take us there.”

Mole led them on a wide loop around their destination, an abandoned inn that had been transformed into a safe house for the Last Laugh. The Last Laugh was the city’s largest thieves’ guild, and while the companions had long suspected their involvement with the city’s troubles, they hadn’t had any solid evidence of an organized link. Until now, it seemed. Mole and Zenna had had a run-in with the guild shortly after they’d arrived in Cauldron, where they’d saved the cleric Ruphos Laro from a beating at the hands of several Last Laugh thugs. They’d first met Fario Ellegoth and Fellian Shard a short time after that encounter. The two half-elves had joined them in investigating the disappearance of several orphans from the Lantern Street Orphanage. What they’d found in a complex deep under the city was a slaving operation run by a half-troll warrior named Kazmojen. They’d managed to defeat Kazmojen and his allies, but Ruphos was slain by the slaver.

That wasn’t all they’d found on that trip, and the memory was something that still haunted them. During the confrontation with Kazmojen, a monstrous aberration had appeared: a terrible beholder. Fortunately the creature had not lingered, taking one of the children before vanishing back from wherever it had come. The child, a wisp of a boy named Terrem, had been returned to the orphanage a few days later, without any memory of what had happened.

After that, the companions had lost track of Fario and Fellian. The two half-elves were members of a loose organization called the Striders of Shaundakul, followers of the deity of wanderings and adventure. Shensen, too, was associated with them, and the companions knew that the Striders had been working behind the scenes to try to uncover the source of the troubles confronting Cauldron. Fario had explained that he and Fellian were linked by a magical telepathic link to a wizard named Meerthan Eliothlorn, the leader of their operation here in Cauldron. Fellian had been staking out the house of a noblewoman that they’d suspected of participation in the conspiracy behind the troubles infecting the city, when he’d

been captured by agents of the Last Laugh. Through the mental link, Meerthan had known immediately of the capture, and he'd quickly alerted Fario to seek out aid.

And so, here they were.

"Okay, careful, don't make any loud noises," Mole said, as she led them down a narrow alley that opened onto the back of the courtyard behind the Last Laugh safehouse. "If you can help it," she added, with a glance back at Hodge.

"Fellian saw ten beds in the common room on the second floor," Fario reported. "There were at least that many rogues in the place, plus a halfling that had the look of a wizard, and..." he faltered for a moment, "and a woman... she's the one leading the... interrogation."

"Hold it together, man," Hodge grumbled. "We'll get yer boy outta there."

"So, what's the plan?" Dannel said.

Beorna's answer came as she slid one of her swords from its sheath; the black adamantine blade shone dully in the faint moonlight.

Chapter 296

"I wish Zenna was here," Mole said, softly.

"Yeah, but I'm sure she'd just say we were being crazy again, 'Yet another insane plan,' or something of the like," Dannel replied.

The elf and the gnome were perched on the roof of the safehouse, mere shadows against the blocky outline of the building. Dannel wore his magical slippers, but even with them Mole had still beaten him up, darting up the uneven wall of the old inn as though she'd been out on a paved boulevard on a Tenthday stroll.

"Here comes Beorna," Dannel said. "Get ready."

The two crouched low against the tiles as the templar, *enlarged* to a height of eight feet, strode forward. As they watched, she lifted her massive sword in both hands, calling upon the *divine power* of her patron god.

"That wall's at least a foot of volcanic rock," Dannel said.

"My money's on Beorna," Mole commented. "Come on, let's go."

The two started quietly across the roof, and therefore did not see Beorna as the templar drew her blade back, and then with a grunt slammed it into the wall. Mole and Dannel felt the building tremble slightly beneath them as the force of the impact was driven through the wall and through the supports of the structure. It was a mighty blow, one that should have resulted in a broken sword. But Beorna's weapon was forged of adamantine, that nearly

mythical substance forged by dwarves in the deepest places under the earth, and it was the wall that gave way.

The first blow had shattered stone, but she did not pause, sweeping the blade out in one massive swing after another. When she finally stepped back, mere seconds since her first attack had shattered the stillness of the night, the wall was a ruin, with a gaping five-foot hole in the building yawning open before them. Behind the gap they could hear confused shouts as the inhabitants of the building reacted to the surprise assault.

Fario was the first through the opening, launching himself through like a shot fired from a catapult. By the time that Arun appeared he'd already run the first rogue through, and was exchanging blows with two others, his two swords darting back and forth as he parried the sweeps of their falchions. Another Last Laugh rogue came at him from behind, his weapon raised to backstab the half-elf, but Arun's blade carved through him, and he barely had time to scream before he crumpled, blood erupting in a flood from the gash that had cloven his torso to his spine.

Seeing that help had arrived, Fario disengaged from his foes, ignoring a cut that opened a gash in his left leg as he darted toward the staircase up against the right wall. "Hold up, man!" Arun warned, but the half-elf, possessed with fear for his friend, ignored him. Behind him Hodge entered the fray, stepping through the gap before firing his heavy crossbow at point-blank range into the chest of one of the remaining thugs. The man staggered back, injured, while Hodge tossed aside the empty bow and lifted his axe, its head bursting into magical flame.

"Go ahead," he said to Arun. "I'll mop up these rakes."

The two rogues' eyes widened as they saw Beorna appear in the entry, the *enlarged* dwarf filling the opening before she released the spell and stepped through.

Mole and Dannel, meanwhile, had reached the front side of the inn. Mole fearlessly bent precipitously over the front eave to look down at the shutter a few feet below, one of two windows that overlooked the front door. She'd already secured a rope to one of the chimneys behind her, and now leapt out into the dark void, falling lightly back against the wall beside the shutter as it grew taut and drew her back in. Above, she could hear Dannel moving into position, climbing under the eaves with the help of his magical slippers to hold him in place against the vertical wall. He lifted *Alakast* as she drew out some small tools and went to work on the shutter, bracing the rope around her by holding it taut between her legs.

Fario ran up the stairs and emerged into a large common room, where he quickly found himself in a world of trouble. Two rows of beds ran across the room in parallel columns, several of which had been tossed over hastily to serve as makeshift barricades for the half-dressed rogues who now aimed shortbows in his direction.

As if that wasn't bad enough, a pair of lean humans, clad only in light silk leggings, turned from drinking vials of unidentified potions to face him as they entered. Their naked torsos were corded with muscle and covered with tattoos, and their faces were painted in the

white-and-black harlequin mask of the Last Laugh. By the way they snapped into ready martial stances, it was clear that they did not need to reach for weapons.

Don't... throw... your life... away, Fario! came a faint, familiar voice in his mind, over the telepathic bond.

But the half-elf's rational thoughts were driven away by the pain he could feel through that link, and there was no hesitation as he let out a loud cry and leapt at the nearest monk to attack.

Hold on... I'm coming, Fellian! he screamed, silently.

Chapter 297

The light was bad, she was hanging from the side of a building, and the desperate sounds of battle added a particular urgency, but Mole's concentration did not break until she heard a faint but satisfying *snick* as the lock on the shutters gave way to her efforts.

"Good work, Mole," Dannel whispered.

To be honest, she was rather pleased at her good fortune, since she'd let her lock-picking skills atrophy somewhat of late. But then she heard a loud bustle of activity from beyond the window, accompanied by multiple shouts—lots of shouts. Apparently the room they were about to enter was already a fairly busy place.

The darkness hid the wide grin that split her face.

Pulling open the shutters, she revealed a window with panes covered on the inside with dark fabric. Likely that was locked as well, but Dannel was already coming forward, *Alakast* at the ready. Even in the faint light she could see that he'd done something to himself, and his fists that clutched the pale wood were knobby and scaled.

Cool, she thought.

The elf struck, and the window exploded inward as the magical quarterstaff slammed into it. With a flick of her wrist, Mole tossed the little ball from her *bag of tricks* into the room, and instantly followed it by kicking off against the wall beneath her, using the rope to drive her back through the open window to land in an easy roll on the floor beyond.

The space she was in seemed unnaturally small, with thick red curtains dangling from long bars attached to the ceiling above. But she could hear shouts and activity all around, and knew that there were Bad Guys all around, close.

To her great pleasure the little rust-colored ball beside her expanded into a new creature, a black bear.

“Come on, let’s go kick some evil butt!” she said to the bear. She didn’t have to go far, as one of the curtains flew aside to reveal a pair of armed men clutching sweeping falchions, their faces painted half-white and half-black in the Last Laugh style.

Fario knew from the first exchange that the twin monks were expert melee combatants. Despite being unarmored, they moved with lightning quickness, and the potions they’d drunk apparently had given them some sort of magical protection, as he learned when a seemingly true thrust had glanced off of a tattooed torso. He wasn’t surprised when they moved smoothly to flank him, and he only hoped he could hold out long enough for help to arrive.

Pain blossomed through his body as an arrow stabbed through his armor into his side, followed a moment later by a crushing one-handed blow that snapped into his left arm just above the elbow. His entire arm went numb, and his shortsword went flying. But the half-elf just switched to a two-handed grip on his longsword, and fought on.

“You will regret coming here, elf!” one of the pair hissed, in thickly accented Chondanthan.

“You will join your friend, yes?” the other echoed, as he spun to avoid another thrust from the half-elf, snapping his foot around to drive painfully into Fario’s gut. Bright flashes of light exploded through his vision as he fought to recover the breath that had been driven from his body by the hit.

“It will not be long now,” the first monk said, but even as the words left his mouth, the loud rumble of someone heavy charging up the stairs drew their attention toward the corner of the room.

Mole dodged a sweeping falchion that clanged hard against the floor where she’d been standing a few heartbeats before, tumbling to the side so that the rogue was between her and the bear. As she came out of her roll she stabbed up with her rapier, and the rogue fell back, blood fountaining from the deep puncture that had penetrated his heart. The bear rose on its hind legs and clawed at the second rogue, knocking him back into the curtain, the weight of both of them pulling it down off its moorings. As the rogue fell, he and the bear half-tangled in the fabric, a larger portion of the room was revealed beyond.

Along with another five of the Last Laugh rogues.

“Dannel, I could use a little help here!” she shouted over her shoulder.

A crunch of feet upon shattered glass announced the arrival of the elf. In the light of the room he looked far more imposing than he had out in the dark outside, the lean features of the elf replaced by the thick hide and ferocious mein of a lizardman. Even the hardened rogues took pause at his appearance, but Dannel did not hesitate, leaping into their midst with *Alakast* already slashing out at the nearest. The end of the staff slammed into the man’s shoulder, driving him back, but the others were quick to recover, spreading out to take him from all directions at once.

Back on the opposite side of the inn, Arun exploded into the common room. Several arrows from the rogue archers glanced off of his shield or the mithral plates of his armor,

doing no damage. The dwarf peered through the narrow slit of his helm, taking in the scene in a single glance, then rushed at the nearest warrior monk. The nimble figure sensed him coming and shifted into a stance designed to offer defense without opening himself up to Fario. It might have worked against most foes, but not Arun Goldenshield. Blood sprayed into the air as the paladin's blade bit deep into his body, piercing his magical protections. Through some intent focus of will the man remained standing, but then Fario reared up behind him, his sword clutched in both hands above his head. The injured monk's twin shouted a warning, and drove a potent kick into the elf's back, but Fario was beyond feeling anything except a drive for revenge. The tattooed warrior might have been able to dodge the blow, save for the torrent of blood he'd already lost, and the weakness that flowed into him as his life poured out of him. The second monk let out a shriek as Fario buried his blade to the hilt in the man's chest, and he went down in a gory pool of his own insides.

"Moskaius!" the second monk shrieked. He added, "You die!" and leapt at Fario, all pretext of defense abandoned as he lashed out at his enemy. The injured half-elf tried to defend himself, but could not react in time to avoid a punishing razor-punch that slammed into the side of his head, staggering him. The monk raised his fist to deliver a finishing blow to the half-elf's neck, but before he could strike the bright glow of a holy blade fell across his eyes.

"No," Arun said simply. The monk hissed and lashed out.

But bare skin and fast moves were no match for mithral plate and a holy sword. The second monk died quickly and messily.

Mole's summoned bear let out a roar of pain as a falchion dug deep into its body. The rogue did not have time to press its advantage, however, as Mole backflipped away from the man she'd been fighting, twisting in mid-air to bring her facing the rogue. Confused by the maneuver, the man swung at her, but the blade passed harmlessly over her, just a second too late. No sooner had the curved steel sliced by then she crouched and sprung up again, her rapier darting out like a wasp's sting, finding a tiny crease in the man's armor and sliding deep into his body.

The rogue just stood there as she kicked off him and landed easily a few feet away. He knew something was terribly wrong, but it wasn't until his mouth began to fill with his own blood that he knew that he was dead.

Dannel was holding his own against his foes; he'd already taken one rogue down and had injured a second. They'd managed to flank him, but the thickened skin gained via his *alter self* spell, combined with his magical armor, was making him a tough target. Still, they had him outnumbered; Mole moved to help him, but suddenly her muscles stopped obeying her orders. A cold chill fell over her as she stiffened and fell, unable to move. She felt rather than saw a shadow move over her, and saw out of the corner of her eye the injured bear moving to protect her. *Attaboy*, she thought, but her heart froze a moment later as the artificial creature let out a painful cry and slumped to the ground before her, already dissolving into nothingness as the magic holding it here evaporated. She heard a faint scuff over the sounds of the fray and knew that the man who'd killed her bear was standing over her, just out of her line of sight.

Uh oh, she thought, unable to do anything but wait for the blow to land.

Chapter 298

Beorna reached the top of the stairs, Hodge just a few steps behind, to see Arun charging a quartet of poorly dressed archers who seemed extremely reluctant to face him. A mangled heap of what looked like it had been two men remained in his wake, along with the slumped form of Fario.

“Tend to the elf!” the paladin shouted, as he batted aside a thrust from a hastily-grabbed falchion and sank his sword to the hilt in the man’s chest. That was enough for the other three, who threw down their weapons in unison. “Quarter, we beg quarter!” they cried.

“Get over there in the corner, and do not move,” Arun ordered. Amazingly, the paladin had yet to be injured, though he’d killed four men in the seconds since Beorna had hacked the opening in the wall of the inn. “Hodge, watch them,” he said, starting toward the back corner of the room.

“Where’s the secret door?” he asked the prisoners. For a moment they feigned ignorance, but when Arun raised his bloody sword one of them pointed to a panel that appeared to be just part of the surrounding wall. The dwarf gave it a quick look, then gave up and slammed at it with his sword, the wood splintering before his strength and steel.

“Don’t go off getting into more trouble without me,” Beorna said, moving to join him. Behind her, Fario stood weakly but determined, healed but still looking like a man who’d lost a dozen fistfights in quick succession.

Despite being pressed from all sides, Dannel clearly heard the last sounds of the bear, and he spared a glance to see Mole down, threatened by another rogue. With a spinning feint to drive back his attackers he turned and leapt at the man. His thrust with *Alakast* failed to connect, but it drove the man back two steps to the nearest curtain, allowing Dannel to take up a protective position over the fallen rogue. She wasn’t moving, but he didn’t see any obvious wounds; the mystery was resolved a moment later as a cold feeling descended over him. Knowing that they were both dead if he faltered, he fought off the spell, looking around in an attempt to find the caster. He deflected a pair of strokes with *Alakast* as the rogues pressed him, barely keeping them at bay with counters from the long staff.

There. A flicker of movement in the corner of the room, near the ceiling. Looking up, he saw a small figure, a halfling, clinging to the wall, the outline of his body shifting with magical *displacement*, a *shield* up before him.

Unfortunately Dannel wasn’t in a position to do anything about the enemy wizard at the moment, as a painful cut made its way through his defenses, ripping his mail links and scoring his back. The rogue laughed and darted back out of the reach of his counter, while two others prepared for another coordinated attack from ahead.

“You won’t last much longer, lizard!” one of them snarled, as Dannel missed a parry. Luckily his armor held, and he was able to turn out of the full force of the blow into a second

that he did deflect, snapping the staff up into that attacker's face. The man staggered back, blood draining from his broken nose.

"I don't have to last much longer," the elf said, even as the sound of breaking wood sounded faintly through the far wall of the room.

A beam of ruddy light shot down from the wizard, and Dannel's strength faded as the familiar effects of a *ray of enfeeblement* settled upon him. The rogues took this as a signal to rush in at him, and for a moment the elf was surrounded by a swarm of blades. *Alakast* flashed and blurred in his grasp, and another rogue fell back, choking for breath through his crushed throat. But Dannel was also bleeding from another wound, a painful gash that ran across his left hip down his leg.

"Could use some help now!" he yelled, as the three remaining rogues gathered themselves for another rush.

A panel in the wall exploded outward, falling from its mountings in a ruin of scraps and splinters. Beorna strode into the chamber, her adamantite sword once again proving to be an effective remover of barriers. Arun was just a step behind her.

Dannel parried a swing from a rogue who'd thought to take advantage of the distraction. "Wizard!" he said, pointing with his staff in the general direction of the halfling before sweeping it around to block another cut. The rogues, to their credit, held their ground, although two of those facing Dannel fell back to face the dwarves.

Unfortunately, they didn't know quite what they were getting into.

Beorna lifted her hand and unleashed a blast of *searing light* that slammed into the corner where the wizard crouched. She got lucky and hit him through the misleading shield of his *displacement*, and his cry of pain was quite satisfying. Apparently the sudden change in odds was not to his liking, as he swept his faded red cloak around his body, vanishing in a small flash of smoke.

Dannel put his remaining foe down with a pair of strokes that snapped ribs and cracked his skull, then bent to examine Mole as Arun loudly dismantled the remaining rogues. One, clutching an arm ruined by the paladin's backswing, tried to dart toward the broken window and escape, but Fario was on him before he'd made five steps, bringing him down with a thrust to the back.

"How is she?" Beorna said, quickly crossing to Mole.

"I'm... I'm all right," the gnome said, grimacing as she flexed muscles painfully tautened by the halfling's *hold person* spell. Dannel offered a hand to help her up, but she snapped her back and popped onto her feet in a single motion. "I'm fine," she said. "Though you look like you've taken a fall in a razor factory."

"Yeah, well, you did leave me four of them," he said lightly, leaning slightly on *Alakast* while Beorna laid a potent healing spell upon him.

Fario had already turned back to the wall opposite the windows, drawing back another of the red curtains. “There’s another secret door here, somewhere,” he said, sheathing his sword and running his hands along the wood paneling. He quickly found something and leaned in closer, but then his expression tightened into a pained grimace.

“What is it?” Dannel said, stringing his bow.

“She’s waiting in there with her blade to his throat,” he said. “She intends to kill him as soon as we enter.”

Chapter 299

“What do we do?” Mole said, her blood-slicked rapier in her hand, hopping slightly on the balls of her feet with barely-constrained anticipation.

Arun and Beorna exchanged a look; they could remove the door in seconds, but both dwarves knew that the Last Laugh leader on the far side would only need an instant to do her deed.

“Can we parlay with her?” Dannel asked.

“No...” Fario says. “No, they won’t... they won’t let him live... he knows too much... they’re sadistic... evil...”

“Then we go in, and take the bitch out,” Beorna said, lifting her sword.

“No!” Fario said, tears of rage and frustration choking his eyes.

“Hold on,” Dannel said. As their eyes all turned to him, he drew a long arrow out of his magical quiver, and set it to his bowstring. “I believe I can give us a split-second’s distraction, but it’ll be just that, a split-second. You’ll all have to move fast.”

* * * * *

“They’ll be in here any second,” Finch said, rubbing his blistered cheeks where the dwarf’s *searing light* had blasted him. “They went through our rogues like a hot knife through butter...”

“Calm yourself,” Jil replied. “And take up your position, now.”

The slender but muscular woman ran the length of her blade up the naked back of the imprisoned half-elf, letting the edge linger on each of the dozens of cuts she’d personally opened with precise blows from her whip. This half-elf had been... durable. She had no doubt that he would have folded, eventually—no one had resisted her skills for long—but now, with his friends outside, she would have to expedite the situation. She smiled darkly as she thought of the look on Velior’s face when she told him what had happened here; that alone was almost worth the slaughter suffered by the Last Laugh this day. It was a pity about Makaius and Xendro though; the twins had been quite... innovative.

"I'm afraid our affair will have to come to a premature end," she said, leaning in close to the half-elf to whisper into his ear. She settled her blade against his throat, but he did not flinch. A pity; he'd lost consciousness.

She was alert to any movement from the secret door, but she was not expecting an arrow to come *through* the solid wooden panel, knifing through the air directly toward her. She twisted back, but the missile still grazed her arm, drawing a painful gash across her bicep.

Even as the pain of the wound—admittedly superficial—reached her brain, the door simply *disintegrated*, exploding inward in a storm of wooden shards. *That* she'd been expecting, along with the half-elf who hurtled into the room, twin blades seeking her flesh. But even though the door had been destroyed, her blade trap was intact, and the scything blades snapped on their lines in a collapsing arc around the doorway, cutting deep into the intruder's body.

Fario screamed, and fell to the floor.

"Nice try," Jil said, drawing her sword across her prisoner's throat, opening it in a bloody mess. A gnome darted through the doorway, landing in a cautious crouch, with what looked like a number of warriors directly behind her. The Last Laugh assassin stepped smoothly behind the rack that held her erstwhile captive, vanishing into the shadows that seemed to enfold her like a lover's embrace.

Chapter 300

"Where is she?" Arun said, the light of his holy sword driving back the shadows, but failing to reveal the assassin. The room wasn't that big, and there didn't appear to be many places to hide, with only a few assorted shelves and cabinets along the walls, and a bloody mess of a rack the dominant feature in the center.

Lashed to the rack lay the savaged corpse of Fellian Shard, his blood collecting in a red puddle on the floor beneath his slit throat.

"No... no!" Fario said, his body heaving with grief and weakness as the poison from the trap blades coursed through his system. Despite the serious wounds, and the fact that he barely had the strength to stand, he drew himself up to his feet through sheer force of will, and staggered toward the rack.

"Careful," Dannel said as he entered the room behind Arun and Beorna, an arrow nocked and ready at his bow.

"Damn you," Fario said, as he tenderly touched the once golden, blood-matted hair of his friend. "Damn you, why did you let Meerthan send you alone? I should have been there!"

Beorna moved quickly to the half-elf's side, but only a second's examination was needed to tell her that they were too late; even the divine magic she commanded would be of no help here.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Arun said, turning in a slow arc, shining the light of his sword into every corner. “And that assassin may still be here.”

“Invisible, maybe,” Dannel said, moving deeper into the room. Mole, meanwhile, had faded back into the shadows herself, her keen gnomish ears listening intently for the faintest sound of movement. It wasn’t easy, with the clanking made by her friends.

“Let us see,” Beorna said, her face tight with anger. She spoke a command, *demanding* the power of her god. And Helm heard her, and granted her that which she sought. There was no dramatic flash of light, no obvious manifestation of the god’s power, but the effects were instantly clear as the halfling wizard abruptly appeared, high along the wall of the room above a pair of wide wooden cabinets.

Dannel instantly drew and loosed, but the arrow sliced through an illusory image to shatter against the wall, a figment cast by the wizard’s *displacement* spell.

“Nice try, fool!” the halfling laughed, pointing his wand at the elf archer. Dannel had resisted its effects once before, but this time the compulsion overcame his will, and his body froze into position.

Arun lunged at the halfling, but he stepped back out of reach, the paladin’s holy sword smashing one of the cabinets but not harming the wizard. “Too slow, dwarf!” Finch cackled.

Beorna stepped around the rack, calling once more upon the power of Helm. A *dispel* knifed into him, removing both his *displacement* and his magical *shield*, but the power holding him against the wall must have come from an item, for the wizard still clung to his perch, out of range of their melee weapons.

But not out of the reach of their acrobatic gnome. Mole appeared out of the shadows, leaping onto a nearby shelf, catapulting herself up into the air with smooth grace, kicking off of the fragments of the cabinet Arun had smashed, using the magical power of her boots to leap up directly at the surprised halfling. Mole slammed into him and locked her arm around his body, the two of them suspended there as the wizard tried to fight off the gnome’s darting dagger.

Fario, overcome with weakness and grief, had staggered back, unable to bear looking at the ruined body of his friend. With the distraction of the battle against the halfling, he had no chance of detecting the shadow that disentangled itself from the wall behind the rack, stepping behind him.

“Time to join your friend,” she whispered into his ear.

The half-elf cried out in agony as the assassin’s blade plunged deep into his body, stabbing through his heart. Darkness engulfed him like a flood, and the last thing he heard was Jil’s laugh as she released him to fall upon the cold, bloody floor.

Chapter 301

The companions turned in time to see the evil assassin murder Fario. With the doorway directly behind her, she danced lightly back to stand half-in the portal.

“Time to go, heroes...”

The woman staggered roughly forward, back into the chamber. The source of her sudden shift became evident as Hodge appeared in the doorway, his burning axe flaring as the flames charred the assassin’s blood clinging to the blade.

“Goin’ somewhere?” he asked.

The injured assassin spun around, snarling at the dwarf. “You cannot hold me!” she said. She opened her mouth to speak the words of a magical spell...

And screamed, as Arun *smote* her. The strike was perfect, backed by a combination of divine force and physical power, and the evil woman crumpled, driven to the ground, her sword clattering from her hand as she lost consciousness.

Beorna lifted her sword to finish it.

Mole had been too... preoccupied... to deal with the situation between Jil and the others. Entangled with the halfling, she wasn’t able to land a critical blow, busy as she was in trying to keep him from casting some unpleasant spell upon her. He spat at her—*ooh, yeah, that’ll hurt me*, she thought—but was a bit more concerned as he worked a hand free and pointed his wand at her.

Not wanting to see if she would have more luck resisting his magic this time, she snuck her leg through his, and twisted against the back of his knee. She had leverage, and while the force wasn’t great, it was enough to break the tenuous grip on the wall that his magical slippers gave him.

The halfling tried to break free as they fell, but Mole rode him down, and made damned sure that his head was the first to hit.

The two fell apart with the impact, and to her surprise, the halfling got up. At least his face was bloody, though, his nose smashed in from the collision with the floor.

“Die!” he screeched, hurling a *scorching ray* at her. The flames washed over her, and hurt. Hurt a lot—but if the halfling thought that one spell was going to take her out... well, one spell *this time*...

“Um... I’d say your time is up, wizard,” she said, with a glance behind him.

To his credit, he didn’t fall for the ruse, but then again, it really wouldn’t have mattered. Dannel’s arrows slammed into his body, one after another, and when he slumped to the ground, he looked like nothing more to Mole than his mother’s old red pincushion.

Dannel spun around just in time to see Beorna raising her sword over the stricken assassin. “Hold!” he shouted. As the templar turned to him, a look of incredulity on her face, he added, “Maybe just this once, we can keep someone alive for questioning, eh?”

As Arun bound and gagged her (after stabilizing her with a trickle of divine power), Beorna covered Fario’s body with a cloak. After looking back to make sure Mole was okay—she was already looting the halfling—Dannel turned to Hodge, still standing in the doorway.

“I thought you were guarding the prisoners?”

The dwarf spat. “Yer didn’t say yer wanted ‘em awake.”

Chapter 302

Awareness came in a flash of light, painful in its intensity. His mouth opened, his chest swelling with a sweet flush of air even as his heart began to pound again, spreading life through his body.

Fario Ellegoth opened his eyes, blinking against the intensity of the light. The first thing he saw was a familiar face.

“Fellian,” he said, his voice weak as his body adjusted to the sudden transition back to life.

“I am here,” the golden-haired half-elf said. Like Fario, he was clad in a simple robe of soft white cloth, his body cleansed from the taint of blood and death that had clung to him when they’d taken him from the Last Laugh safehouse. Fario extended an arm toward his friend, the gesture costing him some clear effort; Fellian took it in his and held it to him. At that touch, the grief that had clenched Fario’s heart in its grasp shattered, and he finally felt truly alive once more.

“We... we were dead,” Fario said.

“Yes. But our friends brought us back, together.”

It was then that Fario realized that they were not alone. Turning, he saw Jenya Urikas, a tired look etched on her fair features, a now-empty scroll held in her slender fingers. Nearby stood Beorna and Mole. The gnome’s expression was cheerful, but the dwarf templar wore a serious frown.

“Welcome back, Fario!” Mole said.

“Thank you, all of you,” Fario said. His body was weak, incredibly weak, but he made the effort to rise up onto his arm on the padded couch where he lay. “We are in your debt.”

“I’d say so,” Beorna said. “Those scrolls cost upward of six thousand each, you know. Not to mention the drain upon the creator.”

Jenya shot a cautionary look at the templar, but Fario nodded in acknowledgement. “Yes, I know. As I said, we are in your debt... and the Striders pay their debts.”

“You are allies in our common struggle against the dark,” Jenya said. “What aid we can provide is ours to give.”

“What... what happened... after?” Fario said. Fellian brought him a cup of water, and the warrior-rogue drank gratefully, the liquid washing away the dryness that had made a desert out of his mouth and throat. He managed to pull himself up to a seated position on the edge of the couch.

“Not much to tell,” Mole said. “We had another run-in with the Watch; seems our activities at the inn stirred up a bit of a ruckus.” She grinned, recalling the event. “Dannel and Beorna handled them, well enough.”

“Bloody useless,” Beorna grumbled.

“They took our extra prisoners, the common rogues, into custody,” Mole continued. “But we brought the lead assassin back here for questioning. The guards didn’t like it, but with Beorna looking right about to chew nails, what were they going to do?”

Fario’s face darkened at the mention of the Last Laugh leader. He tried to get up, but his tired body finally rebelled, and Fellian had to help him to keep him from toppling forward onto his face.

“Your body and soul alike have been through a great ordeal,” Jenya said. “You need rest, both of you.”

“We may not have time for rest,” Fellian said. “Something big is happening, and we may not have time for hesitation.”

A clank of metal on metal announced the arrival of Arun and Hodge. The paladin nodded to see the half-elf alive again, and Fario in turn inclined his head in respect and gratitude.

“Any luck?” Mole asked.

“She’s not talking,” Arun said.

“I cannot say that I am surprised,” Beorna said. “She will likely have to be compelled.”

“If you mean what I think you mean, I’ll have no part of it,” Dannel said. “I think we’ve had enough torture for one night, don’t you think?”

Beorna’s face tightened. “That is not what I said. But there are other means of coercion besides physical force.”

“She has already resisted my charm spell,” Dannel said. “Unless you have something else...”

“Well, we still have the halfling,” Mole said. They’d brought the wizard—or more accurately, his corpse—back with them, so that Jenya could *speak with the dead* in an effort to find out what he knew. But the high priestess would have to wait until the morrow, to pray for that particular spell. For the moment, Finch was in storage, his body temporarily preserved with a *gentle repose* spell.

“We cannot afford to wait...” Beorna began.

“Please,” Jenya interrupted, her open hands extended in a calming gesture. “Let us find out what we do know, first. Fellian, if you would share your account?”

The half-elf nodded, his own exhaustion showing as he sat down on the couch beside Fario. When he looked up at them, however, his expression was one of grim determination.

“We’ve been monitoring the activities of some of the leading figures in Cauldron,” he began. “We... we had reason to believe, through our investigations, that some of them were involved in the troubles facing the city. With the mayor disappearing...”

“What? The mayor’s gone? I hadn’t heard that,” Beorna interjected.

“There have been rumors, but nothing specific,” Jenya said. “But it’s true that Navalant has fallen into the background of late. His circle of close advisors have all but taken over the administration of the city, in particular Lord Orbius Vhalantru.”

“That is a name we know well,” Fellian said. “We haven’t been able to find out much about him—he’s fairly secretive—but we had uncovered some suspicious behavior about one of Vhalantru’s associates... a noblewoman by the name of Thifirane Rhiavadi.”

“I know of her as well, although we haven’t met,” Jenya said. “She has a considerable estate in the southeastern quadrant of the city.”

“That’s where I was captured,” Fellian said. “I’d been watching the Rhiavadi estate for several days...”

“I should have never let Meerthan send you alone,” Fario said.

Fellian looked at his friend, and shook his head. “We all had to do what we must,” he said. “Your mission was no less important than mine...”

“Yeah, what *were* you doing, Fario?” Mole asked.

The half-elf’s expression suggested that he wouldn’t answer, but Fellian said, “We are fighting the same fight. We need keep no secrets from them.” Turning back to the companions, he said, “Fario was trying to break into the mayor’s residence, to find out if Navalant was truly dead, as we suspect.”

“The place was all but deserted,” Fario said. “A few guards, that’s it. Somebody cleaned it out, that much was obvious.”

“So what of Rhiavadi?” Arun asked.

“She’s a wizard, and apparently one of great skill,” Fellian began.

“Wonderful,” Hodge said.

“She’s something of a gadfly, and spends a lot of time at various events through the city, always close to the avenues of power. From what I could gather from watching, and from a few careful questions around the neighborhood, Rhiavadi’s been having some odd guests at her estate, at some very unusual hours. Something was clearly building, there... and earlier this evening, I saw several very curious individuals arriving there. A trio of very unfriendly-looking dwarves... a very corpulent tiefling... and an armored cleric, whom I believe was a follower of Loviatar.”

“The maiden of pain,” Beorna said grimly. “This just gets better and better.”

“There may be others,” Fellian said. “While I was watching, I heard a faint noise near my position, and as I was sneaking out the Last Laugh ambushed me. I have several spells to get me out of tricky positions, but clearly they knew exactly where I was, for they didn’t even give me a chance to utter a syllable of magic.”

“So this meeting may still be going on,” Arun said.

Fellian nodded. “In any event, it’s *something*, and all my instincts scream something big.”

“So again we have more questions and guesses than hard information,” Dannel said.

“And there’s someone just a few paces away who has some answers,” Beorna returned.

“Then let us see if we can get them,” came a voice from behind them. Seven faces turned in that direction, where a shadowy figure draped in an enveloping body-length cloak stood framed in the outer doorway. As she stepped forward into the light, her identity was revealed, but those gathered here had known who she was from the first word spoken.

“Zenna!” Mole exclaimed.

Chapter 303

“That was a foolish risk you took,” Dannel growled, as the companions made their way through the shadows of a dark alley through the Cauldron night.

“As I said earlier, I felt that the risk was a necessary one,” Zenna replied. The night held no secrets for her, the crowded alley as clear as day to her darkvision, but Dannel had a tougher time of it, even his elvish eyes of little help on this cloudy, moonless night. Mole was taking them to their destination by a roundabout route, avoiding the four broad avenues that formed concentric rings around Cauldron in favor of less-traveled back ways

where the light did not often penetrate to the cobbles below even nights when the moon was full.

“For what? A few spells?”

“I’d limit your comments to things that you actually understand,” she shot back.

Stung, he still rallied with another dig. “At least you could acknowledge that taking those jewels—which all of us fought together to win—was wrong.”

“If you’d bothered to talk to Mole, you’d know I only took my share,” she said. But after a moment’s pause, she amended, “And a bit extra for a new healing wand... an item we all benefit from.”

“You lovebirds can continue this reunion later,” Beorna said, breaking into their conversation. “Helm’s blade, the two of you are making more noise than Hodge with all this yapping.” She pointed down the alley, where the dwarf’s progress was obvious by the nearly continuous clank and clatter of metal as his weapons and armor shifted with every step he took.

“Hsst!” came Fario’s voice, back to them. “We’re getting close!”

“I hope we’re not making a mistake, bringing them with us,” Dannel said softly.

“They have as much right as any of us to be here,” Zenna replied.

The two Striders had insisted on going with them to House Rhiavati, despite their condition upon being just-raised back to life. The two had lost their permanent telepathic connection to Meerthan Eliothorn with their deaths, but Fario had left a message for him with Jenya along with instructions on how to deliver it. Jenya was also able to restore them somewhat with her healing powers, but even so, it was clear that the experiences they’d suffered had taken a lot out of both of them.

Not that the others were all that fresh themselves; invading a hostile, fortified building occupied by sinister rogues took something out a person as well.

The alley rose sharply ahead, with well-worn steps offering a narrow but passable ascent to one side. They made their way up to where the alley opened onto Obsidian Avenue, one of the major thoroughfares of the city. At this time of night, near the stroke of midnight, the street was deserted, but Mole did not hesitate, leading them quickly across the street to another dark passageway between looming buildings. This neighborhood was fairly gentrified, so the buildings were tall, solid, and in good repair. They passed a number of walled courtyards that were no doubt guarded by silent watchers inside, but nothing emerged to challenge them as Mole directed them unerringly to a large garden swath surrounded by a fence of close-spaced iron bars topped with slender points.

House Rhiavati was a hulking shadow on the far side of the grounds, looming up a good forty feet above ground level. The stately manor was set a good distance back from the

street, with several tall, finely manicured hedges offering some degree of privacy from prying eyes.

“Here we are,” Dannel said, scanning the building intently. All of the windows were shuttered, and no lights were visible.

The companions stared at the house for a long minute in silence. In the dark depths of the night, the place seemed... spooky. Even without what they knew...

For once, they were going into a situation with at least some knowledge of what they might face. In addition to Fellian’s report, they had intelligence provided by Jil. The assassin had proven uncooperative until Zenna’s powerful *charm monster* spell had bent her will to theirs. Made compliant by the power of the spell, Jil revealed that she’d been present, unknown to them, since the very beginning; she’d been there, perched on a nearby rooftop, that night when Zenna had saved Ruphos Laro from several Last Laugh thugs.

Jil’s tale was a somber one that confirmed in the minds of the companions the seriousness of their cause. The Last Laugh had been working closely with the Cagewrights for over a year, she told them. She wasn’t able to reveal many details about that nebulous organization, except for the fact that at its pinnacle were thirteen individuals, figures of great and varied powers. She did not know the details of their plans, except that they hoped to engineer some sort of disaster for the city of Cauldron. Jil’s superior, a man named Velior Thero, worked more closely with the Cagewrights, and was at the meeting planned for this very night at Thifirane Rhiavadi’s estate. That meeting was supposed to include some of the most notorious villains of the entire region, and Thero had let slip that Rhiavadi had something special planned that would set a definitive course for Cauldron’s future.

At Zenna’s prodding, Jil had happily recounted a bloody series of assassinations, torture, betrayal, and other grim events that she’d been a party to over the last few years. Still young, she’d eagerly descended into a cauldron of filth and moral decay, turning her talents to the pursuit of personal power and advantage over others.

Beorna had been prepared to cut her head off right then and there, but Jenya and Zenna both agreed that she should be kept alive for now; she would answer for her crimes later, when the passage of time was less critical to their cause.

Leaving Jil held safely in a sealed room within the Temple of Helm (well within the *dimensional anchor* that protected the entire *hallowed* temple grounds), the companions had immediately made their preparations for an interruption of Rhiavati’s little “party.” Jenya lent what healing she could to Fario and Fellian, who refused to remain behind, and then she secured the *Star of Justice*, the holy mace entrusted to the High Priest of Helm in Cauldron. Using the power of that artifact, Jenya evoked a potent *divination*, seeking illumination to guide their steps.

As always, the granted vision was clouded in a riddle of metaphorical language.

*At the depth of darkness the parasites gather
To take their places at the grim table laid by the thirteen*

*Within the fire a fuse is burning bright
And the key draws near to the lock of disaster*

“We don’t have long,” Fellian reminded them, breaking the silence.

“Let’s go, then,” Dannel said. He led them to a heavy iron gate in the fence nearby. The fence showed signs of age, but the complex iron lock seemed very new, without a stain of rust marring its surface.

“Boost me up,” Mole said. Arun lifted her, and she gave the lock an expert examination, mostly by touch using a slender metal probe. “No way,” she said, finally.

“I can open it,” Beorna said, reaching for her sword.

“Subtlety might be more advantageous in this case,” Fellian said, stepping forward. He drew out a small metal tube from his pouch, and held it close to the lock. “Keep an eye out; this’ll make a small noise.” With that he rapped the tube against the metal bars, keeping the end of it pointed at the lock. A clear note filled the night, followed by a click as the lock audibly popped open.

“Handy,” Dannel said.

“I gotta get me one of those,” Mole added.

They made their way silently—well, as silently as was possible with three armored dwarves in their company—through the darkened garden toward the house. This time, however, instead of a covert approach, or the through-the-wall assault they’d used at the Last Laugh safehouse, they moved around to the front of the house, and walked up the front steps to the covered porch and the wide front door.

Mole couldn’t quite reach the antique brass door knocker, but she managed a decent rap on the door with her knuckles.

They heard heavy footsteps on the far side of the door.

“I got a bad feelin’ ‘bout this,” Hodge grumbled.

Chapter 304

The sound of a heavy latch being draw was followed by the door opening. The foyer beyond was dimly lit, but that radiance seemed bright in contrast to the deep night outside. The doorway was filled with a familiar sight: a muscled, armored half-orc warrior, armed with a massive double-bladed axe and a handful of other assorted sharp weapons.

“There must not be a half-orc left anywhere else in the Southlands,” Beorna muttered under her breath.

“What you want?” the guard said, suspiciously.

His wariness eased somewhat when Zenna hit him with her prepared *charm monster* spell. Stepping forward confidently, she announced, "We're here for the meeting with Lady Rhiavati. I hope we're not too late."

The half-orc's expression became a look of amiable confusion. "No, you not late... not expecting more... come on in."

He opened the door fully and stepped back. Zenna was the first to enter, nodding at the second guard who was standing back from the door. He looked even more confused than the first guard, but without the mental lubrication of Zenna's *charm* he was still suspicious. Zenna moved quickly to forestall him.

"You haven't seen any spies about the ground tonight, have you, guard? This meeting is of utmost importance, and Lady Rhiavati will reward you well for your vigilance."

"No... no, lady," the guard grunted, observing the finery that Zenna wore under her cloak, courtesy of her *hat of disguise*.

"Very well, guard. Keep up the good work." Turning back to the first guard, who grinned stupidly at her attention, she said, "You. Show us up to the meeting hall. There's no need to announce us; we're running a bit late and don't want to disrupt the meeting unduly."

"Wait," the second guard said. "You not supposed to go into house without escort by Lady Rhiavati."

Zenna looked up at the first guard, who returned the look with an expectant expression. "That is not necessary. We are expected."

The *charmed* guard nodded in agreement. "Lady not need escort. I go with her, show her way to ballroom."

The second guard's suspicion lingered for a moment, then he shrugged. "All right. But if Lady Rhiavati upset, it your problem."

They took their leave of the guard, and moved from the foyer into the grand entry hall of the mansion. The floor was comprised of exquisite white marble tiles, and numerous paintings and fine tapestries decorated the walls. Several doors exited the chamber, but the guard led them to one of several spiral stairs that provided access to the upper level of the place. As they climbed, Zenna plied the compliant guard with questions about the estate. There were four guards in total, with two off-shift at the moment, and about a half-dozen halfling servants. She also got descriptions of the other "guests": in addition to Lady Rhiavati, there were three armored dwarves, an armored cleric, a half-elf who had the look of a wizard, a white-skinned half-elf woman with black clothes who gave the guard "the creeps", a fat tiefling accompanied by a pair of emaciated black demons, the Last Laugh guildmaster, and a hulking blue-skinned ogre.

"Quite the rogues' gallery," Dannel commented.

“This won’t be easy,” Fario added, softly so that the words wouldn’t carry to the guard.

The stairs deposited them in a plushly apportioned anteroom with a curving back wall. There were two side doors, but the large double doors in the opposite wall, with a faint line of light visible under them, drew their attention even before the guard gestured toward them.

“They in there,” the half-orc said. “You need any more help, Lady?”

“No, you’ve done quite well,” Zenna said. “I will be certain to mention your assistance and fine work to Lady Rhiavati. Return to your post, and tell your companion that you will be rewarded for your efforts.”

With a dumb grin, the guard departed.

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea, leaving them behind us,” Beorna said. Mole had gone over to the doors, giving them a quick but intense examination. She then fell to the ground, pressing her ear toward the tiny crack at the bottom of the doors.

“We could take them out, but we’d risk alerting the whole house to our presence,” Dannel said. “We follow the plan... strike hard and fast.”

“Yeah, fer once we should be the ones doin’ the ambushin’,” Hodge said.

“Shhh...” Mole said quietly, gesturing them to quiet.

“Let’s make our preparations,” Zenna said softly, retreating to the far side of the room before settling down into her spellcasting. Beorna and Fellian joined her, while Hodge took up a position near the stairs to watch for any intrusions.

Mole, meanwhile, focused her keen hearing upon the tiny crack; the distractions around her faded as the thread of sound from beyond the doors grew distinct, a woman’s voice, speaking in a large room...

Chapter 305

Lady Thifirane Rhavati was not a beautiful woman by contemporary measure, but on this troubled night in Cauldron, a tangible aura of power hung about her, drawing the attention of everyone in the room to her like a magnet. She wore an elegant black gown decorated with glyphs stitched in silver thread, forming a pattern that managed to draw the eye and seem strangely disturbing at the same time. Her golden-brown hair was trapped in an intricate construction of thin wire, rising in a pyramid above her head, and a tiny silver cage glimmered across her chest, a pendant that dangled right above her breasts. But most disturbing was the third eye set in the center of her forehead; it seemed to track the gathered men and women in the room independently of her normal eyes, as if possessed of its own distinct thoughts.

The noblewoman let the wine goblet she held drift from her hand, suspended in mid air by some invisible magic. A golden weasel slunk across the floor to her leg, and in a smooth motion she drew it up into her hands, stroking its furry hide. She held the moment for a second longer, reveling in the attention fixed on her by those that had gathered here tonight for a revelation.

"More than five centuries ago," she began, "the demodands sent a few of their kind to our reality. Disguised as humans, they mated with humans and other denizens of this plane. Most of their spawn were stillborn, but a few survived. They mated and produced the next generation, with demodand blood. As the generations passed, all obvious traces of their demodand ancestry faded away. Today, we recognize this sacred lineage by an invisible birthmark: the sign of Carceri!"

She turned and lifted her hand to highlight the symbol on the tapestry behind her, a slanted arrow with an empty circle in the center. At her gesture, the sigil began to writhe, as if seeking release from the cloth. "We call these honored descendents 'the Shackleborn,' and their sacrifice is the key to unlocking a portal to Othyrs, the first layer of Carceri. Here, demodands and countless other fiends have languished for near-eternity. In Cauldron, we have found more Shackleborn than anywhere else in the realm, and in Cauldron, we have the perfect conditions for the Ritual of Planar Junction."

The rune upon the tapestry suddenly grew and shifted, taking on the form of a twisted black tree adorned with metal cages suspended from its iron branches. "For the past five years, the Cagewrights have labored in secret to build thirteen soulcages to drain the life energy from the Shackleborn. These soulcages hang from an artifact called the Tree of Shackled Souls—the device that gathered the life energy needed to unlock the prison doors of Carceri. Our preparations are nearly complete. We have assembled the Shackleborn and have prepared them to give their lives to change the world forever. All that remains is the final key, and once it is in our hands, the ritual will commence."

The image of the black tree burst into silken flames, melting away into nothingness, leaving only the unadorned golden cloth. "Once the ritual is complete, Cauldron won't be the same quiet little burg it is today. It will be the unholy font from which darkness gushes forth, a roiling pit filled with doom and despair for our enemies. Almost immediately, fiendish armies will sweep across the land and lay waste to surrounding territories, enslaving the weak and carving out new dominions. Naturally, we expect resistance on all sides, and that's where you come in."

A grotesque tiefling with boarlike tusks chuckled. "All eyes will be on Cauldron. We'll have their worst fears to toy with."

"Precisely," Rhiavati returned. "As kings raise armies to confront the legions of Carceri, your slavers, merchants, mercenaries, spies, and assassins will methodically search for weaknesses from within, soften their resolve, and convince them that their only true choices are to yield or die."

Rhiavati held them all captivated with the vivid picture, but the moment was interrupted as the double doors behind them burst open suddenly, revealing a muscled, eight foot tall dwarf woman clutching a brilliant holy sword.

“Party’s over!” Beorna cried, followed an instant later by an exploding *fireball* that filled the center of the room.

Chapter 306

Zenna’s *fireball* erupted in a blazing maelstrom of flames, enveloping the tapestry behind Thifirane Rhiavati, exploding the slender crystal goblets atop the table, and searing the gathered assortment of villains. Even as the blast cleared, Beorna stepped aside, allowing the others to launch their own readied attacks. Dannel took aim and let fly an arrow that sliced across the room, between the white-skinned woman in black and the robed magus beside him, finally slamming into Thifirane’s shoulder. The noblewoman hissed in pain, but before she could conjure a spell of defense, a small dart glanced painfully off her temple, its razored point cutting a deep swath to the skull beneath.

The combination of the *fireball*, along with Dannel’s arrow and the sneak attack from Mole’s crossbow, should have killed her. But Thifirane was rarely caught completely unprepared, and as her shield guardian started moving in response to the threat to her, cracks were evident on its shoulder and head where its mistress had taken hits. Through the eldritch magic that linked the wizard and the construct, the guardian had absorbed some of the damage threatening her.

Still, Thifirane had not survived as long as she had through hesitation. Even as the dwarven warriors charged into the room, and her “allies” leapt out of their chairs to defend themselves, she spoke a word of magic and *teleported away*.

As Beorna stepped forward and to the side to give her friends access to the room, a babau demon, thrown backward by the sudden opening of the doors, screeched and threw itself at her, its claws tearing at her armored body. Grimacing as the foul thing tried in vain to find a gap in her adamantine armor, the templar lifted her sword, and with both hands drove it *through* the demon. The babau shrieked as the holy blade transfixing it, and as Beorna placed a huge boot upon its chest, pushing it off her sword, it collapsed in a noisome, disgusting heap.

Arun and Hodge had already entered the room, seeking out other foes. A pair of dwarves flanking another nearby set of double doors to the immediate left rushed forward to meet Arun, holding dwarven urgoshes, odd mergings of axe and spear that they handled with easy familiarity. Arun did not hesitate, driving his sword deep into the first guard’s shoulder with the momentum of his charge behind the stroke. The warrior grunted, but they were dwarven veterans, and no single attack was likely to fell *these* combatants.

Hodge’s axe blazed into flames as he entered the room, looking for a ripe target to smite. Before he could start toward the table, however, a second babau to the right of the doors leapt at him, swiping a claw across his face. The dwarf’s instincts saved him from anything more than a few slight gashes across his forehead, and he countered with a powerful two-handed sweep that dug deep into the creature’s side. Forewarned of the presence of fiends, Zenna had *aligned* his axe, and the blow clearly had a telling effect upon the monster. But Hodge saw with alarm that when he drew his weapon back, some of the

reddish, caustic ooze that covered the creature had splattered on the blade and its supporting shaft, persisting even through the nimbus of fire that surrounded the head of the weapon. But the axe was the only weapon he had that could harm it, and unfortunately the babau didn't give him much of a chance to consider alternatives as it leapt at him in an all-out attack, clawing and biting with a violent fury.

Meanwhile, the mephits that Zenna had summoned hovered above the melee, causing trouble with their spell-like abilities, or diving down to unleash their breath weapons onto particular defenders. One called into being a small rainstorm of boiling-hot water that filled the area around the table. But all of those gathered here were tough, experienced combatants, and at best those attacks were mere distractions.

The companions had dealt considerable damage in the first seconds of the fray, but now the evil veterans attending the unholy gathering began to recover and take action. Khyron Bloodsworn, the grim priest of Loviatar, kicked away his chair as he stood, drawing out a black steel mace and calling upon his patron. Beside him the gaunt necromancer Melagorn Thireq began to cast a spell, but even as the first arcane syllable passed his lips an arrow from the anteroom stabbed into his thigh. The evil half-elf cursed—or rather tried to, for no sound escaped his silent lips. The area around him was draped in magical *silence*.

Fario and Fellian, still in the antechamber, had made their presence known.

The vampiress Mhad needed no words to draw upon her dark powers. But despite her considerable power, born of centuries of violence and blood, she had no passion for a sudden battle against unknown foes in an unfamiliar setting. While her “allies” fought around her, she lifted up into the air above the table. Her cloak, a black thing of utter night, fluttered around her, although there was no breeze in this place to explain its movements. The *fireball* hadn't hurt her, not severely at least, and her natural healing ability would soon ease those wounds. But she recognized the servants of good gods among their foes, and the presence of at least two holy blades, and those *did* give her pause.

She flitted up to the rafters, high above the chamber floor, almost casually smiting a mephit who had the misfortune of getting too close. Once near the ceiling, she dissolved into a gaseous mist, and vanished through a crack into the night outside.

The tiefling Vervil Ashmantle was likewise not a brazen hero, but nor was he above killing a foe from the shadows. He retreated from the table until outside of the radius of the *silence* spell—at the very edge of the chamber—and then cloaked himself within a protective bubble of *greater invisibility*.

The dwarf slaver Adrick Garthwin darted nimbly from the table, joining his two guards in their attacks upon Arun. The paladin, surrounded, held his ground, fighting through a sudden stabbing pain as Adrick's waraxe crushed into his hip, denting the mithral plates from the force of their impact. Before he could counter, Thifirane's shield guardian stepped forward, the floor shaking with the ponderous force of its coming. As it approached, a halo of blue flames appeared around its body, enveloping it with a chill that could be felt ten paces away. Arun was the closest enemy, and it reached over the dwarves that surrounded him, delivering a punishing blow that the paladin simply absorbed, refusing to give ground.

Velior Thero of the Last Laugh was no mere sneak thief; around his neck hung the blood-red sigil of the violent god Talos. Unable to cast spells through the *silence*, he lifted his magical morningstar, stepping forward to face Beorna alongside Bonesworn. The templar met the two fell clerics in a silent exchange of blows, the *enlarged* templar looming a head over the smaller men. Bonesworn's unholy mace crushed Beorna's leg painfully, a bone crunching under the impact, while Thero's morningstar was turned by the holy aura of her *shield of faith*. But Beorna was heavily reinforced with magical augmentations, and two evil clerics could not likewise call upon their gods under the effects of the *silence* spell.

The last seat at the table was occupied by the hulking form of the ogre mage Zarn Kyass. As the huge, blue-skinned brute rose it hurled the table away in a silent cascade of broken glass and smoldering wood, unlimbering a massive two-handed sword. Stepping forward, it brought the blade down in a powerful arc that tore into Hodge's torso. The dwarf's magical armor held, but the ogre's sword nevertheless came away slick with Hodge's blood. The babau tried to take advantage of the distraction as it tore mercilessly at Hodge, but the dwarf had chosen his ground, and he simply ignored the tearing claws, the bite that snagged on his arm and bit down painfully before he could tear the limb free. He knew all too well that the ogre had the strength to bring him down; armor or no, he couldn't take many more hits from that massive sword. His mouth moved in a string of silent curses as he drove the babau back with the haft of his axe, driving the blade down into its body before it could surge back to the attack. The demon staggered, a foot-long gash oozing ichor from its chest, and collapsed.

Unfortunately, as he turned to face the ogre, the babau's last act of vengeance came to fruition as its acidic ooze ate through the haft of the axe, and its heavy steel head snapped off and fell to the floor.

Arun judged the shield guardian the greater threat, and unleashed a full series of attacks upon it. The construct, forged of steel and stone, was a durable creation, but Arun smashed into it with crushing force, his strength and speed augmented by magic, his sword knocking huge chunks of its frame off its body. It had already been weakened by the damage it had absorbed on Thifirane's behalf, and as Arun's sword slammed into it for a third time, it collapsed backward into a pile of debris. The paladin's blows had not been without a cost; the biting chill of its *fire shield* had penetrated his body with each attack, and he'd left himself open to the three dwarves facing him. They rained blows down upon him, and even his tough armor could not absorb all of them. Finally Adrick clipped him with another swing that glanced off of his helmet, mere inches away from caving in his skull, and he staggered back, half-blinded by blood flowing from a nasty cut on his forehead.

But Arun was not alone. A wave of energy swept through the room, *slowing* the various adversaries that still stood. The more disciplined among them resisted Zenna's potent spell, but the dwarves, even with their innate resistance to magic, were experts at fighting, not battles of will. Their sudden slowing gave Arun an opening, and he opened the throat of one fighter with a powerful stroke, immediately twisting and driving his sword deep into the slaver Gorthwin's body with the same momentum. The evil dwarf grimaced, and fear shone in his eyes as he realized the true nature of the foe he battled.

The necromancer Thureq spat blood as he yanked Fario's arrow from his shoulder, looking for a place to toss the *silenced* weapon so that he could escape its radius and regain the power of his magic. Despite the intervening combatants, and the chaos of battle that filled the room, an arrow found its way unerringly through the chamber, guided by the instinctive power that fueled Dannel's craft as an arcane archer. The half-elf's eyes widened in disbelief moments before the missile buried itself to the feathers in his chest, and the evil spellcaster fell, still not entirely sure of what had happened.

The center of the chamber was dominated by the raging struggle between good and evil, as Beorna of Helm battled the evil clerics of Loviatar and Talos. The holy templar, infused with the *divine power* of Helm, and bolstered with various other magics, shrugged off powerful blows and in turn unleashed a storm of death upon her adversaries. Her initial target was Bloodsworn, and with two powerful swings clove through his plate armor, decorated with grim fetishes honoring his warped deity. Realizing he was outmatched, the priest snarled and raised his unholy mace for a final blow... only to lose it, along with most of his arm, as Beorna swept her sword across in a final bloody arc.

She turned toward Velior Thero, but the Last Laugh guildmaster was already running.

The mighty ogre slammed his sword into Hodge, driving the dwarf to his knees. Once more, expecting combat in close quarters, the dwarf had not brought his spear, so he could only draw his dagger, a pathetic weapon against the seven-foot blade wielded by his adversary. But Hodge was not alone, and his companions were quick to come to his aid. A twirl of black cloth darting across the floor announced Mole's arrival, tumbling between the ogre's legs into a ready stance behind it. Fario and Fellian were close behind, Fario moving ahead to face the giant while Fellian tended to Hodge's grievous wounds.

Zarn Kyass was a canny adversary, though, and rather than waiting for his enemies to tear him to pieces with sneak attacks, he lifted straight up into the air, rising some fifteen feet to brush the ceiling before unleashing a *cone of cold* directly on top of them.

Mole and Fario were both fast enough to dodge out of the full force of the blast, but Fellian and Hodge were enveloped by the cone. Fellian staggered back against the wall, his body rimed with frost, while Hodge went down, unmoving, his skin drained of all color by the icy touch of the potent spell.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Fario abruptly staggered, clutching his chest, and as his expression deepened into a look of horror his body shifted and collapsed into a tiny pile of red fur. Where the half-elf had been standing, now only a little red rat remained, squeaking in alarm.

But the fight had gone out of the defenders, whose main goal was now escape. Gorthin abandoned his remaining henchman and ran for the nearest exit, letting the dwarf fighter's sacrifice buy him a few seconds. Unfortunately for him his flight drew the attention of the remaining mephits; the fire mephit cackled as it fired a *scorching ray* that sprayed across his back. That wasn't enough to bring him down, but Dannel was also tracking his progress, and even as the dwarf's fingertips touched the door an arrow sank into his hip. He managed to get the portal open before a second shaft buried itself in his back, and when he fell forward into the next room, he didn't get up. They found him there later, dead.

Velior Thero likewise disengaged, although Beorna's long reach let her clip him on the shoulder as he fled. Despite his wounds, he was still more agile than she, and with the hovering ogre mage remaining a serious threat, he was able to make it to one of the exits and slip away. Vervil Ashmantle departed in his wake, still cloaked in *invisibility*, and he didn't drop that protective shield until he was well out of Cauldron.

Zarn Kyass, the ogre mage, was not a coward, but nor was he one to remain to the last in a losing battle. If he had any lingering doubts, they were dispelled as Zenna appeared in the doorway to fire a pair of *searing rays* into him. Only one of the rays got through his spell resistance, but it was enough to convince him of the prudence of retreat. One of Zenna's mephits drew near enough to unleash a cone of hot magma onto him, but the ogre mage ignored the feeble attack. Kyass drove his huge sword through the ceiling, opening a jagged gash that revealed the black night sky beyond. The gap was far too small for him, but as the companions watched the mighty ogre's body dissolved into a cloud of mist, vanishing through the crack into the darkness.

Arun felled his last remaining foe and ran over to Hodge. Fellian stood over him, pouring the contents of a healing potion down his throat. The dwarf stirred, faintly, and the paladin let out a sigh of relief—audible, now, as Fellian's spell of *silence* lapsed.

"That was... intense," Mole said, petting the rat that squirmed in her grasp.

Chapter 307

"We got lucky," Dannel said, later, in the relative security of the Temple of Helm. "We should not underestimate the foes we faced, simply because we overcame them so easily. Without the advantage of surprise and magical preparation, events would have gone quite differently."

"Easily?" Hodge said. He held a cup of steaming hot tea—liberally "seasoned" with alcohol—in hands that still shook, hours after he'd been hit with the ogre's *cone of cold*.

"Several got away," Fario said. The restored half-elf shot a look at Mole, who'd seemed a bit disappointed earlier when they'd dispelled the *polymorph* spell that had transformed him into what she'd referred to as, "a cute furry rat." Mole was now seated on the floor on a small carpet, examining the various magical items they'd taken off of the villains they'd slain at House Rhiavati.

"I think that white-skinned woman was some sort of undead," Zenna said, looking up from the spellbook she was reading. Since their return, she'd been buried in the book they'd found in the personal possessions of the necromancer Melagorn Thureq. "And Thero got away as well, along with that tiefling sorcerer who made a mouse of our friend here."

Fario grimaced, but Fellian clasped him on the shoulder as the others laughed. It was healing, in a way, to be able to laugh in the aftermath of such carnage. And in the face of what they now knew.

“Velior Thero won’t find easy sanctuary,” Dannel said. “As long as Jil is in our custody, and under your sway, she’ll reveal the whole network maintained by the Last Laugh to us.”

“A good point, elf,” Beorna said. “Her knowledge should allow us to crush that nest of thieves once and for all.”

“I am more concerned with the wizard’s speech,” Arun said. Mole had shared all of the details she’d remembered from Rhiavati’s address to the gathered villains, and the grim outline of the Cagewright’s plans had left all of them shaken.

“Damn it, we’re in the same position we’ve always been,” Zenna said, slamming her fist down on the arm of her chair. “Always a step behind, always in the dark. We know what they want to do, but not *how*... or where, or when, except that it will be ‘soon’. Who are the Shackleborn? Where is this ‘Tree of Shackled Souls’? And what is this ‘key’ that they need to complete the ritual? How in the hells can we stop them, if we don’t even know where to find them?”

“We will find a way,” Arun said. “We’re clearly facing long odds, but we’ve won a victory tonight, and though our adversaries are powerful, we are not without resources of our own.”

“Well said,” Beorna said, coming to stand beside him. “We *will* finish this.”

“Face it, Zenna,” Dannel said, a hint of his old spark shining in his eyes as he looked at her. “You just can’t argue with a dwarf.”

“Let alone two of them!” Mole added.

“It’s been a long night,” Beorna said, looking at Fellian, who was already half-asleep, leaning back on the couch beside Fario. “Morning will be here in just a few hours, and maybe the situation will be clearer in the light of the day. This place is safe, if anyplace in Cauldron can truly be considered such.”

They filtered out toward their rooms. Even Fario and Fellian were too exhausted to do anything but accept the guest quarters offered by the acolyte of Helm. The rectory was nearly full now, with some of the new “recruits” even sleeping in the lofts above the stables, but there wasn’t one among them who wouldn’t have been willing to sleep out under the open sky, if one of the Heroes of Cauldron needed a soft bed in a private room.

Zenna didn’t feel like a hero; she just felt tired. Belatedly she realized that she and Dannel were the only ones left in the room. The elf was watching her, something unfathomable in his eyes.

“You should get some rest,” he finally said, after a long and awkward silence.

“I will,” she said. Her eyes were on the book in her lap, but she did not see the glyphs inscribed therein as she slowly turned the page.

“Zenna...”

Her hand froze in the middle of a page. "Please," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Not now; I can't handle it, not now, on top of everything that's happening."

He stood there a moment longer, but she did not look up from the book. It was as if she was frozen there, a statue enfolded in soft dark cloth. Finally, he turned and left the room.

Zenna's body shook, and there, on the page, a single tear fell onto a magical glyph, blurring its outline.

That night, the companions slept the sleep of utter physical and emotional exhaustion. Morning came all too swiftly, however, and the adventurers were still bleary-eyed as they gathered for a late breakfast. The rectory was quiet, with most of the temple staff already out and engaged in the activities of the day. But the needs of the companions was not unanticipated; even as they continued to straggle from their beds into the common room several of the new recruits brought in trays laden with sweet breads, sausages, various fresh fruits, and pitchers of fresh-squeezed juices. Hodge immediately intercepted one of the trays, directing it to the table in front of him, not even bothering with an individual plate as he started stuffing foodstuffs into his mouth. Zenna, rubbing her temples at the headache that had resided there since awakening that morning, skipped the food entirely and poured herself a large mug of the black, strong-brewed coffee that was the common morning beverage here in the south. Even after almost a year, she was more used to the teas that were drunk in the north, but there was something to be said for the bitter black liquid when one was trying to wake up from an insufficient sleep.

"I don't know how you can drink that stuff straight," Mole said, adding a fairly considerable dollop of honey to her own, smaller cup.

Once they'd served the meal, the young recruits left them to their privacy. For several minutes they just ate in relative quiet, restoring the strength that had been burned in a long night of battles and tense confrontations. Finally, Fario stood.

"We must go; Meerthan will be greatly concerned, and we'd better update him on what's happened."

"I thought you guys had that mind-link thing," Mole said, gesturing with a cinnamon twist, her mouth full of berries.

"The link did not survive our deaths," Fellian explained, likewise pulling himself away from the table with an obvious effort. "The note Jenya sent last night will let him know we live, but we have to discuss what happened at House Rhiavati."

There it was; with the spoken reminder of last night's events, the illusion of peace that they'd let linger over their repast evaporated. Arun let the pastry he'd been about to bite into fall back to his plate; only Hodge kept eating, continuing his decimation of the platter of sausages.

"I suppose we'd better..." Dannel began, but he was interrupted as the door opened, and Jenya Urikas stepped into the room.

The look on the cleric's face was immediate evidence of trouble. "What's wrong?" Beorna asked, her hand stealing to the hilts of the swords propped up against the bench beside her.

The High Priestess of Helm took a deep breath to steady herself, before shattering their day with another dire pronouncement.

"Lord Orbius Vhalantru is a beholder."

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Orbius Vhalantru is a beholder...

The words echoed in Zenna's mind, as the six heroes—bolstered by Fario and Fellian—once more made their way through the streets of Cauldron. She knew that they all had to be thinking the same as she, had to be recounting the grim stories and legends that surrounded that most terrible of aberrations, the dreaded Eye Tyrant.

All of them except for Beorna and Hodge had been there, when they first encountered the creature. It had been in the dark subterranean chambers of the Malachite Fortress, when they'd confronted the evil slaver Kazmojen in his lair. The beholder had appeared out of nowhere in the midst of that meeting, taking the child Terrem and departing with him without any clue as to its intentions. They'd already confirmed earlier that day that Terrem had again vanished quietly from the Last Laugh orphanage over a month ago. The companions had been absent then, making their way back to Cauldron via their circuitous road leading through Occipitus, and they'd been so preoccupied with the almost constant threat of danger and progression of deadly events since their return that none of them had thought to follow up on the child's fate. *Not that we could have done anything to help him, even if we'd known*, Zenna thought, but it didn't ease the sense of guilt that she felt hovering at the edges of her mind.

Was that child one of the Shackleborn? she thought, grim at the possibilities of the child's fate. Like everything else they knew about the Cagewrights and their plans, the boy's fate was nebulous and murky, leaving their imaginations tempted to fill in the gaps.

Now, as the afternoon deepened toward evening, and the sun made its way back down toward the western horizon, they were headed toward yet another confrontation, one that—they hoped—would add that piece to the puzzle that would finally allow them to discern the solution to the mysterious danger that faced the citizens of the volcano city. The plots of the Cagewrights... to plunge the entire region into an interplanar nightmare.

They had not spent the day idly, resting their tired bodies, making what preparations they could, seeking knowledge that could possibly aid them. They knew that their adversaries would be ready for them. After last night's events, there could be little doubt that the companions were a dire threat to the plans of the Cagewrights. Oddly enough, the city seemed mostly oblivious to the most recent developments; unlike the dramatic events at the Temple of Kelemvor, the assault on the Last Laugh safehouse and House Rhiavati failed to create much of a stir in the city. Whether that was due to the simple incompetence

of the Watch, or a deeper cover-up, none of them knew for sure. With the revelations they'd gained from Rhiavati's speech, Jil's *charmed* disclosures, and finally the secret of the nobleman Vhalantru, taken from the slain halfling Finch via Jenya's *speak with the dead* spell, they now knew that the Cagewrights had insinuated their tendrils into almost every aspect of the city's operations. It had been Vhalantru who had taken on more responsibilities as the Lord Mayor increasingly withdrew from public life, Vhalantru who had organized the hiring of the half-orc mercenaries who now dominated the Watch, Vhalantru who had been largely behind the increased taxes that had stirred such unrest in the city. Taxes that probably had financed much of the Cagewrights' operations, Zenna thought.

Vhalantru, who held the ends of the chains that held the city shackled.

There was little they could do, few that they could confide in. Fario and Fellian reported what they'd learned to Meerthan Eliothlorn, who immediately began sending out word through his own network of contents in the city and elsewhere. The half-elves had returned to the Temple of Helm earlier that afternoon, ready to continue despite the trauma both had suffered, each dedicated to walking this road to its very end.

Jenya had approached the leaders of the other churches in the city; Kristof Jurgenson of Lathander, and Asfelkir Hranleurt of Tempus, and transmitted a message via *sending* to the superiors of her church in Almraiven. Arun had spoken to those who'd gathered under his banner at the Temple of Helm, to add their weight to those fighting for the survival of the city.

"I haven't had the chance to get to know all of you well," he told them. "The last few days have been a tumult, and the storm facing this city... *our* city, will likely grow darker before it eases. I believe that a decisive moment is approaching. If you would be true to the oaths you swore, you must ready yourselves. I do not know if I will be here when the test arrives, but you may be certain, my companions and I will be on the front lines of the struggle against the evil threatening Cauldron. Gather your equipment; steel yourselves against what may come. Listen to Jenya Urikas... if it comes to it, and I am not here, she will organize your efforts. Good luck, and may the light of Helm, Moradin, and all the other gods of good shine over all of you."

Zenna remembered the cheers that had followed the dwarf's words, remembered being surprised at how many men and women Arun had managed to attract to him, not by his oratory and promises, but through the simple clarity of his deeds. So much was happening, she felt as though the details were sliding away from her, out of her control. It was a terrifying sensation, especially for her, and not eased by the complex emotions tugging at her in a dozen conflicting directions at once. She'd become powerful; almost as powerful as her parents, she thought... but it had all come so quickly, in a way she found shelter in the constant rush of activity, the pressure of events that drew her from one frenzied confrontation to another. It saved her from having too much time to ponder the implications of everything that had happened to her.

And from the fact that despite all of her newfound power, all the crushing responsibilities laid upon her shoulders, she was still barely nineteen years old.

“Are you all right?” Mole asked quietly. Zenna hadn’t seen or heard her approach, but she was used to that, and had learned to avoid being startled at her friend’s sudden appearances.

“Yes... I mean, as well as can be expected, anyway,” she said, with a wry smile that was only a bit forced. “We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”

Mole nodded solemnly. “A very long way.”

Zenna cast her gaze down the long street, and the thin tide of people who went about their business, unaware of the destiny being shaped around them. “Well, you wanted an adventure...” she said. Turning her eyes back to the gnome, she said, quietly, “Are you sorry you came with me?”

“Are you kidding? I mean, come on... sure, we’ve had some tough times, vicious monsters, terrible evil, yadda yadda yadda... But we’re right on the front lines, Zenna! We’re involved in events that can literally can shape the very course of history, change the lives of thousands of people. Growing up, I kept hearing the stories told by my uncle, about what he and the others did, their travels, and I kept thinking, ‘What must it be like, to be like that? To be... *important?*’”

“We wouldn’t have gotten here without you.”

“Well, those bad guys just never think that a gnome can be a threat, so when they turn to face Arun or Beorna... ‘whap!’”

Zenna smiled; even though all the battles they’d been through had been full of blood and agony and fear, her dear friend had a way of evoking the triumph, the shared courage, and somehow, even the humor, in violent situations.

“Are we ready for this?” she said softly, not really seeking an answer. Mole, of course, heard her, and offered one.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m scared down to my toes. But we’re not alone... we’re with friends, people who we can trust with our lives. Right?”

Zenna looked down at her friend, and nodded.

“Besides,” the gnome continued, “Beholders aren’t *that* tough. I mean, sure, they got those nasty eyes, can turn you to dust, fog your mind, blast your flesh from your bones, loosen your bowels with terror...” She was talking a bit louder now, and Zenna looked around in concern, lest any passersby hear too much and grow curious. But the street near here was nearly deserted, with many of the homes and business shuttered and abandoned by folk who’d had enough of the troubles that cursed the city. Zenna finally realized the true target of Mole’s litany: Hodge, trudging a few paces ahead of them. The dwarf was muttering curses, too low to make out clearly, although the words, “crazy” and “gnomes” could just be distinguished.

Although she hadn't seen it before, somehow she knew Vhalantru's estate when she saw it. The structure was smaller than House Rhiavati and looked older, reminiscent of the architecture of some of the noble houses in the old Chondanthan style she'd seen in some of the cities of eastern Tethyr. The building was apparently of three stories, with a squat tower to one side and numerous narrow windows visible in the front. It was clearly kept up in good repair, but to Zenna's eyes, knowing what she did about its inhabitant, the place seemed ominous.

They'd already decided on a strategy, and did not hesitate, creep about, cast spells, or do anything else suspicious that might have drawn attention to themselves. They'd already made what preparations they could, and none of them expected their arrival here to come as a surprise.

There were no obvious guards. The grounds around the manor house were quiet. The street behind them had grown strangely quiet, as if the city itself sensed that something was wrong, and wanted to avoid getting involved in the confrontation here.

"Let's get this over with," Beorna growled, striding up to the front door of the manor. The only barrier at the entrance of the grounds was a low iron fence with an unlocked gate that opened easily at the templar's touch, creaking slightly. She tested the door, but it was locked. Beorna glanced back, but Mole was already coming forward. She gave the lock a quick look, probed it with a small wire for a few seconds, then shook her head.

"Fellian, you're up," Arun said. The half-elf came forward, Beorna stepping aside to make room for him on the already crowded porch. Fellian glanced around to make sure that there was no one nearby, then he struck his *chime of opening*. There was an audible click from the door, which Beorna swung open, one hand on the hilt of her sword.

The foyer beyond the door was empty, a long hall beyond running back through what looked like a good part of the house's interior. They entered, wary of a trap, but the house seemed as quiescent as the street outside. As they entered, each drew weapons or readied spells. Zenna took the opportunity to shroud them all in a protective *magic circle against evil*, dribbling a tight circle of silver dust around herself as she cast the spell.

"You sure we got the right place," Mole asked.

"I'm sure," Arun said. "There's evil here..."

They moved slowly into the house.

The interior of the manor was richly decorated. The walls were polished wood panel with decorative moldings, their simple grace punctuated by the occasional tapestry or oil painting featuring a bucolic natural scene. There were several exits to side rooms that appeared to be quiet and empty, but they were drawn to a wider space at the end of the hall, where a slender staircase ascended halfway up to the second level before splitting into two, flanking a wide balcony above. A subdued red carpet of plush fibers ran down the length of the hall.

Several statues were situated in niches along the length of the hall. The carvings were of exceptional quality, depicting adventuring types captured in a variety of poses. They included a dwarf warrior, holding a greatsword as if to strike, a woman spellcaster with a staff and sword, a lean, robed, muscular man shown in a fighting stance, and an armored gnome with a small morningstar, a look of surprise on his face. Mole was drawn to the last one, giving it an appraising look.

“Those are good... too good,” Dannel said.

“You don’t think...” Mole began.

“Petrification,” Zenna said. “Turned to stone, by the beholder’s magic.”

“Our boy’s got an interesting sense of humor,” Fellian said, but his expression was grim as they left the statues behind and continued down the hall.

Suddenly, Mole, a few paces in the lead, hissed a warning, gesturing back with a wave of her hand. Even as the companions shrank against the walls of the hall, taking cover behind the statues or in nearby doorways, a door near the stairs opened, unleashing a noise of raucous laughter from the area beyond. A half-orc mercenary stepped into view, clad in unkempt but functional chainmail armor. His attention was on the room behind him, rather than out into the hall.

“Shut yer yap, Mrak, I’ll get me money back later, an’ mebbe a slab o’ yer hide as well!”

The guard stepped into the hall, carrying his heavy but awkward double axe with him; a second stepped into the doorway just behind him. Mole, Dannel and the half-elves were just shadows, even in the sparse cover available in the hall, but there was no way that the dwarves could be missed by even an inattentive viewer. As the first guard looked down the wide corridor toward the entry, his eyes widened as he saw Beorna step out from behind a statue, her holy sword sliding from its sheath.

“Intruders!”

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“Intruders!”

The half-orc’s warning was interrupted by a cry of pain as two arrows slammed into its chest, punching through its heavy armor and staggering it. The missiles from Fario and Dannel hurt him, but he managed to get his cumbersome weapon up in a defensive posture to meet the charge of the three dwarves, rushing down the remaining length of the wide hall in a clattering wedge. Behind him, the second half-orc charged through the doorway to the aid of his companion, only to stumble to the side as Mole, appearing out of nowhere, stabbed her rapier through a chink in his armor deep into his thigh. Beyond the doorway, they could hear shouts of alarm as the remaining guards readied themselves for battle.

The injured mercenary roared out a challenge as he slammed his heavy weapon down at Arun, but the paladin took the stroke on his shield, deflecting it harmlessly to the side. Arun's return stroke clove through the armor links protecting his side, opening a huge gash in the muscled torso beneath. The blow offered an easy opening to Beorna, who smashed her blade down into the mercenary's head, splitting his helm and laying his face open to the bone. The half-orc crumpled, a bloody mess well on its way to death.

Hodge met the second guard as he kicked out at Mole, nearly falling as his injured leg gave way under his weight. His situation deteriorated further as Hodge brought his magical waraxe around in a broad arc that crushed the greave covering the warrior's left leg, leaving him with two seriously mangled limbs. But the mercenary was of a durable stock, and despite the obvious pain he suffered he managed to drive his axe into Hodge's shoulder with enough force to drive him back a step.

Reinforcements arrived as another guard burst through the doorway; however, the half-orc had barely lifted his double axe when he froze, captured by a *hold* spell from Fellian. The paralyzed mercenary partially blocked the entry into the hall, and the next guard finally just thrust him aside, knocking him prone against the base of the nearest staircase. But the delay cost him, for even as he turned to face the battle a pair of *scorching rays* from Zenna slammed into his chest with blazing force. Screaming as the flames turned the chain mesh protecting his torso a fierce, cherry red, the half-orc swung his weapon blindly at the nearest foe. He managed to connect with Beorna as she stepped over the body of the warrior she'd just dispatched, but the templar shrugged off the hit. The guard snarled at the dwarf woman as both combatants lifted their weapons to strike, but the mercenary never got to finish his attack. An arrow slammed into his face, sliding neatly through one of the black openings in his helm, driving through his eye into what sufficed as a brain. Deprived of an adversary by Dannel's masterful shot, Beorna turned and finished off Hodge's opponent with a powerful two-handed overhand strike.

The battle had lasted all of ten seconds thus far, and already four of the mercenary guards were down or dead. Two more appeared in the doorway, launching immediate attacks that failed to do more than irritate the fierce dwarves. In a clatter of swords and axes, the two were driven back, and it looked as though they would shortly join their companions.

Zenna had moved cautiously into the open space at the foot of the stairs, staying clear of the battle. She knew that the dwarves had matters well in hand; she was more worried about what the din of violence might bring.

Her fears were borne out as a sinister hiss drew her attention up toward the balcony above. There, twined around the slender pillars that flanked the summit of the stairs, was a reptilian horror. It looked like a huge viper, only the face at the end of its twisting body belonged to no snake. That face was humanoid, a visage of malevolence. Its eyes blazed with a dark energy that seemed to bore into Zenna as she met its stare, and she reflexively threw her will against it, knowing that she was under attack. For a moment she felt the danger of that gaze, but then her innate mental discipline asserted itself, and she felt the evil power recede, and the surge of noise and activity around her returned to full intense focus.

None of the others had seen it, she realized, still focused as they were upon the battle with the half-orc guards. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but before she could utter a word, she felt a familiar surge of spellpower behind her, and she altered what she'd been about to say.

“FIREBALL!”

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The explosive *fireball* filled the grand hall, blasting the decorative woodwork, engulfing tapestries, consuming the carpet to reveal scorched hardwood beneath. The dark woods had apparently been treated to resist fire, for the structure itself did not immediately catch flame, but the fragments of carpet and nearby tapestries continued to burn, threatening the house and shedding a lurid light upon the ongoing battle.

The naga's spell had been dramatic, but the companions had faced dragon's breath and potent wizards, and while they had been scorched by the blast, all of them weathered it more or less intact.

“Naga... nagas, up above!” Zenna cried in warning, drawing the attention of her friends to the more serious threat. As she looked up, she saw another pair of the creatures appear around the perimeter of the second-story balcony, moving to block the stairs, shifting under the effects of the all-too-familiar magical *displacement*.

Well, that I can deal with, she thought, grimly calling up the trigger words of a spell. For the moment, she held off on her *dispel*, instead conjuring necromantic powers to unleash a series of *waves of fatigue* that enveloped the nagas. The three creatures unleashed angry shrieks as the spell sapped at their vitality, dulling their reflexes.

Mole, who'd taken the opportunity to finish the *held* guard, and who'd completely avoided the *fireball*, looked up at Zenna's warning. And met the gaze of one of the nagas. Mole lacked Zenna's strength of mind, and as the creature snared her in its powerful *charm*, her face cracked into a fascinated grin, and she sat down on the chest of the man she'd just killed, looking up at the creature in bemused admiration.

The gnome was not the only one caught up in the fell power of the nagas. Hodge, turning from a falling half-orc, was likewise snared, and both Dannel and Fario, each drawing their bow to fire, suddenly lowered their weapons, their arrows falling out of suddenly limp hands to clatter harmlessly to the floor.

All in all, it was a devastating and effective attack against her weak-minded friends, Zenna thought. “Don't look directly at them!” she shouted, wondering if the warning would avail them.

“I'll deal with them,” Fellian said to her, indicating their *charmed* friends. “Take those fiends out!”

Beorna and Arun, their wills fortified by their commitment to their respective gods, continued to press the attack. One half-orc still stood, but with a gushing wound in his shoulder, his face blackened from the *fireball*, he'd clearly had enough of this fight. He turned and ran toward the exit, rushing past the charmed archers unhindered. The dwarves let him go, instead turning to rush up the stairs toward the waiting nagas. One slid down the steps to meet Beorna, while the second blasted Zenna with a quartet of *magic missiles*. The third creature, the one that had cast the original *fireball*, took the opportunity to protect itself with its own shifting aura of *displacement*.

The dwarves clambered noisily up the stairs, their heavy boots sending splinters of flame-scored timber flying with their progress. They reached the division in the staircase and split, with Beorna charging left toward the descending naga, and Arun moving to the right. The naga hissed a challenge at the templar, who responded with a powerful swing that passed harmlessly through its *displaced* body. A few paces opposite, Arun rushed up at the naga that had blasted Zenna. The gold dwarf attempted to keep his gaze averted, looking at the creature's sinuous body rather than its face, but as he lifted his sword into readiness his eyes happened to meet those of the naga. The paladin was a steeled veteran, but even his hardened will was not immune to the dark whispers that filled his mind, the treacherous grip of the creature's evil power.

The naga let out a triumphant keening as it drifted down to meet the paladin, twisting its coils around Arun's motionless body.

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With Fario, Dannel, Mole, Hodge, and now Arun ensared by the charming gaze of the nagas, and none of the creatures as yet even slightly injured, the situation looked pretty grim for the companions.

But as tides in the sea both rise and ebb, so to do the tides of battle often turn on the smallest point of fate.

In this case, that point was Fellian's *dispel magic*. The half-elf's spell, centered on the base of the stairs, filled the entire hall with an invisible surge of magical disruption that sundered the spells holding the companions. Or at least most of them; the clashing eddies of power were unpredictable, and both Hodge and Mole remained trapped in the grip of the nagas' power. But the others were freed from the cloying enchantment, and the auras of *displacement* protecting the ugly monstrosities likewise shimmered once and faded, revealing their true locations.

Arun roared in anger as he realized what had happened to him. His sword had been knocked from his hand by the enfolding wrap of the creature, but he shook his arms free of its grasp with a violent surge of strength, loosening his grip on his shield to free both hands. The naga turned its head toward him, fat gobs of poison dripping from its jaws as it snarled at its prey. Arun wrapped one arm around its long neck, and as its head snapped inward he cocked his gauntleted fist back and *smote* it with a powerful blow to the face.

That got its attention.

On the far flank, Beorna's foe lashed out at her, snapping at the templar's face with its envenomed bite. But it still suffered from the lingering effects of Zenna's *waves of fatigue* spell, and the templar was easily able to avoid its attack.

The same could not be said for the naga, as Beorna unleashed a full attack upon it that left it flapping in three bloody segments upon the stairs.

Arun's foe drew back in pain, hissing as blood dripped from its shattered face. But the naga still held the dwarf in its grasp, and it lunged at him, sinking its long fangs into the arm he raised to block. Unfortunately for the naga, the chance of a dwarven paladin suffering the full effects of its venom was next to nil, and Arun was quick to tear his arm free, ignoring the pain of the vicious wound. An arrow slammed into the naga's neck a foot below its head, and even as the creature turned toward this new threat, a second followed, and then even as the first still quivered in the wound, a third. The naga's head gyrated in pain as blood oozed from the three deep punctures, even as Fario and Dannel kept up their barrage. Finally, its agonized motions drew the head within Arun's reach, and the paladin reached up, snared its head in his muscled hands, and *twisted*.

With a snap, the naga's neck broke, and its body fell limp.

The last naga had not been idle while its companions were being destroyed. Uttering dark syllables in the language of power, it conjured a swarm of angry, fluttering bats at the foot of the stairs, enveloping Zenna and obstructing the aim of Fario and Dannel. It then drew back, intending perhaps to slink away, or shroud itself in a protective cloak of *invisibility*.

What it got was a pair of *scorching rays* from Zenna, who stepped forward from the shrieking swarm, her hair in disarray, blood dribbling down the sides of her face from shallow gashes. But her concentration was absolute, and the two blasts struck the naga's body squarely, the flames flaring out around it in a painful embrace.

Now completely sold on the idea of flight, the naga did finally cast its *invisibility* spell. But it was too late, for Fellian was ready with his *invisibility purge*, and when the naga reappeared Beorna was close by, her face an implacable promise that was soon fulfilled by her bloody sword.

With the deaths of the last of the creatures, the lingering *charm* holding Hodge and Mole snapped, and the two looked around in confusion that quickly changed to abashed embarrassment as they realized what had happened. Hodge's face twisted into a look of disgust as he stared up at the head of the nearest naga, dangling over the edge of the stairs, as he tried to reconcile the thing's horrid features with the blind adulation he'd felt for it only moments ago.

"Don't feel bad," Dannel told him. "Their magic got most of us."

"Bah," Hodge replied, but he gave the thing a wide berth as he cleaned his axe and slid it back into the loops of leather that held it in place across his back.

“So where’s Vhalantru?” Fario asked. “After that battle, I’m sure everything in the house know’s we’re here.”

“Maybe he’s not home,” Mole said, hopefully.

A cloud of steam rose from one of the burning tapestries as Zenna cast a *create water* cantrip, dousing the flames from the earlier *fireball* that still burned along the walls. Dannel helped her, stamping out the burning remnants of a tapestry that had fallen beside the door to the guardroom where the half-orcs had been quartered.

“Should just let the place burn,” Hodge suggested. “Better to come back and sift through the rubble later.”

Once she was satisfied that her spell had had the desired effect, Zenna turned toward Hodge. “How many reasons do you want for that being a bad idea? First, it’s unlikely that even if Vhalantru is here, that a fire would kill or even injure him. Second, there may be leads here that we need to find. Third, there’s no guarantee that a fire wouldn’t spread to half the city—that’s all we need, right now. Fourth, those statues—she pointed back down the hall—were once living people, and we may be able to restore them. Fifth—“

“We get it,” Dannel said. “Let’s continue our search.”

“Stay alert,” Arun said, unnecessarily, as they pressed on from the ruin of the once-fine hall.

They elected to remain on the first floor for now, rather than head upstairs. They explored several rooms, including the guardroom where the half-orcs had congregated. Even that room was fairly uncluttered, with just a few trinkets, copper and silver coins, and a couple decks of cards and dice on the long table surrounded by simple wooden benches against the far wall. The whole house seemed static and lifeless, like a museum rather than a place where people lived. Even House Rhiavati had been more vital than this place, with servants and furnishings suitable for use, not just viewing.

They found a wine cellar just off the guardroom, with walls of unadorned stone rather than paneled wood. It was a testament to the authority of Vhalantru that the place was dusty and rather neglected even with the presence of a half-dozen half-orc mercenaries just one room over. Mole took a look at a few bottles as she gave the room a quick once-over. Finally, she returned to the middle of the room, staring at the blank wall to the right of the entry.

“What is it?” Arun asked.

“You don’t see it?” Mole said. When the others shook their heads, she licked a finger and lifted it up. “There’s a slight current of air here. And that wall,” she said, pointing at the blank face of plain stone. “No dust.”

Dannel and Zenna both nodded, but Hodge only shook his head. “So?”

With an exasperated sigh, the gnome walked over to the wall and stuck her hand *through* it. “So, it’s an illusion, silly.” She stuck her head through the barrier, creating the unnerving appearance of her headless body sticking out from the wall.

“Anything?” Fario asked.

“Just a small room,” she said, stepping entirely through the illusion. Sound was not blocked by the figment, so they could hear her voice as she continued to speak. “Nothing but...”

She was cut off with a startled yell.

Chapter 312

“Mole!” Zenna cried, starting toward the wall. Dannel was faster, darting toward the illusory wall, the others only a step behind.

They passed through the illusion to see what Mole had found, an unremarkable, roughly circular room maybe fifteen feet across. There was no obvious sign of the gnome, but her voice came up from *below* even as they entered the room.

“Don’t come in!” she shrieked. “The floor’s an illusion too!”

Dannel instantly stopped, slashing his hands out to arrest the movement of the others. Hodge quite nearly went over anyway, his foot vanishing through the illusory floor up to his knee before Dannel and Fario were able to grab him and drag him back into the wine cellar.

Fellian was the first to spot the tiny fingers sticking out from the floor, at the edge where illusion and reality met. He reached down and grabbed onto Mole, pulling the gnome back up to where the rest of them waited.

“Well, that was almost an unpleasant journey,” the half-elven cleric commented.

“Where does it lead?” Fario asked, as Hodge shook himself free and regained his footing, muttering something unpleasant about dwarves being rescued by “damned fey elves.”

“It’s dark, so I couldn’t see anything,” Mole said. “But it sounds and feels like it goes quite a ways down. Listen.”

They quieted, and could hear the faint whisper of air moving through the shaft, the tiniest hint of a breeze that Mole had detected earlier. There were some unpleasant smells on that current of air, as well.

“Probably some sort of tunnel complex, below the city,” Beorna suggested.

“We’ve found more than a few of those,” Arun agreed.

“Perfect for a beholder,” Zenna said. At the confused looks of the others, she explained, “They have the ability to levitate their bodies, and can travel straight up, down, or horizontally about.”

“So what you’re saying, is that Vhalantru could appear at any moment, while we’re climbing down there,” Fellian said.

“That’s right.”

“What’s a matter, elf? Scared?” Hodge asked, but his taunt was undermined by the way his eyes kept drifting toward the shaft, and the nervous way he kept worrying the snaps on his belt pouches with the fingers of his free hand.

But the half-elf refused to rise to the bait. “No, just making sure we know what we’re getting into.”

“Trouble,” Hodge muttered under his breath. “Up to our bleedin’ necks in it, as always.”

Mole had taken a lengthy coil of rope out of her *bag of holding*, and now affixed it to one of the sturdier units of shelving in the adjacent wine cellar. Giving it a few trial tugs to confirm that it was secure, she looped the rest of the coil around her body. “I’ll go first, check it out,” she offered. “Of course, I can’t see in the dark like the dwarves can. Lend me that flaming stick you have, eh Dannel?”

The elf took the brand, enchanted with a *continual flame*, out from his belt pouch. He handed it to Mole, who stuck it through one of the straps she wore over her armor to keep her pouches close at hand. “Be careful,” Dannel said. “If you hear or see anything, anything at all, give a holler and we’ll draw you back up.”

With a grin and a mock salute, the gnome unraveled about fifteen feet of slack from her rope, then leapt out into the room and vanished through the illusory floor.

“We cannot cover her effectively, with this illusion in the way,” Fario said, an arrow nocked to his bow. “Can we dispel it?”

“Permanent illusions are no simple magic,” Fellian explained, and Zenna nodded in confirmation. “And I think our remaining dispels might be needed,” Zenna added. She didn’t have to elaborate.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Dannel said. Carefully he descended into the shaft, using his *slippers of spider climbing* to walk along the sheer surface of the cylindrical bore. To the others, it looked as though the floor swallowed him up.

Mole felt a familiar thrill of excitement as she dropped lower into the shaft. The flickering flames of Dannel’s torch showed the shaft descending in a straight line down as far as she could see, at first; but as she descended she could make out an opening below, and a floor maybe fifty feet below the chamber above.

That would have been a nasty fall indeed, she thought.

She rappelled down easily, letting out slack in the rope as she kicked off and descended in bursts of ten to fifteen feet at a time. She drew the rope taut right at the edge of the shaft's bottom, right where it opened onto a large room, ten feet above the floor below. She expertly slipped the remaining length of rope through one of her belt loops before wrapping it around her left leg and tucking the rest into the strap that she used to hold her crossbow close at hand. Once secure, she inverted herself and leaned down over the rim of the shaft to dangle upside-down over the room, drawing out the torch and shining it about.

The room was dank and unkempt, a bubble of stone blasted from the volcanic stone by the power of Vhalantru's magic. The chamber was circular and of considerable size, maybe forty feet across. And as she scanned the place, she spotted a shadowy alcove on one side, but her eye was drawn to movement on the opposite side of the room. A humanoid figure shifted in the shadows, lumbering slowly and awkwardly forward into the light. As it drew close enough to clearly distinguish, Mole's face wrinkled in disgust. A zombie; she could smell the stench of rot rising from its body from here. There was more movement along the wall behind it; two more of the foul creatures.

She must have said something aloud, for she could hear Dannel's voice from above, drifting down to her as he descended the shaft. "What is it?"

"Just some trash," she called up, already digging in her magical *bag*. It was a bit tougher, dangling upside down, but nothing that she couldn't manage, with her incredible agility.

She found what she'd wanted, a clay flask sealed with beeswax that would have drawn a very disapproving stare from Zenna. Mole didn't see the big deal; alchemist's fire was... well, *fun* wasn't really the right word, but it was certainly *useful*, especially in the dangerous situations that they often found themselves in.

The first zombie was drawing nearer, although there was no way it would be able to reach her up in the shaft, unless it suddenly sprouted wings, or its arms grew five feet longer. Mole took careful aim, and hurled the flask in a straight arc that connected solidly with the zombie in the center of its forehead. The flask exploded, showering the creature in a satisfying eruption of orange flame.

"What was that?" Dannel yelled down, and Mole smiled as she heard the voices of her friends from up above echo his concern.

"Just a little fire," she offered up, "Don't worry, I got it under control." She waved her hand as some rancid smoke drifted up from the creature; a minor glitch in her otherwise perfect plan.

A roar from above drew her attention back down to the zombie. The undead creature staggered forward, the flames eagerly eating away at the remains of its flesh. But even as the flames consumed it, its body shuddered and *snapped*, bones cracking loudly as its torso seemed to come apart from within. As Mole watched in terrible fascination, the zombie's body split in two, and... *something* came out from inside its body. Massive claws appeared, followed by arms and a body that were clearly too big to have fit inside the frame of the man-sized undead.

But the presence of the creature offered irrefutable evidence to its apparent contradiction of the laws of nature. It was nearly seven feet tall, lean almost to the point of being skeletal, its head an oblong orb dominated by bulbous eyes and a gaping jaw full of jagged teeth. Its body was covered with a thick, clinging black slime, and it gave off an odor that made the zombie's stench seem pleasant by comparison. The creature looked up at her, and snarled something in a language that she didn't understand, but which didn't sound like a friendly greeting.

"Uh oh..."

Chapter 313

Confronted with the sudden and most unexpected appearance of a faratsu demodand from the ruin of the burning zombie, Mole decided that it would be a very good idea if she returned back up the shaft.

But as she tried to pull herself back up, her leg got tangled momentarily in the rope stretching up into the shaft behind her. It only took her a second to shake free, but that second was all the demodand needed. The creature leapt at her, its long arms extending to snag her body with its claws, the sticky black goo that clung to it adhering to her as she tried in vain to slip free. For a moment the rope held, taut, but the combined weight of the two of them proved too much for her mooring in the wine cellar at the summit of the shaft.

"Mole!" Dannel cried, as the gnome, still clutched tightly in the demodand's embrace, fell hard to the floor of the room. The fiend tore at her with her claws, and Mole screamed in pain as its sharp nails penetrated her armor and dug painful punctures into her body. It lifted her up to its waiting mouth, trying to jam her feet-first into that jagged orifice, but she managed to spread her legs enough to land her feet on its forehead and chin, narrowly holding her out of reach of the gnashing teeth.

For the moment. But the demodand was both bigger and stronger than she was, and the sticky coating that covered it made getting out of its grasp a tricky business.

The two remaining zombies shambled forward, mindlessly seeking to add their strength to the fray. They did not assault the faratsu, but moved slowly and awkwardly around it, their withered hands already reaching for the fiend's captive. An arrow slammed into the faratsu's shoulder, a message from Dannel's bow, but the hit appeared to do little damage, its otherworldly defenses insulating it from even Dannel's potent magical arrows.

"Damn it, we have to get down there!" Beorna said, looking at the illusory floor as if considering leaping down into the fifty-foot shaft.

"The gnome was carrying all of the extra rope," Fario exclaimed.

"Great," Hodge said. "Who's plan was this, again?"

"I can get us down there, but you'll have to trust me," Zenna said.

The half-elves nodded, and after a moment's hesitation, Arun did as well. The dwarf was averse to heights, Zenna knew, but no one could doubt his courage, especially when a friend was in danger.

Another scream drifted up from below. "If you're going to do something, do it now," Beorna said, her blade shining in her fists.

"Everyone, stand at the edge of the shaft, and take hold of the person next to you," Zenna said. "On my word, step forward, and let yourselves fall."

"I dunna like this plan," Hodge said. But he joined the others as they readied their weapons and moved beside the shaft.

"Now!" Zenna said. As one, the companions stepped forward, and started falling. Hodge let out a roar as they disappeared through the illusory floor into the shaft, the ground below rushing rapidly up to reach them. For a moment it looked as though they would collide with Dannel, who was descending more slowly using his magical slippers, but then Zenna spoke a word of magic, triggering her *feather fall* spell. A heartbeat later their precipitous descent had slowed to a gentle drift. Dannel easily dodged their falling bodies, and a moment later the companions appeared at the base of the shaft, landing softly on the stone floor of the chamber below.

Fario and Fellian were quick to react, leaping to Mole's aid. Fario darted around the slower zombies and lunged at the faratsu from behind, slashing at its bony torso. He seemed to connect, but again its resistance to mundane weapons protected it, and the half-elf's blow barely pierced its thick hide. But Fellian quickly came at it from the other side, flanking the creature, forcing it to divide its attention between them.

Arun opted for a more direct approach, stepping straight at the fiend, and the zombie that blocked his path to it. Even as he swung, the still-struggling Mole warned, "Don't kill the zombies!" But she was too late, for the undead monster was already falling, knocked on its back with its torso rent near in twain by a stroke from Arun's sword. But before Arun could move to help the gnome, a terrible figure exploded out from the body of the zombie, and a second faratsu appeared to face them.

Hodge held his stroke as he was about to attack the last zombie, dodging back as the creature hit his shield with a powerful slam. "What are we s'posed to do wit' it then?" he yelled.

"Just keep it busy!" Beorna said, rushing to attack the second faratsu. The creature quickly got its bearings after appearing from the gory remnants of the zombie, but it had no time to mount an attack before the templar slammed her holy blade into its body. Unlike the other attacks thus far, this one clearly was telling, and a great gout of putrid black ichor erupted from the deep gash in its body. But Beorna's sword was fouled on the adhesive slime that covered its body, and she had to fight just to keep her grip on the weapon as the demodand staggered back from the force of the impact.

“Use the holy weapons and magic!” Zenna said, calling upon a current of divine power to *turn* the last zombie facing Hodge. The zombie retreated before her, and Hodge turned to help the others, but Zenna forestalled him. “Let me *align* your axe, so you can better hurt them.”

“Well, get to it, then!” the dwarf replied, holding up his weapon.

Fario and Fellian’s attacks had thus far done little to actually hurt the demodand, but their feints distracted it enough for Mole to finally tear herself free of its grasp. The injured gnome darted back but didn’t go too far, pausing only to rip her rapier from its sheath before rushing back to join the attack.

The fiends, outnumbered now, unleashed waves of icy *fear* that swept through the room. Both Hodge and Fario were overcome, dropping their weapons and drawing back in shivering terror. But the rest of the companions, bolstered in part by the aura of courage that surrounded Arun, fought on, bringing the attack to the creatures.

Fellian missed with a swing of his sword that glanced off of the first faratsu’s oily hide. But his attack created an opening for Mole, who darted into position behind the demodand and sank the entire length of her rapier into its back. The weapon clung to the creature and was yanked out of her hand by the fiend’s sticky hide, but it was nonetheless hurt, and hurt bad. More arrows from Dannel, who was now perched on the ceiling near the lip of the shaft, slammed down into it, and even though its resistances protected it from most of the damage, the electrical jolts that shot through its body with each hit were clearly having an effect.

Beorna, rather than fighting to recover her sword, simply unleashed a blast of *searing light* into the chest of the fiend. The creature screamed and fell back, but not far enough to avoid Arun, who swung his holy blade in a glittering arc that intersected its body where its torso met its hips. The sword sang a brilliant note of triumph as it hit, and the faratsu collapsed into two pieces, its ichor steaming as it poured out from both halves onto the stone floor. Beorna reached down and recovered her weapon, her mouth twisting in disgust as she shook off the clinging corpse of the slain demodand from the holy sword.

The second creature tried to escape, calling upon magical *invisibility* to hide it from the blessed blades of its foes. But Fellian quickly countered with an *invisibility purge*, and the faratsu found no escape as the holy warriors surrounded it and hacked it to pieces.

“Are you all right?” Zenna asked Mole, while Fellian and Arun tended to their terror-infused friends. Fortunately the fear effect was temporary, and Fario and Hodge were quickly able to recover their weapons and rejoin the group.

“Yeah,” Mole said, a slight sheepish tone to her voice. “Thanks to you guys dropping in.”

“Next time something *looks* harmless, don’t just assume that it is,” Dannel chided her, as he moved to the wall to join them on the floor of the chamber.

“What about that last zombie?” Fellian asked. The creature, still under the effect of Zenna’s *turning*, cowered at the far side of the room, near the dark alcove that might be an exit.

“Destroy it,” Beorna said. “If there’s another fiend coming... well, then bring it on.”

“No sense in inviting more unnecessary trouble,” Zenna said. “We can incapacitate it, and leave it here securely bound.”

“If you like leaving a potentially dangerous foe behind us,” Beorna returned. “We can destroy it; let us do so.”

“Yeah, I’d like a chance for a little revenge,” Fario said, still smarting at his failure to resist the mental assault of the faratsu.

Overruled, Zenna frowned in disapproval as the companions gathered in a semicircle around the zombie. Dannel slew it by firing a volley of arrows into its chest and head, and as the faratsu predictably began to burst out of its body, the companions rushed in and destroyed it.

“Now, that wasn’t so bad,” Fario offered, as he cleaned the remnants of slimy gunk off of his blades. The faratsu hadn’t even been given a chance to call upon any of its infernal powers, this time.

“And if a pit fiend had stepped out of that zombie’s corpse...” Zenna mumbled to herself.

The circular chamber had nothing else of note evident to cursory examination, so they made their way to the dark alcove. Mole’s light revealed it to in fact be another shaft, descending into the darkness yet deeper beneath the city.

“Great. Here we go again,” Hodge muttered.

Chapter 314

After a brief discussion, the companions proceeded carefully down this new shaft. This time Fario and Mole were the first down, with Mole using her own *slippers of spider climbing*, and Fario rappelling down using rope that Hodge and Arun had securely fastened via several spikes hammered into the chamber walls above. Dannel remained at the top of the shaft this time, with his own *feather fall* spell ready to bring the rest of the group down, if necessary. This time there was no illusory floor to block the view from above, so the companions could watch the gnome and half-elf as they descended.

The shaft was dark and quiet, with Mole’s burning brand forming a bubble of light as they descended, pushing back the menacing black below. They gone down almost a hundred feet before they encountered their first break in the smooth walls of the shaft: an odd door set into a shallow recess. The shaft continued down into more darkness, well beyond the radius of their flickering light to penetrate.

“Strange,” Mole said, examining the door. The portal was round, and oddly crafted to resemble the visage of a beholder. Carved eyestalks set with gems were positioned around the perimeter of the door, and a clear stone the size of a fist was situated in its

center. "It looks like it's designed to break apart into several segments, which draw back into the threshold."

"I don't see a keyhole or other locking mechanism," Fario said.

"It's probably operated by some sort of magic, or something to do with these gemstones," Mole said.

"Trapped?"

"Oh, no doubt."

A voice drifted down from above, faint. Fario gave the rope a few quick tugs; a symbol they'd agreed upon to indicate that all was well.

"Well? Should we go further down?" Fario asked.

"Hmm... I don't like the idea of leaving this door behind us. But on the other hand, the coolest stuff is probably deepest down."

The half-elf grinned. "I'm sure the others would hate to miss that. How much rope is left?"

"I brought four coils, about fifty feet each."

"There's not much room here," Fario said, indicating the slight indentation into which the door was set. The ledge there was tiny, maybe two feet deep, wide enough for maybe three or four people to stand tentatively there.

"If we could get the door open, we could take a quick look at what's behind, and if it's danger, we could hurry back up the shaft, with the others covering."

"Unless something is waiting for us to open it."

"Well, yes, there's always that. But look at it this way; there could be something waiting for us below, and with our light, it'll see us coming a long way off."

"There is that."

"Wait here," Mole said. "I'll go up and borrow Fellian's magic chime."

"I'll just hang around here then, until you get back."

The transaction went smoothly, with Mole hurrying to get maximum use out of her slippers. Their magic was not unlimited, and she was very conscious of the down side of their potency suddenly failing while she was hurrying up or down the shaft. But soon she had rejoined Fario with Fellian's *chime of opening* in hand, having appraised the others waiting above of what she'd found.

“Okay, ready?” she asked. She was perched above the door, ready to flee if the portal opened to reveal something nasty. Fario hung across from the door, ready to be pulled up quickly by the others at a sudden tug on the rope.

The chime’s clear note echoed through the shaft. The door split into three segments, each sliding back into the threshold, leaving a round opening into a chamber beyond. Nothing immediately jumped out to attack them, so Mole shone her light through the opening.

“Better tell the others to get down here,” Mole said, peering into the darkness.

Chapter 315

Ten minutes later found the adventurers reunited in the long hall beyond the beholder door. The portal had started to close automatically shortly after it was opened, but Mole and Fario were quick to jam it open with iron spikes from Mole’s *bag of holding* jammed into the threshold. The opening left in the partially-closed door was small, but enough for all of them to fit through with a bit of effort.

They left their rope dangling in the shaft behind them, a tenuous avenue of retreat. “Not goin’ get back up as easy as we came down,” Hodge said, the last of them to make the descent. He only spoke what most of them were thinking; if they ran into trouble down here that they couldn’t handle, there were no easy escapes.

The hall broadened as it penetrated deeper into the volcanic rock, forming a wide area maybe twenty feet across halfway down its length. That open space had been used to form a gallery of sorts. Another of the beholder doors was set in the wall to their right, and facing it was a curving wall where a half-dozen stone statues of exquisite detail were carefully arranged. Unlike the statues they’d encountered in Vhalantru’s mansion above, these figures were cut in the shape of terrible monstrosities, fell creatures that had fallen prey to the beholder’s *flesh to stone* power. They recognized several of them, including a small black dragon, a kuo-toa, and a minotaur, but several others were of creatures none of them had ever seen before.

“These, I don’t think we should restore to life,” Dannel suggested.

Mole shone her light down the far end of the hall, revealing another terminus at a sealed beholder door. But the others were already turning to the portal in the middle of the corridor, the object toward which all of the monster statues were oriented.

“I get a real bad feeling here,” Arun said.

“Everyone, be ready for anything,” Beorna said, taking the opportunity to summon the power of Helm to bolster herself.

“Let me cast my *clairvoyance* spell,” Zenna suggested. “We’ll know what we’re getting into.”

The templar nodded. They all knew that the spell took time to prepare, so they settled down to wait as Zenna came forward and knelt before the portal, gathering her thoughts to focus upon her casting.

But she'd barely begun her incantation when she slumped back, her expression twisting in pain. They all felt it, a tangible wave of pure evil, hatred and pain sweeping out in an invisible but tangible tide from somewhere beyond the portal.

"What was *that*?" Fario said, rubbing his head. Fellian looked worse off, clutching his temples.

"Something's happened," Beorna said, her sword held before her in a ready position, as if expecting an enemy to materialize from thin air before them. "Open the door."

"That might not be a good idea..." Zenna began.

"Whatever it was, it wasn't good, and it can only strengthen our enemies' position," the templar said. "We have to strike, and quickly."

Zenna looked at her friends, but Arun had already turned back to the door, and Dannel shook his head, fitting an arrow to his bow, filling the air with the nearly-silent melody of power that surrounded him in his archery, infusing the missile with potency. Mole shrugged, but Zenna knew her well enough to know that she was far too excited to be worried about whatever it was that was waiting for them behind that door.

So be it, she thought, a grim fatalism drifting over her. As Mole moved toward the door, the magical chime in hand, Zenna took the opportunity to summon her own wards, adding to the *magic circle* that she'd called upon before. Fellian, likewise, placed *shields of faith* upon himself and Fario.

Mole reached the door, and glanced back at her companions. They were ready, but Zenna couldn't shake the black feeling that had settled over her, a certainty that only disaster awaited them behind the beholder portal.

"Do it," Beorna said.

The chime sounded, and as its clear note reverberated through the hall, the slabs of the door parted and slid back.

Beyond the door was another great chamber, a smooth hemisphere blasted from the surrounding rock by the beholder's magic, the ceiling rising in a perfect dome above. The chamber was lit, with flickering blue flames in sconces around the perimeter filling the place with a surreal aquamarine glow. There were no furnishings or other mundane details; the only other unique feature of the room was a magical diagram, easily ten paces across, carved with glowing blue runes, set into the center of the floor. The diagram formed a triangle inscribed inside a circle; at each point of the triangle was a dark object, roughly the size of a man.

And hovering above the diagram was the creature they had come to find.

The beholder was turned away from them, quivering within a glowing nimbus of soft gray wisps that surrounded it like a haze of fog. The companions readied weapons and spells, but before they could strike, another surge of power slammed through the room with the force of a physical blow, stunning them. Black tendrils of energy exploded up from the three figures imprisoned on the perimeter of the magic circle, each disintegrating into ash as the power was released from them. Those flares rose up and tore into the beholder, whose form swelled and distended. The gray haze vanished, and even as the companions felt control over their minds and bodies slowly returning, the dark orb slowly began to rotate.

A grim laugh that was too jarringly human came from the beholder. "You're too late, heroes."

As it turned to face them, they saw that the beholder had... *changed*. Its already thick and mottled hide had darkened, cracked and broken with sores that oozed a toxic black putrescence like tar seeping from the earth. As Vhalantru's huge jaws opened, its mad laughter continuing to roil from within, a great gout of putrid green ooze erupted from its body, landing in a noxious splat on the floor below. And as its large central eye opened, unleashing its potent cone of *antimagic* upon them, the companions could see the glistening organ ripple and move. For *within* that eye, quivering as if trying to break free, they could see the face of a trapped fiend...

"By the gods," Dannel said, his face as white as a burial shroud.

Chapter 316

"Attack!" Beorna croaked, lifting her sword with difficulty as she fought through the lingering aftereffects of the grim ritual that had transformed the already monstrous beholder into something... *more*.

The companions readied weapons and spells, and Arun and Beorna half-charged, half-staggered forward to meet the monstrous aberration before it could unleash its deadly attacks. Their wards were gone, and their magical weapons made temporarily useless, by the cone of *antimagic* that was emitted from its central eye. The dwarves still had their strength, and their swords were still sharp, but Vhalantru was ready for them, and before the pair of holy warriors could close to strike, it rose up into the air, hovering twenty feet above them. Its jaws opened and it spat a globule of green goop at Beorna, the noxious substance splashing across her chest. The templar shuddered as the paralytic effects of the spittle coursed through her body. The dwarven woman was possessed of an incredible fortitude, but this time it just wasn't enough. She managed an agonized cry of frustration as the unholy toxin took hold of her, her muscles freezing in a fierce but futile martial stance.

Missiles sliced through the air around the beholder, as the rest of the companions added their support to their companions. While Dannel's song was magical in nature, and thus unable to add to his arrows' effectiveness, his skill was unaffected by the beholder's power. His first shot sank with a solid thunk into its obese body, but he belatedly realized, as he

reached for another arrow, that his *efficient quiver* likewise could not work in the anti-magic field.

He had no more ammunition.

“Here, Dannel!” Fario said, indicating his own quiver as he fired a shot that scored a direct hit on the beholder. Fellian and Mole’s shots missed, however, glancing off its hide, its leathery skin augmented further by the transformation it had undergone. Hodge ducked behind the threshold of the open door, fumbling with his winch as he tried to wind his crossbow with shaking fingers.

“Right... now... take... a dragon...” he muttered.

Zenna held her ground, studying the creature, knowing that she had to find a way to regain her magical powers. She knew that the antimagic field came from the central eye, and suspected that it was emitted in a cone. She could retreat back into the hall, but any help she summoned would be neutralized the moment it entered the field. So there was only one option.

Tightening her jaw, and trying to ignore the flutter of panic in her gut, she ran forward into the room.

The beholder continued to rise slowly higher into the air, and was now a good forty feet above them, nearing the apex of the dome above. It rotated as it climbed, keeping its central eye fixed on them, its smaller eyes twisting on their narrow stalks.

It cannot use its other powers in the antimagic field, Zenna realized, looking up now almost directly at the creature. She started toward the far wall; according to her calculation it should not be able to cover the entire room unless it rose all the way to the ceiling, and even then if it covered her, her friends in the entryway should be out of the radius of the effect.

But then, to her surprise, it closed its heavy lid over the central eye. Zenna could feel the familiar tingle of her wards returning, and wondered what it was doing.

Why would it... But even as she began the thought, she knew the answer.

“Watch out for its eye-stalks!” she warned.

Even as her shout echoed through the dome, a pale gray beam sliced down from the beholder, splashing across her body. She felt the cold touch of negative power penetrate to her soul, a power with the ability to suck the life right out of her body.

Fortunately, when Vhalantru had closed its central eye, her *death ward* had taken hold once more.

But her friends did not share her protections. Even as the beholder targeted her, its other eyestalks were seeking out the foes that had hurt it. Zenna saw them twist and the focus on the far side of the room, where Dannel had stepped up beside Fario, and was loading

his bow with an arrow from the Strider's quiver. Both lifted their longbows in unison, but as the tracking eyes fixed on their targets, Zenna knew that they were too late.

"No!"

A green ray sliced down from above, stabbing into Fario's chest. The half-elf didn't even have a chance to scream as the ray surrounded him with a bright emerald glow, *disintegrating* him.

Even as Fario's gear clattered to the ground, a second ray blasted into Dannel. The elven archer stiffened, and Zenna could do nothing but watch as the elf was turned to stone.

Chapter 317

"You monster!" Fellian shrieked, tears flowing down his face as he fired arrow after arrow at the beholder. The missiles failed to harm it, sticking harmlessly in its outer hide or glancing off to clatter to the ground below.

"Now, too late, you understand," the beholder cackled. Its great jaws opened again, and a gob of green muck the size of a man's skull fell to splatter on the ground below. The projectile did not hit any of them, but as it struck it exploded out into a noxious cloud of greenish vapors that quickly started to spread throughout the room.

Cloudkill! Zenna's mind screamed, as she drew back from the cloud that had already engulfed Arun and Beorna, and would soon incorporate the rest of them as well. She'd readied a spell to blast the beholder, but hastily shifted to a *dispel* aimed at disrupting the conjuration. For a moment she felt a surge of terror as her spell impacted the potency of the beholder's magic, augmented by the bizarre ritual that had infused it with fiendish power. But then she saw Dannel in her mind's eye, killed by Vhalantru, and with a surge of rage her *dispel* knifed through the energies sustaining the spell, dissipating the evil cloud.

But their situation was not far improved. Three of them were already out of the fight, and with those deadly eyes able to pick them out at will...

Forcing herself to turn her gaze away from the beholder, she turned and ran toward Beorna.

A small object rose from the periphery of the chamber, where Mole had taken cover in the shadows. The awkward missile arced up and impacted the beholder near the top of its body, hitting and sticking with a soft 'plop'. There was no explosion of alchemist's fire, no dramatic sizzle of acid, but as the beholder turned violently several of its eyestalks appeared to be stuck within a spread of brown goo that had spilled from the bag on impact.

"Take that!" the gnome chimed from below. But she quickly had to evade as a green line shot down from below, narrowly missing her. The ray *disintegrated* a swath of the floor behind her, opening a pit that she leapt out of even as it formed, tumbling forward into a desperate arc.

Spinning in an attempt to bring its other eyestalks to bear, fighting against the clinging mess of Mole's tanglefoot bag, the beholder fired a soft rose ray at Zenna. The ray struck her, but the tiefling easily fought off the somnolent effects of the *sleep* attack.

Another wave of fiendish power filled the room. Zenna felt a sharp attack upon her mind that she fought off with an effort of will. She saw that Arun was likewise unaffected; the paladin had unlimbered his bow, and unleashed a barrage of powerful but thus far ineffective shots at the beholder. Archery had never been the dwarf's strong point, she knew. But a quick glance was enough to show that Mole had been neutralized, the gnome standing there staring up at the beholder with a vapid look on her face, and the fire from Fellian over in the entryway had ceased as well.

She turned to Beorna, readying her *remove paralysis* spell, but the dwarf, her face straining from the effort, managed to spit out a few words. "Attack... attack!"

Zenna saw the fierce conviction in the other woman's eyes, and nodded. She looked up to see Vhalantru already tracking its eyestalks toward her. She didn't hesitate, unleashing an *empowered fireball* that rose up to meet the beholder, filling the entire upper half of the dome with flame.

A wave of heat rushed down over her, but as the flames cleared, she saw that she hadn't done as much damage as she'd hoped. The beholder's ugly hide was scorched, true, but it was still hale, and all of its deadly eyes were still active. *Resistant to fire*, she thought, knowing that now she would face the full fury of the creature, knowing also that her own significant defenses would not be enough to overcome all of its varied and deadly attacks.

"Have faith," a voice said to her.

She looked down to see Arun, standing beside her. There seemed to be a glow around the paladin; as she looked upon him, Zenna felt as though she was looking upon a different man, filled with the shining light of divine wrath.

The paladin dropped his bow, and drew his sword. Even as Vhalantru raged above them, the paladin drew back his holy blade, and with a single mighty snap of his arm forward he hurled the sword straight up. The blessed steel shot through the air like a spear from a ballista, entering the beholder's body from below, stabbing deep until the crossguard of the weapon caught on its body.

Vhalantru screamed, a twin sound of agony as both the beholder and the fiendish symbiant were sundered by that sacred weapon, and by the power of the man who had driven it through them. Then the beholder was falling, plummeting to the ground. Arun drew Zenna and the paralyzed Beorna back with him, a moment before the beholder impacted the floor with a sick squish of bloated flesh.

A brisk wind tore down Obsidian Avenue, tugging at the long cloak that Zenna pulled tighter around herself. The chill in the air didn't bother her, not really, but it was an indicator that winter was on its way back to Cauldron.

A man passed her on the street, a sandy-haired elf clad in unassuming but well-crafted garments of dark cloth. For some reason, seeing him reminded her not of Dannel, but of Fellian. She felt a twinge as she thought of the young—for his people—Strider of Shaundakul, and his slain friend. Fario... somehow, though it had only been a tenday, she had difficulty conjuring up the image of his face in her mind, as though Vhalantru's disintegration had not only destroyed the physical embodiment of the brave half-elf, but all memory of him as well. She shuddered, and it was not due to the chill in the wind.

Jenya Urikas had possessed the power to bring Fario Ellegoth back to life, even with only the dust of the man trapped in the folds of his clothes all that remained following his destruction. But Jenya's recent *raisings* had depleted the temple's stock of precious diamonds that were needed as a focus for the spell, and while some of the rare stones could be found in the city, they were nowhere near enough to conduct the powerful ritual.

Fellian had not hesitated; he took the urn containing the remains of his friend and departed for Almraiven, walking away from Cauldron and its troubles. Zenna could not blame him; even lacking such a noble motivation, she wanted to flee the city as well.

Her thoughts drifted back from Fellian Shard to Dannel, as they often did, no matter what the original course they had started down. She hadn't seen Dannel much over the last tenday. Getting his petrified body out of Vhalantru's subterranean fortress had been a monumental undertaking, even with three muscular dwarves to do the heavy lifting, but after doing battle with the transformed beholder none of them had wanted to linger there, not even for the half-day needed for them to rest and recover their spells. It had taken Zenna two days of attempts for her to finally break the enchantment holding Dannel, and to return him to living flesh. The restoration had not been without cost; the elf's magical bow, its slender shaft and string made much more fragile by its transformation into stone, had not survived the strain of Dannel being hauled out of the dungeon.

Somehow, even as she'd broken the spell, bringing Dannel back to life, her own heart had hardened within her. She felt as though her emotional world was under constant siege, and she fell back on her usual defense, putting up walls in a vain effort to protect her from the pain. The arcane archer had not taken the time to batter down those walls, instead disappearing for days at a time on his own private business. Arun spent a good deal of time training his new recruits at the Temple of Helm, with Beorna at his side. Hodge spent much of the tenday comatose from drink. Mole... well, Mole seemed to be the only one immune to the dark cloud that had crept up over their company, from the strain that had driven them apart. They were all conscious of being in great danger, still; despite Vhalantru's defeat the Cagewrights were still a dire foe, working on their plots to destroy the city and cast the region into the chaotic shadow of Carceri.

They'd gone back to Oblivion—they now knew the name of Vhalantru's hidden stronghold—once... after. The deepest level of the dungeon, beneath the tier where they'd battled the beholder, was vacant, with empty rooms behind the sealed beholder doors. They found signs of recent occupancy, however, and an empty treasure vault that drew

more than a few creative curses from Mole. But the most disturbing sign they found was a small room furnished as a comfortable bedchamber, with a wood floor and paneling installed over the bare stone burrowed by the beholder's disintegrating ray. The place had been recently used, and a clear sign had been left for them: a wire latticework, the sort used by noblewomen to dress up their hair in elaborate fashion for social events.

The kind they'd last seen worn by Thifirane Rhiavati.

Zenna nearly stumbled as the clatter of a wagon rumbling up one of the steep alley streets that linked Cauldron's four major avenues shook her out of her reverie. She jumped back, flattening herself against the wall of the nearby building on the side of the side street until the four horses and the trailing wagon had negotiated the transition onto Obsidian Avenue and continued on its way.

After everything... to be crushed by a wagon in the street, she thought. Her musings were morbid today, she thought to herself as she caught sight of her destination ahead.

The two-story building was intimately familiar to her, with its lower story of mortared volcanic rock, and the upper of weathered timbers so dark as to seem nearly as black as the stone. There was a shop or manufactory of some sort on the first floor; oddly she'd never bothered to discern exactly what, as its entrance was on the far side of the structure. She hesitated for a moment on the covered walk that fronted the building, then opened the door that led to the private stairs that rose up to the second story of the structure.

She hadn't been here for quite some time. The last time she'd walked these steps she'd been consumed with anger and shame, after she'd learned that Dannel was a Harper, sent by her parents to monitor her activities. What had made the revelation so humiliating was that she'd just slept with the elf for the first time... had thought that he loved her, and had convinced herself that she loved him as well. The sting of the betrayal came back to her, and she had to crush the simmering wave of emotion that threatened to undo her. She needed to be in control, now. While Esbar Tolerathkas had done a great deal for her, had in fact guided her onto the path of the mystic theurge that she now followed, she had more than a few pointed questions for him regarding Dannel, her parents, and just how much he knew about her.

Esbar's rented flat occupied the entirety of the second floor; there were only two doors on the upper landing, and one, she knew, led only to a supply closet. The other opened easily to her touch, revealing the living room more or less exactly as she'd remembered leaving it. The furnishings hadn't changed, with the antique desk, the soft couch before the fireplace, the bay window with a nice view of the city. It was all so familiar, but somehow now it felt sterile, empty, even though Esbar's note indicated that he'd returned to the city two days ago. A hall led back to the laboratory where she'd spent hours engaged in magical research, and also to the bedroom, where she'd engaged in some other activities...

Her skin turned crimson at the memory, followed by a niggling thread of sharp red anger. She squashed both emotions as she heard a faint clatter from beyond the swinging door to the combination pantry/kitchen to her left.

She pushed the door open. Esbar was there, sitting at the compact round table, drinking a cup of tea from a small porcelain cup. It was part of a set he'd been gifted with upon graduating from the academy of magic at Alaghôn, he'd told her.

As she stepped into the room, she felt a sudden sense of unease, a tingling sensation that started at her skin but seemed to culminate in a tight knot of vertigo deep within her gut. She stumbled slightly, and as one of her boots scuffed slightly on the polished wood floor Esbar turned from the small window that fronted the wide boulevard outside and looked at her.

His appearance caught her off guard. Her mentor looked gaunt, almost emaciated, and while there was a burning fire in his eyes, it looked as though whatever passion that consumed him had fueled itself by stealing his vigor. It had been less than a year since they'd last seen each other, but he seemed to have aged ten in that interval. He was clad in a simple robe of soft blue cloth, and there was a small gemstone apparently embedded in his forehead, a multifaceted sliver that sparkled slightly in the diffuse sunlight shining through the window.

All her questions and recriminations fled, replaced by new ones about the changes that Esbar Tolerathkas had clearly experienced since he'd departed, leaving his home here in Zenna's care.

"Zenna," he said. "It is good to see you again."

For a moment, she was too surprised to mount an effective response.

"Please, sit down," he said, as he gestured toward the vacant chair. "Tea?"

As he poured her a cup of the hot brew, wisps of steam rising like sinuous tentacles from her cup, she finally rallied enough to speak. "What... *happened* to you, Esbar?"

"Ah, Zenna. Long have been the roads I have traveled, since we last met. Much has happened, and much yet remains to be done... But more to the point, *you* have changed, that I can see plain."

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and did not touch the cup that Esbar slid across the table toward her. "These have been difficult times, since you left. Cauldron has been under siege, and a great evil works to destroy the city."

"Yes, I know," he said calmly, taking a sip of tea.

"Is that why you've come back?" she asked.

"In a matter of speaking," he said. "But in truth, I have never really left Cauldron, even when my roads diverted temporarily from this place. I have been monitoring your progress, and I must say, you've far exceeded the expectations that I had set for you. Truly, your accomplishments in so short a time have been incredible. The power you command... indeed, were these different times than they are, you could have been among the greatest workers of magic to walk the forgotten realms."

Her eyes shot up. “Could have been? What do you mean by that?”

He did not flinch from her gaze; rather he held her pinioned with his stare. “I truly am sorry, my dear. But *you* are the key, the last of the thirteen, and the most important; a Shackleborn possessing the twin gifts of arcane and divine magic. I molded you, encouraged you, but deep down it was always your potential, and the unalterable reality of *who you truly are...*”

Realization struck her like a fist slammed into her gut. Her blood pounded in her veins; she suddenly could not breathe.

“You...” she gasped, the single syllable deep with meaning, beyond recrimination.

“You struggled so, against your destiny,” he went on, outwardly unruffled, as though they were having just another one of their philosophical chats over tea. “It is in your nature, to question what life gave you, to take nothing at face value. But—and I share this with you as your final lesson, Zenna—such a trait does not make you stronger. For your refusal to trust was easy to turn against you, easy to redirect your natural suspicions outward, while the true threat was the closest of all.”

Her gaze shot desperately back and forth: the window, the door. The former was out; the iron crossbar that held the four panes in place was thick, too damned thick, she saw now. She edged back in her seat. But one thing kept her from flight, one burning question that she *had* to have answered.

“Dannel?” The word was barely audible, a prayer.

Esbar—if that was his name—leaned forward, a sympathetic look on his face. “He knew nothing. He believed me to be what you believed me to be... a soldier in the eternal war against the Dark. Given what I already knew about you, it was easy to co-opt him into helping me, especially since we shared the same objective at that point, keeping you safe and alive.” He shrugged. “Like you, he had no inkling of my true vocation.”

“A Cagewright.”

“You say the word with so much venom, yet you have no understanding... no *true* understanding, of what that word means. I am sorry that I will not be able to show you, but maybe you will gain some insight, before...” he trailed off.

“I’ll not go easily,” she spat. But in truth, she knew that he had her; too late she’d identified the strange feeling she’d felt upon entering the room, too late she recognized that the disorientation she’d felt was the magical effects of her protective items fading, leaving her as she’d been when she first came to Cauldron. When she’d believed that she was the one controlling her own destiny.

But whatever the source of the *anti-magic* field that filled the room, it couldn’t be *that* extensive. Without turning, she gauged the distance to the door...

"I know," he replied. "I would expect nothing less."

He didn't move to block her as she slid back her chair, and rose toward the door. He lifted his cup to his lips, unconcerned, as she paused before the swinging portal. She pressed her hand against the polished wood...

Before she could apply pressure, the door pushed inexorably toward her, backed by a force of strength far beyond anything she could have countered, without her magic at her call. As the door opened, a charnel reek drifted into the room, and a... *monstrosity* filled the room, the bulging, muscular form of a shator demodand.

Zenna dove for the narrow gap between the shator's legs, but it easily buffeted her back into the room to land in a heap at its feet.

She drew her dagger, turning toward Esbar, but before she could rise to attack, or do anything else with the weapon, those huge hands came down over her, overshadowing her thin form.

The blackness came quickly.

Chapter 319

Pain.

At first, it was just a sea of pain that poured into the black nothingness, but then, as consciousness slowly poured back with it, other things emerged that coalesced into a hazy reality. Light, bright and red, stabbing through closed lids like needles. Noise, a deep rumble that seemed to shake her very bones, a sick mewling that sounded like a tormented animal. A creak, close, metal protesting.

The pain washed her about, threatened to drag her back down into the black, a journey that she would have welcomed, if only for the release. What was it that kept her here? Voices... something, something she should know, recognize... voices at the edge of her awareness.

Slowly, fighting the pain as the brilliant red stabbed through her mind, she opened her eyes. As the world slowly swam into focus, she looked out onto a nightmare.

Her first thought was that somehow, she'd been cast back into Occipitus. The red glow, the heat, it was all evocative of the Abyss. But then reality returned enough for her to see that she was in an extensive cavern, a massive bubble of jagged, uneven stone. The red glow came from a great rent in the cavern wall, a cleft that disgorged a stream of lava that ran across the floor in a slow but constant current.

Black bars ran across her vision. As she pulled herself up, the pain still fighting her with every movement, the outside world swayed slightly. Confused, that pathetic mewling noise still distracting her from somewhere nearby, she looked around, trying to gain her bearings.

She was in a cage, one of many, she saw, all affixed to the branches of a great tree. Tree... no, that was the proper word for it, but the metallic monstrosity that dominated the center of the cavern resembled no living thing that she had ever seen before. She could feel the power rolling off it in waves, and even more trapped within, buried within the twisted depths of its massive bole, waiting to be tapped.

She was naked, with even the dignity of her robe stripped from her. A sharper pain twisted through the general haze. She reached up to her face. It was numb; she could not feel her fingers probing, but flakes of dried blood came away at her touch.

It was then that she realized that the tormented sound she'd heard was coming from her throat.

"I see you've awoken," came a familiar voice.

She looked down and saw Esbar Tolerathkas—or whatever his name truly was—walking toward her, along the cavern floor fifteen feet below the bottom of her cage. He was now clad in a robe of dark cloth, and he wore a sigil as an amulet at his throat; a metallic arrow with a circle—an eye, perhaps?—set in the center. The blue gem in his forehead seemed to pulse oddly, as if trying to echo the pounding of her heart.

She tried to speak, but only crude noises fluttered from her throat.

"I am sorry that we had to remove your tongue," he said, as calmly as if he was commenting on the weather. "But we could not rely on anti-magic in this place to keep your gift in check. Your suffering will be brief; at least that much I can promise you. We are nearly prepared to begin the final ritual, and soon it will all be over."

She tried to scream; the sound was so horrible that she stopped after a few moments. She looked around, desperate. All of the other cages were occupied. With a sickening realization she recognized the orphan boy, Terrem, looking at her with an expression that was... dead. And in another, Zenith Splintershield, his head bent beneath the weight of an impossible depression.

"You will be a participant in something truly great," Esbar went on. "Again, I wish that things could be otherwise, but in the end, we all have to confront our destinies."

She tried to shake her cage, but managed only to knock herself prone, the pain eagerly rushing back up into her damaged body. Looking at the bars, she saw that some of her flesh clung to them where she'd grabbed them; her hands were slick with bright red blood.

"You cannot destroy yourself," Esbar said. "I'm afraid we've thought of everything."

A heavy, measured tread drew her attention up, toward the far side of the room. Someone was coming.

"Ah, now you can meet one of the leaders of our little band," Esbar said. Turning from her to the newcomer, he said, "Drd'rydd, you may gather the others, we are ready."

The hulking figure stepped from the shadows into the ruddy red glow of the lava plume. As she saw him, and as his gaze met hers, Zenna screamed.

She screamed until the blackness drew her back, back into the merciful embrace of oblivion.

THE END OF “LORDS OF OBLIVION”

Book VIII: “Foundation of Flame”

Begun 10-14-04

Chapter 320

The Vault was one of the more obscure hidey-holes in the city of Cauldron—or more precisely, *under* it. In an odd correlation of ironies, the underground chambers were situated approximately sixty feet directly underneath the office of the Teerson Skellerang, the Captain of the Watch. Crafted two centuries ago by a particularly paranoid member of the city’s ruling elite, only a handful of people today knew of its existence. Four of those were gathered in the central chamber of the Vault, immersed in a vigorous argument. The room they were in looked smaller than its actual size, in part because of the partial walls that subdivided the back of the room into smaller cubicles used for storage and other miscellaneous purposes.

“Your recklessness in your choice of allies has threatened the very existence of the guild!” The speaker was a middle-aged human male, who looked as though he’d never been young and handsome. His name was Pratcher Olann, and he was a veteran criminal, peddler of obscenities, and dealer in illicit substances. He was also one of the highest ranked thieves, called Jesters, in Cauldron’s premier guild of iniquity, the Last Laugh. Unlike the others, he did not bother with painting his face in the harlequin decoration that was the primary identifier of members of that organization.

Velior Thazo seethed. Not so much because Olann’s charge was accurate; it ran counter to his nature to admit his own error. No, the half-fiend was angry because his grand ambitions, which had soared so high before that damned meeting at Rhiavati’s manor, now were crashing down around him in a blazing ruin. Thazo’s hands itched; he wanted to kill something.

“Those damned clerics have Jil, and it won’t be long before they ferret out this place,” another of the Jesters, a rail-thin elf named Karakates, added. “Adrick’s mint has already been uncovered and destroyed, and nearly two-thirds of our membership has been incarcerated... or killed.”

“Damned heroes,” the last Jester, a pudgy human woman named Wayrel Talinn, broke in. Thazo’s scowl deepened, though inwardly he agreed with the curse; if Talinn felt bold enough to actually speak up in a meeting of the Last Laugh leadership, then his once-lofty position had descended far indeed. She was a master poisoner, there was no doubt about

that; but Thazo always thought of her as the two-bit whore she'd been when he'd first met her, a little over a decade ago.

"You will have to get out of town," Olann went on. "You are the only one they saw, and you were the one Jil answered to." *And the one she hated most*, Olann didn't have to add.

Punks, he thought, glaring at his peers within the guild. His anger pounded in his veins like the blood of his fiendish ancestor, and all three of the others fidgeted slightly as his rage became obvious. None of the three other leaders of the guild were his equal; all were at best petty crooks, veterans of the softer side of organized crime. They all bore weapons—like most guilds of thieves, the Last Laugh did not tolerate weakness of any sort—but Thazo knew that he could take all three of them together in a fight, if it came to that.

Almost reflexively, his hand had stolen to the haft of his morningstar. But even as his fingers touched the familiar steel shaft, a shadow shifted beside him, and a familiar chill of danger settled over Velior Thazo.

Forcing himself to relax, letting his hand fall as he chuckled grimly, Thazo deliberately did not turn to look at the hulking figure that remained cloaked in shadow beside him.

"You are all panicking, acting more like marks than master rogues. The... defeat... we suffered was significant, but we are far from undone. Jil is dead, executed at the hand of that dwarven bitch in the name of "justice", now unable to harm us further. And our adversaries have bigger fish to fry than the Last Laugh. We may have to lay low for a while, but we will continue to thrive, in the shadows."

"They took out a whole safehouse, and went through some of our best talent like forged steel through beaten copper," Olann said, his confidence obviously bolstered by the arrival of the shadowy newcomer. "We all agree, that you've made too many mistakes, Thazo. It's time to cut our losses."

Thazo managed a sinister, confident grin in return. With his inhumanly large jaws and protruding fangs, the effect was garish, and the half-fiend was completely cognizant of its effect. "You never complained about me when you needed someone removed for the improvement of your various little schemes, Olann," he said. "I've been a Jester for seven years, and now you think you can just run me out, drive me from the guild that I painstakingly built into what it is today? Talos is still with me, always with me, never forget that!" He turned to the shadowy figure now, stared into the darkness of its hooded face with penetrating eyes. The massive figure stood there impassively. "You stand with these mice now, Thusk?" he asked. "You agree that the guild will survive without my strength?"

The only response was a glimmer of white within the black cowl as the bugbear shadowdancer showed his teeth, a deep rumble of a growl originating from deep within his body.

"We cannot afford this petty squabbling, not now," Thazo went on, turning back to the other Jesters. "You think it would just be that simple, send me on my way, hope that your problems are solved? You could force me out, perhaps, but I'd take half of the remaining members of the guild with me. And if you think that pushing me out will stop the 'Heroes of

Cauldron' from tracking the lot of you down, you're as naïve as you are foolish." Thazo knew that he was taking a risk; with his threat laid down, the best option for the Jesters was to simply kill him. And if Thusk sided with them, they might even be able to succeed in that aspiration.

"A moment ago, you said they weren't interested in us," Talinn pointed out, but the little conviction she'd been able to muster earlier had faded, and she quickly retreated into the shadows of the other two men beside her.

"We will not be the ones to sunder the guild," Pratcher Olann said. "But if you wish to remain a force within the Last Laugh, it will not be as a Jester."

Thazo kept his smile from his face; he had won. Titles were unimportant, he knew; the end of it all was in the simple reality of power. And none of these fools—save for the enigmatic and deadly Thusk—had enough of it to seriously threaten his agenda. And Thusk, while a canny and vicious adversary, was not equipped for the subtle battles of politics, alliances, and backstabbing where Velior Thazo shone.

"Very well, I will serve the guild as a warrior in the trenches," Thazo said. "But we will have to..."

"Aw, you mean you're not going to fight?" came a small voice from the far side of the room. "Man, I was hoping for a little show—my money was on the big shadowy guy."

They turned as one, sinking into ready crouches, weapons hissing from their sheaths. Thusk faded back into the shadows, disappearing from view. The other Jesters contributed useless exclamations—"Who are you?" "How did you get past the wards?" Thazo focused on more practical concerns; he stepped back to the wall, pressing a subtle protrusion there. Immediately a heavy door of reinforced steel slid down from above within the dark archway of the chamber's exit, falling into place with a loud clang of metal on stone. The half-fiend also called upon the power of Talos, invoking the Storm God to fill the chamber with an *invisibility purge*. No hidden foes appeared, and it was only then that the evil rogue-priest allowed himself to relax—only slightly—as he looked up on the stranger who had intruded upon their conclave.

That intruder was an unassuming gnome woman, only a bit over three feet in height. She wore dark garments and carried weapons, but did not appear threatening; in fact, she seemed to have an amused look to her as she regarded the deadly leaders of the Last Laugh.

"Mole Calloran," Thazo said.

"Velior Thazo," the gnome returned. "Gosh, you're uglier than I remembered."

The half-fiend stepped forward, the bat-wings that were one of the gifts of his demonic heritage spreading behind him. His eyes were points of orange flame, and his morningstar seemed to pulse in his hand, as if eager to participate in violence.

"If they've found this place, we must flee," Talinn urged. But Thazo did not move, fixing the intruder with a dark stare that the gnome returned with equanimity.

"You made a mistake coming here alone," Thazo said. "You will pay, for that, and for the rest..."

The gnome shrugged. Ignoring Thazo, she turned to the other Jesters. "I've come here to give you one last chance. You've done a lot of ill to Cauldron and its people, but right now there's a bigger danger, one that threatens the entire city and all within it. I have nothing against thieves' guilds per se, but we cannot tolerate distractions. Get out of town, today, right now, and don't come back... or face justice."

"Your threats seem... small." Thazo chuckled.

She turned a scathing look upon the half-fiend. "Oh, I wasn't talking to you, Thazo. No, you don't get this offer... your life is already forfeit, and you're coming with me."

A shadow shifted behind the gnome, slowly taking on substance as it loomed between her and the blocked exit.

"Your brazenness is almost... refreshing. Were these different times, I would almost welcome you among the Jesters," Thazo said.

"You guys are a bit too sociopathic for my tastes." She glanced at Olann and the others, who'd faded into the background behind Thazo. "Did demon-breath here even tell you what he was in on? That he and his friends were planning on making Cauldron over into 'Fiend Central'? Can't think that would be good for business..."

"Prattle on, little one," Thazo said. "I know you have some little plot in play, for your friends to pop in here and rescue you from the lion's mouth. But there's something you should know. This place... this Vault, is more than just a chamber under the city. No, there's a *reason* why we use this place. Its entire structure is surrounded by magically-treated lead plating; no *scrying* magic will penetrate it, nor does any magical teleportation function in or out of this place. In fact, when that door closed, all contact with the outside world was severed."

"So you see, my little one, you are very, very much alone. And I am quite afraid that you are about to find our company to be most... unpleasant."

And with that, he took a step toward her, his eyes burning like molten pools.

Chapter 321

"So you see, my little one, you are very, very much alone. And I am quite afraid that you are about to find our company to be most... unpleasant."

Without shifting her gaze from the approaching Thazo, Mole pointed toward the other Jesters. "Last chance," she said. "Join me now, or pay the price for your crimes."

None of them moved.

“Never the easy way...” the gnome grumbled.

The shadowy form behind her darted at her back, as silent as a soft breath of wind. Somehow Mole sensed the danger, for she twisted nimbly to the side as a morningstar swept powerfully toward her head. Even though she avoided the full force of the attack by her dodge, she was still clipped on the shoulder by Thusk’s weapon, snapping forward into a smooth roll that absorbed the force of the impact.

Unfortunately, the motion took her closer to Thazo, who had already lifted his weapon to strike. But the evil priest took a moment to call upon his patron for aid, which gave her the split-second she needed to act.

“Gotta go,” she said, folding her cloak about her, and vanishing in a puff of gray smoke.

Thazo looked around, peering into the shadows around the circumference of the room.

“She’s gone?” Olann asked.

“Invisible, perhaps,” Karakates suggested.

“No,” Thazo replied. “She’s using the cloak of that blasted incompetent Finch. She cannot have left the room through the shielding... search every corner!”

The rogues spread out, their animosity temporarily forgotten in the face of an external threat. Thusk had disappeared again, lost in the shadows, and Thazo took the opportunity to reinforce his magical wards, enhancing both his strength and endurance with the divine power of Talos.

Despite the partitions in the room, there weren’t many places to hide. It was the elf who found her behind the cover of a half-dozen stacked barrels in a shrouded alcove. He revealed his find by staggering back into the center area of the room, a small crossbow bolt buried to the feathers in his shoulder.

“Nice work,” Thazo snarled at the injured elf, his voice thick with sarcasm. Roughly pushing the elf aside, he started toward the gnome’s hiding place. He didn’t have to go far; the gnome came to them, running *across the ceiling*, clinging to the smooth stone through some form of magic.

The ceiling was just high enough to take her out of easy range of their melee weapons, but the Jesters had other resources. Thalinn hurled a small dart, no doubt envenomed with some nasty toxin, but the gnome narrowly dodged the missile. Thazo had a more direct response: a blast of *searing light* that drew a cry of pain from the annoying gnome girl. However, Thazo’s spell failed to dislodge her from the ceiling.

Olann added to her difficulties a moment later, lifting a hand that bore a bronze ring fashioned into the head of a ram. He spoke a word of command, and a bolt of force

smacked solidly into the gnome's back, knocking her free of her perch to fall to the hard ground below. She landed smoothly in a roll that absorbed the energy of her fall, but as she looked up, she saw that the bugbear shadowdancer had reappeared before her, his weapon lifted to crush the life from her body. The other Jesters closed in around her, closing off all avenues of escape.

"Time to die, little rogue," Thazo said.

Chapter 322

A huge metallic CLANG sundered the quiet of the Vault, and as the rogues turned toward the sound, they saw the solid steel door bulge inward into the room. A moment later a line of light shone through the door as a rent opened in the metal of the portal, followed a moment later by yet another tremendous blow.

"Time's up," Mole said. She darted for the edge of the surrounding circle, taking another painful hit from Thusk as she did so. But she avoided the attacks of the other rogues, finally tumbling between Olann's legs before the startled Jester could react.

"Fool! Now our doom is upon us!" Karakates hissed. Thazo turned upon the injured elf, and with a single sudden strike crushed his skull.

"Fight them off, all of you, or I'll do the same to you!" he snarled at the others. Thusk had already disappeared from view again, but whether to get into position to strike, or to flee, was impossible to discern. Talinn drew out a potion vial and downed the contents, but by the look on her face it did not have the desired effect. She didn't know that Thazo's *invisibility purge* was still in effect, hindering her attempt at escape.

The ravaged metal of the door protested under the continuing assault. Now multiple gashes revealed hints of motion beyond, and with a final groan of twisted metal the remnants of the door came crashing forward to slam hard onto the stone floor of the room.

Beorna stepped forward into the room, her adamantine sword resting against her shoulder as she surveyed the chamber. "Looks like we found another rat's nest!" she said, lifting the heavy sword easily into a fighting position. Behind her, Arun and Hodge moved into the now-open doorway, and behind them Dannel, his bow at the ready.

"Kill them!" Thazo roared, conjuring an *unholy blight* that raged in the confines of the doorway and the passage beyond. For a moment the dark energies of the spell obscured the heroes, but then Beorna stepped forward through the dissolving storm, apparently unharmed, dropping her adamantine sword and replacing it with the holy blade that seemed to sing as she drew it from its scabbard.

"You and I have unfinished business, fiend!" she said, rushing forward to meet Thazo.

The rest of the heroes emerged from the *blight* injured, but with more than enough fight left in them to engage the remaining rogues. Blood already covered Arun and Hodge's armor, but it clearly belonged more to others than the two dwarves, who seemed little hindered as

they charged the other Jesters. Olann lifted his hand and fired another blast from his *ring of the ram* at Arun, but while the force-bolt hit the paladin with the force of a giant's punch, Arun stood his ground and even managed a counter that drove the guildmaster back, bleeding from a deep gash in his side.

On the other flank of the battle, Hodge saw Talinn trying to sneak around toward the door, and moved to block her. The Jester took out a small tube from a hidden pocket and lifted it to her mouth, blasting the dwarf with a spray of toxic dust.

That was enough for Hodge; he unleashed a full assault upon the poor woman, tearing into her with powerful strokes that knocked her back against the shelving lining the wall. Old pots and jars clattered around her as she fell to the ground, bleeding out her life through the multiple wounds.

"Tryin' to poison a dwarf... yer got nerve!" Hodge grunted, although his eyes were watering somewhat as he wiped his gore-splattered axe on his pant leg. He let out a loud sneeze and spit up a fat glob of phlegm before turning back to the melee.

Dannel entered the room last, taking aim at Thazo before he spotted a shadow descending upon Arun from behind.

"Arun... watch out!"

But his warning came too late as Thusk smote Arun from behind. A cackling surge of chaotic energy tore into the dwarf as the shadowdancer's anarchic morningstar unleashed its fell power upon the lawful knight. Olann took advantage of the assault to attack as well, but even flanked by two rogues Arun's magical armor was more than enough to turn the narrow blade. There was no denying that the paladin was hard-pressed, however, and he favored the side where Thusk's morningstar had delivered its painful blow.

But Thusk had left the concealing shadows behind, and now he in turn confronted the deadly assault unleashed by the companions. Working in unplanned coordination, Dannel's arrows slammed into the bugbear's back, punching through his cloak and the chain shirt beneath it. Arun, meanwhile, unleashed a full attack with his holy sword, the shining blade driving back the shadows that surrounded the monstrous rogue, each swing biting deep. Thusk staggered back, grievously wounded, but before Arun could lunge in to finish him, the shadows shifted and the shadowdancer disappeared.

Thazo, bolstered this time by the full power of his patron, met Beorna in a violent clash of steel upon steel. Initially confident as his first stroke slammed hard into the dwarf woman's chest, hurting her even through the heavy adamantite mail she wore, he was quickly reminded of the templar's ferocity in battle as her assault tore into him. Her sword, likewise infused with holy power, tore through the magically enhanced steel of his breastplate as though the armor plate were made of soft leather, biting deep into the flesh beneath. Staggering back, blood gushing down his torso from the wound, he looked around.

Talinn was down in a bloody heap. Olann had thrown down his sword and now knelt for mercy before the paladin, begging for his life like the craven that he was. Thusk had

disappeared, and if he wasn't already a hundred paces away, leaving them and this mess far behind, Thazo would have been greatly surprised.

The doorway beckoned him, taunting him, with too many enemies blocking his escape. The templar lifted her weapon, looking down the shimmering length of the steel at him, with eyes as cold as ice.

"Yield."

"So you can drag me off to a formal execution? Not likely."

"Then taste the justice that you have earned." The sword came up, and behind her Thazo could see the other dwarf, the axe-wielding warrior, coming at him from the side, while the elf took aim at him with his bow.

But the templar's parley had given him a vital instant in which to prepare, and he took it, calling upon the potency of a second *unholy blight*. Even as the spell exploded through the room, he was running for the exit. Something hard caught him in the side, crunching ribs, and as the elf materialized from within the crowd an arrow punched into his gut, stabbing a deep tendril of pain through him. But then the doorway was before him, with the dark tunnel offering escape beyond.

Agony erupted through his foot, and with his next step the limb gave out under his weight. Thazo fell hard, his monstrous face caroming off the stone threshold before he splayed out atop the ruin of the steel door. He tried to get up, but his body refused to obey his commands. Barely clinging to consciousness, he managed to look up and see the gnome standing before him, a small, bloody knife in her hand.

"You were saying?"

Thazo tried to reach out to Talos, but the power of his connection to the god was already fading from him. All he saw was a bright light as the templar... or was it the paladin? stepped forward, a shining sword blinding him with painful light. The last thing he heard was a single word.

"Justice."

Chapter 323

With a final heave of effort, Mole laid the last suit of armor—sized to a human, and therefore cumbersome—onto the low counter. The breastplate still bore a nasty cleft in it, and bloodstains still decorated the armor where the hasty cleaning hadn't quite reached, but it still bore a potent enchantment.

One that hadn't saved its former owner, but made it valuable nonetheless, even damaged.

"Okay, that's the last of it," Mole said with a grin, refastening her *bag of holding* and tucking it back into the pouch at her hip.

“Quite a haul,” Skie Aldersun said, giving the objects scattered along the long counter a preliminary survey. In addition to Velior Thazo’s breastplate, the display included the half-fiend’s morningstar and magical gauntlets, Pratcher Olann’s magical rapier, a dozen assorted masterwork weapons they’d taken off of slain Last Laugh rogues, and a few suits of magical chainmail worn by the mercenaries in Vhalantru’s manor that Mole hadn’t gotten around to unloading yet. She’d had to dump out the usual contents of her magical bag to make room for it all, and there were still a few things in her quarters at the Temple of Helm that had been too bulky for this particular trip.

“Don’t forget the adventurer’s discount for the Heroes of Cauldron,” Mole replied with an even wider smile.

The other gnome lifted one of the weapons and examined it with a critical eye. “You’ve done well, Mole; almost too well. I’m afraid that my coffers are nearly empty, thanks in no small part to the activities of you and your companions, and I won’t get more coin until the payment for the last shipment of merchandise that I sent to Almraiven arrives at the end of the month. I will certainly credit your account until then, if you wish.”

Mole frowned, but then, as she often did, she quickly spotted the positive side of a setback. “Maybe a trade?”

Skie gestured toward the various displays throughout the main room of her shop. “You know my inventory better than I, nearly,” the older gnome said. But there was a canny look in her eyes as she added, “Although... there was something new that I just recently acquired, that you might be interested in...”

Mole’s smile returned; she knew that Skie had been leading her to this since she’d walked in the door. It was refreshing, dealing with another gnome; human merchants were just so damned *serious* about everything.

Feigning disinterest, as she looked over an amulet that she’d sold to Skie only a tenday back, Mole said, “Oh?”

The ring was very impressive, even before Mole picked it up. Lying on the white cloth that Skie had brought it out in, it was nearly invisible. The band was crafted of a transparent material much like glass, except that it was as heavy as metal and solid, too; Skie demonstrated that by bouncing it off the nearest wall and catching it as it flew past.

“What’s it do?” Mole asked.

“Try it out.”

Mole put on the ring. “I don’t feel any diff... oh!” Looking down, she gleefully realized that she couldn’t see herself; she was *invisible*.

She reappeared a moment later, her grin as wide as it had ever been. “Interested?” Skie asked.

“Oh, I think we can do business.”

* * * * *

The counter was made of thick, very solid wood planks, but it squeaked in protest as Arun laid the last of the heavy sacks upon the polished surface. Metal clinked slightly as an indication of the contents of the bag, which joined its fellows to make an impressive treasure.

Vortimax Weer’s eyes were wide as he took in the fortune in hard cash sitting on his counter. “I trust you and your elvish companion will be content with the enhancements,” the mage said. “I don’t normally do armor, mind you, but for the Heroes of Cauldron...”

“Thank you, master Weer,” Arun said, gesturing to Hodge who was folding Dannel’s mithral shirt into a compact bundle for travel, awkwardly juggling that with the wooden box that he carried under his other arm. Arun carried his own armor, and he looked somewhat uncomfortable clad in a simple tunic and leather breeches, not dissimilar from any of the hundreds of laborers who made their living in Cauldron.

Of course, not many laborers carried a holy longsword slung across their backs.

“I’m sure that your elixirs will be as useful as always,” Arun added, as the wizard started transferring the heavy sacks to the cart on which he’d wheeled out the upgraded suits of armor. Weer waved at them absently as the two dwarves exited the shop.

“I’ll feel better once I have this back on,” Arun said, fastening a leather strap around the compact bundle of armor and slinging it across his back.

“Damned but yer could buy yerself an inn for what yer paid that wizzerd,” Hodge said.

“Knowing what we are up against, we will likely need the protection,” Arun said. “In fact, I wish you would reconsider, and allow Weer to upgrade your items as well.”

“I heard ‘ow much he wanted to magick up this stuff,” the other dwarf retorted, rapping his own breastplate with his gnarled knuckles. “I got better uses fer me money, thank yer.”

“I would have been happy to pay for the upgrade out of my own share...”

“Nah, yer spent that extra coin on folk who needed it more, I reckon.” The dwarf frowned, as though the comment had snuck up on him unawares. Hodge stuffed the mithral shirt into the strap that held his huge axe in place across his shoulders. “Come on, let’s get this junk back to that elf.”

“That elf” was at that moment testing his new bow in the long but narrow yard behind the rectory of the Temple of Helm. The target he’d hung up on the back exterior wall of the temple stables was small, only about a foot across, but it may as well have been half that size based on the holes he’d already punched in the thick cork.

He had a small audience; a few of the newcomers that everyone was referring to as “Arun’s recruits” had taken breaks from their chores to watch his archery. But Dannel ignored them as he took another practice arrow from his magical quiver, drew, aimed, and released in a single smooth movement that took less time than the space between two heartbeats. The arrow struck only an inch from the center of the target, but Dannel frowned, checking the string of the bow. The weapon was still new to him, in no way the match of the magical bow he’d lost in Vhalantru’s secret dungeon, but still an exceptional construction. But Dannel’s attention was only partially upon his practice, and the song that filled him when he drew his bow in anger was discordant. He was distracted.

Mole materialized right in front of him, a bit disappointed that Dannel didn’t jump. Mole had been trying out her new ring all afternoon, and already Hodge had threatened her with dire consequences if she came within so much as twenty paces of him. Without turning his attention from his examination of the bow, Dannel said, “You stepped in something, and left tracks.”

“Eew,” Mole said, looking down at her boots. Dannel ignored her, looking at the target as though he could transfix it with just his stare, then he shrugged slightly and unstrung his bow.

“Arun and Hodge aren’t back yet?”

“No,” the elf replied.

“Zenna?”

“She has not returned.”

“Well... she didn’t leave a note this time, but it’s too soon to worry, I think. She probably just went to Saradush again for some more scrolls. I mean, she’s been distant and all, ever since... well, for a while. She’ll be back, she knows what’s at stake...”

“With everything arrayed against us, I am not willing to wait. This morning I asked Jenya to *scry* her, and to try and reach her with a *sending*, Dannel said. We’ll have an answer tonight, after the meeting.”

Mole made a face. “We still gotta go to that? Bunch of nobles... booo-ring!”

Dannel’s features were tight, betraying the depths of his worry of Zenna, but he forced a smile. It had only been a day since Zenna had vanished, and Mole was probably right, but Dannel could not shake the sick feeling in his gut that something ill had befallen her. They’d already had one group of assassins seek them out...

When she did come back, he was going to *kill* her.

“Those nobles will have a lot to say about Cauldron’s future,” Dannel pointed out. “Besides, you had fun at the Cusp of Sunrise that last time.”

“That’s true. That Vanderboren... man, you remember the look on his face when I rolled the twenty?” But Mole’s grin faded too, after a moment, as her thoughts too drifted back to her friend.

Where was Zenna?

Chapter 324

The Grand Library at the Cusp of Sunrise was a popular outpost among the wealthy scions of Cauldron’s leading families. Now the long windows in the dome above let in only a muted light from the overcast skies, while a slight patter of drizzle against the leaded panes served as a reminder of the dreary day outside. Normally the ill cheer of a rainy day did not penetrate to the floor of the great chamber, with its roaring fireplaces, soft leather chairs, open bar, and various nobles at play at cards or rounds of gemsnatcher. But today, the feeling in the Library was tense. The soft chairs and game tables had been removed, and the bar was closed. The broad chamber was full of people, some of Cauldron’s leading lights, clad in garments of expensive cloth cut with a nod to the latest fashions.

Cauldron’s leading churches—with the notable exception of the fallen church of Kelemvor—were represented. Jenya Urikas was there, clad in a soft white robe that framed her warm face and the dark curls that cascaded down to her shoulders. She looked tense but calm, a noticeable contrast to Kristof Jurgenson of the small church of the Morninglord. The cleric of Lathander was clearly ill at ease in this gathering, and he stood off to the side, fidgeting with his cloak. More stoic was Omar Tiskinson, the Second of the Church of Tempus. The martial priest’s hard expression seemed etched in stone, and whenever he moved the heavy greatsword slung across his back clattered slightly against the breastplate that he wore under the surcoat bearing the fiery sigil of the God of War.

Several of the city’s leading merchants and other important factors were also present. Unlike the priests, they seemed inclined to group together, as if drawn by the common bounds of profession that set them apart from the other groups present. All had interacted before with the companions before, each playing a minor role in the developing saga of Cauldron’s fate. The halfling Tygos Mispas and the gnomes Keygan Ghelve and Skie Aldersun formed a small circle, chatting amiably. The shorter folk were overshadowed by two men who appeared to be prosperous merchants. They were far more than that, however; the half-elf Meerthan Eliothlorn was the leader of the influential Striders of Shaundakul, while Maavu Arlental was a prominent figure in the Chisel, a semi-secret group that operated out of the nearby community of Redgorge. Both men were also skilled wizards, and both surveyed the gathering with intent looks that saw much that wasn’t immediately evident.

In addition to the clerics and the merchants, two other groups were represented at the meeting. The small cluster of nobles included several whose names were already well-known to the adventurers, who’d had dealings with their children before. Ankhin Taskerhill was particularly dominating, a somber, ebon-skinned gentleman with a prominent jaw and hard eyes that could flay a competitor with the intensity of his gaze. By contrast, Premiach and Aeberrin Vanderboren seemed less at ease in these surroundings, almost huddling together near one of the bookcases instead of offering idle chatter with any of the other

guests. The two had made a fortune in real estate speculation, but there was a trace of the rogue still about them despite their finery, especially the wiry Premiach. Ophellha Knowlern was one of only two elves present. She looked cold and distant in a soft blue robe that framed her pale features and delicate, graceful figure. She was also the owner of The Drunken Morkoth, one of Cauldron's most prosperous inns.

The final group consisted of the adventurers, the band known throughout the city now as "The Heroes of Cauldron." But at the moment, none of them looked particularly pleased to be present at this gathering.

"This is a waste of time," Dannel said, fidgeting. He wore a new doublet that flattered his lean figure, but which still bulged slightly where his shirt of mithral links settled beneath the rich fabric. He bore no obvious weapons, but his magical quiver—with *Alakast* and his new bow inside—was slung across his right shoulder.

"Politics is just another battlefield," Beorna said. She and the other dwarves wore their armor and carried their weapons, and their sheer physical presence dominated the gathering. Her adamantite armor had been polished to a reflective sheen, and the sigil of Helm across her breastplate glimmered with the reflected light of the many lamps that were mounted around the circumference of the room.

"Jenya will need our support," Arun said. "We are popular amongst the general population of the city, but these nobles will not be so quick to lend their allegiance, regardless of what fawning words they may speak."

Hodge only frowned; he looked very much like he wanted to spit, but Beorna had taken him in hand before the meeting and spoken to him for a full five minutes. Since then, the dwarf had been utterly silent. He even looked halfway presentable, although there were tangles in his beard that even an adamantite comb might have had difficulty penetrating.

"When are they going to start?" Mole asked.

"They are waiting... ah, I believe that's him now," Beorna said, drawing their attention to the entry where a tall gentleman entered. Clad in meticulous white trousers and coat with red trim, Zachary Aslaxin's face was dominated by a copious moustache and penetrating blue eyes that swept the room as he nodded to the gathering.

"With all your wealth, you could not afford a timepiece?" Taskerhill said. "The hour of this meeting was plainly set, Aslaxin."

The other nobleman turned toward his rival, and for a moment the air between them was electric as their stares matched. Finally, the newcomer pulled off his gloves and swished them through the air dismissively before tucking them in his belt. "I offer apologies to all present for any inconvenience caused by my delay. Please understand that I fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation faced by our fair city." Turning to Jenya, he added, "Lady Urikas, I believe you are playing hostess to this gathering?"

Jenya nodded, and came forward to stand in the middle of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen of Cauldron. Thank you all for coming today. Lord Aslaxin speaks truly to the

gravity of our circumstance. I tell you this; I will speak with candor to you today, and I will not equivocate: Cauldron is on the brink of utter disaster.”

“Isn’t that just a bit overly-theatric, priestess?” Taskerhill interjected.

“I think, my lord, that we would do well to hear what the High Priestess has to tell us,” the elf woman Knowlern replied.

Jenya nodded. “Thank you, Ophellha. No doubt you have all heard of the recent events at the Temple of Kelemvor, and of the demise of the false Orbius Vhalantru.”

“Yes, a fearsome creature indeed,” Aslaxin said, with a nod to the adventurers.

“These events are linked to an even greater threat,” Jenya went on. “The efforts of these brave souls,” she said, also indicating the companions, “fighting on our behalf, has uncovered a dire plot that seeks to accomplish nothing short of the destruction of our city, of opening a permanent gateway between Cauldron and the fiendish plane of Carceri.”

Chapter 325

There was a pregnant silence, but while most of those present were shocked by the news, the companions could see that almost all of them appeared to expect it, or something equally serious. The nobles, particularly Taskerhill and Aslaxin, wore faces that might have been chiseled in stone, but a fiery passion burned in their eyes. Whether it was concern for Cauldron and its people, or for their own private interests, was impossible to determine.

“The rumblings under the volcano,” Premiach Vanderboren said. “They are linked to these efforts, I presume?”

“Who is behind this plot? And what can we do to stop them?” Omar Tiskinson exclaimed.

Jenya nodded in answer to both questions. “From what we have learned, these enemies are part of a cabal who call themselves the Cagewrights. Their plans have been dealt a setback by the revelation and destruction of Vhalantru, but we have not been able yet to track their leaders, or uncover the location of their secret headquarters.”

“The population... they must be notified of this,” Tygot Mispas said.

“Don’t be a fool,” Taskerhill said, cutting the merchant off. “What do you want to do, start a panic? The city’s already a tinderbox, and you want to splash oil upon the smoldering flame? Imagine your shop looted, people stampeding each other in the streets...”

“Yet we cannot stick our heads in the sand and hope the threat goes away,” Aslaxin added. “I think we should prepare a contingency plan for the evacuation of the city.”

Jenya nodded. “That was one of the suggestions that I brought to this gathering. The Temple of Helm will lend whatever aid it can to the planning and execution of that plan, should it become necessary.”

“Evacuation?” Aeberrin Vanderboren said. “Shouldn’t we first seek help? I mean, if what you say is true—no offense, priestess—then this danger threatens the entire region. What of the good churches, the guildlords of Almraiven, the magnates of the city-states on the Lake of Steam... or even the pasha, in Calimport?”

“I believe you will find that most of the powers of the ‘Shining South’ would consider troubles in distant Cauldron beneath their notice, lady,” Meerthan Eliothorn said. “Those who might be able to help have already been contacted, but aid may be slow in coming. We must be prepared to act on our own.”

Maavu Arlintal stepped forward. “It would seem that, if belatedly, Cauldron is awakening to the depths of the danger that I have been warning of for months. What course do you propose we take now, High Priestess? Can your divinations reveal how this threat is to be overcome?”

Jenya met the merchant’s eyes with an unflinching gaze. “The people of Cauldron will need strong leadership, to face the inevitably darker days that will follow. I have called this meeting, to propose the election of a new leader to replace the former mayor.”

“Election?” Taskerhill said. “An odd concept if you want a strong leader. Do you intend for us to vote, then? Cast secret ballots into an urn and draw out the man—or woman—with the strength to save us?”

Jenya’s mouth tightened. “I’d hoped we could come to a consensus, actually. We represent different elements of the city—church, trades, nobility—and it is vital that we present a united front to the people of the city.”

Taskerhill did not hesitate. “Then that leader should come from the ranks of those already recognized as leaders by the people of the city: the nobility.”

Aslaxin laughed, a deep, rich sound that echoed in the domed chamber. “Subtle, as always, Taskerhill.”

“If you have something constructive to add to the discussion...”

“Oh, just shut up, the lot of you,” Arun said, stepping forward between the two men. “This is pointless. I don’t know you men, but I’ve been here in Cauldron for nigh on a year now, and I’ve never heard of either of you. But I have seen first-hand someone who has given everything of herself for the sake of this city and its inhabitants. She has already shown initiative, bringing you all together, acting while others talked and dithered. If it’s a proven leader you want, you could do a lot worse than Jenya Urikas.”

Everyone turned to the priestess, who’d suddenly grown pale. But Beorna had moved up behind her while Arun spoke, and now she stood at Jenya’s side, whispering something lost in the general noise of activity that followed Arun’s declaration.

"I'll not support a theocracy in Cauldron, and nor will the people," Taskerhill said bluntly. But many of the other comments were positive, with the other two priests offering guarded support, and the merchants generally favorable.

"High Priestess Urikas has been my friend since she came to Cauldron, ten years ago," Ophellha Knowlern said. "She is up to this task."

"Your recommendation comes highly valued in its own right," Meerthan Eliothorn said to Arun. "You and your friends have fought hard for Cauldron, and the people respect your judgment."

"I do not doubt the worthiness of the High Priestess; she has proven her mettle," Aslaxin said. "But she is young... not yet thirty? Perhaps we should consider tempering the vitality of youth with the value of experience."

Taskerhill responded with another cutting barb, and several others joined in the exchange. As the debate continued, Mole leaned over and said to Dannel, "Do you think any of them would notice if I turned invisible and snuck out of here?"

Dannel shook his head. "Don't do it unless you can take me with you," he muttered. But he frowned, turning toward the abandoned bar on the far side of the room. There was something, unusual...

"What is it?" Mole whispered.

"Something..."

Mole looked in that direction, and while there was nothing unusual to be seen there, her attention did come just in time to detect a faint, "WHUMP" of air, a sucking sound that was accompanied by a hazy shimmer that hung in the air for just a heartbeat before dissolving.

The disturbance hadn't gone entirely unnoticed by the others in the room. "What in the blazes?" Taskerhill said, annoyance etched on his features at being interrupted from a point he'd been making.

But Dannel and Mole were already surging to action. The two had shared an instant's glance, confirming what each had sensed, the subtle clues that revealed the truth of what had just happened. Then the gnome was flipping her rapier out of its scabbard as she leapt forward into a twirling somersault. In mid-leap, she abruptly vanished. At the same time Dannel's longbow slid out of his enchanted quiver at his command, along with an arrow that jutted from the magical container, ready to draw as soon as the archer strung the bow.

"Someone's here, invisible!" Dannel shouted in warning, but before the rest of the occupants of the room could overcome their initial confusion, a cackling voice barked out a phrase in the language of magic, and a pinpoint of bright flame appeared out of thin air before erupting into the familiar and deadly conflagration of a *fireball*.

Chapter 326

The *fireball* lasted only an instant, but in that explosion of fire the Grand Library of the Cusp of Sunrise was transformed. Fine furnishings were blackened as the flames overturned small tables and turned expensively trimmed chairs into ash. Tapestries and paintings were likewise charred, along with thousands of gold pieces worth of books, décor, and statuary.

The focal point of the spell had been the head of the steps that led into the foyer, at the feet of Zachary Aslaxin. The nobleman had been blasted roughly back into the adjoining entry, while those around had likewise been killed or seriously wounded. Keygan Ghelve lay crumpled against the base of a bookcase, his skull showing white where his flesh had been blasted away by the blast, while Tygot Mispas was just a blackened lump a few feet away. Kristof Jurgensen and Skie Aldersun were both down, either dead or well on their way, and everyone else within the radius of the blast had been seriously injured. Jeyna Urikas, her fine robe an utter ruin, her hair burned half away from the charred flesh of her skull, looked around bewildered at the destruction that had been a gathering of vital people just a few seconds before. But her indecision lasted only a moment. Invoking the full power of Helm that she commanded, she unleashed a *mass cure critical wounds* spell that poured life back into the battered survivors of the fiery blast.

But even that potent spell could not help Ghelve, Mispas, and Jurgensen.

Even as Jenya countered the destructive power of the *fireball* with her magic, it became clear that the magical attack was just the opening round in an all-out assault upon the gathering. Arun had drawn his holy sword at Dannel's first warning, and even as the explosion of flame erupted throughout the room he was charging toward the origin point of the spell—oddly, it looked as though it had begun a good eight or nine feet above the tiled marble floor. But before he could reach the invisible spellcaster, he grunted as something hard slammed into his side. He turned as a foe materialized there, his *invisibility* disrupted by his attack. The enemy was a grim, feral-looking dwarf, coming barely to Arun's shoulder. The dwarf was clad in light armor, chain links over black leathers, and the skin visible under the black half-helm he wore was bluish in color, clashing with wide eyes that were an opaque milky-white. He carried a battle-axe in both hands, and even as Arun shifted to face him he lifted the weapon to strike again.

"Derro!" Arun hissed, recognizing the race of their adversaries. The derro were well-known to the gold dwarves, members of an insane, degenerate subrace of dwarvenkind that subsisted deep within the bowels of the Underdark. This one was clearly a veteran warrior, hurling himself at the paladin in a furious rage. Hodge moved to assist his friend, but quickly came under attack from a second derro, who appeared in the wake of a crippling assault that dug deep into the miner-turned-defender's armored thigh.

Beorna had likewise drawn her holy sword, its brilliance fighting through the haze of smoke that lingered in the aftermath of the *fireball*. But she did not immediately rush to the attack; instead, she drew upon the power of Helm, casting an *invisibility purge* to reveal their enemies to them.

Two more derro warriors appeared, one in the midst of raising his axe to strike down Aeberrin Vanderboren. The couple had been on the edges of the gathering and had avoided the worst of the fireball, but even though the noblewoman was nearly double the derro's height, she had no defense against his deadly axe. But even as the creature gibbered an eager cry for blood, her husband Permiach darted between them, knocking her backward out of the deadly path of the axe. He paid for his sacrifice, however, as the blade cut deeply into his side, knocking him prone in a mess of blood that poured from his side in a deadly cascade.

Aeberrin screamed, but before the derro could press his advantage the flame-blackened form of Omar Tiskensen appeared through the haze. The priest of Tempus held his greatsword high above his head, screaming an invocation to his patron as he smote the skittering dwarfkin. The blow would have cloven a cow in twain, but the derro was far tougher than he looked, rolling with the force of the stroke and coming around into a ready stance, prepared to counter.

The last warrior had rushed toward Ankhin Taskerhill, whose eyes widened in terror at the rapid approach of the diminutive warrior. But before the derro could reach its prey, Meerthan Eliothorn stepped to the nobleman's side. The half-elf was accompanied by Maavu Arlinal, who held the stricken form of Skie Aldersun in his arms. Maavu held onto Meerthan's shoulder as the half-elf touched the noble lord, speaking a word of magic. Reality shifted around them, and all four of them vanished from the chamber.

The derro warrior snarled, and looked around for other prey.

Beorna's spell had revealed one other enemy, the one that each of the heroes had looked for since Dannel had shouted his warning. That last was the derro sorcerer who had hurled the *fireball*, and whose spells had both transported the warriors here and bolstered their fighting ability. He was flying above the chamber floor, continuing to ascend in a slow spiral, and as he became visible he cackled madly. His white hair and beard jutting out from his blue-tinged skin in a disordered riot, and he held a long ivory rod in one hand, sweeping it over the battleground below as if willing his enemies to cease annoying him by dropping dead on the instant.

The sorcerer's eyes fixed on Tiskensen as the cleric and his derro adversary hacked at each other. "Priest of War God!" the sorcerer screeched, his voice as painful as fingernails being drawn across a slate. "Your master calls you to him!" Lifting the rod above his head in benediction with his left hand, he extended a stubby finger from his right at the cleric, and blasted him with a thin green ray of bright energy.

Omar Tiskensen had just enough time to look up before the ray *disintegrated* him.

The sound of his empty armor striking the hard floor sounded unnaturally loud in the cavernous interior of the chamber.

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With several of the gathered notables already dead, and a powerful spellcaster flying above them unleashing more spells, the surprise assault perpetuated by the mad derro had already achieved some degree of success.

But the companions, though bloodied, were quick to reply. Dannel had strung his bow with a practiced motion, and now drew the first long shaft back to his cheek as he sighted in upon the derro savant. His first shot missed, turned by the layered magical defenses protecting the sorcerer, but the elf did not hesitate, keeping up a rapid-fire barrage of shots as quickly as he could fit the arrows to his string and draw. Within six seconds the derro bore two wounds, although his shields had kept the impacts from being anything more than grazing hits.

But the sorcerer only laughed, plucking the arrows from his body to drop to the ground below. He waved his hand at the elf, calling upon his magic once more in a dread invocation of power. Dannel staggered as the spell took hold of him, his next arrow falling from his hands as his eyes widened in horror.

“Annoying archer... you remind me of a tunnel slug... in fact, I think I prefer you as one!”

Dannel cried out as his body began to shrink and distend, and within a few heartbeats, the nimble elven archer had been replaced by a foot-long gray slug, splayed out over the burned carpet in a slick of greasy slime.

The rest of the companions could not come to his aid, as they had their hands full with the derro warriors. The diminutive demi-dwarves proved quite tenacious, ignoring wounds that should have crippled them, shouting gibberish as they redoubled their berserk, all-out attacks. Arun kept hitting his foe, but the derro barbarian just simply refused to go down, even with torrents of blood pouring down his body from the rents that the paladin’s holy blade had torn in his chain armor and the flesh beneath. Hodge held his ground on the holy knight’s flank, but he too was hard pressed, favoring his left side where the derro’s axe had crunched through his armor. Hodge had opened the battle with violent power attacks, but as they proved ineffective against his dexterous foe he’d switched to a more deliberative approach, standing his ground and exploiting the openings left by his adversary’s raging assault.

With Omar Tiskensen’s disintegration, the derro that had faced him cackled maniacally and turned back to finish Premiach Vanderboren. The nobleman was unconscious, blood still oozing from the deep gash in his side onto the ruined carpet. His wife Aeberrin held him in her arms, and when the derro turned to face her, lifting his axe, she held herself over his body, offering him protection in what could only be a futile gesture.

But before the derro could strike, a fleet form tumbled up on the warrior from behind, leaping into a high flip that culminated with a rapier stabbing deep into the barbarian’s shoulder.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, creep!” Mole said, kicking off from the derro’s shoulder and landing easily on her feet a pace back from him.

The derro turned, more enraged than hurt by the attack.

“Uh oh,” Mole said, as the dwarfkin rushed at her, his axe sweeping out in a blur.

Beorna had been temporarily forgotten, in the midst of the battle, and she drew upon the fullness of Helm’s might, infusing herself with the *divine power* of her patron. She looked up at the sorcerer, and as he *polymorphed* Dannel she prepared a *dispel* that would hopefully negate some of his defenses. But before she could act, a familiar cry drew her around. The last derro warrior, frustrated by the escape of Meerthan and the others, had turned to the nearest vulnerable enemies: Jenya and Ophellha. The High Priestess was strong in the power of Helm, but on this day she was not clad in heavy armor, nor did she carry any weapon. Most of her spells were designed to heal and protect, rather than to destroy enemies. But her expression remained calm as the derro screamed and ran at her, and she did not turn to flee, protecting the elven noblewoman with her slender body. She hurled a powerful enchantment at the derro, intending to immobilize him, but the creature’s insanity protected it like a shield, and the spell dissipated harmlessly. She staggered as the derro’s axe clove through her layered robes, opening a cruel gash in her side that grazed the ribs beneath.

Beorna’s roar of rage overshadowed the high-pitched screech of the derro, and she slammed into him from the side with the force of a battering ram. Her holy blade glanced hard off his partial helm, but even though the blow should have stunned him, the derro hardly hesitated before turning and laying into the templar with his axe.

The derro savant exulted in the chaos that swirled through the chamber below him. The smell of roasted flesh and fresh blood filled the once-pristine interior of the Great Library. Even in his insanity he knew that his potent rays would have little chance of affected the tough dwarves, but he aided his warriors by firing an empowered *ray of enfeeblement* that stabbed into Arun’s chest, draining his strength. His critically injured adversary took advantage of the paladin’s sudden weakness, leaping at him with a series of crushing blows, two of which penetrated his armor and cut painfully into his flesh.

Arun took the hits, and then, grunting against the pain that stabbed through his body, he lifted his sword and drove it through the chest of the derro warrior.

Beorna’s intervention had given Jenya a chance to shepherd Ophellha to the chamber exit. The high priestess looked down at Zachary Aslaxin, lying in the foyer, but one look at the roasted corpse was enough to tell her that there was nothing that could be done for him, at least not right now. “Go!” she said to the elf woman, all but pushing her forward toward the front exit before she turned back toward the raging battle. She looked frightful, pale with her white robes soaked with her own blood, but a solemn calm seemed to descend about her as she filled herself with the divine power of Helm once again.

The companions had taken a beating, but once more healing energy suffused them as Jenya filled the room with a *mass cure serious wounds* spell. The derro, without any such benefit, were being quickly worn down. Arun’s foe had been downed, and as he turned to help Hodge the two dwarves quickly finished the second warrior was well. Beorna’s adversary could not match her in sheer determination, and even Mole had managed to hold

her own, although blood marked her dark clothes in several places as she darted and tumbled around the derro, thus far avoiding the critical blow that would have finished her nimble evasions for good. She wasn't even bothering to attack, instead buying time as she harried the frustrated warrior. Her stratagem worked; as Jenya's healing filled the room Premiach was able to rise, and the two Vanderborens rushed for the exit.

The savant shrieked as his victims sought escape. He focused on the high priestess, standing there defying him in the entry to the foyer. A wise assassin might have chosen to retreat at that moment, as his fighters went down around him.

But Kravichak was, of course, insane.

The savant laughed as he blasted Jenya with the coruscating green ray of his *disintegrate* spell. But Jenya, protected by Helm, simply absorbed the hit, defying destruction even as her body shook with the grim power of the spell. And she was quick to counter, calling upon a *greater dispel* that slammed through the savant's magic with the force of a sledgehammer. Kravichak's *shield* collapsed, and as his *fly* spell faltered he plummeted twenty feet straight down to a hard landing on the marble floor.

The sorcerer drew himself up to his knees to see Arun and Hodge looking down at him. "Help Mole," the paladin said to his friend. "I'll deal with this one."

The derro laughed, although his white eyes blinked back moisture as the light of Arun's holy sword stabbed into them. "The Cagewrights will destroy you!" he hissed. "They are as gods, and will not be denied their prize!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Arun said, lifting his blade. "But you, at least, are at an end."

With a maniacal scream, Kravichak conjured a final *fireball*, centered on himself.

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They had washed and been healed, and replaced their singed garments with fresh clothes, but an odor of char still hung about the companions as they gathered that evening in the sanctuary of the High Priestess in the Temple of Helm.

"It could have been much worse," Arun said.

"Five dead," Jenya said, looking tired as she sat in the simple hardwood chair decorated with the gauntlet of Helm etched into its high back just above her head. "Aslaxin, Jurgensen, Tiskensen, Ghelve, and Mispas."

"There was nothing that we could have done differently," Beorna said. "And the dead can be returned to life with Helm's intervention, if they choose to return."

"I will have to contact the church in Almraiven," Jenya said, not even bothering to look up as she responded. "We have an insufficient supply of the diamonds needed to focus the

spell, and I doubt that enough will be found in all of Cauldron, not after all of the deaths in recent months...”

“We must concern ourselves with the living,” Dannel said. Jenya had broken the derro savant’s *polymorph* spell, but he still seemed agitated. He hadn’t sat down, and in fact his pacing seemed to grow more animated the longer that they remained there. “Damn it... they’ve got her, and we aren’t doing anything!”

“Dannel, I’m as worried as you are,” Mole said. “But without knowing where the Cagewrights are, we cannot help her, not yet.”

“What she’s sayin’, lad, is yer can’t be stupid,” Hodge said. Despite having “bathed” earlier, Hodge looked gruesome, with great swaths of his beard and brows missing where the *fireballs* had burned them away, and an ugly scar across his balding scalp where a wound hadn’t quite fully healed cleanly.

“There are several reasons why my divination may have failed to detect her, or why she may not have been able to respond to my *sending*,” Jenya said. She hadn’t mentioned the most obvious one; none of them wanted to countenance the possibility that Zenna was dead, however probable that likelihood came to be with each passing hour. “As I said earlier, I will pray for a more potent divination magic on the morrow, one that can pinpoint the location of something regardless of where it may be, here or on any other plane of reality.”

“But if they do have her, she’ll probably be warded against even that,” Dannel returned.

“It is very difficult to hide from a *discern location* spell,” Jenya said. “But yes, it is possible.”

“Blast it,” Dannel said, clenching his fists in frustration. He opened his mouth to say something else, but he was cut off by a faint rumbling that was nonetheless clearly audible through the solid foundations of the chapel. The sound was followed by a momentary trembling of the structure, just barely significant enough for them to feel it, which faded before they could do anything more than shift in their chairs.

“That’s the second tremor today,” Beorna said.

“Do you think the volcano’s stirring?” Mole asked.

“There have been no signs of a buildup of pressure beneath the caldera,” Arun said, but he frowned deeply as he said it.

“Oh, come on!” Dannel said. “This is obviously connected. The Cagewrights are moving their plans forward, mark me.”

“I’m not disagreeing,” Arun replied. “But again, without information, there’s not a lot we can do right now.”

“I just need to *do* something,” the elf said.

“Right now, you need to rest,” Beorna said. “We all do. We’re like as to do more ill than good, exhausted and clouded in mind.”

“Tomorrow, you can come with me, Dannel,” Mole said. “There’s a few leads in town you can help me track down.”

“We’d better go with you,” Arun said. “Clearly our enemies know much about our movements, and we cannot afford to let our guard down, not even for a moment.”

“I will continue my divinations,” Jenya said. “There must be an answer here somewhere, awaiting our discovery. Our enemies are very, very skilled... but they are mortals like us, and therefore not infallible.”

“I’ll bring you Zenna’s notes,” Mole said. “They might help you find the right questions to ask.”

Arun stood, his armor clanking slightly about his body at his movements. “I will check on the guards. It will be a long night, I fear.”

The others rose after him, gathering their gear before returning to their quarters in the rectory. Dannel was the last to leave, staring through the narrow slit windows at the starlit sky above the city, asking questions for which there were no easy answers, no answers at all.

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The next two days passed swiftly, for despite their uncertainties and their lack of hard information there was a great deal to do. Mole led them back and forth across the city seeking information, but even though gold coins and sometimes the threat of violence changed hands frequently, they were not able to turn any of their faint leads into something tangible. Jenya’s *discern location* likewise failed, a grim portent indeed, given the power of the spell.

The tremors within the volcano continued, and the panic within the population grew with each passing hour. Some left the city, piling their belongings onto overladen carts pulled by tired animals, scattering onto the four roads that wound down from the volcano town. But most hunkered in their homes, too fearful of any action that might tip the delicate balance that kept the city poised on the edge of the precipice. The day after the assault at the Cusp of Sunrise a mob formed at the Town Hall, demanding action, and blood was again spilled as the Watch clashed with desperate people afraid for their lives. Only the presence of Arun, along with a company of his followers, kept the situation from devolving into a mad riot. Bereft of strong leadership, the city seemed to be adrift. Ankhin Taskerhill had apparently given up his aspirations to serve as Mayor; the merchant was seen leaving the city on the road toward Almraiven along with most of the members of his household, all mounted and moving with the speed and determination that bespoke long planning. Jenya appeared at the Town Hall in the company of Meerthan Eliothorn, Maavu Arlental, and Arun Goldenshield toward the end of the day, and met with Teerson Skellerang and his officers, along with the leading municipal officials. While they shared a consensus on the need to

maintain order, the visitors pointed out the importance of provoking confrontations and breeding further chaos. A new schedule of patrols by the Watch was instituted, with most of the mercenaries that Vhalantru had hired to be kept in their camps outside of the city for the immediate future. Arun's force of volunteers had handled themselves well during the clash at the Town Hall, and they were deputized into service in the Watch, along with others who had past experience in the militia or other military bodies and were known for being level-headed and reliable under pressure. One of Arun's recruits was a grizzled oldster named Alowyn Tristane, who as it turned out had spent six years of his youth as a campaigner in the armed forces of Tethyr. Arun installed Tristane as liaison between the Watch and the temple forces, and while Skellerang clearly didn't like it, he knew the way of the wind (and the tenuousness of his own position, for he had been a vocal support of Lord Vhalantru before his true nature was revealed) well enough not to stand in the way of the changes. It was well after midnight by the time that the last of the meetings had adjourned, but there was a slightly greater sense of reassurance among Cauldron's government now that *someone* had stepped forward to provide direction.

The next day was even busier. Despite their commitment to continue seeking information that might lead them to the Cagewrights and Zenna, all of the companions found themselves drawn into the vacuum of power, taking to the streets in an effort to keep order and reassure the populace. Dannel used his music and oratory to defuse a potential riot in front of a merchant's stall. Accusations of price gouging had circulated, and the crowd didn't need much incentive to start breaking things. Firing an arrow between the fingers of an angry man who'd reached forward to grab a hanging gourd of lamp oil on the side of the stall might have also helped to quell the brewing anger of the dozen or so townsfolk, and encourage them to be a bit less rash. There was a tense moment as one of the men, standing beside the elf, angrily reached for the dagger at his belt—only to find that it had vanished, along with most of the other weapons that had been carried by the gathered townsfolk.

At least Mole had agreed to put the weapons into storage at the Temple of Helm, rather than selling them.

Arun and Hodge spent the morning at the temple. More volunteers had showed up there, wishing to assuage their own fears by being useful. Arun put them to work or directed them to the Town Hall or to other quarters of the city, depending upon their skills and experience. Some of the recruits had developed a uniform of sorts, a thin surcoat of blue cloth marked with the sigil of a hammer done up in hasty black stitching. It wasn't as impressive or as professional as the garb worn by the Watch, but there was a certain reassurance in seeing the small teams of men and women in blue rushing throughout the city, moving with purpose and determination. Often the Hammers (as they quickly became known) would arrive at a destination to find a good dozen or so people hot on their heels, eager to help.

Beorna remained at Jenya's side, and her dominating presence, clad in her adamantine plate with her two huge swords slung across her back, certainly helped the High Priestess push her points when dealing with Skellerang or the other town officials. She met again with Maavu and some of the other leading merchants again that morning, and when she returned to the temple shortly after noon, she already looked like she'd had a full day. Dark circles were visible under her eyes, but she held her head high, and didn't flinch away when

several of her acolytes greeted her return with a press of important details that required her attention.

As the morning turned into afternoon, the sky grew darker, with heavy clouds gathering over the city. Flickers of ochre light that might have been lightning stirred within that dense morass of gray, although there were no sounds of thunder. The quakes continued to build, with two or three tremors coming each hour now, although none as yet had been severe enough to cause any more than slight damage.

Dannel and Mole returned shortly thereafter, their faces grim at what they'd seen in the city. Despite the odd lack of wind and rain, it felt like a storm, with the iridescent haloes of yellow energy flaring within the thunderheads floating low above the city serving as an omnipresent reminder that something bad was brewing for Cauldron. The five companions—six, as Beorna rejoined them from inside the temple—gathered for a hasty meal in the stableyard, in the lee of the old wooden structure.

“I will likely have to return to the Town Hall shortly,” Beorna said as soon as she'd taken a seat on one of the bales of hay stacked up against the stable wall. “The High Priestess is due for another several meetings this afternoon, but she has taken seclusion in her chapel, and damned if I'm going to let anyone pull her out before she's ready.”

“She has risen to the challenge of providing leadership in some tough times,” Dannel said. “I've known many who presented themselves as harder, tougher, to the world, but who folded under less pressure than she's faced.”

Another flicker of eerie yellow light flared within the gray depths of the cloudbank, directly above the city. “I so do not like the looks of that,” Mole said.

Hodge paused in the process of stuffing sausages into his mouth so snort and offer his view on the subject. “If ye weren't all fools, ye'd be leavin' this accursed place well and far behind. Anyone with sense could see that somethin' be brewin', an' it ain' nothin' good. An' we just sit 'ere, waitin'.”

“I don't think we'll have long to wait,” Arun said. “Whatever is gathering here, it is seeped in taint. The Cagewrights are making their gambit, and we will have to stand against them.”

Hodge grumbled, but didn't respond. The conversation died out then, and they ate in silence, quickly, as if guilty for even a brief respite in the day's activity. Or maybe they were just eager to be back in action, even if without knowledge of what they were fighting against, in order to keep difficult questions and niggling doubts in check.

As they were finishing, a hint of motion drew their attention around. Jenya stood there in the doorway to the rectory, limned in a halo of light from within the building, giving her a saintly, otherworldly look. The companions could instantly see from her face that something was very, very wrong.

“What is it?” Arun asked, even as Beorna strode purposefully across the courtyard toward her patron.

Jenya sagged slightly against the threshold of the outer door. Tears shone in her eyes as she looked up and fixed them with an intent stare.

“Cauldron is lost,” she said. “We must evacuate the city!”

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They did not waste much time in idle conversation, but Jenya did her best to answer their questions. She had reached out to Helm once more for guidance, and had been nearly overcome by the intensity of her god’s response. “Look to the heart of the matter,” spoke the words—divine or divinely-inspired, at the very least—in her mind. It was not much of a revelation, but it cut through the fog of weariness and confusion that had belabored her these last days, and replaced that with a calm certainty. The meaning of the tremors, the gathering storm, the strange happenings of the last few days, had become clear.

The Cagewrights were making their move.

In the midst of the High Priestess’s revelations, it came without warning. One moment they were talking, and the next the entire world around them seemed to be shaking violently. A dull roar overwhelmed their shouts, and Beorna only barely caught Jenya before she fell. The quake—actually just a single, massive pulse from within the volcano—barely lasted long enough for terror to replace surprise, but in its wake they could hear the screams from beyond the walls of the temple grounds that indicated that it had not come and gone without wreaking destruction.

“We’re out of time,” Dannel said.

“Orthos!” Arun yelled, pointing to one of his younger recruits, just rising from where he’d been roughly knocked onto the cobbles in the entry of the stable. At Arun’s cry he jumped up and ran over to them.

“Sir?”

“Gather all of the Hammers currently here at the Temple compound,” the paladin commanded. Even as the young man dashed off to obey, Beorna shouted after him, “And if you see any clerics, tell them to get their butts over here as well!”

“I must go to the Town Hall, and coordinate the evacuation with the Watch,” Jenya said. “Just give me a few seconds—there are a few sacred relics that cannot be left, and the *Star of Justice*.”

“I will accompany you, High Priestess,” Beorna said. “You will need protection, and the streets will not be safe, especially as panic begins to set in among the population.”

“No, that is where you will be needed,” Jenya said, holding up a hand to forestall the templar’s protest. “Fear not, I will be adequately guarded; I have prepared a potent call to Helm for an ally in the fear of this moment coming. But you... all of you... will have to take

the lead in the evacuation. It will take an hour, if not more, to mobilize and organize the Watch, and I fear that in that time, people will die.”

“Where should we start?” Dannel asked.

“There, I think,” Mole said. They turned to follow her gaze, down toward the pit of the caldera. The buildings across Obsidian Avenue from the temple obscured their view of the lake, but they could all see the vast plume of steam rising from the center of the town.

“The lake,” Arun said. “As the volcano awakens, it will superheat and overflow its banks, killing everyone it touches.”

Beorna had not shifted her gaze from Jenya, the two holy warriors testing each other in a silent battle of resolve. Finally, the templar nodded, and to Jenya’s surprise knelt before her, taking her superior’s hand and pressing it to her forehead.

“Go with the blessing of Helm,” Jenya said. She took the templar’s head in both of her hands and bent low, laying a soft kiss upon her brow, then turned and darted across the courtyard toward the temple structure, looking like a slyph as her long white robe—faintly gray from dust—trailed behind her.

Men and women had gathered in the stableyard. There was only about a dozen, but more than half wore the distinctive tunics bearing the hammer sigil that they had taken as the symbol of their service. Most of Arun’s followers were out in the city with Jenya’s few remaining priests, helping to keep order or to otherwise lend their support to the troubled townsfolk remaining in Cauldron.

Arun didn’t waste time, pointing to a half-elven woman of middle years wearing the blue tunic. “Ambelin, you’re in charge of this group. We are evacuating the city. Travel light, but take your weapons and tools. The High Priestess will be coming out in a few minutes, and will be going to the Town Hall to coordinate the evacuation. I want you to go with her, and tell Tristane that he and the Hammers are to fully support her in whatever she commands. Help whomever you can, but don’t dally long; we need to get as many people out of the city as we can. I fear that we may not have much time.”

“Yes sir!” the woman replied. She turned and immediately started giving orders to those gathered, who quickly started running for their gear or otherwise preparing to depart. The young man, Orthos, hesitated a moment. “What about you, sir? Where are you going?”

The adventurers had already started toward the gate that led out from the relative sanctuary of the temple into the growing chaos of the city. At the question, the paladin glanced back over his shoulder. “Into the fire, lad. Into the fire.”

Chapter 331

On a normal day, it was a pleasant walk of ten to fifteen minutes from Obsidian Avenue, the outermost of Cauldron’s ring-streets, to the shores of the crater lake.

On this day, it took over an hour, and the journey was far less than pleasant.

The city was in a tumult. Everywhere confused and frightened citizens ran about. Some were hastily gathering their belongings, obviously intent on flight, while others were hurrying on errands of vital importance, checking on a loved one or rushing back to a home or place of business to see if the latest quake had ruined them. And there were even more people who went to the streets for no reason, just a vague panic that grew and built off of every additional soul seeking answers.

The companions could not stop to give those answers, even if they had known them. But they directed people toward the gates, to leave the city as quickly as possible. The city leaders would have more information for them, would escort them to safety. Their words only spawned more questions, fear, even anger; but the Heroes of Cauldron did not allow themselves to be diverted for long.

Despite their intent, however, they did find themselves facing distractions that they could not avoid. While making their way down one of the sloping alleys that connected Ash and Magma Avenues (the city streets had taken on a grimmer allusion now, Mole commented as they traveled), they passed a three-story tenement that was leaning slightly out over the cobbled pavement below. One look was enough for the dwarves to spot the cracks in the stone foundation of the structure, undermined by the quake. A man stood in the street in front of the building, surrounded by a few bystanders, all focused upon another figure visible in the narrow window visible under the gables of the top floor above. The man in the street was entreating the man in the window to come down, but even from several stories below the companions could see that he appeared to be mad, his eyes wide and darting wildly about. He carried a burden against his body, and as they closed they could see the small arms and legs jutting from it that identified its nature.

“Tomash!” the man in the street shouted. “Come down... it is not safe, we must leave!” Some of the other bystanders offered similar urgings, caught up in the drama of the moment.

“He’s going to drop that child,” Mole said. “I’d better hop up there and grab him.”

“Hold a moment,” Dannel said, stepping forward, toward the concerned man in the street.

“Who is he?” the elf asked, his tone reassuring yet infused with a gentle air of command.

“Tomash,” the man said. “My brother. The big tremor, it shook everything... I rushed out of the house, but he would not come... The last tendays... So much pressure... I fear that his mind, it has been sundered!”

The elf put a hand on the man’s arm, and looked up at the panicked man. “Tomash,” he said, his voice cutting clearly through the din, the building background noise of fear and confusion, that now resounded through the entire city. “Tomash, you must come down. Your child depends on you. Go into the house, and come down to the street, to your brother.”

The words seemed to flow together in an almost melodic cadence. The gathered townsfolk could not see the power of his *charm person* spell take hold, but even in the tumult—or perhaps, because of it—a visceral part of them could sense the presence of power in the air, and they watched with fascination as the man Tomash grew calm, and after a moment turned and disappeared back into the building.

A minute later, he appeared in the doorway, with the child safe in his arms, and a second—a young girl, maybe six or seven—clinging onto the drooping tail of his disheveled tunic.

“Get these people away from the structure, and don’t let anyone back in,” Arun ordered Tomash’s brother. The paladin and Hodge had given the sagging foundation a quick look, and it confirmed their earlier suspicions. “One more tremor, and this building is going to be here in the street.”

“The people are leaving the city,” Beorna added. “Go to the nearest gate and wait for directions.”

“But...” the man hesitated, turning back toward the building. “Everything we have...”

“You have your lives,” the templar said, harshly. “Now, all of you... go!”

Her tone was not one that would brook challenge, and the people went, fearfully looking back over their shoulders. A few, they saw, ran into nearby buildings, no doubt intent on rescuing what they could of their possessions regardless of the danger.

“Fools,” Beorna said, as they pressed on.

Magma Avenue was in even more of a tumult. The panicked neigh of horses contrasted with the cries of people dashing about; a half-dozen teamsters were trying to keep two trains of horses under control while people loaded the wagons behind them in a frenzy of activity. A few people tried to push their way into the queue, carrying their own possessions, but steel-eyed guards were quick to intervene and prod them on their way. It looked like a pair of shops fronting the street were coordinating the evacuation. Arun grimaced as a trio of grimacing men, merchants by their dress, emerged from one of the shops maneuvering an obviously expensive but quite heavy and impractical oak desk toward one of the wagons.

“What do these people think they are doing?” Beorna said.

“They’re afraid!” Dannel said.

“There’s goin’ to be a riot brewin’ here, any minute!” Hodge said. As if to punctuate his words, the ground shook beneath his feet, and a new surge of fear sliced through the crowd as people stumbled and fell to the hard cobbles. This quake lasted only a few seconds, but it added to the ferocity of the scene, like water added to an already overflowing pot.

“Over here!” Mole shouted, darting off to the right, down the street.

“Where’s she going?” Beorna asked, at the same moment that Arun yelled, “Stay together!” But they could now hear the screams that had no doubt alerted their keen-eared friend, and they hurried after her. The crowd, despite its panic, got out of their way; three heavily armored dwarf warriors had that kind of effect.

It didn’t take long to reach the scene of the disturbance. A chasm, some fifty feet long and at least ten feet across, had opened like a great gash in the center of the avenue. Wisps of volcanic gas rose from the fissure, and as they rushed forward to join Mole at its rim, careful to remain back from the crumbling edge, they could hear the desperate cries coming from below.

“There are people trapped down there!” Mole yelled.

As if the moment wasn’t intense enough, the ground shuddered beneath their feet, and the sides of the chasm shifted. Drawing gradually—but inexorably—closer as the rumblings of the volcano began to push the fissure shut.

Slowly crushing the helpless people below.

Chapter 332

With the fissure beginning to close, Mole did not hesitate. She’d already dipped into her *bag of holding*, and as the dwarves closed she withdrew two bundles of rope from the magical container and threw them at them.

“Toss ‘em down!” she said, not even waiting for a response as she turned and leapt into the fissure.

Dannel sat on the cracked paving stones a few feet back from the lip of the opening, quickly removing his boots and slipping on his *slippers of spider climbing*. By the time that Arun and Hodge had gotten the ropes unwound, Dannel too had descended into the uneven opening, darting precariously down the sharply slanting and uneven sides of the fissure. Streamers of steam and sulfurous ash filled the space, making visibility beyond a few feet almost impossible. From below, they could hear the screams of pain and panic of the people trapped below.

“Mole!” Beorna yelled into the expanse. “Ropes coming down!” At her gesture Arun and Hodge stepped forward, hurling the loosened coils down, keeping hold of the far ends.

“Spread out, one to each side,” Arun directed, already moving from the narrow end of the fissure toward one of the crumbling sides.

“Watch those edges!” Beorna warned, needlessly; all of the dwarves knew enough about stone and earth to know the danger.

It only took a few seconds for the first line to grow taut. Arun, his legs braced solidly against the pavement a spare pace back from the edge, pulled until a pale human man in the clothes of a day laborer appeared through the smoke. Beorna grabbed him as soon as

he drew close enough to the edge, taking his hand in a crushing grip and hurling him bodily to safety. Even as the man stumbled back, coughing, Hodge drew a second person up on his line, a woman who cried in pain, favoring her left arm.

The ground shook again as the sides of the chasm drew another foot closer. Hodge and Arun were now a bare five paces distant on the opposite sides of the fissure, but both ignored the closing walls, focusing only on drawing up more people from below. Another woman, the line secured around her body, her broken arm dangling uselessly behind her, was helped up by Arun and Beorna, while Hodge pulled up a man holding an elvish child who seemed utterly frail and delicate in his soot-stained arms. Another man followed the woman with the broken arm on Arun's side, unconscious, the rope lashed around his chest. Arun and Hodge were nearly close enough now for them to reach out and touch across the closing gap of the fissure.

"Mole, Dannel, get out of there!" Arun yelled down into the fissure. Both dwarves heaved on their ropes, each drawing another person out of the jaws of death. Both of the victims were unconscious this time, and Beorna had to lean precariously over the opening to draw them in.

Dannel appeared then, moving awkwardly up the closing gap, his magical slippers the only thing keeping him from sliding back into the ashen darkness below. His cloak was wrapped around a considerable burden held close against his body, and his face was tight with tension and effort as he leapt up to a jutting stone that shifted beneath his weight. He started to fall, arrested only by Beorna's sudden grab, her arm shooting out to take a fistful of his cloak, focusing on the bulge of his quiver underneath. For a heart-shattering second he hung from her grip solely by the strap of the quiver secured under his arm, unable to help her lest he lose his grip on his burdens. Then Arun was there, and the two dwarves pulled him up to safety.

"Thanks," he gasped. Beorna drew back the cloak, revealing two pale human children, each maybe six or seven years old. They were conscious, very scared—and alive.

"Meeka!" one of them, a little girl, cried, reaching for the chasm.

The dwarves turned toward the opening just as the ground lurched again, and with a crash that propelled a last jet of ash and smoke up into the sky, the fissure slammed shut.

"Mole!"

Chapter 333

Arun helped Dannel to his feet, as one of the injured women came forward, taking the children into her arms, sobbing in relief. The girl was crying, now, pointing toward the fissure, repeating the name she'd called out earlier. Beorna was tending to some of the unconscious victims they'd pulled out of the chasm before it had slammed shut, and her face was grim as she glanced back at the ridge formed where the sides of the fissure had buckled together. Hodge clambered forward, pulling at loose debris, but while steam

continued to vent up from narrow cracks, the fissure had been well and truly shut by the inexorable movement of the earth beneath them.

“Fool girl,” Hodge cursed, but his voice was thick as he looked for what he knew would not be found.

Then there was a flash of smoke, just a few steps to his left. The dwarf started in surprise as the smoke dissipated to reveal Mole, kneeling bent over, coughing as she fought for a clean breath of air.

Hodge offered Mole his ubiquitous jug, but she shook her head. “I’m not *that* desperate,” she said, pulling herself, up, cradling her arms close against her chest.

“You just have to make it dramatic, don’t you,” Dannel said, moving around the ridge of the close fissure to join them. His tone was acerbic, but the relief was obvious on his face.

“Did we get everyone?” Arun asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Mole said, opening her cloak to reveal what she’d been protecting. The little girl let out a shriek as a small form twisted in the gnome’s grasp, yapping; it was a blackened but otherwise hale puppy.

“Meeka!” the girl cried. Mole walked over to her, a wide smile on her face, and offered the child her pet.

“Thank you,” the woman, the child’s mother, said. “Thank you, all of you.”

“The city is being evacuated,” Arun said, his voice pitched to carry through the small crowd that had gathered around the drama of the rescue. “Stay together, move to the closest city gate as quickly as you can. Don’t stop, and don’t go into buildings.”

Beorna helped the last of the injured survivors to his feet. Her healing powers hadn’t fully restored all of them, but they were all ambulatory, and would have a better chance than some of escaping the increasingly deadly city. That fact was made clear a moment later as a sudden plume of white steam rose up from the Lava Avenue, just one street below them now, on the edges of the lake.

“The lake is overflowing its boundaries!” Dannel said.

“Let’s go,” Arun said. The companions gathered their gear, Mole quickly wrapping up the ropes in case they were needed again. The first connecting street was blocked by a collapsed building that had fallen inward across the sloping avenue. No one was evident, although fifty people might have been buried under that rubble as far as they could have known. Rather than essay the unstable barrier, they rushed down to the next block, and turned into a pedestrian walkway that led down a wide stone staircase that ran down between several buildings to the lowest of Cauldron’s four main boulevards.

Lava Avenue was relatively quiet, compared to the rest of the city. There were few residences here, on the edges of the lake; with the danger of flooding most people who

could lived higher up along the rim of the caldera. There were a number of businesses and warehouses here, and several docks that had already been inundated by the rising waters. The lake was clearly in turmoil, steam rising from the waters brought to a boil by the release of superheated gasses from deep within the volcano. Angry waves five or more feet high rushed outward from the advancing rim of the lake, splashing out onto the avenue.

“Leave it, get to higher ground, out of the city!” Dannel yelled, yanking a man from where he’d been trying to load a wagon in front of a warehouse nearby. The elf drew his sword and cut the panicked horse at the lead of the wagon free, calming it enough for the man to take its lead reins.

“Greedy fools,” Beorna observed, as the man ran off, horse in tow. “They’d risk their lives for a few gold pieces in swag.”

“The livery stables!” Mole yelled, pointing down the street toward one of the long structures that abutted the lake, home to dozens of domesticated animals. Apparently some people had elected to depart without taking their property, and they could hear the panicked bray of trapped creatures from within the structure even from a hundred paces distant. The back of the stables were normally a good fifteen feet above the waters of the lake, but now the steaming waves were slamming hard against the wooden planks.

“Great, now I’m playin’ hero to a bunch o’ cattle,” Hodge grumbled, but he followed the others as they ran toward the stables. They passed a group of men staggering from the ruin of what had been an inn, several of them bloody and unconscious, helped by the others. Beorna and Arun paused to help them, while Dannel and Mole continued toward the stables.

But before either group could reach their destination, a roar from the lake drew their attention around. The already roiling waters had suddenly erupted in a surge focused maybe fifty yards out, not far from where the lake’s edge was normally situated. A fresh wave pulsed out onto Lava Avenue, forcing Dannel and Mole back to avoid being scaled. Even as they darted out of the way of the boiling water, the source of the disturbance became evident, as a... *thing* rose up out of the lake, borne up out of the water on a thrashing tangle of limbs. It had a vaguely humanoid look to it, not much larger than an adult human, although its alien features were more those of a fish than those of a man. Even from this distance they could see the markings of an unholy bloodline about it, and from the waist down its body terminated not in legs and feet, but in a number of thick tentacles that now slapped the water as it lifted its body up out above the waves, transforming the surface of the lake around it into a sea of steaming froth.

“Now what in the blasted blooming hells is THAT?” Hodge yelled, already fumbling with his heavy bow.

The creature let out a terrible roar from its inhuman jaws, a sound of blind rage and searing pain. It was clearly discomfited by the boiling water, and as its thrashings lifted it above the waves wings unfolded from its back, pounding the water as they furiously lifted the infernal monstrosity into the sky. Despite its terrible appearance, it looked to be intelligent, for as it

ascended they could see that it wore gleaming bracers at its wrists, and it carried a slender wand in one hand.

“It has already been injured,” Arun said. “Perhaps it will just fly off, and leave this place.”

“Takin’ bets?” Hodge muttered, sliding a fat bolt into place and hefting his weapon.

And indeed, the creature, once it was clear from the lake and more or less stable in the air, rose above them over the flooded avenue. It looked down at them with a gaze that seethed with malevolence, and it sundered the air with a cry of pure hate.

“Begone from here, fiend!” Arun said, drawing his holy sword, letting its light shine out like a beacon as he lifted it above his head.

In response, the creature spoke a word of pure corruption, and in response the air around it rippled and seethed. For a moment the boundaries between realities were sundered, and through that opening a pair of filthy, scarabous vulture-things entered the world.

“Vrock demons,” Beorna said. She lifted her palm, and calling upon the power of Helm, extended a ray of *searing light* from her to the fish-man fiend.

The beam struck the creature, but instead of burning it, there was a flash and the energy blast returned back on its course, slamming into its caster’s chest. “Ah!” Beorna cried, as the holy power of her own patron stabbed a fist of pain through her body.

“Let’s see if it can reflect one o’ these!” Hodge said, lifting his bow to his shoulder. But even as he drew the trigger of his weapon, the fiend pointed at the trio of dwarves, and a wave of pain swept through each of them. The potent energies of a *horrid wilting* spell tore through their bodies mercilessly.

Chapter 334

The *horrid wilting* spell was a terrible magic, capable of ripping the moisture that facilitated the basic processes of life right out of a living being. The fiendish morkoth’s spell, a gift of its dark ancestry, hit them with its fullest potential of power.

The injured men in the shadow of the ruined inn behind them screamed and collapsed, reduced in a heartbeat to desiccated husks that only barely resembled men. The dwarves were made of sterner stuff, but even they could not fully resist the dark energies of the spell.

Or at least two could not; Arun and Hodge gritted their teeth as their bodies screamed in protest against the moisture torn from them by the potency of the spell. Arun’s skin sank close against his skull, and blood flowed from his fingers as the suddenly-dry flesh burst within his gauntlets. Hodge stumbled, tears of blood trailing from his eyes as he blinked, trying to clear his vision.

But Beorna, her mettle bolstered by the power of her faith, and the sheltering hand of Helm, fought off the dire effect of the *wilting*. Her face twisted into a snarl as she jammed her sword point-down into the ground at her feet, and reached around to the small bow still slung across her back. In part, her ire was directed at herself, for while she possessed the power to send such an infernal monstrosity back to its plane of origin, she also knew that her chances of affecting it with her magic were almost nil. That was the price of her chosen path, sacrificing the power to wield spells for the toughness and dedication of the templar. It was a choice she'd made freely, but at this particular moment it grated.

The morkoth let out a shriek as a missile stabbed into its body. The shot had not been Hodge's, as the bolt from his crossbow had missed cleanly. Rather, Dannel and Mole were running back down the road toward them, forced now almost onto the far shoulder by the advancing waters of the lake. The buildings on the lakeward side of the avenue were now surrounded by boiling water, and the crash of breaking glass and splintering wood sounded now almost constantly from all around the edges of the lake. Dannel paused long enough to loose another shaft, which the creature was able to dodge. It had erected a dark field of energy around it, a familiar *unholy aura* that the companions had faced before. It beat its wings to gain more altitude, but none of the adventurers would have wagered that it was retreating from the fray.

The vrocks let out their terrible shrieks and dove toward the dwarves. Cautious, the avian fiends did not immediately dive into range of their blades, but instead drew upon dark currents of power to bolster themselves prior to engaging their foes. Beorna fired an arrow at one, but the missile barely stuck in its thick hide, not harming it. The vrocks, now maybe twenty feet above them now, circling them in a wide sweep, responded with a mocking cackle as they surrounded themselves with shifting cloaks of *mirror images*. Arun, who had not gone for his bow, only held his sword ready, waiting for the inevitable attack.

Dannel drew out a handful of arrows from his magical quiver as the morkoth angled back toward him, spreading them onto the bed of a nearby ruined wagon that had been left beside the road. Mole had been beside him a moment ago, but she'd disappeared somewhere, naturally. Dannel only hoped she'd gotten clear; he'd seen what effect the morkoth's initial attack had had, and he fully expected to draw something similar down upon himself.

Drawing his first arrow to his cheek, he set about stimulating that response. His first shot missed, to his frustration, but he did not spend any time berating himself. The arrows were close at hand; each was fit to string, drawn, and fired in a heartbeat. The morkoth's thick, oily hide and the evil aura of power surrounding it were potent defenses, but Dannel was one with his bow, the song filling him, infusing his arrows with magical power. The creature flinched noticeably in its flight as the elf's second arrow vanished into its torso, and even as it recovered the third clipped its wing, punching through the membrane as it passed through. The creature howled in rage and drew its wings close around its body, plummeting toward Dannel like a stone. Still Dannel fired, and his fourth shot stuck in the creature's leg, trailing fat drops of black blood that splattered on the stones at his feet.

He reached for another arrow, but before he could ready another shot, the morkoth spread its wings and let loose another spell upon its tormentor.

The vrock, content with the potency of their defensive preparations, finally unleashed their assault. They opened with a paired screech, a sonic assault intended to stun their enemies, and leave them completely vulnerable to attack. Unfortunately for them, their enemies were dwarven veterans, who were easily able to resist the terrible sound. Hodge had reloaded his bow and shot one of the vrock, a square-on impact to the chest that unfortunately connected with a *mirror image*. Beorna's arrows likewise struck only empty air, although she did manage to remove several of the images from one of the creatures before they both wheeled and dove to the attack.

Arun waited in a ready position until he actually felt the impact of claws tearing at his shield, trying to find an opening in his defenses. In that instant he released the attack he'd been holding, driving his sword through the body of the demon, *smiting* it with a critical strike that tore through its ribcage, drove through a lung, and then erupted out from its back. The demon seemed shocked, opening its beak soundlessly as the holy power of the sword seared its corrupted essence from within. It managed to get one of its hind legs up between itself and the dwarf impaling it with his sword, and pushed off of the blade, flopping awkwardly to the ground made slick with its own blood. Hodge rushed up, ready to finish it, but the vrock still had a bevy of *mirror images* protecting it, and the dwarf's axe clove through one of those instead of the real creature.

"Blast ye!" Hodge cursed, almost losing his balance as his foot landed on a cobblestone slick with demonic ichor.

Beorna, meanwhile, was closely engaged with the second vrock. As it drew within reach she dropped her bow and drew forth her own holy blade, hefting the weapon with both of her muscled hands wrapped around its hilt. She was cautious, wary of overextending herself with a strike against a false image, and that caution allowed the vrock to get in the first strike. As it dove at her it lashed out with one of its hind legs, clipping her solidly across the right side of her face. Her helm prevented her from losing an eye, but the sharp talons still dug painfully across her brow, opening gashes that trailed blood down the side of her face.

The templar merely shook her head and countered with a series of expert cuts that formed a weaving pattern of light between her and the demon. Several more of the *mirror images* vanished as she tore through them with the holy blade, but they served their purpose, keeping the demon safe from harm, for the moment.

Dannel screamed in agony as the morkoth, now a mere fifty feet above him, spread its wings and extended a webbed hand down toward him. Black flames erupted around him, slashing into his slender body, threatening to tear the very fabric of his soul asunder. But even as the *destruction* spell took hold, a clear thought sounded in his mind, a picture of the woman he loved, her fate dependent on them, on *him*, surviving to find her...

He screamed again, but this time there was more frustration and rage than pain in the sound. He realized that he'd fallen to the ground, and that while wisps of black smoke rose from his body, he was alive. His bow was still in his hand, his fingers white around the smooth shaft.

Then an echoing scream drew his attention up, and he saw the morkoth, its wings spread wide like some avenging angel, descending upon him, his death shining in its eyes.

Chapter 335

There was no time for thought, only for instinct. Dannel raised his right hand, the one bearing the magical ring he'd recently acquired, and with a thought called upon its power. The ring, its bronze face shaped into the head of a ram, hummed as a plane of translucent force formed around the elf's fist, then blasted into the descending form of the morkoth.

The creature was caught off-guard, and any mundane foe would have been diverted by the potency of the ring's attack. But Dannel, reacting out of a self-preserving reflex, had not factored in the half-fiend's considerable spell resistance. The force-blast dissipated as it struck the morkoth, which snapped its head forward as it landed, opening its huge jaws to seize the unfortunate elf. Dannel didn't even have time to cry out as the creature *smote* him, and he was unconscious even before it sent him hurtling back behind the wagon to fall in a gangly heap in the muddy ditch behind it.

The morkoth lifted its head and bellowed in triumph, a hollow, gasping sound made more terrible by the red smears of Dannel's blood that surrounded its gaping mouth. But despite its success thus far, the creature was clearly in some discomfort. Its body had been designed for dwelling under the water, not for breathing the air above, and blood continued to seep from the various puncture wounds Dannel had inflicted upon it already with his arrows. Turning to see its summoned vrock doing poorly against the dwarves, it started beating its wings to lift it once more into the air.

But before it could alight, something struck it across the back with a sucking plop. There was no pain, but within a few seconds it became harder for the morkoth to beat its wings. It could not see, of course, the sticky strands of alchemical goop that spread out from the tanglefoot bag that had just hit it between the shoulder blades, fouling its wings more with each beat. Nor did it see the rope that had been wrapped around the bag, and which now was tangled in the mixture, trailing out behind it to a terminus that Mole was quickly wrapping around one of the axles of the ruined wagon nearby.

The morkoth, its wings pounding furiously, leapt into the air, and was finally able to start gaining altitude despite the hindrance caused by the adhesive strands cluttering its back. But it quickly reached the limit of the rope, which jerked it roughly back down. Hissing in fury as it landed, it turned and grabbed hold of the rope. Looking back, it spotted Mole, who darted behind the wagon as the morkoth lifted its wand and fired a *lightning bolt* that slammed into the damaged conveyance, sending wood splinters flying. And more importantly, from its perspective, severing the rope that bound it to the ground.

In the meantime, as the morkoth struggled with Mole's entangling line, Arun and Hodge had finally whittled away the last of the shifting images protecting the critically injured vrock. The hapless demon, compelled by the *summoning* that had drawn it here, could not retreat, and so it perished in a bloody mess, dissolving into noxious black smoke as the bond holding it on the Prime Material Plane ebbed with the ending of its life. The two dwarves turned to aid Beorna. The templar's foe had tried everything it could in an effort to stop her;

telekinesis had failed against her indomitable resistances, and even blasting her with a cloud of invasive spores had done little to ease the ferocity of her attack, although the burrowing growths fostered by the spores had to be causing her intense pain. Only its *mirror images* was keeping it in the fray at all, and as Beorna drove it back, the demon flapping its wings madly as it hovered a few paces above the ground, it paused to refresh the blurring shroud of images surrounding it. Like its kin, however, the demon did not, could not, withdraw, and with a shriek it met the templar's charge, slashing at her body with all four of its taloned limbs.

"Damn it, slay the master fiend!" Beorna shouted at the other two dwarves. When Arun hesitated, only for an instant, she added, "I can handle this one! MOVE!"

The two men complied, charging toward the morkoth, some fifty paces distant, even as it blasted the wagon with its *lightning bolt*, freeing itself. Beorna, fighting through the pain of the spores burrowing into her flesh, cursed as her sword again passed through empty air, popping another image, suffering in turn a painful impact as a talon bruised her shoulder. She wasn't badly hurt, not yet, but each small wound inflicted by the demon was adding to her tally of injuries. And the others *had* been hurt, hurt bad by the *horrid wilting*, and she knew that they would need her help against the powerful fiend that had unleashed such destructive magical powers.

To the hells with it, she thought, and she lowered her head, closing her eyes as she listened for the flapping of wings that announced another sweeping assault from the demon. When the sound filled the interior of her helmet, and its shriek echoed within that adamantine cavern, she thrust her blade forward with all her might.

The morkoth lifted once again into the air, laboring against the clinging strands of tanglefoot mixture splayed across its back. The fragment of rope, still anchored solidly to that adhesive, trailed behind it. The remnants of the rope formed a twenty foot tail behind the ascending creature, and as its end lifted up off the ground Arun, charging hard, lunged forward and seized it in a mailed fist. For a moment the dwarf was jerked roughly into the air, dangling several feet above the ground before his weight dragged him—and the morkoth—back with him. The fiend let out a fierce roar of protest as the paladin tossed his shield aside, taking ahold of the rope in both hands, yanking the morkoth down while Hodge lifted his burning axe, ready to deliver a telling blow.

But before he could strike, the morkoth opened its jaws wide, and spoke a single word. A word of utter anathema that shook the reality of the world in a forty-foot radius around it.

Hodge clutched his head and crumpled. Likewise, Arun fell, paralyzed by the fell power of the *blasphemy*. Behind the blasted wagon, Dannel, brought to the brink of consciousness by a healing potion from Mole, slumped back into the muck of the ditch, while Mole, her body quivering, fell across his ravaged frame. With a single stroke, the fiendish monstrosity had incapacitated almost all of its foes.

The morkoth, exulting in its evil power, landed and stood over the helpless form of the paladin, ready to deliver a final, killing blow.

Chapter 336

Beorna felt the tremor of impact as her sword slid through the body of the vrock. She opened her eyes to see the demon thrashing, impaled on the holy blade, and followed it as it collapsed to the ground, twisting the sword in the vicious wound. For the demon, already injured by her earlier attacks, it was enough, and in moments it had dissolved into greasy black smoke.

She turned just in time to hear the *blasphemy* uttered by the morkoth. She was outside of the radius of the effect, and so she felt it as a vague dissonance, like a scream in the distance that one isn't quite able to sort out from background noise. But seeing the effect upon her comrades, she realized instantly what had happened.

Even as the morkoth flapped down to the soaked cobbles of the street, she was charging. Her boots splashed in puddles that steamed hot wisps of noxious volcanic gasses. Her head was starting to swim, the toxic fumes from the lake searing her lungs. The vrock spores had sprouted tendrils of ugly fibrous growth that showed through the gaps of her armor like long hairs, their pain persisting as they continued to burrow deeper into her flesh. She had healing at her call, but there was no time for that now as she saw the demon stand over the prone form of Arun, prepared to end his life.

“AAAAAAAAAARRRRRRHHHHHH!” she screamed, channeling her pain into an inchoate cry of rage and battle as she ran at the fiend. The morkoth turned and lifted the claw still clutching the wand, firing a *lightning bolt* that knifed into her chest. She made no effort to dodge the blast, just took it, letting the pain purge her, fueling her with a wave of righteous fury as she slammed into the morkoth, *smiting* it with the holy power of Helm. The backlash from its *unholy aura* slammed into her, and she felt her strength draining from her body, but the blow had nonetheless been telling, and the morkoth staggered backward, black blood oozing from a great cleft in its torso.

The energy of her charge spent, Beorna was open to a counterattack from the morkoth. But the fiend, now seriously injured, was feeling the growing surge of need. Its lungs could not breathe air, and although the boiling lake promised pain, it was currently the only alternative to slow asphyxiation.

Beorna quickly recovered and rushed at it again, but a few strong beats of its wings were enough to carry it out over the surging waters, out of her reach. With a final ugly sound it dove into the lake, which swallowed it with a huge splash.

Beorna did not waste time watching it. She knelt by Arun, and felt a surge of relief when she saw that he was merely stunned, and that he still drew breath. His eyes were vacant, but she knew that to be an aftereffect of the spell, and that he would soon recover. His skin was tight and cracked, and runnels of blood ran down his face from where his lips had split, results of the *horrid wilting*. Beorna channeled a powerful stream of healing energy into him, carefully positioning him so that he would not be washed over by the nearby waters, before turning to where Hodge lay a few feet away.

Even though she'd half expected it, it still pained her when she knelt to examine the dwarf.

Hodge was dead.

A loud noise drew her attention up, and she saw the morkoth erupt once more from the lake, rising swiftly into the air on powerful beats of its wings.

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Beorna's lips twisted into a snarl as she reached for her holy sword. But the morkoth did not fly immediately toward her, instead working for more altitude, rising until its unnatural form was obscured behind the rising tendrils of steam and volcanic gasses rising off of the lake.

"What... happening..." Arun's voice came from behind her, thick with effort as the paladin tried to fight off the paralysis.

Beorna didn't respond, alert to another assault, or some kind of trick, on the part of the fiend. It looked like the creature was in genuine retreat, however, and when she could no longer see it, she moved to help Arun back to his feet. Her own pain, largely forgotten in the rush of battle, had returned, and she paused to infuse herself with a *cure critical wounds*.

"We've got to find Dannel and Mole," Beorna said. Arun's eyes showed the obvious question, glancing at Hodge, and Beorna shook her head.

"The living, first," Beorna said, and Arun nodded. Another tremor, relatively faint this time, shook the volcano, and steaming water surged out over the avenue, almost to where they stood. "First, we've got to get out of this place, to higher ground. And then, we still have work to do."

* * * * *

The morkoth seethed with pain and anger as it rose high above the city. From above, the place truly looked like a chaotic hellscape, with dozens of fires burning across the city, and ruined buildings toppled over into the once-clear avenues. Tiny dots of motion were everywhere amidst the destruction below, as the panicked inhabitants of the doomed city ran for their lives, seeking escape.

A familiar need presented itself; there was no time to dally and enjoy the scenery. The morkoth had spent decades living in the sunless depths far beneath the surface of the crater lake, exploring tunnels and delving passages that no Cauldronite even suspected existed. It knew, in a vague sense, that rivers emerged from the mountains, and that there had to be other bodies of water not far from the volcano, where it could take shelter, recover its strength, and bide its time.

A brilliant light from above interrupted its musings, and it raised a clawed limb to shield its eyes from the painful radiance. It was not the golden orb of the sun, safely obscured behind the infernal clouds that hung over the city, but a moving object, drawing closer. As it drew nearer, the morkoth could see that it was a winged human—or at least appeared to

be, for as it approached the half-fiend could sense the otherworldly nature of the thing, like it a creature that was not native to this prime material plane.

The morkoth shrieked a challenge, although at the moment it would have preferred nothing more than a quick retreat from this confrontation.

“You called me, by the unholy utterance that violated this place,” the winged creature—a female—said. Her voice itself was painful, a clarion and pure sigil that contrasted strongly with the roiling chaos that surrounded them.

The morkoth’s response was an *unholy blight* that, unsurprisingly, did little to hinder the celestial, who erupted from the chaos storm with a blazing sword held high above her in both slender hands.

“Return to the abyss from which you were spawned, fiend!” the deva cried. The morkoth dove, trying to avoid the charge, but the celestial was too swift. The last thing it felt was a sharp pain between its shoulder blades, and then it was falling, plummeting down into the waiting embrace of the shattered city below.

* * * * *

“Did you see that?” Mole asked, pointing behind them, back toward the lake. “Something falling...”

“Just find us a way up to the next street!” Arun said, coughing. He and Beorna were carrying Hodge’s body between them, using a crude stretcher fashioned from the remains of the wagon below. There had not been time to remove his armor, with the lake splashing at their heels as they retreated, and Arun had insisted on bringing the slain dwarf’s magical axe, despite the added weight. Dannel, even without such a burden, was barely able to keep up with them, the elf pale and wan despite the healing potions that had been poured into him. All of them were suffering from the smoke and the fumes from the lake, and every few steps were an effort.

The lower parts of the city seemed almost deserted, now. The wreckage of ruined buildings, overcome by the continuing tremors, were evident everywhere, spilling out to block alleyways and even some of the main avenues. Plumes of smoke rose across the city, ascending to join with the roiling tumult of the unnatural clouds hanging overhead.

Mole found them a steeply sloping route up to Ash Avenue that was nearly clear of debris, only an overturned wagon offering some difficulty before the dwarves were able to push it aside enough for them all to pass by. As they emerged onto the boulevard, the sounds of the city’s chaos hit them again in full force, although the immediate area around them was free of pedestrians. A black horse bolted down the street past them, trailing its leads, lost in panic as it galloped aimlessly down the street.

“Rest... a moment...” Arun said, all but dropping the stretcher to the hard cobbles, Hodge’s armored body clattering loudly against the stones of the street. Beorna was little better off, although her face was a mask of stoicism, and Dannel simply fell where he stood, sucking

in breaths in between bouts of coughing. Only Mole seemed mostly intact, her innate toughness belied by her lithe form.

“It looks like most got out, at least at this level of the city,” Beorna said. None of them commented on the bodies they’d seen on Lava Avenue, or the many ruined buildings that might have held living beings when the tremors had claimed them.

“I wish we’d been able to save those animals,” Mole said.

“If we can get the people out, it’ll be a worthy accomplishment,” Arun said.

“So... what will we...” Dannel began.

He was cut off as Mole pointed upward, and shouted a warning. “Look!” she cried, before she vanished, shrouded in *invisibility*.

They could all see it this time, a bright point of light descending from the skies above, clearly visible through all of the smoke and haze. It was coming right toward them, getting brighter the closer it got.

“Looks like we’re not done yet,” Beorna said, exhausted, pulling herself to her feet, her holy sword sliding from its scabbard.

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The companions rose wearily, preparing themselves for yet another confrontation. But this time, for once, their wariness proved unnecessary, as became evident once the light drew close enough for them to clearly discern its source. Arun recognized her immediately, for the newcomer had made a powerful impact upon him at their first meetings, in the jungles near the Demonskar.

“Nidrama!” he exclaimed.

The deva drifted down on wings spread to catch the air, but even as she reached the ground her bare feet drifted a few inches above the stones of the street. Despite the ash and soot choking the air, her white gown was pristine, and ruffled slightly as if trammelled by a soft breeze.

“I bid you greeting, heroes,” she said. “It is good to see you once more. And you, templar.”

“Celestial,” Beorna said simply, with a nod. “We are quite busy, as you’ve no doubt noticed. What is the purpose of your visitation?”

Ignoring the dwarf’s brusque manner, Nidrama said, “The hour of travail has come upon Cauldron... but this you know, that I can see plainly in your eyes. Your foes seek to open a permanent gateway...”

“Yes, we know, Carceri, Shackleborn, Cagewrights, all that,” the templar interjected. “We were in the midst of helping to evacuate the city, when that... *thing* appeared.”

“You have done well, for despite the destruction wrought here by the agents of Evil, there are many who yet live through your direct actions.”

“There is still much to be done. Divine agent, what we truly lack is knowledge. Can you tell us where the stronghold of the Cagewrights is located?”

The celestial frowned, and with that change in her expression it seemed as though the light shining from around her dimmed somewhat. “They cloak their activities through dark magics and the blessing of foul gods,” she said. “I am limited in what I can do...”

“I understand the nature of the Compact,” Beorna said. “That comes as no surprise.”

Nidrama seemed to bristle at Beorna’s tone. “Matters are not so simple as you would imagine, templar of Helm,” she said. “Cauldron has become a focal point, and there is a danger of a cascade opening here, a rift that would transform the city into a nodus of the eternal struggle between Dark and Light. Would you have your world so riven?”

“It looks like they’re going to do it regardless,” Dannel said, adding his first words to the conversation. “Unless we stop them.”

“Yes,” the deva said, and there was an odd inflection to her voice. “Unless we stop them.”

“Holy One,” Arun said, wiping his brow of layered soot as he came forward. “I would ask one boon...” He gestured to where Hodge lay motionless in the street. “He gave his life, again, fighting against evil. Is there something that can be done?”

Nidrama turned away from Beorna and Dannel, and as her eyes fixed on the slain warrior, her expression deepened into a look of sadness and sympathy. “Brave warrior,” she said, stepping forward upon what seemed to be an invisible cushion of air. “Once again you have answered the call, ignoring the cost.” She bent low, reaching down to touch the dwarf on the forehead. The touch was ephemeral; even as her fingers appeared to contact the greasy, soot-stained brow of the dwarf she was drawing back, making the connection seem an illusion. But where the fingers had appeared to brush his grayed skin there was now a patch of brightness, a point of light that dimmed slowly, spreading inward through his body. As the companions watched in amazement, the dwarf’s body stirred, and then a loud cough racked Hodge’s supine frame.

“Blast,” the dwarf said, pulling himself up. “Bloody blazing bastards...”

Looking up, he saw the deva hovering over him, a faint smile on her face. “Um... beggin’ yer pardon, lady,” he said, his eyes wide.

“Welcome back, Hodge,” Mole said, her own eyes glimmering slightly.

Beorna knelt beside the warrior, who was still grievously injured, and channeled positive healing energy into him until he could stand, if with assistance.

“We are in your debt, Holy One,” Arun said.

“My act is but one small weight on the balance,” Nidrama replied. “I fear that it will be upon your shoulders that the final burden falls.”

“Well, we’d better get to saving the rest of the city,” Beorna said, allowing Hodge to stand on his own, once it became clear that he could do so.

“Jenya Urikas waits for you by the western gate of the city,” Nidrama said, rising slowly into the air, until she hovered a good two paces above the street. “It may be that she may find the answers that you seek.”

“Nidrama, wait,” Dannel said, stepping forward to face the celestial. “Zenna...”

The deva’s white eyes shone with a deep expression of pity. “I fear that she is lost to the light, Dannel. For in the opening of this lock, the keys are consumed.”

“No, it cannot be...”

“Do not give up hope, for in the end, nothing is truly impossible. Remember that, and may the Light shine upon your steps.”

She brandished her sword, the flames along its length forming a brilliant arc in the air before her as she rose up into the air, her wings beating back the polluted air, the light shining around her forming an envelope of purity within a scene of darkness. It looked as though that light would pierce the shroud forever, but in reality it was just a few moments before she was gone from view.

“I wonder where it is that they go, when they make those dramatic exits,” Mole said.

“Are you all right, friend?” Arun asked, clasping Hodge’s shoulder.

“A bit weak,” the dwarf admitted. He’d drawn out his jug and uncorked it, but when he looked inside his expression darkened. He held it upside down, but not even a drop emerged from the empty container. “Damn and double damn,” he said.

“We should make for the west gate, then,” Dannel said.

“I don’t think we’re done yet,” Beorna said again, sliding her sword back into its sheath. The brief encounter seemed to have reenergized her, and her usual determination shone in her face as she turned to face the others.

“Let’s get going.”

Chapter 339

The giant eagle knifed through the skies over Cauldron, darting effortlessly across the thermals that rose from the ravaged city, but giving the swirling amber clouds a wide berth as it descended toward the core of the volcano. For a moment the eagle saw something flash in the sky above it, then had to bank hastily to avoid a large, ungainly form that plummeted from the sky into the chaos below.

*What in the hells was **that***, Shensen thought, not sure that she believed what her eyes had just showed her. Of course, given what was happening in the city, odd sightings were to be expected. At least whatever it was had been falling, and its wings hadn't been flapping, so gravity would likely handle the matter.

The druid had been spending the last few days at the Lucky Monkey, present to reconsecrate the small shrine to Shaundakul located within the roadhouse. The place had been restored to full operation for some time now, but she'd postponed that duty for several months. The Monkey still held some unpleasant memories for her, ones that were not easily banished.

She'd been there when the tremors had started in earnest. Movements of the earth were not uncommon in the Alamirs, especially with the number of semi-active volcanoes in the region, but Shensen had quickly sensed that these disturbances were not natural. She'd left Bristle in the jungle near the roadhouse (with careful instructions not to molest its patrons), and began the journey back to the city. The tremors had quickly grown in intensity, and the odd clouds gathering above the volcanic peak where the city was perched were clearly not natural, so she'd taken the form she now wore, and hastened her return.

She'd stopped first at the Temple of Helm, seeking information, and the adventurers with whom she'd battled the evil forces threatening the region before. The compound was strangely deserted, but even a casual glance at the street outside was enough to tell her that the city was in its death throes, its citizens fleeing toward the gates that offered escape.

The druid's eyes narrowed, and she took to the air once more, heading for the lake.

Her vision, enhanced in her borrowed form, was of little avail given the amount of smoke, steam, and haze that blanketed the city. After dodging the falling morkoth, she swept down to the lake. Her druidic resistances helped her against the noxious effects of the volcanic gases rising from the boiling lake, but being here was still far from pleasant. She saw that her grove was completely immersed, and as she detected the cries of desperate animals she let out a screech and dove toward the livery stables, completely surrounded by the raging waters that had by now completely claimed Lava Avenue. Hot geysers erupted from numerous points across the roiling surface of the once-calm waters as volcanic gases burst up to the surface from below, and Shensen knew that a full eruption, if not imminent, was at least a strong possibility.

She landed smoothly on the edge of the roof of the stables. She'd mastered the ability of casting spells in her animal form, so it was a mere matter of an avian screech to draw upon

the natural power to pull back the waters before the building, forming a channel that stretched from the front doors to the mouth of the alley opposite the stables on the far side of the street, a steep rise that offered a difficult but passable access to Ash Avenue above.

She offered another cry, this time focusing her power on the doors of the stables. The wood had been warped by the superheated waters, but at her command they buckled and tore free of their hinges, falling forward out into the street with a loud crash. The cries of injured animals greeted her, and she dropped off the roof, spreading her wings to drift down to the soaked floor below. When she landed, her body already shifting back to its natural form, she was already calling upon her magical powers once more, empowering herself to *speak with animals*, and then sending out a wave of soothing energy to calm the panicked creatures, left trapped in their stalls and pens, several already seriously burned by the waters that had penetrated the structure.

A minute later, a column of animals charged out of the stables, led by a white stallion bearing the druid Shensen Tesseril upon its back. Later, a number of the numbed survivors of the city would comment upon the strange procession that they saw rushing through the city streets, led by the black-skinned woman with the long white hair billowing out behind her, riding bareback upon a great white horse.

But there were other wonders, amidst the tales of suffering and destruction from that day, that would become part of the lore of the people of Cauldron. One tale that was often repeated was a report of a tall, winged man, clad in robes of shining silver and bearing a huge silver trumpet. Most of the stories regarding this uncanny apparition involved it swooping down from the skies to rescue someone in dire need, from a trio of citizens that had gotten stranded on a thin crust of hardened lava, to an elderly man and his wife trapped within a burning home. His touch closed wounds and mended broken bones, according to multiple reports. According to all of the stories, the winged man did not bother to speak nor did he linger, leaping back into the tumultuous skies over the city once the endangered townsfolk had been placed in a more secure location.

One other group caught at least a quick glimpse of this mysterious figure. The adventurers known as the Heroes of Cauldron made their way slowly toward the northern gates of the city, lending their aid where it was still needed, drawing upon reserves of strength to keep going. Most of those who could get to the gates easily had done so, and those remaining tended to fall into the categories of either the infirm or injured, or the foolishly stubborn. The former the companions aided, when they could, and the latter they tried to convince, but more often were forced to leave to their own devices.

The tremors shaking the city had redoubled in intensity, and now a pall hung over the city as great plumes of smoke and volcanic ash rose up to join the dark nexus of clouds that continued to swell overhead. Great rifts, billowing forth gouts of flame and noxious gasses, were now frequently visible in the pavement of the avenues, some so wide that they forced the party to make wide detours to get safely around them.

As they were making their way down Magma Avenue, drawing near to the mercantile district that surrounded the Town Hall and its broad public square, a streak of light and a vicious cry drew their attention skyward. Two forms flew overhead, only visible for a few heartbeats, appearing above the rooftops and streaking across the street to vanish above

the buildings on the far side. The lead figure, a bloated demodand similar to the one they'd battled in Karran-Kural, was being chased by the second, a winged man in silver robes carrying a massive silver greatsword shining with brilliant light. They were there and gone before Dannel could even lift his bow.

"What was that?" Hodge asked.

"A trumpet archon," Beorna said. "That's Jenya's work, no doubt. She was supposed to summon protection for herself," the dwarf added in an undertone.

"That other was a demodand," Dannel added. "The barrier between worlds must be growing weaker."

"Come on," Arun said. "We cannot join that battle, but there's no shortage of threats in this place."

"How much longer until the volcano erupts?" Mole asked.

"It could be hours, or days, or tendays," Arun said. "If this were a normal geologic happening, I would think that the venting that we're seeing now would ease the pressure beneath the earth, but this..." He didn't have to finish; they all knew that the Cagewrights' dark plots were behind the waking volcano, and the energies being released here could unleash an uncontrollable surge of destruction at any time.

"Careful," Dannel said, gesturing up ahead.

They slowed as they came upon an ugly form splayed out across the street. The familiar stench of a farastu demodand identified it even before they got a good look at its remains. The cause of its death was instantly evident from the cracks in the pavement around its body, and the obvious impact damage wrought upon its body.

"The gate must be opening above," Dannel said, looking up at the vortex in the sky above them.

"At least these ones don't have wings," Arun said, moving to skirt it.

"Um... guys?" Mole said, drawing their attention to the near side of the street, where a damaged storefront stood. At first glance it looked as though the place had been devastated by one of the tremors, but as they studied it they could see that most of the building was still intact, with most of the damage centered around a caved-in section of the roof facing the street. The windows of the building had all shattered, and the interior was dark, but there was enough light to reveal shifting movement. Sounds drifted out into the street, the crunch of glass, accompanied by a clatter of falling pottery and other, even less pleasant sounds that clearly weren't natural in origin.

"Looks like we got a live one," Beorna said, drawing her holy sword. "This won't take but a moment." Her stance betrayed her eagerness to be on the giving side of things for a change.

"We've got bigger problems," Dannel said, his eyes still on the skies above. As they looked up, they could see ochre flashes from within the streaked morass of gray and yellow clouds above. From those flashes, dark things plummeted downward; more demodands. A few, their bloated bodies identifying them as kelubars even from this distance, drifted down on their stubby wings, while the hapless farastus simply fell, crashing into various parts of the city.

"It's beginning," Arun said, his voice grim.

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The sounds from within the ruined shop grew louder, drawing their attention back to earth. But a few moments later one of the plummeting demodands impacted the roof of a three-story structure less than a block up the avenue, sliding off to land painfully on a smaller shed attached to the side of the building. Its landing crushed the small structure, but the fall clearly hadn't killed it, from the way that the wreckage started shifting violently a few moments later.

"Go ahead," Beorna said to Arun. "I'll finish this one off," she said, indicating the building in front of them, "and catch up to you."

But even as they spoke, fresh screams became audible just behind them, their source revealed as several panicked townsfolk appeared at the mouth of one of the side-streets that connected Ash and Magma Avenues. One of them caught sight of the adventurers, and screamed, "Fiends! Fiends! They're everywhere!"

"On second thought, perhaps we'd better stay together," Dannel said.

"Over here!" Arun said, already moving to help the frightened townsfolk. More were still coming onto the broader avenue from the side-street, but as the last appeared, an older woman of maybe sixty years, hobbling painfully with obvious difficulty, a pair of farastus exploded into view behind her, reaching for her with their sludge-covered claws. Arun yelled a battle cry and rushed at them in a full charge, but he could not reach the woman in time. Dannel sent an arrow flying into the first, but its infernal resistances protected it from injury. The old woman screamed as the demodand bore her down, tearing her torso open with tearing gashes of its claws, splaying her lifeblood across the street in a miasma of gore.

The sight drove Arun into a fury, and he rushed into the farastu with sword raised, *smiting* it with a powerful downward stroke. The demodand was already injured from its fall into Cauldron from the vortex above, and Arun's holy blade bit deep, driving it to its knees. But its companion was quick to leap upon Arun from the flank, tearing at him with its claws and bite. One claw dug through his armor, inflicting a painful but largely superficial wound upon the paladin. Arun found himself in difficulty, his sword stuck to his dying foe by the tenacious grip of the farastu's slimy coating. But Hodge rushed to his friend's aid, distracting the second farastu with a sweep of his burning axe.

Even as the demodands had appeared, assaulting the helpless woman, the damaged front doors of the adjacent storefront had erupted outward, disgorging the farastu that had fallen within. The creature was a mess, covered with glass, pottery, and other debris that had clung to its adhesive slime, but that did not hinder its fury as it staggered toward Beorna. The templar lifted her sword and shouted an invocation to Helm, but before she could strike the farastu gestured and blasted a *ray of enfeeblement* into her chest. Grimacing as her already-depleted strength was further drained, she nonetheless rushed at the demodand, sweeping at its body in a broad cut intended to separate the upper half of its body from the lower. Weakened as she was, the blow merely knocked it sideways and did some miscellaneous damage to its innards; not enough to stop it.

The remaining townsfolk, driven to panic by the *fear* power of the demodands, rushed blindly past the companions, seeking safety. Mole dodged out of the way of an overweight teamster, and turned to glance up the block where the last demodand—of this batch, anyway—had fallen into the shed. The wreckage of the shed was clearly visible, but there was no sign of the fiend. Her face deepened into a frown—what remained of the shed didn't look like enough to conceal the bulk of a farastu.

“Dannel, I think there's one invisible behind us,” she said, moving to the side of the street to get a better view as the fleeing citizens obscured her line of sight to the shed.

The elf turned even as screams erupted at the leading edge of the fleeing mass of townsfolk, confirming Mole's suspicions. The gnome had already disappeared, so Dannel grimaced and slid his bow back into the magical space within his quiver, drawing out *Alakast* as he ran at the backs of the terrified citizens of the stricken city.

Arun braced his boot against the face of the crippled demodand he'd struck down, yanking his sword free of its sludge-encrusted body through simple strength and will. The second demodand had turned on Hodge, and laid into him with violent bashes of its slender, clawed hands. The dwarf replied with a powerful stroke of his axe, but the weapon, lacking the holy empowerment of Arun and Beorna's swords, merely grazed its leathery hide.

Arun's attack, however, encountered no such difficulty, and his sword clove through the fiend with alacrity, finally coming to a halt as it lodged in its spine. The demodand staggered back, drawing Arun and his sword with it. Too late it attempted escape, turning itself *invisible* even as Arun, still grasping his sword, yanked the weapon loose and ripped it out from the farastu's body, laying open half of its torso as he did so. A spray of blood and guts revealing its position clearly, the demodand collapsed to the paving stones, gasping out the last of its pathetic existence.

It took Beorna's opponent a moment to recover from the glancing but painful blow she'd landed in its side, and she used that respite to call upon the divine strength of Helm, offsetting to some degree the losses she'd suffered earlier. Thus reinforced, she was able to withstand a furious assault as the demodand leapt at her, clawing and biting. One claw clipped her painfully on the side of the head, although her helmet protected her from serious damage. She tried to run it through but fumbled her weapon, the sword dislodged from her grasp as the demodand seized at her arms, trying to pin her. In her currently weakened state, she found it difficult to break the attempted hold, and had to spend all of her effort to avoid being firmly grappled, placed at the fiend's mercy. This close, its breath

was a noxious plume, and its sticky layers of exuded slime clung to her armor, impeding her movements. Fortunately, her own innate toughness and the excellent protection offered by her armor made it difficult for the demodand to really hurt her, and it too seemed to grow frustrated as its victim continued to defy its efforts. Beorna's legs were like tree trunks rooted in the street as the farastu clung to her body, trying to find a vulnerability in this determined enemy. Meanwhile, Beorna struggled in its grasp, bending as her hand stretched slowly but inexorably toward the hilt of the brightly glowing sword at her feet.

A woman screamed as a demodand materialized from thin air in front of her in the middle of the street. It seemed to cackle in glee as it lashed out with its claws, knocking the woman off her feet with a terrible gash to the face, and sending a gnome merchant flying with an impact that left him dazed and bleeding. The panicked townsfolk drew back in horror, just trying to get away from the terrible creature, which reached out for a teenaged girl whose scream shook the very stones with its intensity. But before the fiend could grasp its latest foe, a slender elf leapt between it and its victim. This adversary was clearly no easy prey, although the farastu laughed at the stick that the elf waved at him threateningly.

It wasn't laughing a moment later, as *Alakast* slammed into its chest.

Roaring in pain, the demodand leapt at the elf, trying to tear that fearsome weapon from its enemy's grasp. But the elf was fast, pulling the staff out of its reach before it could close its claws around the polished shaft. With a sneer the farastu shifted its efforts to the elf's face, but before it could strike a fierce and terrible pain exploded through its lower body from behind. It never even saw the source of the attack, for the elf shifted his stance and drove the staff into it once more, and the fiend's world exploded in a white web of agony as the outsider-bane weapon sent a hot lance of power through its skull into its brain.

The farastu loosened its grim incrementally as Beorna drove a mailed fist into its face. The creature snapped at her with its huge maw, intending to take her entire head, helm at all, into that fetid gap. The templar did not try to avoid the attack, for even as its jaws clamped down across her helmet, her probing fingers tightened around the hilt of her sword.

But before she could strike, she felt a shuddering impact *through* the body of the fiend, which screamed as it was torn from her. Her helmet, still locked in its jaws, was ripped from her head, and she could see Arun and Hodge hacking at it as though it were a stubborn tree under assault by a pair of fanatical lumberjacks. The farastu had no chance, choking on its adamantite prize even as the dwarves drove it to the paving stones in a gory mess of rent flesh and steaming ichor.

Ignoring the stinging pains that her enemy had left at various points across her body, Beorna walked over to the slain demodand. Arun had already turned toward the last of the four fiends, but it seemed that Dannel and Mole had handled it and were now assisting the terrified survivors.

Hodge bent to help her recover her helmet from the slain demodand's jaws, but she shrugged him off, a bit too roughly, perhaps. The defender shrugged and drew back, hefting his axe as he looked about for more adversaries.

"Are you all right?" Arun asked.

"I had it handled," Beorna said, shamed as a wave of weakness overcame her. Her limbs felt leaden under her heavy armor, and she could not work her helmet free from the locked jaws of the dead fiend.

"I know you did," the paladin replied, "But we were there, and the fiend was focused upon you, and did not see us approach. Would you have had us simply watch, while you defeated it?"

"You could have helped the others against the last creature," she replied, finally drawing back and giving the farastu's head a frustrated kick.

"I'd cut its jaws open," Hodge suggested. "Once a giant lizard took one o' me pack mules, was the same thing. Hadda just 'bout carve the thing open to get me best sifting pan back from that beast."

Beorna shot the other dwarf a venomous look, but Arun continued, "Look, we're all tired, and worn out." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're the one who told me that even people like us need someone else every now and again, right? We're part of a team, here; we've got to stay together if we're going to get out of this city alive."

Beorna took a deep breath and nodded. "I apologize, Hodge," she said. "I am not accustomed to... needing... help."

"No problem," the dwarf said. To be helpful, he knelt and went at the farastu's head with his dagger, finally producing Beorna's slime- and blood-encrusted helmet, which he offered with a grin.

She took a moment to clean off the worst of the encrusted filth before settling the helmet back on her head. As she did so, Mole and Dannel came over to the three dwarves. Behind them the survivors of the latest attack huddled in a mass in the center of the street.

"We're getting close to the square in front of the town hall," the elf said. "From there it's pretty much a straight shot down Obsidian to the west gate. We've calmed down the remaining townsfolk, and I've treated those with serious wounds. But we'd better get going."

Beorna adjusted the helmet to its proper place, then nodded. From within the cavernous interior of the adamantine shroud, her voice was hollow and deep.

"I am ready."

Chapter 341

The streets of the city were nearly deserted as the company made its way steadily higher toward the massive black walls encircling the city. Still, they managed to locate several other desperate souls as they made their way closer to the west gate, until they had nearly two score ragged survivors trailing behind them as they turned onto the final rising avenue

that ascended from Obsidian Avenue toward the walls and the compact square where one of four exits from the city was situated. The companions were quite familiar with this gate, for it was the one through which Zenna and Mole had entered the city, just over a year ago, and which they had used in their journey to the Lucky Monkey, in a time when their problems seemed easy and straightforward in comparison to now.

Then, they'd only had evil cults, floods, and a were-baboon barbarian to deal with.

As they made their way closer to the gate, they could see that the square ahead was occupied, and in fact cluttered with people. A humble, almost pathetic statue decorated the square; the likeness of an armored man cast in bronze, his specific identity worn away by centuries of the elements, the plaque that had once marked his plinth stolen before most of the current residents of Cauldron had been born. But the statue still served as a gathering point, and as the companions drew nearer they could make out the familiar form of Jenya Urikas standing on the edge of the platform, the bronze warrior looming protectively behind her. She was surrounded by a number of people in the uniform of the Watch, and a smattering of Arun's Hammers, their blue tunics stained by blood and soot. Around the authorities mingled a much larger crowd of uncertain residents of the city, surrounded by barely-controlled mules and horses, carts, wagons, and containers of every sort, holding what possessions the city's residents had been able to preserve from the cataclysm gripping Cauldron.

As they reached the square, they directed their charges to join the crowd, and started making their way toward Jenya. The High Priestess looked wan and tired, as if the hours since the first quake had stolen decades from her, leaving her old and frail. But the spark of determination that shone in her persisted still, and they could hear her voice over the din of the crowd, issuing orders that the people, if confused and reluctant, nevertheless appeared to be following. The gates were open, and slowly the living contents of the square were drifting through them, to the long road that led down from the mountain to the lowland forests and safety.

Jenya saw them before they drew near enough to hail her, and some of the tension gripping her seemed to lift as she waved them over. That gesture seemed enough to help part the crowd, or perhaps it was the looks on the faces of the adventurers. As they reached the stone plinth, the High Priestess issued a few more orders to the nearby Watch officers, who saluted and headed out into the crowd. Then she bent and reached down, letting a pair of acolytes help her to the ground at the foot of the pedestal.

"I'm glad you're all well," Jenya said. "With all that's happened..." She trailed off, and it was clear that she'd seen her own share of pain and suffering, since they'd parted at the Temple of Helm.

"We saw the archon," Arun said. "You Called it?"

Jenya nodded. "I gave him the Star of Justice, in exchange for his aid." At Beorna's surprised look, she added, "The Compact requires an exchange, and while I intended to merely summon a protector, as you required, templar... the portal had begun to open, and I could not just let fiends wander the city at will, slaying its citizens. We needed time, and the loss of the artifact is a small price to pay for the lives saved."

“Speaking of fiends, we ran into a few,” Mole pointed out.

“The portal is not yet fully open, but within hours, Cauldron may become a gate-town, a permanent link between Carceri and Faerûn.”

“What can we do to stop it?” Arun asked.

Jenya looked at him with eyes that shone dully. “I do not know that it can be stopped, at this point.”

For a moment, no one spoke, and despite the tumult around them, it was as if a sudden quiet had fallen over the world.

“The evacuation,” Beorna finally said. “What happens to the survivors?”

Jenya shook her head, as if the templar’s words had shaken her from a reverie. “We are focusing the evacuation to the west and south; it would be foolish to try to bring columns of refugees across the Alamirs at this time of year.”

“Especially with demons crawlin’ all o’er the place,” Hodge grumbled softly.

“Skellerang and Tristane are leading a column south to Redgorge,” Jenya went on. “This group we’ll take to the Lucky Monkey; I’ve already sent riders ahead to begin preparing clearings for a temporary camp. Other smaller groups have set out on the lesser trails, but we’re going to try to get everyone gathered at one of those two points. Messages have also been sent to Almraiven, and to the Temple of Eternal Vigilance in Tethyr. Our enemies may be ascendant, but we will not meekly surrender our realm to their foul scheme!”

“No, we will not,” Arun said, his words like cold iron. “And I, for one, have a few matters to resolve with the Cagewrights.”

Suddenly, loud screams sounded from the crowd outside, from beyond the gates. The companions instantly grasped their weapons, alert for signs of danger. Arun actually started toward the gate, but a wall of confused and panicked people and animals stood in his way.

“What now?” Dannel asked.

In answer, a dark shadow passed over the square. A terrible and familiar wave of sensation rushed over them. Throughout the open space, already scared people cowered in abject terror as the ancient power of the shadow’s owner spread its fell influence, borne above them on spread wings.

It was a dragon, its scarlet hide shining bright in the dull red glow that issued from the stricken city. It swept low over the wall, barely clearing the empty battlements above, a rush of smoke and ash blasting in its wake, creating an artificial wind that tugged the garments of the terrified people below. Gliding on wings that might have enfolded an entire

house in their membranous sweep, it slid north over the city, toward the town hall. There, its wings spread to catch the air, and it slowed to grasp the slender spire that rose from the dome of the great structure in its huge claws.

The people of Cauldron had seen terrors this day, but nothing compared to the sight of the great dragon Hookface, a monstrosity out of legend, perched on the summit of the town hall, a great plume of fire erupted from its draconic jaws to scorch the sky, laying claim to the wreckage of the city.

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The dragon launched itself from the cupola, sweeping out over the city in a slow, lazy arc, barely over the level of the rooftops. It drifted in and out of view as it cut through the haze of smoke rising over the city, and it almost appeared to be...

“Looking for something,” Dannel said, his keen eyes fixed on the massive creature.

“Us, likely,” Hodge grunted.

“What makes you say that?” Mole asked.

“Ha’ ye forgotten our record with drakes?” the dwarf railed. “By Clangeddin’s puckered buttocks, this one’s prolly the sire... or gran’sire, o’ the baby red we killed at that crazy bastard’s hut up in the mountains!”

Mole looked thoughtful. “Oh, yeah, that one.”

Jenya turned from where she’d been issuing curt commands to those members of the Watch and the Hammers that were still present. The square had been transformed into a sea of chaos, with people now dropping all of the possessions they’d hoarded earlier, rushing for the gate in a press. A few leaders were trying to maintain order, but even at this distance, all of the companions could feel the familiar tinge of dragonfear.

“This will get worse,” Jenya said. “If that dragon decides to attack the refugees, there will be a slaughter. We cannot stand against a red of that size...”

“We’ll take care of it,” Beorna said. Amazingly, she appeared calm, her face hard like chiseled stone.

“Templar...”

“Go, the people need you. Without your presence, the flight will become a rout, and more will die in the panic.”

A loud roar and a crash sounded out over the city. The companions readied their weapons, but the sounds seemed a good distance off, and after a few seconds they turned back to Jenya.

“Probably looting the city,” Mole observed, with the air of a lecturer speaking to students. “Reds are greedy bastards.”

“Well, unless any of you can sprout wings, we’ll need to draw its attention,” Beorna said, unlimbering her rarely-used bow.

“I believe I can handle that,” Dannel said, drawing out his own longbow from his magical quiver.

“Yer all insane,” Hodge said. “That ain’t no piddlin’ wyrmling yer wantin’ to pick a fight with! That there drake’s a fully-grown adult wyrm! Why, them things snack on giants fer breakfast! Yer all stark, blasted, raving...”

“Hodge,” Arun interrupted, without turning; he was preparing his own bow. His string had been broken during their encounters in the city, so Dannel gave him one of his spares. “Go with Jenya; she’ll need your help with the refugees.”

“Go stuff yerself.”

The paladin looked up. “Excuse me?”

“Ah, sorry. I mean, go stuff yerself, most holy champion o’ Moradin.” With an angry shake of his head, Hodge unlimbered his heavy crossbow and winch, and began loading the weapon, a more or less constant stream of muted curses accompanying every stage in the process.

Arun glanced over at Beorna, whose face cracked into a hint of a smile.

“He’s right, though,” Dannel said softly. “This one won’t be easy.”

Arun sighed. “They never are, not with us.”

Jenya had taken a scroll from one of her acolytes, and was reading from it in a steady cadence of magical syllables. Each of the companions in turn felt a tingle as a protective ward settled around them, and the High Priestess did not stop until all of the magical writings on the scroll had faded. She then laid a blessing upon them, followed by a healing spell that sent a surge of positive energy through them.

“I’m sorry, that is the best that I can offer,” she said, as the effects of the *mass cure moderate wounds* spell faded. “Almost all of my divine spells are depleted, and I doubt that there will be many chances to pray in the next few days.”

“Thank you, High Priestess,” Beorna said, bowing deeply in respect, her armor clanking noisily about her at the awkward movement. It was an odd moment, the six of them standing there in the midst of a sea of chaos, taking a few precious seconds for another leavetaking.

“We’ll join you at the Monkey, if we’re able,” Arun said, testing the new string on his bow. Jenya nodded, but did not respond. The companions shared a look, and then started back

down the now-deserted street behind them. Jenya only lingered for just a few seconds as the five heroes rushed down the street, then turned to join the last remnants of the flood of survivors pouring out of the city, hoping to find some sanctuary in the wilds beyond.

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The companions made their way swiftly down the connecting street that spilled out onto Obsidian Avenue. The city was strangely quiet, now, with most of its inhabitants having escaped to join the floods of refugees now streaming down the mountainside roads.

“How are we set for healing?” Arun asked, as they made their way to the end of the street, joining the main boulevard and heading toward the square in front of the town hall.

Despite her shorter stride, Mole’s magical boots allowed her to easily keep pace with the others, especially the heavily armored dwarves. “I have a few healing potions left,” she said. “The moderate-strength ones, I think.”

“Anyone else?” There was a grim silence punctuated by the tread of their boots upon the flat stones of the street. All of them knew what they were getting into. Arun shared out the last of the potions he’d bought from Weer the alchemist with Hodge and Beorna, downing the contents of the small vials as they ran to enhance their strength, endurance, and agility. Beorna in turn laid her hand upon the paladin’s shoulder, covertly placing a protective ward upon him that would hopefully spare him from the next assault he suffered.

That delay meant it was Dannel who first arrived in the great square that opened in front of the town hall. The place was a ruin now, with more than half of the buildings surrounding the square either collapsed or seriously damaged.

The elf turned as a loud noise echoed across the city, punctuated by a loud roar. Its source was visible an instant later as the dragon rose into view again, its massive wings beating the air as it lifted above the uneven line of rooftops, silhouetted against the plume still rising from the lake behind it. It had barely gained a hundred feet of clearance above the city skyline when it spread its wings and swept out over the city in what looked to be a resumption of its search, its dagger-shaped head scanning the streets below as it slid across Cauldron in a wide arc. At one point, it adjusted its course fractionally to avoid a farastu plummeting down into the volcano, but otherwise it seemed uninterested in the cataclysm gripping the town.

Dannel did not wait for the dragon to spot him. The song had filled him from the moment he’d first heard the dragon, and he as he tracked it with his eyes, a long arrow fitted to his longbow, he abruptly drew and aimed at an empty expanse of sky high above the city.

The elf had always been good with a bow, but in the last months his skills had advanced until he could rightly claim to be one of the foremost archers in the South. But with the song playing through him, binding him to the bow, he exceeded even his exceptional skills, and became one with the weapon.

The arrow... *changed*, as the song entered it, taking a part of the arcane archer and infusing his essence into the wood and feathers and steel. Every distraction faded into the background, and when Dannel finally released, it was as if the arrow sprung eagerly from the bow, ascending into the sky like a caged bird finally embracing its freedom.

Mole and the dwarves rushed into the square in time to see Dannel's arrow rise high into the air, and as it reached its apogee and began to arc downward, eight hundred feet from the bow that had released it, it intersected with the dragon.

The arrow had lost much of its force, with such an insanely long shot, and against a flying target it lacked the ability to recapture some of its momentum as it descended back to earth. Against the dragon's armored scales, the shot should have had no chance. But Dannel's song still resonated in the missile, and as it struck the dragon just below the left shoulder the *phase arrow* knifed into its body, sending a clear message in the form of a lancing spear of pain.

Hookface got the message, and the dragon banked toward the square, hatred burning in its eyes as it instantly spotted the archer standing in the open in the middle of the square.

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"Spread out, take cover!" Beorna yelled, rushing forward to a ruined storefront whose edge had collapsed into the square, offering at least a modicum of protection to an archer. As she ran, she called upon Helm, drawing her patron's *divine power* into her, letting it fill her with the bright glow of divine energy. Arun and Hodge went the other way, slipping out toward a line of overturned wagons that had been abandoned in front of the barracks compound of the Watch adjoining the town hall. Mole, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Dannel did not move toward cover, remaining fully exposed as the dragon dove toward him, releasing arrow after arrow in a staccato rhythm. The dragon was clearly magically protected, wreathed in a pale nimbus of soft red light that it wore like a suit of clothes. Dannel had used up his *phase arrow*, but as the dragon closed his shots grew more telling, and could punch through even the thick scales of the drake. But the hits that made it through were like mere pinpricks to the mature dragon, and it did not alter from its focus as it knifed through the air over the square, clearing the rooftops at its edge by mere feet.

As it flew past at high speed, it unleashed a great gout of explosive red fire into the square. The dragon pounded the air as it rose up out of the square, lifting into a broad turn, ignoring the projectiles fired by the dwarves that bounced harmless off its armored hide or stuck in the thick scales, doing no damage. Without the imparted magical energy of Dannel's song, the missile weapons of the rest of the group had little chance of affecting the dragon.

The flames cleared to reveal a vast stretch of the square scorched black from the impact of the dragon's breath. Dannel was still standing; he'd dodged aside at the last moment from the full force of the streaming flames, and Jenya's *protection from fire* spell had held against the force of the dragon's breath—this time.

But the dragon was already coming back for more. Winging out in a broad arc that took it out over the city walls, inducing yet another wave of panic in the fleeing townsfolk, it took its time scanning the threat, making a full circle around the town hall before turning into another descent approaching the square from the south, from the direction of the lake.

A great, fat bulbous mass descended from the sky, a kelubar demodand freed by the swirling interplanar vortex. The fiend, too foolish for its own good, dropped close enough to Hookface's intended path to draw its attention, and the dragon paused to unleash its breath upon it, blasting through its resistances easily and charring its oily, sick hide. It tried to conjure up a cloud of acid to cover a hasty retreat, but the dragon simply ignored the obstacle, knifing through and seizing the demodand on the wing. Crushing it in its jaws, the dragon snapped its head and sent the hapless fiend flying down into the city, where it crashed nosily through an intact roof and disappeared from view.

The distraction gave Dannel time for a few more shots at long range, enough to draw a roar of anger from the dragon as it flapped its wings back into a swooping descent toward its foe.

"Take cover, ye daft elf!" Hodge blurted, lifting his crossbow for another shot. His last shot had struck the dragon to no effect, but there was nothing else he could do except keep shooting and hope for a miraculous impact that penetrated its thick hide. Arun, aided by *divine favor* and the considerable strength of his mighty bow, did manage a hit that punched through one of the dragon's wings, but the hole was a handspan across in an expanse the size of a frigate's mainsail, and hindered Hookface like a pin stuck in the flesh of an ogre.

But Dannel's bow was another matter, and the elf's fourth hit was a telling one, half the length of his arrow vanishing into the dragon's thick neck. But he did not have time for another shot as the dragon bore down on him, ignoring the other foes whose attacks thus far had been trivial at best.

For a moment it looked like the dragon was going to drop to the ground and attack, but at the last moment it swept upward, unleashing another blast of flame at an almost horizontal angle ahead of it. There was no place for Dannel to dodge this time, and he took the full force of the dragon's breath, flying backward to land charred and unmoving on the cobblestones. The flames penetrated to the wagons where Arun and Hodge had taken cover, although the barriers protected the dwarves from feeling little more than a brief rush of heat. The dragon soared upward, looking almost for a moment as though it would slam into the town hall, but once more it narrowly cleared the edge of the roof to sweep out over the structure's central dome. But instead of banking to the left or right to avoid the spire that ascended from the cupola of the dome, the dragon reached out with both of its hind claws and took hold of that pinnacle, using it as a fulcrum to spin its massive body about and reverse its direction without sacrificing the full force of its momentum. The maneuver was too much for the building, and as the dragon leapt forward, diving once more back toward the square, the dome crumbled, and with a loud clatter of cracking stone and falling debris the whole structure collapsed in upon itself.

Beorna had leapt from cover as soon as she'd seen Dannel go down, and was kneeling at his side as the dragon rose up over the town hall. Like the others she'd assumed that it

would gain altitude and come around for another pass, but her eyes widened in horror as Hookface completed its maneuver and bored down on them like a boulder hurled by a giant catapult.

Beorna healed Dannel and stood, drawing her holy sword and stepping forward to challenge the descending dragon. She opened her mind and soul to Helm once more, calling upon the power of the god to infuse her sword with the holy power to destroy the dragon. Helm answered her prayer, but before she could do anything further the dragon knifed down with incredible speed, lashing out its head like a whip to snatch her up in its maw with the crushing force of a vice. An instant later the dragon kicked off of the ground with both of its hind legs, narrowly avoiding crushing the semi-conscious Dannel, and then lifted back up into the air with the struggling templar trapped in its jaws.

Arun ran forward, loosing another useless arrow, too late to intervene as the dragon's powerful wings carried it up over the city with its captive.

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Beorna felt the rush of air past her as she tried to fight through the stabbing pain where the dragon's teeth had driven through her armor and into her body. She still held her sword in one hand, but the other was pinned against her body in the drake's mouth.

This wasn't good. Even if she could get free, which was a dubious proposition considering the dragon's incredible strength—the dragon's grip felt like a house had fallen onto her—they were already a good hundred feet or more above the rooftops below. And from what she'd seen of the farastus that had fallen into the city, that wasn't a path she felt much like taking.

But as the dragon gained more altitude, turning as it ascended, she realized that there weren't any other options.

With a heave, she managed to free her other hand, but her location, with most of her body pinned inside the dragon's mouth, made it almost impossible to position herself for an attack. And the dragon clearly wasn't interested in keeping her alive; as she struggled she felt a sudden surge of heat wash over her, moments before a great gout of flame erupted from the dragon's mouth, pouring over her like a skewered hunk of meat thrust into a bonfire. There was no place to go, no way to avoid the full force of the dragon's breath, and only the protection spell laid upon her by Jenya earlier saved her from instantly being incinerated.

But she survived, and when she could actually draw a breath again, she gritted her teeth and ordered her arms to lift the sword dangling beneath her. Her helmet had fallen off at some point after the dragon had grabbed her, and the wind blew wildly through her hair. Her faith gave her the ability to call upon divine intervention to greatly increase her strength for a few flickering heartbeats, and she called upon that aid now as she lifted the sword and raised the tip of the blade against the base of the dragon's jaw, the only vulnerable spot she could reach.

“For you, my lord Helm!” she cried, as she drove the blade home.

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Arun watched in helpless horror as the dragon rose higher over the city, the struggling form of Beorna only just visible in its jaws. Behind him, Hodge was helping Dannel back to his feet.

“We’ve got to find a way to stop it!” Arun growled, furious at his own inability to come to grips with the enemy.

“Too... far...” Dannel gasped, staggering despite the healing that Beorna had poured into him. His garments were charred and his skin blackened from the effects of the dragon’s breath, although he still held his bow tightly in one hand.

But as they watched, the dragon started to turn, forming a wide arc over the city.

“It’s comin’ back!” Hodge said.

“No... look!” the sharp-eyed elf cried. They saw the dragon’s flame jetting in a forked stream from the sides of its mouth, each felt a pang as they realized that Beorna, trapped in its jaws, had been squarely in the path of that blast. They were too far away to see Beorna’s heroic action, lifting her sword into place and calling upon Helm’s strength as she slammed it into the base of the dragon’s skull. But they did see the dragon suddenly snap its head back, a terrible sound erupting from within, and they could see the templar flying free, a black figure that plummeted quickly toward the ground several hundred feet below.

Arun looked beseechingly at Dannel, who possessed the power of *feather fall*, but the elf grimly shook his head. “Too far,” he said, but they started running anyway, toward the point where Beorna had fallen behind the line of rooftops on the eastern edge of the square.

Above, the dragon circled the city, unleashing a roar of fury and pain that echoed through the volcano.

* * * * *

It only took them a few minutes to reach their destination, even with the scattered debris and the wide cracks that marked the once-smooth course of the boulevard. Arun, fueled by a growing sense of dread, was almost able to pace Dannel down the broad length of Obsidian Avenue, the two leaving Hodge slightly behind. When they saw where the templar had fallen to earth, each felt a strange sense of significance, as if the odd ironies of the world had come together to confirm an inevitable outcome.

The Temple of Helm was largely intact, although the empty stables had collapsed in upon themselves, and one side of the rectory showed a gaping hole above a long crack in the foundation facing the courtyard. But their eyes were drawn to the stairs leading up to the foyer, where the double doors stood open into the vacant sanctuary of the temple.

Beorna lay near the head of the steps, surrounded by bits of rubble. She'd impacted the stone arch overhanging the foyer solidly, an adamantite-encased missile that had plunged through the two-foot-thick canopy and fallen hard onto the carpeted marble below. Her helmet had been lost, along with her sword, and one glance was enough to reveal that life had fled the battered form of Beorna, templar of Helm.

Arun's cry filled the sanctuary, as he fell to his knees before the broken body of the woman he'd loved.

Behind him, Dannel entered the foyer, his eyes lowered. But a moment later another cry echoed the paladin's, a familiar sound that was followed by the rush of wind and the flap of powerful wings.

"It's back," Dannel said.

Arun looked up, and his eyes were cold like anvils as he threw his shield aside, and took up his holy sword in both hands as he stood, turning back toward the street.

Chapter 347

Once again, everyone had forgotten about the gnome.

Mole felt a rush of exhilaration as she swept through the air, the glorious sensation of flight tempered only slightly by the fact that she this adventure was being conducted by means of her clinging to a tenuous perch on the hind claw of a huge red dragon. Still, a random voice whispered in her mind that *technically*, she was *riding* the dragon, and that was about a hundred times cooler than just flying.

She didn't know what had possessed her to leap onto the dragon's claw when it had landed for that briefest instant, long enough only to grab Beorna and then lift off again into the sky. She'd been *invisible*, moving along with Beorna to help Dannel, knowing (with a bit of rueful disappointment) that she had absolutely no chance of harming the dragon with her tiny crossbow. Its leap had been so powerful that she'd almost lost her grip, and the first thing she'd done was to loop a length of rope around one of its dagger-like—okay, broadsword-like—claws, helping her to hold on.

The city was rushing along below her *awfully* fast, and she quickly realized that her brain, which had come up with the brilliant idea of leaping onto the dragon, had no answers for what to do next. She wanted to help Beorna, but had no idea how she could do that. She also knew—she'd learned a lot about dragons from her uncle Cal, who knew an awful lot about *everything*—that the dragon would have no trouble detecting her even through her invisibility, if it cared to pay attention or even glance down at its legs. She prayed she was small and light enough to evade its notice, as she tried to figure out what she could do.

But Hookface was distracted by its dealings with Beorna, and despite its phenomenal senses, the tiny, *invisible* gnome clinging desperately to one of its claws temporarily escaped its notice. Mole's heart froze in her chest as the dragon unleashed its fiery breath

upon Beorna, and she nearly lost her grip as it suddenly lurched in mid-air, finally recovering and hurling the templar out into the void. She felt sick, unable to do anything but hold on with trembling hands as the dragon banked into a wide turn, swinging out over the steep mountainside outside Cauldron—way, way, far down!—before completing its arc and turning back toward the city.

The dragon was making a lot of noise, and it sounded really, *really* mad. Mole willed herself to be lighter as the dragon knifed through the chaotic skies, and found that the thrill of flying didn't seem quite so entertaining as it had a few moments ago.

The dragon seemed to know where it wanted to go. Mole saw that it appeared to be heading for the Temple of Helm, and as they drew near enough to clearly discern the structure and the adjoining courtyard, she saw what looked like Arun and Dannel entering the front doors of the main building.

The dragon had seen it too, apparently. It let out a roar that was an obvious challenge even though Mole did not speak Draconic, and spread its wings to land in the street in front of the temple.

The motion sparked something in the gnome, who realized that if she was going to do something, she had to do it *now*.

Summoning a desperate reserve of courage, she loosed her hold, and took the end of the rope that she'd used to secure herself to the dragon's claw. The dragon had slowed and was descending toward the middle of the street facing the temple, hind legs extended to catch it as it landed. Mole's eyes darted around, looking for something to anchor the rope onto, but the nearest building was thirty or forty feet away, too far for even a magically augmented leap.

And then she saw something else, and got a crazy, desperate idea.

Chapter 348

Arun and Dannel turned to see the ponderous but majestic bulk of the dragon descending toward them, its wings casting a dark shadow over the temple entry as they spread to slow its flight.

"Take cover!" Arun said to Dannel. "You cannot survive another blast, and I'll need your bow!"

The elf nodded, darting back into the shadowy depths of the temple sanctuary. Arun, in turn, stepped boldly forward to meet the dragon, raising his sword so that its brilliance would leave no question as to his intent. The dwarf could see that the dragon had suffered some injuries; several arrows that had penetrated its scales jutted from various points on its body, and it bled from a deep puncture wound where its head met its long neck. But the beast looked to be more enraged than hindered by the damage wrought upon it thus far.

Hookface spotted the dwarf, and as it extended its legs to land it opened its jaws to immolate its enemy in scorching flame.

Arun was brave, but not a fool; as he saw the dragon's jaws open wide he ducked back behind a pillar, hoping to at least avoid some of the force of the breath attack. But to his surprise, the dragon suddenly shifted awkwardly in mid-flight, lurching to the side and landing off-balance so that its right leg twisted under its weight and its body slammed hard onto the pavement. The dragon roared in obvious pain, and instead of blasting Arun its head shot back toward its hindquarters, where a diminutive form tumbled free of the thrashing dragon. Mole's tiny dagger was in her hand, and bright red blood stained not only the weapon, but also coated her fist and a good part of her sleeve. The gnome's expression was one of pure and utter disgust, but she'd managed to find at least one part of the dragon's anatomy that was not invulnerable to attack.

Hookface breathed, expelling a violent cone of red fire that swathed its...tender... backside. Its own fire did not harm it in the least, but it caught up Mole with the force of a tornado, lifting her and driving her into the wall of buildings on the far side of the street. The breath weapon transformed the block of worn storefronts into an inferno, but Mole had fortuitously spotted a window, and covering her face with her arms she shot through it, landing in a long hallway that she somersaulted down until she had lost enough momentum to regain her footing. Behind her, the entire front of the building was aflame, the window lined in the bright glow of the dragon's fire. On the other hand, she was mostly intact, although she falsely credited luck and skill, when Jenya's *protection from fire* had had a larger share in protecting her from the full force of the dragon's breath. Maybe it was better that she forgot about that ward, for the blast had entirely used up that protection.

In any case, as she ran back toward the entrance, eager not to miss the rest of the battle, a smile was back on her face.

Arun did not fail to take advantage of Mole's distraction. Even as the dragon blasted her with its flame, the paladin was charging down the steps of the temple. Hookface was a canny, experienced fighter, and it was quick to regain its footing, moving its massive bulk with surprising speed. As Arun moved within the long reach of its head the sinuous member shot out, clipping the dwarf hard on the shoulder, but failing to get a hold with its sharp teeth. But Arun would not be denied, and as the dragon turned its body back toward him he *smote* it, his holy sword opening a five-foot gash in its breast near its left shoulder. Hot blood cascaded from the vicious wound, drenching the paladin. The dragon drew back, hurt, but now it brought the full force of its various weapons to bear, a barrage of claw, tooth, wing, and tail that laid into the paladin with the deadly force that only a fully-grown dragon can manage.

Arun withstood hit after hit, only his magical armor and incredible fortitude keeping him from being torn into shreds instantly. His magical augmentations were of little use against this foe, and even he could not stand up to the dragon's full force alone.

Fortunately for Arun, he was not alone.

Hodge, his chest heaving from the effort of running full-out in plate armor all the way from the town hall to here, nevertheless managed a roaring dwarvish battle cry as he lifted his

axe and stormed into the dragon's flank. The dragon saw him coming and lashed him with a blow from his tail that knocked him sprawling, but the dwarf merely got up and kept coming, bringing his axe down into the dragon's side. The attack lacked the sheer power of Arun's smite, but the wound was still another tally against the dragon's life, and it shifted so that it could address both of its enemies at once.

Unfortunately for Hookface, this again meant that its back was turned to Mole, who leapt through the shattered window into the street into a full run toward the dragon. Intent on Hodge, the dragon did not react with an attack of opportunity, so she reached her target and sprang into a leap that easily cleared twice her height, coming down on the joint where the dragon's hind right leg met its body. Once again precision made up for what she lacked in size and strength, and her dagger vanished into a gap between two scales, rewarding her with a spurt of bright red as she leapt free.

Meanwhile, from the balcony atop the temple, where Jenya Urikas used to enjoy looking out over the city, Dannel emerged with an arrow already fitted to his bow. The elf took aim and fired, and while his first shot narrowly missed the dragon's head, undulating wildly on its long neck, he definitely got its attention.

Hookface was a red dragon, known for their vanity, pride, and utter ruthlessness. But the great drake had not survived the centuries that it had by being reckless. The unleashing of the power of the Tree of Shackled Souls had wakened it from a sleep of years in its mountain hold far to the northern spur of the Alamirs, and it had come to Cauldron more irate than angry. It had no concern about the destruction of the city or the opening of the planar gate, but it had immediately seen the potential for a bit of looting, especially for the magical items of power that it craved. It didn't need its *detect magic* spell to recognize the powerful items borne by these two-legged adversaries, but nor did it need any more urging to recognize that its situation here was precarious. It had killed one enemy already, and had inflicted a lot of damage upon the others, but every movement was now causing stabbing pains to shoot through its body, and the quiet of its cave seemed like a very pleasant place to be right now.

Its decision was made when the dragon's sharp senses drew its attention to a series of shouts and cries that originated down the ruin of the boulevard. Glancing in that direction, it saw a small company of perhaps a dozen people running up the street toward the battle between the drake and the hard-fighting defenders of the city. The knot of newcomers looked ragged, with tunics frayed and scorched and faces marked with black soot, but they came on with grim determination toward the fray. They were a mixed group, with both genders and at least six races represented in their company, but all wore blackened tunics that had once been light blue cloth, emblazoned with the still-distinct sigil of the hammer. At their head came the half-elven merchant-turned-warrior Ambelin, whose longspear was caked with the blood of a demodand that had not died easily. Others carried bows, which they held at the ready even as the first tendrils of dragonfear washed over them as they closed.

The appearance of reinforcements, even tired and ragged ones, made this confrontation enough for the veteran dragon. Hookface spread its copious wings and gathered the air beneath them, augmenting the mechanical potential of its physical form with the innate magical source that gave all dragons the power of flight. The dwarves rushed in to attack,

but the dragon leapt into the air, driving itself higher, out of their reach. It left one more gift for them as it hovered fifty feet above the ground, bending its neck to unleash a final gout of hot red flame. Then an arrow stabbed into its side, reminding it of the elf archer who'd already hurt it. Hookface released a last roar that echoed over the city, promising a later accounting, and then ascended into the smoky skies over the city on powerful beats of its wings. Within less than a minute it had vanished from sight.

The companions gave it little more thought; they were far more intent upon surviving the hell that Cauldron had become. The dragon's last blast had seriously burned Arun and Hodge, overcoming the last vestiges of Jenya's magical warding. Arun, already seriously injured in the brief melee with the drake, collapsed and had to be revived with a potion. When Hodge tugged off his helmet to administer the draught, they could all see the blackened flesh and fresh blood where the dwarf's battered body had given way before all of the punishment Arun had withstood.

But as the paladin stirred, the magical elixir working its potent energies through his frame, his dark eyes shone still with hard resolve. "Dragon... gone?"

"Fer now," Hodge grunted.

Arun nodded, and allowed Hodge to assist him as he pulled himself to his feet. His followers had gathered, their faces writ with awe as the legend of their champion grew just that much more in that moment. Arun looked at them, then fixed his gaze on Ambelin, the half-elven woman he'd placed in command when they'd left the Temple of Helm what seemed like a tenday past.

"You were supposed to be helping Jenya get the people out of the city," he said, but his face betrayed the harshness of his tone.

"The city has been evacuated," Ambelin reported. "Columns are already making their way to Redgorge and to the Lucky Monkey. From there..."

"The High Priestess said you'd gone back in, to confront the dragon, young Orthos said. "We couldn't just..." he trailed off.

Arun nodded, and looked up. The swirling vortex within the storm had grown wider and more agitated, and while no demodands were currently falling from the sky, they could all hear the continued sounds of destruction from all over the city.

"I think it might be a good time to get out of here," Mole said.

Arun's gaze shifted back toward the temple, where Dannel was just exiting the foyer. The paladin's eyes betrayed his grief in that moment, where his companions could not see it. But they didn't need to see it; they understood his feelings.

"There is one we need to bring with us," he said, softly, and Ambelin gestured for several of the Hammers to recover Beorna's body from the wreckage of the church entry.

With the slain templar carried on a crude stretcher between them, the Heroes of Cauldron left the stricken city.

Chapter 349

They caught up with Jenya at an outcropping at one of the numerous places where the steep road from Cauldron switchbacked down the mountain. Below them, a line of refugees stretched down the blackened slope like ants, continuing for at least a mile before vanishing into the hills below. Behind them was only the outline of the city walls, wreathed in thick plumes of smoke that continued to rise out of the shattered city. Those columns rose into the gathered clouds that seemed now to hang low over the city like a blanket, almost low enough to touch the few spires still visible over the black line of the city walls.

Jenya stood atop the projecting stone like a statue as they descended toward her. A handful of guards and priests remained with her, serving as rear-guard for the detritus of overwhelmed humanity that fled the destruction of Cauldron for what might have been a fleeting hope of safety in the lands beyond.

The High Priestess's face hardened as she noticed the burden that they were carrying between them. A stranger might have thought Jenya Urikas cold for the way that she regarded her former ally, but those who knew her understood that the cleric's veneer of control was thin indeed, reinforced as a bulwark against the storm of chaos that all of them had battled this terrible day of days.

"How did she fall?" the cleric said, her lips compressed as though they could keep the depths of her emotion from pouring out in an uncontrollable flood.

"She fell in the triumph of battle, smiting her enemy," Arun intoned, his own voice thick with the exhaustion of grief and suffering. The weary Hammers laid her down gently on the stone as they came to the outcropping. They had not found her holy sword, lost somewhere over the city when the dragon had dropped her, but her second blade, forged of adamantite, lay across her body, its sheathed tip protruding beyond her boots, its pommel nearly touching her bloody chin.

"So it's over... and we lost," Mole said. "Cauldron is gone, the gate is opening, and we never found..." She glanced over at Dannel, but didn't need to finish; the fate of their missing companion, even in the face of the greater destruction wrought upon the city, was still at the forefront of all of their minds.

"Evil is triumphant," Dannel said, his body slack with the weight of exhaustion and worry.

For a heartbeat there was silence. Arun's hand tightened on the hilt of his holy sword, but confronted with the hard reality of the dead woman at his feet, he did not speak.

"Evil wins only if Good surrenders the fight," came a voice from nearby. Everyone there turned to see Nidrama step out from behind the sheer stone bulk of the outcropping onto the trail. Her familiar white robe had been replaced by a breastplate of shining steel over a

white tunic, and her greatsword hung bare from one slender hand, golden flames flaring up the length of the weapon.

A collective gasp came up from the gathered Hammers, who were not so inured to the wonders that surrounded the Heroes of Cauldron that they were not amazed at the appearance of a celestial in their midst. Several fell to their knees or bowed deeply, overcome with emotion and piety.

Nidrama smiled warmly at those, but her expression quickly steeled as it turned upon the companions, and at the corpse in their midst.

“We have done all that we can, celestial,” Jenya said. “And we would give yet our lives, if we knew the source of the threat, and had a target for our remaining strength.”

The deva nodded, and for a moment something intangible hung in the air, a quiet exchange between the celestial and something... *else*. But then, before any of them could put words to the questions in their thoughts, Nidrama nodded and stepped forward. Something changed in that instant; it was as if the glow about her faded somehow with that single step, although outwardly nothing had changed in her appearance.

“I will help you,” she said.

The companions gathered close.

“It is not too late to stop the plans of the Cagewrights,” she told them. “The ritual to tap the power of the Shackleborn, and through the corrupted conduit of the Tree of Shackled Souls open the gate to Carceri, has begun. The lives of those unlucky souls are being used to shatter the barriers between worlds. By the time that the sun rises anew over this region, it will be complete... and at that point, there will be no undoing what has been done.”

“Zenna?” Dannel asked.

“She is one of the Shackleborn,” Nidrama said. “She will share their fate.”

“And Cauldron?” Jenya asked.

“Once the full power of the Shackleborn is channeled through the Tree, Cauldron will become a Gate Town, host to the gathered hordes of Carceri,” the deva replied. “Armies of fiends will descend upon the city, to begin the transformation of the town into the first of many infernal prisons. From there they will begin their conquest of this world.”

“How do we stop this from happening?” Arun asked.

“That answer I do not have, knight of Moradin. But the Tree is situated within a dark bubble underneath the mountain, where the Cagewrights make their lair. The place is shielded from both divination and magical transportation, but a mundane route to their citadel has been opened through the stirrings of the volcano, through the lava tunnels. There, we will find the remainder of the Cagewrights, and perhaps the means to stop what is being wrought.”

“We?” Mole asked.

The deva nodded. “I have made my decision, and will pay the price demanded. This Evil would overturn the balance between worlds, and lay waste to the lives of millions. This cannot be allowed to stand.” She raised her sword before her, so that its burning steel stood between them, surrounding her features with wisps of cleansing flame.

The companions shared a look. Inwardly, each agreed with the words of the celestial, but they had spent nearly a full day engaged in a constant life-or-death struggle within the stricken city. They had fought fiends, a dragon, and the mountain itself. Their enemies would expect an assault, and would have mustered the full force of their strength against them.

Arun’s head came up, and with a sudden surge he slammed his sword point-first into the stones of the path at his feet. The blade sunk half a foot into the rough ground, quivering there as he released the hilt.

“I swear by the blood in my veins, the stones of this mountain, and by the forge of Moradin, that I will not rest until these fiends are destroyed, and their evil plans sundered, or until I draw breath no more,” the dwarf said, and there was no weariness in his voice, no hesitation or doubt that he spoke nothing but unvarnished truth.

Hodge said nothing, but he stood behind Arun with his axe propped up against the ground before him, as if daring anyone to challenge him.

Dannel came forward. “I *will* find Zenna,” he said, to no one in particular.

Finally, Mole stepped into the circle. “Well, we’re beat up and wiped out, and there’s a whole lot of bad guys who want us dead just waiting for us to get to them so they can kill us.”

Her face cracked into a grin. “This’ll be fun.”

THE END OF “FOUNDATION OF FLAME”

Book IX: “Thirteen Cages”
Begun 1-25-05

Chapter 350

A dark, slender figure walked in a cyst deep beneath the earth. He strode with a deliberate, purposeful gait, a man who held the fate of worlds in his hands. Behind him came a shadow, a second figure who walked hunched over slightly and off-balance, as though struggling with a heavy and awkward burden.

The man in the lead was Shebeleth Regidin. That name was known to few who lived; to some in the world of light above he'd been known as Esbar Tolerathkas, mystic theurge of Azuth, a name layered with several lies.

It required effort to come to this place; more, now that the Tree was exerting its power, sending tendrils of energies through the mountain and across the boundaries between worlds. Coming here was a risk, as this distant bubble in the mountain was technically outside of the perimeter of the dark lair of the Thirteen, outside of the layered protections that sheltered the fell citadel from detection and assault. But Shebeleth Regidin was not one to leave even the smallest matter to chance, and for this rendezvous it was necessary to pass beyond the borders of the place where the sinister designs of he and his cabal of villains had matured into fruition.

Behind him, Baiul giggled inappropriately at some secret thought. Regidin paid him no heed; his acolyte's descent into insanity had been gradual but inexorable, and in any case the wizened mastermind of the Thirteen had long wondered if any of them were truly sane, now.

The two passed through a broad opening shaped eerily like a huge maw, framed by ancient stalactites and stalagmites that had formed into the resemblance of uneven teeth. But neither traveler concerned themselves with imagined threats. There were dangers enough in the real world.

The opening passed them from one cavern into another; the second contained several layers of broad terraces that made the floor a maze of tiers and levels ranging from a few feet across to as wide as twenty paces. The place seemed vast and hollow, an empty womb deep beneath the earth. There was the faintest light, more a promise of illumination than a real brightness, provided by phosphorescent lichens that clung high along the walls, in the crannies where moisture gathered in the cold air.

Regidin took three paces into the room and stopped, waiting. Those he had come to meet were already here, he knew. Behind him, Baiul fidgeted with his burden.

Two dark shadows materialized from different levels of the chamber, coming forward to where the men waited. One was approximately man-sized and shaped, although a dark robe shrouded any details of his features. The second, however, was clearly a monstrosity, looming over all of them, its demonic visage obvious even in the near-darkness, its eyes bright red orbs that fixed upon Regidin and his follower with a fierce intensity.

"Speak your words, manling," the glabrezu said impatiently. "I do not have time for idle chatter."

The other, the cloaked figure, did not comment.

Regidin raised an eyebrow; a slight gesture that would not go unnoticed by the others. Behind him Baiul giggled again.

“Do not worry, my lord Nabthatoron. Or you, Kaurophon. When I contacted you, I promised information that you would consider quite valuable, and I will not waste your time with mere gossip.”

The glabrezu drew its inner arms together to fold them across its chest in an unsettling human-like gesture. No doubt its intent was to unnerve them, but the motion also drew emphasis to the fact that its huge upper arm on the left terminated just below the elbow, in a jagged stump. “Get to it then,” the demon said. “I quite nearly slew this other wretch when I arrived; you should have been more specific that others would be invited to this... gathering.”

“I have bound greater fiends than you, glabrezu!” Kaurophon hissed in challenge. Nabthatoron snarled, the demon’s natural proclivity to aggression filling it with rage, and it appeared even more imposing as it drew itself up to its full height, its remaining pincer snapping angrily at the air a few paces back from the sorcerer’s throat in a menacing gesture.

“A few drops of demonic blood in your veins does not make you my equal, little man.”

Baiul had tensed, the links of his potent spiked chain clinking slightly as he grasped the weapon, but Regidin had not moved, his expression still schooled to careful neutrality, betraying nothing. “Gentlemen,” he said, the single soft word inserting itself into the tension like a knife. “We all have reason to be... upset... but let us direct our ire at its deserving target, not at each other.”

“There is a group of adventurers, who have taken on the sobriquet of ‘heroes’, at least so far as the hapless folk of the ruined city above us were concerned. Ah, I see you remember them, then,” he went on, observing the subtle reactions of both listeners. “Likewise they have caused myself and my companions some... inconvenience. I have called you here to suggest a temporary alliance of convenience, to wreak the final destruction of these meddlers.”

“I need no aid from you to gain my vengeance,” the glabrezu rumbled, but Regidin, accustomed to the mannerisms of fiends, could tell that the demon’s bluster betrayed a significant interest. Kaurophon’s silence offered no similar confirmation, but the cleric had studied both with great intensity before he’d first established contact, and his instinct told him that the sorcerer, too, was more than casually interested in gaining revenge over those who had confounded his own plans of glory and power.

Regidin waved a hand dismissively. “Naturally I would not wish to preempt your privilege. But I may be able to give you an opportunity to exercise your right of revenge, in a situation that is favorably inclined toward success.”

The half-man and demon did not immediately reply, and in that momentary lull Regidin pressed his advantage. “And, of course, the body that I represent would be pleased to offer you a gratuity in exchange for your assistance in this matter.”

He stepped aside, revealing his associate. Baiul, came forward, pulling pack the tarp that concealed the bulky object that he carried.

It had the look of a weapon about it, big and amorphous in the darkness of the chamber. But none of those present needed augmentation to penetrate the shadow, and thus when Baiul came forward, they could clearly see it for what it was. The object was a massive pincer-claw forged in metal blacker than the surrounding darkness. Its significance was immediately clear in the context of Nabthatoron's presence, with the demon's missing member highlighted by the presence of the construct.

"Bah," the demon said, but it was clearly a forced comment that fooled none of them. The metal claw was made of adamantite, one of the strongest substances forged upon—or under—the surface of Faerûn.

"A small token," Regidin offered, waving his hand dismissively as if the gift he offered was not equal in value to a good-sized town.

The demon's hesitation lasted only a moment. "I accept your proposal," it said, coming forward with a sudden rush and taking up the artificial claw in its remaining pincer and snapping it into place against its stump. The prosthesis, infused of course with magic, attached itself seamlessly to the injured member, and the demon's fiendish jaws barked a cruel laughter as it lifted the limb, testing its newly whole arm.

Regidin watched silently, although the cleric was more alert in that long moment than at any point in the interview. There was nothing stopping the demon from just teleporting away right now, taking its prize... nothing that it knew of, anyway. Regidin had naturally prepared a contingency for that possibility, but after all of the effort he'd put into gaining the glabrezu's aid, he preferred not to have to resort to such measures.

Fortunately—for Nabthatoron—the demon's desire for revenge outweighed its selfishness, and it remained.

"What boon for me, then?" Kaurophon asked.

Regidin drew a small book from his tunic, about the size of a small ledger, thin enough so that it could not have held more than a dozen pages. He inclined the book toward the sorcerer, so that he could clearly identify the markings on the stretched-leather cover, now cracked with age.

Kaurophon finally betrayed his emotions, as he sucked in a startled breath. "That is..." he breathed, trailing off.

Regidin nodded. "K'rastin's Codex," he said. "The last copy extant, as far as I am aware. A grimoire of more than passing historical significance. I think you will find the True Names of the five devils mentioned specifically within to be... useful, in your researches."

Kaurophon dry-washed his hands within the sleeves of his robes, unconscious of the gesture or anything else except for the book. "Indeed. Might I peruse it?"

The book vanished back into the cleric's tunic so quickly that he might have been a rogue. "Later," Regidin said. "If you come with me, both of you, we can discuss the upcoming fate of our mutual foes."

Kaurophon's face tightened, but he was clever enough to recognize that the apparent insult—the glabrezu granted his reward before the service, his being kept for after—was actually a backhanded compliment. The two outsiders followed the lord of the Thirteen and his adjunct as they retraced their steps, leaving the cavern empty again behind them.

Chapter 351

"How much farther?" Mole asked plaintively.

"We are growing near," Nidrama said.

The gnome grumbled and hopped up onto a small stone shelf on the side of the tunnel, hastily tugging off a boot and shaking out the pebble that had worked its way inside. The delay allowed Arun and Hodge to pass her, but she quickly recovered her position, her magical boots allowing her to easily outdistance the plodding dwarves.

A deep, thrumming vibration that seemed to come from everywhere around them followed the companions as they delved deeper into the volcano beneath the ruined city of Cauldron. They'd spent the better part of an hour in the maze of lava tubes that burrowed through the depths of the mountain. A thick, sulphurous stench hung in the air, and the temperature had risen until all of them were covered in a sheen of sweat. A few aftershocks had shaken them at first, but as they penetrated further the force of the quakes seemed to fall off, until the omnipresent vibration was broken by only an occasional shudder of the ground beneath their feet.

They were a small company again, five against many, with the deva taking Beorna's place at the head of their column. Jenya Urikas and Arun's followers had been quick to suggest their aid, but the companions had rejected both. While Jenya's powers would have been a great boon, the priestess had depleted her reservoir of clerical spells in the evacuation of Cauldron, and for all her determination and resolve, she was not a warrior. Arun was even more blunt with Ambelin and his other Hammers; knowing that bravery alone would not help his followers survive against the Cagewrights, he'd simply cut them off, ordering them to accompany Jenya down the mountain.

So it fell to Dannel, Arun, Hodge, and Mole to continue their fight against the darkness threatening Cauldron. Already exhausted and battered in the fight to evacuate the city, there was nothing to do but press on; Nidrama had been clear that the Cagewrights were hours, not days, from successfully completing the transformation of Cauldron into a permanent gateway to Carceri. Nidrama had brought with her a magical wand that she used to treat the worst of their injuries, but despite the welcome potency of the device, it could do little to address the deeper haze of fatigue and emotional exhaustion that suffused them all. As Jenya and her escorts had taken their leave, following the long string of refugees down the mountain, Mole had provided foodstuffs and waterskins from her *bag of*

holding. Their meal had been a silent and hasty one, and they paused barely a quarter-hour before setting out under the direction of the celestial.

Nidrama had seemed to know exactly where she was going. She'd led them on a circuit of the volcano's rim, outside the perimeter of the city's walls. Those massive malachite bastions still stood, but they could hear the chaos continuing within as the vacant city burned, and the cries of demodands filled the empty streets. Above, the vortex-cloud continued its ochre spiral, with flashes of yellow light flickering within like streaks of lightning. They encountered nothing, neither friend nor foe, and finally the celestial led them down a twisting trail that descended about a half-mile down the volcano's face. There they finally encountered a dark shaft that speared into the mountain's depths, a lava tube that spewed out a constant emission of ugly yellow smoke.

"The Cagewrights accessed their citadel by magical means," she'd explained. "The shifting of the earth has opened a direct route, now. We must make haste."

That had been over an hour ago. Since then the shaft had undulated through the mountain, meeting and merging with other tunnels driven through the rock by the pressures of lava and water. At times the way was clear and easy; at others it narrowed to only a few paces across, or grew so steep that they had to use ropes to avoid what could have been a deadly fall. Driven beyond complaint at such mundane obstacles, the companions merely faced each obstruction and negotiated it before pressing on.

After Nidrama's evasive reply to Mole's question, Dannel hastened his pace until he was walking alongside the deva. The celestial seemed as distant as ever, her expression hardened as she pondered matters beyond mere mortal ken. Her once-pristine tunic and armor had surrendered now to the inevitability of the dirt and smoke of the volcanic tunnels, and even her perfect features showed more than a hint of strain. Likewise the aura of power that had surrounded her before had seemed to dim somehow, although her otherworldly origin was still obvious in the way she carried herself, and in the depths that shone in her eyes when she turned her gaze briefly to the elf. Her sword, naked in her hand, cast flickering echoes of light upon the smooth stone walls around them as they walked.

"You seem suddenly well-informed," Dannel said, ignoring the warning in that look. "I cannot help but wonder what we might have been able to accomplish, had we been given this intelligence earlier, before all this started."

The celestial stopped abruptly and turned, but Dannel was ready, and he did not flinch as he faced her.

"I have not deceived you, mortal elf... I was clear on the limitations we face, and the Compact that binds our intervention in your reality."

"Odd... I haven't seen our enemies bound by that pact; it seems that they've had all kinds of otherworldly help since we've started this whole mess."

"You barely know enough to demonstrate your own ignorance. The actions of the Cagewrights have been governed by a complex set of rules... and if they succeed in what

they do now, they will change the very nature of this realm with those governing strictures. That *will* bring a reaction, and they know it; but it will be too late for the millions caught in between as this realm is reshaped by the legions of Carceri.”

Dannel did not look satisfied. “And you say that your... *friends*, they couldn’t do anything to stop this? Why do we pray to these gods of ‘good’, anyway?”

“Dannel,” Arun said, the warning clear in his tone.

“They do what they can,” Nidrama said, her voice underlaid with a tinge of deep sadness.

“Yes, they cannot interfere directly, you said earlier. And yet it would seem that you’re interfering now, just a bit.”

The deva met his gaze squarely. “I made my choice, Dannel Ardan, much as you have. And I have paid the price for my action. I am no longer what I was... I have been expelled from the Host, and am now diminished... ‘fallen’, I believe, would be your term for it.”

The elf did seem somewhat taken aback by that revelation, and did not have an immediate reply. Finally Mole said, “Does that mean... does it mean that you’re mortal now, one like us?”

Nidrama shook her head. “It means that I am what I am. Come, we do not have time to waste in this idle chatter. The first test is not far, I think.”

They moved down the corridor in silence once more, and indeed, within a few minutes the light of Nidrama’s sword glinted off of metal in the side of the tunnel ahead. As they neared the source of the reflection, alert to any wards or organized defenses, their illumination revealed a large metal portal, so dark as to be almost black, recessed deep into the surrounding volcanic stone. The door was surmounted by a crudely shaped figure that resembled a gargoyle or demon, a grim decoration that seemed to follow them with black eyes as they cautiously approached.

“Adamantine, or I’m a gnome,” Hodge said, indicating the door. The dwarven miner-turned-fighter had grown uncharacteristically quiet of late, and his hands tightened heavily upon the shaft of his axe as he regarded the black barrier.

“Let me see what I can see,” Mole said, starting forward, but Nidrama forestalled her by lowering her sword to block her progress.

“Wait,” the deva said. “There is still power left to me, and our chances may be improved if we are protected.”

She came to each of them in turn, briefly touching them and laying defensive magics upon them. When she came to Dannel, she paused briefly. “You accept my aid?”

“I’m not a fool,” he said. Taking up his bow, he added, “Let’s be done with this.”

“Some of the wards are but temporary, and will need to be renewed before each encounter,” she said, as she finished her ministrations.

“Assuming that our enemies give us the chance,” Arun said.

“Well, as the official Party Scout, I will do my best to see that you guys are forewarned,” Mole said, offering a mock-salute.

Hodge mumbled something dark about being in the hands of crazy gnomes.

Nidrama, meanwhile, had already started toward the portal, the others following close behind.

They were ready for anything, but it was still something of a surprise when the stone figure atop the door suddenly glowed and blasted a pair of shimmering black rays into the chest of the approaching deva.

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The black streams of liquid energy coruscated into a flare of gray as they impacted the deva’s chest, intersecting her defensive wards in a chaotic storm of energy. The rays only lasted a second, but even as they faded, and the celestial staggered back, she cried, “The door! Quickly!”

Mole was already moving, leaping into a twisting cartwheel that wove a sinuous line up to the portal, an evading course just in case the guardian had any more tricks up its sleeve. It took her just another two seconds to complete the journey, and as she snapped back up into a ready crouch, she lifted her hands to reveal a small object that she pointed at the implacable adamantine barrier.

The clear note of her *chime of opening* sounded loud in the confines of the subterranean chamber. The waves of magical energy released from the item sank into the door, and the portal opened, swinging ponderously wide on recessed hinges to reveal a dark passageway beyond.

“Come on,” she urged, standing in the doorway, gesturing for the others to follow. Shooting a cursory glance down the passage—it seemed empty—she returned her efforts to urging her companions forward.

The adventurers quickly passed through the door and out of the line of sight of the warding statue above the portal exterior. In all, maybe six seconds had passed since Nidrama had been hit, and no further blasts had been forthcoming in that quick interval. The light of Nidrama’s sword revealed that the corridor, a rough-hewn shaft maybe twelve feet across, continued straight ahead for as far as they could see. There was just enough irregularity to the passageway to suggest that it had its origins in volcanic action, although it had obviously been crafted by intelligent hands to accommodate the door.

The door started to swing shut, but Arun grasped hold of it, and Hodge was quick to secure the jam with a pair of hastily driven spikes. Despite their commitment to braving the defenses of the Cagewrights, none of them wanted their escape route blocked if it came to a retreat.

“Oh, damn,” Mole said.

The others turned. “What is it?” Dannel asked.

Mole held up the magical chime, clearly revealing the crack that ran through its length. “Fellian said its power was limited, but I was really hoping that it had a few more charges left.”

“Well, if we come to another door like this one, we’ll have to improvise,” the elf said.

“Come. Remain alert,” Nidrama said, leading them down the passage.

“Who put ‘er in charge?” Hodge growled to Arun, but the paladin only shrugged and followed the celestial deeper into the complex.

They hadn’t gone far when the tunnel began to curve slightly to the right. Shortly thereafter, they came to a fork, with a side tunnel jutting off at a right angle to their right. Ahead, they could see that the main corridor began to veer right once again, perhaps following parallel to the side passage.

“Which way?” Dannel asked, glancing down both passages.

“This seems like the main tunnel,” Nidrama said, pointing forward, but she glanced down the side passage, adding, “Though I like not the possibility of leaving a foe behind to catch us unawares.”

“What’s that smell?” Mole asked.

“What?” Hodge said. “I don’t smell anythin’.”

“Based on past experience, I’d be shocked if your olfactory senses were functioning normally,” Dannel said dryly.

“Which way, Mole?” Arun asked.

“Side passage, I think,” the gnome reported. She sniffed at the tunnel, and wrinkled her nose. “Yuck. Smells kinda oily, I think.”

The elf archer and dwarf paladin shared a look. “Demodands?” Dannel suggested.

“Like as not,” the paladin replied. “Nidrama’s right; we don’t want them coming up on us from behind. We’d better check it out, but carefully.”

"I'll go on ahead," Mole said. She disappeared into the shadows, vanishing within five paces. The others followed slowly, wary of any danger.

The tunnel continued for perhaps fifty feet, before appearing to end in a blank stone wall.

"Mole?" Dannel asked.

"I'm here," came the gnome's voice, softly, from somewhere nearby.

"There's somethin' not right 'bout that there wall," Hodge said, clanking as he moved forward. The dwarf had never mastered the art of being quiet in armor, and every movement he made seemed to resound down the length of the passage.

"It's a curtain, designed to look like a stone wall," Mole said. "Be quiet, there's..."

But they never got to hear what she was going to say, for the dark curtain was roughly drawn aside by an oily claw, revealing the unpleasant visage of a farastu demodand beyond.

Chapter 353

Uncommonly, Arun was the first to act; through the gifts provided via his spiritual link to Moradin he'd detected the taint of the fiends even as Mole had begun her warning, and as the curtain came back his holy blade hissed from its sheath, filling the corridor with its pure gleaming radiance. The paladin did not hesitate, leaping at the creature even as he noted the two others hovering behind it. He felt the surge of battle pounding in his veins, but he resisted the urge to unleash his final *smite evil*; there were others for whom he intended that final retribution. Even without that added holy power, however, the sword struck true, opening a terrific gash in the creature's chest that spewed forth an ugly spout of black ichor.

But unfortunately for Arun, his sword stuck in the wound, the adhesive black slime that covered it folding around the blade and wrenching it from his grip as the demodand flailed back. It drew the curtain back with it, showing a dank chamber beyond, as well as clearly revealing the other two fiends.

Dannel's first arrow knifed through the air, slamming into the chest of one of the demodands, but his arrows, despite their magical potency, were not aligned to Good, and the steel-tipped shaft did little damage. While the elf considered *Alakast*, Hodge and Nidrama were already coming forward, their weapons raised to strike.

But before they could close to melee, the demodands unleashed their own fell powers.

A wave of *fear* swept through the tunnel. This tactic had proven effective in the past, but this time, fortified by Arun's protective aura of courage, all of the companions resisted the driving wave of incipient panic. Another blasted Nidrama with a *ray of enfeeblement*, but the beam of energy dissipated against the deva's spell resistance. The last demodand, the one that Arun had grievously wounded, recovered enough to add a final defensive effort,

conjuring a billowing *fog cloud* of sickly gray vapors into the corridor that had quickly engulfed the entire melee in a concealing murk.

The cloud turned all of the combatants into vague dark outlines within the gray, with even Nidrama's flaming sword and Arun's holy weapon doing little to drive back the clinging mists. But the warriors at the fore did not pause, driving into the ranks of the demodands. Nidrama's voice sang out a clarion cry to battle in the Celestial tongue, a note that sent a tremor of fear through the demodands even as she materialized from the fog and laid into one of the creatures with a powerful two-handed strike. The great blade, infused with her holy power, tore through its defenses easily, cleaving deep into its shoulder and nearly taking off its left arm. The demodand tried to counter with a claw and bite combination, but its assault merely flailed harmlessly against the shining lines of her breastplate, and the agility of her defense.

Hodge met the next demodand, the one that Dannel had lightly injured with his arrow. The dwarf's weapon had no holy properties, but he more than made up for that with a critical strike that dug deep into its side, staggering it. But like his fellow dwarf he had difficulties keeping ahold of the weapon, as it adhered to the farastu's slimy hide. The two creatures twisted about in an odd tug-of-war, the dwarf holding onto the haft of his weapon, the farastu trying to pull away, all the while hacking at the dwarf with its vicious long-fingered claws.

Dannel's first instinct was to move forward through the fog to join his companions, but he hesitated; there was a faint buzz of warning in the back of his mind that caused him to draw back, toward the mouth of the corridor. As the fog thinned, he peered back down the passageway. The darkness was nearly absolute; the fog effectively blocked the faint light from the warriors' weapons.

But there was nothing wrong with his ears, and the sick sticking plop of a farastu demodand's tread upon stone was all too familiar.

"More of them, from behind!" he yelled, summoning his song as he withdrew *Alakast* from his Efficient Quiver, focusing the power of a *light* spell upon the quarterstaff. The weapon seemed to thrum in his hand as he faced a trio of farastus that appeared in the mouth of the side tunnel from the corridor beyond. The quarterstaff had been created to destroy evil outsiders, and maybe somehow it could sense that it had been brought forth to further that purpose.

But there was no time for further musings on that, for even as the light exploded from the staff, the farastus spotted him and charged eagerly forward, claws extended. Dannel was no coward, but he also knew that he alone would last mere seconds in a close melee with three demodands. Hoping that his friends would be able to come quickly to his aid, he withdrew back into the relative shelter of the *fog cloud*.

The demodands followed him inside.

Just a few paces away, the elf's companions continued their struggle against the first cohort of demodands. With an angry cry, Arun ripped his sword from his injured foe's body, fighting off its flailing claws before thrusting half the length of the blade through its throat.

The demodand fell, ichor bubbling up from its jaws, nearly ripping the sword from the paladin's grasp once again. He turned to help Hodge, but then Dannel's warning carried, muted, through the fog.

"Go on, we'll finish off this lot!" Hodge said, although at the moment it was taking his full effort just to keep his grip on his axe. The demodand took advantage of his distraction to blast the dwarf with a *ray of enfeeblement*, and as Hodge weakened it finally yanked itself free, the dwarf's primary weapon firmly attached to its body.

"Gimme that back, ye bloomin' bloody bastard!" Hodge cried, hurling himself against the demodand. This might not have been the best strategy, for the creature's sticky hide caught on the dwarf's armor and stuck the two combatants together. Fiend and dwarf crashed together to the ground in a tangled heap, limbs jutting awkwardly out in every direction.

Arun, however, had already vanished back into the fog.

Nidrama had taken her first hit, a solid blow that drew a bright line of red across her shoulder from one of her opponent's claws. But the farastu was far worse off, and its situation continued to deteriorate as the deva brought her heavy greatsword around and crashed it into the demodand's other side, giving it now two serious wounds that continued to drip trails of hot ichor down its body.

The three reinforcement demodands snarled and slowed as the *fog cloud* engulfed them. Spreading out, lashing the tendrils of mist as they sought out the elf, one sensed a hint of movement along the wall to its right. Turning, it caught the long shaft of *Alakast* in the side of its head as Dannel whipped it up in a quick snapping gesture that knocked it roughly off-balance. But the demodand was quick to recover, leaping at the elf, trying to wrest the deadly staff out of his grasp. It got another solid hit for its trouble, but still managed to lay its sticky claws upon the wooden shaft, wrestling with Dannel for control of the weapon.

Its two fellows took advantage of Dannel's plight to spread out and take him from the flanks. Dannel saw them coming and released *Alakast* suddenly, darting along the wall back down the corridor before he could be fully surrounded. The nearest farastu ran him down, tearing with its claws, but the nimble elf avoided its grasp with only a few minor scratches for his trouble. As he retreated the fog faded with surprising suddenness, and he turned to see all three demodands following him, the first snarling as it tossed Dannel's brightly-glowing quarterstaff over its shoulder.

"Great," he said, to no one in particular. His hand had dropped reflexively to the hilt of his sword, the one he hadn't drawn in anger for... how many months now? But even as his fingers tightened on the hilt, he knew that he'd have no chance to even hinder the farastus with that weapon, not with the kind of damage resistance that the fiends possessed.

His other hand had already reached back, to his magical quiver, and he spoke the command that caused his longbow, strung and ready, to slide out of the extradimensional space within. But before he could draw out an arrow, the farastus were upon him. It was all he could do to keep from being surrounded in the initial rush. One of the farastus took a

moment to shoot him with a *ray of enfeeblement*, but Dannel had been expecting something like that, and he was able to narrowly dodge the thin stream of negative energy.

The other two farastus reached for him with their claws, but before they could strike the faint clink of metal from within the fog alerted Dannel a moment before Arun appeared suddenly, charging full-speed toward the melee. Ignoring the one standing to the side, that had fired the *ray*, the paladin caromed into the one that Dannel had struck earlier with *Alakast*. Arun's shield hit the farastu in the back, sticking with a sick sucking sound, shifting his momentum to lift the demodand up off its feet. For a split second the paladin was actually holding the monstrous creature up above him, the fiend struggling in surprise, and then Arun's holy blade clove through its neck, flaring with bright white light as it tore into the tainted fabric of the farastu. Its cries were cut off abruptly, and as its head fell limply to the ground a few feet away, Arun tossed its body—his shield still stuck to it—to the side.

The two remaining fiends turned to face the paladin, the elf temporarily forgotten in the face of this obviously more dangerous foe. Arun's charge had put him in a disadvantageous position, with the fiends able to flank him easily, tearing at him with their claws.

Dannel lifted his bow to fire, but a huge sound from behind suddenly filled the corridor. Back behind them, at the intersection of the two passages, something new had arrived. The north wall there, seemingly solid when they'd passed it before, had exploded outward, revealing a hulking form that was almost lost in shadow at the edges of the light cast by Arun's dancing sword.

It was... *big*. Muscles the size of tree trunks knotted in its arms and legs as it stepped out into the corridor from the secret passage that had concealed it. Silvery links of flowing mail covered its torso, stretched across a chest broad enough to use as a banquet table. The echoes of light danced upon the length of a long, curving falchion, six feet of flawless gray steel within which a miasma of wavering lines seemed to flow and intersect, trapped within the metal. And its face...

The face of the newcomer was that of no normal creature. It was a bestial face, with bovine features that terminated in powerful jaws and a pair of jutting ivory horns. The face of a minotaur, but this monstrosity resembled an ordinary minotaur in the way that Arun resembled an elderly dwarven merchant. Its eyes were twin points of rage that seemed to glow as they drank in the scene before them.

Gau had arrived, and she was not pleased.

Chapter 354

Dannel spun at the noise of the minotaur's arrival, and even as he took in the fierce appearance of the creature, he was fitting an arrow to his bowstring.

Time seemed to slow around him, as the song filled him and the minotaur lowered its flat head, its steps shaking the ground as it charged.

First arrow...

Damn, that thing's huge...

The arrow struck the creature in the meat of its left arm, but even though it dug deep into the muscle, the jutting shaft looked painfully tiny against the thickness of the limb. The minotaur took its first step forward, its eyes locking onto Dannel with an almost audible click.

It's raging... make it tough to stop...

Even as the thought came and went, his second arrow was fitted and fired. He's aimed lower, hitting it solidly in the thigh, and again the shot appeared to have no effect. If anything, its charge continued to pick up momentum... a second step, a third, a fourth, the corridor seeming to tremble now at its passage.

Fool! You aren't going to be able to slow it down... Your only chance is to hit a vital organ!

His third arrow punched through the armor covering its chest, sinking deep into the minotaur's body. Its stare never wavered, and Dannel wondered if it was even feeling the hits. He'd seen barbarian warriors lost in battlerage before, men who'd taken a dozen arrows, men who'd killed several enemies before their bodies realized that they were dead.

The minotaur was only a few paces away, now. The falchion came up, its cutting edge gleaming as it caught the light.

Dannel lifted his bow, his fourth—and last, he knew—arrow in place. He drew the string back, drawing the bow taut. The song screamed in his ears, filling him with power, passing through him into the bow, into the arrow.

The bowstring snapped.

Time unfroze.

All he saw was a blur. He was vaguely aware of the impact as his body caromed off of the wall... it had been several paces behind him... pain, as a slivered rib stabbed through his lung...

Then nothing.

* * * * *

Even as the minotaur barbarian appeared to change the dynamic of the melee on the far side of the *fog cloud*, the rest of the group was still having difficulties against the first cohort of demodands. Nidrama had crippled her adversary, scoring a third hit against her hapless foe, but the injured creature, confronted with one of its most hated enemies, refused to withdraw. Instead the monster hurled itself at the celestial, taking another hit that nearly finished it in the process, but managing to lock the sticky fingers of one oozing claw around the crossguard of the deva's flaming sword. With its other hand it swatted her breastplate, doing no damage but snagging handfuls of her garment that clung to its foul limb.

Nidrama's mouth tightened in disgust as the weight of the creature—now clinging to life only through stubbornness—threatened to drag her down off her feet.

Hodge, meanwhile, was already enjoying that fate, as he and the demodand wrestled upon the floor a few feet away. The constant stream of profanities in dwarvish and common seemed to match the ugly sounds coming from the demodand's jaws. The demodand had the advantage of having natural weapons that could hurt the dwarf, while the dwarf's axe was securely pinned to its body, but it was in turn hindered by the fact that its own adhesive slime was sticking its limbs to Hodge's armor, clothes, flesh... and even more than a bit of his wiry beard.

The demodand addressed this problem by snapping its jaws around Hodge's shoulder, opening a considerable rip in his hide at the base of his neck. This only amplified the dwarf's litany, and with a sudden surge he tore his arm free, using that opportunity to jam his fist into the creature's gaping maw. Even though the punches weren't doing a lot of damage, they seemed to make the dwarf feel better.

"You want a fistful o' dwarf! Here, 'ow's that? You want more? 'ere, 'AVE SOME MORE, YOU SACK O..."

He paused as he noticed something odd; the creature wasn't thrashing around so much any more. Drawing up (a considerable effort, as his body was still stuck to demodand all over the place), he saw that the fiend's eyes had become gaping, bloody sockets. The thing looked to be dead.

Hodge looked at his fist in surprise. He didn't think he'd hit it that hard.

"Aug, teach ye to mess with a dwarf," he said, turning himself to the tricky (and painful) process of extracting himself from the fiend's sticky clutches.

A few paces away, Mole grinned, but the sounds of battle behind through the fog were growing more intense, so she lowered her magical dagger—careful not to foul the sticky thing on her trousers—and darted back off into the cloying mists.

Chapter 355

Even before he saw the minotaur take down Dannel with a single swing of her massive falchion, Arun knew that his situation had suddenly grown real, real grim. He'd hurt one of the remaining demodands with a thrust that had torn open half its side, but he'd nearly lost his sword again, finally yanking it free in a spray of blood and rent flesh. Dannel was still intact, his armor holding against the minotaur's swing, but by the way he'd hit the wall... Arun hoped he was just unconscious, and not dead.

But there was nothing the paladin could do for his friend at the moment, for the minotaur immediately turned her ire upon the next adversary.

Even aside from her hulking size and incredible speed, Arun could tell from the way she moved that the beast was a skilled combatant. He also knew that if he went toe-to-toe with

her, even leaving aside the two demodands flailing at him with their claws, he'd be opening himself up to a ton of punishment. He hadn't taken anything more than a few minor scratches thus far from the demodands, but the minotaur was another story entirely. But even if he'd wanted to retreat—the persistent fog offered concealment only a few feet away—the demodands would be all over him before he made two steps, and the minotaur had speed, and reach to boot. If they caught him in the fog, it would be over quickly.

So instead he grimaced and stepped forward, within the minotaur's reach, and laid into her with everything he had. There was no holding back now; his first attack was a *smite* that cut deep into the minotaur's flank, driving through her armor. *That* one she felt, as well as the follow-up backswing that Arun had intended to splay open the wound further, but which hit a foot higher, only adding a fairly minor tear along her ribs. He tried to keep it going, spinning into a third powerful attacks upon her, but his effort had been spent out and his sword only glanced harmlessly off her armor.

The huge falchion came up.

Arun had been expecting pain, but even so the terrific impact startled him. His armor held, although he could feel the sharpness stab into his torso as the hit *buckled* the mithral plate, a sound echoed by the crunch of bone underneath. It felt as though someone had reached into his lungs and stolen all of his breath out of him. He could do nothing as the curving blade came around again, and only a last-instant dodge kept him from losing his head. As it was, the falchion glanced off of his helm, again denting the metal, and the world spun around him as he staggered back. He was only distantly aware of the demodands clawing at him eagerly as he fought to recover from that devastating assault. Only pure idiot chance kept him from taking a third stroke, as a demodand in its attack moved into the descending path of the falchion, and the minotaur adjusted—slightly—to avoid decapitating her ally.

But though he yet stood, Arun knew that he would never survive another attack like that one. One more hit would do him in.

Neither he nor the minotaur saw the subtle variation in the air, the slightest disruption as a shadow detached itself from the wall and slipped around behind Gau in a soft tumble. Through her rage, the barbarian was dimly aware of the slightest pressure, little more than that of a stiff breeze, that touched first her hip, then her back. Even as she shifted in response, growing aware of the danger, Mole made her presence known by stabbing her rapier—all twelve inches of it—into the small gap in Gau's armor at the point where her right arm entered her torso.

Gau roared, again more in rage than pain, although the thrust had grazed her lung, and blood began to slowly seep into the injured organ. But the minotaur seemed barely hindered as she lifted her sword, and with expert precision sliced it over her shoulders and down her back to dislodge the gnome hanging there.

Mole swung narrowly out of the path of the blade, its edge sliding mere inches from her face as she hung on by two fingers, her body dangling out in open air. Kicking out, she passed under the minotaur's arm before snapping her body out and clambering up its shoulder, using her horn as a pivot to settle her back behind the minotaur's neck. Gau

shifted her sword to her right hand and tried to grab her with her left, but again she only clasped empty air.

The minotaur snapped her head forward in an attempt to dislodge the gnome, but Mole held on, stabbing Gau again with a cut that was only a nuisance, this time. Arun could not help her, tangled in the grasp of the two demodands, and although Mole had thus far kept her huge foe in check thus far, her luck could not hold out against Gau's sheer strength and speed for long. This was confirmed a second later as the falchion shot out suddenly in a sharp upward thrust. Again Mole dodged, but this time the blade drew across her torso before she could get out of its way, leaving a nasty bleeding gash across her body.

Still, the gnome held on.

"Athaladras!" came a clear cry from the fog, a moment before Nidrama appeared, her wings driving her forward in great pulsing beats, her sword held out before her like a pike. Gau snarled but took the hit, a driving thrust that sank a full foot into the meat of her left shoulder before the deva's onrushing momentum was spent.

For a moment, the two combatants just remained there, facing each other; the minotaur spitted on the edge of the celestial's sword, the deva hovering in the air, dwarfed by an enemy almost twice her size. A rank burning smell filled the air as the sword's flames seared Gau's flesh.

And then the falchion came around, and clove into the celestial's breast. Nidrama's armor crumpled and she fell back, too-bright blood issuing from the deep gash in her body.

She fell hard and did not stir.

Gau roared in triumph as she turned back to Arun. The paladin, teeth gritted against the surges of pain that threatened yet to overcome him, had fought free of one farastu, and ignored the other still clinging to his side as he drove his sword through the first fiend's face. The demodand fell back, and Arun yanked his weapon free, trying to turn to confront the minotaur. Every breath he took drove a knife of pain through him, and the world around him was starting to grow dim, only his sword clearly defined against the shadows.

An awkward clanking sound behind him gave him hope, however. Hodge appeared from the fog, looking a sight with his armor and clothes covered in farastu slime and blood, his beard a fouled ruin that had been splayed across the lower half of his face in a gooey mess.

"Right then," he said, regarding the minotaur, lifting his axe. "Yer be wantin' some o' this, now?"

Gau laughed and charged. Or rather, started to charge, for as she launched into her first stride, Mole leaned around and cut open her jugular with a long stroke of her dagger.

Chapter 356

A few minutes later, the companions gathered at the original intersection of the two corridors, only a short distance from the charnel heap of blood and slime and gore and corruption where the desperate battle had taken place.

Nidrama, looking more mortal than at any time previous, was still pouring charges from her *wand of cure serious wounds* into Dannel. The elf was pale. They all were, realizing how close they'd come to being defeated in their first confrontation with the Cagewrights' forces.

Well, most of them were pale with such thoughts, anyway; Mole seemed more interested in the boots she'd taken off the minotaur barbarian. At first they had seemed ludicrously big for her, but after handling them for a minute or two they had miraculously shrunk to a size that seemed perfect for her.

"Well, that was fun," Hodge said, spitting out a fat gob of blood that might have contained a tooth. He'd been the only one of them not critically wounded in the brief battle, and in fact it had been his hasty "first aid" that had stabilized Nidrama. Of course, it might have been the farastu slime covering the cloth he'd used that had helped bind the deva's wound, rather than any particular medical skill the dwarf possessed, but it had held long enough for Arun to free himself from the grasp of the last dying farastu, and use Nidrama's healing wand to bring her back to consciousness. Dannel, mercifully, had stabilized on his own, although his breathing had been rasping and shallow when they'd gotten to him, and even repeated healing spells had left him wan and shaken.

"That... that *creature*, that was one of the most devastating warriors I've ever faced," Arun said. "No, let me correct myself. That was *the* most devastating warrior I've ever faced. She would have gone through even Zarik Dhor like a hot knife through butter."

"She was a Cagewright, one of the Thirteen," Nidrama said, finally rising as she completed the healing of Dannel's wounds—the physical ones, anyway. From the heavy use they'd put it to in the aftermath of the battle, the wand was likely well on its way to being depleted of its store of magic.

"Faugh!" Hodge snorted. "Just one o' them nearly took us all for sausages! Yer sure yer want to be doin' this, now?"

The last was directed to Arun, who merely fixed his stare into the darkness of the corridor ahead. "We have no choice. We will just have to be more cautious."

Mole suddenly looked up from her prize. "Hey... I wonder if she had any treasure?" Without waiting for confirmation from the others—or permission—she hopped up and darted through the gaping secret door in the north wall.

"Mole!" Dannel exclaimed. He started to say something else, but caught himself and shook his head.

"You'd only draw attention to her," Arun said. "If she does stick her feet into something, you can wager she'll let us know."

“And like as not we’ll get sucked into it up to our necks,” Hodge said. He was trying to scrape the clinging farastu slime from the blade of his axe, and not having much success. Nidrama saw him and reached out to touch the axe. As her slender fingers closed around the haft, the ooze seemed to grow viscous, sliding off the weapon to plop in lumps upon the ground.

“Hey!” Hodge said. “Why didn’t yer do that before? I mean, when that thing was hoppin’ all over me?”

“The secretions of the demodands are one with their essence of corruption,” the celestial said. “It is of them; anathema. When they live, only the purification of utter destruction—” she held up her sword, letting its flames glimmer brightly between them—“can cleanse it of its foulness. When they die, the corruption weakens, and eventually fades.”

“Yeah, well,” Hodge said, scratching his head.

Dannel had strung his bow anew with a spare string, and now tested its draw. “We should not linger here,” he said. “Likely this was just an initial test; the others no doubt have prepared a welcome deeper within the complex.”

“Why didn’t they just all meet us at the door?” Hodge asked.

“Distracted, no doubt,” Arun said, scraping what he could of the farastu slime from his shield before taking it up again. He’d beaten out the dents in his armor and helm as best he could with one of his hammers, but he still looked a sight, even with Nidrama’s healing.

“The Tree will take time to build its dark power to full fruition,” Nidrama said. “Once that happens, Cauldron will be no more, and your world will be refashioned in the image of the Dark.”

“That is what we must stop,” Arun said, drawing his sword.

Their attention was drawn to the door by a faint exclamation of glee, followed a moment later by the appearance of Mole. She was carrying something long and slender wrapped in a cloak, and wore the look of someone quite satisfied with herself.

“Glad you came back... it’s time to move out,” Dannel said. “Were there any other exits that way?”

“Ha!” Mole returned. “And to think, you guys would have passed it up!”

“What didje find, girl?” Hodge said, trying to maintain an aloof air but failing at it. In his case, the avarice of his nature wasn’t far from the surface, regardless of his long apprenticeship to Arun.

“Well,” Mole began, “She had a pretty grim set-up in there—the minotaur, that is. Whole room full of martial junk... man, the weapons...”

The men looked at her piercingly, and Nidrama, she saw, had turned to her with eyes suddenly wide. The deva came forward quickly and looked to be intent on spoiling her surprise, so Mole drew back the cloak with a dramatic flourish...

“Ta da! It’s a sword! Kinda like yours, eh Arun?”

The sword—a smooth, perfect longsword—looked a bit dingy and ill-cared for at first glance. It had the look of a weapon forged of cold iron, rather than finely processed steel, and its hilt was a simple straight shaft with a leather grip. Its crossguard bore its only decoration, shaped into a half-circle in the form of a rising sun, the sigil of the god Lathander, the Morninglord.

Nidrama reached out and touched the blade, her fingers drawing lightly down the length of the steel. “A holy avenger,” she said, reverently.

“By the gods,” Arun echoed.

Nidrama turned to him. “This is a gift, paladin. Take up this weapon... it is meant for your hands.”

Arun looked uncharacteristically indecisive.

“Do not fear that your patron would frown upon such; in our quest the will of the Soul Forger and the Morninglord are linked as one. Take it... do not reject the boon that has been handed us.”

Arun reached out and took hold of the sword. Mole, feeling quite pleased with herself, smiled as the sword seemed to flash in his hand, an almost electric tingle passing through all of them as the power in the sword found its match in that wielded by the man. For a moment, the gnome considered the adamantine morningstar and the silver flail she’d also found in the minotaur’s chamber, both currently residing in her *bag of holding*. Might not those have some wondrous powers as well? She allowed herself to resist the urge to reveal them to the others; none of them used either sort of weapon, after all.

Arun handed his own holy sword to Hodge, who accepted it with only a bit of grumbling; even though it was not his favored axe, the latter dwarf had seen firsthand, many times, how effective the weapon was against evil foes. For a moment, the paladin simply admired his new blade, then finally, almost grudgingly, he turned to the gnome.

“Take us forward, Mole.”

Chapter 357

Arun’s ability to *detect evil* revealed the second ambush, giving them a few precious seconds to prepare.

They’d followed the corridor to another room that showed clear indications of being a demodand lair—the tarry gunk the farastus secreted covered everything, and even Mole

did not advocate lingering long for a detailed search. There was little more than smooth walls and a few rounded boulders in any case, so they crossed to the doors in the far wall, and passed into another passage that wound deeper into the complex to the east.

They all felt the pressure of time's rapid passage, but they'd learned caution. Thus it was that when they entered the passage, which appeared to stretch on unbroken for as far as they could see, suspicions arose and they paused a moment for Arun to draw upon his gifts.

"Evil. Just ahead, to either side of the tunnel."

At that warning, Nidrama drew upon her innate powers, summoning a bright eruption of *daylight* that filled the passage with its warm glow. In the bright light, they could see that a length of the tunnel bore another irregularity; more of the dark curtains that were designed to blend in with the surrounding stone walls.

As it was clear that the companions were not going to be surprised, the curtains were drawn back to reveal a pair of vrock demons, their vulture-like heads bobbing in eager anticipation of the fray as they regarded the intruders. Each was prepared, surrounded by a swirling nexus of *mirror images*, and they immediately rushed down the corridor, their compact wings beating powerfully to augment the hops from their powerful hind legs.

Dannel immediately lifted his bow to fire, but Nidrama, her attention focused upon Arun, forestalled him. "Hold your missile, archer," she said. Dannel looked at her in surprise, but obeyed. The demons would be on them in seconds, quickly closing the distance between them.

Arun lifted his sword, holding it straight out, the point directed at the demons. As the others watched in surprise, a gleam of light erupted from between the paladin's fingers, tight around the hilt of the weapon, traveling down the straight steel before flashing out in a momentary pulse of golden radiance. Arun looked as surprised as the others at the unexpected display, but the effect was immediately obvious as the *mirror images* suddenly vanished, revealing the true locations of the vocks.

The demons hesitated in surprise, faltering just for a single heartbeat before leaping once more to the attack. But that second cost them. Dannel's arrow knifed into the first demon's shoulder, doing little damage through its resistances, but throwing off its momentum and forcing it to wildly adjust to bring itself back into stride.

The second demon abruptly stopped five paces from the ready ranks of the companions, leapt into the air, and released a terrible, piercing screech. Dannel staggered back, stunned, but the dwarves easily resisted the effects, and Nidrama's only response was to lift her blade and meet the second vrock as it hurtled itself forward, tearing with all four talons at the celestial. The assault might have been effective, if it had been given time enough to complete its full attack; as it was the creature's first claw tore a minor gouge into the celestial's exposed forearm, but then it came under immediate counterattack from the deva and from Hodge, who'd come forward swinging Arun's holy sword. Both scored hits upon the vrock, Nidrama driving it back with a serious blow to the body, and then Hodge finishing with a violent swing that took the demon's left leg off just above the knee. The

vrock, screeching in agony, fell to the ground, flapping out the last of its life in a spray of demonic ichor and mottled feathers.

The second vrock, driven to a fury of bloodlust, leapt at Hodge. It managed to clip him on his temple with a lashing claw, driving the dwarf back. Flapping its wings madly, it lifted itself three feet in the air, preparing to shred the dwarf with a full assault of claws and bite.

And then Arun stepped forward.

The demon seemed to recoil from the piercing glimmer of the *holy avenger*, but it was too late for it to escape. The paladin seemed possessed as he swept the blade twice through the air, each time cleaving deep through demonic flesh, and finally lunged, driving half the length of the blade through its body, transfixing its heart. The demon seemed to deflate, sinking to the ground and trembling once, then falling still.

Mole materialized behind the demons, where she'd been waiting for a good moment to backstab one of them. The entire battle, from the time that the vrocks had first revealed themselves, had taken less than fifteen seconds.

"Wow," she said. "Cool sword."

Chapter 358

"The invaders have broken through the outer defenses. Gather our guests, and take them to join the giant and his creatures," Shebelith Regidin said.

"As you command," Decrihni Baiul replied, giggling as he bowed. He shot the woman standing beside Regidin a suggestive leer that caused her lips to compress into a tight line, then darted off, moving surprisingly quickly for a man clad in full plate armor.

"How you tolerate that little troll, I have no idea," the woman said upon Baiul's departure. She was clad in a fashionable outfit of spotless red silk, and she looked rather out of place in the dark tunnels of the Cagewright stronghold. A wand was tucked into a case at her waist, and a *detect magic* spell would have revealed her to be a veritable beacon of magical auras.

"He is useful, for all his idiosyncrasies, my dear Freija," Regidin said. He turned his considerable gaze upon her; the woman did not flinch and if anything her disapproving frown deepened. "And do not underestimate his competence."

"I do not agree with this plan," Freija returned. "We should meet the enemy with the combined force of the Thirteen."

"Twelve, now," Regidin noted. "And a number of our colleagues are elsewhere, as you know."

Freija lifted an eyebrow slightly. "All the more reason to gather our forces and strike a decisive blow."

“Your ideas are incisive, as always, my dear. But the Tree cannot be left alone at this stage; matters approach a decisive fulcrum upon which the entire fate of our plans is balanced.”

“I know not if you are brilliant or merely a coward,” Freija answered.

“Perhaps both. In any case, you will have Ti’irok and his little band, Baiul and his demodands, and our new allies at your command. Not to mention those beings that you will no doubt summon to our cause.”

“Bah. Foot soldiers are all and well, but if you and Dyr’ryd cannot be stirred from your precious Tree, at least release Ardeth and Nulin to my command. Grehlia and Thearynn can go hide in their holes; both are as mad as Baiul, if not more, and I would as soon not turn my back upon either when my life is on the line.”

“Ardeth and Nulin are completing a special project upon my behalf, but I will send them to you as soon as they are available.”

“That level of commitment is unacceptable.”

“You have the full intelligence as to the capability of our foes. Their numbers are depleted, and their magical power is surely at its nadir.”

“Indeed, and that is more reason to not underestimate them. It would appear that Gau did so.”

“I have full confidence in your abilities. And consider; these invaders are potent, and are likely to have a comprehensive arsenal of magical items.”

“I am not some pathetic underling to be bribed with trinkets, cleric. And if you think to leave me out on a limb, perhaps to fall against these intruders...”

“If that were my intent, would I have bothered to reinforce you with the sorcerer and the glabrezu? Your vaunted intellect has you jousting at shadows, Freija. I believe that these invaders will be easily handled by what forces we have assembled, but should they prove more resourceful than I have anticipated, I have complete confidence that you will be the first to withdraw, and the last to fall.”

“Self-preservation is an instinct we all possess in abundance. Perhaps fanatics like yourself and Grehlia feel differently, but I will not throw my life away needlessly.”

“Nor would I expect it of you.”

“You are in a position of leadership in our cabal... but I am not yours nor any other being’s pawn.”

“Allow me to clarify my position: the Tree must be protected, at all cost. If that cost includes the giant and his mercenaries, or Baiul, or you, or every other one of the Thirteen, or even

my own life, then I will pay it. Once the ritual is complete, and the portal between worlds secure, then and only then will I shift my attention to other matters.”

Freija’s eyes narrowed. “As will I.” She inclined her head in a tight gesture that might have been intended as a bow, then spun and strode stiffly away.

Chapter 359

Once they had bound the minor wounds suffered in the brief battle with the vrock, the companions continued deeper into the complex. Shortly thereafter they came to a split in the tunnel. Both options appeared identical, so they turned to the right. Their chosen way seemed to curve ever so slightly around to the left as they progressed further, until they’d left the intersection well behind them.

“It’s getting hotter,” Dannel commented.

“Well, we be in an active volcano,” Hodge grumbled.

“We could be nearing an active lava tube,” Arun said. “Be alert.”

“There’s a door up ahead,” Mole noted. The corridor came to an end there, with a pair of massive stone portals, each easily ten feet in height, offering the only obvious way to continue their explorations.

“Not a casual entry,” Nidrama said, stepping forward.

“Too bad Zenna’s not here; she could use her magic to see what lies beyond,” Mole said. As she finished speaking, she could sense the sudden tension that had come over the rest of them, in particular the stricken look that had crossed Dannel’s features before he was able to school his expression back to one of hard neutrality. “Ah, yeah, right, way to put your foot in it,” she mumbled to herself, before busying herself with the door. “I don’t see any traps,” she reported, after a few moments.

Arun gestured to Hodge, and the two dwarves sheathed their weapons, stepping up to the nearer of the double doors. Even with their combined strength, the door edged open only fractionally, as if resisting their efforts. A wave of heat greeted them as the doors slid open enough to reveal the area beyond, and a line of orange light glowed through the narrow slit. Mole leapt up onto Hodge’s shoulder, eliciting a protest from the dwarf, and peered through.

“Looks like a big cavern, full of lava,” she said.

“Any bridge or ledge that runs across?” Arun asked.

“I don’t see one. Open the door a bit more.”

The dwarves complied, with Nidrama reaching over them to add her strength to the effort. Finally Mole slid her head through the opening, and looked around, including a scan of the ceiling above.

“No way,” she said. “The whole floor is lava, with maybe a few islands here or there. I could hop across, but there’s no way you dwarves are going to make it without sprouting wings.”

“Is there another exit on the far side?” Dannel asked.

“I didn’t see one,” Mole said. “But it’s a big cavern; there may be something on the far side that I cannot see from here.”

Nidrama drew back. “I sense evil... old, deep.”

Arun nodded. “We may have to come back here... but for now, let’s try the other passage.”

They closed the door as best they could, and then retraced their steps back to the intersection. The other passage continued for only a relatively short distance, a few dozen paces, before splitting again into another passage that ran perpendicular to each side. To the left, they could see that the passage quickly opened into a larger chamber; to the right the corridor ran on for some distance straight ahead.

“Let’s check out that room,” Dannel said, but he hesitated as Mole suddenly appeared ahead of them. The gnome was pale.

“Torture chamber,” she said. “Recently used, I’d say. Stinks of demodands, but there aren’t any there now.”

“Any exits?” Arun asked.

“No, not that I could see.”

“It’s quiet,” Dannel said.

The others shared a quick look. They were all thinking the same thing; the Cagewrights were likely waiting for them somewhere ahead, at a point where they could attack from a position of best advantage.

“Well, let’s get to it, then,” Arun finally said, leading them back in the other direction. Mole, once again, had disappeared.

The remaining passage continued for maybe forty feet before ending in a small recessed door to the right. Mole—or rather, her voice, for she was still *invisible*—pronounced it free of traps, and after waiting a moment for them to check their weapons, Arun shouldered it open. A spacious room with a spartan décor lay beyond, obviously personal quarters for someone of at least medium rank. They took in the weapons racks, the narrow bed, the heavy carpets laid out upon the floor and hung upon the walls as cheap insulation. A plain iron brazier, currently unlit, likely served as a source of both heat and illumination. But the

oddest thing about the place was set into the far wall; a bulky pipe organ, large enough to have served adequately in a cathedral to one of the more favored gods of the Realms. The thing appeared to have been built into the back wall of the room itself; apparently its owner had not been planning on relocating anytime soon.

“This place... there’s somethin’ not quite right about it...” Hodge said.

Arun nodded. There were little signs, subtleties in the arrangements of the modest furnishings, the choice of coverings for the walls and floor. Nidrama said, “The resident of this chamber is possessed of a damaged mind.”

“Guys,” Dannel said from behind them, directing their attention back out into the corridor. “There’s a secret door here.”

They retreated, giving the room a final cautionary look, and joined the elf. “Here,” Dannel said. “Either someone was careless, or we were meant to find it.” The portal was of excellent design, and looked indistinguishable from the surrounding wall, but Dannel indicated a narrow crack where the door hadn’t been returned fully into its setting.

“Trap?” Arun asked.

“Yer ain’t been payin’ attention,” Hodge said. “O’ course it’s a trap. Everythin’s a trap!”

“We might have missed something, another secret door,” Dannel noted. “And there’s the lava room.”

“Nidrama?” Arun asked.

“We knew when we came here that the road would be fraught with suffering.”

“Oy, that’s inspirin’,” Hodge said sarcastically, wiping his hand across his mouth.

“We should be prepared,” the celestial said, ignoring the dwarf as she refreshed their wards.

“Well, here we...” Arun began, turning to the portal.

He never got a chance to finish, for at that moment the entire door, along with a good section of the surrounding wall, just *vanished*, leaving behind only a few motes of dust that slowly drifted to the floor. Beyond lay a considerable chamber, a council room of some sort, dominated by a long, thin, oddly shaped table that ran most of the length of the room. The room was filled with a ruddy light that emitted from pools of lava at the corners. A single exit was visible at the far side of the chamber.

But they did not have the luxury of examining the chamber further, for it was here that the Cagewrights had prepared their ambush. Behind the table was arrayed a line of over a half-dozen humanoid warriors, muscular, dark-skinned creatures with ferocious, vaguely canine visages and thick layers of jet black fur covering their heads and the backs of their arms. They had longbows, with arrows at the ready. At the end of the table stood a

massive fire giant, armed with a huge greatsword that burned with a bright, eager flame. Standing in the doorway opposite, behind the warriors, a figure stood in the shadows, its form obscured by the familiar shifting of magical *displacement*. Beside that figure stood a vrock demon, its wings twitching in anticipation.

And there was one other present, one already familiar to the companions. As the doorway was *disintegrated*, the glabrezu Nabthatoron lifted its adamantine claw, barking a sinister greeting as it fixed the Heroes of Cauldron with a terrible, eager stare.

Chapter 360

The companions, caught flat-footed by the suddenness of Freija's *disintegration* of the barrier between them, found themselves caught in an unenviable tactical position.

Arrows knifed through the air, powered by the mighty bows of the haraknin warriors. Their aim was expert, but the companions, warded by Nidrama's *protection from arrows* magic, avoided serious injury in that initial barrage. Unfortunately the protection was not sufficient to fully absorb the oblong iron missile the size of a man's skull hurled by Ti'irok Coalfire. The giant had laid his ammunition into the lava pool in anticipation of the battle, and the superheated lump, half-melted by the brief immersion, caromed off of Arun's shield, driving the paladin back a step as hot droplets of molten metal splashed onto his helmet.

Arun's situation grew more dire a moment later. Nabthatoron had not forgotten the foe that had taken its claw, and the glabrezu was not in a mood to mess around. Even as Ti'irok's missile struck hard and bounced off its target, the demon hurled a *power word, stun* that send the paladin reeling, staggering back against the wall of the passage.

Seeing Arun blasted by the demon's power, and noting in a quick glance the enemies arrayed against them, Dannel exclaimed, "Fall back!" But even as he reached for Arun, hoping to be able to drag the stunned dwarf free of this exposed position, he heard the sounds of creatures approaching from behind. He looked up to see a pair of kelubar demodands approaching, filling the tunnel with their bulk. Behind them, he could just see the outlines of an armored man, easily twirling a long length of spiked chain in his hands.

"Damn," the elf said.

And that's when the *horrid wilting* hit.

Freija Doorgan chuckled as she observed the effects of her magic upon the intruders. Thus far the ambush was going perfectly; while the adventurers seemed protected against the arrows of the haraknin—not that she'd expected much from the mercenaries in the first place—the glabrezu's magic had taken out their toughest fighter, and the screams as her *horrid wilting* ravaged them were quite... stimulating. The presence of a celestial had been a surprise; Shebelith's briefing had not indicated that any of them had the power to summon such an ally. But the deva looked hard-hit by the *wilting*, and the next spell would likely finish off the lot of them.

The half-fiend sorcerer made a desultory comment that she couldn't quite identify. Kaurophon had not seemed pleased when she'd ordered him to remain back, at her side. His *cone of cold* might have helped hasten the inevitable outcome here, but she didn't want to have to worry about allies getting in the way of her spells. The sorcerer was shrouded by *greater invisibility*, which was a problem for her, given her inability to cast divination spells, but thus far the sorcerer's mutterings had allowed her to keep track of his presence. She hadn't seen the gnome rogue yet, but was ready for Mole Calloran, if and when she made her appearance.

The elf, moving quickly despite the agony of the *wilting*, lifted his bow, an arrow already fitted to the string. For a split second, Freija thought she heard something odd—a few melodic notes?—but then the elf released his shot. She's known that the elf was an arcane archer, but even she was surprised when the arrow *shifted* as it left the bow, and suddenly multiple missiles were knifing across the room. Several haraknin took hits, and one arrow even knifed narrowly past her, fortunately piercing the false image projected by her *displacement* spell.

The conjurer mentally placed the elf on the next-to-destroy list.

The haraknin, following their orders, had already taken up their greataxes and started forward. She turned and barked a single-word command to her summoned vrock, but even as the creature eagerly leapt forward, flapping its wings to attack, a cloud of green vapors erupted around their enemies.

"That fool Baiul!" she exclaimed. "I told him, no obscuring spells!" The *acid fog* might further injure their foes, but it also gave them concealment, and would injure their own forces as they closed to melee. And Freija's tactical acumen extended to a simple principle: hit first, hit hard, and hit often, until your foe is no longer a threat. She did not want to give these enemies a chance to retreat, or to recover the initiative.

"It would appear that your friend is not as effective at controlling fiends as you are," Kaurophon said.

Freija's response was like ice. "*Dispel* the fog," she commanded, already focusing her mind on her next spell. What to bring next? Fiendish vermin were always enjoyable, but the space here was limited, and with the haraknin charging the melee would already be crowded. Perhaps a pack of yeth hounds? With their resistance to any but silver weapons, those were always a pain in the ass to deal with. Folding her hands in an intricate gesture, the conjurer began the familiar incantation that would draw minions across the barrier between worlds.

Intent upon her summoning, she did not even see the celestial erupt from the cloud, a fierce cry erupting from her lips, her sword lifted high as she flew in a line toward the glabrezu. The demon dominated the room, towering over the deva by an easy eight feet, its head nearly touching the ceiling above. But Nidrama did not hesitate in the face of this deadly adversary. Consumed by the urge to destroy the classic enemy of all celestials, the demon representing the polar opposite of all that she was, the deva flew directly at the glabrezu. Her sword seemed to sing as she drove it down in a glimmering arc that tore

viciously into Nabthatoron's shoulder, releasing a spray of hot ichor that sizzled as it hit the air.

The wound was considerable, but it would take far more than that to destroy this adversary.

The mists of the *acid fog* faded, the magic holding it together disrupted by Kaurophon's *dispel magic*. The spell also had the salutary effect of stripping away a few of the wards that Nidrama had laid upon the companions, but it likewise removed some of the magical benefits enjoyed by the nearest of the Cagewright forces, already closing upon the companions. This included the two kelubar demodands, who eagerly lumbered forward to destroy the trapped intruders. With Arun stunned and defenseless, Hodge, despite feeling terrible from the *wilting*, stepped forward to meet them. The corridor was too narrow for both demodands to easily assault the dwarf together, but they did quite effectively block any route of escape. The nearer of the two lunged at Hodge with its long arms, but the dwarf merely stepped into its reach, shrugging off a painful blow to the shoulder, and laid into it with Arun's holy sword. Hodge used the weapon much as he would his axe, cleaving into the fiend's flabby torso, opening a terrible gash nearly five feet across, spilling its organs out in a mess of slime and gore upon the bare stone of the corridor floor. The kelubar gibbered in obvious distress, but it continued its attack, slashing and tearing eagerly at this foe a fraction of its size.

Dannel hurled himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the first diving assault of the summoned vrock. Behind it, he was all too aware of the line of mercenary warriors who were rapidly closing in. With Arun temporarily—he hoped it was only temporary—out of the fight, he had to hold the line. But his attention remained drawn to the enemy wizard, the source of the *horrid wilting*. Dannel knew enough about magic to know how dangerous this made the enemy spellcaster, and through the chaos of battle, the shouts and rapidly shifting figures, his sharp eyes caught a glimpse of the woman moving her hands in an intricate pattern. Another spell, on the way, and if it was taking this long, it would have to be a nasty one.

He did not hesitate. Even though it exposed him to the vrock hovering a few feet above, and even though it meant that he would be open to the charging haraknin, he drew back his bow, letting the song fill him once more, and released.

Freija, lost in her summoning, did not see the elf's shot; with all of the intervening foes and the added benefit of her *displacement*, she considered herself secure. Their enemies contained no spellcasters to threaten her, and while their swords were said to be quite effective, there was no way for them to reach her...

Pain exploded in her shoulder, as Dannel's *seeker arrow*, navigating the shifting openings through the melee, found its target. Her concentration, normally an unbreakable steel sphere of self-control, was broken as the missile pierced muscle and grated painfully off her clavicle before jutting out of her back. The wound was not life-threatening, but the pain was certainly no less intense for that.

For an incredulous moment Freija looked down at the arrow jutting from her shoulder. Then her gaze shifted down to the blossoming field of darker red that was spreading across her pristine velvet dress, transforming the expensive white lace trim into an ugly red mess.

At that sight the pain disappeared into the background, and Freija let out a terrible shriek.

“You... you... GOT ME DIRTY!” she screamed.

For all her pathological fixation on cleanliness, the next words that came from the conjurer’s mouth were decidedly... filthy.

While Freija Doorgan dealt with her personal demons, the Cagewright ambush, for all its initial clockwork timing and execution, had quickly devolved into a desperate and chaotic melee as the Heroes of Cauldron fought for their lives.

Dannel dropped his bow, drawing out *Alakast* as he tried to dodge the shrieking assault of the vrock. Unfortunately, this distraction meant that the elf could do nothing to protect Arun from a pair of haraknin warriors, who rushed in to finish the stunned paladin, their huge axes raised to strike.

But even as the first lunged in to deliver a critical blow, it stumbled on something. As it fell, the second mercenary was caught off-guard as a small but ferocious boar—coming out of nowhere, it seemed—appeared and attacked. The animal’s tusks failed to penetrate the haraknin’s thick hide, but they did get its attention.

The diminutive figure of Mole appeared across the fallen warrior’s back, slamming her rapier deep into the gap where its arm met its torso. The haraknin were durable combatants, however, and almost immediately the injured creature started to rise. Its companion, ignoring Mole’s conjured boar, spun and brought its axe around in a controlled sweep designed to remove the pest from its perch. But the gnome saw the attack coming, and at the last instant she sprang up above the sweep of the crescent blade, thrusting her little weapon out at the haraknin’s face. The creature was forced to dodge back, but even so it took a nasty gash across its brow. The boar continued its persistent attack, although its tusks barely scratched the haraknin’s leathery skin.

Mole’s efforts had won a few critical moments, but there were another seven haraknin behind the first pair, including a massive figure that muscled its way to the fore. This huge specimen, half a foot taller than its kin, wielded a two-handed sword that bore an obvious and seemingly contradictory enchantment; one edge was covered with hot licks of flame, while the other was surrounded by a rime of white frost.

“Uh oh,” Mole said, as Aszithef, Ti’irok Coalfire’s second in command, stepped forward with her magical sword *Coldburn*, ready to do some serious damage.

The glabrezu reeled from the initial ferocity of Nidrama’s assault, and for a few seconds the two seemed insulated from the rest of the melee merely by virtue of the demon’s height. The two, fiend and celestial, were acting out a rivalry that existed back to the beginning of time, and the deva’s ferocity seemed unmatched as she swept her blade deep into Nabthatoron’s body.

But her brave charge could not obviate the fact that Nidrama was greatly outmatched by this foe. The glabrezu’s thin inner claws reached out and took hold of the deva’s arms,

seizing her long enough for it to bring up its huge pincer arm, equipped with the deadly adamantine claw that had been its prize for joining this struggle.

Nidrama saw her destruction coming and tried to draw away. But she'd been already seriously battered by the *wilting*, and she'd foresworn the full powers of her celestial ancestry by her decision to intervene in this mortal conflict. Wincing in pain she tore free from the glabrezu's claws, but too late to avoid the descending metal limb. The pincer caught her solidly in the chest, crushing her body, driving her down into the ground ten feet below with enough force to shake the volcanic stone. Her sword flew from her grasp, twisting end over end before it clattered noisily to the ground a few paces away.

The celestial, still somehow conscious despite the sundering of her body, looked up in defiance as Nabthatoron loomed over her. "This is not the end, demon," she spat, the words all but lost in the gurgling of her blood from her shattered torso into her lungs and throat.

The glabrezu's response was its heavy foot upon her chest, crushing what was left of her against the stone.

Chapter 361

The companions could do nothing to aid Nidrama, as their situation rapidly devolved from bad to worse.

Hodge had taken down the first kelubar with several strokes of his holy sword, the blessed steel opening huge gashes in the demodand's torso and legs. But even as the first foe fell, the second clambered forward over its ally to lay powerful blows upon Hodge's armored body. The dwarf was tough, but there was a limit to how much damage even he could absorb. Even as the titanic struggle continued, Baiul's insane laughter from behind continued, punctuated by sharp scratches as the mad cleric slapped his magical spiked chain against the nearby passage walls. With the kelubar in the way, there was no way for the priest to join the melee, but Baiul seemed content to observe, taking delight in the predicament of the intruders whose interference in the plans of the Cagewrights seemed to be coming to an end.

Dannel was likewise hard pressed. Already seriously hurt by Doorgan's *wilting*, the vrock was getting the better of him. He'd managed a solid blow with *Alakast*, which had hurt it, but in turn he'd taken several hits from its claws. It had also released a cloud of spores, which were starting to burrow painfully into his flesh. Unfortunately, there was little he could do; while he might have been able to reach the nearby door into the chamber with the pipe organ, he had little doubt that the vrock would pursue him until it had torn him to pieces.

Mole let out a sudden screech and threw herself backward off of her awkward perch on the back of the injured haraknin as Aszithet thrust *Coldburn* at her with controlled precision. The other haraknin gave way to their subcommander, letting her take the lead as she had in so many battles across the planes. Mole managed to avoid being run through, but the

searing blade with its doubly-deadly enhancements cut along her body, sending twin lances of pain through her side.

Mole's efforts had bought a few vital instants, however, long enough for Arun to shake off the effects of Nabthatoron's *power word*. The paladin roared an invocation to Moradin as he lifted himself up off the wall and stepped up to the two haraknin Mole had engaged. One swept its axe at the dwarf, only to have its stroke diverted by Arun's shield. The paladin, in turn, unleashed a devastating series of attacks, the *holy avenger* tearing through its armor as though the magical chain links were merely decorative. The haraknin crumpled, blood fountaining from its wounds, and Arun continued his last stroke into the second foe, crunching his sword into its ribs, driving the shattered bones like arrowheads into its lung.

The preliminaries completed, the paladin stepped forward to meet Aszithef. But even as the two veterans engaged, Freija Doorgan unleashed another devastating gambit.

A bolt of lightning shot through the chamber, striking Dannel in the chest. The elf tried to dodge out of the way of the blast, but the stream of energy nevertheless stabbed through his body. Dannel's scream was cut off as his chest exploded in a spray of blood and gore. The *chain lightning* continued to explode in secondary blasts that tore mercilessly outward. Hodge was struck in the back even as the dwarf stabbed the second kelubar, and the dwarf went down. Mole dodged the bolt, but her boar was instantly incinerated. Arun took the blast full on, but the stream of liquid energy flared on the length of his sword, draining off through the power of the weapon. But as the flickering afterimage of the bolt faded, the paladin and the gnome were left nearly alone, still surrounded by deadly foes.

"Mole! Get out of here!" Arun said, blocking the first swing of *Coldburn* on his holy weapon, the two swords meeting in a flare of multicolored sparks.

Mole refused to give up, tumbling between Aszithef's legs, ready to set up a sneak attack in conjunction with Arun's assault. But even as the Mole sprang to her feet, a long limb stabbed into the melee, snapping her up. She screamed as Nabthatoron lifted her into the air, crushing her in its pincer. Around the demon's feet, six haraknin stood at the ready, and behind them the huge giant, Ti'irok Coalfire, stood confident in the victory of his minions, his own terrible sword apparently unnecessary. To the rear the injured kelubar lumbered forward over Hodge's inert and blackened form, its oozing flesh rippling as it reached out for Arun from behind. Baiul, in no hurry, laughed.

"It's over!" Freija Doorgan screamed. "You are done!"

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Dannel was dead. Hodge was down; if he wasn't dead now, he surely would be in a few moments. Nidrama was gone, the life crushed out of her by the glabrezu Nabthatoron. Mole was currently held firmly in the grasp of said demon.

Arun stood alone against an overwhelming force. In addition to the haraknin mercenaries and their giant commander, there was still Kaurophon, who hadn't contributed much thus

far, and whose considerable spellpower remained in reserve. Freija Doorgan had unleashed terrible magic upon the intruders, but still maintained numerous spells in her arsenal. And both a kelubar and Decrihni Baiul blocked the only means of escape.

Arun lashed out, taking the kelubar's lunging arm off at the elbow, and driving even the fierce Aszithef back with a powerful backswing. As the demodand gave way, Arun shifted his position, taking up a defensive stance over Hodge's unmoving form. A few paces away lay Dannel's corpse, his face left intact with a look of incredulity frozen on his fair features, his torso open in a gory mess below. A momentary lull fell over the battle, with the haraknin facing off against the paladin on one side, and the crippled kelubar and the accompanying cleric on the other. Mole struggled in the glabrezu's grasp, but could not escape the pincer that crushed her body like a steel vise.

"You fought... bravely, noble warrior," Freija said, stepping forward. Her words were given the lie by the thick sarcasm that dripped from every syllable. "You were bold indeed, to think that you could undo the plans of the Cagewrights."

"You will fail," Arun said, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his gauntleted fist. He stood in a heap of sundered flesh and gore, surrounded by the mangled forms of a kelubar and the two haraknin he'd slain. They could not all rush him at once, but several of the haraknin had already recovered their bows, and loaded steel-tipped sheaf arrows to the strings.

Freija Doorgan laughed. "Your inability to accept the reality of your defeat is amusing, but I have little time to spare for idle parley. The hour of our victory is upon us, you know. Were we less pressed for time, I might enjoy watching you break, paladin. They all break, in the end."

"I will enjoy seeing your broken corpse, dwarf," Nabthatoron intoned.

"And my vengeance is fulfilled, as well," came a voice, which materialized into the familiar figure of Kaurophon, as the sorcerer shed his *invisibility*. "It is a shame; you could have been truly great, if you had chosen instead to serve me as Lord of Occipitus."

Baiul spat something incoherent, but quickly subsided.

Arun stood defiant. The bright glow of his holy sword seemed to intensify in his grip, and the paladin's bearing, for all the odds against him, and the friends he'd lost, there was a noble glory that infused him that these foes could not shatter. He'd drawn upon his link to his patron, filling him with *Order's Wrath* as he prepared for the final stand that had to end in only one way. He looked up at Mole, met the gnome's eyes briefly. He would do his best to give her a chance to escape, at the last.

"So be it," Doorgan said. With a desultory wave of her hand to her troops, she stepped back to watch the end, her eyes casting a feral glow in the echoed brightness of the lava pools.

Time slowed as many things happened at once.

Baiul, hearing a noise behind him through the mad gibbering that sounded more or less constantly in the prison of his insane mind, turned around. His eyes widened in disbelief as he witnessed something unusual, if not unprecedented. A small group of fiends had approached them from behind. The sleek, sensual figure of a succubus was in the lead, her eyes pinpoints of burning fire. With her was a fat imp, walking along the ground, and the ebon figure of a jovoc demon, clad in a coat of black plates, clanking slightly with every movement.

For a heartbeat, Baiul was too surprised to react, his jaw hanging open as he regarded the newcomers. Just as his mind was starting to register that something wasn't quite right, the succubus stepped forward, and spoke a single word of power.

Reality trembled as a surge of clarion energy swept outward in a wave from the demoness. Baiul screamed and clutched at his ears, deafened by the purity of the sound, but he was not the worst off. The vrock demon instantly vanished, banished back to its home plane, as did the crippled kelubar. The haraknin likewise staggered back, and more than half of them disappeared as they were driven from the Prime. Of the three that remained, two were struck down, paralyzed and helpless, while Aszithef, while keeping her feet, was blinded. The giant was not affected, nor was the glabrezu, whose spell resistance held against the potency of the magic. Nor was Freija Doorgan harmed by the *holy word*, although she shrieked in anger as the tide of battle suddenly shifted against her.

Baiul, gibbering madly, lifted his spiked chain to bring down this false succubus who'd spoken a word that should have been anathema to her. But before he could strike, the jovoc lifted a heavy axe and tore into him with an unbridled ferocity. He could not hear the mighty impact of the weapon as it slammed into him repeatedly, but he certainly felt it as the strokes crushed armor plates and the bones underneath. It was the last thing he felt, as a final stroke drove through his gorget and separated his head from his shoulders.

Invisibility fell from another figure like a shed cloak, revealing a tall, bearded man clad in a dark tunic over which he wore a shirt of shimmering black chain links. He had a longbow at the ready, and as he became visible he released an arrow at the glabrezu. Even as the first shaft was fired, he was reaching back to his quiver for a second, firing and aiming in a rapid sequence that bespoke great training. The arrows looked tiny against the hulking figure of the huge demon, but each of them seemed to strike with the force of a battering ram, staggering the glabrezu. The first two shots sank deep into its body, while the third penetrated its arm just above the claw. The force of that shot slightly loosened its grip upon Mole, who instantly seized the opportunity to slip free and drop lightly to the ground.

"Benzan, wizard!" the imp warned, pointing across the room. The archer looked furious as he scanned the battlefield, his gaze finally settling upon Freija Doorgan. The conjurer, no stranger to the fury of men, nevertheless felt a cold chill at the intensity of that stare.

"Where's my daughter?" Benzan shouted, as he fitted another shaft to his deadly bow.

Chapter 363

Confronted by a new set of—apparently very dangerous—adversaries, Freija Doorgan did not hesitate. Speaking the words of another spell, she conjured up a shimmering *forcecage* that engulfed the newcomers, surrounding them with solid walls of force that offered no escape. The demon woman with her damned *holy word* was outside of the cage, behind it, but no matter; the prison was large enough to block the passage, and that was what Freija had sought to accomplish. The dwarf paladin and the gnome were on her side of the wall, but both were far enough way to be discounted as threats of the immediate moment. She looked around for Kaurophon, but the sorcerer had disappeared again. No big surprise there, she thought; she'd had him pegged as a coward from the moment they'd met.

“Finish the paladin!” she urged, although she suspected that the half-fiend had already fled. In any case, there was no obvious response to her command.

The force-prison's walls were transparent, so she could see as the imp gestured in an obvious spellcasting motion, a suspicion confirmed a moment later as he *disintegrated* the walls of the *forcecage*.

Freija was already backing toward the exit, holding a *prismatic spray* at the ready.

The succubus stepped forward. “Destroy the fiend,” she said.

Another being became visible beside her—a perfectly formed, winged youth, clad in a golden breastplate, carrying a heavy mace in both hands. The astral deva eagerly leapt at Nabthatoron, his body shining with the bright glow of a *holy aura*. The demon growled and swept its augmented claw in a violent arc designed to crush its second celestial victim of the day, but this time the glabrezu's attack was deflected as the angel parried the massive limb with his weapon.

This time, Nabthatoron had met a foe that could give it a real fight.

Ti'irok Coalfire stepped into the fray, defending his stricken haraknin by unleashing a terrible onslaught upon Arun with his massive sword *Blackfire*. The unholy sword drove through the paladin's defenses with ease, and within moments the holy warrior was on the brink of sharing the destruction already suffered by his companions.

“Lok!” the imp cried in warning, but the jovoc was already rushing forward. It was big for its kind, close to five feet tall, but it still looked puny against the hulking, muscular figure of the giant. But that impression was broken a moment later as the small demonoid leapt forward through the giant's guard, ignoring a late attack of opportunity that crushed hard into the armored plates covering its back. The giant lifted the weapon to strike again, but could not complete its attack before its foe charged ahead and slammed his axe deep into the giant's meaty thigh. Coalfire roared in pain, and drove *Blackfire* down to sunder this annoying gnat.

But somehow, the gnat refused to be smoten, taking the hit with a mere grunt before unleashing another series of deadly counterattacks.

Everything seemed confused to Arun as he staggered and nearly fell, hovering on the brink of consciousness. His friends, dead or dying... Fiends attacking fiends, another celestial appearing out of nowhere... whom were the enemies, and whom allies? The hits from the giant had been incredible, and added to the impact of the *horrid wilting* had reduced him to the limits of even his incredible stamina.

Then he felt a presence next to him, and looked up to see the face of the succubus. She wore a visage of evil, her body lean and seductive, clad in tight leather that accentuated the curves of her form. Reflexively, Arun reached for his holy sword, but he was halted by her eyes, as their gazes locked. Those eyes... those eyes were kind, sympathetic.

And then a cold surge of positive energy rushed through him, healing his wounds. With a shock he realized that he had been completely restored, the beneficiary of the most potent of healing spells.

"Who... who *are* you?" he managed to ask.

"A friend, Arun Goldenshield... a friend." She smiled, but the look became one of concern as she looked to her right. "I fear that Lok may need your help with this one," she said, indicating the giant.

Arun nodded, but he hesitated for one instant more, looking down to where Hodge lay face-down a few paces away. Arun had tried to stabilize him with a trickle of healing energy, but the paladin's powers had been drained over the course of this very long day, and he'd only managed the faintest hint of curative power. He did not know if his cohort yet lived. "My friend..."

"I will do what I can," the woman promised. Arun nodded, and taking up his sword, rushed back into the fray.

The archer Benzan tracked the retreating conjurer, waiting for the slightest move that would indicate a spell being cast, ready to disrupt it with a well-placed arrow. It looked like she was intent on retreat, though, so he decided to just go ahead and unleash a full barrage.

But before he could release his shot, he was distracted by the intensity of the fray in the middle of the room. The astral deva had laid into Nabthatoron solidly with his heavy mace, landing punishing blows that had caved in segments of the demon's torso. But the demon responded with an equally vigorous counterattack, tearing with its smaller claws, and finally catching the celestial hard with a sweep of its adamantine claw. The impact knocked the angel off-balance, sending him fluttering awkwardly to the ground to land in a half-crouch, shaking his head to clear it.

Unfortunately, he was still within the glabrezu's reach, and the adamantine claw came up to deliver a crushing blow before the demon's adversary could recover.

Benzan shifted his aim, releasing his arrow and immediately drawing another, directing his rapid-fire stream of arrows at the glabrezu. Again the shafts slammed into it with the force of shots from a ballista. Each missile released a bright glow like that of a miniature sun as

it vanished into the demon's body. The demon, transfixed, could not respond, and finally a last arrow slammed into its chest, piercing its heart before it exploded out from its back in a spray of white light and ichor.

Nabtharon regarded its enemies with an incredulous look, and then expired, falling backward across the Cagewright's meeting table with enough force to crack the heavy stone object. The room shook with the impact, momentarily drawing the attention of everyone in the room to the fallen creature.

Benzan looked at his handiwork, glanced at the quiver at his hip, and shook his head.

"Damn, those holy arrows are expensive, too."

Ti'irok Coalfire was slowing, bleeding from several serious wounds. It limped now, the Achilles tendon on its left ankle deeply scored by Mole's knife. It faced two implacable foes that inflicted devastating wounds upon it, for all that neither could reach higher than the giant's waist. Lok had taken several mighty hits that should have killed him, but clad in adamantine plate, tougher than any mortal creature had a right to be, he simply absorbed the impacts and fought on. Arun, meanwhile, restored to health, smote his holy sword through the giant's leg, hewing at it as though he were a mad lumberjack hewing at the bole of an ancient oak.

A few feet away, Aszithef stood powerlessly in a defensive stance, blind and deaf, trying to fight off the aftereffects of the *holy word*. At her feet lay the two other haraknin not banished by the spell, utterly helpless as their bodies refused to obey their commands.

In the face of that assault, there was only one possible outcome. The giant finally surrendered, dropping its sword as it fell to its knees, unable to stand on its battered legs. "I yield! Spare my servants, and we will surrender to you!"

Lok, suspicious, kept his axe at the ready. Arun, tired of the slaughter, lowered his sword, but did not relax his vigilance. "Command your 'servant', then, to drop her weapon," he directed.

The giant said something in a language they did not comprehend. Aszithef, apparently at least partially recovered, heard and responded in kind, and then dropped *Coldburn* to the ground. Even in defeat, unarmed and still unable to clearly see, the haraknin bore a noble air, standing defiant.

"The mage got away," Benzan said, as the warriors took the defeated mercenaries into custody, divesting them of weapons and other valuable gear. "And there was another guy with her... he went invisible, I think."

"Keep watch," the succubus said to the deva, who nodded and took up a warding position at the far exit. She knelt beside Hodge, and turned her attention to him, healing the dwarf. The battered warrior stirred, and as he caught a glimpse of his savior his eyes widened, and he exclaimed a startled curse.

The woman sighed. "Cal, I think we can drop the *veil* now."

“Very well,” the imp said, waving his hand. Instantly the “demons” changed form. The imp was replaced by a stout gnome clad in a rich blue robe, with numerous pouches dangling from various belts, and an array of wands jutting from a bandolier at his waist. The jovoc warrior became a dwarf clad in plate armor of dark adamantine... or at least he looked like a dwarf, for when he removed his full helm his features were revealed to be of a consistency and color similar to granite. The archer did not change form, but the succubus was revealed to be an attractive human woman of middle age, clad in comfortable garments in brown and green, with a silvery cloak and the sigil of a crescent moon at her throat.

“Who are you people?” Arun asked, even as Mole exclaimed, “Uncle Call!”

Chapter 364

Freija Doorgan battled a combination of seething rage and ongoing stabbings of terrible pain as she half-ran, half-scuttled down the corridor. Tears born in both emotions streamed down her face, and she struggled with the last shards of her dignity as she glanced back over her shoulder every few steps, alert to any sign of pursuit.

She should have heard something, if they were coming after her; the fiendish tiger she’d summoned to delay pursuit would certify that. It *should*, anyway.

And according to Regidin, she *should* have had no difficulties dealing with the intruders, either.

Her shoulder felt like it was on fire. Damn her for not bringing a healing potion. Damn Regidin for not granting her more reinforcements. And most of all, damn those adventurers.

She’d had matters well in hand. Where had those others come from? Disguised as fiends, they could have been anyone... Did they have additional rivals to contend with? The Cagewrights had lots of enemies...

Could it have been? No. **He** could not know of their plans... Could he? Freija felt a cold thrust of pure fear stab through her, cutting through the pain of her wound as if it wasn’t even there. If **he** had found out about their ultimate plans...

“Well, hello there, my dear.”

Freija started in surprise. She’d been so intent on the passage behind her, she’d almost run into the group coming up the tunnel toward her. She tried to recover her *gravitas*, but with an arrow jutting from her shoulder and blood staining her dress, that was a fairly difficult procedure.

The two individuals before her were as odd a matched pair as one could possibly expect to find. Ardeth Webb was a lean, muscled figure of a woman, her otherworldly heritage instantly obvious in the nubs of ivory horn that jugged from her forehead. She was clad only

in a tight, form-fitting suit of white silk that left bare her upper arms, belly, and ample chest. Much of her exposed flesh bore intricate multicolored tattoos. Like Freija, most of her accoutrements were practical rather than fashionable, infused with potent magic that augmented her physical talents. In Webb's case, this involved the ability to pound just about anything living into a shapeless mass of bloody ooze within a matter of seconds.

The monk's companion was a middle-aged human man whose sardonic expression seemed etched onto his face. He looked like a soft merchant at first glance, but that was an erroneous first impression that had proved deadly for more than one person in the past. Nulin "Fish" Wiejeron was a master assassin, and the rapier dangling at his belt with a gem-studded decorative hilt was a potent magical weapon, rather than some noble's fob. He too bore numerous magical adjuncts upon his person. Freija had spent some effort cataloguing the various magical items owned by each of the Cagewrights, and collectively they would create an inventory that would rival the best guild storehouses and shops in the great metropolises of the Heartlands.

Behind the pair two dark shadows stood, identifiable instantly by their stench. Farastu demodands, which Freija quickly dismissed with a haughty sniff.

"Why, my dear, I do believe I've never before seen you this... mussed," Wiejeron offered.

She'd intended to keep her cool, but Freija could not stifle a retort that came out like a feline hiss. "Fool! The intruders have broken through the outer defenses, and slain Coalfire and his minions. Regidin's 'allies' were worse than useless; that half-fiend sorcerer of his turned invisible and fled, and is probably already looting our stockpiles as we speak."

"Nothing came this way, invisible or no," Webb said. Her voice was like silk sliding over glass, soft and sibilant.

Freija mastered herself with an effort, despite the agony of her shoulder. "The point is, they will be coming, if they are not already. Regidin was wrong about their strength; the adventurers from Cauldron have been reinforced by a small group of powerful spellcasters disguised as fiends."

The two other Cagewrights did not betray anything at that statement, but Freija knew that they would quickly make the same connections that she had.

Webb finally shrugged. "They will fail. Already the ritual is nearly complete."

'Nearly' is not 'finished'! Freija thought. She knew more than any of them just how true that was, and she thought of the failsafe she'd been tasked with integrating into the *Tree*. Regidin knew what she did, and her lips tightened as she recollected their earlier conversation.

"So now we have two groups of foes arrayed against us, eh?" Wiejeron said. Freija wondered if the man's idle façade concealed an inner worry, of if the man was truly feeble-minded.

“Now that you have finally deigned to join the defense, you can go see for yourselves,” Freija said. “I must return to my quarters, and restore myself before the next confrontation.” She started to walk past them, but Wiejeron forestalled her. It was uncanny the way the man moved, sometimes; one moment he was standing to the side, and then suddenly he was there, in front of her.

“An ancillary defense is being established close to the *Tree*,” the assassin said. “Webb will escort you, and see that your wound is tended, my dear. I suspect that we shall have need of your spells, if these intruders are as dire a threat as you say. Regidin no doubt will wish to query you regarding their abilities, as well.”

Freija did not respond, but Webb grinned, cracking her knuckles noisily as she settled her petite hands into the fists that the conjurer knew could shatter stone. For a moment, the conjurer had to fight for self-control as the words to her *prismatic spray* spell came unbidden to the surface of her mind, so close that her tongue began to shape itself into the first syllable of the spell.

But she was still in control. Gritting her teeth, she nodded. “Let us go, then,” she said.

Wiejeron waved his hand idly. “I think I will go on ahead, and take a quick look at these intruders.” He shot a quick look at Webb, then turned down the passage.

“I summoned a guardian,” Freija interjected, regretting the words as soon as she’d said them. Wiejeron’s smile was tinged with contempt, and then he was gone. No spell, no trick of the Art that she might have followed, just... gone.

The man was very, very, good at what he did.

“Come then,” Webb said, her words dripping with false sympathy. “Let’s see to your injury.”

The two women returned down the passage, the two farastus following a short distance behind them.

Chapter 365

“I am sorry that we could not get here sooner,” Cal said, as they gathered around the body of Dannel.

Dana knelt beside the gruesome corpse. The white shafts of his ribs shone too-bright in the ruddy light, stabbing into the air. Between them, there was little left but blackened shreds of flesh and broken links of mithral armor.

“How is he?” Cal asked.

“e’s dead, ye daft gnome,” Hodge growled.

Cal raised an eyebrow, but did not reply as he watched Dana, her brow furrowed in concentration as she slowly passed her hands over the dead elf’s body.

In the aftermath of the battle, there had not been time for more than perfunctory introductions between the two groups. Mole had mentioned her uncle, Balander Calloran, to them before, and there was in fact a slight familial resemblance evident in the features of the two gnomes. The others were Lok, a mixed-breed dwarf/earth genasi whose fighting skill had already been revealed to them; Lady Dana Ilgarten, a priestess of Selûne and mystic wanderer; and her husband Benzan, an arcane trickster with a diverse mastery of stealth, steel, and spell. Arun greeted them cautiously, although inwardly he was grateful for their timely appearance. The paladin currently was keeping a close eye on their captives along with Benzan, although the giant and his three remaining haraknin seemed content to remain where they were, unarmed and nursing their wounds.

“How did you know to find us here at all?” Mole asked, as Dana drew out a scroll from her pouch.

“Dannel contacted us,” Cal explained. “We’ve been keeping an eye on the situation here in Cauldron for some time now, ever since we found out that you two had settled down here. Events clearly outpaced us here; even so we would have been here sooner, but the cult of Cyric was making a bid to seize control of the Western Heartlands, and we were the ones in the right place to put a stop to it. Turns out we were virtually neighbors to their base of operations; they’d suborned the government and military of the city-state of Iriaebor, through the brilliant machinations of a Spur Lord who’d made himself the virtual king of that city.”

“We found this out about a month ago, and since then we’ve been fighting almost non-stop as we’ve unraveled the complex skeins of the Cyricist plot. In fact, we were right in the midst of laying low the Twin Towers of the Eternal Eclipse, in northeastern Amn, when we got the message from Dannel.” He looked at Benzan, who wore a look of fierce determination that betrayed also more than a hint of frustration. Lowering his voice, the gnome continued, “More than a few times he wanted to come here, to find Izandra, to bring her back home. Dana told him that she would have resented and resisted any efforts to control her, and I supported her. But now... he blames himself, for what happened.”

“We’ll find her, don’t worry,” Mole said. “We’ve gotten out of lots tougher scrapes than this one.”

“Yes... I’ve heard a great deal about your accomplishments, and checked in on you a few times as well; covertly, of course. I’m very proud of you... of both of you, Clarese. We all are.”

“Well,” the gnome said, blushing slightly. “We just kinda all got caught up in the flow of events.”

“Don’t be modest. You’ve done a great number of things in a very short time, and overcome some incredible challenges. Ah, good, Dana’s doing the *resurrection*. This may take some time.”

“What about Nidrama?” Mole asked. “Our celestial... the glabrezu stomped her.” After the battle, they’d found nothing of the celestial but her magical wand of healing, her two-handed *flaming sword*, and a faintly golden outline etched onto the stone where she’d died.

“I don’t know... we can ask Dana’s *planar ally*, perhaps.” He smiled wistfully. “I remember when it was badgers we summoned to our cause... and we were glad to have them.”

“Nothing ever stays simple,” Mole said.

“True, Clarese.”

“It’s Mole, now.”

“Ah.” The older gnome smiled. “So it is. If fits you. You know, your mother still has hopes for you to settle down and take over the family business.”

Mole’s lips tightened in a gesture of dismay. “Calloran Imports. Yuck, booring...”

“Yes, well, she blames me, you know, and my stories, for diverting you from a ‘proper’ life-calling.”

“I wouldn’t give it up for the world. Adventuring, I mean.”

“The cold, the mud, the long treks, the sleeping outdoors, short rations, and constant fights?”

“No...” She shrugged. “The other stuff.”

He touched her shoulder. “Yes, I understand exactly what you mean.”

On the other side of the room, near their prisoners, the genasi warrior, Lok, turned to Arun. “You serve the Soul Forger?”

Arun nodded. “I have been called to serve.”

“I have traveled far, but never have I encountered one of the golden dwarves.”

“Well, I haven’t seen a dwarf genasi before, though I have heard of such combinations.”

“My story is a long one,” Lok said. “For another time, perhaps.”

“I would welcome such an opportunity.”

The genasi nodded. “You fight well.”

“Thank you. You, as well.”

Hodge came over to join the two warriors. “So, what we doin’ with this lot, then?” the dwarf asked.

“The giant claims that he is a mercenary, with no particular loyalty to the Cagewrights or their plans.” Arun said.

“Oy, but ‘e’ll take their gold fair ‘nuff, is that it? And if a city gets blasted to bits, ‘at’s not ‘is problem, eh?”

Arun did not equivocate. “We have accepted their surrender. To kill them in cold blood is not acceptable.”

“Yer not goin’ to let them go? Mark me, that giant’ll turn on ye as soon as ye blink.”

“If they are that foolish, then he will earn his fate,” Lok said simply, hefting his axe in a gesture that was simple, and no less menacing for it.

Dana continued the ritual of *resurrection*, while the rest of the group kept watch. Cal treated Mole’s injuries with one of his wands, and the gnome rogue busied herself by collecting loot from both their slain foes and the prisoners. The haraknin and the giant made no move to interfere; perhaps it was the steely stares of Arun and Lok that promised dire consequences if they so much as moved; maybe it was the barely-contained rage in Benzan’s cold eyes.

Within about a minute, Mole had collected a small pile of loot which she laid out at the end of the stone table. Benzan came over to join her.

“I thought I was a veteran looter, but it looks like I must defer to a true master,” he said to her.

“We get lots of practice,” Mole said, “What with all the high-powered bad guys who keep trying to kill us.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.” The tiefling indicated the pile. “Anything good?”

Mole held up a golden ring she’d taken from one of the slain haraknin. “They were well equipped, for mercenaries, but I expect that the wizard probably had the best stuff.”

“We’ll get another shot at her, don’t worry,” Benzan said, his hands tightening on the shaft of his bow.

“My uncle says that the most important rule of tactics is to always take out the wizard first.”

“You know, I think I may have heard that before.” He indicated the massive corpse of the glabrezu, astride the broken table. “You know, I *did* take out that demon.”

Mole looked up at him, a mischievous grin on her face, and shrugged. “Not bad, I suppose... of course, *I* once goosed an adult red dragon...”

Another minute passed into two, three. A blue glow had settled around Dannel’s body, and as they watched his broken form began to slowly knit back together, into wholeness.

Dana's voice grew stronger even as her incantation drew on, and finally she shuddered, unleashing the final words that drew a momentary surge of divine power through her, into the slain elf.

"Go on, we'll keep an eye on them," Lok said to Arun and Hodge. While the genasi and tiefling covered the prisoners, the surviving Heroes of Cauldron walked over to their fallen friend. Dannel looked at peace, now, his body reformed, his bare flesh pink in the reddish glow of the lava pools.

"He'll need new armor," Arun said.

"If ye can bring him back, from that..." Hodge breathed, "There ain't nothin' that can't be done..."

"If only that were so," Cal said, looking to Dana. The two shared a sad look, an old pain briefly revisited. But then Dannel stirred, his eyes fluttering before opening fully, groaning as he shifted his newly-whole body.

"Welcome back, Dannel," Mole said warmly.

The elf gradually became aware of his surroundings. "I was dead..."

"Were ye ever," Hodge said. "Yer guts were strewn—" he cut off, silenced by a hard look from Arun. "What?"

Dannel's mind cleared enough to recognize the presence of others here with them. He finally settled on the tall woman who rose slowly, her expression tired but pleased.

"Lady Ilgarten," he said, with amazement.

"Yes, Dannel Ardan. We've come... a bit late, but we've come."

"If you're up to it, lad, we have some unfinished business with these folks," Cal said.

Dannel rose, gratefully accepting help from Arun. He found his bow where he'd dropped it, what felt like an eternity ago.

"Let's do it, then."

Chapter 366

With their companion restored to them, the adventurers—both groups—turned to the far doorway where the enemy conjurer had escaped. Dannel's armor was ruined, but he appropriated one of the magical chain shirts formerly worn by the haraknin, gingerly sliding it over his still-tender torso.

"They've had a good ten minutes, and I don't think they'll have wasted it," Benzan said. "What exactly are we dealing with, here?"

“Fiends. Lots of ‘em. Big ones,” Hodge said.

“The Cagewrights include thirteen individuals of great power, and varied talents,” Arun said. “We’ve killed one, already... the giant minotaur.”

“Yes, we saw her as we came in,” Cal said. “That must have been quite a fight.”

“Great, that just leaves twelve,” Benzan said. “And I’m already running low on holy arrows.”

Arun nodded. “Nidrama knew more... she was a celestial who aided us; the glabrezu killed her.”

“I hope for her sake that she was not *called* here,” Dana said.

“I do not know. She did sacrifice something to join us.”

The deva turned to them as they approached the far door. “I must remind you, Lady Ilgarten, that my time of service is limited by the terms of the Compact, which governs our agreement.”

“As are our buffs,” Cal added. “Some of the short-duration ones have already lapsed, I’m afraid. If we’re going to do this, we should be about it while our abilities are at their strongest.”

“Ah, we’ve kinda been going nonstop for about a tenday already,” Mole said. “You know, volcano erupting, fiends falling from the sky, that kind of thing.”

Cal looked at her. “Well, if you like, you can go up and wait for us above. We won’t be too long, I don’t think.”

“I believe our dwarvish friend over there has a standard response to those sorts of comments, but I won’t repeat it, as we’re in mixed company. No way I’m going to miss the finale, Uncle Cal.”

“What about the giant and his minions?” Lok asked.

“I can deal with them quickly enough,” Benzan said. Arun frowned, and Cal shook his head. “We’ve been down that path before, my friend,” the gnome said.

Dana turned to the deva. “Transport them someplace where they will do no harm.”

The creature nodded, and walked over to the giant and the three haraknin. The mercenaries did not resist as the deva gathered them, then collectively *plane shifted* them away to some other reality.

“Yet another enemy who survives to bear us a grudge,” Benzan said. “Yet another decision that may come back to bite us at a later date.”

“We’ve faced such before, Benzan. Better that than to compromise what we are,” Dana said.

“What exactly is that? Fools?”

“You took the same oaths that I did, Benzan. We both serve the same ends, and I think you believe the same things, even if you’re too stubborn to admit it.”

“I wear the pin, Dana, but that doesn’t mean that I’m just a Harper lackey...”

The two faced off for a moment, something intense passing silently between them.

“They were like this even before they were married,” Cal whispered aside to Mole.

Finally, Benzan turned and strode toward the door. “Enough useless banter, let’s be about this,” Benzan said. Drawing out a wand, he made himself *invisible*.

“With you guys here with us, they won’t know what hit them,” Mole said, also disappearing.

Unfortunately, the gnome was very, very wrong.

Chapter 367

Shebeleth Regidin could not help but feel a sudden twist in his gut as he stepped into the huge underground chamber. In the last twenty years he’d passed through trials that had forever changed him, such that emotion, at least as normal mortals experienced it, had been all but burned out of him. But this place still had the power to affect him. How could it not, he thought, staring up at the culmination of the Cagewrights’ efforts. The *Tree of Shackled Souls* was a dark shadow of black lines and ugly angles, despite the surrounding illumination. Strands of coruscating energy formed and unformed around the boughs of the tree, a flickering halo of violent surges of black and gray that were utterly and coldly silent.

“It is beautiful, is it not,” came a voice from the left.

Regidin turned as the hulking bulk of Dyr’ryd materialized from the shadows. In the pulsating light from the lava flows that crisscrossed the floor of the chamber, the shator’s bloated and layered flesh appeared lurid and sickly. But the monstrous demodand also shone with the glow of power, a power attenuated to its fullest expression in this place, at this time. One massive hand was encased in a steel gauntlet, and it carried an equally huge guisarme with a blue-tinged steel blade that eagerly flashed in the ruddy light of the chamber. There was a growth that bulged from the side of its head like a cancer, a horror in its own right, for that misshapen form was the residence of the second of the two personalities that dwelled within the hulking form of the fiend. An aberration twice over, the foul leader of the Cagewrights likewise shared the peculiar madness that had driven each of the Thirteen to this conclusion.

Regidin, familiar with the mannerisms of the demodand, waited until the two entities had acknowledged him and settled out the inner hierarchy through which they would deal with

him. It was the mouth of the shator that spoke next, although the tiny symbiant—parasite?—seemed to be watching him intently.

“The intruders draw near.”

“Yes. They have battered through our outer defenses, including Gau and Coalfire’s mercenaries.”

“And your two recruited allies.”

Regidin shrugged. “They gave their best for the cause. The Heroes of Cauldron have been reinforced by a new cohort of powerful interlopers, with potent allies at their call.”

The tiny Ryd symbiant chortled. “We knew that she had powerful friends, yes, yes. Gave them a nice invitation, we did.”

The slight twist to Regidin’s lips might have been a frown. “She was the key. What was done, was what had to be done.”

The huge demodand’s jaws smacked noisily. “The ritual of planar binding is not yet complete. The *Tree* must be defended, at all costs.”

Regidin nodded. “I am already gathering our remaining forces to destroy the intruders. Thearynn is not allowing himself to be found, but I have collected the rest of the Thirteen, and the few demodands left to us. Unfortunately, the ritual is interfering with our ability to draw more allies from Carceri.”

“Defend the *Tree*,” the shator repeated. “Soon, soon the gate will be secure, and then this place will become one with the prison plane. Then, the Master will be free, and our rewards will be great...” Ryd chuckled, a terrible sound as the shator finished speaking.

Regidin did not comment.

“Go,” Dyr’ryd said, both mouths speaking in unison. “We will remain with the artifact, and guide the ritual to its conclusion. Go.”

Regidin offered no farewell, merely turned and departed.

* * * * *

“You will listen and mark my words, fiends,” Freija Doorgan said, her words like knives in the relatively narrow confines of the passageway. Her fury was fueled not only by her still-fresh humiliation at the hands of the enemy adventurers, but by the terrible stench given off by the demodands crammed with her into the cramped space. Her wounds had been healed by Grehlia Cairnis, who stood now a few paces away, watching her with bright eyes that shone like twin orbs of cut ice. No doubt that tiefling bitch Webb was somewhere nearby; the monk hadn’t let Freija out of her sight since they’d parted with Wiejeron not more than fifteen minutes ago.

The conjurer poured her fury out against the demodands, who wisely knew better than to rise to the challenge. Even Regidin's pet shator, a miserable beast named Keeriv, said nothing as she laid down her commands. Regidin had ordered all of the remaining demodands to obey her before he'd left to meet with Dyr'ryd, true, but all of the fiends had considerable egos and only seemed to follow the orders of the Thirteen when it suited them.

Or when a furious wizardess with a *prismatic spray* at the ready was raging at them.

"There will be no fogs, no acid clouds, this time. You will remain invisible until our signal, and then assault the enemy with *acid arrows* and *rays of enfeeblement*. You kelubars will target the spellcasters. Farastus will weaken the warriors. Now, is that simple enough for your feeble brains to grasp?"

Keeriv rumbled, a sound like an avalanche erupting from deep within its huge body. "And how do I fit into your plans, conjurer?"

Freija's eyes narrowed, as she sifted through the comment for insult. "You, my dear shator, you will destroy their celestial ally." Her lips tightened into a dark smile. "And once he is gone, then you may have your way with whichever of the enemy remains."

The shator nodded, its own monstrous mouth twisting into a smile at the anticipation of unleashing destruction.

Of course, if it had known the entirety of what Freija Doorgan had planned, it might have been less amused.

Chapter 368

The Heroes of Cauldron, now bolstered by the *Travelers*, set out once again deeper into the Cagewright stronghold. Despite having just met, both groups contained veterans of untold combats and deadly situations, and they combined their skills to best advantage. Benzan and Mole, cloaked in *invisibility*, took the lead. Behind them came the three warriors, Arun, Lok, and Hodge, forming an iron wall of defense. Just behind them came Dannel, able to shoot over the shorter fighters with his longbow, Dana's *planar ally* at his side. The deva's superior senses would help ensure that they were not caught off guard, and his presence in the middle of their order ensured that everyone but the scouts could benefit from the protective aura that it radiated against all things evil. Cal and Dana brought up the rear. At Dana's direction the deva had blessed them all with divine *aid*, a temporary but useful warding that improved their durability significantly.

The tunnel beyond the double doors on the far side of the Cagewright meeting room started curving almost immediately to the right, the bend in the passage obscuring anything more than maybe forty or fifty feet ahead of them. They pressed on, their light sources indicating a side tunnel opening off to the left. As they neared the split, Mole appeared suddenly ahead of them. "Torture chamber, empty, no exits," she said, fading back into *invisibility* even as she finished speaking.

“Could be a trap or a secret door,” Dannel suggested.

Arun nodded and halted. “Let’s check it out, quick but thorough.” But the room proved to be as empty as Mole had said, and after a minute’s delay they continued down the main corridor.

“So much pain here,” Lok commented.

“The demodands are the masters of Careri,” Cal explained. “The entire plane is basically a giant prison. Creatures from throughout the multiverse are trapped there... and there is no parole, or time off for good behavior. The demodands are the warders, and from what I read, they take great joy in their duties.”

“Just gets better an’ better,” Hodge grumbled.

“And these Cagewrights seek to transform the Realms into an extension of that place?” Dana said. “Madness...”

“They delude themselves into thinking that they would hold power, when the portal opened,” Arun said. “Ultimately, though, any revolution ends up consuming those who first ignite it.”

“Your military exterior betrays the heart of a scholar, paladin,” Cal noted.

Mole’s voice hissed in interruption out of thin air. “Sheesh, you guys are as loud as a gnomish circus! Keep it down... there’s a chamber up ahead, looks empty, but Benzan is checking it out.”

Thus chastened, the group continued—with the clank of the heavy armor worn by the dwarves, only moderately more quietly—forward.

The place was a fairly large bedchamber, dominated by a comfortable four-poster bed. Mostly-empty shelf and workbench space carved into the stone decorated the walls, and an elaborate summoning diagram covered almost half of the floor space. For being in a dungeon, the place was fastidiously clean, without a single speck of dust in evidence upon the floor or any of the other surfaces. There were no obvious exits, making this an apparent dead end.

“Either there’s a secret door somewhere, or that woman is still here,” Dannel said.

“As always, yer grasp o’ the obvious be amazin’, elf,” Hodge offered.

“Invisible?” Lok asked.

“There is nothing invisible within this chamber,” the deva said.

“I don’t sense any live auras,” Arun agreed. “But dark things were done in this place.” The warriors moved slowly into the room, avoiding treading upon the summoning circle in the floor.

The deva turned, his heavy mace coming up into a ready position. "Something comes," he said. A heartbeat later, they could all hear it, a rumbling noise that seemed to sound through the very walls near where the corridor met this room.

"What in the hells..." Hodge began.

He did not get a chance to finish his thought, for the wall abruptly erupted outward, and a huge figure strode into the chamber in an explosion of shattered stone and dust.

Chapter 369

Cal and Dana, who'd remained near the entry of the chamber, found themselves directly in the path of the exploding wall and the huge intruder who materialized through the cloud of debris. Shards of shattered stone struck Cal in the face and upper body, but bounced off of his skin, which had been magically treated with a *stoneskin* spell. Dana, lacking such protection, staggered as a piece of volcanic rock the size of a sling bullet caromed off of her temple. She spun away from the force of the blast and darted back as a massive stone limb swept through the open space where she'd been standing. Cal threw aside dignity and hurled himself back down the corridor, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the tread of a giant stone foot as the creature moved forward through the breach in the tunnel wall.

The companions responded swiftly to the sudden appearance of the greater earth elemental. Dana's *planar ally* spun and hurled itself at the foe, his mace lifted to strike, but the elemental's considerable reach allowed it to pummel the deva before it could close to deliver the attack. The elemental's punch landed with devastating force, and the deva's forward momentum was instantly reversed as he flew roughly back to land hard on the floor several paces behind where he had started.

That display offered a powerful caution, but did not stop the rest of the companions from pressing the attack. Dannel and Benzan drew back from the deadly circle of the elemental's reach, already drawing their bows taut to fire, while Lok and Arun rushed in to engage the stone monstrosity in melee. Great chunks of pulverized rock were shorn from the huge creature's frame as axe and sword clove into it, while cracks were driven into its upper torso as steel-tipped arrows infused with magical power struck hard and drove deep into its body. Against foes such as these, its advantages of size, strength, and the durability of its physical form were of little avail, proven again as Dana struck a considerable blow with her longspear at the joint of its left arm and torso, widening a crack already opened by Benzan's arrow.

But despite the injuries it had taken, the elemental did not falter, or pause, or retreat. Instead it surged forward another step, shaking the floor with its movements. Its shin connected with Lok, who brought his shield up and caught the blow. Unfortunately the elemental's mass overwhelmed Lok's by several orders of magnitude, even with his adamantine armor and heavy kit. The impact lifted the genasi from his feet, and he too clattered heavily to the ground several feet away, battered but not seriously hurt.

Arun shifted his position and lifted his holy sword to strike. But the elemental's movement had brought its right arm around, and before the paladin could unleash his attack its fist drove into his shoulder with the force of a siege ram. Arun's battered armor held against the onslaught, but he nevertheless was knocked to the side like a sporting pin struck by a lead ball. Dana only narrowly avoiding being struck by the paladin, who crashed into the wall and sank down in a dazed heap.

The elemental had gotten a few good licks in against its foes, but it was clearly showing the effects of the damage that had already been wrought against it. Hodge rushed forward to take Arun's place in melee; the elemental took a powerful swing at him as he drew close to melee range but the dwarf judged the distance well and darted underneath the blow with uncharacteristic agility. He'd left his holy sword in his scabbard, choosing instead his old favored axe. Even as arrows continued to slam into the elemental's upper body, the sturdy dwarf hewed at the elemental's legs like a berserk lumberjack. Great shards of stone and packed earth went flying under the onslaught, and the elemental staggered back. A sizzling sound became audible from the back side of its body; Cal had retreated to a safe distance and hit it with an *acid arrow* from one of his wands.

The elemental reared, now barely cohesive, and lifted its arms for a final strike against the enemies it had been summoned to destroy. But it was spent. The final blow was struck by the deva, which had recovered and flew straight at the creature's head like a missile shot from a catapult. Its blessed mace struck one final blow, and the creature collapsed into a heap of inanimate rubble.

Lok and Arun got up, accepting healing from Cal and Dana. Dannel quickly surveyed the passage from which the creature had emerged, verifying that there were no more immediate threats in that direction. Mole, whose tiny weapons had been of no use against the creature, continued her search of the chamber, while Benzan gave the elemental a quick examination to verify that it concealed no further surprises.

"That wasn't so hard," the tiefling commented.

"You didn't feel its punch," Arun observed, twisting his arm to make sure that his shoulder was still properly in its socket.

"I think what he means is that they had the jump on us; I'm surprised that they only sent the one elemental to attack us," Dannel observed. The elf had taken up a position at the edge of the tunnel behind the secret door that the elemental had blasted through.

"Maybe they're running out of resources," Lok noted. "The giant admitted that he and his haraknin comprised a significant portion of the Cagewrights' military forces."

"I hope you haven't forgotten that there are thirteen of them," Dannel replied. "We've only faced two, maybe three, thus far."

"Kaurophon is here as well," Arun reminded them.

"Another old friend?" Dana asked.

“Let’s just say that we have a score to settle,” the paladin replied.

Cal had been musing over the situation. “I think the elemental’s purpose was to reveal this secret tunnel to us, without making it look overtly obvious,” he said.

“So you’re saying this is another trap,” Benzan said.

“I could’a told ye that, and I ain’ no wizzerd,” Hodge said.

“There may be another way to get to the Tree,” Dana said.

“You may be right,” Arun said. “But time is against us.”

“How long until the ritual is completed?” Dana asked, turning to the deva.

“The paladin speaks truth,” the deva acknowledged. “The evil power within this place grows exponentially, but I cannot be more specific.”

“Well, let’s be about it, then,” Benzan said, turning to the passage. “If we’re going to make a grab for the bait, we may as well have both feet within the jaws of the trap.”

“Wait a moment,” the gnome said. “Dana, what about your *find the path* spell? It may reveal an alternative route to the Tree of Shackled Souls.”

The mystic wanderer nodded, summoning the power of her connection to Selûne. The casting took about twenty seconds, during which time Dana kept her eyes closed, her mouth moving as soft syllables filtered out, fading as soon as they hit the ears of the gathered listeners.

Finally, however, she opened her eyes, her frustration clear on her face. “Something is not right. I am not getting a clear reading.”

“Maybe the Cagewrights are interfering with your spell?” Dannel suggested.

“No, I don’t think so,” Dana said. “The spell may fail, however, if there is no clear physical route to the stated objective.”

“They may have collapsed the tunnels leading to it,” Arun said.

“If that is the case, I may be able to help,” Cal said. “But I’d prefer not to start burrowing blindly, given our current locale.”

“Here’s an idea,” Benzan said. “Let’s find us a Cagewright, and direct a few... *pointed* questions at him. They must have a way to get to their precious tree.”

“I will go ahead to spring the ambush, if you wish,” the deva said. “I do not fear evil.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hodge chimed.

"I do not like the idea of splitting up," Cal said, even as Dana added, "I do not consider you expendable, Alyx."

At that moment, Mole appeared again, shedding her *invisibility* to appear in their midst.

"Gah, girl, ye goin' to take a year or ten off me life, if ye keep doin' that!" Hodge exclaimed.

"Your niece has light feet," Benzan said to Cal. "I have to admit, I didn't hear her at all, although the deva's eyes shifted when she came out of the tunnel, which did serve as a giveaway."

"You scouted ahead while we were talking?" Dana asked. "Don't you know how incredibly foolish that was?"

"Yer wastin' yer breath, lady," Hodge said. "Gnomes don' grasp common sense stuff like that. Somepin' broken in their heads, me thinks."

"Tell us what you found, Mole," Cal said.

"Well," she replied, with a slight huff at Dana, "The tunnel heads east for maybe forty feet or so, then bends sharply to the right. There was some lava-light in that direction, and a pretty nasty smell of demodands. Both kinds, I think. I didn't see any of them, but I'd bet they were down there, invisible or hiding."

"Demodands can see invisible creatures," Dana said. "I think it's pretty safe to assume that they know we're coming, now."

"Hey, I'm pretty hard to see even without my ring," Mole said defensively.

"I believe it is moot—I would be stunned if the remaining Cagewrights did not know exactly where we are," Cal said. "The result of Dana's spell suggests that they have already shaped the battlefield to their choosing. We either go forward or back, or blindly strike out in another direction. The deva and I can manage the last, if it comes to that, but that approach also has its risks."

"Yes, burrowing into passage flooded with lava would be most inconvenient," Dannel noted.

"So our choice is made. There is no going back," Arun said. "Mole, if you would... Mole?"

There was no sign of the diminutive rogue.

"Gnomes," Hodge muttered under his breath.

Chapter 370

They didn't have to go very far to find their enemy.

The tunnel was fairly broad, its smoothed walls indicative of its origins as a lava tube. After making some elementary preparations, including the casting of several wards, the companions proceeded cautiously to the bend that Mole had scouted. The dim light of exposed lava became evident ahead even before they reached the sharp kink in the passage. They could also smell the distinctive stench of demodands that Mole had identified earlier, the odor growing stronger with each step.

“This wall is new,” Arun said, noting the unnaturally smooth surface to their left.

“Conjured, likely, to block another passage and direct us right,” Cal suggested.

“Well, maybe we should take it down and...” Dannel began.

He didn't get a chance to finish his statement, for the deva abruptly lifted his mace and shifted into a ready stance, pointing with the weapon to the south. “Invisible fiends!” he said, following his statement with a *holy smite* that filled the corridor maybe twenty paces to the south beyond the bend. The angry screams of demodands revealed the truth of the celestial's report.

The demodands were quick to counterattack. Coruscating beams lanced down the length of the tunnel, *rays of enfeeblement* that stabbed into the warriors at the front of the group. Lok was hit and seemed to sag as the thieving energies sapped his strength, but a second evaporated as the ray splashed against the aura cast by Arun's *holy avenger*. *Acid arrows* also sought out their targets, with one catching Benzan with a glancing impact across the arm that seared a hole in his cloak, sizzling through the links of his mithral chain shirt to burn the flesh covering his bicep. Another targeted Dana, but the mystic wanderer moved in a sudden blur, and it missed her to splash harmlessly against the tunnel passage behind her.

As the fiends attacked, they became visible; massive, bloated kelubars, flanked by the lean and grotesque farastus. But the worst was last to appear, the massive figure of a shator demodand that regarded them with hateful eyes sunk deep into a distended face. Keeriv laughed as it ambled forward to meet the deva, which did not hesitate in lifting his own weapon and surging into battle.

The shator's reach allowed it to draw first blood, pounding the deva with a heavy two-fisted slam to the chest that staggered the angel. But the celestial did not fight alone, and Lok, Arun, and Hodge swiftly charged into the fray. Lok struck the fiend a solid blow with his thundering battleaxe, and Hodge, having selected again his holy sword, echoed his attack with a deep thrust that slid into the shator's thick leg. A farastu lunged around the larger demodand, ignoring Hodge as it reached out to grapple the celestial and divest it of its deadly mace. But before it could complete its attack Arun drove into it, his holy blade shearing a two-foot gash in its body, driving it back in pain.

Arrows knifed through the air, stabbing into demodand flesh. Dannel's missiles, even enchanted with the potency his song, did little against the fiends' fell resistances, but Benzan was using a bow specifically designed to bring an end to creatures such as they. The shator cried out as an arrow pierced its arm, jutting from the meat of its tricep, trailing black lines of ichor that splattered in fat drops to the stone floor.

“Unleash a *holy word!*” Dana cried to the celestial. But even as the deva summoned its power, the Cagewrights unleashed the second half of their ambush.

The wall at the bend of the corridor shuddered with a solid impact, a five-foot vertical crack appearing in the volcanic rock. Before the significance of that could even be registered, a second blow burst open a six-foot square segment of the wall. Thin plates of shattered stone fell forward to reveal the tiefling monk Ardeth Webb, snapping a set of adamantine nunchaku under her arm as she smoothly stepped aside.

Freija Doorgan’s eyes glowed with intensity as the conjurer released her prepared spell. The *prismatic spray* flared out into the corridor, engulfing almost the entire company of intruders. Only Cal, who’d remained back at the bend in the passage, was outside the path of the deadly beams. The deva, the target for the center of the *spray*, was struck by two of the twisting beams that pierced his spell resistance, electrical energy stabbing through him as the yellow beam knifed through his torso, while a sickly dark aura surged outward from his leg as the limb was intersected by a green ray.

The rest of the companions were hit by other colored shafts, dealing various quantities of fire, acid, or electrical damage, or other ill effects. Fortunately the deva’s protective aura, combined with the wards they’d cast earlier, enabled them to overcome the most devastating effects. Hodge, struck by a blue ray, resisted being turned to stone, while Dannel fought off the mind-rending power of the indigo beam. But Dana and Lok both suffered damage from the rays, and even with his sword Arun could not fully resist being drained of vitality by the green ray that intersected his wrist after passing through the deva’s leg.

The power of the spell was not selective, and the rays continued into the ranks of the demodands. A farastu was struck by a violet ray and vanished, screaming, while a kelubar recoiled as flames erupted from the red ray that splashed across its chest. The fiends were tough and resistant to many forms of magic, however, and the beams winked out altogether as they intersected the shator, which snarled as the true nature of Freija’s plan became apparent to it.

Even as the *prismatic spray* wrought its colorful swath of destruction down the length of the corridor, a roaring pillar of flame conjured by Grehlia Cairnis marked a grim sequel. The *flame strike* struck the ground and spread outward in a merciless swath, searing at the flesh of the companions gathered in the tunnel. The spell looked devastating, but as the wisps of flame cleared it was obvious that the companions had not suffered as much damage as was first evident. Several of the companions had been warded against fire, and even in the confined space their agility allowed others to escape the full force of the blast. Arun, surrounded by the nimbus of his *holy avenger*, was unaffected, and his presence shielded Hodge, just a step away. Likewise the deva resisted the spell.

The ambush had been clever and well-timed, the attacks telling, but through luck, preparation, and sheer fortitude the companions had held up well against the initial volley. But that changed a moment later as Shebeleth Regidin, standing behind his allies in the secret side-tunnel, unleashed a word of *blasphemy*.

Chapter 371

Regidin's *blasphemy* had a devastating effect. The spell rippled outward from the dread loremaster like ink poured into a pool of clean water, searing through the consciousness of the heroes. Everyone, even Arun, was dazed by the spell, and greatly weakened by the wave of disruption unleashed by the magic. Hodge collapsed, paralyzed, and likewise the deva, although he resisted being banished back to his plane of origin, fell helpless to the ground, his mace clattering from limp fingers.

Emboldened by the effectiveness of their leader's tactic, the Cagewrights and their remaining allies pressed the attack upon their suddenly discomfited foes. The shator Keeriv laughed terribly as it reached out with its long, gangly arms and took up the deva in its claws, its muscles tightening as it crushed the helpless celestial's body.

The remaining farastu likewise took pleasure in attacking Arun. With Arun able to offer little resistance, it tore the dwarf's holy sword from his grip, hissing at the blessed steel burned at its flesh. It hurled the weapon away over its shoulder, far out of his reach. The kelubars could not easily move their bulky bodies into melee, but they continued their barrage of *acid arrows*, striking Dana and Dannel with fat gobs of corrosive goo.

Ardeth Webb leapt forward through the opening she'd created. She let her nunchaku fall to the floor, instead leaping into a fully-extended snap-kick that connected solidly across Dana's chest, knocking her roughly to the floor. The monk sneered as she effortlessly twisted back to land on her feet, her hands tightening into deadly fists as she loomed over the fallen priestess.

Behind her, Grehlia stepped forward, her own fists covered by spiked gauntlets that glowed faintly with an ember aura of dark power. Seeing that her ally had the enemy priestess well in hand, she cast about for a target, settling finally upon Bengan with a dark smile.

Freija remained in the side tunnel, content to strike from a distance with her spells. She had not forgotten the archer who had wounded her earlier, and upon seeing him restored to life even felt a bit of grim pleasure at the ability to torment him further. Even though she'd spent her most powerful spells already, she was still more than equipped to inflict that torment, which she proved as she unleashed a trio of *scorching rays* that blasted into the elf, each knocking him a step backward until he was driven against the far wall of the tunnel. Already seriously wounded by the *flame strike*, only the benefits of the deva's earlier *aid* spell kept him standing at all.

Freija smiled. He was tough, that elf, but she'd already destroyed him once, and it wouldn't take much more to finish him a second time. And this time, there wouldn't be anyone left to *raise* him.

Regidin likewise held his position, calmly summoning a *blade barrier* into place in the corridor leading back to Freija's quarters. The whirling barrier appeared a few paces behind Cal, effectively blocking the only way out.

The companions began to recover from the initial effect of Regidin's *blasphemy*, although they remained gravely weakened by the spell. Cal reinforced his allies with a *mass bear's*

endurance spell, eschewing a defensive ward for the moment. He paid for that a moment later when a shadow materialized behind him, unleashing an unexpected full attack upon him. The gnome staggered as Wiejeron's rapier tore into him mercilessly. Even though the assassin had not taken enough time to set up a death attack, the blows were nevertheless telling. Only Cal's *stoneskin* kept him from being taken out immediately, although as the slender blade of the man called the "Fish" punched a hole into his lung, he could feel the chill hand of death creeping closer.

"I don't know what Freija was so worked up about," the assassin said, his eyes cold as he regarded the crippled gnome. "You don't strike me as particularly challenging."

"Yeah, we get that a lot," Cal said, spitting a gob of blood. Wiejeron lifted his rapier to finish him, but Cal was ready with the words of a spell, hurling the magic at his attacker. Wiejeron's eyes widened as the transmutation took hold, and his body shimmered and shifted until the deadly assassin had been replaced by a bloated sea slug, maybe two feet long, making an ugly sucking sound as it quivered against the stone floor.

"New taunts, same idiots," Cal said, lifting himself up to his feet despite the hot knife of pain that stabbed anew through his body at his movement.

Dana, meanwhile found herself hard-pressed against her own dangerous foe. She nimbly snapped her back and sprang to her feet, although the maneuver left her open to a driving punch from Ardeth, which slammed into her chest with enough force to crack ribs. Dana staggered back, fighting for breath, while the tiefling regarded her with a bemused expression.

Benzan had started toward Dana to help her, but the tiefling was quickly forced to defend himself by Grehlia's approach. The evil cleric's spiked gauntlets looked nasty, and were marked with the tell-tale smear of poison. And there was that red glow surrounding the steel gloves—Benzan didn't know what spell she had placed on her weapon, but he had no doubt that whatever it was, it was *bad*.

Grehlia noted his interest. "Yeth, hath-breed, your death ith here," she lisped, springing forward. Under her ochre robe she wore a chain shirt, he saw.

He narrowly avoided her first violent lunge, twisting his body back to avoid the sweep of those deadly gloves. She tried a backswing that would have caught him across his face, if he hadn't sprung back five feet, out of her reach. He's always been fast and nimble, and the magical gloves he wore enhanced those attributes to almost superhuman levels.

Even as he opened the small gap between them, he was drawing out another of the white-fletched arrows from the magical quiver at his hip. Grehlia spun in time to take an arrow that punched through the side of her torso. She shrieked as the energy of the *holy arrow* drove through her. The impact delayed her enough for Benzan's second shot to hit her, this time a low impact that stabbed deep into her body just above her left hip. She staggered toward him, snarling like a feral beast. Benzan loaded another arrow, and held his ground as she lifted her gauntleted right fist like a hammer.

"Die!"

“You first, bitch.”

He released the shot, which drove into her chest with apparent finality. Benzan knew he'd hit something important by the look on the evil cleric's face. But even though she was clearly dying, Grehlia was driven by a force beyond herself. To Benzan's surprise she suddenly extended her body toward him, thrusting the gauntlet with its embedded *harm* spell at his throat. The tiefling started to dodge back, knew that he was too late.

Uh oh, he thought.

Chapter 372

The battle between the Cagewrights and the Heroes of Cauldron, augmented by the Travelers, raged on in a desperate, no-holds-barred struggle. Each side had released their initial volleys in the ambush, and now fought in an all-out melee in the confined space of a tunnel within the Cagewright stronghold.

With both the deva and Hodge taken out by Regidin's *blasphemy*, and Arun disarmed of his potent holy weapon, the battle against the demodands at the far end of the tunnel was turning against Lok and Arun. The shator Keeriv had grappled the helpless astral deva, and chortled with glee as it crushed the life out of the celestial's body. Behind it a pair of kelubar continued their directive from Freija Doorgan, hurling *acid arrows* and the occasional *ray of enfeeblement* into the melee.

Arun found himself hard-pressed by a wounded but still-potent farastu. Standing over Hodge, disarmed, seriously weakened by the *blasphemy*, there was nothing he could do but fight on. The farastu tore at him with its claws to little effect; despite the drains to his strength and vitality that he'd suffered he was still incredibly durable. But Arun knew that his friends were in dire need, and that he was certainly not invincible. That was confirmed a moment later as an *acid arrow* splashed across his chest, filling his helmet with noxious vapors that made his head spin.

With a roar, holding the farastu back with his shield, he reached down and picked up Hodge's sword, his own former weapon. The demodand gibbered something—worried, perhaps?—and tried to intercept the sword by grappling with the holy warrior. But Arun, despite his temporary weakness, was still a veteran fighter. The sword clove into the farastu's upper arm, driving to the bone. Had he been at full strength, he might have taken off the limb, but even as it was the farastu screamed and drew back, critically wounded now.

Lok tried to aid the captured angel, sweeping his axe at the shator's flabby body. Even with the *ray of enfeeblement* he'd taken, and the lingering effects of the *blasphemy*, the genasi was still stronger than the average man. But the shator's resistances protected it from weapons not consecrated to good, and they'd not had the opportunity for Dana to *align* the weapon at the start of the battle. For all that, he still managed to hurt it with his strokes... but not enough. The shator looked down at its foe, tiny in comparison to its own

considerable bulk, and laughed as it tensed the fat muscles in its arms. There was a loud snap, and the shator hurled the broken body of the astral deva down in contempt of its foe.

Something very cold appeared in the genasi warrior's eyes. Even as the shator reached for him, intending perhaps to duplicate its feat, the genasi lifted his axe, driving it into the center of the shator's torso. A deep reverberation erupted from the blade as it shattered Keeriv's breastbone, sending a devastating sonic pulse through its body, converting its foul organs into splattered messes of quivering gelatin. The shator looked down at the warrior in surprise before the inevitable took hold, and it fell backward to smack heavily upon the floor.

The two kelubars took a look at each other, then at the warrior, and promptly turned *invisible*.

Dannel, clinging to consciousness through sheer determination—and magical augmentation—felt an uncanny calm fall over him. The song still filled his mind, sharpening his senses, binding him to the bow. Despite the battle raging all around, some of the exchanges a mere three or four paces away from his current position, his own attention was fixed like a knife's point upon the conjurer standing in the ruins of the shattered wall on the far side of the tunnel. Freija's eyes met his, and the conjurer smiled in anticipation of his destruction.

Well, if she'd forgotten what his arrows felt like, he'd be happy to provide a reminder.

Even diminished by the ordeal of his resurrection, and critically burned, Dannel remained a peerless archer. The song filled his limbs as he drew and fired, reloaded and fired again, all at a speed almost too fast for the eye to follow. Freija had refreshed her defenses, but even so a pair of arrows struck her, one driving deep into almost exactly the same spot where Dannel had hit her in their earlier confrontation. Her thoughts of revenge temporarily overcome by the instinct for survival, she ducked back behind the still-intact portion of the wall, giving her full cover. She glanced back at Regidin, perhaps slightly nervous, but the cleric was lost in the depths of a summoning—a potent one, she realized with a faint tinge of envy.

Dana was not an untrained novice when it came to hand-to-hand combat, but she was also experienced enough to realize when she was outmatched. The monk was blindingly fast, and Dana knew that she would have no time for a summoning spell, or any other complicated stratagems. The tiefling was covered with tattoos that seemed to move of their own volition as their owner's body shifted, a mesmerizing effect that almost cost Dana dearly as a driving punch sliced the air less than an inch from where her face had been a split-second before. Dana spun and gave ground, falling back toward the north, the monk following her every move. Unfortunately there was nowhere to go in retreat, unless she was willing to endure the *blade barrier*. One glance was enough for her to know that the barrier was empowered, a spinning wall of death as effective as a ten foot thick stone wall in blocking their escape.

There was only one more place that she could go. Darting back, calling upon her goddess, she drew power into her. The monk leapt in to stop her, but even as Ardeth's fists knifed in

at her she leapt backward into the air, *flying* upward to almost the level of the ceiling fifteen feet above.

She'd thought that she'd gain at least a momentary reprieve, but to her amazement the monk leapt forward, springing lightly into the air. It didn't look like she would come even close to reaching Dana, but her plan became evident a moment later as she struck the wall behind them, ran three steps *up* the smooth surface, and then kicked off directly toward the flying priestess.

Dana's own reactions felt sluggish compared to the speed and grace of the woman monk, and she could not avoid her in time as the tiefling grappled her, snapping her legs around Dana's lithe torso.

"Time for pain," the woman hissed.

Benzan knew he was going to take the hit, and whatever vicious spell the evil cleric had loaded into those nasty gauntlets. But an instant before the blow landed, Grehlia shifted, the razor-sharp spikes slicing empty air an inch beside the tiefling's head. Benzan fell back in surprise as the woman collapsed at his feet, but the mystery was resolved a moment later as he saw the small rapier jutting from the back of the cleric's neck, its owner materializing an instant later beside her.

"Help your wife," Mole said, recovering her weapon. "I've got to do something about those wizards in the tunnel." Before Benzan could respond, she'd tumbled off like an acrobat fired from a ballista, using her hands, feet, and even head interchangeably as she passed effortlessly through the close and crowded battlefield.

A flare of black smoke and a potent stench of brimstone announced the arrival of another combatant, back in the tunnel at Regidin's side. Although he would have preferred to bring another demodand to service, the disruptions caused by the *Tree* forestalled that option. So instead, he'd reached across the planes into the depths of the Abyss to bring a hezrou demon. The disgusting frog-like creature looked down at its summoner and then at the outer tunnel where the sounds of battle raged, its eyes already betraying its eagerness for battle. But Regidin forestalled it with a raised hand.

"Do not waste your time trying to *blaspheme*," he said in Abyssal. "These foes are potent and would resist your magic. Likewise, teleportation magic will not function in this place... and do not utilize a *chaos hammer*. Use a *blight*, if you wish to weaken a number of enemies at once."

"Is there anything else, human?" the hezrou grouched impatiently.

Regidin did not rise to the bait, his tone remaining perfectly neutral. "Do not strike any demodand, or any creature wearing this sigil," he said, indicating the ring he wore that bore the mark of the Cagewrights. "Go."

But even as the hezrou leapt eagerly for the gap in the wall, the entire tunnel became filled with *webs*. The hezrou was ensnared, as was Freija Doorgan, but the webs refused to touch Regidin, who clucked with slight annoyance. The hezrou likewise quickly adapted;

after a few tentative tugs upon the strands holding it, it simply shifted into *gaseous form* and slipped out through the opening into the far tunnel where the battle continued. Freija, however, reacted rather more dramatically to being caught up in the *web*. Despite the fact that the spell was a relatively common phenomenon to an advanced spellcaster such as she, her cold logic and self-control evaporated as she stared down at the sight of the hundreds of sticky strands enveloping her body, touching her fine red robe, tugging at her hair, dangling from her skin...

“Get them off!” Freija shrieked, tugging at the clinging webs. Her actions only served to draw the webbing tighter around her, and pulled a thick tangle of webs across her face. “Get them off!” she screamed again, louder.

“Calm yourself, my dear,” Regidin said coolly. From his perspective, the *web* was not entirely unwelcome; for one thing it offered a useful barrier between him and the intruders. The enemy archers were not in a good position to target him, not yet; from his position further down the side tunnel from the sundered wall he was virtually invisible to anyone not directly in front of that opening. Of course, that also meant he had a more difficult time seeing what was happening... but that did not hinder him from contributing to the destruction of the intruders.

If anything, it made him more deadly.

Without sparing the slightest thought for his allies, he conjured an empowered *flame strike* that filled the space just beyond the opening with a roaring storm of liquid fire. The rush of heat that surged through the tunnel blasted back Regidin’s robes, although the flames did not reach him. The same could not be said for Freija; eager tongues of fire spread outward through the *web*. The backblast of the *strike* lasted only a moment, and they freed her from the web, leaving her robe, her slender fingers, and her pristine face marred with black char. The woman fell to her knees, coughing, looking down at her ruined hands in horror.

The conjurer screamed, and for once, in a rare event, Shebelith Regidin’s lips twisted in a slight approximation of a smile.

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Dana cried out as the merciless tiefling monk slammed a punishing blow into her gut. The priestess felt pain twist her insides as the blow pulverized tissue and ripped muscles hard from training. The monk was locked to her in a deadly embrace, and all of her attempts to escape were proving futile thus far. The legs locked around her torso may as well have been steel bars for all her struggles did to loosen their hold.

“I would make it last longer, my sweet,” hissed a voice close to her ear... close enough for her to feel the monk’s hot breath. Her voice was soft, a deadly whisper. “But your friends, they need my tender ministrations.”

“They’ll kill you... bitch...” Dana hissed before a sharp, snapping pain in her body cut off her breath. There was nothing she could do; she could not even draw breath to cast a spell.

No. There was one thing she *could* do, realization that stabbed through the pain. It took only a thought to become action, as she dove straight toward the ground below, Ardeth Webb still locked to her.

It took less than a second for them to descend, but that was enough time for the monk to react. Just before they would have impacted the hard stone below, Dana felt herself flung wildly aside as the tiefling snapped their link, driving her back to land heavily and awkwardly on the ground a few paces away. Benzan, caught off guard by the sudden movement, drew his sword; but before he could strike Webb had already regained her footing, and swiveled gracefully into a defensive stance.

“Let us dance then, brother,” she hissed.

Her senses detected the danger an instant before it struck. She could *feel* rather than see the looming form behind her, for when she darted aside, turning to view the corridor behind, she saw nothing there but Regidin’s still-spinning *blade barrier* blocking the passage. But she felt the massive claw that grabbed her by the arm, crushing the limb with incredible strength.

“Good timing, Cal,” Benzan said, moving behind the still-struggling monk into a position to deliver a critical blow. He felt a welcome surge of positive energy as Dana unleashed a *mass cure serious wounds* spell, easing some of the pain from the still-burning kelubar acid searing his arm.

But that’s when Regidin’s *flame strike* hit.

Benzan was standing right where the blast of divine fire hit. There was nowhere for him to escape, no clever dodge he could undertake to avoid the force of the blast. His innate resistance to fire was of little help against the screaming rage of the evil spell, and even with Dana’s healing he found himself fighting through a wave of dizziness and nausea as the smell of his own burned flesh filled his nostrils.

But he was better off than most. Dannel and Dana both lay prone, dead or unconscious, wisps of smoke rising from their flame-ravaged forms. Benzan could make out the outlines of Cal, *polymorphed* into the shape of a gray render, by the wisps of gray smoke that framed his nine-foot body in silhouette. Clearly the monk could too, for she twisted in the render’s grasp to deliver a powerful kick to Cal’s torso. The blow was enough to loosen his grip, and the monk dropped free to the ground, landing in a wide spider-like stance. For all that she’d been held stationary a few feet from the impact zone of the *flame strike*, she somehow did not seem to be seriously burned.

Benzan tore his eyes from Dana’s immobile form. Suddenly he didn’t feel quite so secure about his ability to handle this deadly adversary.

“You are not alone,” a voice came from behind him. Arun Goldenshield stepped forward, holding his old holy sword, his armor splattered with farastu slime and the greasy stains of kelubar acid. The dwarf looked like he could barely hold his weapon up, but his eyes were

pinpoints of iron determination. Benzan spared a look down the corridor, where the sounds of battle continued as Lok engaged the two kelubars in a violent melee forty feet away.

As he turned back toward the monk, he saw a cloud of ugly yellow smoke issue out from the gap leading to the side tunnel. Even before it drifted to the ground and began to take on a solid form, he knew that this was Not Good.

Just a few feet away from where Ardeth Webb stood outnumbered but undaunted against three seriously hurt foes, another drama played out. Freija Doorgan looked up at Regidin, who regarded her with an icy, calm expression.

“The enemy has been dealt a serious blow, but fights on,” he said. “Inflict a *cloudkill* upon them; I will conjure another *barrier* to block their escape and channel them toward us.”

He started forward toward the opening, but Freija’s expression had not changed; a intense stare of fury, agony, and madness that was fixed upon Regidin like an aimed crossbow. Regidin saw it and paused.

“Do not be a fool. We draw near to what we have worked for, the hour of Rebirth, when worlds will be transformed.”

What little remaining threads of sanity that Freija Doorgan possessed abruptly snapped. She spat the words of a spell, hurling a wedge of magic upon the mind of Shebelith Regidin.

Regidin’s mind was a complex maze of potencies. He was not the warped genius that Freija was, but his will was like a stone castle built to withstand any siege. His *spell resistance* was not enough to stop Freija’s spell, but the force of who and what he was shielded him against almost any mental assault upon him. He had once slain a mind flayer with his own hands, and had traveled to planes where most mortals would have been reduced to gibbering idiocy in the space of seconds. He was insane, true, in the sense that all of the Cagewrights were, but that did not detract from the gifts that he possessed. Even with her vaunted intellect and spellpower, Freija’s sudden attack could have been hurled at him twenty times, and nineteen of those times he would have laughed at the futility of her betrayal before he crushed her beneath the power of his divinely-granted might.

Nineteen times out of twenty, that would have happened.

Unfortunately for Shebelith Regidin, fate took a hand, as Freija’s spell knifed through a split-second’s window of surprise, and she *feble-minded* him.

Chapter 374

Benzan’s initial attack didn’t fare so well, as the tiefling monk twisted her body back to avoid the sweep of his sword, snapping back to drive her fist solidly into his face. Benzan staggered back, stunned, blood fountaining down his face from his shattered nose.

But the monk was quickly forced back onto the defensive. Her attack upon Benzan gave Cal a free moment to hit her with a targeted *dispel magic*, which stripped away some of her layered wards and the enhancements granted her by her magical tattoos. Then she was forced to dodge back from a series of cautious attacks by Arun. The strength drains that the paladin had suffered were immediately evident, and none of his attacks connected, but he likewise left few openings for the tiefling to exploit.

Freija cackled madly as she saw the hard look in Regidin's eyes replaced by the vacuous stare of a moron. Wincing against the pain that seemed to infuse every muscle in her body, she started to pull herself up to her feet. Suddenly, however, that pain seemed tiny in comparison to the spike of agony that blossomed in her belly. Her eyes widened and she slumped back down to her knees, looking down to see the slender blade jutting from her stomach. She looked back up to see Mole Calloran standing there, shaking her head.

"Whatever you did to him, thanks," she said.

Freija opened her mouth to speak, but no sounds came out.

"I hope you get the fate you've earned, on the Other Side," Mole said, drawing out a small knife. Freija's eyes fixed on it in horror; everything else was fading, the world around her growing dim. "This is for killing Dannel," the gnome said.

They were the last words that Freija Doorgan would ever hear.

"Oh, crap," Benzan said, as he shook his head to clear it of the aftereffects of Ardeth Webb's nasty punch. His comment was directed at the combination of the monk, still standing against Arun, and the hezrou demon that leapt right toward him, claws outstretched toward his throat. Benzan thought he heard laughing as he brought up his sword in defense, too slowly. A foul stench filled his nostrils as the creature grabbed his arms with its claws, its oblong head snapping down to seize his shoulder and upper arm in its jaws with a crushing grip. Benzan felt like a rag doll as the demon lifted him off the ground, crunching the bones of his upper torso as it stuffed more and more of him into its gaping mouth.

Arun missed with another swing that Webb leapt over, spinning her body in mid air to drive a snap kick into the side of his helmet. The blow should have broken her bare foot, but it was the paladin who staggered back, his head ringing. Only determination and the lingering effects of Cal's *endurance* spell was keeping him on his feet, after all of the damage he'd taken in the battle thus far. Webb seemed to sense it too, but she did not have the luxury of taunting him as she turned to face a rush from Cal. The gnome-turned-render lowered his head as the monk dodged aside, but despite her efforts to tumble out of his reach his jaws closed around her hip, getting a solid hold on her. Webb shrieked terribly as the gnome shredded her body with his claws, inflicting serious damage before she finally managed to tear free.

Arun had started to go to Cal's aid, but a clang of metal on stone drew his attention around to the left. The noise was Benzan's sword falling to the ground; the tiefling's struggles were growing weaker as the hezrou stuffed more of the tiefling's body into its gaping maw. Now his head, shoulders, and his left arm were inside it, and it looked like the rest would soon

follow. Arun leapt at it, and despite his fading strength managed to slide half of the length of his sword into its body. Being impaled by a holy weapon got the demon's attention real fast. It spat out Benzan, who collapsed in a limp heap atop the ravaged body of Dannel, and turned to face the paladin. The demon's body was ravaged by holy fire—apparently Regidin's *flame strike* had not spared it, even in gaseous form—but it still assaulted the paladin with gusto, tearing with its claws and biting with its huge jaws. Arun nearly had his arm torn off as the hezrou grabbed hold of his shield in those jaws and yanked it upward. The paladin slipped his arm from the grips even as the hezrou tried to find a vulnerable place to grab on with its claws. Falling heavily at the demon's feet, he yelled and drove the holy sword up into its body.

Cal felt a slight breeze as Webb delivered a lunging strike that mercifully hit only empty air; his still-active *greater invisibility* had fooled the monk, this time. The *polymorphed* gnome was quick and—thanks to the spell—stronger than his foe, but despite his borrowed form he was still no warrior. And Ardeth Webb was a master at close-quarters combat, as she'd already proven. She'd taken serious punishment already, but that did not appear to hinder her as Cal tried to snag her with a grab of his left claw. As soon as the claw closed upon her torso she struck, delivering a powerful blow that snapped the bones in Cal's upper arm. The limb fell uselessly to his side, but before she could follow up the attack he roared an inchoate cry and dove his head forward, snapping the monk's head up in his mouth. He lifted her off her feet, the monk kicking and punching violently at his torso, but even through the pain of those hits he summoned all of his remaining strength to keep his jaws locked.

All of his senses became numb to what was around him, to everything except for the struggles of his prisoner. Finally, even as he felt his consciousness slipping, a faint but audible snap penetrated his awareness, and the monk's struggles abruptly ceased.

After Freija had fallen dead at her feet, Mole regarded the enemy cleric cautiously. The priest had clearly been seriously affected by whatever the wizardess had done to him; even she could see that. He'd taken out a morningstar, which he held awkwardly, holding his place as the remnants of Cal's *webs* burned around him. Wary of a trap, she drew out a ball from her *bag of tricks* and snapped it down the passage toward him. The little furry oblong rolled between the cleric's legs and grew into the form of a wolverine. The summoned creature's demeanor was quite similar to the real animal that it resembled, and it immediately attacked Regidin's legs with its claws and bite. The cleric, startled, turned around and exclaimed something incomprehensible as he started bashing on the animal with his weapon.

It was a trivial matter to come up behind him and stab him in the back.

The cleric gibbered in pain, but amazingly did not turn around, instead intensifying his efforts against the wolverine, which had seized hold of his ankle. Mole was not one to refuse a gift, using the remnants of the man's robe to draw herself up across his back, stabbing as she went. The cleric seemed to realize something was wrong just as she reached the summit of her ascent, and when he turned his head it gave her the perfect opportunity to slide her knife across his exposed throat.

The tunnel and the adjacent passage had grown quiet. After a quick look around to make sure that there weren't any more enemies here, the gnome cleaned her blade on the dead

man's cloak before retracing her steps back to the entry. She saw Cal materialize, his hulking figure shrinking back down to its natural form, his arm hanging badly broken at his side, blood trailing from his broken jaw. The gnome managed to drag himself over to Dana's side, touching her with a wand before he himself slumped over, unconscious.

A few feet away, Benzan and Dannel lay in a heap. Arun lay against the wall next to them, atop a greasy smear that had been the hezrou. The paladin managed to nod to her, but did not have the strength for anything else, not even to lift his battered body up.

A loud thundering noise drew her head around to the south. A figure approached... Lok, his dark armor covered with ooze. The genasi pulled off his helmet and let it drop to the floor, revealing a face that was marred by garish black streaks where acid had burned his flesh almost to the bone.

Behind him were the gashed corpses of two kelubar demodands.

The genasi made it around the hacked corpses of the shator and farastu, to where Hodge lay motionless, still paralyzed from Regidin's *blasphemy*. Lok reached down and checked the dwarf; he then made it all of one step toward the others before he collapsed.

Mole, of course, was unhurt, although the *flame strikes* had singed her a bit and made a mess of her outfit. The gnome looked around at the bloody mess of the battlefield, and let out a low whistle.

"Wow."

Chapter 375

It had been a close call. Dana, brought back to the edge of consciousness by Cal's intervention, burned one of her remaining high-power spells on a *mass cure moderate wounds* that drew them back from the brink. Dannel and Benzan were both alive, although it had been a very narrow thing for the unfortunate elf. Cal and Dana drew out healing wands and immediately set about doing what they could, completely burning out two of the precious devices in the process. Dana *restored* Arun's health, damaged by the green ray of Freija's *prismatic spray*, and soon the effects of the *blasphemy* and the demodands' *rays of enfeeblement* likewise began to fade.

"Haven't had a fight that intense in a while," Benzan said, wiping his face with a damp cloth as he lay against a nearby wall. They'd retreated to the chamber at the end of the passageway, a small shrine by the looks of it with a glowing pool of red-hot lava and a stone altar in the center of the floor. It was hot, and the stench of blood and fiends was strong, but at least it was relatively secure. A thorough search had turned up no hollow walls or secret doors, or at least none detectable through normal means.

"I don' know 'ow much more beatin' I kin take," Hodge said, sucking in deep breaths as he lay sprawled out on his back near the rear wall of the chamber. "Gods damned, how many 'ours we been fightin' now? I forget what it be like to sleep..."

“We cannot sleep now,” Arun said, and as if to punctuate his words, a slight tremble passed through the stone of the chamber.

“This place seems to be shielded from most of the effects of the earth tremors,” Cal said. “I can only imagine what’s going on in the city above, or on the rest of the mountain.”

“Go on then,” Hodge groaned. “I can nay go no more.”

Mole sidled up to Cal and whispered something to her uncle. The illusionist nodded and dug into his magical backpack for something, finally producing a clouded flask which Mole took over to Hodge, dropping it in his lap.

“What’s this?” the dwarf said. “Another healin’ potion? Thanks fer the thought, girl, but me body’s fine, it’s me...”

His words trailed off as he recognized the label on the flask.

A few (dozen) swallows later, Hodge was back on his feet, if a bit less steadily than before. “If it weren’t agin me religion, I could kiss ye, gnome.”

Benzan had spoken briefly to Dannel, finally handing him a number of his few remaining white-fletched arrows. “The Thirteen did their worst, and we’re still here,” the tiefling said. “Let’s finish this thing.”

“We did not get our captive... we still don’t know what we’re facing, or how to defuse the threat of the Tree.”

“We find it, we destroy it,” Arun said simply.

“Perhaps we have another option, after all,” Cal said. He stood, hefting a small canvas sack, and crossed to the center of the room, dumping its contents upon the altar. The others gathered around it, Mole stuffing a few looted treasures she’d been examining into her *bag of holding* before joining them.

“Eww,” she said.

The gnome’s prize was a two foot long slug, which looked up at them as if aware of the misery of its fate.

Chapter 376

The interrogation of Nulin “Fish” Wiejeron was quick and to the point.

When Cal dispelled his *baleful polymorph*, the others instantly ready for any attack or attempt at escape, the lean-figured assassin merely shrugged and sat down upon the altar. Even as they divested of his weapons and other accessories, he began to speak. “I realize that you can kill me at any moment,” he said. “And that you are on a... tight timeline. So I

will be concise. I offer you any information about the Cagewrights and their plans that you require, without reservation, in exchange for my life and freedom.”

“You think we would let one of the Thirteen just walk out of here, free as a bird?” Dannel asked roughly.

Wiejeron nodded at the comment. “From what I understand of you heroic types, the ‘greater good’ is the driving principle in this instance. I make no apologies for what I am, but is giving me the justice I no doubt deserve worth the destruction of your world?”

There was a heavy pause.

“You would just sell out your allies, not to mention your ‘grand scheme’, just like that?” Cal asked.

Wiejeron shrugged. “In my case, the principle of ‘self-preservation’ trumps that of the greater good, in this instance that of my confederates. From what I’ve seen, you’ve killed most of them anyway, and I do not doubt that you will prove capable of handling Dyr’ryd as well. As for the Tree... well, that is a tale of a different sort entirely, and one which I will expound upon, should you grant me the assurance I seek. Sworn to by that one,” he added, nodding to Arun.

Wiejeron just sat there, looking as relaxed as if he were at a casual gathering rather than a trial for his life, while the companions shared a number of meaningful looks in the space around him.

“If we sink to dealing with them, then how are we better than they are?” Arun finally said. The dwarf looked troubled.

Benzan had drawn his sword, and now stood back a short distance, with an expression like a thunderhead. “Leave me alone with him for a few minutes, and we will see what can be learned.”

“Torture won’t work on this one,” Cal said plainly. While the others had been talking, he’d watched Dana, standing behind their prisoner. She’d quietly used her powers in an attempt to *charm* the assassin, but he wasn’t surprised when she looked at him and shook her head. Wiejeron’s expression had merely flickered for a moment, and he did not turn around.

“Perhaps I can convince him,” Dannel said, stepping forward. Cal realized that the elf was going to try the same thing Dana just had. Wiejeron, he saw, had looked up and even smiled at the elf disarmingly... *great, just broadcast what you are planning, so he can focus his mental defenses*, the gnome thought. Dannel drew upon his bardic powers, filling the air with the haunting notes of a melodic song designed to catch up the will of the target and bend it to his own. But once again, the spell failed.

“Let’s just ‘ave ‘is ‘ead and be on with it,” Hodge said.

“No,” Arun said. He’d drawn his holy avenger and now stepped forward. Wiejeron did not flinch, but something flashed in his eyes as the dwarf lifted the weapon to a point about an inch away from the assassin’s throat. “You know us well, rogue, and I do not doubt that to your mind, those traits you catalogued are tallied among our weaknesses. But we are here, victorious, while your companions lie dead in the tunnel out there. So hear my words, and pay heed. You will reveal your secrets, and by my honor, this blade, and the name of my god Moradin the Soul Forger, you will be permitted to depart, upon pain of death should you ever return to this part of the Realms henceforth, or take any action whatsoever against those people under my protection. I do not doubt that you are a master at the art of falsehoods and deceit. I warn you, however, that should I detect a lie, this blade will separate the head that speaks it from your miserable carcass.”

Cal quietly cast *detect thoughts*.

Wiejeron nodded. “Fair enough.”

The interview proceeded quickly, with the assassin’s testimony broken only sporadically by questions, mostly from Cal. Wiejeron gave his revelations without spurious comments or unnecessary elaboration, and they learned much, some of which they had already known something about, but which now took shape in ugly detail.

He spoke of Dyr’ryd, the shator abomination who nominally led the organization. It was Shebeleth Regidin, however, who had been the motivating force behind the creation of the *Soulcages* and the fell artifact that would open the portal between worlds, the *Tree of Shackled Souls*. The companions had already learned about the fell Ritual of Planar Joining, the dark rite that would open the permanent gateway to Carceri using the souls of those unfortunate individuals known as the Shackleborn, descendants of a cohort of demodands who’d come to Faerûn in humanoid guise a millennium past. But Wiejeron’s simple, casual explanation of the process that had led up to the current situation filled them all with a sense of horror and dread. Hundreds of people had already given their lives to the project, without any apparent concern on the part of the Cagewrights of what atrocities had to be wrought in the path to their destination.

Arun interrupted to turn the conversation to the termination of the ritual. With the holy sword hovering a few inches from his face, Wiejeron revealed that the destruction of the tree in the midst of the ritual would create a backlash of energy that would create a full-force eruption of the volcano, and the destruction of not only Cauldron, but a good part of the entire region. He spoke of the process without any apparent feeling for the thousands of refugees from Cauldron who would likely die in the cataclysm, or the tens of thousands that would be affected by the quakes, falling ash, and environmental devastation wrought by such an outcome as far away as Almraiven to the west, and the city-states along the Lake of Steam to the east. Intent upon the need for control over their own creation, Regidin had tasked Freija Doorgan with the creation of a fail-safe, a shutdown mechanism for the artifact, but Wiejeron had not been party to the details of that arrangement.

“Freija and I weren’t on the best of terms,” he admitted.

“Hard to believe she could resist your charms,” Dana returned dryly. Wiejeron shrugged and offered a slight smile.

“An intricate plan,” Cal said. “Brilliant, if twisted.”

“It fits with what we’ve learned,” Dannel added. “But there is one more bit of information that is lacking.”

“I cannot believe that this plot reflects solely the initiative of a cabal of mad plotters, no matter how talented all of you are. Your tale speaks of a figure in the shadows, pulling the strings that tie all of this together. Nidrama implied as much, though she would not come out and admit it. What I wish to know is, who or what do the Cagewrights serve?”

Wiejeron lowered his head for a moment, and let out a deep sigh.

“Answer,” Arun said.

The assassin’s head came up, and there was a bleak look in his eyes. “Adimarchus,” he said. “We serve Adimarchus.”

Cal and the other Travelers betrayed no knowledge of the name, but Arun, Dannel, and Mole reacted quite differently. “Adimarchus!” Dannel exclaimed. “We’d thought him long-dead!”

“It would appear not,” Cal said. “This individual is a Power of some sort, I assume?”

Wiejeron nodded. “A rebellious angel, fallen into the Abyss, long before the Age of Man became a dream in the minds of the gods. He is not gone, but held prisoner in the depths of Carceri.”

“So your plans involved the release of your patron,” Cal said.

“It was on our long-term list of things to do,” the assassin admitted.

“We will deal with Adimarchus when the time comes,” Arun said. “The ritual advances to conclusion as we speak, and the opening of the portal may be nigh. We cannot dally here further.”

“I hold you to your word, then,” the assassin said.

“We don’t know yet if you were telling the truth,” Dana said.

“Ask your paladin if he detected any falsehoods. In any case, I have fulfilled my obligation, betrayed my cohorts and my master, and feel the need to relocate far, far from this locale.”

“I have one more question,” Benzan interrupted, the first words he’d contributed since the opening of the interrogation.

“I will answer as best I can.”

“When you put my daughter, my Izandra, in one of those cages, and shackled her to your fucking artifact,” he said, his voice rising to a shout, “did you spare any thought for her soul or the others that you were going to trample in your mad dreams of power?”

Without warning, the tiefling lunged past Lok and Hodge, thrusting with his magical longsword at the assassin’s face.

Chapter 377

“Benzan!” Cal yelled, even as the tiefling unleashed a deadly thrust with his keen sword at their prisoner. Wiejeron had clearly been expecting an attack, however, for even as the point darted toward his eye he threw himself backward across the slab. He could not avoid a long cut across his jaw as Benzan lunged after him, but then he flipped backward, rolling into a smooth crouch. He spoke words of magic, and even as Arun tried to grab him, he vanished from view.

“Stop him!” Dana said, even as Cal added, “Damn it, Benzan!”

The companions fanned out around the altar, with the spellcasters inside a ring formed by the warriors. But the assassin seemed bent more on escape than combat, at least until Cal gestured and conjured from webs of shadow a black-tinged *wall of ice* that blocked the corridor about twenty feet down the tunnel. Benzan followed with a *glitterdust* that filled the passage and a portion of the room with a blinding fog of flickering motes, but the spell did not reveal the outline of the invisible assassin.

“Is he still here?” Lok asked, scanning alertly for any sign of the Cagewright.

“Give me a moment to sort out the auras in this place,” Cal said, focusing upon his *detect magic* spell.

“You broke your word,” came a deep voice, pitched to echo off the smooth volcanic walls of the chamber, making it hard to determine their source. Cal, however, was a gnome, with ears specifically adapted to discerning fine gradations in sound, and he quietly focused his concentration in a far corner of the room, near the open lava pits. “So much for the honor of a paladin.”

“Show yourself, and I’ll give you the gift of a quick death,” Benzan snarled, sweeping his sword in wide, blind arcs that had little chance of revealing the canny assassin’s position.

Arun’s expression betrayed a barely-contained fury, but he did nothing to intervene as his companions swept the room. Hodge, intent on detecting a telltale sound that would reveal their foe’s location, did not notice when his dagger slid from its scabbard at his belt and vanished into thin air behind him.

Dana, however, suddenly turned, firing a ray of *searing light* that knifed through the air maybe a foot in front of the dwarf’s face. Hodge cursed in surprise and staggered back, and so he didn’t see the beam suddenly flare out as it struck something solid. Wiejeron’s

only response was a muffled curse, quickly controlled as he tried to shift away to another location.

But Mole had been waiting for one of her companions to reveal Wiejeron's location, and even as Dana fired her spell she threw a small cloth parcel to the ground at Hodge's feet. The bag broke open with the impact, dislodging a small cloud of brown dust—finely ground coffee from the gnome's extensive stores in her *bag of holding*. Most of the grounds quickly settled to the ground, or stuck in Hodge's leggings, but a thin film of dust hung in the air about a foot off the ground, quickly moving away toward the far side of the room. Lok moved to intercept the assassin, but as he lifted his axe to strike Wierjeron suddenly shifted and darted smoothly past him, driving his stolen dagger deep into the crease where Lok's heavily armored leg met his torso. The blade slid with precision under a plate and through the chain links beneath, opening a serious wound. The blow was designed to cripple him, and Wiejeron was quick to dart away, leaving little opportunity to counter.

But Lok was a master fighter, and little opportunity was enough. Even as Wiejeron slipped around the genasi, Lok spun around, shifting his weight to his uninjured side as he spun around, his axe humming as it sliced the air. Droplets of blood exploded out of the air as the thundering blade cut leather—they'd divested him of his *shadowed silent chain shirt* and flesh. Even then the Cagewright quickly adjusted, accepting the momentum of the blow and tumbling forward to regain his footing. The maneuver left an ugly red splotch on the ground where his injured back had pressed against the ground momentarily, and that was enough for Dannel to deliver a nearly-blind arrow that stabbed through his arm, the bloody head and feathered end hovering in mid-air about six inches apart.

"Damn you all to the hells!" Wiejeron exclaimed, leaping toward Dana. The mystic wanderer darted back, but not fast enough to avoid the knife that grazed her ribs. She wasn't hurt too badly, and the attack opened Wiejeron to a final counter, as Benzan ran him through with his sword. As he died his *greater invisibility* faded, revealing a bloody corpse with a frozen look of rage lingering on his features.

"That was stupid," Cal said.

Benzan shot a final dark look at the body and turned around to see Arun standing before him, his sword held up a few inches from his chest.

"I'm not the sort of man who appreciates threats," the tiefling growled. "I'm not bound by your narrow moralism, paladin, so spare me your sermon about honor."

Arun did not waver. "I'll not defend the likes of that," he said, with barely a nod to the dead man. "And I understand that you are distraught about your daughter."

"But mark me, for I will only say this once. You are not the only one who has lost here; I considered Zenna to be one of my closest friends, and I felt the pain caused by this man's words. But we will not prevail here as eight individuals. The Cagewrights, for all their selfish evil and stupid infighting, still functioned together well enough as a unit to unleash this storm of destruction upon our world. I will not stand beside a man whom I cannot trust to be there when I need his strength, nor would I offer my aid to one to whom I could not offer all of the fight that I possess. His fate—" Arun again indicated the corps—"was ours to

decide... but your action threatened us all, and through that the thousands who yet depend upon our victory over the Cagewrights.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned, and sheathing his sword, crossed over to the exit where the *glitterdust* was already fading into nothingness. Hodge followed him, and after a moment, Lok and Dannel followed.

“Well, for once I didn’t have to say it,” Cal said, sheathing one of his wands and moving to join the others.

Benzan turned to Dana. “I was wrong,” he said quietly, so that only she could hear. “But I’m not sad that bastard’s dead.”

“I know, honey,” she said, taking his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder as they followed after the others.

Chapter 378

The *wall of ice*, already melting with the heat of the nearby lava pools, disintegrated completely in a few minutes, leaving the passage clear. The corridor remained empty save for the wreckage of the earlier battle. They quickly returned to the bend in the tunnel where the ambush had begun. The sides of the passageway were scorched black from the multiple *flame strikes* that had been unleashed here, and the corpses of the slain Cagewrights, hastily looted and covered with loose cloaks, formed dark mounds that they gave a wide berth. The stench of death hung heavily over the tunnel, even in the relatively short time since the battle.

“Well, do we retrace our steps, take down this wall, or press on?” Dannel asked.

“I suggest we go forward,” Cal said, indicating the secret passage where the Cagewrights had waited to ambush them. “We should find the Tree of Shackled Souls first, and remove any lingering defenses that the Cagewrights have established.”

“Including this Dyr’ryd fellow,” Dana added. “From what Wiejeron said, I do not like the sound of him.”

“I think they’re all mad, to some degree,” the gnome replied. “It’s likely a byproduct of their interactions with Carceri, and their bond to this Adimarchus.”

“Yeah, his digs were nuts,” Hodge said, with a shudder.

“Occipitus,” Dannel clarified. “An abyssal demiplane, the former home of the fallen angel-turned-demon. We left one of our companions there, a cleric of Helm, who believed that he could rehabilitate the place.”

“Well, if this Adimarchus gets out, he might try to return there,” Cal said. “You might want to warn your friend.”

“Enough chatter, we have something to do here,” Benzan said, slipping through the ruined doorway into the far passage. The others followed behind, stepping around the covered bodies of Freija Doorgan and Shebeleth Regidin.

“We should dispose of these corpses more permanently,” Mole suggested as they passed. “Keep them from being *raised*.”

“A good suggestion,” Cal said. “Before we depart, we’ll drop them all into the lava.”

The tunnel, which had the look of a natural lava shaft worked to make it more passable, continued straight for about thirty feet before it gradually began to bend to the right. Right around the start of the bend, however, they encountered a set of stone double doors on the left side of the corridor.

“Tunnel ends at another set of doors up ahead, maybe forty feet further down,” Benzan said, emerging from the shadows ahead of them.

“They’re warm to the touch,” Mole—or rather, Mole’s voice; the gnome was *invisible* again—said from in front of the doors.

“Careful,” Cal said, nodding to Arun and Lok, who took up positions opposite each other at the doors. While the others prepared weapons and spells, the two warriors pushed the heavy portals open.

They were greeted with a wave of heat and orange light from a broad pool of lava, maybe thirty feet across, directly beyond the doors. A path of evenly spaced stones led across the obstacle, beyond which they could see a large chamber. The larger room was adorned in an unusual décor, with woven mats covering much of the floor space, and brightly colored paper screens laid out around the perimeter along the walls. There were a few pieces of furniture in their line of view, including a cot and an armoire, but overall the effect was very Spartan.

“Bodies, hanging from the ceiling,” Dannel said, pointing across the room toward the shadowy far edge.

“I detect no evil, other than the Taint which infuses all of this place,” Arun reported.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Cal said, indicating the conveniently-placed stepping stones.

“Ah, it’s not so hard,” Mole said, and before the others could intervene she was darting across the steps, popping into visibility briefly at the far side of the lava pool to take a bow before sliding the ring back onto her finger.

“Gnomes,” Hodge muttered meaningfully.

“Come on, let’s not get split up,” Arun said, starting across the stone bridge. The flat slabs were close enough so that moving across the gap wasn’t that great a hazard, and soon they were reunited on the far side.

The cavern looked to be part living space, part training hall. The “bodies” that Dannel had spotted turned out to be training dummies suspended by long chains from the ceiling forty feet above. In addition to the paper screens they found several weapon racks, which held a diverse collection of exotic weapons of the sort used by monks. Lok pronounced the weapons to be of masterwork quality, and soon produced a kama that possessed an odd, almost translucent blade. Dannel investigated the armoire and reported that it contained a selection of expensive men’s clothing. There were no apparent threats or exits, however.

“Looks like quarters for our monk, and perhaps for the assassin as well,” Cal said.

“Well, they won’t be needing it any more,” Benzan said. “Let’s get going.”

“Hold a moment,” Cal said, humming a melody to summon his bardic magic.

“Like the paladin said, we don’t have a lot of time,” the tiefling impatiently said.

“If we have to come back and search this room again because we missed something, we’ll waste more of it,” Cal said, as slowly turned, scanning each segment of the room in turn. “This will only take a minute.”

But it was only a few seconds before he pointed at the cot. “There. Strong magical auras.”

Almost immediately the blankets covering the cot were thrown back, as Mole quickly examined the cot. “There’s a secret compartment in here,” the gnome reported. “Good catch, Uncle Cal.”

“Watch out for traps,” Benzan suggested.

Because Mole was still invisible, the others couldn’t see her roll her eyes at the tiefling. But a moment later the gnome appeared holding a number of objects, the most obvious of which was a six-foot staff of wood so pale that it looked almost like ivory.

“Got a scroll, this vestment-thing, and the staff,” she said. “You want to take a look at it, Uncle Cal?”

“Yes, but later, when we have more time. Benzan, if you would store the staff in your magical quiver?”

“Fine. But let’s get moving.”

They retraced their steps and made their way back down the tunnel to the doors at the end. Again after a cursory examination for traps Arun and Lok shouldered them open to reveal another large chamber beyond. This one was dark save for the light shed by their magical weapons and Cal’s *light* spell. That light revealed ugly red walls, either painted or some natural property of the stone here. The place was dominated by a huge mound of cushions, a veritable mountain nearly thirty feet across and six feet high at the center. The cushions and the floor alike were covered with a layer of gooey gray slime, hinting at the resident of this chamber.

“Demodand gunk,” Mole said, looking around. To their right a deep alcove almost twenty feet deep held a stone desk sized for an individual ten feet tall, and to their left the gnome quickly identified another of the heavy curtains colored and textured to look like another wall to the casual glance.

“Couple of urns, back here,” Mole reported, pulling back the curtain.

“If there aren’t any bad guys, we’ll worry about them later,” Cal said.

“Apparently you don’t know your niece very well,” Dannel said dryly. “I’d wager that one of those urns is being opened as we speak.”

A moment later, a voice from the curtained nook reported, “Gold and platinum... a few thousand. Looks like there was a lot more here, not too long ago.”

Dannel looked at Cal, who shrugged. “Curiosity’s a family trait,” he admitted.

“Probably used most of their wealth to finance their operation,” Lok said. “Mercenaries like those haraknin don’t come cheap.”

“Nor does the creation of an artifact,” Dana said, her face shrinking in disgust as she pulled her boots from a thick patch of clinging slime.

“This could be another dead end, but spread out, take a quick look,” Cal suggested. “There may be another secret door, or we may have missed something in one of the earlier rooms.”

“There’s still that conjured wall back at the ambush site,” Dannel reminded them. “I am sure it was created to hide something.”

But they didn’t get a chance to go back to Freija’s barrier, not yet, in any case. Benzan found a secret door in the back wall of the chamber near the edge of the heap of slime-encrusted cushions. Lok was able to discern its function, and pushed open the relatively large slab, roughly seven feet square, that sank back on a recessed stone pivot into another short tunnel. This one only ran for about fifteen feet before ending in another secret door, its function more obvious from the inside. Again Lok applied his strength, and the cumbersome portal dragged slowly open.

Beyond lay a vast chamber, dwarfing anything they’d encountered in the Cagewright complex thus far. The place was a great bubble in the mountain, a hemisphere maybe a hundred feet across. Rivulets of molten lava flowed slowly across the floor, shedding enough light to see, but leaving much of the room deep in shadow.

And in the center of the room stood the objective of their quest.

The Tree of Shackled Souls was a warped, twisted metal monstrosity, rising on a trunk fully six feet across before spreading into a dense network of branches dominated by thirteen thick primary boles that each culminated in a dangling black metal cage... the *soulcages* described by Dannel and the others. The Tree was wreathed in a furious nimbus of

unnatural violet light interwoven with tendrils of semi-substantial black energy. Strands of that weave twisted outward from the tree to vanish into the cavern walls above. The artifact was at the center of a web of power unleashed by the Ritual of Planar Junction, and none of the adventurers needed much insight to sense that something Very Bad was happening in this place.

Benzan had moved forward quickly, ignoring the cautions offered by the others, trying to get a good look at the motionless lumps that lay at the base of each of the cages.

“So much evil,” Arun said, staring up at the Tree in grim horror. His fingers tightened on the grip of his holy sword until they were white within the shell of his gauntlet.

“So you have come to the end at last,” came a deep, throaty voice from across the chamber. “The end!” echoed a higher-pitched, demented voice that broke off into a sinister cackle.

Shedding his *invisibility*, Dyr’ryd appeared on an island formed by several lava streams about forty feet ahead of them to the left. The massive, bloated shator looked down at the intruders into its realm with eyes that burned with unreadable emotion. The symbiant creature, Ryd, twisted its tiny limbs that jutted from the side of the demodand’s oblong skull. It was obvious that the fiend had not neglected his defenses, from the obvious shimmer of magical *displacement* that surrounded its massive form. It wore a metal gauntlet on one hand, which held a large polearm with a blue-steel blade that almost seemed to scream “powerful magic!”

“It is fitting that you should be witnesses, after all that has transpired,” the leader of the Cagewrights said. “The Ritual draws to a close... and with it, the melding of our worlds will be complete.”

“Complete,” Ryd echoed, with an evil grin.

Chapter 379

At the Tree of Shackled Souls, the demodand aberration Dyr’ryd confronted the Heroes of Cauldron. Divested of its most powerful allies, without even the ability to summon additional demodand minions due to the interference wrought by the Tree, the shator was nevertheless an imposing foe.

“You face an interesting dilemma,” the creature said. “You cannot stop the ritual now, the backlash would cause an eruption of the volcano, and...”

“Yes, we know,” Cal interrupted. “WASTE IT!” he shouted, punctuating his command by hurling a targeted *dispel magic* at the shator that dissolved its *displacement* and revealed it standing a few feet away.

Its plan to delay and deceive the intruders ruined, Dyr’ryd snarled and lifted its deadly guisarme *Mindbite*, calling upon its innate powers to unleash some nasty effect upon the

adventurers. A canny and experienced adversary, mentally and physically ready for battle, the shator was flat footed for barely a second after the gnome's shouted command.

But a lot happened in that second.

Dannel and Benzan were both ready, and drew and fired in the same instant even as the echoes of Cal's words died in the cavern. They shifted their aim as Dyr'ryd's *displacement* was broken, and both holy arrows slammed into the demodand's baggy torso, vanishing into its corrupt flesh with small white flashes of light. The shator stumbled back a step, its body wrought with agonies as pure divine energy lanced through it. The parasitic Ryd screamed as a tiny bolt punctured its malformed body, a gift from Mole's crossbow. The shator was a product of the dank pits of Carceri, and no stranger to pain, but Dannel and Benzan both maintained their barrage with an almost insane speed and accuracy, the elf filled with his magical song, the tiefling filled with rage at what had been done to his daughter.

Dana, meanwhile, reached over and touched Lok on the shoulder, filling him with the divine power of Selûne. The genasi, well-acquainted with the magic she empowered him with, instantly rose off the ground and flew like an arrow toward the demodand.

Both of Dyr'ryd's mouths now exploded with cries and curses, as arrow after arrow slammed into it with the force of a trebuchet stone. The demodand could not focus its magic quickly enough to respond, but it saw the genasi coming, and with fury it lifted *Mindbite* to return some of the pain it had thus far withstood.

But even as it started its swing a last pair of white-fledged holy missiles buried themselves, a few inches apart, deep into its throat. The impacts threw off its aim, and the potent magical weapon sliced harmlessly above Lok as the genasi dove straight in, and at the last instant drove his magical axe with grim fatality into the shator's ugly throat. A thunderous retort shook the cavern, and as Lok flew past, his momentum carrying him inexorably forward past his foe, the rest of the companions watched as the monstrous double-head that had carried two unique minds tumbled end over end, and landed with a sizzling splash in the bubbling rivulet of lava.

The body stood there upright a moment longer, as if unrecognizing the absence of its driving essence. But then, inevitably, the fat corpse of the fearsome demodand crumpled into a noxious heap on the uneven stone floor.

Chapter 380

Benzan knelt on the hard stone floor, his body shaking. The eerie illumination cast by the surrounding lava flows framed his features with a diabolical glow that seemed to highlight the faint hints of his mixed ancestry. He'd always been able to pass for human, unlike his daughter, but at this moment, in the depths of his grief, he seemed more alien than ever before.

Directly above him was the *soulcage* containing the dead body of his daughter. Her friends and family stood arrayed behind the tiefling, offering quiet support and witness. A short

distance away lay the sagging corpse of Dyr'ryd, a hissing sound occasionally rising from it as runnels of demodand blood trailing from the decapitated body found their way into the surrounding lava streams.

For several minutes they were silent, respecting the man's grief and each sharing it. Dana stood closest, but she knew the man better than anyone ever had, knew that he needed to be alone, at least for the moment. After a time, Cal spoke. "We have to go. We must find the failsafe device that Wiejeron spoke of."

"Go," Benzan said. "I will wait until you are clear, and then destroy the Tree."

"Benzan, we can't..." Lok began.

"I know what you are going to say. But Cauldron is already destroyed; everyone who can get away has already done so. Isn't it more important to be certain? What if Wiejeron was lying, and while you're looking for something that doesn't exist, the ritual is completed? There's only one way to be certain that this is done, now."

"I share your conviction, and if it comes to that, I will help you destroy the Tree," Arun said. "But a cataclysmic eruption would mean certain death for the refugees from Cauldron, and suffering for many thousands more. We must seek out what options remain, swiftly, before taking the ultimate action."

"He's right," Dana said. "And if the Tree must be destroyed, we'll all do it together. Its destruction may disrupt the interference that prevents teleportation magic to function, which would give us a chance to escape."

"I was thinking, that room with the summoning diagram looked like it might have belonged to the wizardess, the one that Wiejeron mentioned," Mole said. "Maybe we can find some clues there."

"I was thinking the same thing," Cal said. "I would suggest we start the search there."

"Benzan?" Dana asked.

The tiefling rose, and slide his sword into the sheath at his waist. Deliberately, he turned to them, an iron look in his eyes.

"Let's go."

The adventurers hastened back through the complex to the chamber of Freija Doorgan, where they proceeded to tear the place apart in a hurried but intense search. Mole found a secret door near the summoning diagram that opened onto a small hidden workshop cluttered with stone tables and shelves along the perimeter of the room, along with a weathered desk in one corner. Everything was laid out with precision, and there was not a speck of dust to be found anywhere within the room. A small fountain full of bubbling lava provided heat and light. After a quick examination Cal reported that the materials here were used in the creation of various magical items, possibly including the evil rings that

each of the members of the Thirteen wore. They had six of those rings now, stored in a velvet bag tucked deep inside Cal's *handy haversack*.

Mole found a hidden drawer in the desk and produced a folio of papers that she quickly shared with Cal.

"Abyssal," he said, examining the ugly script that covered the parchment sheets. The gnome had permanently empowered himself with the ability to *comprehend languages*, so he had no difficulty understanding the text. He read quickly while the others finished their examination of the room.

"No other exits," Benzan reported. "What do you have there?"

Cal held up a hand to forestall him, while he continued reading. His augmented intelligence allowed him to grasp the content of the documents faster than most scholars, but it was still nearly a full minute more before he responded.

"We're looking for something called a 'dispersal collar,'" he reported. "Doorgan constructed it at Regidin's direction to be able to abort the ritual, if necessary."

"And where is this collar now?" Arun asked.

Cal frowned. "The only reference to its location is here. The entry reads that it has been given for safekeeping, to "that fiery beast from Gehenna."

"That doesn't sound promising," Lok said.

Arun and Dannel exchanged a look. "The lava cavern," the elf said.

"I think I be needin' a drink," Hodge said.

Chapter 381

For the second time the heavy stone portals swung open, but this time the Heroes of Cauldron, along with their new allies, stepped forward into Moltenwing's lair.

The cavern was much as they'd left it, a vast open space maybe sixty feet wide and more than twice that in depth; it was difficult to make out the far edge with all of the smoke and haze from the roiling sea of lava that filled the room in between. There were a number of stone "islands" situated across the chamber, but they were surrounded by stretches of lava too wide for most of them to hazard leaps across. The ledge they were on was only about fifteen feet deep and maybe twice that across, gently sloping down to a crumbling edge that was only a few feet above the surface of the bubbling lava.

For a long moment they simply regarded the chamber in watchful silence, looking for any sign of danger.

"This is so obviously a bad idea that I'm not going to say anything," Benzan said.

“Clearly the Cagewrights picked a good place to hide their object,” Cal noted.

“Where’s the ‘fiery beast,’ do you think?” Mole asked.

“Gold piece gets you five it’s under the lava,” Dannel said. “Probably knows we’re here, and probably is just waiting for us to make our move.”

“From the description in the notes, I doubt that the collar would survive long-term immersion under the lava,” Cal said. “It’s likely hidden somewhere else in the chamber.”

“*Detect magic scan?*” Benzan suggested.

Cal nodded. “That was my first thought, and I’ve already given the room a quick scan. Unfortunately it’s either shielded—perhaps in a deep crevice that we cannot see from here—or situated on the far side of the chamber, beyond the range of the spell.”

“So what you’re saying is, we’re going to have to go out there,” Arun said.

“You kin fly, right?” Hodge said to Lok. “Why not just scoot out there an’ take a look, eh?”

The genasi shook his head. “That was Dana’s magic, and the spell is only useable once per day.”

“I can go,” Mole said. “The islands are close enough for me to make the jumps.” Somehow the gnome managed to look frightened and excited at the same time. She’d actually taken a few steps toward the edge of the lava lake before Cal stopped her.

“Wait. Dana?”

The mystic wanderer regarded the lava field with an intent expression. The way that the ember glow from the superheated magma shone over her pale features, she looked eerily like the succubus she’d imitated earlier through the power of Cal’s *veil* spell. Finally, she spoke.

“I will try.”

* * * * *

Their names were Ik-tr’k, Noxtes, and Calimansyes, and they were not that enthusiastic about Dana’s commands.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that the mephits conjured by Dana’s spell were in their element. They were a varied lot, each with a unique form and features, but all united in their affinity to heat and flame. The other companions gave them a wide berth as Dana quickly related her instructions. The mephits were not especially intelligent, and the summoning spell of limited duration, so she was brief and clear in expressing what she wanted. Despite whatever misgivings they might have had about being used as proxies in an obviously dangerous situation, the creatures were bound by the power of her spell, so

once she finished issuing her commands, and pointed out across the room, they hastened to obey. The magma mephit dove into the lava pool, instructed to seek out any threats lurking within, while the other two, a fire mephit and a steam mephit, flapped their tiny wings and flew out across the room, with orders to look for hiding places that might conceal the *dispersal collar* that they sought.

“It looks like there’s a big ledge there, on the far side of the room,” Dannel said, advancing almost to the edge of the bubbling sea of hot lava, peering through the thick haze of smoke and noxious gases that filled the room.

“Careful, Dannel,” Dana cautioned. “A bath in that would not be pleasant.”

The elf nodded, and turned back to his viewing. The mephits, advancing cautiously, were about halfway across the room, now. “Odd... I can just make out the back wall of the ledge... it looks strange, almost like golden striations in the surface.”

“Maybe it’s a vein of ore,” Cal suggested.

Arun abruptly looked around. “Where’s Mole?”

“Invisible again,” Hodge suggested. “Probably hidin’ somewheres ‘round ‘ere.”

“No...” Cal said, alarmed, looking out across the lava maze.

“Mole, no!” Dannel said, realizing what all of them had. “Get back here!”

But before any of them could do anything further, there was a tinny screech as the magma mephit burst from the lava toward the far end of the chamber. Its wings flapped madly as it tried to climb into the air, but it had gained barely ten feet of clearance before the lava below it erupted.

A huge form emerged from the lava, sending a spray of molten droplets across the far side of the room. As it unfolded they companions could see that it was an enormous dragon, its dense brown hide glowing with heat, its wingspan easily thirty feet across as it spread them out upon the surface of the molten rock, allowing it to lift its upper body and long neck high up into the air after its hopeless prey. Its jaws spread wide, wide enough to simply *absorb* the desperate mephit, which disappeared into that cavernous maw before the jaws snapped shut, crushing it with obvious finality.

Moltenwing had appeared, at last, to greet its visitors.

Chapter 382

Charmed by the summoning of the mephits—Zenna had called them before, she recalled—Mole quickly decided that she wasn’t going to wait on the sidelines while events developed. She had no doubt in the ability of her friends to deal with the “fiery beast” described in Freija’s journal, but she also knew that their success might depend upon them getting that collar-thing and getting out of here, fast.

That was true, but there was also something else that drew her forward. The uneven sea of lava, with the jagged stone islands stretching out across the cavern, presented her with a challenge. A difficult, dangerous challenge; the sort that she wasn't very good at resisting.

Mole Calloran wasn't a fool. She knew that a dire threat lurked in this place, probably even now moving to strike at them from beneath the shelter of the magma expanse. But she was confident in her abilities, had survived virtually unscratched dangers that had nearly destroyed her companions. She'd ridden a dragon, had taken down three of the Cagewrights herself. She was a shadow, a zephyr, one of the best-damned rogues in the Realms.

Invisible, silent, she ran across the platform and leapt out across the lava. Augmented by her magical boots, she flew across superheated molten death. The gap between the starting ledge and her goal—a long, slender finger of uneven rock about eight feet wide, and twenty feet long—was just under twenty feet, and she cleared it easily. Landing smoothly, conserving her forward momentum, she kept running to the end of the first island. The next one was nearly thirty-five feet away, but there was a small outcropping of stone jutting from the lava field near the halfway point of the gap. The outcropping was only about two feet across, but it was her target, and she did not hesitate, leaping across the gap. Her aim was flawless, and as she hit the outcropping she sprang forward into another leap, somersaulting in mid-air as she arced toward the larger island. Below her, the lava grew closer as her inertia faded, hot bubbles of air popping through the surface of the molten rock as they rose from below, as if to welcome her lethal immersion within.

But then, there was solid rock beneath her feet, and she landed smoothly into a crouch, her forward momentum spent. Glancing behind her, she saw that there were six inches of exposed stone behind her feet, and then only lava a foot below the upper edge of the rock island where she stood.

Breathing heavily, exhilarated, she looked back at her friends. The only bad part was that none of them had seen the deed, but as Dannel called out after her, she knew they'd recognized her absence.

Looking up, she saw the mephits flying above her, just a short distance ahead. She'd covered just over half the distance across the room in her leaps. She looked ahead, at the far ledge now almost within reach, and started forward, looking for the best route to reach that destination.

But she never got there. Even as she took her first step, the magma mephit appeared from the lava ahead, followed by the impressive figure of the pyroclastic dragon, Moltenwing.

Mole just stood there for a moment in stunned amazement as the dragon effortlessly destroyed the magma mephit. The other two mephits had drawn back in sudden alarm, but not quickly enough; the dragon had driven itself forward to the nearest outcropping of rock—thankfully, not the same one that Mole was perched on!—and pulled itself out of the clinging magma with a speed and agility that surprised the gnome. As she watched, Mole became aware of buzzing shafts lancing the air around the dragon, missiles fired from the weapons of her companions. The part of her brain that was registering cohesive thoughts

studied the impacts, most of which glanced harmlessly off the dragon's body. Armor, then; a hide stronger than steel plate, or a castle bulwark. It likely had some sort of magical protections inherent as well, she thought.

Her brain and body were starting to work together again, and she crouched low, her body pressed into the rock beneath her, willing herself to be silent, unseen. The dragon launched itself into the air, ignoring the continuing barrage of fire. A black ray glanced off its torso, but it seemed to dissolve as it impacted the dragon's body. *Spell resistance*, she thought, not really surprised.

Her hand dropped to her small crossbow, but her mind dismissed that thought as ludicrous. Getting back to the others was the logical course, but she would have to get a running start to have a reasonable chance of clearing that long gap at her back.

Above her, the dragon lashed out and took out the steam mephit much as it had the first. The fire mephit was backpedaling as fast as it could fly in the opposite direction, but the dragon almost casually flicked its long tail out behind it, and smote it a devastating blow that knocked it down into the lava, its little body broken. The drake seemed capable of easily coordinating its actions against multiple opponents, and it had a purely ungodly reach.

Hovering, the dragon turned toward the entry to its cavern, and the companions gathered on the ledge at the edge of the flowing lava. More missiles impacted it, and Mole saw that several arrows drove deep into its hide. Dannel and Benzan were starting to have an impact... but the missiles looked damned tiny in the hide of the massive beast.

The dragon flew over her, and Mole froze. Even to one able to penetrate her *invisibility*, she was but the tiniest bump upon the stone island.

But the dragon suddenly stopped in mid-air, the beating of its wings casting a driving wind across her shelter.

Mole looked up, and met the dragon's eyes. In that instant she knew what it saw her to be, knew what she was. A tiny, insignificant thief, trying to steal its treasure.

The dragon's jaws opened.

Mole heard a yell from across the cavern. Her name. She tensed, ready to dodge. She'd avoided explosions, spells, even dragonbreath...

She was quicksilver, uncatchable.

But the dragon did not disgorge a cone of fire, nor any other attack she could evade. Instead it breathed an ultrafocused stream of pure sonic energy, a devastating pulse that stabbed unerringly at its target.

The gnome did not even have a chance to scream as the blast slammed into her body, and *disintegrated* her.

Chapter 383

“Mole!” Dannel screamed, knowing that there was nothing he could do, even as he drew and fired another arrow. The missile flew true, but the dragon ignored it as it hovered above a random island in the lava cavern, what had to be the *invisible* gnome’s perch.

“We have to get out there!” Arun shouted. The paladin had drawn out and put his own powerful bow into play, but his shots thus far may as well have been stings from gnats against the incredible damage resistance possessed by the dragon. He stood at the very brink of the ledge overlooking the lava, frustrated by his inability to aid his friend.

Dana started forward, although without the ability to fly or teleport herself, it was unclear what she intended to do. But Benzan quickly stopped her, grabbing her by the arm.

“No, Dana! You cannot go out there! It’s suicide!”

The woman shook herself free, fixing her husband with a hard look, but held her ground.

The elf offered a silent prayer that Mole would find a way to escape. But the dragon unleashed its devastating breath weapon, and for an instant, Dannel saw the gnome’s tiny form outlined as the sonic beam slammed into it.

And then she was gone.

“Damn you!” the elf cried, drawing another arrow from his quiver even as the dragon turned toward them. The song was a raging martial crescendo that filled him as he drew, aimed, and released in one motion. The arrow hit the dragon in the shoulder, but he had no time to gauge the effects of his shot, for the dragon abruptly dove for an open patch of lava, and with a massive impact that sprayed lava almost to the edge of their position, vanished beneath the surface.

“What happened?” Arun said. “Mole!”

“It vaporized her,” Cal said, his voice thick. With a great effort, he added, “It’ll come up from below the lava, and continue the attack. We haven’t hurt it badly, not yet. Be ready.”

“I have to go, find if there’s anything left,” Dana said. “If there’s anything, we can *resurrect* her...”

Benzan started to block her, but surprisingly it was Arun who stopped her with a hand on her arm. “No. We must remain together, first defeat the dragon. If it destroys us all, then Cauldron... and our world... are doomed.”

The companions drew back, alert for the slightest hint of Moltenwing’s return.

They did not have long to wait.

The only warning they got was a faint vibration through the stone, and then the dragon was there, rearing up out of the lava at the very brink of the ledge, drawing itself up with its forelimbs and powerful hind claws, spreading its wings to balance it. The companions were showered with molten rock that clung to their clothes and armor and burned, but they ignored the pain, launching their prepared attacks upon the dragon. Dannel and Benzan fired arrows, both of which stuck in its hide, hopefully penetrating enough to cause damage. The tiefling's store of *holy arrows* was gone, but his bow added a degree of magical potency to the normal missiles that he fired. Even that was not the equal of Dannel's song, which infused his arrows with a potent magic, enabling his shots to drive through the dragon's incredible defenses.

But as Mole had observed earlier, they were still small, against an enemy that was far too big to stop with even a few well-placed arrows.

Lok and Arun rushed forward, weapons ready to strike. Their spellcasters had not put the few seconds they'd had while Moltenwing had maneuvered under the lava to waste, and both shimmered with the tell-tale aura of magical *displacement*. Hodge held back at Arun's order, although his crossbow seemed useless against the dragon's thick hide. Cursing, the dwarf tossed the weapon aside and drew out his holy sword.

If *anything* counted as evil, it was this monstrosity.

Cal and Dana, further back in the entry, bolstered the attack with spells. Cal's *acid arrow* splashed against its neck, searing even the dragon's armored flesh, while Dana summoned a shimmering morningstar of silver light, a *spiritual weapon* that she directed against the dragon's flank. The weapon struck its haunches solidly, overcoming its spell resistance, but it appeared to do little if any damage.

The dragon shrugged off the hits, and reared up, opening its jaws once more to breathe.

"Watch out!" Dannel cried, although there wasn't anywhere for them to go.

But this time, instead of breathing its disintegrating sonic blast, the dragon unleashed a cone of sonic force, ash, and flame that blasted out over the entire ledge, and into the corridor beyond. Benzan, Dana, and Dannel, who were farthest back, were able to avoid the worst of the blast, but the warriors in the front ranks took the full force of the dragon's breath attack. The exit corridor seemed to focus the energies of the blast, and Cal was picked up and tossed bodily ten feet down the passage, seared and battered. It was a devastating attack, but all of them survived through sheer toughness and determination.

The dragon pulled itself up fully onto the ledge, no doubt to exploit the damage wrought by its breath weapon. But it instead found itself facing a deadly counterattack, as Lok and Arun opened a full assault upon the dragon with their heavily enchanted weapons. Realizing how durable their foe was, both veterans eschewed powerful but inaccurate all-out attacks for targets strokes designed to penetrate its tough hide. Lok's thundering axe clove into its torso, opening a foot-long gash in its left side, while Arun drove in from the right with his *holy avenger*, hitting it at the spot with its neck met its body, with enough force to unleash a torrent of searing bright red blood that smoked as it sprayed across his armor. Even as the two warriors pressed their attack, their companions kept up their own attacks,

with Cal firing another *acid arrow* into it, and the archers scoring additional hits now that the range had been reduced to point-blank.

Now it was the dragon that was in a difficult position, and the ancient and crafty creature was quick to shift its tactics. Dropping its body forward so that all four claws rested on the stone ledge, it abruptly spun around, using its size to drive both warriors back. Lok was struck hard by the dragon's left wing, driving him back. But despite the dragon's size and strength, Lok was very difficult to move when he didn't want to be moved, and its gambit only bought it a few feet of distance. Knocked off balance, Lok fell to one knee, but quickly drew himself back up, lifting his axe as he reset his stance.

But Arun was not so fortunate. Its rotation turned it toward the paladin, and as Arun raised his potent sword to strike again, it swept its head into the holy knight's armored gut. Arun grunted as the dragon snapped its head up, lifting him off his feet, and it hurled him outward like a stone fired from a trebuchet. Arun too was heavy and laden with armor and gear, so he didn't fly far, but it was far enough. He landed on his back fifteen feet out, smacking hard into the crusty red-hot surface of the lava pool. His weight made escape impossible, and he quickly started to sink below the surface of the molten lake.

That was obviously the dragon's plan, for as it completed its turn, snapping out its tail behind it to hit the charging Hodge solidly in the chest, it surged forward and dove off the edge of the ledge back into the lava. Its bulk created a ripple wave in the lava that drove Arun even further away from them, but far too far from the nearest rock island to offer him a chance at escape.

Chapter 384

"If that thing drags him under, he's finished!" Benzan shouted, an arrow fitted but nothing to shoot at as the dragon sank beneath the lava just a few paces from where Arun was slowly sinking to his destruction. The paladin did not struggle, knowing it would only hasten his descent, and he held onto his sword yet, silent despite what had to be an agonizing pain as the lava cooked him alive within his armor.

"Dana!" the tiefling cried, as he turned to see his wife running toward the edge of the ledge. A pale silver glow spread out from her cloak around her body as she leapt out over the lava, but while wisps of flame surrounded her boots as she landed running upon the surface, she did not sink. Within moments she'd reached Arun, and reached down to grab his outstretched hand. He'd loosed his grip on his shield, which had sunk beneath the lava, but would not relinquish his sword.

But even as she grasped him, the dwarf was abruptly and suddenly dragged roughly back. Somehow Dana held on, the magic of her *mooncloak* holding her above the surface even as she was pulled down and dragged with him, flames started to flare about her clothes.

"Let go!" Arun cried, only his head and the hand holding her left visible above the surface of the magma. But Dana only focused her attention upon him, holding his eyes with hers as she drew upon the other power of her magical garment, a gift of the goddess, channeling its power into him.

Their companions could only watch as the two were drawn further from the entry ledge, across the lake of burning magma. Benzan turned to Cal, urging action, but the gnome could only shake his head; he had no spells that could help in this circumstance.

With Moltenwing's jaws locked onto his legs, Arun was unable to break free. Suddenly the paladin was yanked beneath the surface of the lava. Benzan shouted Dana's name, but even as she was drawn beneath the surface of the lava, the dragon's weight overpowering the magic of her cloak, the priestess of Selûne maintained her grip on the gold dwarf. She could feel Arun struggling now to free himself from her grasp, but she held on just long enough to channel one more spell into him, sending pure healing magic through the tenuous link, feeling that glorious surge pass through her into him, even as the lava scorched and burned her skin, tearing through her clothes mercilessly.

Only when the spell was complete did she let go, bouncing quickly back to the surface, screaming as her cloak drew her back above the surface of the lava. She was on fire, now, her hair burning, her clothes in tatters, only the still-functioning magic of her *mooncloak* keeping her from sinking back into the enfolding grip of superheated death. But lying atop the lava was little better; within a few seconds the heat and flame would consume her.

Fortunately the dragon's tugging had drawn her close to a rocky promontory. Dragging herself to her feet, she staggered to the relative shelter of the stone. Her legs gave out as she reached it, and she had to claw herself up onto the exposed rock, collapsing on her back as soon as she was clear.

I'm getting to old for this, she thought, fighting the pain that wanted to drag her down into the nice, pleasant realm of unconsciousness. Drawing painful breaths into her scorched lungs, she managed to croak out the syllables of a prayer, burning one of her few remaining higher-order spells into a *cure critical wounds* spell. Blackened, dead flesh sloughed off of her as the healing power flowed through her, revealing tender but healthy pink skin beneath. She could hear her friends shouting her name, and managed to wave her hand. Even with the healing, getting up just yet felt like a feat beyond her abilities.

But she struggled up nonetheless. Her limbs felt stiff and unsteady, and she didn't need to look down to know that her magical boots were ruined. She scanned the lava field, feeling a sick twist as she failed to find what she'd hoped to see. There was no sign of the paladin; it looked as though her gambit had failed.

A brave man, she thought. Even in the short time she'd known the paladin, she'd been impressed by his determination and skill.

But the practical side of her knew that there was no time now for grief or reflection. The dragon would not stop until all of them were dead, and it was likely already repositioning itself for another vicious assault. She'd dropped her longspike when she'd rushed to Arun's aid, but even with it she knew she was no match for the pyroclastic drake. The magic of her cloak that allowed her to *water walk* was still in force, but she was leery of returning across the lava. Another healing spell would return her nearly to full health, but she suspected that the dragon might be waiting for her to make the attempt. If only this

place didn't interfere with her ability to *dimension door*, it would have been a trivial matter to escape.

Isolated, surrounded by a sea of burning rock, Dana's expression tightened into a look of hard determination, and she opened her mind to her goddess.

Unfortunately, even as she began her spell, a noise from the lava field behind her drew her attention around.

Chapter 385

Dana spun around, the words of a spell ready on her lips, poised to flee or fight for her life.

Her eyes widened as she saw Arun Goldenshield rising out of the lava, the molten rock clinging to his armored body as he lifted into the air, reluctant to release him.

Somehow, the gold dwarf yet lived, although it was clear that he had to be in agony. His mithral armor glowed with heat, and his sword was a white bar of bright steel, as though it had just come from the depths of an active forge. The cold iron should have melted, but like the paladin it was made of stern stuff, infused with power and purpose to survive in the face of evil.

The paladin rose higher into the air, buoyed by the power that Dana had infused into him earlier, the *levitation* magic possessed by her cloak. She'd never before directed the power of her *mooncloak* into another, and she inwardly thanked Selûne for sharing her blessing with one dedicated, like her, to the eradication of darkness and blight from the world.

Dana concentrated momentarily, and the paladin stopped rising, hovering now about twenty feet above the lava. "Hold on!" she shouted, wishing that there was a way that she could reach him, to ease his obvious suffering. But the paladin had emerged from the lava a good fifteen feet away from the edge of her island, and *levitation* only empowered vertical movement. She glanced over at the far ledge near the entrance, and could see that her companions were doing something together; hopefully enacting a plan to extract the two of them from this mess.

She drew back in alarm as the lava below the dwarf bulged suddenly upward, exploding a heartbeat later as the injured dragon reappeared. Dana fell back, shouting a warning, screaming in pain as hot gobs of liquid rock splashed onto her arms and thighs. Moltenwing surged up again, its jaws opening wider than before, a dull roar coming from deep within its body. That roar became a cacophony that shook the cavern as another stream of focused sonic energy exploded in a narrow line from its throat, driving into the paladin with enough force to drive him several paces higher into the air.

It was the same potent attack that had destroyed Mole. But Arun, full of the blessing of his patron, fought off the disintegrating power of the blast, crying out in defiance as the dragon's breath washed over him and faded.

Moltenwing roared in anger and splayed its wings out over the surface of the lava. Ignoring the missiles that stabbed into it from the bows of the companions on the entrance ledge, it pushed its upper body up out of the lava, its long neck stretching toward its enemy. Cheated once of its prey, this time it would not be denied.

Arun saw it, too. Looking down at Dana, he shouted, "Release the spell!"

Dana saw only death for the paladin, but caught up by the fire in those words, she complied.

The dwarf suddenly plummeted, directly toward the waiting jaws. Moltenwing was caught slightly off guard, but no matter; it quickly snapped its mouth shut to crush the life out of this annoying foe.

But even as the dragon's powerful jaws closed around Arun, the paladin drove his holy sword, still glowing like a lance of pure sunlight, through the roof of the dragon's mouth, through the cavernous interior of its skull, into its brain.

Chapter 386

The terrible pyroclastic dragon was slain, its monstrous body reclaimed by the lava. But it still took the companions a good deal of time and trouble to escape the cavern with their prize.

Arun had almost been claimed by the lava once more. Within seconds of his killing blow, the dragon had collapsed, sagging back into the lava that quickly embraced it. Fortunately the grip of its jaws relaxed rather than locked upon its death, and the paladin was able to struggle free. Dana empowered the *levitation* again to lift him free of the sinking dragon, and she'd then hazarded a quick run out onto the lava to grasp him and drag him back to the island of rock.

Getting them back to the exit proved more problematic. Dannel and Benzan, using *spider climb* magic, ultimately crawled across the ceiling of the room, establishing a network of silk ropes secured to pitons to allow Dana and Arun to safely return without having to contact the expanse of molten rock again. Dana first returned to the island where Mole had met her end. She collected the slain gnome's possessions, careful to gather all of the fine dust that had been trapped within those items of clothing that had survived *disintegration*. It wasn't much, but hopefully it would be enough for a *resurrection*, later.

While Benzan assisted her, Dannel crossed to the far ledge. The odd golden striations he had detected earlier turned out to be markings on another gray curtain, a huge, heavy barrier designed to casually resemble a plain rock face. The elf warily drew aside the curtain to reveal a deep alcove littered with assorted treasures. Dannel quickly sorted through the largess, unable to take any pleasure from it, knowing that the one who would have most appreciated the find was not here to enjoy it. He quickly found the *dispersal collar*, easily identified from Cal's thorough description derived from the notes of Freija Doorgan. The other loot was hastily stored within their *bags of holding* for later examination, and then, mindful of the limited duration of the power of his magical slippers,

he returned across the room to the others. Arun had already been carried over, and Dana was making her way across, so he paused to recover their ropes before making his way back down to the entry where his friends waited.

The seven adventurers were eager to leave this hellish place behind them. Dannel was the last to leave, casting a long glance across the cavern, a single tear glistening unshed at the corner of his eye. But the waves of heat quickly stole it, and the elf's face was grim as he hurried after the others.

* * * * *

The actual use of the *dispersal collar* was anticlimactic.

The companions returned swiftly but attentively to the cavern where they'd left the dread Cagewright artifact. Now that they had the means to undo the evil Ritual of Planar Junction they felt a particular drive motivating them forward, but none of them wanted to walk into another ambush. In their pouches they carried six of the distinctive rings worn by the Cagewrights they'd defeated, but that meant that there were still seven others at large. Wiejeron had suggested that Dyr'ryd was the last line of defense warding the Tree of Shackled Souls, but none of them were quite willing to place their faith in the dead assassin's final words.

But the complex was eerily silent as they retraced their steps. Within ten minutes of departing Moltenwing's fiery cavern they had regathered at the base of the fell tree. The currents of power still flowed through the place, dimly perceived like the faintest hint of a breeze on the back of the neck. They did not waste any time. With Cal directing from Freija's notes, Arun and Lok secured the conjurer's heavy collar around the thick lower bole of the metal tree. Like the construct, the collar was an ugly thing, a combination of greasy gray hide and black metal, with nasty spikes jutting from it at unexpected angles that had to be carefully watched lest they pierce the flesh of the one carrying it.

The two veteran warriors secured the collar, cinched it tightly into place, and quickly withdrew. The impact was immediate if subtle; the weaving tendrils of power immediately vanished around the twisting branches of the Tree, and a deep, unnatural stillness filled the vast interior of the cavern. In that void, even the heartbeats of the companions seemed loud, intrusive.

"We did it," Cal said, verifying with a cantrip that the ripping of the gateway between worlds caused by the Tree had been interrupted.

"There may still be work to do in the city—" Arun began, but he was interrupted by an unexpected tremor that shook the cavern faintly for a few seconds before fading.

"What was that?" Dana asked.

"The ritual was unleashing havoc on the volcano," Cal said. "The abrupt ending may have unexpected side effects. It may be some time before it is safe for the people of Cauldron to return."

“What about the Tree?” Lok asked.

“It must be destroyed,” Arun said.

Cal nodded. “Yes,” he said. “But we must first be certain that doing so will not cause further destruction.”

The paladin frowned. “If we give the remaining Cagewrights the opportunity...”

He was cut off by a loud crash. The companions turned to see that Benzan had climbed up into the branches of the Tree during their conversation, and had released one of the *soulcages* from its tenuous perch. The adventurers gathered slowly behind him as the tiefling sprang down, ignoring what had to be a painful jolt as he landed hard on the bare volcanic stone, and walked over to the cage. A pitifully compact form lay in a lump at its bottom, barely visible through the thick bars.

With a sudden fury, the tiefling drew his sword and hacked at the latch on the door of the cage. Bright sparks flew as his magical sword clanged into the dark metal. For a full minute he unleashed his attacks, his face a rictus of fury, the others watching silently. Lok or Arun might have been able to open it more efficiently, but they seemed to realize that the tiefling needed this catharsis of action.

Finally, the lock gave way. Benzan tossed his sword aside, and wrenched the heavy door open, the cage resisting as if fighting his efforts. Immediately his manner changed, and it was with gentle tenderness that he reached inside, and drew out the crumpled form from within.

The companions came forward, surrounding the man who held his daughter’s dead body cradled in his lap. She was barely recognizable. She’d only been in the cage for a few days, but whatever the ritual had done had obviously ravaged both her body and soul. Dried blood was crusted on her hands and face, and body seemed gaunt, fragile.

Benzan knelt with her in his grasp, his head bent to touch hers, his body shaking with grief.

“Can she be *raised*?” Arun asked, in a whisper.

Cal shook his head sadly. “She was, like Benzan, an outsider, her soul not native to this plane. Conventional resurrection magic cannot help her.” He did not elaborate on what he feared to be true, that the ritual had consumed her soul as its power source for the opening of the gateway between Carceri and Faerûn. But when he looked up, his eyes met Dana’s, and he saw the same conviction mirrored there.

They would search for her soul, and use magic to confirm the finality of what they saw here, but both spellcasters had seen too much to doubt what they both suspected to be true.

Dannel had briefly examined some of the other *soulcages*, and the shattered hulks lying within each one. “The orphan, Terrem,” he said, quietly. “Zenith Splintershield.”

Hodge looked up, surprised at that last revelation, but did not speak.

“Others I do not recognize,” the elf went on. “All dead.”

“We have seen much in the way of evil and depravity,” Cal said. “This was... this is something beyond that.”

Benzan’s head came up, slowly, and there was something truly frightening in his eyes. He stared at the Tree of Shackled Souls, but he was seeing something beyond that, something yet hidden within shadow.

“There will be a reckoning,” he whispered, his voice as cold as ice.

THE END OF “THIRTEEN CAGES”

Book X: “Strike on Shatterhorn”
Begun 4-12-05

Chapter 387

Journal Entry of Balander Calloran
1 Nightal, 1392 Dalereckoning
The “Lucky Monkey,” in eastern Calimshan

Last night was the Feast of the Moon. Always a somber occasion, to memorialize those lost to us, and to recall those who have come before, this gathering was made especially meaningful by what we’ve all come through to get here. I did not feel like speaking, but I did so, mostly for the sake of those poor souls who have gathered here, who in many cases have nothing left. My words did little for my friends, especially Benzan, who has spent the last several days in seclusion, isolated from us within a wall of grief and guilt.

It is too soon to say whether Cauldron will be rebuilt, but even if it is, the city has been forever changed by its ordeal. That final tremor that we’d felt only distantly in the Cagewright stronghold created an opening in the rim of the caldera. A wedge of the city encompassing several city blocks is just gone, and the lake is no more, drained into the bed of a new river that descends from the summit down the southeastern face of the volcano into the lowlands. Arun noted that the Temple of Kelemvor was situated almost exactly within the center of that ruined zone; coincidence, perhaps, or an expression of anger by the Lord of the Dead at the sins committed by his former servants.

It has rained almost constantly since we departed the city. Dannel tells me that this downpour is nothing compared to what the region experiences a few months later, in what the locals call “Flood Season.” And despite the rain the winter here is mild indeed compared to what we’re used to in the Western Heartlands. Still, it is enough to make the situation of the refugees here truly miserable. The roadhouse, even jammed as it is, can only accommodate a fraction of those gathered here. Yesterday Jenya Urikas and Dana cooperated to summon a pair of massive earth elementals that cleared a section of forest

and raised walls for crude barracks to house these people. Lok, Arun, and Hodge have worked almost non-stop on their behalf, and the magical foodstuffs created by Jenya and Dana will likely stave off starvation for more than a few, at least until supplies can be delivered from Almraiven. Each day Jenya conjures multiple heroes' feasts in different parts of the camp, and each day she walks among the people, curing sickness and injuries, helping them prepare their shelters, or just sitting with them, listening. The Cauldronites have come to see her as a saint, and even this jaded old bard is impressed by the dedication that fires this woman through adversity. The templar, Beorna, rarely leaves her side. Arun was quite grateful when I returned from my trip to the gem markets of Calimport, bringing the diamonds needed for Jenya and Dana to raise our fallen. The treasures of the pyroclastic dragon were put to good use, and even after restoring Clarese and Beorna to life, we still have a considerable cache of the precious stones if further such intervention is necessary. It is my fervent hope that they remain unused.

Clarese has been restored through the grace of Selûne, but I can sense that she has been deeply troubled by her experience. Having returned from Beyond myself, I can understand what she feels, to a degree. And on top of that, she must come to grips with the death of her closest friend. Her confidence has been shaken, and I fear that some of the verve with which she seizes life may be harmed. I will speak to her, but ultimately it will have to be she that decides how she will choose to embrace her life.

Both my niece and my friend will need time to grieve, and time to heal. Unfortunately, that is the one thing that we may not have in abundance. From what we learned from that wretch Wiejeron, and the other evidence recovered from the stronghold of the Cagewrights, our foes remain dangerous despite the crushing blow we have inflicted upon them. Six rings we have collected, but seven of the Thirteen remain at large, and beyond them, their unholy master, the imprisoned divine, Adimarchus. We do not know who or what holds the former angel hostage, but it is clear that he is able to exert a considerable influence yet from within his prison. Dana and Jenya have dedicated themselves to tracking down the Cagewright remnants; from what we have learned they likely have another hidden base that must be uncovered and destroyed.

It might be better if Benzan were distracted somehow from this mission; his single-minded focus on revenge may cloud his judgment and put all of us in jeopardy. There is little chance of that, however.

There are times when I miss the less complicated way things were, back when we were all simple travelers on the wild roads of the west. Even now, with my talents expanding to levels I had only dreamed about in my youth, there are times when I would discard my spellbook and magical accompaniments, take up my lute, and find a small but pleasant tavern in some backwoods settlement.

But as I have so often told others, life is usually about what is, not what may be. The struggle for Cauldron was not initially our fight, but when Izandra and Clarese chose to make this place their home, it became our home as well. Our foe is a dire one, perhaps the deadliest we have yet faced. But we have been literally to the Abyss and back, and we have new allies, friends whose skills and dedication will be a vital bastion against the suffering yet to come.

It is late, and when I start to get this poetic in my private journals, it is time to go to bed. Perhaps treating with that polearm earlier has drained me more than I thought. It is “watching” me even now, I suspect. The shator’s weapon is sentient and surprisingly intelligent; in fact I believe it is the most powerful weapon of its kind that I have ever encountered. I had expected it to be suffused with taint, given its former owner, but it seems aligned to neutrality, and truly indifferent to the crimes of Dyr’ryd and its associates. I have established dominance over it for now. In our exchange it mostly seemed curious, although it suggested repeatedly that I relinquish it to the custody of Lok. Perhaps it merely is drawn to the warrior that bested its former master. Oddly enough I felt some jealousy at its comments, which suggests that I should dispense with it as soon as possible. I suspect that if I kept Mindbite in my custody for any length of time it would live up to its name, and I would not be willing to part with it.

Tomorrow will be a busy day; I intend to put my newly-mastered spell of greater teleportation to the test. If the gods smile upon us we may have a new mission by the next sunset.

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The next morning the rains abated briefly, but that only led to an intensification of activity in the forest clearing as the refugees from Cauldron hurried to complete their shelters before the inevitable return of the deluge. About a dozen carpenters had been included in the nearly eleven hundred people who’d made it to this site; they were put to work supervising a work crew that was quickly cutting the trees they’d felled earlier into crude boards to serve as the basis of roof frames for the shelters outlined by the summoned earth elementals the day before. Other crews were already at work constructing shingles to deflect the rain, while yet more Cauldronites worked on preparing vats of tarry sealant, making iron nails from simple molds, braiding coils of rope, digging latrines, hunting or gathering food from the adjacent jungle, or any of a hundred other tasks that needed to be done before the rains started up again. Jenya and her helpers had realized that the citizens of the shattered city needed to be kept busy in order to keep their minds off of the disasters they’d experienced, and there was no shortage of things to be done. Whenever conflicts broke out—inevitably, given the frustration and tension that lingered in the camp—a white-robed acolyte of Helm or a blue-garbed Hammer was usually quick to arrive, defusing the situation before it could escalate into violence. A few people grumbled at the authority placed over them so hastily, but they found themselves in the minority. Most of the people of Cauldron found reassurance in being told what to do, and while factions and dissent would predictably arrive once things settled down and the immediate threats of hunger and disease were avoided, for now the camp proceeded in its busy buzz of activity without undo problems.

Most of the rooms of the Lucky Monkey were packed with people; most of the sleeping rooms were filled to double or even triple their usual occupancy, often with the beds being used two or even three times per day, with occupants sleeping in shifts. Despite the crowds the rooms were kept fairly clean; one of the assignments Jenya had given to those without specific craft-related skills was to maintain the general cleanliness of the roadhouse and larger camp to avoid the spread of sickness and disease. Even with several high-powered clerics present in the camp, no one wanted to add an epidemic to their problems.

Even the Heroes of Cauldron had to deal a bit with the overcrowding, although their status granted them a trio of small, private rooms jammed in under the eaves on the eastern side of the roadhouse's second story. In one of those rooms, clearly sized for small folk with its low ceiling and sized-down furnishings, Ballander Calloran was packing carefully sorted parcels laid out across his bedspread into his *handy haversack*. He didn't turn when the door opened and Mole silently entered. He continued what he was doing while she stood there behind him, fidgeting somewhat, but did not start when she finally spoke.

"I heard you were going to Waterdeep today."

Cal finished his loading, and cinched the draws on the top of the pack. Even fully loaded, it weighed only about five pounds, although a number of the packages he'd put inside weighted at least that much independently. His eyes lifted to the weapon laid across the small desk, carefully wrapped in brown linen. *Mindbite* had adjusted itself to his size, but it would still be an awkward burden for one unused to dealing with large weapons.

"Yes," he finally replied. "There are things we'll need, and we have a lot of excess loot to unload. In addition to the haversack, Lok's loaning me his *bag of holding*, so I should be able to bring back a good quantity of supplies for the refugees as well on the return trip."

Mole twisted the toe of her boot on the floor, her hands stuffed awkwardly in her pockets.

"You know you can tell me what's on your mind, my dear," Cal said.

"I thought... I thought I'd go with you."

"I was planning on asking. You've got a good eye for bargains, and with the amount of magical loot I'll be carrying, I could use an eye on my back as well."

"Sure. But... I thought I'd... well, I thought maybe I'd stay there. Home. You know."

Cal stepped over to her, took her chin and raised her head so that their eyes could meet.

"If that's what you want, Clarese. But you'd told me before, just a few days ago, that you couldn't think of giving up this life."

"That was before!" she said, some of her shell fracturing under the weight of the emotions she'd kept inside. She broke away and walked around him to the bed, sitting there, miserable. "Zenna's gone, gone forever, and me too, almost..."

Cal joined her on the bed, but didn't say anything. After a long minute, Mole continued.

"I thought I was soooo good. I thought nothing could touch me. That dragon... just another bad-ass monster that couldn't catch me, no, not the master thief..."

"Part of what we do is face risks that sane people probably wouldn't touch," Cal said. "I mean, when you *really* think about it... look at the enemies we've faced in just the last few days. Do you want me to tell you that rushing out into that lava field wasn't stupid? It was,

and I won't. But you've heard all my stories; how many have started with, 'And so Benzan did something stupid...?'" And while we all enjoy mocking Benzan, we've *all* made mistakes. Back when it was just the five of us... Lok, Dana, Benzan, Delem, and myself... gods, we got into so many troubles of our own making. And yet we survived, and..."

"Delem didn't," she interrupted.

"No, he didn't. And what happened to him was bad for all of us. We all felt a little like you and Benzan are feeling now, losing Zenna. And yet, somehow, we kept going. Why?"

"I suppose you're going to say something about the greater good, and helping people who can't help themselves..."

"No, I'm not. What, why should you be surprised? Of course, that's part of it... and I in no way want to denigrate the motivation that drives your friend Arun, or Lok, or the Harpers, or any of us who are driven by what you describe. But that's not all of it, and you know it isn't."

"I *know* what you felt, when you charged out there into that blind rush across the lava chamber. I wasn't much older than you when I set out down that long road. I had no idea where it led, then, and I still don't. But it's the *journey* that matters."

"We live in a reality where we know that there's something more beyond what we have here, now. We know more than most, because we've been to that beyond, and been brought back here. But that doesn't take one iota away from the significance of *this* life. If anything, it adds to it."

"People like us... we seek adventure, not because we're crazy thrill seekers, or blind fools who court death. But we seek it because it is a drive that is core to our being, it is *part of what we are*. How many people are there that can do what we do, Mole? How many people see a red dragon unleash its deadly maelstrom of fire, and instead of fleeing in terror, jump onto its claw? How many people will stand up to a horde of enemies intent only on their death and destruction, and instead of running away, leap into the fray against hopeless odds to aid a friend?"

"You can go home to our family, take over the trading business, live a settled, peaceful life; heck, maybe get married to a good, hardworking craftsgnome and raise a houseful of children. That's a good life, and I won't say different. I won't think any less of you, my dear, none of us would, because we've all had to confront that decision, and not just once. But don't think that this would be the easier choice. It would be harder, because you'd be running against the core of who you are, that part of you that originally made the decision to walk down that road, not knowing where it led."

Cal rose, and shouldered his backpack. He took the wrapped polearm, and walked to the door, not looking back.

Mole remained, sitting there on the bed for a long time.

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“All right, HEAVE!” Arun enjoined, punctuating his words as he put his own back into the effort of lifting a thirty-foot segment of roughly shaped wood, easily about two feet thick, into place along the central axis of one of the new barracks buildings. This segment was going to serve as the basis for most of the structure’s slanted roof, which would be a simple but functional affair that would hopefully keep the people sleeping beneath it dry and warm. Two pulleys attached to nearby trees provided the leverage that lifted the heavy log into the air, with another pair of ropes attached directly to the log guiding it gradually into its proper place. Two young humans assisted Arun on one lifting rope, while another pair worked with Hodge on the other. Two more men were on the guide ropes, while two others waited on narrow platforms near where the log would rest, ready to fix it into place.

“A little more, a little more... okay, that’s it!”

The men on the pulleys released their thick ropes, letting out groans from the concerted effort. On the far side of the building, Hodge walked stiffly over to a nearby barrel, taking a dipperful of water that ended up more in his beard than his throat. Arun paused to verify that the log had settled properly in its place, nodding to the carpenters before moving to join his friend.

“They should ‘ave somethin’ real to drink,” the dwarf grouched, splashing another dipperful of water into his face. “A man drinkin’ water while buildin’... ain’t natural.”

Arun smiled. The two dwarves saw Lok walking by carrying a log not all that much smaller than the one they’d just spent work and sweat lifting into place. Arun was strong, but the genasi’s strength, augmented by the powerful magical belt he wore, was something phenomenal.

Hodge winced. “Now that ain’t right,” he said. “Bloomin’ showoff.” He straightened, cracking his back, muttering something unpleasant about age and hard labor.

“You all right?” Arun asked.

The other dwarf straightened, and bristled. “Course I’m all right! Take off all those damned magical doo-dads yer wearin’, and I’ll still thrash yer from ‘ere to tenthday! Bah! They may not ‘ave a drop o’ anythin’ worth drinkin’ in this godsforsaken hole, but damned if a workin’ man ain’ goin’ to get a bite o’ somepin’ hot to put in his gullet.”

“We were going to help putting up the base logs for the new watchtower.”

“I won’ be long,” Hodge grumbled, not turning as he trudged through the muddy mess that was the open clearing that now stretched for about a hundred yards between the front of the Lucky Monkey and the edge of the forest, newly retreated.

“Your friend is quite... interesting.”

Arun turned to see Dana Ilgarten, walking through the mud toward him. The paladin bowed his head in respect, a gesture that was warmly reciprocated.

“Hodge is a loyal friend,” Arun said. “Too loyal, perhaps.”

“How many times has he been *raised* since he took service with you?”

Arun raised an eyebrow. “Twice in the last year,” he said. “Been a lot of close calls, besides.”

The priestess nodded. “His soul is tired. Being brought back from beyond the veil is a... difficult experience.” She passed her hand through the air, and a blue glow briefly outlined her fingers. “We clerics can restore the body, heal the mind. You can rush into battle, get beaten down to within an instant of death, then get healed back to full health in a heartbeat, ready to rush into the fray once more.” She snapped her fingers. “The gods grant us great power, but that does not remove the fact that we are mortal. We can only be stretched so far before we break... that is true for the strongest among us, as well as the weakest.”

Arun nodded, watching as Hodge walked up the steps into the front door of the Monkey, not bothering to wipe his feet on the mat laid out before the door to catch the mud.

“I’ve asked him to remain behind several times now, but he’s stubborn. A common trait among our kind, I’m told,” he added with a smile.

“The people here will need defenders, when we go,” Dana said.

Arun shook his head. “I’ve tried that tack. Like I said, stubborn.”

“I could try to convince him, if you wish.”

Arun looked at her, confirming for himself just what she was offering. She met his gaze squarely, hiding nothing.

“I don’t know if he’d forgive me, for that.”

Dana put her hand on his shoulder. “I suppose it comes down to what you believe, paladin. Do you feel that every adult should have the ability to choose for themselves, knowing the risks of what course they would undertake, or is it necessary sometimes to protect them from the consequences of those choices?”

The priestess nodded in respect and walked on, leaving Arun behind with a troubled look on his face.

Chapter 390

The headquarters of the Guild of Mages in Waterdeep was situated in a tower, but that description was wholly inadequate to describe the majesty and sheer impact of the place. Leaving aside the architectural impressiveness of the great vaulted Guildhall, with its vaulted arches and doomed ceilings towering some fifty feet above the marble tiles below, the place was frequented by some of the foremost masters of the arcane in all of Faerûn,

who added their own considerable mystique to the drama of the location. Various subtle magical effects were visible to the common visitor, but to one capable of sensing the subtle currents in the Weave wrought by the practice of magic, the entire structure seemed a blazing font of all forms of magical energy.

Most visitors never saw more than the main hall, to the private quarters used by visiting Guild mages situated in the higher reaches of the tower, the most skilled gifted with views that spanned the entire breadth of the sprawling metropolis. Or the workshops layered with protective wards, designed both to keep prying eyes out, as well as to keep certain things *in*. Even those wards were minor castings compared to those surrounding the ancient vaults in sublevels as far beneath the guildhall as the topmost tower chambers were above it. Those deep chambers were rarely even mentioned in casual conversations where someone might hear, and they spawned all sorts of rumors in nearby taprooms, and worried glances followed by a hasty sign to any of a hundred deities as passersby hurried on their business past the mighty home of the Guild.

The Guildhall was typically busy on this chill day of early winter. A cold gust and a colder rain off the Sea of Storms presaged another nasty storm in the days ahead, but inside the hall it was warm and comfortable. Conversations in half a dozen languages filled the cavernous interior of the space, as Guild mages talked and did business with merchants, apprentices, and petitioners of two score nations and regions scattered across Faerûn. Maybe sixty or seventy people were here altogether, men and women representing all of the major races of the Realms, and every time a handful left by either of the ornate gilded double doors at the ends of the hall, another handful would trickle in to maintain continuity of the ongoing buzz of activity.

Hardly anyone paid heed to the pair of gnomes who entered the Guildhall shortly after the service of the midmorning tea. They had the look of veteran travelers, and the fact that they were not soaked with rain suggested that they had arrived via magical means, rather than by more conventional modes of travel. The younger of the pair, a curious-eyed girl, was clearly impressed by the diverse wonders of the setting, but the other, a man well into middle age, awkwardly bearing a standard or weapon wrapped in cloth, seemed to know exactly where he was going, and he directed them across the hall toward a marble counter at the far end.

The guards, both the obvious ones and those more dire, noted the two and continued their vigilance. Unlike at most guildhalls throughout the city, weapons were not expressly forbidden here, for the simple reason that the members of the Guild had plentiful means at their disposal for dealing with such conventional threats as blades and arrows.

The mage attending at the counter, a stout human clad in long purple robes, nodded in greeting as he caught sight of the elder gnome. "Master Calloran," he said, directing the gnome to his left, where the counter was situated about a foot lower, suited to one of his stature. "A pleasure to see you this day. Does this visit perhaps presage your agreement—finally—to accept a position within the Guild?"

"If and when I make that commitment, Kerates, you'll be the first to know, on my word," Cal replied. "No, I am afraid my business this day is more... prosaic."

“Well, as always, the Guild is happy to entertain your business,” Kerates said with a smile. “You always do find such interesting artifacts in your travels.”

Cal unslung his magical backpack, and drew out his borrowed *bag of holding* beside it, placing the carefully wrapped form of *Mindbite* beside it. The weapon seemed to quiver in his hand as he placed it down, and the gnome felt a brief pang of uncertainty that he quickly quashed. Kerates, who sensed at least part of the exchange, raised an eyebrow in interest.

Five minutes later, that subtle expression had been replaced by a look of open amazement. The mage hurriedly called a clerk from the storeroom behind him, whose eyes widened in turn as he caught sight of the materials that were laid out in a crowded but orderly display across the entire spread of the counter, in some cases stacked several feet high. They included an array of weapons, suits of armor, gloves, bracers, glittering jewels, a whole slew of rings and amulets on a leather throng, and other assorted marvels.

“We’ve had a busy tenday,” Cal explained, as he and Mole lifted a heavy breastplate—mithral—onto a pile of similar items. Mole dug around in the *bag of holding* to see if they’d missed anything, half her body disappearing into it for a few moments before she reappeared. A number of other mages had gathered around, curious as the pile of gear had grown.

“I do not appreciate being mixed in with all of this... debris,” came a muffled voice from atop the pile. Kerates looked in surprise at *Mindbite*, still secure in its linen wrappings, and then at Cal, who merely shrugged.

“We’re going to need a few things,” the gnome said casually. “I brought a list. A few are divine in orientation, but I assume that the Guild script is still valid on the Temple Mount.”

Kerates grabbed the clerk, by the arm, drawing his attention away from the heaped items. “Um... you’d better get Master Umbright down here, and tell him he’d better clear his afternoon calendar.”

It was rather late in the day, with the overcast sky already deepening to twilight, when Cal and Mole reappeared in the back part of their room at the Lucky Monkey, where a small open space had been roped off with a sign requesting that it not be disturbed.

“That was fun,” Mole said, with a grin.

“Let’s find Jenya, she’ll know what do with these supplies,” Cal replied, lifting Lok’s *bag of holding* onto the bed with a grunt.

“The look on all those mages’ faces... and the expression on that cleric when you gave her a Guild script for one hundred thousand gold pieces...”

Cal smiled. “Yes, I have to admit... I’ve never in my life carried around this much wealth. Good thing we weren’t jumped, eh?”

“Pffbbbt. Like any rogues were going to go after *us*...”

“It’s good to see you smile again, Mole.”

Mole flushed slightly. “Well... I’m not saying I’m through all that stuff I talked about this morning. But I do feel better... and there’s no way I’m going to let the guys jump back into trouble without me. Maybe I’ll just be a little more careful, that’s all.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now come on, we’ve had a long day, let’s find the others and get something hot to eat.”

“Ugh, more of Dana’s gray stuff, I bet,” Mole said, with a face.

“Now, now, niece, is that the trust you show in your dear uncle? We spent the day in Waterdeep, after all. Rest assured, some choice viands made their way into my magical backpack; after all, heroes require quality fare to prepare themselves for struggles of life and death.”

“Just don’t let Hodge know,” Mole said with a giggle. “He’ll eat the backpack and all!”

They opened the door and almost ran into Dana, who was coming down the hallway in a hurry.

“Dana!”

“Good, you’re back. We have a name and location for the Cagewright redoubt: a place called Shatterhorn.”

Chapter 391

Dawn was just breaking over the mountains when the adventurers convened in a small room on the upper storey of the roadhouse. The Lucky Monkey and the camp surrounding it were already beginning to stir into activity, but stern-faced Hammers ensured that no one approached this room. The place had once been a small meeting room, but the table and chairs had already been removed for use in the camp, and the few remaining pieces of furniture—a sideboard, a small cabinet, and a weathered chest—had been pushed into a corner to leave most of the floor space open. Even so, with ten heavily armed and armored people in the room it was getting a bit crowded. Two stood apart from the others near the door; Jenya Urikas, clad in white, with Beorna a hulking warder in her shadow.

Cal stepped onto the chest, drawing the attention of the others to him.

“Today we are going to face powerful enemies. We’ve already tussled with a number of the Thirteen, and we know what they are capable of. They’ve been dealt a serious blow, but don’t think that you can let your guard down; it’s almost certain that the remaining Cagewrights have a few surprises left up their collective sleeves, and that they’ll be ready for our visit.”

“We’ve all faced foes of this strength before, so you know what I’m going to say, but I’ll say it anyway. Enemies this strong will have attacks that can kill in an instant. Your fortitude, reflexes, and strength of will may all be challenged.”

“We have a plan, and you know what you need to do. But you also need to be ready to adapt, to change up your tactics based on what they throw at us. We will need to combine our diverse abilities to best effect. Those of you who have fought together for a while know best what your companions can do, but we’ll need to bring both groups together to work as a single unit. We did well in the Cagewright stronghold under Cauldron, but to be honest, there were a few instances where we were sloppy, and it almost cost us dearly.”

“Yer not plannin’ on talkin’ them to death, eh gnome?” Hodge interjected.

“You’d be surprised how much talk is in that little body,” Benzan replied, to general laughter.

Cal smiled. His eyes met those of his niece briefly. “It takes a certain kind of craziness to do what we’re about to do,” he said. “The kind that leads someone to prod a hornet’s nest with a stick,” he added, glancing over at Benzan, “to see what will happen. But do not forget that what we’re doing here is vitally important, and if we don’t succeed, people are going to suffer, and die. Good people, people like the ones you’ve all had a chance to meet over the last few days. People who no longer have homes thanks to the mad dreams of an imprisoned godling.”

“Those dreams will come to an end,” Lok said, his fist tightening against the haft of his axe.

“You all know the plan, and the contingencies we came up with last night,” Cal continued. “Timing is important; the preparatory spells we will cast are of limited duration. But rushing into an ambush will give the Cagewrights an easy victory. So we go in, swiftly but methodically, and we hit hard with everything we’ve got.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Arun said, lifting his blessed *holy avenger*. “To victory, for Moradin, for Cauldron, and for Zenna!”

“For Zenna!” the others replied, lifting their weapons in an echo of the dwarf’s cheer. Benzan did not join in the shout, but his eyes burned with a cold fire, and his fingers were tensed white around the thick shaft of his magical longbow.

“I will ward you with Helm’s power,” Jenya said, coming forward. Behind her Beorna scowled, her eyes hard as she looked at Arun. Restored to life by a *resurrection* spell from the high priestess, she’d resumed her role as Jenya’s guardian. In their gathering of the previous night they’d agreed that Beorna would remain behind to help protect the Jenya and the refugees from a retaliatory attack from the remaining Cagewrights. There had been another reason beneath the surface, one that none of them had spoken of openly. If their assault failed, and they were all destroyed, someone had to be left behind to carry on the fight, and ensure that the Cagewrights were not allowed to restart their vile plans. They’d contacted the Harpers and the hierarchs of the church of Helm, seeking aid, but by the time that any assistance arrived, it was likely that the issue would already be decided, for good or for ill.

Arun had been among those pressing the argument most forcefully on this issue, although Jenya had added her support for Beorna remaining behind. In truth Arun had been relieved when Beorna had reluctantly agreed; the templar had been drained by her return from death, and while she was still a formidable warrior, the paladin did not want to see her thrust back into a deadly situation. He had to fight the warring feelings inside him, and felt a moment of shame as he glanced over at Hodge. Dana's words had ultimately led him to accept the choice made by his friend and cohort to remain with him; what right did he have to press Beorna to make a different one?

Beorna's expression did not soften as she came over to him; she was still angry. "Watch your back," she said, touching him to infuse a *protective ward* upon him. She took up the heavy shield that Cal had brought back from Waterdeep, and all but jammed it onto his arm. "You've made promises to me, and I will hold you to your oaths." She checked his weapons and armor with an experienced eye, frowning as she twisted his scabbard back into its proper position.

"Beorna..."

She lifted her eyes to fix his. "Just come back." She turned around without saying more, and returned to Jenya's side. It was not the dwarvish way to show intimate feelings in public, but much was said in those simple words.

"Okay, time to fiend up," Cal said, as he finished casting his own wards. He, Dana, and Jenya had prepared a virtual battery of protective spells earlier that morning, and the companions were now protected to varying degrees against fire and acid. Arun summoned a *magic circle against evil*, and Cal protected himself with *stoneskin*. Jenya had prepared several *greater magic weapon* spells, which she used to augment those arms of lesser power possessed by the group. Augmenting the benefits of those spells, their breakfast that morning had been a *heroes' feast* conjured by Jenya, and thus fortified they were ready for the enemy.

Or so they earnestly hoped, at least.

"Are you sure that it's necessary to go as demodands?" Benzan asked. "Damn if those things don't stink."

"Part of the effectiveness of the disguise," Cal said. "One whiff, and few will want to take a closer look at us. And if anyone has the right to complain, it's Mole and myself; your noses aren't nearly as sensitive as ours."

"Anything for the cause," Mole said with a mock salute, holding her nose with her other hand.

"I still think it might be better to disguise ourselves as the dead Cagewrights," Benzan persisted.

“We went over this,” Dana said. “It’s almost inevitable that those left know all about what happened to their peers. Better to be anonymous; it’ll give us a better chance to slip in undetected.”

“Not likely,” Benzan said, but he dropped the argument as Cal cast his *veil* spell, transforming them into the outward semblance of farastu demodands. The spell was thorough; even though all of them knew that the glamour was illusionary, the thick stench of the fiends still hung in the air, an echo that stained the senses.

There was more preparation to be made, but not here. The companions gathered in two close circles around Cal and Dana. All knew their place, and there was no more conversation as the companions tested their weapons and gear one last time. Finally, Benzan drew out his wand, and using its power made all of them *invisible*.

The air was filled with the soft sound of chanting, and then the eight companions *teleported* away.

Chapter 392

The companions rematerialized on the edge of a bluff that rose out of the center of a broad jungle. The air was moist and heavy, but noticeably warmer than where they’d just departed, promising a sultry day once the sun had finished ascending into the bracingly blue sky above.

“The Mhair Jungles,” Cal reported, as the companions briefly scanned the unbroken sea of green that surrounded them. In the distance they could vaguely make out the approximate forms of mountains, many miles distant. But their attention was quickly drawn to their immediate destination, which dominated the bluff. Sprawled upon the outcropping was an extensive ruin, ancient stone grown over with crawling vines and other vegetation. The place looked to spread over several acres, but in turn was overshadowed by the massive spire that rose from the center of the ruin. That pinnacle, a rough formation of shiny black stone, had been sundered at some point in the ancient past, now rising in three spread fingers of rock that reached easily two hundred feet above them.

“Looks pretty run-down,” Mole’s voice came.

“There’s likely an entrance to an underground complex within the ruins,” Cal said. “Probably near the spire; our *scrying* was blocked anytime we came close to it.”

“Come on... the *invisibility* will only last for a few minutes,” Benzan said. “Let’s at least get into the cover of the ruin.”

They made their way cautiously—for they could not see each other through the tiefling’s magic—toward the ruin. Up close, the stone walls, rising some twenty feet into the air, looked even more imposing, the relics of some ancient but now lost civilization. But the place was clearly in an advanced state of decay, with huge slabs of rock littering the site where parts of the walls had given way, and numerous complete breaches evident. They headed toward one of those openings.

“Baboons,” Dannel said, drawing their attention to the side, where a half-dozen of the creatures sat in a row atop a fallen slab. The animals watched them silently, tracking their movements despite the *invisibility*.

“Probably don’t know what to make of us, with the glamour,” Benzan suggested.

“If they perceive us as fiends, they should be fleeing in terror,” Cal said. “This is definitely not natural... be watchful.”

“More inside,” Mole said. “They aren’t doing anything but watching, however.”

“I should put an arrow through one, see if that stirs them,” Benzan said.

“At least they’re being quiet,” Cal said. “Leave them be, for now.”

They made their way into the deep shadow of the walls, where the temperature dropped noticeably. Thin wisps of morning fog still clung to the ground close to the ruin, although it wasn’t really enough to hinder visibility that much. Thick interior walls partitioned the inside of the ruin into huge chambers, which looked as though they’d been roofed in at some point. Now, however, it was all open to the sky above, and weeds that were in some places taller than they were rose up out of massive cracks in the ancient stone beneath their feet.

“This stonework is very, very old,” Lok said. “There are many voices in the stone here... and much sadness.”

“Ancient civilizations rose and fell in these southern jungles, long before the rise of Netheril and the other old kingdoms of Faerûn,” Cal said. “Now degenerate creatures dwell within these primordial jungles; yuan-ti and other aberrations.”

“Them Cagewrights should fit right in,” Hodge said.

They probed deeper into the ruin, leaving behind the bright sunshine and green expanse of the jungle. In a few moments they found themselves in an empty chamber, maybe thirty feet across, with empty doorways on either side. “I think it’s time for stage two, Dana,” Cal said.

“We’ll keep watch,” Dannel said, accompanied by the clink of metal as the armored warriors moved to cover the two exits. Dannel, clad in his magical slippers, simply ascended the nearest wall, taking up a position high above them, his bow at the ready.

Dana began casting a spell, an intricate summoning ritual that went on for several minutes. The *invisibility* spells faded, leaving them each feeling exposed as they waited for the priestess to complete her spell.

But before she could finish, Dannel hissed a warning. “Aerial patrol, incoming!”

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“Take cover!” Cal urged, as the companions hid in the deep shadows along the chamber walls. Dana, still lost in her summoning, was heedless to the danger, but Benzan paused to make her once more *invisible* with his wand, before refreshing the magic upon himself as well.

Dannel ran vertically down the wall before leaping into a shadowed nest between two uneven slabs of stone. Even as he landed lightly in his chosen position, the companions became aware of a dim buzzing noise that rapidly grew louder. Something flashed above them quickly and then was gone, fading as quickly as it had come.

“What was that?” Hodge said.

“Half-orc mercenaries, mounted on spider eaters,” Dannel said. “There were only two, but I caught sight of others on the far side of the ruin. Apparently they conduct regular patrols over the area.”

“They’re going to make it harder to get further in,” Lok commented.

“Once Dana is done, we’ll go straight for the spire,” Cal said. “I’ll handle any conversation; remember that I can understand any spoken language.”

“With all due respect, bluffing isn’t exactly your strong point,” Benzan noted.

“While I will concede that your tongue can be silver, my friend, your foot is so often in your mouth that it interferes with your ability to...”

“Um, maybe Dana should do the talking,” Lok said diplomatically. “She always seems to get what she wants.”

“You know,” Benzan replied, “After all these years, I still can’t tell when you’re needling me...”

Hodge sidled up to Arun, while the others were quietly debating. “I thought they ‘ad everythin’ planned out in advance?” the dwarf whispered.

Arun shrugged. “As always, when the enemy appears, the plan usually explodes. Just pick a bad guy and start hacking.”

Hodge nodded. “Aye, that be some advice I can follow.”

A flare of silver light interrupted their quiet conversations and drew their attention back around to Dana. The priestess was visible once again, kneeling on a bare patch of stone, her lips still moving in nearly silent prayer as she invoked the power of her patron to open a conduit between their plane and the higher realms of Good. The light opened into a vertical slash that broadened until a tall figure stepped through, at which point it quickly dimmed and vanished.

The newcomer was a perfectly-proportioned, hairless woman with pale green skin, and shimmering white wings folded across her back. She overshadowed all of them at nearly nine feet tall, and wore glistening, form-fitting attire formed of silvery scales that seemed more like a second skin than a suit of armor. The hilt of a greatsword protruded over her left shoulder, and as she looked down at them, each of the companions felt a sense of awe and wonder.

“I have come, priestess,” the planetar said, her voice melodic and soothing, but with a hint of steel to it. Naturally she could easily see through Cal’s *veil*; no mere glamour or figment would suffice to betray one such as this.

“You honor me with your service,” Dana said, rising to her feet, smiling at the celestial. “We are engaged in a deadly struggle against a potent force for evil...”

“I know of your enemies,” the planetar responded. “You may address me as Tzadkiel, the Bringer of Justice.”

Dana drew out a dazzling blue sapphire that seemed to glow with a faint inner light. “Per the terms of the Compact, I offer for your service this stone, infused with my own...”

“The Compact requires that I accept payment for my service on this plane,” the celestial interrupted, cutting her off again. “I set my price at one piece of copper, of any of the currency forms of this world.”

Dana looked confused for a moment.

“My price is one copper piece,” the planetar repeated, and something powerful shone in her eyes; had she been a mortal creature, a viewer would have called it a barely-contained rage. In the planetar, it was something stronger, and even the veterans in the group quailed somewhat at its intensity. “Do you accept the bargain?”

“Here, I’ve got one,” Mole said, materializing beside Dana, offering her a copper coin. “It’s my good luck piece.”

Dana took the coin and handed it to the planetar. “The bargain is struck,” the celestial intoned, drawing out the massive sword slung across her back.

“Yer know, I be startin’ to see the advantage o’ bringin’ a cleric along on these outin’s,” Hodge whispered to Arun.

The paladin did not reply; his thoughts were on what might have been, had a certain young woman been allowed to grow into her full potential.

The planetar took the lead, heading immediately toward the far exit. “We are going for a more stealthy approach,” Cal suggested, hurrying to keep up with her long strides.

The planetar looked down at the gnome, who looked insignificant in the lee of the angelic entity. “I will defer to you, then, but do not linger long; the Cagewrights have not been idle,

and once more events build to a head.” Without additional preamble, she vanished, accompanied by a rush of air as she lifted into air on her powerful wings.

“It would be so much easier if they would just tell us what they know, damn it,” Benzan said.

“Part of it is the Compact, and believe me, you should be grateful they take it so seriously,” Dana replied. “It is one of the things keeping Faerûn from being turned into another Oinos, or Acheron, wasteland battlefields for outsider factions. But more than that, often times they seem mysterious and cryptic because they just don’t know the answers. Celestials may seem powerful, and they are, but they are not omniscient.”

“But they serve the gods directly,” Arun said.

“Yes. And do the soldiers of a king know all that their liege does?”

The paladin frowned at the analogy, but didn’t say anything further as they gathered their gear and pressed deeper into the ruin.

The exit led through another ruined chamber, then opened onto a broad avenue that gave them a renewed view of the great shattered stone, even more impressive now that they were closer. The fog had grown thicker here, cloying around the walls, masking the farther outlines of the ruin behind a murky haze.

“Stay close,” Cal suggested.

No sooner than they had all emerged from the chamber into the courtyard, they heard a loud baying that seemed to echo from everywhere at once. Two forms materialized out of the fog, massive dire wolves that slavered as they growled at the intruders. Behind it they could see an even larger form take on distinctive shape as it stepped out of the shadow of the spire, resolving into a massive hill giant. Above them came the blare of a horn, followed quickly by the familiar buzz that heralded the return of the mercenaries upon their spider eater mounts.

“Looks like we’ve found the welcoming committee,” Benzan said.

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Cal quickly stepped forward, ignoring the growls from the dire wolves. Probably the smell was the only thing keeping them back, he thought. No animal wanted to sink its jaws into the gooey mess of a demodand’s hide. The giant regarded him warily, but it kept its huge greatsword—adamantine, he noted, the Cagewrights equipped their minions well—rested easily upon its shoulder. “Master cleric send us,” Cal said, doing a fairly good imitation of a demodand’s rasping voice. “He said we join others below. He said show you this mark.”

The Cal-demodand held out the wax seal he’d made the night before, impressed with an enlarged version of the Cagewright icon that appeared on the rings they’d collected thus far. The rings themselves were stored safely in a secure box, warded against scrying, in Jenya’s possession back at the Lucky Monkey.

“Think they’ll buy it?” Hodge whispered.

Dannel shrugged. “If we don’t kill them now, we might have to do it on the way out.”

“As always, yer a load o’ sunshine, elf.”

But the giant merely grunted and pointed a meaty thumb over its shoulder toward the spire.

The “demodands” made their way to the narrow opening in the near face of the spire. The split in the stone extended all the way to ground level, so technically there were three massive stone pillars, rising up hundreds of feet above them. Darkness swallowed them up as they progressed single-file into the crevasse. They wound their way deeper into the shadows, until they came across a fork, with both side passages appearing to extend back to the exterior of the spire.

“I don’t see anything,” Benzan said.

“There is a tunnel that slopes down into the rock, immediately to your left,” came the voice of the planetar. None of them had heard the creature return.

“An illusory wall,” Cal quickly said, confirming that there was an opening in the black stone.

“Truth cannot be hidden from the eyes of justice,” the celestial intoned.

“Yeah, whatever,” Benzan said, disappearing through the wall into the blackness beyond.

The tiefling led them into a tunnel that sloped decisively down into a tight spiral that took them quickly beneath the surface, into the granite foundations of the bluff. They’d circled back around to their initial route—and descended a good forty or fifty feet in the bargain—before the tunnel straightened and deposited them into a chamber.

The air was stale and musty, and thick square pillars five feet across crowded the room, making the place seem smaller than it was. Even though the ceiling was a comfortable fifteen feet above them, the chamber still felt tight and oppressive. Wary, they passed a pair of flanking pillars before the room opened onto a broad central area maybe thirty feet square. The light of the warriors’ enchanted weapons glinted off of bright gold, a massive altar set atop a low stone dais in the center of the room, carved with obscene depictions in cold metal, and surmounted by a twisting representation of a serpent that covered the lid and rose from each end to a pair of heads that faced each other with open jaws equipped with sharp fangs. The weathered floorstones on each side of the altar bore the mark of the Cagewrights, the Carcerian Eye.

“Evil dwells in this place,” the invisible celestial said.

“Well, duh,” Benzan said.

Most of them were still crowded in the entry, back behind the pillars, when a hiss drew their attention to the altar. A slender figure clad in a clinging black cowl and trailing cloak rose

up into view behind the golden object, terrible syllables flowing from its lips. He shifted with the familiar telltale of magical *displacement*, and a warding translucent *shield* hung in the air before him.

“Spellcaster!” Benzan warned, even as the companions felt a surge of energy pass through them. But that wasn’t the end of it, for the magic-user’s appearance triggered movement from the floor to either side of the altar. The room was filled with a rumbling sound as the two Carcerian Eyes rose up out of the ground... set into the chest of a pair of stone golems, their bodies flat across the front, and shaped to perfectly fit the man-shaped depressions that had been carved into the floor to hide them until an enemy appeared to threaten the evil masters of this place.

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The cowed spellcaster’s *slow* spell did not have its full intended effect upon the companions. Bolstered by the protective aura emitted by Dana’s planetar ally, and their own considerable collection of magical augmentations, nearly all of them were able to resist the spell, with only Mole and Hodge succumbing to the lethargic grip of the magic upon their bodies.

But the golems were another matter, and the warriors quickly spread out to confront the hulking constructs before they could fully rise and assault the companions. The golems were considerably resistant to even their magical weapons, however, and while Lok delivered a powerful blow to the side of one that sent chips of stone flying, it clearly didn’t do more than inflict minor damage upon it.

Dannel lifted his bow, a white-fledged arrow fitted to the string. “Wizard first?” he said as an aside to Benzan.

The tiefling had likewise drawn and aimed, but held his shot for a moment. “Cal!” he shouted.

“On it!” the gnome said, defensively casting a *dispel magic* that sliced through the magical defenses of the enemy caster, disrupting both his *shield* and the *displacement*.

That was the cue for both archers, who released upon the same instant, both missiles knifing scant inches above the altar to sink heavily into the shoulders of the enemy. The caster let out a scathing hiss as he staggered back, the *holy arrows* driving pure goodness through his torso like a purging flame. His situation grew rather more desperate a moment later as the planetar invoked a *holy smite* that ripped mercilessly through him. Falling back to the cover of the dark exit on the far side of the chamber, he tried to *teleport* away.

He barely got his mouth open before another pair of arrows sank to the feathers in his back, and he crumpled in a heap in the doorway.

But the golems were up now, and inflicting considerable damage with pounding blows from their massive fists. Those impacts battered the warriors like sledgehammers, and both Lok and Arun were driven back under the force of their attacks. Hodge went to Arun’s aid, but

the *slowed* dwarf was ineffective due to the cloying magic that reduced his usually impressive charge to a lumbering stagger.

But the golems quickly came under heavy attack from the companions. The planetar lifted herself into the air with powerful beats of her wings, driving her sword down into the head of one of the golems with a fierce power attack that smashed its granite cranium into fist-sized fragments. Unfortunately the absence of its head did not seem to hinder it, and it caught the angel with a potent punch that knocked her back roughly across the chamber. But the celestial's assault provided Lok with an opening; loosing his shield, taking his axe into both hands, he unleashed his own series of power attacks against the golem's legs. Stone chips flew, and although the golem outweighed the genasi many times over it was the construct that staggered back, unsteady on its seriously damaged lower limbs.

On the opposite flank, Arun recovered and launched his own renewed assault upon his foe. He took another blow on his shield, deflecting the golem's attack upward while he brought his own holy blade up into its elbow from below. The golem was immune to the blessings infused in the blade, but the paladin's strength was enough to crush the rock joint, and as the construct drew back it gave way, the lower half of its arm falling free to the ground with a loud crash.

In the rear of the company, Dana found her way to the melee blocked by the others before her in the narrow space between the flanking entry pillars. Upon seeing the golem's she'd drawn out her new weapon, the adamantine nunchaku taken from the corpse of Ardeth Webb. She moved around the pillars, intending to flank the constructs, but as she passed a dark alcove something stirred and leapt out at her. It was a foul skeletal creature, some sort of undead, its ribs occupied by tendrils of ugly, bloated flesh, one of which ascended along its spine, through its empty skull, and out of its mouth like some horrific serpentine tongue. Her reflexes were adept but the thing moved with surprising speed, slamming her with a powerful blow that nearly knocked her off her feet.

"Undead!" she shouted, to warn her companions of this new threat. The creature did not pause to give her time to recover, coming at her again with its bony fists raised again to strike. She snapped her weapon around, slamming it into the skeleton's side, but the blow hardly seemed to faze it as it punched her solidly again. For lacking muscles, the thing was incredibly strong. As if that wasn't bad enough, its "tongue" lashed out, extending to almost five feet in length, and stabbed into her shoulder before snapping back. The injury was not serious, but Dana could feel her body stiffening as a numb coldness spread throughout her.

No! she thought, but could not do more before the mohrg's paralysis took her, and she fell helpless to the ground at its feet.

Dannel drew the feathers of his latest arrow back to his ear, releasing the shaft to fly point-blank into Arun's golem adversary. The missiles he and Benzan had been firing appeared to do little damage, but the veteran adventurers knew that each little tally brought them closer to overcoming the foe. They heard Dana's cry, and the elf spared his companion an instant's attention. "Go!" he said, before drawing another long shaft from his magical quiver.

Benzan was off instantly, darting back around the pillar toward the source of his wife's voice. Cal, who'd been holding back, conjuring minor enchantments to aid his companions, likewise heard and was already moving to assist. The two rounded the corner a mere second apart, to see the mohrg standing over Dana's motionless form.

Cal drew out a wand in a flash and spoke the word of command that caused a fat gob of green acid to shoot out at the undead monstrosity. The acid struck the mohrg on the side of its skull, burning away the bone, revealing only empty space inside. And then Benzan was rushing past the gnome, discarding his bow as he drew his sword and charged.

The mohrg leapt eagerly forward to meet him.

The golems were continuing to dish out damage to the warriors, but it was clear that the paladin and genasi could simply absorb more punishment than the constructs. Aided by Dannel's continuing barrage, and Hodge's support, Arun had created great cracks in the golem's torso through powerful ringing blows from his holy sword. The golem had released a spell power upon them, but the paladin resisted the *slowing* magic once more, and Hodge, already affected by the sorcerer's earlier magic, could not be further hindered by another application of the effect. The hesitation cost it, as the two dwarves laid into its legs from opposite directions, finally toppling as its knees were sundered, crumbling into inanimate debris as it hit the floor.

Less than five seconds passed before the other golem likewise fell to the combined assault of Lok and the planetar. The golem mindlessly split its attacks between its two foes, and while it landed several more devastating blows it likewise absorbed damage that it simply could not withstand. Lok finally put it down with a two-handed overhead stroke of his axe that cracked the sigil plate installed in its chest. The crack widened with the golem's struggles to continue its assault, and finally it split down the middle, disintegrating like the first into component rubble that offered no further threat.

Meanwhile, off to the side, in one of the galleries formed by the flanking row of pillars, the battle raged on. Benzan and the mohrg met in a violent exchange, with the mohrg's potent blow glancing off of the tiefling's shoulder. Its long tongue snapped out and nipped the tiefling's neck, but Benzan fought off the cold clinging touch of its paralysis. He in turn delivered a powerful blow with his sword that knocked it roughly back, crushing several of its ribs and scoring the bloated knot of purple flesh that filled its chest cavity.

He should have pressed it, ensured that it was destroyed, but he bent quickly to check on Dana. The gesture took only a second, but it was a costly one, for as he touched his wife's skin the icy chill that held her paralyzed spread into his fingers and through his arm.

And this time, he was unable to resist succumbing to the paralysis.

The mohrg, quickly recovering, stepped forward to deliver a coup de grace against its helpless foe.

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Unable to defend himself, Benzan was helpless before the mohrg. The undead creature lifted a hand to deliver a crushing blow to the back of his neck...

But before the blow could land, a pale green beam lanced into it. The mohrg let out a subvocalized shriek, a thin tinny quiver in the air that was its only protest before it was *disintegrated* by Cal's spell.

The gnome came forward, alert for any other threats, until he stood next to the paralyzed couple. "Well, I'd hoped not to have to use that spell up so soon."

Benzan could barely move his eyes, yet somehow he managed to express a lot in the look he shot the gnome.

Cal failed to see Mole, standing in the shadows a few feet away. *Slowed* by the sorcerer's spell, she hadn't been able to effectively contribute to the battle; both the golems and the mohrg were all but immune to any damage she could unleash with her weapons.

Or that, at least, was what she told herself, as she stood there, covered by the darkness, trembling slightly.

"That was too easy," Cal said, directing Lok and Arun to move their two paralyzed companions into a sheltered alcove far from the chamber's two visible exits. Having seen Benzan affected by touching Dana's skin, he warned them not to contact their friends' bare flesh with their own. None of them had magic to dispel the paralysis, however, so they had no choice but to wait for the effect to fade. At least the *slow* effect was quicker to vanish, and soon Hodge and Mole were unencumbered by that magical hindrance.

"Easy?" Hodge said, incredulous.

"I would have expected a stronger initial defense," Lok agreed, although he favored his jaw, rubbing the bruised skin where a glancing blow had almost taken his head despite the protection of his adamantine helm. Cal drew out one of his healing wands, offering its benefit to the battered warriors.

"The taint in this place is unacceptable," the planetar said, hefting her huge sword as she turned to the ugly golden altar. But she hesitated, and Cal too suddenly looked up, as though he'd heard something disagreeable whispered nearby.

"We are being watched," he said quietly.

The planetar dispelled the invisible magical sensor, but none of them felt all that reassured by the knowledge that their enemies knew they were here.

"Mole?" Cal asked.

"I'm here," the younger gnome replied, stepping from the shadows.

“Keep an eye on the exit tunnel,” Cal said, “In case the guards above heard the ruckus down here, and come down to investigate.”

The rogue nodded, although she looked distracted as she walked over to the far entry.

“I do not think that be a good idea,” Hodge said, as the planetar stepped up to the altar, lifting her sword with clear intent. The celestial positioned herself so that her body would shield the companions from any debris, then she smote the unholy object with the full force of her divinely-granted strength.

There was a flash of light, bright enough to dazzle them for an instant. When they could see clearly again, the celestial was gone.

“Wha? Where’d it go?” Hodge said.

“Some sort of trap,” Dannel said, scanning every corner of the room with an arrow nocked and ready to fire at an instant’s warning.

Arun had moved to the altar, but Cal cautioned him. “No one touch it,” he warned. “If Dana’s ally was transported somewhere, she can more than handle herself, but we cannot afford to be separated, not here.”

The companions watched nervously as the seconds passed, feeling as if time had suddenly slowed down, waiting for the attack that they knew could come without any warning. But nothing stirred in either passage, and after a few minutes Dana started to shift, groaning as her body reestablished control over itself.

“Tzadkiel,” was the first word she said, when she could speak.

“We do not know,” Cal replied. “The spell upon the altar is potent, and reeks with abjuration and transmutation—that much I could discern, anyway. It may have transported her away.”

“I... perhaps I have erred in bringing these warriors of light to our cause...”

“They serve willingly, against the forces of darkness,” Arun reassured her. “Do not second-guess yourself, priestess.”

“Let’s get out of this damned place,” Benzan said, accepting Lok’s help as the paralysis began to fade from him as well, and he leaned against the pillar behind him. Dannel returned the tiefling’s bow, which he accepted with a nod of thanks.

“We must assume that our enemies know we are here, and are preparing a more vigorous defense deeper in the complex,” Cal said.

“So it’s business as usual,” Benzan said, moving gingerly as feeling came back to his limbs, before taking his position at the lead of their company, facing the far exit. The tiefling reached down to the wand in his belt, grasping it and muttering the word of command that wreathed himself in magical *invisibility*.

“Let’s go,” he said. The companions started out with Benzan ahead, and Mole bringing up the rear.

The corridor proceeded only a short distance, perhaps a few dozen paces, before opening again into another larger room. The stale scent of musty air and ancient decay hung thicker in this place, which had the aura of some long-undisturbed crypt. More thick pillars supported the ceiling, and like the first room gave the place a crowded feel to it. The chamber seemed to merge into a long hall that continued ahead as far as their light sources penetrated.

They spread out as they entered the room, wary of any signs of an ambush. The only thing of note was a stone object on the center of the floor before them. Arun shone the light from his sword upon it as he stepped forward into the chamber, showing it to be a stone arm, perhaps the remains of some ancient statue that had once stood here.

“This goes on quite a ways,” Benzan’s voice came from the direction of the hall. “It looks like it might bend to the right some distance down, but I don’t see or hear anything else from that direction.”

“Spread out, keep a close eye for hidden doors, traps, or anything else unusual,” Cal suggested. “Arun, with Tzadkiel gone, can you occasionally sense for the presence of evil auras?”

Arun nodded. Meanwhile Mole, the last to enter the room, walked over to the stone arm. “Hey, there’s an iron ring on its finger,” she said, bending down.

“No, don’t!” Cal warned, but he was too late as his niece’s fingers brushed the metal band. At that instant the four nearest pillars, at the corners of the room, exploded outward, showering them with pulverized fragments of plaster from the false pillars. Even before they could clearly see, they sensed movement where the pillars had stood.

“Enemies!” Lok warned, falling into a ready stance.

The cloud of plaster dust cleared, giving them a clear view of what faced them. The locations vacated by the pillars was now occupied by four humanoid enemies, clad in chain shirts, and armed with small swords and bows. Somehow the four had been preserved, encased in the false pillars, waiting to do battle against those who would intrude upon the sanctity of this place.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. For as the eyes of the companions rose to the faces of their enemies, they saw fierce, terrible visages, topped with a writhing mess of tangled hair.

No, not hair. Snakes.

Even as realization dawned upon them, several of the companions met the gaze of the medusae, and Cal, Mole, Benzan, and Dannel were all turned to stone.

Chapter 397

“Don’t look at them!” Dana warned, too late, as fully half of them succumbed to the dreaded gaze attacks of the medusae. Lok and Arun, resisting the fell power of that stare, lowered their eyes to the floor, spreading out to attack the creatures before they could fully recover from the interruption of their *stasis*.

“How we s’posed to fight ‘em, if we can’t see ‘em?” Hodge exclaimed, lowering his head behind his raised shield, awkwardly hefting his axe in the other. His frustration was reinforced a moment later when the medusae lifted their swords and flowed into a smooth, coordinated attack, easily avoiding the blind swings of the warriors as they moved into position.

Dana unleashed one of her greatest powers, a *holy word* that sanctified the dark confines of the crypt. She’d hoped to at least blind the medusae, to equalize the battle between them and the warriors, but their enemies were just strong enough for the potency of the *word* to wash over them without serious hindrance.

She paid for her action as two of the creatures leapt at her, flanking her and thrusting their slender shortswords at her. She twisted away from the first attack, but the second plunged a half-foot of steel into her side, piercing her liver and staggering her with a devastating sneak attack.

Rogues, too! she thought through the agony that pierced her. She felt a separate pain as a tiny puncture caught her arm momentarily as she fell back. The bite from one of the medusa’s snakes was minor, and fortunately Dana’s fortitude, hardened by the many trials she’d faced, was sufficient to resist the effects of the poison injected into her bloodstream by the bite.

But the medusae had far deadlier stings, and they quickly shifted to continue their attack. Knowing that she would never survive another coordinated attack, she spoke another word of magic, and opened a *dimension door* that took her away even as the two rogues stabbed through the empty space where she’d been standing an instant before.

The remaining two creatures had likewise elected to coordinate their attack, moving to flank Arun while attempting to protect their own flanks from a counterattack from Lok. One fainted at the paladin, distracting him, while the other stabbed her sword deep into a gap in the mithral plates protecting his side. Arun grunted in pain, but held his ground. The other one turned into an attack designed to drive Lok back, but the medusa clearly far underestimated the genasi’s fighting prowess. Her sword clattered harmlessly against the warrior’s shield, and in turn it was *her* that was driven back, bleeding profusely from a wide gash across her scaled torso.

Even blind, the warriors were far superior in stamina and skill to the medusa rogues, and they were virtually immune to the poison injected by the nest of writhing serpents upon their heads. But as Dana disappeared, the other two medusae quickly moved to aid their comrades, surrounding the embattled warriors.

“Back to back!” Lok said, and Arun quickly moved to comply, making it more difficult—but not impossible—for the medusae to flank them.

Hodge, momentarily forgotten on the side of the room, still holding his shield up to protect his eyes, tried to intervene. He ran at the nearest medusa as it crossed the room from where it had stabbed Dana, but as he lifted his axe to strike, he momentarily drew the shield aside to get a bead on his target.

Unfortunately for him, the creature happened to be looking his way. It just wasn't the dwarf's day; despite his considerable fortitude the power of the medusa's gaze filled him as he locked gazes with it. He joined the others in stony immobility, frozen in mid-charge, balanced precariously on one booted foot.

That left Arun and Lok. The dwarves did not take chances with their ability to resist the gaze attacks of their enemies, and they simply closed their eyes, trusting their other senses to guide their attacks. At least they didn't have to worry about hitting their companions; the nearest statue was safely out of their immediate reach. But the medusae were under no limitations, and it quickly became clear that they were augmented by various magical enhancements. Upon realizing this Arun paused to unleash a *dispel magic* effect from his holy sword. He could not immediately tell if the spell was successful, and was quickly forced to focus upon defending himself as another stroke pierced his defenses, this time jabbing painfully into his shoulder before he could get his shield around in time.

A few feet away, Lok was having an easier time of it. He'd established a defensive stance, and even without the ability to see his enemies, he seemed to be able to anticipate their attacks. Numerous strikes glanced off of his adamantine armor or his heavily enchanted shield, doing no damage. In turn, his own counters were devastating, with only the enhanced quickness of the medusae enabling them to dodge back and avoid being cut in twain by the genasi's mighty axe. Even so, after the first few exchanges Lok remained unhurt, and both medusae bore serious wounds. He focused more on one, hoping to bring it down quickly, but the injured creature shifted to a more defensive posture, letting its companion direct the assault.

A rush of air and a flapping of wings announced the arrival of a new combatant to the melee, as an avian humanoid entered from the altar-chamber to the east, hovering above the melee in the center of the chamber. Several of the medusae glanced up at it, but the avoral, immune to petrification, was unfazed. It in turn unleashed a barrage of *magic missiles* that seared into the back of one of the creatures attacking Lok, drawing angry hisses from the serpents dancing in a mad gyration atop its angular skull.

Arun took quick advantage of the distraction, slamming his sword deep into the shoulder of one of the medusae. The creature staggered back, the holy blade crushing bone and tearing muscle as it ripped through its body, but the paladin paid a heavy price as the one behind him stabbed him again, sliding its sword up over an overlapping plate and deep into his back. The paladin spun and tried to hit it with his backswing, but the medusa had already drawn safely back, hissing gleefully as blood fountained down over his greaves to puddle at his feet.

The avoral came to his aid, diving low enough to seize the medusa he'd injured with its powerful hind claws. The creature shrieked and tried to break free, its snakes biting at the outsider's legs, but it was not enough for it to break free as the powerful talons pierced its scaled flesh and bit deep into its body.

Its struggles ended for good as Arun turned back and drove the full length of his holy avenger through its body.

Lok, meanwhile, continued to maintain his impenetrable defense. He finally took a hit, a blow that found a crease in his defenses to score a cut on his weapon arm, but it was barely a scratch, even with the ability of the medusa rogues to exploit with sneak attacks. The medusa in turn received more than a scratch in payback, and when its head finally rolled to a stop about ten feet away, a look of frozen disbelief was forever locked on its face.

A roar from the east announced yet more reinforcements; a trio of celestial lions that bounded into the fray, leaping at the remaining two adversaries. One ran afoul of a deadly stare and was turned to stone, but the other two leapt upon the medusae, unleashing devastating attacks with their powerful claws and teeth. The avoral lifted back into the air and resumed its bombardment with *magic missiles*, which unerringly darted around allies to blast into the flesh of the medusa rogues.

It ended quickly.

Dana reappeared cautiously from the chamber to the east. Her caution was more than simple prudence; she represented the only hope for the recovery of those who had been petrified.

"Are they all slain?"

"Dead as dead can be," Lok said, cleaning his axe calmly. Nearby, Arun nodded in thanks to the avoral. The outsider landed next to him, regarding him intently with its alien stare, before extending a wing out over the paladin's smaller frame. Arun felt its feathers brush over his face, followed by a surge of healing energy as it purged him of pain and healed his wounds. The paladin bowed deeply, and the creature let out an acknowledging screech before returning to its plane of origin. Dana ordered the lions to scout out the area for other foes, but their time too was limited, and within about a minute they had likewise returned to whence they came.

The three companions gathered in the center of the room, surrounded by the petrified forms of their friends. Suddenly the crypt felt a whole lot smaller, and menacing.

"Now what?" Lok asked.

But Dana had already removed a small ceramic jar from her belt pouch, and as the dwarves watched she knelt beside the diminutive petrified form of Cal. The jar contained about an ounce of gray ointment, which she deftly applied onto the stone surface of the gnome's body. The salve quickly seeped into the gnome's skin, clothes, and even his weapons and other gear, which began to shimmer faintly. By the time she'd finished, the

gnome's rigid outline had begun to soften, and within a few more moments he'd been restored to living flesh.

"That was a decidedly unpleasant experience," he said, stretching his muscles to shake out the last lingering effects of his petrification.

"Do you have enough salve for the others?" Arun asked.

"No, I only had the one dose," the priestess admitted, "Which is why I used it on Cal."

"I can break the enchantment, but I do not have the required spell in memory," Cal said. "I will have to rest and study my spellbook."

"Then we must retreat," Lok said.

"Cal and I can teleport us all back to the *Monkey*," Dana said.

"Our enemies may not wait quietly for our return," Arun said.

"It cannot be helped," Cal said. "Lok, Arun, please move our petrified friends into two close circles."

The warriors complied, and within a few moments they had completed the necessary preparations. Cal glanced over at Dana. "Be certain that you take a good look around, and fix this place in your memory."

Dana nodded, understanding. "I have."

"Then let us be quit of this foul locale... for now."

The gnome and priestess of Selûne uttered words of magic, and with their companions disappeared from Shatterhorn.

Chapter 398

Embril Aloustinai turned over a piece of rock with her foot, a frown as deep as a canyon etched on her otherwise fair and even alluring features.

"You are not listening, Embril!" came a shrill, almost panicked voice. "A planetar... do you know what that means! And on top of that, the destruction of the Egg... disaster! Our enemies close upon us!"

Embril looked up, fixing the speaker with a desultory look that momentarily quieted her. Thifirane Rhiavati had fallen far, to be certain. The once unflappable noblewoman—and powerful mage—was clad in a hastily-donned dressing robe that failed to conceal the gaunt flesh that clung tightly to her bones beneath. Her hair, which she'd always taken a considerable vain pride in, hung in a confused tangle around her face. Blood trailed from a

gash in her forehead just below the hairline, a cut from a fragment of the Egg when it had exploded outward, most likely—but the woman seemed to not even feel it.

“Panic will not solve our problems, my dear,” Embril said, calmly. “And we will yet obtain our objective... I have seen it.”

The conviction in the woman’s voice did not arrest the doubts of the wizard. “The Egg...”

Embril waved her hand dismissively. “The Egg of Merrshaulk was a potent boon,” she said. “But it is one we inherited, not one that we crafted for ourselves. And if it could not even contain the celestial, then its viability was limited in any case. To be honest, we were not going to remain much longer in this place.”

“Embril,” came the voice of another speaker, across the room. “Viirdran requires more healing.”

Embril turned from the still-fuming wizard and walked across the room. It wasn’t easy—fragments of stone ranging from sharp slivers a few inches long to blocks the size of a child’s head littered the floor. She also had to step over the mangled corpse of a farastu demodand, split open almost from head to crotch to reveal a disgusting, sticky mess inside. Small puddles of acid that had until recently been inside the Egg of Merrshaulk filled subtle indentations in the floor, complemented by gobs of demodand slime that formed glistening slicks here and there. These obstacles required further adjustments. Embril appeared to pay no heed to such inconveniences, reaching the one who had requested her aid.

Kyan Winterstrike rose as she approached, nodding to the man resting against the wall beside her. The elf and her companion were an odd pair, for she was clearly a moon elf, while Viirdran was a drow, his fine robes marred by the vicious rents that had opened gaping holes in fabric and flesh alike. He’d already been stabilized by Embril, but still breathed laboriously, pain evident on his face.

Embril bent and channeled healing power into the injured man.

“They will be back,” Thifirane continued, still on the far side of the Egg—now just an uneven base upon its pedestal. “That planetar will be eager to treat with us again, I suspect.”

“I am quite certain you are correct,” Embril said, rising again, drawing out a small white cloth to clean one of her fingers of a smear of blood gathered from her brief contact with the drow blademaster.

“What are we to do, Embril?” Kyan asked.

“Gather Sorizan, and Xokek as well. And bring me Nahazir’s corpse as well... that useless fool may yet offer some benefit to our cause.”

“Xokek will not come willingly,” Viirdran said, the drow’s voice deep and thick, as though echoing from within a vast empty cavern inside his body.

“He will come,” Embril said.

“Where are you going?” Thifirane asked, as Embril walked toward one of the chamber’s less obvious exits. She had to know the answer already, and Embril smiled before turning at what it revealed of the woman’s fears.

“I must consult with my companion,” she said. “And I have too long neglected our other guest.”

“You are taking a very big risk, Embril,” Thifirane said.

Embril Aloustinai laughed at the comment. She did not share the reason for her mirth, but as she turned and walked away, she felt a grim thrill of sensation that was both pleasure and gut-clenching terror, in the same instant. Thifirane had once been among the highest in their cabal, but the destruction of her little pretend world in Cauldron had clearly had a deleterious effect upon her.

For having forfeited their very mortal souls to their cause, what did it matter what they risked now?

Chapter 399

Embril entered a black chamber, a cyst many strides beneath the surface of the sunlit world above.

At first, it appeared that the place was empty, the center cleared, the perimeter marked by regular pillars and vague shadows that might have been furnishings or other random objects. But that was an illusion; this place was very much occupied.

Embril stepped forward, enjoying the chaotic surge of emotion that filled her upon entering this place. Thifirane was right, this was madness; yet she did not care, enjoying the sensations, reveling in her power and the insane dreams that had brought her to this conclusion.

She came forward almost to the edge of the glyphs drawn in powdered black metal upon the floor. For a split-second she had a mad impulse to break one of the thin lines that made up the diagram, but she was able to repress that feeling. Now that would have been *true* insanity, she thought with a quiet chuckle.

It appeared from the shadows, looking at her with its usual inscrutable expression. Its skin was a chalky white, its face alien, its six arms bent in poses that would have been painful for her to duplicate with her two.

agitation

“I know, my dearest,” Embril cooed, walking over to it. “This is not comfortable for you, I understand. I would not enjoy it either, I suspect. But it is necessary... for our plans, yours and mine.”

The spellweaver said nothing, retreating a step until it was all but lost in the shadows once more.

"It holds you in contempt," came a voice from within the diagram.

"Our interests coincide," Embril replied without turning.

"Your mind is too small to conceive of its thoughts," the voice continued. "Your 'ally' will betray you, it is only a matter of time."

Embril turned to face the speaker, and smiled. "I do not pretend to understand it completely, but it knows the meaning of gratitude, at least." She came forward, once again. "But enough meaningless chatter. I would treat with you, demon. Show yourself, if you would."

The air within the summoning circle roiled and solidified into currents of black smoke that took on material form. Embril had to crane her head upward to meet the blazing red eyes that took shape within a massive visage, a terror beyond mere human imagining. Power was in those eyes, ancient power matched by a fury that threatened to bring down the walls and swallow up this place, deep below the surface of Faerûn.

That stare should have stripped the sanity from a human woman, but Embril merely laughed. "I hope that your stay with us has been... comfortable, my lord Ndulu."

Ndulu's anger, if anything, intensified. "Your madness has truly consumed you, Embril Aloustinai, for you to call me here. You know who I serve!"

"Indeed, balor." She looked around the chamber. "Your master has come down quite a bit in the overall scheme of things, has he not? It would seem that his fall from power has affected you as well. To think, the mighty Ndulu, caught up in the *binding* of a mere mortal creature." Indeed, the spell cast by her ally should not have been able to hold a creature of Ndulu's power, but it could not know that the spellweaver had burned a *wish* spell to augment the potency of the calling enough to snare the balor, and to reinforce the summoning circle to hold it.

Ndulu exploded in a paroxysm of fury, fire and black power roiling off him in waves, but confined within the potency of the summoning diagram. Embril waited for it to spend its anger, which happened rather quickly... too quickly, perhaps.

"I do not know what you hope to gain from me, but you will never extract any benefit from this plan," the demon said, once it had subsided. "You cannot keep me imprisoned forever, and my master will be quite pleased to hear of the failure of your aspirations when I return to his side."

For a moment Embril's weave of self-control cracked, if only slightly, and she shot an annoyed glance at the spellweaver. What had it revealed to the demon? It could not know what had transpired at Cauldron, for it had been confined here since the day before the commencement of the Ritual of Planar Joining. Could it have somehow gained access to information *through* the barrier of its prison?

No. It had to be playing her, reading whatever subtle clues she herself was projecting through her own defenses. Demons were uncanny at finding weaknesses in their foes, and this one was one of the greatest of its race, a mere step below the mighty Princes that ruled the diverse layers of the Abyss. She quickly regained control—the demon was regarding her intently, almost eagerly—and looked up again to meet its gaze squarely.

“You can tell Graz’zt anything you wish,” she said. “I am prepared to release you... but first you must agree to a service, to which you are bound to obey by the terms of the Compact.”

The demon’s laughter was a terrible thing. “Foolish little wench, you think to barter with me? I will have your flesh as a throw rug, but the rest of your body will continue to feel agonies long, long after...”

“Yes, yes, eternal torment, suffering of my soul, etcetera, etcetera,” she said. “But first, the service.”

“I will never deign to serve a weak mortal bitch who thinks her modest powers give her the right to treat with me,” the balor replied. “You can take your pet abomination and...”

Embril just stood there as the demon offered a series of vile threats and promises of destruction. It spoke for a full minute before it realized that she wasn’t listening; in fact she stood there, looking off to the side, tapping her foot with a bit of impatience.

“Go then, frail little mortal, go to your dreams of power, and the mad whispers of your dying god,” it finally said, its voice a deep hiss like metal dragged over stone. “Know that your patron will never be released, and that your little cabal will join him soon enough, your screams adding to the neverending dirge of the insane in the halls of Skullrot...”

“That remains to be seen,” Embril said. “But I have not yet made my offer.”

“Speak then! So that at least I may be spared your foolish prattle. You waste my time and yours.”

“Your master may disagree,” Embril said, with an enigmatic smile upon her face. She made a motion with her fingertips and spoke words of eldritch power. It was a minor spell she called upon, but it had an immediate effect as an image took form in the circle formed by her hand movements, an illusion that nonetheless took on clear resolution, suspended in the air between her and the demon. It wasn’t a very big picture, just large enough to clearly show the faces of the individuals depicted therein.

The demon was silent. Embril had not lied; its master would be very, very interested in what it had seen.

Embril let the illusion dissolve, and merely waited.

The two faced off for a long minute that crept into two, three... the mortal woman—powerful, but mad—and the ageless demon, lord of its kind.

Finally, it was the demon that spoke first.

“Speak your terms.”

Chapter 400

Night descended upon The Lucky Monkey, and the refugee camp that had been extracted from the jungle surrounding it. The place looked almost unreal in the filtered moonlight that made it though the scattered cloud cover above; more an illusion than a real outpost, the jungle crowded close around the structures as if eager to reclaim this clearing for itself. It was quiet, even the animals of the forest apparently content to go about their business in silence on this dark eve. The night was not entirely empty; vigilant watchers stared into the night from concealed positions in the summits of trees, or in shelters installed in the crevices upon the roof of the roadhouse. And high above, another kept watch as well.

Behind the roadhouse the jungle encroached hard upon the structure, despite the obvious efforts over the years to trim back the growth. There was a low mound where a waste trench had been dug earlier and covered over, and a faint smell of ordure still hung over the place, discouraging visitors.

There was absolutely no warning. One moment the small clearing behind the roadhouse was empty, the next it was full of sound and light. A massive figure rose up over the mound, twelve feet tall, a miniature sun immolated in a nimbus of living flame.

Ndulu had arrived.

The guards atop the roadhouse had barely time to register their doom before the balor lifted his hand and transformed the night into a sea of flame. The *firestorm* descended in sheets upon the building, engulfing huge swaths of it in flame, transforming the sturdy structure into a pyre. Even as those inside became dimly aware through the haze of sleep that something was wrong, the demon lord strode into the flames, lifting its huge sword and sweeping away a twenty-foot face of the structure with a single mighty sweep of the burning weapon. Several people were killed instantly as the outer wall exploded into their room, and others looked up from their beds, frozen in terror as they were suddenly exposed to a face out of their worst nightmares.

An avian cry shattered the night sky, as an avoral—this one called by Dana’s *planar ally* spell to guard the night—dove toward the demon. It fired *magic missiles* at the demon’s back as it dove, but the little violet streaks vanished as they entered the fell aura of power surrounding it. Still crying out its alarm, it pulled out of its dive and winged over the forest before turning for another pass. Its course took it briefly over the road that ascended into the mountains, toward Cauldron.

Suddenly it staggered in mid-flight, spinning awkwardly aside to reveal a black-fledged arrow embedded deep in its breast. Its wings pounding fiercely in an effort to regain control, it flew away from the road, where the arrow had originated. A moment later a *lightning bolt* rose up from the same area to slam into it, but the avoral was not injured by the energy that flared briefly around it.

“Fool, it’s a celestial, immune to electricity!” Thifirane Rhiavati said to the man standing beside her, a *resurrected* Ssythar Nahazir. The yuan-ti pureblood hissed something in return, but did not offer further comment.

“Let me show you how to do it, *sorcerer*,” Thifirane said, lifting her hand, focusing upon the avoral as it tried to get away. It had nearly disappeared back over the forest canopy before a thin green ray erupted from the wizard’s finger, flashing instantly through the night, hitting the outsider and *disintegrating* it.

The remaining Cagewrights turned toward the sounds of destruction that continued to rise from the location of the nearby roadhouse. Screams now added to the sound of breaking wood and shattering glass, a cacophony that sounded out over the jungle night. The trees blocked a direct view of the site, but they could see the bright glow that rose from the flames, and they knew that the balor was already well into its work. There were eight of them there on the road. In addition to Rhiavati and Ssythar, they included Kyan and Viirdran, the two oddly juxtaposed elves. There was a heavily armored man clad in full plate and shield, a bare bastard sword easily balanced in his right hand, his bare face marked with a web of red tattoos. The warrior was shadowed by a huge four-legged beast the size of a man, a mere mound of fur in the night shadows. Embril and her spellweaver cohort were present. Finally there were three others who were felt rather than seen, individuals so at one with the night that even the sharpest-eyed would have failed to see them standing there on the road. These three simply hovered at the edge of the gathering, as if bored with the proceedings.

“Go, kill everything,” Embril said, the tall, lean form of the spellweaver looming behind her, its pale flesh like scoured bone in the diffuse moonlight. “With one exception. The priestess—Jenya Urikas. She is to be taken, and brought to me at Shatterhorn.”

“What?” Thifirane exclaimed. “You abandon us now?”

“Do not forget, we have a greater goal,” Embril said, her voice like a silken purr. “I must attend to the completion of our plan. Do not fear, dearest Thifirane, you shall not lack for your reward when the Master is restored to us. Go! Instruct these fools what it means to interfere with the Cagewrights. Destroy the pathetic remnants that they seek to protect. Slay every man, every woman, every child, every animal that breathes its life at the sufferance of a civilized soul. I suspect that you will not have much to do, once the balor finishes its work, but I am finished with equivocation! They must be ended.”

“They shall rue their decision to interfere in the whims of Adimarchus!” the tattooed warrior exclaimed. “They shall be made to suffer for their crimes!”

“What of the demon?” Viirdran asked, flexing his muscles, his hands drifting close to the hilts of his twin rapiers.

“He has his own interest tonight. The balor is compelled by the Compact to obey its obligation, but you would be wise not to trust its forbearance,” Embril said with a chuckle. “Of course, it has been called, not summoned, so its fate on this plane is binding upon it. If it were not to return to Graz’zt’s side, to report what it knows...”

The Cagewrights each nodded, understanding the theurge's implication clearly.

"Let it wreak destruction... and pick up the pieces. But Urikas! She must be recovered, alive, that is my mandate to you!"

"Well, if we hope to find her alive, we'd best hasten," Viirdran said, turning toward the refugee camp. The others joined it, but Thifirane paused, glancing back over her shoulder, meeting Embril's gaze momentarily before the woman called upon her power, and along with her unnatural companion *teleported* away.

But even as the Cagewrights made their way toward the burning roadhouse, the Heroes of Cauldron were already finding themselves in a world of hurt.

Chapter 401

The Lucky Money burned, a bonfire that lit up the surrounding jungle.

The balor used its power of *telekinesis* to snap a load-bearing support, bringing down an expanse of burning roof onto a room full of screaming, helpless civilians. The demon took delight in the sudden halt to their screams—though their panic had been quite satisfying too. It knew that its assault would provoke a response, and it found itself looking forward to that as well.

Even so, the ferocity of that counterattack took it somewhat off-guard.

* * * * *

"What's happening?"

"Man can't even get a bloomin' night's sleep 'round 'ere..."

"An all-out attack..."

"It's destroying the inn..."

"Cagewrights..."

"I told you that they would not sit around and wait for us to return..."

"It's evil, overwhelming... a greater demon..."

"A balor, I'd expect; I only got a glimpse of it..."

"A balor? You've got to be kidding!"

"The refugees will be slaughtered..."

“Hells, we’ll be slaughtered!”

“Arun, wait! We must prepare before we face it...”

“Jenya, get the people out, we’ll do our best to hold it off...”

* * * * *

A compact figure appeared in the ruin of the second story hallway, now open to the outside, and the widening swath of ruin and destruction wrought by the demon. Already about a quarter of the structure had been destroyed, and the screams of those trapped in the rubble echoed those of the people trying desperately to escape the crumbling structure. A man appeared in the ruin of the common room below, clad in a blue tunic, thrusting a longspear at the demon in an act of futile defiance. The head of the weapon melted as it entered the nimbus of flame that surrounded the demon’s body, the steel bending uselessly off its armored hide. His sacrifice was in vain as the demon barked a laugh, separating the man’s head from his shoulders with a casual swipe of his massive sword.

“Pathetic. I was led to believe that there would be some resistance, at least...”

Even through the chaos it had created, the demon’s sharp senses detected the charge of another man who’d appeared in the upstairs hall, this one a brown-skinned dwarf, pushing through the dangling wreckage of ruined beams and shattered masonry. It also recognized the power in the sword that the man carried; power that could hurt it. The demon recognized this foe as one of those that had been shown to it, one the enemies who had caused so much difficulty for the Cagewrights. Not one of those that its master bore such a fierce hatred for, but that wouldn’t save him against the balor’s power. The demon enjoyed destruction, but it was eager to join in combat against real foes that could give it something of a challenge before they fell to its terrible might.

It was clear that this enemy was not prepared for battle. Though clearly a warrior, he wore only a hastily donned chain shirt, not the heavy armor that might have given him a chance against the balor’s assault.

As the man reached the end of the hall, the demon snapped out its flaming whip, intending to divest this foe of his dangerous weapon. The eager tongue of the whip snapped the warrior’s wrist exactly as intended, but somehow he yanked away, ignoring the tongues of flame that bit at him, avoiding being entangled in the sinuous strands, carefully crafted from the flayed hides of a hundred victims.

There was nowhere for the warrior to go as the hallway suddenly ended, but to the demon’s minor surprise he simply leapt out over the gaping ruin, landing heavily in a jumble of roofing tiles and wooden beams a few feet from where the balor stood. Ndulu felt an explosion of pain that lanced up his left leg into his body as the dwarf gashed the limb with his holy sword, a cold iron blade that burned with the pure divinity that was anathema to its kind, even to the mightiest of their race.

Furious, the demon unleashed a *power word* that gratifyingly impacted the warrior, knocking him roughly prone, stunned. Inwardly the demon was gratified; a more powerful

foe would have been able to shrug off the effects of the magic, and likely would have been some trouble with that damned holy blade.

“A valiant effort, knight, but doomed to fail...” the demon droned, its words mocking.

Light flared from within the building, resolving into a quintet of brilliant white globes that rose out of the gaps in the structure. The five globes of light rose up into the air, firing beams of golden light that seared into the demon. They caused obvious damage, even through its many defenses, but the marks they made in its hide were barely scratches to one such as it.

“Lantern archons, how droll,” the balor said, rising up to its full height, chuckling. “Is this the best you fools can manage?”

But others were joining the fray now, the response that Ndulu had been expecting to provoke. Two more warriors appeared at the edge of the ruined common room. They charged toward the demon, but the debris impeded their rush. One, a dwarf with a large waraxe, stepped on a solid-looking piece of roofing and broke through, entangling himself momentarily. The other, clearly possessed of outsider blood, actually made it close enough to attack with his own axe, but the weapon glanced off of the malignant radiance of the balor’s *unholy aura*.

The balor turned to deal with this new threat, but even as it shifted a missile streaked from above, striking it solidly in the shoulder. The demon instantly spotted the source, an elf archer lurking in the ruins of the hallway above. Ordinarily a mere bowman would have not given it pause, but the arrow was also blessed with holy power, from the way that it burned in its hide. These were enemies that clearly had experience in battling fiends, although Ndulu doubted that they had ever faced the likes of it, one of the lords of the Abyss.

They had managed to hurt it, although the injuries thus far were mostly pinpricks, scratches. But still, enough was enough.

Ndulu called upon the full power of the Abyss, speaking a word of *blasphemy*. It watched with gratification as its foes collapsed, one after another, paralyzed. The lantern archons popped out of existence; what was left of them might be found as a bright-colored smear on a rock somewhere in Celestia. None of them could resist it, and now they were as good as dead, helpless to do anything to stop it.

Chapter 402

At the moment, it looked as though the Cagewrights rapidly approaching the burning roadhouse would find only their corpses of their enemies in the ruins.

Pleased with the sudden cessation of resistance following its *blasphemy*, the balor turned back to the dwarf knight with the holy sword. He was double incapacitated now, both stunned and paralyzed, but having felt the bite of the *holy avenger*, Ndulu wasn’t going to take any chances.

“Your skull will make a fine vessel for my blood wine,” the balor said, as it reached for him.

Another bite of stabbing pain interrupted him. Annoyed now, the demon turned to see that another archer had appeared around the far side of the building, a corner that still stood, toward the front of the structure. The man was invisible, or at least he thought he was; the shroud of *greater invisibility* he wore was nothing to the supernatural senses of the demon lord. Its annoyance was instantly replaced by eager anticipation as it recognized the attacker.

Ah, there you are...

The balor ignored a second stab of pain as another missile lodged in its arm. The tiefling was using holy arrows too, and fired from a bow designed to destroy creatures such as the balor to boot, but Ndulu was focused more on how he could use this enemy as a lever to win favor—and power—from his master. Spreading its wings, the balor leapt at its target, moving with a speed and ferocity far beyond that of any mortal creature.

The look on the tiefling’s face at its onrushing doom was quite satisfying.

The archer ducked back behind the corner of the building, which a moment later exploded outward as the balor swept his sword through it, sending shards of shattered masonry and wood flying out in a wide arc. The archer was falling back but really had nowhere to go. There were others in the clearing in front of the roadhouse, mostly civilians who screamed at the demon’s sudden appearance, rushing to get out of the way. But one did not flee; a woman who lifted her hand at the balor, calling forth a blast of *searing light* that unfortunately faded as it struck the demon’s *unholy aura*.

“Dana!” the tiefling called out, warning the woman, as if it wasn’t obvious that she was flirting with her own destruction. Ndulu had recognized her even before the tiefling’s words, however, and the demon leapt, covering half the distance that separated them even as its whip lashed out, wrapping around her torso. She screamed—gratifyingly—as the balor drew her in, immersing her in the aura of fire that surrounded it.

Its pleasure at her suffering was cut short, however, as she *dimension doored* out of its grasp. Angry, it turned to the tiefling, but before it could act he too transported himself away.

“Cowards... you cannot run from me,” the demon snarled. It had a good idea where the two had gone, however, and it summoned its own power to *teleport* back to where it had left its other helpless foes.

* * * * *

“I... I can’t, uncle Cal,” Mole said, a miserable ball of fear, huddling in the ruins of The Lucky Monkey, what was still left intact of the interior wreathed in thick smoke, watching helplessly as the demon engaged her friends. “Nothing we do hurts it, and none of them could resist it!” Her own heart had felt like it would freeze when the demon had spoken its *blasphemy*, although she’d been just far enough away that the sensation had passed, and she’d been able to react a few moments later.

Inwardly, Cal could not disagree with her niece's pessimistic assessment. The balor was a deadly foe, and it possessed magic that could not be dodged or resisted. And even if he hadn't already burned many of his most powerful spells in their earlier engagements at Shatterhorn, he did not have much in his arsenal that would even inconvenience the demon lord. Thus far the buffs he'd placed upon his allies had done little to protect them against the demon's power. And if that wasn't bad enough, a loud crash nearby was a reminder that the entire building was on fire, and was going to collapse down upon them before too long.

But he masked those feelings, knowing that his niece tottered on a precipice of self-doubt that could cost all of them. "We'll do what we can," he told her. "Our friends deserve no less."

He began a complex spell, but before he could complete it the demon turned and charged out of the rubble toward the front of the building.

"Where's it going?" Mole whispered, curious despite her fear.

Cal completed his spell, giving shape to shadowstuff that he drew across the ether, forming it into the outline of a bralani eladrin that he gave substance through his magic. As it took solid form, awaiting commands, Cal caught sight of a wisp of white moving through the building nearby, accompanied by a familiar clank of heavy metal.

Jenya, and Beorna! The pair were moving toward the ruined quarter of the building where their friends lay helpless, perhaps unaware that the battle had already shifted to the front of the building where Dana and Benzan had circled around to flank the demon.

"It's got Dana!" came Mole's voice, confirming his suspicions a moment later.

If it comes to this, so be it... we've given it a good run, the gnome thought. He turned to his *shadow conjured* eladrin. The creature had been good enough to drive away the smoke in their immediate vicinity, and Cal nodded gratefully as he took a clean breath before speaking.

"Go out the back of this structure, and gain altitude. There is a balor in front; I want you to distract it using your holy arrows. Do not engage it in melee unless you have no other option."

The shadow-creature nodded, and in a rush of wind darted out toward the ruined rear entry.

Cal moved to the front entry to join Mole, when a loud crash from behind suggested that the battle had again shifted to their rear.

* * * * *

"Well, do we engage?" Viirdran asked, his rapiers balanced easily in his slender hands. The Cagewrights were still in the wood, having come off the road to approach the roadhouse from behind, though they were now close enough now to clearly see the rear of

the building. Even from here they could feel the roar of the flames and taste the acrid smell of smoke thick on the air.

Even though they were not the targets of the creature, the veterans started as the balor suddenly reappeared in the midst of the ruins it had created, announcing its return with a loud roar.

“Mayhap we let the beast finish its assault,” Thifirane suggested, a feral grin on her features. “Then we go in and pick up the pieces. *All* of the pieces.”

“Their hearts will make interesting additions to my collection,” the armored warrior, Alurad Sorizan, said with a chuckle. The furry mound at his side, a massive dire badger, let out an accompanying growl.

“Await my signal to start the attack,” Thifirane continued. “Destroy the balor quickly... and then any others that remain.”

Cautiously, spreading out, they slowly approached the battlefield.

* * * * *

Ndulu materialized to find its two foes, the priestess and the tiefling, indeed where it had thought to find them, trying to aid their helpless companions. There were others here as well, another armored dwarf and a woman clad in the raiment of a high cleric of the god Helm. That last one Ndulu did not know, but it could instantly sense the power within her, as well as the fear that shone in her eyes as she looked up from where she knelt over that useless paladin.

But the Helmite’s companions did not hesitate, immediately launching a violent all-out assault upon the balor. The tiefling archer fired another one of those damnable holy arrows into the demon’s shoulder, but he’d already been luckier than he’d had a right to be, and his follow-up shot was more properly deflected by the still-coruscating potency of the *unholy aura*. The other woman, the servant of Selûne, tried to *dismiss* it in a gesture that was almost amusing in its futility.

The dwarf woman likewise gave her best effort, trying to smite him with an adamantite sword that the balor recognized (with some alarm, though it would never consciously admit such) had been infused with holy power. But her assault was equally useless, even the legendary hardness of the rare metal insufficient against its hide, infused with the essence of the darkest pits in the Abyss.

As she continued hacking at it in a foolish display of mulish persistence, the demon’s eyes focused on the high priestess. Something plinked against its shoulder, and the demon distantly noticed and dismissed the pathetic shadow-creation that hovered above, out of easy range.

Smiling, the demon uttered another *blasphemy*.

Chapter 403

Again a terrible word sundered the gap between realms, unleashing another wave of foul energy that struck the minds of the companions like a hammer. Dana, Benzan, and Beorna were struck down, as helpless as their friends lying around them.

The balor looked at the cleric, who had not succumbed to its fell power. *Spell resistance*, it thought, recognizing the magic she'd summoned to protect her.

So be it. It would not protect her against having her head separated from her shoulders.

The cleric rose, determination clearly warring with terror in her eyes, the former barely holding out as she held the paladin's holy sword up—not as a weapon, but as a talisman against an evil she could not resist.

"You cannot use that against me," the demon hissed, lifting its own terrible sword.

"It is enough that you fear it," the woman said, presenting her holy symbol with her other hand, and speaking her own word of power.

Ndulu roared, recognizing too late what she meant, unable to resist the power of the *banishment* spell that sent it screaming back to the depths of the Abyss.

Jenya sagged back, worn by the brief but terrible struggle of wills against the demon lord, looking around at the destruction that surrounded her, feeling the heat of the flames that continued to burn around the exterior—and gradually into the interior—of the roadhouse. The place was doomed; a single look was enough to prove that.

She turned to her friends and their allies; they had to get out of here.

She staggered back, pain exploding through her shoulder as an arrow slammed into her. She looked up to see a group of figures emerging from the forest: a heavily armored man accompanied by a huge dire badger; a dark elf bearing two swords; three rail-thin elves who seemed to drift in and out of her view, as if her brain refused to recognize their presence. Behind them, she could just make out the archer who'd shot her, and another figure, wreathed in dark robes, a shadowy figure impossible to clearly discern. She felt some sort of magical attack impact her defenses, dissipating as it struck her *spell resistance*.

"Surrender, Jenya Urikas!" the armored man said. "The judgment of Adimarchus is upon thee!"

She glanced down at the helpless adventurers lying all around her, paralyzed, unable to intervene.

She was alone.

Chapter 404

“Give it up, priestess,” the drow said, hefting his rapier. Even though he was approaching, like the others, at a wary and even pace, his arms were twitching, moving quickly, too quickly, and the part of Jenya’s mind that was still allowing rational thought noted the presence of a *haste* effect.

The struggle against the balor had almost unnerved her, but a sudden calm filled her at that moment, standing alone against the Cagewrights and their minions. When she spoke, there was no hint of a tremor in her voice.

“We will never yield.”

Another arrow struck her, but she barely felt the pain as she uttered a *holy word*.

The spell had an immediate and significant effect, the echo to the devastating *blasphemies* spoken by the balor. Two of the three shadow-elves shrieked and dissolved, their forms for a split-second revealed for what they really were, hulking and fearsome death slaad that vanished as they were banished back to the chaos of Limbo. The third elf staggered back, blinded and deafened by the holy word, but a moment later he was gone, obscured by some dark art.

Viirdran was likewise stricken, losing sight and hearing. He could not hear Kyan calling his name, or see her angrily reach for another of the long, deadly arrows that stuffed her quiver.

Alurad Sorizan was a bit stronger than his peers, and merely lost his hearing briefly, the echo of the *holy word* sounding inside his skull. That sound merely took up residence among the other voices he heard in there, and he rushed forward, eager to confront this champion of Good who defied Adimarchus.

Of course, in his insane mind, it was *he* who was Adimarchus, but that was a minor detail in the face of the reality of a charging warrior in full plate waving a big bastard sword about menacingly. His dire badger did not join him, dead or paralyzed from hearing the *holy word*.

But before he could reach his foe, a golden light flared brightly before the blackguard. It cleared to reveal a massive, perfect figure of a man, its skin a shining gold, white wings spread behind it, a huge sword of white light in its hands. Blocking Alurad’s advance, it extended a hand in warning. “Begone, Cagewright, for these are under My protection.”

Alurad screamed and blindly assaulted the solar, swinging his sword in a violent arc. The celestial surprisingly—and adroitly—jumped back, giving way as “Adimarchus” followed, laughing as he swung at it, just narrowly missing each time.

“A solar!” Kyan Winterstrike breathed, in stunned awe. The arcane archer had faced many odd foes since joining the Cagewrights, but she was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed. First a balor, and now this!

“It’s an illusion,” Thifirane said, her voice thick with disgust as she watched Alurad taken in by the ruse. “No doubt the gnome wizard is in there somewhere, directing it, trying to buy some time.” With a wave of her hand and a few words of magic, she *dispelled* the image. Alurad looked around in confusion, before turning back to his original quarry. Meanwhile, Thifirane screamed as an arrow glanced off of her forehead. Her *stoneskin* protected her from serious damage, but the holy power of the missile nevertheless had hurt.

“Blast it!” she said, looking up at Cal’s bralani, still flying high above the battlefield, fitting another arrow to its holy bow.

The priestess of Helm knelt over the immobile form of Arun Goldenshield, calling forth the power of her god to purge the lingering effects of the demon’s *blasphemy*. As Arun stirred, his body gradually returning to his control, she pressed his weapon into his hand.

“We yet face dire enemies!” she said, as the paladin struggled to his feet.

“Do what you can for the others!” Arun said, lifting his sword in time to meet Alurad’s charge. The paladin took the blackguard’s powerful swing on his *holy avenger*, the two weapons meeting in a flash of energies as the holy power of the paladin’s sword clashed with the corrupt power infused in the blackguard’s blade. For all his variegated forms of madness, the Cagewright was still a master swordsman, and it quickly became clear that his heavy armor—not to mention Arun’s exhaustion—gave him a significant advantage. Arun managed a solid blow that dented the black plates covering Alurad’s right torso, but in turn he took a devastating critical strike that forced him back, blood oozing from a great rent in his stomach.

“Taste the justice of Adimarchus!” the blackguard gleefully intoned.

The shadow-bralani let out a high-pitched cry as a salvo of empowered *magic missiles* slammed into it, the first contribution to the battle from Ssythar Nahazir. The yuan-ti pureblood was concealed deep within the sheltering foliage of the jungle, perhaps a bit skittish from his recent demise. Thifirane had recognized the true nature of Cal’s creation, and the things seemed to lose some of its substance as the bolts crashed into it. A moment later it dissolved into wisps of shadowstuff as Kyan impaled it with a perfectly-placed arrow that would have pierced its heart, had it been a true living creature.

Arun felt a chill as something intangible touched the edges of his awareness. Even with Alurad in his face, unleashing powerful if inaccurate swings at him, he sensed that there was another danger here, something nasty moving through the mélange of smoke and shadows that pressed in upon the halo of light that surrounded his sword.

Alurad lifted his sword to strike again, but a black ray stabbed out from the smoke of the common room, striking the blackguard in the breast. The *enervation* sapped his life energy, diminishing him, although he proved how dangerous he remained as his blow drove under Arun’s shield and cut a fresh, bleeding gash in his left shoulder.

But then Arun’s wounds suddenly knit together, the dwarf feeling reinvigorated as healing power poured into him. Jenya Urikas, lacking another *remove paralysis* spell, had instead

added her efforts to the fray by casting a *mass cure critical wounds*. She then attempted to *hold* Alurad, but the spell had no effect upon the blackguard.

Thifirane Rhiavati, however, had noted the contribution of the high priestess. Ssythar had attempted to balance the scales in the melee between the two champions of light and dark by hitting Arun with his own *enervation*, but as the beam lanced out at him his *holy avenger*, seemingly of its own volition, cut into the path of the black ray and absorbed its dark energies.

“The priestess!” Thifirane hissed. “Destroy her!”

“Embril said she was to be taken alive,” Kyan said calmly, as she fired an arrow that knifed into the melee, hitting the paladin in the bicep of his weapon arm.

In the darkness, and with the elf turned away, she could not see the terrible look that crossed Thifirane Rhiavati’s face in that instant. Calling upon the full power of her magic, she brought her own power to the balance, defying her “superior” in the haphazard hierarchy of the Cagewrights.

Her second *disintegrate* found its target, highlighting Jenya Urikas in a green halo for a moment before the cleric was blasted into oblivion.

Chapter 405

Mole watched, wide-eyed, at the titanic struggle developing before her eyes. It was as if she was outside of her own body, a disembodied participant in a drama far beyond her, a legend being written down for bards to share around warm firesides in crowded common rooms on cold winter nights.

Only she was here, now, on a cold night, in a common room that was being destroyed around her. Her friends were still held by the balor’s power, helpless to do anything to affect their fate as they struggled for their lives. She felt her heart pound in her chest as Jenya had faced the balor, releasing along with the breath she’d been holding when she successfully *banished* it back to whence it had come.

But then another ambush had followed immediately upon the heels of the first, and Mole saw more enemies emerging from the forest, confident in their victory. She could hear the soft sounds of Cal’s chanting nearby, knew that her uncle was calling on his magic again, adding what he could to the fight. Yet she could only stand there, a mouse hiding in the shadows, surrounded by cats and dogs engaged in a bloody struggle for survival.

Still, a part of her marked each of the enemies, balanced the strengths and weaknesses that she could see, identified the spells they cast, the way they moved. Jenya’s *holy word* did not affect her, but she reveled in what it did to their enemies. But then the bad guys were coming again, delayed only momentarily by Cal’s illusion. Cal’s shadow-ally distracted the spellcasters in the jungle for a few moments, but then they destroyed it, too, and turned their attention back to the melee. Jenya got Arun on his feet, and then healed

him when the enemy warrior had gotten a few good licks in against the virtually unarmored paladin.

All during that, she just stood there, watching. Her crossbow hung neglected at her side, her rapier dangled uselessly from the opposite hip. It was as if she'd forgotten how to move, how to do anything but suck in breaths made painful by the gathered smoke.

And then the enemy wizard *disintegrated* Jenya Urikas. Jenya, who'd been so welcoming to her and Zenna, when they'd just been strangers in a harsh, foreign city. Jenya, who had healed their wounds so many times, had protected them against the powers of their enemies. Jenya, who had given the people of Cauldron help when so much had been falling apart around them...

It was as if someone had thrown cold water in her face. Shaking, but able to move, the gnome darted out from her shelter, leaping out from the ruined frame of a window. *Invisible*, silent, she was swallowed up in the nearby undergrowth at the jungle fringe in a matter of seconds.

Arun, healed by Jenya, was holding out against Alurad Sorizan, but his situation was rapidly growing more dire. First, the effects of the high priestess's *holy word* were beginning to fade; out of the corner of his eye he could see the drow fighter coming forward again, moving faster as he shook of the lingering blindness effect of the spell, coming to his right around the melee, likely to establish a flanking position. That was bad enough, but they also had allies still concealed in the jungle fringe; he'd already taken one arrow to the shoulder and narrowly avoided several others, and one spell that he'd somehow blocked with his sword. He knew without looking that his friends were still helpless; he'd been hit with a *blasphemy* before and knew that it took several minutes to fight off the paralysis.

Several minutes may as well have been ten years.

Arun gritted his teeth. Jenya clearly did not have another *remove paralysis* spell at hand; for whatever reason she'd chosen to use it on him, so it was up to him to hold of the Cagewrights for as long as it took. So he gave ground before Alurad's assault, forcing the blackguard to follow, not allowing him to get set for a full attack. He did not see Jenya disintegrated, did not know just how alone he was. Another attack from the forest—a blast of ochre *magic missiles* that he absorbed once more with his sword. There were probably others that he didn't see—more than once, he felt a sudden icy touch upon his soul, which quickly faded as he fought off whatever it was that tried to affect him. More arrows, which found their way past Alurad as if they'd been launched in anticipation of the blackguard's movements, darting through Arun's defenses to score his flesh. Thus far he'd avoided a hit that would have crippled him, but it was only a matter of time before he was too slow, and one pierced something vital. But he also felt his reflexes suddenly increase, his limbs feeling light and agile, and he knew that Cal, at least, was still with him, aiding him from cover.

He'd just darted back from another powerful rush, calling upon Moradin's power to heal him, when the shadows around him came alive.

At first the paladin thought he was seeing things. But then a wisp of shadow wrapped around him, and he felt pain explode across his back, real pain. He lashed out at another shadow with his sword, but his sword passed through it; it had no substance, was no conjured monster or undead thing.

Arun was too veteran a fighter to let his guard down, but even so he nearly had his head taken off when Alurad leapt in, swinging his sword in a decapitating arc. Luckily he'd donned his helm when he'd hastily left his quarters, but even so he felt a ringing echo in his skull as he staggered back, briefly stunned.

But that pain was nothing compared to the agony that exploded through his side as a shadowy form appeared out of the darkness behind him, sinking a wedge of what felt like frozen death deep into his body.

Chapter 406

Arun felt death brush against his soul as the Cagewright shadar-kai Xokek backstabbed the paladin with his *shadow dagger*. The semi-substantial blade caressed the paladin's heart, urging it to cease its unflagging efforts, but the paladin marshaled his will, tearing himself away with a desperate cry. He yet drew breath, but the wound was nevertheless a serious one.

Now, surrounded by two foes who knew how to take advantage, Arun's situation had grown significantly more grim.

Cal experienced a similar sensation as a considerable section of ceiling collapsed onto the curving bar of The Lucky Monkey's common room, showering him with sparks and a rolling cloud of smoke that burned at his lungs as he struggled to draw breath. Thus far he'd remained in a fairly secure position, crouched beneath a heavy table close to the gaping opening created by the balor's rampage of destruction through the inn. Although the drifting smoke occasionally blocked his view, and he could not discern the enemies that he knew lurked in the nearby forest, he otherwise had a good view of the battlefield. Shrouded by *greater invisibility*, and protected by various other defensive magics, he was in a perfect position to provide covert magical support with his remaining spells and his considerable arsenal of magical wands.

But Arun was taking a pounding, the others remained helpless to intervene, and the collapse indicated that the security of his redoubt was rapidly becoming untenable.

When he saw the shadowy rogue appear behind the paladin and strike, he thought for a moment that it was all over; the thrust looked deadly. But Arun pulled away, clearly hurt, trying to reset his defenses against two nasty foes.

Cal had been holding a gambit in reserve, a spell that he'd doubted would have worked against the enemy warrior threatening Arun. But against a shifty wizard-rogue...

The gnome's stratagem proved effective a moment later, as the deadly shadar-kai darted behind Arun with incredible speed, his *shadow dagger* poised for another sneak attack.

Xokek suddenly staggered, his eyes widening as his body collapsed in upon itself, leaving behind another fat, bloated slug.

The drow Viirdran had been about to join the fray when he saw what had happened to his comrade. He bore little concern for the misanthropic Xokek, but he was worried about an enemy magic-user throwing around powerful spells. Scanning the interior of the ruined roadhouse, his keen eyes caught a hint of movement. Viirdran was much more than just a mere warrior, and a brief incantation brought a *fireball* that blossomed in the wreckage of the building, adding a new intensity to the already spreading fire. The blast also engulfed a few of the helpless enemy still scattered about from the balor's earlier antics, and caught up both the paladin and Alurad.

Viirdran grinned. A bit of friendly fire couldn't always be helped.

Just a few dozen feet away, the jungle remained relatively quiet in contrast to the violent battle raging in the ruined roadhouse. Ssythar let out a hiss of frustration as his latest enchantment—another *slow* spell—again failed to take hold upon the dwarven knight. He considered simply unleashing one of his favorite enchantments, the *black tentacles*, but he'd faced Alurad's ire before, and thus he was not quite so casual about engulfing his allies in area-effect spells. He glanced over at Thifirane and Kyan, but there didn't seem to be much in the way of effective destruction coming from that direction either. The yuan-ti clucked, considering other options...

He never had any warning. Pain exploded through his lower body, and as his legs buckled he fell forward, hands flailing at the surrounding brush in a futile effort to arrest his fall. A thought shouted in his mind... *must escape!* But his *teleport* spell was gone, permanently wiped from his mind by the trauma of being raised once from death to life.

This time, he wouldn't get a second chance. He still hadn't seen his attacker when something sharp tore into his throat, and the last thing he felt was his own hot blood spraying out from his severed jugular, and then... darkness.

Mole didn't even bother to clean her blade, vanishing back into the jungle.

Arun staggered back, not seeing the shadowy rogue that had stabbed him, unaware of Cal's intervention on his behalf. The *fireball* had washed over him, but even though it had overcome the resistance offered by his *holy avenger*, he hadn't been seriously injured by the flames.

After all, once you'd been dragged down into molten lava by a massive pyroclastic dragon, regular fire just didn't seem quite as imposing.

But the fact remained that despite the healing that Jenya had provided before her demise, and his own *laying on hands*, he was in bad shape. He'd taken hits from numerous sources: Alurad's sword, the backstab, arrows from the forest. Only the protection against magic provided from his sword had kept him from being blasted by several spells from the hidden casters in the jungle. And he couldn't keep running from Alurad; he'd seen the drow caster and knew that another enemy was on the way.

But as Arun gave way once again, luring the blackguard after him, Alurad suddenly stopped. Instead of chasing after Arun again, the Cagewright instead shifted a few steps to the side, broken masonry crunching under his heavy boots. Arun recognized his tactic even before he reached his destination: standing over the immobilized form of Lok. The genasi had been on guard duty, and so was clad in his adamantine armor, but that would be no protection against a coup de grace delivered from the blackguard.

Arun knew that the Cagewright was luring him into a full attack, but he had no choice. If he hesitated, Lok was dead. Lifting his holy sword, he roared out a challenge, and rushed at the deadly enemy warrior.

Meanwhile, behind the paladin, someone stirred in the rubble. Beorna, lying face-down in a pile of debris, extended a trembling hand, shaking with effort as she reached for the hilt of her sword.

Alurad smiled as the paladin fell for his ruse, rushing into the fray to save his crippled friend. As the dwarf drew near he smoothly reversed his blade from the killing stroke he'd intended for the fallen warrior, sliding into a ready stance to meet his enemy's charge. Arun saw it but kept on coming, his own weapon raised to strike.

A roar from the ruined common room drew Alurad's attention briefly to the side, nearly breaking his concentration. Something appeared from within the smoky interior, highlighted by the surrounding flames as it clawed its way to the edge of the field of rubble, leaping onto a fallen beam that gave it a clear view of the battlefield.

A silver dragon—not a big one, but a dangerous adversary nonetheless.

"The wizard's made his appearance," Kyan said, drawing another arrow from her quiver. Thus far she was not happy; she'd scored a number of hits on the paladin, even with the added challenge of having to shoot around that lumbering brute Alurad, but the heavy smoke swirling around the melee had caused her to miss twice.

She did not like missing.

"I see him," Thifirane said. The transmuter was equally unhappy with the progress of the battle thus far. Embril had not given her adequate time to refresh her spell selection after the battle with the planetar, and the paladin's spell resistance and innate durability had already thwarted her several times. But she had a little surprise in store for the wizard, and now that he'd finally shown himself, he would learn what it meant to earn the ire of Thifirane Rhiavati.

But even as she called to mind the trigger words for her *resilient sphere* spell, a growl from behind distracted her. She started to turn, only to stagger as something darted out from the brush, tangling itself in her legs. The once-noblewoman let out an undignified scream as she toppled to the ground in a heap. Something stabbed into her side as she fell, but her *stoneskin* still protected her, and she avoided serious injury.

"Shoot her!" Thifirane shrieked, finally identifying her attacker as the gnome rogue, Mole Calloran. She'd revealed herself prematurely to interrupt Thifirane's magical attack on her

friends, and she would pay for that mistake, the wizard thought as she tried to kick free of the diminutive little wretch.

But in the next instant her attention became fully absorbed by the wolverine that leapt onto her head, tearing and scratching. With her *stoneskin* it could do little real harm, but it certainly made it difficult for her to focus her concentration.

Kyan snickered, taking pleasure in the ridiculous plight of the wizard, but the arcane archer nevertheless quickly backed off and started firing deadly arrows from her *frost longbow*. Mole moved like greased lightning, somehow dodging out of the way of the arrows, but still two shots grazed her, cutting gashes in her right arm and left leg, wounds that froze shut instantly as the arrows released their magic into her. She suffered more damage as Thifirane lifted a crystal wand and fired a salvo of four *magic missiles* into her, attacks that she could not avoid as they blasted painfully into her torso.

But Mole Calloran was not only sneaky and fast; she was also incredibly tough.

Arun charged forward, taking the hit from Alurad, and it hurt as much as he'd expected. His chain shirt was now little more than bloody tatters, and it barely hindered the sword that crunched into his side. The paladin dropped to one knee as fire exploded through his gut. Something vital had been hit, he knew, and he felt blood on his tongue as he coughed, sagging from the force of the blackguard's readied attack.

"Now it is time for you to die!" Alurad screeched, bringing his sword up to finish it.

Chapter 407

Arun knew he only had one more attack left in him, and as he unleashed it, he felt a power surge within him. In that heartbeat, a thousand miles away, the sacristans in the holy sanctuary of Moradin, deep within the Rift, uttered the blessing that marked the start of a new day. Arun had stood within that place when he'd uttered his vows of lifetime service to the Soul Forger, and ever since that day, that ritual, unseen and unheard by the exiled dwarf, had signaled the restoration of the powers granted to him by his patron.

He called upon that power now, and drawing in every last bit of it he *smote* Alurad Sorizan with the divine power of his god. The holy blade crushed armor plate and kept going, completing its circuit in a bloody path that bisected the blackguard's torso, emerging in a spray of hot blood that covered the surrounding debris.

For a moment the Cagewright looked down in surprise, then he was falling, his upper half clattering to the rubble a full second ahead of his lower.

Arun stood there, gasping in agonized breaths, his body slick with his own blood, barely clinging to consciousness. He awaited the last blow that would kill him—a common iron dagger would do it, now—and was vaguely surprised when it did not come.

He heard the drow yelling, and looked up to see a silver dragon—Cal, it had to be—swarming over it, biting and scratching. For all that Cal was no fighter, he seemed to be

getting the better of his foe, at least for the moment. Then he heard a familiar voice, and turned to see a welcome sight.

Beorna looked as battered as he was; lying in the rubble, she'd been caught in a *fireball* and scorched by the flames that still ravaged the roadhouse. Her armor was blackened, and she still moved swiftly, fighting off the linger effects of the demon's earlier *blasphemy*. But she was no less beautiful to him for all that.

"By Helm, you look a sight," she said, coming over to him, channeling healing energy into him. She looked down at Alurad's two halves, and nodded in simple approval before turning back to him. "Well? What are you doing standing around here, when the battle rages on! You're not going to let a *gnome* finish off the foe?"

Arun grinned, and lifted his weapon.

Thifirane tried to get up, pulling away from the storm of fur and claws that was the wolverine, but she collapsed again as Mole tumbled through her legs and kicked the backs of her knees. The gnome was looking battered now, with an arrow stabbing through her shoulder in addition to the multiple impacts she'd already taken, but she fought on with an almost insane determination. As Thifirane fell the gnome stabbed her again with her magical dagger. Her *stoneskin* was holding, but Mole seemed to be able to find vulnerabilities even through the spell's protection, and the wizard felt another sharp pain twist her insides as something in her side gave way.

"Get her off of me!" Thifirane shouted, blasting the gnome with another volley of *magic missiles* that only seemed to drive her to a greater fury in her assault.

Even before he saw Alurad's demise, Viirdran was starting to think that the time was fast approaching for a quick withdrawal. He quickly recovered from the surprise of a small dragon leaping onto him, tearing and slashing with claws, wings, and bite. Small in a relative sense anyway; it was still bigger and heavier than he was. But he was fast, and still augmented with magic, and within a few moments he'd inflicted several wounds upon it with his adamantine rapier.

When he saw the two dwarves coming, he did not panic, spinning away from the dragon's continued assault while snapping a small globe at the two warriors. The *bead of force* exploded as it struck the ground at their feet, knocking them roughly back. The paladin was able to fall free, escaping the globe of force that resulted, but the woman was trapped inside, furiously but uselessly hacking at the sphere with her black sword.

The drow saw that the paladin got up only with difficulty, and for a moment he reconsidered; maybe this battle wasn't hopeless after all? No further help appeared to be forthcoming from the wreckage of the inn, and he thought he could take the dragon, which hadn't been as impressive as he'd first thought. But he glanced over his shoulder back at the forest fringe. No more arrows had been coming from there, and with his darksight he detected violent movements within the brush.

"Kyan!"

His decision made, the drow turned and dashed toward the wood.

“Die already, you little bitch!” Thifirane shouted, hurling a *lightning bolt* at the gnome as she crawled backwards, trying to get free. The gnome dodged the blast easily, but it slammed into the wolverine, vaporizing the little creature conjured from her *bag of tricks*.

Mole turned invisible—not a problem for Thifirane, who’d enchanted herself to see through that obscuration earlier—but then as another arrow from Kyan’s bow stabbed into her thigh she tumbled around the bole of a nearby tree, disappearing from view.

“That’s right, run away, you little pest! It won’t save you, or your friends!” Thifirane said, favoring her side as she pulled herself up against another tree.

“Time’s up for you, Thifirane,” came the return, from somewhere nearby.

“Thifirane, we’d better get out of here,” Kyan said. The elf looked back toward the roadhouse, where the *polymorphed* wizard was just *dispelling* the sphere holding Beorna. Viirdran was running toward them, with the paladin not far behind him.

“Behind you, my love!” Kyan cried, drawing her bow to fire. But the elf screamed as a tiny crossbow bolt slammed into her neck from behind, causing her show to go awry, bouncing harmlessly off the paladin’s shield.

“Taste the kiss of shadow, dwarf!” Viirdran said, spinning and releasing an *enervation* that blasted into Arun. But the elf had apparently not heeded the lesson learned earlier by Ssythar, for the paladin’s blazing sword intercepted the beam, dissolving it into nothingness.

Putting on a sudden and surprising burst of speed, Arun leapt forward, and unleashed his second *smite* of the day.

Viirdran screamed as the sword clove his torso, opening a great rent in his chest to reveal heart, lungs, and intestines, now a ruined mess. The drow screamed and collapsed, falling back onto the turf in a bloody heap.

Kyan screamed.

Standing over the remains of the drow, Arun started forward again. The paladin, covered in blood, looked more like some vengeful fiend than a holy knight, but the effect was the same. “You’re next, archer,” he said, blood spraying from his lips as he spoke.

Tears streaming down her eyes, not even feeling the pain from her injury, the elf just stood there, staring at the corpse of her beloved. But as Arun approached, she reached up and grasped an amulet dangling around her neck. “I will avenge you, my love! Our salvation awaits... in Carceri!”

And with that, she vanished in a cascade of streaming violet light.

Thifirane, too, had decided she'd had enough. She had another *teleport* ready to whisk her out of this charnel mess, but as she spoke the word of power to activate the spell, a small crossbow bolt shot out from high above, catching her in the left eye. Her *stoneskin* wasn't enough to save her from an agonizing wave of pain as the missile struck true, and she screamed, her spell lost, as she fell back against the trunk of the tree at her back.

Clawing at the bolt, mewling piteously, she never even saw the thrust that ended her life.

Arun withdrew his sword, his face twisted in a grimace of disgust as the limp form of the wizard collapsed in a heap. He and his companions had been victorious, but he only felt exhaustion, and it took a supreme effort of will not to lie down next to the body of the dead woman and slip into the depths of sleep.

Mole reappeared, dropping down easily from the branches twenty feet above, at the same time that Beorna stepped forward through the brush. "I think that's the last of them," the gnome said.

Arun looked down at her. "You did well, Mole," he said. "Thank you."

She met his gaze, and nodded, somberly.

"We must attend to the living," Beorna said. "Our friends are in danger, and some may yet live inside..."

They turned to the roadhouse, which was now a raging inferno. They could see Cal, still in dragon form, dragging their still-immobilized companions out of the wreckage, and they quickly moved to join him.

They had won, but the Cagewright assault had exacted a heavy cost. Thirty-seven people lost their lives in The Lucky Monkey, including several of the clerics of Helm, and the most senior of Arun's Hammers, Alowyn Tristane, who'd dared to stand before the balor with his spear. The ceiling of the roadhouse had collapsed upon him, and they only recovered charred remains.

Hodge too was dead, struck down by the balor's *blasphemy*.

And finally, Jenya Urikas, high priestess of Helm, was gone. *Disintegrated* by Thifirane Rhiavati, caught in the destruction of the roadhouse, they found only a few fragments of burned cloth, and her silver holy symbol, the only thing to survive the flames undamaged. Of the cleric herself, there was nothing, not even the bits of debris needed for a *resurrection*.

Morning came to the camp at the edge of the Forest of Mir, and with it the flames that consumed the roadhouse died, leaving only a charred reminder of the power of the enemy.

Chapter 408

It was late in the morning, not far off from noon, when the companions gathered around a makeshift table in one of the shelters. The mood was grim. Spread across the table was a map of the region, and some of the items they'd taken off of the Cagewrights they'd killed the night before. Prominent was the cluster of four magical rings, marked with the sigil of the Thirteen.

"We don't even know that they're still there," Benzan said. "Like as not, Shatterhorn is an empty shell—except for deadly traps."

"We need to make certain," Cal said. "And Dana's *divination* seems to indicate that we must return there."

"As always, the gods were vague in their directions," Benzan countered. Several of the others nodded; the spell had been rather more ambiguous than usual, offering only the following information:

*Madness caged, the Cagewrights rage
While pieces on a chessboard shift
The theurge plots, lest all be naught
Waiting for a worthwhile gift
In shattered spire, yet still aspire
Her caged lord to yet uplift*

"I heard one of them say something about Carceri," Mole said. Arun nodded; he'd heard Kyan Winterstrike's last words as well.

"We have to consider anything they tell us—intentional or no—as a possible trap," Dannel said.

"Dana?" Cal asked.

The priestess looked haggard as she started, looking up from the far side of the table. "Shatterhorn is still secure from divination, at least inside the complex. The guards are still there, on the outside."

"Too bad we couldn't extract any information from the shadar-kai," Dannel said. At Dana's look, he hastily added, "I do not mean any criticism, priestess. The man was clearly insane." They'd hoped to repeat their success with Nulin Wiejeron, and gain more information from their prisoner. This time Lok and Arun had been poised to seize their captive's arms and legs, while Benzan was kept at a discreet distance. Dana had stood ready to counterspell any magic he might attempt. But when Cal had dispelled his *polymorph* the fey had spoken a simple word, "*Shadak*", and simply vanished before Dana could even react. Cal had believed that the shadar-kai rogue had possessed an item that had allowed him to *plane shift* to a predetermined location; they'd found something similar on the corpse of the drow eldrich knight. The whole episode had only added to the strain each of them already felt.

"We should have just dropped him into a bucket of salt and been done with it," Benzan had noted afterward.

"What of your other query, Dana?" Cal prodded.

The priestess again lifted her head, pulling back her tangled hair with a hand that still bore some flecks of dried blood. "Nothing useful," she said. "The man is as insane in death as he was in life." She was referring to her attempt to *speak with dead* on Alurad Sorizan, which had not been successful. "I think he believed that *he* was Adimarchus."

"How these people can be so mad and yet so effective is a puzzle," Dannel said.

"Someone else pulls their strings," Beorna growled.

"Yes," Cal admitted. "We will not be truly done with them, I fear, until Adimarchus is dealt with."

"Someone who can summon a balor will not be easy to deal with," Benzan said.

"We have our own allies," Dannel pointed out.

"No," Dana said, gripping the table. "No, I will not summon another celestial this day. Already I am responsible for the destruction of several..."

"Dana, our cause..." Cal began.

"No, Cal, I am resolute. Summonings is one matter; the essence of the being is preserved. But I will not call another entity to this plane, merely to serve as fodder. No, Benzan, do not say it. I've made up my mind."

"I understand your decision," Benzan said. He looked at the others. "And you others may not know that those callings drain the caster as well. I know that Dana will not use that as her reason, but you should know."

"We will fight with what we have," Arun said, simply.

"And this time, I will be at your side," Beorna said, as if defying him to deny her words.

"What of Hodge?" Mole asked.

"He will remain," Arun said. Dana had *raised* the fallen dwarf earlier, but although healthy, it was clear that the doughty warrior was greatly diminished by his recent and repeated paths across the boundaries between realities. Arun met Dana's gaze; the two had agreed that Dana would use her *charm* abilities, if necessary, to ensure that Arun's cohort remained behind with the refugees this time.

"I need but a little more time to finish replenishing my spells," Cal said. "Are there any other questions?"

There were none, only a shared look of fierce determination. They were committed, only more so after the disaster of last night, and would see this to its conclusion, for better or for ill.

Chapter 409

On their second visit, Shatterhorn did not put up much resistance, not at first.

They *teleported* into the same chamber that they had left, just a little more than twenty-four hours previous. They were alert for any ambush, trap, or even an all-out assault by the remaining forces of the Cagewrights. But the chamber was empty, dark, silent. Someone or something had cleared away the bodies of the medusae, leaving only ugly red splotches on the stone floor that stank of corruption.

They continued onward down the pillared hall, deeper into the old yuan-ti stronghold. Mole, back with Benzan in the van, detected a trap through virtue of her gnomish nose. While nearing the bend in the tunnel that Benzan had reported on their last visit, she recognized the familiar stench of demodands. She alerted Cal, who sensed for magic, detecting that a portion of the north wall was shrouded by an illusion. The image covered a slot barely the size of an arrow slit, and behind it lay a farastu that was quite displeased at being detected. It operated a pit that blocked the entire width of the tunnel, but Mole's warning had given them sufficient alarm, and only Benzan was over the ten-foot gap when the trap doors fell open. The trap was a nasty one, with the pit lined with ugly iron blades attached to revolving stone cylinders, but Benzan was able to leap away before gravity took its inevitable course.

Dealing with the demodand was problematic, with it relatively secure behind the arrow slit, but Dannel found a secret door nearby that offered access to its sanctuary, and the fiend was swiftly dispatched.

Bypassing the pit, the companions pressed on, watchful for another trap. They entered a large chamber that was currently empty, and after a brief search continued further onward. The long hall split at its end, opening onto a grim chamber with a décor that suggested it had served as the lair of one of the Cagewrights. They did not linger long, scanning the chair covered in human hide, the jaws containing humanoid hearts soaked in brine, an iron chest with claws for feet, and other unpleasantries. The chest revealed its secrets to Mole's new *chime of opening*, and they discovered a considerable cache of magical weapons that were promptly wrapped and carefully stored in their assorted extradimensional containers.

They were not here to loot, however, so it was not long before they were continuing on, deeper into the stronghold. The fact that the Cagewrights had left a considerable cache of magical items essentially unguarded suggested that perhaps they had indeed abandoned the complex. But they would not stop until they had completed their search, so they returned to the hall and took the other passage into another pillared chamber.

"There is evil in this place," Arun intoned, before they had covered five steps.

The companions readied weapons and spells, just as a creak of metal proved the paladin right, and a pair of heavily armored warriors stepped out of illusory pillars in the center of the chamber.

It took only one good look to confirm that these weren't ordinary adversaries. They looked like half-orcs, but the iron plates that covered their bodies appeared to have been grated directly onto their frames, rather than attached to a suit of armor. Their eyes, deep within the cavernous interior of full helms, were cold and empty, and they carried massive shields with one hand, and axes of familiar black adamantine in the other.

They immediately lifted their weapons and charged into battle.

Chapter 410

"Let them have it!" Benzan urged, putting his own words into action as he lifted his bow and fired at the half-golem warriors. His shot was accurate but glanced harmlessly off a steel plate; given the amount of metal grafted to their bodies, it was almost impossible to tell where the golem ended and the living creature began.

Lok and Arun both tried to overcome that difficulty by the simple expedient of inflicting massive damage upon the enemy warriors. Both scored powerful hits, although the armor of the golem men diminished the effects of their assault. Beorna, however, had no such difficulty, her adamantine sword delivering a crushing blow to the solar plexus of one of the armored warriors.

Dana blasted one with a beam of *searing light*, but the ray had no effect.

"Immune to magic!" Cal warned. Realizing that his own spells would not harm the things, he instead bolstered his allies with a *haste* spell. Mole got around the creatures easily and attacked one from behind, although they proved as immune to her sneak attacks as they were to the spellcasters' magic.

The golems clanked and quivered before releasing gouts of sick yellow vapors in a spread directly before them. The toxin engulfed the warriors, although their fortitude was such that they were able to shrug off the worst effects. Benzan, unfortunately, had been standing too close when he'd fired his last arrow, and he sucked in a mouthful of the stuff. He staggered back, coughing.

Dannel fired his own bow into the nearest half-golem, not expecting much in the way of results. To his surprise, the missile shot off a spray of sparks as it hit, and the creature stiffened, noticeably affected by the shot.

"Your bow, Dannel!" Cal exclaimed. "They're like iron golems... electricity *slows* them!"

The elf nodded, and promptly shifted his aim to the second creature, affecting it as well. But even without that impact, the outcome of the melee was a foreordained conclusion. One of the half-golems managed to deliver a punishing blow that injured Beorna, but that

was all they could do before the warriors hacked them to pieces. When it was over, there was very little blood, only heaps of bent metal and crumpled limbs.

“Let’s move on,” Arun said.

They passed several apparently empty rooms, and found themselves in a passage that opened onto a broad chamber. The passage deposited them onto a ledge ten feet above the level of the chamber floor, with curving stairs to either side that linked the room and passage. The place was a jumbled mess of debris, and a strong odor that combined blood, farastu slime, and some other acrid stench filled the place. In the center of the room was a large pedestal upon which the remains of some sort of statue or stone object stood, and fragments of rock littered the floor, possibly all that was left of whatever it had been. Pillars lined the wall, forming small galleries to the sides and rear of the chamber.

“Looks like a battle happened here,” Benzan said, as they carefully descended the stairs into the room.

“Arun?” Cal asked.

“Nothing active. But there’s a strong lingering aura of Taint here.”

“I’m sensing the same thing, with regards to magic. Okay, spread out, everyone, and search, but stay alert.”

Benzan was the one to find it, this time; a hidden door concealed within one of the pillars near the back of the room. The door opened easily on recessed hinges, revealing a ladder leading up.

“Don’t like the looks of that,” Dannel said. “Too narrow; if there’s something waiting up there, you’re screwed.”

“If one of you can scout it out and tell me how far it goes up, I can *dimension door* the fighters up with me,” Dana said.

“I’ll go,” Mole said.

“Are you sure, Clarese?” Cal asked.

The younger gnome smiled. “Sure. And don’t forget, I can always ‘poof’ out if it’s a trap.” She flourished her magical cloak, and turned toward the shaft.

“Shout down how far you’ve gone, and we’ll be ready to join you in a flash if needed,” Dana said. She gestured to Arun, Beorna, and Lok, who joined her at her side.

But nothing terrible happened to the gnome as she quickly ascended the shaft. Dannel stood beside the opening, watching her progress. “She says that there’s another door about twenty feet up,” the elf reported to the others. “I’ll go up after her.”

“Cal, Benzan... I can take all of you,” Dana said.

“Twenty feet, directly above you,” the elf’s voice came down from the shaft opening.
“There’s a room... come now!”

Dana spoke the word of her spell, and she and the others were instantly transported twenty feet directly upward.

They found themselves in another chamber, smaller than the one they’d just left. The door to the shaft was open behind them, although there was no sign of Mole. A summoning diagram was etched onto the floor, empty, although the companions could guess as to its most recent occupant.

On the far side of the diagram, a stone bier stood before a row of pillars. Laying on the bier was a supine woman, clad in a flowing red robe draped suggestively over her voluptuous frame, apparently unconscious. Standing over her was a strange creature, a lean humanoid with utterly alien features, huge black eyes that revealed no emotion, and six long arms that ended in slender, multijointed fingers. It did not react as they entered, although its hands moved in soft, languorous motions, interweaving in an almost hypnotic movement.

“What in the hells is *that*?” Benzan exclaimed. He and the others held their weapons ready, but as the strange creature did not immediately threaten them, they held their attack.

“The creatures we found at Karran-Kurral, in the crystal blocks,” Dannel observed.

“I... I do not sense...” Arun said, swaying slightly, clutching his head.

“What is it?” Dana said, turning to the paladin in alarm.

Beorna lifted her adamantite sword. “Whatever you are, creature, we want answers, and right now! Who is that woman, and what have you done to her? Where are the Cagewrights?”

The entity did not reply, but suddenly Benzan lowered his bow, and walked forward.

“Ware the diagram, Benzan!” Cal shouted, but the tiefling merely walked through the circle, his boots smearing the silver lines that demarked its influence.

“Benzan?” Lok asked, perhaps sensing that something was wrong.

“What are you doing?” Dannel added, as the tiefling approached the bier, but Benzan did not respond. The six-armed creature still did nothing threatening, covered by their readied spells and missile weapons. It held something in two of its arms, close against its lower torso; a disk of metal perhaps a foot across that looked to be a different color from one moment to the next, depending upon the angle by which one viewed it.

Dana immediately turned away from Arun and rushed after her husband, but she was caught up short as a *wall of force* sprang into being between the bier and the companions, bisecting the room.

“Benzan!” Dana yelled, slamming the barrier with her fists.

The tiefling did not respond, coming to stand directly in front of the bier and its unmoving occupant, the six-armed creature looming over it with an unreadable look in its dark eyes.

“Cal! The wall!” Dana cried. But the gnome had already started casting his spell, summoning magic to *disintegrate* the barrier.

The six-armed creature handed something to Benzan. A green ray sprang from Cal’s hands, striking the *wall of force*, and the shimmering plane vanished. Benzan reached down, picking up the unconscious woman, holding her in his arms.

Dana charged forward, the warriors only a step behind. But before they could reach their friend, Benzan turned to face them, uttered the words of a spell, and disappeared.

“Benzan!”

Chapter 411

“What have you done with him!” Dana exclaimed, shouting at the still-inscrutable creature standing over the empty bier.

The creature’s response was to start waving all six of its arms, two still holding the odd metal sphere, in a complex weave of gestures. That was enough for the rest of the companions, who unleashed an all-out attack upon it. Dannel’s first shot caught it solidly on the shoulder, but it showed no pain, or in fact any reaction at all, continuing its arcane perambulations. The warriors charged at it, but even as they rushed across the chamber floor, further smearing the ruined summoning circle with the heavy tread of their boots, the spellweaver took a step back and conjured another *wall of force* that partitioned itself and the back fraction of the chamber apart from the rest, where the companions stood.

The two dwarves and the genasi came to an abrupt halt before the translucent barrier. On the far side, they could see the creature already moving its many hands in more spellcasting gestures. Beorna smashed her adamantite sword against the barrier, but no one was surprised when the blade merely rebounded without effect.

“We’ve got to get through!” Arun exclaimed. The warriors turned to Cal, but they already knew that the gnome generally only carried a single *disintegrate* spell.

Cal’s brows furrowed in a mix of consternation and intense concentration. The creature’s ability to rapid-cast spells was impressive, and without even knowing the full span of its arsenal he sensed that they were in for a tough fight. But he also noticed something else, which he quickly pointed out to his companions.

“Above!” he shouted, pointing toward the ceiling. And indeed they could all see what the gnome had detected, that this time the *wall of force* did not extend all the way to the ceiling

above, twenty feet above the thick stone blocks of the floor. Whether by intent or accident, the enemy caster had left a gap of about four feet at the top of its *wall*.

Dana quickly cast a *fly* spell, leaping into the air even as the spellweaver protected itself with a barrage of *mirror images* and the surging nimbus of blue flame of a *fire shield* spell. Both spells were cast nearly simultaneously, and the odd creature immediately launched into a new wave of spells, its many hands conducting the somatic components of multiple spells at once. Still it had not spoken, and it had to be triggering the vocal component of its magic through some alternative, elder lore that was unique to its race.

Mole's thoughts were along those lines as she watched the creature from behind one of the pillars in the back of the room. Forgotten by everyone, including (hopefully) the spellweaver, she'd slipped around the side of the room to the rear moments before it had brought up its second *wall of force*. Now, essentially alone with it, she steeled herself to do what had to be done.

With a normal wizard, she would have tried to time her attack to spoil its latest spell. But this... *thing* seemed to be drawing magic in a constant surge, without interruption. She was *invisible*, of course, and she trusted to that and her exceptional talents for stealth to keep her from being detected as she came up behind it. It was facing half-away from her, so it shouldn't be too difficult

Except that as soon as she stepped from cover, the creature immediately turned, fixing her with those dark, emotionless eyes.

The hard way, then, she thought, running straight at it. The creature seemed to be ignoring her, continuing its spellcasting. She'd intended to spring up into a surprise leap at the end of her charge, catching it off guard, but on her last stride her foot landed on a broken piece of crockery, throwing off her charge. She still managed to recover and came out of her flip with her knife stabbing at its throat, but instead of puncturing its larynx as she'd intended, the blade merely scratched its chest just below the left shoulder. She kicked off it, landing back on her feet five feet away. Her entire arm felt numb, and her dagger was covered with frost, the backblast from striking its *fire shield*.

Should have used your crossbow! she said to herself, knowing that she'd probably just earned something very unpleasant from the alien caster.

But the spellweaver merely continued infusing itself with magic.

"Mole, get back!" Dana urged, as she cleared the top of the *wall of force*. The gnome backflipped out of the path of the priestess's *flame strike*, which spiraled down out from above into the spellweaver. The creature merely absorbed the force of the divine blast, its shield protecting it from some of the damage. As the flames cleared, revealing the scorched but still hale body of the creature, it made an intricate gesture with four of its hands, directing a spell at its attacker.

"Ooof!" Dana grunted, as a huge transparent hand appeared from thin air and slammed into her, catching her up and driving her across the room. The hand was far stronger than she was, and she was pushed roughly backward until she was slammed roughly against the

wall in the nearest corner, more than twenty feet away, and no longer in the line of sight of the spellweaver. She struggled against the hand, but it simply held her there, resisting her every effort to break free.

Dannel could only watch as his companions engaged the creature. “If only I still had my magic slippers!” he exclaimed.

He’d only been speaking to himself, but Cal, standing adjacent, heard him. “If mobility is what you need, I can assist,” the gnome said. “Eat this!” he commanded, presenting a small wrapping from his pouch. The elf took it, observing that it moved slightly. He was familiar with the *spider climb* spell, so he did as was directed, while Cal infused magic into him.

As Dannel ran off toward the nearest wall close to the translucent barrier, Cal walked forward to join the warriors. They had confronted the barrier with their own tactics. Arun had spent some moments in concentration, summoning his celestial mount, the giant lizard Clinger. The creature appeared and instantly divined the needs of its master, waiting for the paladin to strap himself in before it started toward the nearest wall. Beorna, meanwhile, had called upon the power of Helm to *enlarge* herself, doubling her size to just over eight feet tall. She quickly grabbed Lok, lifting him toward the top of the wall.

“Gods, man, you are heavy!” she grunted, even her augmented strength barely enough to lift the genasi—or more exactly, the incredible weight of his arms and armor. Lok tossed his shield aside, but even with Beorna’s boost, the top of the wall was still several feet above his reach.

Mole was relieved that she’d been spared an attack, especially after seeing what it had done to Dana, but at the same time she felt a bit insulted that it was simply ignoring her. But why not? Without being able to sneak attack, her little weapons just weren’t very effective; and it didn’t look like it was going to fall for any of her feints or special moves.

Of course, it didn’t know about *all* her surprises, she thought, reaching into her *bag of tricks*. She threw the little furry ball through the creature’s feet, and as it grew into a creature—a big wolf, this time—she moved forward to flank it.

Cal, meanwhile, reached out to touch Beorna’s leg, intending to *teleport* both her and Lok with him to the far side of the *wall of force*. But the spellweaver lifted off the ground, avoiding Mole’s clever plan as it flew up to the ceiling, close to its conjured barrier. The maneuver opened it to Dannel’s line of fire, and the elf immediately let fly with an arrow that drew a violet gash across one of its forearms.

But the spellweaver survived the hit, and unleashed its own surprise: a *horrid wilting*.

The spell had a devastating effect, sucking moisture from the bodies of the heroes. The potency of the spellweaver’s magic was incredible, and only Beorna was able to resist it, using the *mettle* granted her by Helm’s patronage to avoid the power of the spell. Dannel collapsed, gasping as his desiccated lungs struggled to absorb air, and Cal likewise crumpled in a shivering heap. Clinger, halfway up the wall, collapsed, dropping Arun

painfully to the ground, the paladin likewise severely affected. Only Mole, by virtue of being on the far side of the *wall of force* escaped the effect of the spell.

Lok had avoided the worst of the spell through his considerable fortitude, but his skin looked stretched over his bones as he looked down at Beorna. Even with Beorna's boost, the spellweaver was still a good eight feet above him. "Hurl me up!" he shouted.

Beorna nodded, although she could barely lift the man, let alone utilize him as a projectile. But she focused her will, drawing upon the strength of Helm to infuse her muscles with potency, and with a roar literally pushed the genasi up toward the enemy.

The spellweaver drew back from its magical rampart, but not fast enough as the genasi's free left hand closed upon the top of the barrier. Lok's strength and the impetus from Beorna's push carried him up and over, hanging there just long enough for him to bring his axe down in a deadly arc that coincided with the exact center of the spellweaver's skull. There was a reverberation that echoed through the chamber, as the axe unleashed its thundering power upon impact.

Fifteen feet below, Mole had to get out of the way in a hurry, before the bloody carcass of the spellweaver landed with a heavy splat at her feet.

Chapter 412

The sky above was a blasted expanse of ugly reds and sickly browns, the landscape below an equally mottled collection of malevolent color and hostile terrain. Occasionally flashes would shatter the landscape across a far horizon, yet it never seemed to actually rain. Rain would have been welcome, something to cleanse this horrid scenery. Foul odors assailed the nostrils of any traveler, and the only music that carried over the wind was the screams of suffering and harsh laughter evoked at the suffering of others. Signs of organized settlement were few and far between, mostly ugly citadels atop isolated bluffs, and fortresses ringed with high battlements surmounted by spikes and tangles of sharp wire.

This was Carceri, the Prison Plane, a place of suffering and blight.

Benzan trudged through a mire that clung to his boots with each step, releasing his foot only reluctantly with a sickly slurping sound. He still carried the limp figure of Embril Aloustinai in his arms, and he was careful to keep her trailing robe clear of the mud that seemed to coat every exposed surface in this place.

After a time, he came to a small rise, and found a fairly flat stretch of ground covered by sharp tufts of red grass. Spreading his cloak upon the ground, he carefully laid his burden down upon it. He ran his hands over her body—not lasciviously, but with purpose, finding a gleaming gem nestled carefully in the folds of her garment.

He took up the gem, and looked at it. In the ruddy light it seemed to gleam with a crimson tint like fresh blood. The light flickered slightly, as if it were a candle's flame frozen in the mineral lattice of the stone.

He smiled.

“You shall be the tool that earns the final freedom of my Master,” he said. “Graz’zt wants you badly, oh, yes, he does...”

He laughed, a sinister laugh that wasn’t his own. Placing the gem in his pouch, he bent down and picked up the woman again, and started out once more across the blasted landscape of Carceri.

THE END OF “STRIKE ON SHATTERHORN”

Book XI: “Asylum”

Begun 5-9-05

Chapter 413

Dana Ilgarten walked through the long grass, the night wind blowing her hair and her cloak out behind her as she walked. Fat drops of rain struck her face, cold, hard. Mud squished between her toes; this rain was only the last of a series of storms that had struck the region, and more would be coming, if what her senses told her on the wind were true.

She was clad only in the long silvery sheen of her *mooncloak*, and carried no weapon or other gear, other than the milky white icon at her throat, the *moon mote* that, like the cloak, was born of the sacred moonfire of Selûne. It was cold here, far colder than it had been in the south, and it would not be unheard of for snow to come with one of the later storms. She had warded herself against the cold, but even so barely noticed the weather, so immersed she was in her own thoughts and feelings.

On this rainy night, it was as if she was utterly alone in the world.

That was not true, she knew. This world was full of living things, many of which wanted to hurt her. And there were other worlds that touched this one as well, places of darkness and horror and blight. In many ways she was a fool to be here, alone, vulnerable. She should have remained in her quarters, secure within the radius of Cal’s *private sanctum*. Hiding under her bed, perhaps.

She spat out a curse—one of the ones she’d learned from Benzan. Self-pity was not becoming. But nor could her anger at herself obviate the great rent she felt inside herself, a pain that nothing could fill.

She came to a squat crag that jutted out from the meadow, little more than a collection of boulders that had probably sat here for generations, absorbing sun, wind, and rain with equal equanimity. It was a place she knew well. Moss grew on the ancient stones, and mud slicked everything in sight, but she did not hesitate, scaling the boulders to the small flat space atop the tor, fifteen feet above the waving grass below.

Here the full force of the storm battered her, as if indignant that this puny mortal creature would dare to challenge its rights here. No, it seemed to say, in each gust of wind, each gust of rain, you belong in a shelter, beside a warm fire or under a thick quilt. Begone from this place! You do not belong!

Dana ignored the wind and the rain. She knelt, welcoming the hardness of the stone beneath her knees. It helped to distract her from the pain.

But her mind could not be so easily distracted. It traveled back, over a conversation earlier that day.

"Dana, are you all right?"

She looked up at the warm eyes that were filled with concern. The feeling there was not easy to find, surrounded by such a harsh exterior, but Dana had known Lok for many years, knew him perhaps as well as anyone, better even than his own people.

She could not speak. She turned away, looking down at the objects she'd laid down in the matted grass at her feet.

Lok recognized them as her bracers, the ones that she'd worn into battles for years now, the ones she'd worn earlier that day, on their second invasion of Shatterhorn. Blessed of the goddess, sacred product of the moonfire, like her cloak and amulet.

"I do not understand."

Of course you do not, my friend... how can you know, my failure... Go away, she willed, not wanting to expose her frame before her friend. He would not judge her but that did not matter; she had already judged herself, and despite all her vaunted wisdom, despite knowing that she was wrong, it did not help.

He was not going away. He was standing there, looking down at her... It would have been easier with Cal. But the gnome was gone, seeking aid for their cause.

She looked up at Lok, forced herself to meet those deep gray eyes.

"I could have saved him," she said.

"We did everything we could," Lok replied.

"No. I could have saved him," she repeated. With these," she added, kicking the bracers with a foot, as if the inanimate metal could feel her ire. "They grant the power to dimension door. I should have gone right through the wall of force, not waited for Cal, not turned to him... I should have gone right through, and stopped her from taking him..."

Lok shook his head. Lok, always the quiet one, despite his deadly presence on the battlefield, quiet... who nevertheless saw so much. "That spell-creature would have killed you. We would not have been able to help you in time, you would have been alone on the far side of the wall, and it would have killed you. It would have accomplished nothing."

She knew the words to be true, her gods-damned wisdom saw that, saw even without that infernal periapt that sharpened her will, turned her insight into a dagger that cut both ways. But knowing the truth and knowing the truth could be different things...

She shook and quivered, weak, crying, mewling with the pain that she could not hide, not from her closest friends, not from herself. First Delem... then her father... now, the man that she loved, taken from her.

She would fight. She would rage and those who had taken him would know fear. Yes, that would come. But for now, as she felt rough, strong arms encircle her, she knew that for now, the best thing would be to let the grief out.

Now she was alone, in the wind and the rain. The others would have come... Cal would have insisted, in fact. She'd made the decision for them when she'd *dimension doored* out of the camp, using the bracers that had betrayed her before. Or had she betrayed them? The goddess provided the power, but it was up to the wearer to use them properly, to further Her goals.

The night was dark, with little moonlight making its way through the storm clouds banking the sky above. It did not matter; Selûne was there, and her follower could feel Her presence.

Dana slid out of the cloak, exposed herself to the storm. Her skin seemed pale white, too white, in the faint light that penetrated the storm. The sigil at her throat seemed to glow with its own opalescent fire, the light of the moon reflected here upon the earth.

She opened her mind. It was not easy; even with decades of prayer, reaching the necessary equilibrium did not come easily this night. But her patron offered solace as well as power, and finally she succumbed to that familiar embrace.

On some nights she had remained in that blissful exchange for almost the entire night, stirring only with the setting of the moon in advance of the rising of the new day's sun. But this night she had a purpose, and Selûne granted the power she needed.

Completing her prayers, she opened her mind once more, and began the casting of a powerful spell.

Chapter 414

Despite his darkvision, Arun was nevertheless startled when Dana appeared out of the storm, approximately an hour later. Each thought that the other looked tired and disheveled; neither had gotten much sleep in the last twenty-four hours. Neither spoke, the paladin escorting the priestess into the fortified tower that they'd chosen as their new base of operations before returning to his vigil. The templar, Beorna, was still likely atop the tower, the two dwarves alert for another assault from their enemies.

Following the disaster at the Lucky Monkey, they'd shifted their headquarters to a small rural community in the Western Heartlands, at a crossroads in the sparsely-populated region known as the Fields of the Dead. This site was an ideal target for the *teleport* spells of Cal and Dana, for it had been their home for many years. The settlement had been founded by Cal and Lok following their return from the Abyss almost twenty years ago, and since then had grown into a considerable town with over a thousand permanent residents. The region was still rather unsettled, and so a twenty foot high wall of real stone surrounded the place, with watchers who patrolled its length at all times of day and night alert to dangers that might threaten from without. A slender tower fifty feet tall was the most distinctive feature. The structure looked sleek and almost unnatural, as if crafted by a sculptor from a single block of stone. In some ways it had; urdunnir from Lok's home in the North had participated in its construction. It was commonly known as "Travelers' Rest," although the town proper was named Ember Vale.

Both the paladin and Beorna had expressed concern about "abandoning" the refugees from Cauldron. But Cal had responded with irrefutable logic; their enemies were interested primarily in seeking *them* out, not with inflicting further harm on the unfortunate survivors of the volcano city. The victims at The Lucky Monkey had been collateral damage, and their presence at the refugee camp would only have encouraged additional attacks.

Of course, even here, over a thousand miles from Cauldron, they were not wholly secure. But even before they had come to the aid of the people of the shackled city the Travelers had earned a number of enemies, and in the course of the construction of the tower both Cal and Dana had infused it with a number of magical protections. The place was secure against scrying and other forms of magical detection, and was further *hallowed* with an enchantment that prevented magical teleportation into the citadel. One of the improvements made by the urdunnir was the excavation of a secure chamber deep under the place, lined with many feet of solid stone, just outside of the *hallow's* effect. This place, secured from the remainder of the stronghold both by heavy mundane portals and numerous glyphs and wards, allowed the veteran adventurers to enter and exit the place conveniently by magical means as necessary.

Dana stepped through the foyer—also fortified against assault—and into the richly apportioned great room that took up much of the first floor of the tower. The place was maybe thirty feet square, but it had the look of an intimate study. Plush armchairs lined the walls adjacent to numerous bookshelves packed with volumes. A small fireplace added a merry glow to the place, augmented by a half-dozen brass lamps that contained *continual flames*, now shuttered in the deep of the night. A worn table that had clearly seen many years of use occupied the center of the room; a forgotten tea service still lay upon it at one end.

There was one occupant in the chamber. Dannel was sitting in one of the chairs near the fire, one of Cal's books laid open in his lap. The elf had not unshuttered the lamps, using only the firelight to read. The flames shone on his narrow features, glimmering in the dark eyes that looked up as she entered.

"Have Cal and Mole returned?" she asked.

“No,” Dannel said, rising. He raised an eyebrow at her disheveled, soaked condition, the streaks of mud covering her feet, legs, and hands. He brought a blanket from the back of a nearby chair and laid it over her as she sat down in the chair on the far side of the hearth. “I imagine that they remained overnight, so that Cal could recover his *teleportation* spells.”

Dana nodded, expecting as much. Despite the burning need to act that filled her, the chair seemed to embrace her, luring her into sleep. Shaking her head, she forced herself to remain alert. Thoughts of Benzan, and what might be happening to him even now, helped her in that regard. She doubted if sleep would be welcome, right now, with the dreams that would surely come.

Dannel noticed her agitation. “What did you find out?”

Dana did not look up from watching the fire. “He is being held at the asylum of Skullrot, on the prison plane of Carceri.”

“Do you know the location of this place?”

Dana shook her head, suddenly weary again. At that moment she looked older than he’d ever seen her, the elf thought. “I attempted a *commune*, immediately after discerning his location. I wasn’t able to get much information. Apparently there is some sort of magical veil over the place, clouding its location, and any information about anyone or anything within. I could learn nothing about Benzan, except that he is there.”

“Hidden even from the gods?”

“I suspect that whatever enchantment wards the place is more masking my spell than their knowledge,” she admitted. “Cal would know better, I think.”

“What were you able to learn?”

She did then finally look up at him. “That Adimarchus is exerting a greater influence outside his prison.”

“It’s clear that he was driving the Cagewrights, and their madness, at least,” the elf noted.

“I asked if he would be able to escape his bondage, if we did nothing to intervene.”

“And?”

“There was a long pause. At first I thought that the spell had been broken... but then I got my answer. Yes.”

“Predicting the future is never a sure business, even for the gods,” Dannel reminded her.

“Were your researches able to offer any insight?” Dana asked, indicating the small stack of books on the end table beside Dannel’s chair.

Dannel nodded. "I wasn't able to find many references to Adimarchus in the literature on the planes." The elf indicated the handful of books from Cal's library that he'd been reading. "He was an angel that led a revolt in Celestia, as Wiejeron told us. The sources are unclear as to his status in the hierarchy of the greater fiends, but he was likely not short of the status of prince, and may have even been analogous to a demigod. He is said to have ruled an Abyssal layer, but was betrayed by one he thought to be an ally."

"Occipitus."

"Indeed."

"If Adimarchus does escape, then your friend there may be in trouble."

"Sending him a message may be difficult. I don't even know how we'd get back there. Kaurophon brought us over, on our last visit."

"You'd need to obtain the right focus, in order to facilitate a *plane shift*. But we have a more immediate destination."

Dannel nodded. "Skullrot, on Carceri. But how will we get there?"

"Cal believes that the amulet that we took from the drow is a planar transportation device, keyed to Carceri. I can use it as a focus for my *plane shift*, and bring up to eight of us across. As for finding Skullrot... we'll have to search once we arrive. *Someone* there has to know where it is located."

"So just grab a passing fiend, and beat the information out of it?"

Her gaze turned icy. "We will find a way. We have no other options. If you prefer, you can return to Cauldron, and we will handle this matter."

"That is not what I meant, Dana. We are together, all of us... Mole, Arun... likely Beorna as well, although I have not spoken to her on the matter. But you saved us, saved Cauldron from destruction, and prevented a planar apocalypse. We will not forget Benzan, do not fear."

Dana lowered her head, rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hand. "I know, Dannel. You have been a great help... I... I know that you have suffered a loss as well."

"I loved her," Dannel said simply.

She reached out and took his hand. "I know."

After a long moment, he spoke again. "Do you think that we will find Adimarchus there as well?"

"I do not know. Benzan is there, and that is all I need to know."

"You need to get some rest, Dana. I can prepare a draught, if you like, to help you sleep."

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’m not a total fool, Dannel.”

“No one who knew you at all would say that about you.”

She rose, overcoming the lure of the chair through sheer effort of will. Pulling her still-damp cloak around her body, she started toward the spiral stair that led up to the quarters higher in the tower.

“We’ll get him back, Dana.”

She looked back at him and managed a sad smile, then walked up the stairs, leaving the elf alone with a troubled look on his face.

Chapter 415

“There is nothing to be gained by delay,” Cal said. “We are not as prepared as we could be, but we have no choice but to act.”

The seven companions stood around the old table in the great room at Travelers’ Rest. Before them, spread out across the table, was an amazing assortment of weapons, cases of ammunition, scrolls, potions, wands, and other diverse items of magical power. They’d pooled their resources, chronicling everything that they had available to them, everything that could and would be needed in this deadly venture. Along the wall behind the gnome were piled cases, sacks, waterskins, coils of rope, small casks of oil, and other mundane supplies that would be carefully loaded into their extradimensional storage devices. Each would carry a small pack with additional items carefully selected from their total stores, a backup in case they were placed into a situation where their magical bags and backpacks failed to function.

“Mole and I were able to find the help we needed at Twilight Hall,” the gnome went on. “Cylyria was not in attendance, but fortunately the man we needed to see was there. Jarthel was reluctant to lend us his most prized treasure, but we ultimately prevailed upon him to lend the device to our cause.”

“We got a magic flying rug, too,” Mole added, indicating the ten-foot roll that had been laid carefully off to the side, out of the way. “A big one, that should be able to carry all of us.”

“You all know what’s at stake here,” Cal said. “Our primary mission is to find the location of the prison Skullrot, and recover Benzan. But several of the Cagewrights escaped to Carceri, and we also have in the mix a mad demon lord whose shackles may be failing.”

“Sounds like an average outing for this group,” Lok commented.

“Jarthel was able to provide the name of a starting point on Carceri from the Harper libraries,” Cal continued. “A citadel known as the Bastion of Lost Hope. We’ll start our search there.”

“Let’s be about this, then,” Beorna said. “We know what we’re about; all this chatter serves no purpose.”

They said little more as they packed up their gear, double-checking everything in the manner of experienced veterans. Cal had prepared a tally of everything they had, and had carefully totaled the cumulative weight of everything they were bringing with them. They literally had almost no spare space; everything had its place and every one had their specific assignments, down to the spells they’d selected for that day. They would be going in somewhat light in that regard, due to the spells that Dana and Cal had already cast, but they were not willing to sacrifice another day, to leave Benzan in the hands of their enemies longer than was necessary.

“I feel as though something is missing, without an acerbic complaint from Hodge,” Arun said, as he slid his backup weapon—an adamantite battleaxe—into its loop across his back.

“His strength will be needed to help the people of Cauldron return and rebuild,” Beorna said. The dwarf templar’s mien was utterly serious, her solemn expression set in stone as she tended to her own weapons. She’d taken Jenya’s death quite hard, and the prospect of revenge was driving her as powerfully as Dana’s goal to recover her husband. She had immediately volunteered to join them as soon as Dana had shared her revelation about their next destination.

Finally, the table was empty, the supplies along the walls vanished into their assigned containers. Lok went to pick up the heavy carpet, when a solid knock on the outer door interrupted them.

A hiss of swords being drawn from scabbards was followed by the bright glow of Arun’s *holy avenger* shining in the room. Wary of yet another attack, the companions followed Cal over to the viewing port installed near the portal. The device, a gnomish innovation, consisted of several mirrors installed covertly in the frame of the door so that someone on the inside of the portal could look out at whoever stood on the outer threshold, without their being aware of being watched. Cal looked through for a moment, then stepped back, surprised.

“It’s a man in golden armor. One of his eyes is... *burning*, it looks like. He is accompanied by an avoral and a celestial whose flesh has been marred with abyssal markings.”

Arun, Dannel, and Mole exchanged a look. “Morgan,” Dannel said.

Cal drew back the bolts and opened the door. The man in the golden armor smiled, although the expression was made ominous by the wisps of smoke rising from his left eye socket, where a bright orange flame burned.

“Greetings,” Morgan Ahlendraal said to his erstwhile companions.

The reunion was rushed, both because of the urgency of their own quest, and because of the news that Morgan brought with him from Occipitus.

“Adimarchus’s power grows within his prison,” the cleric of Helm told them, when they’d allowed him and his unusual companions into the great room of the tower.

“We’ve recently learned that as well,” Dannel said. “In fact, we had sought a way to contact you, to warn you.”

“I have heard you speak of this man,” Beorna said quietly aside to Arun, who was standing next to her near the hearth. With so many people in the chamber, it was getting a bit crowded. “A servant of Helm, yet he allies himself with one of the Fallen?”

“Morgan accepted the redemption of Occipitus as his task,” Arun replied. “Perhaps he includes the deva as part of that mandate. In any case, it is clear that the power of his god is with him.”

Beorna frowned, but her senses did tell her that Arun was right, that Morgan had in fact been chosen by Helm as a divine agent of the god’s will. By all rights—and the rules of her order—she should defer to him, but her eyes shifted to the scarred figure of Saureya, and her frown deepened.

“We have thwarted the plans of the followers of Adimarchus here on Faerûn,” Cal was saying. “The time has come for a final confrontation; we were in fact preparing for a shift to Carceri when you arrived.”

“Even in his prison, Adimarchus is powerful,” the fallen deva said. “Freed of his bonds, he will be beyond your power. Even in his madness, he is still what he is.”

“Who holds him?” Lok asked. “How was such a being imprisoned?”

The deva looked to Morgan, who nodded. It was a significant gesture. “He was betrayed by one whom he thought to be his ally,” the deva replied. “His closest companion, who turned out to be the son of his enemy. It is that enemy now that holds the key to the shackles that bind the dreaming god.”

“Speak plainly, Fallen,” Beorna rumbled. “Say the name of this foe.”

“Graz’zt. The one who holds Adimarchus, the master of Skullrot, is Graz’zt, Prince of Shadows, Lord of Azzagrat.”

Chapter 417

The fallen deva’s words struck the gathered companions with the force of a trebuchet stone.

“Graz’zt!” Cal exclaimed.

"Gods, no... *he* has Benzan," Dana said, staggering back as if struck. Lok quickly reached out to steady her.

"We cannot face a demon prince," Dannel said. "No matter how powerful we have become, we are not *that* strong."

"We have quarreled with the ebon lord before," Cal said, although it was clear that he was shaken by the news.

"My oath is unchanged," Beorna said. "And in any case, it is unlikely that the demon prince will be present at the prison when we arrive. From what I understand, they tend to spend most of their time secure in their fortresses; they are as much a danger to each other as they are to the realms outside of the Abyss."

"Do not underestimate him, templar," Morgan cautioned. To the others, he continued, "So then, you would continue on this mission?"

"We must," Cal said, as Dana looked up, steel in her eyes.

"Without our intervention, Adimarchus will break free," she intoned. "Such is the vision of Selûne."

"I would offer my aid, but Occipitus lies on the edge of a razor," Morgan replied. "But there is the matter of more immediate import, that which brought me here."

"You had said that Adimarchus's influence is growing," Cal said. "He is fighting your efforts to redeem Occipitus?"

"Not consciously," Morgan replied. "But the taint within the plane... it is difficult to explain, but there have been... surges, waves of madness that have passed through the place. My bond with the place," he said, subtly indicating his smoking eye, "makes me sensitive to these effects, although myself and those allies I have been able to recruit to my banner are resistant to their effect. However, there have been a number of manifestations in recent time, hindering our efforts."

"The most recent of these... effects... directly impacts you," the cleric went on. "Occipitus has of late been visited by a powerful entity. A huge beholder, infused with dark energies and fiendish potency, named Vhalantru."

"Vhalantru!" Arun exclaimed. "But we destroyed him!"

"Not thoroughly enough, it would seem," Dannel noted.

"The beholder seeks revenge upon those who destroyed him here on the Prime," Morgan said.

"But Morgan... you left us before we learned of Vhalantru's true nature," Mole pointed out. "How do you know about it?"

The cleric deferred to the angel beside him. "It was I who initially detected the beholder's presence upon Occipitus," Saureya said. "Being curious, I approached the creature, and spoke with it."

"I am surprised that it did not destroy you out of hand," Dannel said. "It had a bit of a temper, as I recall."

"I surmise that the creature was reborn out of Adimarchus's madness," the deva continued. "It was disoriented, and had no knowledge of how it had arrived upon Occipitus. But it burned with a fury for vengeance against those who had defeated it. After speaking with it, I notified the Chosen of my findings, and he raised a force to destroy the tainted monstrosity."

Morgan nodded. "We tracked it to the Smoking Eye, in the center of the plane. It overcame the guardians I had placed there, and entered the plasma matrix. The energy column should have destroyed it, yet somehow it used the power there to transport itself out of Occipitus."

"Where is it now?" Mole asked.

"That I do not know, but I suspect that it will come here if it can, and destroy you. It is driven by the last motivation that animated it in life, and is now likely insane."

"Well, it can follow us to Carceri if it wishes," Dana said, standing straight. "We thank you for the warning, sir cleric, but this changes nothing."

"Wait a moment," Cal said. "If this thing did return to Faerûn, it would seek us out first at Cauldron. We cannot leave an insane, fiendish beholder wandering about."

"We don't have time..." Dana began.

"Our personal obligations do not obviate our obligation to the people of Cauldron," Arun said. "We have the power to at least confirm where the beholder is, at least."

"And if it can travel between planes, we would be ill-advised to let it come upon us at a time and place of its own choosing," Dannel said. "Vhalantru was a fierce enemy; he has infused himself with the power of a Tarterian creature, and his powers go well beyond even the considerable abilities of a normal beholder."

"I can attempt to *scry* the location of the beholder, if it is upon this plane," Morgan said. "It will take time..."

"I can do it faster," Dana said. "Lok, I will need my font." The genasi withdrew the small platinum basin from his *bag of holding* after a minute's search, which Dana filled with a vial of holy water. The liquid formed a thin, shimmering sheen along the shallow bottom of the font, into which the priestess summoned the power of her goddess. It took only a matter of seconds before a picture formed in the font, and the others crowded around to see.

"By the gods," Dannel said.

The beholder filled the image, a huge, bloated monstrosity. It looked even more terrible than it had the last time they had faced it, its foul hide broken and mottled with patches of cracked, blackened flesh, trailing ugly lines of glistening ichor. Its central eye had been replaced with a blazing ember of flame trailing smoke, a foul copy of Morgan's own marking. As they watched, they could see beams of energy erupting from its eyestalks, and they saw it fly over a wall, with smaller structures visible below. The spell did not give them enough distance to clearly distinguish what it was attacking, but Mole recognized the location from the subtle clues visible in the font.

"That's Redgorge!" she said. "Remember, Arun, Dannel? We were there, for that meeting with the Chisel..."

"They will not be able to stand before the beholder," Arun said. "We must take action!"

Even Dana seemed overwhelmed by what she saw, and she nodded. "I can take five with me. Cal?"

"I can bring four," Cal said, staring down at the image in the font, marking a target location for his *greater teleport*. "I'll take Mole, Dannel, and Lok. Dana, you take Arun, Beorna, Morgan, and his companions. We'll be out in the open, and it may notice us right quick, so spread out quick and be ready to attack. Everyone better get a missile weapon ready. I don't know if that flame effect upon its central eye means that it no longer possesses its antimagic power, but be ready to have any spells upon you cancelled when it faces you."

"Arun, give me your quiver," Dana said. "I can only affect one batch of arrows, so you will have to share them out once I have laid my enhancements upon them."

"Go ahead," Dannel said. "My missiles require no such enchantment."

The paladin nodded, distributing a number of the empowered arrows to Lok and Beorna. He slung his shield across his back, and fitted one of the long shafts to his bow.

The companions quickly readied themselves, gathering around their appointed spellcaster. They waited only about twenty seconds, casting buffs and other spells in anticipation of engaging the enemy. Then, taking hands, they formed two circles around Dana and Cal, who cast their *teleport* spells, sending them halfway across Faerûn into the mouth of danger.

Chapter 418

The two groups materialized in the midst of a maelstrom of noise and violence.

The beholder was instantly visible above them, drifting over the town, rays of energy blasting from its eyestalks into structures and the screaming forms of fleeing townsfolk. Redgorge's population had been greatly expanded by the flight of refugees from Cauldron, but the half of the town's buildings had been empty to start with, so shelter had been found for everyone. Now the beholder was destroying building after building; as they watched, it

disintegrated the entire front face of a two-story building, causing it to collapse forward, the upper facing sagging to the street as though the structure was tired and was lying down for a nap.

Vhalantru was distracted; the townsfolk were offering some resistance that thus far was proving ineffective. A robed man emerged from a large stone structure, surrounded by visible auras that bespoke magical wards, and as he emerged he hurled a *fireball* up at the beholder. The companions recognized Maavu Arlinal, one of the leaders of the organization known as the Chisel. The building was their headquarters, which the companions knew from their earlier visit to Redgorge, an inn named The Redheaded Miner. Arlinal's *fireball* flew true toward its target, but Vhalantru quickly spun, focusing the gaze of his burning central eye toward the spellcaster. As soon as that gaze passed over the *fireball*, the projectile winked out of existence. Another armed man appeared in one of the upper-storey windows of the inn, firing a crossbow at the beholder. The bolt struck the bloated form of the eye tyrant, but it appeared to merely stick harmlessly in its thick hide. Another man, armed with a long spear and wearing a leather bartender's apron, was ushering panicked people into the inn through its side entrance.

The members of the Chisel were offering what resistance they could.

The companions had appeared behind Vhalantru, separated by approximately sixty yards. Cal, Mole, Dannel, and Lok had appeared at street level, surrounded by the wake of destruction formed by the beholder's passing. A man lay in a bloody heap a few paces away, half of his torso blasted away, while a petrified figure of a fleeing woman stood in the middle of the street a bit further on.

Dana and the others appeared atop the town's outer wall, the massive bastion originally raised by Surabar Spellmason centuries ago. Morgan, the avoral, and Saureya all lifted into the air at once, while Dana began spellcasting. Beorna and Arun hefted their bows, drawing the arrows that had been magically enchanted and *aligned* to Good by Dana's magic.

"I don't remember it being that *big* last time," Mole said, staring up at the monster. Indeed, Vhalantru was now a huge spheroid nearly sixteen feet in diameter, its ugly black hide even more garishly unwholesome in the flesh.

"It's turned away... blast it, quickly!" Cal urged, putting his own words into action as he fired a *disintegrate* ray into the beholder's body. Vhalantru resisted the spell, but it nevertheless took some damage from the destructive energy of the spell.

Vhalantru had detected the new threat as soon as the companions had appeared, its many small eyes making it almost impossible to surprise. Even as the companions fired their bows or closed the range, it started unleashing blasts from its eyestalks. A beam lashed across Saureya's torso, drawing a black scar across his body as the fallen deva turned out of its path. Another struck Cal in the chest, attempting to return the gnome's favor by *disintegrating* him, but the gnome, his fortitude augmented by magic, was able to resist the effect.

But even as it started unleashing attacks, the beholder came under heavy fire from the bows of the companions. Beorna and Arun, atop the wall surrounding the town, were at a decent range, almost a hundred yards from the beholder, but the huge orb still made for a fairly big target. Arun scored a hit with his first shot, the enhanced arrow stabbing deep into the beholder's body, but Beorna's smaller bow did not carry quite so far, and while she impacted it her first arrow failed to penetrate its tough outer hide.

Dannel, on the other hand, was both closer and better with the bow than either of the holy warriors. His weapon sang in his hand as he fired shot after shot up at the beholder. At a little over a hundred feet distant, his shots struck with perfect intensity exactly where he wanted them to, punching deep into Vhalantru's unnatural form. Each shot flared with a discharge of magical energy as it struck home, releasing the power imparted to them by the elf's magical bow.

But Vhalantru was not done, and it quickly targeted the elf with another eyebeam, blasting him with a violet ray that overcame Dannel's will, filling him with a stark terror that drove all logical thought away. Dropping his bow, the elf ran screaming from the battle.

"You... will... all... pay..." the beholder hissed, its voice barely comprehensible as it drifted back toward them. As it moved the gaze of its central eye swept over them, the companions could feel their magical protections and the efficacy of their items fade. It kept the angle of its gaze down, allowing it to continue to use its eye-beams on foes located above ground level.

The barrage of missiles continued, with the members of the Chisel continuing to add their support from behind, while they escorted the panicked townsfolk to safety. Maavu Arlinal blasted it with a volley of *magic missiles*, but the glowing darts merely evaporated as they struck its body, defeated by the creature's spell resistance. An eyestalk swiveled back to track the magic-user, blasting him with a ray that spread out over his body, turning him to stone. With that threat removed, the beholder continued its focus on the enemies that had already destroyed it once before.

Saureya dove at the beholder, prepared to strike. He carried no weapon, but looked no less dangerous for it, his raven wings folding close around his body as he slashed through the air. The beholder tracked him with one of its eyestalks, and even as the fallen deva lifted a fist to strike it blasted him with the full force of a ray at point-blank range. Saureya immediately went limp, his inertia carrying him straight down and *through* the slate roof of a nearby house in a clatter of dust and noise.

The avoral, seeing that the beholder's central eye was directed downward, let out a screech and conjured a *lightning bolt* at the monster. The blast vanished as it struck the beholder, as did the blast of *searing light* that Morgan unleashed at it a moment later. The knight let out a cry in Celestial, echoed by the avian outsider as the two dove toward the beholder, claws and sword outstretched. Again, Vhalantru was ready, and beams lanced out to strike its attackers. The avoral was hit by the same ray that had injured Saureya earlier; this time, however, its target was not able to resist the grim power of the beholder's *finger of death*. And as the winged celestial fluttered lifelessly to the street below, another beam struck Morgan, fixing him within a blue glow and hurling him bodily to the side, into the gaze of the beholder's central eye. The beam winked out as it entered the *antimagic*

cone, but so too did the power of flight granted by Morgan's armor immediately fade, and the knight plummeted hard to the muddy ground fifty feet below.

Chapter 419

"Keep firing!" Cal enjoined, his own magic temporarily neutralized by the beholder's gaze. "Once your missiles pass out of the cone, the enchantments on them will return!" And indeed, the barrage was having an effect, with both Lok and Arun scoring additional hits that appeared to penetrate the beholder's hide. Fat gobs of blood fell from its body now, splattering with a hiss on the ground below.

A scuffling noise from a nearby ally between two damaged buildings drew Cal's attention around. A mad-eyed dwarf appeared and rushed at him, his intent clear even before he leapt at the gnome, hands outstretched. Cal quickly sidestepped the *charmed* commoner's rush, unwilling to injure this hapless pawn of the beholder's will. Lok glanced his way, but Cal only pointed up at their foe, a grim look on his face.

A rush of air atop the battlements announced Dana's summoning of a huge air elemental. She instructed it in Auran, and the creature darted almost straight up into the air. Vhalantru could temporarily banish it simply by lifting its gaze, she knew, but that would reopen it to magical attack from the enemies below.

The beholder, meanwhile, had ceased its approach, slowly gaining more altitude as it settled into an ideal range for its own attacks. Whatever its rebirth had done to its mind, it seemed no less canny an adversary than when it had fought them before, in the dark undertunnels of Oblivion. But one thing was clear; it had come back far tougher than it had been before. Already it had absorbed more damage than had killed it in their first confrontation, and it only seemed to get more enraged with each arrow or spell that drove through its defenses.

Its approach had brought the enemies on the battlements within the range of its eye-rays. It blasted Arun the blue ray that it had used against Morgan a moment ago, lifting the dwarf from his feet and hurling him back roughly over the battlements. It was a long fall to the ground below, and an even longer walk to the nearest opening in the wall; for the moment Arun was out of the fight.

"Try that with me, you bastard!" Beorna said, firing another arrow. But Beorna had yet to injure the beholder, and it focused its attention upon more dangerous foes.

It found one of those in Dana, who stood her ground as Arun was blasted away just a few feet from where she stood. She called upon the goddess, summoning a column of flame down from the sky that descended onto the body of the beholder. Her spell overcame its spell resistance, and while it was resistant to fire, it could not absorb the divine energies infused in the *flame strike*. Snarling in pain, it blasted Dana with a pair of beams, but the priestess was strong in both mind and body, and she resisted both effects.

Mole had come into the battle knowing that mere *invisibility* wasn't going to help her remain unseen against *this* adversary. Thus, as soon as they'd appeared she darted around the

edge of the nearest building, moving closer to the beholder while staying out of its direct line of sight. It had taken her about twenty seconds to get to where she was now, crouched under a water trough almost directly under the creature. Silent as a mouse, she cocked her crossbow, and took aim.

The beholder shuddered as Dana's air elemental slammed into it from above, blasting it with solid blows of ultraconcentrated air. The elemental was a powerful creature, but unfortunately it lacked the resistances of the adventurers, and it could not resist as Vhalantru almost casually *disintegrated* it.

The beholder roared in pain as it took another pair of hits; another powerful shot from Lok's longbow, accompanied in the same instant from a *shocking bolt* from Mole's crossbow. It spun its body, lifting its gaze upward, settling it purposefully upon Dana, who was forced to abort a second *flame strike*. As Dana set out in a run along the wall, trying to get out of the radius of its antimagic cone, the beholder fired its eye-beams at Lok and Mole. Lok was struck by its *fear ray*, and despite his considerable mental strength he could not overcome the power of Vhalantru's power. Even as the genasi fled the beholder fired another pair of rays down at Mole. The gnome darted behind the cover of the water trough as the first ray struck it, *disintegrating* it. As she was revealed she leapt back, avoiding a second ray that blasted a long scorch across the muddy ground where she'd been standing an instant before.

"Nyah, nyah!" she shouted up at it, firing another bolt from her crossbow before tumbling into the cover of a nearby doorway.

Saureya, meanwhile, had reappeared, covered in dust from his forced landing. His expression was strangely detached as he leapt again into the air, but he'd gained barely thirty feet of altitude before several of eye-beams lanced into him. One cut a swath of rent flesh across his shoulders, *inflicting* a painful wound. The second was the *fear ray* that had already taken two of the beholder's enemies out of the fight. The deva was likewise affected, and it aborted its attack to fly off, departing the battlefield.

"Run, little angel!" the beholder chortled.

Cal had been grappled by the *charmed* dwarf, but as soon as Vhalantru's gaze had shifted upward his protections returned, making the commoner's efforts significantly more difficult. The gnome immediately *teleported* out of his adversary's grasp, leaving the dwarf looking around in confusion. The gnome didn't go far, reappearing under a porch he'd spotted a short distance down the street, out of the immediate view of the beholder.

Once there, he made himself *invisible* before sidling carefully into position, slowly moving forward until he could just see the lower half of the beholder's body—without it being able to spot him.

Morgan had been stunned but not seriously hurt by his fall, and once the beholder lifted his gaze he was quickly leap into the air, carried aloft once more by the power of his *celestial plate*. But once again the beholder seemed to be waiting for this, blasting the cleric with a black beam that slammed into his chest with dark finality. With a scream Morgan barely

overcame the fell power of the *finger of death*, and he flew up below it, his sword lancing out in a brilliant arc that opened a gash several feet long in its gruesome hide.

Now truly feeling the pain of the many attacks it had absorbed, Vhalantru spat a violent gibberish of curses and insane promises of wrath. It spun again, catching up Morgan in the effect of its central eye as the cleric turned for another attack. Once more he was helpless to stop it as the power of his armor faltered, and again he fell to the ground, landing hard on top of an overhanging porch attached to the front of a nearby house, crashing through it to land in a clatter of broken wood and clay tiles.

Meanwhile lancing rays of energy continued to blast out from the beholder in all directions. Beorna, frustrated at her inability to score a hit with her bow, had finally unleashed a *searing light* that had managed to overcome its spell resistance, but her reward was a barrage of beams that tore mercilessly into her. Bolstered by the mettle granted by her service to Helm, she was able to avoid being killed outright by its *finger of death*, but its *sleep* ray overcame her, and she slumped down behind the battlements, blissfully unconscious.

Dana had moved into position for another *flame strike*, but she'd barely managed the first syllable of her invocation when Vhalantru found her with another beam, turning her to stone.

Mole had moved into position behind the building where she'd taken cover, and appeared just long enough to shoot the beholder with another *shocking bolt*, the missile disappearing into its body with a fizzing pop. The gnome stepped back into cover almost in the same instant, but Vhalantru had apparently been expecting this as well. Its *disintegration* ray sliced into the corner of the house, vaporizing a good portion of the surrounding wall. A moment later the blue *telekinesis* ray impacted the roof, directing the inevitable collapse of the building onto the spot where the gnome had just vanished.

Vhalantru's laughter redoubled, reek with its madness, the sound a terrible echo across the town as the beholder continued unleashing destruction all around it. It kept laughing until the moment when Cal blasted it with an empowered *disintegrate*, transforming the monstrous creature into a plume of fine dust that drifted down onto the ruins of Redgorge.

Chapter 420

Dana's first words on being restored to living flesh were to the point.

"How many days?"

She was in a small, nearly empty room with wood paneling covering most of the stone walls. Other than a few mostly unpopulated bookshelves and a couple of well-worn armchairs, the room was empty. Cal and Lok were the only other ones there.

"Two days," the gnome replied.

"Two days? Why so long?"

The gnome sighed, and sank back into one of the smaller chairs, designed for folk of his size. "Because that's how long it took," he said. "The power of the beholder's magic was considerable, and I suspect significantly augmented since our friends last tussled with it. I was able to restore Arlantal and a few of the commoners who'd been petrified, but with you... it was as if some of the beholder's essence lived on, fighting me. To be honest, I'd considered teleporting you to Waterdeep, to seek help from one of the Guild mages, or perhaps the Blackstaff himself."

The priestess stretched her muscles, grimacing as her body experienced the strains of recovering from the transformation. "I'm sorry, Cal," she said. "I just cannot help but think of what's happening to Benzan, with each moment we spend here, delayed."

The gnome nodded. "We do not help him by rushing blindly to our doom."

"My mind recognizes the wisdom of your words, even as my heart rails against them," Dana admitted. She sighed. "What else has transpired?"

"Morgan and Saureya have returned to Occipitus. The knight of Helm left this for you." He handed her a small, thin metal device about six inches long, shaped like a dagger shorn of its hilt and crossguard. It was actually a slender fork, the two tines separated only by the barest of spaces.

"A focus for the *plane shift* spell," Dana said.

Cal nodded. "It will allow you to take us to Occipitus, should the need arise."

"From what the others have said about the place, it does not sound like a pleasant locale," Lok said.

"The fallen deva believes that the power of the plane may revive the beholder again at some point, so long as Adimarchus continues to exert his madness beyond the confines of his prison," Cal said.

"Wonderful," Dana noted dryly.

"Arun and Beorna have been helping the people of Redgorge," Cal said. "Nine people lost their lives in the attack, while over fifty were injured, some seriously."

"It could have been much worse, had we not intervened," Lok said.

"Is everyone else all right?" Dana asked. "Dannel, Mole?"

"Mole had a house dropped on her," Cal said. "She broke a few ribs, but she healed up all right."

"Then we are ready."

“It would be better if we regained our spells, first. My higher valences have been focused upon the task of restoring you, and your spells are heavily depleted from the encounter with the beholder.”

“My *plane shift* is ready,” Dana insisted. “I had prepared two, so that we can return to the Prime if necessary.”

Cal met her eyes for several long seconds, then nodded. “Let us go get the others.”

Chapter 421

Carceri.

Everywhere was devastation, from one horizon to the next, alternating between marshes fetid with the stench of rot, to blasted hills covered with razor-sharp black weeds that oozed poison from their tips, to cracked flatlands where wisps of toxic vapors swelled unpredictably from the ground. Above it all was the unchanging sky, its colors a *mélange* of blood and mud and foulness. In whole the place was unwelcoming, unpleasant, and inimical to long life.

But life did exist here. Demodands, the masters of the plane, tormenters and wardens and guardians of those condemned to this place. Other races of fiends were common, and even some other outsiders could be found, pursuing their own business. There were very few other indigenous species, most of which eked out a hard existence preying upon members of those other categories.

There were settlements scattered across the plane. Most were prisons, fortresses tall or squat, but alike in the cries of agony and madness that filled the air around them. There were no cities per se, but one could find the occasional safehold, a place where visitors and residents of the plane could meet to trade and deal, using any of the varied currencies of the planes where souls and magic were as important as coins and gemstones.

It was toward one of these sites that the companions from Faerûn traveled. Their conveyance was the large magical carpet that Cal had acquired, flying low over the ground, just high enough to avoid the obstacles of terrain that occasionally rose out of the blasted landscape. The carpet was loaded down almost to its maximum capacity, and it traveled barely further than a man’s brisk walk, but it did not cease, and they made good time toward the destination. Dana had cast her *find the path* spell shortly after their arrival; while the spell had since faded, they continued in the direction that it had indicated, toward the hold that the Harper researches had indicated might hold some answers for them.

“The Bastion of Lost Hope,” Dannel said, breaking a silence that had lasted for almost an hour. “It does not sound like a pleasant place.”

“Let Dana and myself do the talking,” Cal said. “I will see that we are all *veiled* to disguise our true natures, and my *tongues* spell will ease communication, if necessary. We’ve dealt with these sorts of creatures on their home planes before.”

“Arun, will you be okay with this?” Mole asked. “I mean, there’s bound to be a lot of nasty folks there who won’t like bumping elbows with a paladin.”

“I can... restrain myself,” he said, though his hand drifted to the hilt of his holy sword as he spoke.

“Even so, you may wish to wear that extra *ring of mind shielding* that we took from the Cagewrights after their little ambush,” Cal pointed out, holding up his own hand to indicate the silver ring there.

“What of Beorna?” Arun asked.

“I can ward myself,” the templar said. “Do not worry about my presence or actions spoiling your schemes; if necessary you can have we warriors represent ourselves as your bodyguards.”

“An excellent suggestion, and in line with my own thoughts,” Cal said.

“We’ve got company,” Dannel said, drawing their attention ahead and to the left, where a small speck was visible in the distance, flying at what looked to be a few hundred feet off the ground. The companions readied weapons and spells, and looked warily in that direction.

“What is it?” Beorna asked, stringing her bow. She’d replaced the compact weapon that had been so ineffective against Vhalantru with a full-sized longbow she’d purchased in the village. It was a bit crowded on the carpet, and Dana had to dodge back to avoid being poked in the eye with the weapon.

“Too far to tell,” Dannel said.

“Time to put on our disguises,” Cal said, casting his *veil* spell. “Remember your roles.”

“It just got a lot closer... I think we’ve been spotted,” Dannel said. And indeed it had suddenly just... *shifted* closer, maybe a thousand yards out, now, close enough to identify it.

“Vrock demon,” Dana said, somberly.

“Should we land and dismount?” Lok asked.

“Wait, let’s see if we can bluff past a confrontation,” Cal suggested.

“If it comes to a fight, we’ll be at a disadvantage, all squeezed together here,” Beorna pointed out.

“If need be, you and I can dismount,” Dana said to the genasi, casting her *fly* spell upon him. Her own magical boots offered the same means of mobility.

“I’ll take the carpet down, if it looks like trouble,” Cal insisted.

“More of them,” Dannel reported, although they could all see the two additional vrocks that had *teleported* in, flying now well off and above them, giving them a thorough examination from a safe distance.

Cal stood. “HINDER THE EMBASSY OF THE YUGOLOTHS AT YOUR PERIL, FIENDS!” he shouted, his voice greatly augmented by a *ghost sound* cantrip.

The vrocks did not appear fazed by the warning, continuing their lazy flight around them before all three *teleported* away.

“Think they bought it?” Mole said.

“That, or they’re getting help,” Dannel replied.

There was nothing to do but press on. Several nervous minutes passed without any sign of the demons. Finally, when they were starting to think that they’d escaped a confrontation, a massive demon nearly twenty feet in height appeared directly ahead of them, hovering in mid-air. It looked to be a humanoid cross between an ape and a boar, with tiny wings that nevertheless seemed quite able to keep it in the air. The vrocks had returned with it, six of them, now, flying a good distance above and around them. That wasn’t all; a quartet of demons had appeared on the ground below them, loping in pace with the carpet; hezrou demons with bloated bodies and toad-like visages. Cal reflexively brought the carpet to a halt, maybe thirty feet away from the demon blocking their path.

The nalfeshnee laughed. “I thought I would pay my respects personally, to the mighty ‘embassy’ of the Yugo...”

It never got a chance to finish, for Cal had quickly recognized the nature of the demon, and realizing that it possessed the ability to see right through their disguises, he shouted, “Take it!”

Chapter 422

As Cal spoke his command, his companions, ready for battle, immediately released their attacks. The demons were prepared for a confrontation as well, but in that first critical moment, the adventurers from Faerûn claimed an edge measured in fractions of a heartbeat.

Mole was by far the fastest of all of them, and even as Cal opened his mouth to shout his command the gnome had gauged the threat and lifted her small bow to fire. Her little bolts would not have done much against the huge demon, but before it could react she’d already fired a shot into its throat, the tiny missile all but vanishing into the thick folds of flesh gathered there. Clearly she’d had an effect by the way that the demon’s eyes widened and it roared in pain and outrage, but before it could counter she’d already slapped the string down and palmed a new bolt into place, lifting and firing in a motion that an ordinary crossbowman never could have managed. The second bolt struck within an inch of the first, adding to the demon’s discomfort.

But the nalfeshnee was a grandee of the Abyss, a potent beast indeed, and a few bolts, sneak attacks notwithstanding, were not going to take it out of the fight. It called upon some fell power, and an aura of multicolored beams of gyrating light sprang up around its body, rapidly building in intensity.

Cal, true to his word, commanded the carpet to descend, aware of the hezrous but knowing that their warriors would be seriously hampered in such a crowded space. As the nalfeshnee gathered its *smite* power the gnome used what was rapidly becoming his favorite tactic, an empowered *disintegrate* that lanced through the nimbus of lights into its fat form. The demon resisted being turned into ash, but even so the gnome's ray cut an ugly black slash in its thick hide.

The vrocks screeched in anticipation of the fray, a sound echoed by the terrible croaks of the hezrou below. As the carpet descended, the hezrous leapt up in anticipation of tearing into its passengers. A few started to conjure *unholy blights* or *chaos hammers*, the better to soften up their prey.

All that ended, however, as Dana rose up above the carpet, her boots sprouting tiny magical wings, and spoke a *holy word*.

The four hezrous were instantly struck down, slain by the divine purity of the *word*. The nalfeshnee was very fortunate, its spell resistance barely holding against the power of the magic, but it swiftly draw back, quick to recognize that these foes, while not what they claimed to be, were nevertheless extremely dangerous.

Lok leapt off of the carpet a moment later, flying in a straight line toward the nalfeshnee. Arrows from Dannel's bow sped past him, burying themselves into the demon. The elf was using the blessed white-fletched *holy arrows*, which struck the fiend with great effect. By the time that Lok reached it three arrows already pierced its chest, trailing ichor that ran down its body through its furry hide to fall in fat drops to the ground below.

Lok added his own voice to its troubles by swinging his axe at the creature's head. Its reach far exceeded his, and its huge jaws snapped at him as he dove at it. Lok did not try to avoid the attack, twisting to the side as its tusks pounded his shoulder and side, and driving his axe down in a powerful arc that removed one of its ears.

The vrocks, meanwhile, had thus far avoided damage, well outside the radius of Dana's spell. *Mirror images* appeared around several of them, while three dove down in a tight knot about eighty feet above them, twisting and gyrating in a complicated aerial dance that, whatever its purpose, clearly didn't bode well for their enemies.

Arun and Beorna were the last to act. Beorna lifted her bow and took several shots at the nalfeshnee. The thing was so big that she could hardly miss, but her arrows were no longer *aligned*, and the shots merely stuck in its hide, doing little or no damage. Seeing that archery would not have much effect, Arun instead summoned a *magic circle against evil*, warding them against the dark powers wielded by the demons.

It was a timely gesture, for a moment later the rainbow hues dancing around the figure of the nalfeshnee exploded in a brilliant display of light. Each of the companions felt a sudden wave of disorientation as the lights twisted around them, creeping into them, filling them with whispers of terror and images of that which they feared most of all.

For the most part, their wills stood up to the barrage, but Dannel, Mole, and Lok all suddenly stiffened, dazed, their eyes wide with the horrors that they suddenly saw before them.

Screeching madly at the success of the nalfeshnee's *smite*, the vrockes began to circle lower, claws outstretched.

Chapter 423

What had started as a random encounter with a pack of demons had suddenly gotten a lot more serious, as the nalfeshnee ensnared three of the companions with its fell power.

The nalfeshnee wasn't taking any chances, flying farther back, calling more aid to its cause. The air around it shimmered as it drew upon the power of the Abyss, opening into a pair of rifts that disgorged another pair of vrockes. The summoned demons let out loud screeches, happy to join the developing battle. One dove at Lok, clawing at him, while the second dove at the rug, which had nearly settled to the ground. As soon as it had gotten close enough, it let out an ear-splitting screech, but the companions were able to resist its effect.

The other vrockes dove in to exploit their advantage, except for the three that continued their mad dance above. Cal, recognizing the danger of that ritual, opened his mouth to issue a warning, but before he could speak another diving vrock let out another screech, and he fell onto his back, stunned.

Dana, hovering in the air about twenty feet above the ground, drew the attention of the other two diving vrockes. Surrounded by *mirror images*, they looked like a horde of demons, and they quickly flanked her, eagerly tearing with claws and bite. The priestess had called upon the *divine power* of Selûne, but her weapons were not enhanced to pierce the demons' damage resistance, nor did she have another spell with the potency of the *holy word*.

So she did the only prudent thing, and *dimension doored* to a safe distance.

Arun drew his holy sword, but the vrockes kept their distance, tormenting him with evil cackles and cruel hisses. They could feel the power building above them even if the mortals could not, and they waited for the power of their fellows to be unleashed. Beside him, Beorna uttered a *prayer* to Helm, whose blessing reached across the planes to fortify them and hinder their enemies. She then crossed over to Dannel, grabbing the dazed elf's quiver with its cargo of *holy arrows*.

"These might have more effect!" she said to Arun, as she and the paladin stepped off from the carpet onto more stable ground. The vrockes above continued pacing them, but did not immediately attack; they were joined a moment later by the two that had threatened Dana.

All now were protected by *mirror images*, and had infused themselves with *heroism*. Another issued a shriek, and while the dwarves again resisted it, Cal was again stricken, unable to move.

“What are they waiting for?” Beorna asked, firing through a *mirror image*.

Her question was answered a few seconds later. When the dance of the vocks reached its height, a terrible sound filled the air, like a roll of tough fabric being ripped apart. A wave of sizzling energy spread outward from the three linked vocks, enveloping all of the companions, with the exception of Dana, in its radius. Each of the companions was blasted by the terrible energies of that wave, and while no one was killed outright, even the dwarves found themselves hard hit by the effect. Before they could fully recover the rest of the vocks were upon them, diving and clawing with all four of their taloned limbs. The dwarves held their ground, laying about them with their swords. One of the vocks dove onto the carpet, where Cal was just beginning to stir from the effects of the demons’ terrible cries. It seized hold of him roughly and started to lift him into the air. Arun quickly leapt to the gnome’s aid, charging into the vrock, *smiting* it in the back with his holy sword. The vrock immediately dropped the gnome and *teleported* away.

Beorna found herself hard-pressed as two vocks tore at her. Her adamantine armor and inherent toughness made it difficult from the vocks to seriously harm her, but they had her flanked, and both released clouds of spores that sifted through the small openings in her mail, burrowing painfully into her flesh. One vrock nailed her with a claw that snagged in her visor, piercing her forehead and nearly taking out her eye. She was already reeling from the energy blast from the *dance of ruin*, and could not take much more punishment. Her own counterattacks struck images, and the demons laughed at the futility of her counterattacks.

But the templar was not alone. Lying on his back, Cal tossed a *dispel magic* into the midst of the vocks. Their magical powers sloughed off of them, with *mirror images* vanishing from two, and a third seeming to fade slightly as its *heroism* was removed. Screeching in anger, the demons redoubled their attacks, hoping to overcome the dwarves through brute force. They were reinforced by the three diving down from their aerial dance, conjuring added defenses as they came.

Once the true location of her foe was revealed, Beorna did not hesitate. Channeling the power of Helm into her sword, she *smote* the demon that had struck her, taking off the arm that had struck her just below the shoulder. The demon screeched and started to fall back, but having bled her opponent she was not going to let it get away that easily. Her follow-up strike was a thrust that tore into its belly, disemboweling it. The demon’s screams turned into gurgling hisses as it collapsed to the ground, flopping about as it bled out the last of its life.

Arun was hit in the back as a vrock tore at him with claws and bite in a violent fury. The paladin merely took the hits, letting the demon get its fill of him before he abruptly turned and tore into it with a full attack. This demon too paid the price for the loss of its *mirror images*, and within a few seconds it joined its comrade bleeding out upon the cracked Carcerian soil.

During the entire battle with the vrock, no further attacks had been forthcoming from the nalfeshnee. The reason for this was the running battle that the demon had been engaged in with Dana. After opening her *dimension door* to take it out from the grasp of the vrock, she'd reappeared a few hundred feet behind the giant demon. Its back had been to her, but she quickly got its attention with a *flame strike* that ravaged it despite its inherent resistance to fire. Turning, the demon countered with a *dispel* that canceled the power of her boots, sending her plummeting to the ground. Fortunately she hadn't been that far up, only about sixty feet off the ground, but even so she landed hard, collapsing into a roll that ended with her dusty and bruised, but alive.

Looking up, she saw that the demon wasn't quite finished with her yet. It hurled its power at her, seeking to destroy her reason, but the attack slid effortlessly off of the iron discipline of her mind.

Nice try, demon, she thought, forcing her battered body to obey her commands as she pulled herself to her feet. The demon was trying another tack, and as she started limping away—*let it think it's got me*—a bolt of lightning shot down from the clear skies above, slamming painfully into her back right between her shoulder blades.

"Okay, that's it," she said. The demon had not fallen for her ruse, and indeed had pulled away some, and was now pretty far away. But not far enough, as she fired a beam of *searing light* that blasted into its chest. For the already battered demon, it was too much, and it fell to the ground to land in a massive rumble of dust and sound.

Dana could see that vrock were still swarming over her friends, and saw the familiar glow of Arun's sword as the paladin fought them off. Ignoring the stabbing pains that continued to shoot up her legs, she called upon the power of her boots again, and lifted off into the sky toward the battle.

She saw Lok, still floating in the air, caught up in the aftereffects of the nalfeshnee's stun. He did not look to be seriously hurt; the vrock that had been attacking him had returned to where it had come from, its *summons* by the greater demon having expired. She flew on, approaching the area near the grounded magic carpet where Arun and Beorna were still fighting against the remnants of the demon forces.

The demons were losing, she saw. Only their *mirror images* were keeping the last few vrock in the fight; two had already been brought down, and while the dwarves looked to have taken a beating they fought on with indefatigable vigor. And the rest of her friends were recovering from the effects of the nalfeshnee's *smite*; as she drew near she saw Dannel shake his head, reaching for his bow.

Hoping to tilt the odds more in their favor, she cast a *dispel magic* onto the battle, trying to focus the center of the spell high enough so as to catch up the vrock in its effect without stripping any remaining buffs from her companions.

She needn't have bothered; the demons were already growing tired of this fight which had claimed a number of their fellows, including their leader, without much in the way of result for their side. As Arun connected with one demon, nearly taking off its left leg, the four

demons let out a loud but non-magical screech and without further preamble *teleported* away.

“Is everyone okay?” Cal asked, scratching his arms where some of the vrock spores had taken root and started to burrow into his flesh.

They’d all taken a beating, especially from the blast from the *dance of ruin*. Beorna nearly collapsed a few moments after the vrocks departed, her entire body aflame with the painful infection of vrock spores across her face, arms, and upper torso. Already thin tangles of vine-like growths dangled from her skin. Arun and Lok were likewise affected, but Dana purged them with a *bles* spell that killed the spores and caused the painful affliction to ease. After that it was a simple matter of applying healing, which all of them sorely needed.

“Well, we survived the welcoming committee,” Beorna said when they were done, cleaning her blade of demonic ichor. They spent a few minutes cleaning off the magical carpet as best they could, and then piled back aboard, carefully resorting their stores to make sure that nothing fell off the edges.

“This was just a roving band, probably opportunistic raiders,” Cal said. “What we really have to worry about are the organized groups. We’ll have to be extra careful from here on out.”

Dannel shuddered. Neither he nor Mole or Lok spoke of the things they’d seen while under the effects of the nalfeshnee’s power, and no one pressed them on the matter.

Leaving yet another bloody battlefield behind them, the companions rose up into the air upon their magical conveyance, and soon were on their way once more. Mole glanced back, once, at the bloody wreckage that had been eight demons, already just vague mounds on the blasted plain.

“Wherever we go, it always seems to end the same way,” she sighed.

“We brave evil in its den, so that others may live without experiencing what we just did,” Arun said.

Beorna nodded. “We’ll teach these bastards what it means to interfere in the lives of those under our care,” she said, her eyes as sharp as the adamantite steel of her sword.

Chapter 424

“Ah, but there are so *many* asylums on Carceri,” the cambion said, leaning back in a chair that creaked alarmingly to hold his bulk. He made a gesture with one a finger topped by a three-inch, lacquered nail, and the succubus standing at his left shoulder popped a white globe roughly the size of an eyeball into his mouth. To his right stood a massive minotaur with glowing red eyes, who had stared menacingly at the intruders since the beginning of the interview. “I would so love to help you, my dear, but you understand how these things are.” He shrugged, the movement causing the layers of fat draped down from his bloated neck to jiggle unpleasantly.

“We are grateful for your time, master Cymberion,” Dana said. “If we were referred to you in error, then I certainly apologize for disturbing you. If, however, your superior recollection can direct us to the particular locale we seek, then we would be most grateful.” The priestess made her own gesture, and Cal quickly stepped forward, laying a small package of scrolls onto the low table that separated them from the cambion and his entourage.

The cambion leaned slightly forward, even the small movement requiring an obvious effort from the bloated fiend. He shifted the scrolls with a long fingernail, enough for him to read the names of the spells written in Cal’s neat hand on the outside of the parchment.

“Hmm... yes, well, I am sympathetic to your plight, as you may well understand. I myself had a cousin who was wrongfully imprisoned over a trifling matter, some decades ago. A terrible inconvenience! But let me see, let me see...” He touched his chin with a long nail, displacing a fold of bloated flesh. But he also made a subtle movement with his eyes, and a rail-thin figure clad entirely in black—they never did discover his race or particular purpose—detached himself from the wall of the cramped booth and quickly moved to the curtained entry, standing where he could scan the rest of the tavern outside.

Cymberion leaned forward conspiratorily, his belly flopping out over the edge of the table. Dana leaned forward as well, although she had to will herself not to gag at the demon-spawn’s foul breath, which smelled like the inside of a sewer.

“Skullrot is not easily found, my dear. Its master cloaks it in a powerful *dweomer*... one does not stumble upon it, nor can one utilize the... *usual* spells of location-finding to discern its location. Indeed, the only way I have heard of reaching it is to be escorted there by one who knows the way.”

Dana’s gaze dropped down to the scrolls in the middle of the table, and the cambion, observing the gesture, was quick to continue. “Now, there might be someone who can be of assistance to you, I think. Have you heard of Harrowfell? Ah, no matter, I can easily direct you to *that* place; many of my clients make use of the shattered stone that is the citadel’s most prominent feature. Its current owner is a marilith named Byakala. She has a certain... shall we say, *interest* in the most famous resident of Skullrot, and it is quite likely that she knows its location.”

Cal and Dana shared a look; they had a good idea to whom the cambion was referring.

Dana stood back, her manner indicating that she considered the exchange acceptable. “Very well, master Cymberion. If you could direct your instructions to my valet... I thank you for your time, and trust that your discretion in this matter will be up to its reputed standard.”

The cambion nodded. The scrolls had disappeared somewhere; it was probably best not to dwell upon where the creature had hidden them. “Of course, my dear. I hope that we will have the opportunity to do business again, if your interests bring you back to Carceri.”

The succubus knelt beside Cal and whispered in his ear; from the way that the gnome flushed it was clear that she’d passed on more than just the location of the marilith’s hold.

Then the black-clad figure drew aside the curtain and ushered them out, so quickly that they barely had time to glance back before the heavy black fabric was drawn shut behind them. The others stood as they reappeared in the back of the tavern's common room; a few nearby fiends cast idle glances their way, but no one took any further action to hinder them.

"Let's get out of here," Cal said.

They made their way out of the crowded tavern back to the main hall of the Bastion of Lost Hope. The fortress was really a small town, a sprawling complex packed into the space within the massive black basalt walls. The three warriors formed a wedge in front of the others, moving those who did not make way for their party with hard looks bolstered by a few inches of drawn steel. They did not speak until they were clear of the gatehouse, warded by a pair of gorgon demons that cast hard looks at them. Even then, the companions did not linger. The citadel was located on a wide shelf nestled in between a range of ugly black peaks, within a range of mountains it had taken them two hours to ascend even with the magic carpet. Oddly, the temperature was exactly the same as it had been in the lowlands, obviously this place did not follow the rules of their home-plane with regards to geography and climate.

"We have a destination," Cal told the others. "But we've been on Carceri now for at least ten hours, with a battle to boot; we need rest, first." Dana opened her mouth to speak, but thought better of it, shaking her head and turning away.

"I take it we are not going to take advantage of the high-class accommodations available in the Bastion," Dannel said.

"Something tells me that folk don't sleep too soundly in there," Cal said. "No, let's take the carpet back down to that valley we passed on our ascent. Then, we'll see if the prized possession of the Harper High Mage meets our needs."

Chapter 425

On Carceri, there was no cycle of night and day, so the sky outside was exactly the same ugly shade of red and brown as the companions rose from their rest and gathered in the lower chamber of their citadel for the "morning" meal. Dana had prepared a *heroes' feast* for them, so at least the provisions were of exceptional quality, particularly by Carcerian standards.

"We could have really used this, back in the early days," Lok said, running a hand along the smooth black stone.

"Indeed," Cal said. "But *instant fortresses* are not cheap, nor are they easy to come by. In fact, when he learned where we were planning on taking his, Jarthel almost demanded it back. I had to turn over the drow's spellbook, and both of Rhiavati's books, to him as security before he'd agree."

“The Harpers owe us,” Dana said. “We would have done at least as much for them, if it had been Jarthel, or Cylaria, who’d been dragged off to another plane as a captive.”

“So what is the plan for today?” Arun asked.

“The cambion gave us enough specific information for us to *teleport* directly to Harrowfell,” Cal said.

“You trust that... creature?” Beorna asked.

“Of course not. But it’s the only good lead we have. Based on the reactions we got from others at the Bastion when we asked about Skullrot, I think that we’re not likely to get better information.”

“No one wants to mess with a Prince,” Arun said. “Especially not one holding a god captive.”

“First a cambion, then a marilith,” Beorna said, her expression sour. “These creatures are for spitting upon holy blades, not for coy words and deals. They are corrupt, and negotiating with them only invites their corruption to spread.”

“I like it little better than you... less, likely, since I had to treat with that grotesque monstrosity directly,” Dana said. “But it is but a means to the end we seek.”

“A philosophy of chaos,” Beorna scowled.

“You knew what we were about here when you agreed to join us, templar,” Dana said, not giving one inch in the argument. “Yesterday you agreed to play your role, and now you question the morality of it?”

Beorna glanced over at Arun. “You have been silent for some time, paladin of Moradin. Does my understanding of the Soul Forger’s creed reflect an erroneous view of its dogma? Do I stand alone with my concern?”

Arun met her gaze squarely, although there was feeling in his eyes as he regarded her. “Long have I had to follow my own path, alone. Thus I have had to learn to interpret the doctrines of my faith according to the commands of my heart, rather than the theological dicta of the high clerics. I am not disciple of moral relativism, nor do I believe in the whim of the moment as justification for actions that violate my beliefs. But I do not feel shame in what I have done.”

“Perhaps you would feel more comfortable wading through the blood of a neverending sea of fiends,” Dannel said. “For you could swing your sword until your strength gave out, Beorna, and not make a dent in the evil of this place. It is only prudence to use stealth and cunning, rather than brute strength, in these circumstances.”

Beorna’s expression darkened. “I am not a fool, elf...”

“Friends,” Cal said. “We cannot afford to drive a wedge between us, not here, not now, even if that wedge is merely one of words and ideology. I agree that allowing ourselves to compromise our beliefs is a dangerous path, and one best avoided. Believe me, templar... I understand whereof I speak; this is not the first time that we have sojourned to the Lower Planes. But I will respond to you now as I did to my companions then. It is not right to fight evil with evil. We cannot descend to become what we fight, in the name of justice. But we face a foe of unspeakable power and utter depravity. Adimarchus has already nearly cast our home into an apocalypse of planar war. If he escapes his prison, lost in his madness, I fear for what dark days may follow.”

The conversation ended on that note, and the companions completed the meal and busied themselves with their preparations. Weapons and spell components were checked and double-checked, and then the company followed Cal out of the citadel onto the surrounding plain. A word of command from the gnome archmage caused the *instant fortress* to collapse upon itself in a matter of seconds, leaving a small black cube that he placed into an inner pocket of his tunic.

“Everyone ready?” he asked. They formed into their two groups, around him and Dana. They cast their usual suite of protective spells, joined hands, and then the spellcasters *teleported* them to the next destination in their journey.

Harrowfell was an ugly tower, perhaps ten paces across, squatting atop a stone bluff overlooking a blank, desolate landscape that extended to the horizon in every direction. The travelers from Faerûn materialized near the entrance, perhaps thirty paces from the dark archway that served as an entry to the tower. The place had an odd texture to it, which resolved into a quick realization from the companions that filled even their veteran composites with disgust.

“Armor, weapons, and bones,” Dannel said.

“An odd material for construction,” Cal said.

“I can feel the Taint from here,” Arun said. “Fiends nearby.”

“Well, let us not keep them waiting then,” Cal replied, starting toward the dark archway.

There was no stirring from the black maw of the tower, or any other sign that their arrival had been noted, as they crossed the bluff to the entrance. Up close the tower seemed even more menacing, and they hesitated for a moment there.

“Perhaps our... bodyguards... should wait here,” Cal suggested quietly.

“We stick together,” Beorna said, although her expression indicated what she thought of this venture.

They had not bothered with a *veil* this time; the marilith would be able to see through such magic with ease. They had, however, agreed to conceal any overt signs of their faith or allegiances, another gesture that had not improved Beorna’s mood but which was so

patently necessary here that even she could not dissent. With Cal in the lead, they entered the tower.

The place was empty save for a nine foot, v-shaped spike of black stone that appeared to have been jammed into the ground here like a dagger. The split stone oddly reflected the weak light that filtered in from outside, and when the eye turned away from it there seemed to be hints of movement briefly visible in its sheen.

“Fiends, on the walls,” Dannel warned, just loud enough for them all to hear. They looked up and saw them, babau and hezrou demons hanging from the interior walls of the tower, hissing warnings at the intruders upon seeing that they’d been detected. One babau shifted and a fat drop of red ichor dropped from it to land sizzling on the ground by their feet.

Why come you to Harrowfell? a voice echoed in their minds. They turned as a sibilant hiss of movement drew their attention to the sundered stone, around which a terrible monstrosity became visible. The marilith seemed to grow out of nothingness; the stone clearly wasn’t large enough to conceal her, yet there she was, coming around it into view. Her upper body was that of a woman, but her six arms and fiendish visage instantly ended any parallels that one might draw to a mortal creature. Each hand held a black-bladed sword with a jagged cutting edge, and behind her trailed the rest of her body, a mottled gray and black serpent’s tail that trailed for nearly twenty feet behind her. Her considerable presence filled the place, a power that whispered obedience and submission to her will. She was nearly nine feet tall, and they had to crane their necks to look into her black eyes.

“You do not belong here,” she said, her swords clinking slightly together as she moved, forming a crossing pattern of steel in front of her body. At her words, the demons above began to laugh, an eerie cackle that filled the confines of the tower.

“Uh oh,” Mole said.

Chapter 426

“I agree with your assessment, Lady Byakala,” Cal said, stepping forward. “But nevertheless, we have not come seeking a confrontation. Your citadel and your stone there are quite renown here on Carceri; a fiend at the Bastion recommended you to us.”

“The fee for its use is a minor magical item of a specified value, or a living humanoid, per individual use.” The marilith chuckled, sensing the discomfort that her words had provoked in them, especially the dwarves. There was some movement among the demons hanging above; possibly a preparation for an attack.

“We do not seek to use the stone,” Dana said.

The marilith regarded her coldly. “You would not be wise to attempt your powers upon me, priestess,” she said. She drew herself up to her full height, almost eclipsing the magical stone beside her. “I do not enjoy parlay with clients, and even less intrusions by those who have no purpose here. Speak your business, so I may be quit of you.”

Dana and Cal shared a look, but it was Arun, to their surprise, who stepped forward. The paladin was not a diplomat like Dana or brilliant arcanist like Cal, but he had the ability to weigh the moods and words of others, and he could likewise sense the growing tension between the two groups here that could explode into chaos at any instant. “We seek Skullrot,” he said plainly. “We were told that you might know its location.”

The marilith did not bother to hide her reaction to the name. “Much depends on your reply to this next question,” she hissed. “Why do you seek the asylum?”

For a moment the demoneess and the paladin stood facing each other, the others on both sides deferring to the two who weighed each other, each evaluating what they could of the motives of the other. Finally, Arun said, “A companion of ours was taken by those who serve Adimarchus. We have reason to believe that he has been taken there.”

“So the Dreaming God is your enemy, then?”

Arun hesitated again before replying, but this time the marilith was inscrutable, giving no clue as to her own feelings. Dana finally said, “We do not wish to see him escape from his bonds.”

The marilith chuckled. “Nor do I, priestess. Nor do I.”

She turned, her massive body trailing behind her as she slipped around the far edge of the broken shaft. “The masters of Skullrot will not be as... welcoming... as I have been.”

“We are determined,” Arun said, and there was nothing but truth in his voice.

“So I see. Well then, perhaps... perhaps we can reach terms.”

The demons hanging from the walls seemed a bit disappointed, but the companions were relieved as the immediate tension ebbed somewhat. The negotiations with Byakala lasted nearly an hour, and ended with the companions handing over another portion of their magical wealth, in the form of another pair of scrolls and an *attuned* gemstone from Dana. In truth, the price was lower than they’d expected, and afterward Cal had suggested that the marilith likely had some sort of grudge against the current owners of the prison.

“It may be a trick,” Dannel said, later, as they sped over the blasted wasteland that was Carceri. To increase their speed and save time, only half of the companions rode upon the magic carpet; Dana, Arun, and Beorna were all *wind walking* alongside, easily pacing the slower magical conveyance. With the lightened load the carpet was able to manage a higher speed, and they elected this time to travel at a higher altitude, trading a wider line of sight for the greater risk of drawing attention from aerial predators.

“Perhaps,” Cal said. “Demons are certainly master liars, and I doubt any of us would have been able to tell if she was weaving falsehoods. But they do understand power, and I think that she knew that we have a good share of it ourselves. It looks like she’s made quite a fief for herself around that magical stone, and I doubt that she’d be willing to give it up

unless it were necessary. If I were in her place, I'd not want to risk having us return to Harrowfell seeking blood."

"Perhaps," the elf said, but he didn't look convinced as they continued their progress high above the surface of Carceri.

But this day luck was with them, and they detected nothing either in the air or upon the ground below as they made their way steadily in the direction that Byakala had indicated. The demoness had scoffed at Cymberion's contention that the place could only be found by one who had already visited; the site of the citadel was real and stable enough, she said; it was just magical detection that was thwarted by the potent enchantment laid upon it. The landmarks that the marilith had described were easy enough to follow.

Almost twelve hours had passed since leaving Harrowfell when their route took them over a vast swamp. The stench of rot reached them even flying hundreds of feet above the ground, and the misshapen growths of diseased trees jutting from the mire seemed to be clawing at them, frustrated by their inability to reach into the sky and draw them down into their embrace.

"I am *real* glad we don't have to walk through that," Mole said, bending out over the edge of the carpet to look down at the landscape passing below.

"We're going to need to stop soon," Cal said, looking over at the insubstantial forms of Dana and the warriors floating through the air nearby. Those on the carpet could take turns resting, but those under Dana's spell had no such luxury.

"Look!" Dannel said, pointing at the swamp ahead of them.

Peering through the murk, they could see what the elf had detected, sprawled across the swamp, half-buried in mucky pools and stacked atop muddy hillocks.

"Demodand bodies. Lots of 'em," Mole said.

"It looks like a battle was fought here, not too long ago," Lok said.

"I wonder why," Mole said.

"The army of fiends," Dannel said.

"Yes," Cal said, knowingly. "We must be nearing the place where the gate between worlds was to be opened by the Ritual of Planar Joining."

"I don't understand," Mole said.

"When the portal failed to open, the fiends must have turned on each other," Cal said. "While not as chaotic as demons, demodands are nevertheless nasty, cruel, and selfish. No doubt they were gathered here with promises of a new world to conquer, an escape from this," he said, indicating the whole of their surroundings with a wave of his hand. "Bring this many together, and then disappoint them..."

“It looks like there were thousands of them,” Mole said.

“Good thing they didn’t make it through to Faerûn,” Dannel said.

“Indeed,” Lok agreed.

They progressed further over the landscape, holding their noses against the smell of decay and corruption that rose up off the battlefield in waves. The swamp seemed endless, stretching out over the horizon as far as they could see in any direction. Cal called out to Dana, urging her to join them upon the carpet, but the *wind walking* priestess ignored him, drifting out ahead of them, all but forcing the dwarves and the others to follow her.

“Stubborn,” Cal grumbled.

“I think we can all understand her feelings,” Lok commented quietly. “She remembers Delem...”

Cal nodded.

“There’s something ahead,” Dannel said, drawing their attention forward once again. It was not long until they could all see what the sharp-eyed elf had spotted, rising up out of the swamp ahead in the distance.

It was a citadel, obviously massive even from their current range, growing exponentially more impressive as they drew closer. The place was set atop an outcropping of rock that rose up out of the swamp. In the garish half-light of the Carcerian sky the place had the look of baked adobe, rather than cold stone. Skullrot comprised a thick central core, rising high up into the sky like a tower, before splitting into four spires that curved outward before coming back together, bending to almost touch several hundred feet above the mire below. Black gobs hung on the sides of the structure, resolving into iron cages that appeared to be fixed to the exterior walls at random intervals. Those cages moved, slightly, although there was no wind.

There was sound, at first a vague stir on the air, becoming a cacophony of screams and mad gibberish that grew louder as they drew closer. It was as if the walls of the citadel were porous, allowing the noise to pass through clearly, and Cal grimly stated that it was not an illusion; what they were hearing was coming from inside the place.

Skullrot.

They had arrived at their destination.

Chapter 427

“Look, Dana and the others are landing,” Lok said.

Cal guided the carpet down to the hillock of exposed, muddy earth that the *wind walkers* were descending toward. A narrow, treacherous path led up the outcropping, although the only possible entrance that they could see was a narrow balcony that jutted out over the swamp; they'd need the carpet to get up there.

"Not very welcoming," Cal mused.

Dana materialized, followed by Arun and Beorna. As soon as her body had returned to substantial form she collapsed, falling to her knees in the mud, sucking in tired breaths. Arun, somewhat better off due to his considerable dwarven fortitude, moved to help her, but she held him at bay with an outstretched hand.

Cal had the carpet hover a foot or two above the muddy ground, close enough to the others to reach out and touch them. "We need to rest," he said. "We should head off, find a place to erect the *fortress*. The inhabitants of the place have seen us, no doubt, but that cannot be helped."

"No," Dana said, gaining control enough to look up, although she as yet did not try to rise. "We go in, now."

"Dana, don't be a fool," Cal said. "You can barely stand, and the dwarves, for all their strength, are surely little better off. And even those of us who rode the carpet all day need sleep..."

"Benzan is in there," Dana said, plainly. "I understand what you are saying, and I know the wisdom of your words. But rested or not, we cannot afford to wait. As you said, they know we are coming, and we cannot give them more time to take him away from us."

Cal looked at her, and then at the faces of his friends.

"I suppose you are going to tell me that you are going ahead, whether or not we elect to join you," the gnome said sardonically.

Dana did not respond, but her feelings were clear in her eyes; she could not have concealed them if she'd wanted to.

Cal sighed. "So be it," he said. "But we go in prepared."

"And not alone," Dana said.

The priestess cast spells of restoration to purge herself and Arun of their fatigue; Beorna used her own magic to do the same. Dana then began the familiar invocation of aid that would draw a powerful celestial to this place. The others kept watch while she cast her spell, scanning the surrounding swamp, their gazes drawn constantly back to the shadowy fortress that rose up out of the murk behind them. The light of Carceri was a constant, but down here at ground level, a dense miasma not unlike a brown fog hung in the air, blurring the outlines of anything more than a few yards distant. The air was foul, but at least it offered them some degree of concealment.

Dana's summoning drew on for minutes, but finally she threw down her hands in exasperation. "There is no response," she said. "I do not understand; I can feel the link to Selûne, strong even in this place. The spell should work."

"I can call upon helpers, when it comes to it," Cal said.

"Whatever potions or other limited-use items you have, don't be afraid to use them," Dannel said, drawing out and consuming a long-lasting potion of *barkskin*. Arun invoked a *magic circle against evil*.

"Dana," Cal said, stepping over to the priestess, who was enchanting another quiver of arrows for the warriors.

She did not turn to him. "Don't say it, Cal."

"Dana," he repeated, his tone firm, his voice compelling her to acknowledge him.

"We have to get him back."

"We are all in agreement on that. But you're the only one who can get us out of here... and you're the only one who can bring a fallen friend back to life. We all depend on you, Dana."

"I am not going to throw my life away!" she said, angrily. Seeing everyone look up, before turning quickly back to their preparations, she took a deep breath and looked down at him again. "All right, you've made your point," she said. "I will not fail in my obligation to the group."

"I know you won't," he said, touching her on the arm. "Come, let's go."

They boarded the carpet, which again sagged under their combined weight, and at Cal's command rose up above the swamp toward Skullrot. As they drew closer, the sound of screams from inside became almost overwhelming. They could see that the cages contained skeletons and zombies, twisting uselessly within their prisons, reaching through the bars toward the carpet bearing the companions.

"Remember your training, and your experience," Cal said softly. "Rely on the others, and work as a team."

"Take out the leaders first, and then worry about the grunts," Dannel added, testing his bowstring. In addition to his magical quiver, he'd hung a backup quiver full of holy arrows from his belt, secured to his thigh by a length of leather cord.

"Helm watch over us," Beorna said, running a length of cloth over the black adamantine length of her sword. At that moment, it was difficult to determine whether blade or woman was stronger. Arun reached out and clasped his hand on her armored arm; after a moment she covered it with her own. Within their helmets, their eyes could not be seen, so the others could not know what passed between them in that moment.

“Hold on, Benzan,” Dana mouthed silently, her eyes focused on some vague point ahead of them.

“Hoo, boy, this is exciting!” Mole said, hopping up and down on the edge of the carpet.

They reached the edge of the balcony, and quickly dismounted. Cal commanded the carpet to cease flight, and Lok and Arun quickly rolled it up. It was bulky, but carefully rolled it fit into Lok’s spacious *bag of holding*. Of course, that also meant that it could not be accessed quickly if needed again.

Up close, they could see that the fortress was constructed from an insane composite of skulls, all of varying size and shape. The place had to include literally millions of them, held together by some sort of resin. They didn’t need to test to know that the result was likely more durable than any masonry construction, and the skulls allowed the sound from within to pass through, explaining why they had heard the cries of Skullrot’s inmates earlier. This close the noise was almost deafening, but the companions steeled themselves to the suffering in those plaintive cries.

There was a single heavy metal door in the wall before them. Mole checked it quickly for traps, shooting them a thumbs-up before turning *invisible*.

Dana had used her *discern location* and *greater scrying* spells again that morning, in Cal’s magical fortress. Again Benzan had been reported at Skullrot, although the spell was not more specific, and this time she had attempted to *scry* Embril Aloustinai, without success. Dana still had her *locate object* spell, and she cast it now, focusing on one of Benzan’s possessions.

“Inside,” she said, after a moment. Arun and Beorna moved to flank the door, while Lok approached it, his axe tucked under his shield arm, in easy reach.

“Ready?” the genasi asked, his voice soft, even.

One by one, the others nodded.

Lok opened the door, and the seven companions from Faerûn entered Skullrot.

Chapter 428

The initial welcome was far from... welcoming.

The metal door screeched open reluctantly to reveal a large square hall, maybe fifty feet across. On the far side of the room a staircase led up to an open arch that presumably led to another portion of the prison. As the door opened the stench of demodands rolled out over them in an almost overpowering wave, its source instantly evident in the press of bodies that occupied the chamber.

“Farastu demodands!” Lok warned, even as coruscating beams of pale light lanced out at him. One hit the jam of the door, splaying out harmlessly into wisps of violent energy, but a

second caught him in the chest, weakening the genasi. Several of the fiends—there looked to be about a dozen in the room—immediately rushed toward him, their sludge-encrusted claws reaching eagerly to grasp the intruder.

That stopped immediately when Dana unleashed her first *holy word*.

The farastus screamed and collapsed, their bodies quivering out of all control as they fell to the ground. One of the creatures, the one that had blasted Lok with its *ray of enfeeblement* had chanced to be in the back of the room, just out of the range of Dana's spell, and it hastily ran toward the stairs, intent upon escaping the power that had blasted its comrades.

Lok had moved into the room, hindered somewhat by the thick layer of farastu slime that coated the floor. He cautioned the others, who remained clustered by the doorway. Dannel entered, already drawing a bead on the fleeing farastu, and shot it in the back with a white-fletched arrow. The creature screamed in pain, but kept up its flight.

"All of them must be destroyed!" Cal said. Eyeing the floor dubiously, he cast a *spider climb* spell and started up the wall, intending to circle around and come at the stairs from above.

The demodand had reached the top of the steps now, with two of Dannel's arrows sticking out from its back. Beorna blasted it with a *ray of searing light*, and for a moment it looked like it would be enough to take it down, but it staggered up the last few steps and vanished through the arch.

Dana lifted into the air, carried aloft by her magical boots, but Cal cautioned her. "Let it go," he said. "We should get ready for the help it will bring, however."

Meanwhile a gristly scene played out on the floor of the chamber, as Lok and Arun put an end to the paralyzed farastus. Beorna trudged across the sticky floor, carrying Mole on one shoulder, while Dannel remained in the entry, covering them with his bow.

They did not have to wait long for the response. Barely ten seconds after the wounded farastu had disappeared, a sick sucking sound drew their attention back up to the arch. A dark form appeared... becoming a bloated, massive figure of a kelubar demodand.

With six arms.

Hexavog did not look happy to see them, and it promptly conjured an *acid fog* that billowed out from the center of the chamber floor, engulfing Arun, Lok, Beorna, and Mole in the corrosive green vapors.

But having unleashed its destructive power upon them, the demodand quickly came under heavy attack. Less than a second after creating the *fog*, before the mists could rise up to block the line of sight to the entrance, Dannel shot it with an arrow that vanished into the thick folds of its body, releasing a devastating pulse of electrical energy. Even as that gave it pause, it was engulfed in a painful blast of flames, as a *flame strike* from Dana caught it up, hurting it despite the considerable resistance to fire that it possessed. This was quickly followed by a *lightning bolt* from a tiny figure crawling upon the ceiling that Hexavog hadn't

immediately seen. The magic was mostly shadow, which the demodand had recognized, but it still felt a nasty sting from the bolt that it preferred not to experience again.

As if that wasn't bad enough, two of the enemies within the *fog* quickly appeared, a dwarf woman waving around a big sword and another gnome, darting nimbly up the steps as if it going to engage Hexavog directly!

Heavily outnumbered, the demodand decided that it would be the better part of valor to withdraw and seek Slouva's assistance in dealing with these intruders. It wasn't going to let them off completely free, so as it retreated it hurled a *dispel* at the flying woman, grunting in satisfaction as her magic faded and she fell into the *acid fog*. Then it added a quickened *fear*, which hopefully would distract at least a few of its foes from pursuit. Without waiting to see how effective those tactics were, it retreated back into the core chamber of the prison to call upon some allies. The injured farastu was still there, cowering near the doorway, so Hexavog ordered it to create a *fog cloud* at the top of the stairs, again to better confound the intruders. The mutant kelubar would have liked to become *invisible*, but that of course was not possible here.

But even as the pathetic little farastu moved into position, one of the tiny gnomes appeared, moving very quickly for a creature of its unassuming size. The farastu saw it too late, and even as it turned the gnome leapt up into the air, somersaulting into an attack that easily befuddled the demodand. Something flashed in the gnome's hand, and the farastu collapsed, the hilt of a small rapier protruding from its ruined eye. The gnome didn't bother to try to recover her weapon, instead drawing forth a tiny knife as she landed smoothly on the stone tiles of the asylum floor.

"Slouva, get down here!" Hexavog shouted, its booming voice filling the vast interior of Skullrot. No doubt the little creature's friends were already making their way up to join her, but it would not be driven off by one tiny mortal, no matter how fast it was!

Thought became action, and Hexavog leapt forward, multiple arms raised to squash the daring, but foolish, rogue that had followed it alone to her doom.

Chapter 429

Mole looked up at the huge, six-armed monstrosity that towered over her, and felt a tingle of anticipation.

There's been a moment of uncertainty before, when she'd leapt off of Beorna's shoulder and rushed up the stairs, using the steep stone banister rather than the actual steps. The wave of *fear* from the kelubar had awakened a familiar gnawing pit of doubt in her gut, bringing back all the terrors and uncertainties that she'd felt in the wake of Zenna's loss and her own trip Beyond. Her will was not as strong as Arun's or Uncle Cal's or even Dannel's, and she'd often fallen prey to enchantments that clouded the mind, leaving her looking like a fool while her friends dealt with the threat.

But this time an unfamiliar surge of anger had flooded through her on the heels of the fear, banishing it, and as it departed she felt a burst of energy as she rushed up to the arch,

darting through it without even a thought of hesitation. She saw the farastu step into her path, and leapt into an attack that left it dead, her rapier stuck for good in its skull.

She could not help but be astounded at the sight that greeted her, even with the giant kelubar dominating the chamber directly in front of her.

The interior of Skullrot was dominated by a vast open shaft that ran up the full height of the structure, hundreds of feet above. The lower tiers of the asylum contained side wings that ultimately opened onto the shaft, with low balconies at uneven intervals in all four directions. The sound was almost overpowering, the cacophony of mad cries from the cell blocks of the prison filling and rebounding in this central space. The whole was a heady insanity that was really quite intense.

But Mole's attention was quickly drawn back to the kelubar, which apparently decided it had had enough of running. It moved with a speed surprising for a creature of its size and bulk, and the ground shook—or was that just her heart pounding in her chest?—at its coming. Its smell preceded it, making her want to gag, but she fought off the reflex. It opened its jaws and a gob of acid shot out at her; well, that was something she could deal with, anyway, as she smoothly side-stepped the *acid arrow*. She leapt over the first sweeping fist that slammed into the ground where she'd been standing, but as she came down another clipped her solidly on the side, knocking her flying. She was able to land on her feet, ignoring the sizzling pain where the acidic slime covering its body had contacted her flesh, but quickly had to leap back as another fist pounded into the ground. It followed her, keeping up a violent all-out assault.

She didn't even bother to try an attack, putting all of her effort into keeping it busy, staying in one piece. She knew that her friends would be coming, but she'd seen how the floor in the last room had made even walking a struggle even for her stronger companions. An arrow emerged from the archway, buzzing as it stabbed into one of the kelubar's arms, but it did not even appear to notice the attack. Mole smiled, but quickly had to contort her body to avoid another powerful attack. Her face burned as something sharp just clipped her on the forehead, and she staggered back, hot blood pouring down her face. Before she could recover another fist slammed solidly into her with the force of a battering ram, and she was knocked back roughly, landing on her chest and sliding several feet more before she came to a stop.

"Ouch, good one," she muttered. The kelubar started toward her, but it stopped as a green beam struck it in the chest, blasting away a great swath of rancid flesh. She heard a clank of metal behind her, and didn't have to turn to recognize the familiar sound of Beorna joining the fray. Lok and Arun would not be far behind, she knew.

But even as the demodand roared in pain from the power of Cal's *disintegrate* spell, Mole caught a hint of movement that drew her attention behind the creature. Emerging from a shadowed stairwell came a gray skinned, muscled hag, easily eight feet tall. And behind her, making her seem puny in comparison, came a pair of massive, shuffling monstrosities, humanoid things that looked, to her horror, to have been stitched together from the hides of other creatures.

"Well, well, what have we here," Slouva hissed.

Chapter 430

Mole waited for the kelubar to try to finish her, poised to spring back up into an evading roll. But Hexavog, it seemed, had decided that close combat with tough foes was less desirable than beating upon a solitary gnome, and its small wings beat furiously behind it, combining with its magic to lift it into the air.

It didn't get very far as a barrage of arrows knifed into it. Three missiles slammed into the fat kelubar's body in rapid succession, and as the last disappeared into its bloated neck, its wings suddenly stopped working, and it plummeted to the ground to land in a sick splat upon the stone.

Mole glanced over her shoulder at Dannel, who'd changed—he'd sprouted wings! The elf was already drawing out another arrow from the quiver at his hip, switching targets to the hag.

Beorna was already on her way, charging the witch, calling upon the power of Helm to infuse her sword with divine potency. Slouva merely gestured for her golems to flank the charging templar, their incredibly long limbs giving them the ability to attack long before Beorna drew close enough for her own attack.

Mole flipped herself back onto her feet almost effortlessly. She glanced back again, and saw Cal standing at the peak of the arch that led back to the farastu room, clinging to the wall with his magic. Lok and Arun appeared in the opening below him, both looking a mess with acid burns on their armor, and their bodies and weapons coated with tendrils of clinging farastu slime. Dana had not yet appeared, and Mole hoped that she was all right.

But at the moment, the battle continued, and she turned her attention to helping Beorna. The templar took a pair of mighty hits from the golems, staggering but not abating her rush toward the hag. But even as she lifted her sword to strike the hag leapt suddenly at her, seizing her with her claws, grasping her arms and *twisting*, sending agonizing spikes of pain through her body. Pinioned by the hag's incredible strength, Beorna could only struggle weakly, unable to break free.

"That's right, my pretty," the hag said, her face inches from Beorna's. "It hurts... but soon it will hurt much more, every day more than the day before!" Cackling, she twisted again, and something popped in Beorna's body, and the templar screamed in pain.

Dannel had sighted down the length of a white-fledged arrow, but held his shot; the annis and templar were so closely intertwined in the grapple that even he could not clearly force his target. He'd already used his *seeker arrow* against the kelubar, so there was nothing he could do to aid the dwarven woman.

But he could help his companions. Lok and Arun had immediately charged after Beorna, although the remnants of the farastu ooze continued to hinder them somewhat. The golems moved to block the pair of warriors, but by a subtle agreement Lok moved to engage them while Arun burst through, ignoring the powerful blow that caromed off his shoulder as he blasted between them. The golems immediately set about battering Lok, but the genasi was far too tough for even these foes to take him down quickly. The genasi

unleashed several powerful blows with his axe, and soon one of the golems was staggering backward, great rents opened in its legs and lower torso under Lok's assault.

Dannel picked that one, and commanding his quiver to produce normal missiles he began peppering it with arrows. The golem was resistant to his missiles, but Dannel infused each shot with magic, and collectively they began to have an effect, tearing at the very form of the monstrous construct.

Dana appeared through the arch, flying high over the battle through the power of her *winged boots*. The priestess looked even worse than the warriors, her white skin splotched with acid burns, but a barely-controlled fury burned in her eyes as she fixed them upon her target. The annis sensed her coming, but did not release Beorna, continuing her pressure until the inevitable snap that would mean the end of her first victim.

But Dana wasn't going to wait for that, and as she landed behind Slouva she reached out to lay a gentle touch upon the hag's shoulder.

Slouva let out an involuntary scream as the priestess's *harm* spell ravaged her body. Snarling, she spun, hurling her grappled victim into the priestess, knocking both of them to the ground as she staggered free. Arun rushed at her, but while he was able to just clip her with the tip of his *holy avenger*, it was not enough to stop her as she spun and darted rapidly away toward a door not far from the staircase where she'd appeared. The paladin did not immediately pursue, instead looking to Beorna.

The templar could not move, both of her shoulders dislocated and several bones snapped, but through a haze of pain her gaze fixed on Arun's. "What are you waiting for, you fool! Stop her!" she shrieked. It was clear that only dogged stubbornness kept her clinging to consciousness; her body had absorbed more damage than anyone should have been able to take.

But Arun only helped her up, pouring healing energy into her as he did so. Only when it was clear that she could stand on her own power did he turn toward the departing annis.

But she'd already vanished through the door. And Dana, he saw, had rolled to her feet, and was already there, rushing through the portal after her.

"Dana, no!" he cried. Hoping that Lok could handle the golems alone, he ran after them.

At that moment, Lok was having difficulties. While his armor was holding against the powerful blows of the golems, each hit was driving a pulse of momentum through his body until his organs began to feel like jelly within his body. Another few hits, he knew, and he'd be in trouble.

But the golem he'd targeted was likewise having problems. Dannel's arrows and his own powerful swings had left its body a mess of shredded flesh, with only the fell power animating it keeping it together. The second golem was a problem, able to get in unabated attacks against Lok's less-protected flank, but the genasi was aided by a shadowed dire lion that leapt onto the creature, slashing and rending with all four of its claws. The brainless construct immediately shifted to this adversary, leaving Lok free to focus his

attacks upon the golem in front of him. It managed one more punch that Lok took on his shield, then the genasi brought his axe up into its left knee, severing the already-savaged joint and sending it toppling to the ground. The golem struggled feebly for a few moments, then fell still.

Arun reached the half-open door through which Slouva and then Dana had disappeared, when a familiar scream from the chamber beyond, full of pain and despair, chilled him to the bone.

“Dana!”

Chapter 431

When Dana chased the fleeing hag, she really didn't have a clear idea of what she was doing; on the one hand, she was too seasoned not to know that she might be running into another trap. But the buzzing in the back of her mind triggered by her spell was still there; she *knew* that Benzan's wedding ring, the focus for her earlier *locate object* enchantment, was nearby, in the general direction of the annis's flight. And where the ring was located, Benzan might still be...

So she chased after Slouva, darting through the door just in time to see the hag exit through a portal on the far side. The chamber was fairly spacious, maybe thirty feet by sixty, with another door on the far wall in addition to the one that the annis had used. It looked like a workshop, dominated by a huge table apparently fashioned of bone, with a thick cover of stitched flesh stretched atop its surface. At the corners of the table bone hands about twice the size of a man's were extended, shaped like claws, with what looked to be faces stretched out over the tips of the fingers. Several large glass vats were stationed along the walls, most filled to the brim with a reddish fluid from which rose a harsh chemical odor. Above the vats shelves were crowded with clear jars and pots that held body parts preserved in fluid.

But of more immediate concern was the fact that she was not alone in the room. A pair of the huge golems were already moving forward from the flanking walls toward her. Dana's stomach clenched in disgust as she got a good look at them; like the others outside their hides appeared to have been stitched together from the flayed faces of hundreds of diverse beings. The nearest was already close enough to swing at her with an unnaturally long arm. The priestess dodged, but even so took a glancing blow that knocked her roughly to the side, almost dropping her into one of the vats.

“Look out, Dana!” came a warning from behind. Mole's voice; apparently the gnome had followed her in here. She spun around and leapt back as a massive limb shattered the vat. Cold fluid washed over her legs, and a body that had been submerged in the vat fell out onto the stone floor of the chamber. Her breath froze in her chest as she realized that the face of the dead person had been removed, and she felt a terror building inside her as the familiar outlines of that mutilated body impressed themselves in her mind.

The hulking table was jostled aside by an onrushing golem as it rushed toward her. She turned, and got a good look at the golem's face... or rather, at the features of the face that had been stretched over the oblong shape of its head...

She screamed, as the distorted visage of Benzan, her husband, looked down at her.

A moment later, the golem's fists slammed into her chest, and everything went mercifully dark.

Chapter 432

Mole couldn't do anything to help Dana as the golem bashed her with both fists, knocking her roughly across the room to land in a limp heap next to one of the processing vats. From Dana's reaction to the faceless body, she had a pretty good idea of who *he* was, but she had other problems right now, as the second golem attacked.

She dove under the table, which sagged as a golem blow pounded into it. For a moment she wondered if this was the best strategy—despite the nature of its construction, the thing looked damned heavy, and could likely crush her beneath it if it gave way—but then the sounds of battle filled the room, and she knew that her friends had arrived.

She flicked a creature from her *bag of tricks* out into the room, to help distract the bad guys.

A creak drew her attention to one of the far doors. As it opened, she heard a buzzing noise that filled her with a strange lethargy. She tried to fight it, knowing the danger as she saw the gray legs of the hag reappear, but it was hopeless as she sagged to the ground, falling into a deep magical sleep.

Arun heard the buzzing too, but was able to shake off the somnolent effects of the drone, bolstered still by his earlier *magic circle*. He saw the hag return, accompanied by a huge, grotesque fly-like fiend, the source of the buzzing. But he could not focus on either just yet, as the golems pressed their attack. A fist imprinted with a stretched humanoid face slammed hard into his shield, sending a jolt of pain up his arm.

He knew that his best option was to retreat, and try to draw these foes out into the larger room where his friends could bolster him. But he'd seen Mole vanish under the table, and saw Dana's limp form as he'd come in, and knew that if he fell back, that his companions were dead.

So he stood his ground, and stepped forward to attack the nearest golem.

The annis seemed a bit more cautious now, content to let her allies focus on the foe. The chasme, floating nearer but still well out of Arun's reach, blasted the paladin with a *ray of enfeeblement*, which certainly did not help his situation any. He'd already seen how much damage the golems were capable of inflicting, and knew that the time he could hold out was measured in the seconds. And he'd already used most of his healing on Beorna, earlier.

Ah, to the hells, he thought, and taking the hits he knew he would, he leapt forward, and smote the chasme.

That got its attention.

A roar announced Beorna's return as she burst through the open doorway, followed only a few paces later by Lok. The templar's body still moved awkwardly, as if her limbs didn't quite know what her brain had in mind for them, but she ignored the pain as she rushed toward the nearest golem, slamming it with a mighty two-handed strike from her adamantine sword as it turned to meet her. The blow carved through its body, knocking it back a step despite its huge size. But it was incredibly tough, and quickly countered with a pair of blows that in turn drove Beorna back. She'd healed herself, and Arun's magic had likewise aided her, but she was quickly back on the brink of consciousness, another hit or two from joining Dana on the floor.

Lok rushed into the fray a moment later, choosing as his target the same damaged golem. He aimed for the gap in its body opened by Arun and Beorna, and his axe clove deeply into it, backed by his considerable strength. A snap announced the severing of its spine, and it crumpled into two disparate halves, each trying uselessly to function.

"Beorna... help Dana!" Lok urged, turning to face the second golem, turning to catch its fist on his shield. The dwarf obeyed, falling back away from the melee; although she knew that Arun was in trouble, duty infused her, and she had to turn away.

The chasme, meanwhile, disengaged from Arun, but not before lashing out with a foreclaw that stabbed through the visor of his helmet, opening a gash at the corner of his eye that oozed blood. As Arun tore free, lifting his sword to strike, the demon buzzed higher into the air, lifting its grotesque body just out of the paladin's reach. With the holy warrior unable to intervene, it called upon its power, and a buzzing many times stronger than its own lulling drone filled the air.

Beorna knelt beside Dana's stricken form, battered but still alive. Calling upon the power of Helm, she cast a powerful healing spell upon the priestess, who stirred, the positive energy channeled by the templar snatching her back from the brink of death.

"We need your power, priestess!" the templar urged, before a familiar voice drew her around.

"Come back for more, did you?" Slouva cackled. With the chasme distracting Arun, the hag had circled around the edge of the room, intent upon finishing Dana. Seeing how seriously wounded Beorna was, the hag leapt at her, long claws outstretched.

"EEEEeee!" she screamed, as a holy arrow blossomed in her side. Electrical energy blasted through her as Dannel's arrow buried itself deep into her, and she aborted her attack to leap instead toward the open doorway.

A storm of buzzing insects—locusts, each almost half a foot in length—filled the chamber, called by the power of the chasme. The *insect swarm* surrounded the combatants in a blinding storm, slamming into them, crawling into gaps in their clothes and armor to bite

and scratch. Hundreds settled onto the golems, both the active one and the one already destroyed, feeding on the ruined flesh. Others leapt eagerly upon Mole, who still slept, deep under the effects of the chasme's buzz.

Dannel held his ground as Slouva appeared in the doorway, just ten feet from where he stood. The hag leapt at him, taking the arrow he fired into her chest. She seized him with her powerful claws, tearing at his flesh even through his magical armor. She was so incredibly strong; even as injured as she was, she flung the elf around like a rag doll, spinning him around before flinging him roughly into the nearby wall. Dannel, stunned, could barely stand, fighting to get back the breath that had been dashed from his lungs.

"Perhaps we will dance again later, pretty boy," she cackled, turning toward the nearest stair.

Her laughter became a scream as another ray from Cal blasted her in the torso, highlighting her in a green nimbus before she was *disintegrated* by the beam.

"Thanks," Dannel said to the gnome, who was clinging to the wall just above the side doorway.

"Just taking out the trash," the gnome said. "We'd better get in there," he added, gesturing toward the room where the chaos of battle and the noise of the *insect swarm* sounded yet from within.

The warriors fought on, greatly bolstered by a *mass cure critical wounds* spell from Dana. The chasme held its ground, but that only gave Arun and Lok a chance to double-team the remaining golem, hacking it to pieces with their powerful blades. The demon used its power of *telekinesis* to hurl one of the heavy tables at Arun, knocking him roughly to the ground, his shield arm jutting at an unnatural angle from his side. The demon sought to follow up its advantage by descending enough for its deadly claws to savage the crippled paladin, but before it could reach him several holy arrows darted through the still-raging storm of locusts to sink deeply into its body. The chasme keened in protest, but its own distraction caused it to notice too late the bulk of Beorna, *enlarged* by the magic of Helm, approaching through the swarm. The templar unleashed her own *smite* against the insectoid fiend, cleaving it in half with a single mighty blow of her adamantite sword.

Lok got a hold of Mole and dragged her out from under the table, and the companions withdrew from the chamber. Some of the locusts came with them, but most remained where the chasme had summoned them, feeding on the remains of the golems.

"Gah, get them off!" Mole exclaimed, waking to find several yucky insects crawling around in her hair and under her clothes.

"Good thing she didn't wake up a minute ago," Dannel said to Lok, as the genasi helped her.

Dana, meanwhile, started back inside the room, but Cal quickly moved to grab her. "Dana, what are you doing?"

“He’s in there... Benzan’s body!” the priestess cried. “We have to get him out, before those bugs...”

Cal nodded. “Let me see what I can do.” And indeed, a quick *dispel magic* cleared the swarms, sending the summoned insects back to wherever they had come from.

They went back into the room, closing the door behind them, wary of more guards coming from the prison in response to the battle. In the frenzy of the melee they had each almost tuned out the constant noise of the asylum, such that its return made them start, the screams of the mad prisoners tearing again at their senses.

Dana knelt beside Benzan, holding his ruined body against her. “I’ll help you, my love, I’ll bring you back,” she said, sobbing softly. “Get his... his face, it’s attached to that golem,” she said, pointing, but not turning to look at the ravaged form of the creature that Lok and Arun had destroyed.

The paladin and genasi carefully removed the flayed skin of their friend, returning it to Dana, who laid it almost tenderly upon Benzan’s ruined face. She then began chanting, calling upon the power of Selûne to return him to life.

“We are still in danger here,” Beorna said, looking around. “I do not believe that this is the sum total of Skullrot’s defenses.”

“You are likely right,” Cal said, plying his healing wand upon his companions. Nearly all of them had been heavily wounded in the running battle that had begun when they’d opened that first door, and only luck or fate had allowed them to avoid fatalities in this initial engagement. Arun and Lok took up a warding position near the outer door, while Dannel and Mole checked the rest of the room. Mole started toward the left door in the far wall, the one opposite the portal that Slouva and the chasme had used, but Cal forestalled her.

“Let’s wait until Dana finishes her spell,” he suggested. Mole nodded, giving the door a quick examination for traps before returning to the center of the room.

Dana’s incantation continued, her voice all but drowned out by the ongoing cries of the asylum’s inmates, which passed through the porous walls as though they were not even there. Cal drew out his lyre, and played a melody that created a dissonance between those horrible sounds, the tune filling the room and making the background cacophony seem to fade slightly. It wasn’t much, but it helped their resolve as they waited for the priestess to finish her casting.

It took only about a minute, but it seemed like longer, given the circumstances. Dana abruptly stopped and rose, her expression betraying the outcome of her spell even before they looked down at Benzan’s immobile corpse.

“It’s not working,” she said. “His soul cannot return.”

The companions shared a look; none of them wanted to say what they were all thinking. But Dana herself put it into words, her voice empty, as though her own life had been drained away by her failure to restore Benzan’s.

“Graz’zt has him,” she said. “It’s Delem, all over again. Graz’zt has him...”

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“Dana, we don’t know that for certain,” Cal said. “We’ll take him back with us, we can try again when we return to the Prime...”

He trailed off as she saw that she wasn’t listening; she’d turned her attention toward the two doors in the far wall, an odd look of concentration on her face.

“There is one more matter that we must deal with, ere we depart,” Beorna said.

Lok nodded. “Adimarchus.”

“Whoever or whatever still wards this place, it no doubt knows we’re here, and is prepared for our coming,” Dannel said.

“We must be cautious,” Arun said. “Whatever happens, we do not wish to facilitate the imprisoned godling’s release from his bonds.”

“I thought we were here to destroy him?” Beorna asked.

“It may come to that... but at the moment we do not know if such a thing is even possible,” Dannel said.

“If he is bound, his powers may be weakened,” Lok said. “Cal, what say you?”

But the gnome was turned away. While the others talked, Dana had started toward the left door. “What is it, Dana?” Cal asked her.

“Benzan’s ring... the focus for my *locate object* spell... it is beyond that door.”

“Careful,” the gnome said. He and the others moved quickly into ready positions near the door. Dana barely waited for them to prepare before she reached out and pulled the heavy door open.

The chamber beyond was square and almost thirty feet across, but it seemed much smaller due to the utter blackness that filled it, seeming to resist the light shed by their magical items like some living thing. But nothing stirred in the room, which was dominated by three tables fashioned out of some sort of black resin, glistening as the illumination finally reached it. The tables had been crafted to resemble great mushrooms with their tops flattened. Laid out upon those surfaces were an assortment of grim artifacts, including black-bound grimoires, scrolls manufactured from flayed skin, vials and jars of rare powders and condensates, and other objects of indeterminable use and function. The most dominating item was an intricately fashioned pair of metal claws. The sculpture, set on the nearest table facing the door, had been arranged so that one of the claws clutched a dull metal bottle, while the second had its long nails dug into the bottle’s stopper. Behind the

tables they could just make out what looked like an iron chest, close against the far wall. The entire place was infused with a subtle odor; not the familiar and ferocious stink of demodands, but a charnel smell that was reminiscent of graveyards and decay.

They all paled as they looked into the room's interior, but Cal was especially grim. "The magical auras in this place," he breathed. "Gods, the level of power... it makes my own spells seem cantrips in comparison..."

"There is evil present as well," Arun agreed.

Dana had been looking for one thing, and as she saw it—a familiar ring, left almost casually on one of the tables—she stepped forward into the room.

And as she did, the metal hands shifted, drawing the stopper from the iron bottle atop the near table. Almost immediately a gout of green smoke was disgorged from within the container, swirling and growing rapidly into a substantial being.

"An *iron flask!*" Cal exclaimed, too late.

It took only a few seconds for the prisoner of the flask to appear in full form. It was huge, looming over them, its head nearly brushing the ceiling fifteen feet above. Its body was lean and skeletal, with ugly green flesh clinging to its bones. Its ribs formed a cage around an empty hollow in the center of its body, a hollow that was occupied by a small, terrible remnant of a being, trapped within the prison of the monster's body. That figure opened its mouth in a silent scream, mockingly echoed by the gaping jaws of the devourer as it eagerly regarded the living foes that had released it with a hungry look burning in the twin pinpoints of life deep within the sockets of its skull.

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Having released a huge, advanced devourer clearly set as guardian over this place, the companions wasted no time in getting down to business.

"Destroy it!" Cal shouted, stating the obvious in case anyone was too overwhelmed by the creature's sudden appearance to attack. Cal was quick to put his own words into action, blasting it with an *acid arrow* from a wand. The acid splashed over its body, doing little damage, but one look had told the gnome that this enemy would not go down easily.

But the others were already adding their own attacks to the tally. Mole darted around the edge of the threshold long enough to fire her crossbow into the creature; the tiny bolt did little damage but unleashed a jolt of electricity into its body as it sank into its thigh. Dannel likewise was able to fire over Dana, scoring two hits that ricocheted off of the thick bones of its torso, tearing away strips of ugly green flesh. The imprisoned being inside the devourer's chest tried to shrink away from the impacts, shielding its head in a pathetic gesture.

"Dana, clear the doorway!" Lok urged, his axe at the ready. The priestess lifted a hand and fired a bolt of *searing light* into the devourer's body, blasting away part of its substance,

driving it back. She stepped aside, deeper into the room, to let her companions enter, but the undead monster was already reaching for her. Its claw was large enough to seize her head entire, but it merely reached out, touching her lightly with the tip of a claw, drawing a pinpoint of red blood from the center of her forehead.

Dana staggered, fighting off a cold chill that she recognized as an attempt to paralyze her. She was made of stern stuff, however, and she was further bolstered by Arun's still-active *magic circle* against the evil touch of the devourer. But even as she regained control, she felt a wave of mental energy wash over her, forcing her to shift focus from strength of body to strength of mind. Her will was such that this attack too slid off of her without effect.

But her companions were not all equally gifted. The *confusion* effect unleashed by the creature took hold of Mole and Lok, taking hold of their minds and temporarily stealing their sanity. Lok just stood there, his axe lowered, but Mole lifted her crossbow and shot her uncle point-blank in the shoulder.

Arun turned as Cal grimaced in pain, but the gnome pointed at the creature with his wand. "Destroy it first, then we'll worry about them!" he urged. The paladin nodded, and followed Beorna into the room, their weapons raised to strike down the huge undead abomination.

The creature's size and reach made just getting to it difficult; Beorna took a powerful hit that staggered her, its claw crushing into her shoulder, the brief contact draining her of a fraction of her life essence. The templar merely grunted and shook off the monster's claw, driving forward to rip her adamantine sword deep into its leg, shivering the bone beneath the emaciated flesh.

Arun, a step behind, rushed around the odd mushroom-shaped tables to flank the creature, coming at it from the side. But before he could reach it, the devourer released another wave of mental power. Again Dana and Beorna, their minds fortified by their commitment to their gods, resisted the effect, but this time Arun faltered. The dwarf, screaming incoherently, brought his holy blade down across the table, striking the iron claws and sending them flying across the room.

The devourer followed up its advantage by blasting Beorna with a *ray of enfeeblement* that sapped her strength. But the templar merely tightened her grip on her sword, and invoked the power of Helm.

"You made your mistake by letting me get close," she hissed, her jaw clenched.

Then, with a roar, she unleashed a full assault of power attacks against the huge undead creature. The devourer, being undead, was not vulnerable to the critical strikes that would have disemboweled a living creature, but it was nonetheless staggered by the powerful impacts of the templar's ultrahard bastard sword.

But Beorna found herself nearly alone against the monster, as her companions were finding their hands quite full with their *confused* companions. Dana tried to release Arun from the magic holding his mind, but her attempt to *dispel* the devourer's magic failed, and the paladin charged at her in a rage, swinging his holy avenger. Dana darted back, narrowly avoiding a cut that would have impaled her, but still taking a glancing hit along the

ribs that stung through her light tunic. She leapt into the air, her magic boots carrying her out of the paladin's reach.

Back in the outer chamber, Cal and Dannel were likewise having difficulties. The gnome had lifted his wand to fire another blast at the devourer, but he saw Lok turn to face him, madness in his eyes, and quickly aborted that plan. Knowing that he could be diced into stew meat if he remained adjacent to the genasi, he instead fell back, out of Lok's reach. Predictably, the warrior followed, but Cal quickly cloaked himself in *invisibility* and leapt to the side. It was a close call—close enough for him to feel the breeze caused by Lok's axe as it whipped close by his head.

But while Cal had temporarily escaped his ally's attack, the maneuver left Lok close by Dannel, who likewise had no choice but to withdraw, taking him out of the line of sight of the doorway, and the enemy.

"We've got to take that thing out!" he yelled.

"Working on it!" came Cal's voice, from nearby.

Beorna felt her life force ebbing as the devourer tore at her with both claws, tossing another quickened *confusion* at her for good measure. Again she resisted—barely—and returned its attacks with more two-handed strikes from her sword. But she was getting weaker, the *energy drains* combined with its earlier *ray of enfeeblement* to sap her vitality and very skill with the blade. She had no choice but to cut back on the all-out desperate strength of her blows, as a power attack deflected harmlessly by its unnaturally durable hide. The entity trapped in its ribs cowered, shrinking with each release of its captor's powers.

Thus occupied, she did not see Arun turn away from Dana, and step toward her from behind, his holy sword coming up slowly above his head.

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"Beorna!" Dana warned, seeing the *confused* paladin step forward to strike down the templar from behind. The templar glanced back and tried to adjust, but was hindered by another series of attacks from the devourer, including a claw that seized at her helmet, ripping the adamantine headpiece roughly from her head, exposing her to death if she took another blow to her exposed skull.

"Selûne's light!" Dana cried, hurling her second—and last—*dispel magic* at the paladin in a desperate attempt to forestall a tragedy.

Arun hesitated, his sword quivering in his hand, just another step away from being within reach of Beorna. Then he roared out a challenge in dwarvish, this time his fury directed at the monstrosity that had nearly caused him to strike down the woman he loved. He came forward, but it was not to attack Beorna, but rather to bring his *holy avenger* down in a brilliant arc of white light that cut *through* the devourer's body. The trapped being seemed to flicker and then vanished, as half of the devourer's body—its left leg and a big chunk of

its torso—went flying across the room, while the rest simply dropped to the ground in an inanimate heap.

Meanwhile, out in the chamber, Lok turned toward Mole, who'd simply remained there with a dull look on her face, occasionally breaking out into a series of crazy giggles. The genasi's body trembled with effort, and for a moment lucidity returned to his gray eyes. He did not hesitate, ripping his helmet off of his head and shucking his shield, and with a mighty effort he slammed the flat of his axe into his own face.

His face splayed with blood from his shattered nose, Lok toppled to the ground, unconscious.

Mole screamed, running at full speed across the room, and through the far door, into Slouva's personal chambers. Fortunately there was no trap or other guardian waiting there, and the others found her huddling in a corner, whimpering. Arun and Beorna took hold of her, and shortly thereafter she returned to her own senses.

Dannel had bound Lok securely with rope, using about five times more than what he would have used to tie up a normal man. But when they healed the genasi he too had recovered from the devourer's magic. Cal and Dana plied their healing arts, and quickly restored most of the wounds they'd taken in the battle. Beorna was still drained, however; it would be another day before Dana could prepare more *restorations*.

"That was a close one," Cal noted. "If one or two more of us had succumbed to the *confusion*, we could have done real harm to ourselves."

"I am sorry," Lok said.

Dannel grinned. "Don't be. In fact, we owe you gratitude, for what you did... to yourself. Can't say I've ever seen that approach to enemy mind-control magic before."

Arun looked equally grim, but Beorna poked him with the tip of her sword. "Don't you be feeling sorry for yourself, either. Mind magic is nothing to sneeze at, and there is no shame in being under its power."

"It was potent," Dana said. "I failed to *dispel* it the first time, and very nearly failed to the second as well."

"This always happens to me," Mole said. "I may as well hang a sign around my head that says, 'Weak mind here, cast a spell on me.' I need something... Uncle Cal, is there an item you can make for me that will help protect my mind from these sorts of things?"

"I may be able to craft something," Cal replied. "But it will have to wait until we return home."

"Speaking of which," Lok said. "Perhaps we should attend to our task."

"Let's clear out these rooms," Cal suggested. "Quickly, but carefully. Mole, if you would?"

Arun and Beorna kept watch on the outer door while they conducted a quick search. Lok assisted Dana in carefully wrapping Benzan's body, which they stored in one of their larger *bags of holding*. The priestess's body shook as she bound the mutilated corpse of her husband in white cloth, but when they finished, her expression was frighteningly intense as she stood and took up her weapons. Lok, too, looked uncharacteristically grim.

Cal, Dannel, and Mole found nothing worthwhile in the annis's chamber, other than a bed apparently fashioned of flayed skins, but the same could not be said for the other room, the black chamber where they'd fought the devourer. There they discovered numerous items of magical potency, on the tables and in the iron chest in the back of the room. They found the rest of Benzan's items, which they temporarily shared out to those best able to use them, along with a number of magical potions and scrolls, another *bag of holding* filled with thousands of gold coins, and a small ebon lacquer box containing three huge black sapphires. They also found a pair of bundles with some familiar items: a longbow carved with a leaf pattern accompanied by a quiver, sword, cloak, bracers, and an amulet wrapped in a mithral chain shirt; and a headband, pearl pendant, wand, and a small wooden replica of a chest wrapped within a bright red robe. Even before Cal found the two familiar rings in a vellum wrap at the bottom of the chest, they had a good idea of who the two packages of items had belonged to.

"It looks like the Cagewrights that fled here were unsuccessful in their bid to release their master," Cal noted, handing the unstrung bow and quiver to Dannel. The elf admired the weapon—Kyan Winterstrike's *frost longbow*—for a moment before storing it, along with the extra arrows, in his *efficient quiver*. Cal placed the other items into his *haversack*, for review later when they had more time to spare.

"Do you think they're held here now?" Dannel asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Cal noted. "Although I would be surprised if they were in any condition to speak with us right now." As if to bolster the gnome's comment, a fresh surge of screams filtered through the walls, a babble from dozens of voices that seemed to mesh together in a backdrop just shy of painful upon the ears. Of more concern was the damage being wrought to their minds and souls; Cal wondered how long it would take all of them to become mad, in this place.

"These are worth a *lot* of money," Mole said, lifting one of the sapphires to examine it with an expert eye.

Cal had turned to the books upon the tables. "These are foul tomes, full of dark lore, sacred to the Prince that is our enemy."

"We should destroy them," Dannel said.

"I agree, but we lack the time and perhaps the means to do so here," Cal noted. "And we may learn something of use about our foe. I will exercise caution," he added, noting Dannel's expression, "but for now, we will at least remove them from the grasp of our enemies." He placed the books into his *haversack*, making room by redistributing some of their extra supplies.

“Are you ready?” came Dana’s voice from the outer room. “I’m getting sick of this place, and want to be quit of it soon.”

Dannel, Mole, and Cal rejoined the others. The archmage looked at each of his friends, noting the effect that the discovery of Benzan’s body had had upon Lok and Dana, in particular. He understood all too well what they were feeling, but he also knew that they risked even more, if they let their emotions dominate them, in an unforgiving environment like this one.

But the part of him deep within, beyond his godlike intellect, beyond the clinical analysis of the archmage’s mind, grieved for the loss of his friend.

“Let’s go,” he said, barely able to keep his voice from shaking.

They opened the door and started back into the main hall of the prison.

And screamed as a *horrid wilting* blasted into them, sucking the very life from their bodies.

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The companions staggered as the dark magic tore through them, drawing moisture from their flesh and organs, turning breathing into an agony, tightening their throats until even their cries of pain rattled in their gorges like dice in a cup. Even Beorna, weakened as she was by her earlier clash with the devourer, could not resist the effect, and Dannel and Mole were each particularly hard hit.

“Where?” Cal hissed, coughing as he fought the word out.

“Above!” Arun said, lifting his sword to point into the cavernous empty interior of Skullrot rising hundreds of feet above where they stood.

Looking up, they could all see it, sixty or seventy feet above them. Wrapped in diaphanous robes that were little more than shreds of black silk, it was a monstrosity straight from the most depraved nightmares of sickened minds. It was skeletal, part man, part something *other*, with huge wings that were only struts of bone jutting from its back. Those wings could not keep it aloft, yet somehow it flew, drifting slowly down toward them. It carried a scythe with a black blade that seemed to ooze bloody red light, and its eyes were points of black fire that were somehow darker than the deepest night, mesmerizing orbs that drew the viewer in, releasing them only with an effort of will.

“What... is... that...” Mole chattered.

As if in response, each of them heard a voice within their minds, a rustling of wind through a graveyard.

I am the Dark Myrakul, mortals... and you have violated the sanctum of the Great Lord... Rejoice in your last instant of free thought, for the rest of your existence shall be spent as wards of Skullrot, trapped in an eternal prison of your own suffering...

“A lich...” Cal breathed, the sound of his own voice breaking the spell of the Dark Myrakul’s fearsome appearance and terrible words. “Spread out!” he warned, following his own advice as he retreated back into the doorway to the golem laboratory. He cast a spell—not at the Myrakul, for he knew that his wands and few remaining attack spells would be of little use against it—but at his companions, bolstering them as best he could against what he knew to be coming.

As the others spread out across the floor of the wide main hall of the asylum, drawing out their missile weapons or preparing their own defensive magics, Dannel stood his ground and unleashed a barrage of rapid-fire *holy arrows*. Equipped with Benzan’s *greater bracers of archery*, his shots were even more devastating, and while the skeletal body of the lichfiend was largely immune to even Dannel’s potent arrows, the holy missiles discharged their blessed power into the body of the fell monstrosity with each hit... one, two, three impacts that drew a mental scream from the creature.

“That’s it, blast it, Dannel!” Mole said, shouting encouragement. The gnome rogue was at a loss for what to do herself, given that she had no holy ammunition for her bow, and she thought (in hindsight, as her shout echoed through the interior of Skullrot) that it might not be a good idea to draw its attention to her in any case.

Darting into one of the shadowy stairwells that occupied the corners of the hall, she tried to think of something to do.

Dana ran toward the stairs that led down to the exit, not intent upon escape, but merely on gaining position for the battle against the lichfiend master of Skullrot. She cursed herself for choosing to give up her *undead to death* spell for the *heroes’ feast* that she’d cast that morning; not that the spell would likely have worked against this foe’s mental defenses in any case. She was drawn by Lok’s call.

“Dana! I must close with it!”

She nodded, and opened her mind to the goddess as she ran over to the genasi.

Beorna and Arun moved together across the hall, drawing out their heavy bows. “If we cannot bring it into melee, we will be hard pressed to harm it,” the templar muttered. Arun agreed, but while he had no doubt that its scythe was a terrible weapon in close quarters, he suspected that it would most likely remain high above them, raining down destructive magic from its secure perch in midair. Dannel was really the only one who could hurt it, with his incredible skill with the bow, combined with the holy arrows in his quiver.

He was right on both counts. The Dark Myrakul had come to the same conclusions as the paladin, and as the brilliant white shafts continued to fly up into the empty hollow of the fortress’s interior from Dannel’s bow, the lichfiend drew upon the fullness of its dread power, and calling upon the most potent of its magics it *imploded* Dannel. Even with Cal’s magic bolstering him, the elf could not resist the spell, and his body crumpled in upon itself, his deadly bow clattering to the stone floor beside the crushed heap of flesh that had been the arcane archer a heartbeat before.

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“Dannel, no!” Mole cried, only able to watch as another of the Heroes of Cauldron fell, destroyed by a powerful enemy.

Flames engulfed the lichfiend as Dana called upon her last *flame strike*. But the column of searing divine flame faltered as it struck the body of the Dark Myrakul, dissipating against the undead priest’s spell resistance. It turned toward her, its mocking gaze terrible as its dark orbs pierced her, promising suffering to come.

But the master of Skullrot faced a more immediate problem as Lok lifted off of the ground, empowered by Dana’s *fly* spell, and knifed straight up toward it. The genasi’s axe was not the ideal weapon against the resistances of the lichfiend, but the look on Lok’s face said that he would not be forestalled by any such hindrance. The Dark Myrakul ignored him, focusing its still-active *implosion* spell upon Dana. The priestess screamed as the magic gripped her, but staggering backward she drew upon every last reserve of her focus and determination, and was barely able to overcome the potency of the spell before it left her like Dannel, a crumpled mound of flesh.

Lok roared and lifted his axe in both hands, dropping his shield and focusing instead on an all-out attack. Had he struck, he might have sundered even the unholy fabric of the lichfiend’s corporeal form, but as he drew within ten feet of it he rebounded off of an irresistible invisible shield. Momentarily stunned, the genasi’s momentum carried him off to the side, beyond the lichfiend, as he reverberated from that barrier—an *antilife shell*—and slowly spun to a stop fifteen feet away.

Arun had strung his heavy bow, but what he’d seen thus far had told him that his shots would have no effect upon it. If only he’d been able to close, with his *holy avenger*... but then the outcome of Lok’s aborted attack told him that the lichfiend had prepared against that contingency as well. The paladin turned and retraced his steps back to where Dannel’s body lay. Only the vague outline left by his garments and armor revealed that the gruesome remnants had once been a living man, but Arun did not spare thoughts for his friend now; this foe would not stop until all of them were either like the elf or forever imprisoned in the cages of Skullrot, their screams adding to the cacophony of insanity that filled the place. The paladin saw what he wanted, and took up Dannel’s bow and magical quiver.

Beorna had realized what he was about, and had followed him. As Arun rose he held out the quiver, which on command had already produced several of the white-fletched arrows from its extra-dimensional space.

A flash of light and a rush of air from the doorway to the golem laboratory announced Cal’s latest contribution to the battle; a shadow-eladrin, a bralani who rose up into the air toward the lichfiend, firing arrows from its *holy longbow* as it came. Against the mundane and magical defenses of the Dark Myrakul, however, its attacks were little more than a distraction.

Lok turned in mid-air and immediately came at the lichfiend again, lifting his axe to strike. This time, however, as he neared its barrier he tensed and hurled his weapon at it. The

axe struck its body squarely and bounced back, doing little damage but certainly drawing its attention. The Dark Myrakul gestured, and a black beam lanced into the doughty warrior. Lok had faced dragons, fiends, and even gods, but he could not withstand the power of the *energy drain* as it mercilessly stole away a considerable fraction of his life-energy. Already seriously injured by the *horrid wilting*, the genasi had no choice but to fall back, barely clinging to consciousness.

But Lok's efforts had given the others a few precious moments to act. Arun and Beorna opened up their own barrage of holy missiles, and while they lacked Dannel's skill, they still managed at least one solid hit that further damaged the undead creature. Dana had withdrawn into the cover of the archway and was engaged in a powerful summoning, while Cal was doing the same from within his own shelter. Mole, unsurprisingly, had disappeared.

The Dark Myrakul unleashed a terrible cry, a sound barely audible to normal hearing, but which seemed to grate upon the soul like fingernails drawn over a slate. At first the companions thought they were under another magical attack, but the noise seemed to do no lasting harm, and they wondered what it portended.

They did not have long to wait.

"What in the Hells was that?" Beorna said, as she drew another holy arrow and fitted it to her bowstring. As the two dwarves lifted their bows, they saw what looked like a huge black orb appear in the shadows high up near the summit of the spire. The orb grew larger as it plummeted down toward them, taking on form, thick arms and legs, misshapen body...

"Get back!" Arun yelled, pushing Beorna aside before retreating back in the other direction. The Dark Myrakul calmly shifted position, moving out of the way of the plummeting newcomer, which streaked down past it to strike the floor below. At the last moment it had unfolded considerable wings that caught the air, slowing it, but it still hit with enough force to crack the ancient stone.

The thing was huge, bigger even than the misshapen flesh golems they had fought before. It had a similar look, constructed of body parts from various creatures combined to form a new level of monstrosity, but this creature was formed from pieces of fiends, adding the worst elements of multiple species of demons and demodands into one hideous being. The force of its impact would have broken every bone in the legs of a mortal creature, but the demonflesh golem indicated no hindrance whatsoever as it lumbered forward, its massive claws reaching out for the two dwarves.

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Arun felt a cold touch of fear settle over his soul as the gaze of the demonflesh golem met his. But he was a knight consecrated to the hammer of Moradin, and the fell power of such a monster held no power over him. Drawing his sword, he rushed at it, taking the hit he knew he would have to withstand to get to it, tearing free from its grasping claw, lunging forward and bringing his sword down into its leg.

It was like hewing at old leather with a dull knife. The thing's hide was incredibly strong, but the construct was infused with evil, and that made it vulnerable to the power inherent in Arun's weapon. The paladin stood his ground as the golem pounded him with its huge claws, one larger than the other, drawn from different creatures. It was strong—insanely strong—but Arun was full of the power of his god, and he gave as good as he got.

And then Beorna was at his side, hewing at it with him, her own deep voice adding a strident dwarvish battle cry. It was only then that Arun realized that he'd been singing a song of battle that he had not heard since his youth in the Rift, part of the past he thought he'd put behind him.

But the golem was not merely a tough physical combatant; it was infused with dark magical powers as well. It demonstrated this by opening its jaws wide and breathing a cloud of vapors upon the dwarves that tore into their already desiccated bodies; it was in effect another *horrid wilting* upon the one that the Dark Mrykul had hit them with before. But the dwarves stood their ground. Beorna was able to shake off the effect this time, her divinely granted *mettle* protecting her. Arun lacked that gift, although he withstood the worst of the effect, and while he was weakened, he was able to fight on.

But then a coruscating pillar of flame descended from above, a gift from the Dark Myrakul who still hovered sixty feet above them, wreathed in its multilayered wards, all but immune to attack. Beorna had simply taken too much abuse; she collapsed, smoke rising from the gaps of her armor, a stench of burned flesh rising above her. Arun had been protected from fire, but he too suffered from the corrupt energies of the *strike*, and suddenly his situation looked a lot more dire.

But with Beorna lying unconscious beside him, he could not retreat, even grievously wounded with a dire foe looming over him. He lifted his sword again, knowing that without help, there could only be one outcome.

But help was in short supply, as the dwarf's companions were finding themselves in dire situations of their own.

Dana had summoned an avoral, which she'd commanded to aid Lok. The genasi had withdrawn to one of the galleries flanking the main hall, barely conscious, collapsing to the floor behind the shelter of one of the stairwells, fumbling with a healing potion from the pouch at his waist. He felt weak, diminished; the *energy drain* had stolen much from him.

The Dark Myrakul had ignored the bralani thus far, which had closed to almost point-blank range, firing arrows that caromed harmlessly off its many shields. The lichfiend recognized it as a shadow-creature, of course, which further diminished its effectiveness. But as a quartet of lantern archons—also shadowed—rose up from below, blasting with their light-beams as they came, its patience was exhausted. It spoke a word of *blasphemy*, instantly destroying the summoned creatures, including the avoral as it headed toward Lok's retreat.

That small matter attended to, the master of Skullrot examined the battlefield. Its demonflesh golem had the dwarven warriors well in hand, especially after its *flame strike* had taken out the female. The enemy spellcasters had withdrawn to shelter to summon

allies, but if the shadow-creatures and the avoral were the best they could do, then this engagement would soon be completed.

Content in its own invincibility, the lichfiend began its own powerful conjuration.

Mole's heart pounded in her chest as she ran up the stairs, the sound warring with the noises of battle and the usual screams of torment that filled Skullrot. Desperation thrust her onward, and she rapidly gained height, ascending the varied tiers of the citadel, glancing out over each balcony that she passed, dreading the sight of the lichfiend waiting, watching her, ready to blast her with some nasty magic. The sinister powers inherent in Skullrot kept her from becoming invisible, but cloaked in her dark garments, and nearly silent, she was almost undetectable. Still, she did not trust in her skills to conceal her from this enemy, which had already killed one of her friends with apparent ease.

It'll kill all of them, if you don't do something! came that annoying voice in the back of her mind that tried to interfere whenever she did something crazy.

"I'm working on it!" she hissed back, coming to a stop at one of the galleries. She was a little bit below the lichfiend's level, now, although as she saw the roar of a *flame strike* knife down at her friends below, she knew that she didn't have any more time to go higher.

But instead of running toward the balcony and the battle raging in the interior of the asylum, she ran outward, deeper into the gallery. Huge portals of iron set with small, barred openings were set along the walls at regular intervals, from which the familiar screams issued intermittently.

Mole glanced through a few of those openings, hopping up with her magical boots long enough to look through. Finally she came to a likely candidate, and stopped. She drew out the *chime of opening* she'd taken from Slouva's body, but she didn't need to use it immediately; the door was open.

That was odd, and it gave her pause, but the desperate sounds from without drove her forward.

As she entered she saw why the outer door hadn't needed to be locked. The prisoner was secured with chains that surrounded him entirely, pinning arms, legs, and body with a thoroughness that she had to acknowledge even as she felt pity for the poor thing's suffering. The captive was a planetar, his wings battered remnants, the rest of his body in little better condition. He lifted his head and regarded her, his eyes full of a deep madness that Mole might have recognized had she not been in such a hurry.

"We're having quite a lot of trouble with that lich," she told him, as she lifted the chime toward him. "If you could... well, you know, use your holy powers and all, help destroy it... well, that would really be helpful."

She struck the chime, and the chains loosened their grip upon their captive. Of course, she wasn't quite ready for the reaction she got from the released celestial. It wasn't *quite* the gratitude she'd expected...

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They were nearly done, Arun thought, as another blow from the demonflesh golem slammed into his shield. He saw it twist, its tail coming around at his face, but he could not move swiftly enough, not now, with his body stiffened by the *wiltings* it had absorbed, blackened by fire, battered by the hits he'd taken from the golem. He'd called upon Moradin's power to bolster him, but even so he knew he could not take more than another hit or two. The golem's tail struck him square on the front of the helmet, driving him back, his vision full of exploding stars. But some stubborn core kept him going, demanding that the *next* hit, not this one, would be the one to take him out.

"Arun!" Dana cried, rushing back out from cover, toward him. The paladin knew that she offered hope, healing magic that could keep him going longer, fighting on... or succor for Beorna, restoring her to the battle, drawing her back from the brink.

He thought he could see the blue glow forming around her hands, when a vrock demon dove down from above and into her, sending both rolling back in a tumble of arms and legs and wings.

He did all he could do. He attacked. He could only reach the lower half of the golem's body with his sword, and his attacks were feeble—he could almost sense its anticipation, as the paladin's blows slid off of its thick legs. The massive fists came up. There was no way he could resist them, no way he could take another hit...

"Have faith," came a voice from behind him.

Despite himself he started, and even as he recognized Cal's voice a billowing cloud of gray smoke swept out over him, momentarily obscuring everything in its folds. But then the leading edge had passed, and he realized that it was just a figment, concealing the dwarves and the gnome archmage, lingering back outside of the reach of the golem.

"Get her, quickly!" he urged, directing the illusion. Arun could dimly hear his own voice, and the loud clatter of the golem's movements, and realized that the smoke had been only part of the gnome's distraction. The paladin took up Beorna, and half-carried, half-dragged her with the gnome into the relative shelter of the golem lab.

Cal thrust a potion into the genasi's hands. "Heal her... we haven't got much time." He immediately began spellcasting again, drawing upon what was left of his magic.

Dana screamed as the vrock tore into her with its talons, feeling her skin burn as its spores tunneled into her flesh. The demon was tougher than she was, but she had anticipated close-quarters combat and had infused herself with *divine power*. Thus fortified, she was able to slide out of the vrock's grasp. She immediately shot off through the doorway back to the entry foyer, calling upon the power of her *winged boots* to carry her swiftly away.

The vrock, letting out an eager screech, was quick to follow.

The Dark Myrakul was an ageless creature, undead for so long that it could barely recall the vicissitudes of mortal life. But that part of it that could still feel was growing impatient

with these enemies who so tenaciously fought on, against the odds that were so stacked against them. They had destroyed Slouva and its golems, but that was no great matter; minions could always be replaced. The annis had been plotting to supplant it in any case, and probably would have had to been removed at some point anyway. But these enemies had intruded upon *its* citadel, had undermined the security of *its* charge. And for that if nothing else, they would experience torments...

Impatience became annoyance as the dwarves were evacuated out of the reach of its mighty golem, drawn away by a simple figment. The construct lunged after the two illusory dwarves, and the lich had to admire the complexity in the hastily-crafted spell; the figments were *just* too swift, moving out of its reach, while remaining close enough to lure the golem further after them across the chamber. A sentient being would have recognized the illogic in the scene, but the golem, intent only upon destruction, was fooled.

Waving a hand, the Dark Myrakul *dispelled* the *major image*.

Sensing movement, the lichfiend turned to see that the genasi had reappeared at one of the balconies, holding a greatsword now, burning—and freezing—in an unusual combination of elemental powers. The mortal warrior had healed himself somewhat, but even as he stepped forward and lifted into the air to return to the fray the Dark Myrakul hit him with a *destruction* that enveloped him in black fire, blasting him backward to fall unmoving to the ground.

Two, the Myrakul thought.

A loud cry—familiar—drew the undead ancient's attention back around, to yet another gallery. It saw a diminutive form charging toward the balcony—the gnome rogue, coming for... a suicide attack? The gnome leapt for the railing of the balcony, too soon to clear it, it seemed. But that was her intent, as a moment later she twisted her body as she hit the floor and slid between the metal bars that supported the railing, coming to a halt as she dangled over the edge of the gallery, placing herself in a clearly unenviable and vulnerable position.

The reason for her odd behavior became obvious a moment later as a charging form appeared behind her from the shadowy depths of the gallery. The insane planetar caught sight of the Dark Myrakul and leapt at it, madness radiating from him in his gaze, his movements, and the nonstop screaming that filled the air around him. He struck the *antilife shell* of the lichfiend and battered against it, slamming it with his fists in a violent but useless gesture.

The lichfiend calmly blasted the angel with another *destruction*, surrounding it with unholy fire. But the fallen celestial was beyond mere pain, and some small part of his mind whispered of powers never lost. With another cry he *dispelled* the aura keeping it at bay, along with a few of the lich's other wards, although most of its spells remained intact. The angel eagerly dove at its tormenter, slamming at its skeletal body with desperate strength. Several ribs snapped as he blasted the lichfiend with a powerful punch. For a moment it looked like the ancient undead priest would be overcome by the sheer violence of the attack, but the fallen celestial's assault faltered a moment later as the Dark Myrakul swept its scythe up in a sudden arc, intersecting the angel's body with a red flash. The angel fell

back and down, its head separating from his body as both plummeted sixty feet to splatter on the hard stone below.

Holy arrows slammed into the lichfiend from below, as Arun and Beorna, recently restored at least to partial health, reappeared from below and opened fire. Again they were largely ineffective, although this time it was Beorna who scored a lucky hit, penetrating the undead priest's defenses with an arrow that glanced off of its oblong skull. The demonflesh golem, alone and unoccupied at the far end of the chamber, immediately turned and lumbered toward them, and the dwarves retreated into the room, forcing the golem to bend low and attempt to squeeze through the doorway after them.

The Dark Myrakul's summoned vrock returned via the eastern arch, sans the priestess it had chased out a few moments before. With the golem fully occupying the doorway to the laboratory where the dwarves had taken refuge, it spotted an easier prey in the form of Mole, and it flew toward her as the gnome flipped back up over the railing, running back into the gallery with the winged demon following.

The Dark Myrakul let it handle the retreating gnome, instead taking advantage of the momentary lull to refresh the magical defenses that protected it. The planetar had brought down its *spell immunity*, but with the enemy spellcasters having yielded the battlefield, it did not look like it would need that protection... and in any case its spell resistance was still potent.

A crash that reverberated through the hollow spire drew its attention upward. The sound had originated in That Place That Must Be Guarded At All Costs, the focal point of its duty in this place, the prison that held Skullrot's most powerful "guest". Immediately the lichfiend launched straight up into the air, ascending the shaft, casting ahead with all of its unnatural senses

A slender form appeared high above, knifing through the air as it plummeted down the central shaft of Skullrot toward the Dark Myrakul, much as the demonflesh golem had just a few moments earlier. But this time the newcomer was much smaller, smoother, diving with fists extended above her head straight toward the undead priest. It was Dana, and her body seemed to glow as she cut through the darkness. The lichfiend reflexively adjusted its position and hurled a spell at her, but both were ineffective; she shot right through its final *destruction*, fighting through the agony of the black fire, and using her boots she altered her course to match the Dark Myrakul's.

The lichfiend lacked time to cast another spell, but it brought its vorpal scythe up to intersect the priestess's descending form. They struck at the same instant, the undead priest stabbing its weapon deep into the woman's body even as her fists, empowered with a *heal* spell, drove into its skull. With its *greater spell immunity* stripped away the full power of the Selûne's divine light tore through its body, bathing the interior of the citadel with the soft life-affirming glow of gentle moonlight. For a few brief moments the suffering of the asylum's inmates eased, and their screams faded to a silence that seemed wholly peaceful.

The two combatants drifted downward in a tangle of black robes and shattered bone. Half of the lichfiend's skull had been blasted away, and blood poured from the terrible wound in Dana's chest opened by the Dark Myrakul's scythe. Dana fought a surge of pain and

madness that radiated out from the body of the undead ancient, but could not resist a terrible feeling of horror that crawled over her flesh as the lichfiend's ruined skull twisted, fixing her with a black gaze that radiated still from the ruined hollow.

I am not finished with you, Dana Ilgarten! came a voice, and with a terrible realization she knew that it was not coming from the Dark Myrakul, but from someplace... *else*.

But in the here and now, bony claws locked around her throat, binding the two of them together. Poison spread into her through that touch, poison and madness and death. Dana screamed and unleashed the power of Selûne through that link, countering its fell darkness with pure healing energy.

The two priests, undead and mortal, crashed into the ground in an explosion of bone and blood and black fire and white light.

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"Dana."

The voice drew at her across a great gulf. She was floating in darkness, but it was calm, reassuring, not the shadows that filled the place where the voice originated. She did not want to go back there, but the voice was insistent.

"Dana. Come back to us... we need you."

She wanted to turn away, but could not. She was brought back across the boundary, back into a light that was blinding, painful. She lifted her eyes to shield them, and realized that she could do so; she'd regained physical sensation and awareness of her body without realizing it. Vision came somewhat slower, as she gradually recognized the forms that hovered over her.

"Wha... what happened?" she managed to ask. Her throat felt as dry as the sands of Anauroch.

"Drink this," Cal commanded, offering her a waterskin. The water tasted amazingly good, but her throat was unable to handle it all, and she choked.

"Careful, slowly," Cal said, easing her head up enough so that she could recover, before offering her the skin again. She couldn't quite get up, not yet.

"What happened?" she repeated.

"You took out the lich," Cal said. "It was really quite dramatic."

"I remember that," she said. "If by 'dramatic' you mean 'crazy'. What happened after that... is everyone all right?"

“Dannel is dead,” the gnome said. “Lok nearly joined him, but he stabilized at death’s door. Fortunate that he’s as tough as he is.”

Dana turned her head—it took some effort—and looked around. They were still on the ground floor of the prison. She saw that the door and a big part of the surrounding wall leading to the golem lab had been torn away.

“Arun and Beorna took out the demonflesh golem,” Cal said. “I burned an entire healing wand and most of my remaining buffs keeping them standing, but they did all the hard work themselves. They also killed the vrock that the lich had summoned; Mole was able to keep it busy long enough for them to come and help. I saw it chase you out; when it came back without you, I’d feared...”

“As soon as I cleared the outer doors I *dimension doored* up to the top of the citadel,” she explained. “Once there I used my adamantine nunchaku to batter a small opening in the wall, enough to just slip through. There’s a huge chamber at the top of the spire; somebody’s up in a cage up there, but I didn’t get a good look.”

Cal nodded; he had a good idea of who it was, but they had more immediate concerns at the moment.

“Help me up,” Dana said.

“You’ve taken a heavy beating—not just physically, but mentally and spiritually. You should take it slowly...”

“Help me up,” she repeated, in a way that did not brook disagreement. Sighing, the gnome complied. Her body was responding to her commands, although she felt more than a bit unsteady. She called upon Selûne’s power and cast a *cure serious wounds* spell upon herself. It helped, some, although Cal was right; she’d been battered in ways beyond the power of a simple healing spell to resolve. In particular, that dark voice that had spoken in her mind, at that last moment...

“Dana, what is it?”

“I’m all right,” she said. “Where are the others?”

“They are helping Lok. Ah, look, there they are. Come on, I think he’ll need what healing we have left.”

They gathered together again, surrounded by the debris of battle and the remains of their enemies. The mad cries of the imprisoned had resumed at their full strength, and the weary companions felt oppressed by the aura of the place, somehow stronger now that they had overcome its guardians.

“Let’s get out of here,” Mole said. They’d done for Dannel what they could, gathering his possessions and wrapping his body as they’d done for Benzan, putting what was left of the elf into one of their *bags of holding*.

“We are not finished here,” Beorna said.

“We have little strength left in reserve, Beorna,” Cal said. “Adimarchus would be too much for us, in our current state.”

“Even at full strength, that might be the case,” Lok noted.

“There is another thing to consider,” Arun said. “Assuming that the lich was the final guardian, then Adimarchus’s is now without defenders. What would stop any of the Cagewrights from entering this place and releasing him?”

Cal frowned. “We don’t even know *how* to release him.”

“If anyone has that knowledge, it would be his servants,” Lok said.

“I agree that retreat may be necessary,” Beorna said. “But I would first look upon the one responsible for Jenya’s death, and all of the suffering unleashed upon the good people of Cauldron.”

Cal looked up into the great shaft that formed the interior of Skullrot. The heights above them were lost in darkness, but the spire had been where the lich had come from, and its deadly golem.

“Come on then,” he said, starting toward the nearest stair.

Slowly, they began to ascend.

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The companions made their way up through the tiers of Skullrot, passing the galleries with their prison cells.

“What should we do about them?” Lok asked, as they passed another ward of the prison.

“There is nothing we can do about them,” Cal said. “We do not know what crimes led them to be placed here, but we do know that all are almost certainly insane, like that celestial Mole freed.”

“I think it is premature to assume they are criminals,” Arun said. “Their only crime may have been to antagonize Graz’zt.”

“I would be cautious in using that name, especially here,” Dana said.

“In any case, we have enough on our plates right now,” Cal said. “Let us first deal with Adimarchus, and then we will revisit the issue of the fate of the prisoners.”

They rose up higher into the citadel’s spire, now over a hundred feet above the ground floor below them. The galleries gave way to blocks of cells placed on the inside of the spire

itself, between the stair and the inner hollow within the spire, so they could no longer see the central shaft. At each corner another flight of stairs curved higher up into the fortress, opening onto another row of iron doors to their left. These cells were obviously much smaller, barely big enough for a full-sized human, and those that were occupied did appear to hold humanoid creatures encased in straitjackets crafted from black hides. Those unfortunates reacted unpredictably to the passage of the companions outside their cells; some lay in comatose states, others babbled in strange languages, and others screamed at the top of their lungs, hurling themselves at the door and not ceasing until the intruders were well past.

“This is the worst place I have ever visited,” Mole said miserably.

“I think that we will find our objective at the top,” Cal said, urging them ahead. Mole, in the van, charged up the nearest flight of steps, the others close behind. As they reached the landing of the next tier of cells, they saw Mole crouched by the doors of one of the cells up ahead.

“What is it, Mole?” Cal asked.

“Fresh blood, here on the stairs,” she said. “Whoever’s in here, they were put in fairly recently.”

The companions gathered before the small iron door. The door was tightly secured, but a note from Mole’s *chime of opening* caused it to swing open, revealing the crowded space beyond.

The only occupant was a woman of middle years, naked, wreathed in blood and sweat and a stink that washed over them as the door opened. Her hair was matted and tangled about her scalp and across her shoulders, and she was entangled in a mass of black chains that bound her arms and legs tightly together, forbidding even the most basic of movements. The chains were interwoven with metal barbs that pierced her flesh, opening fresh runnels of blood that ran across the filth that covered her, dripping to the resinous floor that seemed to drink up each splash eagerly, leaving the floor dry and bare.

She looked up as the door opened, and they recognized her; she was the woman who had taken Benzan, back in Skullrot. But there was nothing else about her that was familiar; in her eyes there was only an empty depth, a vacuous nothingness that seemed as hollow as the empty promises that had brought her here.

“You...” Dana said, sucking in a breath, her fingers tightening to white on the haft of her spear.

“Embril Aloustinai, former High Priestess of Kelemvor, in Cauldron,” Cal said. “Mystic theurge... and Cagewright.” The woman did not show any recognition at the gnome’s words, but a thin keening noise sounded in the back of her throat, a piteous mewling that was not quite human.

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“How do you know that?” Arun asked. “Hers was a name we’d heard a lot, in Cauldron... but we’d never seen her, the whole time we were in the city.”

“Yeah, even when we trashed the temple of Kelemvor,” Mole added.

“After our last... encounter,” Cal explained, “While we were in Redgorge, I spoke to several of the members of the Chisel about what we’d learned in Cauldron. Maavu Arlintal was able to match my description of the woman we met in Shatterhorn with the name of Aloustinai.”

“How the mighty have fallen,” Beorna said.

Dana had leaned into the cell, staring at the woman. Embril did not react, but the chains seemed to tighten around her body, opening new wounds as the barbs dug into her flesh. It wasn’t clear how she could continue to take so much abuse and still live.

“Careful, Dana,” Mole said. “I think those chains are... alive.” Remembering an encounter with a chain-creature in the depths of the Malachite Fortress under Cauldron, an encounter that had not ended well for her, the gnome rogue shuddered.

“She deserves to die for her crimes,” Dana said.

“She may yet have information that may be useful to us,” Cal said. “She was a leader among the Cagewrights... and she knows more of... of both of our enemies, I think.”

“She is mad,” Dana said.

“Madness can be healed,” the archmage returned, softly.

“We are not far from the top of the spire,” Lok pointed out. “If she is not... going anywhere...”

“I do not condone torture, but in this case I must agree with the genasi,” Beorna said. “Adimarchus is not far, I suspect.”

At the mention of the demon prince’s name, Embril’s head shot up, causing the chains to twist reflexively tighter around her torso. Even barely unable to draw breath, she shuddered and screamed, “The Eye! The Eye! The Smoking Eye! It burns! It burns forever!” The sound of her voice filled the hall and distorted eerily up and down the spire, until it echoed back as a grotesque cackling.

“Shut up, SHUT UP!” Dana cried, finally slamming the haft of her spear into the woman’s face. The screams shut off as the Cagewright crumpled, blood oozing from her broken nose.

For a moment the Heroes of Cauldron just stood there, silent with the noise of Skullrot surrounding them.

Finally, Cal sighed. "Let's go."

They made their way up the last few flights, until the stairs opened onto a massive open chamber, a rough hemisphere with a ceiling that rose to a dome nearly fifty feet above them. Other than a hole in the center of the floor that accessed the hollow interior of the spire, the room was devoid of unique features. There was a small hole in the ceiling, opened by Dana during the battle with the lichfiend and its minions, through which the ruby sky of Carceri could be seen. The only other design element was a large cage of black metal, suspended over the opening by a long chain that passed through a socket in the ceiling, trailing across the room to a secure mooring on the far side of the chamber. Sitting inside the cage was the figure of a man, the details of his form obscured by the thick bars and ugly flourishes that decorated the structure. The cage itself was familiar, resembling too keenly the *soulcages* wrought by the Cagewrights as part of their bid to join Carceri and Cauldron, and free their master.

"Echoes of madness," Cal said, as the companions stepped warily from the stairwell into the open space of the room. Spreading out, they slowly approached the cage, each step reluctant, as if they were fighting the reflexive and sensible instinct to flee this place and never return.

Adimarchus did not respond to their presence, to the sounds of their approach, or even to the holy light of Arun's sword as it penetrated the cage and spilled over his flesh. He was slumped over, looking away from them, an ebon-skinned figure clad in a skirt of metal scales, with four tentacles that rose from his back, culminating in mouths that unconsciously gaped open every now and again, as if tasting the air. The body of the captive god was muscled, shorn of hair, impressive even in captivity.

As they watched in silence, the form of the imprisoned figure shifted, blurred. Then they were looking at the same being, yet at the same time completely different in form and appearance. Still in the shape of a man, the captive prince's body became a violet hue covered in golden runes that crawled over his body, disappearing beneath the golden breastplate he wore. Golden wings spread out from his back, replacing the tentacles, and he wore a golden gauntlet that culminated in sharp points that idly scratched at the flesh of his thigh, without conscious realization of what he was doing. Still he did not acknowledge their presence. After a few moments the angel-figure shifted, again reverting to the form of the black-skinned demon.

"By the gods," Dana said. "What... what *is* he?"

"A demon prince," Cal said. "A godling... a being of incredible power. But mad... whether through the collapse of his own mind, or by the efforts of his captors."

Arun looked unsteady, and did not refuse Beorna's steadying hand. "The Taint... so strong... I have never felt the like."

"Does he even know we are here?" Lok asked.

“On some level, I am sure he does,” Cal said. “But from what we’ve observed, and what we have learned, most of his influence is more subtle, working through the minds of his followers, drawing them into his madness. The Ritual of Planar Joining... even the design of the *soulcages*; they have been shaped by him, from within the confines of his prison.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I get the feeling that we are treading upon a very, very narrow bridge, overlooking a great precipice,” Lok said.

No one offered any disagreement.

“So after all of it... after everything we’ve gone through to get here,” Mole finally said. “Now what do we do?”

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A simple question, yet it opened a great many uncertainties.

“We cannot do any more,” Dana said. “We have to leave this place, return with our dead to Faerûn... and then, do what we can.”

“Just leave him here?” Beorna said, with surprise.

“There is nothing more we can do,” Lok said. “Dana is right.”

“He doesn’t look so tough... Arun’s blade through his back should solve our problem, demon prince or no.”

“I do not think that would be advisable,” Cal said. “But this may require further deliberation. There are two things that we need to remember. The first is that if we do depart now, we may not get another chance to stand where we stand now. The second is the response we received to Dana’s *commune*.”

“If we do nothing to intervene, then Adimarchus escapes his prison,” Dana said, nodding as she recalled the information she’d received in her last bonding with Selûne.

“Um... should we be talking about this in front of him?” Mole asked. “He’s not doing anything, but he’s still really creeping me out.”

“There is still the fate of the prisoners here, including the Cagewrights, to consider as well,” Arun said. “What is it that you propose, Cal?”

The gnome did not respond for a moment, rubbing his chin with one hand. “We need more guidance,” he said. “And to study this situation further. At the moment we seem to be at a *détente*, but that could change at any moment.”

“Including the return of our host,” Lok said.

“I have not forgotten that possibility.”

“Let him come,” Dana said.

“I agree with your sentiment, Dana, but getting ourselves killed or enslaved is not going to help Benzan. We shall not forget him; this I swear. But as to... the master of this prison... it's far more likely that he would send emissaries, rather than come in person. To be honest, I am more than a little surprised that we have not heard from him already.”

“All the more reason to leave,” Dana said.

“I think I see what you are getting at,” Arun said. “We can *raise* Dannel here, and cast the spells you need to learn more, without returning to Faerûn.”

“Not without rest,” Dana said. “And this is not my idea of a campsite...”

“I can erect a *private sanctum* here, in this very room,” Cal said. “It blocks sound and vision, both mundane and the sort accessed through *scrying* magic. I can sculpt its confines to suit our exact preferences. We would have to post a rotating watch on the exterior, in order to detect any threats before they became apparent.”

“If Hodge were here, I believe he would make some comment about gnomes all being crazy,” Arun said. “Settle down to share a quiet night's rest with a demon prince who's cage may be more precarious than we know.”

“We're all crazy, we who choose this life,” Cal noted simply.

“What about him?” Beorna said, indicating the prisoner.

“Well, he isn't going anywhere,” Cal said. “And while our dreams may not be placid, I suspect that his cage separates him from the physical world, at least while he is in it. I will have to make a more detailed analysis, but I believe that even your threatened sword thrust would have no effect upon him, so long as the cage is intact.”

“This is nuts,” Dana said. “But as long as we can find a way to hurt Graz'zt, then I am in.”

Chapter 444

Arun felt tired. As wearying as the physical exhaustion that days of battles and almost constant battering was the emotional drain inflicted by the constant noise of suffering that filled Skullrot. And on top of that was the *presence* of the entity trapped... securely?... in his cage on the far side of the room.

One mere step offered solace; to his left as he walked his sentry path was the cloudy white border of Cal's *private sanctum*. Inside, he knew, Lok was his second on watch. The companions had agreed that they'd hold double watches, with one person inside, one just outside of the *sanctum*. Those inside could see out, but no sound penetrated the outer border of the spell effect, forcing them to keep someone on post outside lest they miss the sounds of an approaching enemy. Prior to their rest Cal had laid an *alarm* at the main

entrance to the citadel below as well, but none of them wanted to take any chances, not here, not with the dangling cage and its inhabitant as a constant reminder of what was at stake.

Arun cracked his back, twisted his arms to loosen them, and kept walking. Lok would spell him after a while; despite their experience one could not help but have their senses dulled by the constant cries of Skullrot's mad inhabitants. The paladin had already inwardly decided that he would not wake Beorna for the second watch; the templar needed her rest, especially for the spells that she would be able to cast after a good night's sleep. They'd already determined that Cal and Dana would sleep a full eight hours uninterrupted. Unfortunately that meant long shifts for the warriors.

Arun was used to long nights; during his training he'd spent several watches of twenty or more hours at the ramparts deep under the earth, below the Great Rift. Those had been lonely watches, with only the darkness to keep him company. Darkness that could contain goblins, orcs, or worse—foul abominations come up from the Underdark seeking warm flesh and hot blood to feast upon.

The paladin had found himself thinking of his homeland more often of late. He'd accepted his exile, had come to grips with it... and he'd found a new place to call home, a place that had embraced him. In talking with Beorna there had been oblique mention of plans, of a future... nothing they'd wanted to put into concrete terms, not with the threat of obliteration a constant on this mission. But it was enough to know that there was hope, beyond all of the blood and evil and madness.

Despite all that, his thoughts drifted back. Maybe it was the solitude of this watch; even though his companions were just a few paces away, the barrier of Cal's spell separated him from them, partitioned them off into a shadowy reality that was less real than the screams and cages and dreaming godling that were his companions this night.

Lok had not complained. The genasi was possessed of a calm fortitude that Arun found to be refreshing and reassuring. He was still suffering from the effects of the lichfiend's *energy drain*; all the more reason for Dana to get her rest, to restore him before the effects of the spell took hold upon his soul and became permanent.

Arun reached the end of his circuit and turned back. As he did, his gaze stole back to the cage for the thousandth time. Adimarchus had not stirred, although occasionally he shifted between his two forms. Angel and demon. The juxtaposition spoke of a shattered mind, and from what Arun knew of the fallen creature's tale there was a suffering beyond mere mortal comprehension trapped in that cage with the immortal lord.

He lowered his eyes and continued his patrol, but before he'd taken two steps in his circuit around the borders of the *sanctum* a sound, faint, drew his attention back around. At first he thought that the noise had come from the cage—his heart pounded even with that flickering suggestion—but then he realized that it had originated from the dark shaft below it, the one that opened onto a two-hundred foot drop to the blood-splattered floor of Skullrot below.

He moved quickly over to the edge of the opening, careful not to draw *too* close. He did not like heights, but liked even less the sounds he could just hear over the background noise of the citadel. A rumbling vibration, very faint, accompanied by a clatter of what might have been falling stone.

“What is it?” Lok asked, his body materializing through the edge of the *sanctum*. Arun didn’t answer, but they could both hear the loud sound that followed, a loud screech, something new, yet at the same time vaguely familiar.

“Wake the others!” Arun urged, edging forward and leaning out over the dark opening to get a look down. The pale red light that shone through the walls of the fortress wasn’t very good to see by, but when they’d returned to the ground level for Cal to cast his *alarm* spell, they’d left Dannel’s old torch, glowing with *continual flame*, in the eyesocket of one of the skulls that comprised the walls. The golden glow of the torch seemed wan and feeble in the great interior of the prison, but it was still somehow reassuring to see it far below them, flickering still.

Something drifted into view, appearing through a new gap the size of a house that had been blasted into the wall of the citadel, maybe thirty or forty feet above ground level. The source of the sounds, then; although there was only a faint hint of dust floating in the air, no evidence of an explosion or other forced entry. The intruder was little more than a vague outline in the weak light, but its size and shape were distinctive. Arun felt a sickening twist in his gut as recognition dawned.

“What is it?” Mole asked, appearing through the edge of the *sanctum* a few moments before the others, Beorna holding her armor in one hand, and her bare sword in the other.

Arun turned to face them. That his report would be bad was evident on his face even before he spoke.

“It’s Vhalantru... the beholder’s back.”

Chapter 445

Vhalantru’s mad cries were a reflection of the cacophony that built from the galleries of Skullrot as the beholder floated into the central hall of the citadel through the opening it had *disintegrated* in the wall. Its invasion of the fortress had taken it through part of a cell, releasing an insane slaad, but the chaotic outsider was now just a gory red carcass—most of a carcass, anyway—still half-tangled in what was left of its chains. The beholder’s eyestalks twisted as it scanned the interior for a moment, but then it began to rise, its body tilting until its burning central eye peered upward through the haze of smoke that issued from the empty socket.

“Oh no, not again,” Mole said, frozen with terror as that evil stare seemed to lock onto her.

“We are in no condition for a rematch with that thing,” Dana said.

“We can’t just let it have Adimarchus,” Beorna said, moving with grim efficiency as she slipped her heavy breastplate over her shoulders. Arun moved to help her.

“Is there anything we can drop on it?” Mole asked, but as she looked around she saw only their bedrolls, and the other things they had brought with them; there were no furnishings in the room save for the great cage and its inhabitant. Something must have shown in her face as she glanced back down the shaft, for Cal said to her, “Don’t even think about it!” Glancing over his shoulder at Beorna and Arun, he said, “We may need an escape route!”

Arun nodded, turning from fastening a buckle on Beorna’s armor and reaching, not for the *holy avenger*, but for the adamantine battleaxe he’d recovered from Shatterhorn. Dana had already proven that the walls of the citadel were not invincible, although the fact that they were two hundred feet above the ground might have given them pause, had it not been for the more pressing threat rising up from below.

Lok had unlimbered his bow and fired a *holy arrow* down the shaft at the beholder, but it was too dark to see if the shot had any effect.

“Careful, it’ll be in range in a moment...” Cal began.

But even as he spoke, multicolored rays of energy erupted from the beholder’s eyestalks, stabbing up through the shaft toward them. They had the advantage of range and the cover provided by the lip of the shaft, but that didn’t protect Lok from the first beam, which shot into his chest. The genasi staggered back but resisted the effects of the ray, which might have been disastrous if he’d succumbed to magical *sleep* while leaning over the edge of the shaft. A second beam lanced through the empty space where he’d been standing a moment before, and a third impacted the floor a few feet back from the shaft’s edge, missing them entirely.

Of course, that wasn’t necessarily a good thing, as a segment of the floor suddenly vanished, *disintegrated* by the beholder’s eye ray. Doubly so since Cal had been standing there, and now found only empty space beneath his feet. Gravity took its inevitable hold, but even as the gnome started to fall Mole leapt across the shaft, her hand outstretched to snag hold of her uncle’s cloak. Her momentum carried her forward, just enough for her other hand to catch hold of the new edge of the shaft by the tips of her fingers. Cal dangled below her, one hand holding onto his cloak, the other holding a wand that he aimed down at the beholder, blasting it with an *acid arrow*.

“You... need... to go... on a... diet!” Mole gasped, fighting to maintain her precarious hold.

“Hold on, Mole!” Dana said, directing the *spiritual weapon* she’d just conjured to harass the beholder, then diving to grab onto the gnome rogue’s wrist. Dana wasn’t particularly strong, but Arun was there a moment later, kneeling at the lip of the chasm to help her drag the two gnomes to safety.

“It’s still coming!” Cal warned. Lok had kept up his barrage, but was hit by another pair of beams in quick succession. While he’d avoided being disintegrated, turned to stone, or instantly killed, as he drew back from the edge of the precipice his labored movements did indicate that he’d been *slowed* by the beholder.

“If you have any ideas, I’d love to hear them!” Dana said.

As soon as Arun had pulled her up, Mole had drawn back and dug deeply into her *bag of holding*. She found what she was looking for; a small wooden box that opened to reveal a number of lumpy canvas sacks stashed inside.

Sometimes the old favorites are the best, she thought, taking all three of the tanglefoot bags out and tossing the box aside. One must have had a tear or something, for the interior was hard and dried out, but the other two seemed okay.

She returned to the edge of the chasm. Beorna, she saw, was hacking at the outer wall of the chamber with her adamantite sword; the others had fallen back from the opening, apparently yielding that defensive position to the beholder, who seemed able to target its eye-beams with precision no matter how little of them was exposed to its searching eyes.

“Mole, what are you doing?” Cal asked.

“Just going to tangle it up a bit!” she replied. Then, before he could dissuade her, she lifted the bags and darted up to the edge of the opening.

The first thing she noticed was that the beholder looked a lot... *bigger*; it had managed to climb quite some distance up the shaft and now wasn’t more than sixty or seventy feet below. It literally was the size of a house—and one built for humans, not just the compact structures sized for gnomes that she remembered from certain neighborhoods back in Waterdeep. It had clearly been waiting for one of its enemies to reappear; for as soon as she saw it one of the fist-sized eyes atop the twisting eyestalks flashed, sending death her way.

“Woah!” she yelled, snapping her upper body back before her conscious mind could order her body to react. She dropped the tanglefoot bags, but that was the last thing on her mind as she saw the green ray lance inches past her face, stabbing upward, finally intersecting the chain that stretched between the top of Adimarchus’s cage, through the eyehole in the ceiling, and across the room to the heavy winch set into the far wall.

Oh, no, she thought, as the beam seeped into the chain, infusing six or seven of the heavy links with a green glow that lasted less than a heartbeat before they just... vanished.

Leaving the cage holding the imprisoned prince to plummet through the hole in the floor and down the shaft.

Mole would not have been who she was if she did not immediately snap back to the edge of the shaft, her eyes wide as she observed what transpired next. She saw the cage falling toward the beholder, which fired a blue ray at it seconds before it hit. The beam had no apparent effect upon Adimarchus’s prison, although it did leave a flickering blue glow around the bars of the cage, giving the whole of the construct an eerie corona that persisted even as the cage struck the beholder, driving it halfway down the depth of the shaft before Vhalantru twisted away and separated from it. The cage, still glowing with the afterimage of the beholder’s power, dropped like a stone the remaining seventy feet to hit

the unyielding floor below with a resounding crash. The cage bounced into the air and to the side as if hurled away, rebounding off a nearby wall before landing again and rolling to a battered stop some distance away.

As Mole's gaze drifted to the cage, she saw that the blue glow was gone. But even worse, it was empty, its crumpled door creaking faintly as it twisted on ruined hinges.

"Oh my gods..." Mole breathed.

Adimarchus lay on the ground, a black smear in the flickering light of the torch. This far away, he didn't look all that different from a man, battered and tormented, the torchlight glistening on his bare ebon skin.

Then he stirred, and slowly, began to rise.

Chapter 446

"Mole, what is it?" Cal asked, returning to the opening where his niece stood transfixed, watching the scene below. She could only point, unable to turn away from what happened next.

Vhalantru may have been reconstituted through Adimarchus's power, but that certainly didn't appear to have sweetened the beholder's attitude toward the Prince. The beholder spun and fired a series of blasts into the freed lord, beams that lanced into his body as he slowly pulled himself to his feet. One cut a bright swath across his torso that hissed black vapors, but all of them had expected Adimarchus to have considerable resistance to magical assault, and Vhalantru's initial barrage seemed to have little overall effect.

The Demon Prince of Madness reached his full height and spread his arms wide, the tentacles sprouting from his back forming a wide "X" behind him. He opened his mouth and unleashed a scream that shook the citadel of Skullrot to its foundation.

"Okay, we're in trouble," Cal said.

The beholder continued its assault, blasting the demon prince with more eye-beams, trying to find a combination that worked. It hit him again with the *disintegrate* ray, and again the prince suffered another flesh wound that hissed black smoke and drained black ichor.

Adimarchus seemed to belatedly recognize the presence of the adversary trying to destroy him. He lifted his hand, and unleashed a power upon the beholder. The companions could see its effect even at this range, as Vhalantru's body shook in agony, ravaged by a powerful *horrid wilting*.

Vhalantru quickly responded by shifting its body and opening its central eye, bathing Adimarchus in *antimagic*. The Prince snarled as he recognized the smoking orb, a larger cousin to his own right eye, trailing a wisp of black smoke, its radiance brightening with the demon lord's fury.

The beholder did not let up, running its *disintegrate* ray along the base of the railing that fronted one of the nearby galleries. Even as the moorings holding the metal construct were sundered, it hit the barrier with its *telekinesis* ray, ripping the structure from its remaining supports and hurling the entire thing at Adimarchus.

The demon prince made no move to dodge or avoid the huge object, merely bringing his arms up across his face. The metal barrier struck him solidly. The impact would have utterly crushed an ordinary man, as the banister had to weigh at least several hundred points. Adimarchus was driven back.

One step.

The form of the Prince of Madness shifted, and he took on the other form familiar to the companions, the golden-winged angel with the clawed gauntlet. The prince leapt into the air, his wings carrying him easily aloft, out of the radius of Vhalantru's antimagic field. The beholder, now drawing back, resumed the full fury of his barrage, hitting Adimarchus with another series of eye-beams. Apparently recognizing that most of its beams with mental effects had little chance of affecting this enemy, the beholder had settled upon combination strikes with its *disintegrate* and *finger of death* rays; even when the full potency of those was resisted, they still inflicted considerable damage. Those beams drew black lines across the perfect features of Adimarchus's angelic form, but did little to stop the demon prince as he flew directly at the beholder. Vhalantru blasted him with its *telekinesis* beam in an effort to drive the charging demon back, but to no avail. As Adimarchus flew past the beholder his golden wings lanced out, cutting deep gashes in the giant orb of its body. The golden claw shot out a moment later, puncturing the beholder's body, drawing out a terrible sigh of agony as the gauntlet drew back covered with black blood and gore.

Now seriously discomfited, Vhalantru abruptly dropped twenty feet, its eyestalks twitching in unison as they all fixed onto the angelic figure directly above. Adimarchus was swallowed up in a blaze of colored light as beams from all ten of the beholder's eyestalks blasted into him. Rents opened up in his violet skin, and fat droplets of golden fluid trailed from his body to drip down onto the beholder's bloated form.

The beholder's attacks were clearly starting to take their toll, but Adimarchus did not appear to be seriously hindered as he abruptly closed his wings around his body, and plummeted straight down. Vhalantru tried to get out of the way, but moved too slowly as the golden gauntlet was extended, straight down, and the demon prince slammed into the beholder's body, his weight driving that member deep into its body. Vhalantru screamed as the prince unleashed some potent energy through the attack, an energy that drove into the core of its corrupted being. As Adimarchus clung to it, his arm sunk into its body up to his elbow, a bright glow seemed to shimmer around the beholder. Then, so quickly that an eyeblink might have caused one of the watchers to miss it, the orb collapsed in upon itself like an overfull waterskin rent open by a dagger. Adimarchus withdrew his arm as the wreckage of the beholder was reduced to a mass smaller than he was, and as he spread his wings to catch the air once more what was left of Vhalantru plummeted to the ground below to land in a sad heap on top of the mangled form of one of the Dark Myrakul's flesh golems.

Up above, the companions had watched the entire exchange. With Vhalantru's destruction, it was as if a switch had been thrown, suddenly restoring their ability to act.

“Um... we’d better get out of here, don’t you think?” Mole said.

“He has been weakened,” Arun said. “This may be our only chance to overcome him.”

“Did you just see the same exchange I did?” Dana asked. “We have to go, now!”

Cal nodded. “I agree.” He turned to the opening that Beorna and Lok had wrought in the wall of the chamber; fully ten feet across, it revealed the blighted landscape of Carceri in all its terrible glory. There was no wind, no indication other than the vast panorama that they were more than two hundred feet above the ground.

Mole was the last to leave the opening to the shaft. “Here he comes!” she said to the others, who needed no further incitement to gather at the breach.

Lok had taken the *flying carpet* out of his *bag of holding*, and was preparing to unroll it. “There’s no time for that!” Cal said. “Everyone, take hold of someone else; Dana, in the center; you’ll need your hands free. On the three count, we leap, as one.”

“You’d better know what you’re about, gnome,” Beorna said, as they took their positions. Lacking time to repack the carpet, Lok merely slung it over one shoulder.

“One, two, three!”

On that last word they leapt, the warriors all but carrying the gnomes, Dana locked in the center of the ball of interlaced limbs as they plummeted down, down, down.

More than one of them screamed, although Mole’s cry sounded suspiciously like a whoop of exhilaration.

Cal let them fall about a hundred feet before he invoked his *feather fall*. Their rate of decline abruptly eased, and they could hear Dana’s invocation to her goddess as she drew open the veil between worlds.

Even as he sensed the magic building around them, Cal chanced to glance upward, back at the spire. He saw Adimarchus, still in his angelic form, emerge from the opening in the prison, his wings spreading as he burst out into the open air. Cal imagined that he could feel the multiverse tremble as the demon prince hovered there, drinking in the liberty that had so long been denied.

He wasn’t sure, but as the bright glow of Dana’s spell enveloped them, taking them home, he thought he heard one wondrous and terrible word echo out across Carceri.

“FREEDOM!”

Chapter 447

It was deep in the night in the Western Heartlands of Faerûn, but one would not have known it from the crowded, windowless space of the study, separated off from the rest of the world by thick stone walls and potent magical wards. The bookshelves on each of the walls made the place seem even smaller than it was; most were overflowing not only with books, but with scrolls, boxes of polished wood and handwoven wicker, and dozens of other assorted items ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. The dominant feature of the chamber was a low desk and matching chair, the former likewise burdened with miscellany, the latter occupied by a small figure clad in a soft robe of faded blue silk. He was bent over a book, his pen making a constant *scritch, scritch* as it darted over the parchment, pausing only for a refill from the adjacent bottle of ink. The two candles burning brightly atop the desk—no danger to the books and scrolls, these were *continual flames*—highlighted the writer's features; he was a gnome, fixed with an incredible look of concentration and gravity undermined slightly by the large smudge of ink above his right eyebrow.

The door to the room opened, but the gnome did not even look up.

"You need to rest, Cal," Dana said.

The quill stopped its steady progression across the page. Cal looked up.

"Did Selûne refresh your spells?"

Dana nodded.

"I can tell from your expression that you've already tried to find Benzan, without success."

"Yes."

"And Adimarchus?"

"I did not even try. You *know* where he's going, Cal."

"Yes, I suppose that I do."

Dana came more fully into the room. There really wasn't anywhere else to sit, but she carefully pushed back a stack of books from the corner of the desk, and situated herself there, just a few feet from her friend.

"Is Dannel all right?"

The priestess nodded. "Weakened somewhat, but that is normal. Mole is keeping an eye on him."

"Good. Coming back from Beyond... it is not an easy experience."

"Arun and Beorna are chomping at the bit," she said.

Cal sat back in his chair, folding his hands together in his lap over his belly. It had become more ample, over the years, but he could still walk the average laborer into the ground, even without all of the magical augmentories that each of them carried in abundance. "And what do you feel?" he asked.

"I think that Adimarchus will quickly regain much of his power, if he is not stopped."

"I did not ask what you think," Cal said. "I asked what you *feel*."

She met his gaze for a moment, then turned away. "My heart tells me to find Benzan, whatever the cost." She looked up again. "I will do what is necessary."

"We need you, to get to Occipitus, and to make our way back safely."

"And in between?"

Cal laid a sheet of blotting paper into the fold, and then closed the book. He had not mastered any of the spells of the highest valence that had just opened to him, or any of the other spells from the bundle of scrolls that rested in the small but sturdy iron box attached to the underside of the desk. If only he could have twenty-four uninterrupted hours... but there was no time, not now.

He stood, and stepped away from the desk and the power that would have to wait.

"In between, we knock a Prince off his throne."

Chapter 448

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Mole asked.

"It does look... different," Dannel said, turning as he took in the full panorama of their surroundings.

"Better, or worse?" Dana said, her expression indicating her own feelings about the matter.

Dannel, Arun, and Mole, the three who had been to Occipitus before, turned to the others. "Better, I'd say," Mole noted.

Occipitus *had* changed, although its underlying core remained recognizable. The deadly plasms that had filled the sky on their initial visit were gone, replaced by a low-hanging golden sky that resembled the interior of a great domed cathedral, with a soft glow that added a faint metallic tinge to their skin. The surrounding ring of mountains were there, but they no longer looked like jagged teeth; indeed, they were almost like pillars holding up the huge dome. The ground was still soft, giving slightly beneath their feet, and the landscape was still marked by blighted ruins and odd forests. There were none of the oozing red pools that they'd encountered the last time, at least not within visual range, and the odor

had improved as well, although only in comparison to what it had been before. And in the center of the plane...

"There's a storm over that mountain," Lok said.

"Not a mountain," Arun said. "It's a great skull... the center of power in this place. Our last visit was... unpleasant."

"But Morgan's in charge, now," Mole said.

"I wouldn't put a large wager upon that," Cal said. They all stared at the distant mound, where occasional flickers of energy were visible darting in and around the place. There was a disturbance above it; not quite a cloud, but something not unlike the vortex that had appeared above Cauldron during the Ritual of Planar Joining.

"It doesn't look very far," Dana said.

"Distances can be deceiving here," Arun pointed out.

"No horizon," Cal said, grasping what was "wrong" about the geography of the plane. "Occipitus is flat, unlike the surface of our Toril. I wouldn't be surprised if it were a hundred miles from here to that skull-fortress."

"Whatever's going on here, it looks like that's the place where it is happening," Dana said. "We could *teleport* directly there..."

"We have already covered this. It may not be wise to hurl ourselves blindly into a situation with which we are unfamiliar," Cal said. "We must be cautious. While we can see the skull, we have no idea what the situation is there; the place could be quiet, or it could be crawling with demons."

"Let us hope that you are right," the priestess said, turning away and busying herself with the straps of her pack.

Lok was already unrolling the *flying carpet*; as soon as it was ready they embarked and set off. They had already discussed their plans, and so did not need further conversation as they made efficient preparations. Mole, Dannel, Arun, and Cal rode upon the carpet, while Dana cast her *wind walk* spell, transforming herself along with Lok and Beorna into insubstantial wisps of pale white cloud. The two groups lifted off into the air together, moving quickly across the landscape. Despite her impatience, Dana remained close by the carpet, pacing the magical conveyance. They were not looking for trouble.

As it happened, trouble found them first.

Chapter 449

"Something's coming from above, approaching fast," Dannel pointed out.

The companions readied weapons and spells, and looked in the direction that the elf indicated. They'd spent maybe half of an hour flying toward the center of Occipitus since arriving via Dana's *plane shift*, and true to Arun's earlier comment they seemed to have come little closer to their destination.

"If it looks like a fight, Dana, get ready to empower Lok with flight and then disembark yourself," Cal said. "I'll bring the carpet down to ground level." The spellcasters wove a few preliminary buffs, preparing themselves for a confrontation.

"Hold," Dannel pointed out. "I don't think it's a demon."

As the intruder drew nearer, the companions could see that it was a golden winged serpent, easily twelve feet in length, with a broad feathered wingspan more than fifteen feet across. It was beautiful to behold, and indeed it bore a certain majesty about it that seemed to radiance calm and reassurance.

"I sense no Taint," Arun said.

"Indeed not, paladin," Cal said, quietly. "It is a couatl, a powerful emissary of Good."

"Travelers from the Prime," the creature said as it came up alongside their conveyance. "I bring you greetings and bid you follow me, at the summons of the Master of Occipitus."

"Which one?" Beorna asked.

"You knew him as Morgan Ahlendraal," the couatl said. "Your attendance is most urgently required... time is short."

"He's not at the Big Skull?" Mole asked. "Is Adimarchus back?"

"The Master will answer your questions," the couatl replied. "Please, you must accompany me with all speed."

"We're pretty slow on this thing," Cal said. "But with a thorough description of the destination, I can *teleport* us there. Dana will have to materialize to do the same with the others."

The couatl complied, providing a terse but accurate narrative of Morgan's headquarters as it related to their current location and other landmarks visible across the plane. As it spoke, Cal gently guided the carpet down to the ground, with Dana and the other wind walkers close behind. By the time it was finished, they had fully materialized, and stood ready. Lok helped Arun roll up the magical carpet.

"Did you get all that?" Cal asked Dana. The priestess nodded.

"I can bring you as well, couatl, if you can come close so that I can touch you," Dana said. The outsider responded by *polymorphing* itself into a slender, muscled youth, with golden skin and a metallic skirt around his hips.

"I am prepared," he said, his voice soft and melodious.

They materialized directly in front of their destination. It was a place well familiar to Dannel, Mole, and Arun, who had been here before to face the trials of Adimarchus for the rulership of his abandoned realm. The ancient celestial cathedral looked to be in far better condition than that last time, its white walls shimmering faintly in the diffuse golden light. But it was still a ruin, with gaps in its walls and large segments of its roof missing, collapsed in the trauma that had torn Occipitus free from Celestia and ultimately deposited it here in the Abyss.

The place had the look of a military camp, although the forces gathered here were sparse in the least. They saw several archons, gleaming bulbs of flickering light and sharp-eyed humanoid hounds carrying bare greatswords in ready stances, and a wolf-like lupinal that disappeared into the temple before they could get a good look at it.

"There is a lot of sadness here," Dana said, surveying the exterior of the structure.

"Come on, it's pretty cool inside," Mole said. "There are these 'flashbacks' to another reality, where it's all intact and shining and peaceful..." She outpaced the couatl who was directing them inside, but even as she reached the open double doors—they, at least, showed signs of recent repair—Morgan appeared.

The companions sucked in a startled breath. For Morgan, too, had changed since they last saw him. His golden celestial armor was fouled with blood and black char, and his right arm was simply... *gone*, replaced by a stump at his shoulder hastily wrapped with a bandage thick with crusted blood.

Chapter 450

The knight of Helm regarded them with a tired but determined expression. "I am glad you have come. I'd feared that you had not gotten my message."

"We did not get any message," Arun said. "What happened?"

Morgan did not answer for a moment. "I'd feared that my *sending* did not get through... it is as I suspected; his arrival immediately began to interfere with my grasp upon Occipitus, already tenuous..."

"You encountered the demon prince, I take it," Dannel said.

But again Morgan seemed not to have heard. "Already tenuous..." he repeated, cupping his chin in his remaining hand in a strangely mundane gesture, ruined by the wisp of smoke rising from his left eye socket, where the Smoking Eye flickered. For a moment it seemed like he'd forgotten their presence.

"Morgan?" Mole gently prodded.

The divine agent looked up. "If you are not here at my summons, then your arrival here is merely happenstance?"

"Not quite," Cal said. He briefly related their experiences on Carceri, culminating in their visit to Skullrot. Morgan's earlier vacuous mood seemed to have finally shifted, and he paid close attention to their words. "We were present when the Prince was freed, although we were not the agents of his release. Vhalantru, restored again, somehow followed us to the asylum, and opened his cage."

Morgan nodded. "It makes sense; the beholder was given new life through Adimarchus's madness; it would have been drawn to him, much as the Cagewrights had been."

"So now the demon lord has returned to his home," Dana prodded, glancing at the distant skull mountain and its surrounding nimbus of violent energies.

"He already works to reform Occipitus," Morgan said, spitting the words with contempt. "All my work here will be undone in short order."

"What happened?" Arun asked again.

"He came upon us very quickly; I can sense in a general way what happens here, but I had very little warning. He descended upon the Great Hall of the Flame like a hurricane, sweeping away all opposition with a wave of his hand."

"We would have sent warning, if we could have," Cal said. "As it was, we were pretty battered and depleted of magic when we left Carceri, and we came here as soon as we could recover our spells and utilize the key you had left for us."

Morgan nodded, some of the drive in his expression softening to mere weariness. "I do not blame you, friends. Long had I feared this, ever since the buildup of power I sensed growing here in the very fabric of the plane. I spoke of this to you, on our last encounter?" At their nods he went on, "All my efforts were to naught. His power is beyond anything I have ever encountered."

"He came nearly alone; there were a few minor demons, babaus, mostly, which my forces engaged at the base of the Skull. Adimarchus came directly to the Hall of the Flame, accompanied by a marilith."

The companions shared a look, but did not interrupt.

"We met him with our full strength; everything I'd been able to prepare. He shrugged off the full power of Helm, including the Crushing Hand of Righteousness, the greatest gift granted by the Vigilant One to his mortal servants. He smote through my allies with a single word of *blasphemy*. I was somehow not affected..."

"Perhaps your power grows greater than you realize," Beorna said. "Do not question your own commitment, knight of Helm."

But the cleric-turned-master of an Abyssal layer waved his hand dismissively. “I believe was Occipitus itself that sheltered me, through the touch of the Smoking Eye. It touches all with a slick of Taint, despite all of my efforts to redeem this place from the depths of the shadow in which it lies.”

“I stood nearly alone against the Prince of Madness, with only Saureya still at my side. I should have drawn some conclusion from the fact that he was not harmed by the demon’s power either, but my attention was fully absorbed by my enemy.”

“I brandished Aludrial’s Shard, the mighty blade that I found and recovered through the grace of Helm. Calling upon the power in that long-lost artifact, and the righteous might of the Vigilant One, I smote the Prince. He was injured already, it seemed; at close quarters I could see black marks upon his cursed hide. The blessed blade harmed him, and I drew faith as he recoiled from the divine power of the Shard.”

“I prepared to press my advantage, but in that moment I realized my error. Saureya betrayed me, striking from behind, wresting the holy blade from my grasp. The Prince... *changed*, his false aspect of angelic purity shifting to a monstrous form of utter demonic depravity. The wounds I had seen earlier, and the hurt I had inflicted upon him with the Shard were alike gone; it was as if a new creature entire faced me. Tentacles jutting from his back tore at my flesh, stealing my life energy, and he drove a sword of smoke and ash into my arm, consuming it in a searing blast of flame...”

“I do not know how I survived. When next I could perceive my surroundings I was looking up into the eyes of madness. The Prince regarded me as a man might regard an insect that had managed to sting him. He spoke... I cannot repeat his words, even now, though they are seared into my soul!” Even the thought of it seemed to stagger the man; he flailed with his remaining arm, as though trying to fight off an invisible attacker.

“Morgan!” Arun exclaimed, coming to the man’s side, taking his arm in both of his muscled hands, steadying him.

Slowly the knight seemed to come to his senses. “I... I will be all right,” he said, gulping breaths of air.

“You’ve been through an incredible trauma,” Dana said. “You need to rest; once I recover spells I can pray for magic to restore your arm.”

Morgan shook his head. “There is no time! Already Adimarchus is bending Occipitus to his will, regaining the power that had been sapped from him in his captivity. I have no choice... I must face him again now, or he will become unstoppable!”

“But from what you said, and what we ourselves saw on Carceri, he’s virtually invulnerable now,” Dannel said. “What chance do we have against a demon prince, even one freshly released from captivity?”

“We knew that the odds were long when we agreed to come here,” Beorna reminded the elf.

“But if he can *blaspheme*, to give just one example, then how can stand against it? That magic cannot be resisted. I remind you of our encounter with the balor, in case you have forgotten.”

“I do not think that his power is unlimited,” Morgan said. “And Aludrial’s Shard harmed him, although it is lost to me, now.” He reached around and drew a bastard sword from the scabbard across his back. The weapon was clearly old, with small pits and other imperfections visible in its blade, and it looked dull, as though its forging had been completed with cheap metal rather than fine steel.

“Cold iron,” Lok said.

Cal slapped his forehead. “Damn it, I am a fool! I should have had us reequip before coming here.”

“Arun’s sword will do well enough,” Beorna said. “And my blade can hack through anything, given enough muscle and spirit.”

“I don’t doubt your conviction, templar,” Cal said, “But the Prince is not a mere demon. He will be stronger by far than even a balor. His damage resistance will be a problem.”

“I have a few of the cold iron arrows we found in Shatterhorn,” Dannel reported.

“And we still have the rapier we took from the drow warrior in one of the *bags of holding*,” Mole said. “That was cold iron as well, I remember Arun saying something about it.”

“Give it to Lok,” Cal said. “Dana can *align* it; that should be sufficient to penetrate his damage resistance.”

“So we’re doing this, then?” Dannel asked. “Attacking a demon prince, on his own turf.”

“It’s not so bad,” Dana said. “We’ve done it once before.” But despite her easy words, her hands were shaking; she clenched the shaft of her longspear tightly to still them.

“We will be victorious,” Morgan breathed. “There is no other option.”

Cal turned toward the center of Occipitus. “The other problem is how to get there. I can *greater teleport* directly to the Skull, but Dana has already spent her magic...”

“We can resume *wind walking*,” the priestess suggested. “Or, I have my remaining *teleport*.”

“It is over a hundred miles, although it may not look it,” Morgan said.

“That’s not the difficulty,” Cal said. “The difficulty is that one cannot use a regular *teleport* to journey to a place one has not visited.”

“How about transporting directly on top of the skull?” Mole suggested. “I mean, you can *teleport* wherever you can see, right?”

“In a sense,” Cal said. “But at this range, it is impossible to clearly mark the destination. It would be a huge risk; the chance of a mishap or false destination would be at its greatest. Dana and everyone accompanying her could end up teleporting *into* the mountain, suffering injury or possibly even death.”

“I think we’re beyond the point of balking at risks,” Dana said. “We will all have to do whatever we can.”

“I will accompany the priestess, then,” Morgan said. “We will share the risk. How many can you transport, together?”

“Five each,” Cal said, “In addition to the caster.”

“You take your other companions, then,” he replied. “I will go with the priestess, and bring what allies that I have...”

He turned back to the interior of the cathedral, and raised his hand. Immediately they could hear a loud clanking noise, more like the bellow and creak of machinery than the clatter of armor.

“I have begged Lord Helm for aid against this enemy,” he said, as two figures strode forward from the shelter of the cathedral into view. The first had the shape of a centaur, a half-man, half-horse melding, while the second was a massive brute the size of an ogre. But it was immediately obvious that neither of them were living creatures, even before they could clearly mark the nature of the flesh that lay beneath the suits of heavy armor that each wore.

“Inevitables,” Cal said.

“As inevitable as Adimarchus’s doom,” Morgan said.

“I have to wonder which side is more insane,” Dannel whispered to Mole.

“Yeah... but you have to admit, it’s pretty damned exciting.”

Chapter 451

With a faint shimmer the two groups of companions materialized upon the bleached white expanse that was the summit of the great skull crag that dominated the center of Occipitus. They found themselves in the midst of the storm that enfolded the citadel, but instead of familiar rain and wind, they encountered only a strange darkening of the ambient light combined with a tickle of power that made the hairs on their arms and on the backs of their necks stand on end.

“Taint,” Arun said, drawing his holy sword. The paladin was a veritable beacon of magical buffs, focused upon him more than the others due to his ability to harm the demon prince with his holy sword. As for the others... well, their efficacy would have to be proven in the

encounter. They had prepared their best weapons and tried tactics, but against this foe all were cognizant that their best may not be near enough.

Their misgivings about their method of transportation had proven unfounded as Dana and Morgan appeared a mere sixty feet or so away from Cal and the others, the hulking form of the marut and the sleeker figure of the zelekhut behind them. Each step made by the marut made the ground tremble beneath their feet.

“Well, there goes any chance of surprise,” Dannel said, as the two groups rejoined.

“There never was any chance,” Morgan said simply. “He knows that we are here.”

“Let us be about this, then,” Beorna said.

“Come,” Morgan said, leading them across the skull, toward the front side where a tendril of smoke rose up into the air from below, ahead of them out of sight beneath the curvature of the white summit.

“Watch your step,” Cal said, as the slope grew more treacherous. The zelekhut unfurled segmented metallic wings from its back as a caution, while the marut simply plodded forward, its weight acting as an anchor, for now.

“Perhaps we should affix some ropes,” Dannel suggested, but before the others could comment Mole pointed to the destination Morgan was leading them to, a great crack in the surface of the skull, starting only a few inches across but widening to nearly ten feet by the time that it joined with one of the cavernous eye sockets that they knew connected to the Hall of the Flame below. On their last visit that opening had been filled with deadly plasms that issued regularly from the pillar, rising through the gap into the sky above. They had made an approach from this direction incredibly hazardous, but with the plasms gone their access to the interior of the citadel was currently open.

“Stay together, and I’ll use my *feather fall* to slow our descent,” Cal said, as they made their way carefully to the nearest point where the crack was wide enough to accommodate them.

They had already discussed their approach, and possible tactics, utilizing the best of their own skills, as well as the abilities of Morgan and his outsider allies. Peering through the gap, Mole reported that the great chamber below seemed empty. Arun confirmed that the Taint was strong here, an overwhelming aura that prevented him from singling out individual creatures. Morgan said that Adimarchus was here, close; perhaps waiting for them to show themselves before he made his appearance.

Most of the group dropped through the opening, using Cal’s spell to drift safely to the ground sixty feet beneath the crack. Dana remained aloft, using the magical powers of her boots to give her some distance from the others, while Cal slid through the crack and started walking on the upper side of the domed chamber, using his *spider climb* spell. The zelekhut likewise spread its wings and remained aloft, long spiked chains emerging from its wrists as it flew, while the marut merely drew upon its power and opened a *dimension door* directly to the chamber floor.

“Well, this is different,” Mole said, as she landed gently upon the floor.

The huge chamber was dominated, as before, by the swirling pillar of surging plasma flame that continued to issue black threads of smoke that rose up through the skull-eye into the sky above. But everything else about the place had been changed. Where on their last visit here the rest of the chamber had been barren, empty, now it was occupied by stone forms that appeared to have risen directly from the floor and the walls. These figures, of varying shapes and sizes, resembled statues or bas-reliefs, although their design was blocky, unfinished. It was as though a sculptor had begun work on each only to grow bored with the project, moving on to the next one. The only exception was the faces; these were captured in perfect detail, almost as if they had been cast from the original living models and used to carve incredibly detailed reproductions. There were dozens of them, forming an intermittent forest throughout the chamber.

“Cagewrights,” Dannel said, recognizing some of the faces.

“Umm... I think this one’s Arun,” Mole said, indicating a squat form that did indeed seem to resemble the dwarf. The sculpture’s helm hid most of its face, but they could see that its jaws were spread wide, frozen in a silent scream. They found other familiar faces; the Heroes of Cauldron were all represented, captured in expressions of turmoil and torment. A short distance away they encountered a winged, skeletal form that could only have been the Dark Myrakul, and across from it, a robed figure that bore the face of Jenya Urikas, her face twisted into an evil scowl.

“Blasphemy,” Beorna said, turning away from the figure of her slain superior.

“Madness,” Cal said, as they spread out across the room. “These would be the faces of those who touched him—or whom he touched—in his captivity.”

“I don’t like this,” Mole said, staring at a depiction of her that was little more than a piteous ball, her face peering upward from the compressed mass of stone, looking small and utterly alone.

“Stay alert,” Morgan warned. “I sense His presence here.”

On the far side of the room, facing the pillar of fire, a great throne of stone had formed out of the floor. In front of the seat was another stone figure... no, two of them, they saw, half-melted into each other. They looked vaguely humanoid, but with misshapen features; it was difficult to determine more, as they were formed in a supplicant pose, bent over on their knees before the empty stone throne. Lok knelt briefly beside the pair, noting that while their bodies were indistinctly represented, both had six fingers on each hand.

“Adimarchus! we have come for you!” Morgan cried, his voice echoing throughout the chamber.

“Wonderful,” Dannel said, tensing his bow, a cold iron arrow already fitted to the string.

Behind the throne something stirred.

“The staircase!” Mole warned, directing them to the chamber’s only exit, other than the opening through which they’d entered.

A slithering sound accompanied by the clink of metal announced the arrival of a familiar foe. The marilith Byakala moved forward slowly into the light, her six swords held in a ready position, forming a ring of steel around her body.

The warriors and the inevitables moved to face the demoness, forming a half-circle on the near side of the stone throne.

“Byakala!” Cal said, the gnome’s voice echoing through the chamber from high above. “You don’t have to do this... we’ve come to destroy Adimarchus! Join us, and you can be free!”

The marilith’s expression was almost one of regret. “I was never truly free, so long as He existed,” she said.

Lifting her swords high, she unleashed a keening wail that combined rage and despair.

Chapter 452

“This may be a distraction,” Dannel hissed as the others parlayed with the demoness, scanning the dark corners of the chamber with his keen eyes. But the room appeared to be empty, save for the marilith, the companions and their allies, and the stone sculptures. Morgan had empowered himself with *true sight*, so he should have been able to penetrate any ruse or illusion, but none of them would take anything for granted as far as the demon lord was concerned.

“If you stand with Adimarchus, then you have sealed your own doom,” Morgan said. Pronouncing the might of Helm through a brief invocation, he began to swell in size, drawing upon his god’s *righteous might* until he dwarfed even the marut, standing over twelve feet in height.

“Let her come to us, do not allow her to set for a full attack!” Arun urged his companions. But Morgan was beyond reason, infused with power and the madness of Occipitus, and he screamed something incomprehensible as he leapt at the demoness, his borrowed sword a gleaming arbiter of destruction in his hand.

The others could do naught but follow him into melee.

Morgan’s expanded size gave him considerable reach and allowed him to strike before the marilith’s extended blades could touch him. He rose high into the air in an unnaturally arcing leap, driving his sword down into her body with incredible force. The blow crushed into the left side of her body, driving deep through a lung, releasing a spray of black blood from the devastating wound that splattered over the shining armor of the knight. Behind him the others were rushing forward, although a direct charge was blocked by the enlarged form of the knight, delaying them for a precious second or two.

But even as she screamed in pain, Byakala unleashed a storm of death upon Morgan. Her blades sliced through the air and into the knight's body from every direction, driving through his armor and cutting deep into the flesh beneath. Morgan staggered backward, his blood flashing out from his wounds, brought from full health to the brink of death in a flash of an instant. Nor was the marilith finished; with surprising speed she suddenly reared up, snapping her long tail around. The agile member clove *through* a nearby statue, sundering it into fragments, before smashing into Morgan's head, knocking him aside like a child's discarded doll. The ground around him shook as he hit the floor hard, dislodging another statute that fell beside him. The stricken knight did not stir, oozing blood that formed a sticky pool around his unmoving body.

"Heeeaaaa!" Byakala keened, exulting in the defeat of her adversary.

But her moment of triumph was very short lived, interrupted first by a long shaft that slammed into her torso, driving a hot wedge of pure pain through her body. The zelekhut flew overhead, lashing her with its spiked chains, but those nasty weapons did little damage through her potent resistances, and she was completely immune to the jolts of electricity that shot through her with each hit. She slashed at its underside with one of her swords, but the creature was just out of her reach as it flew past.

She turned back as the diminutive—to her scale—enemy warriors charged at her, two spreading to come at her from the flanks while the last rushed straight on into the position just vacated by the fallen knight. Byakala focused on that one, for he bore a brilliantly glowing sword that she instantly recognized as a holy weapon. Her long reach allowed her to strike him solidly across the body before he could reach her, but despite what had to be a painful hit he continued his charge, that deadly blade coming down in an arc that she knew was final even before she felt it intersect with her body. That pain overwhelmed the sensation of the two other attacks that drove into her sides, and with a final cry of agony she collapsed into a twitching heap, her body almost severed in two by the deep cuts opened by the weapons of the companions.

Dana had flown down immediately on seeing Morgan fall, and she was relieved to see him stir as she poured the pure restorative energies of a *heal* spell into him. Arun, she saw, was being attended by Beorna, although the one hit he'd taken could not have been that serious for the durable paladin.

"Where is Adimarchus?" Morgan asked, as he struggled to get up.

"He's not here," Arun said, looking around. "He abandoned his minion to be destroyed."

"No," Morgan said, toppling another statue as he struggled to his feet. "He is here..."

They turned, as one, as the feeling that had animated Morgan became obvious to all of them. The intensity of the light that filtered down from the crack above, and the pulsing flow of the plasma pillar, did not change, but it was as if a *shadow* had been passed over the room, filling the place with a miasma of dread.

Adimarchus stepped forward out of the roaring column of fire into the chamber. He was in his demon form, carrying the smoldering length of his greatsword, the deadly artifact called the *Ashen Blade*, easily in one hand.

“I knew that you would bring them all to me,” he said to Morgan, his voice soft, even, yet somehow filling both the expanse of the chamber and the hollow of their minds together. Shifting his attention to all of them, he said, “Yours is the first installment in the measure of my vengeance. First I will repay you... and then I will extract my revenge upon my six-fingered adversary!”

Chapter 453

“Do you fear Graz’zt so yet, that you tremble even to speak his name?” Arun shouted, lifting his holy sword between himself and the demon prince.

“I will have my vengeance!” Adimarchus screamed, his yell a pulse of dark energies that sent quivers of sharp pain through the minds of everyone gathered in the chamber. Most of them weathered the release of power, but Morgan seemed particularly stricken, staggering back before the potency of the true master of Occipitus. Several of the statues crumbled, and others seemed to briefly come alive, clutching at the sky or clawing at the sides of their heads as if they were the targets of the demon lord’s despair.

“I think you pissed him off!” Beorna yelled at Arun, as the two dwarves charged forward.

Tendrils of flame abruptly burst out of the plasma column. At first it looked like some dire new attack from the Prince, but they coalesced into a humanoid form, over thirty feet tall, which stepped forward and enveloped Adimarchus with its long arms. The dwarves hesitated, not so much from the heat radiating from the elemental—both had been warded against fire—but out of desire not to aid the demon lord by inadvertently hitting Dana’s summoned creature.

Their hesitation did not last long. Just a few seconds after it had grappled Adimarchus, the elemental disintegrated, torn asunder by a full series of attacks from the *Ashen Blade*. The Prince’s arms and body bore marks of black char from the elemental’s brief embrace, but it was clear that he had not been seriously injured.

But the demon lord now found himself under heavy attack. The marut had lumbered forward, and now bashed Adimarchus with a pair of heavy blows from its massive fists. It may as well have been punching a wall of adamantite; although it defied reason for the huge creature’s impacts to have no effect upon the much smaller Prince, somehow it was the inevitable that was repulsed.

Still, the attacks kept coming, the companions pressing their assault with everything they had. A cold iron arrow from Dannel’s bow clipped the Prince’s shoulder, doing minor damage but at least proving that he could be hurt. A single drop of utterly black fluid separated from the wound and dropped to the ground, burning a small hole through the very fabric of Occipitus. The warriors swarmed around the marut and unleashed their own attacks, stabbing at the Prince with perfectly aimed attacks that did very little, even Arun’s

holy sword glancing harmlessly off of Adimarchus's ebon body. The zelekhut flew overhead, lashing at the Prince's body with its spiked chains, trying to knock the sword from his grasp, but failing utterly.

Surrounded by foes, Adimarchus calmly unleashed a *horrid wilting* upon the spot where he stood.

The inevitables were not affected by the spell, but the same could not be said for the companions. The *wilting* was utterly devastating and utterly irresistible; they best they could hope for was to fight off the worst of its effects. But Adimarchus's spell was more potent than that of any mere mortal caster.

Dannel and Mole were nearly killed outright by the released power, the elf collapsing, gasping to suck in air through his desiccated lungs. The others were hard hit as well, but they did not hesitate, continuing their attacks despite their ineffectiveness thus far. Dana, flying above, her skin crinkling painfully with every movement, cast a *mass heal* that poured life back into them, washing away the effects of Adimarchus's dread power in a single gesture.

Thus far, they seemed to be holding their own. They even started to inflict damage, as Morgan leapt into the battle, looming over the smaller forms of Arun and Beorna, using his superior reach as he thrust his blade into Adimarchus's shoulder. The Prince snarled as the point of the ancient weapon, its fragile iron empowered with Helm's divine power, sank a few inches into his body. When Morgan drew the weapon back, its tip smoked with black blood.

The marut, seeing how ineffective its attacks were, gave up its physical assault and merely enfolded Adimarchus's body in its huge arms. The serpent-tentacles sprouting from the Prince's back snapped and tore at those mechanical limbs, but the inevitable stoically absorbed the attacks, trying to hold on.

The grapple had an effect, but it didn't last long enough to turn into a tactical advantage. Adimarchus, perhaps reminded of his captivity at the hands of Graz'zt, screamed and vanished, *teleporting* out of the marut's grasp.

"Where is he?" Arun asked, searching the chamber. But Morgan looked directly up, to the summit of the dome, where the black figure loomed above them. This aspect of Adimarchus lacked the power of flight, and he started to fall, but then he... *shifted*, and the angelic form of the demon prince spread his wings, a beautiful but corrupt avatar of destruction.

"I purify you!" he shrieked, unleashing a *word of chaos*.

Chapter 454

It should have ended right there.

The *word* was pure power, and spoken by one of the demon lord's might, it would have resulted in confusion or death for all who heard it. Dannel, Mole, and Dana would have avoided its potency, their own philosophies of life resonating with the echoes in that rending utterance. But Arun, Beorna, Morgan, Lok, Cal... and the inevitables, too... they would have been fully affected, either struck down or their minds clouded with madness. Divided, weakened, turned against each other, the advantage would have surely swayed decisively to the side of the Prince.

Several of them had various forms of spell resistance, granted by spell or item, but it would not have mattered against Adimarchus's power.

Cal saw all of that in a single instant, the moment Adimarchus opened his mouth to utter the *word*. He also knew that his own intervention had almost no chance of stopping that outcome; he'd seen the demon lord's power firsthand, and despite his own brilliance, or perhaps because of it, he *knew* what he faced. But their plan had placed the ultimate hope in his hands, and he did what he'd been ready to do, since the confrontation had begun. He had held back his actions thus far, ready to intervene should the Prince call upon his dread power.

Even as he spoke his own word, triggering the final release of the *greater dispel* on the scroll he carried, he knew he would not succeed. It wasn't a question of confidence; he could *feel* the power of Adimarchus's magic building, how own spell a dagger thrust against a stone wall. How could there be any other outcome?

But there was one factor that the gnome did not include in that instant's calculation. The scroll that he used was not his own; he had not had time to transfer the spell into his own books, to make it his. Thus the spell was one borrowed, found upon the scroll taken from one of the Cagewright strongholds; he'd even forgotten which one.

What he did not know, was that the scroll had been originally scribed by Thifirane Rhiavati.

Thifirane Rhiavati, the mad transmuter with dreams of power and glory, pawn of Adimarchus. Though the spell was arcane, not divine, so much of what she had become, at the end, was tainted by the madness of Adimarchus that the words scribed upon the scroll were as much *his* words as hers.

The power of the *greater dispel* struck the energies of the *word of chaos*, impacting with a perfect harmony, for they ultimately had come from the same source.

The deadly sound quivered in the air, once, and died.

Morgan leapt into the air, pursuing his adversary, the rival to Occipitus whose madness now bound the two of them together through the very essence of the plane. His sword clove into Adimarchus once from below, this time knocking the Prince noticeably aside, opening a shallow gash in one violent leg, the golden runes inscribed into the flesh glowing around the injured member. They could see, now, that the angel-form of the demon prince retained the wounds of the earlier battle they'd witnessed on Skullrot. True to Morgan's earlier words, they could see the scars wrought by the black powers of Vhalantru's eye-beams, and the ugly tear where Morgan had smote it earlier with *Aludrial's Shard*.

Arun followed the knight, calling upon Dana's earlier-cast *fly* spell to come up behind the demon lord. But again his swing had no effect, turned by one of the razor-sharp golden wings, clanging off it as though it were a shield of layered plate steel.

Another arrow knifed into the Prince from below, caroming off of one of his wings without apparent effect.

Despite his injuries, both old and new, the Prince was still a powerful enemy in this form, even without the *Ashen Blade* and his life-draining tentacles. Adimarchus smote Morgan across the face with his clawed gauntlet, piercing the knight's golden helmet, opening bloody gashes across his face. The knight screamed as golden light suffused the wounds, seeping into his body, threatening to crush him much as Vhalantru had been crushed, back in the cavernous hollow spire of Skullrot. But Morgan resisted the *implosion*, and fought back with another series of attacks that for the most part failed to penetrate the demon prince's incredible defenses. In fact he came off the worse for the exchange, as the golden wings tore at him, opening up long gashes in his legs. Already the warrior of Helm had bled out enough to kill three men, and kept fighting only through the earlier intervention of Dana's magical healing.

Morgan continued to take an incredible amount of abuse. But again he was not alone, and his allies finally began to make their attacks be felt.

Hovering behind the Prince, Arun kept trying to find an opening, and finally managed a swing that darted under the golden wings, tearing into the Prince's back. His holy sword opened a depressingly small rent that trailed brilliantly bright droplets of white liquid. Another arrow slid into the melee, a gift from Dannel that zinged off of the metallic skullcap of the demon lord. The elf's cold iron missiles were spent, but he was using Benzan's bow, and the *holy arrows* that he now fired could injure Adimarchus, even if the arrows themselves had little chance of penetrating his demonic—or angelic—hide.

Chains lashed at the Prince as the zelekhut joined the attack, flying around the borders of the melee, careful not to interfere with Morgan or Arun. It whipped a chain around the Prince's arm, snaring on the deadly gauntlet, trying to grip and hold the limb. A look of momentary annoyance crossed the demon lord's face as he twisted his body, drawing the larger outsider in despite the frantic flapping of its wings. The zelekhut tried to disengage, but before it could extract itself from its own grapple Adimarchus drove his gauntlet into its chest. The golden light flared from the impact, and the creature released a tinny screech as it crumpled into an oblong shape a small fraction of its original size. Adimarchus shook free the chain holding him and let the outsider drop, falling atop a stone statue and crumpling it in a spray of stone shards.

The exchange had only taken a few seconds, but it was enough time for the companions to continue their attacks. Morgan managed to injure the Prince once more, cutting through the heavy gauntlet to score the flesh beneath, but Arun's attacks were again ineffective. Dannel's supply of cold iron arrows had been already exhausted, but his shafts, empowered by Benzan's *evil outsider bane* longbow, still possessed a potency against one such as the Prince, and one of his arrows managed to lodge in his thigh, digging a scant few inches into the muscle there.

A number of flickering lights appeared around the melee, slightly hazy, as if viewed through a pall of thin smoke. Cal's *shadow conjured* archons immediately did what they had been called to do, blasting Adimarchus with rays of holy light. They did not appear to have much effect, but the Prince responded by unleashing an *unholy blight* that surrounded him with a brief but deadly nimbus of evil power. The shadow-creatures were immediately blasted out of existence, but both Morgan and Arun were able to hold their position and continue to press their attacks. Each accomplished a minor injury upon the demon lord, and were bolstered a moment later as Dana healed their injuries with a *mass cure* spell.

Adimarchus was starting to show the effects of his wounds now, the angelic figure's body riven by numerous cuts and gashes. The two holy warriors prepared for another full assault, but suddenly the Prince drew his wings close around his body, dropping out from between them to the ground below. As he landed, he shifted form once again, returning to his demonic manifestation. The two forms were clearly distinct identities, for the wounds the angel had suffered were gone, replaced by those hurts he had taken during his initial manifestation. Unlike the angelic form, however, the demon identity obviously had the power of healing, his wounds from the earlier stage of the battle already beginning to fade.

The Prince came immediately under attack from the rest of the companions that had remained on the ground. Lok, armed with Viirdran Daragor's rapier, infused with divine magic, scored his first hit of the battle, coming in under the demon lord's guard to sink about six inches of the blade into Adimarchus's side. Backed by Lok's very considerable strength, the blow had to have hurt it, but Adimarchus merely snarled at him. Somehow the gesture made the Prince seem... *smaller*, more like the common foes that they'd fought and defeated before.

The others joined in the attack, Beorna rushing at the demon lord's flank, while Mole appeared out of nowhere and rushed past in a near-blur, leaping into the air, kicking off a statue, and past Adimarchus's face in a blur, her knife cutting a tiny but obvious scratch in his forehead. The marut came forward as well, again using its reach in an attempt to pound the demon lord's body into ruin, again without much success.

Arun and Morgan descended from above, ready to strike with their blessed blades. Morgan misjudged slightly and his stroke was turned by one of the long tentacles; a second lashed out and seized his ankle. The tentacle sought to sap his life energy, but Morgan was protected by a *death ward*, which protected him from that form of attack. The knight's efforts gave Arun a chance to slip in opposite Lok, bringing his sword down in another heavy slam that dug deeply into the Prince's back between the roots of the thick tentacles. This time his blade bit deeply, and Adimarchus turned, death in his eyes.

"No! Fight me, you bastard!" Beorna yelled, swinging her sword at the demon lord's head. Her sword had crushed stone walls and foul monsters of all sorts, but the blow merely rebounded off of his oblong skull, almost knocking the weapon free from her grasp.

Adimarchus fixed Arun with his dark gaze. The paladin roared and lifted his sword to strike, but the Prince merely said, "Be gone."

And Arun disappeared.

Chapter 455

“NO!” Beorna yelled, redoubling her assault, again to no effect. Blind with fury, she simply threw herself at him, hoping at least to grapple or hinder him in some way, but Adimarchus merely shrugged her off, knocking her away to fall hard upon her back.

A storm of attacks came in from all directions, all but ignored by the Prince, who seemed to act according to his own altered perceptions of his surroundings. Arrows from Dannel’s bow, melee attacks from the warriors, even a *disintegrate* from Cal that dissipated harmlessly as it struck his spell resistance. The attacks may as well have been made with wooden practice weapons. They were hurting him, if gradually, but in his demonic form Adimarchus continued to heal, the wounds knitting shut even as the companions watched.

“Keep attacking!” Lok urged, stabbing again with his rapier, without effect. Beorna tried a new tack, turned her assault toward the Prince’s weapon, but Adimarchus wielded the *Ashen Blade* like an extension of himself, easily turning aside Beorna’s sunder attempts like a master defeating the clumsy strikes of a beginning student.

The marut finally got lucky, smashing its fist across Adimarchus’s face as the demon prince turned around. A thunderclap sounded from the force of the impact, although Adimarchus was again barely moved by the punishing blow. Still, when the marut’s fist came back, a faint trail of black blood could be seen running down his face from one nostril.

Ignoring the foes that continued to hack at him furiously, Adimarchus lifted the *Ashen Blade* and drove it into the body of the huge construct. Half of the length of the greatsword vanished into its torso, and the thing let out a high-pitched screech as red fire burst from its gut and its back. Adimarchus drew out the sword and the inevitable fell backward, smashing a pair of statues as it crumpled and fell still.

Morgan let out a loud yell as he dropped to the ground, crashing his sword into the back of Adimarchus’s head. The Prince shuddered from the impact, but only slightly, and he quickly turned to confront his adversary.

“You will now be destroyed, pretender,” he said, bringing up the *Ashen Blade*. Morgan lifted his sword to strike, but Adimarchus moved in a blur of speed, the greatsword crashing into him even as the deadly tentacles seized his body. Although his life force was protected by his ward, his defenses could not shrug off the deadly impact of the Prince’s blows. Despite his divine protections, and the fact that he doubled the Prince’s size, Morgan was driven back, pursued at each step by Adimarchus. The others tried to distract him, but even though Lok managed another solid jab into the Prince’s side, Adimarchus seemed fixed on his chosen enemy. Finally the demon lord drove his weapon into Morgan’s gut, and the knight fell to his knees, blood spilling from the terrible wound in a torrent. Morgan’s allies lashed at the demon from behind, trying to stop him, but as he met the eyes of the Prince of Madness the knight realized that at that moment, Adimarchus didn’t even know they were there. Morgan felt his divinely-granted power fading from him, and he shrank back to his normal size, all of his wards and protections fleeing before the demon lord’s power. He could do nothing to resist as Adimarchus seized him by the throat in an iron grip, the *Ashen Blade* held over him in the Prince’s steady right hand.

“Now you shall have the fate you have earned, you who would claim MY throne. But another will bear witness to your failure, servant of Good.” The last word was a sneer, infused with the deep contempt only possible to one who had known the extremes of both the Light and the Dark.

Adimarchus glanced across the room, toward the mighty throne, and made a subtle gesture. The stone chair began to change shape, its thick base coming apart to reveal a hollow space within. Within there was a figure, crushed into a compact shape. Black wings and pale, marked flesh were visible, revealing the identity of the prisoner even before he lifted his head.

Saureya.

“Come forward, slave,” Adimarchus intoned. “It is my wish that you witness the death of hope, and learn that none but I will be master of Occipitus.”

The fallen deva rose and came forward slowly, clearly fighting pain with every movement. His wings were both crumpled against his back in jarring positions, obviously broken in multiple places; his left knee was also bent in an unnatural angle. His expression, however, was utterly devoid of feeling, and his eyes were the empty cavities of one who knew he was damned, and no longer cared. He came to within ten paces, and stopped.

“Do what you will,” he said.

Morgan’s companions hurled themselves at the Prince, trying to distract him from his prey, to free the knight from the doom that awaited him at the hands of their adversary. But the three—Morgan, Saureya, and Adimarchus, seemed locked in a separate drama that they could not pause or derail. Morgan and Beorna tried attacks that simply failed, and Dannel, while he manage to stick a pair of arrows into the demon lord’s back, did not even draw a glance. Lok tossed his shield aside and stabbed the rapier through his belt, leaping upon Adimarchus from behind, trying to grapple him, to tear him away from Morgan. The genasi was stronger than any of him, but he may as well have been grappling a statue cast in steel. He did draw a counter from the Prince, as two of the tentacles sprouting from his back seized him, siphoning life from the warrior’s body. The attack broke the genasi’s grip, and Lok trembled and staggered back, a significant portion of his life force torn from him.

Dana dove down at Morgan, intent on attempting a *dimension door* to free him from Adimarchus. The Prince’s eyes flickered upward as she descended, and while he did not alter his grip on Morgan, another of the tentacles flicked forward at his command.

“Do not interfere, Moonmaiden,” he growled. The tentacle’s “mouth” spread and grasped onto Dana’s throat, and before she could even cry out the Prince sent her to another plane of existence.

In desperation Cal hurled another *disintegrate* at Adimarchus, but again the spell-beam dissipated against his spell resistance.

“You feign disinterest most convincingly,” Adimarchus said to Saureya. “But I know what it is to have hope. Learn what I have learned... hope is an illusion, a cruel trick! Hope is naught!”

And with a cruel laugh he drove the *Ashen Blade* down into Morgan’s skull, piercing through his head deep into his torso. As the sword penetrated the knight’s body it flared out with unholy fire. Adimarchus kept pushing until the point of the sword clanged down into the stone of the floor, then he planted his foot on the ruin of what had been a man, drawing the artifact free, holding it up.

“And so is the fate of all who oppose me,” the Prince of Madness said.

Chapter 456

Adimarchus arched his back as Lok drove into him from behind, using both hands and all of his strength as he pierced the demon lord’s body with his cold iron rapier. This time the weapon sank deep, penetrating Adimarchus’s body until its point jutted from the front of his body just above his left kidney. The Prince roared in pain, and the weapon snapped off just above the hilt, smoke and ichor rising from both openings where the metal shaft entered and exited his body. Lok fell back, already reaching for his axe.

The Prince spun, bringing up the *Ashen Blade* to grant Morgan’s fate to another foe.

As he turned, the smoking greatsword intersected the descending arc of Beorna’s adamantine blade. Infused with the power of Helm to serve as a *holy sword*, this time the mighty bastard sword crashed full onto the evil artifact, driven by mortal muscle against the inexorable strength of the demon prince. Adimarchus reflexively shifted to draw off the force of Beorna’s strike, but this time he was a barest instant late in adjusting.

There was a flash of light and a scream of pain, and when they could see again, the companions could see the demon’s blade riven, with a jagged edge wreathed in smoke ending less than a foot from the end of the sword’s hilt.

“You fool!” Adimarchus shrieked. Beorna lifted her weapon to follow up with a strike aimed at the demon lord himself, but before she could unleash the blow the demon seized her, tentacles pinioning her arms as he reached out and grabbed onto her body with his hands. She too had been sheltered by a *death ward*, so her life force withstood the draining touch of the Prince, but his mundane strength was sufficient to lift her off the ground, armor and all, and hurl her bodily across the room. She landed twenty feet away, almost on top of the twin statues before the remnants of the throne, stone giving way before her adamantine-sheathed form.

Stunned, it took her a moment to regain her bearings.

Another arrow slammed into the demon’s shoulder. Turning toward Dannel, the Prince snarled and hurled an *unholy blight* at the archer, injuring and sickening him.

Mole leapt past, stabbing at the Prince as she went by. Her blow managed only a tiny gash in his upper arm, but this time she drew a response; one of the tentacles shot out, snared her by the wrist, and hurled her across the room into the dark stairwell, out of sight.

Lok came in again, hefting his axe this time. He drove the weapon into the demon lord's chest, unleashing a blast of sonic energy as the power that Cal had infused into the weapon was released. Through that cacophonous blast the genasi thought he heard a faint crack, but he could not be sure. Adimarchus was certainly not weakened by the attack, it seemed, as the Prince lashed out with his tentacles, striking the genasi in the chest and arms, sucking more life from the warrior. Lok, weakened now almost to the point of death, still tried to hold his ground, but Adimarchus struck him solidly in the head with the back of his left hand, knocking him out flat upon his back, unconscious.

"It is over, you puny fools," the Prince intoned. But although he continued to heal, it was obvious that the demon lord had taken a beating. Wounds crossed his body, and several arrows jutted from his torso.

He turned to Saureya. "I command you to *heal* me," he said.

Saureya came forward.

Beorna fought to get back up; the room seemed to spin a bit around her, and the weight of her armor made it difficult to extract herself from the ruins of the statues. She thought she heard a whisper in her mind.

In His enemy, His destruction lies.

She glanced down, and saw a gleam of silver jutting from the still-intact portion of the bent and kneeling statue.

A whisper of rushing air and a faint gleam of light was the only announcement of Arun's return. The paladin, finally escaping Adimarchus's *maze* spell, immediately spotted his enemy—and the few of his friends that remained—and charged.

Opposite the demon lord, Beorna rose, holding Morgan's sword, *Aludrial's Shard*, bright in her hand.

Saureya extended a hand, and grasped his master on the arm. Adimarchus looked into the eyes of his slave, and reveled in the emptiness that he saw there. Battered, he let down his defenses for the instant it would take to fully restore him.

In that instant, he knew his mistake.

Saureya's grip tightened, even as the whirling storm of a *blade barrier* erupted around the two. The fallen deva was too close to avoid the *barrier* himself without releasing Adimarchus, and he made no effort to do so. In fact, his face twisted into a slight smile as the storm of blades cut into his flesh. Adimarchus, far more durable, suffered less from the cutting blades, but even so black droplets flew from the wounds cut into his body by the spell.

“You will have an eternity to regret your betrayal,” the demon prince said. His defenses lifted again, and the magical blades began to dissolve as they impacted his spell resistance.

Arun and Beorna charged in from opposite directions, their rush perpendicular to the plane of the *blade barrier*. The two dwarves each carried a weapon anaethema to the Prince of Madness. Adimarchus, realizing his danger, started to *teleport* away, but Saureya, still locked onto him, knowing his master’s thoughts even before he did, disrupted the magic as it gathered.

Arun and Beorna each yelled a dwarven cry of battle, fused with a deep invocation to their respective gods, as they struck.

Two holy blades pierced Adimarchus’s body.

The demon prince staggered, and fell away from Saureya, crumpling to the ground, his face frozen in a look of dark despair.

Chapter 457

A great rumbling shook the entire chamber. Arun and Beorna staggered back, as a cloud of black vapor rose from the demon lord’s body, coalescing into a figure that took on a golden glow as it solidified into coherent form.

“The angel-aspect... it is still a threat!” Cal shouted.

The alternative manifestation of Adimarchus took on solid form, rising up higher into the open air of the chamber, out of the reach of Arun and Beorna, who rushed forward to face it. Arun, still empowered by Dana’s *fly* spell, rose up to meet it, and Dannel continued his barrage of arrows, which zinged off of the demon prince’s wings even as they became substantial.

But Adimarchus, or what was left of him, had clearly had enough of the fight. The angel-form was also seriously wounded, and rather than remain to confront his foes, the Prince shimmered and vanished.

Looking down at the ruined body of the Prince’s demon-form, the companions wondered at the ultimate fate of their adversary.

“What happens now?” Arun demanded, turning to Saureya.

The fallen celestial shrugged. “The fate of Occiptius is not mine to determine.”

Mole, who emerged from behind the sundered stone throne, somewhat drained but otherwise intact, was the first to notice the other change.

“Morgan’s body... it’s gone!”

* * * * *

High above the surface of Occipitus, in fact almost directly above the chamber where he had battled the companions from Faerûn, Adimarchus rematerialized. The angelic countenance of the demon lord was savaged by the blows he had suffered. The sacred markings that covered his flesh, already profaned by what he was, were further mangled by gashes and tears. Droplets of golden ichor trailed after him as he rose higher into the sky. He had a tired look about him, his earlier anger fading now into resignation, for now he had to live.

A *presence* alerted him, and he turned, fury rising again into his features. His angry shout filled the air. "Occipitus is mine!"

Something manifested in the empty expanse of the Abyssal plane's skyscape. The golden glow that suffused the plane's dome began to coalesce, much as Adimarchus's spirit had left his demon form to return to the second half of his shattered personality.

"I destroyed you once, and shall again!" the demon lord shrieked. "Occipitus is mine!"

"Occipitus rejects you," came a Voice from Everywhere.

Golden light flared through the sky, and the Prince screamed.

* * * * *

"What's happening?" Mole asked. They could all see the disturbance wrought in the sky above through the opening at the top of the Skull, and those sensitive to such things could feel the roiling currents of power that trembled throughout the entire plane.

"Judgment has been rendered," Saureya said, and for an instant there was a hint of emotion in the fallen celestial, a hint of what he had once been.

They looked down at the body of the fallen Prince. Adimarchus's demon form started to shake, and the dwarves reached for their weapons, fearing that their foe was not yet destroyed. But before they could close a shaft of pure brilliance shot down from above, lancing through the opening, striking the fallen lord. The companions staggered back, shielding their eyes from the radiance. It lasted only a second, and when it was over, all that had been left of the Prince of Madness was gone.

"It is over," Saureya proclaimed.

"We've won?" Dannel asked, incredulity evident in his voice.

Beorna was helping Lok, who groaned as he stirred. "What about the priestess?" she asked, looking up at the deva.

"She returns," he said.

“She had a second *plane shift* memorized,” Cal said.

“And Morgan?” Arun asked.

A hint of an ironic smile twisted at the edge of the fallen celestial’s mouth for a moment. “I would have thought you would have known that answer,” he said.

Cal nodded. “Will we see him again?”

“Perhaps. If there is one thing that I have learned, it is that nothing can be foreordained.”

“What will happen to you?” Mole asked.

The deva shrugged. “Whatever it is, that, too, will come in time.”

“I cannot believe it,” Arun said, his sword lowered at his side. “We just took out a demon prince.”

“Ah, come on, you didn’t really think we were all going to just come here and die, did you?” Mole asked, a wide grin plastered on her face.

The companions passed around a look; that had seemed a far more likely outcome than their current victory.

“It feels... empty, somehow,” Dannel said, coming forward to join them. Beorna jabbed him in the side with her elbow.

“Let it all go, elf,” she said. “We’ve won a mighty victory today. There will be more darkness tomorrow, no doubt; but this day, the world has been changed.”

“Look!” Mole cried, pointing upward.

They all craned their heads, sheltering their eyes as another bright shaft of light stabbed down through the opening in the skull above. But this was not another temporary release of power like the one that had wiped away the remains of Adimarchus. It took them a moment to recognize it for what it was, for while it was something common to their reality, it was something foreign to the Abyss.

“It’s the sun! The sun is shining!” Mole exclaimed.

“Toril’s sun, shining in the Abyss?” Dannel whispered to Cal. “Doubtful, to say the least.”

“Just enjoy it,” the gnome replied, with a grin. “Whatever it means, it is better than before, no?”

“Hodge would have liked to have seen this,” Arun said. Beorna leaned up against him, taking his hand in hers.

The companions stood there, close in each other's company, letting the healthy glow of golden rays wash over them, driving away dark memories, and filling them with the hope of a new day.

THUS ENDS "ASYLUM", AND THE CONCLUSION OF THE SHACKLED CITY ADVENTURE PATH

Shackled City Epic: "Vengeance"

Begun 6-17-05

Prologue

Clarity came gradually, like a roadside sign materializing out of a thick fog. He became aware of where he was, what he was, and who he was, in that order. His body was numb, a leaden appendage only loosely bound to the mind that shuddered with the inflow of memories of this place, the realization of what had happened.

With a great effort, he was finally able to move, but the attempt was cut short by the shackles that bound him against the wall of the chamber. The wall of his prison.

The room was circular and not spacious; had he been free, he could have crossed to any point by taking less than six steps. There was no door that he could see; his recollections did not include any details of this room, nothing useful that could help him escape.

Escape. He laughed, a sound that rattled in his chest so menacingly that he quickly clamped his mouth shut tightly enough to hurt. Pain... that was a good sign in a way, that he'd recovered enough to have sensation, but he knew that the feeling was just a precursor to what he would feel, in this place.

A sound, faint at first, then resolving into the measured tread of booted feet. The prisoner tensed, although there was nothing that he could hope to do; the shackles that bound him had been designed to hold fiends capable of ripping down the walls of fortified citadels. The part of his mind that had regained the capacity to think clearly whispered at power that he should have had, spells he could have cast to flee, but that part of his brain was a clean slate.

A door opened. Or rather, it was more exact to say that a part of the wall... *retreated*, widening from a point that became large enough to accommodate the figure that stepped into the cell.

He was ebon skinned, beautiful, of a height and approximate build with the prisoner, but there all similarity ended. He was attired in a shimmering raiment of dark, conservatively cut silks and trim leather that managed to look outrageously expensive without being festooned with gaudy baubles or other fancy decorations. He had six fingers on each hand, and youthful features that nevertheless bespoke a noble bearing and an epic self-confidence.

The prisoner had been ready to hate his captor, but as his eyes met those of the black-hued youth, the emotion drained from him like water from a punctured skin, replaced by a wave of admiration and even adulation. Had he not been bound, he would have knelt before the newcomer, and abased himself as an acolyte suddenly presented with the living avatar of his god.

“Graz’zt,” he was able to stammer out.

The youth laughed. “No, but the mistake is an honest one; *His* line breeds all too true.” His mouth twisted slightly in a hint of a frown; for some reason that sent a pang of sadness through the captive. He laughed again, the sound not harsh, but as light and pleasing as the soft melodies of his words. “No, I am Athux, scion of the ebon lord whose enmity you have so richly earned. And you are Benzan, Traveler of Faerûn, although I suspect that my father has a new identity prepared for you.”

At the man’s words Benzan felt a part of his own fire return, and he tugged his gaze away from Athux’s in a gesture that he knew was futile. “I will not be Graz’zt’s pawn.”

The cambion’s look was almost sympathetic. “It is already too late for that, Benzan,” he said earnestly. He reached out and touched Benzan’s cheek; the soft slide of Athux’s fingers sent a paroxysm of joy through the tiefling that drew a sob of despair from his chest.

“We will speak again, soon,” Athux said. He kept his gaze on Benzan as he drew back to the entry, then turned and vanished, the opening closing behind him in the blink of an eye.

Benzan felt a wave of revulsion pass through him in the wake of the false emotions that the demon had evoked in him. His strength left him, and he sagged down against his bonds, his body wracked with agonies both physical and mental as he cried for what he had lost.

And for what he had yet to lose.

Chapter 458

The underground chamber was cavernous and clearly of volcanic origin, formed within the earth by ancient combinations of pressure and heat. The interior space was irregular and complicated by later alterations wrought by air and water and deposits of minerals that had built up over time. But even with that clutter and the various twists and bends that jutted off of the core, the great open space in the center was easily a hundred feet across, and a stone dropped from the highest point would easily have fallen twice that distance before it finally came to rest amidst the cracks and crannies of the chamber floor.

A reddish glow brightened the interior of the cavern at one end. A first glance would have likely led to the surmise that its source was some remnant of volcanic activism, but that assumption would be quickly dispelled by a more intense scrutiny. For resting within a niche roughly thirty feet off the ground, hovering above a ledge of stone that jutted from the cavern wall, was the source of the light, an oblong latticework of red crystal the size of an ogre’s skull. That wonder might have drawn more attention but for the fact that its rays

brilliantly reflected off a splendor of golden wealth more substantial than the treasury of a kingdom. The cavern opposite the glowing crystal rose in terraces like a stepladder fashioned for a titan, and there countless coins of varied mints and metals were scattered as if to collect the gleam of the light to best effect. Mixed in among that hoard were other items of obvious wealth; scattered gemstones, precious jewels, objects of rare wood polished to a shimmering shine, assorted pieces of armor and weapons, and even the head of a statue shaped from solid mithral, crafted after the appearance of a bearded man of stern visage and of a scale at least six times that of its subject.

But even this fabulous treasure, however grand, was not the most notable focus of the chamber. For on a wide ledge yet further distant, a dragon slumbered.

It was a huge red, its body the size of a middling farmer's cottage, easily sixty feet from the ends of the teeth that jutted from its spacious jaw to the tip of its tail. It lay recumbent upon the surface of the ledge, its tail curled around its lower body, wisps of smoke rising from its nostrils with each massive breath. The creature bore the scars of numerous engagements, including some marks that looked to be fairly recent in origin. Several scales had been torn from its body, two broad healed gashes crossed its breast, and one wing still bore a foot-long tear that dragged an uneven flap of leathery skin. None of those badges of experience detracted from the aura of power and potency that surrounded the creature, however. Even at rest, Hookface was a monstrous foe, representative of one of Faerûn's most devastating races.

Even with the dragon asleep, the cavern was full of sounds, subtle noises of the stone, currents of air that shifted deep underground, adding their always-changing whisper to the background. Thus it might have easily been missed when a soft noise like a breaking wave sounded upon a ledge near the base of the wall opposite the dragon's perch, and six individuals materialized out of nowhere into the cavern.

The six newcomers—most of which hovered slightly above, rather than stood upon, the ledge—immediately started moving. They had weapons at the ready, and bore the tell-tale auras of numerous spells, betraying instantly their intent. The dragon, asleep, looked to be easy prey, despite its considerable advantage in size and bulk.

But that impression changed almost immediately. Even as the echo of the faint noise caused by the *teleport* faded, the dragon reared up, its eyes widening more with rage than surprise, its jaws opening even as it lifted its body, clutching the edge of the ledge with its fore and rear claws. Even the most agile of the newcomers had barely managed to cover ten feet from the point of arrival when Hookface unleashed its deadly breath, and filled the cavern with fire.

Chapter 459

Flying.

The sensation could not be beaten, in Mole's estimation. The freedom of it, the speed, the grace, the rush of air past one's head, the ability to look down at the poor ground-locked masses and laugh!

Uncle Cal should have bought one of those wands of flying earlier, she thought. Maybe she could convince him to craft for her a more permanent device, one that would grant her control over the exercise of the power. A ring, perhaps... although that would force her to make a decision over the two she already wore, since for some reason known only to arcanists and sages an individual could only wear two magic rings at a time.

All of those thoughts flashed through the gnome's head like streaks of light, for she was being blasted roughly aside by the concussive force of the expanding plume of dragonfire, and the cavern wall was getting mighty close. The dragon's breath had been way off to the side, instead of focused right in the knot of them as she'd expected, and it had sort of thrown off her evasion.

A stalactite promised an unfortunate collision, but Mole effortlessly twisted her body and slipped past it with at least a full inch to spare. She kicked off the wall behind it, using her legs like springs to transform her momentum into a bound that was further augmented by her magical boots. Her leap carried her out into the open air again like an arrow, rising high above the cavern floor below. The rush of heat from the backblast of the dragon's breath had washed over her like an overheated oven, but with the wards against fire that all of them wore, she barely felt it. Not that something as basic as a dragon's breath weapon would catch her, she thought.

A brief hint tickled at the back of her thoughts, a memory of a lava-filled cavern, and another dragon, its jaws opening to unleash a stream of death upon her...

But that memory was old, and she shrugged it off as the intensity of the moment, the adrenaline surge of battle, filled her. The warriors had emerged from the flames to fly toward the dragon, their oversized choppers ready for some hacking and slashing. As the inertia of her spring-leap began to flag, and the power of the spell reasserted itself, Mole looked down to see that the fire from the dragon's breath continued to burn—no, she reassessed, recognizing what was happening, it was a *thing* that lived in the fire, an elemental unleashed somehow by the dragon to help it guard its lair. *Ah, so that's why its aim had been so poor*, she thought. It had emerged from the burning lattice-crystal, now gone, shattered by the intensity of the dragon's initial attack.

Damn, that's big, she thought. And indeed, it nearly reached her current height, at least forty feet tall, a living bonfire with arms that swept out at her friends while she watched. The warriors had already pulled away from it in their charge against the dragon, but Cal and Dannel were vulnerable, her uncle staggering as it blasted him with appendages of living flame. Cal was protected against fire, she knew, not to mention about a dozen other defensive wards, but even so, those blows looked like they *hurt*

"I'll take care of it!" she heard Beorna yell, even as she distantly heard her uncle shouting for them to focus on the dragon. But the templar either did not hear or was ignoring him, for she flew straight into the elder elemental, swinging through the ephemeral substance of its body with great sweeps of her adamantite sword. How effective she was Mole could not gauge, for the elder elemental did not bleed. Beorna did seem to get its attention, however, as it lifted its arms and started pummeling her with powerful blows.

The dragon rose even as Arun and Lok charged into it, their blades flashing in the reflected firelight. The dragon's superior reach allowed it to attack before they could get close enough to strike. Its head darted out on its long neck, its jaws snapping at Arun in an effort to snatch the paladin right out of the air. But the paladin, his own considerable strength augmented by powerful magic, tore free and slammed his sword down into the side of the dragon's head. Hookface roared and drew back in time to take a second hit from Lok, who buried a foot of his axe's blade into its shoulder on the opposite side of its body.

Rather than unleash a full attack upon the two warriors, the dragon leapt into the air, using its bulk to knock Arun and Lok roughly aside as it arced across the cavern to the far wall, some seventy feet above the ledge where Cal and Beorna battled the elemental. Along the way several arrows from Dannel's bow bit painfully into its torso, punching through the thick scales with the force of the elf's potent magic behind them. Dannel had withdrawn far enough from the elemental's position to get a clear shot across the cavern, *spider climbing* along the uneven maze of chasms and ledges that spread out across the lower part of the complex, and now he put his deadly bow to use, tracking the dragon's movements as he rapidly reloaded and fired.

Arun and Lok quickly recovered, and flew across the cavern after the dragon to reengage. But Hookface was not finished, and again it leapt across the open interior space, gaining more height with a single powerful stroke of its wings, taking hits and inflicting them as it passed. It drilled Lok with a snap of its tail that would have broken the breastbone of a lesser combatant, even through plate armor. But these foes were stronger than any the dragon had ever faced, and they followed it still as it again clung to the cavern wall with all four claws, perched like a salamander upon a rock. It was high up now, over a hundred feet above the lowest crevices of the cavern floor below.

Beorna, infused with the power of Helm, was singlehandedly unleashing a ceaseless storm of destruction upon the great elemental. Its blows pounded her mercilessly, but protected from fire as she was, and further resistant to physical attack through her divinely-granted gifts and the durability of her armor, she merely grunted softly with each impact and surged forward once more to the attack. Beorna had empowered her weapon to function as a *holy sword*, and although the elemental was not technically evil, the enchantment was more than sufficient to penetrate its resistances to mortal attacks. And it was becoming clear that she was having an effect upon it, for the roaring inferno that comprised its body was rent now with huge gaps, through which the far side of the cavern behind it could just be discerned.

Finally, the fact that this confrontation was heading inexorably in one direction seemed to impinge upon the elemental's dim mind. It moved suddenly forward, enveloping Beorna, taking another hit in the process but wrapping its fiery arms around her. Those tendrils of coherent flame twisted around her until she was engulfed in fire. Even as she struggled to free herself the elemental drove her down, slamming her into a crevice into the ground. It held her there, looming over her, continuing to stream red-hot waves of fire and heat into the crack. Her *protection to fire* spell, overwhelmed by the earlier force of the dragon's breath and the constant attacks from the elder elemental, began to falter.

"Over here, you overgrown bonfire!" Cal challenged, casting his newest and most powerful spell, weaving a web of shadow into a powerful blast of quasi-real elemental energy.

Strength of will was not the elemental's strong suit, and it failed to recognize the shadowy nature of the gnome's *cone of cold*. The spell tore through it, vaporizing swaths of its body that were turned into great plumes of steam that exploded outward through the chamber. That was enough of an opportunity for Beorna, who tore free from the elemental's grasp with a yell and leapt up out of the crevice, the still-active *fly* spell allowing her to ascend and bring her sword around in an arc that bisected the twin points of coherent flame that were the elemental's "eyes". The creature let out what sounded like a tired hiss, and then it dissolved into wisps of fire that quickly vanished.

But even as the elemental was overcome, a cry of alarm filled the cavern. High above them the dragon had dug into the cavern wall after its latest leap. Arun and Lok, still in pursuit, rushed toward it, their weapons already slick with its blood, several new wounds added to the dragon's inventory of injuries. Thus far it had evaded their full attacks, and had inflicted several heavy hits of its own upon the warriors. But like with the elemental, it looked as though this could only end one way. Already it looked like the dragon was starting to flag, despite its incredible fortitude, while its two adversaries only came on with greater intensity, unrelenting as they drove Hookface further back into a corner from which it could not escape.

But then the dragon's strategy became evident a moment later, as it turned and hurled a *dispel magic* at the closing warriors. The magical power holding them aloft faltered, and both plummeted toward the uneven ground, over a hundred feet below.

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"Call!" Dannel yelled, drawing the gnome's attention upward to the falling warriors. The elf was too far away to intervene, having moved away from their arrival point in order to secure a good position from which to snipe at the dragon, but he knew that Cal's magical power exceeded his by a considerable margin.

Cal looked up and instantly gauged the situation. Like the others, he had been empowered with the ability to *fly*, although he had not yet taken advantage of that power. He did so now, darting across the floor of the cavern, mere feet above the uneven surface. Lok and Arun had been fairly close when the dragon had hit them with its *dispel*, but the gnome frowned as he judged the distance between the two descending figures. He figured that both were tough enough to survive the fall, but better not to take that chance...

A musical chord erupted from Cal's lips, and his *feather fall* caught both Lok and Arun a mere twenty feet off the ground, softening their descent so that they landed easily upon the jutting ridges of stone that would have otherwise done considerable damage to their armored frames.

"Thanks," Arun said, looking up in time to see the dragon descending rapidly toward them.

For a moment, Mole forgot what she was supposed to be doing as the dragon soared majestically through the darkness of the cavern. It had gotten a lot dimmer when the elemental was destroyed, although her keen eyes allowed her to see just enough from the light of their magical weapons and Cal's *light* spell to make out huge silhouette of the

dragon passing by below her. Thankfully it seemed more intent on her friends below than on plucking her out of the air; but that might have been because thus far, she hadn't really managed to harm it in any way. It was just sooo damned *big* that her tiny crossbow bolts just weren't going to harm it in any significant way.

From below, the companions responded to the dragon's dive with their own volley of attacks. Arun and Lok were effectively out of the fight for the moment, their mobility reduced to scrambling over the rough ground of the cavern floor, but Beorna could and did rise to meet it, despite having been considerably roughed up by her encounter with the elemental. Dannel continued his barrage, scoring hit after hit with his enchanted bow, his arrows jutting from the dragon's neck and body like needles in a pincushion.

The dragon roared as Beorna lunged at it. The templar sword dug into its side, but the dragon merely shifted its course slightly, flying *through* her, knocking her roughly aside into a violent spin that continued for several seconds before she could recover and steady herself. Hookface continued its dive, flashing through the space above them in a black blur of shadow. Halfway through its pass fire exploded downward in a torrent, a stream of flame in a long line that engulfed Cal, Lok, Arun, and Dannel in its reach. Their resistances held, for the most part, although Cal and Lok both took damage as Dana's wards were overloaded and dissolved.

The next one's going to hurt, Cal thought, as he reached Arun and touched him with his wand, renewing the *fly* spell upon the paladin. But even as Arun lifted off and turned toward the dragon's wake, they saw it tuck its wings close around its body and vanish like a catapult stone into a broad tunnel that gaped like a black mouth at the far end of the cavern.

"No way we'll catch it, moving at that speed," Dannel said, coming over to join them. Beorna, too, landed nearby, looking a mess in her flame-blackened armor.

Cal grimaced and stared into the passage where the dragon had disappeared. "It's up to Dana, now," he said, drawing out one of his healing wands from its scabbard at his hip.

* * * * *

Hookface barreled through the underground tunnel, using its legs, wings, and tail alike to propel it through the passage at a speed greater than that of a mounted knight at full gallop. Streaks of hot blood marred the rocks of the tunnel walls and floor as it passed, steaming in the cold air of the deep ways far beneath the earth. It was already nearly a mile away from its lair, and the volcanic heat that still warmed that place had long since faded.

Fear and humiliation burned under a red-hot surge of anger in the dragon's thoughts as it fled—no tactical retreat or mere withdrawal, this! To be forced from its lair, and worse, to abandon its treasure to a lot of... humanoids! The mere thought filled the dragon's vision with red and banished the pain of its many wounds, nearly driving it to stop and return to reclaim what was its.

But Hookface was far too canny to second-guess itself for long. Within the first ten seconds of the engagement it had recognized the intruders into its lair, and had also

acknowledged that the foes it had battled in the wreckage of Cauldron had grown significantly in prowess since that last confrontation. And they had new friends as well; the gnome was obviously an archmage, while the earth genasi struck even harder than the paladin, with that axe that the dragon could sense was veritably dripping with magical enhancements. Even the powerful elemental whose services it had... acquired, had barely slowed them down. No, Hookface *knew* that if it had lingered to battle the intruders, then the humanoids would now be enjoying the prize of an elder dragon's corpse in addition to its fabulous horde.

Hookface had yielded the day, and the advantage for the moment. But nor was it without resources, even with its lair overrun, and while these humanoids were powerful, they lacked the experience... and patience... of an old red dragon...

Light appeared up ahead; the end of the tunnel was approaching. Hookface barreled forward, but as it neared the secret exit to its lair a figure appeared, drifting down from above to float in the middle of the opening. A woman, human, clad in a form-fitting robe with a soft white cloak drawn aside to spill down her back, leaving her arms and legs free to maneuver.

Hookface did not stop, did not even slow, charging forward with jaws open to engulf the woman.

Faced with the impressive spectacle of a huge red dragon coming toward her with incredible speed, the woman did not even flinch. Instead she waved a hand, and uttered a powerful invocation.

The result was immediate, and there was no way for Hookface to avoid it. A deep rumble shook the tunnel, and even as the dragon tried to charge through the area of effect of the *earthquake*, the ceiling collapsed upon it, burying it under tons of fallen rock and debris.

The woman drifted back a few paces as a cloud of dust arose from the mouth of the tunnel. She was already casting again, even though the dragon had completely disappeared beneath the mountain of rock that had completely blocked the passage.

Her caution was well founded, for a moment later the debris pile shifted. A claw burst through into open air, followed a heartbeat later by the jagged shape of the dragon's head. The dragon was covered in pulverized stone dust and dirt and looked terrible. One eye had been crushed and oozed black fluid, but the other fixed onto the woman, and promised a reckoning. With a painful hiss the dragon surged forward, just a few feet at a time, now, shaking free from the imprisoning stone that still pinned its body.

The woman calmly continued her invocation. Finally, she stopped, and regarded the dragon with eyes that were coldly neutral.

The dragon had freed nearly half its body now from the rubble, and was moving faster now, dragging huge boulders out of the slick as it pulled its body clear. But it was caught off guard as a pair of massive arms rose out of the tunnel floor, locking around its neck in a punishing grip.

The dragon screamed and tore at the grappling arms even as they were followed by a massive body and head that nearly filled the tunnel. The appearance of the massive elemental obscured the dragon, which fought on with desperation. Red flames poured out from around the woman's conjured ally, almost reaching her at the mouth of the tunnel, but she merely watched as the elder elemental she'd drawn from across the planes punished the critically-wounded dragon. In the relatively cramped confines of the tunnel, with nowhere for it to retreat, there was only one possible ending.

Finally, it was done. The woman floated forward to confirm it, then dismissed the elemental with a wave. She spoke a word of magic, and was gone.

* * * * *

Back in the dragon's lair, the companions looked up as a light shone in the exit tunnel where the dragon had disappeared just a few minutes previously. They readied their weapons, but the light quickly resolved into the familiar form of Dana, surrounded by the soft white glow of moonlight, flying through the power of her magical boots.

She came to them, hovering well above the ledge where they'd gathered to wait for her. Most of them, anyway; Mole was already going through the dragon's horde.

"It is done," she said, her voice flat.

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Cal was not working when the door opened and Dana slipped silently into the chamber, but the number of books and scrolls piled in neat stacks across the heavy mahogany table indicated that he had been quite busy indeed. The gnome lay back comfortably in the chair, his eyes closed, and at first the priestess thought that he was asleep. But a moment later, he spoke.

"Welcome, Dana." Without opening his eyes, he indicated the chair adjacent around the corner of the table, one sized for humans.

Dana came across the room and seated herself. The table and accompanying chairs were of quite clever construction, offering comfortable access at a similar level to persons of radically different height without straining either a gnome or a tall human excessively in adapting to the needs of the other. Cal had been spending more time here than in his study, both because of the greater space and because of the comfortable feeling that this chamber gave him. During normal times it would have been more crowded, since this room was situated in the center of the tower and persons passing through to other parts of the building would often have to pass through it. But at the moment, he and Dana were the only occupants of the place.

"You have something on your mind," Cal said simply, finally looking up and meeting her eyes.

"I suppose you already know what I am going to say," she began. "You always were the sharpest of us, even before you acquired that magical headpiece. But I guess you don't have to be a super-genius to know what I'm thinking; I haven't been very secretive about my feelings, I suppose."

The gnome let out a small sigh. "You know—I hope you do—that we are all with you in this matter."

Dana slapped her hand down on the open surface of the table, making a loud noise that seemed to surprise her. "And yet, what are we doing?" she exclaimed.

Cal did not respond, and a moment later the woman took a breath, steadying herself. "I'm sorry. I know that you and the others have been doing your best. Our contacts, our friends... the divinations you and I have been making every day since our return... everyone has been trying. And I know what you're going to say, about me pushing myself too hard, but Cal, we *know* who has him. We may not know *where*, yet, but I think we both know where to start looking."

The gnome nodded and reached across a thick book for the mug of tea he'd left there some time previous. It was cold, and he summoned a quick cantrip to heat the half-full container before taking a sip. Dana said nothing during the delay, although it was clear in her expression and posture that she was barely containing herself.

"Your last *commune* suggested that things have... changed... on Azzagrat. Given the nature of our departure, on our last visit, it might be better if we spent more time investigating the matter before we take action."

"All the more reason to set out for Sigil now," Dana replied quickly. "Where better to find out more information? Graz'zt is clearly masking his activities, and I doubt that more spells are going to reveal more than the little we already know."

"It seems that I do not need to make any arguments," the gnome said, lightly. "You are anticipating each of my points."

"I *have* thought this through," Dana said.

Cal let out a small sigh. "The encounter with the dragon demonstrated the advantage of being prepared. We dictated the terms of the confrontation with Hookface, and as a result were victorious."

Dana nodded brusquely. "I agreed to go along with that, agreed with Arun's plea that the dragon remained a dire threat to Cauldron. And the dragon's treasure will facilitate the process of gathering information on Sigil. But I do not understand why we must delay further. Cylyaria has given us the focus for my *plane shift*; we have a list of contacts to get started. The spell is in my memory; we can leave right now, right this minute."

Cal made a small gesture that took in the whole of the quiet chamber. "Our companions..."

Dana sliced her hand across the space between them. "You're stalling, Cal; it's not like you. If it were *you* who'd been taken..."

The gnome leaned forward earnestly, as she trailed off, frustrated. "Dana, I want him back as much as you do! But it's not as if we are all wasting time here!" He prodded one of the heavy books; it barely budged before his effort. "Ever since we first came to Cauldron, we've barely taken time for a breath, driven by the rush of events, by the demands of the moment. Yes, we rushed to Carceri... and barely escaped with our lives. Then Occipitus... and there we had allies, and a foe who was only at a fraction of his true strength, still weakened from his long imprisonment, with few allies. Do you think Graz'zt will fall as easily as Adimarchus? You know that he is one of the six most powerful Demon Princes in existence! You know his sway, even upon our world! You know the legions that he commands..."

During Cal's speech, the priestess's gaze had sank to her lap. Now she looked up, and her eyes shone with moisture. "Cal..." she said earnestly. "I cannot just give him up..."

The gnome reached out and took her hand, holding it tightly. "I know, Dana. None of us will. We're doing what we can... I have gained new powers, and am working on spells... they might be enough to give us a chance. And our new friends, they will help us as well, I know it. Arun and Beorna have their responsibilities in Cauldron, but once the rebuilding is well along, they will join us. And we have other allies who aided us once before..."

"I cannot wait any longer," Dana said. "I... I know that everything you say is true, my friend, my dear friend. But..." She took a deep breath. "I am departing for Sigil today. Now. I took the extra *bag of holding* we found in Skullrot, and have filled it with... things I may need for the journey."

Cal met her gaze for a long moment. The silence drew out, but Dana's determination did not waver. Finally, the gnome rose, and walking across the room to a hutch situated against the far wall, unlocked a drawer and drew out a small laquered box. Returning, he handed it to her. Dana opened it to reveal the three huge sapphires that they'd recovered from the lair of the Dark Myrakul, in Skullrot.

She met the gnome's eyes. She knew, as he did, that the stones were more than just unusually large and valuable gems; in the hands of a powerful spellcaster they could serve as foci for a *soul bind* spell.

"Be very, very careful with those," Cal said. "They won't help with our... 'friend,' of course. But if you find yourself needing particular leverage in Sigil..."

"I will be wary, old friend," Dana said. "And I plan on bringing help with me; I'm not going to rush blindly into this situation."

"I know, Dana. But even so, I will expect a *sending* on every fourth day."

"The spell doesn't always pass the barrier between planes..."

“I know, but make the effort nevertheless. I cannot cast the spell myself, but I’ll have Beorna or another of our friends keep in touch with you from this end. And remember to prepare an extra *plane shift* each day, in case you need to make a quick retreat back here.”

“Ever cautious,” Dana said, with a hint of her old smile. “Old mother Calloran.” But both knew that her levity was forced.

“Damned straight. And I want an oath, that you are only seeking information, this trip. You will not confront the Lord of Shadows or his followers, without first getting our aid. I don’t want to have to plan out a rescue operation for *two* friends.”

“I swear it.”

Dana stood. The two friends faced each other for a moment, then Dana knelt and embraced the gnome.

“Be careful, Dana,” he said.

“Tell the others... tell them...”

“I will tell them to be ready,” Cal said. “I was planning on heading to Cauldron tomorrow, in any case. After I finish these latest spells.”

Dana nodded, and without further words turned and left the room the same way she had come.

“Good luck,” Cal whispered, long after the door had closed behind her.

Chapter 462

INTERLUDE

In his private chamber, the cambion Athux looked up, a slight hint of a frown marring the sculpted beauty of his features. He started to return his focus to the huge and ancient tome that dominated his desk, the pages open before him covered in a scrawling script almost as old as the book. But even as the slender quill hovered over the line he’d been scribing, he hesitated, turning back toward the chamber’s only door. It was not the only way out of the room—he’d existed too long to be so foolish—but the iron-banded portal was the only obvious exit, sunk deep into a threshold that revealed the thickness of the massive stone walls of the citadel.

With the charismatic prince as a contrast, the spartan accordings of the chamber seemed downright plain by comparison. Other than the desk, which was a functional slab of black wood, there were only a few tapestries that looked temporary, a single shelf of tomes and scrolls, and a mismatched set of furniture that had the styles of at least a dozen different cultures stamped upon them. For all his smooth self-control Athux never regarded the shelf without his face twisting into a scowl; for all the power represented in those books (and they were, in truth, only a fraction of what he carried with him, or had stashed in other

convenient locations), they were a reminder of what had been left behind or destroyed in Zelatar.

It was true, that his sire had forfeited more, much more, if one considered other forms of power in addition to arcane lore. But unlike Graz'zt, Athux's power was derived from wizardry, and he was particularly sensitive to the foci that all the practitioners of that craft, great and small, depended upon for the application of their craft.

A small noise penetrated the thick door that exited onto the corridor outside. Athux closed the book decisively and rose, extending a hand that was immediately filled with the reassuring solidity of his rod. The artifact tingled with an odd anticipation that the cambion found unusual, but he put that aside and crossed decisively to the door. He paused a moment there, calling upon a few defensive wards. The door itself was silent, the sound that he'd detected not repeating. Within a few moments he was prepared, and he pulled the heavy portal aside and stepped into the corridor beyond.

The connecting passageway was rather cramped in contrast with the wide halls of the Argent Palace, the stone walls starkly bare with visible cracks where the massive slabs that constituted the fortress were joined. The passage split and turned in several directions, offering access to various other parts of the citadel, and Athux knew that there was a staircase not fifteen feet from where he stood. The silence here was familiar yet somehow oppressive; there wasn't a lot of activity in the place, certainly not as much as one would expect given its current owner. But that was in part because the Argent Lord's remaining forces preferred to keep a low profile; the Master was a bit... unpredictable.

Athux closed the door behind him and took one step forward down the left branch of the corridor when a nycaloth stepped around the nearest bend, five paces ahead of him.

The four-armed fiend squinted and registered the presence of the cloaked figure before it, lifting a massive double-bladed axe as an inchoate growl formed deep within its throat.

Athux simply stood there, and as the fiend's weapon reached its apex and started down, its eyes met his for the briefest instant. The descent of the axe immediately stopped, and the nycaloth stood there, rapt in the gaze of the cambion lord.

Athux noted that the dusky steel blades of the 'loth's weapon were wreathed in a familiar nimbus of pulsing blue light. *Axiomatic weapon*, he thought. *Specifically suited to slaying demons*. A holy weapon would have been equally deadly, but of course would have been equally potent against yugoloths. The implications whispered clear connections in his mind, and he frowned as he considered them for a heartbeat or two.

The nycaloth stood there in silence, waiting. Athux opened his mouth to query it, but his eyes shifted down the passage as a pair of insectoid mezzoloths stepped into view around the far bend twenty feet further down the corridor. The two new arrivals spotted him, lifted their three-pronged spears, and rushed down the hall toward him.

"Slay those bugs," he commanded the nycaloth, who instantly leapt to the cambion's bidding. Even as the sounds of battle and the chattering shrieks of the mezzoloths filled the passage, Athux was already walking down the side passage from which the nycaloth had

emerged. He'd set upon a destination, and walked toward it with deliberation, if not haste. If what he'd deduced was correct, rushing heedlessly forward would accomplish nothing, and might even place him into danger.

There were sounds now in the citadel, additions beyond the conflict he'd spawned behind him. He stepped over several bodies; a canoloth with its armored torso staved in, a succubus sundered in two, a lamia pinned to the wall by a bloody spear that had sank a full foot into the stone. The last still clung with grim determination to life, and her eyes fixed imploringly upon the cambion as he strode past, but he barely paid heed to her presence.

The corridor culminated in an arched foyer where several other passages from different parts of the citadel met. As he had expected, the great doors on the far end were partially open, and he could hear the sounds of battle from just beyond. His fingers tightened on the haft of his wand—drawing a thrill of eagerness from the item into him—and warily continued through the gap into the huge chamber beyond.

Unlike most of the rest of the fortress, the great hall was generous with space, with an unobstructed open center nearly fifty feet across and thirty feet deep, and a broad, concave alcove dominated by a huge stone throne on the far side.

The chamber was full of yugoloths of varying size and function; a pair of nycaloths and at least a dozen mezzoloths shared space with a small host of armored canoloths, and even a disgusting fish-like pisoloth skittering around the back of the room. Athux caught sight of an ultraloth hovering in the shadows at the edge of the chamber, directing the assault upon his father in the center of the room.

Prince Graz'zt was magnificent, dominating the chamber even surrounded by creatures that loomed several feet over him. His bare torso shone with a slick of sweat and blood—none of it his own, it seemed, for he bore no obvious wounds. His face was obscured by a faint black haze that hung around his head like a drawn-up cowl, but within that artificial gloom the cambion could clearly mark his father's eyes, bright points that drew him in even through the chaos of the battle. There was a frightening fire in those eyes, a burning rage even deeper than that which was being unleashed upon these intruders who had come into this sanctum.

Athux stood there, watching, as the great wavy-bladed sword spun a circle of death around the mighty demon lord. Already a dozen dismembered yugoloths lay in a mangled ring around him, but the survivors pressed heedlessly in, seeking an advantage. The nycaloths beat their wings to gain a few paces of clearance and then leapt at the prince from both sides, their claws outstretched in an effort to grasp and hold their foe. One was hit and went flying across the room, one wing and two arms shorn clear of its body, but the second descended upon the demon lord and seized hold of him, its weight bearing down upon the Prince with inexorable force while its smaller cousins swarmed upon him from all sides with eager diligence. One thrust a blue-haloed blade into Graz'zt's torso that did achieve a noticeable effect, the axiomatic blade cutting a shallow gash in his iron-muscled side. The Prince's roar shook the huge stones of the chamber walls, but only seemed to further entice the 'loths, which pressed their attack with even more fury.

For a moment it looked as though the demon lord's situation was hopeless, but Athux, who had as of yet not moved further into the room, knew better. So, too, did the ultraloth, which hissed commands in its sinister language, directing its forces to continue pressing upon the Prince, until only flashes of black skin could be seen beneath the swarming horde. It hurled magic, as well, invisible tendrils of power stretching out from it that Athux could sense like strands of music floating on a faint breeze.

And then the nycaloth screamed, and seemed to... *shiver* was the only word Athux could think of, as he watched. Tendrils of diaphanous energy the color of faded bloodstains twisted around the 'loth's body, and where they touched, its flesh seemed to melt away. The other yugoloths knotted around the grappled Prince likewise began to scream and fall back, with parts of their bodies disintegrating as the scarlet fibers sliced into them.

Athux stared in wonder as the yugoloth attackers were literally torn to pieces. He had not witnessed the casting of many epic spells, and even before he saw the pinpoint of white light within the black halo of energy around Graz'zt's head he knew that his sire had drawn upon the power of the Heart of Axion. Thoughts rushed into his head to accompany the sudden flush of heat that made him feel almost dizzy. Something important had changed here, just now; whether he would be able to discern the nature of the shift was something that would have to be worked out later, when he had time to reflect.

The last few 'loths had completely abandoned their attack, their efforts now focused merely on escape. But their fate was sealed; the spray of red tendrils expanded to engulf each of them, and where it came, death accompanied its arrival.

Only the ultraloth, by virtue of its simple distance from the melee, had a chance to escape. But even as it called upon its magic to flee, Athux finally intervened. It was a trivial matter to ensnare its mind; its potent resistances protected it for all of two seconds before the cambion shattered them and seized what he wanted. But even as it succumbed to his will, a black shaft shot out from the already fading aura of gory death around Graz'zt, materializing into the wavy blade of the Prince's sword. The weapon pierced the ultraloth's breast, driving through it and into the wall with enough force to sink half of the blade's length into the stone. The yugoloth quivered on the sword for a moment, finally falling still.

So much for an easy interrogation, Athux thought. There were other ways of finding out what one needed to know from an enemy, of course, but they were invariably more... messy.

A dozen demons burst into the chamber a moment later, too late to do anything but watch their lord stride forward across the ruined corpses of the yugoloth invaders. The chamber floor resembled an abattoir, with hardly a square foot not covered in the mess of dead monsters. His body covered in blood and gore, his face hidden in the black shroud he wore like a cowl, Graz'zt looked truly what he was, a corrupt entity of pure unadulterated Evil. Athux knew this to be true, and yet he shivered involuntarily as he took in the sight. The Prince walked over to his still-quivering sword, drawing it free from the stone with a quick jerk, letting the ultraloth collapse into a bloody heap at his feet.

Athux could feel the overwhelming power that radiated from the aroused Prince, and he bowed as Graz'zt's stare bore into him. His father's eyes were now hidden within his dark mask, but Athux could feel them nevertheless.

"My Lord," he said.

Graz'zt's gaze fixed him for another minute, and then it shifted to the wreckage that surrounded him. "Clean up this mess," he said, and with a desultory wave he turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter 463

Cauldron.

The volcano city had narrowly escaped being transformed into a gate-town, the conduit for a fiendish invasion of Abeir-Toril. Although it had survived the corrupt plots of the Cagewrights and their dark master, the city had been permanently transformed by its ordeal. The map of the city had been reshaped by the tremors that had accompanied the Ritual of Planar Junction. A considerable segment of the caldera rim had collapsed outward, opening a gap in the volcano's rim that allowed the central lake to drain out in a dramatic cascade that had formed a new river that plummeted down the side of the mountain in a series of spectacular waterfalls. Whole districts were just... gone, including such familiar sites as the Temple of Kelemvor. Other areas had suffered widespread destruction, such that as many as half of the city's buildings were unsafe for habitation without considerable repairs and reconstruction. The city now resembled a giant "C" when seen from above, with the gap containing the new river gorge where the first waterfall plummeted down almost five hundred feet to spray against the mountainside below on the first stage of its journey to the lowlands.

The crisis that had swept over Cauldron was still a very recent memory, but the city was now a beehive of activity as its residents returned and set about the work of rebuilding. Many of its residents had perished in the catastrophe, and others had elected not to return, seeking new opportunities in less tumultuous lands. But most had returned, and they were joined by others; newcomers from Almraiven or the lands adjoining the Lake of Steam to the east. Shield dwarves came from the mountains to the northeast, knowing that their skills would be much in demands, and even an embassy of tall moon elves from the northern Miir could be seen in the city, meeting with city leaders to negotiate their aid to the reconstruction efforts. The new mayor, Ankhin Taskerhill, was putting in long hours meeting with these and other delegations, and already was winning renown as a tireless advocate for the people of Cauldron and the future of their city.

Balander Calloran materialized in the courtyard of the Temple of Helm. The place was familiar despite the new work done on the stables the scaffolds that covered the entire front of the temple sanctuary. The courtyard was quiet, but Cal could hear the din of construction work from all over the city, the constant noise of hammers, saws, and working men and women.

Crossing to the temple, Cal encountered an acolyte who wore both the mantle of Helm and the sigil of Arun's Hammers. The undercleric reported that "Lord Goldenshield" and the High Priestess had both traveled to Almraiven two days previously, by means of the group's flying carpet. Cal asked about Lok, and the young cleric said that he believed the genasi to be helping with the construction of the Victory Bridge, in the southeastern part of the city.

As he made his way through the city streets, Cal smiled slightly at the reverence infused by the young man in Beorna's new title; the templar had resisted being granted this new authority and responsibility, but ultimately she deferred to her superiors and reluctantly accepted the role that she had been granted. Arun had told him that she'd already begun the process of nominating Jenya Urikas for sainthood, a considerable honor within the church of the Vigilant One, Cal knew. She would have no trouble gaining testimonials from the people of Cauldron, Cal thought.

As he made his way through the city Cal took in the faces of the people he passed, gauging their mood and commitment to their work. These people had suffered a lot, he knew, but from what he saw they were dedicated to restoring the city they called home, and with it their own damaged lives.

The wind shifted slightly, bringing a hint of moisture and another, familiar scent, to his nostrils.

"Hello, Mole," he said.

The air beside him shimmered, and Cal's niece materialized, to the surprise of a nearby vendor who nearly dropped a basket full of apples. "I would have had you, if not for the breeze changing," she said with a wide grin.

"How did you know I was in town?" Cal asked.

"Oh, I've got my little birds that tell me things, now and again."

Cal raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you've already got half the town under your... supervision."

Mole shrugged. "It's pretty chaotic. There's no thieves guild, not at the moment; there were a few Last Laugh remnants who tried to organize something but I persuaded them that the last thing Cauldron needed now was more of their hijinx."

"Persuaded?"

"Well, you know," Mole said, flashing a wide grin.

"I suspect I probably don't," Cal said, but he smiled as he said it.

"You just missed Arun and Beorna."

"I heard; I've just come from the Temple of Helm."

“Helm and Moradin, now. Beorna and Arun are going to reconsecrate it to both gods, once all the rebuilding is finished.”

“That’s not all that surprising, I suppose.”

“Want to join the pool? Me and some of the others have bets on when the two of them get married.”

“Dwarven culture is a bit different in such things. It may take years.”

“Words are good, but gold talks.”

Cal shook his head. “How are other matters?”

“Lok’s been helping a lot with the rebuilding, especially with the bridge project. Dannel’s left the city; he decided he needed to make a visit home. From what I could sense, the prospect raised some mixed feelings.”

“He’s been through a lot, lately.”

“What about Dana?”

“She’s gone to Sigil. We’re still looking for information... about Benzan.”

Mole nodded, her demeanor shifting to become more serious. “How long, do you think, until we head out again?”

“It’s tough to say, right now. There’s too many variables, too many things we don’t know.”

“Well, let me know when... hey, there’s Lok! Lok!”

The genasi was coming down Lava Avenue toward them, and when he saw them he immediately hastened his pace. He was clad in plain working garments rather than his heavy armor, but he carried his battleaxe at his side as though he thought he might have use for it. Behind him they could see the pilings of what would become the Victory Bridge, connecting the city across the new gorge. Work had progressed swiftly; in addition to Lok’s expertise with stonework Cal knew that magic had been used to expedite the construction.

“Looks like he’s got something on his mind,” Mole said, as the genasi approached.

“What is it, Lok?” Cal asked, as their friend reached them.

“I am glad you are here,” Lok said. “I just received a *sending* from Gaera. I need to return to the North, at once.”

Cal and Mole shared a look. Even before they heard the details, they had traveled and experienced enough to know the sound of Trouble when they heard it.

Chapter 464

"I'd forgotten how cold it gets here," Cal said, shivering as a frigid gust tore at his cloak, causing it to flutter out behind him.

"It is winter," Lok said simply, already walking across the barren field, snow crunching beneath his heavy boots.

Cal looked around as he followed the warrior. Mole was nowhere to be seen, but that was no surprise; she would be somewhere nearby. His gaze rose to the tower that was Lok's destination. Eyes watched from there, he knew; the dwarves of the North had learned vigilance, and had they been foes they already would have heavy crossbow bolts sticking from them, no doubt.

A lot had changed since their first visit to this rocky shelf, situated on the shoulder of the mountain that the dwarves knew as the Maker's Anvil. Only a few days' travel from the shield dwarf stronghold at Caer Dulthain, this was the site where Lok had been found by one of those surface warriors, nearly forty years ago, now. It had been a battlefield, then, strewn with the corpses of orcs and dwarves. Now it was an outpost that served a dual role. It warded the northern edge of the shield dwarves' land from the fierce orc and ogre tribes that dwelled beyond the Anvil. But it also served as a gateway between two very different worlds; the surface realm of the shield dwarves and the community of the urdunnir, far below them in the depths of the Underdark. On their first visit, they'd entered the Underdark via a deep shaft concealed within a narrow cleft in the mountain located here. Now, the tower here warded the shaft, which had been equipped with a winch assembly and a miner's cage to facilitate traffic between the two dwarven realms. It would have been easier to teleport directly into the tower, or better yet, into the urdunnir halls, but the former locale was warded against such magic, and the latter was inadvisable, as the strange energies of the Underdark interfered with the efficacy of teleportation and made magical means of transportation there very dangerous.

The heavy stone door, set deep into a lintel with murder holes all around, drew open as Lok approached it. Cal saw a cowed figure that he suspected was Gaera Silverheart, the priestess of Berronar Truesilver whom they had met on their first visit to this region, when they had come to free Caer Dulthain of the grasp of a powerful ghour demon. It was not a pleasant thought, for that encounter had marked the beginning of Delem's ordeal, and had catapulted them into a trial that would end in their first confrontation with the Demon Prince Graz'zt.

"Are you just going to stand there and freeze?" Mole's voice came from ahead.

Cal shook off his musings and followed his friends into the citadel. He felt like he was walking into a cave as the huge stone blocks of the entry surrounded him; the walls were easily eight feet thick, testimony to the permanence of dwarvish architecture. A shield dwarf in steel plate and with a huge brown beard stood watch at the interior of the door, a double-edged battleaxe ready against his shoulder. The interior of the tower appeared to be comprised of a single chamber almost twenty feet across. A balcony ringed the tower about fifteen feet up, where light filtered in through narrow slits that pierced the thick walls. Cal could see that the arrow slits were protected by iron shutters that could be used to seal

them from within; from what he knew of the dwarves that practicality was rooted more in concerns of defense than from protection from the weather. Or at least the tower seemed as cold as it was outside; the break from the frigid wind offset by the cooling effect of the massive stone cylinder. There was a curving staircase that led up to the balcony and the higher levels of the tower, and another that descended to the entrance to the shaft leading to the urdunnir settlement far below.

“Welcome, archmage,” Gaera said with a nod of respect, drawing him into the conversation that the priestess had been having with Lok. Cal had not heard that initial exchange, consumed more in his own musings, but he quickly got the gist of the matter.

“What is the nature of the threat?” Lok asked.

“I am not entirely certain,” the priestess admitted. “The urdunnir elders became quite agitated about two days ago, culminating in their request that I contact you at once, earlier today. They say that a powerful *urdun’a*—a spirit of the world—has awakened and threatens the People.”

“A ‘spirit of the world’... what is that, some kind of elemental?” Mole asked.

“I do not know,” the priestess explained. “Berronar was unable to provide more clarity, and my own detection spells revealed nothing out of the ordinary. I asked them if they wanted me to ask Koruth to send warriors to help their defenses, but they only insisted on your presence. I got the impression that whatever it is that threatens, it’s not something that can be fought with axe and hammer.”

“Well, an axe they may have to settle for,” Lok said. “Come, let us go, then.” He started toward the downward stair, but hesitated, turning back to Cal.

“I am sorry, my friend, but you know my errand in Waterdeep demands that I return at once,” Cal said. “The Blackstaff’s schedule is such that I may not get another opportunity for several tendays.”

Lok nodded. “I understand. When the time comes for us to act, I will be at your call.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle Cal,” Mole said, materializing suddenly and causing Gaera to start slightly in surprise. “I’ll keep an eye on things here. With a Calloran on the job, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Lok and Cal shared a look. “Good luck,” the gnome said to his friend.

“And you.” Without further ceremony, the genasi turned and descended the staircase, his heavy boots scraping the stone, his armor and weapons clattering slightly against his body with each step. Gaera and Mole followed quickly behind.

Cal waited until they were gone, and then turned to depart. With a nod to the guard, he strode out into the snow. Even as the heavy portal closed behind him, he summoned his magic, and was gone.

Chapter 465

The story of the urdunnir upon—or more precisely, beneath—Faerûn was replete with tragedy. If anything, this made the tale of Udon Oryx more tragic, both for the potential of what might have been, and for the darkness that he brought upon his people.

The Thunder Blessing, the gift of Moradin, had been extended to all of the Soul Forger's children. It even reached the urdunnir in their homes far beneath the stones. One of the sets of twins born of the Blessing were two males named Udon and Urok. They were very different; Udon was strong and hale, while Urok, while slight of build, was possessed of agile limbs and a quick mind evident even in his earliest years. The bond between the two twins was uncanny, a trait shared by many of the matched pairs born of that generation of dwarves in the annum of Moradin's gift. Their parents observed that often one would sense what the other was feeling, even when the two children were not in the same room.

But life in the Underdark was as cold and unforgiving as the deep tunnels themselves. As the twins neared their fifth birthday, a pestilence swept through the urdunnir community, a wasting disease that stole vitality and sapped the very life from the bones. The disease resisted the calls of the urdunnir priests to the Keeper of Secrets. Most of the dwarves, with their adamant constitutions, overcame the sickness, but the weakest succumbed, with over a dozen claimed by the illness. One of those who fell was Urok. The child's parents were consumed with grief, and did not fully observe the change in their remaining son, Udon. But something subtle happened to the surviving child; it was as if the disease had claimed a part of him as well.

In a strange way, the disease helped prepare the urdunnir for what would come, for only three years later, the duergar penetrated the Shield Wall through dark treachery and foul arts, sundering the urdunnir community, slaying those who resisted, and enslaving the remainder. Among those killed were Udon's parents; his father at the Shield Wall, and his mother in a dark corridor, dragged away by sneering duergar warriors, never to return.

Many of the children of the urdunnir did not survive the dark raid or its aftermath. The duergar were interested in securing slaves for their dark project, designed to restore the fallen dragon-god Tiamat to life. Children were a burden, and only those that could be of use to the enslavers were kept alive. Udon survived into adulthood for two reasons. First, he was already stronger in his youth than many of his kin four or five years older. Secondly, he found that he could curry favor with their masters by informing upon his own people. Over the decades in captivity the dwarf did what he had to in order to survive. Several of his people died at the hand of duergar torturers due to the words he whispered to the overseers, but his heart was dead, and he embraced the darkness that had enfolded his people. He scorned the hope that some of his kin clung to as the years went on, and scoffed at promises of deliverance and of a messenger that the Keeper would send them, to shatter their chains and release them from their bondage.

Freedom was long in coming, and many of the urdunnir perished in those long years. But ultimately it was one of theirs who released them, an exile who returned with powerful allies and divine mandate to confront the duergar leaders and their malefic ally, the dragon-god. Lok led his people back to their abandoned community, and led them in rebuilding their homes and their lives.

While many of the urdunnir viewed the genasi as a hero, and to some almost a god himself, Lok's leadership was not hailed universally within the urdunnir community. Some resented Lok's efforts to build a bridge between the urdunnir and the shield dwarves who lived closer to the surface. Some of the younger urdunnir left their homeland to travel among the outsiders, sharing their talents and learning new skills. These sojourners returned with strange ideas and alien philosophies, and in some cases with words about different gods, challenging the monolithic dedication to the Keeper, Dumathoin, the god of the chosen people who had dwelled within his deep halls. The faith of many of the urdunnir had been weakened by their long ordeal, and many of those who could channel the Keeper's power had been slain by the duergar, who had not wanted clerics stirring up their captives against them.

Udon had long since left the faith of his people behind. As the years after the Return passed, the misguided urdunnir again found his place in seeking personal advantage at the expense of his peers. It was perhaps not surprising that he fell into the lure of a competing message, a new faith that had taken hold of a small but growing segment of his kin.

Six years after the Return, almost to the day that commemorated Lok's defeat of the duergar, Udon swore oaths to the cult of Abbathor in a secret chamber deep within the urdunnir settlement.

For a time the secret cult of greed flourished, hidden within the bowels of the urdunnir community, preying upon the deep dwarves and their surface kin, exploiting the cracks in the new arrangements to advance the personal ambitions of the evil group's followers. But greed often turns in upon itself, and in time the cult's activities became known to those in power. It was Lok himself whose axe sundered the mask of the cult leader (and the skull beneath), bringing low the corruption that had long festered within the dwarven community. Udon escaped and fled into exile, traveling deeper into the dark expanses of the Underdark.

The intervening decade passed swiftly. While Lok fought to rebuild the lives of his people, Udon drifted, his anger and desires for revenge and power driving him, giving him the edge that he needed to survive. He eventually ended up at the drow city of Asran Vok, where he served as a mercenary to one of the lesser Houses. As an un-caste alien warrior his life was of little value, but Udon had long practiced the art of staying alive, and he quickly gained what passed for influence in that place of malice and deception.

The story might have ended here, with the dwarf living out the rest of his years as a thrall to the dark elves. But his accomplishments and covert dealings led him to the service of a powerful drow wizard named Ebbar Thora. Thora might have been an archmage in the colleges of magic in Waterdeep or another of the great cities of the surface world, but in the drow city his status was defined more by his gender and his low caste—his House was not one of the greater—than by his considerable talent. This embittered him, and it allowed one such as Udon to get close enough to take advantage.

The wizard's most prized possession was a collection of ancient tablets that contained potent spells of elemental summoning. Most of the tablets contained magical writings of a clerical, not arcane, nature, and Thora had long been maneuvering to use the tablets to

gain advantage with the priestesses of Lolth. The effort was probably doomed from the start, for the servants of the Spider Queen were not generally aligned to being manipulated by a male, no matter what magical tricks he knew. But in any case Thora's plans never came to fruition, for Udon, upon realizing the potential of the wizard's cache, had struck him down from behind and stolen the entire collection.

He had to flee the city for his life, of course, but he'd made preparations for that contingency as well. Nor was his flight random, for when he'd made his decision to steal the tablets, he'd also set upon a destination.

In his travels, Udon had learned a great deal. One bit of lore he'd stolen from its original owner was the secret of a great underground cavern, located several leagues from the drow city. From what he'd learned, the place was a nexus, a rare site where the elemental planes overlapped with the Prime. He made his way there, his urdunnir abilities allowing him to escape both the drow parties sent to hunt him down as well as the other predators of the Underdark. Finally, he reached his destination, the elemental nexus.

The dwarf felt a bit of humility as he entered the cavern; a feeling foreign to the selfish creature. He encountered several xorn, creatures drawn to the node, but was able to bluff his way past them into the inner reaches of the cavern. Here, the stone itself seemed to possess life, swelling and twisting as the very makeup of the place shifted before his eyes.

Udon did not dawdle long. Even his own nature, so at touch with the powers inherent in this place, would not preserve him long from the shifting tides of elemental energy at work in the nexus. Setting up wards to protect himself, he used the stolen tablets to work a calling of incredible potency, further amplified by the power present in the cavern.

The working of the spell took hours. Udon did not call a mere elemental, even one of the potent elder entities that could tear down castles and crush dozens of warriors beneath their massive fists. No, he called a being like himself; one of the sentient elemental lords, an organism seeped in malevolence and shadow. Its truename was unpronounceable by mortal tongues, but it could be called Terror, for that was what it brought with it into the Prime Material.

Udon was not intimidated by it; his spell of calling had bound it with invisible tendrils of compulsion; it could not harm him. It filled the cavern, an amorphous thing of stone that flowed like a frozen wave risen up from the ocean floor. Dark pools of utter black served it as eyes, and they shone with hatred as they focused upon the mortal dwarf.

Why have you called me to this ugly place, it said, its voice an echo in Udon's mind.

The dwarf smiled. *Destruction,* he thought.

He wasn't certain, but he thought he felt a tremor of pleasure pass through the entity. Yes, they understood each other... He gave his instructions, sensing the Terror's resentment grow at being shackled, but knowing it could not resist the impetus of the magic that bound him here. It would not remain long... but long enough, plenty, for the mission he gave it.

For destruction.

The end shall be done, the Terror said to him. *Yours shall be the first.*

Udon felt a cold sliver of fear. *You are bound to my will!* he shrieked in his mind. *You cannot harm me!*

The end shall be done, it repeated. The urdunnir spun as he sensed the truth in its words, in time to see four xorn rise up from the ground around him, surging at him with their claws outstretched.

Despite being caught off guard, he destroyed two of the elemental creatures before he fell, his lifeblood pouring from deep gashes torn in his flesh. The last thing he sensed was the Terror, looming over him, eager to devour what his failing body would issue.

And so it began.

Chapter 466

Mole wandered the halls of the urdunnir settlement. She was battling an enemy more treacherous than dragons or wizards or fiends... boredom. It had been at least two hours since she, Lok, and Gaera had come down from the tower above. The lift had been interesting, especially when she'd leaned out over the edge, looking down the shaft which vanished into darkness that sounded (from the echoes of the wind currents) like it continued for miles below. Lok had simply stood stoically in the middle of the lift, saying nothing for the entire descent, while Gaera had paid her little heed, her own worried features focused on the genasi.

She'd looked forward to the meeting with the urdunnir elders, but she'd been disappointed when Lok told her that she could not sit in on the council, which by custom was restricted only to the People. Gaera, as a fellow dwarf, and a recognized ally, got a pass, it seemed, but a gnome... a *guest!* at that, was not allowed...

Exploring the urdunnir settlement was interesting... for all of about ten minutes. The tunnels and chambers were all so uniform, and the people equally drab. Their main interest seemed to be work, and most of that involved painstaking shaping of metal or stone objects, at a pace that sometimes made it appear that the worker had fallen asleep. Or so it seemed to Mole, who might have been surprised at the way she appeared to the urdunnir, who saw her as a flighty spirit who danced through their midst and was gone in a flash, before her appearance could even fully register upon their senses. That was when they detected her at all; stealth had become such a habit to her that she blended with the shadows almost subconsciously, even when she wasn't using the power of her ring to become entirely invisible.

She finally found herself in a side tunnel that appeared to be unpopulated, at least until she emerged with surprising abruptness into a small square room much like all the other small square rooms she'd explored thus far. While the urdunnir work areas had been dimly lit by small stone disks that shed a pale gray light as faint as a candle's flame, this corridor had been unlit. The urdunnir, like all dwarves, possessed darkvision, and so Gaera had lent her

a small candle that was enchanted with an *everburning flame*. Drawing out the taper from her pocket, she had pressed on down this side tunnel, wondering if the darkness hid anything interesting. With her excellent vision she needed no further illumination, but in that weak light she did not immediately realize that this room was occupied until she was almost in the middle of the place.

That figure was an elder urdunnir, ancient if the maze of canyons and ridges etched into his face was any reliable guide. His skin, beard, eyes and tunic were a uniform gray, causing him to blend into the surrounding stone, explaining her initial failure to detect him. In fact, at first she thought him to be a statue, until his eyes shifted ever so slightly, following her movements.

“Hey,” she said. “I thought all you elders were at the council meeting.”

The dwarf betrayed no reaction at first. She finally was wondering if he spoke Common, or if he was senile, when he rumbled, “I am not so old as all that, little daughter.”

It was an odd thing to say, but inwardly she shrugged; the urdunnir were a weird people with odd customs. “I’m a friend of Lok’s,” she said, moving around the perimeter of the room, looking for anything distinctive. The place seemed to be pretty much exactly what it appeared; a small dead-end chamber.

“You are like quicksilver,” the old dwarf said. “You travel the world, slipping through the cracks, undetectable, unstoppable.”

Mole grinned, taking the comment as praise. “Well, I am pretty fast,” she said, casually twisting with her next step into a cartwheel that brought her left foot around in a circle above her head and then back again to the ground without breaking pace.

“And yet, you often act without thought. Action follows stimulus; there is no consideration in between.”

Mole’s smile disappeared. Had she just been insulted? What did this old dwarf really know about her, anyway? They’d just met.

The dwarf slowly drew his hand out from his cloak, and opened his palm to reveal a small stone. “Take this from me, if you can.”

Ah. So the fogey wanted to play a game, eh?

“I don’t really think you want to...” she began, turning toward the wall, running her hand along the stone. In mid-sentence she twisted and kicked off, flying across the room like a bolt shot by a crossbow. The dwarf hadn’t moved; it was like taking candy from a...

There was a sudden twist, and she found herself lying on her back a few feet away. There was a vague pain, nothing too bad, but mostly surprise.

She snapped her body and sprang up to her feet. The dwarf was still sitting there, the stone unchanged in his palm. “What did you do?” she asked. “Are you a wizard?”

The dwarf laughed. “Come, try again, little daughter. And this time, *think* as you act.”

Time passed, and Mole found herself being repeatedly humiliated by the aged dwarf. Her cheeks burned and her backside was feeling particularly sore, but the dwarf did not seem to take pleasure at her misfortunes, instead urging her to react, directing her with subtle hints and clues. For all his aged appearance, he appeared able to move at the speed of light when he desired, changing position so quickly that she didn’t even see a blur in between. She quickly realized that she had no chance of outmaneuvering him; she had to *outthink* him, discern where he was *going* to be, figure out how her adversary thought and use that against him.

She was coming close, she thought, finally; something new was opening up to her from these impromptu lessons. But as she pulled herself up—no more hopping to her feet, not after the last few failures—the dwarf rose and came to her, placing the stone on the ground before her.

“Your friend comes for you; our time is at an end. I hope that you will take to heart what I have tried to show you.”

Mole nodded. “I will,” she said earnestly. The dwarf turned and walked past her out of the room, but she forestalled him. “Wait! I don’t even know your name. I’m M...” she hesitated. “I’m Clarese, Clarese Calloran.”

The dwarf nodded. “Some have called me Lord Liggett, in the past.”

What an odd name, Mole thought, but she only nodded, offering the dwarf a respectful bow.

“Take the stone,” he told her. “You may have need of it someday.”

She bent to recover the gift. The stone was little more than a pebble, oddly smooth, and it felt cool in her hand. When she turned back, the old dwarf was gone.

She took her candle, which she’d laid aside during the... *training, I guess it was*, she thought. She left the room and looked down the corridor, and wasn’t really surprised that there was no sign of the dwarf. It fit with his odd personality, and the strange skills he had possessed. But she could hear a familiar clank in the distance, and then her name being called.

“I’m coming, Lok!” she cried, running down the passage back to the main halls of the urdunnir citadel.

Chapter 467

A faint haze of dust hung in the air over the drow city of Asran Vok. Situated in a twisting cavern shaped roughly like a huge letter “S”, the city had been organized around a long avenue that ran roughly through the center of the place. The low valley in the center of the cavern was packed with fungi farms and ponds stocked regularly with fish, while the higher

ridges that adjoined the cavern walls contained the fortified estates of the city's great Houses. The northern terminus of the cavern contained the precincts of the Temple of Lolth, while the southern end contained a trading bazaar, warehouses, and a barracks where fifty drow warriors donated from all of the city's Houses provided collective security for the trade center and monitoring of the primary access points where the city interfaced with the surrounding Underdark.

All of it, now, was in ruin.

The broad central avenue was a swath of destruction, littered with rubble that in some cases had been hurled from a hilltop estate torn from the sloping ridges and strewn across the valley floor, sometimes hundreds of feet distant. Drow bodies were littered here and then, interspersed liberally with the corpses of deep rothe, bugbear and orc slaves, duergar mercenaries, and other races that associated with the drow lords.

The gates of adamantine that had fronted the entry to the temple grounds where the Spider Queen's servants held sway had been twisted and torn free of their moorings. One bent segment of that barrier still held the impaled corpse of a priestess, her face frozen in a look of utter terror, her tentacle rod lying forgotten a few dozen yards away. The temple itself looked to have been almost split in two, like an overripe melon dropped onto the hard pavement. A sickly stench of rot rose from within, accompanied by the skittering of vermin who were already eagerly devouring the products of this gory conquest.

But one thing was missing from this scene of carnage. All of the bodies were of the victims, all of the destruction belonged to the drow and their minions. There were not tracks, no trace of the engine of this devastation. It might have been an earthquake, except for the thoroughness of the obliteration that had been wrought here. Asran Vok had simply ceased to be. Later, the few survivors that had fled the Terror would return, amazed at the complete end of everything that they had known.

* * * * *

Lok's expression was inscrutable as he entered the cavern. The place was dark and still, the faint sounds of water and wind reaching his ears, echoing softly to produce an impression of great solemnity and empty space. It was a cathedral, of sorts, like the tomb of a dead god.

The genasi shook himself of such dark thoughts. He hadn't slept much since his meeting with the urdunnir elders, troubled by what they'd told him, and troubled by the path his own dreams had taken.

He became aware of light and sound. Gaera and Mole, coming up behind him. It was comforting to have friends here; although he'd first tried to insist on coming here alone, to face whatever it was that was threatening his people, inwardly he was glad that the two women had refused to remain behind. The urdunnir warders had likewise been confused at his directions, at his statement that he would go out beyond the Shield Wall to face the threat alone, but the elders had only nodded, accepting his decision as an inevitability that was clearly evident.

If only it was so clear to him, Lok thought.

He'd dreamt of the Keeper, in that halfway-real place between wakefulness and sleep. Dumathoin had not spoken to him—not this time—but Lok had sensed that there was something there, that the dream-encounter was not just a product of his own imagination and memory. He had come far since that last encounter, since Dumathoin had spoken to him.

It is not yet time. You have accomplished much, but you are not ready...

Those words had come in the aftermath of their confrontation with the avatar of Tiamat, the dragon-god of Unther, brought back into the Prime by the plottings of the duergar and their deep-dragon ally. When he'd heard those words his physical body had been dead, lying empty on the cold stone in the duergar citadel. But Dumathoin had had other plans for him...

I send ye back into the world, my Lok, as a defender of the urdunnir and those others that need thy aid. I send you not as a missionary, for my star has already passed its zenith, and even now descends swiftly toward its nadir. But you, who have walked the many diverse pathways of the world, will not make the same mistakes that I made... That is my hope, my son.

Was now to be his time? the genasi thought, unlimbering his axe and laying it on the stone before him. The quiet cavern was a fitting place for the meeting, solemn, so far beneath the world in which he had lived his life.

"Mole, you should return to the settlement," he said. He didn't even try to convince Gaera; the woman had made her feelings on the issue quite clear earlier. The priestess did not agree with him coming here, but nor was she going to let him stand here alone. None of them understood what they faced here; Lok did not have any additional insight into that, but from what he'd learned from the elders, and from his own dreams, he knew that it was something ancient that had the power to strike down what he had accomplished with the urdunnir.

"In the words of another dwarf I once knew, go stuff yourself," Mole said with a grin. "Besides, I want to see what it is."

What is it? Lok thought. He stared into the darkness, but although his darkvision penetrated it, there was nothing there to be seen. The elders had spoken of a vibration in the stone, a tremor that spoke of a thing that was coming toward them, moving quickly and with purpose directly toward the heart of their community. Lok had not been able to feel it, but he knew his people well enough to sense the unease that suffused the inhabitants of the settlement. The urdunnir were a people in close harmony with the stone, and even when the warnings were subtle, they could sense wrongness, even when it could not be fully identified. The elders had been able to give him a direction and a time. The former intersected with this cavern, and the latter... well, the latter, Lok realized had just about run out.

He knelt, drawing off his gauntlet and pressing his fingertips against the cool stone of the floor.

"I don't feel anything," Mole said, imitating Lok's motion. She dropped to the ground and pressed her ear against the stone, trying to improve the efficacy of the detection stratagem.

"Quiet," Gaera said, her own voice a whisper. The priestess was clad in a breastplate of shining mithral, and with her heavy mace and shield, both of fine dwarf-forged steel, she looked more martial than she felt. She'd already laid several long-lasting wards upon them, including a potent invocation against evil that surrounded her, enveloping her two companions.

Lok did not respond to them; he focus was on the stone, and his senses. He had never possessed the urdunnir gifts that his mother and the other of his kin had as their birthright. But he was *of* the earth, and on some deeper level, he felt a bond with the stone, with places such as this...

Then he felt it. Alien, malevolent, surging through the crust of the world beneath them like a shark through the ocean.

And close. Very, very close.

Lok's eyes popped open. His hand tightened on his axe, and he pushed himself to his feet.

The only other warning the others had was when a massive tremor shook the cavern, a pulse like an explosion that threw them all roughly from their feet. The two dwarves fell hard, but Mole landed on the ball of one hand and popped back to her feet instantly, where she bounced lightly against the bucking stone.

Since she was standing she saw it first.

It was as if the stone floor of the cavern had become water, and a massive tsunami was forming in its surface. The wave filled the cavern, the floor and walls coming together into a surge that rose almost to the ceiling of the place, forty, fifty, maybe even sixty feet above them. It was... *huge* wasn't even close to enough to describe it. The time it took from when she saw it emerge from the rock to when it was looming above them could be measured in fractions of a single heartbeat. As it came, it became more distinct, with massive arms erupting from the wave, and black points of utter malevolence becoming visible in its top, its 'head', Mole supposed, although to give something like this humanlike traits seemed somehow *wrong*.

"We're in trouble," the part of her mind that could still think managed to say.

Then the wave broke over them.

Chapter 468

A massive arm at least six feet thick and thirty feet long detached from the amorphous mass of the Terror and descended toward the stunned adventurers. Gaera shrieked in fright, but Lok grabbed her and rolled, hurling the cleric free as he himself twisted out of the path of the huge hammer-shaped fist that smashed into the ground where they'd been lying. The impact shook the cavern, and both Lok and Gaera were knocked roughly back by the concussive force of the blow, shards of stone zinging off of their armor.

Mole, of course, was well away, darting back into a crevice in the wall about ten feet away, wondering just what in the heck she could do against such a... monstrosity.

Ignoring the smarting pains already starting in his limbs from being battered about, Lok pulled himself up and rushed at the Terror, uttering a deep-throated cry to meet the rumbling potency of the elemental monster. The genasi barely kept his feet as he rushed into the surging, uneven mass of stone around its lower body, but he came close enough to drive his axe into the broad expanse of the wave. The metal sang oddly as it clove the stone, and rather than shatter the liquid rock into fragments, as might be expected, the stone *tore*, opening bloodless gashes like meat carved by a butcher. But despite the strength and fury of the genasi's assault, the effects were like an assault upon a great ancient oak by a child wielding a kitchen knife. The Terror was just so *huge* that there seemed no way that Lok could do enough damage to hinder it.

Even so, Lok's attack seemed to have gotten its attention. Twin arms of rock descended upon Lok like battering rams, clearly meant to simply smash him to a pulp. The genasi glanced up and saw death coming, and shifted into a defensive position, his heavy shield coming up, his body tensing to withstand impacts that could have pierced a castle wall. There was a woman's cry, but whether it came from Gaera or Mole he could not tell; everything was the rumbling and then the pain that drove through even his nearly indestructible adamantine shell and the only slightly less hard flesh and muscle beneath.

No mere man could have survived those twin blows. And yet when the terrible fists, each almost twice the size of the warrior's entire body, drew back, Lok rose to his feet and charged again, that axe of his cleaving through the Terror once more, opening gashes several feet long, hewing at it with an almost fatalist fury. He's stood against an inexorable force and fought on, but it was obvious that even Lok could not take much more of the creature's might and live.

But the genasi did not stand alone, and his companions now came to his aid. An electrically-charged bolt shot up into the creature's "head", but Mole's shot merely vanished against its bulk, less significant even than a mosquito's annoying bite. Gaera came forward toward Lok, enveloped in a white glow of divine power. The Terror brought down a long arm that would have crushed her into gory ooze had it connected. The priestess cried out and threw herself desperately forward, even so taking a glancing hit across her back that knocked her sprawling. With Lok hewing at it with desperate ferocity the injured cleric drew herself up and staggered close enough to touch its "body," unleashing her *dispel evil* spell against it.

The spell was potent, and the Terror was certainly evil, but the entity's ancient malevolence was far greater than the priestess's magic. The surge of light vanished into the Terror's monstrous form, and Gaera drew only violence as a response as the body of the creature seemed to rear up before her, the cavern floor rising up like a rug that was lifted up and snapped to dislodge dust. The power of the surge sent both Gaera and Lok flying across the room toward the entry, as though the two armored dwarves were insignificant ants.

And then, as they reached the apogee of their arc and started to fall, the Terror slammed a fist down into Lok in mid-air, driving him down twenty feet into the ground with enough force to crack the stone.

Chapter 469

This is crazy, crazy, crazy! that little voice in Mole's head screamed. The voice usually only came out at times like this, when the sensible course was just too blatantly obvious to miss. Yet somehow, she always seemed to miss it, nevertheless...

When she'd seen the Terror strike down Lok, she'd just acted, letting her instincts hurl her into a desperate maneuver in just the way that the old urdunnir had critiqued. As the elemental monster drew back its arm, already shifting its other forward for another attack against Gaera, Mole was running up its length, following its curving course toward the Terror's shoulder and its upper body. She was still at a loss for how she was going to affect it; if Lok's strikes didn't do anything, then what could she hope to accomplish? But she knew as clearly as she knew her own name that it was going to kill Lok and Gaera, and while she might be able to avoid it, she could not return to Uncle Cal and tell him she'd stood by while his best friend was murdered by an animated mountain.

"Yaaaa!" she screamed, running across the creature's form, rapid-firing her crossbow into what she took to be its head, the lump across the cresting wave where a twisting spiral of utter blackness was focused. The shots did nothing, as far as she could tell; the thing did not appear to even acknowledge her. She heard a desperate cry from below; Gaera's voice, and sensed the creature shifting its weight, the big arm coming around to squash her, and Lok. If Lok wasn't already dead; could anyone have survived that slam?

In frustration she threw her crossbow at it, feeling incredibly useless. The weapon bounced off its head and vanished into the dark below, and she slipped, bouncing onto her chest in surprise, barely keeping from plummeting off of her perch to the ground far—very far!—below.

She felt a stabbing pain in her right breast. *What now?* she thought, pulling herself up quickly, shifting her motion to match the movement of the creature. Even in all the chaos and grief and fear of the moment, she was glad that no one had seen her almost fall like that.

She found the source of what had hurt her—the pebble that the old urdunnir had given her, dropped into her pocket.

It was at that moment that she finally came to the realization of what “Lord Liggett” had meant. Stunned, she almost fell—again!—but Gaera’s second scream shook her back to reality.

This time, she thought first, a crowded insane jumble of thoughts that raced through her mind in the course of a single heartbeat.

Then she acted.

The Terror’s movements had turned its “face”, if that’s what the black-spiral thingee was, away from her. So she sprang forward and leapt, twisting her body as she passed before it, snapping the stone square into the middle of the dark pattern. Then she was falling, and falling fast, and had to attend to not breaking her neck. She spread her limbs wide to slow her descent slightly, and then as she reached the ground she tucked into a roll, absorbing some of the force of her fall with her legs before tumbling forward. She detected a jutting, sharp-edged ledge that rose about a foot above the ground surface just before she would have slammed into it, and expended the last of her momentum in coming up into an easy somersault before landing on her feet.

She turned and looked up. She’d expected something at least moderately dramatic, maybe a smoking ruin where the Terror’s head had been.

But the elemental monstrosity was still intact. It just loomed there, quivering, an earthquake in place. Mole could see that gray cracks stretched out from where she’d hit it with the magic stone, but even as she stared it seemed as though the creature was recovering, the disruption or damage or whatever she’d done to it being absorbed, overcome.

“Damn, you could at least have given me a few more rocks,” she muttered under her breath. She turned and saw Gaera bent over Lok. The genasi was moving, now, although he was bent over on his knees and forearms. Mole frowned—she’d give Gaera plenty of time to heal the warrior, and in terms of distractions, she’d used up her best, and apparently only, gambit that was going to work.

“Gaera, look out!” Mole warned, as the Terror lurched forward once again, as if the priestess could not sense the massive form and the huge rumbling that accompanied the resumption of its assault.

The priestess turned from Lok, and rose. She called upon the power of her goddess, firing a lance of white-hot energy into its damaged face. But like her earlier *dispel evil*, the beam of *searing light* was merely absorbed by the creature, with little apparent harm done to it.

Gaera looked determined, resigned, as she lifted her mace, standing in defiance of the Terror. But rather than attack, the black spiral twisted, and a gray beam exploded from it, sweeping over the woman, surrounding her with a soft aura that faded within just a few seconds. And when it had disappeared, it left her changed.

Turned to stone.

Chapter 470

Lok hovered in the gray border between consciousness and the dark void that threatened to simply absorb him. His body felt like a burden dragging him down, and his breath rattled in his chest as his crushed lungs struggled to draw in life-preserving air. The part of him that struggled against the inevitable urged him to keep fighting, for if he faltered now, then it meant death for him, his friends, and ultimately, his people.

But that narrow wedge of the cavern visible through his helmet visor blurred and faded, and Lok knew that he had lost this fight.

He did not hear Gaera cry out to him, or feel the surge of healing energy that tore into him. The *heal* spell from the priestess restored his broken body, but it did not penetrate the gray veil that had surrounded him, nor did her desperate cries reach him as the Horror loomed over them to put an end to the hopes of the urdunnir.

In that moment, as events passed quickly on the Prime Material, Lok found himself lying on a bare stone floor in a familiar stone room. The place was warm, and cozy, and safe. The genasi could do no more than raise his head, which alone took an insurmountable effort, enough to see the figure seated in the ancient stone chair, regarding him with a sad look on his face. The dwarf seemed as old as the world, his face lined with troubles.

“Father,” he managed, his voice rasping.

“It is time, my son,” the elder dwarf said.

“Father,” he repeated, unable to say more. He tried to shake his head, but only managed a shivering quake.

“I name you my Chosen,” the dwarf said, and with that word he seemed to... diminish. The last thing that Lok saw was his eyes, points of light in the darkness as everything else went gray around him once more.

Reality returned, and with it action. The sound of battle and the incessant rumbling of the Terror was everywhere around him, in him, as he tore free from the last lingering threads of unreality that had held him. He drew himself up, his wounds mostly memories. He saw Gaera, froze into stone, but turned the rage at that sight against his enemy. The Terror had been hurt by his friends, he could immediately see, but it was still coming, still a deadly force.

His axe was gone, knocked away when he had been sent flying by the monster. There was no time to search for it now; he instead hurled aside his shield and drew out *Coldburn*, rushing past Gaera to meet the Terror. He saw the inevitable strike coming and hurled himself aside, his boots skidding on the uneven surface of the ground complicated by the still-roiling effects of the elemental entity's presence upon the surrounding stone. He felt something hard carom off his armored torso from the side, but his attention was focused wholly forward. He rushed up a slope of rippling stone that trembled beneath his hard boots until he could unleash his assault upon the body of the Terror. The wounds he had opened before with his axe had vanished into its body, enveloped by its shifting mass,

leaving no indication of whether they still hindered it, or had been simply repaired. But the massive two-handed sword opened a fresh gap four feet long lined with blackened char on one side, and crystals of ice on the other, as the odd magical effects of the sword inflicted their damage upon the entity.

Lok expected a counterattack, and it came swiftly, powerful blows that rained upon him from the Terror's massive fists. *Healed* by Gaera, infused with the power that had been imparted into him by Dumathoin, he nevertheless felt the hits shake his body; for all of what he was, he was still mortal, and this foe seemed to be beyond the power of mere weapons to defeat.

He felt a momentary calm settle over him, as the huge stone fists lifted up to continue battering him down. He felt... *different*, and part of that was a new perception, something inexplicable that he felt through the body of the monstrosity that confronted him. He could sense its link to the surrounding stone, the creature both of and against the fabric of this world that was not its own, and he could feel the tendrils of energy that infused it, leeching strength from without to restore itself from the damage being inflicted upon it.

Releasing one hand from the grip of his sword, he reached out and plunged it *into* the body of the Terror. The stony surface gave way at his touch, rippling out like a pool of water around the point where the limb vanished into the depths. Lok leaned forward, until the entity had absorbed his arm up to the elbow. Through that connection, he felt an odd synergism with the elemental, and a rage that made him shake with the overwhelming strength of the emotion.

The Terror was shaking too, now, clearly not happy with what was being done to it. Its upper body was looming over Lok, now, and its fists came together from the sides to crush the warrior between them. But an instant before the impact, Lok plunged forward, his body sinking into the elemental's form entirely. The stone fists smashed together with incredible force, but when they drew back there was nothing there to be seen.

But whatever Lok was doing, it was obviously having an effect. The creature drew back, receding away from the spot where it had engaged Gaera and Lok. But as it fell back, its body began to split apart, like a cloth being torn from its base upward. In that opening, Lok became visible, still holding *Coldburn*, dropping away from the grasp of the creature as its substance retreated from him. Looking up, he saw that the stone of the Terror's body had crumbled away enough to reveal a great black lump, right where the heart would have been had the elemental been a living, mortal creature.

Above that, the black spiral, now twisting in agitation, of the monster's "face" had focused upon him. It unleashed another pulse of energy at its tormenter, enveloping him in gray light that threatened to swallow up the genasi. Lok struggled within that enveloping glow, his movements slowed as though he'd been dropped into a vat of molasses.

And then Mole shot into view. She'd recovered her crossbow, and fired a tiny bolt into the thick of that black mass, the monster's "heart".

The Terror shuddered, and the gray beam faltered—only slightly, and only for a span of time measured in fractions of a second. But in that instant Lok surged forward, thrusting

through the enveloping field of energy, and he drove *Coldburn* upward, through the black heart, the flames and frost engulfing the corrupted knob as the steel slid deeper into its substance.

The gray beam of energy vanished, and with a roar Lok twisted his body, tearing his weapon and half of the matter of the black orb free.

The cavern was filled with another violent tremor, but this time the pulse was the death-throes of the intruder, as the substance of the Terror began to dissolve. Great chunks of it broke free and crashed to the ground, and finally the hulking mass of its body collapsed backward, filling the cavern with a surge of pulverized stone and shards of debris that gradually settled to the ground. Lok and Mole staggered free of the radius of destruction, the gnome coughing for breath, until they stood at the point where Gaera's petrified form stood, her mace still lifted in bold defiance.

"Well, that was something," Mole said, looking back at the ruins, clapping her hands to clear them of dust.

"We must take Gaera back... the elders should be able to restore her," Lok was saying, but he stopped as Mole turned toward him and her jaw dropped in surprise. "What is the matter?"

"You look... different." And indeed, the genasi's appearance had changed. The stone-like coloration and texture of his flesh was as before, although now it was smudged with dust and dirt. But where his dark eyes had been, now twin sparkles of pale white light shone, like lonely stars witnessed through the haze of clouds on the deepest of nights in the world above.

Chapter 471

INTERLUDE

Athux stepped through the wide stone arch into the hall, patently ignoring the two towering glabrezus who flanked the entry, peering down at him with their eager red eyes. He likewise took no notice of the succubi who cooed at him as he walked though the foyer and into the hall proper. The demonesses hissed in frustration but did not follow him; only a fool would have missed the prominent shift in the air, the tangible aura that reflected the mood of the large chamber's most prominent occupant.

Athux's perfect features did not betray any concern, although he was more sensitive to such things than most of his fiendish kin. Of course, it did not take much knowledge of the Prince to know that his mood of late had been foul, not with all that had happened.

Just over fifty hours of subjective time had passed since the yugoloth assault upon the citadel, and despite the thorough cleaning Athux could still sense the stink of death and corruption in the hall. As his peripheral vision slid over the weathered gray stone and the stark, angular lines of the buttressed ceiling fifty feet above, the contrast with the glories of the Argent Palace could not simply be ignored. Such stray thoughts were dangerous, and

distracting, and he quickly schooled his mind to smooth, unrevealing stillness. It was among the first skills he'd mastered, given his upbringing; demons who revealed too much quickly found themselves exploited by their ruthless kin, no matter whose line they rose from.

The sound of the cambion's tread filled the hall as he walked across the barren stone floor. This was despite his agile stride and soft-soled boots; a trick of the acoustics of the place.

"Son," Graz'zt said, from the shadows of his throne.

Athux came to a stop in the center of the floor. His sire filled the simple but considerable chair of stone and iron, his upper body wreathed in darkness in the depths of the far alcove opposite the foyer through which Athux had entered. That was artificial; there was no "sun" in this place to cast shadows, and the magical illumination shed by steady ochre globes in the four corners of the ceiling above were well able to brighten every corner of the chamber. But the light did not reach to Graz'zt; it just died as it entered the alcove, simpering into a murky death that absorbed the tenuous rays.

"Father," Athux said, his voice utterly neutral, compliant. These days it was impossible to predict what would provoke the Prince, but Athux, at least, was fully cognizant of his own importance in the schemes of his sire to cling to the last lingering vestiges of his power.

"You have learned nothing new?" Graz'zt asked.

Athux squelched the urge to raise an eyebrow. Graz'zt knew that he had not left the citadel since the attack. Was the Prince acknowledging his knowledge of his son's outside sources of information? Or was there some other game at work here? Before the pause could become awkward, the cambion's intricate mind had already worked through a dozen permutations, and ultimately settled upon a simple approach.

"No, father," he replied, his manner utterly open.

Graz'zt seemed to sink into himself, and a long silence filled the chamber. Athux finally allowed himself to ask the question that had been on his mind.

"Do we not risk much in remaining here?"

The Prince's hands tightened on the stone rests of the throne, where deep impressions had already been pressed into the gray surface to match those twelve long fingers. It was just one of the ways that this place had already begun to shape itself to the whims of its master, but to Athux's eyes those changes only highlighted how far they had fallen.

Finally, Graz'zt regained control, and relaxed. "The attack was merely a random raid," he said. "If my enemies truly knew I was here, they would not have bothered with such a pathetic assault."

Athux did not respond, but Graz'zt must have sensed his doubt, for he added, "You can ease your fear. My power, and the potency of the Heart, conceals me from those who would take advantage. And servitors can be replaced. There are always more demons,

always more of the weak to serve the strong.” The last words were thick with scorn, but Athux knew they were not truly directed at him—although the subtle message underlying them, of course, was a warning.

Athux bowed deeply.

“You waste your thoughts in nostalgia for what was,” Graz’zt went on. “We must focus on what is, and what will be.”

Athux shook himself inwardly, silently berating himself for allowing his focus to waver even the slightest bit. “I am at your command, father.”

But Graz’zt merely leaned back in his seat, more of him sinking into shadow until only his long legs and his hands upon the stone rests were clearly visible. A rough shape that Athux knew to be his father’s great curved sword was visible in profile against the side of the throne; he hadn’t noticed it there before.

Belatedly Athux became aware of another presence in the room. Turning, he regarded the new arrival.

Like the cambion, his appearance was youthful, his features attractive. But the newcomer was fair in coloration, with a shock of hair the color of fire gathered into a braid that descended into the gap between his shoulders. He was muscular, clad only in a rippling skirt of silver scales that covered him from his waist to just above his ankles. Faint scars covered his torso, but they merely accentuated the smooth proportions of his frame, drawing the eye to the perfect lines of flesh and muscle over laid over bone. He bore no weapons, but there was something in his eyes that gave one pause. Those who had seen such before might have recognized the iron determination of the fiercely committed... or the fanatic.

He strode across the chamber, paying no heed to Athux until he stood adjacent to him, facing the alcove and its occupant. He then fell to his knees, his fist slamming into his chest with a smack that had to have inflicted pain. “I serve.”

“Rise, Malad,” Graz’zt said.

The youth stood, and only then acknowledged the cambion standing beside him with a faint tilt of his head. “Brother,” he said.

“We have a new guest you might be interested in, Malad,” Athux said smoothly. “A friend of your father’s, I believe he was.”

Something flashed in the youth’s eyes, but he did not reply. His armor shifted slightly around his hips, at first appearing to be a simple response to a subtle adjustment in his stance. But that impression was belied a moment later as the silvery scale skirt rippled and flowed up his body, twisting around his torso and muscular chest until it covered his entire body from his neck to his knees. Athux betrayed no reaction at this amazing development, but inwardly he chuckled slightly.

Well, Synesyx is not happy to see me, he thought.

But the subtle exchange between the two men was cut short as Graz'zt emerged from his alcove. Both lowered their eyes, but the Demon Prince barked something, a syllable infused with command, and their entire attention was drawn back to him, a compulsion raw and powerful. At the same order, the demons still attending in the back part of the room retreated hastily, drawing the huge doors of the foyer shut behind them. As he came forward the black haze that had obscured him faded away, revealing the Lord of Shadows in all of his glory.

Graz'zt reputation was of a sensualist, a creature of debauched interests and utter depravity. His charisma, and the alien beauty of his features were renown, and sages in a hundred worlds and realities noted the legendary seductions that he'd completed, and the extreme nature of the rites practiced at his temples across the multiverse. He had been ranked among the six most powerful of the lords of demonkind, with connections and tendrils in extreme locales far removed from his lair, the three layers of the Abyss known collectively as Azzagrat.

But this plain citadel was not the Argent Palace, and the light that filtered from the slits high in the walls was not of the Abyss.

And the Graz'zt that appeared to his two most favored underlings was much removed from the being noted in the accounts.

He wore a half-robe of black cloth with the texture of silk and the sheen of metal, draped loosely over a body that was flawless in proportion and form. One hand was hidden beneath the fabric of one sleeve, while the other was twined into the straps of an intricate belt of gray strands, those threads slipping in and about his six long fingers as though alive. He wore a necklace of golden links, which supported six black gemstones in a weave of adamant that bespoke the potency of the enchantments upon them.

But above that, wreckage.

The Demon Prince's face was a ruin, a foul landscape of sickening, pocked flesh, wasted and dead. One eye socket was a ruin, the surrounding flesh burned away, leaving only a gaping hole in which a sightless gray orb was fixed. But on closer examination that "eye" was revealed to be something else, as there was a faint gray glow from within.

That was the artifact, the Heart of Axion. While it did not grant Graz'zt sight to replace the eye he had lost, it was possessed of far greater powers, drawn from the trapped soul of a demigod who had fallen millennia before the first human beings had walked upon the surface of Faerûn.

Continuing across the Prince's twisted visage, at several places hints of white showed were enough of the covering skin had been violated to reveal the ivory skull beneath. A faint smell of rot hung about the Prince, and Athux had to fight the urge to gag, for all that he was familiar—intimately familiar—with the true face of his father.

The cambion managed a covert glance aside at his companion. Malad had not flinched at the revelation of Graz'zt form; if anything, the fanatical devotion in his expression had deepened. Athux could not read his fellow cambion well enough to know if that dedication was real, feigned, or simply the product of the still-considerable aura that Graz'zt projected. Even defaced by wounds that could not be healed, Graz'zt was still what he was, and his lure could not be fully diminished. In some ways, it had been enhanced, for Athux knew that horror could be as powerful an attractor as beauty.

Malad did not react as Graz'zt came before him, overwhelming him with that horror, fixing him with his remaining eye, the one that still perceived things in the mortal realm.

"You have grown in power," he said, finally. "You approach transcendence, so quickly." There was the slightest gesture, a flicker of movement that Athux did not miss, and which caused him to seethe inside. Malad had come up fast, very fast, and was now quite near the level of power of Athux himself. The demon lord's son had been on the cusp of the transition to truly epic status that Graz'zt had referenced for some time. It was no light matter to take that final step, and Athux wondered at how this news boded for the complex relationship between the Prince and his underlings. Demons were very zealous of their power, after all, and too much in one under them was always considered in the context of how much of a threat even the most apparently loyal could provide.

Graz'zt finally released Malad from the power of his attention, and stepped back. "Share your news, my powerful young thrall."

Malad bowed. "The Blood Legion has experienced schism, as you expected, Great Lord," he said. "Two companies of vrock and a host of flying hordelings attempted to defect, but their treachery was detected in time, and your loyal forces tore the would-be-deserters to pieces. We also came under surprise attack from allied forces commanded by... several of your prominent rivals, Great Lord."

Athux could feel the rage radiating from Graz'zt like a tangible wave, but he controlled it. The devils had to be having a grand celebration right now, Athux thought.

"Continue," Graz'zt said.

"I commanded a withdrawal, sacrificing a unit of hezrous whose loyalty I had reason to question," Malad went on. "Once I had secured our position I consolidated the remaining forces, weeding out a few more units of doubtful reliability. I can report that you have nine companies under your banner, at your call, ready to kill or die at your command."

Athux tried to weigh Graz'zt response to the news. Nine companies, assuming Malad's reorganization had not inflated or deflated the total number of forces, meant that about two-thirds of Graz'zt's armies had been destroyed. That did not include the demons and allied troops that the Prince could call upon from his other outposts and holdings across the planes, but Athux knew all too well that they as well had suffered greatly in the purges, struggles for power, and opportunistic attacks that had followed the Disaster.

Malad simply waited, while Graz'zt regarded him with an unreadable visage. Long minutes passed, but none of those present in the room relaxed in the slightest.

Finally, Graz'zt spoke. "You have done well, Malad. You have preserved what could be kept in the face of catastrophe, and increased your personal prowess in the bargain. It is time for you to complete a final test, one that will install you to the maximum secrets of thralldom, and join your brother on the threshold of transcendence."

Malad bowed. Graz'zt turned away from them, but did not yet walk back to his throne and the shroud of darkness that would again conceal him.

"And then, then I shall have a final assignment for you, and for the Blood Legion," he continued.

Athux waited for more, but Graz'zt was still keeping his plans, whatever they were, close. The Prince made a subtle gesture that was a dismissal, and the two cambions, rivals and masters of great power in their own right, bowed and departed the room, leaving their master to his private thoughts.

Chapter 472

The air was thick, musty, alive with the odors of life and growing things as Dannel Ardan made his way swiftly on foot deeper into the Wealdath Forest in northwestern Tethyr. It had rained recently, and the thick blanket of leaves were still slick with damp, but the sure-footed elf had no difficulty making his way. There were no tracks or trails in this part of the wood, nothing but an endless expanse of thick wooden shafts that seemed to go on forever as far as one could sense in every direction.

It had been six decades since Dannel had last set foot amidst those ancient giants, but the smells and sounds of the wood had catapulted him back. It was a part of him, he realized, and no matter how long he had spent living in the world outside, working for the causes advanced by the Harpers, he had never really left it behind.

The only detractor from his experience was that someone was following him.

He hadn't been sure at first, his woodlore a bit rusty despite the two days he'd spent traveling through the woods since his arrival by means of the portal that had transported him hundreds of miles across Faerûn from the Forest of Miir. The druids tending the fey crossroads warding the portal had been welcoming, recognizing something even he hadn't seen in himself, a sense of belonging to this place.

The forest was not without dangers, but Dannel had advanced in skill and power to the point where he had little to fear from common predators. At one point he'd had to use an *alter self* spell to grow wings and fly high above a small pack of displacer beasts that had been more than casually interested in his scent. The monsters had followed him for a time, but a few expertly-aimed shafts from his bow had persuaded them toward the task of choosing a new alpha to replace the one that had gone down with an arrow stuck in its brain.

The elf came to a clearing, perhaps twenty paces across, with a cluster of boulders covered in moss gathered at the far end, shaped roughly like a giant who had sat down to rest and then gradually solidified into this permanent formation.

Here's as good a place as any, he thought, drawing his bow out of his magical quiver and stringing it in a single smooth motion.

He did not have to wait long. There was no sound, no odor to betray the pursuer, but he *knew* that something was there. Moving slowly, he drew out a long arrow and fitted it to his string.

"You never paid heed to the lessons of woodcraft," came a voice from the trees.

Dannel lowered his bow, but kept one hand around the arrow, holding it in place against the string. "I remember much," he said, loud enough to carry to the still-invisible speaker.

An elf appeared and stepped into the clearing. Like many of their kind, his age was indeterminate, but he had a hard look to him, and he wore dark garments of green and brown in a pattern that tended to blend with the surrounding forest. His tunic was bulky enough to suggest at least a chain shirt underneath, and he carried both a sizeable longbow across his back, and a slender longsword that he carried drawn at his side as he faced Dannel.

"A child could have tracked you," he said.

"It is good to see you, too, Eldren," Dannel replied, deliberately putting his arrow back into the spare quiver at his hip. The other elf did not reciprocate the gesture. "I appreciate the escort, but I think I can still find my way to Aldair Kelalei without your assistance."

The other elf frowned. "You do not sense it, do you? Truly you have lost much since you left, cousin."

"What do you mean?"

"Darkness stirs in the Wealdath. I suppose you would have found out soon enough, but there is still enough loyalty in the Ardan family to not let one of its own stagger blindly into it. Come with me—I am going to Korul Ulgor, and you'd be well advised to follow."

He strode across the clearing and vanished back into the wood, not waiting to see if Dannel would follow. The arcane archer did, after a moment, and he had to hurry to maintain the pace set by the other elf. Eldren did not seem amenable to conversation, and so the two moved swiftly through the woods for a good number of minutes before Dannel got exasperated and asked the obvious question.

"What is the nature of the darkness you spoke of?"

The elf shot him a look. "I would have guessed that the first question would have been about our family."

"I know that Alindre has taken service at the elven court in Evereska, and that Olondril has... has passed Beyond," Dannel said. Letting more bitterness into his voice than he'd intended, he added, "I have not been so casual about keeping in touch with the doings of the Ardans."

"Grandmother might disagree," Eldren said, but he did not offer further argument.

"And my question?" Dannel asked, impatient.

Eldren darted under a fallen log that offered only about three feet of clearance, leaving Dannel to fall behind as he negotiated the obstacle with more difficulty. When he'd caught up, Eldren said, "Odd creatures have been spotted in the woods, seemingly part undead, part animated plant material. They are very resistant to attack and difficult to destroy, but fortunately there have not been any apparent pattern or consistency to the encounters."

"Where do these things originate from?"

"The arcanists and clerics are not certain, but some have suggested that they originate in Bryth'an Torgul."

"The ruins?"

"You remember. Good."

"I suppose a scouting party has been sent."

"A pity we did not have your incisive strategic acumen here before. Yes, of course. They have not returned, and attempts to scry the area from afar fail, of course, because of the *mythal*."

"Isn't there supposed to be a guardian there?"

"Have you spent so much time among the humans that you remember nothing of the history of your own people? Yes, there was a guardian—a baelnorn of ancient power from a noble family of the Second Age. No elf living today has communicated with him, however, so we do not know what role, if any, he may have in broader events."

Dannel digested that, and they pressed on in silence for some time further. When it was broken again, it was Eldren who spoke.

"Why did you decide to come back, Dannel?"

"This is still my home," the arcane archer said quietly, almost to himself. But Eldren heard what he said, of course.

Even running through the woods, there was a certain stillness around them, so Dannel was able to make out the faint telltales that indicated someone drawing near, from up ahead and slightly to the right of their current course. Eldren had indicated no reaction, so he

hissed out a warning, and again drew up his bow, slipping an arrow once more to the string.

Eldren looked at Dannel's sudden alarm and sneered. "Calm yourself, cousin. It is no enemy that approaches." But Dannel noticed that as the other elf turned away, a brief flash of concern crept into his features.

The newcomer drew swiftly nearer, speed clearly overruling stealth in the manner of her approach. But even so, by the time the stranger was close enough to clearly discern, she was nearly on top of them, her face slightly flushed with the exertion of hard running. She was an elven woman, clad and equipped much like Eldren, although she wore strands of vegetation woven into her auburn hair, and carried a slender rapier at her hip in lieu of a heavier blade, like the ranger. She was attractive, Dannel thought, and although her elven cloak obscured the sigil on the oak medallion she wore at her throat, he thought that she had the air of a priestess of the Seldarine, the pantheon of elven gods of Faerûn.

"Jannae, this is my cousin, Dannel Arden," Eldren said. But the priestess barely spared a nod for the archer, worry obvious on her face as she focused upon Eldren.

"The outpost at Korul Ulgor is under heavy attack," she said. "You are needed, at once!"

Chapter 473

Dannel felt a bit lightheaded as the trio of elves continued their mad dash through the forest, their soft boots barely touching the dense carpet of fallen leaves as they darted between the maze of thick trunks. At one point they ran through a small clearing where a massive bear was drinking from a small pool; Dannel barely had time to meet the surprised bear's eyes before they were past, continuing their sprint. He was bringing up the rear, with Eldren at the front and Jannae only a few paces distant, and only by digging deep into reserves of strength he didn't know he had he'd been able to keep up with them at all. He doubted that they would stop for him, if he did not keep pace; the look on his cousin's face at Jannae's news had told him that much.

At the start of the sprint he'd called upon magic to enhance his speed, but clearly the other elves had similar abilities, for even with the *longstrider* spell in place, he could only just keep up. But the anticipation of battle gave him enough of an edge to dig deeper, to press on. His bow was strung and an arrow fitted to the string at his side, his fist locked around the shaft to keep it in place. He only hoped that when they reached their destination that he still had enough breath left in him to use the weapon effectively.

As if summoned by that thought, he heard sounds from up ahead; all-too-familiar cries of battle, the noises of conflict muted somewhat by the blanket of surrounding vegetation. His cousin and his companion rushed ahead, reenergized by the proximity to their destination, but now finally Dannel put on a burst of speed of his own, energizing himself through the song of power that exploded through his limbs with the power of an *expeditious retreat* spell. But in this case his objective was attack, and the other elves regarded him with surprise as he shot between them, weaving between the low-hanging branches, clinging to bushes, and fallen limbs that posed constant obstacles in the forest undergrowth.

“Dannel!” Eldren’s cry came after him, but whether the call was a warning or a request, the arcane archer never knew. For in the next moment he caught sight of the outpost, and his attention was drawn entirely to the scene of carnage developing before him.

He had never been to Korul Ulgor prior to his departure from the Wealdath so many years ago, but the outpost matched the familiar pattern of other similar bases he’d remembered. The main focus was three platforms perched in sprawling treetops spaced approximately sixty to eighty feet apart, ranging from as low as fifty feet off the ground to just over a hundred. The platforms were normally connected by rope walkways, but those had all been cut now, and Dannel could see that the lowest of the platforms had already been overrun, horrible figures crawling over the wreckage of the defenders, who had been hurled to the forest floor below or torn to pieces where they stood.

The invaders were fearsome undead, skeletal humanoids, perhaps once elves themselves. But unlike the mindless lesser creations that adventurers of all stripes had been destroying for century upon century, these monstrosities were clearly faster, stronger, and possessed of an animating cunning that guided their actions. Plant matter clung to their bones, sinuous vines woven through their skeletal forms, and a packed mass of loam that seemed to pulse with life jammed into the empty hollow of their ribs. They clung like ants to the thick trunks of the two trees that supported the two remaining outposts, and some had already reached the lowest of the struts that formed the foundation of the lower of the two, eighty feet above the forest floor. Dannel could see elves atop both platforms, not more than a dozen in all, fighting desperately to repel the attackers with bows and long spears. Neither, of course, was ideal for combating skeletal undead, he knew, and some had reversed their spears, using the ends as staves to try and dislodge their foes from their ascent.

Even as his mind took in it all he was drawing and firing. His first arrow, a white-fletched holy missile, slammed into the skull of a skeleton as it fought its way onto the lip of the lower platform from below. The impact dislodged it from its precarious hold and it fell, tumbling in midair before impacting hard on a cleared stretch of packed earth. Dannel had already fired two more arrows and scored two more hits by the time that the creation landed, and to his concern he saw that it had not been destroyed by his missile or the long fall, the vegetation clinging to it cushioning the impact and holding it together as it slowly clattered to its feet.

And he also saw that he was not alone. Several of the skeletons were still on the ground, a few also having survived being knocked to ground by the defending elves, and they quickly caught sight of him, heading in his direction.

As worrying as that was, it was nothing compared to the loud crash that drew him around, in time to see a massive, lumbering hill of earth and rotting flesh in the rough shape of a giant crash through the bushes and come surging toward him.

Chapter 474

The zombie-giant-earth thing was obviously powerful from the way it uprooted bushes as tall as Dannel in its rush, and each massive step forward caused the ground to shake noticeably. But it was slow, and that allowed Dannel just enough time to dodge back as it unleashed a two-handed overhead strike that slammed into the earth where he'd been standing a moment before. He gave ground, the creature lumbering behind.

The skeletons were much faster, and three of them moved to intercept them. As they came lengths of what looked like green vine twisted from their open jaws, and as Dannel recognized them he felt a cold fear grip him in the gut.

Mohrgs! he thought, knowing that if one of those barbed tentacles touched him, he might be in trouble.

"Wealdathanthala!" came a loud cry, announcing the arrival of his two companions to the fray. Eldren appeared and leapt at the giant zombie's flank, his enchanted sword cleaving deep into the substance of it, sending clods of earth flying from its side. But the unholy force animating the creature was potent, and it quickly turned to face him, sweeping out its massive arms in a powerful but inaccurate attempt to crush him. The ranger dodged to the side, but a jagged length of branch jutting from the limb caught him in the shoulder, tearing his cloak and knocking him off-balance.

Jannae had initially helped Dannel, by firing a blast of *searing light* into one of the mohrgs threatening him. But seeing Eldren in trouble, she quickly moved to his aid, shifting into position to flank the giant zombie and distract it from the injured ranger. It was an effective tactic against most foes, but the zombie had few weaknesses that could be exploited through tactical advantage.

Dannel, giving ground, still augmented by his earlier spell, was easily able to outdistance the mohrgs while continuing to snap off the occasional shot from his bow. But as Jannae blasted the one with her divine spell it and another broke off and rushed at her, while the last continued to press him, its spiked tendrils proving the air ahead of it, eager for the elf's flesh.

"Damn," Dannel said, immediately stopping and planting his feet as he spun around. The mohrg, seeing its prey turn to face it, eagerly rushed forward. It was only about fifteen feet away from the elf at that point, but with each step it took forward another white-fletched arrow slammed into it, unleashing a combined blast of divine and electrical energy into the undead abomination. One skeletal arm went flying, sundered by a precise hit, followed by an explosion of shards as half of its skull was shattered by a second. With its next step a rib was destroyed, causing half of the mass trapped inside its chest to crumble into dust, evaporated by the holy power of the missile. And finally, even as it lifted its remaining arm to strike, closing the last gap separating them, the elf drove a final arrow into its torso with enough power to penetrate the foul muck clinging to its ribs and slam into its spine with enough force to shatter the vertebrae. The mohrg expired with a soft sigh, collapsing onto the loam.

The screams of the elves above told him that the second platform was falling, but Dannel could spare them no attention; his two companions were in dire straits. Eldren had unleashed a series of precise but largely ineffective attacks against the zombie. In exchange he'd lingered an instant too long in the same place, and suffered a glancing blow to the head that almost took him to the ground, staggering him for a moment. Jannae, quickly realizing that her sneak attacks were of little effect against the huge undead creature, reached out and laid a bare hand against its flank, unleashing a *cure serious wounds* into it. The soft blue glow of healing burned it like fire, and large chunks of packed earth and flesh turned to ash and dropped away from its hulking frame. The hulk turned ponderously toward this new threat, giving Eldren the seconds he needed to recover.

But the priestess paid for her action a moment later, as the two mohrgs swarmed on her from behind. She sensed the first and dodged its penetrating tentacle, but the second intercepted her and delivered a punishing blow across the jaw that drove her back almost into the zombie's hulking mass. And then, before she could recover, the monster's tongue shot out and stabbed momentarily into her forearm. The contact between them lasted only an instant, but Jannae stiffened, collapsing paralyzed onto the carpet of dead leaves at the feet of her enemies.

Chapter 475

"Jannae!" Eldren exclaimed, darting into jeopardy by leaping behind the zombie, coming up into a roll directly in front of the priestess before the mohrgs could take advantage of her helplessness. The zombie, already turning, slammed him in the chest, but the ranger almost immediately leapt back to a defensive position over the incapacitated woman, deflecting the probing tentacle from the second mohrg with his sword as he did so.

Dannel came to their aid with another flurry of arrows that knifed with keen precision into the mohrgs. He focused on the one that looked the most damaged, and scored three hits in rapid succession that left it shattered into inanimate fragments. Without pausing he started in on the last one, hitting it solidly in the back of its skull, sending it forward into Eldren's sword. There was a moment of tension as it nipped the ranger's cheek with its tentacle, but the ranger fought off the paralysis and swept his enchanted blade around in a decisive arc that separated its head from its torso.

But even as the mohrg clattered to the ground, the zombie struck Eldren yet again, clouting him solidly across the shoulders and driving him to the ground. Lying across Jannae's motionless form, he struggled to rise, his breath driven from his lungs by the force of the blow.

The zombie's massive arms came up to finish him, but Dannel again unleashed a punishing barrage, fitting arrows to his string as fast as his magical quiver could produce them. His first shot went *through* the zombie, taking a hunk of its form with it, but his later shots vanished into its massive form, sending tendrils of electrical energy out from the points of impact. For a moment it looked like it would shrug off the incredible punishment it was taking, but then a last arrow slammed directly into the center of its head, and it exploded in a shower of clods, corrupted flesh, and shards of bone. The thing just stood there for a few seconds, then it toppled backward into an inert heap.

Eldren struggled to his feet, drawing a healing potion from one of the pouches at his belt and downing its contents. Dannel, meanwhile, looked up at the evolving scene of chaos above them.

In just the few moments since they had entered the clearing, the second platform had been overrun. A few of the defending elves could still be seen at the edges of the platform, held in the grip of mohrgs that tore them to pieces. Even as he fought the rising gorge in his throat, Dannel saw that the last platform was being swarmed by nearly a dozen other mohrgs, most of which had reached the platform and were already fighting with the defenders to gain access to the top.

Once even one or two made it up there, Dannel knew, it was all over.

“Dannel!” Eldren warned. The arcane archer saw that one of the mohrgs that had been knocked from the middle tree in the last rush had noticed them, and was heading toward them.

“Defend Jannae!” Dannel returned, already lost in the growing intensity of the magical song that tied him together with the bow in his hand and his distant targets. Time seemed to slow around him as he called upon his quiver, which disgorged the first of a sequence of white-fletched holy arrows at his command.

Eldren watched in amazement as Dannel erupted into a blur of motion, fitting and firing arrows with a speed even he, who’d considered himself a peerless archer, had never before seen. The ranger was dimly aware of the song of power that his cousin wove around himself as he unleashed a *hail of arrows* at the mohrgs assaulting the platform. Even as the first arrow slammed into a mohrg’s skull from behind, a stream of others were on their way. When the barrage finally stopped, and the elf archer sagged wearily back, his limbs moving again in real time, ten arrows had been fired, and ten direct hits had been scored. That first mohrg had been destroyed, three others had been knocked free of their perches by the impacts, and six others had suffered damage, the force of the arrows augmented by the electrical damage imparted by Dannel’s bow and the holy energies stored in the blessed arrows. The few surviving elven defenders were quick to take advantage, using their own bows and spears to target the injured undead, knocking another two from their grips on the bottom of the platform.

“Dannel!” Eldren warned again, and he spun to find the damaged mohrg rushing at him. Calmly he stood his ground, reloading and firing, sending two arrows into the mohrg, which collapsed at his feet. By the time its skull crashed against his boot he was already turning and firing again, sending more shafts up to the aid of the elves fighting above. He destroyed another mohrg, but then he had to return his attention to the ground, for several of the mohrgs he’d dislodged before were getting up, and quickly heading his way.

“Behind me, I’ll give you cover to shoot!” Eldren urged, downing another healing potion as he moved into a defensive position in front of Jannae’s limp form. Dannel complied, moving swiftly into position as the mohrgs formed up into a loose cluster, reinforced by several of their fellows who were descending from the second seized platform. Dannel shot one of those for good measure, knocking it free to land on another just below, sending

both to the ground in a clatter of bones. But neither was out of the fight, and they quickly joined the rush at the defiant elves.

With a yell Eldren met their charge, deflecting the lunging slam of the first, and narrowly avoiding the stabbing tongue of the second that tried to pierce his neck from behind. He smashed through the rib cage of the first with a powerful swing of his sword, causing it to falter, but then found himself overrun as a third, and then a fourth, came at him, one seizing him from behind while the other dealt a punishing blow to his body with its skeletal fists. The long vine-tendrils plunged at him, and while he fought off the cold paralysis that would have left him helpless, he could not fight free from the strong grasp of the monsters grappling him.

But the ranger's fierce defense had bought precious moments, and Dannel had not wasted them. The mohrg Eldren had damaged fell as a long arrow punched through its damaged rib cage and sundered its spine, and a moment later the one that had punched him fell back, spun around by the force of one, two, and finally a third arrow that exploded its shoulder and sent an entire arm flying free. Eldren finally was able to plant his feet and spin, knocking one of the mohrgs holding him into the second, disrupting their hold enough for him to pull his sword arm free. Even as they lunged at him again he brought the elvish blade down into the first, smashing its skull, knocking it limply back. The second got a solid hit in that in turn left the ranger's face bloody, his nose broken, but he met it and cut through the long tongue as it stabbed in to strike, and a moment later two arrows from Dannel finished it.

The ranger spun, looking for another enemy, but the battle was coming to an end. Dannel continued to fire, plucking mohrgs out of the trees above with almost casual grace. Thus far, of all the arrows he'd fired, almost every one had scored a telling hit. The elven warders had secured their platform from immediate threat, and now they had joined in the barrage, targeting mohrgs that still lurked on the middle platform or who were descending the tree in order to engage Dannel and Eldren. None of the undead monsters tried to retreat, but within another minute the grove fell quiet once more as the last undead creature was reduced to inanimate bone fragments and piles of noxious, rotting vegetable matter.

Eldren was helping Jannae up; the priestess groaned as she shook off the last lingering effects of the paralysis. The ranger indicated the rope ladder being lowered by the elves from the last high platform, but Dannel shook his head.

"We have to abandon this outpost, and fall back to Aldair Kelalei."

"It is not your right to..."

"Eldren. Listen to me. This was not a casual raid, nor were those monsters mere undead. This is an *invasion*, and all of the residents of the Wealdath are at risk. We must warn the elder lords, if they do not already know, and find out who or what is behind this... before it is too late."

Chapter 476

A soft breeze redolent with the smells of lavender and autumn rustled through the trees, swirling through the open spaces of the ancient grove. The gentle wind tugged at the threadbare, ragged cloak worn by the solitary individual seated upon the throne of cragged gray wood shaped from the remains of a long-dead stump. In the late afternoon light, here in the depths of the old wood, the figure's face was lost within the shadows of its cowl, for all that the garment was little more than wisps of fabric as ephemeral as moonlight, seemingly kept together by a memory of what it had once been.

The seated figure did not smell the fragrant hints upon the breeze. It did not remember the rich odors of the forest in autumn, or what it felt like to have the afternoon sun filter down through the canopy to strike the face in a forest clearing. It did not remember the joys of running through the wood, or chasing butterflies, or enjoying the soft patter of rain upon the leaves.

It did not even remember its name.

All that it remembered was its mandate, to preserve the forest, to maintain the purity of the Wealdath. Even that name was lost to it, and it remembered only the Wood, always the eternity of the ancient sentinels, the holiness of this place above all others on the surface of the world.

And now, the Wood was in danger.

The figure rose, silent. It turned and walked solemnly toward the nearby ruin. The stone arch rose above it in greeting, although the interior was now little more than cracked foundation beneath its feet, with walls that barely rose to its chest in most places. Age—time—had done to this place what it could not do to the walker, for it too was eternal, ever bound to this holy site and to the Wood.

A pulse of power greeted it as it entered the sacred core. It had not left the ruin, but the Wood was no longer visible. Here, it was both within the Wood and outside of it, the reality here torn by the vast power of the mythal.

The baelnorn regarded the ancient artifact. It knew the currents of power radiating from the crystal better than it knew its own self, recognized them like old friends. To its eyes the black smear of taint upon the crystal, consuming the entire upper half of its surface, seemed a natural part of it, unchanged since forever. That taint spread outward from it in a web that embraced the ancient lich, welcomed it as the undead thing came forward into the uneven glow of the artifact.

As soon as it could sense fully the flows of energy it knew that it had failed in its mandate. The threat to the Wood had grown, its efforts rebuffed. The impurity would swell and undo all that it had fought to preserve...

No. The baelnorn grew calm once more. It reached out toward the mythal; not actually to touch it, but some habits died hard. The gesture drew tendrils of power from within the web, tendrils that coalesced until they had become visible as a black distortion that hung in

the air a few feet in front of the undead guardian. The mythal pulsed beyond that growing disruption, drawing more power into itself along the threads that linked it to the worlds beyond this place.

Minutes passed, hours, but what was time to a creature that existed forever? Finally the blackness faded, or seemed to; as the matrix dissolved the faint light from the mythal revealed three larger regions of un-light hovering in the corners of the chamber.

“Go forth, purify,” the baelnorn commanded, its voice sounding like the faint hiss of a candle’s flame consuming the last bit of wick. The dread wraiths, however, heard the command clearly, and bound to obey, merely vanished, passing through the barrier that surrounded the mythal and separated from the world beyond.

The baelnorn remained for a time longer, drawing more power from the ancient but flawed artifact. It would need more power, would need to draw upon all it could to complete its mandate, to save the Wood from the threat posed by the life forms that infested it. Even if it meant its own destruction, it would complete that task, would be the scourge that would finish the final cleansing of the Wealdath.

Chapter 477

The face of every elf in the Arbor Hall in the moon elf community of Aldair Kelalei was creased with worry and exhaustion. Many outsiders commented that elves often did not display their emotions outwardly, but that could not be said of those gathered here, clearly concerned about the dire threat to their people.

Dannel sat quietly in a low chair fashioned out of a single curving slab of wood, and listened to the discussion going back and forth between the elders of the community. Eldren had been a prominent speaker, and Jannae had added some words as well, but few had even acknowledged him. He recognized many of the leaders of the community, who appeared unchanged to his eyes; he’d been gone almost sixty years, a great deal of time in the world outside, but to elves decades were just small increments in the long span of flowing time.

“The *mythal* in Bryth’an Torgul has begun to surge unexpectedly,” a gray-haired elf who looked ancient even by his race’s standards was saying. He was Phelan Tarin, and while his body looked frail, all but absorbed by his copious blue robe, he was one of the most powerful archmages ever to walk the forest paths of the Wealdath. Oddly, Dannel found himself reminded of Cal when he saw him, although outwardly there was little in the way of similarities between them.

“What of the guardian?” a lean elf clad in mithral chainmail queried.

An elf clad in green robes decorated with an intricate leaf pattern came forward. “The Green has been disrupted throughout the western Wealdath,” said Harin Alindrela, High Priest of Rillifane Rallathil. “I have attempted to contact the ancient one, as has master Tarin, but the disruptions caused by the wakening of the mythal block all magic in the region of Bryth’an Torgul.”

“So the baelnorn is fallen, or is himself corrupted by this surge,” Eldren said. “Do we have any idea of what caused this calamity?”

Alindrela and Tarin shared a look, but neither had an answer for him. “It could have been many things,” Alindrela said. “The *mythals* are of an elder age, and not fully understood even by the wisest of us today. Their power is... unpredictable.”

“Think of Myth Drannor,” Tarin said abruptly. That place was well known to elves across Faerûn, and from the looks that passed around the gathering the reminder was not a pleasant one.

“There has been no word from our scouts?” another elf asked.

“They just... vanished, into the wood,” Eldren said. “We have heard nothing at all from the region beyond Korul Ulgor, since the assault.”

“Have there been other sightings in this part of the wood?”

A silver-haired elven woman named Thalia Oliades, clad in the simple brown tunic of a senior druid, shook her head. “The druids have set up a line of watchers—plants, animals, and elves—along the frontier of Kelalei to the west. Dark things move in the wood beyond that line, but nothing yet has penetrated deeper, as far as we can tell. But beyond, the Green has become silent to us.”

A general disquiet had developed, as the limits of their knowledge became more stark. Finally, there was a long silence, and it was Dannel who finally broke it, coming to his feet and drawing all attention to him.

“Well then, we’ll have to send a force to Bryth’an Torgul, to deal with the threat at its source.”

“You have chosen to be an outsider, Dannel,” Eldren began, frowning, “It is not your role to...”

“Oh, do shut up,” Jannae said, cutting him off. “I love you, dearest, but you’re wrong; Dannel is one of us, and you saw him at Korul Ulgor. And you saw what we’re up against; we need all the aid we can get.”

Eldren clearly bristled at the admonition, but he held his tongue.

“We have come to the same conclusion as you, Dannel Ardan,” Alindrela said. “But the danger will be great. The power of the mythal is beyond mortal comprehension, and its disruptive power is such that our arts may be of little avail to the elves we send.”

“Steel is still steel,” Eldren said, simply. “And an arrow will still fly straight regardless of whether it bears enchantments.”

“A small, fast, stealthy force might be best,” Dannel said. “But you should still have a contingency, in case we fail.”

“Word has already been sent to the other communities via magic and by messenger. If necessary, we will fall back to the eastern wood, and prepare our stand there, at a place and time of our choosing. Farther from the mythal, the power of our foes will be weaker.”

“Evacuate Aldair Kelalei?” Eldren said. “I did not know of this.”

“With the grace of the Seldarine, it will not be necessary,” Alindrela said. “But we must be prepared.”

“Then we should begin at once,” Eldren said. “I already know who I want on my squad; most of them should be here in Aldair Kelalei.”

“Time is short, but we need rest, and time to make preparations,” Dannel said. “And our enemies may be stronger in the darkness.”

“It’ll be dawn in about five hours,” Jannae said. “We should be well on our way by then.”

“We will grant you what magical aid we can, both divine and arcane,” Alindrela said.

“And we can see that you are transported swiftly to the edges of the mythal’s power,” Oliades, the druidess, added. “But from there, you will be on your own.”

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From there, you will be on your own.

The words of the druidess rang true in Dannel’s ears six hours later, the morning fog still stick throughout the forest as the dawn light still gathered to filter down through the dense canopy high above. Even to Dannel’s keen eyes the elves running beside him were like wraiths, shadows moving through the surreal landscape of early morning in the wood. It was a disturbing impression and one that he quickly tried to banish from his mind.

Eldren and Jannae was some distance ahead, running swiftly in the van, his trained senses alert to the slightest sign of trouble. Dannel knew little of the eight elves that were his companions on this mission, save that each was an expert woodsman, hand-picked by Eldren. Most were rangers, and a few had animal companions with them, including a huge gray wolf and an eagle that easily paced them on their journey through the forest. All bore bows and various melee weapons, but one had also worn a symbol of Corellon, indicating a second cleric in the group, and another had carried familiar small component pouches on his belt alongside his longsword and quiver that suggested a fighter-mage.

With the entire company empowered by long-lasting magic, either through their own arts or by draughts provided by the elven druids, the elves maintained a pace that rapidly consumed the miles. Dannel briefly thought of Dana, and her ability to *wind walk*, which would have made their journey a matter of hours rather than days. But even though the

High Mage, Tarin, could have transported them to the vicinity of Bryth'an Torgul instantly using his magic, Dannel knew enough about the lore of the *mythals* to know that such an attempt would have been incredibly risky. Especially if, as they had theorized, the unpredictable surges of power coming from the ancient artifact was directly responsible for the rampaging undead in the forest.

And so they ran, pausing only briefly to take rests and eat food concentrates drawn from Eldren's small *bag of holding*. There was little small talk; all of them had been briefed on what had happened at Korul Ulgor, and knew that they were heading into great danger.

Eldren had criticized Dannel's woodlore, but even the arcane archer could sense the deepening sense of wrong that pervaded the forest as they pressed on, morning turning into afternoon. The fog finally dissolved around noon, but the wood remained deep within a pervading murk, as though the light from above simply could not muster the effort of reaching the forest floor. The Wealdath was eerily silent—not even the faint whisper of the breeze, or the subtle sounds of the forest's teeming wildlife, accompanied their progress. In that ominous quiet even the faint whisper of the elves' cloaks against the underbrush as they passed and the soft exertion of their breathing as they ran sounded excessively loud to Dannel's ears, an announcement of their coming to whatever dark entity awaited them.

He quickly broke in his new boots, although in all fairness the supple elven craftsmanship was far kinder to his feet than the best human-made footwear that he could have purchased in Cauldron or even one of the larger cities of Tethyr or Calimshan. The *elven boots* made not even a whisper even at their hurried pace. He'd also acquired new arrows—although far fewer of the blessed *holy arrows* than he would have liked—and several potent healing draughts, gifts of the elves of Aldair Kelalei. The other elves were likewise very well equipped. Jannae carried several scrolls bearing potent clerical spells, and Eldren wore a soft green mantle over his torso that resembled a patch of lush green moss but which in actuality was a powerful garment that offered protection against some of the more terrible powers commonly possessed by the greater of the undead.

By mid afternoon their pace slackened some, as their store of *longstrider* potions and spells became depleted, and exhaustion at their rapid pace began to catch up to them. Eldren seemed impatient, but Jannae spoke to him and he eased his pace to the need of those accompanying him. Dannel was grateful for the reprieve, although he too felt the sense of urgency that drove them all on, to dig deeper into their reserves of energy.

The day's light had already faded well into the gloom of twilight when Eldren called a halt. He'd directed them to a grove of especially massive trees, a place he apparently knew well, for he led them quickly to a particular tree with a trunk over fifteen feet across, and which bore faint marks on its bark that Dannel recognized as subtle aids for climbing.

"All right, we'll take our rest up above," Eldren said. "Jovran, go up first, set a line. Dalan, Yaela, clear the perimeter and then follow us up."

Jovran, a lean, angular elf, shot up the tree with a speed and agility that reminded Dannel of Mole. Dalan and Yaela, siblings who looked almost alike to be twins, vanished into the forest on their scouting assignment, taking their animal companions with them. Meanwhile, the others made their way up the tree, rarely needing the rope that Jovran tossed down to

aid their descent. Dannel carefully stashed his bow into his *efficient quiver* and climbed, not ashamed to use the rope to help with the ascent.

The upper branches of the tree contained enough flat space to accommodate all of them, and it clearly had been used for such a purpose in the past. The elves set safety lines and watched, with Jovran climbing higher into the canopy to set the first watch. Dalan and Yaela returned a few minutes later to report that the immediate area was clear. Dalan's wolf remained below, but Yaela's eagle floated in to perch atop the ranger's shoulder, regarding all of them with what Dannel took to be a suspicious look in its eyes.

The fighter-mage, a raven-haired elf named Oloran, placed an *alarm* spell in the middle of their perch. The elves remained close, wrapping themselves in their cloaks, dropping into trance to refresh their minds while their bodies rested, while those on watch hovered at the edges of the branches like shadowy gargoyles perched on the battlements of an ancient castle.

Dannel had claimed a spot close to the central bole of the tree, a few yards away from the others. He sensed a presence and looked up to see Jannae coming over to him. Eldren had disappeared; he hadn't seen the ranger since they had started up the tree.

"He's verifying that the position is secure," she whispered, sensing his question. She indicated the spot beside him, and when he nodded sat down, her back against the trunk of the tree.

"He doesn't mean to be so abrasive toward you," she said, finally. "It's just that he feels very committed to the traditional ways, to family, to the obligations that he himself has made such a central part of his life."

"You do not need to defend him," Dannel replied. "I do not ask Eldren to be anything but what he is, any more than I can be anything but who and what I am."

"We are not ignorant of what the Harpers accomplish, out in the wider world. And I know that he is impressed with your skill, even if he will not come out and admit such openly. From what I understand, you were much the same way, in your younger years."

"You've been talking to our grandmother," he said, but his tone was light.

"Give him a chance, and he will accept you."

"I'm afraid that right now we have more important things to worry about than old family squabbles."

She shrugged. "There is always darkness and danger in the world; at times like this family is even more important."

"I thank you for your wisdom, priestess. I will think on your words, I promise."

"Good. It's good to have you with us, Dannel."

He nodded and the elf woman rose, silently walking over to another empty space on the branch before pulling her cloak around her and lying down, becoming just another dark shape in the night.

Dannel let out a sigh, thinking of life and fate, before calming his thoughts, softening his breathing to a slow rhythmic flow as he fell into trance.

It seemed like just an instant later when he was startled back into reality by a chaotic explosion of sound. A tinkling of chimes announced the triggering of Oloran's *alarm* spell at the same time that Yaela's eagle screeched loudly and leapt into the night. Even as Dannel registered those sounds, his hand already darting for his bow, they were followed by a scream, a terrible cry of agony from above. A dark form hurtled toward him, and he drew back just in time to avoid being struck by the falling body of Jovran, his face frozen in a look of terror, his flesh a sickly pale white.

Looking up, he saw the huge dark forms that had killed the elf descending toward him.

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Reflex took over as the elf registered the threat. The song filled him as he drew, sighted, and fired. The shot was true, bisecting the center of the first dark mass, but Dannel realized his mistake an instant before the arrow passed harmlessly through the wraith.

"Ghost touch," he whispered, his magical quiver producing one of the ten translucent gray missiles from its extradimensional space at his command.

Both wraiths—gods, they were *huge*—descended toward him, blocking out the faint light of the moon and stars that filtered down through the treetops. But Dannel was a seasoned veteran, and while he could have leapt from the tree, relying upon his *feather fall* spell to drop him safely, he was not one to abandon companions. He could hear the other elves in the party stirring to wakefulness, but knew that it would still take precious seconds for even the experienced rangers to respond to the sudden attack.

And so the arcane archer's bow sang, the enchanted missiles stabbing true through the body of the first wraith. It was fast, incredibly fast, but Dannel was one of the foremost archers of the Realms, and by the time it had descended the twenty feet to his perch he'd already scored two solid hits. The wraith made no sound, but in that dark, unknowable part of the mind where nightmares were born he could hear its baleful scream. Great rents were visible in its body as it reached him, and it extended a long incorporeal claw that pierced his chest and tore at his very soul. Dannel felt an icy chill grip him at that touch, and staggered as the dread wraith *ripped* a portion of his life energy from him.

The second wraith moved around the first to press the attack, and Dannel would have been hard-pressed to withstand another such assault. But before it could reach him the night was transformed by the golden blast of a ray of *searing light* that Jannae fired into the undead monstrosity's black form. The wraith writhed as the holy power of the cleric's attack tore at its substance, and as the light faltered it immediately turned and dove at the priestess. Before it could reach the branch where she stood, however, another black

shadow detached itself from the bole of the tree and leapt to intercede itself between the undead and its target. The undead appeared as though it would pass right through the defender to get at its chosen victim, but a greenish glow flared around the body of the newcomer as the wraith approached. The wraith recoiled from that light, which revealed the features of Eldren, who lashed out at it with his magical sword. The blade, empowered by elves as a potent talisman, cut through the substance of the wraith. It was damaged, but not seriously so, and it quickly assaulted the elf blocking it, piercing Eldren's defenses easily with its incorporeal claws. The *mossmantle* that the elf wore protected him from the life-draining effects of the wraith's touch, but even that potent device could not inure him fully against that dread contact.

Arrows knifed through the wraith from behind as the rest of the elves joined the battle from the adjacent branch. The rangers had been equipped with a supply of magically-enhanced arrows, but most of them still passed harmlessly through the creature. Fortunately the elves had aimed carefully, so none of the errant shafts threatened Jannae or Eldren. More effective was Oloran, who blasted the wraith with a trio of *magic missiles* that tore glowing holes in the fabric of the undead creature.

Unfortunately, that success also drew attention to him, and he screamed when a few moments after his spell, another black wraith emerged *through* the branch at his feet, having come up at the embattled elves undetected from below. The wizard drew out a wand and discharged a current of electrical energy through the wraith at point-blank range, and the nearest of his companions tried to distract it with attacks of their own, but they could not save Oloran as the wraith hungrily drew the rest of the elf's life-force out from him. Oloran screamed and stiffened, collapsing backwards and slipping off of the branch to plummet into the darkness below.

The wraith turned hungrily at once toward the next nearest victim.

Dannel stood his ground against the wraith, firing his deadly arrows at it point-blank. The wraith tried to strike him again, to draw off more of his life energy, but Dannel sliced an arrow through the vaporous claw, dissolving it into wisps of gray that quickly vanished. The wraith tried to simply envelop the archer, but as it lunged forward Dannel drew a final missile and buried it into the core of wraith. The unholy apparition seemed to shudder, once, and then with a soft sigh it evaporated into nothingness, leaving not even the arrows Dannel had buried in it behind to mark its existence.

Dannel did not hesitate to enjoy his victory, turning to aid the others. But even as he shifted he caught a hint of movement, and looked down in time to see a black form emerging from the ghastly corpse of Jovran, the elf scout.

"Ware the fallen... more are spawning!" he warned the others, dodging the initial attack from the thing that had minutes ago been a friend and ally.

Eldren danced along the very edge of the branch, his nimble feet carrying him within inches of plummeting off to the forest floor fall below. His efforts paid off, however, as he kept the wraith from getting around him to Jannae. The wraith had drifted back slightly, making it difficult for the ranger to attack it directly. But Jannae could still attack. Protected by Eldren, the priestess unrolled a scroll, and reading from the soft glow of her holy symbol

she summoned a *spiritual weapon* that she sent to assault the undead creature. The glowing quarterstaff slammed true into the body of the wraith, its soft glow piercing its black substance like a shaft of moonlight through shadow. The wraith reacted immediately, abandoning caution to lunge at the cleric. It passed over Eldren as it did so, and the ranger immediately struck, his blade bisecting it lengthwise, tearing a great rift in its form that continued until the entirety of the wraith had been split in twain, destroying the creature.

Jannae immediately directed her spell-staff at the wraith that had destroyed Oloran.

The aid came none too soon for the embattled rangers. Despite what had happened to their peer they fought on bravely, for all that the majority of their attacks passed through the wraith without harming it. One of them boldly stepped forward and stabbed the wraith with a wand of *cure light wounds*, searing it with holy healing energy. The elf paid for his courage as the wraith enveloped him, but even within its black form the others could see the blue glow as the ranger continued damaging the wraith, up until the moment when the undead creature withdrew, leaving behind the withered husk of the man lying motionless upon the bark surface of the branch.

But the elf's sacrifice had won precious moments, and the elves rallied to focus all of their attacks upon the last undead creature. Dannel, having dispatched the weaker wraith spawn that had emerged from Jovran's corpse, now directed the last of his *ghost touch* arrows at the dread wraith, each hit piercing its incorporeal hide. Likewise Jannae's *spiritual weapon* damaged it. Eldren unlimbered his own bow and sent his own stream of potent magical missiles into the creature, and combined with the barrage from the other elves, this finally resulted in the destruction of the creature.

"Ware the spawn!" Dannel cautioned. The elves drew back from the body of the elf ranger, and thus warned were able to destroy the black form that emerged from the body a few seconds later before it could attack or escape.

However, they never did find the one that would have come from Oloran, although they did later find the body of the slain elf later, his skull crushed from landing on a jagged-edged rock below.

"His *alarm* spell gave us warning," Dannel said of the magic-user, as the elves gathered together. Jannae called upon her gifts to lay a *lesser restoration* upon him that eased some of the loss he'd suffered from the wraith's touch. He still felt acutely the echo of that chill contact, but he smiled and nodded gratefully for her aid.

"Likewise Jovran and Caylen gave their lives for our cause," Eldren added. "We should not remain here."

"Without rest, we will not be as effective," Dannel pointed out. "And the night is not our ally."

"We will go cautiously, but go we must," Eldren insisted, an edge to his voice as he turned to face his cousin. "Our enemy will only grow stronger, the longer we delay."

Dannel nodded, deferring to the ranger.

“What of Jovran, and Caylen?” Jannae asked. “We should not leave their bodies to be claimed by the undead.”

“Bless them then, but make haste. We do not have time for a pyre; we will treat them properly upon our return, if that is our fate.”

The elves made their preparations quickly and in silence, and descended the tree to the forest floor below. Down below the depth of the night was almost total, proof even to sharp elven eyes. But the members of Eldren’s company were veteran trackers, and even in the near absence of light they made their way forward. The ranger remained in the lead, accompanied by Dalan, whose wolf companion’s senses helped them maintain their course. But progress was slow, and Dannel found himself stumbling several times, once even falling flat on his face when an unseen root caught his ankle firmly in its grasp. Finally one of the trackers took his arm, and the arcane archer allowed him—her? He could not even see enough to discern the ranger’s gender—to guide him.

To Dannel’s senses they traveled at a crawl, but at least there were no more undead attacks; in the darkness they would have been easy prey for another ambush. Finally, however, he realized that the wood around him was becoming more distinct, the trees resolving into more than just vertical shadows slightly darker than the surrounding night. Dawn was approaching. He felt a weariness that was deep in the bone, as though it had been a lifelong companion. But he also knew that there would be battle this day, and blood, and likely death. When it came, he knew he would be ready... but that anticipation did nothing to ease the exhaustion that tugged at his limbs as he pressed deeper into the western reaches of the Wealdath.

Eldren seemed indomitable, driving them all further on, and as the light gradually brightened Dannel could see that the rangers openly showed the same strain that he himself felt. Somehow, oddly, that comforted him. The elf at his arm withdrew, now that it was light enough for him to clearly mark the trail. It was a woman, he saw—Ellene, he thought her name was. Despite having spent almost a day in the company of the elven scouts, he’d exchanged barely a dozen words with any of them. The hunters communicated as often with hand signals as with spoken words, and the silence seemed appropriate to this cursed forest, where even the whisper of a boot against bare rock seemed like an unwelcome intrusion.

Finally, Eldren called a pause. Dannel resisted the urge to topple onto his backside; his feet, despite the relative comfort of his new boots, each felt like a single massive callus. The elves gathered close around him, so that his words would not travel beyond their company.

“We draw near to Bryth’an Torgul,” he told them, his voice a soft whisper. “The animals grow agitated, and will not go further.” The elves all nodded, as if this was patently obvious; Dannel realized that he had not noticed. He was a ranger, like them, but in this alien place he felt as though his skills had departed him. Had he spent too long living in cities, among humans? He felt the reassuring weight of his bow at his side. That, at least, was something he could rely upon.

“Food and drink. Ten minutes,” he told them. He drew out supplies from his *bag of holding*, and distributed them to the elves. Dalan and Yaela went off a short distance and appeared to communicate with their animal companions, likely bidding them wait here for their return. Dannel took his light trailcake and waterskin and leaned up against a nearby tree. He did not trust himself to sit down, doubting whether he would be able to get up again. He was not in poor shape, and his magical amulet augmented his stamina, but the effects of the wraith’s touch lingered, despite Jannae’s assistance earlier.

The appointed rest period passed too swiftly, and Eldren called them together again. The elves rose wearily, checking their weapons, but their hesitation ended when Ellene hissed a warning, and they spun to see the baelhorn standing twenty feet behind Eldren, regarding them calmly.

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Dannel had never seen an elven lich, but there could be no doubting the nature of the unannounced intruder. It was tall, still bearing the lines of the noble elf it had once been, its features desiccated, its gray skin stretched tight over the angular shape of its skull. It was clad in a robe that had seen better days, now a ruined fragment that hung about the lich’s form like wisps of cloud.

He had an arrow ready in a heartbeat, but held his fire, alert to any sign of threat or spellcasting. One of the others was less hesitant, and loosed a shaft that passed *through* the lich before vanishing into the surrounding undergrowth.

“It’s an image,” Dannel said, his eyes shooting around, observant for other threats.

“It can still cast spells through the projection,” Jannae warned. She had readied her own magic against it, but Dannel knew that it was highly unlikely that an elder creature like the lich would be discomfited by the limited powers of the priestess.

“What is your business, guardian?” Eldren said, boldly stepping forward to address the creature. “Is the evil in the wood your doing?”

The lich hissed, like air coming from a leaking bladder, and it took them a moment to realize that it was speaking. “Evil...” it said. “Yes... evil... evil must be purged, the Wood must be cleansed...”

It lifted up its hands high above its head, looking up as if to invoke the very skies above to smite its enemies. “Ware!” Eldren said, drawing back in alarm. But the lich merely shuddered, and with a faint shimmer it disappeared.

“What was that all about?” Yaela queried.

“It sounded... mad,” Dannel said.

Yaela’s eagle, perched on a nearby branch, cried out and leapt into the air. Dalan’s wolf echoed the bird’s alarm, backing away with its teeth bared in a hostile growl.

“What is it...” Ellene asked, her bow half-drawn.

“Something stirs...” Jannae said.

They could all feel it, a sense of building unrest in the wood. The feeling became reality a moment later as a massive rumbling shook the forest floor around them, almost strong enough to shake them from their feet. But even over that cacophony they could detect the sounds of something massive coming at them from the forest, from the direction of their ultimate destination.

“Ready yourselves!” Eldren shouted, casting a ward that immediately toughed his flesh to the color and consistency of rough bark. The other elves made whatever similar provisions they could, consuming potions or taking up positions of relative cover. They did not have long to wait. Whatever was coming was moving slowly, but from the sounds they heard it was coming straight *through* the undergrowth, the tearing of plants and crushing of brush sounding unduly harsh through the otherwise silent wood.

Dannel had taken up position atop a nearby fallen log, and from that vantage watched for a look at the approaching enemies. He caught sight of them quickly, four bulky masses approaching through the forest, but the obstructing trees and dense brush obscuring them made a shot difficult even for him. He could fire a *seeker arrow* that would penetrate that maze, but with only one such missile per day, he elected to hold his fire for the moment. A few of the other elves attempted shots anyway, but none of their arrows made it near the approaching forms as far as Dannel could tell.

“Four of them!” Eldren warned, having spotted the same thing as Dannel.

The four creatures finally emerged from the brush into the open, giving the elves a clear look at their foes. The intruders resembled massive heaps of rotting vegetation, animated into the crude resemblance of a humanoid form. Each was almost ten feet tall, and from the way the ground shook at their movements, they had to weigh thousands of pounds. A wave of rot swept through the clearing ahead of them. They clearly knew exactly where their foes were located, for they came immediately forward toward the elves without hesitation, massive “arms” unfolding from their bodies as they begun their attack.

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Dannel had drawn and sighted down the length of a long arrow as soon as the enemies emerged into the open, but before he could loose Eldren’s voice forestalled him.

“Hold, Dannel!” the ranger warned. “Shamblers... your shock-bow will only empower them!”

Dannel nodded, remembering that bit of lore. He cursed his decision to leave Benzan’s longbow, itself a potent magical weapon, back at the Traveler’s Rest in Ember Vale, in Cal’s care. He had no other backup, and without it the firepower he could bring to bear was greatly impaired.

“Dannel!” Jannae cried, drawing his attention around as she tossed her own longbow up at him. The priestess’s bow had a weaker pull, and lacked the powerful enchantments laid upon Dannel’s weapon, but he was an arcane archer, and the song filled him as he drew, aimed, and released his first shaft.

The first shambler staggered as a half-dozen arrows slammed into it. The thing apparently could be harmed by mundane weapons, for it seemed to be hindered by the impacts, although the missiles jutting from it seemed miniscule in contrast to its incredible bulk. The other shamblers moved around it, but all four were engulfed in a spread of entangling growth as the forest floor suddenly became animated, clinging to them as they moved forward. The huge shamblers were far too strong to be long hindered by the *entangle* spell, but it did slow them, leaving them open targets for the ongoing barrage of arrows coming from the elves. Another ranger laid a second *entangle* at close range, extending the area of effect to almost directly in front of the line of defenders.

The first shambler went down as the storm of arrows continued, the huge creature sagging with over two dozen missiles stuck into its body. The others pressed on through the *entangled* areas, however, not even bothering to try to avoid the radius of the spell effects, simply tearing forward through the clinging growth. By unspoken agreement the elves shifted their fire and focused on a second foe, sending a hail of arrows into it as well. Yaela’s eagle flew low over them, trying to distract them, but the monsters paid the small avian no heed. Dalan kept his wolf close at hand, lest the animal move forward into the *entangle* spells.

Damn, these things are tough! Dannel thought, as he fired yet another arrow into the second monster. With time and distance they could possibly slay all of them without loss, as they were slower than the elves; a few of the scouts had already shimmied up into the lower branches of nearby trees, to give them a protected vantage from which to fire. All of the elves moved faster than the shamblers, and with his own *expeditious retreat* spell he could easily lure them off while maintaining a more or less continuous barrage of fire. He glanced back over his shoulder, looking for the easiest route of retreat; what he saw, however, caused his heart to pound in his chest.

“Mohrgs!” he yelled.

The elves turned and saw that the undead monstrosities had formed a wide ring around them, and were rapidly closing in. There were almost a dozen, their tentacle-tongues already probing in anticipation of stinging warm flesh.

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“Go high!” Eldren shouted, putting his own words into action as he rushed to the nearest tree and started to climb. The elves immediately started aiding each other, those already in the trees tossing down lines to help those still below.

Dannel knew that his position atop the fallen log would not give him much advantage against the charging mohrgs, whose skill at climbing he’d already seen in action. He

instead called upon his magic, and used his ability to *alter self* to take on the form of an avariel, wings sprouting from his back through the careful seams he'd long ago had installed in his armor. He saw Jannae, exposed in the center of the clearing, and leapt down beside her. Taking the priestess into his arms, he beat his borrowed wings to lift the two of them slowly into the air. She was not exceptionally heavy, but Dannel was not a natural flyer, and the nearest shambler was only about fifteen paces distant when he finally got high enough off the ground to be sufficiently clear of their reach.

"There, that branch!" Jannae said, pointing out a good destination.

"Dalan!" cried Yaela, from halfway up the trunk of another nearby tree. The elf ranger had not joined them in their ascent, instead taking up a defensive position amidst the protruding roots of another tree, his wolf by his side.

"Yaela, don't stop!" Eldren warned, seeing a shambler lumber toward the woman ranger's tree. She started up again, but the massive creature slammed into the tree with a powerful all-out blow from its thick arms. The trunk of the tree was easily seven or eight feet thick, and even the shambler could not unroot it, but the blow was enough to shake it severely. The elf screamed as she lost her grip, plummeting into the waiting grasp of the plant creature. For a moment she looked as though she would get free before it could grab her. Bouncing off its spongy mass she tumbled to her feet, darting away as it turned.

But then a second shambler rose up before her, and engulfed her in its huge arms before she could even scream.

"Yaela!" Dalan cried. He started toward her, his wolf running ahead, but almost immediately had to defend himself as a mohrg leapt at him, trying for a bite that would leave him paralyzed and easy prey.

Ellene let out a battle cry as she leapt from her own tentative perch, using the rope she'd been climbing to swing her into the melee. She caromed into the mohrg with enough force to send it sprawling, and as she landed she drew out her twin shortswords with a flourish. "Behind you!" she warned Dalan, engaging the mohrg she'd knocked down while the elf and his wolf faced another three of the skeletal undead, with others close behind them. The last two rangers had already reached secure branches about thirty feet up and had wedged themselves into firing positions, and started blasting mohrgs with accurate shots from their masterwork bows. One, locking her knee around the branch to steady herself, fitted two magical arrows to her string and fired both into a charging mohrg's chest, shattering bones and stabbing deep into the putrescent mass inside its ribs. But none of the undead started for the trees, not yet, swarming instead upon the embattled elves on the ground.

Dannel dropped Jannae on the branch and immediately took up his bow again. They were relatively safe, but only so long as their friends distracted the enemy forces. Without hesitation he called upon one of the greater powers of his song, launching another *hail of arrows* that slammed down into their foes in a devastating barrage. A second shambler went down, Dannel's arrow finally pushing its tally of injuries over the threshold of what it could take, and several mohrgs took hits, but they already knew that these enemies were too tough to be taken out with a single blow.

Jannae, meanwhile, drew upon her powers to *bless* her allies; there was little more she could do, with Dannel's bow lying atop the fallen log almost forty feet below them.

Yaela's eagle dove down at the top of the shambler holding its companion, digging its claws deep into its dense mass. The attack was little more than a distraction, but the ranger became momentarily visible as she tore herself free from the creature's grasp and fell hard onto her back before it. The shambler immediately lifted its huge arms to crush her, but before it could strike Eldren yelled and leapt from his position thirty feet up a nearby tree, drawing his sword as he fell. He slammed sword-first into the shambler's body, driving the elven blade deep into it, even its momentous bulk affected by the weight of the elf impacting it. As Yaela leapt free, Eldren tore his sword out from the wound and fell back, tumbling on impact and coming awkwardly to his feet. As the shambler turned, he glanced to the side, where two mohrgs were already coming his way.

"Come on then!" he yelled, leaping inside the shambler's reach, taking a solid hit across his shoulders but avoiding its enfolding grasp.

"He's crazy!" Dannel exclaimed. The last shambler, still coming slowly through the second *entangle* spell, was only a few steps from reinforcing its peer, and the mohrgs were everywhere. He tried to help Eldren by firing arrows into the back of the one he'd dropped onto, but again the missiles seemed of little individual effect.

"Yes," Jannae whispered, as she stepped forward and dove off of the branch.

Dalan smote a mohrg across the front of its skull with his longsword, sending the already-injured undead staggering back. Beside him, his wolf Longfang had borne a second of the undead monsters to the ground, and was trying to shake it to pieces. But the elf cried out as three mohrgs leapt at him from ahead and each flank, two of the piercing tendrils stabbing through his armor into his flesh. The elf stiffened and went down, barely feeling the punishing blow across his back as he fell. Longfang instantly leapt to his help, or tried to; the mohrg he'd taken down nipped the wolf in the flank, and the animal crumpled, paralyzed.

Ellene could do nothing to help either, struggling against two mohrgs that were doing their best to flank her. Her head swam from the effects of the glancing punch she'd taken to her left temple, and she felt stiff from the toxic bite to her hip that she'd barely resisted. She was a master swordswoman, very adept at the two swords style that maintained effective offense and defense, but these were no common adversaries. She was not alone, as her friends continued to rain down arrows from above, but the mohrgs seemed able to withstand an incredible amount of punishment.

Eldren ignored the blows that punished his back, focusing on the shambler. The *mossmantle* protected him from the mohrg's paralysis, but he thought he felt a rib pop as another crushing blow slammed into him. And on top of that, the shambler was winding up for what looked like a pretty intense attack of its own, its arms coming up high above its body. Yelling a curse in elvish, he swept his sword through its torso, feeling the resistance of its body collapse before the preternatural sharpness of the blade. The shambler staggered back and toppled over, crushing Yaela beneath its crumbling bulk.

The ranger turned just in time to take a solid hit across the front of his face from the last shambler, and everything went dark.

Chapter 483

Ellene fell back before the assault of the mohrgs, dodging their probing tentacles and the punishing blows from their fists. The potions she'd consumed at the start of the battle had bolstered her strength and stamina, but she was still mortal, a living and breathing creature with the weaknesses that these adversaries lacked. Thus far the only thing keeping her fighting was the lingering effects of those draughts, instinct, and the magical suit of elven chain that she wore. That suit had been in her family for seven generations, a legacy passed down to her through her grandmother, who had been a fighter of incredible skill.

Now, it looked as though it would be finally lost, torn apart by undead in the depths of a cursed wood. She was tough, and had already resisted the paralyzing effects of two mohrg bites, but as she heard the sounds of Dalan and Longfang being torn to pieces by the mohrgs, despair thick in her throat, she knew that there was only one way that this battle could end.

But she fought on, as her grandmother had at the Battle of Kevlan Grove. The relief party had found Alyana Aleastralas lying among the bodies of twenty-six orcs. The same Alyana who'd initially had to find a private tutor to learn the talents of the blade, as the martial orders had refused to accept the slight woman, barely four and a half feet tall, for training. All of the slain orcs bore wounds caused by her slender sword, *Moonstream*. The sword had gone to another of her descendents, but Alyana's armor had been passed down to her. That was the armor she wore now, an elegant but functional suit of elven chainmail that Ellene had worn for seventeen years now. Ellene, whose gifts had impressed everyone in a family already blessed with an impressive history, was now the inheritor of the tradition of honor and skill created by her grandmother.

She was one with the twin blades, blocking and countering without conscious thought. *That* would have killed her, had she even given an instant to considering Dalan's fate, and the fate of the others around her. The mohrgs kept pressing her, kept hitting her, but she kept hitting back. The one in front of her finally went down, her sword—Left Sword, as she called it—smashing its skull. But three others rushed forward to take its place, and she saw with horror that their claws were red with fresh blood.

She fell back, against the fallen log that Dannel had used as a perch, and which now offered at least some cover from being flanked.

Dannel saw Ellene being threatened, and how the elf woman fought back against odds that should have meant her death at once. A part of him longed to duplicate the insane sacrifices of the others, leaping into the melee to save friends in jeopardy. But Dannel had fought in too many battles, was too experienced not to recognize that the leaps of Ellene, Eldren, and Jannae into the melee, while motivated by bravery and self-sacrifice, were foolish from a tactical standpoint. His wings could place him anywhere on the battlefield in an instant, where he could unleash *Alakast* against these undead in defense of anyone he

chose. But it would only take one nip from a mohrg's "tongue" to take him out of the battle, permanently. And while he could wield the staff with skill, that was nothing in comparison to the damage he could wreak with even a borrowed longbow.

All these thoughts darted through his mind as he continued firing arrows in a steady stream, the missiles slicing through the air with a hum punctuated by a solid thwack as each arrow hit its target. The song of the bow filled the arcane archer, and his quiver produced each arrow that he requested in a steady stream. He went through all of the magical shafts provided by the elf wizards and priests, the arrows unleashing splashes of acid or frozen blasts of cold upon impact. When those were gone he switched to normal missiles, which were infused with the power of the song, adding to their efficacy, transforming the elf-forged shafts into deadly lances of destruction that hit with the force of a ballista shot.

He tracked the last shambler, pouring arrows into its back that vanished into the mass of its form and passed through, tearing huge chunks of rotting vegetable matter out as they went. He could not stop the thing from pulverizing Eldren, nor the mohrgs that eagerly leapt onto the fallen elf. But there was another who could, and did.

Jannae landed lightly at the base of the tree, tumbling into a somersault that culminated back in a standing position, absorbing some of what still had to be an incredibly painful jolt to her legs. She used the momentum to leap forward, her sword slicing from its scabbard. The shambler swept a huge limb at her, but she ducked under the powerful but clumsy stroke, coming up into a wild swing that nevertheless got the first mohrg's attention. It leapt off of Eldren and came at her, punching her solidly in the shoulder, driving her back a step. Its tongue lashed at her face, but she had protected herself from evil, and that divine reinforcement allowed her to resist its paralytic touch.

The second mohrg paused for a moment over the helpless ranger, intent upon delivering a coup de grace to finish this foe before moving on to the next. But before it could strike, an avian cry drew its attention back up a moment before Yaela's eagle flew into its face, lashing with its claws. The attack did nothing to harm the undead creature, but it distracted it for a moment. Displeased at being diverted from its victim, the mohrg lashed the eagle with its tongue. As the bird stiffened and began to fell, the undead monster slammed it aside, knocking it away to land broken a few paces distant.

Turning back to its prey, the mohrg lifted a fist to crush the dying ranger's skull.

The first arrow struck it solidly in the temple, cracking the bone and staggering the undead monstrosity. The mohrg looked up just in time to see Dannel release his second shot, which flew as true to carom off the mohrg's shoulder, shattering the clavicle and half-tearing its right arm joint away. The mohrg, knowing it could not get at the elf archer, instead focused on killing the helpless one at its feet. But as it drove down its left fist, another arrow struck its humerus, shattering it. The powerful blow became a weak swipe that barely glanced off of the ranger's chest.

The mohrg looked up hatefully, in time to take the final arrow between its eyes.

Ellene's arms felt leaden, and her body felt cold, as though she'd been doused in ice water. She'd taken more of the stabbing bites than she could remember, yet somehow she fought on. Every movement sent sharp pains through her from the broken ribs in her left side, from a mohrg punch that had hit with devastating force, and her jaw bled from another punch that had knocked out several of her teeth. Thankfully the wounds were growing as numb as the rest of her, and she knew that she wouldn't have to worry about the pain for much longer.

She'd finished a second mohrg, and Aymie and Lyson above had destroyed a third with their supporting archery, but there were still four more pressing at her. The fallen log offered enough cover so that only three could really come at her at once, but that was small solace; those three could inflict more than enough damage.

She somehow brought Right Sword up and deflected a punch aimed at her head. But before she could draw the weapon back into a defensive position, or offer a counter, another mohrg smashed her forearm with enough force to dent the bracer, driving it back hard into the log. Ellene heard, rather than felt, the snap, and in her attenuated perceptions it was the tumbling of the sword that caught her focus, as the blade slowly fell to the ground a few feet away.

The mohrgs pressed in. She grinned, though with her shattered jaw it looked more like a mad scowl.

"Cub on den!" she spat bloodily, jabbing Left Sword into the first mohrg's face. To her surprise, the undead's skull exploded, and the creature toppled forward to land at her feet.

The second mohrg stabbed her with its tongue. Again she fought off the paralysis. But it followed with a solid blow to her chest that drove her back against the log, her breath stolen from her lungs by the force of the impact. She tried to bring up Left Sword, but her arm felt like a lead weight, like the ones that Master O'dan had commanded her to strap to her arms for days, forcing her muscles to thicken and develop. She screamed, and barely lifting the blade to horizontal drove Left Sword with the force of her body into the mohrg.

The blow was pathetically weak, but the mohrg just seemed to come apart, shards of bone exploding from its torso. The creature sagged and collapsed, Ellene almost going down with it. There was another one behind it, but it too was on its last legs, half of its skull missing, its "guts" dangling from the wreckage of its rib cage. It tried to hit her, but only managed to fall over as its leg crumpled under it.

Looking down, Ellene saw the feathers of an arrow buried in the loam, finally understanding what was happening. She looked up and saw Dannel, outlined faintly against the faint light filtering down from above, arrows knifing down all around her, each striking a target, shattering undead bones. The sound of the arrows was loud in her ears, and for a moment she thought she heard a faint melody as the shafts whizzed past.

She smiled, and toppled forward, Left Sword falling from her grasp as she collapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 484

Diffuse rays of golden light filtered down through the forest upon the elves from Aldair Kelalei, as they made their way into the ruins of Bryth'an Torgul. They were six, now, leaving Dalan and Yaela behind to mark their latest confrontation with the baelorn's minions. Dalan had been torn to pieces by the mohrgs, along with Longfang, but they hadn't been sure of Yaela when they'd pulled her out under the remains of the slain shambler. She'd looked peaceful, without any obvious wounds, but when they'd lifted her they'd found a sharpened stub of a branch that had slid through her back into a lung when the mass of the dead creature had fallen on her. A freak wound, ill fortune, and another death. They'd left behind Yaela's eagle, which had survived its own encounter with the mohrgs, but which had simply watched them from a high branch as they departed the fateful clearing.

Their healing wands and potions had restored the survivors to health, but all of the elves bore haunted looks with them as they completed the final stage of their journey. Dannel had considered the wisdom of proceeding, but none of them raised the possibility of retreat, at least not out loud. Their encounters on this trip had reinforced the gravity of the danger facing the elves of the Wealdath, and all of them remained committed to doing what they could to defeat that threat.

The quiet beauty of the morning in the forest seemed to mock them. It seemed as though nothing dangerous could exist in this place, but they knew better, continued hyperalert to the slightest stirring around them.

Ruined structures of old gray stone rose up out of the forest around them, almost invisible until they were almost adjacent. The forest had reclaimed them over the centuries, until only the odd artificiality of their shape distinguished them from the natural curve of the land and the dense growth.

Eldren seemed to know where he was going, leading them down a narrow path that wound deeper into the ruins.

Dannel paused at one point to summon a minor magical spell. The result was immediately, he staggered back, dropping his bow as he clutched his head.

"Dannel! What is it?" Ellene asked, appearing at his side to help him. Her words were slightly slurred by the wreckage of her jaw; multiple *cure light wounds* had healed most of her wounds, but that spell alone could not fully repair the damage done to her face by the mohrgs. The others quickly gathered on him, alert for any sign of ambush or assault.

"I... I'm okay," he said, as the effects of the spell—lost immediately upon casting—faded. "That was foolish," he said. "I tried to detect for magic, but it's everywhere, here... overwhelming."

"We're close," Eldren said, unnecessarily. "Use whatever wards and protections you have, now." He took his own advice by consuming another *barkskin* potion, then led them forward once again.

“The baelnorn... what can we expect?” Ellene asked.

“The elves that become undead guardians were among the most powerful spellcasters of our history,” Jannae said. “High priests, hierophants, archmages. The potency of their magic is greater than almost any elf living today.”

“And with the *mythal* at its command, that power may be even greater,” Dannel said.

“How can we deal with the artifact?” one of the other elves, Lyson, asked.

“Focus on the lich,” Eldren said. “Once we take out the guardian, then we’ll deal with the *mythal*.”

Dannel, having touched that power directly, had his own doubts about that, but he said nothing.

The forest cover began to thin out somewhat, and more sunlight was visible ahead in a broad clearing populated by several clusters of ruined stone interspersed with occasional ancient trees. Brush covered everything in a dense carpet, except along a pathway that may have once been a roadway of smooth paving stones. Now, that avenue was a tangle of weeds and fragments of ancient stones, frequently interrupted by gaping holes that had been claimed by weeds and dense knots of thornbushes.

The center of the clearing was dominated by a pair of low mounds, compact hills grown over with brush and waist-high brown grass. Between them sat a more cohesive structure, a ruin that still had partially-intact walls grown over with vines and clinging brush. There was enough of the building left to hint at what it might have once been, a beauty of flowing, curved walls and aspiring vaults. Pieces of broken stone lay about, carved in intricate patterns that reflected an exceptional craftsmanship even after millennia of exposure and neglect.

As they drew nearer, they could see that a stone arch over the entry to the ancient building remained intact. The stone had been fashioned to resemble an arbor, complete with intricate carvings of roses that had been worn down by the passage of time. A strong smell hung over the place, the stench of death and decay.

Jannae lingered back with Dannel as Eldren led them slowly toward the structure.

“I understand your concern,” she whispered. “If Eldren and I should fall... there is a potent device in my pouch, a blanket formed of a weave as light as spiderwebs. There is also a scroll, an incantation in the old dialect. I do not know if you can read it, but if it comes to it...”

She was interrupted by a cry from Eldren, followed by the twang of a bowstring. They turned to see the lich standing in the entry of the structure, its arms uplifted, its eyes closed. Apparently oblivious to them, its lips moved in a silent invocation. Dannel saw the arrows fired at it veer suddenly upward as they entered the building; clearly some sort of magical ward protected the undead spellcaster.

“Come on!” Eldren said, drawing his sword and rushing forward. The others followed, but Dannel hesitated as he heard a crackling sound, and turned to see a twisting thicket erupt out of the ground in a wide ring around the ruin, encompassing the southern of the two hills within its radius. The *wall of thorns* rose to at least fifteen feet high, and was so thick that Dannel could not see anything beyond it.

Trapped! he thought.

He had barely started running again when a massive roar filled the clearing. “What now?” he hissed, stumbling and nearly going down. Jannae, a few paces ahead, had fallen, and she clung to the ground. The other elves were likewise affected, abandoning their charge in an effort just to stay on their feet.

Only the lich appeared unaffected, secure within the walls of his shelter. As the tremors eased, Dannel bent to help Jannae, who quickly regained her footing.

“That doesn’t bode well,” she began, and her eyes widened as she caught sight of something behind him.

Dannel turned in time to see the “hill” rise up, tearing itself free of the ground. A sick smell of rot washed over them, a dozen times stronger than before, the foulness of a slaughterhouse floor left abandoned on a hot day. As the elves watched, the top of the mound split into a gaping, jagged maw, and long tentacles appeared from within the bulk of the thing, lashing out at the invaders.

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As the gargantuan ghoulish tendriculos rose up out of the ground, revealing the full insane scale of its form to the elves, Dannel surrounded himself with the magic of his song. Empowered by the *expeditious retreat* spell, he did exactly that, grabbing Jannae and running swiftly toward the far side of the ruin. One of the tendriculos’s tendrils smacked the ground where the two elves had been standing a heartbeat before, but they were able to make their escape from its reach before it could fully mobilize itself from its entrenched position.

Of course, they could not go very far, given the constraints of the lich’s conjured *wall of thorns*.

With their main adversary apparently protected against their arrows, Ellene, Aymie and Lyson turned their bows toward this new threat. The elves held their ground and unleashed a potent barrage, but their arrows simply vanished within the incredible bulk of the creature.

Eldren, on recovering his feet focused upon the lich. Charging into the arch that marked the entry of the ruin, he slammed hard into an invisible barrier, and fell back. He cautiously stepped forward and probed the obstacle; while his sword passed through, his hand was blocked by what felt like an utterly smooth, impermeable wall of force.

The lich lowered its arms, and met Eldren’s gaze with its own undying stare.

A scream sounded behind the ranger.

Eldren snarled, and turned back to his companions.

The tendriculos moved ponderously, its own bulk hindering its movements. But its long tendrils gave it an incredible reach, demonstrated as it lashed out and caught up Lyson by the ankles. The elf screamed as the creature lifted it into the air, but the sound died as the fell power of its undead touch froze his muscles. The ghoulish tendriculos lifted the stiffened ranger up above its huge body, and dropped him into its waiting jaws. The elf just disappeared within, vanishing with finality.

“Lyson!” Aymie screamed, unable to do anything to stop it, except to fit a pair of arrows to her bow and fire both into the body of the undead-plant combination. The missiles tore into its body like all the others, but the elves could see that the injuries that it was suffering were quickly closing, healing as the monster regenerated.

“It is vulnerable to blunt weapons!” Eldren shouted, his extensive woodlore including knowledge of such creatures, although he’d never before faced one that was a ghoulish as well as a plant. Such things were... impossible, he would have said, but here they were dealing with the raw power of an out-of-control *mythal*, and lore that had been ages lost when his great-grandparents had lived.

Mayhap that knowledge, that power, was better lost.

Despite Eldren’s knowledge, the fact was that nearly all of the elves’ weapons inflicted slashing or piercing damage. Eldren improvised, leaping forward as one of the tendrils lashed out at his back, narrowly avoiding a hit and coming up into a roll that brought him within range of the creature’s body. Striking with the flat of his blade, he managed to smack it solidly, crushing the vegetable matter that made up its leathery hide, sending a quiver through the creature’s ample body. Sensitive as it was to such blows, the tendriculos immediately focused its attention upon the ranger, slamming him with both tentacles and rolling forward until it had almost toppled onto him, the huge maw coming around with the rotation of its body, until it could seize the ranger with a single huge bite.

Dannel was running forward, *Alakast* coming into his hand as he ran, his still-effective spell adding speed to his movements, his boots seeming to barely touch the ground with each preternaturally long stride. Ellene had drawn out her own blades, but Aymie looked uncertain, her skills with her sword inferior to her efficacy with the bow.

“Keep firing, overwhelm its regeneration!” Dannel shouted at them, at all of them, for he knew that Jannae was coming up behind him, and knew that her own sword would be of little use against the massive creature. He spared a glance back at the ruin, wondering why there had been no more magical assault from that quarter. But the arch was empty, the baelnorn gone.

That respite was welcome, but it still left them facing the undead horror.

Eldren slammed the flat of his blade down on the tendriculos's maw as he darted back, the massive opening closing on open air with a grinding snap. The ranger tried to evade, to gain a new position from which to strike, but one of the tendrils slapped him on the leg, knocking him off-balance. The creature took advantage, and wrapped the other tendril around his neck, jerking him back into the waiting opening where Lyson had vanished moments ago. The elf struggled and kicked, somehow summoning the fortitude to resist the paralytic touch of the creature, but he could not avoid being hurled into that dark gap.

Dannel was there an instant later, too late to stop it, but able to lash out with a heavy blow that smacked solidly into its side. The tendriculos, arrows sprouting from its body as Aymie kept up her fire, shifted to face him. He dodged a tentacle that nearly caught him in the forehead like a bullwhip, but a second twined around his left ankle, pulling him roughly down. It started to lift him, but before it could add the arcane archer to its list of swallowed foes Ellene was there, hacking at the dense vines with her swords. Right Sword cut deep into the tendril, which loosened enough to deposit the elf roughly upon the ground.

Jannae arrived a few moments later, eschewing a martial attack for a simple touch attack, unleashing a *cure moderate wounds* into the monster. The blue glow burned at its hide like fire, and it slammed a tendril across her side, knocking her sprawling—and, unfortunately, overcoming her resistance, paralyzing her.

Dannel, pulling himself back up to his feet, launched an all-out attack at the creature, trying to draw it toward him, and away from the helpless priestess. "We have to get Eldren and Lyson out of there!" Ellene said, hacking at the body of the tendriculos, although the wide gashes she opened began almost immediately to close.

"I know!" Dannel replied. His blows with *Alakast* were doing damage, but he lacked the sheer destructive power of Lok or Arun. Either of the warriors would have made short work of this foe, the elf thought... but they were not here, so he had to make the best of what he had at hand.

A tendril came sweeping down at him. He saw it coming, and leapt aside... but the creature's maw was coming down again, its huge bulk shifting forward to engulf the elf. He darted out of the way of that bite, but the creature's momentum carried it into him nevertheless, knocking him roughly back. The elf spun and slammed his staff hard into the monster's body, its sick green hide turning gray as the blow destroyed its tissues.

Ellene had dragged Jannae out from under the path of the surging monster, and now rushed in again, her swords at the ready. Aymie continued to fire her bow in a staccato rhythm, the shafts sinking into its body, forcing it to maintain the energy of regenerating the punctures in its body.

Dannel lifted his magical staff again, but a tendril came around and snared the weapon, twisting around the long shaft and one of the arms that held it. The elf felt the sickly chill of paralysis creep into his body through the touch, but gritting his teeth he was able to resist that numbing flow. But even though he retained control over his muscles, he was unable to keep from being lifted off his feet by the creature's incredible strength. For an instant he was hurtling through the air, high above the battlefield, the landscape rushing past his vision in a blur.

And then he was descending, straight toward the open maw that gaped wide to accept him.

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Dannel only had an instant to react. Calling upon his magic, he summoned a *feather fall*. His descent slowed, although he was only a few strides from the huge opening of the tendriculos's "mouth". The undead plant's maw snapped shut prematurely, sending a gust of air sick with the stench of rot up at the elf. But his respite was momentary, as the creature reared up, lifting the upper half of its body to meet the descending elf, intent on engulfing this prey, one way or another.

There wasn't anywhere for him to go; the spell did not give him control over the direction of his fall. The tendriculos's maw opened wide again, four, six, eight feet across, leaving no option but the dark hole deep within the creature.

Dannel saw the jagged-edged opening clench, and as it started to snap shut, he set *Alakast* in its path.

The tendriculos's powerful jaws closed on the staff, and Dannel's descent abruptly stopped as the creature impaled itself on both ends of the weapon. One side of the staff sank two feet into its body, while the other caught on a dense ridge of muscular fiber that rimmed the interior of the maw, tearing half of the creature's jaw construction from its moorings. The creature quivered and plunged forward, and Dannel, already gagging from the stench of the monster's insides, could only hang on as it pitched around on its axis, falling for a full second before it came to a sudden and abrupt stop. Dannel was slammed against the insides of its mouth opening, a spongy mass of fibers that oozed greenish sludge. The stuff burned his hands, but the tendriculos had stopped moving, and he was able to get up. *Alakast* was still wedged into place in its jaws, supporting a narrow opening that he was able to crawl through.

Ellene was there to help him extract himself. It would take more work to recover his weapon, but for the moment, verifying that the creature was indeed dead—well, *more* dead—seemed more prudent.

"We need to cut into it, get Eldren and Lyson," he began, but Ellene pointed to the side of the creature, where a long gash was visible in its bulbous body. Aymie was helping Eldren, who was covered in the acidic green goo, drag Lyson's limp form through the gap.

"Eldren went at it from the inside while you were slamming at it from without," Ellene said. Her words were barely understandable, her jaw a swollen red mess, but Dannel found her presence a welcome sight. The tendriculos did not appear to be regenerating further, so he glanced back at the ruin, and the empty arch.

"It did not attack us," Ellene said. "Do you think it's waiting in there for us?"

Dannel nodded. He wiped his face, pulling away some of the sticky green muck. Ellene handed him a clean rag, and he nodded in thanks. He felt spent, and for a moment he could not speak.

Eldren came over to him. If he was a mess, the ranger looked like death personified. The flesh of his face, neck, and hands bled freely where the acidic ooze inside the tendriculos had burned it. It was a miracle that he'd been able to resist its paralysis, Dannel thought, but then he saw the fire that burned in the elf's eyes, the determination that had taken on an almost frightening intensity. He walked under his own power, Aymie having gone to help Jannae. Lyson remained where they'd laid him; that he was dead was obvious even before Dannel got a good look at his face.

"Once the paralysis wears off, we will proceed inside," Eldren said.

Dannel found a sudden and irrational anger rise up inside him. "Nice of you to show such concern," he snapped, glancing meaningfully at Jannae.

Eldren's gaze looked like it could have frozen water. "Do not speak of what you know nothing. We are here to complete a task, and that gets first priority—above anything. Everyone here knows that. Lyson knew it, and Caylen, and Jovran, and Oloran, and Dalan, and Yaela. Think of the elves at Korul Ulgor, and think of the same at Aldair Kelalei, and throughout the wood."

Dannel thought of the ranger leaping down to aid his companions against the shamblers, and the way he'd rushed to Jannae's defense against the wraiths. "I spoke hastily," he said. "I think we're all near the limits of endurance."

Eldren took a breath. "We will have to push that limit a little, cousin," he said quietly. Turning, pain evident in every movement, he turned and walked back over to Aymie and Jannae, limping slightly.

They distributed the last of their healing—a few potions, a few *cure light wounds* from Jannae, once she'd recovered from the tendriculos's paralysis. It was not enough to fully restore the injuries suffered in the battle, but it would have to be enough.

During their preparations nothing stirred from within the ruin.

The five elves gathered before the arch.

"Let's finish this," Eldren said, stepping forward into the ruin.

The transition through the arch was mostly symbolic; the walls of the ruin were irregular and rose barely to chest height at their tallest, so they did not feel that separated from the world outside. The stones that made up the floor near the entry were cracked and seeded with intrusive vegetation, but as they penetrated further inside their condition improved, though still worn by time and exposure. Runes and other designs had once been carved into the floor, it appeared, but now only faint outlines were left.

They continued through other remnants of rooms. At several points they had to detour around massive piles of fallen rubble, including columns up to five feet thick and thirty feet long, now reduced to broken slabs of white marble. Dannel began to think that through some trick of perception the interior of the place had to be bigger than its outward appearance; by his judgment they should have already exited out the rear.

And then they saw the portal up ahead.

It was another arch, but it made the one outside seem feeble by comparison. It was not unduly high, reaching an apex perhaps eight feet above the smooth stones of the floor, but it stretched at least fifteen feet across. The arch was formed of white stone, as pure as new-fallen snow, fashioned into a weave of twisting vines interwoven into a strand about two feet across. The arch stood unsupported, and architecturally should have collapsed under its own weight. They could see the chamber beyond it, yet another unremarkable ruined hall, but there was an odd haze between them, like a bit of heat-mirage rising off of sun-baked pavement.

Jannae reached down and unfastened the clasps on her pouch. Eldren glanced at her, and she nodded.

The elves stepped forward, through the arch. Dannel felt a tingle pass across his skin, followed by a sudden wave of nausea.

He looked around. They were through, and behind them there was the portal, filled with a haze through which he could see the ruins outside. But their immediate surroundings had changed.

The walls were still cracked and uneven, of the same white marble and gray granite of the ruin outside. But the sky, the sun, the soft breeze of the day... all of that was gone, replaced by a neutral gray haze that surrounded the chamber like a translucent dome. Ahead of them broad stone steps led down into a sunken hall, its floor maybe seven or eight feet below their current level, and that was new too.

They walked forward slowly, silently, as if in a dream. Dannel felt a lurching twist that passed through his body... not like a wave of sickness per se, but more like a fundamental *wrongness* against which his body rebelled. The others felt it too, he could see.

The floor of the hall was covered by smashed pieces of stone of varying shapes and colors. It was as if a frieze on the ceiling had come collapsing down at some point... but above, there was only the gray dome. Amorphous forms on stunted pillars surrounded the hall at even intervals. Perhaps statues once, now all that was left was shattered remnants that might have been feet; it was impossible to tell. Eldren lifted his sword, indicating a wide doorway that lay between two of those figures, through which an odd light emanated.

They pressed on, trying to avoid the loose rock that crunched loudly beneath their boots, elven magic notwithstanding.

The doorway opened quickly onto a long chamber, maybe twenty feet across and twice that in depth. Enough remained of the intricate carvings on the walls to indicate that this room

had once been beautiful. But they only noticed that in passing, for their attention was immediately drawn to the center of the room.

The *mythal* was a dagger-shaped wedge of crystal, about six feet long and a foot thick. It rested on a pair of white marble pillars about four feet off the ground, perpendicular to the doorway, which appeared to be the only way into or out of the chamber. The glow came from it, a yellowish light tainted by the ugly black smear that suffused the center of the crystal, at the top. That taint was projected by the light out upon the ceiling and upper half of the walls, shifting slightly to make it look like creeping black vines were crawling forward across the cracked ancient stone.

“It’s... beautiful... and horrible...” Eldren breathed. For a moment, they were overcome, and could only stand there, watching it.

Something buzzed in the back of Dannel’s mind. He tried to shake it, as it was distracting him from the awesome power of the artifact, but it kept at him, until he suddenly realized what was wrong.

The lich... where is the lich!

He felt rather than heard Jannae coming forward, her hands digging into her pouch. She moved slowly, as if she was underwater, pushing through a flooded grotto. He and Eldren turned at the same moment, looking at her, and so both saw the lich materialize behind her, its bony claw outstretched, rimed in a black aura that echoed the corruptive stain upon the *mythal*.

“Jannae!” Eldren yelled, willing his body forward, his sword coming up.

Too slowly, too late.

The elf priestess turned and saw the lich. The baelnorn laid its hand upon her face, its long fingers claspng hard upon her temples. Jannae screamed as the lich poured a *harm* spell into her, and her body contorted in obvious agony before it broke the connection, and she collapsed like child’s doll tossed casually away.

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“You bastard!” Eldren yelled, attacking the lich in an all-out assault. The baelnorn barely seemed to acknowledge him, even as the elf-forged blade tore into his ragged garments and the withered flesh and ancient bones beneath. The ranger’s blows lifted small puffs of dust from the creature’s body that swirled around it from the force of the impacts, but otherwise it was like hacking at one of the marble pillars they’d encountered in the ruin outside.

An arrow caught the lich in the chest, sticking into a bone. Aymie’s hands shook as she reached for another missile. Ellene drew her swords and came at the lich from the side opposite Eldren, using tactics designed against living foes, trying to flank it. The lich did not

even turn as her blades caromed uselessly against its torso. Despite its apparent frailty, the lich was insanely durable.

Dannel saw his companions attacking the lich, knew he should be joining them, however futile the assault was. But his gaze was drawn to Jannae, lying broken at his feet. The priestess was still conscious, somehow, and her gaze fixed the arcane archer, drew him to her.

“Take... Weave... only... hope...” she managed to gasp, as he knelt at her side. Her face was a deathly white, and Dannel could see the blue scars where the lich’s fingers had grasped her. Her eyes drifted down, and Dannel followed them to the open pouch she’d dropped when it had struck her down.

He reached for it, but then Jannae screamed, her body contorting as a fountain of bright red blood erupted from her mouth, splattering Dannel’s chest and face with scarlet droplets. Dannel felt to his knees as he felt like something was exploding inside of him, and as he looked up, he saw that the others had been hit equally hard. Eldren staggered back, blood oozing from his nostrils and the corners of his eyes, clutching his gut with his off hand. Aymie had fallen, her hands spasming as she clawed at the stone, her body arched. And Ellene had dropped to one knee, her face clenched as the injuries she’d suffered in the desperate battle against the mohrgs violently reopened, the healing spells undone by the lich’s *mass inflict critical wounds* spell. Maximized by the *mythal*, the spell had been devastating.

With a roar, Eldren hurled himself at the lich once more. This time he held his sword reversed, his gloved hands wrapped around the blade, and he drove the heavy pommel down into the center of the lich’s skull. There was a flare of silver light and the lich shifted—slightly, but something ugly burned in the red glow of its eyes as it turned to face the ranger.

Dannel reached out and grabbed the pouch. Jannae was dead... that much was instantly obvious, but they would all join her within moments if he did not act. He drew out the Weave, the device the priestess had spoken of. It felt as light as air, sparkling softly in his hand, like a web of shimmering lace. The entirety of it was small enough to conceal in both of his hands.

Staggering back as the pain shrieked mercilessly through his body, he rushed toward the *mythal*.

Eldren, his face a gory red mask, lifted his sword to strike again. Ellene had resumed her attacks from the opposite side, hacking at its body. The lich opened its mouth and whispered something, a deadly benediction. The *mythal* flared, the black tendrils squirmed eagerly, and the two warriors were hurled back as a new wave of agony exploded out from the undead lord, strengthening it even as it stole life from the invaders of its sanctum.

Dannel felt the new surge and nearly crumpled. This one wasn’t as strong as the first, but in his weakened state it was still almost enough to finish him. He wouldn’t survive one more *mass inflict*, he knew. He heard metal clattering on stone and knew that he was now

alone against the lich. But did not turn, leaping forward, letting the Weave come open in his hands as he rushed at the *mythal*.

“NO!” came a voice, sepulchral, filling his mind. But he defied it, and swept the diaphanous blanket over the surface of the artifact.

Something hard slammed into him from behind. He was blasted roughly across the room, his flight interrupted by the sudden arrival of the far wall. He hit hard, and slumped down, only partially conscious. Later, he would not be able to clearly distinguish what had been real, and what had been an illusion of his battered mind.

The light from the *mythal* had brightened, but filtered by the Weave, it was now a soft golden glow that filled the vault with warmth. The lich was still there, standing like a grim harbinger of death over the motionless bodies of his friends.

But they were no longer alone.

The golden light shone on the translucent forms of at least a dozen elves, standing close along the walls of the chamber, the ancient reliefs showing through their insubstantial bodies. They were of varied gender, all showing the signs of age that for an elf meant they were truly venerable. They wore elaborate robes that drifted around their bodies, as though a faint wind stirred in whatever reality they existed.

The lich looked upon them, something flashing in its burning eyes—grief? Regret? Anger? Dannel could not tell, the baelnorn’s emotions unreadable in the alien nature of its eternal existence.

“I have failed,” it said, its voice scratching through its desiccated throat.

The ghostly elves spoke, their voices sounding in Dannel’s mind. He could not tell which of them was speaking at any given moment, but the voices sounded slightly different, though all of the words resonated with power and ancient wisdom.

Yes, Aladir Ardan.

But not through a lack of dedication to your task.

You have been led astray, corrupted by the faltering of the power you warded.

But your line has remained true.

Your error has been redeemed by sacrifice.

Now is the time for your long service to come to an end. Your rest has been well-earned.

Two of the elven spirits detached from the wall and approached the lich. The undead creature did not react to them, but as their ephemeral fingers brushed its face, the unholy glow of its eyes softened, replaced by a soft gray light that felt like the sadness of a rainy day. Dannel felt a pang as the lich’s head turned slowly to face him.

“I am sorry,” it said. “I...”

Dannel managed to shake his head. Tears streamed down his cheeks. What could he say? He thought of the death he’d seen since returning to the Wealdath, of his companions, torn to pieces. All for—a mistake?

The lich nodded, as if sensing the elf’s feelings, knowing that forgiveness could not be granted, accepting what could not be changed.

The spirits drew back, and the baelnorn’s body began to grow insubstantial. “Wait!” Dannel said. “Jannae... the others...”

Your kinsmen and the other warriors yet live, and shall go on.

The priestess has been accepted to the bosom of the goddess.

Dannel had known the truth of Jannae’s fate, but he still could not stifle a sob that clenched at his chest at the spirit’s words.

We are not the gods, child. We can only shape what is, what not was, or will be.

Dannel lowered his head, overcome, his battered body fighting him as he struggled to remain above the crest of the black wave that threatened to overcome his awareness.

What now, then? he thought.

You will go on, the voice said in his mind, gently, he thought.

A loud crack surprised him, drew him back to full awareness, and his head shot up.

The vault was again quiet, dark. The spirits, and the baelnorn, were gone, and he could just make out the shadowy outlines of his prone companions—and the body of Jannae—in the near darkness. But his attention was drawn to the middle of the room. He knew what he would see there even as his eyes adjusted to the dark sufficiently to make out the altered outline of the *mythal*, now lying broken between the two pedestals, the remains of the elven weave still draped over it.

Grimacing at the pain that shot through his body at the movement, he started to crawl toward his fallen companions.

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The soft whisper of the arrows in flight knifed through the forest clearing, each followed by the more substantial “THWACK!” as the missiles buried themselves into the makeshift target in the cleft bole of the dead tree. The arrows, slender practice shafts with weighted nubs for heads, all lay within a tight cluster, close enough so that one could have encircled them all within the ring of a thumb and forefinger.

Sixty yards away, Dannel lowered his bow, letting the song fade away, welcoming the brief pang of regret that always accompanied its withdrawal. The bow felt... *right* in his hand, although it had a less than elegant look to it, and it certainly could not be judged a masterwork weapon. It had a strong pull to it, enough to test the arcane archer's strength. It was the first bow he had made from scratch. He'd been studying the bowyer's craft for some time, and had even begun a few test weapons, but with the frantic pace of events that he'd been caught up in over the last few months, there had not been an opportunity to complete his work. Upon returning from Bryth'an Torgul he'd thrown himself into the manufacture of the bow he now held, embracing the distraction from memory and still-fresh wounds that he'd brought back from that journey into the deep wood.

"A fine effort," a voice said behind him. He'd been so distracted that he started slightly, even though Eldren had not been actively trying to sneak up on him.

"I am sorry if I am intruding upon your quiet," the ranger said.

"No, please," Dannel said, gesturing to the space beside him. He started to unstring the bow, but Eldren forestalled him. "May I?"

Dannel handed him the bow, which the ranger examined with an expert eye. Eldren, he knew, was a master bowyer. "Not bad," he said, finally, after running his hands along the shaft and testing the pull.

"You are too generous."

Eldren peered at the distant target, where the knot of arrows was dimly visible in the shadows of the broken trunk. "Even the best craftsman cannot work well with an inferior tool," he said, handing the bow back. "If you like, I could show you a few tricks. You've picked up some talents out there in the wider world, but we elves of the Wealdath still have a few particular talents that are our own."

"I would enjoy that opportunity."

For a moment, the two elves stood there in silence. Dannel unstrung and checked the bow before laying it against the trunk of a nearby tree. There was a fallen log nearby, and he leaned against it, wrapping his arms across his body. After a moment, his cousin joined him.

"You'll be leaving soon," Eldren finally said.

"I have... obligations," Dannel said. "An oath made to friends."

"Friendship is important," the ranger replied.

"And family as well."

Eldren nodded. "I know that Ellene would be pleased, if you should decide to return."

Dannel looked up at the long shafts of the trees rising up around him. “Since I’ve been back... I’ve come to realize how much of this place is still with me, has always been a part of me.”

“Jannae said that the forest and its life were in the blood of our people, and that our hearts beat in tune to its pattern.”

Dannel looked over at his cousin. “I miss her, too.” He squashed a feeling of regret that came over him. They had spoken, once, about *raising* the priestess, but Eldren had dismissed the idea. Dannel knew the customs of his people, who saw death as a natural transition to another stage of life. But more than that, Jannae had made her own wishes clear on the subject, and whatever he felt about her, Dannel had to respect that.

But he knew his cousin well enough to know that despite all that, the wound caused by Jannae’s death would not heal swiftly for his cousin.

“So, the magic you command is fairly impressive,” Eldren said, after another long silence. Toying with the shaft of his own longbow—a masterwork weapon also crafted by his own hands—he continued, “I wonder how your skills are without it?”

Dannel managed a soft smile. “Three flights of four?”

The ranger stood, and extended a full quiver of arrows. “Let us see, then,” he said, drawing out a handful of shafts.

INTERLUDE

Chapter 489

Benzan ran through a tortured iron landscape, his breath searing his lungs, his heart pounding angrily in his chest. Above him stretched a wild gray sky, occasionally populated by distant blockish objects that were just slightly too misshapen to be moons or planets, but were too indistinct to clearly identify. Around him the ground was the same dull metallic gray of old swords and battered shields, a comparison reinforced by the actual presence of old broken weapons found in ugly heaps with more than casual frequency. Occasionally a bone could be seen to accompany the discards, but for the most part it was as if the landscape were the dumping ground of some mad blacksmith who produced enough excess for a hundred armies.

The ground was uneven, and frequently erupted in jagged openings rimmed by razor-sharp projections of rough raw iron. There were forests, too, leaning shafts of metal rising up out of the plain before sprouting into dozens of branches that likewise often culminated in a dangerously sharp point that seemed poised to impale the unwary traveler.

In all, it was a landscape of peril and threat, devoid of color and life.

The tiefling came to a halt before a wall of the uneven iron trees, blocking his path. As he fought for regain his breath he glanced back over his shoulder. He was fleeing... what?

He felt disoriented. He knew that something was chasing him, had been pursuing him, and if it caught him, he would be dead. He had to keep running...

Yet he hesitated, for a moment.

He glanced down, lifted his arms to examine the familiar bracers, the heavy leather gloves, the shimmering links of his mithral armor. He felt a familiar presence at his hip, and ran the fingers of his left hand along the hilt of his sword, the old familiar weapon, its bronze blade crafted in an archaic style on another world, but empowered with a magic that had saved his life more than once...

Benzan frowned. Something... wasn't right. The sword was familiar, but there was something... missing. He tried to remember what it was, tried to concentrate, but the effort only created a buzzing in his head that quickly threatened to explode into a full-out headache.

In any case, the effort was interrupted by a familiar sound behind him. Instinct overcame his confusion, and he hurled himself aside just as the familiar rush of noise and heat from a *fireball* blossomed near the point where he had been standing.

Danger overcame prudence, and he rushed forward, into the thicket of iron trees. Deadly spikes passed inches from his body as he negotiated the initial boundary at a speed that was purely reckless, but the risk proved valuable as a second blast sounded behind him among the trees. This one erupted not in orange flame, but a thunderous pulse of sonic energy that tore through the trees mercilessly, filling the air with fragments that formed deadly projectiles. One stabbed deep into his shoulder, and the tiefling bit back a cry of pain as he staggered and nearly fell into a thicket of needle-like spikes that rose up into his path as if it had been waiting for him to falter. He leapt over the obstacle, and kept running, his head ringing from the vibrations of the blast.

He plunged recklessly forward, and saw that the forest began to thin out ahead. He emerged from the thicket and stopped, his breath rasping in his chest, the pain in his shoulder stabbing deeper with each gasp of precious air.

Ahead of him the ground dropped off abruptly, a cliff that formed a precise line exactly perpendicular to his direction of travel. Warily he came forward, until he could see that the drop was a sheer one descending as far as he could see, until a flash of vertigo drew him back. It was as if the world had suddenly just... *ended*, here.

A preternatural whisper of danger drew his attention around, to the threat that would have him ended, as well.

He saw the figure approaching, *flying* over the forest of iron trees. He started to rush for cover, but his hunter already had his arms extended, and as Benzan ran he unleashed a blast of focused sonic energy that impacted Benzan high upon his right shoulder. The tiefling screamed at the pulsing wave tore pounded through his body, ripping and tearing at the tissues beneath the flesh as it passed. Nearly blinded by the intensity of the pain, he staggered forward back into the thicket of iron spikes and twisted forms, disappearing from view.

Malad dropped easily down to the ground, the shifting black aura of *death armor* enfolding his body, augmented by the translucent field of a *shield* spell. As his bare feet touched upon the rough iron, he conjured a *thunderlance* that shone in his hand like a wedge of white flame. He held the magical weapon with easy familiarity, born of over a decade of constant struggle against demons, devils, and other unholy monstrosities in the gore-filled trenches of the Blood War. The light flickered dully on the hard iron shells that surrounded him, casting menacing shadows through the area. As he finished his casting, the skirt of shimmering metallic scales drawn around his hips swelled and grew across his torso, spreading out across his upper arms until he was clad in a form-fitting hauberk that moved with his easy motions, like a second skin or a dragon's scaly hide.

The corrupted sorcerer moved forward, the burning lance probing ahead. As he moved into the outer edges of the forest, however, darkness seemed to gather around him, as though the iron trees themselves were calling forth night in this place without sun, moons, or stars.

"Darkness will not conceal you from me, Benzan," Malad said, his senses fully alert to the hunt. "You are my final test, and I will not be denied the power that is rightfully mine."

He saw the shadows shift slightly ahead and to his left, and drew upon his magic. But Synesyx sensed the trap before he did, caught the faint scrape of leather upon the ground that betrayed his quarry. Malad spun, but before he could hurl another sonically-substituted *fireball* a sharp pain tore into his right side. Glancing down, the sorcerer saw the jagged edge of an old, broken blade jutting from his torso.

And then his prey was upon him, his bronze longsword catching the light from his *thunderlance*. Malad darted back, twisting away from the path of the cutting blade. The edge of the sword caught on the scales protecting his body, but Synesyx easily turned the attack, and Malad felt only a slight sting through the excellent protection provided by his magical armor. Sneering, the sorcerer lifted his *thunderlance*, driving it with his magically-enhanced strength deep into his foe's shoulder—the same one he'd blasted with his *sonic ray*. The mithral links of Benzan's armor parted before the driving power of the energy-lance, and a jet of blood erupted from the vicious wound. The agonized cry torn from his enemy was quite rewarding.

Malad smiled as the two foes broke apart, warily facing each other. Malad had the advantage of reach with his long weapon, and his adversary was more seriously injured. But the demonspawn sorcerer seemed to be in little rush, now that he'd brought his enemy to bay. The wound in his side continued to ooze blood, but Synesyx rippled against the uneven length of the improvised weapon, forcing it out of the wound as the magical armor closed again over Malad's torso. The bloody shaft clattered against the ground, splattering droplets of bright red blood around the sorcerer's feet.

"Why are you doing this?" Benzan said, his sword up in a defensive position. The effort involved in that was instantly obvious in his face. "Are you another of Graz'zt's pawns?"

"Thrall' is the word you are looking for," Malad replied with a broad smile. "And I am one of the greatest in His service."

“A slave with special titles and privileges is still a slave,” Benzan spat.

“You know nothing, little man,” the sorcerer began, but he was cut off as Benzan suddenly lunged forward, his sword sweeping around in a wide sweep toward Malad’s throat. Synesyx flared, the metal scales of the sentient suit rising up to protect its master, but Malad reacted faster, his *thunderlance* flicking almost casually into Benzan’s forehead as the tiefling entered his reach. Benzan went down, dropping his sword as he clutched at the gaping wound that spurted blood into his eyes, blinding him. For a long moment Malad merely watched the suffering man, something dark shining in his eyes.

“Go ahead, finish it,” Benzan finally said, kneeling, his face a bloody mask as he looked up. “None of this is real... or if it is, then you have the power to destroy me anyway. Either way, I am tired of playing Graz’zt’s game.”

Malad dipped the end of the *thunderlance* under Benzan’s chin, forcing the tiefling up with enough pressure to sear the flesh of his jaw, filling the tiny clearing with a sick stench.

“Does that feel real?” he asked, chuckling as his foe’s body stiffened. “Reality is itself an illusion, Benzan. This place, Acheron, it is real enough, in that it responds to our presence. These iron trees, if we are careless, they can cut our flesh. My weapon burns you, my spells can inflict damage and pain. Yet in the ultimate calculation, this power is but fleeting.”

“The torture’s bad enough without the lecture,” Benzan said, spitting a fat gob of blood to the side.

Malad smiled. “You would learn this lesson soon enough, but I will share it with you anyway.” He came closer, the length of the *thunderlance* shortening so that its point remained focused upon the tiefling’s throat. Leaning close, he hissed, “What we *perceive* is the real reality, Benzan. And power, real power, is the ability to shape the perceptions of others. You can force someone to do your will—that is easy enough, especially when you are surrounded by demons your entire life. Likewise, you can employ magic to cloud an enemy’s mind, bend their will to yours. That is the track that Athux uses; but that, too, is ultimately just a crude bludgeon.”

“No, what power is, that is real *control*. Not the simple tools of emotion—fear, lust, greed. No, the truth of what Graz’zt represents—what all of the great Powers represent—is shaping reality by controlling the very perceptions of us all.”

“Have you ever thought about religion, Benzan? No, I don’t suppose you have, much; you have known clerics, but never really comprehended their dedication to their causes, to their gods. The truly dedicated, they are the ones who prove the point of my argument. You and I are much alike, in that we have both been outsiders in our respective societies.”

“Your ramblings are getting a trifle hard to follow,” Benzan sneered. The tip of the *thunderlance* flickered, slightly, opening a new runnel of red down the tiefling’s throat, but then the iron control returned. Abruptly, the magical weapon vanished, and Malad kicked Benzan solidly in the chest. The tiefling fell back, dimly aware of pain in his back as sharp

spines of the iron bushes behind him pierced the links of his mail and penetrated his flesh. He couldn't move, could only lie there, a red haze settling over his vision.

"I can see why the Prince is so aggravated by you," the sorcerer said. "But I am still glad that we met."

"Not... mutual..."

"I understand that you any my father had your differences, as well."

Benzan said nothing, but Malad could see that he'd gotten his attention.

"Oh, you cannot say you hadn't wondered," Malad continued. "*One will produce a scion, that will prove the bane of nations...*"

"How... do you know... how *could* you know..."

"My father shared everything he knew, in his time with us." Malad's lips twisted in an evil smile. "Shared rather more than that, indeed." He leaned forward so that all Benzan could see was the upper body of the other tiefling, the stark iron branches of the surrounding trees forming a hazy backdrop behind him, out of focus for his fading eyes. "I know a great deal about you, Benzan. Know what you desire, what you fear... and what you love."

Benzan lashed out, but the spines piercing his back held him, and he could only manage a feeble grab that ended with his fingers inches from his enemy's throat.

"You are strong in your passions. That's too bad... for you."

He turned away. All Benzan could see now was the vague outlines of the branches, a gray web that resembled the bars of a prison. But his other senses could still feel the sorcerer, nearby... and others, now, dark shadows creeping closer.

"And now, we begin."

Benzan began to slip away, but the last thing he heard was Malad's chuckle, and a spoken command.

"Bring him."

Chapter 490

The dwarf stood like a pillar as the traffic on the edge of the busy street flowed around him, pedestrians barely sparing a look for the oddly-dressed figure. He was clad in a suit of gold-chased half-plate that was partially covered by a heavy linen mantle bearing prominently the sigil of an anvil and hammer in silver thread. He was a gold dwarf of the Great Rift by his coloration, his skin the dark brown of freshly tilled earth.

He stood in front of a building that was obviously a tavern by the look of it, and by the expression on the dwarf's face he was not pleased by either the smell, the noise emitting from within, or perhaps its very existence upon the face of the earth. But the information he'd been given placed his objective within, so after a moment, he adjusted the huge warhammer slung across his back (where it kept company with a large steel shield, a massive full helm, and considerable traveler's pack), and stepped inside.

The dwarf's appearance drew some curious attention from the tavern's patrons, but here in Cauldron the unusual made for casual fare, and most returned to their prior activities within a few moments. One who didn't was the man who nodded to the dwarf as he crossed the room to stand before his table.

The conversation was brief and to the point. What he learned was similar to the other bits of information that the dwarf had spent the better part of the day collecting, since his arrival in Cauldron that morning. He'd spoken to about a dozen people, mostly tall, lanky humans, most he'd sought out, a few who'd offered a few casual words of their own initiative upon seeing him and the symbol he wore on his breast.

"Goldenshield? Yeah, he's that pal'erдин o' Mordan, ain't he? Hey, 'e's got that same simber on 'is jacket, yer guys related?"

"You are a priest of Moradin, aren't you? I am honored, sir, but I have only been a member of the Hammers for a few tendays, since right after the Catastrophe. Are you a retainer of Lord Goldenshield? I... hey, where are you going?"

"Arun? Yeah, he's a damned wonder, right like. Did you know he saved my sister once? During the Troubles, damned demon would'a tore her to pieces ere that dwarf come along. Cut the damned thing in half with that damned holy sword of his. Damn, we're lucky to have him..."

"Well, don't tell anyone I told you this, but my sister's got a friend whose cousin is an acolyte in the Temple of Helm, and *she* says that Arun and Beorna are going to get married, and fuse the two temples together! They're such a cute couple... Isn't that great news?"

"If you ask me, they should make *him* the mayor. That Taskerhill guy, he gives me the creeps, what with them beady eyes of his. Them merchants just care about making money; hells, we wouldn't even *have* a town if it weren't for the Heroes of Cauldron."

"Well, the Hammers can be a bit heavy-handed, but I'm not one to complain. Better than those damned half-orcs, by a fair margin. And hey, I'll put a few coins in to the collection box for the Anvil as ready as for the Gauntlet... heck, Cauldron can use another patron god, ever since the Kelemvorites damn-near destroyed the town."

"You want the dwarf temple? It be up on Obsidian Avenue, near the north gate..."

Umbar Ironhammer looked up at the notable structure he'd been directed to. From the outside it looked moderately impressive, a solid temple building of undressed stone adjoined by a walled courtyard and what appeared to be a rectory and stables. The temple

had sustained obvious damage, with the arched portico above the entry stairs sundered and open to the sky above. It looked as though it had been hit with a trebuchet stone, the dwarf thought. From what he'd seen of the rest of the human city, it was surprising that it hadn't suffered more damage.

He approached, marking the obvious sigils of the human god Helm; he looked for other indicators, but saw none. The doors had clearly been recently repaired. He did not bother to knock, but pushed the left portal open and entered.

The temple was quiet; there were a few humans about, engaged in quiet prayer in the pews that flanked the central aisle down the middle of the structure. None noted his entry. He made his way down the aisle toward the sanctum, separated from the worship area of the church by a polished wooden railing. There was a white cloth bearing the sigil of Helm above the plain marble altar, and few other decorations; in all, the temple had a starkness to it that appealed to the dwarf's sensibilities.

But Umbar was not here for a study of human religions.

As he reached the opening in the divider, his armor clanking slightly with each step, a white-clad acolyte emerged from the curtained arch that presumably led to the sacristy. She looked barely old enough to be considered an adult by human standards, but she bowed respectfully to the dwarf. "Can I be of assistance, sir?"

The dwarf fixed her with a stern expression. "Bring Arun Goldenshield to me."

The girl's eyes widened slightly, but she retained her equilibrium as she shook her head slightly. *By Moradin's hammer, she looks like a slight breeze will carry her off*, the dwarf thought. *I thought Helm's was a martial sect?* But he kept his feelings hidden beneath the wrinkled exterior of his face.

"I am sorry, sir, but Lord Goldenshield is not available at the moment. If you'd like, I can take a message for you, or if you'd prefer to wait..." She trailed off at the intensity of the dwarf's frown; that look had caused veteran warriors to quaver, so it wasn't a mark against her that it had an effect.

As she tried to rally, Umbar's attention was drawn to the side, where the door to the courtyard opened and another dwarf appeared.

"Ah, Shirl, glad ye be 'ere. I be needin' another load a concrete a'fer..."

The dwarf stopped as he caught sight of Umbar.

The newcomer was obviously a shield dwarf, although his much paler skin was barely visible under the thicket of tangled hair and the truly chaotic beard that exploded from the lower half of his face. Umbar frowned as the dwarf's unkempt appearance, but the dwarf's only reaction was a scowl in response as he felt himself being judged. The dwarf was clad in a simple workman's tunic that bore several noticeable stains, and he wore a leather harness weighed down with what Umbar recognized as stoneworking tools, likewise marked with signs of recent use.

One of Goldenshield's 'followers', no doubt, Umbar thought, his frown deepening. He could not resist saying, "Do all your folk show equal disrespect to the servants of the All-Father?" he asked.

The dwarf's lips twisted, as though he wanted to spit, but was resisting the urge. "Praise the Anvil," he said, making a fist. "Now, whaddaya want? Arun didn't say nothin' 'bout no cleric comin' by, but I guess we ken be usin' the 'elp. Been a few outbreaks o' sickness in the city, o' late, ken ye cast *remove disease*?"

Umbar was barely able to conceal his outrage at the dwarf's presumption; as it was his hands tightened into fists. "Where is Arun Goldenshield?" he said, in a voice that brooked no delay in reply.

But the dwarf appeared to be in no hurry. "What be yer business with 'im?"

Umbar came forward. "While *human* customs are often different, it is not my custom to discuss church matters with an outside audience." The other dwarf glanced at the worshippers, who indeed had taken a decided interest in the proceedings, although a few were still pretending to be engrossed in their private prayers, their eyes dropping quickly as the dwarf looked at them.

"Arright, yer lordship, come on then," the dwarf said. To the human girl, he said, "Shirl, be sure to put in that order fer the concrete." Then he departed back into the courtyard, the gold dwarf cleric not far behind.

She seemed grateful to watch them leave.

The private chapel in the back of the rectory had clearly been created as a human place of worship. The short benches of polished wood looked far more comfortable than the plain stone seats Umbar was accustomed to, and there was even a bar of wood across the floor in front of the compact altar—presumably for the human priest to kneel upon when prostrating himself before his god. Again there was not an excess of decoration, with small figures of Helm in the warrior aspect along the walls... but here, Umbar quickly saw, there had been additions; a definite emblem in silver above the generic altar, the familiar anvil-and-hammer sigil that the priest wore upon his own breast.

The man he had come to see was kneeling—upon the stone, not the wooden slat—in the small open space before the altar. His head was bowed, with one fist laid flat upon the ground before him, the other holding a longsword point-down against the stone beside him. A brilliant white glow shone around the weapon, surrounding the praying warrior with a bright nimbus of radiated light. He wore a simple tunic of gray cloth fit neatly to the considerable muscles of his squat frame, and beneath the evenly-trimmed brown hair his skin was a nearly identical shade as that of the priest of Moradin.

The entry of the cleric and his escort had not been silent; the praying dwarf heard them and turned around. He was clean-shaven, Umbar saw, but also prominent was the same sigil so evident upon the far wall of the chapel, captured in a plain iron disk that the dwarf wore

as an amulet upon his chest. When he caught sight of the priest, surprise was visible in his eyes.

Arun rose. Even without his armor, with the *holy avenger* blazing in his hand he cast a picture of a holy knight, ready to smite down evil.

“Prelate Ironhammer,” Arun said, inclining his head in the customary dwarvish bow.

“Yer know this feller then?” Hodge said.

The priest ignored him, fixing his full attention upon Arun. “My title has changed. I am here in my function as Inquisitor.”

Arun’s brow tightened, but he merely nodded. He seemed to realize that he was still holding his sword bare in his hand; he reached over to the nearby bench and recovered the scabbard, sliding the blade home. Its absence seemed to cast the chapel back into gloom, the late afternoon light struggling through the narrow windows that faced away from the direction of the setting sun.

The cleric drew out a small parchment scroll, bound with strips of leather, and sealed by a dark gob of wax marked with an oval sigil as broad as a thumbprint. Arun took it without comment, his eyes cold.

“Arun Goldenshield,” the priest said, “It is my duty to hold you for an inquisitorial hearing, into violations conducted against the terms of your exile, and against the doctrines of the Faith of our people.”

“Violations? What are ye talkin’ about, man?” Hodge said.

“Hodge, please,” Arun said softly.

But the priest acknowledged this question. “The charges are detailed in the document you have just received, but they include: violation of the terms of exile, to wit, claiming the title of a paladin of the All-Father, and public misrepresentation to that purpose. The inculcation of personal followers who are not only non-dwarves, but are not properly initiated servants of the Faith. Doctrinal heresy, specifically the merger of worship and doctrine of the Faith with elements of a... *human* religion.”

Hodge’s mouth dropped, but Arun kept his reaction to the news hidden, although something flared in his eyes at the priest’s words. He only said, however, “I understand.”

“I am the representative of the Council here,” Umbar said. “This will be a hearing only, subject to the dictates of the Law. I will make the determination of whether you are to be bound and returned to the Rift for presentation to the full Council and the Inquisitorial Court.”

“Very well. Then I submit myself to the judgment of the Inquisitorial Council.”

Hodge looked about to say something, but Arun silenced him with a look. Umbar extended his hand. Arun looked at him for a long moment, silent; then, slowly, he reached up, and withdrew the symbol upon his chest, the icon he'd carried with him into battle since his arrival in Cauldron. He handed it to Umbar, who took it and placed it into a small pouch at his belt.

Chapter 491

"This is insane."

Beorna paced back and forth across the small room that served as Arun's quarters, her heavy boots making a loud clatter against the thick wooden floorboards. She was not clad in her heavy adamantine armor, but even in her robe she could not appear as anything other than the warrior that she was.

Arun, by contrast, stood calmly by the plain rack that held his armor and sword, on the far side of the room, his hands folded across his chest. "You know about my past," Arun said.

Beorna made a dismissive slashing gesture with her hand. "Bah, so you wouldn't slaughter innocents... But that has nothing to do with this. You *are* a paladin, you've been fighting on the front lines of the battle against evil nonstop for the last year! How anyone could doubt that is... it's... insane!"

Arun sighed. "From what I've learned about Helm and his church, you do not do things all that differently. The Law..."

"I *know* about the Law! I'm a templar... I've *served* on tribunals of inquisition! But we aren't so bound by blind tradition that we ignore reality that is starkly clear..."

She trailed off, frowning. The fact was, she *could* remember several cases where just that had happened. She herself had been caught in that trap, the danger of all those who followed a strict code, and who tended to rely on that code rather than confront difficult situations where nuance trumped clean and easy solutions. But she wasn't going to let that change what was so blatantly wrong about the current situation.

Snorting, she started pacing again. "So. What happens, if you are indicted? Are you just going to go with this cleric back to the Rift, surrender yourself for trial, a thousand miles away? Walk away from all we've done here, from what still needs to be done?" Her voice cracked slightly with the last sentence, and she turned away for a moment, disgusted at herself for letting her feelings undermine her argument. Arun pretended not to notice, and she pretended not to thank him for it.

"It is highly unlikely that I would be ordered back to the Rift. My return would be... problematic, and the Inquisitor is perfectly able to pronounce and implement the sentence, should I be found guilty of the charges."

Beorna turned back toward him, frowning. “I admit that I do not know enough of the details of the All-Father’s doctrine to know this, but what are we talking about here, in terms of penalty?”

“A *mark of justice*, combined with an outright prohibition on wearing the icons of Moradin or his church, or claiming leadership therein. Possibly a public lashing. In a dwarven community, that would be naked, but I do not know how the law would be applied within a mixed-race community such as Cauldron.”

“Oh, Taskerhill would probably sell tickets,” Beorna drawled.

“I am sorry that you have to be involved in this,” Arun said. “This is my burden, not yours, and a public hearing could bring shame upon the Temple of Helm.”

Beorna came over to him. “Now you’re just being an idiot,” she said. “This foolishness is no fault of yours, even a child could see that. Whatever happens—whatever!—we will face it together.”

“Beorna—“

“Do not challenge me on this! I have your oath, do not forget, and while this fool cleric may doubt your word, I know better.” She took his hand, crushed it in hers, lifted it to her lips and brushed it with them. Then, as if embarrassed by the action, she released him and stepped back.

“The matter is settled, then. I have a meeting with that blasted Taskerhill, I’m already late for it. But tonight, we will have dinner, and discuss your defense at this hearing. Assuming you weren’t planning on playing at a martyr and meekly accepting the judgment of this Umbar Ironhammer.”

“I may be many things, but meek is not one of them,” Arun said.

“Good, because I cannot stand milksops.”

She started toward the door, but as she reached it she turned back to him. “I know that you know this, Arun, but it is the man, not the symbol, that is important.”

“I know, Beorna.”

She nodded, and departed. She was already thinking about the unpleasantness likely to occur during her meeting with Taskerhill, so she nearly collided into Umbar Ironhammer in the hall outside. Arun, unfailingly polite, had offered the priest lodging on the temple grounds, and while Beorna did not feel particularly hospitable toward the gold dwarf, she was compelled to recognize the respect due his office. The cleric no longer wore his full plate armor, but the tunic he wore still bulged with the presence of at least a shirt of chain links beneath. The sigil of Moradin was still featured prominently upon the garment, spreading across his chest.

“Templar,” the priest said, with a curt nod.

Beorna did not trust her voice, so replied only with a nod so abbreviated that it could almost have been perceived as an insult. The corridor was narrow enough to make it difficult for the two to pass each other easily, but after a moment the cleric of Moradin turned aside, letting her depart. Her boots made a loud clatter as she stormed away, expressing her displeasure at the unplanned encounter.

Umbar glanced after her, then continued to the door through which she'd appeared. He rapped upon it.

"Come in."

He opened the door to find Arun seated at the compact desk arrayed in a corner of the plain chamber. The warrior quickly rose and bent his head in the traditional gesture of respect.

"I am not here in my official capacity," he said. "I know that the hour is late, but I wished to speak to you."

"I am at your disposal, Inquisitor," Arun said, indicating the only other chair in the room, a simple three-legged stool that looked sturdy enough to support the muscled dwarf. But the dwarf remained standing, crossing to the armor rack where Arun's magical platemail shone in the light of the room's single oil lamp. The breastplate bore prominently the mark of the anvil and hammer, and the cleric's gaze lingered on that sigil.

"The armor was a gift from the Temple of Helm," Arun said.

"It is a fine suit." The cleric turned his attention to the scabbarded longsword placed in the slots atop the rack. "You once wielded the warhammer, as I recall."

"In the struggle against evil, I have made use of the weapons that have come to me. The sword is a *holy avenger*," Arun said. "It has proven a great ally."

Umbar reached for the weapon, after directing a glance at Arun for permission. No matter what their respective statuses, it was still a great insult to take a warrior's weapon without leave. Arun nodded, and the cleric drew the weapon, examining the blade in the light of the lamp, as it did not radiate its usual glow in his hands.

"I have not had the fortune of handling such a weapon," he said finally, replacing the weapon in its holder. "The mark upon the blade... the sigil of the human god Lathander, is it not?"

Arun nodded. "We found it in the hands of an evil cult that had headquartered in the tunnels beneath the city. They were intent upon the destruction of Cauldron, and the facilitation of a permanent gate between Faerûn and Carceri."

"So I have heard," Umbar said.

"I can prepare a written overview of recent events, from my perspective, for the record, if you wish."

Umbar shook his head. "I am certain that all of that will be addressed in sufficient detail in the hearing." In an odd parallel to Beorna's actions earlier, he turned and strode across the small room, pausing near the door, looking away from him. "Your actions have created no small amount of disruption within the leadership of the Rift," he finally said.

"I have always tried to follow the dictates of our faith, as dictated by my conscience and my best judgment," Arun said.

The inquisitor snorted, and turned. For the first time, some hint of emotion was visible on his face. "This isn't some chaotic elf-faith, Goldenshield! Our religion is based upon *rules*, and *order*. The dictates of your 'conscience' have no bearing upon this matter, but rather the violations of our code, and the defiance of ecclesiastical law, that you have perpetuated."

"It would seem that I have already been judged," Arun said, quietly.

"You will receive a fair hearing according to the letter of the Law," Umbar intoned.

"Perhaps I should reserve any further comments for that event," Arun said.

"I do not wish to be your enemy, Goldenshield. It is not my intent to try you again for the sins of the past. My responsibility now is to my office."

"I have never expected any less of you, Inquisitor. Yours was not the deciding vote for my exile..."

"But I voted in favor nevertheless," the cleric finished for him. "I hope you understand why it was done."

"I accepted the judgment. And I will accept any lingering consequences of my actions."

The two dwaves stood there for a long moment, facing each other in a silent confrontation of wills. Finally, Umbar opened his mouth to speak, but his words were distracted by the sound of a commotion in the hall outside. The noise of hasty footsteps was followed by an equally abrupt patter of knuckles on the door.

"Lord Goldenshield!" came a muffled voice through the portal. "Lord Goldenshield, forgive the intrusion, I know it's late, but there's trouble in the city..."

Arun came forward, waiting for Umbar to step back to provide access to the door. The cleric's expression had hardened again into a stony commentary of disapproval as Arun drew the latch and opened the door to reveal an agitated young human, clad in the blue livery of the Hammers. He glanced at Umbar, momentarily uncertain.

"What is it, Caleph?" Arun asked.

“There’s reports of an attack, near the river chasm,” the young man said quickly. “No one’s really sure who it was, but it seems that several people have been abducted... they just vanished!”

Chapter 492

Arun knelt beside the body, covered in a dark cloak that seemed an amorphous gray in the weak light. Even before he drew back the covering, he knew what he would find; he’d grown accustomed to the *feeling* of death.

The victim was a young man, in his early twenties by the look of him, with the stubble of several days on his cheeks and his raven hair flying unkept around his head. The cause of death was instantly apparent; there was an obvious dent where his skull had been bashed in. There was very little blood, but it was likely he had been killed instantly by the blow.

Droplets of water fell around them. A light rain had started up on their walk across the town to this place, and the remnants of the roof of the ruined building provided only a nominal protection against the elements. In addition to the omnipresent mustiness there were other odors that suggested that a number of people had called the partially-collapsed warehouse as a home.

“There were no signs of the other residents?” Arun asked.

The Watch sergeant hovering behind him shook his head, then belatedly realized that Arun couldn’t see him. “No, sir. The witnesses we talked to said they heard sounds of a struggle; one old woman who’s been staying in another of these condemned shells nearby said she saw some shadowy figures heading out into the night, toward the chasm, but couldn’t provide any details. She and the other witnesses have been taken to the town hall for statements; if you like I can have them made available to you.”

Arun nodded, but for now they needed to see if anything could be found here. It would not be easy; the wet, booted feet of the guardsmen who’d initially come upon the scene had obliterated any tracks, and it was highly unlikely that whoever had been behind this attack would have lingered long enough for their trace to be discovered. Arun could sense an echo of Taint, a memory of the dark deeds done here this night, but it was not strong enough to provide direction of where the assailants had left.

“You let your people live in such conditions?” Umbar growled.

“We have been doing everything we can to relocate people into appropriate housing, and get damaged structures restored to a status safe enough for occupation,” Beorna responded quickly. “We’ve marked condemned buildings, but without posting guards, it’s almost impossible to keep people out of the shells.”

“Human civilization,” Umbar muttered.

Arun saw Beorna tense at the implied challenge of the statement, and quickly rose, hoping to forestall this exchange. The cleric’s presence had been the result of a compromise.

When they'd gotten the news of the attack, Umbar had not be insensitive to Arun's desire to investigate, but he'd insisted upon accompanying him. Arun had gotten the impression that the priest of Moradin was not going to let him out of his sight until the date of his hearing. His other companions had not been pleased with that decision; the dark clouds brewing in Beorna's expression, combined with the utter impossibility of Hodge restraining himself from saying exactly what he thought of the matter, made collectively for an explosive situation. Now all he needed was for a clash between the cleric of Moradin, Beorna, and the harried members of the Watch.

"Inquisitor, can your spells reveal anything of use from the victim?"

The cleric glanced down at the battered corpse, the victim's eyes staring sightlessly up into the air. He shook his head. "I do not have that blessing prepared. Perhaps on the morrow." His expression indicated his feelings about the prospect of using his gifts to communicate with the spirit of a murdered human. Arun ignored that, and turned as Hodge came over to him, holding something.

"Found it in a pile of rubble, near the back door," he said. He held out the object. In the flickering light of the hooded lanterns of the Watch it was just a vague oblong, but the dwarves had darkvision, and could pierce the deep shadows. Umbar, who'd come up behind Arun, hissed in a surprised breath as he saw the item: a long dagger with a curving blade. "Drow!" he exclaimed, recognizing the craftsmanship of the weapon.

The guardsmen exchanged a few nervous looks.

"Aye," Hodge said. "Hasn't seen a whetstone in a while, though."

"There are entrances to the Underdark beneath the city," Arun said. He knew of one in particular, a dark tunnel in the Malachite Fortress, a place that was not associated with good memories.

"I thought those had been closed," Beorna said.

"Those we know of... or perhaps the quakes might have opened another access point," Arun said.

"You think dark elves are behind this, ser?" the sergeant asked.

Arun shook his head. "Doesn't fit with what the witnesses reported... and it just doesn't sound right, not for drow."

"The dark elves wouldn't bother with abducting a few thugs," Umbar agreed.

"Have there been any other people reported missing in this neighborhood?" Arun asked the sergeant.

"Not that I'm aware of, ser."

"Has there been anything else unusual here, in the last tenday or so, that you recall?"

“Well... we’d heard a few rumors—nothing concrete, mind you—of something creepin’ around these ruins. Kinda put it off to spooks, folks uneasy, you know? We’d been walkin’ these streets as part’a our patrols, ‘long with your Hammers, we hadn’t seen nothin’ unusual. Cleared some folks out who weren’t s’posed to be there, unsafe buildin’s, an’ all.”

Arun wore his heavy armor, but a blank tabard covered the sigil etched in his breastplate, another result of the compromise he’d reached with the inquisitor of Moradin.

“It could just be a clash between rival gangs, ser,” the sergeant suggested. “They say that there’s a few lingering elements of the Last Laugh left in the city, fighting over the scraps of their organization.”

Arun nodded, but his own information, imparted by Mole, belied that possibility. And his gut felt something... *wrong*, here. As if a murder on a stormy night could ever be “right”.

“Whoever did this, they be long gone, like as not,” Hodge said.

Arun inwardly agreed, but he could not let this go without at least trying to find some clue. In the morning, divination magic might be able to uncover more, but by then the trail of the assailants might be even colder. He turned to the guardsmen and their sergeant. “We’ll take a look around the neighborhood. Our darkvision will allow us to see better without the lamps. I want you to send two men to the Town Hall, and alert the Captain of the Watch of what’s happened here. Tell him I want twenty men dispatched here at once. Have the rest of your men set watches here, and wait for our return.”

“Ser!” the sergeant said, saluting. He turned to offer orders to his men, while Arun turned to the other dwarves.

“We’ll get more done if we split up, but we should always remain within sight of at least one other at all times, in case something happens.”

“You are taking command of this operation, I presume?” Umbar asked.

“He’s doing what needs to be done,” Beorna snapped, but Arun laid a hand on her shoulder. “We would appreciate your assistance, Inquisitor,” he said.

The cleric nodded. “We should start in the direction that the assailants were last spotted heading,” he said.

Arun nodded, and the four dwarves set out into the night.

Chapter 493

Gusts of wind drove fat droplets of rain into the dwarves’ faces as they made their way deeper into the neighborhood surrounding the river chasm. Hodge sneezed, and grumbled something that was lost on the breeze. Here, within bowshot of the new-formed gorge, casual comments could not be discerned. The sound of the river making its way down the

side of the mountain, combined with the noise of the wind rushing through the chasm, was loud enough to override most other sounds. Most of the buildings here had been condemned and remained vacant; eventually they would be torn down. It was unlikely that there would be much rebuilding here. Although magical divination had revealed that the majority of the city had regained geologic stability in the aftermath of the disaster, the constant noise and the general human fear of unwarded heights provided little incentive for such projects.

The bridge that would eventually cross the new river gorge was still just pilings at this point, and the tenuous rope bridge that crossed the chasm was far from safe even on clear days, let alone on stormy nights when gusty winds blew through the gap that had forever changed the landscape of the volcano town. On this night, the neighborhood was all but deserted.

Which was not to say that the neighborhood was uninhabited. In addition to what they'd seen tonight, Mole had reported that several of the abandoned buildings had been claimed by squatters, refugees who had lost their homes, or simply poor folk who had owned nothing to start with. A lot of people had left Cauldron before the disaster, and others had died in the calamity, leaving a lot of empty buildings that could be reclaimed. But restoration work took time, and Arun suspected that there would always be people who slipped through the cracks, who for whatever reason preferred to hide in the shadows beyond the ebb and rush of the town's active life.

Beorna remained close at his side, and she touched his shoulder as they left the ruined warehouse behind them. "If they are dark elves, we'll never see them," she said, speaking loud enough to carry over the wind, but not loud enough for her words to carry to the other two dwarves.

Arun nodded. "We still have to look," he told her.

They spread out then, following Arun's injunction to remain within sight of at least one other at all times. There wasn't much to see; several buildings had collapsed entirely, leaving only piles of rubble slick with wet from the rain. One entire block had been consumed by fire, leaving only heaped ash and a few blackened timbers that jutted from the mess, clawing at the sky like barren fingers. The streets had been cleared enough to allow passage, but they still occasionally had to move around a heap of rubble that protruded out into the avenue.

A strong gust slammed into Arun, and for a moment the street ahead was lost in a spray of water into his eyes. He drew off his helmet, wiping his face to clear his vision. When he could see, he noticed that Umbar had stopped in the entry of an alley, one of the steeply sloping corridors that connected the terraced layers of the city. One thing that these connecting streets allowed for was the drainage of rain down to the center of the city, to the rushing river that now drained out into the gorge and down the mountainside to the southeast. Most of the alleyways had either subterranean pipes below the pavers or runnels to either side that allowed the water to drain to the next tier without washing away pedestrians passing by, but the quakes that had reshaped the city had damaged many of them, making even cautious travel a risky proposition.

The current level of precipitation wasn't enough to fuel heavy levels of flooding, not yet, but small plumes of water nevertheless flared around the dwarf cleric's ankles as he stood there in the mouth of the alleyway. Arun motioned to Hodge and Beorna and moved to join him.

"What is it?" he asked the priest. The two buildings to either side of the alley were mostly intact, at least from the exterior, but deep cracks in the foundations and the shattered windows indicated that this block had not escaped damage in the disaster. This neighborhood had been mostly an industrial district prior to the disaster, with workshops and warehouses occasionally interspersed with retail establishments that now gaped empty, their contents evacuated by their owners or looted by the opportunistic in the aftermath of the disaster. Arun remembered one shopowner who'd insisted on reopening his business even though the building had been condemned; after the collapse that killed him, his wife, two children, and two customers the city officials had become more stringent in cracking down on such foolish choices.

Umbar shot his fellow gold dwarf a cold look. "You have forgotten much of your stonelore, it would seem."

Arun peered into the alley. High stone walls that also served as part of the foundation of the flanking buildings formed a long passage that led up to the next avenue about fifty feet away and above them. The only thing of note here was a storm drain, set vertically into a recessed depression to one side, blocked by a grille of heavy iron bars that were set into the surrounding stone.

"No debris," Hodge said, pointing to the drain. The dwarf stepped through the swirling water to the drain, and bent to examine it. Spray washed around his hips and the current tugged at his cloak, but he ignored both as he completed his search. Then, after glancing back at the others, he reached out and gave the bars a yank.

The entire stone frame around the drain slid outward several feet, sufficient space to allow a man-sized creature to pass into the pipe beyond. Beyond the initial narrow opening the shaft appeared to widen into a circular tube about four feet across, sloping downward at a considerable but not impossible angle.

"Most of these drains ended up at the lake, didn't they?" Arun asked.

Beorna nodded. "With the quakes, who knows where they all go, now. Though it would be unpleasant, if one were suddenly catapulted into the river gorge."

Arun concentrated, but he detected no hint of Taint. "It's a lead, but we have no way of knowing if the attackers came via this route."

"The All-Father can provide the answer," Umbar said. "I will embark upon an invocation, but it will take some time." Without waiting for a reply he began casting, a sonorous chant in the Rift dialect of dwarvish, a tongue heavy with long syllables and complicated pronunciations. Inured to the water washing around his boots, the priest delved into the power of his office, communing with his god.

The other dwarves kept watch, but as minutes passed with the chant continuing unabated, Hodge began to fidget. "Could we not have waited someplace dryer while 'e did this?"

"This is a complicated spell," Beorna said. "Be patient."

Finally the chant came to an end, and the cleric stepped forward. He placed his bare hands upon the stone around the grate entrance, and leaned forward until his bearded cheek was pressed up against the wet stone.

"Yer expectin' that stone to tell yer what happened?" Hodge snorted.

"Exactly," Arun said, like Beorna recognizing what the priest was doing.

They watched as the dwarf cleric stood there against the stone, his eyes closed, his lips moving soundlessly. Finally, he drew back, shaking water out of his beard before putting his helmet back upon his head.

"What did you learn?" Arun asked.

"The stones had much to say," Umbar replied. "We now know the identity of our enemy."

Chapter 494

In the shadows, the Chosen waited.

The only illumination was the coals in the braziers set in a half-circle around the dais, their ruddy light shining off the glossy black sheen of the chamber's walls. The light was insufficient to reveal details, only suggesting at the considerable size of the room. Thick stone pillars supported the ceiling above, which was utterly lost in darkness, giving the illusion of a vast endless space.

The light also reflected on the faces of the occupants that crowded the chamber. There were dozens of them, humanoid, but with monstrous visages and sightless white orbs for eyes that glowed redly in the glow of the braziers. The light also had some odd effect upon the mostly-naked creatures, for it seemed to shine *through* their skin, as though their flesh was translucent, infusing them with a carcerian nimbus that added an additional fierceness to their appearance. Their hides were marked, criss-crossed with scars and piercings that looked to have some sort of ritual significance. All were armed, mostly with heavy axes of black metal, although some bore small swords, metal bludgeons, or curved knives tucked into the wiry leather harnesses they wore across their bodies.

The creatures all faced the dais, where the Chosen sat upon a plain stone bier, shrouded in a long cowled robe of heavy gray fibre.

"Bring the petitioners forward," came a voice from within the cowl, thick and gravelly but decidedly feminine.

The cloaked figure rose as the gathering of creatures parted to reveal several wide-eyed humans, some still struggling against the unyielding grip of their captors. There were five of them in all. The last one was unconscious, his left eye a bloody mess, dragged easily by the strong humanoid warrior who'd taken him.

The humans stared up at the cloaked figure in obvious terror. Her identity was lost within the darkness of the cowl, but a small gray stone floated around her head, animated in its lazy orbit by some foreign magic. She lifted an arm, the robe falling away to reveal a slender, feminine hand that was so transparent to be almost invisible, like the appendage of a ghost.

"Wha... what do you want with us?" one of the young humans managed to squeak.

"I am the Chosen of the Cha-Sabratoh'ka," she intoned, pointing at them with an eerily indistinct finger. "In your tongue, surfacers, that means, 'the children of the ordeal.' For many years we have wandered the underworld. All hands are raised against us, for we exist outside of the bounds of mere mortal folk. We have been through the fire and through the flensing, and the weak have been pared away like the dust. Those that remain have become strong, but we continue always the trial, to pare away those that are not worthy."

The humans could only look up at her, fixed by the potency of her power and the iron hands of those holding them.

"At last, after passage of the tests set for us, we were guided to this place, the Cairn of the Fade. Here, and in the halls above, we found the true purpose of our search, the gateway to the evermore, that beyond this world of ordeal and suffering... release... truth... deliverance."

"Oom bar sabrat," the gathered creatures chanted as one, causing the men to flinch at the cold potency of that united sound.

"At first we feared that gift, the touch of the Fade. But then, it was revealed, that this was not another ordeal, but rather the final test. The Fade has taken some of us, and those that remain must prepare for the last transition into Beyond. Ours is the ordeal. Oom bar sabrat."

"Oom bar sabrat," the collective echoed.

The cloaked figure looked down at the humans cowering before her. "When we learned of the proximity of your surfacers settlement to the Cairn of the Fade, our final purpose was revealed. We will bring the Fade to all... such is our purpose, why we have been left in this mortal realm of suffering, while our brothers and sisters have gone ahead into Beyond to prepare the way. Your people will be first, and you few will have the honor of being the first pilgrims to chart the way for those that must follow."

"Bring forward the vessel," she commanded.

A scarred creature of the same race as those others gathered came up upon the dais from behind, bearing an oblong container that resembled a miniature keg, perhaps two feet long

and a foot thick. The bearer's hide was mangled with carvings, piercings, and fetishes that were too patterned to be anything but deliberate, but it was not evident how a living being could have suffered so much damage without going insane.

The bearer held forth the container prominently as he came forward. The red light from the coals glimmered on golden runes inlaid into the thick wood, but they were meaningless to the humans, who were not familiar with the gnomish language. But the obvious veneration given by the creatures and their leader to the device were enough to instill a great fear in them, and they quailed within the grasp of their captors.

The robed female produced a small silver cup from under her robe, and extended it to the small spigot on the side of the container. She touched the rune marker with her other hand, and whispered something, a command, perhaps, although it was barely audible and not in a language that any of those present spoke. That knowledge had been difficult to come by for the Chosen, as well, but she was a being of great resourcefulness and cunning, and after much effort the little keg had yielded its secrets.

A small trickle of liquid issued from the container into the cup. It only took a second to fill it; the female quickly muttered another word to stop it, and the mutilated acolyte withdrew, remaining on the edge of the dais with his burden.

"You will now take into yourselves the gift of the Fade," she said, moving closer to the first young human with the silver cup extended. As she came, the two creatures holding him released him, although they remained close at hand, offering little chance of escape.

Still, the prisoner lashed out immediately, striking the female's hand and knocking the silver cup flying.

"Worm!" she hissed. "You refuse the blessing we would bestow upon you? You are not worthy!" And she reached up and drew down her cowl. Her servants had twisted the other prisoners, turning them away, leaving only the single man to face her. He tried to break free, but the rough hands drove at his body, offering no escape.

He tried to lunge ahead, across the dais, but as he stepped forward he caught sight of the woman looking down at him. Her features were not at all like the crude visages of the other creatures, the outlines of her form smooth and even sultry. But her flesh was still nearly transparent, and the red light of the braziers revealed that her skin bore a texture to it, rough like scales.

And her hair... it *moved*, animated by a living force... no, not hair...

The young man's mouth fell open to scream, but he never got a chance.

When the other prisoners were turned back toward the dais, the female's cowl was back in place, and their erstwhile companion stood frozen in mid-lunge, a statue perfectly captured in grainy gray stone.

The medusa gestured, and the acolyte came forward again, bearing the keg. Another of the creatures had recovered the cup, bowing deeply as he placed it once more into her hand.

“Now... let us see if the rest of you are worthy,” she said.

Chapter 495

“Grimlocks,” Hodge said, the word coming out as a curse. He followed that with several other juicy epithets, directed at their enemies, the rain, the mucky slickness of the pipe, and the universe in general.

“Silence yourself,” Umbar said, from ahead of the former miner. “The creatures have phenomenal hearing, and will detect us coming.”

“I doubt that they will miss us, regardless,” Beorna noted, as the four armored dwarves clanked their way down the sloping shaft of the pipe. For humans, the pipe would have been incredibly difficult to traverse, but even for the squat dwarves, used to tight underground spaces, the descent was far from easy. The water draining from the street above drove down at them, making each step treacherous, and the surrounding walls were slick with layered muck and filth that had accumulated over time. Arun was in the lead, and he used his shield and right arm as wedges to steady his progress as he made his way forward. They bore no light sources, as Arun’s sword was in its scabbard and the four needed no external illumination with their darkvision in any case.

The pipe continued straight for about sixty yards. Occasionally small drains opened onto it, a foot in diameter or less. They kept a close eye also for hidden doors or other possible digressions, but saw nothing. Arun paused frequently to seek out hints of Taint, but likewise his divinations proved empty.

Finally they came to an oddity, a break in the pipe. The water collected here in a frothing pool about four paces across that drained into the continuation of the pipe on its far side. The break had obviously been opened by the recent quakes, and they could see that a wide crevice, two feet above the level of the water, appeared to extend for some distance into darkness to their right.

Arun tried to move toward the crevice, but he stumbled and nearly slipped into the pool. Beorna’s steadying hand was upon him in an instant, drawing him back.

“Careful,” she said.

“Take my shield for a moment,” he said, divesting himself of the bulky object before extending himself again toward the crevice. This time he made it, grasping onto the tenuous edges of the crevice and pulling himself up into it.

“It goes back quite a ways,” he told the others. “It was probably opened by the quakes, but there are definite signs that it’s been cleared and widened. It looks like another passage, extending further below the city.”

“Well, let’s get this over with, then,” Hodge said from back in the pipe.

Arun took his shield back from Beorna, and working together they were all able to make the transition into the new corridor. This tunnel was even tighter than the pipe, despite the effort that had gone into widening it, but it was drier, and they quickly were able to descend for about another fifty or sixty yards before the tunnel widened and opened onto a chamber of worked stone.

This room clearly predated the earthquakes, but it likewise showed signs of recent damage. The place was maybe thirty feet square. The tunnel they’d negotiated entered onto a wall that was flanked by a pair of massive stone hearths, now quiet and dark with debris. Additional rubble cluttered the floor, possibly from furniture, for the ceiling appeared to be mostly intact, with just a few small cracks. A small, low rough-hewn passage exited to their right, and directly ahead of them on the far side of the room gaped an empty round doorway with a thick stone threshold. Wooden shards of what might have once been the door were scattered across the floor on both sides of that opening; they could see what looked like an even larger room beyond.

Arun looked around, a strong suspicion dawning in his mind. While the others checked for any traces of their quarry, he crossed to the round doorway, bending to examine the curving lintel. The rune he found there confirmed what he’d expected to find.

“Jzadirune,” he said. “We’re in Jzadirune.”

Hodge and Beorna both understood the significance of that name, having heard the tales of Arun’s first journey to this place. But Umbar shook his head. “What does that mean?”

Arun opened his mouth to speak, but he did not get a chance to immediately elaborate, for a round object flashed past his eyes, and the room was filled with an explosion of blinding light and surging heat. The flare blinded him, but he could hear the sounds of scurrying feet approaching from the larger room, accompanied by an inhuman croaking noise from many throats. Drawing his sword, he lifted his shield in time to take the first heavy blow that clanged solidly against the bulwark, driving him back.

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Hodge had actually gotten a momentary warning of the ambush. He’d been standing by the rough-hewn northern passage, most of his attention on Arun and that heap of self-righteous cleric, when he heard a skittering noise from the tunnel opening. He’d started to turn, reaching for his magical waraxe, when the explosion in the center of the room blinded him. Fortunately he’d been looking away; he blinked a few times, the bright stars clearing from his vision. He smelled something acrid, a stench like burning rags, and looked down to see that his beard was on fire.

The hurled oversized flask that had narrowly missed Arun had struck the ground in the center of the room, almost at Umbar’s feet. The force of the explosion had knocked the dwarf backward, but even though white flames licked at the entire front side of his torso, the

remnants of the explosive mixture coating his armor from his helmet down to his greaves, the cleric was quick to recover. Beorna, who'd been partially shielded from the blast by the cleric's body, moved to help him, but she had to turn and draw out her sword as a horde of grimlocks erupted from the small side passage, bearing black axes that they quickly put to use as they engaged the dwarves.

Arun, likewise, found himself hard pressed by another group that swarmed through the small round doorway to assault him. The grimlocks were raging, launching violent all-out attacks upon the dwarves, but they also moved with cunning, setting up flanking positions that allowed them to slip devastating sneak attacks through the dwarves' defenses. Arun's potent armor protected him from the first few blows, but he found out firsthand the hazards of letting himself get surrounded as an axe crushed into his hip from behind, sending a white-hot wedge of pain through his limb. He gritted his teeth and blinked his eyes furiously as he tried to clear his vision enough to clearly distinguish the enemies swarming around him. His first stroke had gone utterly wild, cleaving only empty air, and he heard the mocking chatter of the grimlocks, confident that this foe would be easily overcome.

Unfortunately for them, they were gravely mistaken in that assessment.

Umbar pulled himself up in time to stagger as a grimlock hurled himself bodily into the cleric, trying to bear him down to where he could be hacked to pieces. The priest of Moradin was menaced by only this one foe at the moment, as Hodge and Beorna had blocked the others, who crowded around them in a blur of vicious cuts and counterattacks. Blood sprayed across the room as Hodge took one grimlock's arm off at the shoulder, but he fell back a moment later as another stabbed the finely-edged length of a drow shortsword into a crease in the armor plates covering his torso. Beorna, likewise, had been surrounded by four of the creatures, but her adamantine sword was already wreaking havoc among them, the deadly black blade exploding a grimlock's chest and then cleaving into the jaw of the next, sending teeth and bits of bone across the chamber in a gory spread.

"Taste Moradin's justice, foul creature!" Umbar said, thrusting the grimlock off of him and the driving the head of his magical warhammer solidly into its face. The blow would have shattered the skull of a common man, but the grimlocks were fiercely durable, honed by the trials of the Underdark into machines of violence and destruction. The grimlock, absorbed in its rage, snarled, spraying blood from its shattered nose and jaw as it hacked at the cleric with its axe. The adamantine weapon clanged hard into the dwarf's armor, failing to penetrate the layered plate but nevertheless inflicting pain as the impact of the blow drove through Umbar's body.

The cleric, of course, merely grunted and kept fighting.

Hodge paused a moment to slap at the gob of burning... *whatever* that had splattered his beard from the explosive contents of the grimlock flask. Hot wisps of flame had spread across the unruly mass of whiskers that the dwarf had cultivated like a wild forest, but he could not spare more time to deal with the growing calamity as three grimlocks pressed him intently, spreading out to take him from left, right, and ahead. He could feel blood running down his side and leg from the nasty stab wound one had put into his torso, but that too was a lesser concern to the deadly axes that continued to batter at his magical armor. He

wasn't as experienced a fighter as Arun and Beorna—the cleric was still an unknown quantity—but he was veteran enough to know that these were no common foes. He had a gnawing suspicion that only their heavy armor had kept them up as long as they had, and as he saw the one whose arm he'd taken off stagger back up, grasping its axe with *its other hand*, he knew that these guys would have to be literally taken apart.

Well, so be it. Grimacing, the dwarf planted his feet—a decisive gesture for one who'd taken the path of a defender—and started laying about him with his axe, accompanying the assault with a steady stream of dwarven profanity.

A few feet away, Beorna thrust her sword deep into the body of the grimlock whose jaw she'd mangled a few moments earlier. The creature fell, blood exploding in a fountain from the grievous wound, but even as she turned toward the next of the two still attacking her, the mortally injured grimlock seized at her legs with desperate strength. That alone would not have been near enough to threaten her, but the one behind her detected the stratagem and hurled itself at her, latching onto her shoulders and dragging her down with its full weight. The templar could not adjust her footing with the grimlock literally holding onto her legs with a death grip, and she collapsed back onto the one holding her from behind. That creature paid a price as the heavily armored dwarf woman crushed its chest with her considerable weight, but it continued to clutch at her, seizing her helmet and yanking it free. Her last foe, the one she'd been about to strike, had been waiting for that opportunity, and it stepped forward, its axe lifted above its head in both hands, ready to separate her head from her troublesome body.

Arun staggered under the impact of another blow that had penetrated his defenses. He swept his sword up against his attacker, and connected, but the angle had been poor and the grimlock spun away from the impact, a deep gash in its side gushing bright red blood.

As he lifted his sword to strike again, one of the grimlocks behind him leapt and seized the limb, trying to force the deadly sword from his grasp. The creature was strong. Not as strong as Arun, especially with the paladin's magical belt, but it had allies, and Arun was still somewhat disoriented by the aftereffects of the explosion and its accompanying flare. A battleaxe clanged hard off his helmet, dazing him, so that he did not immediately see the grimlock who darted in, a long knife poised as it targeted the vision slit in Arun's helmet, intending to finish the job begun by the bright flash of light upon the dwarf's vision.

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Arun felt a crushing pain in his wrist, and despite himself felt his holy blade wrenched from his hand by the grimlock behind him. He twisted to see the grimlock fall back, clutching the sword, and so the knife thrust from the one ahead of him failed to find the narrow opening in his visor, instead glancing off of the side of his helm.

Ignoring that attacker, Arun drove forward at the one who'd stolen his sword. The grimlock tried to withdraw, and Arun took a hit to his side from a grimlock axe that felt damned painful. But the paladin called upon the power of Moradin, and with a dwarvish cry of battle he *smote* the creature with a punch from his gauntleted fist. His fist crunched solidly into the creature's face, and it staggered, dropping its stolen treasure.

Arun bent to recover it, taking multiple attacks of opportunity from the surrounding grimlocks as he did so. Every breath, now, was driving sharp needles of pain through his battered torso; he was tough, but the beating he was taking was phenomenal.

Beorna looked up into the face of the monster standing over her, unable to react quickly enough to stop it from a deadly blow to her head. But before it could strike, a ray of *searing light* blasted into its face. Its eyes were not susceptible to light, but the holy light ravaged its hide, filling its sensitive nostrils with the sweet stench of its own burning flesh. The beam distracted it only for a moment, but that was enough for Beorna, who swept her sword around with a desperate surge of strength, catching the grimlock in the kneecap. The preternaturally sharp sword tore through the limb, severing it, driving the creature to the ground.

The grimlock beneath her was still tearing at her, one of its hands clutched in her hair, the other wrapped around her body, its foul breath hot against her neck as it tried to seize her with its bent teeth. She slammed her head back against its face, which quieted it somewhat, but it refused to release its grip.

So, focusing her concentration, she called upon Helm to *enlarge* herself.

The grimlock's squeals as her mass increased eightfold were quite rewarding. Her magical growth had put her within reach of the grimlocks that were assaulting Hodge, so she lashed out with her boot, delivering a heavy blow to the back of the neck of the nearest. Hodge took advantage of the distraction, bringing his already bloody axe down into the skull of the grimlock, crushing it in a spray of blood and brains.

"Get up from that one, ye blasted bugger!" he shouted. The dwarf had stood his ground against his enemies, laying about him with his oversized axe. This was the second he'd dropped, including the one whose arm he'd severed, and who had returned to the fray in time to take an uppercut that clove through six ribs and laid open its chest. That one lay on the ground, now, its struggles continuing even as the lake of blood around its torso grew inevitably.

But that still left two, and Hodge was winding down rapidly. His defensive stance had given him a second wind, but he knew from experience that the added burst of vigor would not last long, and his axe already felt like an anvil in his hand. The two remaining grimlocks had shifted to keep him flanked, and continued to press him with their axes, looking for a momentary opening for a devastating sneak attack that would put the dwarf down.

A retreat would have been timely, the dwarf thought, but there was nowhere to go, so Hodge just kept fighting, laying into the nearest with a tired sweep that still tore a foot-long gash in the creature's gut.

Arun rose, drawing upon the power of Moradin until it felt like he would burst. Infused with *Order's Wrath*, he laid about him with his sword, hewing at the gray-skinned monsters that ringed him in and pressed at him from every direction. Blood filled the air in a fine spray as his sword flashed brilliantly in his hand, each blow opening a deadly wound. The grimlocks should have fallen like stalks of wheat harvested by the scythe, but in their rage they

remained standing with wounds that should have left them screaming upon the barren stones. Only outright death would forestall them, and Arun gave them that, the paladin himself lost within his own rage, caught in the intense flood of battle, ignoring the blows that continued to rain upon him, dealing out destruction.

Finally, only one foe stood before him. The dwarf, still half-blinded by sweat and blood that splattered his visor, lifted his sword in challenge, but the adversary raised his hand.

“Peace, warrior,” Umbar said. “This battle is won.”

Arun lowered his blade, took a heaving breath, and collapsed.

Chapter 498

“I have fought the blind stalkers before, but never have I encountered ones like these,” Umbar said, the pale blue glow of healing fading from his hands as he drew back from Hodge. They were in the larger hall outside of the small chamber where the ambush had been sprung, although they brought the stench of blood with them, their clothes and armor liberally sprayed with gore from the short but vicious fight.

“They were rather durable,” Beorna said.

“Blast, but not a one o’ them even tried to retreat,” Hodge observed, nodding to Umbar in thanks for the healing. Beorna had already treated Arun, and while the four still had a few cuts and bruises to show for the ambush, their enemies were worse off by a pretty significant margin.

“That’s not all,” Arun said. “Did you notice their hides?”

“Aye,” Umbar said. “Odd... almost transparent, some of them... like skulks. Some magical effect, perhaps?”

“No,” the paladin said. “No, I wish it was so simple. We’ve encountered it before... it’s the Vanishing, a magical affliction that destroyed this community, the gnomes that lived here decades ago. It’s part disease, part curse, and it causes the infected to fade, gradually losing substance and reality.”

“I remember you speaking of it,” Beorna said. “Zenna had been infected by it, right?”

“Yes. She got very sick before we found out what was happening and had the curse removed.”

Hodge’s eyes widened as he looked down at the bloody front of his tunic. He’d already lamented the damage wrought upon his beard by the fire-blast of the grimlocks; at the moment, he looked like a butcher who’d worked several back-to-back shifts. “Yer sayin’ them things were infected with this... Vanishin’? That mean we got it, now?”

“You need not fear any ailment, magical or mundane, while traveling in the company of the high priest of Moradin,” Umbar said.

“It’s not spread like a normal disease, anyway,” Arun said. “At least none of the others had shown any symptoms, despite having been close to Zenna during her affliction. She believed it spread through infected magical items, like the scrolls we’d found down here during our first visit.”

“So you think that these grimlocks found some of this cursed magic, and are now affected by the disease?” Beorna asked.

“If that is true, then they are destroying themselves,” Umbar said. “Within a few tendays, the problem may resolve itself.”

“If they are intent upon assaulting the city, we may not have a few tendays,” Beorna retorted. “We handled a dozen, with our combined talents, but even one of those things is more than a match for two or three of our city guardsmen.”

“Then we must seek out the remainder and destroy them.”

“That may be difficult,” Arun said. “This complex is a maze; there are many more of those doors like the broken one we came through, most of which have potent, still-active defense mechanisms.”

“What about those burrowed tunnels?” Hodge asked.

“The most recent occupants of Jzadirune, a gang of dark creepers, opened up those side passages using a few gnomish pulverizer automatons that they were able to gain control over,” Arun explained. “They do bypass some of the doors. There is also a lift that provides entrance to a deeper complex further beneath the city; a place called the Malachite Fortress. There was an entrance into the Underdark in that latter location.”

“The humans seem willing to tolerate a lot of things beneath their city,” Umbar commented.

“It’s not that dissimilar from the existence of the Underdark beneath the Great Rift,” Arun said. The cleric frowned at the comparison, but Arun continued, “I know that the dwarves guard all such transitions very intently, and monitor any digging or new tunnels that approach their chambers. When we cleared out Jzadirune, and fought slavers who’d established themselves in the Malachite Fortress, we likewise sealed the entrance that connected the former to Ghelve’s Locks up in the city. Later, another band of adventurers traveled below and sealed the entrance to the Underdark itself.”

“It would appear that they did not do a thorough job,” Umbar said.

“As I told Beorna earlier, it is likely that the quakes opened another access point.”

“So the rest of the grimlocks, and the prisoners, may be either here in Jzadirune, or below, in the Malachite Fortress,” Beorna said.

“Those little tunnels be beggin’ fer more ambushes,” Hodge pointed out.

“Well then, we’d better get started finding them,” Arun said, sliding his sword back into its scabbard.

They spent the better part of an hour probing through the accessible parts of Jzadrune. They found no ambushes, although they did spring a few traps that, while not lethal, caused damage that clerical magic was required to treat. There were also more signs of the grimlocks, but they did not find any of the creatures themselves. A few more of the gnomish doors had been breached, but it looked as though the lair of the creatures lay somewhere beyond.

“Down it is, then,” Arun said, directing them by memory to the location of the hidden lift that descended to the black halls of the Malachite Fortress.

After their last expedition down here, when they’d fought and overcome the half-troll slaver Kazmojen, they had considered destroying the lift that connected Jzadirune and the deeper underground fortress. Ultimately they had agreed to leave it be, after setting the mechanism so that the lift could only be activated from up above. Apparently the grimlocks, if they had indeed found their way up through the Underdark, had found a way to confound that precaution, for the lift appeared to be in working order and showed signs of recent use when they finally reached it.

“Clever,” Umbar granted, as the four of them activated the lift and started down. “Gnomish work, you say?”

“So far as we could determine,” Arun replied, standing near the center of the platform as it ground its way steadily down the approximately octagonal shaft. The journey took several minutes and progressed without incident, the lintel of another recessed door appearing as the platform slowed and finally ground to a halt.

“Ready?” Arun asked.

“A moment to bolster our defenses,” Beorna said, invoking a *blessing* of Helm upon them. Umbar, likewise, took a moment to augment his own considerable stamina, while Arun created a *magic circle against evil* to enfold all of them.

Hodge used the delay to steal a few swallows from a small flask he had tucked into a pocket of his surcoat. When he’d put it back into its hiding place, he looked up to find the other three dwarves looking at him.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he tapped his axe. “Right then, ready.”

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Once they were prepared, they essayed the door. Beyond lay a wide passage familiar to Arun; on their first visit they’d battled a strange stone spike and a vicious ogre here. The iron cages that had dangled from the ceiling that last time—used by the former occupants

to hold fire beetles for illumination—had been torn down and lay in battered heaps amidst scattered crushed stone debris along the walls. An ugly odor hung thick in the place, but nothing stirred to challenge them as they moved forward into the Malachite Fortress.

“What a foul stench,” Beorna said. “I thought these grimlocks relied on their sense of smell; how can they distinguish anything over this?”

“On our last visit it was worse,” Arun said. “The ogre we fought here lived in utter filth, in a chamber beyond that door up ahead.” They gave that room a wide berth, Hodge looking in briefly to confirm that the room was empty. They made their way to the far wall. Once there had been a secret door there, but it too had been torn free of its moorings, leaving an irregular gap into the next chamber beyond.

“It’s like they are compelled to destroy just for the sake of it,” Beorna commented.

“Do not expect logic from such as these,” Umbar said. “They are vermin, fit only to be tread upon by a heavy boot.”

The others exchanged a look, but did not offer comment. It was clear from the vehemence in the cleric’s voice that there was a considerable hatred behind those words.

“I do not sense Taint,” Arun said. “Let us proceed.” He stepped through the open doorway into the next room, the others following close behind.

This chamber was still mostly intact. The four xorn-shaped braziers in the corner were empty and dark. The statue in the center, of an armored dwarf facing to the huge double doors to their right, was missing its head, but otherwise appeared much as Arun remembered. There was another set of doors to their left, and Arun led them in that direction.

The paladin paused before the heavy stone portals. Coming here had triggered memories he’d thought were well and left behind. It had only been a little over a year since that trip, not long after his initial arrival here in Cauldron. He’d been angrier then, much wilder in his words and deeds, trying to recover something of what had been lost in his exile from his homeland.

He glanced at Umbar, who was looking at the dwarven statue, examining it with a critical eye. It was strange, really, Arun thought; the arrival of the cleric, a none-too-subtle reminder of his past... shouldn’t it have bothered him more? The cleric had threatened his honor, his faith, and his new-found standing within this, his adopted home. Now was not the time for introspection, but still, it was a thought he could not fully banish as he turned toward the doors.

As he turned his gaze briefly met Beorna’s, and she nodded, ready.

Maybe *that* was part of the answer, he thought, as he reached for the handle.

“Beyond these doors lies a corridor that leads to the main hall of the fortress,” he told the others. “If our foes are down here, then we’ll likely find them there.”

“Well, what are we waitin’ fer?” Hodge muttered.

“Smite evil,” Umbar said to Arun, in the dwarvish dialect of the Rift. Arun nodded, appreciating the meaning in the gesture.

“Smite evil,” he returned, pushing the door open.

The corridor was as Arun had said, running ahead for a short distance before turning right at a diagonal and continuing for at least another fifty or sixty feet before fading at the edge of the dwarves’ darkvision. Arun already knew what lay at the end, another set of double doors that led to the bazaar, the great hall where they’d confronted Kazmojen and his evil allies. About halfway down the length of the passage smaller side corridors branched off of the main route, and several doors could be seen, opening onto small rooms that they’d only cursorily searched on their last visit. They’d come here after the conclusion of their battle with the half-troll and his minions, and had been more interested in making their way back above to the clean air of Cauldron at the time.

“What a mess,” Beorna said.

The length of the corridor was strewn with debris. It looked like the grimlocks had drawn out all the furnishings from the surrounding rooms, smashed them into ruins, and then strewn the wreckage casually down the length of the hallway. The passageway was about twenty feet wide, leaving plenty of space for them to make their way through, but the assorted trash left plenty of cover for anything that might be lurking in wait.

Arun paused, sensing for Taint. He felt a vague sense of unease, but nothing else within the range of his ability.

“This smells like a trap,” Hodge said, putting the paladin’s feelings to words.

“There’s another way around,” Arun noted. “There’s another secret door in the statue room, which leads to a block of cells and a bridge across a chasm that opens onto the main hall from the west.”

“They will likely have warded every approach,” Umbar said, but he did not challenge them as Arun drew back and closed the doors, turning to the wall opposite the one through which they’d entered. The secret door there had not been destroyed, and after a few moments Arun was able to locate the hidden portal. But it refused to budge at his push, even when Beorna added her strength to his efforts.

“There may be something bolstering it from behind,” she suggested. “A bar, or maybe even a collapse in the space beyond.”

“What about those doors?” Umbar said, indicating the huge portals in the northwest wall.

“That was the entry to the Underdark,” Arun said. “The access point was originally closed by another adventuring band after our visit... but it may be open again.”

"If they 'ave retreated into the Underdark, then catchin' them will be tough," Hodge said.

"Agreed," Umbar said.

Arun nodded. "The passage, then," he said, turning back to the double doors to the south.

They headed into the debris-choked corridor, with Arun in the lead, Beorna a step behind, then Umbar, with Hodge bringing up the rear. They hadn't gone more than twenty feet when Arun lifted a gauntleted hand, calling a stop.

"Taint!" he warned, pointing at the double doors they could now see at the far end of the passageway. As if in response, they caught sight of a flicker of movement, as something shifted behind one of the piles of ruined furnishings.

"They be a bit more cautious, this time," Hodge noted.

"Perhaps they can be persuaded to venture forth," Umbar said. Lifting his hammer in invocation to Moradin, he called upon the power of his god. A grid of blue light, the pure energy of absolute Law, erupted around a point centered upon the doors. *Order's wrath* drew angry cries from the grimlocks hiding behind the debris, three of whom came into view, snarling at the dwarves. One pushed open the doors and darted into the space beyond, while the other two remained behind cover, close by two levers that jutted from the passage walls near its end.

"They seek to lure us in," Arun began, but his words fell upon deaf ears in at least one case, as Umbar lifted his hammer and charged forward, a dwarvish battle cry shaking off the walls. Arun felt a strange feeling of *déjà vu*... hadn't he always been the one to lead the assault? When had caution stilled the power of righteous anger that had always guided his sword?

Hodge was watching him; apparently his cohort had no qualms about leaving the glory of the charge to others. Umbar had reached the intersection in the middle of the corridor, Beorna a few steps behind. Arun drew his sword, its glow filling the passage with its brightness, and he started after them.

He had barely managed two steps before he saw the grimlocks leap up, and reach for the levers.

Damn! he thought, a moment before the floor collapsed from under him, and he was falling, staring down at the forest of jagged spikes rushing up to meet him from below.

Chapter 500

The dwarves were all veterans, but luck abandoned them as they fell prey to the grimlock trap. When the levers were pulled, two trapdoors the full width of the passage, twenty feet wide by ten feet long, had fallen open beneath the charging dwarves, one on either side of the intersection in the middle of the passage. Umbar tumbled facedown into the first, and Beorna, close on his heels, could not arrest her charge in time to avoid following him in.

She tried to leap across the gap; normally a ten-foot jump would have been trivial for one of her strength, but her armor weighed her down, and she slammed hard into the far edge, her sword going flying from her grasp as she clutched at the bare stone, the weight of her gear threatening to drag her down after the cleric. She held on as a wave of heat rushed up from below, enveloping her in wisps of white flame.

Arun's momentary delay had put him right over the second pit, and luck was not with him as he tumbled down into the black opening. Hodge was the only one not to fall, the dwarf halting right at the edge of Arun's pit. But he could do nothing but watch as the paladin landed hard on the spikes below. Arun's armor protected him from serious injury from the spikes, but their situation was complicated an instant later as the flasks that the grimlocks had piled under the debris choking the tunnel shattered on the spikes, flooding the pits with an explosion of white fire. Hodge fell back, blinded by the intensity of the flare, hoping that the paladin, lost within the inferno, could withstand the immolation.

Beorna looked up to see the two grimlocks rushing forward toward her, their axes poised to drive her back into the burning pit. Calling upon Helm for a surge of strength, she roared and pulled herself up in time to meet them. One tried to bull rush her back into the pit, but against her augmented strength it may as well have been trying to topple a stone wall. It rebounded off her as she stood, and she reached out, snaring it by the throat with the iron grip of a gauntleted hand. The grimlock tried to shake free, and its companion laid into her with a powerful blow of its axe, but she ignored both and bodily hurled her captive into the pit behind her.

"Arun!" Hodge yelled, as the white fire continued to engulf the pit, hiding the paladin from view. The dwarf had a rope, but if he could not see his friend within the pit, then how was Arun supposed to see the line?

But the question became moot a moment later, as a glowing length of steel rose up out of the pit, wreathed in wisps of persistent fire and trailing smoke. Arun's sword landed with a loud clatter on the far side of the pit, followed a moment later by the paladin himself, leaping out from the smoke to seize the pit edge, pulling himself up with a surge of strength before he collapsed in the middle of the intersection, blinded and coughing.

Thus incapacitated, he didn't see the door at the end of the side corridor to the east burst open, or the half-dozen grimlocks that surged through it, axes raised as they rushed toward him.

Beorna turned to face her remaining foe, taking an axe hit across the front of her helmet that failed to do anything more than cause her ears to ring. Her bastard sword was out of reach, so she drew forth her backup weapon, stepping into the grimlock's reach to punch the dagger meatily into its torso. A foot of steel stuck into its side had to have hurt it, but the creature only unleashed another series of attacks with its axe, each of the blows clanging uselessly off of the templar's adamantine armor.

But her prospects took a turn for the worse as the double doors behind it opened, and a horde of the creatures came charging through it.

And beyond the doors, a shadowy figure momentarily stepped into view, but behind the more pressing wave of grimlock barbarians, the templar failed to notice it. She saw her sword, lying about six feet away down the corridor, but there was no way that she was going to be able to recover it before the wave broke upon her.

So, being practical, she called upon Helm and transformed her dagger into a *holy sword*.

The grimlocks surged into her, moving to flank her, leaping at her with powerful two-handed blows from their stolen axes and swords. The pit, a mere pace behind her, protected that flank, but that still left her open to up to five attackers at time, pressing in at her from every direction. Another tried to grapple her, but she dissuaded it by punching her dagger into its shoulder, opening a gusher of red blood that ran down the front of its scarred torso.

Behind her, white smoke billowed out of the pit, forming a wall at her back. A familiar roar signaled the arrival of reinforcements, as Umbar vaulted out of the pit. The cleric was transformed, filled with the *righteous might* of Moradin to double his normal size. He'd dropped his shield in the pit, but as he clambered up into the corridor he drew his warhammer—likewise significantly increased in size—out of his belt, driving it into the face of the first grimlock that turned his way. The creature staggered back, but was immediately replaced by three others that violently surged at the cleric, trying to keep him off balance. The priest, his defenses significantly augmented by his spell, shrugged off the hits.

"Fall before the righteous!" the cleric said, laying about him with powerful blows of his hammer, crushing bones with each solid impact.

"Arun, look out!"

The paladin was trying to pull himself to his feet as Hodge's warning reached him. His sword was lying just a few feet away, but even with its bright glow he could not see it, the aftereffects of the flare and stinging white fire having thoroughly blinded him. The first grimlock eschewed its axe and hurled itself on top of the paladin, seeking to bring him down with sheer weight and fury. Arun straightened, refusing to be overborne, but the movement opened himself to powerful blows from the axes of the grimlock's friends. One blow cracked heavily into his left elbow, drawing a cry of pain from the paladin; his shield too had been lost in the escape from the pit.

"Damnation!" Hodge cursed, watching the grimlocks surge over his friend. The ten-foot gap between them might have been a league for the armored dwarf; he'd watched Beorna, who was far stronger than he, fail that leap, and while he was a decent climber, Hodge had never been much for jumping over chasms. Especially not ones filled with spikes and lingering wisps of white fire and burning smoke.

"Moradin's balls!" he finally yelled, dropping back and shucking his shield, taking his axe up in both hands as he rushed toward the gap. The smoke seemed to swirl up to enfold him, and he nearly misjudged the edge; but then he was flying across, the smoke absorbing his vision for a moment before he was through, and a grimlock was rushing straight for him. He was a bit surprised when his boots landed on solid ground.

“Aaaaaaaaar!” he shouted, bringing his axe down into the grimlock’s chest. The weapon tore a deep gash in its chest but snagged on its breastbone. Two grimlocks were on him in a flash, stabbing with hook-shaped curving swords that tried to find gaps in his plate armor. He suspected that if he let them, they’d gut him and hang him up to rot soon enough.

“Eat crap, ye bastards!” he yelled, laying out with everything he had. It was a gamble, since these guys were tough and agile, and too much strength would overextend himself and cause a miss, leaving him open to the inevitable counterattacks. But his first power attack connected, hitting the one he’d injured with enough force to cut through its body all the way to the spine. The grimlock went down in a bloody mess, almost wrenching his axe from his grip before he could yank it free. A sharp point snagged in his side, no doubt puncturing something significant, but there wasn’t time to worry about that just now.

“By yer right foot!” he yelled at Arun, not able to spare even a moment to look over to see how the paladin was doing. Well, he hoped; he had a feeling he was going to need some help in a couple of seconds, and he’d lost sight of Beorna and the cleric in all the smoke and confusion.

Something hard caromed off of the side of his head, and he staggered. The white smoke rose up and he could feel the edge of the pit drop off on the side of his boot. *Damn, that was close*, he thought.

Then a pair of grimlocks slammed into him, and the lot of them went over, swallowed up into the searing white fog.

Chapter 501

Beorna and Umbar formed a dwarven wall before the menacing gap of the pit at their backs. The grimlocks formed a bloody wave that blasted against that wall, but each surge was driven back, leaving behind bits of itself as detritus that oozed blood and gore from huge gashes and crushed skulls.

Beorna could not reach her sword, but her dagger, infused with divine magic, was punching deep holes into grimlock bodies with each thrust. One grimlock already lay at her feet, its body pierced by several such thrusts, and in a momentary lull she defensively cast a quick spell, infusing herself with *divine power*. Thus fortified, she met the next attack with a jab that pierced a lung, followed immediately by a slash across the grimlock’s throat that sent it tumbling back into its fellows, bleeding out the last of its life upon the stones.

But even the templar’s storm of controlled violence faded in potency compared to what Umbar was doing beside her. The dwarf, now over ten feet tall, was knocking grimlocks around like straw dummies, his hammer pulverizing even the insanely tough bodies of these foes. Yet the grimlocks, driven by their insane fanaticism, refused to give way, launching attacks that could not penetrate the dwarf’s resistances.

The battle was rapidly turning into a slaughter, the dwarves’ attacks becoming a mechanical process of transforming living enemies into corpses. There was one momentary break in the melee, as a high-pitched noise, not quite human, sounded in the

dark gap in the partially open double doors at the end of the corridor. That opening was limned in a soft red glow, giving it a diabolic aura. The dwarves looked up and saw a dark form moving in that opening, just for a moment; each felt a surge of *something* wash over them, a sick feeling of malevolence that their sturdy constitutions quickly shook off. They had not even paused in their attacks, each sending another grimlock to the ground with their next blow.

“What was that?” Beorna shouted over the din of violence.

“Evil!” Umbar returned, stepping forward, through the muck of corpses and still-struggling survivors. At least four grimlocks that could still stand threw themselves at him, but the cleric ignored them, pushing forward to the doors.

There was nothing there; the chamber beyond was huge, but no enemies presented themselves within. His motion had opened himself to a cunning attack, however, and a pain erupted in his leg as a grimlock cut into his hamstring with its axe. His greave held and the wound wasn’t crippling, but it forced him to turn around and punish the offender with a solid two-handed blow to the chest that sent it flying backward.

“Arun!” Beorna shouted, unable to turn because of the two grimlocks that were still pressing her, unable to see through the lingering smoke that hovered above the pit in any case. “Are you all right?”

The paladin could not immediately respond. His armor had kept him alive in that initial surge, ironically the grimlock clinging doggedly to his back helping to protect him from the axes of its fellows. A second tried to yank his helmet off, but he was ready for that trick, and he knocked it back with a solid punch to the head. He heard Hodge leap over to aid him, and could hear enough of what was going on across the far pit to know that Beorna and Umbar would be too busy to help them.

So he cast out his mind, and called for aid.

He felt the familiar presence even as the cries of the grimlocks announced the arrival of the newcomer. Clinger tore into the grimlock ranks, seizing the grimlock on the paladin’s back with its powerful jaws, and yanking the pesky foe off. Grimlocks attacked the celestial lizard, tearing into its golden hide with their axes, but the loyal creature remained by its master, shielding him until he could recover.

Arun’s vision was still hindered by the stinging tears left over from the acrid smoke, but the bright glow provided enough guidance for him to find what he was looking for. Bending down to recover the holy sword cost him, as a pair of blows clanged hard into his back, one crushing a plate and opening a bloody gash just below the lowest rib on his left side.

But he had the sword.

He straightened. Both grimlocks lifted their axes to strike again.

The paladin called upon Moradin, and unleashed a red storm of death upon them.

Six seconds later, both grimlocks lay on the ground, looking like they had been dropped into a threshing machine.

Arun turned to help his companion. Clinger had the last grimlock still fighting pinned in its jaws, but that didn't stop it from trying to hack at the lizard with its axe. However, Arun taking its head off its shoulders did put a tone of finality on its efforts.

"Hodge!" he cried, looking around for his cohort.

"Down 'ere!" the dwarf shouted, the words followed by hacking coughs.

Arun rushed over to the edge of the pit. The fire had mostly burned out, although some of the ruined furniture still flickered with more "normal" yellow tongues of flame. The smoke cleared enough for Arun to see Hodge standing amidst the spikes. One of the grimlocks that had knocked him down was impaled on the metal stickers, while the second lay a few feet away, a round oval in the side of its skull where Hodge had chopped through with his waraxe. The dwarf looked a mess, and he pressed his hand to his side where blood continued to ooze from a shot that had gotten through his armor.

"I could use a hand up," he managed.

Arun nodded, instructing Clinger, before turning toward the far end of the corridor. Through the gaps in the fading wall of smoke, he saw Beorna and Umbar, the cleric still empowered by *righteous might*, surrounded by a veritable wall of bodies. The templar's eyes met his, and he felt a surge of relief.

But the relief also meant that the pain, pushed aside in the rush of battle, came rushing back, and he decided that it might be a very good idea to call upon Moradin's power for healing.

Chapter 502

The battle in the corridor appeared to have broken the strength of the grimlock tribe, for they encountered no further resistance as they continued their exploration of the Malachite Fortress. Once again clerical magic restored them to health, although this time they also had to rely upon a few potions to supplement the abilities commanded by Umbar, Beorna, and Arun. The four of them had absorbed enough damage to lay low a battalion of common soldiers, and Arun hoped that their enemy did not have some further surprise waiting for them deeper in the complex.

The pit levers, when raised, lifted the trapdoors back into position, settling with an audible click. "Dwavish work," Umbar noted, with an approving nod. This allowed them to reunite and press on, into the great hall at the end of the passage.

The place was barren, nearly empty, although it bore enough similarities to Kazmojen's bazaar to stir dark memories in Arun. There were four iron braziers set up around the raised dais on the southern end of the chamber, their dying coals still shedding a faint red light.

To the west, a heavy stone door opened only after considerable effort to reveal a gaping chasm. The bridge that Arun remembered from their last visit was gone, destroyed in the recent quakes, leaving only a narrow ledge that ended in crumbling stone.

So they turned to the other exit, in the east wall. That door opened to reveal a long chamber, once a dining hall, now showing the same signs of deliberate destruction they'd encountered elsewhere in the fortress. The remains of several large tables were scattered across the floor, and garish things had been sketched on the walls in what looked like dried blood. Five doors, three to the left, and two to the right, offered a wealth of choices. The four dwarves spread out to quickly check the room for any signs of their quarry.

"Hey, this one's been wedged shut," Hodge said, drawing them to a door in the far corner of the room. The iron spikes were quickly removed by Umbar's hammer, and they forced the door open to reveal a twenty foot square room beyond. Huddled in the back of the room were four young human men.

"Who... who are you?" one of them ventured. They were in poor condition, their garments torn and hanging in remnants from their pale bodies, shivering together against the cold. Several bore marks of struggle.

"Friends," Arun said, coming forward.

"Be careful!" one of them said. "Those... things, they infected us with some sort of disease. We didn't want to drink, but they made us... they turned Orran to stone!"

The dwarves shared a look, but Arun did not hesitate, assisting the men, treating their wounds with trickles of positive energy. Calling upon his power, he purged them of the taint of the Vanishing, and each relaxed as the healing surge passed through them.

"You're... you're Arun, the dwarf paladin, aren't you?" one of them asked.

Arun nodded. "Tell us what you can about the grimlocks."

The one who had initially spoken shuddered. "They came up on us by surprise, up in the city. Gratham tried to fight back, he actually hit one with his dagger, but the thing just punched him... damn near killed him! The rest of us couldn't do much, I'm afraid... those things are *strong*."

"Aye, that we know," Hodge said.

"Are they all..." another youth began.

"We killed a good lot o' them," Hodge replied. "If there be more, then they be smart to run off."

"Tell us more about what happened to Orran," Arun prodded.

"Their leader," the first youth said. "Gratham was out cold, but the rest of us saw it," he said, as if doubting that the dwarves would believe him. "She was... well, we thought she was a woman, but she said such terrible things, told us we were the first, that others would follow."

"She called it the Fade," another of the men added. "She made us drink from the gray cask. Orran wouldn't do it, he knocked the cup away. That made her mad... they turned us away, and when we turned back, Orran was a statue! They took him away somewhere, I didn't see where."

"Petrification," Umbar said. "Sounds like a medusa. Common leader for grimlocks, works out since the blind stalkers can't see."

"Tell me more about this gray cask," Arun said.

"She said some kinda magic word, and water came out," one of the men said.

"And she had a rock flyin' around her head," another added.

"Magic items," Beorna said. "And you said that the Vanishing was transmitted through cursed magic items..."

Arun looked at them. Something clicked as the pieces came together for all of them.

"They intended to infect the entire city with the plague," Umbar said.

"We've got to get above, quickly," Arun said, picking up one of the young men. Despite the healing, they were still weak from their ordeal.

"Perhaps we should leave them here, for now," Umbar suggested. By the looks on the young humans' faces, the prospect did not hold appeal for them.

"No one stays behind," Arun said. "Come, let's get back to the lift."

The dwarves all but carried the weakened humans as they retraced their steps through the underground citadel. They were wary of another ambush, but nothing emerged from the darkness to hinder them. Within a few minutes they had made their way back to the shaft leading up to Jzadirune, where they made a not entirely unexpected discovery.

"Someone's taken the lift up," Beorna said. She looked up into the shaft, but there was only darkness for as far she could see up into it.

Arun pulled the triggering lever that would bring the lift back down. There was a grinding noise from up above, and then a loud clatter that grew rapidly louder.

"Get back! Out!" he shouted, putting his own words into action as he retreated into the outer passage, Beorna only a step behind. Umbar and Hodge were already clear, along with the humans.

Only a heartbeat after Beorna had burst out through the open doorway, a loud crash announced the arrival of the lift, falling from its upper station at Jzadirune. Shards of shattered wood and a plume of dust poured out over them as the heavy mechanism settled upon the floor of the shaft, although none of them were harmed.

Hodge came forward and looked at the wreckage. "Well, now what?" he asked.

Chapter 503

"We must find another way to get back up to the city," Arun said.

"Your companion," Beorna said. "Clinger can take you up, and then come back for us."

Arun frowned. "I will try, but the walls of the shaft are almost sheer; there are limits even to what he can do."

"I can assist here," Umbar said. He lifted his arms, spreading wide his shield and hammer, his eyes closing as he intoned the rough syllables of a dwarvish prayer. The chant went on for several seconds before a rumbling in the ground startled them, and they retreated from the spot where Umbar stood. A moment later, a rough humanoid form, a good eight feet in height, rose up out of the ground before the priest. The earth elemental bowed to the cleric, who addressed it in the Terran tongue.

"The elemental will bear you up the shaft," Umbar said to Arun.

"It won't be able to carry more than one of us at a time..."

"It will only remain long enough to take you; bring a rope to toss down to us below, and we will follow."

"But..."

"There is no time, warrior! The medusa must be stopped. Go! We will follow behind as swiftly as we can."

Arun nodded, accepting the rope from Hodge and stepping forward toward the elemental. The creature did not hesitate, taking up the paladin and treading ponderously into the shaft, ducking to pass through the low threshold of the entry. The elemental immediately started up the shaft, its legs sinking into the stone as though they were soft sand, using its bond with the earth to carry it upward, its upper body holding Arun clear as it ascended.

The ascent seemed to take an eternity, although consciously Arun knew it was only a little over a minute. The elemental deposited him in the doorway at the top end of the shaft, and then vanished back into the surrounding stone.

Arun wasted no time tying off the end of the coil of rope to the nearby doorjam before unwrapping it and tossing it back into the shaft. It had been a thick coil, well over a hundred feet—but was it enough to reach the bottom of the shaft? If only he'd had the

foresight to bring the *flying carpet*, despite its bulk... but no, it remained in secure storage in the Temple of Helm above.

The paladin shook his head. He was wasting time, and there was no time to delay. He already had a good idea of where the medusa was going; rising, he drew his sword, its brilliant glow banishing all shadows and doubts.

Making haste, he started back toward the shaft that led back to the surface.

Chapter 504

The storm had intensified somewhat, the icy rain off the Alamirs now falling in a continuous stream that ran down the streets of the city, draining steadily down the sides of the caldera before ultimately trailing off through the city's drains into the river chasm in the center.

Down by the lowest tier of the city, Lava Avenue was awash in puddles of water that in some places were up to a foot deep. This lowest tier of the city had suffered particular damage in the disaster that had reshaped Cauldron, and with the draining of the lake a number of buildings, now perched precariously over the river chasm, had been condemned as unsafe. At places, the remnants of once-busy docks trailed out over the darkness, over fast-moving waters below that were starting a tumultuous descent down the side of the mountain. The street was still navigable, but the quakes had caused damage here as well, and street repair was being postponed until the structures that could support citizens of the town were restored to a safe condition. The streets were all but deserted, even the Watch not in evidence on this particularly unpleasant night.

But even if there had been more of the town's inhabitants out in the predawn hours, it was unlikely that they would have seen the dark figures that made their way stealthily through the town. The first was a slender, nimble figure, the robe that flapped around her form like a flap of discarded gray fabric dancing in the wind. The pale flesh protruding from the sleeves and hem was almost completely invisible in the near-darkness. The second, following close behind, was more bulky and ponderous, but likewise its neutral gray skin was nearly translucent, a shade in the night. This one was hunched over, its arms wrapped around a cumbersome burden that it clutched close against its body.

To the Chosen, even the darkness of the city in the depths of the stormy night seemed bright to eyes that had known only the dark reaches of the Underdark. The rain and wind were bewildering in their intensity, the great open space above the caldera strange and terrifying to one who had always known the tight confines of a cavern roof above. But she was driven by a fanaticism that allowed her to push all of those fearful distractions to the back of her mind. She knew her destination from the careful descriptions provided by her scouts, and even though the last of her grimlocks were likely already destroyed by the invaders into the Cairn of the Fade, she at least would prove worthy of the ordeal placed before her by the powers of her universe.

It rose up out of the night, ahead, a massive rectangular shape. The massive cistern lay on the chasm side of Lava Avenue, upon a broad shelf of jutting stone that had once supported a pleasant park, Before. The landscape was still reassuringly green during

sunny days, but now, in the depths of the night, the trees formed dark shadows with bare branches that resembled grasping claws. The Chosen saw these and shuddered, consumed with apocalyptic visions of death and destruction.

The collapse of the volcano's rim and the loss of the lake had presented a problem for Cauldron; the city's water supply was dependent upon that resource, and many of the city's wells had gone dry once the water had found a way to exit its former confines and pour down the volcano toward the lowlands and the yet more distant sea. The cistern was the first step in providing the city with a new water supply, a stopgap until new wells, pumps, and pipes could be put into place. It had been created in just a few days, both through combined labor and the intervention of Beorna of Helm, who'd cast a dozen *stone shape* spells over several days to form the stone gathered from the wreckage of the city into a rectangular container fifty feet long, twenty feet across, and up to eight feet deep. The cistern was filled by a simple pumping system that used collapsible leather buckets attached to a winch and pulley assembly, drawing up river water from its rapid course to an open pipe that fed the container. That assembly had been safely stored now, and with the rains continuing to fill the already awash cistern it was unlikely it would have to be used anytime soon.

The cistern had been partly built into the ground, so that its lip was only about five feet above the level of the surrounding street. A simple wooden platform had been set up to abut it, and a spillway installed on one of the narrow sides, so that water could be drawn from it easily into barrels or other large containers. The Chosen and her companion made their way up to the platform. Water trickled out over the edges as rain continued to fall into it, the droplets splattering across the flat plane like tiny spiders crawling over a stone floor. The cistern held sixty thousand gallons of water; enough to meet the needs of three thousand people on an average day, slightly more than the current population of the town.

"And so we fulfill our destiny," the Chosen said, clicking her tongue to signal to her companion. The scarred grimlock acolyte came forward carrying his heavy burden. The gnomish variant on the *decanter of endless water* itself could have solved Cauldron's water issues, had it not been infected with the corruptive influence of the Vanishing. As it was, it was the perfect vessel for the completion of the Chosen's twisted plans.

The grimlock strained with the weight of his burden as he lifted it up to the lip of the cistern. The little keg itself wasn't very heavy, but several large paving stones had been attached to it with thin but durable elastic lines. At the bottom of the cistern, it would appear to just be a large rock to anyone not actually within the huge container.

A clanking noise that sounded distinctly over the noise of the storm drew the attention of the medusa around. She turned to see the dwarf paladin standing in the street, the rain sloughing off of his metal skin.

"Yield, or die," he said, his hand tightening on the hilt of his sword.

Chapter 505

Just getting back up to the city streets had been a challenge for the dedicated dwarf. The broken drainpipe had been flooded with a steady rush of water from the wet streets above, threatening to dislodge him every time he took a step. He was soaked through by the time he emerged into the open air once again, but he ignored the physical discomfort he felt in face of the gravity of his mission.

He did not divert himself to seek out the Watch. Convinced that his hunch about the medusa's destination was correct, he'd ran directly toward the cistern that he and Beorna had helped build shortly after their return to the town. He encountered no one out on the street, and within a few minutes he'd reached Lava Avenue, and could see his destination ahead.

And the two figures creeping up to it.

He kept his sword in its scabbard, to avoid drawing their attention, and continued at a more measured pace toward the two stalkers. Their backs were toward him, but he could not effectively mute the telltale clank of his heavy armor, and the woman—the medusa—turned and looked at him before he'd crossed half of the distance between them.

"Yield, or die," he said, his hand tightening on the hilt of his sword. He did not truly expect them to comply, but he hoped to distract them from their purpose.

The medusa drew back her hood, fixing him with the fell power of her gaze attack. Arun did not flinch, his inherent dwarven fortitude combined with the dedication of his calling allowing him to easily resist being petrified by that gaze. Still, he did not tempt fate, averting his eyes as he drew his sword and started forward. A ring of bright golden light surrounded him as the sword blazed out of the scabbard, a halo against the night and the storm.

The medusa muttered a command in Undercommon, and the grimlock leapt off the platform and charged at the paladin. It drew a pair of long black knives from the harness at its waist, and a low, guttural sound emitted from deep within its chest as it flew into a tightly controlled battle-rage.

Arun stood his ground, and let the enemy come to him. The first dagger thrust was turned by his breastplate, and he quickly counterattacked.

There were few evil creatures upon or beneath the surface of Toril that could withstand a full attack from Arun. The grimlock acolyte was not one of them.

Arun stepped over the carcass, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the surrounding darkness. The "battle" with the grimlock had taken all of about five seconds, but the medusa was gone. Wary of a trap, he rushed up to the platform. The water in the cistern, level with the lip of the container, was a sheer plane broken by the patter of raindrops, glowing in reflection of the light of his sword. Arun leaned forward and stabbed his blade deep into the water, peering into the water. Nothing. He paused for a moment, just a moment, to scan for Taint. There was a faint, indistinct aura that clung about this place, but

not enough to pinpoint the presence of the medusa. Had she fled, and taken the gnomish device for use at a later time?

Arun knelt upon the edge of the cistern, and removed his helm and shield. With one hand balancing himself on the stone rim, he dipped low, stabbing his head beneath the surface of the water, thrusting the sword deeper with his other hand.

There—just barely visible, below; a gray object that did not belong.

Arun did not hesitate; taking a deep breath, he leapt into the cistern, vanishing beneath the surface of the water with a mighty splash.

Weighed down by his armor, he sank to the bottom of the cistern like a stone. His sword brightening the dark waters, he immediately turned and pushed forward to the location of the object. It was the gnomish keg, held in position by several heavy stones securely fastened to it, quivering with the force of the water that was pouring from it. Arun did not know how much of the tainted water it had to produce for the fell disease to be potent, and did not intend to wait to find out.

He tugged at the throngs holding the keg, drawing aside one of the stone blocks, revealing the deep brown wood beneath. The light of his sword glimmered off of a golden rune set into the wood. Standing, he braced himself over it, and lifted his sword, both hands wrapped around the hilt.

A surge in the water alerted him. He turned, narrowly avoiding a stabbing thrust of steel that sliced into his cheek as he ducked back. The wound burned like fire, and as the sword came around with him he looked up into the face of the medusa, snakes writhing in a halo around her alien features, the light shining through her translucent skin. Her weapon was a slender rapier of black metal, its blade oozing green droplets that formed tiny plumes in the water as she wielded it.

Arun tried to bring his sword up to stab her, but the water impeded him. The medusa dove at him, her mouth open in a silent scream as she dug her fists into his hair, dragging her face down to his in a sick parody of a lover's embrace. Arun felt a cold feeling creep into his bones as the medusa's gaze swallowed him up, followed by pinpricks of agony as the serpents upon her head stabbed their tiny fangs into his forehead and temples.

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The medusa, driven by her insanity, held the paladin in her grip, attacking with enchanted steel, venom, and the dark power of her gaze attack all as one. Against such an onslaught, any defender would have been hard-pressed to survive.

But the gods shone their blessings upon the paladin, and none more than his sturdy patron, who infused the knight with the power of the forge, the iron of the anvil, and the might of the hammer. Arun snarled and reached out with his free hand, locking it around the medusa's throat. The creature did not retreat, her serpents snapping at the fingers that tightened into

a fist around her scaly neck. If anything, her grip upon him tightened, her own fists yanking at his black hair, drawing them even closer.

And then Arun brought up his other hand, and thrust the length of his holy sword deep into her body.

The medusa quivered as the blade entered her, then she began to thrash with an inescapable agony as the paladin drove the sword deeper. It pierced her, and a shaft of light penetrated her as it emerged from her back. Even as her struggles deepened she still forced Arun to meet her eyes, willing him to die, trying to drag her enemy down with her into oblivion. But Arun's fortitude was unflinching, and she wailed with frustration and anguish as her power slid harmlessly off of the dwarf's resistances.

Arun drove the sword a last foot, until the crossbar slammed hard into her chest. The medusa's struggles ceased, and she drifted, her eyes now lifeless and harmless. Blood floated in around them in a spreading plume.

Arun began to feel the first stirrings of what he knew would become an insistent need, as the gulp of air he'd taken began to burn in his lungs. He lifted a leg and kicked the medusa free of his sword, the slain creature drifting back to settle to the floor on the opposite side of the cistern. The whole thing would have to be drained and cleansed before refilling, now, he knew, but his more immediate concern was the vessel that continued to pour out its pestilence a few feet away.

He returned to the keg, braced his feet, and with a single powerful drive of his sword he pierced the wooden container. There was a tiny flash as the magical steel drove through the golden rune, and then the thing just came apart, bits of wood floating about in an eddy.

The need was growing greater, now. Arun sheathed his sword, and with a powerful kick he leapt up and grabbed the edge of the cistern with a gauntleted fist. When he drew himself up, that first breath was a relief, filling his lungs with cold purity. He clung there, for a moment, holding onto the side of the cistern, letting the raindrops fall upon his face. His head turned to the east, where the horizon above the town's wall had just begun to brighten with the promise of the coming new day.

Chapter 507

The hearing was held within the private chapel in the Temple of Helm. It was low-key, and the only individuals in the chamber, with the exception of a few witnesses called to testify, were dwarves. The pews had been temporarily replaced by two tables covered with white linen cloths. Arun Goldenshield sat at one, clad in a simple gray robe belted at the waist with a length of cord. At the other, Umbar Ironhammer sat as both Adjudicant and Prosecutor, his heavy iron symbol of Moradin laid out on the table in front of him.

Beorna sat to Arun's left, clad in a long white robe that prominently bore the sigil of Helm across its chest. She was serving as Arun's Advocate, but as the hearing progressed, her expression grew more tempestuous, as her ability to hold her anger in check steadily eroded.

But even that was better than Hodge, who'd been ejected before the end of the hearing's first hour.

There were not many witnesses called. Arun had refused to allow Beorna to issue *sendings* to their friends, who could offer testimony on the paladin's behalf. "There are greater matters at stake," he'd told her.

"Greater than your honor?" she'd replied, trying to sting him. But he'd only turned and returned to the hearing room. His face had been a stone mask during the entire proceedings, but when Umbar opened by reading the charges against him from the parchment scroll he'd originally delivered upon his arrival, something flashed in his eyes.

They'd had two days to prepare a defense, but Arun had spent most of that time helping the Watch seal the new entrance to Jzadirune, and in draining and refilling the cistern. Beorna had lost her temper, suggesting that Arun was not taking the dwarven cleric's mission seriously, but both knew that the charge was not true. Hodge had suggested a more direct course of action, suggesting that they could use the cleric's bloated head to close the pipe leading down into the abandoned gnome fortress.

They'd found a few more items infected with the Vanishing upon the medusa's body. There was no more insights as to why the creature had been so consumed with infecting herself and her people with the strange illness, and spreading it to others. Having gained some insight into madness through the whole ordeal with Adimarchus and the Cagewrights, Arun realized that no logic or reason would apply in this case, so he let it go as just another threat that had required the blade to purge.

"At some point, we should conduct a thorough search of the tunnels under the city," Arun had suggested, in his quarters the night before the hearing. "If Cauldron is going to be safe in the long term, then we must be certain that other threats are not brewing beneath us."

"You might want to apply as much concern to your own affairs as to the citizens of Cauldron," Beorna had retorted. "I cannot believe you are allowing yourself to be subjected to this travesty of justice."

"It is part of the code which I have sworn to uphold."

"The code of the same order that threw you out on your ass? Where were they when fiends were overrunning Cauldron? Where were they when the portal from Carceri was opening? Where were they when we battled Adimarchus? **You** do not need to prove yourself to anyone, Arun! You have sacrificed..."

He'd interrupted her by clasping her hand tightly in both of his, and holding it close against his heart. "I know you do not understand, Beorna, but I must ask that you defer to me in this case. I will need you by my side tomorrow... but for tonight, let us not pass our time in argument."

And now, as Beorna scowled openly, Umbar Ironhammer looked up and fixed the accused with a stern gaze.

“Arun Goldenshield,” he began, “In the past few days, I have been witness to your courage and determination in service of the people of this human town. It is clear from those witnesses that this tribunal has heard that the people of Cauldron have adopted you gladly, and that you have found a new home here.” The cleric’s eyes shifted momentarily toward Beorna, who met his look with a stare that could have cut glass. But the priest turned his attention back to Arun. “It is also true from the accounts submitted in your defense, that you have held true to the ideals of the faith of our people, and continued to struggle against evil, darkness, and corruption in our shared world.”

“But one of the bulwarks of our people is the Law. We the golden dwarves live in a realm where the tides of shadow dwell constantly beyond our fortifications, waiting only for the slightest relaxation in our vigilance. Our enemies would deny us land, provender, and life alike. This, I know, you understand, perhaps more than most.”

“You have not denied the fundamental charge against you, that you acted with deliberation against the terms of your exile. Perhaps it was not your intent to breed a heretical cult of the All-Father in this place, but ultimately it was your actions and choices that allowed this course of events to develop.”

Beorna opened her mouth to speak, but Arun grabbed her arm with his hand, forestalling her. With a look of disgust on her face, she subsided.

“Therefore, Arun Goldenshield, this tribunal finds you guilty as charged. Your punishment will be merely to obey the strictures placed against you by the full body of the High Order of Moradin. You shall forever eschew the wearing of the sigil of Moradin, or any other accoutrements of that faith. You will not claim to be a paladin of the All-Father, nor shall you proselytize in advocacy of the faith. In light of your defiance of the initial judgment of the High Order, it is required that you submit to a *Mark of Justice*.”

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“What!” Beorna said, shaking off Arun’s restraining arm to come forward to the space before the Inquisitor’s table. “After what you’ve heard, what you saw below the city... you would still spit upon this man’s honor in this way?”

Umbar fixed her with a hard stare. “This matter is not within your jurisdiction, Templar of Helm. The warrior may refuse to comply with the sentence; he is already exiled, and as my authority outside of the Rift is limited by the bounds of the human laws of this region, the result would merely be *decretum extundo*.

“A decree of expulsion?” Beorna asked.

“*Severing* is a more accurate translation. The warrior would choose to fully sever himself from the dwarven people. He would be free to live his life as he pleased here among the surface world, but no dwarf of the Rift would even recognize him, for he would have foresworn them.”

Beorna turned to Arun, already knowing what she would find.

Arun stood behind her. He met her eyes, and while she did not agree, could not agree, with what she found there, she respected the man too much to defy his will further.

She stepped back.

“I accept the judgment of the tribunal,” Arun said. He carried his *holy avenger*, scabbarded in his hand. As Umbar came around his table the paladin knelt, and drew the sword, placing it point down upon the bare stone of the chapel.

“Are you certain you would not prefer a warhammer?” Umbar said, very softly, glancing down at the etched symbol of Lathander prominently featured upon the blade near where it joined the hilt. “As a weapon, such is not covered by the dictum.”

Arun shook his head fractionally. “It is part of who I am, another choice, perhaps.”

Umbar nodded. He intoned the words of the spell, a complex ritual that stretched on for several minutes. Arun knelt, immobile, while Beorna watched. A tear formed in the corner of the Templar’s eye, but the dwarf angrily blinked it away.

Finally, the priest of Moradin’s holy symbol began to glow. Arun did not blink as he lowered it to the paladin’s forehead, speaking the final word of his invocation to lay the *mark of justice* upon him.

A brilliant flare of golden light erupted from the iron symbol as it touched Arun’s forehead. Umbar staggered back, the symbol flying from his hand to land across the room, where it lay smoking in the corner. Arun’s body arched back, his mouth erupting in a silent scream as he stared up at the bare ceiling. A golden aura surrounded him like a bright halo, focused upon the bright star of pure energy that blazed upon his brow.

Beorna came instantly to him, but was driven back by the intensity of the aura, which surrounded him like a tangible wall. “What did you do!” she shouted, turning on Umbar.

“It... it was not I!” the cleric managed, his own eyes wide as he stared at the paladin.

The golden glow intensified until the two of them could no longer look, lest they be blinded by the intensity. The windows in the chapel, along with every other glass surface within the rectory, shattered. The ground and walls trembled, and a distant sound filled their heads, like the pounding of iron upon a forge.

Then the noise and light and confusion died. Arun was left, still kneeling, his head bowed, his hands still wrapped around the hilt of...

“By the gods...” Beorna breathed.

For the paladin’s sword, his *holy avenger*, had been replaced by a golden warhammer. Even with the fading of the holy radiance that had engulfed the paladin, it seemed afire, shining with an inner light.

“What in the hells is goin’ on...” Hodge yelled, bursting into the room. But as he saw what Beorna and Umbar had seen, he trailed off, for once at a loss for words.

Arun turned to gaze at them. The sigil branded into his forehead still glowed, a pale golden radiance that seemed almost alive. The hammer and anvil. The sign of Moradin.

While Beorna and Hodge looked on, still too stunned to respond, Umbar fell to his knees before Arun. “Forgive me,” he said, his earlier feelings overwhelmed by an intensity of adulation in his eyes. “I did not know... I did not see.”

“Forgive me, Chosen of Moradin.”

Chapter 509

INTERLUDE

Zev’vat looked up at the towering form of a glabrezu as he materialized in the portal chamber. The massive demon was several times his size, but it was the glabrezu who backed off, inclining its head ever so slightly in what passed for a bow, among its kind. It might have put up more bluster, had Zev’vat not been here because of a summons. Or if it had been a fool. For there were few here who did not know of Zev’vat, both what he was, and who he served.

The kelvezu spared little thought for the demon guardian, or the pair of hezrou that warded the heavy iron doors that led out into the main corridor of the fortress. *Graz’zt is wary*, he thought, at the same time that his eyes fell over the poor condition of the place, stark even after all this time of exile. Memories of the Argent Palace were not likely to fade soon, not when juxtaposed against such a precipitous decline.

Lo, how the mighty have fallen, he thought with a inner chuckle. He did not bother to censor his thoughts, not even here. He was entirely conscious of his own precarious position within a precarious situation, even before the tumult of recent events had begun pushing things toward a cusp of change once more. But his current position with his current master had been won through judicious use of his intellect and candor, and changing that now would likely put him in more jeopardy.

His destination wasn’t far from the entry chamber. No place within the fortress was; it was small, crowded. As he made his way down the central hall, he passed a side passage from which disturbing screams issued. Someone was being tortured; he knew all too well that Graz’zt’s specialists in that art were quite proficient. Zev’vat had heard and seen far worse, however, so he put it aside as he reached his goal.

The heavy stone door swung open at his approach. He was expected, after all. The sole inhabitant of the chamber nodded at Zev’vat as he entered, but neither spoke until the door had swung ponderously shut behind the kelvezu.

Zev'vat did not bother with slaving obsequiousness or other false preliminaries. He and his patron knew each other well, and could forgo all of the petty games demons usually played with each other.

"Welcome," Athux said. "Sit?"

Zev'vat took the indicated chair.

"My father is moving ahead with his plans. He has ordered Malad to gather the remnants of the Blood Legion, in advance of an all-out bid for power. We will not be returning to Azzagrat; our rivals expect such a play, and have prepared for it."

"I see." Interesting. I wonder if his Mightiness shared his precise target with you noble prince? Or if we're all equally in the dark about the plans of the Lord of Shadows...

Athux fixed him with an intent look. "You're wondering if I myself have been trusted with the knowledge of Graz'zt's ultimate objective. You can ease your curiosity; I have not. Graz'zt mistrusts me, as he mistrusts everyone and everything around him. Given his current position, he would be a fool to do anything else."

"And yet, the ultimate fate of many revolves around his decision," Zev'vat said.

Athux leaned back, smiling a perfect smile; it was hard not to be drawn in by the cambion's incredible presence. "I have my suspicions, of course. But father is playing the cards very close to his chest. And, naturally, he has already set plans into motion, setting a web within a web. He is mad, his ego under test by the strains of recent events. But he is no less cunning for that."

"I assume that I am here to be a string in one of those webs?"

"You assume correctly. Father is intent upon minimizing several variant factors that could spoil the careful alignment of his plans. In particular, there are several primes with a potential for great disruption."

Zev'vat's thoughts flashed back over the screams of the tortured man he'd heard in the hall.

Athux nodded. "For your own sake, you might want to avoid walking down that path just yet," he said. "That is a complicated matter. Suffice it to say, these primes are your concern."

"On Faerûn," Zev'vat said.

"You know, then."

Zev'vat snorted. "I know what everyone in service to Him knows, about *them*. I'd wondered, to be honest, why he hasn't moved against them before."

"As always, the matter is complicated."

“Well, he certainly has had a lot on his mind.”

“Focus on the matter at hand. Permanent destruction is likely beyond your means, but in any case they must be distracted from intervention when my father reveals his hand. They are scattered at the moment, which may give you an opportunity.”

“What sort of time scale do I have to work with?”

“The critical time will fall between one hundred ten and one hundred forty local hours from this meeting. With the time conversion...”

“Just under five days, on Abeir-Toril. Not much time.”

“You have completed more challenging tasks in less.”

“It’s been quite a while since I last visited the Forgotten Realms. I do not have any active contacts there, but I may be able to tug a few threads, call in a few favors.”

Athux nodded again; he was well acquainted with Zev’vat’s connections, and his not inconsiderable personal talents. “We are not without resources there, but obviously this matter must be approached with discretion, at least until it is too late for secrecy to be of avail to our cause. Obviously direct involvement is inadvisable. I suppose I do not have to tell you not to underestimate these particular primes.”

Zev’vat let out a dry chuckle. “Not after what happened to the last Abyssal lord who underestimated them.”

The statement was bold even for the outspoken kelvezu, and for a moment an awkward silence hung between them. There was nothing more that had to be said, so Athux subtly signaled the end of the interview, and the kelvezu left without even a bow of respect. Patron and client, prince and vassal, lord and servant. Their relationship had been long and fruitful, and always difficult to classify. But Zev’vat was close enough to Athux to know that Graz’zt’s scion had his own plans at work, and that his own role in this drama was very likely to be much more significant than a mere distraction.

It was going to be an interesting period of days ahead.

As he departed, he passed once again the corridor with the screams of the torturee still audible. His suspicion of the identity of the poor sod had been confirmed by what he’d just learned. Zev’vat didn’t have to venture further to know that the cries he could hear through the stone door at the end of the corridor belonged to a man experiencing the true depths of physical and mental suffering.

Zev’vat shrugged and headed for the portal chamber. He had his assignment. The friends of Graz’zt’s prisoner would join him in his misfortune, soon enough.

Chapter 510

The common room of The Cutter's Folly was an amalgam of every tavern cliché on any of a thousand worlds, from the stink of sweat and spilled beer, to the raucous laughter and boisterous jeers of its diverse inhabitants, to the steely faced bartender and the pinchable wenches who ran a steady circuit between the kitchen, the bar, and the forty tables scattered across the wide open area. The place only had a single story, but there was a hall subtly situated in the back corner that offered access to additional rooms to patrons who were willing to pay for a bit of extra privacy.

The clientele of the Folly was a mixed lot, even by Sigil standards. They tended to fall into the middle of the spectrum; the worst fiends and the purest celestials usually preferred to gravitate toward their own establishments, both for the services that catered to their particular needs and for the need to avoid confrontations. Sigil was a place that had a reputation for being rough, but the city was officially Neutral, and open conflict drew the attention of the Lady.

That certainly did not mean that the Folly was a "soft" tavern by any means. A number of the stains that had all but obliterated the original color of the hardwood floor were more than just liquor, and most of the furniture had the look of having been repaired more than once. A pair of hulking ogrillons in mithral shirts provided obvious muscle to discourage trouble, and the bartender hung a blast crossbow in obvious view over the bar, but even so only a fool came to the Folly if he, she, or it couldn't handle themselves.

Thus when the swinging doors parted to reveal a newcomer, a face not familiar to the bar's regulars, most quickly returned to their own concerns. The newcomer was a human woman, quite comely in outward appearance, clad in a light-colored tunic and breeches with a pale cloak trailing down across her shoulders and down her back. A few gazes lingered upon the woman, either out of lascivious curiosity or because of the veritable trove of magical auras about her person. But one look at her eyes was enough to encourage even those to return their focus to their beverages or their companions.

She walked boldly into the center of the common room, and just stood there. A few conversations at the tables around her quieted as their attention returned to her, but while her stare was challenging, she said nothing, just scanning the faces.

Finally, she crossed over to the bar. The bartender, a bariur of considerable age, nodded at her. "What'll it be?"

She replied in a voice designed to carry clearly across the room. "I want Barrat Ghur."

A number of looks were spread across the room, behind the woman's back. The bartender betrayed his reaction just for a moment, then he lowered his eyes to the bar, running a dirty rag across the polished surface. "Lord Ghur no longer frequents this establishment, ma'am. Perhaps a glass of Aelendur firewine?"

A rumbling behind her alerted the woman. She turned to see a mountain of a man step forward, his bulk all but blocking out her view of the room behind him. He looked to be some sort of combination of a minotaur, ogre, and fiend all in one, with the least appealing

features of each. He stood a little under seven feet tall, only a bit more than a foot taller than the woman, but he had to be almost that much again wide. His shoulders were broad enough to serve as a table for four men, and each of his arms were thicker around than the woman's entire body.

"No trouble in here," the bartender said. "Take it outside."

The hulk ignored him. "You look puny, human woman," he growled. "Why you want Ghur? Oogok show you plenty good time."

The woman's lips tightened in disgust. "I'd sooner smear myself in goristo feces," she said. "As it is, I can barely stand the stench of being in the same room with you. Go away." Dismissing him with a wave, she started to turn back to the bar.

Oogok snarled and reached for her with a meaty fist. But the woman spun smoothly, a red glow erupting around her hand as she reached out and splayed her palm across the massive expanse of the hulk's chest. A fierce red glow spread outward from that point of touch, seeping into the body of the fierce monstrosity. Oogok's eyes widened and he staggered back, his upper body quivering as an ugly mewling issued from his mouth. The woman maintained her touch until the red glow had faded. A spray of bright crimson blood fountained from the hulk's mouth, pouring down his chest, leaving little flecks upon the otherwise pristine cloak of the woman. He fell to his knees, staring up at her with eyes wide with terror as she looked down at him, a cold look in her eyes. Then she turned back to the bartender.

"I think I'll pass," she said, turning and walking past the cowering hulk toward the door. No one moved to stop her; in fact everyone in the room suddenly seemed quite intent upon doing something other than appearing to pay any attention to her. By the time that the doors swung shut in her wake, the din of conversation and activity had returned to its former level of intensity.

Oogok, kneeling in the center of the room in a puddle of his own blood and piss, finally toppled forward, coughing up gobs of gore from his shredded lungs.

Sighing, the bartender gestured for his bouncers to help him heave the crippled creature out onto the street.

* * * * *

Dana Ilgarten did not go far after leaving the Folly. Idly rubbing a fleck of blood on her cloak with a fingernail, she concentrated on the ring she wore on the third finger of her right hand.

Do you have him?

Yeah, I got him. Took off like a shot out the back way, just like you said. Hey, how'd that big bastard look when you harmed him? Always thought Oogok had it coming...

Focus on the matter at hand, Dana thought through the telepathic link.

Yeah, yeah. Okay, he's going into the Hive. You want me to—what am I saying? Of course you do. Have I told you yet today that this plan is crazy?

Just do it, Dana thought, already walking briskly in that direction. Her sense of direction around Sigil was still a bit vague, and she thought she'd never get used to the way that the terrain ahead curved up, or the way that she could glimpse the far side of the torus *through* the wisps of cloud above. Sigil lay on the interior of a massive ring, existing in defiance of all of the physical laws of the world she knew.

If he goes deep into the Hive, we'll lose the bastard, Dana thought. She hadn't intended for that to get out through the link, but a moment later she heard the retort, *Well, maybe that wouldn't be... wait! He's ducking into a warehouse... it's just a few blocks from the main drag. I thought I saw a bruiser let him in, damn, the place looks like a fortress.*

Dana came to an abrupt stop. *Give me a fix on your location, and a relative direction and distance to the target.*

There was a momentary pause. *Dana... are you sure that's a good idea? Remember the last time you tried that...*

Just DO IT!

She felt a slight surge along the link. The rings had been damned expensive, and having the *status* power added to the *telepathic bond* had put a hefty premium on the devices. But they'd already proven their worth several times over even in the relatively short time she'd been here. The thought made her regret her harsh tone over the link. She was getting frustrated, but it made no sense to take it out upon her cohort.

Apology accepted, she heard, through the link. *All right, it's sixty paces coreward and fifteen rising arc from my position. Should put you right behind the door, or damned near it.*

Thank you, LL.

Be careful; if there's trouble I'll try to get to you, but...

I know, she thought, then she spoke a word and vanished through a *dimension door*.

The bustle of the street was replaced by the dank interior of the warehouse. She was in a roughly square chamber thirty feet on a side, mostly empty save for some debris cluttered against the walls. Iron posts reinforced the ceiling, and the few murky windows tucked under that roof, thick with the accumulated muck of years, were both incredibly narrow and warded with thick iron bars. There were two other doors besides the one that led outside; presumably they led to other quarters of the building.

And standing directly in front of her, his back to her, was her quarry.

Her arrival had not gone unnoticed. Mocker Darr turned, his disfigured face twisting into a scowl as he saw her. Behind him, near the door, stood a pair of bugbears, clad in black

chainmail that blended with the deep shadows of the room. The door itself was built like the portal of a vault, with a heavy iron wheel mechanism in its center that drove four thick bolts into the surrounding threshold.

Dana reached for the tiefling, but he was faster, his reflexes obviously supernaturally empowered as he leapt back several feet, between his goons.

“Put this berk in the dead-book!” Darr snarled, drawing two daggers with a flick of his wrists. Even in the bad light, greasy smears were visible along the lengths of the blades. The bugbears produced ugly jagged-edge shortswords that also probably were poisoned, and started menacingly forward.

Dana uttered a *holy word*.

As the echoes of the pure syllable faded off of the heavy iron plates that made up the walls of the place, the priestess of Selûne stepped forward to stand over Mocker Darr. She kicked the daggers out of his hands, and then knelt beside him. The tiefling lay quivering upon the ground; the bugbears were both unmoving, blood trailing in soft red currents from their ears. Dana took a few seconds to expertly search the tiefling, then looked down at him.

“I know you can hear me,” she said. “Your eyesight will return in a few moments, but you’re not going to be able to move for a rather longer than that. What happens after that... well, that’s up to you.”

Hey, are you going to let me in or what? came a voice in her mind.

Sorry, she thought, standing and stepping toward the door.

She hadn’t covered the first step when one of the room’s other doors burst open, and a chittering horde of mezzoloths poured into the room, screaming for her blood.

Chapter 511

They were on her in seconds. Dana regretted not having a second *holy word* handy; she’d been relying heavily upon divinations since arriving here, and two *greater scryings* per day had proven more necessary even than the devastating power of the former spell.

She dodged back as the first rank of insectoid fiends rushed at her. Pain blossomed along her side as one grazed her with one of the tines from its trident. The weapon was barbed, designed to cause particularly vicious wounds, but despite her apparent vulnerability, the priestess was warded with a number of potent magical protections. The second mezzoloth found this out as it thrust its weapon at her chest, only to have the blow turned by the defensive auras projected by her *moon bracers* and *ring of protection*.

Dana! came the voice through the link.

Busy! she shot back, moving further back before the 'loths could encircle her, leaping into the air as her winged boots carried her out of the reach of their tridents. Several of the fiends hurled their weapons at her, but none scored a hit as she twisted nimbly in mid-air out of their streaking paths. As she gained clearance over them—it looked like there were about a dozen!—she caught sight of a shadowy figure that remained in the doorway, fixing her with a stare infused with a tangible malevolence.

That would be the boss, she thought, her suspicion confirmed an instant later as a crackling black beam—a ray of *enervation*—shot out from the creature and stabbed into her gut. She felt the icy touch of the beam spread through her body, although her life energy was strong enough to mostly resist the fell power of the necromantic magic.

The mezzoloths could not reach her as she lifted almost to the ceiling fifteen feet above. But the fiends had magical power, and before she could venture her next course she could feel surges of energy from them, seeking to disrupt her magic. Her own spells were of far greater potency than the power commanded by these lesser fiends, but her boots were not, and she realized her error even as a *dispel* took hold, and she plummeted straight down into the knot of waiting fiends.

And if that wasn't bad enough, another of the 'loths conjured up a *cloudkill* that spilled out over the chamber floor, forming a plume of sick green vapors that swallowed her up as she fell.

Chapter 512

Dana! I'll get you out of there... I'll break the icon ...

Dana coughed as the acrid fumes of the *cloudkill* burned her lungs, dodging madly as the mezzoloths swarmed upon her, stabbing at her with their tridents. Already several gashes covered her arms and legs, but thus far she'd avoided a serious injury. There was no way that that could continue, though, she knew, but even so she sent a strong response back through the link.

NO! If we lose Darr, we may never find Barrat Ghur!

She could feel the frustration that came back through the link, but her cohort respected her will, did not sunder the small icon that she'd given to him, prepared with a *refuge* spell as a last-ditch escape mechanism.

The *cloudkill* did not hinder the 'loths in the slightest, as they were immune to toxins. But it did at least grant her some cover, obscuring her from the yugoloth leader and from those of the mezzoloths that weren't right upon her, stabbing with their tridents. Casting defensively, she drew down a *flame strike* that slammed down into their ranks. The 'loths were heavily resistant to fire, but the divine energies in the blast ripped through their spell resistance and into their corrupt bodies. Several of the mezzoloths were incinerated by the power of the spell, and the flames tore into the rank of attackers in front of her, drawing chattering cries of pain as the blast seared them from behind.

“Don’t like that, do you?” she cried. Driven to fury, the ring of attackers thrust at her with renewed vigor, but in the confusion of smoke and swirling vapors only one attack hit, opening another shallow gash across her bicep. A few of the ‘loths tried to return the favor she’d offered with her spell to summon balls of fire that they hurled at her, the fist-sized gobs of flame streaking brightly through the fog to splash across her cloak. But Dana had taken the precaution of protecting herself against several types of elemental energy before she’d stepped foot inside the Cutter’s Folly, and the little blasts of flame inflicted no harm upon her.

She took advantage of the disruption caused by her spell to infuse herself with *divine power*. That cost her another pair of gashes, but they were offset by the surge of vitality that flowed into her through the spell.

She drew out her adamantine nunchaku, and stared out at the ring of glowing red eyes that surrounded her out in the fog. The toxin was starting to affect her, but her fortitude was such that she could ignore its effects, at least for a few moments. The *cloudkill* had spread to fill the entire chamber, the vapors rising up to the rafters above, so there was no easy escape, save for transporting herself out of here. But to do that would be to yield Mocker Darr, and her best chance of finding Benzan.

That, she would not do.

“Let’s dance then, you fiendish bastards,” she snarled, snapping out the nunchaku, crushing the skull of the nearest mezzoloth with a powerful blow of the adamantine weapon. Another came forward to take its place, its body blackened from Dana’s *flame strike*.

A massive clang filled the room, the sound only slightly muted by the cloying toxic fog. Dana didn’t turn, but a few of the mezzoloths glanced in the direction of the door, built to withstand a siege.

Dana grimaced and fought on. The mezzoloths were starting to score more hits, now, with her flanked and slowly weakening from the *cloudkill*. A few more hurled *dispels* at her, trying to bring down her defensive wards, but their efforts were futile against the power of her magic.

The clanging noise continued, growing in intensity.

A dark shadow materialized out of the fog, taller and leaner than the bulbous mezzoloths. Dana did not see it immediately, but she felt the touch of a spell, as a cold voice sounded in her mind.

Lay down your arms, and cease this foolish struggle, and we can talk, it said. We can provide you with the information you seek...

For the barest instant, she hesitated. But finally, in reply, she laughed. “Nice try, fiend! Your feeble *suggestion* is of no avail against me!”

The ultroloth, however, merely lifted a black hand, drawing upon the power of its magic once more. Dana, alerted to its threat by its initial attack, immediately hurled another *flame strike* that descended upon it in a twisting blaze of raging fire. The 'loth withstood the blast—although several mezzoloths around it were incinerated—but it took the hint, withdrawing back into the mists.

But a moment later, pain exploded through her back. A mezzoloth had waited for her attention to shift away, and took advantage of her casting to drive its trident forward, impaling the jagged spines solidly into her back. She staggered forward and fell to her knees, the insectoid fiends surging forward to finish her.

Chapter 513

Benzan... I'm sorry, Dana thought, as the mezzoloth behind her continued to tear at her back, while the others stabbed at her face and upper body from ahead and to her sides with their tridents.

A last massive clang sounded, followed by a terrible noise of creaking metal that culminated in a loud resounding crash. The mezzoloths turned as the poisonous cloud shifted and swirled from the disruption. A dark form streaked forward out of the mist, massive, nebulous as it caromed into the mezzoloth standing behind Dana. The insectoid fiend simply vanished, borne off into the fog with the newcomer.

The mezzoloths, surprised by the sudden development, hesitated for just an instant. That respite was enough to give Dana the opportunity to summon a *heal* spell, fully restoring herself, burning away the toxic effects of the *cloudkill*. Too late, the mezzoloths surged at her again, but even as they stabbed at her she leapt up, spinning around in a wide arc, her nunchaku laying about in a deadly barrage of powerful blows. Fortified by her *divine power*, each impact sundered chitinous exoskeletons and segmented limbs. More mezzoloths staggered forward to fill the gaps as she killed, but all bore the marks of her *flame strikes*, and it was clear that the fiendish surge was abating.

The hulking newcomer returned, catching the fiends from behind. He was big, standing nearly eight feet tall, covered in fur that seemed a pale gray in the weak light and swirling vapors. He snarled as two of the mezzoloths turned on it, lashing out with powerful claws that delivered crushing blows against their alien bodies. The first twisted and chattered madly as the creature snared it and dragged it up to his powerful jaws, and its struggles abruptly ended as they closed upon its head in a nasty crunch. The second one tried a single feeble stab of its trident, but when that failed to even scratch it, it turned and tried to retreat.

It didn't get very far.

Dana was left facing five of the yugoloths, but her violent attacks were quickly driving down that number. The ultroloth had not reappeared, and the fiends seemed to come to the belated realization that this fight was not going to end in their favor. Once the rout began it ended quickly, with the fiends drawing upon the power and *teleporting* away. Or at least

most did; Dana caught another from behind as it tried to draw upon its power, smashing its back with two powerful blows and then snapping her weapon down upon its neck as it fell.

That's the last of them, her cohort said. *Are you all right?*

“Get Darr,” she said aloud, calling upon a *dispel magic* that cleared away the toxic cloud. As the room came back into focus, she could see the battered-down iron door, as well as the iron fence-post that her cohort had used as an improvised battering ram.

As the cloud dissipated, she could also clearly see him. He was an impressive humanoid with animalistic features, covered in fur and a loose-fitting toga that was ruined with yugoloth blood and stains from its exposure to the *cloudkill*. His long limbs ended in sharp talons, and his face was clearly feline, with dark blue eyes that fixed Dana intently. His jaws did not look to be suited to speech, but when he spoke it was without accent or any apparent difficulty.

“Bah,” he said, spitting out a mouthful of gore. “I’m not going to get that taste out of my mouth for a month.”

“You’ll get over it, LL,” she said, looking around the room. She quickly searched the landscape of corpses to confirm that the yugoloth leader was not among them. There were sixteen dead mezzoloths scattered around the room, many with their black carapaces scorched with divine fire. But her interest lay elsewhere, as she turned to Mocker Durr.

The tiefling’s features were green, but he still breathed, his breath rattling in his throat as he fought to draw air into his poison-ravaged lungs. His left hand was outstretched, trembling as he tried to close his fingers on the grip of a dagger, but the paralyzing effects of Dana’s *holy word* still held him. She checked him quickly, to make sure that he wasn’t in danger of dying from the poison in his system. Thus satisfied, she crouched over him on the balls of her feet, where he could see her clearly. The lion-man came over to loom threatening behind her, sending an obvious message.

“Now, Darr. It’s time for you and I to have that little talk.”

Chapter 514

A thick, cloying heat hung over the city of Suldolphor, dry and clinging despite the presence of the adjacent straits that connected the Shining Sea with the Lake of Steam. Not even the slightest promise of a breeze offered relief to the residents of the city this day. From the distance a wavering haze hung over the blocky tan expanses of the city’s wards, crowded upon the slender peninsula upon which the city perched. The sea of brown was broken only where the sunshine glittered brilliantly off of a bulb-shaped tower covered in leaf of precious metals, in the wealthier districts where temples or rich estates overlooked the more humble neighborhoods of the urban poor. Above all in terms of grandeur and brilliance was the spacious palace of the city’s governor, subject to the Syl-Pasha of Calimshan in name, but obligated to his nobles and merchant lords in practice. The city’s position on the wild frontier that was the lands upon the great lake, and its strategic location, ensured that its fortifications were not neglected. Iron-faced men clad in hauberks

of bronze rings, despite the heat of the day, stood vigilant upon massive walls thick enough for wagons to pass each other upon the battlements.

But despite the glories of the city's temples and palaces, most of the city of Suldolphor was characterized by narrow, twisting streets that wound unpredictable paths between rows of tan multistory structures stacked atop each other like crates jumbled in a warehouse. The Old City nearest the bluff overlooking the straits was fashioned mostly out of weathered granite, buildings hundreds of years old, but the sprawling districts outside the inner wall were built mostly of mud brick. In the humid climate those structures had to be rebuilt frequently, giving the city the look of a patchwork of old and new in constant juxtaposition. One hundred and forty thousand people were crowded into the space within the outer walls, a tidepool of teeming life.

The smells of the city core were likewise layered, with the sizzles of meats mixed with the stench of animals and people crowded into too small a place. In these crowded alleys the sea breezes rarely penetrated, and when the autumn rains came they often created short-lived but violent floods that purged the streets of the gathered filth and detritus of the long, hot summer. On many streets the buildings on either side, stacked with floors piled tentatively one upon the other, leaned inward until they almost touched, leaving only a sliver of blue sky above that was almost tantalizingly distant. Within those warrens the noises of the poor neighborhoods could be almost deafening, the words, cries, and screams of its residents overlaid with the barking of dogs, the lowing of cattle, and above all the constant buzz of insects—the one race that outnumbered all others by a considerable magnitude.

Suldolphor was a unique city in that its rich and poor were often juxtaposed in an odd medley; it was possible to leave a richly appointed temple of Deneir, make a wrong turn, and end up in a dead end alley where urchins in tattered linen tunics swarmed like hungry rats. Few could claim to know fully the maze of the city's streets, and fewer still knew all of the hidey-holes and arcane mysteries tucked here and there, offering opportunity and danger for those seeking either.

In the back room of a small, nondescript shop, one of the most dangerous men in Faerûn sat in a small chair behind an ancient desk cluttered with a miscellany of unusual objects. A thin thread of white incense rose into the air from a censer placed on one of the dozen or so shelves that lined the wall behind him, filling the air with an odor strong enough to make the head swim. The place was uncomfortably hot, but the man appeared to be unaffected by the heat, and in fact wore a heavy linen tunic that was bulky enough to have hidden almost anything within its layered folds. His face was lined with the folds and crags of a difficult life, the flesh a rich olive brown, but he could have been fifty years or eighty, the specifics of him difficult to discern in the dim interior.

The man sat watching keenly the only other occupant of the chamber. His guest was a tall, lean man, clad in a voluminous robe in the style of a Calimshite nobleman or wealthy man of business. The scimitar at his waist looked to be more for show than for use, with the rich ivory inlay of the hilt unworn by experience. But he looked no less dangerous for that, especially when one took the time to look into his cold, hard eyes. Those gray orbs weighed the smaller man much as he himself was being weighed, and for a moment there was a quiet *détente* between the two in the silence of the crowded chamber.

“You have come a long way,” the older man finally said.

“I have,” the rich lord said. “Your organization comes highly recommended as the best at what it does. I have need of the best.”

The older man nodded, taking up a tiny cup from its perch on the edge of his desk, and lifting it to his lips. When it became clear that he was not going to immediately respond, the man in the noble garb continued. “It is my understanding that you are not limited by distance, so long as the target is upon Faerûn. You have access to powerful magic, and are accustomed to dealing with powerful foes with unique talents.”

The older man took another sip of his beverage and put down the cup. “You are well informed.”

The rich man inclined his head slightly. “The price, of course, would be commensurate with the difficulty of the task,” he said. He produced a small bag from an inside pocket of his robe, and leaned over to place it upon the desk. He shook it slightly, so that some of the contents spilled out onto the table. They were small cubes, maybe an inch on a side, and even in the limited illumination were instantly obvious as platinum.

The man glanced at them. “The runes, on the sides?”

“The cubes are enchanted with a magic that keeps them at this size. When the trigger word is spoken, each cube becomes a block of the metal ten inches on a side. One thousand times the current volume, solid platinum. There are fifteen within the bag. I could demonstrate with one, if you wish.”

The old man shook his head casually, as if the fact of such wealth—if the rich man’s terms were accurate, the sum value of the offer was not much less than a full year’s assessment of taxes of the entire kingdom of Calimshan—was just a small curiosity in the course of his daily business. “And the target?”

The rich man spoke a series of names. He produced a scroll from the same pocket where the bag had originated. “I have here descriptions and a list of the locations frequented by...”

He’d started to place the scroll beside the bag, but was forestalled by a negative shake of the man’s head. “I am sorry. We cannot accept this commission.”

The rich man’s expression betrayed more than a hint of anger. “If the offer is insufficient—”

“Not at all. The price is extremely generous.” He rose, the movement so fluid despite his casual stance and bulk that he seemed to organically flow from one state to the next. He turned to one of the shelves and its crowded collection of items, and from a hidden space drew out a small book bound in leather so dark as to be almost black. He offered it to the man, who opened it. The inside of the book was a single page of parchment, meticulously rich, carefully scraped so that no stray mark or remainder of past writing remained upon the page.

The rich man's look betrayed his recognition of the words scribed upon the page. Twenty names, penned in a neat script, organized into a numbered list.

"That list is updated twice a year," the old man said, settling back into his chair. "A considerable portion of my organization's efforts is dedicated to ensuring that it is current and accurate. As you can see, three of the names that you mentioned are on the list."

"I see. So these are individuals that your group will not interfere with."

The old man inclined his head slightly. "I am glad that you understand my meaning. I make no judgment about your interest in this matter, or offer evaluation upon the ability of my association or any other to complete the assignment. However, there are certain individuals, whether through personal power, organizational affiliation, or favor with the more powerful of the gods of Faerûn, who simply provide too much risk for an organization such as mine to countenance involvement. If you like, I can suggest a few alternative groups who may be willing, perhaps."

"Perhaps a partial commission, for the names not on the list?"

The old man shook his head. "In this case, it is a matter of association. All of those individuals you cited are closely involved, as no doubt you yourself know. And I suspect that at the next revision of the list, all of the individuals you cited will ultimately end up upon the page. Assuming their rise does not meet a premature interruption," he added, with a slight nod to the visitor.

The rich man nodded. "Very well then. I thank you for your time."

The old man smiled and sat quietly while the other stood, placing the black book upon the desk, recovering his bag and the rune-marked cubes that had spilled out. Neither made an effort at further communication as the richly robed man turned and left. He did not even bother to fully depart through the beaded curtain that led out into the front of the shop before he shimmered and vanished, *teleporting* away.

The old man sat there for a few long moments, looking at the contents of the black book, sipping his drink. Despite his deferral of the rich man's commission, he knew that his organization would have to conduct some follow-up on this matter. Even though the Society of Stealth was not going to be directly involved, when a greater demon showed up looking for assassins to take out some of the most powerful individuals currently alive upon Faerûn, it was a matter to be noted.

Chapter 515

The chant sounded off of the thick stone walls of the vault, amplifying the sound and adding a sonorous echo reminiscent of a dirge. Flickering flames atop a half-dozen candles set in sconces along the perimeter of the room dimly illuminated the six figures that were the source of the chant. The dark forms, clad in body-concealing black robes with heavy cowls, were arranged in a circle around a rune-inscribed ring etched into the ancient stone

blocks of the floor. A dank mustiness filled the place, and lichens grew in the cracks of the walls, hinting that this subterranean vault was linked to the sewers that kept the city above clean and orderly. The very place seemed suited to mysterious and secret activities, such as the ritual underway here.

From deep in the shadows, Zev'vat observed the ritual. His eyes hovered briefly over Grendalla, her back to him at her position at the "head" of the circle. His lips tightened briefly in some unfathomable emotion. It certainly wasn't affection, despite the fact that the leader of this cult cell had welcomed him and gladly professed her loyalty to Graz'zt with the offering of her body. Her depravity had been... well, after experiencing the dark orgies held within the Argent Palace, back before the Disaster, anything that these mere mortal followers could come up with seemed pathetic by comparison.

The chant intensified, and in response a green aura began to coalesce within the ritual. Zev'vat watched closely. The kelvezu had almost immediately gauged that Grendalla was not up to the task that he required of her. Her little coven was weak and craven, scuttling around in the foul pits beneath this prosperous western city. But to be truthful, the demon was forced to admit that he had few choices left with which to work. Graz'zt's followers had suffered along with the calamitous decline of their sponsor, and most of the once-potent cells had long since been overrun or turned by the demon lord's powerful rivals. A few had even fallen to non-demonic cults, absorbed by the followers of this Prime's gods of evil. Those that had remained loyal, like Grendalla's little company, had been forced to lie low, crawling into the dark places under rocks where they could linger unseen.

The chant broke up as a flare of silver energy passed through the circle and into the growing green nimbus within. Screams erupted from the cultists as the silver fire intensified, binding them to the swelling disruption that now began to take on a distinct form, bridging the barrier between worlds.

Zev'vat watched the final stages of the ritual intently. It had been he who had modified the ceremony, drawing the power lacking in the cultists by using their very life forces as a power source. Grendalla, of course, he had not informed of the consequence of the change, and she had trusted him, much to her misfortune.

The ritual concluded, the silver light, green field, and cultists all snuffed out at the same moment. The summoning circle had been broken, but the five individuals now standing within made no move to exit. Zev'vat came forward, and addressed the leader.

He was easily discernable. His—if it was in fact a he—companions were all naked, the candlelight glistening off their hides, skin as black as the darkest night. Their bodies were perfectly smooth, bearing no hair or obvious genitalia, no hint at all in fact as to their gender, if they even had such. Each stood just over eight feet in height but was incredibly broad, almost like Faerûnian dwarves in the construction of their forms. Their muscles suggested great strength, and no bit of flesh appeared to be wasted upon them. Their faces were alien, noseless, with narrow slits for eyes and wide mouths that stretched across the full expanse of their faces. Each of the four escorts bore a single weapon, a bar of black metal resembling a sword but without a cutting edge on either side, the whole nearly five feet long.

The leader was clad in a simple one-piece garment, a violet drape that covered his torso, fastened around his waist with a piece of thick brown rope. He carried a gnarled staff of gray wood, carved with tiny symbols that seemed to shift slightly when the eye passed over them, creating new meaning. He watched Zev'vat intently, waiting. Neither he nor his escorts paid any heed to the corpses scattered around them.

"I greet you, Shaman of the M'butu," the kelvezu finally said, offering a short bow.

The Shaman made a clicking sound that seemed to originate deep within his chest. "We have come to the call." He looked around at his surroundings. "This place is most unpleasant." His escorts were in fact shivering, although by the way they carried themselves, it seemed as though they would simply stand there and freeze to death before they admitted discomfort.

"You need not remain long. Once the service for which I have summoned you is complete, you may return to your world." The kelvezu did not mention the means for that return, given the death of those who had facilitated the initial transition, but the Shaman did not seem troubled by that detail.

"We have come in service to the Six Fingered Man. If we complete this service, our obligation to the Six Fingered Man is complete, per the terms of our bargain."

The kelvezu nodded. "Agreed."

The Shaman's mouth opened slightly in a nasty parody of a smile; a whole lot of jagged teeth the color of old bones were visible within. "Speak then, what must be done."

Chapter 516

Cal spent his tenday in a much quieter fashion than his companions; he faced no fantastic monsters or dire plagues. But nevertheless, the gnome archmage was incredibly busy, and in that relatively short period of time he covered more ground than some merchants crossed in their entire lifetimes.

His interview with the Blackstaff was brief but fruitful. Khelben Arunsun, the Archmage of Waterdeep, was sympathetic to his situation, and was able to provide the gnome with access to several tomes and other sources of at least reasonably reliable information about the Abyss and its lords. There was a lot of misinformation about the Prince of Shadows, the master of Azzagrat, but Arunsun promised that he would dedicate more resources to the topic and forward any information he uncovered to Cal at the Traveler's Rest.

The Blackstaff was also able to help Cal in another way, granting him a recommendation that got him free access to the extensive library and laboratory facilities of the city's renown Mages' Guild. That was particularly useful, for while the Traveler's Rest had a decent study, Cal's resources were scant indeed in comparison to the rich amenities offered by the Guild to its inner circle of arcanists. Arunsun also gave Cal a reference to a contact at the Guild who was able to provide the gnome with a pair of items of great use to one in his position; a *blessed book* to augment his bulging, overfull spellbooks, and a small magical

container akin to Dannel's *efficient quiver*, only designed to hold magical staves, rods, and wands. The ornate leather sleeve held up to twenty such devices, and produced the proper one upon a simple voice command. Given the recent growth in Cal's collection of such devices, the compact cylinder found a ready home at the gnome's belt.

Cal already had a good number of scrolls he wanted to scribe, and with the library of the Guild at his disposal he was set to make a good start at filling the magically-enhanced capacity of his *blessed book*. But first, he had other errands to complete. He still had a good quantity of treasure in his magical *haversack*, mostly specialized magical items left over from their errand at Skullrot, or from Hookface's horde. Those items required unique buyers, so he spent the better part of three days making contacts, collecting references from the other Guild mages, and even delving briefly into Skullport, the corrupt outpost situated deep beneath the city.

He had mastered the ability of magical teleportation, and almost every day he used the power at least twice, transporting himself to distant cities and returning later, worn out by full days of activity. With his *greater teleport* ability, honed to full potency by his archmage abilities, he could travel to destinations he'd never even visited, needing only a detailed description of the place upon which he could focus the energies of the spell. In that tenday he traveled to seven cities scattered all over the Realms, seeking out buyers for his remaining treasures, collecting more spells, or digging up small threads of information that each fit into the puzzle that he was constructing. That last, in particular, was especially troubling. Few knew much about Graz'zt, and even fewer were willing to speak of the demon prince openly. But what was odd was a pattern he was beginning to sense. Faerûn already had plenty of evil gods; the demon princes acted within a crowded field. But the hints that he learned suggested that Graz'zt's power had, of late, been in decline upon the Prime Material Plane. There were no hard facts to clarify this suspicion, and nothing at all about events upon the Outer Planes, and especially the Abyss. Cal actually knew more than most about Graz'zt's own realm, having traveled there personally, almost twenty years ago.

It was not a journey he was eager to make again.

Another errand he'd attended to shortly after his meeting with the Blackstaff. While in Waterdeep, he traveled to the busy crafts district situated along the broad avenue that led up from the city's docks. It had been decades since he'd lived in the city, but a few probing questions and well-placed gold pieces led him to the shop of a craftsman who could fulfill the unusual commission that he had in mind. A much larger quantity of gold set his request in motion. Toward the end of the tenday, he returned, and accepted a fairly large bundle wrapped in cloth that barely fit into the extradimensional space within his *haversack*.

The rest of his time he spent in a private cubby deep within the Guild library, scribing spells into his book. Even here he was forced to choose among the new spells he'd collected, and while he would have liked to scribe a few scrolls as well, there was no time. The lazy pace of magical item creation he'd followed over the last decade, while the Rest had been constructed, and Ember Vale grew from a waystop into a community, seemed a lost luxury.

Finally, on the last day of the tenday since he'd left Lok and Mole at that distant outpost so far away in the North, he returned home. He materialized in the small secure chamber

beneath the Rest, and despite his exhaustion carefully disabled each of the wards that were designed to ensure a most unwelcome reception to those who arrived uninvited. After securing the heavy iron door behind him, he headed up the stairs, crossed directly to his room, and without even bothering to undress collapsed into his bed, instantly falling asleep. Outside, the last glimmers of the sun were already vanishing over distant western horizon, but the gnome was oblivious to the coming of the night.

Chapter 517

Although Cal missed the sunset, there was another watching that evening, the fading rays of the setting sun glistening off the gray orbs of his eyes. Below, spread out before the low, lightly wooded ridge upon which he perched, the watcher looked intently upon the community of Ember Vale as the cluster of buildings snug within the walls became indistinct in the deep shadows of twilight. A few lights appeared within the community as the night deepened, flickering points like the glitter of the *fey-ra* insect, back in his own Reality.

The Shaman of the M'butu lingered until the village was all but invisible in the gathering dark. He rose and departed, moving back into the scattered trees that spotted the ridge. His destination was a copse of scraggly trees that had grown together in a small dip in the ridge, forming a rocky dell where enough soil had settled to support their efforts.

The ground was treacherous, but the Shaman had no difficulty making his way down the uneven descent. As he reached the bottom of the dell his four guards materialized around him out of the dark, making no noise with their movements despite their size and bulk. They were clad now in plain gray robes of heavy wool that could not fully disguise the alien cast of their features, a necessary adjustment to what was for them a bitterly cold Reality. The garments did not fit well, but they served the Soldiers of the M'butu more than their former owners, the late cultists of Graz'zt whose bones were currently being gnawed by vermin in the sewers beneath the city of Scornubel.

The Shaman did not feel any such concerns; for him such minor considerations as temperature and climate were far beneath his notice. This Reality was alien, hostile, but his link to the Spirit World was still potent, his bond pulsing in a beat that was both different and familiar at the same time. He could feel the life that filled this place, tiny beads of heat in the cold surroundings of this place. Those creatures sufficiently aware of their Reality could sense what he was, and they had fled before him, knowing only that an intruder had come among them, and that he was foreign, threatening, Danger. The Shaman could have masked his coming, or compelled them to him, but thus far he had not bothered with either.

The Soldiers spread out, taking up defensive positions around the perimeter of the dell. He ignored them, kneeling beside a small mound of earth formed against the tangled root mass of one of the trees. Making a deep-pitched clicking sound in his chest, he used his staff to draw crude markings in the packed dirt. Then he reached into the ground, his powerful fingers breaking through the hard surface and turning the softer soil beneath. His fingers felt the fibrous length of a root, and he drew his hand back, pulling away the ground from the mass of the tree.

Tiny things squirmed in the ground. The Shaman clucked in approval, watching the insects, sensing their dim awareness of their Reality. A small form crawled over the exposed root—a beetle, perhaps an inch long. The Shaman extended his hand and captured it. The beetle, displeased at the rough treatment, bit his finger.

The Shaman's mouth twisted in that grim smile.

Chapter 518

Cal came awake suddenly. He was a light sleeper, but there was always still that brief moment of disorientation, when dream had not yet fully faded, and reality had not yet fully settled around him. But his years as an adventurer had honed his awareness, and within a few seconds he was already gathering his magical items, placing each in its proper place upon his person.

As of yet, he wasn't sure what had awakened him.

Taking up a tiny brass lamp invested with a *continual flame*, he quickly headed up the narrow stairs that connected the tower's three above-ground and two below-ground levels. Now that he was fully awake he could better sense what had alerted him, a subtle vibration through the stones of the tower, not really a deep sound, the rumbling of an earthquake, but something else, something that his long experience told him likely equated to trouble. If it was a direct assault upon the tower, then the many multilayered wards upon the place would have warned him, but that alone did not mean safety.

He paused only momentarily at the top of the stairs; first to cloak himself in *greater invisibility*, an action that had become almost instinctive to him. Like his ability to *teleport*, his advancing talents as an archmage had grown to the point where he could summon that power without preparing the spell in advance, up to four times a day. Once protected from casual view, he spoke the password to bypass Dana's *glyph*, one of many that protected the tower and its inhabitants. The door itself was of hardened steel set deep into the surrounding stone threshold with sheltered hinges, but the complex lock responded quickly to Cal's expert hands. Shuttering the lamp, tucking it into one of his many pockets, he stepped out onto the roof of the tower.

The night was warm for the season. Although the moon had set, the stars twinkling high above cast enough light through the thin gauze of cloud cover high above to allow him to at least make out in general the outlines of buildings, walls, and in the distance, the low hills that hovered on the horizon to the north and east.

The landscape clearly showed the work of human hands, the random curves and dips of the land shaped into more regular patterns that resulted from deliberate cultivation. In the years since Ember Vale had begun around the nucleus started by Cal and his companions, farms had sprung up along the roads to the east, west, and north. Most of the farmers still lived within the walls of the village itself—this area, still known as the Fields of the Dead, was far from tame—but Cal could see the low forms of at least a half-dozen barns and other compact structures out to about a half-mile beyond the walls, beyond which point the night made everything vague, even to his sharp gnomish eyes.

And he could also see the source of what had alerted him.

In the near-darkness it looked like a barn itself, a massive oblong shadow cloaked in black that blended with the deep of the night. But then it *moved*, skittering—that was the best word he could think of to describe its motion—across the plowed expanse of a field, and as he watched, it crashed into a low barn that stood between the field and the adjacent road. The barn was a sturdy structure—Lok had helped in the building—but it gave way before the... thing... in a loud crash of shattering wood that carried clearly to him even across the intervening quarter-mile or so that separated him from its location.

A few lights appeared in windows in the village below. Apparently others had heard it as well. But Cal was already casting, blending shadow and ether to conjure an ally to his side. The *shadow conjuration* resolved much faster than a typical summoning spell, and within seconds a bralani stood beside him, hovering on an invisible current of air.

“Go out there and investigate what that thing is, quickly,” he instructed it. “Do not engage, and report back to me in thirty seconds.”

The bralani nodded, transforming itself into a whirlwind that lunged into the air above the tower. Even as the shadow-creature sped off into the night to obey his commands, his mind was darting nimbly down other paths. Dana was out, inaccessible on Sigil. He worried about her; she’d kept to her word in terms of the updates via *sending*, but those brief reports hadn’t really elaborated on the subtext that Cal could sense was there. Lok was upon Faerûn, or more precisely under it; and that was the problem. Cal was all too familiar with the scattering effect upon teleportation magic in the dark places beneath the surface of the world.

Cal was not without other friends, but most of them were protected against casual scrying, and had to be contacted through more complicated processes that he did not have time for at the moment. That left two options, but either would involve a percentage of failure.

The bralani came speeding back exactly upon schedule, but by the end of its appointed thirty seconds Cal had already cast another spell, summoning a quintet of lantern archons, their shining glow dimmed somewhat by the infusion of shadow-stuff that comprised them. They hovered around him, awaiting command, as the bralani knifed down and resumed its humanoid form a few feet before him.

“The intruder is a gargantuan stag beetle,” the shadow-outsider report. “It is not alone; there are a number of equally enormous centipedes approaching this settlement from the north and west.”

Cal nodded; the information confirmed what he’d already suspected. “Attempt to distract the beetle away from the village,” he commanded the bralani. It nodded, and sped off in another whirlwind of focused air. “Tell the villagers in the structures below this tower that Cal instructs them to take shelter in the cellars, under a heavy table or other such cover,” he said to the archons. The archons likewise moved quickly to obey, but he was already running toward the door that led back down into the tower. He could still hear the sounds of destruction coming over the battlements as the beetle continued its swath of destruction.

And he thought he heard something else, a distant buzz or hum that did not improve his feelings about this situation one whit.

Wasting no stray movements, he darted swiftly down the stairs, two levels down to his study. The ornate mirror was where he had left it, and it took only a few seconds to cast the spell. Fortunately he had not used his *greater scrying* spell on the previous day, so he still had it burning on the periphery of his memory. There were a number of spells that he would have chosen differently had he expected combat this day, but such musings were a waste of time at this juncture. Besides, one of the things that Cal had learned, as he and his friends had ascended to the heights of power, was that they could expect to be attacked at *any* time.

His reflection in the mirror grew cloudy, and then resolved into a new scene. It was dark, utterly so, but Cal directed a *message* toward the figure his sensor was focused upon. The man he'd scryed had been asleep, but a moment later, he got a reply, and the information he needed.

"The Traveler's Rest is under attack. I will be there in thirty seconds," he whispered, turning away from the mirror and rushing toward the stairs once more, toward the secured chamber beneath the tower outside of the effect of the *dimensional anchor* that Dana had bound to the citadel.

Chapter 519

The walled courtyard of the Temple of Helm in Cauldron was a beehive of activity, with a dozen torches driving back the night, glowing brightly on polished armor and bare weapons. Acolytes and Hammers in their blue tunics ran around as though they could do anything to help with what Cal needed. The gnome stood impatiently as the dwarves argued, tapping his feet, aware of the seconds ticking off in his head.

When he'd *teleported* into the courtyard of the Temple—the church itself and the rectory were both protected against magical teleportation much as the Rest was—he'd intended to simply grab Arun and return. Beorna had been with him, and he was happy to have her sword as well. But the noise of dwarven fighters arming and armoring themselves was more than enough to wake the entire temple community, among them Arun's former cohort, Balthazar Hodge, and another dwarf, a cleric of Moradin from his attire, mussed now as he hastily donned his heavy armor while continuing his argument with Arun.

"We should attend you on this mission, Chosen," the cleric was saying. "The Soul Forger has called you..."

"My friend has called me," Arun interrupted him, as Beorna helped him buckle the straps of his own armor. "I would feel better if you remained here in my absence, to help watch over the people of the city. As we were just reminded, many threats yet lurk in this place, threatening the recovery."

He glanced at Hodge, but the dwarf only shook his head. It was difficult to tell if he'd been asleep or not; he always looked the same whether falling into bed or tumbling out of it.

“Don’t bother layin’ that favored o’ the gods charm on me, I’m goin’,” he said. He shook off an acolyte who was helping him into his greaves. “Arright, I kin do the rest meself,” he growled, accepting his waraxe from a Hammer who had sense enough to quickly withdraw. “Never thought I’d be workin’ fer an outfit where a bunch o’ humans be helpin’ ter dress ye,” he muttered.

Arun smiled, taking his helm from another Hammer and settling it upon his head.

He’d changed in the relatively short time they’d last met, Cal could see, as the paladin turned toward him. The marking upon his brow was the most obvious aspect of that, of course, but there was something else, a new aura of authority that hung about him like a familiar cloak. *Chosen...* There was a tale here, to be certain. But right now, as the seconds since his arrival stretched into minutes, he had to go.

“I can take all four of you,” Cal said. “But whoever’s going, we’ve got to go *now*.” His imagination had always been fluid, but he didn’t need much prompting to picture what might be happening in Ember Vale as they spoke. He was not so much a fool as to deny the dwarves time to armor up, and he knew enough about Arun to know that letting the temple staff and his own Hammers help them was an expediency he would not have otherwise preferred.

Beorna had not offered a comment thus far, except to issue commands to her staff. Now she drew her adamantine sword, an eager look on her face beneath the heavy black helm of that same metal, marked with the sigil of her god upon the brow.

“Very well,” Arun said to the cleric, taking up a golden warhammer that seemed somehow... *right* in his hand. Cal wondered about the disposition of the paladin’s holy sword, but he did not waste the seconds to ask as he gestured for the dwarves to gather around him.

“We may need immediate mobility,” he said, touching each of them with his *wand of flying*, infusing them with its power.

“Bah, how tough can a bunch o’ giant bugs be,” Hodge opined, although he looked a bit leery. The other dwarves looked at him, but said nothing. Cal gestured again, and they all locked hands, adjusting so that they could quickly recover their weapons once the gnome’s spell of transportation was complete.

“We’ll go right to the center of the village,” he told them, and then *teleported* them across Faerûn.

They materialized exactly where he’d intended. The dwarves lifted their weapons and stepped away from the gnome, looking around.

The situation was one of utter chaos. Alien noises—chittering, a constant buzz, high-pitched squeaks—overlaid familiar sounds of destruction. Overhead shadowy blips the size of wagons darted across the edges of their vision before vanishing.

Their attention was drawn toward a massive crash directly ahead, in the direction of the main gate of the village. That barrier was now just *gone*, some of the heavy log constructs pounded into the dirt, other parts of it scattered around in a broad radius. But the sound had come from a long two-story structure, the village inn, its front half torn away by the massive beetle that was laying waste to the building.

Somehow it must have become aware of them, for as the companions looked up at the monstrous thing, easily forty feet long and slightly taller than the building it was crushing, the beetle turned back into the street and charged straight toward them.

Chapter 520

The surrounding buildings shook as the beetle charged down the street. The avenue was barely wide enough to accommodate it, and as it came it tore awnings, overhanging eaves, and porches free from their moorings, leaving them as trampled wreckage in its wake.

The dwarves did not hesitate, using the power Cal had granted them as they lifted off and flew directly at the massive vermin. The gnome remained behind, cloaking himself in *greater invisibility* almost as a reflex as he too rose into the air, careful to remain far from any structure that might threaten a collapse. He saw a number of the huge flying forms alter their course and immediately dive toward the dwarves; giant wasps, he saw, as they drew nearer. But even though he'd fought such creatures before, he'd never seen wasps this large; one could have carried off an elephant without straining itself.

"Incoming from above!" he shouted in warning. One of the wasps shifted its flight somewhat toward him, but even the good eyesight possessed by the vermin could not penetrate his *invisibility*.

Beorna and Arun met the beetle together, launching attacks upon its broad head from both sides as it charged. Arun's hammer smashed into its head with a resounding crack, but the beetle appeared more discomfited by the powerful slam that Beorna unleashed upon it with her two-handed blade. That second hit cracked the bug's thick hide, and it immediately twisted its head toward her, seizing her in its huge mandibles as it continued its headlong charge. Hodge, who had been just a few seconds slower than the others in lifting up off the ground, was caught in that rush and was trampled beneath it, bouncing off its armored belly before being knocked roughly aside by a churning leg as thick as the trunk of an ancient oak. Arun glanced off of the beetle's top as it surged past him, but he quickly recovered and darted back toward its head, where Beorna was struggling to get free of the beetle's powerful grip.

Umbar was out of the immediate path of the beetle, the dwarf cleric having lifted up and to the side before calling upon the *divine power* of Moradin to strengthen him. He lifted his hammer and started back toward the beetle, but was diverted as several of the gargantuan wasps dove at him. The priest met the first pass with a raised shield and a powerful swing, but was knocked roughly aside by the second wasp, which slammed its stinger hard into his back. The dwarf's heavy armor saved him from being impaled, but as he spun around again a thin trail of blood trailed from the thin crack that the stinger had punched through the layered plates. The dwarf lifted his hammer, looking for another target, but barely had

time to get his shield up before a third wasp dove onto him, driving him down a full dozen feet with another powerful sting that hit his shield with enough force to dent the magical steel.

Arun streaked through the air a few scant feet over the multicolored expanse of the beetle's armored carapace, his hammer glimmering brightly in his hand. He saw Beorna, struggling mightily in the beetle's grip, its mandibles like the jaws of a steel trap as they crushed her within her armor. Only the fact that she was clad in adamantine had kept her from being cut in half by those inexorable pincers, but even that protection could not preserve her indefinitely. Seeing Arun, she groaned and called upon the power of Helm, drawing the god's strength into her as she heaved at the crushing jaws. Arun assisted her by delivering a precise strike that cracked one of the mandibles, loosening its grip enough for the templar to fall free. She had dropped her sword when it had seized her, but she did not hesitate in drawing her long dirk, thrusting it with all her might into the underside of the beetle's long head.

The beetle complained loudly at the assault upon it, releasing a high-pitched screech that echoed painfully in the helmets of the warriors. But Arun, positioned now to inflict some serious damage, launched into a full attack upon it. His hammer came down in a punishing series of blows, leaving the beetle's head pocked with great oozing cracks. But its sheer size ensured that it would take more than even Arun's best to kill it. Twisting its body in the middle of the street, its movement caving in the front of the house on the far side of the avenue, it reared up and caught up Arun against its jaws. With its mandibles damaged from the attacks upon it, it failed to get a grip in the dwarf, but that did not hinder it from driving forward, the paladin struggling but failing to break free before it drove its head—and Arun with it—into the front of the building on the near side of the street. The stone building was stoutly built. It had been Lok's smithy, until that moment; one of the first buildings to be constructed back when the village had been founded almost twenty years ago. But as the massive beetle drove into it with its unwilling passenger, the entire front of the building vanished in a cloud of pulverized stone and mortar, followed by a crash like the sound of the world breaking.

"Arun!" Beorna cried, knowing that the paladin would not hear her.

Chapter 521

Hodge caught a glimpse of the destruction of the smithy out of the corner of his eye, but although he shared Beorna's concern about the disposition of his friend and mentor, at that moment he had other matters more prominently on his mind.

When the beetle had run over him, caroming off its underbody and a slashing leg, he'd bounced hard off the ground and rolled to a stop in the middle of the street. His friends were putting the fight to the big bug, he knew, but even as he pulled himself to his feet—that "pop" he heard from his back couldn't be good, but he'd worry about that later—his attention was drawn back to the ruined gate of the village.

His eyes widened as a horde of giant centipedes literally *poured* through the gap, with those unable to immediately fit merely sliding over the wall to either side as though the

fifteen foot stockade were a merely incidental obstacle. And it probably was, to bugs that were forty feet long if they were a foot! The dwarf suddenly became very aware of the fact that he was standing alone, very alone, in the middle of the street, as the flood came directly at him. But then he remembered himself, and he lifted his axe with a snarl. The straps of his shield had gotten snagged and torn from their moorings in his little misadventure with the beetle, so he shook it off, taking up the handle of the axe in both hands. He placed his feet with deliberation, taking up a defensive stance right were he was. Damned if he was going to move for a bunch of *bugs!*

“Arright, you ugly mothers, c’mon and get it!”

A stream of liquid energy infused with black wisps of shadowstuff tore through the night sky, arcing through the giant wasps assuaulting Umbar. The wasps suffered the full effect of the *shadow evocation*, the simulated *chain lightning* blasting through all three of those attacking the priest before culminating in a fourth that had started over to join in the commotion. But although it was obvious that the strike had driven them into a fury, to Cal’s disappointment none of them fell.

Umbar joined in the barrage, calling upon a *flame strike* that blasted two of the wasps heavily, including the one that had been the focus of Cal’s spell. That wasp was suffering now, its body blackened from the dual impacts, but it continue to buzz angrily at the dwarf, its abdomen darting ahead of its body with its deadly sting. Umbar drew back, but took another hit from the second wasp, and yet another from the third. Unable to outmaneuver the massive wasps, he was begin battered around like a child’s ball, and while his heavy armor had protected him thus far from being impaled, Cal knew from experience that those heavy blows had to be hurting him regardless.

“Get out of there!” Cal shouted, risking drawing attention to himself to forestall what he saw to be an inevitable outcome.

Umbar appeared to see it as well, for as he spun away from the latest impact he dove down, moving toward the base of the tower and the cover that it offered. But he had only covered a fraction of the distance when the fourth wasp shot down, intersecting the path of the cleric’s flight. It did not stab with its sting, but rather seized him with the hooked ends of its legs, holding him fast before turning and flying off rapidly with its passenger.

Cal began a casting to intervene, but adjusted his plan when he saw the other three wasps heading toward him, their wings beating with enough power to buffet him even fifty yards distant. They could not see him, he knew, but he’d already long since recognized that there were not only ordinary vermin, but that something... or *someone*... was directing them.

You’ll have to take care of yourself, he thought, before his mind shifted from Umbar’s plight to the pending difficulties of his own.

The cloud of dust and debris continued to surge around the head of the beetle as it drove deeper into the wreckage of the forge. There was no sign of Arun within that chaos, although with the beetle’s mass in the way it was unlikely that the glow of his magical hammer would have penetrated out into the night outside the ruined structure.

Beorna rose up off the ground, her sword a black slab in her hands. Her heart pounded with dread for Arun, but after the beetle had rammed the paladin into the building she'd known that her dagger wasn't going to be enough to stop it. She'd recovered her sword, narrowly avoiding being trampled by the beetle's surging hind legs, and now emerged from under it, moving forward parallel to its massive body until she was abreast of the point where its broad head joined to its body. Most of the head was lost in the wreckage of the ruined building, which the beetle continued to thrust against, as if intent upon reducing the forge to a mere smear upon the landscape of the town.

And somewhere within that building was Arun.

"By Helm!" she shouted, her loud cry sounding over the cacophony of the beetle's destruction of the forge. Her sword came down in a powerful arc, driven by the templar's considerable strength into that joint at the base of the beetle's chitinous skull. The thing was just too damned *big* for her to decapitate it, but nevertheless her sword pierced deeply, her own weight driving it and her downward, cutting an opening easily eight feet long in the side of the beetle's body. Black ooze erupted from the gap, splattering her as the beetle reared upward, turning toward her.

Beorna did not flinch, only bringing her sword up to strike again.

Hodge spat a gob of blood to clear his throat, sweeping his axe into the thick body of a centipede as it knifed past him. Blood splashed onto him from his other side, whipped by the gyrations of another centipede that he'd cut in half moments after it had delivered a painful bite to his shoulder. Twisting multisegmented bodies were everywhere, and he was lost in a writhing mass of bodies that were so intertwined that he could not tell where one ended and another begun. The heads, though... those he looked out for, for in addition to bludgeoning him with their bodies, the centipedes' true danger lie in their envenomed bites. His body burned with the poison he knew coursed through his veins already from the three hits that had gotten through his armor, but there was nothing to be done about that, so he ignored it. Besides, he was a dwarf; he was *damned* if he was going to let a few bug bites do him in.

"Yer want more? C'mon then, yer bloody bloomin' bastards!" He swept out his axe to meet a diving head, shearing half of it away, driving the centipede back chittering furiously. "Oh, yer want a piece?" he shouted, turning as a long body snapped against his back, nearly causing him to lose his footing. Thus far he'd maintained his stance, mostly because the sheer size of the creatures was hindering their own ability to swarm over him. He chopped into the body as it twisted past him, his axe unleashing a spray of blood and gore that fountained across his already befouled features.

"I got plenty fer all a---AAARG!"

Hodge staggered forward, nearly falling as a centipede head drove into him from behind with the force of a piledriver. The burning sensation in his torso intensified a dozen times over as the thing pumped what felt like a gallon of flaming hot oil into his body. Something hard clamped onto his leg, but he barely felt it through the numbness that seemed to fall over him like a blanket. No. He was... a... dwarf...

“That the best yer got...” he mumbled, as he turned, his fists tightening on the bloody haft of his axe. Bodies slammed into him, and something glanced hard off of his helmet with enough force to dent the steel, but he had his gaze focused on the centipede that had stung him, its long body already lifting for another strike.

“Come... an... get... it...” he managed, the words barely audible as he brought the axe—suddenly it seemed so heavy—up above his head.

The head snapped forward, jaws coming wide to engulf him.

Chapter 522

The axe and the centipede struck at the same time. A gout of blood erupted from the centipede’s head, and one of its mandibles went flying, severed by the magical sharpness of the blade. But even though it did not get a solid bite, the centipede’s head caromed hard off of Hodge’s arm, knocking the axe flying and spinning the dwarf nearly half around. Hodge looked around for his weapon, half-blinded by the bloody gore that caked the front of his helmet, but all he saw was the writhing mass of centipede bodies, both the ones still living and the still-moving ones he’d killed.

“Hodge!” came a loud, familiar voice from above. “Get out of there... fly upward!”

It was the gnome, his voice augmented by some kind of magic. The dwarf looked up, but couldn’t see anything except the wide open black of the night sky. Then he saw something... a small bead of golden light, falling from above toward him. For a moment the distractions of noise and blood and centipedes slamming into him faded into the background, as he watched the bright object descend. It fell to the ground right in front of him, a shining gold pellet perhaps the size of his thumbnail.

Fly!

Something clicked in his mind, and even through the haze of violence he felt a sudden flash of embarrassment. He’d forgotten that he was still empowered by the gnome’s magic!

A loud chittering drew his focus back to his surroundings. A pair of centipedes had risen up out of the mass, and were driving at him from his left and right, jaws gaping. Instinctively he leapt up, trusting the magic to know what he wanted to do. It did, the still-active *fly* spell carrying him straight upward.

But the centipedes did not give up their prey so easily; several lunged upward, their upper bodies extending dozens of feet into the air as they snapped at the dwarf’s feet. Bereft of his shield and axe, Hodge could only flail his legs as he willed himself upward.

“Faster, ye damned spell!” he shouted to the air.

And then, below him, the night exploded into day, as Cal’s second *shadow evocation* erupted into the blazing sphere of a *delayed blast fireball*. The centipedes were vaporized

by the blast, and when it faded a circle forty feet across had been scorched into the street, that radius full of the steaming carcasses of the centipedes. A few still twitched, parts of their bodies outside of the area of the blast, but the impact had been devastating nevertheless.

Hodge looked down in amazement. Now that was something!

But then he heard a loud buzzing coming nearer, and he realized that his troubles were only just beginning.

Beorna flew backward in a desperate surge as the beetle surged up over her, slamming its flat head downward in an attempt to crush her against the paving stones of the road. A jutting segment of hard cartilage glanced hard off her shoulder, yanking her roughly down and around, but she continued her flight, narrowly darting out under its looming form moments before the beetle impacted the ground. The blow was hard enough to crack the pavement, but even though the force of it had to have injured it, it quickly lifted up its body, spreading its damaged jaws as it drove again toward Beorna.

It didn't have far to go. The templar was surging forward to meet it, timing her stroke precisely to cleave her blade deep into the center of its gaping maw. A huge hunk of its jaw went flying with the first stroke, and she did not relent, spinning into another swing that crunched mightily into the other side of its maw before erupting out of the side of its head in a spray of blood and jagged fragments of shattered chitin.

Despite its incredible size, the beetle was clearly feeling the effects of its wounds. Its front end was now a bloody ruin, but it still thrust itself forward, using its head as a battering ram as it drove into Beorna. The templar was unable to get out of its way in time, and the impact of its considerable mass drove her roughly back, flying straight until she caught the protruding edge of a building's roof that jutted out over the street. With a cry she twisted and fell in a clatter of roof tiles and wood fragments, landing with a jarring thud upon the ground below. She grimaced, clutching onto her sword with one hand; the other lay at her side, her shoulder dislocated by her collision with the roof.

She staggered to her feet, looking up to see the beetle charging straight toward her, with no place for her to go to escape it.

Chapter 523

Cal heard the buzzing of the wasps well before Hodge detected them coming. Still protected with *greater invisibility*, he nevertheless knew that whoever was directing the vermin would be able to guide them to his general location as long as he was casting spells. He'd already used a *major image* to distract the three wasps that had come after him, sending them on a futile hunt around the tower, but he knew that tricks and misdirection would only keep them at bay for so long.

And besides, Hodge, now hovering sixty feet above the street, made an all-too-inviting alternative target.

The wasps had spotted the dwarf as well, and made directly for him while he tried to collect his bearings. Using his rod to empower the spell, Cal *disintegrated* the first one, but the next two merely flew through the haze of fine ash left behind by the spell.

“Fly down, take cover!” he warned the dwarf.

“Fly up! Fly down! Make up yer bloody mind, gnome!” he shouted, but he nevertheless complied, descending behind the cover of the partially intact roof of the inn. One of the wasps followed him, but the other headed for the source of the spell, buzzing loudly toward the point where the *disintegration* ray had originated. It stabbed its stinger ahead of it, but it passed through only open air. It quickly turned and headed back to join its fellow in attacking the dwarf.

It only got a little way, though, before another green ray impacted it, *disintegrating* it as well.

Hodge ducked behind one of the inn’s chimneys, but the maneuver granted him only an instant’s respite as the wasp stung *through* the construction, knocking the dwarf back along the roof in a shower of shattered bricks. Hodge slid back and tumbled off the roof, but fortunately he remembered this time that he could still fly, and he recovered before he hit the ground below. He tried to dart behind the building, but the wasp was right on him following close behind as it tried to maneuver into position for thrust from its stinger. Hodge, already bitten and battered to the brink of unconsciousness, felt no desire to stop and engage it. He took the corner in a tight turn only moments before the wasp clipped the building, knocking hunks of wood and shattered masonry free from the structure. The turn had not slowed it significantly, and there was no place else for Hodge to go as the wasp descended upon him. Its stinger knifed forward...

And vanished, as Cal’s third *disintegrate* ended it.

Hodge drifted down the six or seven feet back down to the ground, breathing heavily as he glanced up at the sky. “Took ye bloody well long enough,” he groaned.

The colossal beetle clearly wasn’t planning on stopping as it charged straight toward Beorna and the building right behind her. The templar could not move her left arm, but she lifted her sword in her right, spitting out a challenge that ended in another invocation of Helm. But before the beetle absorbed the full span of her vision she caught sight of a streak of movement behind it, and felt a surge of relief pass through her.

Arun, covered in dust and blood, shone nevertheless in the bright nimbus of golden light that emanated from his hammer as he flew directly at the beetle from behind. Ignoring its lumbering bulk as he passed above it, he rose up about fifteen feet above before descending in a steep dive toward the back of its head. The cry of the Chosen of Moradin shattered the night as he drove his warhammer with both hands into the flat center of its head, smashing a plate of chitin the size of a dinner table and driving it down several feet into the soft mush below. The beetle’s brain, a tiny lump uncomplicated by mammalian features, was somewhere within that crushed mass, but it took a few moments for the insect’s body to get the message that it was dead. Beorna leapt aside as the beetle caromed hard into the house behind her, half of the structure collapsing in upon itself in a

loud crash of wood, glass, and bricks. The thing actually rebounded, staggering out into the street before it collapsed in a noisome heap.

Arun flew down to where Beorna lay, knocked prone from a random blow from one of the beetle's thick legs in its death throes. "Are you all right?" he asked, helping her up. She grimaced as the motion stabbed pain through her injured shoulder.

"Shoulder... dislocated..." she managed to say. "Yank it back in for me."

Arun did as directed, adding a flow of healing magic that eased the templar's injuries. The paladin himself was in worse shape, his body battered from his treatment as a dwarven battering ram by the beetle, so she immediately started channeling her own magic into him, the soft blue glow fading from her hands into his body.

"What about the others?" Arun said, not pausing to enjoy the relief that Beorna was offering, already looking about for more foes. The sky was clear of wasps, however, and the only other vermin that still moved were a few centipedes that were clearly in the last throes of life.

"Umbar was carried off by one of the wasps," Beorna said. "I saw Hodge... over there, by the main gate." She didn't have to be more specific; they could both see the scorched mass of dead centipedes that dominated the street.

"We'd better start looking for them," Arun said, lifting up into the air once more, Beorna only a moment behind him. But even as they rose up above the wreckage of the village's main street, Arun caught sight of Umbar flying through the night sky toward them. A moment later, Hodge emerged around the corner of the ruined inn, walking with a clear limp, gesturing for them to join them rather than flying up to meet them.

Umbar joined Arun and Beorna as they landed in the street a short distance off from the blasted circle of bugs.

"Not natural, all this flyin' about," Hodge grumbled, as Beorna healed some of his wounds.

"Where's Cal?" Arun asked.

"I am here," the gnome said, materializing out of the sky above them, before drifting down to hover a foot above the ground, enough so that he could meet the dwarves at eye level.

"Where did those vermin come from?" Umbar said. He looked battered but apparently had already healed himself, as he seemed no more the worse for wear from his encounters with the wasps. "We have huge insects in the Rift, but I've never seen an attack upon a settlement like that."

"It was a coordinated assault," Cal said. "There was an intelligence behind the vermin, directing their attacks."

"Who would have a motive to assault you?" Umbar said.

“We have made more than a few... enemies,” Cal replied. “There’s one in particular, who would have an incentive to seeing myself and my companions dead.”

He looked at Arun as he said it, and the paladin nodded; he knew who the gnome meant. Beorna, too, frowned, her expression darkening. But Arun merely turned, sliding his hammer into the sleeve that lay across his back. “The people here will need help. We should check for survivors.”

The five of them turned to the task of helping the battered people of Ember Vale, who began to trickle out of their cellars, looking around in bewildered amazement at the destruction that had been wrought upon their village.

* * * * *

In the overgrown thicket behind the ridge, a little over a mile from Ember Vale, the Shaman of the M’butu opened his eyes. His black hide was slick with icy droplets of sweat that clung to him like frozen tears. But despite the lack of clothing the cold of the night did not touch him. He was momentarily disoriented, but his iron control did not falter, and he merely swayed for a few seconds before he had fully recovered from the *j’kala* trance. The drug would hinder him for some hours yet, but he had learned to deal with that.

The odd white moon of this Reality had set, leaving the dell cloaked in a deep darkness, but the Shaman did not need its light to sense his surroundings, or to see his Soldiers keeping their silent vigil around him.

His initial gambit had failed. He would have to sacrifice much for the next effort. The Shaman did not welcome that sacrifice, nor what the ritual would do to him, but the price would be paid. He did not trust the messenger of the Six Fingered Man, but for a chance for freedom for his people, no price was too high to pay.

The Shaman settled back upon the rough earth. The first attack had been just a probe, to test the defenses of his enemy. He would rest, gather his strength. His enemy might flee, or otherwise seek escape, but he did not believe that it was so. His initial attack had given him some degree of insight into his enemy. No, it was more likely that this first attack would alert them, drive them to caution, and perhaps draw the foes of the Six Fingered Man together.

In other words, exactly what the Shaman of the M’butu wanted.

Chapter 524

Cal and the dwarves got no sleep the rest of that night, in the aftermath of the attack on Ember Vale. The house that the beetle had slammed into in its final rush had collapsed in upon itself, trapping a family in a tenuous space beneath sagging supports in the cellar. Umbar summoned an earth elemental to help excavate the survivors before the structure collapsed. Others in the community had been injured in the attack, but thanks to Cal’s advance warning, no one lost their lives.

There was another close call in the wreckage of the town inn. The entire front facing of the building had been torn away, revealing the ruins of the common room on the first floor, and a row of sleeping rooms directly above. Arun and Beorna had been helping to free a young man who'd been pinned under the common room's long bar by a fallen beam, when a loud creaking sound drew their attention around in alarm. Two of the heavy struts supporting what was left of the ceiling had buckled against the beetle's assault, and the third was bent, the weathered wooden pillar cracked a few feet above where it vanished into the floor.

"We're going to lose it!" Beorna said, crouched under one end of the fallen beam, using her legs to slowly push it upward. Arun was at the other end with a broken shaft of piling as a lever, pushing it up enough for the templar to drag the man out of his prison. As soon as he was free, Beorna pushed the broken beam out of her way, picking up the groaning man as she staggered toward the gaping open front of the inn, Arun just behind her.

Their efforts seemed to push the tottering inn over the edge; the beam sagged with a loud creaking noise, and debris rained down on them from above as the ceiling edge tilted a foot downward. Beorna was hit solidly by a small table that fell down from the sleeping room above; fortunately she was wearing her helmet, and she merely sagged a bit, protecting the injured man with her body.

Arun staggered against the creaking pillar, driving his hands against it, willing it to hold.

"Come on!" Beorna shouted back at him.

"Get him out!" Arun shot back.

Several other pieces of furniture and broken boards from the sundered front wall clattered down as Beorna navigated the mess of debris and staggered out into the open street beyond. Once clear, she immediately laid the injured man down in a space far enough away from the inn to be secure, and turned back to where Arun remained inside.

But the danger had passed. As the templar reentered the stricken structure, she was surprised to see Arun still standing against the strut, which now stood straight, undamaged, holding the remaining ceiling securely in place.

"What did you do?" she asked.

The paladin drew off his helmet, and ran a gauntleted hand along the length of the strut. "I'm not quite sure."

By the time that all of the villagers had been safely gathered, and those that had suffered injuries had been treated, the eastern sky had brightened with the coming of dawn. Two homes, the inn, and the forge were either heavily damaged or destroyed, but the rest of the settlement had escaped damage. The main gate was a total loss, but that at least could be rebuilt swiftly with raw materials at hand.

The evidence of the battle was just those physical remains of buildings and fortifications, streaks of blood staining the ground and the blackened circle where Cal's shadowed fireball had struck. The giant vermin had disappeared within a few minutes of the battle's end. Cal

had spent some minutes in the road where the outline of the fallen giant beetle could still be seen imprinted in the dirt. He finally found something; bending down, he lifted the dead beetle, now smaller than his forefinger. He looked at it for quite some time, thoughts swirling.

Fear and uncertainty was evident in the faces of the sixty people who gathered in front of the tower, even as the sun began to break above the horizon to the east. The dwarves were there, impressive with their heavy armor and weapons, and even Cal carried himself with an aura of somber dignity and presence as he stood atop a low masonry wall that separated the tower grounds off from the main road through the village. The people quieted, looking to their leader for reassurance, for despite the gnome's short stature, his reputation among the common folk of Ember Vale had been certified over the last twenty years. He was the Archmage, and his words carried weight.

"Friends," he told them, "We have suffered a violent assault upon our community. Thanks to the intervention of a few good friends," he indicated the dwarves with a nod, and sixty faces turned briefly toward them, "no lives were lost. We do not know who or what was behind this attack, but rest assured, we will not cease looking until we uncover the responsible party. Our buildings have suffered damage, but those can be replaced. Of more importance is the healthy and safety of our people... that, we will ever fight to ensure."

"Will there be more of them?" one of the villagers asked.

"In all honesty, we cannot be certain," Cal said. "For today, I ask that you not go out into the fields. Those whose homes were destroyed should stay with friends; we will set up quarters in the Commons Hall for people who do not have other options. If you can, help with the rebuilding effort; we will try and get the gate up again first, and then work on salvaging what we can of the damaged structures. Give me a day, and we will do what we can to determine the nature and dimension of the threat."

The faces of the villagers showed that they were not entirely reassured, but there was nothing that they could do except to shuffle off to their assigned tasks, or to return to their beds to catch up on lost sleep. The dwarves lingered, and accompanied Cal into the tower.

"A fine speech," Umbar said. "So what is it you intend to do?"

"Right now, I intend to get about eight hours of sleep," Cal explained. "And after that..."

He paused, his brow tightening as something seemed to flash through his thoughts.

"After that, we gather our forces, and take the fight to our enemy."

Chapter 525

Night began to descend over Ember Vale once more, accompanied this time by folds of gray clouds that drifted in from the west, promising rain before the coming of the dawn. The sun had already disappeared behind that mass, casting the evening twilight into a

deep gloom. As the light of the day faded, the outlines of the village's buildings started to slip into vagueness, broken occasionally by the bright aura of a lantern or a burning brand set with deliberation to drive back the night. Several such lights haloed the restored gate, which looked durable despite its hasty construction earlier that same day. A few of the silhouettes that loomed within the encircling wall denied the apparent peacefulness of the scene, reminders of the attack that had come upon them a little more than half a day earlier.

Mole Calloran looked out over the valley from her vantage atop the battlements of the Traveler's Rest. The evening breeze that was bringing the rainclouds closer flapped her cloak at her back, and splashed strands of unruly hair against her cheeks as she looked out over yet another scene of violence with tired eyes.

She was glad to be back here, in the thick of things. When she'd gotten Beorna's *sending* a few hours earlier, alerting her that Cal was coming for her and Lok, she'd responded eagerly that she and the genasi would be ready and waiting. Convincing Lok had taken a bit more effort, but ultimately the warrior's loyalty to his friends won out over his sense of responsibility to his people. Mole recognized Lok's conflict, and on some level could understand it. A year ago, before she'd come to Cauldron, she might not have had that level of insight.

The trip to the urdunnir stronghold had had its moments, but overall, it had been an exercise in boredom. After their battle with the elemental earth monster, literally nothing of interest had occurred for days. Her suggestion to Lok that she could go exploring in the Underdark—just on the immediate outskirts of the urdunnir areas, of course—hadn't really been serious, although for once she'd been able to get a strong reaction from him. She'd gone looking for the odd elder dwarf with his stones and his lessons, but hadn't really been surprised when she failed to encounter him again. She had her suspicions about "Lord Liggett", but she hadn't shared them with anyone, for once keeping a secret close to her heart. It just seemed... appropriate. She'd continued to practice her new skills and hone her techniques, but without the threat of real, immediate danger, she quickly lost interest in such exercises.

She drew her rapier, and tossed it up in front of her, so that it fell-point down toward one of the merlons on the battlement. She sprang up and flipped forward, coming down on the weapon as its tip struck the stone, her hand closing on the hilt, her body rising straight up like an arrow as she balanced there, the breeze whipping around her as she teetered on the edge of the stone with a forty foot drop just a few inches away. She closed her eyes, letting the fullness of the sensation wash over her.

Exhilarating...

"You're going to break that weapon if you keep doing that," a voice said.

Mole twisted and flipped back onto her feet smoothly, the rapier flying end over end after her until she snared it out of the air and slid it back into its scabbard with a smooth motion. "It's a good blade, it won't break," she replied. "Or are you suggesting that I've gained weight?"

Dannel came forward from the recessed portal that provided access back into the tower. “I would never make such a crass comment, and it would be false regardless,” he said. “I doubt that I’ve ever met a more athletic gnome in my life.”

Mole raised an eyebrow as the elf came over to join her at the battlement. The merlons were a foot higher than she was tall, so she hopped up onto one, letting her legs dangle down into the crenel. “Cal and I just got back,” he said. “How have you been, Mole?”

She shrugged. “Same old. It hasn’t been *that* long.”

“And yet, it would seem that some things have changed.”

“You saw Lok, I assume.”

“Yes, that too.” Looking down over the village, he caught sight of the dwarves coming down the main road, from the direction of the gate. They appeared to be engaged in earnest conversation, but they were too far away for even the sharp ears of the elf and gnome to pick up any of their words.

“There’s a new dwarf, a cleric,” Mole explained. “He reminds me of Morgan, somewhat. From... you know, before.”

Dannel nodded. “Clerics have not done well with our group, in the past.”

Mole turned and slapped his hand. “You shouldn’t say that, it’s a jinx. And don’t let Cal hear you talking like that. He’s worried about Dana. She went to Sigil, and was supposed to keep in regular contact with us; from what Cal said, her latest message is a day overdue.”

“I didn’t know that. I’m surprised he let her go alone.”

“Yeah, well, if you knew her better, you wouldn’t be so surprised.”

“They mean a lot to you, don’t they?”

Mole looked out over the valley again, staring at the eastern horizon that was now just a black line in the distance. Somewhere beyond that line, she knew, lay the city-states of the Western Heartlands, and the Sea of Fallen Stars, and nations and peoples that she would perhaps never get a chance to visit. Strange sights and adventures, just over that horizon. For a moment, she felt a tug deep inside her, a temptation to leave all of this behind, and just go.

She sighed.

“I didn’t get to know them until I was in my tweens,” she said. “After the Rest had been established, and the village was starting to grow. I spent a few summers there, and then more time as I got older. Dana and Benzan were like those ‘famous relatives’ that you only see on holidays and special occasions, the kind that some families have, you know? But I got to know them... first from Uncle Cal’s stories, and then, when they would come to the

Rest, every now and again. They were nice, and fun to be around. And they always treated me like a grown-up, even when I didn't act like one."

"I knew of them long before I first met them," Dannel said. "To me, they were in the same category as Elminster, or Cadderly, or Storm Silverhand. People whose actions shape the Realms."

"We all shape the Realms, each in our small way," Mole said. "That was something my uncle used to say. He used to tell me that I was destined for great things. I always thought that he was pulling my leg, you know, the sort of thing adults always say to little kids to motivate them to study harder."

"A lot has happened in the last year," Dannel said.

"Yeah. Seems like just yesterday we were in the Morkoth, worrying about the Stormblades and missing wands and *regular* villains... you know, 'stick your sword into the bad guy, take his stuff.'"

Dannel smiled. "I don't know if it was ever that simple, but things did seem a lot less complicated back then."

They were quiet for quite some time.

"What's going to happen to us, Dannel?" Mole asked.

"I don't know. But whatever comes, we'll face it together."

"I miss her."

"I miss her too."

He came up next to her, and put a hand on her shoulder. She leaned into him. Finally, she said, "Now, what are those blasted dwarves up to?"

Dannel leaned out over the battlement, and saw what the gnome had; the dwarves—at least three of them, Hodge had gone inside the tower it seemed—were gathered in the open space in front of the tower's single door, right at the edge of the street. Arun and Beorna were watching Umbar, who had inscribed a crude circle in the dirt with the shaft of his hammer and had now knelt just outside it, his arms extended as he chanted in what sounded like a dialect of dwarvish.

"Looks like he's conducting a summoning ritual," Dannel said. "Cal didn't say anything to you about it?"

Mole shook her head.

They watched as a pale glowing fog began to take shape within the circle. The sight was familiar enough to them; they'd seen Cal and Dana conduct summonings on several occasions. The dwarf's ritual took several minutes, but finally the glowing figure took solid

form, revealing a tall humanoid, apparently female, with greenish skin and large white wings. She bore a silver trumpet in her hand.

“Ah, trumpet archon,” Mole said. “Good choice.”

“Glad you approve,” Dannel chuckled, watching as the dwarf spoke to the celestial, then handed her something. The archon beat her wings and lifted into the air. As she passed the two standing atop the battlements, they felt a sense of calm creep over them. Mole waved.

“Looks like they expect another attack tonight,” Dannel said.

“I think at this point, we need to expect an attack at any moment,” Mole said. “Come on, Cal said we’d all meet in the main hall at eighth bell. Maybe we can find out more about what’s going on.”

Chapter 526

At almost the same instant that Dannel and Mole turned to reenter the security of the Traveler’s Rest, the Shaman of the M’butu lifted his head, blinking as he returned from the far realms of his meditations to the cold harshness of the present Reality. His body resisted his efforts as stood; the frail vessel of flesh that held his consciousness was finally beginning to protest the abuse he’d heaped upon it since he’d come to this alien place at the bidding of the Six-Fingered Man. For a moment he just stood there, until he had mastered himself. Then he walked over to where he had left his few possessions. A drink cleared the crust that lined his throat. He hungered as well. His people, accustomed to the rigors of life upon of the Plains of Cet’abba, were durable, and could go for several cycles without nourishment, but the rituals he’d already conducted had drained his body.

He glanced at the soldiers, who remained in watchful positions around him, ever vigilant against the dangers of this strange Reality. Their loyalty was a tribute to their clans, and the Shaman felt a momentary pang at their loss. But the feeling passed quickly. Their fate had been decided the moment they had come, and passed through the gateway to this Reality. Whether his people would be able to realize the freedom that had been promised was for others to determine. He paused, and took a moment to utter a charm for one of those who would take up the Staff and the Mantle and continue the struggle. He did not know if the potency of his invocation would pass the barrier that separated Realities, or if it would have any effect even if it did. But the action helped to settle him, and enabled him to enter the state of focus that he would need.

The night came upon them with startling rapidity; he was still getting used to the rapid progress of the cycles upon this world. But he did not need the light as he used his staff to begin tracing a series of marks upon the surroundings of the dell. Wherever the staff touched, black lines remained that seemed to ooze power. They seemed haphazard at first, placed upon stones at all angles, upon the earth, and even upon the bole of a weathered tree that had died some years before. As he worked a nexus formed, not visible to normal sight, fashioned of lines of power that emerged from someplace... *else* and

extended through the glyphs to form an interlaced web that resembled the weave of a drunken spider.

When he had finished, he used the staff to excavate a small pit in the ground in the midst of the lines of power that he had created. Then he rose, leaning slightly upon the staff as the exertion—physical and spiritual—from his efforts took hold upon his body. His hunger had returned, redoubled, but the Shaman of the M'butu paid it no heed. He was used to ignoring the demands of his body.

The four soldiers had gathered, and watched him impassively, waiting.

Finally the Shaman lifted his head, and regarded his guardians. He had no doubt of their loyalty, although what he would ask of them lay far beyond the traditional compact that the shamans extracted from the Khalasaar. He met the eyes of each individually, a final gesture of respect, and saw there the same dedication he himself felt. And yes, even hope... if not for themselves, at least for the M'butu.

He selected the first, the fortunate one, with a nod. The soldier came forward, removing his bulky garments and discarding them casually to the side. He knelt on the ground, leaning forward over the small pit that the Shaman had excavated. The Shaman waited until he had placed his fists upon the ground and locked his arms, lifting his head until his eyes stared directly ahead. Then the Shaman reached forward, and using the ritual *ka'a* blade, sliced open the black warrior's neck with a single stroke. His lifeblood smoked as it issued into the pit. The soldier did not flinch, did not stir as his body cooled with the torrent, tapering finally into a oozing remnant that fell in dark runnels down his torso.

When the flow had stopped completely, the Shaman gestured, and two of the soldier's bretheren lifted him gently and placed him to the side. All three of them came forward, removed their garments, and started to kneel in front of the pit. The Shaman interrupted them to reposition them in specific locations, back slightly from the pit but within the invisible weave of power he'd created.

Once they were in position, the Shaman returned to the pit and bent beside it. To his cold-numbed fingers the soldier's blood felt like it was boiling. Taking up his hand, glistening with the soldier's life, he splashed each of the others across the cheeks, returning for more blood before adding a final bloody slap on their torsos, right where their hearts beat in their chest. The three soldiers remained utterly impassive as the hot blood steamed in the cold night air. The Shaman returned to the brink of the pit, and used his staff to draw symbols around it with the blood. As he worked, he chanted, and the tendrils of power surrounding the dell thickened.

For almost a mile in every direction, animals fled in terror.

Chapter 527

Night settled upon the village of Ember Vale, dark clouds warding even the faint glow of the stars above. No one stirred in the streets. The torches set along the walls flickered slightly, although the evening breeze had quieted, and a preternatural stillness spread over

the place. In the sky above, Umbar's called trumpet archon flew in wide circles overhead, her celestial senses scanning both for mundane threats and for the presence of evil. There was something sinister in the night, an undercurrent of shadow that the celestial noted, her perfect face darkening with an expression of concern. But she could not sense its source, and she could not abandon her duty to protect this place to explore the feeling further.

Still, she was wary, and interrupted her scan long enough to cast several long-lasting defensive spells upon herself.

Within the looming mass of the Traveler's Rest, in an interior chamber warded against both magical scrying and transportation magic, the Heroes of Cauldron and the Travelers gathered against the late hour. The chamber, which took up the majority of the tower's second floor, had no windows but was warmly lit by an eager flame in the hearth and by a half-dozen lanterns that gave the place a cheerful glow. The comfortable armchairs sat unoccupied near the hearth, drawn back along the walls to provide more ample space around the low, heavy wooden table in the center. Despite being the largest room in the tower, the place was somewhat crowded, now that the others had joined them.

Cal stood at the head of the table, standing upon a squat four-legged stool that allowed him to more easily look over the table and his friends around it. The archmage had burned through a good portion of his available higher-level valences to scry and contact Dannel, recovering him from the depths of the Wealdath. A *sending* from Beorna had alerted Mole that Cal was coming for them as well; the archmage's niece now stood atop a chair on the far side of the table, next to Lok. Something had happened to the genasi in the Underdark, a transformation obvious in the altered appearance of his eyes, which sparkled in the lantern light. But it was more than that, something evident in a subtle shift in his demeanor that Cal had immediately discerned. There was a story there, but it would have to wait for another time in the telling. Mole had let him in on the general details of their encounter with the elemental monster outside of the urdunnir settlement, but Cal had sensed that she too was holding something back. At another time he would have pressed her to share what was troubling her, but at the moment there were too many matters of more pressing import.

Layers within layers, he thought, turning his attention back to the now, and the more immediate circumstances that confronted them. The dwarves were arguing, and Cal let out an exasperated sigh at the lack of resolution. There was ample subtext here as well. The new dwarf, Umbar Ironshield, had already demonstrated his power, and in all honesty Cal was glad to have him present, especially given Dana's absence. He'd only spoken briefly with Arun after their clash with the giant bugs, and the paladin had not ventured more about the priest's presence except to note that he'd come from the Great Rift, and that he was a consecrated High Priest of Moradin. Arun had likewise been reluctant to speak about the sigil he now wore upon his brow, or the new golden hammer he carried. From what he'd gotten out of Beorna and Hodge, they four of them had just dealt with a small tribe of grimlock barbarians that had come into Cauldron via the Underdark.

It seems like all of them had had an adventure or two in the short time since they'd parted. More tales for his book, if ever he got the chance to write them down.

In any case, Umbar Ironhammer obviously regarded Arun with something akin to adulation, but that dedication clearly did not extend to Beorna or Hodge, both of who appeared to reciprocate the priest's dislike.

"We must deal with the immediate threat first," Beorna was saying. "Whoever sent those bugs will not give up easily, and may already be planning another attack."

"We know who our foe is," Umbar said. The dwarf cleric had *communed* with his god while Cal had been out regathering their distant companions, but while Moradin's agent had confirmed the role of their six-fingered adversary in the attack, the yes-no questions allowed by the spell had not been able to yield a clear identification. The spell had not been in vain; they had learned the Prince's agents had come from another plane, were still active, and that at least one major demon was still present upon the Prime. It was not enough to give them a target for detection magic, even if their foes were not warded against such spells. And several questions that Umbar had directed more specifically to Graz'zt's current activities had been met only with silence. That failure apparently had done little to improve the cleric's mood.

"Would you have us translate to Azzagrat and press an assault upon him?" the templar asked.

"That would not be wise," Cal said. Even now, almost twenty years later, he still had nightmares about Azzagrat.

Umbar did not respond, but Cal noted that the cleric glanced at Arun, the look on his face perhaps suggesting that he wanted approval to do just that! Arun himself stood silent, as he had through most of the discussion. The sigil burned into his forehead seemed to pulse slightly with the faintest hint of golden light, as if sounding in echo to his heartbeat.

Two transcendences, in such short order, the gnome thought, trying to wrap his mind around the implications. So much had changed, and at times he felt like he was sliding down a greased chute, unable to slow his progress toward the unknown.

"I am concerned about Dana," Lok said, interjecting his first words into the conversation. The priestess was only a day overdue on her usual *sending*, but given the attack upon them, Cal's worry about her had justly intensified. At his request, Beorna had prepared and delivered another *sending* for her, but she had not received a reply. He wished that Umbar had waited for his return to attempt his divination; he had a number of questions he would have suggested, not the least of which was an inquiry into her fate. The dwarf had already proven that he was not one to seek approval before taking action; if the divination hadn't been enough evidence, his surprising summoning of a celestial a few hours earlier had been. Perhaps he should have anticipated the dwarf's precipitous actions, and said something earlier. If only the *commune* spell had been within Beorna's reach; Cal felt more comfortable with the templar than with the still-unknown variable that was the cleric of Moradin.

If only the *sending* had worked!

“There is a chance that the spell will simply not function, across the planar boundary,” Beorna gently reminded him. Cal looked up, not aware that he’d spoken his thoughts aloud. Or perhaps the templar had divined his feelings in his manner. “With a message and reply, there are two chances for the spell to fail.”

“I know the limits of the spell,” Cal said, a little more harshly than he’d intended. He forced a smile, nodding in apology to the templar. “Unfortunately evocation magic is outside of my sphere; blowing things up has never been my strong point. But direct action is still open to us. I have a *plane shift* scribed upon a scroll,” he said. “We have a copy of the focus for Sigil that Cylyria provided. We can find out for ourselves.”

“That spell will not transport you with any degree of accuracy,” Umbar said.

“That is only a minor difficulty,” Cal said. “Once there, I can *scry* her, and teleport directly to her location.”

“If she is... not warded.”

Cal knew all too well what the cleric had been about to say. But it was Lok who replied for him. “We do not leave behind one of our own.”

Cal nodded in agreement, but inwardly he felt the doubts raised by the cleric’s words keenly. Now, with hindsight, he wondered if he should have added the *discern location* dweomer to his book, rather than the *binding*. What had he been thinking, to even imagine that he had a chance of using the spell against one such as Graz’zt? Events had raced past them, and he felt as though every minor decision they made was leading them into dark, tangled thickets, where probability played out into greater danger no matter what choice they made. Their enemies knew more than they, of that he had no doubt. But what else could they do, except respond to events as they were thrust forward?

“We should get the people out of here,” Arun said. “Once we depart, they will be defenseless, and their association with us should not doom them.”

“We have some friends who might be able to help,” Cal said. “In addition to my remaining *greater scrying* for Dana, I have a regular *scrying* memorized; I’ll use that to contact them and ask for their aid in evacuating the town.”

“Even so, I’d feel better if we just didn’t leave them to their fate,” Arun said. “Umbar, Hodge, perhaps you two should remain here and assist in the relocation.”

“With all due respect, Chosen, you will need my power in the coming confrontation. I can see clearly, now, that there was a greater power at work in bringing me to you, that made me the unwitting agent of your apotheosis.”

“I am no god,” Arun said softly.

Hodge snorted.

“No, but you were Chosen,” the cleric continued. “And for what... if not to confront the shadow of darkest Evil? The Prince is a blight upon the multiverse, and the Soul Forger’s patience at his meddling has come to an end.”

“So now you are discerning the will of the god?” Beorna said.

Umbar shook his head violently. “You twist my words, templar. Can you not perceive that we stand upon the cusp of great events? I shared openly the result of my *commune* with the All Father. The Dark One has directly intervened in events here upon the Prime. He has stolen one of your companions, and may have already acted against another. I know that I have come lately to this war you are fighting against him... but I offer—freely and without reservation—my hammer, and the power that I command, in this struggle. And my life, if it comes to that.”

“Oh, it will,” Hodge muttered under his breath. But he did not turn to meet Arun’s gaze.

Cal too felt uncomfortable at the cleric’s words, which to his ears bordered upon fanaticism. But they could not refuse the aid of one of the dwarf’s power. “I suspect that we will need all the help we can muster,” Cal said, standing on his chair and placing both of his hands upon the table. “So that we may reach agreement, let me summarize our plans. As Umbar has noted, we know our foe, but we lack enough specific information to discern the location of his agents here upon the Prime. Dana, however, has access to the highest valences of clerical magic; she can help greatly in flushing out our enemies.” Cal looked across the table, at Mole and Lok. He saw in their eyes that they recognized his tactic, that he was shading his argument to convince the others. They knew what Dana could do, but they also, realistically, knew that Dana’s abilities, however considerable, were unlikely to merely produce Graz’zt’s agents upon a silver platter. They just did not know enough. And their foe, all of them knew, was a master of deception and misdirection. But they said nothing.

“How many of us can you transport?” Arun asked.

“I can take eight others with my *plane shift*,” Cal said. “I specifically allocated my spell selection for maximum divination and transportation today, but I have only one more *greater teleport* remaining.” He did not share that he’d had to reserve one of his eighth-level slots for that magic; when he’d taken out his spellbook that afternoon he’d anticipated that he might have to make more than the two round trips he’d already taken today. Between the multiple *teleports* and *scryings* he’d already burned, he only had a handful of spells left in his upper valences. And very little room left for blasting and buffs, if it came to that.

So be it. He’d cautioned Dana about the dangers of precipitous action, but he would not lose her to Graz’zt, in addition to Benzan.

And Delem. Even after ten years, that wound was still not fully healed.

“Getting to Sigil is only half of the journey,” Beorna said. “Assuming you can locate her, how many can you teleport with you to her location?”

“Four,” Cal said.

“Hey, you can stuff me into a *bag of holding* or something,” Mole said. “I can hold my breath for a minute or two. There’s ways around the limits of spells... heck, you guys used to do tricks like that all the time, from your stories.”

“It seems like there are a number of uncertainties in this course of action,” Arun said. “Would I be correct in assuming that you have only one of these planar transportation scrolls?”

“I have the spell in my book,” he said. “Upon resting again, I can memorize it... or the high priest can pray for it to facilitate our return.” Dana also kept the spell in memory, he knew, but he avoided that thought, knowing that the fact was evidence that she *was* in trouble, and was not in a position to escape.

Let it just be a problem with the sending, he thought. He knew what Arun was getting at, that it might be better for them to rest and recover their full potency before setting out on this journey. And it wasn’t unreasonable, especially since it would allow them to keep the scroll as a reserve, and cast the *plane shift* from memory... and even memorize two, allowing an immediate return journey in case the scrying of Dana failed.

Cal was exhausted, despite having slept for most of the day. In the six hours or so since he’d awoken he’d burned numerous potent spells and covered thousands of miles back and forth across Faerûn. But even though the practice of high-level magic was itself draining, of more weight was the constant worry, the neverending surge of plans and contingencies that kept popping into his mind. Over the years he’d gotten used to the strain of his hyper-enhanced intelligence; he’d read accounts of mages who’d been driven mad by the pressure of an enhanced consciousness. Of late, however, he’d been experiencing nasty headaches that were only worsened by the work of transcribing new spells into his book. He’d only recently gained mastery of the eighth valence, and already the final sphere, the most potent spells available to the arcane caster, were nearly within his grasp.

Beyond that there was more, a wilder terrain of magic that few mortals had tread, but that was not a journey he could even afford to think about at the moment.

“Maybe we should wait until the morning,” Mole suggested. “To see if...”

But the gnome never got a chance to finish her thought, for at that moment a great clarion note echoed through the very stones of the tower, only slightly muted by the surrounding walls. For a moment the companions shared a confused look, but they quickly realized the source of the sound.

“The archon!”

Chapter 528

The archon’s name was Abael, and as she passed over the sleeping village below, she cast out into the darkness, scanning for evil as well as for mundane dangers that might lurk

in the darkness. Her senses were far superior to those of most mortals, but even so, the corruption was nearly upon the place before she detected its presence.

A dark form materialized out of the night before the village's main gates. It was massive, easily twenty feet tall, looming over the thick pylons of the repaired barrier. And yet it was silent, its approach unremaked by telltale noises one would expect from a thing of its size, until it reached down and tore the gates apart with great claws that left ugly black scars upon the fresh wood. The gates resisted for only a moment, before the heavy board, fully eight inches thick, that held the portals shut splintered explosively, and they swung open loudly on bent hinges traumatized by the rough treatment.

Abael was already diving to greet the intruder. She lifted her trumpet to her lips, summoning a clarion call that shattered the night, offering an answer to the destructive noise of the creature's arrival. She followed that with a *holy smite* that swallowed up the upper half of the creature in flare of pure white light.

But when the *smite* faded, the intruder stepped forward, unharmed. Lifting its head, it fixed Abael with a cold gaze. The archon felt a grim chill as she barely overcame the paralyzing grip of a *hold monster* spell; and then, before she could react, the monster hit her with an *unholy blight*. The spell penetrated her resistance easily, and she staggered as she fought off the cloying sickness that tried to creep into her bones through the dark miasma of the *blight*.

Recognizing at last the true nature of her foe, the archon cast a *banishment* spell. But the nightwalker was again unaffected, its potent spell resistance enabling it to shed the effects of the celestial magic. Abael tightened her grip on her silver trumpet, which at her mental command shifted into the form of a greatsword.

Before she could dive to engage the terrible undead monster, a faint whisper of wind alerted her of a new danger. Looking up, she saw a dark fold of shadow descending rapidly from above, a wave of perfect black that overwhelmed even the dark sky beyond. Abael lifted her sword in challenge, her aura flaring bright around her celestial form, but the nightwing altered its course to the side, blasting her with a *finger of death* as it slid past. This time the archon's spell resistance held, and the icy chill of the spell was felt merely as a momentary shadow brushing against her life essence.

But as the nightwing turned away, three discrete shadows that were only slightly smaller than the huge undead creature detached and swarmed through the night at her. Their foulness swept over her perceptions in a wave, and a look of anger clouded her face.

Dread wraiths!

The wraiths dove eagerly toward her, their insubstantial bodies spread wide like a cloak catching the wind. Abael waited until they were within thirty feet before casting a *mass cure serious wounds* spell that both tore into their unholy essence and restored some of the injury she'd taken from the nightwalker's *blight*. But there was no time for further action as the powerful undead spirits swarmed around her, trying to suck away her life essence with their cold touch. Her aura fortified her, allowing her to resist that drain, but even so their

incorporeal fingers drew blue lines across her flesh where they touched, spreading tendrils of numbness through her body.

Abael knew that the wraiths were too potent for a *holy word* or her *undeath to death* spell, and would likewise not be fazed by the call of her trumpet. So she swept out with her enchanted blade, tearing into the nearest wraith. The undead creature did not even attempt to dodge the assault, trusting its semi-substantial form to protect it. But the celestial's sword cut into it, once, twice, and with a soft sigh the wraith dissolved.

But the nightshades were still pressing their assault as well. First one, and then a second *unholy blight* erupted around Abael. She resisted the first, but the second, originating from the more powerful walker, cut again through her defenses and ravaged her pristine soul. Weakened, she further succumbed to the touch of one of the remaining wraiths, and she felt her essence diminish as the creature greedily fed upon her life force.

The nightwing had turned, cutting a broad swath through the night sky, and started gliding back toward the embattled celestial.

Light erupted from atop the tower as the heavy door blasted open and the companions, with Arun and his glowing hammer first among them, made their appearance. They rushed to the edge of the battlement, looking for the source of the attack. The celestial glowed in the sky, its radiance muted somewhat by the two wraiths enfolding it. The nightshades were more difficult to spot, blending with the night shadows, sucking up the faint radiance that made its way from the ring of torches on the wall around the village.

Dannel was the only one who caught sight of the nightwing gliding silently down toward the celestial. Drawing an arrow, infusing it with the power of his song, he launched it at the creature. The shaft intersected perfectly with its broad form, but the undead monster did not react, continuing its dive toward the archon.

"What are they?" Mole asked, trying unsuccessfully to make out what the elf had shot.

"Empower me with flight!" Arun urged Cal, drawing upon the power of Moradin to infuse him with *divine favor*. The gnome complied, using his wand upon the paladin. As Arun lifted into the air, Mole turned from loading her little crossbow. "Me next!" she cried.

"Sneak attacks won't work in this situation," Cal said.

"I am next," Beorna said, already filling herself with the *divine power* of Helm.

"Fine, then Lok," Cal said, drawing more power from the wand.

"Back to the pit from whence you came!" Umbar shouted, blasting one of the wraiths harrying the archon with a beam of *searing light*. The creature let out a foul wail as the beam carved a swath through its dark substance, but it did not pause in its assault upon the celestial. Abael drew upon another *mass cure*, fortifying itself and weakening the undead, but the celestial was clearly suffering from the draining touch of the wraiths. She turned as the nightwing descended toward her, and lifted her sword again in challenge.

But the wing did not close to melee, instead blasting the celestial with a *cone of cold* as it passed. It obviously bore no concern for the wraiths; one of them avoided the attack, the blast passing harmlessly through its body, but the second was caught in the white nimbus, an outline of frost forming briefly over its substance before the wraith perished. The blast should have finished off the archon, but she'd taken the precaution of warding herself against both cold and fire earlier, and the *cone* failed to penetrate that defense. Despite that, however, it was clear that she was still nastily exposed to the attacks from the nightshades, as well as the remaining wraith that still hovered eagerly behind her.

“Abael! Fall back upon the tower!” Umbar yelled. The archon lifted her head, acknowledging the dwarf cleric's command. But before she could act, the nightwalker hit her with a targeted *greater dispel* that ripped away her defenses like the layers of an onion. Even her innate aura was disrupted by the spell. Given a moment, Abael could have restored that protection with a thought, but she never got that moment as the walker followed its attack with a final quickened *blight* that tore mercilessly into the weakened celestial.

Abael cried out, and stiffened. The dread wraith greedily latched onto her as she fell, and followed her down, the life bleeding out of her until she slammed into the hard earth with a flat thump.

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The companions could only watch as their ally was dispatched by the invading undead. As of yet, their counterattacks had been of little avail. As the nightwing had flown past the archon, vanishing back into the night, Dannel had switched targets to the nightwalker. The moderate range—the thing stood in the midst of the village, a good two hundred feet distant—was of little impediment as he peppered its body with a barrage of electrically-charged missiles. The darkness hindered his vision, but despite that difficulty he could tell that the shots appeared to have little effect, even with the full potency of his song infused in each arrow.

“I don't think I'm having any effect!” he warned, as he continued to fire.

“Join the club!” Hodge said, winding his heavy crossbow for a second shot. Mole had experienced a similar result with one of her *shock bolts*, and was leaning precariously out through one of the crenels in the battlement, as if considering leaping down to the ground to get more directly involved in events.

Cal had finished enchanting Beorna, who hefted her adamantine sword—transforming it into a *holy sword*—and leapt up into the air after Arun. Lok waited patiently for his turn, not even bothering to recover his longbow from his *bag of holding*.

“They are nightshades,” Cal said. “They are extraplanar beings, not of this world...”

“Save the lecture, ye daft gnome!” Hodge urged. “How do we kill 'em?”

Cal's mind darted back over the memory of dozens of books and scrolls, tales and legends, even tiny scraps of knowledge gleaned from old songs and bits of nearly forgotten lore. A scrap of doggerel clung to that sweep, a verse he'd heard chanted once in a tavern in Waterdeep...

*Shades of darkness, walker in the night,
Shy from silver, or the mornin's light...*

"Silver weapons!" Cal exclaimed.

"Where in the hells are we s'pposed to get silver weapons?" Hodge shouted, jamming his finger painfully as he tried to snap a bolt into place. "Damn and blast!" But Dannel immediately slid off his pack, and dug into it for something.

Umbar had turned away from them, and had fallen to one knee, his forehead pressed against the hilt of his hammer, obviously seeking some form of divine intervention.

Arun felt the divine potency of his patron course through his veins as he ascended into the air over Ember Vale, the night air blowing cold through the slit in his helmet as he flew. His target was the nightwalker, its outline a dark shadow against the night to his darkvision as he drew closer. The creature looked up and fixed him with its horrible gaze, and Arun shuddered as a wave of malevolence swept over him. Whatever grim power was in that stare, he was able to fight it off, and he brandished his holy hammer like a talisman as he dove toward it.

"Arun, look out!"

Beorna's cry alerted him just an instant before the wraith fell upon him. He jerked to the side, but as the two passed its cold claw passed through his hip, sending a stabbing knife of cold through his lower body. He tried to swipe it with his hammer, but the holy weapon merely passed harmlessly through its incorporeal body.

The wraith spun in mid air and turned to meet him again, but before the two opponents could close for another exchange Arun felt another magical attack hit him. His own powers held against the nightwalker's power, but the spell from Cal's wand was much less potent, and even as he realized what had happened the *fly* spell dissolved before the walker's *greater dispel*, and he went plummeting toward the ground fifty feet below.

"Arun!" Mole yelled from atop the tower, unable to intervene to help the dwarf.

"He's tough!" Hodge said, cursing as he fired another bolt uselessly toward the nightwalker. "A little tumble like that ain' gonna hurt 'im!" Still, it looked painful as Arun glanced off of a roof, rolled, and toppled down a final fifteen feet to slam hard into a lean-to shed, which crumpled under the impact.

What was worse, however, was that the nightwalker was already heading in that direction.

Lok lifted off of the tower roof, the latest beneficiary of Cal's wand of *fly*. Before he could join battle, however, a great rumbling shook the tower, the heavy stones vibrating under their feet. "What now?" Hodge exclaimed.

"Umm... guys..." Mole said. From her uncertain perch deep within the crenel, leaning out over the stone edge of the battlement, she could see the ground below, where the packed earthen surface of the road in front of the tower had begun to rise into a low mound.

Hodge looked down in time to see the ground erupt in a fountain of earth as the mound exploded outward, and a massive worm rose up into the air, its body easily seven feet across, formed of segments of utter blackness. It rose higher, fifteen feet, twenty, twenty five, and as the horrified companions stared down at the bulbous head its massive maw opened wide, and it disgorged a spew of black vileness that resolved into a dozen discrete forms... undead shadows, which immediately flew up eagerly toward the living beings atop the tower.

(Author's note: just for the hell of it, I house-ruled that a greater dispel from a 21st level caster could completely wipe out a fly spell from a 5th level caster (i.e. from Cal's wand), rather than lead to the soft-fall described in the 3.5e SRD.)

Chapter 530

"Uh oh," Mole said, as she looked down into the gaping blackness that was the nightcrawler's huge maw. A stench like a thousand open graves swam over her, and she fell back, gagging.

The movement caused her to look up, briefly, so she saw it coming.

"Lok, look out!"

The genasi had lifted himself a few paces into the air and shot out over the battlement, his axe ready to strike, his attention upon the nightcrawler. But Mole's warning brought his focus up in time to see the nightwing sweeping down out of the sky, directly toward him. The genasi struck at the same instant that the wing hit. From the nearly silent way they moved, and the fact that they were accompanied by wraiths and shadows, Lok had expected the thing to be nearly insubstantial, an echo of a living creature without much mass. But as the wing slammed into him, driving him back with the force of a battering ram, he realized his mistake.

Gods, it has to weigh a few thousand pounds, he had time to think, as he was catapulted backward through the air. His axe glanced off its hide, which was like leather and steel and rubber combined into a nearly indestructible combination. For a full second the two were linked, then he tore free and fell back, the wing continuing forward as it spread its wings and began gliding around for another attack.

Aware that its damage resistance would make hurting it extremely difficult, Lok deliberately shucked his shield, letting it drop to the ground below, and he took up his axe in both hands.

Umbar finished his prayer and stood as a skein of light motes gathered before him atop the tower, forming and solidifying until a celestial griffon, its hide a brilliant gold, stood awaiting his command. The cleric instantly leapt atop its back, urging it to flight. The agile summons responded, easily clearing the battlement despite the dwarf's considerable weight, spreading its wings to gather the air as its rider shouted a battle cry to Moradin.

But before Umbar could direct his mount to assail the nightcrawler, he was faced with the small horde of shadows, which eagerly rose to meet him. Several latched onto the griffon, draining its strength, and threatening to bring it down. A pair of the undead monsters came at the cleric himself, their insubstantial claws piercing his armor and drawing strength from his body.

"Be GONE!" he cried. Yellow light erupted from his hammer, from the etched sigils of his faith graved on either side of the heavy iron head. The shadows shrieked, and the nearest half-dozen evaporated as the purifying rays tore through their vaporous forms. The cleric urged his mount toward the rearing form of the nightcrawler, but the griffon's diminished strength was no longer up to the task, and he had to direct his efforts to just staying upon its back as it tried to make a controlled landing a short distance away.

Beorna had seen the nightcrawler's dramatic appearance, but her attention was focused more on Arun's fate. As soon as he'd fallen, she'd dove after him, but was drawn up short as the last dread wraith rose up from the corpse of its celestial victim to meet her. Up close, it seemed even bigger than it has first appeared, and it looked as though it would simply enfold her, to suck her life from her body in a cold embrace. The templar lifted her sword, but at the last moment called upon a blast of *searing light* that tore through the center of the wraith, opening a blazing hole in its body that quickly spread, until the undead monstrosity dissolved into harmless wisps of night.

But the wraith had managed to delay her, for a critical moment.

Arun pulled himself awkwardly to his feet, shattered pieces of wood from the ruined shed continuing to fall around him. His head spun and he tasted blood, but that didn't stop him from tearing himself free, staggering forward, his heavy hammer still firmly held in his right hand.

He looked up, right into the face of the nightwalker.

"Are ye goin' to do somethin', elf?" Hodge all but shrieked, as the nightcrawler seemed to continue to grow larger and larger as more of it tunneled out from under the ground. Already almost sixty feet of its body had formed a coil in the middle of the street, and its head twisted upward, until its head—and that huge opening that served as its mouth—was only a short distance below the level of the tower's battlement.

"I'm working on it," Dannel said, as he poured the contents of a small vial over a thick bundle of arrows. The liquid glistened as it coated the arrowheads, shining slightly even in the darkness.

“Well, ye better do it quick!” the dwarf said, ducking out from cover long enough to fire another bolt into the nightcrawler. His attack, like those before, appeared to have no effect.

As soon as he'd poured out the last drop of the *silversheen*, Dannel tossed the vial aside and rose, one arrow almost leaping to his string as he spread the others out on the merlon in front of him. His first shot penetrated the undead worm's body just below the maw, and this time he got a response. He drew again and fired as the worm surged up, extending until its head was a good thirty five feet above the level of the ground below. He knew something bad was coming, but he drew a third arrow, and even as a white storm of death exploded from deep within it, he released the shot toward its long body.

The *cone of cold* swept up over the battlement, piercing the crenels between the thick stone merlons. The fortifications provided some cover, although Dannel, already exposed, took the blast hard and staggered back, shivering. Most of his arrows went careening away from the blast, although he managed to grasp onto a handful as he fell. Hodge and Cal likewise huddled in cover, and of course Mole avoided the cone entirely.

Dannel struggled to rise, but the crawler gave them no chance to counterattack. Even as its head drew back, it unleashed another potent power, and laid a *mass hold monster* atop the tower. Against its potent magic only the strongest of wills could offer resistance. Cal's mental discipline withstood it, but Mole, Dannel, and Hodge were all caught, paralyzed.

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Arun grunted as the nightwalker's powerful claws slammed into him, driving him back almost into the ruin of the shed behind him. He started forward to counter, but his leg snagged on a broken farm tool, and he had to catch himself before falling flat on his face in front of the massive undead creature.

Gah, blast it! the Chosen of Moradin thought.

Beorna yelled a challenge as she descended toward the nightwalker looming over Arun, her sword shining in her hand, holy power radiating from it.

The undead creature looked up, and fixed her with its dark gaze.

Beorna's will was considerable, and she should have been able to easily shrug off the corruptive power in that stare. But as she looked down, and saw Arun, tiny in contrast to it, she felt a momentary twinge of doubt, and fear. That opening was all that the creature needed. Unleashing the power of its gaze attack, the nightwalker drove a spike of terror through the templar, who, overcome, turned and fled like a streak through the night.

“Burn you!” Arun roared, hurling forward with his hammer coming up in a powerful arc. The holy weapon smacked meatily into the nightwalker's thigh just above the knee, driving white energy into it as he *smote* it. The nightwalker let out a high-pitched keening, and turned its attention back to its foe.

Umbar, having dismounted after an awkward landing, commanded the griffon to attack as best it could. As the celestial creature rose into the air, it met a pair of shadows that had followed him down. The undead creatures assaulted the summoned griffon eagerly, avoiding its frenzied counters.

But Umbar's focus was on the massive worm that undulated menacingly only a short distance away. Taking up his hammer, he ran toward it, calling upon the power of his god as he ran. A white glow began to form around him, shining from the gaps in his armor.

The crawler, sensing his approach, blasted him with a quickened *cone of cold*, followed immediately by a *finger of death*.

The cleric staggered through the storm of ice, simply absorbing the damage, and likewise shook off the full effects of the deadly ray. Pure determination drove him on, although it was obvious that the crawler's magical assault had hurt him. He lowered his head and charged, but as he drew within its reach, the worm's fat head came crashing down toward him. Seeing that it would hit long before he could reach its body to attack, the priest readied himself, crouching and hurling himself aside at the last instant. It was a maneuver of a veteran combatant, and against a normal foe, it would have worked.

But the nightcrawler was a thing of dark energies and ancient potency. It adjusted slightly, and as its head struck the ground with colossal force, its neck twisted and it snared the dwarf with the very edge of its jaws. Bone-white teeth as long as shortswords pierced his shoulder, tearing through his armor. Umbar cried out as the chill of the grave entered him through the creature's bite. He tried to pull free, but the thing was insanely strong; he may as well have been trapped in a vice. He was wrenched roughly back, lifted off his feet as the crawler brought its head around in a wide sweep. His hammer went flying into the night, but he still was infused with the power of his *dispel evil* spell, and as he was lifted up into the air he wrenched himself around enough to splay his hand upon the black hide of the creature.

White light flared from around his fingers into the creature, but it was just too powerful. As the flare dissipated, the spell having failed to send the nightshade back to whence it had come, the massive worm abruptly spread its jaws wide, engulfing the cleric, who vanished into the blacker than black interior of its body.

As Umbar was swallowed up by the nightcrawler, Arun fought for his life against the nightwalker a scant hundred feet away. He slammed it again with his hammer, smashing the magical bludgeon against one unnaturally long arm as it reached for him. The thing was almost indestructible, but even with its damage resistance, the paladin's smites were causing it serious injury. It came at him again, but as Arun steeled himself for another full attack, the walker suddenly lunged ahead and closed its fist around the haft of the paladin's hammer, just below the head. Surprised, Arun tried to pull his weapon free, but the nightshade, far stronger than he, tore it from his grasp. Wisps of greasy gray smoke rose from the edges of the walker's hand, evidence that the holy weapon did not appreciate the maneuver, but the undead creature's unholy eyes blazed with something akin triumph as it lifted the weapon high above Arun's reach, and closed both hands around it.

And squeezed.

Chapter 532

Cal resisted the crawler's *mass hold monster* spell, but as the fog of ice crystals cleared he quickly saw that his companions had not been so fortunate. Unfortunately his stature limited the benefit granted by his high perch; he could not clearly see out over the battlefield. And even if he could, he mused, as he shook the rime of frost from his cloak, it was too dark to clearly resolve anything much in the way of details in any case.

We need help, he thought. Calling upon one of the few higher-order illusions he'd memorized that day, he drew forth strands of shadow and infused them with potency.

Unfortunately, those weren't the only shadows to come upon the battlements; as he cast his spell, dark forms drifted up through the crenels, eagerly seeking out the adventurers. The paralyzed companions were unable to resist as several of the shadows settled upon them; Cal drew a pair who lunged at him, their dark touches pressing against the protective barriers created by his *bracers of armor* and *ring of protection*. The gnome ignored them, focusing on his spell as his conjured shadowstuff took on the form of a quartet of lantern archons.

The archons did not wait for commands, immediately blasting the shadows with their energy beams. One of the two shadows menacing Cal evaporated, hit by several beams in quick succession. The second quivered as a beam struck it, and retreated through the stone floor beneath them. Cal ran past it to Mole, who shook helplessly as another shadow greedily drank her life-essence. The gnome drew a wand and stabbed it; as he released a *cure moderate wounds* into it the shadow let out a hollow shriek and vanished.

The last shadow, which had started to drain Hodge, was set upon by all four archons and was quickly dispatched.

"There is a giant undead worm at the foot of this tower," Cal said to the archons. "Spread out, assail it."

As the archons hurried to comply, Cal lifted Mole up and quickly examined her. The gnome woman shook, still caught in the paralysis, but her eyes rolled up to meet Cal's and she was even able to nod slightly.

But then her gaze drifted up behind him, and her eyes widened.

Lok had not had much luck against the nightwing since their initial clash. He lost sight of it as it vanished into the night, he'd known that the undead flyer wasn't done with him yet. His suspicion was proven correct as he caught sight of it drawing closer from another direction, having completed another broad turn out over the fields of Ember Vale. Almost as soon as he spotted it, he was hit by an *unholy blight* that washed over him and left him feeling violently ill. Still, as the wing drew nearer he screwed up his face and flew at it, lifting his axe with both hands firmly tightened around the long haft.

The wing, however, apparently did not care for another collision. Instead, it banked away, its speed enough to let it easily outpace the genasi. Lok felt a cold chill hit him like a mule's

kick, and focused his will against whatever spell the undead creature was throwing at him. His will was considerable for a warrior, and the feeling passed in just a few moments.

Frustrated, he had started to head back toward the battle that continued to rage on the far side of the tower, when he was hit by a *greater dispel* and started falling.

Arun watched as the nightwalker lifted his precious hammer in both hands and started to squeeze. The weapon was incredibly tough, he knew, but a high-pitched whine of protest issued from between the black claws as it brought its strength to bear. Even the *holy avenger*, almost an artifact itself, could not long withstand the dark power of the nightshade.

Arun did not intent to let it have the chance. With a snap of his arm his shield flew away, and with a quick tug of his other hand his adamantine battleaxe pulled free from the loops holding it across his back. Invoking Moradin, the Chosen rushed forward. The nightwalker ignored him... until the axe came around in an arc, slamming into the creature's left knee. Arun held nothing back. He knew it was a gamble, sacrificing finesse and accuracy for all out power. But the axe hit its target, and as Arun released his third *smite* into the joint his holy power penetrated its defenses, cutting through black flesh and the putrid essence within. The nightwalker keened as its leg was severed, and it tumbled backward, caroming off the façade of the nearby building before slamming hard into the packed earth of the road. There was no blood from its wound, but black wisps of vapor issued from the stump of its leg, oozing out like a thick fog. It still held onto Arun's hammer with one clawed hand, and it brought the other up clutching for the adversary that had wrought this hurt upon it.

Arun leapt atop its chest. In desperation, the nightwalker tried a last gambit, summoning the power of a *plane shift* to cast its foe into the deepest pits of the Abyss. But against the paladin's gathered will, the nightshade's power faltered for a final time. It tried to grab him in its clawed hand, but the paladin avoided the clumsy grab, lifted the axe, and with a final invocation of divine justice he brought the weapon down with full force into the center of the nightwalker's face.

Warned by the subtle shift in focus of Mole's eyes, Cal turned around to see the nightwing bearing down upon them, gliding toward their position from above. It was... huge. He reached for the rod that hung from a long throng at his hip, but before he could act yet another *unholy blight* erupted in a cloying storm over them. It only lasted a few seconds, and when it cleared, the nightwing was still there, closer now, looming over them like a massive stormcloud

A silver streak knifed up through the night to meet the descending creature, intersecting its path at the point where its body opened up to reveal a maw of utter blackness. The wing shrieked and began to turn away again, but Dannel continued his barrage, sending silver arrow after arrow up into it. The elf, having finally fought off the *hold* from the other nightshade, got payback as his missiles tore violent rents in its substance. The nightwing pumped its wings and began to turn as it ascended, perhaps preparing to hurl another nasty attack at the foes atop the tower before it disengaged.

That tiny delay cost it, as Cal *disintegrated* it.

Dannel sagged against the battlement, still in pretty bad shape from the multiple attacks they'd suffered. "Need more... arrows," he said. He had plenty of regular missiles in his quivers, but he was referring to the ones he'd coated with *silversheen*, most of which had been blown away by the *cone of cold*. A few, however, lay scattered across the stone roof of the tower, almost invisible in the darkness.

"I'll get them," came a weak voice. Cal turned to see Mole, still moving stiffly as she pulled herself up and began looking for the enchanted missiles.

Cal rushed over the nearest crenel and looked down to see what had become of the nightcrawler.

It was still there, and much closer than he'd expected.

The archmage barely had time to draw back and grab a firmer hold upon the stones before the worm slammed into the side of the tower a mere eight feet below his perch. The Traveler's Rest shuddered with the impact, and for a moment Cal thought that the entire building would come down under the massive strength of the creature. But the Rest was of solid construction, fortified with magic, and it held.

"What's it doing?" Dannel asked, falling against a merlon as the tower shook again.

"It can't quite reach us... I think it wants to bring us down to its level for a chat."

"Even this tower won't hold up long against that," the elf said.

Cal nodded, and turned back toward the edge... only to clutch at the stone again as yet another *unholy blight* erupted just above the lip of the battlement. As he voided his stomach upon the already slick stones he thought grimly, *How many of those can we take?*

Glancing back at Dannel, who was barely on his feet now, his face an ashen gray, he knew that this had to be decided quickly, one way or the other. In his brief glimpse of the creature he'd seen no sign of his archons, or of Umbar. He had a strong suspicion of where the dwarf cleric would be found; which made defeating the creature *now* all the more imperative.

"We have to finish it," he said, more to himself than to any of the others, for his voice snagged in his throat, which felt hoarse and raw with bile. Crawling forward, he waited for the next slam, and the sound of crumbling stone that he knew would mean disaster.

But the next slam did not come. Reaching the edge of the roof, he leaned forward and looked down.

The worm had shifted, falling back into a coil at the base of the tower that had to be a hundred feet long. Its head had turned away from them, and he could see that its tail, a sinuous extension tipped with a vicious-looking sting, stabbed down at something on the ground, striking with a loud metallic clang. It took him a moment to realize what it was.

Lok!

The genasi took the hit and countered with a two-handed strike with his axe that tore into the rubbery body of the crawler. From his perch Cal could not see if it inflicted any serious injury, but from what he'd seen thus far of the undead creature's damage resistance, he doubted it. Still, the genasi's assault had drawn its attention, and the huge maw opened as the head slammed down to meet the daughty warrior.

Against that, Cal knew, even Lok had no chance.

Dannel staggered forward to the edge of the battlement, clutching a handful of silver-tipped arrows—all that Mole had been able to find. The elf looked unsteady, and for a moment Cal feared he would stumble and fall into the crenel, knocking the both of them over the edge of the tower. But the elf braced himself between the two adjoining merlons, and as his face took on that look of concentration that accompanied his archery, Cal heard a faint hint of a melody on the night breeze.

Dannel's arrows stabbed down and vanished into the body of the worm. The thing reared violently, the attack clearly inflicting a lot more harm than Lok's assault had. Its head snapped up, and Cal knew that another magical blast—another *blight*, or a *cone of cold*—would be coming in seconds. Dannel, he knew, would not survive another magical attack, and while his stamina was considerable, he had his doubts about how many more such blasts he could withstand.

Let it work, he thought, calling upon something... a prayer? He wasn't especially religious, but in that instant, he thought he felt a presence, something external to himself as he sucked in magical power, amplified through his rod, and unleashed it through the triggering words and gestures, culminating in a finger pointed down at the creature.

The green ray struck the worm in the midsection. For a moment the beam flared out in a pale halo of soft light, and Cal thought that the spell had failed, defeated by the worm's considerable resistance to magic. But then a segment of its body, about ten feet of its length, vanished, crumbling into dust.

The worm collapsed, both halves thrashing with an incredible violence. The tower shuddered against repeated impacts, and Lok was hit and knocked roughly back, falling in the shadow of the recessed doorway to the tower. But the worm's struggles were clearly its death throes, and they grew steadily weaker, until it finally—almost a minute later—stopped moving altogether.

As the worm finally expired, a gory figure slaked in black ooze staggered out from one of the ends. Umbar made it all of about five paces before he collapsed.

Chapter 533

The rain promised by the gathering clouds the night before had come and gone so swiftly that the ground was barely damp. A bright winter sun in a sky of startling blue could not banish the chill in the air, but it made the morning much more pleasant than the dreary overcast ones of the last tenday. As the sun rose, with it came the stir of life in the hills that

surrounded Ember Vale, for even in this unfriendly season animals dwelled here, although they gave the settlement in the valley's center a wide berth.

There were no sounds of animals in the brush, or birds scattering at their approach, as the companions descended on their flying carpet into a rocky dell overgrown with dense brush and other vegetation. Cal, kneeling at the front of the carpet, pointed to a compact clearing below, and the carpet descended in that direction. Weapons were readied, and spell components checked for easy access.

But only silence greeted them. They were still a good thirty feet above the ground below when Dannel saw the first body. They were not surprised; Cal's *prying eyes* that had found this place had given them warning of what they would find. Still, they were alert for any sign of an ambush, as the carpet settled a few feet above a wide stone outcropping, and they dismounted, spreading out to watch in all directions. Dannel remained on the carpet, an arrow nocked and ready to fire.

"What manner of man is that?" Beorna asked, as Cal knelt beside the first body. Umbar's voice carried from the far end of the dell, indicating that he'd found another.

The "man", if he was that—he was of no race any of them had ever seen—looked to have been abused. His body was covered with dozens of what looked like tiny cuts, which on closer examination were found to be *tears* in his flesh, as though his body had simply started to come apart under some incredible stress. His eyes were clouded, staring sightlessly ahead nothing, and his jaw was locked so tightly that blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. They found a broken staff nearby, and a depression in the ground that was caked with dried blood.

"There were more of them here, at some point," Mole said, checking the ground.

"That one over there, his throat was slit," Umbar said. "He did it to himself... His hand was clutched on the blade so tight that I'd have to hack off the hand to get it, I think."

"I sense no Taint," Arun said. "There is a lingering darkness in this place... but he, at least, feels clean."

Looking down at the bloody hole in the ground, Beorna said, "It is... *wrong*. What was done here was evil."

"Perhaps," Cal said, still looking at the ruined figure at his feet. "I don't know if we'll ever know who these beings were, or why they came here."

"Seems pretty obvious ta me," Hodge said. "Assumin' yer ain't forgotten last night."

"Do you think that's the end of it?" Mole asked.

Cal lifted his head and looked at his companions. He saw the answer in their eyes. "No," he said.

"So where do we go from here?" Dannel asked.

“We go forward with our plans,” Arun said. He lifted his hammer. “We know who the ultimate enemy is. And while...” He abruptly stopped in mid-sentence, and his eyes grew momentarily unfocused.

“What’s the matter?” Beorna asked. The others turned to him, concern on their faces, but Arun forestalled them with a gesture. When he finally spoke, his voice was grim.

“We are out of time,” he said.

Chapter 534

INTERLUDE

Ediir drew a considerable draught from his pipe, held it a moment, and then let it out in a soft plume of sweet white smoke. He didn’t need to look to his side to see the disapproving look from his second. Avellos, like most celestials, took a pretty strict line on what could be considered a vice.

The leonal guffawed slightly, and took another puff of smoke before tapping out his pipe and tucking it back into a pocket of his war-cloak. It was almost time to move out again. He only had to nod to Avellos—think what he would, the fellow was a good leader—and the hound archon started gathering up the patrol for a resumed march.

Preparation was almost reflex now, for Ediir. He checked his weapons, although they were never far from his hands, riding easily at his hips. The two maces were very different, one small and gleaming silver, the other large and crudely hewn of cold iron. They had seen a fair amount of use during this extended patrol, but inwardly the leonal was thinking that their role had begun to transition to mopping up the remnants of the fiendish creatures that still resided here. Of course, he wouldn’t say as much to his men—no sense in having them let their guard down! Ediir could see the changes wrought even in just the short time since he’d come here, transitioning across planes to join the fight against Evil on yet another front. From what he’d heard from some of the archons, the ones that had been here before the failed attempt from the former master of this place to reassert his authority, those had been some hairy times, back then.

Not that his tally on this extended patrol was anything to scoff at. The fiendish bison weren’t that much of a threat, but they’d also flushed out a knot of dretch that had taken shelter in one of the mounds of rubble dotting the landscape, and a fiendish dire lion that had torn one of his archons to pieces before they’d finished it. It had been a pity to slay that last one, Ediir thought, recognizing a distant kinship with the beast, but in the end, it had been Evil, and his maces had splayed its brains quiet convincingly out over the turf.

He looked up as one of his scouts came buzzing into their camp. Even before the lantern archon spoke, its words sounding like they were spoken from within a long hollow tube, Ediir knew that its news was trouble. His maces sprung into his hands, and his patrol gathered around, alert for any threat.

The lantern archon's report confirmed his feeling, although as usual the celestial's words were thin on the details that he would have liked. The little ones weren't known for their intellect, but they were fearless and dedicated.

"Lead us there," he ordered.

They followed the pulsing lantern archon deeper into the forest of withered strands that they'd been skirting before their break. A faint hint of rot hung over the place, which grew stronger the deeper they progressed. It was all just a part of change, Ediiir noted; as Occipitus evolved, the old faded away, to be replaced with the new. He wasn't sure what exactly would replace this fibrous forest, but it had to be better than the grisly strands that made him feel like a flea walking upon the back of some massive hound.

The archon flashed, and they could see something up ahead, a reddish glow that had a decidedly unfriendly look to it.

"Buff up," he told his forces. The hound and lantern archons paused briefly and prepared *aid* spells. It wasn't much of a boost, but Ediiir had been in enough campaigns to know that every little bit helped. One of the lantern archons touched him, infusing him with the same protection, and he nodded to the celestial in gratitude.

"All right, let's go," he said. He didn't need to issue further orders; if nothing else, the archons were organized and knew their roles.

As they drew closer to the source of the glow, Ediiir could see that it originated at some sort of distortion-field that floated in the midst of a clearing in the forest of dying fibers. The sagging strands grew particularly dense here around the perimeter of the clearing, as if the ones inside the open space had been pushed back to the rim. But they gave way easily before Ediiir's mace, and the leonal stepped forward into the clearing.

The distortion appeared to be a completely flat plane, an oblong roughly six feet high and four feet wide at its broadest point. It floated about a foot off the ground, and although the surface wavered, like a pond that had been disturbed by a thrown stone, Ediiir could just make out something *else* beyond, a landscape of brilliant colors that was somehow jarringly *wrong*.

His suspicions about the nature of this oddity was confirmed a moment later, as it shimmered and something stepped through.

It resembled a tall human at first glance, but that resemblance was quickly dispelled. Its body was lean, almost emaciated, and its hide was a mottled gray, as though all of the life and vitality had been sucked out of it. Its face... its face was a monstrosity, a warped feral thing with jaws too large for its face, and eyes that gleamed with a hungry yellow glow. It moved with an awkward, shuffling gait, carrying a massive double-ended axe almost as large as it was.

Ediiir could sense the sudden surge of anger from his celestials, as they recognized the fiend. A rutterkin demon, one of the lesser tanari, but no less infused with taint for that.

The archons did not hesitate, immediately assailing the demon. Beams of pure white light lanced down from above as the lantern archons hovered overhead, the rays searing the demon's hide, ripping away swaths of corrupted flesh. The thing snarled and lifted its weapon as a quartet of hound archons rushed at it, spreading out to flank it and block retreat back through the portal.

They needn't have worried; the demon had no thought of escape. It managed to inflict a minor wound upon one of its adversaries before their greatswords brought it down, thrashing as black ichor splashed out upon the spongy turf.

Ediir was typically one to lead from the front, even against such a minor threat, but he had hesitated. The portal was clearly some sort of planar gate, but he knew that such an effort was far beyond the capabilities of a mere rutterkin. He heard a bark from one of his archons and saw that another rutterkin, this one armed with a jagged-edged longsword, had pushed through into the clearing, and was already coming under heavy attack.

Why would someone bother to open a gate to send rutterkin here?

The answer came to him in a flash, filling his gut with a sensation of dread.

"They're already here!" he said aloud, even as the air flashed around him, and the clearing filled with demons.

They appeared all around, *teleporting* in, surging immediately at the archons with slavering hunger for carnage. Most were babaus, their emaciated black hides glistening with the acidic red gel that coated their bodies, but Ediir saw a pair of vrocks materialize overhead, and as he heard a loud croak behind him he turned to see a squat, massive hezrou crouched behind him.

The leonal did not wait for the inevitable charge. Recognizing the toad-demon as the greatest threat—a single *blasphemy* would have cut through his entire force—he opened his jaws wide and unleashed a powerful roar. The sound washed over the demon and knocked it back, reeling, stunned. A babau that had been too close shrieked and collapsed, likewise rendered insensate, but that did not in any way dissuade three others from leaping at the leonal from his flanks, their claws eagerly seeking his flesh.

Ignoring them for the moment, the leonal turned back toward the portal. Another demon had pushed through, a squat jovoc. One of the hound archons, too inexperienced to recognize the threat, chopped it with its greatsword, only to roar in pain as its *aura of retribution* returned the pain of the wound to its inflictor, and its allies.

Ediir created a *wall of force* across the gateway. It wouldn't keep out the fiends that could *teleport*, but it would hold back the weaker ones...

But more demons were continuing to appear. Babaus were everywhere, at least two dozen now swarming in and around the clearing, and Ediir could feel the cries of his lantern archons as the vrocks eagerly tore into them, extinguishing their shining radiance.

The babaus snarled as they slashed at him with their claws. His damage resistance protected him for the most part, but the babaus were masters of sneak attacks, and he felt pain as their piercing talons sought out weak spots in his defenses. Turning, he aligned himself so that the maximum number of demons were in front of him, and then let out a second mighty roar. Nearly a dozen babaus crumpled, their bodies ravaged by the mighty blast. His own forces were not affected, but the lantern archons were all gone, destroyed, and only four of the hounds were left standing, having formed a defensive ring in the center of the clearing. Their swords hacked and cleaved into demonic flesh, the canine celestials caught up in the glory of slaying their traditional enemies. Ediir saw Avellos lift his flaming sword high as a vrock screeched and dove at him. The archon did not falter, holding his strike until the vulture demon's claws had reached his fur, then driving the blade deep into its body. The vrock let out a piercing cry of agony and lashed out with all four of its taloned limbs at its enemy, and for a moment the two combatants were lost in a wreckage of violence. The other three hound archons hewed at babaus that leapt over their stunned comrades to tear at the archons with their long claws. One shining sword broke, weakened by the caustic ooze secreted by the babaus, and its owner rapidly fell, its jaws still locked around a babau's throat.

Ediir felt a surge of glorious pride at the courage of his soldiers, but it was clear that the battle was not going in their favor. The leonal tore free of the babaus that were trying unsuccessfully to drag him down, and charged forward toward the embattled archons. He unleashed his third and final roar, and again demons fell, overcome by the holy power of that blast of sound. Avellos was quick to take advantage, driving his sword through the vrock one final time as the demon fluttered dazed at his feet. He turned immediately to aid his comrades, taking the head off a babau as it rushed past, but before he could strike again Ediir forestalled him.

"Return to headquarters... report what is happening!" Another vrock dove down at him, but he lifted his cold iron mace, and drove it up into the demon's body. The blow released a sudden cacophonous blast of sound, the full power of the *thundering* weapon knocking the beastly creature roughly aside.

"I will not abandon you!" the hound archon yelled, stabbing another babau. Already, his sword smoked as the toxic acid ate at the weapon. A foot away, another hound went down under a pair of babaus, leaving only one other celestial standing besides the two leaders, blood oozing from a half-dozen gashes in his fur. Both of the celestials knew that there was no easy escape for the leonal, who lacked the archon's ability to *teleport*.

"That is an order!" Ediir roared, crushing a babau's skull with his backswing. The vrock, recovering, let out a terrible shriek; the hound archon soldier staggered and fell into the eager arms of a babau, and Avellos only barely resisted being similarly affected. Ediir's fortitude was such that he easily shook off the stunning effects of the shriek, and he brought both of his weapons down onto the vrock's shoulders, drawing a reassuring crack as fiendish bone gave way before the assault.

Avellos nodded, drew up his sword, and vanished.

The demons, furious at the escape of one of their adversaries, only intensified their attack. The vrock, still struggling, seized one of Ediir's arms. The leonal broke free, losing one of

his maces. He laughed and tossed the other away; he needed no weapons to hurt demons. His claws found the vrock's throat and tore, and the demon collapsed, gurgling out the last of its life in a bloody mess.

For a moment, as babaus swarmed around him, the leonal considered flight. It was possible that Avellos would be able to return with reinforcements; distances were of no concern to a celestial with the ability to *teleport* at will. He could lead these fiends on a merry chase, and rally his forces...

But as he looked up, and saw more demons descending toward the melee—chasmes, he recognized, and a palrethee—he knew that his initial suspicion about the demonic assault was correct. This wasn't a raid; this was an invasion, a campaign of conquest. Avellos would not be returning soon; if the great spire was not already under attack, it would be soon. The hound archon was loyal, and would seek to return, but Saureya was practical, above all, and he would not allow a veteran leader to throw its life away.

He could run. But while he was faster than these demons, they too could *teleport*.

The leonal let out a growl from deep in his throat, shaking his head to clear it of the buzz that was already beginning to lull his senses. He was bleeding now from a half-dozen deep gashes that had gotten through his defenses; everywhere he turned a babau was tearing at him.

Ediir paused a moment to *heal* himself, then he reached out and grabbed a babau by the skull, slamming it into his knee with enough force to crack its skull like a ripe melon. The action hurt his knee somewhat, and would likely cost him some mobility. In effect, a decision made.

The leonal laid about him with abandon, cutting and tearing and crushing. Demons died, and more came forward to take the places of the slain.

It went on.

No celestial reinforcements came.

Chapter 535

Dana steeled herself as the thick door recessed into the wall slowly opened. The receding portal did not make a sound, but its ponderous swing nevertheless clearly conveyed the feeling of great thickness and weight even before it had withdrawn enough for her to see the space beyond.

The space beyond looked dark, at first, but as her eyes adjusted she could make out the features on the walls inside, highlighted by a deep violet glow that seemed to seep from small globes that were set into the crown molding where the ceiling met the wall at regular intervals.

The dark portal finally came to a stop, leaving a gap only just large enough to allow her passage. Taking another deep breath, she stepped forward. She felt a tingle as she entered the threshold, and for a moment felt a brief thrill of panic that she ruthlessly squashed. For just an instant she thought she heard a voice, calling her name. *LL?* she thought, but there was only silence. Oddly, she almost thought that the voice had been a woman's, slightly familiar but too fleeting to identify.

She steadied herself and stepped forward, committing herself. She had foreseen this, and in fact would have been surprised if there had been no defense here. A ward against scrying, or extradimensional travel, or both. In any case, she was not going to turn back.

Once fully through the doorway, she immediately caught sight of the door warder, shielded behind the portal. She had to look up to meet its eyes; it was nearly eight feet tall, and its long angular wings brushed the ceiling. She would have called it a succubus but for that size, and the fact that its skin consisted of dense scales colored in a blend of gray and olive that was muted in the odd lighting. Its eyes, set deep within their sockets, were black orbs that regarded her without any emotion that she could discern.

"No weapons," it said, its voice deep and androgynous.

"I carry none," she said, spreading her cloak. She forced herself to meet that black stare as she spoke, and the meanings behind the words carried clearly. *I do not need them.* Her demeanor also carried the clear intimation that she would not subject herself to a search.

But the reptilian thing did not press her. It closed the door, leaning into it until it sank cleanly into its socket. She could now see that it was a full foot thick, and if it was solid metal as it appeared, it had to be insanely heavy. As it settled into place, an audible series of clicks sounded that were disproportionately loud in the confines of the corridor.

The door warden glanced down at her. Its mouth twisted into what might have been a grin, as if confirming that she was now without options. She did respond. She had already worked out the implications of this visit, which she had gone through such trouble to arrange, and was beyond second-guessing herself.

The creature gestured for her to proceed it down the hallway. She walked down the corridor, her boots silent on the thickly carpeted floor. The hall wasn't very long, perhaps twenty paces before it ended in a wide arch that curved dramatically in a fashion reminiscent of Calimshite architecture. The shadows deepened within, and it took her a moment to recognize that there was a pair of enameled wooden doors opposite her.

The doors opened easily at her touch. The space beyond was significantly brighter than the oddly lit corridor, and it took a few seconds of blinking to adjust enough to make out details of the chamber.

The floor was somewhat lower than the corridor, with a short but wide staircase leading down to the broad space below. Several additional arches around the perimeter—lushly warded by silk drapings or curtains of colored beads—led into shallow alcoves or to other rooms within the complex. A faint sound of water trickling into a basin was audible, but she could not identify its source. There was an air of luxury here, but also an undercurrent of

horror that became clearer as she looked around. Faded tapestries that appeared to show scenes of frolic were actually depictions of torture, while small objects that looked like innocent knickknacks at first glance turned out to be quite otherwise when they suddenly moved, resolving into bulbous vermin or small fiends that skittered away into hidden corners. A pair of quasits sitting on a high ledge watched her movements, whispering comments in Abyssal that didn't quite reach her ears. One held something in its hand that it occasionally tweaked with a sharp fingernail, drawing a tremulous squeak of discomfort from whatever it was.

She looked back at the door warder, who merely indicated another arch on the far side of the room. This one had a more substantial opaque hanging obscuring it, but as she approached it—careful to avoid a slithering something that slid past her boot as she crossed the room—it drew back seemingly of its own volition, revealing a complex circular iron door that resembled an iris.

She stepped up to the door, which twisted open before her, revealing another chamber.

The room was shaped like a hemisphere, although there were enough bulges, ledges, and alcoves to ruin the pure outline of the form. The dome was crafted from blocks of red stone that bulged slightly, their edges rounded, giving the place the appearance of being part of the shell of some monstrous giant insect. A pair of hooded lanterns dangling from the apex of the dome provided at least a semblance of illumination. Dark shadows along the walls might have concealed exits, or they might have just been part of the unnatural curve of the dome.

A pair of massive forms flanked her as she entered. She recognized them from elsewhere in Sigil; *mogs* or something similar, LL had called them. Each carried an axe larger than she was. How they got in here she didn't know; they seemed too large to navigate the entry.

Dismissing them as mercenary guards, she directed her attention to the others in the room. She felt a momentary quiver as she recognized a medusa, its skin a deep shade of blue, its eyes obscured by a pair of black eye cusps that reflected the light in the room. It stood adjacent to a black divan that pointed toward the door. Opposite it stood another creature that Dana thought she recognized. It took her a moment to place it; the naked, sexless humanoid was of the same race—if not the same individual—as the creature that had betrayed her and her friends to Graz'zt when they were in Zelatar, almost twenty years ago. Its body was hairless, its bone-white flesh pulled tight over its frame, its features pinched and alien with narrow slits for a nose and mouth, and no visible ears at all. For the life of her, she could not recall the name of the creature they'd encountered that last time; in any case this one evidenced no hint of recognition, or any other emotion in its alien eyes.

But the one she had come to see what lying upon the divan, facing her.

That Barrat Ghur was a fiend was discernable at an instant's glance. Even if the black horns jutting from his temples and the sinister red tinge to his flesh did not give it away, the depth of spiritual corruption that radiated from him could never be fully masked. But from that base, all other assumptions collapsed. For one, he looked... *old*, his hair and beard thinning and gray, his skin wrinkled and sagging, gathered in clumps around his neck. His

limbs jutted from his body like sticks, and were marked by spiny ridges that protruded up to several inches out from his elbows and knees. He was clad in a tunic and breeches that glimmered with the sheen of metal, cut specifically to the unique contours of his form.

There was a long moment of silence as the human woman regarded the fiend, who met her look with a cold stare.

“Barrat Ghur,” she finally said.

“Dana Ilgarten,” Ghur said. For his aged appearance, his voice was deep and full, booming from his chest. “You have gone through a great deal of effort to ferret me out. You have bullied your way across the torus of Sigil, slain my associates, and inconvenienced me by sundering operations carefully assembled. Now you come into my sanctum, alone, with all the arrogance of an infernal magnate.”

“Tell me, my dear... why is it that I should not simply slay you where you stand?”

The door twisted shut behind her, and the creak of the maugs as they lifted their weapons sounded unpleasantly loud in the sealed confines of the chamber.

Chapter 536

“Tell me, my dear... why is it that I should not simply slay you where you stand?”

Dana did not react, did not turn as the obvious noise of the door closing and the maugs shifting into a ready position echoed behind her. Instead, she kept her attention focused on Ghur. “I am not someone you would wish to make an enemy.”

“Ah, yes,” the fiend replied. “Perhaps you refer to your fabled thaumaturgic powers. In case you have not noticed, human, this citadel is fortified with a *dimensional lock*. You will not be gating in any angels to your cause this day, nor can you shunt yourself off to a place of safety.”

Dana did not respond.

“Or perhaps you refer to your friend. I was not altogether surprised to hear that you’d attracted Laertes Leonidas to serve as your planar cohort. The werelion has something of a reputation here in Sigil, and has always had something of a soft spot for lost causes. Either way, he cannot assist you here.”

“LL is not involved in this,” Dana said. “He offered to join me in meeting you, but I asked him not to intervene.”

“A selfless gesture,” Ghur said, his tone such that Dana could not distinguish whether it was mocking or sincere. “So given these limitations, why should I be leery of inflicting my... desires... upon you?”

Dana came a step deeper into the room, still a good three paces from the end of the divan. She sighed. "If you feel it necessary to wade through these preliminaries... Very well, then, here's a reason for you: I have powerful friends who would not take it well if I were to be inconvenienced."

"And yet you seem quite cavalier about placing these friends of yours into a circumstance of potential danger, through your actions."

"I am driven by a motivation beyond my control."

"Ah. Love... or hatred, perhaps? Connected like a mobius, they are."

"I would not expect a being of your kind to be able to comprehend the former. But let us speak of hate. *That*, I suspect, is something that you understand quite intimately."

"You presume much."

"A necessity, born of the circumstances I alluded to before."

"Let us speak of that, then. For you would not have come here, would not have undergone the obviously significant effort that you have, without a profound need."

"Would it be too jarring if we simply skipped over the little dance? You know who I am, and why I am here. If not, then I have miscalculated, and you will not likely be of aid to me in any event."

The fiend inclined his head slightly in a nod of acknowledgement. "So be it. Let us assume for a moment that all of your grand presumptions are essentially accurate. Tell me, then, why I should help you."

"You sat high in the councils of the demon prince Graz'zt; were one of his advisors for quite some time. Perhaps even one of his inner circle, for a time. You represented his interests on numerous planes, ultimately settling here on Sigil. Forgive my delving into conjecture at this point my narrative... but perhaps you grew to prefer this place to the stark harshness of the Abyss. When the Prince's fortunes underwent a period of decline, you used the opportunity to sever yourself from him, and establish yourself as an independent agent."

"You have accumulated a lot of data in a short period of time. But your narrative rests upon a tortuous web of assumptions and suppositions, the most tenuous—and risky—of which is the presumption that my 'severing' from the prince was not amiable, and that I bear some resentment of him that is sufficient to motivate me to be of assistance to you. For example... consider for a moment the dynamic if it turned out that the estrangement was initiated by he, and not I... and the potential for restoration of amiable relations, if I were to present him with one of his enemies?"

"That is of course a possibility," Dana replied. "I make no claim to knowing the truth of circumstances, only educated guesses based upon the information that I have been able to access. The problem with an investigation of this sort, is that only some of the facts are in evidence, and the motivations of the protagonists is clouded. For example, one might learn

that you have thus far been approached by representatives of several Powers of the lower realms, including but not limited to the Abyss. And that you have carefully avoided any entanglements, playing off one against the other in an exercise that demonstrates a fair quantity of diplomatic skill, and guile.”

“Raw flattery, while appreciated, will not sway me to your cause.”

“Noted. It is also evident,” she continued, indicating their surroundings with a wave of her hand, “That you have undergone considerable effort and expense to cloak your operation here in a veil of... privacy.”

“If you had spent a longer time in Sigil, you would come to understand that such precautions are not uncommon. The fundamental rules upon the planes are quite different from those on your corporeal globe, not the least of which is that most of the rules themselves are mutable to some degree. But let us continue; your narrative grows interesting, even as the web strains against the weight of your assumptions.”

“Then let me offer my most tenuous statement before the web snaps altogether. You know where he is.”

Barrat Ghur chuckled. “Ah, here at last, your clever story runs into a wall formed of logic. Presume that your statement is correct. This presents several fallacies. First, if that were the case, and if your earlier statement about the mutual antipathy between myself and my former employer is likewise true, would not He be motivated to ensure my silence? Second, if I did possess this knowledge, would it not be insanely valuable? Surely one of my fundamental nature would sell or trade such information, in exchange for fabulous wealth and power. He has many enemies, as you no doubt know quite well.”

“Now you make assumptions,” Dana said. “You presumed, perhaps logically, that the ‘he’ I referred to was the Prince. I know that *his* location and movements are masked, by a potency greater even than a *mind blank*. In fact, finding out anything at all about the Lord of Shadows is all but impossible, even through direct divine agency.”

“Many things are made nebulous by the Heart,” Ghur said, mysteriously. Dana raised an eyebrow, but the fiend offered no clarification.

“Fortunately, his associates—current and former—are not so diligently shrouded.”

“And so you have set upon me,” Ghur said.

“Part of it is a question of access—you are here, after all, and not the Abyss, where a casual visit would be... inconvenient. But it is also true that you, perhaps more than any other individual of the Prince’s acquaintance, are familiar with his interests that are located outside of the Abyss. One such as he would have many bolt-holes that were not casually known, I am sure.”

“And you would be correct. It would take a lifetime to search them all, in fact.”

“I do not have a lifetime, and I think that you are being deliberately obfuscatory, in this case.”

The fiend’s eyes narrowed just slightly. “You still have not addressed my original critique about your construct of postulations. If, as you are obviously suggesting, I have some insight as to where to look, why would I not sell this information to one of His rivals?”

“That puzzled me as well,” Dana said. “But then I had to reorient my assumptions, as you might say. I grant that it would be impossible to even begin to put myself into the shoes of one who had been spawned and raised in the Abyss. But since coming to Sigil I have spent time with individuals who have been... instructive, in many ways. So my best guess is that you recognize that to share—sell, trade, whatever—this information with an Abyssal magnate would be to commit yourself to a faction, and thus forfeit the independence that you have obviously fought hard to preserve here.”

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, Ghur spoke. “Your insight is considerable, for a mortal so new to the Outer Realms. But your fault lies in your limited perspective. You do not truly understand that nature of your enemy.”

“Then enlighten me.”

Ghur shifted his gaze slightly to the humanoid to his left. The pale figure seemed to come closer, although it had not moved its feet. It shifted subtly, its hands coming up into a complicated pattern, its fingers—it only had four on each hand—twisting in a way that she could not have matched without breaking them.

The Silent, it was called the Silent, she thought. And indeed, the creature made no sound.

“What are you doi—“ she began, but then everything around her began to grow insubstantial, and she lost consciousness.

Chapter 537

Dana felt like she was floating, the surroundings of Ghur’s lair replaced by an empty gray expanse that seemed limitless in every direction. She felt a thrill of terror at Ghur’s—attack, betrayal? But the emotion slipped from her grasp, neutered by the void that was this place. Her thoughts flickered back upon the past, to Zelatar, and older treacheries, and Graz’zt.

Her attention was drawn back to the moment as the gray began to form shapes around her. The empty void was replaced by a landscape of black towers and squat buildings laid out like bricks below her; a cityscape. She was flying above it, incorporeal, a hollow observer. She recognized the place instantly; even two decades could not mute the memory.

Zelatar. The corrupt city of the Lord of Shadows, sprawling across three layers of the Abyss, Azzagrat, demesne of Graz’zt.

She could see demons, vrocks flying lazily through the air, swarms of quasits, there a succubus on some private errand. None paid her any heed. Below, the streets filled with

creatures of all shapes and sizes... demons, yes, but others as well; planar travelers, yugoloths, daemons, slaad, tieflings, humanoids, giants, and a thousand other species all represented. Zelatar was far from friendly, but it was cosmopolitan, a collection of lost souls and the jetsam of a hundred realities, bound together in fear and respect for the Argent Lord, the Prince who ruled it all.

There. The Argent Palace, a massive complex that was visible from anywhere in the city, on any of the three planes on which it existed. There, the place that their enemy lurked in security, planning his wars, twisting plots through the fabric of dozens of worlds.

Dana felt something strange... a tendril of power intruding upon the edges of her consciousness. Something... familiar. She could not identify it, but it drew her attention to the depths of the Palace, to a collection of spires that rose hundreds of feet into the air, above a building large enough to hold a considerable town inside.

Something... popped.

A flash, erupting suddenly, blinding her. She covered her eyes with an insubstantial arm, blinking against the spots in her vision. She knew that she wasn't really here, but even so the flare had been painfully bright.

She still couldn't see when the blast wave hit her. She was driven back, although she could only feel the pulse of solid wind like an echo. As her vision began to return, she saw a vrock that flew past her as if shot from a catapult, there and gone in an instant.

She looked down. The city was...

Ruin. The Palace was a smoking pit. A massive orange cloud shaped like a billowing mushroom rose up from where the spired cathedral had been. A wall of flame continued to spread outward in a rapidly-broadening ring; within the ring everything was red fire and black smoke.

A giddy feeling rose up in her; madness came with it, she knew. In the nebulous shadow-state in which she floated, the feelings shore off of her like water upon an oilcloth cloak. She drifted, destruction everywhere she looked.

After a time, the scene shifted. Zelatar was still visible in the distance; a plume of black smoke hung over the city like a shroud. Columns of refugees stretched from the city in long strings. As Dana watched, a crevice in the ground disgorged a ravening pack of abyssal ghouls, who descended upon the nearest cluster of hapless souls fleeing the ravaged city. Demons and others fought the undead in knots, leaving mounds of shredded carcasses...

Another shift. A gray-green portal as big as a house disgorged a legion of heavily armored fiendish troops. A bat-winged woman in full plate atop a nightmare watched as row after row of soldiers poured into the bleak scene. She held a long spear aloft like a pennant; atop its summit hung a pair of severed heads, female...

Another shift. Carnage in a strange cityscape. Bodies rotting in the streets.

Another. A frozen landscape, frost giants with glowing red eyes, ambushed by huge wraiths that rose out of the ground, enfolding them until even their screams were engulfed.

Another. Another. Another.

Dana pressed her palms into her eyes, trying to blot out the images. A part of her knew she had to watch, had to absorb whatever clues were being revealed to her in this litany, but it was too much, too much...

Daughter

The soft voice calmed her. She cautiously opened her eyes, only to see that the neutral gray expanse had returned. She reached out with her mind. *Moonmother?*

Daughter, came the voice again, bringing peace, filling her with the benevolent touch of her patroness.

Were those things I saw real? Did Ghur betray me? Oh, mother... where is Benzan?

Hush, child. I have little time here, and you must save your strength for the trials that will come.

Ghur can only be what he is; ultimately he can only betray himself. He can give you the information you need... but the price will be high.

I will pay it, Dana thought, but she felt a tiny thread of caution through the link.

Do not be hasty, daughter. Some prices are too great to pay, if they cost us the thing for which we paid.

What would you have me do, mother? Speak it, and I will obey.

I cannot—no, I will not—take away that agency that is granted you. I cannot make this course any easier, daughter. But nor will I abandon you. Long have you carried my standard, and what grace I can bestow... I freely grant.

A soft glow penetrated the gray murk, a shaft of silver moonlight that bathed Dana in its radiance. At the touch of that light the fog that had hung over her senses melted away, and she felt a bright rapture as a divine glow spread through her.

Dana let that glow fill her until she thought she would burst. At that moment, she let go.

Her eyes opened. She was looking into the face of the medusa, who started in surprise. Dana saw that she was not what she appeared to be. How could she have missed it, before?

“She is awake!”

She stepped back and to the side. Dana saw that her cloak lay on the ground in front of Barrat Ghur, with several of her items laid out upon it. The fiend looked at her with an expression of interest upon his face. She started to step forward, only to realize that her arms were pinned, each held in the iron grip of one of the maug guards. Since she could not move, she fixed Barrat Ghur with a cold stare.

“I have gained insight from what you have shown me, but I still lack the information I seek,” she said coldly.

“You have surprised me, and I am impressed by your ability. But that does not change the fundamental reality of the situation that I alluded to earlier.”

“It does not have to go this way. I suggest you consider this; your interests and mine can coincide in this matter.”

“Had you come to me even a short interval earlier, I might have been inclined to agree. As it is...”

His gaze shifted for just a moment, but it was enough to confirm what Dana had already begun to suspect.

“Who are you?” she said to the medusa. “Surely it does not threaten you to reveal the truth, not at this point.”

The medusa let out a short, unpleasant laugh. “If you wish.” Her form shifted, and her already lean body elongated, her features altering. The transformation only took a moment, and when it was done a tall, impressive figure stood before her. A cloak of shiny black chitin covered most of its body, obscuring most of its form, but it was still identifiably humanoid. Its head, however, resembled that of a jackal, with milky yellow eyes that shone malevolently within deep sockets in its canine skull.

Inwardly, Dana felt a flutter of worry in her gut. But her voice was calm as she said to Ghur, “So. You have elected to throw your lot in with the yugoloths.”

Ghur tilted a hand apologetically. “Your comments upon my motivations were insightful, for the most part. But as you noted, it is very difficult to avoid taking sides. I do not make the rules...”

“We all make our own rules,” she said, quietly. “And we must live by the consequences of our choices.”

“I would have enjoyed seeing the ultimate outcome of your clash with my former employer,” Ghur said. “But as it is, I am afraid that your quest must now come to a premature end.”

He turned to the yugoloth lord. “She is yours.”

Chapter 538

Dana spoke a *holy word*.

Everything happened at once. Dana, her senses hyperattenuated by the expectation she'd had for this moment, all of the contingencies she and LL and Eleva had worked out, sensed the attempt of the pale asexual humanoid to counter her effort, but it failed. The power of the *word* filled the chamber with a resounding echo of pure Good. The merceenary maugs released her and fell back, stunned. The arcanaloth seemed momentarily discomfited, but she was not especially surprised when Barrat Ghur was not affected; his only response to the spell was a brief lapse of his calm features into a hint of a scowl. Likewise, the Silent showed no ill effect.

Ghur responded immediately with a powerful word of *blasphemy*. His invocation was even stronger than Dana's, and without any sort of spell resistance she should have been dazed and seriously weakened, at least.

Fortunately, the fell magic was one against which she'd prepared a *spell immunity* before entering Ghur's stronghold, and the sinister echoes of the magic slid off of her without harm.

The aranaloth tried to hit her with some sort of *hold* spell, but with her will augmented by the divine gift of Selûne, that too did not affect her. Fortunately, she had returned to awareness before the creature had found and taken her *pearl of wisdom*, which nestled between her breasts under her tunic. *They want to take me alive*, she thought. That gave her an advantage, perhaps, albeit a small one; if they did manage to ensnare her, then she was as good as dead in any case.

The battle had only lasted a second, and while Dana had withstood the initial display of power from Ghur and his allies, she knew that the odds were still against her.

Well. She would have to do what she could to shift them back.

"Selûne's might!" she screamed, kneeling and smacking her fist into the floor. As she struck, she unleashed a massive wave of energy, an *earthquake* that seized the room and shook it madly, tearing through the foundations of the structure and rippling outward. The yugoloth and white humanoid were thrown briefly off balance, while Barrat Ghur was tossed roughly off of his divan, as the floor shifted at an awkward angle beneath him. The construction of the place was durable, so the room did not collapse, but cracks appeared in the ceiling and floor, and the metal of the iris-door behind her creaked loudly in protest as it warped in its threshold, sealing them in.

When Ghur stood, his face had finally betrayed an expression of anger. "You will pay for that," he said, his voice cold.

For a few seconds the four combatants just seemed to stand there; to an outsider it might have seemed like a casual gathering rather than a battle between earnest adversaries. But to one sensitive to the flows of magic that were hurled back and forth, the room would have been louder than a castle siege.

Ghur shifted his tactics, focusing a *greater dispel* at Dana in an effort to shear away her magical defenses. But that spell too dissipated before it touched her; she'd anticipated the tactic and had included that spell in the four protected by her *spell immunity*.

Thank you, Mocker Darr, she thought wryly, before she felt another sharp surge against her Will. It was from the Silent, she thought; it was impossible to be certain, because the creature did not stir, it just stood there with its arms at its side, only the slight shifting of the flaps of its mouth indicating that it was alive at all. The alien creature might be the most dangerous of the three, she thought; she was certainly familiar with its ability to shift reality and sever her grip on consciousness. But her mental defenses were fully alert, her will gathered like a suit of armor, and she resisted whatever assault the creature was launching at her.

The arcanaloth blasted her with a ray of *enervation*. But Dana's *death ward*, cast immediately before she'd entered Ghur's lair, neutralized the spell. Thus far her layered wards were holding... but she knew that her enemies almost certainly had their own protections up.

So be it.

She summoned another powerful spell, lifting her hands high above her head, filling the room with the emerald glow of a *dimensional lock*.

Ghur, recognizing what she was doing, hit her with a *power word*. She hadn't protected herself against that one, but was able to resist the effects—barely, swaying slightly as the spell's power reverberated against her will.

"You play well, but you cannot withstand us forever," Ghur said. "I have twenty fiends in my service, who will be here in moments!"

As if in response to his taunt, a loud crashing noise sounded through the damaged iron door.

The arcanaloth shifted its form, *shapechanging* back into the blue-skinned medusa she'd first seen when she'd entered this place. It immediately fixed her with its petrifying gaze, but Dana's resisted its potency, tearing her eyes away from that deadly stare.

The priestess knelt again, touching her palm to the cold stone at her feet. Divine power flowed through her, spreading outward from her touch. The effect wasn't immediately obvious, and as she stood, she was hit by a devastating spell from Ghur.

A scream was torn from deep in her throat as the flesh on her arms and legs began to tear itself from her body, dangling in long strips. Blood trickled down her limbs as she looked down to see bare muscle pulsing garishly in the room's unsteady light. As if that wasn't bad enough, she began to hear voices whispering at the edges of her awareness, building in intensity. She glanced over at the Silent, who stood motionless at his place, as unreadable as before.

“Ah, didn’t expect a *flensing*, did you?” Ghur said. “Savor the pain, Dana... it is only the beginning of the agonies that you will experience. If Amok Vorr is willing to amend our bargain, perhaps I will keep you for a time, and teach you the true depths of your ignorance about the Planes.”

Chapter 539

“Go fuck yourself,” she hissed, and *imploded* the Silent.

As the pale humanoid collapsed in a bloodless heap, Ghur’s neutral façade cracked for the second time, now betraying a look of surprise. The arcanaloth, perhaps realizing that the situation had grown a bit more serious, abandoned subtlety and tried to *disintegrate* Dana. The green ray tore a painful swath across her torso, but when the beam faded she was still there, her expression cold as she turned toward the yugoloth.

The arcanaloth *shapechanged* into a pit fiend, but even as it lunged at her she focused her will and *imploded* it as well.

She paid a price for that, as Ghur kept up his attack, sending waves of agony through her as more of her flesh ripped free of her body. But she was not unaccustomed to pain, and her focus had reached the level where dedication and insanity were too close to distinguish.

She set her gaze upon Ghur. In an act of desperation, he laid a *destruction* upon her. The black fire scorched her exposed limbs, but even as it did a blue glow surrounded her, and the wounds were *healed* as the *contingency* she’d laid upon herself earlier—courtesy of a *miracle* spell—took effect.

The fiend turned and darted into one of the recessed alcoves nearby. But the secret door there refused to open; Dana’s earlier *stone shape* had sealed all of the room’s exits. Given time he could have forced it, but as he turned he saw that he had no time left.

Another heavy crash sounded, this time filling the room as the iron door buckled under a massive impact. The sound seemed to restore Ghur’s courage. “You can destroy me... but if you do, you will never find your lost love! It is time to make a decision, priestess!”

Dana snarled and lunged at him. Ghur screamed as the unholy red glow of a *harm* spell surged through him. Ravaged by the spell, he lashed out at her one last time, striking at her with a surge of fire that scorched both of them with eager red tongues. But that too faltered against one of the five *protection from elements* wards she wore.

Judging how injured the fiend was from her *harm*, she hit him with an *inflict moderate wounds* spell. The spell easily overcame his spell resistance, and while Ghur resisted the full effect of the destructive magic, what got through was still enough to knock him unconscious.

The door crashed again, the metal squealing as it was torn free of its moorings. Staying close enough to Ghur so that she could keep track of him, Dana stood and turned to face the newcomer.

With a final loud scream of protest, the door crashed free of the threshold and fell into the room. The figure that stepped through the doorway was not what Dana had expected, and her heart sank as she recognized the massive reptilian form of Dhur's fiendish door warden. The demon's features twisted into a violent snarl as it caught sight of her, and as it spread its claws they thickened and elongated, pulsing with an infusion of black shadow-energy.

Dana hit it with a *holy word*.

The demon, unaffected, stepped forward.

Oh, crap.

Chapter 540

Dana brought down a *flame strike* that almost missed the demon. It moved so quickly that it was on her even before her mind registered that it was attacking. Even as the stench of scorched reptilian flesh filled her nostrils she felt pain explode across her body as the thing *smote* her with one of those massive claws, drawing deep gashes in her torso, slicing flesh and muscle down to the ribs below. Staggering back, she opened her mind to the goddess, and poured divine energy into a stream of silver fire that splayed over the body of the demon, scoring its corrupt, scaly hide.

The demon roared in pain. It lifted its claws, snarling as it prepared to tear her face from her body.

A dark form hurtled through the doorway like a rolling boulder, slamming hard into the demon's back. Dana twisted out of the way as the newcomer and the fiend crashed hard to the ground in a tangle of limbs, the demon already twisting its body around in an effort to get at its attacker. The newcomer was just as strong and fast as the demon, however, and after a violent series of attacks, the fierce reptilian monstrosity sagged and collapsed, blood oozing from the wreckage of its back.

"You okay?" Laertes Leonidas growled as he stood. The werelion looked a sight, his fur matted with blood and scorched black across his shoulders and the left side of his head.

"Took you long enough getting here," Dana said with forced levity, as she *healed* his injuries.

"Yeah, well, their welcoming committee wasn't exactly... welcoming." Dana's cohort looked around at the wreckage of the chamber, the two still-insensate maugs, the remains of the Silent and the arcanaloth. "That him?" he asked, nodding at the motionless form of Barrat Ghur.

“Yes,” Dana said. She turned as another figure appeared in the doorway. He looked like an elf at first glance, although his planar heritage was clear in the odd shine of his eyes, the slightly unreal cast of his features. “Everything all right in here?” he asked, his voice musical in its lilting syllables.

“Yes, Eleva,” she said. Now that the battle was over, she felt suddenly tired. But she could not rest, not now. “Bring him,” she said to her cohort, who nodded as he went to recover Ghur’s limp form.

“Thank you again for your service,” she said to Eleva. The ghaele eladrin bowed. “You took most of the risk upon yourself, Moonmaiden. I am pleased that you were successful.”

“I would not have been without your plan. It was... brilliant.”

The ghaele smiled. “The intelligence provided by your captive provided us with the keys we needed to unlock the complexities of the tactical situation.” The statement was true in more ways than one; Mocker Darr’s *headband of intellect* had been one of items Dana had offered Eleva for a term of service as her *planar ally*, and while it had been one of the least powerful versions of said item, it had still helped to augment the eladrin’s already considerable intellect.

“Are you all right?” she asked, noting that the ghaele’s garments were discolored with scorch marks and trails of blood. His greatsword, dangling at his side, was red from the hilt to the tip of the blade. But his wounds had already been healed, and the eladrin shook his head at her offered aid.

“The fiends put up a bit of a fight,” he explained. “Your contingent summoning worked perfectly as soon as we felt the tremors of your *earthquake*, and the elemental made short work of the entry. But as soon as we got inside, we ran into some heavy resistance. That little monstrosity,” he said, indicating the reptile-demon, “was the worst of them; she made short work of the elemental but fortunately disengaged to return here before she became too much of a problem. I was able to distract the remaining defenders while Laertes here followed it. Your friend ran across a few blast wards, but he was quite intent on reaching you.”

“Eleva is too modest,” Laertes said, as he returned with Ghur slung over his shoulder. The fiend groaned, but did not stir back to consciousness. Dana gave him a quick examination; she did not want any more surprises. “Ghur had a good two dozen fiends and merc guards working for him, mostly light stuff: quasits, reavers, half-fiends, maugs; with a couple of nasties like the dragon-bitch there. He went through most of them single-handedly. I marked a *prismatic spray*, a *banishment*, and a *holy word*, and I think I saw a summoned avoral flapping around in there at some point.”

“It was a glorious fight,” the eladrin said, modestly.

“Let’s get back,” Dana said. “Eleva, please give a quick check over the rest of this place for any remaining fiends lurking in the corners, or items of power that we might use. Swiftly.” The eladrin nodded and departed.

“What about them?” Laertes said, indicating the still-helpless maug guards. “They are likely mercenaries, Dana... evil, perhaps, but not implicated in Ghur’s schemes.”

“You know the answer to that.”

The were-lion did not reply, but followed Dana as they made their way out of the complex. It was harder going out than in; the *earthquake* had done some damage outside of the central room, forcing them to detour around a few fallen beams, and at the doorways they had to pass over the wreckage of the portals forced by Dana’s summoned elemental.

Once they had made their way back to the covered portico outside of the main door, they paused. Dana looked back at the black doorway; the violet lighting inside the main hall had faltered during the battle.

“Dana...”

“Later,” she said. After a few moments, Eleva emerged, and nodded.

Dana cast a summoning, and after a few seconds, a trio of large fire elementals appeared. She did not speak Ignan, but Eleva had told her the words she needed, and she had memorized them. She pointed toward the dark entry.

“Go inside there. Burn everything to ashes.”

Without even stopping to see if they obeyed, Dana turned and walked away. Her friends shared a brief look, and then followed after her, bringing with them the prize they had fought so hard to win.

Chapter 541

The scene within the Hall of the Flame had the look of chaotic bedlam, with celestials rushing about, to and from the staircase that led into the room, or flying in through the cleft in the ceiling above. But most of those present were archons, and so the appearance of tumult was in fact underlaid by a precise order. Lantern and hound archons delivered reports crisply to superiors, who in turn passed the information on to others of higher rank. A hulking ursinal clad in silvery plate stood guard, its armor aglow in the golden light that shone from the burning column that gave the place its name.

The center of the buzz of activity stood adjacent to that plume, close enough that he had to be awash in the heat radiating out from it. A sword archon approached and delivered a report in precise language. After his summary was concluded, he paused.

“What else is it?” the figure standing in the glow of the golden pillar asked.

“Avellos again requests permission to return to his patrol leader,” the winged celestial said.

“No,” Saureya replied. The archon waited for elaboration, but upon receiving only silence he made a clipped, formal bow and retreated to receive more reports.

Saureya stared into the column of flame. He already knew most of what the archon had reported, had already deduced the trend in the snippets of information that had flowed in from all over Occipitus since that first hound archon had returned with his news of a planar gate opening in the fibrous forest. At that point the deva had dared to hope that this was just a raid, but it had taken very little time to dispel that dream.

At this point, the only thing he didn't know for sure was which Abyssal magnate was behind this. He had his ideas, of course. Ultimately, what did it matter?

He hadn't wanted this authority. When Morgan had... gone, leadership had somehow just fallen upon his shoulders. He had managed to convince himself that it was all for the greater good in the aftermath of Adimarchus's destruction, when no major threats lingered. But now...

He turned, and looked at the others gathered here. There was no fear, no doubt. They looked to him, and would sell their lives at as high a price as possible, if he gave the word. For the archons, there was Right, and there was Wrong. Everything between was clear.

How he envied them.

He knew that he should make another attempt to secure aid, but he knew it was pointless. Whoever was behind this, they had planned well. The link between Occipitus and the Higher Realms was blocked, and while he might have restored it eventually, using the power of the plane itself as a conduit, there was no time. Thus far the wards had held, but demons had already begun popping in and out in the airspace above the skull, and they were likely only waiting to build up a sufficient advantage of numbers before they swarmed in for a final assault.

The sword archon returned, but Saureya did not acknowledge him. Instead, the fallen deva reached out and plunged his hands into the column of golden fire. That hurt, and more than a little, but Saureya was a creature who had long familiarity with the nature of pain. The flow of liquid fire shuddered as he manipulated it, drawing upon the power of Occipitus to send a message across the boundaries between worlds. He did not even try to penetrate the barrier that lay between him and the rest of the outer planes, but instead drove in a different direction, toward the inner planes and the Prime Material.

It took almost no time. As soon as he felt the tiny pang that meant contact, he issued his *sending*.

Graz'zt unleashed all-out attack on Occipitus. Under heavy attack, several legions mimimum. Celestial aid blocked. Holding skull for moment. Assist immediately or Occipitus will fall.

The effort of completing the *sending* cost him more than he'd expected, and he sagged, the pain from the connection with the plume intensifying in response to his weakness. But he forced himself to hold the connection for a few moments longer, until the response came back, weak but still discernable.

We will do what we can.

He all but fell back from the pillar of fire. The sword archon looked at him with concern; the action in the room had paused as all of the gathered celestials watched. Instead of turning to his adjutant, the deva addressed them all directly.

“Send out the following order to all forces in the field.”

“Retreat.”

Chapter 542

With a hissing crash and a *twisting* of reality, Cal, Dannel, Mole, Lok, Umbar, Beorna, and Arun materialized on an open plain under the golden sky of Occipitus.

The third arrival of the companions from the Prime was not a pleasant one. Cal and Mole collapsed, voiding the contents of their stomachs; Dannel staggered and likewise would have fallen if not for Lok’s quick steadying arm. The dwarves looked unsteady as well, although they were better able to weather the surge of nausea that swept over them.

“What in the... Hells... was that?” Arun said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Some kind of distortion effect,” Cal managed, shaking his head as Umbar started to help him. Summoning an effort, he pushed himself back to his feet.

“Are you all right, Mole?” Beorna asked.

“Oh, hunky dory,” the gnome shot back, grimacing as she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and gingerly stood. “You know, there are times when I envy you dwarves your cast-iron bellies.”

“Something is wrong here,” Arun said, looking up at the sky. They all followed his gaze, and they could see angry red striations in the gold-tinged firmament; had it been a normal skyscape, they might have called it a storm.

“We’re way out on the periphery,” Cal said. And indeed, the massive wall of cliffs that ringed the bowl-shaped plane seemed to almost loom with gray menace over them, extending out as far as they could see to either side. In the opposiste direction, toward the center of the plane, they could make out the massive spire of the great skull mountain that marked the core of Occipitus. The distortion effects appeared to be stronger there, but they could not discern any details at this distance.

“I cannot gauge the distance,” Umbar said. “This place... it is strange.”

“The layer is completely flat, and lacks a horizon,” Cal explained. “It takes some getting used to.”

“You should have seen it when it was evil,” Mole said.

“I do not think I will ever get used to this place,” Dannel muttered.

“We need to find Saureya, and find out what’s happening.” Arun said. “His *sending* said that several legions of demons were attacking, but that they were holding on to the skull—for now.”

“Assuming that the message was legitimate,” Cal said. “Remember, we know almost nothing about this situation. Time flows... differently here than on our plane, and the situation may be more fluid than we know.”

“You said you could bring four with your *teleport*,” the paladin said. “Take Lok, Mole, Dannel, and Beorna with you directly to the skull. Umbar and I will follow on the magic carpet.”

“I do not think that is a good idea,” Cal said. “Not only would the two of you be vulnerable, but we might arrive right in the midst of a hundred demons. At least let me try to *scry* Saureya, first.”

“That could be very time consuming, and we are very exposed here,” Umbar said, siding with Arun.

“I have the more potent variety of the spell memorized,” Cal explained. “I can establish the sensor in just a few moments, once I set up my focus.” He unslung his *handy haversack* which produced the oblong silver mirror on demand. As he prepared his spell, the others established a perimeter around him, scanning the open plain and the sky above for any threats.

None of them spotted the *invisible* quasit that hovered briefly a few hundred yards away, watching for a moment before it flew off with all dispatch in the direction of the skull.

Cal cast his *greater scrying* spell, and focused intently upon the mirror. The silver surface grew murky, as if he were looking through the window of a room filling with smoke. He oriented his thoughts on Saureya, the fallen deva, as he was the last time they saw him, after the defeat of Adimarchus.

The surface of the mirror faded to a dull gray.

“It’s no use,” he said. “He’s warded, or just alert to being detected; the spell has to overcome the subject’s will in order to get a lock...”

He trailed off as the gray void disappeared, replaced by a scene of intense clarity. Cal found himself staring into a familiar chamber; it was the greater chamber in the interior of the skull, with the pillar of fire just visible as a flickering glow in the back of his field of view. “Hey, I got some—”

A darkness appeared, filling the sensor. It fixed the gnome archmage, pouring into him like a torrent through the link. Darkness, nothing but darkness, carrying him away.

“Cal!”

“Cal, what’s wrong?”

“The mirror! Something’s using the sensor to attack him!”

Arun and Umbar pulled the gnome and the mirror apart, the paladin having to rip Cal’s clenched hands from the sides of the device. Cal screamed as the contact was broken, his body arching as his muscles clenched in a violent spasm. Umbar lifted the mirror to break it, but Dannel stopped him. “No, wait! The link has been broken!” And indeed, when the priest cautiously looked at the mirror, he saw only his own face.

For lack of a better solution, Beorna cast a *protection from evil* on Cal. The seizure seemed to be passing, and the gnome groaned in the cleric’s arms, pressing his palms against his eyes.

“What happened?” Mole said, once he’d removed his hands, and blinked up at them.

“He... he’s here,” Cal said, his voice laden with dread.

That grim announcement was followed by a pregnant silence, broken only when a harsh *sizzle* sounded out of thin air almost upon them, followed by a series of pops as demons materialized all around them and attacked.

Chapter 543

The first to appear were a cohort of babaus and a half-dozen apish bar-Igura, which *teleported* in anywhere from a few paces to fifty feet distant to the ring of companions. Wherever they were, the demons immediately let out bloodthirsty howls and leapt to the attack, covering the ground separated them from the nearest mortal in a mad rush. A few of babaus cannily hurled untargeted *dispel magics* into the knot of adventurers, hoping to strip away some of their defenses. The effort was mostly unsuccessful, as their magical potency was greatly inferior to the long-lasting wards cast by Cal and Umbar, but Beorna lost a *protection from fire*.

“Defensive ring!” Umbar yelled, invoking the power of Moradin to fill himself with *righteous might*. The action drew attention to himself, and three bar-Igura fell upon him, leaping up to cling to his torso, clawing and biting.

The warriors fell back into a tight circle, shielding Dannel, Mole, and Cal within, protecting each others’ flanks. The demons, confronted with a firm defense, evoked no subtlety, hurling themselves at their enemies to claw and bite.

For a moment the demonic rush seemed inexorable, as the emaciated babau and the shaggy bar-Igura swarmed over their foes, striking their armor and shields with powerful blows. The companions, caught off guard, did not immediately counter, which only seemed to embolden the demons further. More fiends materialized around the perimeter, another half-dozen babau accompanied by a fat toad-like hezrou. These moved to join their

fellows, the hezrou pausing to hurl a *chaos hammer* into the fray before leaping forward on its powerful hind legs.

But the companions were not falling back or delaying their counterattack out of confusion or despair. No, every movement was planned, buying time and space to prepare as they consolidated their position, summoned powerful magic, and prepared.

When they did unleash their assault, just ten seconds after the first demon had materialized, it was devastating.

Arun held his spot in the circle as two babaus clawed at his armor, looking for any vulnerability. They didn't find any. His very presence bolstered his allies; not only did he radiate a calm assurance against fear, but the hezrou's *hammer* did not touch him or those next to him, and the *magic circle against evil* that he'd created helped all of them to defend against the demons' ferocious assault.

Now, his shield came down, and his hammer, the blessed *holy avenger*, came out. Trusting in the sacred weapon's ability to resist the caustic effects of the babaus' slime, he drove in the chest of the first with a pair of truly colossal blows that laid it sprawling upon the turf a few feet back. The second one thought to use its comrade's death to gain advantage, but even as it reached for Arun's weapon-arm it realized its mistake. The paladin turned the hammer and sent it flying again with a smooth snap of its wrist, crushing one side of the demon's torso in with a devastating straight-on blow. The demon staggered, and before it could recover a *fourth* attack smote it on the bridge of its nose, driving a shard of bone into its corrupted brain.

Beorna, just a step away, had faced a babau and a bar-Igura. The ape-demon had elected to simply try and bear her down, leaping upon her in the hopes of overwhelming her quickly. It found this more difficult than it appeared, as Beorna caught its weight, and taking one hand off of the hilt of her sword, grabbed its chest and hurled it back into the onrushing babau. The demons quickly recovered and came at her again, encouraged by the fact that she hesitated rather than striking at them. As with the two that had threatened Arun, they learned that hesitation did not mean weakness, as they found when the templar attacked fortified with *divine power* and a *holy sword*.

A few seconds later, the only difference between her foes and Arun's were that hers were hacked apart rather than crushed.

Lok was rushed by three babuas. He had no buffing spells to cast, and no need to pause. Once he had fallen back to his assigned place in the line, he set his feet in a defensive stance, and waited. As soon as the demons entered his reach, he was ready.

Three more demons down.

Umbar's concentration held as the three bar-Igura tore at his torso, and he too called upon the *divine power* of his patron. The demons clinging to him dug in with their claws and tried to rip open gaps in his armor, but the magical mail was dwarven-forged, and it withstood their best efforts. Empowered with an incredible strength, he tore one of the demons easily from its grip, thrusting it down upon the ground. The bar-Igura sprang back up, but before it

could attack again the cleric drove his warhammer down into it, smashing bones with the force of the blow.

Within the protective circle offered by the warriors, Dannel plyed his bow. He did not have any more holy arrows in his quiver, but his song of power infused even the mundane missiles with magical potency, enough to punch through the damage resistance of the demons. His shock bow was of little avail against demons, with their immunity to electricity, but he now wielded Benzan's *bane* longbow, which was a different matter entirely. The bow, specifically designed to harm evil outsiders, tore into the bodies of demons mercilessly. His first arrow had struck one of the bar-Igura threatening Umbar, but on seeing the hezrou appear, he immediately shifted targets to that foul demon. His first shot coincided with the blast of its *chaos hammer*, which the elf weathered with no ill effect. If anything, the blast of energy drove him to a renewed intensity, his hands almost blurring as he transferred arrows from his quiver to the string, drawing and firing almost instantly. He felt an added surge of speed—a *haste* spell from Cal, no doubt. Never had he felt the song so keenly in his veins, the bow singing in his hands in harmony with its melody. The hezrou's thick hide may as well have been the parchment of a tournament target, for all the hindrance it offered to his shafts. The demon's gaze fixed upon the archer, and in those alien eyes, Dannel thought he saw fear.

Unleashing its most fell power, the demon croaked a word of *blasphemy*. But the heroes were warriors of legend, and the dark word washed over them, its menace fading like a fireside tale of horror remembered in the reassuring light of the full day.

The demon's foul word had barely faded when Dannel's next arrow slammed through its open jaws, and through the roof of its mouth into its brain.

Thus far, the demonic attack had accomplished little but to litter the ground with riven fiendish corpses. But the hollow flares of more *teleportations* went on around them, as more attackers continued to appear. Another dozen babaus appeared, along with another hezrou, and in the air above them, five vrock materialized. The vulture demons dove down toward the companions, but instead of attacking, they formed into a ring, locking claws as they spun in a mad, gyrating dance.

And if that wasn't enough, a massive form appeared another fifty yards behind the vrock, its bloated body held aloft by stubby wings jutting from its hairy back. Nevuuz took in the battlefield and the ring of slain demons, and smiled. Mortals, caught here by the surprise invasion engineered by its evil master. The nalfeshnee already had a quartet of archon scalps bound to the throng it wore across its body, enough for a fair bounty. Cutting this knot of defenders would bring a fine reward; perhaps even a succubus as a personal attendant?

Surrounding itself with an *unholy aura*, the mighty demon descended toward the battle.

Meanwhile, in the center of Occipitus, an ebon-hued figure appeared in the air over the skull. Spreading his arms, he rose slowly up into the air toward the golden ceiling above. Peals of thunder wracked the plane, as if Occipitus itself were announcing his arrival, and dark webs of energy began to form across the sky, as chaos surged.

Chapter 544

The companions turned from the task of slaying demons long enough to note the loud din that resounded across the plane.

“Now what?” Beorna shouted, twisting to avoid a claw that swiped hard at her helmet, and following it with a thrust from her sword that ran a babau through the chest. When she withdrew the weapon, she saw that the blade was smoking from the acidic gunk smeared along its length. Swearing, she dropped the damaged weapon, which encouraged the next two babaus that leapt eagerly forward.

“I don’t know... but...aagh!” Lok said, as an *unholy blight* settled onto them, courtesy of the latest hezrou to join the fray. When it cleared, it revealed another pair of babaus trying to trip the genasi, who snarled as he grabbed one by the neck and slammed it to the ground at his feet.

Cal’s voice sounded from directly behind Lok. The gnome had made himself invisible almost as a reflex, and naturally Mole was nowhere to be seen as well. “We have to take out those vocks... if they finish their dance, we won’t like the effect one bit!”

“On it,” Dannel said, already lifting his aim and choosing his target. Cal put his words into action by casting a *shadow evocation*, hurling a *delayed blast fireball* made of shadowstuff into the midst of the vocks. The creatures let out a terrible screech, but did not interrupt their dance, even when Dannel dropped his target with a direct hit.

“We need more firepower,” Cal said, even as a blast of lightning stabbed down from above them, splaying across Umbar’s broad shoulders. The cleric merely grunted and kept up his task of mashing the demons still fighting to bring him down. One of the bar-Igura had crawled up onto his back, out of easy reach, and was moving for the gap between his helmet and neck when it suddenly lost its grip and fell. Mole briefly became visible, dangling from a strap of the giant priest’s armor, then she kicked off and fell blade-first onto the demon’s chest.

“Fly me, and I’ll go,” Lok said. But Cal saw that without the genasi, they’d never be able to hold the line; already several of the babau were threatening sneak attacks as they continued to swarm around the defenders.

Grimacing, the gnome began casting again, hoping that he would be fast enough to outpace the beatdown he knew was coming.

A wave of pure stench swept over them, as a hezrou barreled into the melee. The frog-demon took a hit from Arun as it reached for Beorna. The templar tried to stab it, but the hezrou seized her bodily with both claws and stuffed her head-first into its gaping maw. For a moment the demon’s head engulfed the dwarf’s head and shoulders, but then it shuddered, its body spasming suddenly. A second later the demon disgorged its captive along with a flood of bloody gore, and staggered back; Beorna, calling upon a feat of strength granted her by Helm, had *smote* it from within. It managed to croak at her in a violent fury, recovering for another attack, but unfortunately its movement took it within Arun’s reach, and that was that.

“Dannel... take the one with the scorched left wing!” Cal’s voice urged. The elf nodded and let fly, his arrow stabbing up into the vrock, joined a heartbeat later by a second. The vrock faltered and broke free of the circle, its wings flapping wildly as it tried to arrest its descent. The demons smoothly closed ranks, the three remaining ones intensifying their dance as flickers of blue energy began to erupt in their midst. But just as the *dance of ruin* was coming to its peak, Cal hit one of the demons with an empowered *disintegrate*, vaporizing it. The two remaining vocks let out a frustrated shriek, and promptly surrounded themselves with a halo of *mirror images* as they withdrew to a safer distance to regroup.

“Nice one!” said Mole, as she rolled back to her feet beside them. “Say, could you hit me with a quick *improved invis*? A *fly* would be nice as well...”

But before Cal could respond, there was another series of all-too-familiar distortions that announced more demons arriving. All around them, in an uneven ring, babaus, bar-Igura, and hezrous materialized, almost fifty in all. And the sky above blackened as more vocks, at least twenty, *teleported* in, accompanied by a few sleek succubi.

“Oh, damn it all,” Lok said, summarizing the feelings of everyone present.

Chapter 545

Prince Graz’zt felt power surge through him as he rose into the air above Occipitus. He’d invested a fair amount of his power into the opening of the *gates* that had allowed his legions to transfer here, but that had been offset by the use of the Heart of Axion to siphon off energy from some of his minions to fuel the process. The complete annihilation of two hundred demons would be an incentive for the remainder to perform with vigor in the coming campaign.

Now, as the sky around him surged in useless resistance to his presence, it was time to ensure that victory would be the conclusion of that effort.

Extending his gaze, Graz’zt looked down at the base of the skull below. Three massive portals shone like oozing sores around that perimeter, each disgorging a column of fiends upon the plain. They were of all sorts and sizes. The demons were by far the largest contingent, and included hulking goristo, rutterkin, squat jovocs, endless slaving dretches, quasits, and even a few scattered glabrezu and jariliths. There was a knot of mercenary hordelings, no two of which were alike, and a full company of massively armored cambions, including a cohort of cavalry mounted upon fiendish dire lizards that were the size of cottages. The half-demons were the spawn of one of Graz’zt’s lesser harems, and all had been blooded in the eternal struggle against the devils. The harem was another pleasure that was lost to him, now, destroyed in the ruin of Zelatar...

The Prince allowed his anger to fill him, to fuel the growning flood of potency that gathered in him. For a few moments he hovered there, hundreds of feet above his armies, savoring the moment. Even for one such as he, what would be wrought here would be... remarkable.

Finally the columns began to thin. The noise of a sonic evocation reached his ears; the signal from his general that the deployment was complete.

Graz'zt did not rush the process. He was an entity of passion and fury, but he was also possessed of an incredible cunning, and a patience that had allowed him to bring down rival after rival over untold centuries of struggle. He was diminished, now; that could not be denied. His seat of power had been reduced to rubble, and others squabbled over the scraps he had been forced to leave behind. But this place, Occipitus... here, in this place which lay upon the cusp of possibility, a morphic reality teetering on the brink of redemption, here, he would begin anew.

It could take millennia to recover what he had lost. But Graz'zt was patient.

He gathered his Will. As the *gates* below faltered, he siphoned off their power as well; every little bit would help for what would come.

He reached out through the Heart of Axion, and drank of Occipitus.

It was time. Reveling in his might, the Prince unleashed two epic spells.

A massive crack shook the plane, followed by a rumbling that sounded like the end of the world. At Graz'zt's bidding the massive white mountain that marked the heart of Occipitus began to shake and tremble, caught in the eddy of the Prince's Will. The bleached white exterior of the fiendish pillar began to distort, hardening into grim plates of dull gray metal, marked by bands of jagged spikes and angles sharp enough to cut flesh. Spires and battlements jutted from the perimeter of the place in no particular pattern. Every hollow and overhang that could offer even a modicum of shelter from their view grew long, narrow spikes. The drained pool and tunnel that provided access to the place grew a massive iron door, surrounded by narrow slits that were similarly ringed by sharp edges.

The transformation took all of five seconds. When it was done, the mound of the skull was completely gone, replaced by an abyssal citadel from the depths of a nightmare.

But even as the reverberations of that dramatic alteration echoed across the plain, Graz'zt uttered the words of his second dramatic casting. The eddies of energy that the Prince had drawn to himself exploded outward in a cascade of sick emerald light that tinted everything upon the surface of Occipitus with its glow. Graz'zt spread his arms wide, drawing more and more power, screaming with the intensity of it. Again the spell developed rapidly, with the glow spreading to engulf the entirety of the plane in its radiance within a few seconds. When it had reached its furthest extent, the Prince drew upon a final reservoir of energy, and rooted the effect to the very fabric of the layer.

Graz'zt had set a *dimensional lock* over the entirety of Occipitus, sealing the plane.

Exhausted, the Prince half-drifted, half-fell downward toward the fortress of his creation. The armored iron roof bristled with spikes that looked ready to arrest his descent by impaling him, but at the last moment an opening appeared, the metal groaning as it gaped open and accepted the falling demon into its embrace.

Chapter 546

Faced with what seemed like a neverending horde of demons, the companions looked to be in an untenable position. Thus far they'd held out against the sheer force of the demonic rush, but even though none of them had suffered serious injuries yet, all bore wounds from tearing claws and evil spells.

Now, as the latest horde of reinforcements surged at them, they knew that their situation was becoming increasingly dire.

"We'd better think about getting out of here!" Cal shouted, as the warriors hurled back another snarling horde of demons. Up above, he saw that the vrock's had immediately started several new circles, at least four separate groups, all within range to strike them with the terrible power of the *dance of ruin*. The nalfeshnee he's spotted earlier seemed content to hang back for now, calling down stinging lightning bolts onto them from a distance, but Cal had no doubt that the demon was just waiting for the other demons to soften them up some before unleashing some nasty surprise of its own.

"We can handle them!" Umbar yelled, smiting a stray vrock that had dove within the extended reach of his enlarged hammer. The demon shrieked, and darted back long enough to surround itself with a bevy of *mirror images*. Four babaus were tearing at his legs, and another dove between them, nearly broking through to grab Dannel from behind before Mole suddenly appeared, tripping it and sending it sprawling to the ground.

"There's too many! In a few seconds those vrock's will hit us with a deluge that will kill us all! On my signal... fall back on me, and I'll *plane shift* us out of here!"

An *unholy blight* crashed over them, followed a split-second later by a *chaos hammer*.

"Do it!" Arun said, crushing a bar-Igura's skull with his hammer before the demon could grab onto him with its claws.

But the gnome never got a chance to execute his plan. For it was at that moment, halfway across Occipitus, that Graz'zt unleashed his power upon the plane. With the distance and the distraction of the demon horde, none of them witnessed the event, but all of them felt the reverberations across the plane as the Prince's magic shook Occipitus. The vibration through the ground reached them as a tremor nearly strong enough to knock them down; only the strong stances of the dwarves allowed them to keep the defensive line intact. The quaking was accompanied by the violent sounds that reached them even forty miles away from the transformation of the skull.

"What's happening?" Dannel shouted over the din.

But the others were too overwhelmed by the sudden rush of sensory information, and the battle to keep their own equilibrium, to answer. Even as that first pulse faded, they felt the surge of Graz'zt's *lock* spreading outward, tinting the soft golden glow of the sky above with a shading of sinister green. Of the entire group of mortal heroes Cal was the only one who recognized the significance of what had just happened, and even as his mind tried to grasp

the reality of it, the demon prince's epic magic took hold, sealing off their retreat, their way home.

As the wave of sorcery faded, the chaos of the melee returned, the noise and the screeches of demons all around them.

But if the effects of Graz'zt's magic had disrupted the senses of the companions, it had made a much more significant impact upon the demons. All of the eighty or so demons engaged in the battle were reeling, stunned by the backlash of their master's efforts. Graz'zt had drawn deeply from all of his sources of power to fuel his twin incantations, and that included his minions. Babaus and bar-Igura staggered about, blinded, while the vrock circles came apart as the vulture demons fluttered to the ground in a daze. Even the nalfeshnee, Nevuuz, reeled, spinning in the air as explosions of dark energy filled his vision.

"They're caught in some sort of feedback surge!" Cal shouted.

"Hit them hard!" Lok yelled, putting his words into action as he chopped a stunned babau in two with his axe. The dwarves were just a moment behind him, laying into the hapless demons with full attacks that cut a deadly swath through their ranks. Arun paused long enough to tug his backup axe from the loops across his back, tossing it to Beorna. The templar immediately put the weapon to good use, carving a pair of babau into wreckage. The ground shook as Umbar pounded several demons into the ground with his warhammer. Dannel continued his barrage, targeting the two hezrous that had been hitting them with *unholy blights* and *chaos hammers*, dropping the first with six arrows embedded deep in its chest. Mole leapt upon onto the piled corpses of a pair of dead bar-Igura, using the perch as platform from which to rapid-fire a series of crossbow bolts at nearby demons. In one hand she held three bolts spread between her fingers, slapping the string of her weapon back with her palm and dropping a bolt into place one after another so quickly that it seemed that the weapon must be magical. The bolts themselves were not ensorcelled, and appeared too puny to affect the demons through their considerable damage resistance, but each struck a vulnerable spot, driving pain through the haze that clouded the minds of the attacking fiends.

Cal cast a *greater shadow conjuration*, intending to bring in a few lantern archons to start blasting demons, but although the spell was completed without interruption, the influx of shadow-substance normally drawn by the spell did not materialize. Cal quickly realized the significance of that failure, and he grimaced as his assessment of their situation grew yet more bleak.

But there was no time for him to ruminate more upon the big picture, for the demons were starting to recover from the backblast from Graz'zt's release of energy across Occipitus. The companions had slain a good fifteen demons during that brief interlude, but that left dozens more, including the vocks which shook their heads as they rose, getting their bearings before lifting back into the air on powerful beats of their wings. Several paused to summon *mirror images*, while others only bothered to gain ten or fifteen feet of altitude before they dove over their ground-based fellows at the ring of defenders, claws extended. Four of them ascended to renew their arial circle, beginning the creation of another *dance of ruin*.

Nevuuz threw a *slow* spell into the defenders' circle, countering Cal's *haste*. The nalfeshnee began to drift closer to the melee, still surrounded by the protective halo of its *unholy aura*.

The warriors withstood a renewed surge as the demons pressed their attack once more. Umbar staggered and nearly fell, as a babau savaged his left knee with its claws; opposite him, Beorna was nearly taken down by a bar-Igura that leapt onto her back, seizing her armored neck with its powerful claws. Lok and Arun continued to hew with their weapons against row after row of attackers, but both of the veteran warriors was now cautious of the damage wrought upon their powerful weapons by the slimy coating that covered the hides of the babaus. Lok dropped his axe and shield and drew *Coldburn*, sweeping it in a broad arc that decapitated two babaus, but he barely ducked in time to avoid the charge of a screaming vrock, its claw catching on his shoulder plate long enough to painfully wrench the joint.

As the vocks dove at the companions, they unleashed terrible screeches laden with fiendish power. The warriors withstood those potent cries, but Mole, Cal, and Dannel were all knocked reeling, stunned.

One of the vocks took advantage, flying over the center of the circle. Hovering briefly, it used its *telekinesis* power to seize hold of Mole, drawing the helpless gnome up into its waiting claws.

Meanwhile, Nevuuz dropped to a hover sixty feet above the battle. A weave of rainbow-colored lights began to take form around its misshapen form, as the nalfeshnee gathered its power to *smite* these mortals, and take their lives as its prize.

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Mole, stunned by a vrock's screech, only hung limply as one of the flying demons lifted her through the air into its grasp.

With Cal and Dannel momentarily unaware of their surroundings, only Lok, already turning to face the vrock hovering over him, noticed the maneuver. "Mole!" Lok yelled, staggering as his distraction cost him a painful bite to his left ankle from a babau near the bottom of the heap of bodies before him that wasn't quite dead yet.

Arun glanced over his shoulder, saw Dannel lying on his rear, shaking his head. He didn't see Cal; the archmage was still shrouded by his *greater invisibility*. But he did see Mole, through the shrieking chaos of a half-dozen vocks weaving overhead. Unfortunately, without a *fly* spell, there wasn't a lot that he could do to intervene.

A pair of babau came at him from behind, their claws tearing at the creases in his armor. Ignoring them, he swept his hammer around in a wide swipe that achieved maximum velocity right as it intersected the face of the demon splayed across Beorna's back. The demon went flying, taking one of the templar's shoulder greaves with it. As the dwarf woman straightened, Arun caught her gaze and pointed upward. The vrock had gotten

both of its claws around Mole's body, and while the gnome had started to struggle, she could not immediately break free as the demon started to fly off with its prize.

Beorna at once called down a *flame strike* that engulfed both the fleeing demon and an additional pair of nearby vrock, but when the blazing column evaporated the demon, still clutching its prize, continued its retreat.

A second vrock evidently wanted its own trophy, as it too hovered over the melee, trying to snare Dannel with its *telekinesis*. But the arcane archer, taking up his bow again as he recovered his wits, resisted the tug of the spell. He started to aim at the demon, before spotting the one making off with Mole. He shifted smoothly, but before he could release, Cal shouted a warning.

"Dannel, nalfeshnee!"

The elf spun again, releasing as soon as he planted his foot, the huge demon looming large even sixty feet away. Arrows erupted in a rapid sequence from his bow, the third already in the air by the time that the first penetrated through the demon's *unholy aura* and its ugly hide into its torso.

Cal hesitated for a fraction of a second. The demon carrying away Mole would be out of range within seconds, but he was all too familiar with the *smite* power of the nalfeshnee, and his brain immediately calculated that statistically, at least three of them would fall victim to the effects of the demon's chaotic burst, with the warriors particularly vulnerable. That conclusion did not ease his worry as he drew his magic again through his rod, firing a green beam of energy that lanced into the nalfeshnee, piercing both its spell resistance and the *unholy aura*. The demon had an instant to look surprised before the green glow enveloped it, and it was reduced to ashes.

Cal let out the breath he'd been holding. He'd been damned lucky with that shot.

But the destruction of the greater demon did not ease the gravity of their situation. Vrocks surrounded by a confusing welter of *mirror images* dove down at them from above, tearing with their claws, releasing puffs of corrupt spores that drifted down through the gaps in armor in clothes to burrow into the flesh of the adventurers. Dannel was clipped by on the side of the head, tearing a bloody gash across his forehead. Two vrock descended upon Umbar's head, darting their claws under the lip of the cleric's helmet, and drawing them back wet with blood. Another *unholy blight* hit them, the work of the last remaining hezrou, which hovered just beyond the ring of lesser demons surging at the warriors. Beorna went down to one knee as another three babaus dogpiled onto her, their claws knifing through her armor like little daggers. Arun shifted his position enough to help her, but that let another babau through the gap in their line, the demon stumbling over the *invisible* Cal on its way to Dannel. The demon, cackling, paused to empower itself to *see invisibility*, before reaching down to grab at the spellcaster with eager claws.

A hundred feet above, three succubi flew over the battlefield, content to watch, for now.

Mole regained her senses in time to realize that she was being carried off by a very big flying demon. Her first instinct was to use her magical cape to transport her back down to

the ground, but as she drew the garment around her, nothing happened! Somewhat irate at that, she then looked down to realize that the ground was rapidly falling away; already she and her captor were nearly sixty feet up and still gaining altitude.

Oh well, she thought, and with a twist of her body, slipped out of the demon's grasp.

It was a long way down, and nothing to grab onto to slow her fall. Still, she did what she could, spreading her limbs to catch the air, and then collapsing into a forward roll as she hit, her legs absorbing some of the shock and redirecting her inertia as she spun across the ground. The spongy turf soaked up some of her momentum, but she still felt like a child's ball that had been kicked hard when she finally snapped back up onto her feet. Still, falling from that kind of height and still being able to walk after it was no small feat, and the first thing she did was turn around to see if any of her friends had seen it.

But not only could she not even see any of them over the ring of slain fiends and the ones still attacking, but her momentum had carried her within spitting distance of a hulking hezrou, which turned around to regard her with a nasty look in its bulbous eyes. Its long tongue shot out, as if to taste the scent of her on the air.

Above her she heard the shriek of the vrock, which was already diving to reclaim its lost prize.

Uh oh, she thought.

Meanwhile, another surge of energy formed above the battlefield, as the vrock finally completed a successful *dance of ruin*. A crackling blast of energy stabbed outward from the nexus of their ritual, passing through the demons harmlessly, but tearing into mortal flesh with terrible fierceness. Arun's *magic circle* helped the companions withstand the full force of the blast, but Beorna, already heavily damaged, collapsed, and Umbar, already shrinking back to his normal size as his *righteous might* spell faded, fell to his knees as eager tendrils of energy lanced through his armor. For a moment it looked as though he would shrug off even that powerful assault, and he started to stagger to his feet. But then his *divine power* expired, and he too fell, as eager demons surged forward to tear him to pieces.

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The battle raged on, until only sheer will kept the warriors swinging weapons that felt like leaden weights at the nearest charging demon. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of them.

The vrock's fell dance had finally broken the defenders' line, and it looked as though a total collapse was imminent. Arun, who'd simply absorbed the blast of fiendish energy, ignoring it through sheer stubbornness, took in the situation quickly. "Lok... cover Umbar!" he yelled, as he himself rushed to stand over Beorna.

Ignoring the painful gouging he felt in his back, as several demons tried unsuccessfully to bring him down, the paladin bent over the fallen templar, driving back a babau that was

trying to rip off her gorget and sink its claws into her throat. Her helmet had fallen half off her head, and she was pale, with blood trickling down the side of her mouth. Arun placed his hammer down and laid his hand upon her neck, unleashing a surge of positive energy into the broken woman as he *laid on hands*.

The effect was immediate; Beorna's eyes popped open, and she started to get up.

"Heal yourself the rest of the way," Arun told her, but any further discussion was immediately curtailed as a bar-igura leapt onto her chest, clawing at her. Arun reached for his hammer, but even as his fingers touched the haft a babau yanked it out of his reach. Another two were still hanging on him, and one got a good grip on his shield, pulling it—along with the paladin—down on top of it.

Cal's attention was distracted by the babau that had seized him in its claws. It did little damage through his *stoneskin*, but the demon lifted him up and tucked him under an arm, clearly intent on darting off somewhere quiet to dismember its catch at its leisure. Realizing that neither his *maze* spell nor his remaining *shadow evocation* would likely work, given Graz'zt's sealing of Occipitus from extraplanar channels, the gnome contented himself with *polymorphing* the babau attacking him into a slug.

Dannel, threatened by a storm of vrock, barely resisted another stunning screech as he fired his bow up at the dizzying array of attackers. Every shot hit, but most of his targets simply vanished as the arrow struck, merely a *mirror image* of a demon. Already his skin felt like it was on fire, as the vrock's toxic spores burrowed deeper into the flesh of his face, neck, and arms. As Umbar went down, the elf staggered over to him, narrowly avoiding another vrock that almost managed to tear his bow out of his grasp. Lok was already standing over the unconscious cleric, knocking off demons as they tried to finish off the stricken dwarf.

Dannel no longer used his bardic magic much; in most cases the song was much more useful in channeling the power that he used to transform his bow into a devastating weapon. But now he used it to heal, bending over Umbar, infusing him with a *cure moderate wounds* spell. The magic didn't do much against the dwarf's terrible wounds, but it did bring him back to consciousness.

Unfortunately, it also left him open, as a vrock dove down and seized him in its claws. Pumping its wings, it lifted him several feet up into the air, kicking and struggling, while several of its fellows dove in, tearing at his body with their claws.

Mole darted forward as the hezrou tried to snare her with its claws, tumbling between its legs and coming up behind it. It turned quickly, so it did not notice the small furry ball she'd left lying on the ground behind her. The ball expanded into a boar, which immediately set about stabbing its tusks into the demon's leg. The attack was utterly ineffectual, of course, but it did distract the demon slightly, enough for Mole to whip her rapier up into a vulnerable spot in its lower body.

The vrock flew overhead, screeching in anger at the loss of its prey. It turned around in mid-air and flew back around. It tried to grab the gnome again with *telekinesis*, but this time the gnome was able to resist the insubstantial grasp, darting forward a moment before

the hezrou's claws tore deep gouges in the earth where it had been standing. The demon uttered a word of *blasphemy*, intending to stun this elusive foe, but while the spell reduced Mole's roar to a black smear, it had no effect on her as she darted away, careful to avoid its lengthy reach.

"Hoo, boy," she said as she ran, the hezrou and vrock both following her as she ran. The demons were much faster than she was, and both converged on her at the same moment, shrieking at each other as much as at her as they fought to be the first to snag the prize.

At the last moment, as both demons lunged, she disappeared.

Dannel was in bad shape. Not only had he taken damage from the series of *blights* that had washed over him, but the burrowing vrock spores from several of the vulture demons continued to dig deeper into his flesh, until a dense beard of furry growths jutted from his face and neck. He'd avoided the worst of the energy blast from the *dance of ruin*, but as more of the vocks tore at him with their claws, more attacks were getting through his magical armor and the protection offered by his magical ring. It was obvious that within a few seconds, he would be torn to pieces.

Cal had his final *disintegrate* ready, but in the swirling medley of vocks, most surrounded by *mirror images*, he could not get a clear fix on the demon holding Dannel.

"Damn it," he said, knowing that there weren't a lot of options left.

Arun's foes leapt at the paladin with a renewed vigor, encouraged by the absence of the terrible weapon that had destroyed so many of their fellows. Arun slipped his arm out of the loops of his shield, relinquishing it to the babau that had dragged him down as he pushed himself back up to his feet. Another babau was crawling away with his hammer, but he ignored it, instead charging at the bar-Igura atop Beorna, slamming into it with enough force to knock it off the templar. He helped her to her feet, shielding her with his body as she cast a *cure serious wounds* to restore some of the vigor taken in the beating she'd received.

That need attended to, she quickly smashed the bar-Igura with the axe she'd borrowed from Arun, cleaving it with a pair of massive blows that laid it out upon the turf.

Umbar drew upon the power of Moradin to *heal* his own grievous wounds, taking up his own weapon again as Lok fended off a surge of babaus, bar-Igura, and diving vocks. The genasi had abandoned his defensive stance to come to Umbar's aid, but even though he had to be exhausted, he still fought like a machine, his blows tearing demonic flesh asunder with every strike. He focused on the demons on the ground, not wanting to waste a swing on a vrock's *mirror image*. *Coldburn* was beginning to hiss now from the acidic babau ooze covering it, so when he ran through a leaping bar-Igura he let the weapon lodged in its body as it fell, drawing out his third weapon, one of the adamantine battleaxes taken from Shatterhorn. Two babus came at him from opposite sides, and the genasi swung around in a complete circle, chopping both demons down with terrible gashes to their torsos.

Surprised, Lok looked around for the next foe, only to see that he was alone. It was a momentary sensation, as a vrock's screech drew his attention around in time to face a pair of tearing claws.

"Hold on, Dannel!" Cal said, *flying* into the air after the struggling elf. He reached Dannel moments before a trio of vrocks did, spraying the contents of a pouch across his body as he touched him and infused him with a *stoneskin* spell. The spell did not render him immune to the demons' attacks, especially their powerful claws, but it gave him a moment's breather as Cal seized hold of the elf's cloak with one hand, and jabbed his rod up into the body of the vrock holding him with the other. Several of the vrocks, recognizing that there was another spellcaster here, lashed out at Cal, seeking him through his *invisibility*, but even though a slashing claw and a sharp beak nipped him, he was still in fairly good shape and he ignored what little damage got through his own *stoneskin*.

"Get... out... of here..." Dannel coughed, his lips red with his own blood, his face a garish mask from the wounds he'd taken and the growths covering his exposed flesh.

"Hold on!" he said, as he felt his rod touch solid flesh, and he fired off his last *disintegrate*.

Gnome and elf fell like stones as the vrock holding Dannel evaporated, dropping out of the flapping ring of demons. Dannel landed hard on his left leg and went down, that last blow finally pushing him over the border into unconsciousness. Cal recovered quickly, and stood in time to see the vrocks diving down at them.

"Need some help here!" he yelled, hurling a *greater dispel* into the knot of vrocks, shearing away some of their *mirror images* and *heroism* buffs, but doing little to ease the violence of their attack.

Umbar pushed forward, covering the elf with an upraised arm as a vrock tried to seize him again with its claws. The cleric tore free before the fiend could get a hold on him, and he quickly channeled a *cure critical wounds* into the battered elf. Dannel stirred, and Umbar shoved his bow, which had fallen nearby, into his hands.

"Shoot demons," he instructed calmly, lifting his hammer as he stood to face the vrocks once more.

Without more reinforcements coming in, the tide of the battle began to turn. Arun and Beorna appeared again as they slew the last of the demons threatening them. The vrocks began to fall as they pressed their attack, and Lok joined Umbar in shielding Dannel and Cal. Cal used one of his wands to *enlarge* both warriors, given them the same reach as the demons, making their swooping attacks less effective and opening them to full counterattacks that left them shredded. Arun and Beorna dealt with the hezrou that had been threatening Mole, and moved to join them. The babau holding Arun's hammer had tried to slip away, but before it could build up enough of a lead it suddenly tripped, screaming as Mole's rapier appeared jutting from its left eye socket. The demon snarled and tried to grab the gnome, but a pair of arrows from Dannel put an end to it.

And then, it was over.

The companions stood in an exhausted circle above the wreckage of dozens upon dozens of demons. The only demons to escape were the three succubi, which had started to flee as soon as the battle had started to turn, and were now just tiny specks in the distance. All of them—except perhaps for Mole—were covered in blood and gore, at least some of it their own. A foul stench already permeated the ground like a living entity, and each of them knew from past experience that it would not soon fade from their own bodies as well.

“We should consider retreating back to the Prime, to recover our strength,” Beorna said. “Those three bitch-demons will soon bring reinforcements. Our weapons are damaged, and need repair.”

Cal shook his head, his voice grim as he related what he’d learned during the battle. “There is no retreat. That backblast we felt... the green glow spreading over the plane... Somehow, Graz’zt has sealed all of Occipitus with a *dimensional lock*. The demons cannot *teleport* either, it would seem, which is some help, but neither will any of our summoning spells function.”

“Then we will take the fight to him. We will be triumphant,” Umbar said.

“Well, for now, we should find some place less exposed,” Cal suggested. “Perhaps the cathedral... if the demons haven’t overrun it, we may find aid there.”

They started reaching for healing potions and wands, knowing that this was just the beginning.

“I’m starting to think coming here was a bad idea,” Dannel said.

Chapter 549

INTERLUDE

Graz’zt, Prince of Demons, sagged and nearly fell as his feet touched upon the hard ground of his new sanctum. Above, the iron roof of his citadel slid ponderously shut, closing out the troubled sky of Occipitus above.

The chamber had changed dramatically in a short time. The pillar of flame was still there, its roiling surge a confused mixture of red and gold, reflecting the tangled war that was still being raged over the very identity of the plane. But the rest of the chamber had been altered, with tall pillars of black metal ringing the perimeter of the place, buttressing the massive iron plates that now reinforced the domed ceiling above. Spikes jutted from the walls at regular intervals, flanking crude iron carvings of varied and creative foulness. It was a reflection of the Great Hall in the Argent Palace in Zelatar; imperfect, but still imposing.

Graz’zt saw only the imperfections, and it sent new tendrils of anger through his veins. His eyesight was diminished; the Heart of Axion was dull in his socket. A high price had been demanded, and paid. He was committed; he had submitted his final gambit, and now all would rise or fall upon its fate.

A faint scuff of a boot upon the stone drew his attention. Warily, he turned to see Athux standing before him.

“Congratulations, father.”

Graz’zt snarled, and summoned his power. He was depleted, more so than even in the aftermath of the Disaster, but he was still what he was. But Athux was prepared. Black energy shimmered briefly around him, his Rod absorbing most of the potency of the attack. The scion of the Abyss gestured, and black chains shot out from the perimeter of the room, lashing into the arms, legs, and body of the Prince. A violent surge of energy exploded from Graz’zt, but the chains held, the spines interwoven with the links digging painfully into his flesh as they held him.

“You are a fool, if you think that even the Chains of Ur’don will hold me,” the Prince hissed. “You will spend an eternity in suffering for this treachery.”

Athux did not respond to the goad. His lips moved as he finished an incantation that he’d spent centuries acquiring and perfecting, in anticipation of this moment. His Rod, a potent artifact in its own right, was consumed and turned to ash, as was his amulet, cloak, and boots. Their power was sucked into the spell, as was a considerable portion of the young lord’s own energies. It was his masterstroke, and as Graz’zt recognized the flows of energy that were beginning to coalesce around him, fear shone briefly in his one remaining eye.

But as the *enhanced binding* began to take effect, Graz’zt did not beg for forbearance, or offer bribes or threats. Instead, he laughed. This was the way of his kind, and he knew all too well the rules that governed the lives of demons. He had failed to anticipate this betrayal, and now he might pay the price.

That did not mean he would give up easily. Surges of energy erupted around the Prince, as he fought off the thickening web of power that surrounded him. The black metal chains holding him began to melt, their substance falling to the ground in thick gobs, mixed with his blood. But they weren’t really needed, not now. Athux began to sweat, his face tightening as the strain of exerting the full power of his Will began to show. He held nothing back, nor did his sire.

Finally, however, the Prince screamed, and crumpled. Athux let out a strangled hiss that was somehow more exultant than a cry of triumph, as he directed the flows into the final stage of the ritual. All that he had waited for... it was now his.

But in that moment of victory, pain exploded in his back. The one who would succeed Graz’zt fell forward. He spun to see Malad standing behind him, the white-hot fury of a *thunderlance* glowing in his hand.

“What treachery is this, brother!” the cambion snarled, hurling an explosive sonic evocation at Athux.

The blast rippled around Athux, who was warded against magic much greater than this. The spell would have left strong demons writhing in pain, but the son of Graz'zt merely laughed. The half-fiend sorcerer started forward, lifting his weapon to strike, but Athux marshaled his Will upon the other, and Malad staggered, his spell fading into nothing. He resisted, but it took all of a second before he succumbed, collapsing to his knees.

That threat defused, Athux turned around, only to feel an explosion tear through his mind.

Nice... try...

He screamed, trying unsuccessfully to hold onto the sundering fragments of his consciousness. The last thing he heard was the blistering laughter of his sire, and the last thing he saw was a tiny sparkle of light through the haze of red agony that filled his senses. Realization entered him, and followed him into oblivion.

Chapter 550

The adventurers did not linger long over the gory battlefield. Once they had healed themselves, and wiped as much gore as they could from their armor, weapons, and skin, they unpacked their flying carpet from Lok's *bag of holding* and laid it flat upon the ground, clambering aboard. Umbar, who had never before seen an item of this sort, had to be reassured by Arun that it was more durable than it appeared, and thus settled they set out across the plain. Cal took the carpet up to an altitude of about a hundred feet briefly, just long enough to verify their location vis-à-vis a few landmarks remembered from their last visit. Much of the plane's features bore a depressing similarity, but Cal was confident enough to chart a course toward the celestial cathedral. They agreed that it was probably wiser to travel around the perimeter of Occipitus, rather than risk a more direct route that took them closer to the skull. They still did not understand fully what had been wrought in that moment of surging power, but even from here they could see that the monument had been... changed.

Cal quickly brought the carpet back down to just a few paces above the ground, and they started out at a fast walking pace across the landscape. More than a few heads turned to regard the battlefield they left behind, each wondering if the next one would include their ravaged bodies as well.

Mole had done an "informal" count—"Hard to keep an accurate track when you keep blasting them into dust, Uncle Cal!"—and had recorded fifty-eight babaus, fourteen barguras, four hezrous, twenty-five vrocks, and the nalfeshnee Cal had *disintegrated*.

One hundred and seven demons. It had been an impressive tally, especially given the potent abilities commanded by the various demons in the horde. They had come close—damned close—to disaster, with only quick reactions saving Dannel, Beorna, and Umbar from being torn apart. For his measure Cal offered a quick prayer of thanks to Tymora, knowing that his string of successful *disintegrations* was running up against the odds, and would not likely continue as more powerful demons threatened them.

But they had not escaped unscathed. Not only had they heavily depleted their spells, but their gear had taken a beating, particularly from the caustic secretions issued by the babaus. Umbar's hammer and Beorna's bastard sword were heavily damaged, unusable until repaired, and Lok's various weapons likewise had taken some harm. Arun had used the powers granted by the Soul Forger to restore his own hammer to full utility, and promised to repair the other damaged weapons as soon as he could, but he could only draw upon that power once per day. Their armor all needed a few tendays in a well-equipped smithy, but the likelihood of that happening any time soon seemed quite remote.

So they pressed on. The carpet, heavily laden with the seven of them, traveled slowly, but it set a steady pace that they could not have kept up on foot. Mole distributed food and water from her *bag of holding*, and they refreshed themselves as they traveled, keeping a wary lookout in every direction.

They continued for several hours, taking shifts watching while others rested as best they could. The carpet's ride was steady and stable, but worry about their situation made sleep almost impossible. At least for most of them; once it became clear that the landscape only offered a constant vista as they progressed further, Mole curled up on a corner of the rug and instantly fell asleep.

None of them expected that the respite would last long. Thus when Dannel lifted a hand to shade his eyes, peering into the distance, none of them were surprised when he said, "Oh, crap."

As the dwarves reached for their weapons, Cal looked up from the small book bound in blue leather he'd been perusing in his lap. "Could you be more specific?"

"See for yourself," Dannel said, stringing his bow and pointing with one end of it toward the sky in the distance, in the direction of the skull. There they could just make out a cluster of specks flying just under the Occipitus ceiling.

Heading straight for them.

"Demons?" Beorna asked, settling her helmet upon her head, holding the axe she'd borrowed from Arun in the other.

There was a pause as they watched Dannel watching the approaching specks. "Yeah," he finally said.

"There's another group," Mole said, pointing ahead and slightly left of their current course. They turned to see a second approaching flight, partially hidden against the backdrop of the jagged horizon of Occipitus's ring of cliffs, but definitely coming closer as well.

"Here we go again," Dannel said.

Chapter 551

"Let's start buffing up," Beorna said.

“Hold on a bit,” Cal suggested. “Distances are difficult to gauge here, but they’ll be a few minutes, at least. If they could *teleport*, they’d already be here, they wouldn’t give us time to prepare.”

The gnome gestured and spoke a command word, and the carpet slowed and started descending toward the ground. They were only a few paces up to begin with, so it would not take them long to reach solid footing.

“Wait,” Arun said. “Perhaps we should meet them aloft.”

“They are more adept than we in the air,” Cal said. “And as you have seen, the *flight* power granted by my wand is easy to dispel.”

“But the terrain here gives little advantage,” Umbar said. “And a stationary defense opens us to those explosive blasts, from the vrock dances.”

“Dannel, can you identify the types yet?” Arun asked.

The elf had been keeping a close eye on both approaching groups. “The ones coming from the spire look like vocks,” he said. “The others... I’m not certain yet. They almost look like giant bugs, if I had to guess.”

“Chasme demons, probably,” Cal explained.

“Can either type *dispel magic*?” Umbar asked him.

“The vocks, no. Chasmes... I do not know for certain, but I don’t believe so. We’ve only faced their ilk once before, in Skullrot. But their buzzing is a potent soporific. It can be resisted, but with so many of them, it is likely that at least a few of us will be affected.”

Mole shuddered, thinking back to an experience in the Carcerian prison.

“Maybe we can find some cover back in the cliffs,” Beorna said, pointing to the wall they’d been following for the last few hours. “A cleft, or a cave or something.”

“I don’t think we have time,” Dannel said. “They’re coming on fast... a few minutes, at most.”

“We need to make a decision,” Cal said.

Umbar looked at Arun, who nodded. “Then we use the carpet as a mobile platform,” the cleric said. “The archmage and elf, with the templar as close-defense. The genasi, Chosen, and myself, empowered with flight, fly a close formation against the enemies, staying within close range of the carpet... or vice versa. If the vulture-demons begin a dance, we draw off. If anyone is overcome by a stunning effect, then the others rally to his or her aid.”

“Hey, what about me?” Mole asked. “Sheesh, they always forget the gnomes,” she added, as an aside to her uncle. “You know, I’ve taken out my share of bad guys,” she went on, to Umbar.

“Invisible, you can linger next to one of the warriors, and deliver sneak attacks when least expected,” the cleric said.

“All right,” Cal said. “It’s a workable plan. We’ll stay close to the ground in any case, but if someone goes down, then everyone has to converge on that location, vrock dances notwithstanding. And watch out for flanking attacks; you’ll be vulnerable from all sides. Remember flying opens up the third dimension.”

“Sheesh, you sure do worry a lot,” Mole said. “Hey, how about a *greater invisibility*?”

“Looks like they’re pretty eager to get to us,” Dannel said. As they watched, the formation of vocks shifted course to block the avenue of approach of the second flotilla of insect-demons. Faint screeches reached their ears, followed by the bugs spreading out into two wedges that spread out to bypass the vocks. The vocks had the advantage of position, but the chasmes were slightly faster. Now that they were closer they could see that there were about two dozen demons in the first group, and about that or maybe slightly fewer in the second.

“What in the hells are they doing?” Beorna said.

“They’re demons,” Cal said. “Don’t assume they’re working together. They’re probably taking a first-come, first-served approach.”

“With us as the entrée,” Arun said, lifting his hammer.

The spellcasters began making their preparations, as the demons approached swiftly, and began their dive.

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Cal, holding two wands in his left hand, started rapid-firing buff spells onto his companions. With the entire plane locked to summonings and his shadow-spells, the gnome knew that his best contribution to the battle would be in the form of magical enhancements. As the others watched the demons spread out into an attack formation—or rather two, as the vocks and chasmes were definitely not working in concert—the gnome cast *fly* on each of them with his wand, followed by *magic circles against evil* from the second wand upon Arun, Umbar, Lok, and Beorna. He followed that up with a *cat’s grace* upon Beorna.

Beorna used an *align weapon* spell upon the arrows in Dannel’s quiver; her own borrowed axe got a *bless weapon*. She then infused herself with *divine favor*. Umbar did the same, and put a few ability enhancements upon himself and the other companions, including an *owl’s wisdom* on Dannel.

“Shoot straight, elf,” he said.

As the demons closed to a few hundred feet Dannel started opening fire. The carpet was not the most stable firing platform, and it was moving to boot, but the elf easily adjusted, targeting the left wedge of chasme demons. His first shot hit, striking a chasme solidly in the torso.

“Cal?” Arun said, tightening his grip on his hammer.

“Go!” he said, casting a *haste* that empowered all of them. He didn’t stop there, and as the paladin, Umbar, and Lok all lifted up off the carpet, forming a defensive wedge, he was already continuing with his second round of buffs, casting *displacement* on Dannel, and then shrouding him with *greater invisibility*. Normally such layered wards would be superfluous, but Cal suspected that the chasmes, at least, could *see invisibility*. And keeping Dannel active would be key to surviving this battle, he thought.

“C’mon uncle, I need that *greater invis* you promised...” Mole said, as Cal surrounded himself with *mirror images*. He’d elected to stay visible, for this battle, because with his spells either cast or unusable, he’d be more effective as a target and distractor. He slid his buffing wands into the case at his hip, drawing another out with a smooth motion. He had almost a dozen of the magical devices in his inventory, but the magical case provided the one he wanted each time with a simple command; in this case his wand of *enervation*.

“I’ll get to you in a moment, Mole,” he said, launching into another spell. What he didn’t tell her was that he feared that she would not be able to resist the buzz of the chasmes, and would be easily carried off by the foul demons.

The two wings of chasmes had slid around the vocks, ignoring their angry shrieks as they buzzed down toward the companions. Arun, Umbar, and Lok rose to meet them, hoping to keep them far enough away so that their buzzing would not impact those on the carpet below. At least the rivalry between the two groups of demons had aided them in one respect; none of the vocks had hesitated to call *mirror images*. That would probably change once the battle was joined, however.

The first chasme faltered and plummeted downward, several of Dannel’s arrows jutting from its body. Beorna had unlimbered her own heavy bow, keeping her axe close beside her, but her own shots were largely ineffective against the demons’ damage resistance. But six chasmes from the second wing detached and shot around the defensive wedge of warriors, clearly coming for those on the carpet. The first was hit by an arrow that nearly exploded through its body, a critical hit that dropped the foul demon like a rock to splatter on the ground below. The elf’s barrage continued and a second likewise fell out of formation, its wings still fluttering as its claws tore at the two shafts jutting from its face.

Cal directed the carpet into a wide turn that would keep them fairly close to the defending warriors above, firing off an *enervation* that lanced into one of the chasmes, draining some of its life-energy.

“Uncle Cal!” Mole urged, all but hopping as she casually fired off a bolt from her little crossbow that had no effect.

The three flying companions felt a soft wave of tiredness wash over them as the chasmes dove at them. But their wills, bolstered by their own dedication and Cal's *magic circles*, let them fight off the deadly lull of the chasmes' buzzing. The three formed a tight formation, protecting their flanks and letting the demons come to them. The demons tried to break that defensive knot with sheer force, several of them bashing their fat bodies into the smaller dwarves, but each time they were rebuffed by shields or raised weapons. Their drones became screeches of frustration and pain as the companions' weapons lashed out in a violent counter, and the fly-demons fell in clumps to the ground below.

Seven went down in that initial flurry.

"Fine, I'll use my own ring then!" Mole said, impatient at the delay that was keeping her from joining the battle. But before she could use her *ring of invisibility*, the chasmes came close enough for the power of their drone to impact those upon the carpet. "I'll show those... bas..." Mole managed, before she slumped unconscious to the fabric.

Cal finally made her *invisible* then, sliding her into the center of the carpet, right next to where he was standing. He himself resisted the droning, along with Beorna and Dannel with his augmented willpower.

The four demons dove eagerly at the companions, their vicious claws outstretched. They must have empowered themselves to see invisible objects, or maybe they'd pinpointed where the arrows killing them had come from; either way, they made a beeline for Dannel. Beorna intercepted the first with a powerful blow from her axe that clove deeply into its body, knocking it aside from its target. A second tore through empty space, fooled by Cal's *displacement*. The third did manage to get through the elf's defenses, digging an ugly gash across his temple with its claw, but as its momentum carried it past it took a blast from Cal's wand of *enervation*, draining it. The fourth demon never got close enough to attack, as Dannel unleashed a full barrage of arrows into it at point-blank range.

Lok, Arun, and Umbar continued shredding the chasmes that dared to press their attack. More were unleashing spell-effects now, hitting the defenders with *circles of nausea* and *waves of grief*. Arun's hammer shone with golden light, however, and again most of the fell magic of the demons dissipated against that radiance. The dark energies that did get through failed to overcome the grim determination of the three warriors. The surviving demons fell back, overcome by the ferocity of the defense. But the vrockes were right behind them, and now they descended upon the distracted warriors with terrible effect. Far stronger than the chasmes, they slammed into the defenders with powerful force. Several unleashed powerful screeches, and while Arun and Lok were able to resist their potency, Umbar was momentarily overcome. A moment later a vrock caromed into him like a falling boulder, knocking him out of his place in their formation, demon and cleric intertwined as they descended rapidly toward the ground below. But Lok and Arun had their own problems, as eight vrockes swarmed over them from forward, above, and below, tearing and slashing with their long talons.

Above, two small groups of vrockes had already begun the intertwined pattern of their *dance of ruin*.

Caught up in the intensity of the battle, neither side noticed the shadowy forms that appeared in the air high overhead in the distance, approaching swiftly from the direction from which the chasmes had appeared earlier.

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Caught up in his song, firing *aligned* arrows from a bow empowered to slay fiends, Dannel created a storm of death around the magic carpet.

The two chasmes that had assailed him quickly recovered and dove at him again, hoping to take advantage of the momentary distraction offered by their fallen comrade, and by the one that Beorna was still fighting at the front of the carpet. But Dannel spun suddenly, an arrow seeming to jump into his string as he drew and fired. The first chasme, already weakened by Cal's *enervation*, took an arrow right through its left eye socket and fell. The second attacked, but by the time it realized it had again been misled by the elf's *displacement*, long shafts were already piercing its body, one even passing *through* it to continue its flight off across the plain.

"Above!" Cal warned, bending to slap Mole's cheeks, hoping to rouse his niece in time to deal with the next threat. The companions looked up to see Arun and Lok surrounded by a veritable explosion of wings and claws, the two warriors almost invisible within the nest of swarming vrock. Umbar was falling, a vrock grappling with the cleric. Above they could see at least two formations of dancing vrock, and that still left another half-dozen, several of which were already coming around toward their position. At least two, he saw, had now taken the time to call upon their *mirror images*, which suggested they'd taken at least a clue from the decimation of their rivals at the hands of the companions. "Incoming!" the gnome added, in case the others hadn't all seen the threat. As Mole groaned, coming around, he shot off an *enervation*, but his streak ended as the beam disintegrated against a vrock's spell resistance.

Lok and Arun came together, back to back, and fought off the vrock horde. They were truly surrounded, but if they cared, they did not show it. They fought together like warriors who had campaigned at each others' sides for years on end, covering their flanks, and turning in unison to unleash truly awesome blows into the attacking demons. Arun's hammer slammed into the face and torso of a vrock, each blow crushing demonic bones, until the fierce thing had become a mangled ruin. Even as it fell back, Lok disembowled a second vrock, tearing its body open with a pair of violent swings of his axe. The few surviving chasmes chattered angrily around the perimeter of the melee, denied their victims by the vrock, but there might have been the smallest hint of relief in those cries, given how quickly their kin had been savaged by this pair.

Umbar recovered from being stunned to find a flapping vrock in his face, driving him rapidly downward. The cleric concentrated momentarily upon his *fly* spell, slowing his descent greatly. He brought his hammer up, but the vrock seized it, holding it in its claws, while its sharp beak snapped at his helm, splatting his face with foul-smelling spittle. The thing was phenomenally strong.

But Umbar Ironhammer was a consecrated priest of Moradin, and as such he could call upon the power of the forge to crush his enemies. “Burn in the righteous fire of the All Father!” he shouted, slamming his gauntlet into the demon’s chest, unleashing an *inflict critical wounds* into it. The demon shrieked and released the dwarf’s hammer—a mistake, as it turned out, as the cleric drove the axiomatic weapon into the back of its neck, snapping its spine.

Thus far the battle had been heavily one-sided; only Dannel had been seriously injured, and the gash on his forehead from the chasme’s claw, although it continued to ooze blood, wasn’t immediately life-threatening. But as the demons brought their numbers to bear, the situation quickly evolved.

Lok and Arun came under heavy attack, both from the claws of the vrocks, and from a cloud of spores that found the gaps in their armor and begun digging into their bodies. One of them grappled with Arun, immobilizing his weapon arm with a solid grip, while the one opposite grabbed onto his body, driving its claws through the layered plating covering his gut into the muscled flesh beneath. Lok likewise took several telling hits, although he avoided being grabbed.

The defenders upon the carpet likewise found themselves suddenly beset. Having dispatched the last chasme, Dannel lifted his bow to target the diving vrocks. But before he could release his arrow, a stunning screech from one of the vrocks staggered him, and he fell, dropping his bow. Cal, likewise, reeled. Beorna hacked at one of the vrocks, but managed only a glancing blow as all six of the demons landed on the carpet, their weight driving it quickly down to the ground below.

Meanwhile, less than a hundred feet above, the demons continued their *dances of ruin*. Sparks of energy began to flare around the twisting circles, rising now to a building crescendo.

Arun had briefly caught a glimpse of the vrocks driving the flying carpet down to the ground. “We’ve got to take out those dancers!” he said, grunting as a vrock claw caught him squarely in the middle of his face. Were it not for his helm, the blow would have taken both of his eyes.

The paladin tore free from the demon holding his arm, and launched upward, the energy of Cal’s spell carrying him upward. As he passed out of the ring of vrocks he took several attacks of opportunity, but shrugged off the painful claws that snagged momentarily on his limbs. Lok was already ahead of him, and behind them came the vrocks, eager to finish off their foes. Again the two cooperated in concert, splitting in unspoken agreement as Lok shot toward the rightmost cluster of dancing demons, while Arun rose toward the ones on the left.

But breaking free of the grapple had taken a few precious seconds, and as Arun ascended slowly toward the gyrating circle of demons, he sensed that he would not be in time.

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Dannel felt a blaze of pain in his gut as a vrock stumbled over him, the demon nearly falling before a flap of its wings recovered its equilibrium. Quickly sensing that it had an invisible foe nearby, it lunged at him with its claws. Dannel tried to roll away, out of its grasp, but a claw snagged on his cloak, and the demon eagerly seized upon it.

A few feet away, Beorna and Cal were coming under heavy attack. The templar swept a powerful blow toward one, but managed to hit only *mirror images*. Cal fired a blast from his wand at another, but once again the attack was foiled by spell resistance. The demons, on the other hand, proved quite effective in their assault, with Cal's foe getting lucky, scoring a hit through the gnome's own shifting nimbus of images. Only his quick leap back saved him from being grappled and borne down. Beorna drew more attention, with several vocks leaping at her, trying to flank her. Vrock spores filled the air, and the companions soon had to struggle with the agonizing pain of the burrowing tendrils.

Dannel tried to shake out of his cloak, as the demon quickly dug his claws up its length, trying to find its owner's head. The demon let out a triumphant cackle as a claw brushed his cap, but then it let out a screech of pain and staggered, allowing him to pull free. Dannel rolled off the carpet, grabbing his bow as he went. Another vrock heard his movements and leapt at him, but it misjudged his position, and its attack caught only empty air. The arcane archer called upon his song, and as it filled him and his bow he made the demon pay for its error.

The one that had grabbed Dannel did not follow; it had its hands full with Mole. Shrouded by her uncle's *greater invisibility*, she could spring in and out to unleash sneak attacks upon it with impunity, easily avoiding its attempts to grab her. Frustrated, the demon lifted itself six paces into the air, and summoned *mirror images* to defend itself. That was fine with Mole, who shot the one threatening Dannel with a bolt that found a nasty spot in its backside. The vrock barely had time to screech in protest before the elf finished it with a final arrow to the chest.

As Umbar took down his foe, hovering a mere two paces above the ground, he started almost at once flying back up to rejoin Lok and Arun in the melee. But he saw the vocks force his allies down upon the carpet, only about forty feet from his current position. His first instinct was to preserve the Chosen, but almost at once he felt the hard grip of Duty settle upon him. He started toward that melee, but had barely covered half the distance when a pair of chasmes, survivors from the earlier melee, descended upon him, forcing him to defend himself. Both hit him with spell-powers, and one did manage to finally shear him of his temporary ability of flight with a targeted *dispel*, dropping him to the ground ten feet below. The other weakened him with a *ray of enfeeblement*, but the cleric stood his ground, blasting the nearer of the pair with a beam of *searing light* that penetrated its spell resistance and scorched its ugly hide.

High above the battlefield, Lok slammed into one of the vrock dances. Knowing that he could not likely kill one in a single blow, his tactic instead was to bull rush one of the demons, slamming it with his shield and taking it bodily out of the circle. His effort was successful, in that it broke up the demonic ritual. Unfortunately, however, the three

demons immediately leapt upon him, joining the three coming up from below to surround him in a surge of violence.

As Arun looked up at his own target, he caught sight now of the shadowy figures in the air above, pale white streaks like clouds coming forward at great speed. As he wondered what new threat this might portend, the insubstantial aura around the figures parted, and they resolved into a quartet of newcomers. The one in the center drew the paladin's gaze; a glorious figure of a man, clad in a white breastplate, with white wings spreading from his shoulders in lieu of arms. The others, he saw, included a pair of winged elves carrying longbows, and a mechanical half-man, half-horse creation that he recognized as a zelekhut, an inevitable.

The newcomers appeared to recognize the greatest danger at once, directing an immediate assault upon the vrock engaged in their *dance of ruin*. The sword archon hit them with the reverberating energies of an *order's wrath*. The vrock shrieked, blasted by the lawful potency of the spell, but they resisted the dazing side-effects of the *wrath*, and did not halt their ritual. But the arrows of the two winged elves succeeded where their comrade's word of power had failed, as white-fledged holy missiles transformed one of the dancing vrock into a pincushion, scoring five hits, including a critical hit that pierced its throat, putting an end to its chant and its life.

Arun's pursuers and the surviving two demons from the *dance* let out a terrible cacophony, and shot up toward the celestials, ignoring the paladin in the face of their hatred of their traditional foes. Arun smashed one with his hammer as it passed, but it ignored him, flying like an arrow toward the archon. The majority of Lok's foes likewise disengaged and turned toward these new enemies, leaving only a pair that continued to press their attack against the genasi.

The zelekhut released spiked chains from its wrists as it descended to block the vrock's charge at the sword archon. The inevitable tried to *hold* a vrock, unsuccessfully. The demons looked like they would just try to slip past it, but when it lashed one of its chains around the neck of a vrock, the demon fell upon the construct, its claws tearing deep gouges in its metallic hide.

Upon the ground below the arial battle, the companions continued to find themselves pressed hard by the surviving demons. Beorna wielded Arun's adamantine axe, *blessed* with Helm's power, as if she'd borne the weapon her entire life. Each blow tore deep into demonic flesh, and as one went down hard in a thrashing heap, her backswing caught another solidly in the side, sundering a rib. That seemed to drive the demon into an even greater fury, and as it lunged at her, a third flew down almost atop her back, trying to tear her helmet off her head.

Cal, meanwhile, was assailed by his enemy, which chased after him, tearing at his *mirror images*. Each hit upon a false gnome caused the image to disappear. Cal shot it with a *ray of exhaustion* from another wand, but again the device failed against the vrock's resistance. The demon slashed through a pair of images before it pounced upon one of only two remaining instances of the archmage. Cackling as its claws dug into solid matter, it tried to snap up the gnome in its arched beak.

Cal, finding himself in a sticky situation, didn't stop to think. Instinct took over, and magic flowed through him. Intellectually, he knew that his *maze* spell could not function within the *dimensional lock*, as it relied upon an extradimensional portal. But as the power flowed through him he... *tweaked* it, channeling the flow into a different outlet.

Silver fire erupted from his hands, pouring over the vrock. The demon, more than a little surprised, dropped Cal as the *arcane fire* savaged it. Its resistances were of no avail as the flow of liquid energy tore into its body. It wasn't enough to kill it, but it gave the gnome a moment to react, which he used to dart out of its reach.

The demon recovered quickly, and beat its wings furiously as it leapt after the gnome. Cal didn't retreat this time. Again he called upon the power of his magic, this time deliberately directing his *greater shadow evocation* into another blast of *arcane fire*. This time the demon's head was engulfed in the flame, and although it was able to lash out at Cal, striking him a glancing blow to the head with a claw, the demon's time had come to an end. Cal recognized it, too.

"Time's up, pal," he said, a moment before the first arrow slammed hard into its back.

The sword archon held its ground against the vrock charge, calling down a *flame strike* that swept through a dense knot of the vulture demons. Two that were already injured plummeted to the ground below, charred and blackened by the holy evocation. But the others eagerly swarmed upon the celestial, tearing at his arms and wings with their claws. Another went down, pierced by arrows from the elven bowmen. The archon maintained a look of calm even as the demons tore deep gashes in his limbs. He looked helpless before them, but then something flared in his eyes, and a white glow formed in front of him; a plane of wispy energy that took on the shape of a sword. The archon swept this insubstantial weapon before him, and where it intersected with a demon, corrupt flesh was torn asunder.

Demons died, but this only drove the remaining ones into a fury, intent upon taking at least this celestial with them.

But then Arun reached the melee, and put an end to those hopes.

Even as the battle began to wind down, the demons did not attempt flight or retreat. The two winged elves joined with Dannel in putting down the stragglers with precise shots, knocking down the last vrocks fighting Lok and Beorna, and the chasmes that menaced Umbar. The only casualty was the zelekhut, which they found entangled with the vrock that had killed it, bloody gears strewn around the spot where the two combatants had hit the ground.

The surviving celestials lowered themselves to the ground slowly, along with Arun and Lok, joining the others near the grounded flying carpet. The sword archon brushed Arun with his wings, healing him of his injuries. Cal and Beorna were already tending likewise to the others.

"We're glad to see you guys," Mole offered, as the archon, his limbs still trailing blood, landed and walked up to them.

“Yeah, we were starting to think that demons were all that were left here,” Dannel said.

“Saureya sends his respects,” the archon said. “I am the Herald’s Voice. These are Abrigen and Callendes, of the avariel,” he added, indicating his two companions. The two winged elves inclined their heads slightly in greeting, but they did not shift their wary gazes from the surrounding landscape. They resembled sun elves from Faerûn, but one look at them was enough to indicate the celestial influences in their heritage.

“What is the situation?” Arun asked.

“Graz’zt has launched an all-out invasion of Occipitus,” the Voice reported. “The initial wave came via five temporary *gates* through which approximately four hundred demons, most capable of *teleport*, came through. We were able to neutralize two of the gates almost immediately, but the demons were surprisingly coordinated, and were able to quickly annihilate the majority of our patrols. Realizing that the attack was a prelude to a full invasion, Saureya ordered all forces to fall back to the Bastion, where we have established a final line of defense.”

“The Bastion?” Dannel asked. “I don’t remember that from our last visit.”

“A few things have... changed. The Bastion of Helm was created through the will of the Herald.”

“The Herald... do you mean Morgan?”

“That is the name by which you knew him,” the celestial acknowledged.

“I think that there is a lot going on here that we do not fully understand,” Cal said. “I think we need to...”

“Incoming demons,” one of the avariel said, interrupting the gnome. All eyes turned to mirror the winged elf’s gaze. Their eyesight did not match the acuity of the avariel, but they could see the long black line, writhing slightly, upon the horizon roughly in the direction of the central spire.

“We do not have time,” Arun said. “Can you get us back to the Bastion?”

“There is a demonic army between us and it, in the canyon,” the Voice said calmly. “But their arial superiority has been heavily diminished, and while additional forces are marshalling at the Skull, we may be able to slip through. Abrigen, *wind walk* back to the Bastion, and inform Saureya that we will be coming through.” The avariel nodded, and began shifting back to the insubstantial form they had worn when first arriving upon the scene.

“I regret that I do not have another spell prepared to transport you, but Callendes and I will escort you upon your conveyance.”

“How many demons are we talking about altogether?” Umbar asked, as the companions gathered back upon the carpet. Beorna and Arun did their best to get as much of the demon corpses off it as they could, but it was clear that the device was going to need a thorough cleaning once they were through here.

“Our reconnaissance is hindered by the *lock* that has been laid upon the plane,” the Voice said. “Neither we celestials nor the demons can *teleport* at will. In essence, we have been reduced to a conventional army, to a campaign the likes of which you mortals may be familiar.”

“Best guess,” Umbar persisted.

“It would appear that the Shadow Lord has committed the majority of his remaining forces to this action. Approximately fifty thousand demons.”

For a long moment, there was only silence.

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They ascended upon their magical carpet high into the air above Occipitus, hundreds of feet, until the vaulted sky seemed to press down upon them like the interior of an actual dome. With the plasms gone the hazards of high flight upon the plane had been obviated somewhat, but even so it felt strange ascending so close to the golden firmament that lingered low over the outstretched expanse of the plane. Mole kept reaching up with her hand as they rose, as if the sky were something that she could touch with her fingers. Maybe it was; as the disjuncting effect grew more pronounced Cal leveled off the carpet, and they continued on their course, adjusted now to take them toward the cliffs that ringed Occipitus. Even as high up as they were, those black walls still seemed impermeable, a dense barrier keeping them penned in upon the broad bowl of the plane.

Callendes and the Herald's Voice flanked them, easily keeping pace with the moderate crawl of the carpet. Without their guidance, they might have easily missed the canyon, even had they known it was there. The cleft in the rocks was narrow and twisted quickly as it entered the mountains, the dark opening blending almost perfectly with the surrounding cliffs. Once they had changed course to enter the tunnel the high, jagged peaks rapidly closed in around them, and soon Occipitus was lost behind them, save for the vague image of the mighty skull-fortress that remained visible through gaps in the mountaintops, indistinct in the haze of distance and chaos that continued to swirl around Graz'zt's seat upon the plane.

The ground below them was as blasted and empty as the rest of the plane, but as they penetrated deeper into the canyon they could hear a faint noise upon the still air. Initially a soft buzz, it rapidly became more distinct, a roar of many voices, infused with dread and the promise of violence. Even had they not been forewarned of what they would find, each of them would have known those sounds to be the cries of demons. Ahead, they could see that the canyon appeared to widen as it passed around another sharp bend.

“We must not hesitate,” the sword archon said. “Stay your weapons, and follow us swiftly to the Bastion.”

“We’d better prepare,” Dannel said. “The celestials might be right in the demons not having many fliers at the moment, but it’ll only take one reaching us to knock a few folks free. And it’s a long, long way down.”

“Wise words,” Umbar rumbled. “Best empower us with flight, gnome, just in case.”

“The wand is nearly out of power,” Cal said. “If I use it on us now, that will be it for flying for us for this trip.”

“And we could be here a while,” Dannel said.

“What about spell powers?” Beorna asked.

“We should be out of range,” Cal said, but then he frowned. “Telekinesis... that can reach out to five hundred feet or more, depending on the potency of the caster.”

“We’re not quite that far up,” Mole said, leaning precariously out over the edge of the carpet; Arun started to reach for her, but then shrugged and sat back on his haunches, adjusting his swordbelt to avoid poking the tip through the carpet. The movement caused the carpet to undulate slightly. Lok grimaced slightly, sitting on the middle of the carpet with his hands wrapped tightly around the haft of his axe. The genasi did not have a fondness for high places.

“If they can knock over the carpet, you’ll wish we had the flight power,” Umbar persisted.

“Very well,” Cal said, drawing out the wand and touching it to each of them in turn. He saved himself for last, but before he could activate it, he frowned. “It is as I feared; the power of the device is depleted.”

“If something happens, I’ll see that you do not fall, uncle,” Mole said.

“Look...” Dannel said, drawing their attention back ahead, where the canyon opened out ahead of them, as they drew around the final bend.

They knew that they were looking upon just a fraction of Graz’zt’s forces, but even so, the sight was an impressive one. The canyon widened and extended more or less straight for about a quarter mile ahead of them, with a few hundred feet separating the vertical lines of jagged black stone to either side. In that intervening space, was crowded a host of demons of all shapes and sizes. At least several thousand of them, jammed together in a tangle that grew denser the further down the canyon one looked. From their high vantage, the demonic force looked like a carpet of swarming insects, crawling over the landscape like a plague.

And at the end of the canyon, they could see what could only be the Bastion.

A wall of pale stone, almost white against the sharp contrast of the surrounding black cliffs, crossed the end of the canyon. Even from this distance, it was obviously a massive fortification, rising at least a hundred feet above the canyon floor. It bowed slightly, curved like a dam laid across the flow of a river; except in this case, the wild surge was without rather than within, as the demons threw themselves against the defenses. They could see demons, tiny specks at this range, crawling upon it; occasionally one would lose its grip and plummet back into the swarming mass below. It was loud, the cacophony of the gathered demons building against the flanking cliffs until it reached them as a wave of rage and hatred.

A mountain loomed up behind the shield wall, with a massive overhang of black stone jutting out until it almost touched the summit of the wall, looming over the citadel like a knight's shield. The gap between the wall and the overhang was dark, save for in the center, where a bright golden radiance shone from seemingly within the depths of the mountain itself.

"The Bastion," the Voice said, staring at that bright glow, his calm words dismissing the fearsome, terrible hordes beneath them.

"There's no way we're going to get across that unnoticed," Dannel pointed out. He already had a long shaft fitted to his bow, but knew better than to waste his arrows on this massive array of foes.

"I will do my best to obscure us from their view," Cal said. "I will need to concentrate upon this for a time." The gnome sat at the front of the carpet. "Hold on, everyone," he said. "We're going in."

Chapter 556

High above the canyon on their magical carpet, the companions started across the long open space that separated them from the relative shelter of the Bastion. Between them and their goal, spread across the canyon floor, was gathered a horde of hundreds of demons of almost every conceivable variety.

Below, they could hear a subtle change in the roar of the demonic host that started on their side of the canyon and quickly spread. Mole confirmed their suspicion, as she looked down again over the edge of the carpet. "Company, guys." A number of hulking, distorted figures rose up out of the press on broad wings, a good dozen of them at least, similar in form but each subtly distinct, colored in sickly olives, ash grays, and burned reds. Some were decorated with horns, others with ridges of spines or stakes, yet others with humps or tails or even a second set of arms jutting from its torso. All were at least partially misshapen, with discongruent symmetries that made their appearance even more jarring than the ferocious horde of demons that surrounded them.

"Hordelings," Callendes explained, as he fitted an arrow to his white longbow, his wings flapping powerfully as he easily kept pace with the slow-moving carpet. "Be wary... they are unpredictable."

The noise from below intensified, but as they watched the flying fiends rise up slowly toward them a dark black mist began to take shape between them and the canyon below. The cloud roiled chaotically as it expanded to cover a wide swath of space nearly fifty feet on a side, an intangible barrier that sheltered them from view. Fearsome noises erupted from within that dense bank, ominous sounds of a gathering storm. Cal sat at the fore of the carpet, controlling his *major image*, drawing it with them as they made their way toward the shelter of the Bastion.

“More ahead!” Dannel warned. Five heads upon the carpet and two flying beside turned to where the elf pointed. A black crag jutted out from the canyon wall ahead to their right, almost of a height with the companions, and from that perch came a half-dozen flying things; fiendish gargoyles, their screeches trailing to them distinctly over the loud roar rising up from the demonic horde.

The companions were not merely waiting for their foes to converge upon them. Arrows and bolts lanced out from the carpet, striking the oncoming attackers. They could not clearly target the hordelings, who were obscured by Cal’s illusory screen, but the gargoyles felt the bite of their assault. Dannel’s first shot tore *through* the lead gargoyle, exploding out its back in a red haze as he scored a critical hit. The gargoyle’s momentum carried it forward a few yards, but then it dipped forward, plummeting into the gorge into a mass of demons.

Another fell sound that was all too familiar to them drew their attention to yet another threat. A few bulbous figures had risen out of niches in the cliffs on the far side of the canyon, their approach preceeded by the buzzing that lulled the senses, and threatened a deep slumber from which one might never wake. There were only three of them, but the companions knew that this did not make them any less dangerous.

“Chasmes on the left!” Mole said, loading a *shock bolt* into her crossbow. The gargoyles apparently lacked the immunity to electrical attacks possessed by demons, and one of the creatures already lagged, a bolt jutting from the joint where its wing met its body.

“I see them,” Dannel said, his voice a calm island within the radiance of the melody of his song. To the others, the sound was just an echo lost on the wind, but to the elf, it filled him, binding himself to his bow, and to the arrow that he fitted to the string. He was standing on a moving platform, facing an updraft from the canyon below, firing at targets a few hundred feet distant, but he may as well have been shooting at practice butts on a calm day. Filled by the song, he was one with the bow, and his first three shots all hit, the chasme faltering and finally flittering slowly down a few hundred feet before it regained control and disappeared into a crevice in the nearby cliff. Flying alongside the carpet, the half-celestial avariel added his own missiles to the barrage, and while his shots lacked Dannel’s precision accuracy at range, the second chasme soon had a holy arrow jutting from its grotesque form.

There were attacks from below, as well, as the ground-bound demons contributed however they could. A few arrows with burning heads popped up through Cal’s cloud bank, but they all shot past the companions upon the carpet. Cal continued shifting the bank around slightly, so that their enemies could not hit them merely by targeting the center of the storm. At one point a quasit popped up through the illusory cloud, but when it got a good look at the furious hail of fire coming from the defenders it quickly dipped back down out of sight.

The gargoyles approached to point blank range, shrieking as they eagerly extended their talons to attack. But at that distance, the missile fire from the companions was devastating, even through the damage resistance possessed by the creatures. Lok and Arun punched a pair of arrows into the chest of one as it swooped upon the defenders upon the carpet, their mighty bows adding considerable force to the impacts as the injured gargoyle shrieked and extended its claws toward the archers. The two reached for their melee weapons, but Beorna was there first, her adamantine axe chopping it in two.

Another pair of gargoyles surged upon the sword archon, but the celestial's semicorporeal slashing blade made quick work of both before either could lay a claw upon him. The last tried to grapple Callendes, but Umbar intercepted it, lifting off from the carpet and laying hard into it with a solid blow from his axiomatic warhammer. The gargoyle turned upon him and tore at the cleric with its claws and teeth, but the creature could not long withstand close-quarters battle against the inquisitor, and within seconds it had joined its peers in plummeting to the ground far below.

The carpet had continued its forward course with its passengers, so the brief melee had caused Umbar and the Voice to fall behind. Callendes continued to pace the carpet, although that came at the cost of volume of arrows launched from his bow.

The two surviving chasmes continued their approach. As they came within a few hundred feet, one paused to fire off an *unholy blight* that briefly engulfed the carpet and everyone upon it. But the companions were all fixed in their determination, and they emerged from the roiling cloud intact. The other chasme continued to close, perhaps hoping to get close enough to affect the riders with its sleep-inducing drone. But as it pulled ahead, it drew the focus of Dannel. Now that the range was closer, the elf's shots were even more telling, and the chasme took hit after hit, finally tumbling backward in an uncontrolled, spinning dive.

But even as that threat was dealt with, another presented itself. Announcing themselves with a screech that sounded like the end of days, a knot of hordelings erupted through Cal's illusory cloud, their misshapen wings pounding violently at the air as they surged upward toward the carpet from below.

Chapter 557

The hordelings almost seemed to crawl over each other as they flew up through the illusory storm, as if fighting to be the first to reach their enemies. None of them were alike, but all shared the same bestial rage, and all had a variety of deadly-looking natural weapons.

Most of them came on toward the carpet, but a few trailers spotted Umbar and the sword archon lagging behind, and instead swept eagerly in that direction. Callendes shouted a warning and spun, sending an arrow down into the face of one of the charging hordelings. The creature, which had a snub face dominated with a jaw fully three feet wide, let out a violent roar and flew straight for the half-celestial, who led the creature away from the ongoing course of the carpet.

A few of the hordelings were intelligent enough to shift their approach to intercept the carpet, while the others trailed after it in pursuit. Those three, the fastest, came up quickly from below, their jaws trailing slaver as they sought to tear their enemies' means of travel out from under them.

The foremost hordeling—a vulture-faced creature covered in olive green scales—got close enough almost to seize the fabric sheet, undulating slightly with the movements of its passengers above. But even as the fiend extended its foot-wide claws to strike, it staggered in mid-air, dropping ten feet as the beating of its wings lost their powerful rhythm. As it fell, a diminutive form could be seen on its back, clinging to the bony ridge between its wings. The fiend spun as it tried to shake its unwelcome passenger free, but Mole kept her grip with one hand, lifting her rapier to strike again with the other.

The second creature, which resembled a gray bulldog with feathered wings and four long taloned limbs, dove to take advantage of the rogue's distraction. As Mole's "steed" continued to try to shake her off, the second hordeling extended its hind claws to snap her up in its grasp in a fly-by attack. It looked like the gnome was too distracted trying to keep upon her perch to see the new threat, but at the last instant, Mole shot upward, avoiding the wild swing from the hordeling's foreclaws as it tried to adjust. The sudden movement knocked it off balance, and its momentum carried into the first creature, which let out a fierce cry of protest. The first hordeling angrily tore free of the second, knocking it away, and it surged with powerful strokes of its wings toward Mole, who was curving back up toward the carpet—which had already moved on a good twenty paces in the interim, and was continuing on its steady course, Cal's illusory storm pacing it.

The gnome moved with smooth grace through the air, but the hordeling appeared to be faster, its rage adding to its speed as its broad wings seized the air. Fat gobs of ichor continued to trail down its back from the nasty wound Mole had inflicted on it, and fell to eventually splatter upon the upturned faces of the demons below.

Mole adjusted her course slightly, broadening her curve, but did not otherwise look back at the horror that was rapidly gaining on her.

And then, abruptly, she dove, descending almost to the level of Cal's illusion. The hordeling adjusted to match her, gaining another fifteen feet on her in the process.

She shifted again, and started rising again.

The hordeling drew closer. Once again it extended its claws...

And Mole suddenly changed course again, coming almost straight toward it.

The hordeling had been waiting for another such trick, and it smashed her with a claw, cutting shallow gashes in her left side. It tried to get a grip on her, but it may as well have been trying to grapple a waterfall. The gnome slid past its claws and darted across its body before ducking under one outstretched limb, and the wing behind it. As she passed, her little knife sliced out in a quick arc. The knobby protrusion where its wing met its body was scored deeply, and the creature screamed as a tendon was severed. Its left wing suddenly stopped beating, and the creature quickly tumbled over to the left.

Right into the face of the second hordeling, which had been closing around the left side of the first, hoping to cut off the prey and catch it for itself.

For a second time the hordelings collided, and this time the two were tangled together, the first unable to control its flight with its damaged wing. Their thrashing cries continued even after they vanished through Cal's cloud, but they appeared again a moment later as the illusion passed ahead along with the carpet, which had not stopped during the entire exchange, Mole could see the two fiends still tangled together, falling rapidly toward the ground far below.

She smiled, but didn't stop to see if they would fall all the way to the ground. Spinning in mid-air, she saw that the carpet was a good sixty feet ahead, now, and getting further away with each passing moment. Several hordelings still fluttered around it, engaged in a violent hit-and-run melee with the defenders. Beorna, Arun, and Lok formed a defensive ring around Dannel, who was continuing to unleash holy hell with his longbow. It looks like they'd kept the hordelings off the carpet, thus far.

As the carpet and its shrouding illusion drew further away, the roar of the demons below seemed uncannily directed at her, despite the fact that she could only be a tiny speck in the sky to them. The feeling made her feel quite exposed, and she decided that it might be a good idea to rejoin the others. Almost by reflex, she called upon the power of her ring, and became *invisible*.

But she wasn't completely alone. Only about forty feet away, Umbar battled a pair of hordelings, both sides of combatants abandoning subtlety for full attacks designed to simply crush the other. Umbar was doing a good job, and one hordeling's left arm hung uselessly at its side, crushed by his axiomatic warhammer. Apparently the hordelings were starting to get it through their thick skulls that the dwarf wasn't going to just be beaten down, for as she floated up the one in front of him tried to grab his hammer. It got a slimy claw on his forearm for a second, but before it could solidify its grip, the dwarf tore his limb free and drove the hammer into the hordeling's face. Most of the left side of its jaw was smashed in by the blow, but the hordeling refused to die, although the sound that issued from its ruined face was truly terrible.

Umbar turned to deal with the inevitable attack from the hordeling's fellow, but the creature had already started its gambit. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction offered by its ally's attempted grapple, it beat its wings furiously, lifting it a few feet above the dwarf. Then it lunged forward, closing its wings around its body, extending its claws to enfold the dwarf, intending to simply let its weight drag the both of them down to the ground below.

It was a simple but effective plan, and it might have worked had not Mole slid the length of her rapier into the spot where the hordeling's oblong skull ended at the back of its neck. The creature, which never relied much on brains in the first place, was slow to realize that there was a foot of steel jammed into its gray matter, but its limbs quickly ceased their proper operation. The hordeling slammed hard into Umbar, but the dwarf quickly recovered, spinning to halt a few feet away. He looked up at Mole in surprise, who had become visible again with her sneak attack.

“Behind you,” the gnome warned calmly.

Umbar turned to see the first crippled hordeling charging at him, its ruined jaw wide open, revealing ugly rows of mismatched teeth and a long tongue tipped with a slender barb. The creature flailed at him with its remaining functional claw, but the dwarf held his ground, bringing his hammer down in a powerful arc that coincided with the fiend’s vile forehead. All that came from it this time was a strangled hiss, which died along with the monster as it plummeted downward.

“It might be a good idea to go rejoin the others,” Mole said. As she spoke, several arrows shot past them; apparently some of the demons below had missile weapons. At their distance, almost straight up, the shot would have been incredibly difficult, but Mole watched with fascination as an arrow slid past a mere foot from her face. The arrowhead seemed to pulse with ugly red light, and a thin black stream of wispy energy trailed behind it, quickly fading to nothing.

Umbar did not disagree, and the two of them hastened after the others. As the occasional arrows continued to fly past them Mole felt a bit guilty as she became *invisible* again, but heck, Umbar was armored like a golem, and she was only wearing a light tunic.

They were more than halfway across the canyon now, and as they caught up to their friends Mole could see the massive form of the Bastion more clearly ahead of them. There were black spots upon the vast white spread of the fortress wall, no doubt demons attempting to scale the fortification. She could also see defenders atop the summit, although to her eyes they seemed few and far between.

Overall, the place looked very secure, but Mole was veteran enough to know that once the demons brought up a large number of flyers, that wall would not be worth very much in holding back the assault. Surely Saureya knew that, and Mole wondered what contingencies the deva had in place to hold out here.

If he didn’t have any, then they were going from one bad situation into another.

The celestials, Callendes and the Herald’s Voice, were also returning to the carpet. The avariel looked terrible, with great bloody gashes in his slender form, but he did not falter in the powerful beats of his great white wings. The archon was likewise injured but led the other, its hovering blade of silver energy preceding it as it rushed to the aid of its charges.

The assistance turned out to be unnecessary. By the time that the Voice reached the carpet, Arun and Lok had slain the last hordeling, the fell creature tumbling downward, its torso ripped open from a truly punishing blow from Lok’s axe.

Mole could have shot ahead of Umbar, who was moving more slowly due to his heavy encumbrance, but she decided that the dwarf needed to have an eye kept on him. Without any trace of irony she mused that while the stout folk made good companions, and were great if you needed something hacked to pieces, they weren’t as able to get out of troublesome situations as gnomes, and generally needed supervision.

They were within a few hundred yards of the Bastion now. Cal's illusion dissolved, as the spell reached the limit of its range. The archmage directed the carpet downward, in a calm descent toward the opening between the top of the shield wall and the overhanging mountain behind it.

Mole was still about fifty feet shy of the carpet, so she was in a perfect position to see the threat. As the illusory storm faded, it revealed a massive fiend, a bloated monstrosity that had to be at least twelve feet tall. Its wingspan could have enfolded a farmer's cottage, but even so the great wings seemed barely sufficient to keep the creature aloft. Even now, it seemed that the carpet would easily outpace it.

But then the fearsome monster opened its jaws wide—*gods, that thing could eat a horse in one bite*, Mole thought. "Look out!" she warned, knowing what was coming, although she also knew it was too late for her companions upon the carpet to react.

Chapter 558

Having fought through fiendish gargoyles, chasme demons, and a flight of misshapen hordelings to reach the Bastion, now a single huge creature remained to intercept their escape.

Mole saw it all, knew what the giant fiend's intentions were even before the sizzling sound reached her ears. A great gob of green goop exploded from its mouth, shooting out at her friends. Lok and Beorna took the full force of the acidic spray, but all of them were hit with at least some of the caustic stuff. Worse than that, the entire back half of the carpet was splashed, and black smoke began to waft almost immediately from it as the acid quickly did its work.

Almost without thinking, Mole dove toward the monstrous fiend, although it wasn't immediately obvious what even sneak attacks could do against it. The thing resembled a lump of stone with arms, legs, and wings, and a tail that extended for a good fifteen feet behind it. A bony ridge rode down its back, all the way down to the end of its tail, which culminated in a broad bony plate like the head of a shovel. Its head was a massive oblong lump, dominated with those huge jaws and hooded slits for eyes. Black spikes jutted from its skull, horns that gave it a vaguely tauran—or draconic—visage.

Gods, it's ugly, she thought, the sentiment reinforced a second later as she got close enough to smell it.

The carpet, still descending rapidly, began to slow, as the acid began burning away not only at the fabric, but at the magical power that animated it. She saw Arun step to the smoking back edge, his holy sword hissing from his scabbard, surrounding him with a bright golden aura.

Mole saw something slither across the back of the giant hordeling. *What in the hells is that?* It looked like a splatter of black mud, only it moved, independent of the rhythmic stretching of the muscles that powered the fiend's wings. For an instant, she caught sight of something that might have been a head, and dark slits that held dim red coals for eyes.

Its gaze passed over her for only the barest instant, but it was enough to send a cold chill through her body.

Then it looked up at her companions on the carpet. *Something* shivered in the space between them, the faintest haze that Mole, no stranger to magic, recognized as a spell or power of some sort.

Even as Arun leapt off the carpet, calling upon Cal's granted *flight* to carry him forward to intercept the threat, all of his magical wards and protections, including that provided by Cal's wand, failed.

Mole watched in horror as the paladin's leap became a free fall, with nothing to stop his fall but the horde of eager demons waiting three hundred feet below.

Chapter 559

The black dragon Nbrathux was a queen among her kind, favored of the god-dragon Tiamat. The drake was already a blight upon the fading world of Karas-dhun when she was summoned to Avernus, the uppermost layer of Baator, by her mistress to serve in her court of power.

The honor of the appointment was exceeded only by the potential for even greater power, but Nbrathux was a creature of vast ego, a trait which did not serve her well in the court of that most powerful of dragons. Nbrathux had barely served two decades in her post before a rival betrayed some indiscreet plottings to Tiamat, and the ancient black was cast out in disgrace. Perhaps as a nod to the black dragon's chaotic leanings, or maybe as a last ironic punishment, the Queen of Dragons hurled Nbrathux into the Abyss.

Unable to return to the Prime of her own devices—her sorceries were potent, but she lacked the ability to *plane shift* on her own—the dragon spent a desperate year alone in the Abyss, crossing across several layers via *portals* or through the assistance of powerful demon princelings who lacked the power to slay the dragon, but likewise did not want her dwelling within their realm. The dragon only narrowly escaped destruction on several occasions. The power of Nbrathux was considerable even in comparison to the demons that other fiends that populated the dark layers of that plane, but she was alone, compared to millions upon millions of fiends that were not adverse to taking on a superior foe with the advantage of numbers.

After the collapse of several temporary alliances with lesser abyssal magnates, the dragon found herself in the company of a fellow band of outcasts, a small company of hordelings that been brought to the Abyss in the service of the dark lord Kotischtche, only to be abandoned when the demon lord's interest shifted to other matters. The dragon found the creatures pliant enough to fill the role of servants, and the hordelings in turn were delighted at the power that the dragon added to their cause.

If she had chosen to lay low, and given time to establish connections with other powers, the dragon might have been able to survive the Abyss, and even rise to some minor position of notoriety. As it was, however, the dragon did not even survive her own choice of

companions. The hordelings, chaotic as they were, bristled at the pretensions of their new mistress, and following an unpleasant instance of chastisement, fell upon her in a rage and tore her to pieces.

But the dragon's legacy did not end there. Perhaps it was perversion, or merely a recognition that her own line was about to end, but before she was slain the dragon mated with several of the fiends. Hordelings are incredibly fecund; they almost have to be, for their race is prey not only to almost every intelligent and mindless species of the lower planes, but the chaos that they embody also causes them to turn upon themselves as often as not. Some demonologists theorize that this is due to a profound self-hatred experienced by these unfortunate creatures, but as far as it is known no interrogations with a hordeling have ever been able to prove or disprove that hypothesis.

Three children were born of those unions, twisted things that combined the traits of the dragon mother and the unpredictable mutability of the fiendish fathers. The half-dragons were possessed of certain advantages over their cousins, but were given no special exemption to the hazardous lifestyle practiced within hordeling "society", and two were quickly slain by their bretheren over assorted trifling offenses.

The final scion survived, and even prospered, after a fashion. The creature was known merely as Nax, and as it grew swiftly to adulthood, it developed talents that set it apart from its kin. It spent some time on its own, serving in the hosts of several warring nalfeshnee lords upon a layer of the Abyss that was under contest. This experience allowed it to develop its strength, and soon it was a force to be reckoned with even by the standards of the Abyss. While demons bore a certain resistance to the acid that the young half-breed could already discharge in copious quantities, their durability did not extend to grabbed and ripped in half, a tactic that Nax quickly perfected. Its strength was prodigious, but the creature also made a number of enemies. Its prospects, like those of any unique being in the chaotic Abyss, were quite uncertain.

Soon thereafter, it came upon the creature Yavuv.

Yavuv had been a babau of no great distinction, one of the countless legions of lesser fiends that infested the Abyss like flies upon a corpse. It spent four hundred years in the service of the nalfeshnee J'bok'a, until it displeased its master in a serious instance of negligence, allowing one of its rivals to seize a key advantage in their centuries-long on again, off again war. For a lesser offense, the babau would have merely been obliterated, perhaps to reform as a dretch in a few thousand years, but Yavuv would not be allowed to get off so easily.

Demons are masters at the craft of inflicting torment, but Yavuv was doubly unfortunate in that J'bok'a was the owner of several unique powers in this area. The babau attempted to flee, but was brought before its master, where it was subject to skeletal deliquescence. In other words, the demon's bones were liquified within its body, leaving it in a permanent state of heaped languor, unable to even rise, and forced to exist in a constant state of intense, penetrating pain. Having thus chastened its minion, J'bok'a opened a portal to a random layer of the Abyss, and hurled Yavuv through.

In this circumstance, a quick demise was the almost certain outcome. But somehow, in defiance of all the odds of fate, the demon persisted. Driven nearly insane by the constant agony in which it faced existence, something snapped inside the babau's mind. It lost much of what it had been, but in gained something as well, in the form of a rare manifestation of psionic ability. Perhaps it had been latent in the demon all along... but in any case, even with that gift, the demon only narrowly survived by stealth and trickery. Despite surviving its altered condition, it was still virtually unable to move under its own power, and even the simple task of standing upright was forever lost to it.

Yavuv's fate would have likely emulated that of Nbrathux, but for a chance encounter with Nax. The half-dragon was intelligent enough to recognize the benefits that the crippled fiend could offer it, and so began a symbiotic relationship that allowed both creatures, each unusual in its own unique way, to prosper.

Shortly thereafter both of the warring nalfeshnees were betrayed to a rival balor, and the pair found themselves free agents. Yavuv had heard a report of a charismatic new general in the Blood War who was recruiting mercenaries to his banner, and so the two found themselves tying their fate to that of the once-great Prince Graz'tz.

* * * * *

Dannel knew nothing of this, of course, as he drew an arrow back to his cheek, and took aim at the ascending monstrosity. Before he could loose, Arun was hit by the targeted *dispel magic* from the parasite Yavuv, and started to fall. The elf immediately aborted his shot and channeled the power of his song into a *feather fall* spell, which enfolded the paladin a scant instant before he fell out of range.

Arun's descent immediately slowed to a soft drift, but there was still nothing below him but a wave of demons.

"Call! Bring the carpet around!" Dannel urged. But the gnome was having difficulty just keeping the magical rug under control, as the acid from Nax's breath weapon ate away not only at the fabric, but also at the potency of the spell within the device.

Beorna didn't wait. With wisps of black smoke still rising from the crevices of her armor, she dove head-first off the carpet, plummeting like a stone toward Arun. Thirty feet away, on the opposite side of the creature, Umbar had also seen the paladin fall, and was only a few paces behind her, both converging on Arun's drifting form.

Mole's gaze had remained fixed on the parasitic creature clinging to the larger demon's back, so she saw its head turn, following Beorna's movement as she dove after Arun. The gnome did not have to stop to think to know what was about to happen. Her hand shot into her *bag of holding*, closed around something familiar. She didn't think, she just acted, drawing out the object and hurling it with precision at the demon.

The fat clay flask struck the back of the half-dragon hordeling right along the bony ridge that ran up its back, less than a foot above where the black mass of Yavuv began. The jar exploded in a white-hot flash of alchemist's fire, spraying down around his body in the backblast of the hordeling's powerful wings. The demon was largely unaffected by the hot

fire, protected by its inherent resistances, but Mole had clearly gotten its attention. As it emerged from the billowing plume of smoke, flames hissing around its misshapen black body, its glowing red eyes fixed hatefully upon the gnome.

Uh oh, Mole had time to think, before the sky suddenly became insubstantial around her, as the magic sustaining her *flight* dissipated. She knew what it was like to fall, but somehow, with the ground black with crowded masses of demons three hundred feet below her, the sensation that filled her gut as she looked down was just that much worse.

Chapter 560

As gravity started to exert its inexorable hold on Mole, there was no time for casual pondering, only desperate action. The acrobat snapped her body, made a desperate lunge, and grabbed onto the only thing within reach that could possibly arrest her fall.

Arun remained calm despite the still-rapid approach of the ground below. The demons were packing together in a cluster below him, eagerly shrieking in anticipation of tearing him apart. It seemed like all of the occupants of the canyon were focused on the battle raging above them now, and there continued a sporadic barrage from the half-fiend mercenaries whose violated arrows lanced up at the assorted combatants. As Arun drifted downward on the *feather fall*, he drew more of their focus, and soon arrows were plinging off of his heavy armor, seeking the slightest vulnerability to pierce through to the flesh beneath.

He continued to fall, two hundred thirty feet above the ground, two twenty, two ten, two hundred. The demons could now be individually picked out, masses of skeletal babaus, bar-igura, black jovocs, half-fiend warriors in red and black plate, hordelings, countless dretches filling ever space between. A few larger beings, greater demons, in the press, reluctantly granted space by their lesser bretheren.

“Arun!” Beorna cried, drawing the paladin’s attention up. The templar shot down like a heavy stone, adding the impetus of Cal’s spell to the natural draw of the ground below, streaking down in a barely controlled dive. Umbar was not far behind her, converging on the paladin’s position.

Arun sheathed his sword, and extended his hand.

But even as the templar extended hers to grasp him, Arun was buffeted roughly to the side. Below, in the crowd, a bar-igura cackled as the paladin shot thirty feet distant, hovering briefly before he began once more to fall. The *telekinesis* attack had one silver lining, as an *unholy blight* hurled by a hezrou missed him, only briefly catching Beorna on the edge of the effect, who shrugged off the dark power with her divinely-granted mettle.

Arun felt more mental thrusts gathering around him, but he gathered his will and resisted the various assaults. Umbar had shifted his course and now reached for him; Beorna was now behind him, but was hastening to adjust.

A *chaos hammer* hit them, and a moment later Umbar grunted as an evil arrow pierced the calf muscle on his left leg. The cleric ignored both pains, and snapped his hand around Arun's. A moment later Beorna wrapped her arm around the paladin's back, the two dwarves cooperating as they lifted Arun toward the summit of the Bastion's shield wall. The celestials manning the defenses did their best to cover them, firing arrows or hurling pots of holy water into the massed demons below. Those attacks wrought heavy damage, but the defenders were few, while the demons and other assorted fiends numbered in the thousands.

For a few moments it looked like they would make it, despite the furious intensity of the missile and spell attacks. But Arun's fall had dropped them low enough for the babaus to extend their own power, and the cluster of dwarves were hit by a barrage of general and targeted *dispel*s. Again the flight granted by Cal's wand was the weakest link, and the spell upon Umbar failed. The dwarf started to fall, but Arun still held his hand. Beorna now found herself supporting both of them, their combined weight overwhelming the potency of the spell upon her, dragging all of them downward.

"Let me go!" Umbar urged.

Far above them, the battle with the half-dragon hordeling and its warped symbiant raged on. The Herald's Voice dove down to meet Nax as it flew up toward the passengers still upon the stricken carpet. The sword archon let out a clear cry as he challenged the evil thing that was his antithesis, his holy blade taking form before him. Nax eagerly lunged forward to meet him, but as it extended its long claws, the archon darted inside its reach, slashing at its body with the glowing shaft of force. The blow opened a long gash in Nax's body, a bright cut that spewed forth a deluge of putrid black ichor that steamed as it entered the air and fell in fat droplets to the ground below.

But the archon paid quickly for its attack, as Nax closed its huge arms, enfolding the celestial and pressing it tight against its body. The Voice tried to pull free but was caught as the half-dragon's claws dug into its torso. One wing snapped, and the creature tore a cry of pain from him as it dipped its massive jaws and bit a chunk out of the celestial's shoulder.

Arrows slammed into the hordeling's arms and shoulders, as Callendes and Dannel fired off several shots. The failing carpet was becoming an unstable platform even for Dannel, and he was not able to fall into the rapid-fire sequence of arrows that he typically managed. Callendes, his wings keeping him aloft as he hovered, was less distracted, but by stopping his movement the avariel made himself a more attractive target. Before he could release his third arrow, he staggered as a jagged, red-tipped *violated* arrow slammed into his torso just below his left breast. The impact, a critical hit, caused the winged elf to falter, and his face twisted with agony with each beat of his wings, as he fought to remain aloft.

Lok had paused on the edge of the carpet, knowing that another *dispel* would turn him into a burden rather than an aid in the ongoing battle. But it was clear that his bow would not make a significant contribution to this fray, even with his strength, not against foes such as these. Grimacing, he dropped the bow and drew out *Coldburn*, the potent greatsword he'd recovered in the stronghold of the Cagewrights under Cauldron. The blade was damaged, etched with the marks of babau acid, but there was naught to be done for that now.

Stung by the arrows, Nax hurled the broken celestial aside and surged up again toward the carpet, which was losing altitude quickly as it continued toward the wall of the Bastion. They were still above the level of that fortification's summit, but they still had more than a hundred feet to cover to reach it, and the carpet continued to smoke as the hordeling's acidic breath continued its grim work.

Lok disciplined himself to not look down. Commending himself to fate, the genasi lifted his sword and leapt at the onrushing monster.

The hordeling's powerful movements while it engaged the Voice had caused its tail to lash back and forth wildly. The small form clinging to the spade-like plate at the end of that appendage was hurled left and right, barely holding on with one hand as the wind whipped crazily around her. As it dropped the Voice and surged ahead, Mole was finally able to swing herself up and snap her legs around its tail just above that broad tip. She figured she should do something to hurt it, but at the moment nothing effective seemed to come to mind. Still, it seemed like a good idea to start climbing up the tail; the bony segments at least would make that task easier.

But when she looked up, she found herself staring right into the eyes of the black thing clinging to the hordeling's back. Malice washed over her like a wave, and she heard a sinister voice sound within the depths of her mind.

Let go, that voice said. The suggestion did not seem to be a very good one, *no sirrie*, but it was backed with magical compulsion, and she let out a sob as she felt her hands loosening their grip.

Don't listen to it, Mole! came an echoing voice in her mind, a sound familiar and yet not her own. She shook her head, made an obscene gesture toward the fiend, and with her legs holding her in place, she snapped up her other hand from behind her back, throwing her little knife at it. The non-magical missile caromed off its head, doing no damage, but she did succeed in pissing it off just that much more.

It responded with another mental attack, but rather than another *suggestion*, this time a wave of pain exploded through the head of the hard-pressed gnome. For a moment everything faded into gray around her, and then a memory returned with startling clarity; she was in the Malachite Fortress under Cauldron. She'd gone there with Zenna and Arun and Ruphos to find the missing children from the orphanage, and she'd climbed up a statue draped with chains. The chains had been some sort of golem creature, and she'd nearly died there. The pain now felt exactly as it had back then, and for a moment she nearly threw herself free, before she remembered where she *really* was.

Grimacing, she looked up at the demon-thing, and snarled one of Hodge's dwarven curses at it. She locked her hands around the hordeling's tail once more, and prepared to climb up to where she could do some damage.

Unfortunately, before she could so much as crawl a foot forward, the world suddenly whipped rapidly around her, and she found herself and her perch flying through space at an incredible speed.

The hordeling battered Lok with an incredible blow that knocked him roughly aside. The genasi recovered and started back toward Nax with his sword trailing streamers of flame and ice behind him. The half-dragon started to turn to face the warrior, but another arrow slammed hard into its shoulder. It looked up at Dannel in time to take a second hit that caromed hard off its angular forehead, opening a gash above its left eye.

Ignoring Lok, the hordeling pounded its wings, and lunged through the sky, covering the last forty feet or so that separated it from the struggling carpet. The maneuver gave Lok a chance to get close enough to swing at its torso, but the wound was minor at best, barely grazing its armored hide. He prepared for an all-out attack, but out of the corner of his eye he saw something sliding across the monster's back, and caught a glimpse of evil red orbs staring at him that sent a chill down his back.

But before either he or Yuvuv could act, Nax spread his wings and spun in mid air. His left claw swept out and smacked Lok hard across the face, knocking the genasi backward again. At the same time, its tail came around in a deliberate arc, the plate-like end accelerating with whiplike force until it smacked hard into the flying carpet square in the center of what remained of the fabric.

Dannel was standing about a foot from where the tail hit, and went flying like a boulder shot from a trebuchet, his left leg trailing behind him at an obviously unnatural angle. The carpet snapped around the tail and was yanked with it as the hordeling drew it back. Finally the ruined scrap of fabric tore free, no longer animated with even a vestige of magic, and it began fluttering toward the ground below, still trailing wisps of black smoke.

Rid of that trouble, the hordeling turned its full attention upon Lok.

Of Cal and Mole, there was no sign.

Chapter 561

The companions, having fought through the initial waves of demons warding the Bastion, now scattered before the assault of the half-dragon monstrosity Nax and its symbiant passenger, the once-babau Yuvuv.

Beorna's helmet fell from her head as her body tipped downward. She struggled with all her might to maintain her grip on Arun, but with Umbar attached to the dwarf, she was now essentially trying to carry over five hundred pounds of dwarf, armor, and gear forward. She was falling, and the relative safety of the Bastion seemed still too far away.

"Let me fall!" Umbar shouted again. The dwarf was trying to pull himself free of Arun's grip, but the paladin held his hand like a vice. "I'll not drag you to your deaths!"

"No..." Arun said, between clenched teeth. He shucked off his shield, which tumbled in the air as it fell, and locked Umbar's hand in both of his. "Beorna!"

“Too... much!” the templar grunted. An *unholy blight* struck them, and she nearly lost it, there. Emerging from the explosion of dark power, she fixed her eyes on the battlements of the Bastion’s defensive wall. They were almost level with that line, now, and still losing altitude...

Beorna drew focus from deep within her, calling upon that strength that had served her as an outsider, growing up among people different from her. “HELM!” she said, the syllable startling clear over the chaotic noise of the demons below. She filled herself with the strength of her patron, and heaved herself up, her own will augmenting the faltering power of Cal’s magic. With Arun and Umbar trailing below her, she went straight for her target, a gap in the massive merlons that ran along the summit of the wall like a row of perfect white teeth. More attacks continued to impact them, and several other *dispels* sought to unravel the tenuous thread of magic that kept them all aloft, and send them plummeting down to certain destruction. But luck, or determination, or perhaps the benevolent eye of some higher power, protected them. Her arms felt like they were being torn out of their sockets; that was nothing, an externality beyond the border of her iron discipline. An arrow pierced her side, sending a wave of nausea through her gut; she ignored it, lost in her solitary focus on her destination. That was all there was in the world, and she drove for it with all of her being.

The gift of Helm’s strength began to fade, but with a final surge she lifted herself and her passengers up and forward, and the three of them passed between the gap, and over the battlement. Umbar’s lower body slammed into the lip on the edge of the wall, and he would have fallen, had not Arun yanked him bodily up and over.

Lok and the hordeling exchanged a violent flurry of blows, each seeking to undo each other through sheer physical, brutish power. *Coldburn*, backed by the genasi’s phenomenal strength, had opened a pair of gashes in the half-dragon’s body, but in turn Lok’s body had been roughly battered, with several of his armor plates dented seriously in a way that had to be causing him incredible pain with every movement. But he did not falter, lifting himself up over Nax, intending to descend upon him with a two-handed strike to the head.

But that plan was foiled again by Yavuv, who had crept up across the back of its host, and now bent its head up over Nax’s shoulder on its shapeless neck, allowing it to strike the warrior with its power.

Once again, the *dispel* took hold, and Lok faltered. But the genasi had seen the others fall before him, and as the spell faded, and he started to fall, he shifted his grip and drove *Coldburn* downward. His own weight combined with the power of his thrust, and the greatsword tore *through* the half-dragon’s left thigh, and Lok’s fall abruptly ended, with the genasi dangling tenuously from the hilt of the weapon protruding from the fiend’s body.

Nax screamed, and seized the warrior in both of its claws, tearing him from his uncertain perch. Those claws had torn apart demons twice the fiend’s size, and now they crushed the genasi’s already battered body. Lok struggled, tearing one arm free of its grasp, but before he could do more, the hordeling opened its massive jaws again, and blasted Lok point-blank with an incredible spray of concentrated acid.

Chapter 562

Mole's world was comprised of two things; pain, pain that suffused her entire body, and a vague sense of falling. She couldn't see anything; she was enfolded in a tight web of fabric that clung to her, wrapping her up tight like a knot of lettuce inside a spring roll.

The comparison was so odd that it shook her out of her mental fugue enough to realize that it might be a very, very good idea to get out of here! She got her hand on her dagger, and drew the magical weapon, cutting away the cloth holding her at key points, giving her additional freedom of movement. The fabric—the flying carpet, or what was left of it, she realized—fluttered in several long trails that trailed above her. Above was the sky of Occipitus. That meant that below...

She slid free, not fully releasing the rug; though depleted of magic, the shredded mass was still slowing her fall, the strands causing friction on the air.

When she looked down, her breath caught in her throat.

Demons, everywhere. She was less than a hundred feet from the ground now, and just a few seconds from an impact that would be decidedly unpleasant for her. Most of them would not be able to see her, perhaps, with her ring cloaking her in *invisibility*, but enough had the ability to pierce that veil to make escape rather unlikely.

Oh, damn... she thought, her vision momentarily obscured by a blur in her vision. Then she grimaced. Damned if she wasn't going to go down without a fight, not crying like some kind of... girl!

Her confidence thus restored, she started to move, but her attention was drawn upward by a soft fluttering in the air. There was nothing there, but she grinned nonetheless, and extended her hand, becoming *invisible* again just as she felt a sudden grip that snagged on her wrist, and she was yanked off the carpet. She watched with rapt fascination as the remains of the carpet fluttered down into the ranks of the demons, which tore it to pieces in violent frustration. She was sad to see the flying device destroyed, but it was definitely better than having her still be on it when it landed.

The grip holding her was tight, and felt like a claw. But even *polymorphed*, she could still recognize the touch of her uncle, and she smiled.

Lok's body was burning agony. Enough of the acid blast had torn through the slit in his helm that he was effectively blinded, and the only thing he could smell was the stink of his burning flesh mixed with the caustic odor of the acid. He did not know whether his blindness was temporary, caused by the burning fluid and the sizzling smoke, or whether his eyeballs even now were being transformed into runnels of fluid within their sockets. The pain was too universal to distinguish. But the genasi's perceptions focused on his free hand, which closed around the familiar haft that jutted out under his left arm, across his back.

His ears, which alone of his senses seemed to still be functioning normally, were his guide. The fiend's cries echoed within the confines of his helmet, distorting but giving him just

enough guidance as he swept his thundering axe up and around. The timbre of that demonic voice changed as he hit something solid, accompanied by the familiar noise of blood gushing from a vicious wound, and the cacophonous pulse that thrummed through his body as the weapon, empowered by his long-time friend, released its power.

And then he was free, and falling.

“Cal!” Mole shouted, pointing with her free hand at the falling figure before belatedly realizing that she was *invisible* and couldn’t see it. The archmage, changed into the form of a small dragon, was not in a position to intervene, but another individual was. Mole let out a little shout as the Herald’s Voice, his devastating injuries partially healed by his magic, flew up to meet the falling genasi. Lok could not see him coming, but the archon smoothly intersected his path, falling with him for a hundred feet before he spread his wings and rose, the genasi clutching tight to his muscled frame.

The companions and their allies converged on the shield wall of the Bastion. Beorna had landed with Arun and Umbar, the three dwarves staggering wearily to their feet as a pair of hound archons assisted them. Dannel, knocked free of the carpet by the smash of the hordeling’s tail, had recovered enough to fly down to the battlements, assisted by Callendes. He landed awkwardly on his right leg, the left broken in several places from the impact of the tail smash, but even so it was not clear which of the two was lending more support to the other. The avariel’s vicious wound still trailed bright blood, and he looked wan, barely able to hold his bow. Cal and Mole, both *invisible*, flew up over the battlement themselves, the gnome dropping free to land easily on her feet. Finally came the Voice, bearing the crippled genasi warrior.

The hordeling was descending on them, injured but still full of fight, Lok’s sword still jutting from its leg. Those celestials manning the defenses fired missiles up at it, but the wounds they inflicted seemed tiny on its massive frame. The battered dwarves pulled themselves to their feet and readied weapons, and Dannel leaned against a merlon and fitted a fresh string to his bow, his face twisting with pain with every slight movement. Mole just looked up in awe, knowing that a colossal collision was about to occur.

Nax spread its wings, and extended its lower legs, claws extended. But a scant second before it would have hit the battlements, it suddenly shrieked and veered off, sweeping aside into a dive that quickly took it out of view.

Stunned and mostly intact, the companions limped, crawled, and walked into a circle behind the shelter of the fortress battlements.

They had arrived at the Bastion.

Chapter 563

Benzan came back to consciousness with a pleasant, warm glow suffusing his body, which was always a bad sign.

Reluctantly, he lifted his head from where it had fallen across his chest, and opened his eyes. He saw what he'd expected to see, and dreaded. Yeela shot him the familiar smirk that he'd learned to hate as she slipped her empty syringe back into its red leather case. His languor was already fading as the substance she'd injected him with did its work. Soon, he knew, she would be ready to begin again; she never brought him around unless she was fully rested for another session. They could last hours, days; by the end he was not in any condition to gauge the passage of time.

"Ready to begin again, my pretty?" the lamia said, as always reading his thoughts with uncanny accuracy. By now, she knew him better than a friend, better than a lover. She knew things about him that even Dana had no inkling of. Benzan had no idea how long he'd been in the creature's "care", but he suspected it had been a long time, months or even years, perhaps.

He tore his gaze away from her, and looked around, more as a gesture of defiance than out of an interest in the chamber. He already knew every detail, every dangling tool, every pore in each one of the wooden and metal constructs situated around the perimeter of the room. He could not see behind him, could not even twist his head beyond a few degrees, but he knew the rack upon which he was currently stretched better than any of them. Even the splinters that touched his bare arms and legs were mapped in his mind, deviant sensations that Yeela allowed him to feel.

The lamia chuckled as she examined her table of implements carefully and deliberately. That meant that she was allowing him his momentary defiance, and that he would pay for it later. Benzan was developing an air of fatalism, but he could not help but feel a sense of cloying dread at that. For all of the ministrations that he'd experienced at the hands of Yeela, she was always able to come up with something new, a new horror that his body and mind could not anticipate, and not adapt to.

The lamia lifted an instrument and turned to him. "Today, I think we will apply ourselves to your manhood."

Benzan's heart clenched in his chest.

The lamia came forward, her claws clacking slightly on the bloodstained stone tiles of the floor, but before she could touch him the door to the chamber swung ponderously open. Yeela frowned; Benzan knew that she hated interruptions.

Another creature entered the chamber. Her soft face and slender frame were representations of the ideal of feminine beauty, marred by the charcoal wings that spread out from her back. She was clad in a clinging outfit that left only just enough to the imagination to add a certain something to the aura of raw sexuality that she radiated like heat from a bonfire. Something flickered in her eyes, but it might have only been the reflection of the lanterns that danced brightly in them as she entered the room. Benzan did not know her, but that meant nothing; the succubi changed appearance the way that other creatures changed their clothing. They'd had their turn with him as well, and their torments, while different in nature than those practiced by Yeela, were no less destructive to body, mind, and soul.

But he was helpless to intervene in any case, so he merely observed, grateful for even a few moments of relief from the lamia's attentions. Yeela shot him a knowing glance, as if to promise him that he would come to regret that feeling, then she turned toward the newcomer.

"Welcome, my dear Kireen," the lamia said, although Benzan could tell that she was anything but welcoming. Some demons practiced torture as a performance art, but Yeela was different, enjoying the solitary bond that existed between the torturer and victim. "What brings you down to the cells this day?"

"The Great Lord has an interest in this one, Yeela. I was commanded to look in on him, from time to time."

The lamia flicked her wrist in a gesture of annoyance. "I am following the Master's mandate to the letter, with this one," she said. "I do not need anyone second-guessing my skill."

The succubus spread her hands before her in a conciliatory gesture. "I certainly did not mean to challenge your admirable proficiency in the art," she purred. "In all honesty, I would as soon attend to my own concerns, but with the Master gone..."

Benzan perked up slightly at that. Graz'zt had left the citadel? He didn't know whether he considered that good or bad news, but it gave his starved mind something to turn around.

The lamia chuckled. "Your whelp is off at the Master's side now... He has come far fast, but it should be interesting to see how he fares at the forefront of events. Prestige is a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to the intrigues among the great ones."

The succubus's mouth tightened into the barest hint of a scowl, just for a moment. But she quickly mastered herself, and turned to Benzan. "He does not look to be lucid," she said, examining him with the expert eye of one seasoned to pain.

"Oh, he's awake," the lamia said, turning to her tools. The moment she'd shifted around enough to take her eyes off of Kireen, the succubus twisted her wrist, and a short white rod, perhaps two and a half feet in length, appeared in her hand. The demoness pointed it at Yeela and spoke a word of power.

Benzan felt a screaming sound rip through him as a sonic evocation, *maximized* by the white rod, erupted in the confines of the small chamber. Clinging to consciousness, he saw that Yeela was much worse off; she'd taken a direct hit, and blood poured down her body where blood vessels had exploded through her flesh.

But the lamia was a durable creature. Snarling, trails of bright red blood draining from her nostrils and ears, Yeela snatched a jagged hook-edged blade from the table and lunged at the succubus. Kireen ducked back with superhuman agility, but could not avoid a gash that drew a bright red line across her belly. Yeela lifted the weapon to strike again, but before she could stab the knife down into her attacker's chest the succubus fired off another sonic at point blank range.

This time, the world exploded in a surge of red, and Benzan lost consciousness.

Chapter 564

This time, his return to consciousness was both more gradual, and more painful.

“Wake up,” came a voice, insistent and demanding compliance. There was magic in that voice, and he wanted to obey, but his battered body was resisting.

Benzan could only dimly feel his body, but suddenly the tension holding his arms against the rack disappeared. He fell forward, and would have fallen except for the fact that something caught him, holding him more or less upright.

“Wake up,” came the voice again, accompanied by a flash of pain as he was slapped—hard—across the face.

Summoning a fierce effort, he opened his eyes. He was still in the torture room, being propped up by the succubus. Looking down, he caught sight of an ugly red and brown heap of disgusting wreckage that he realized was Yeela, or rather what was left of her. After what he’d been through, the sight should have been a pleasant one, but he had to fight down a sudden surge of bile that threatened to rob him of what little equilibrium he’d been able to retain.

“You need to get ahold of yourself,” the succubus said. “This bitch is done, but others may come by at any minute.”

His gaze traveled upward, and as he met her eyes, he thought he saw something there, through the fog that was still clouding his senses. “Dana?”

The succubus laughed, but it was a cruel, harsh sound. “If you can think that, you’re more damaged than I expected. No, my little tiefling, I am not your lost love, and while I might enjoy the chance to scour her from your mind and body, you must get up and move, if you wish to survive.” He flinched as she lifted her hand, holding the bloody hook-knife that Yeela had used to much effect upon him, and slammed it into the wooden rack an inch from his bare thigh.

Benzan grabbed the weapon and tugged it free, with some effort. He felt weak, his muscles strained from hours upon hours of being lashed to manacles, or this rack, or any of the other instruments of torment located in the room. He had experienced too much to be anything but suspicious of the succubus’s motives, or even the veracity of this entire episode. He was all too aware that the very substance of reality as he perceived it was mutable in this place. But he was still who he was at the core, and he would not pass up any opportunity, however slim.

He had to saw at the bonds holding his ankles, and nearly fell as he staggered forward off the rack. He had to steady himself against Yeela’s table, but did not relinquish the hook-knife as he turned to face the succubus.

“Why?” he asked, glancing down at the mangled corpse of the lamia.

“There is no time for idle chatter,” Kireen said. “The window of action is extremely limited... we must move.”

“So... you’re saying to trust you?”

The succubus laughed again. “You’d have to be a truly incredible fool to believe that. No, Benzan, I ask not for your trust. But you are free of your bonds; trust that. Your torturer is dead at your feet; trust that. And your freedom is a tenuous thing; you can trust that, indeed. Now, let us go, and swiftly. Be silent, if you do not wish to be returned to your former condition.”

He tried to walk, and found that he could, with difficulty. His legs were stiff, and the little pains that shot through his body with every movement were almost nothing in comparison to what he was used to from Yeela’s hands.

A hangover’s never going to feel quite that imposing, after that, he thought to himself grimly. But despite regaining his mobility, he knew he was far from being at his best.

“Wait,” he said, his eyes turning to Yeela’s red satchel, and the injection capsules he knew lay within.

“I would not recommend that,” Kireen told him. “The drugs restore, but the side effects will impair you significantly. I need you with your full wits about you, such as they are. You are not as harmed as you feel yourself to be right now; Yeela had instructions to keep you mostly intact.” As she spoke, she turned to the door, and pulled it open slightly. “It’s time to go.”

“I suppose clothes would be too much to ask?”

Even in her agitation, the succubus managed a lascivious glance that slid up his naked body. With his bones jutting from his lean frame, and his skin covered with a slick of old sweat and dried blood, he knew he had to look almost as frightening as some of the demons he’d seen in his time here. “Don’t worry, I’ll do my best to keep myself in check,” she said, dryly.

Grimacing, his hand clutched tight on his makeshift weapon, he followed her.

Chapter 565

The succubus Kireen led Benzan out into a corridor of bare stone, fashioned from massive blocks of rough-hewn black rock. His bare feet felt like they were being stabbed with tiny needles with each step, but he forced himself to ignore the pain. The place was as quiet as the grave, and he neither saw nor heard the faintest hint of activity in the first few rooms they passed.

“Where is everybody?” he whispered, when they paused at a junction.

“Quiet,” she hissed, drawing him hastily into a side corridor a moment before Benzan heard guttural voices from the corridor ahead, and saw shadowy figures appear in the distance, coming their way. Despite his earlier concerns he now had to trust her, as she led him around a bend, and then into a side room that opened so suddenly off the twisting passage that he nearly ran into the door as she slid it open and ducked inside.

The chamber behind was extremely small, and Benzan found himself pressed close up against the succubus in a way that was decidedly uncomfortable for him. She gave off a heady scent that affected his body despite himself, and he drew back, nearly knocking over a black crystal decanter that rested on a narrow table along the left wall.

“Careful, you fool,” she said. “We will need to move quickly.” She took something out of a cabinet of black wood—the color seemed popular in the décor—and handed it to him. It was a compact package of garments apparently fashioned of dark gray woolens. He unfolded the clothes, a simple sleeveless robe with a pair of matching boots and fingerless gloves, and pulled them while the succubus watched without comment.

“I could use a real weapon,” he said, when he was done. The clothes had been designed for someone of slightly larger stature, and the robe scratched painfully against his abused flesh, but he still felt better for having at least some form of protection upon him.

“If it comes to swordplay, then it is already too late for you,” she said. But she made no move to divest him of the small blade he carried. He held it now at his side as he came up to her again, meeting her cold eyes with a determined stare of his own.

“I think it’s time you told me what your game is here. I’m grateful for being let out of Yeela’s cell, but I’m not going to follow you blindly into another one of Graz’zt’s little mazes. I’ve played his sport before.”

For a moment he thought she would refuse to tell him anything again, but then she leaned against him, catching him off guard as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Ah, but you are still playing, Benzan,” she said, her lips mere inches from his. “It is just that your piece has been upgraded, and moved to a different board.”

He poked her slightly in the gut with his blade, enough to get her attention. “And Malad? Is he another piece on this board?”

The succubus chuckled. “I can see why Graz’zt is so perturbed with you,” she said. “And why Athux took an interest in you, after your arrival here. There is not enough time to explain the rules of the game fully, my dear. But let it suffice to say, that if you are returned to the list of active players, it may advance my interests in the game.”

“Did Delem know the rules?”

“Delem thought himself a mouse, but a raging fire burned in his veins,” the succubus said. “That fire burns on in Malad, who is not corrupted by the weakness that you mortals instill in your young, by the pathetic ideals you espouse: mercy toward the weak, tolerance,

benevolence. He has come into his power, and he knows it. His day has come, and he will finish the work that his father started.”

“You demons are all alike,” Benzan said, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Can’t wait to turn on each other, can you?”

She shifted slightly, and he suddenly found his hand caught in hers, pressing the blade between them. The way it was situated, he could not withdraw it without catching himself on the hook-end of the device. She ran her other hand through his hair, her nails scratching his scalp hard enough to bleed him. Her scent was intoxicating, and he found his body responding to her despite the revulsion that twisted in his gut. “Don’t be so judgmental, Benzan. You are, after all, one of us, no matter how hard you try to deny it.”

She held him for a moment to show that she could, reveling in the effect that she had on him, and then released him. He staggered back, upset at himself for his own weakness. His emotions were a storm that threatened to overwhelm him, and which he barely was able to discipline.

“Use it,” she suggested. “The anger and the despair, and yes, even the lust... that may help you get out of here alive.” He had no reply to that, and she moved to the far wall, where a low-handing buttress provided a shadowy nook. Her hand darted in along the wall, and a small portal opened.

The secret passage was narrow and low, forcing Benzan to shuffle forward awkwardly. The succubus seemed to have no difficulty, but she was probably used to sneaking around in these kinds of hidden tunnels, he thought grimly. In a way, it was a relief to be able to press up against the adjacent walls to steady himself. But there was no chance to rest; Kireen moved swiftly ahead of him, and after a few sharp turns she paused to open another doorway in the side of the passage.

“Come on, come on,” she said, holding the door for her. Benzan sensed the change in her demeanor, and his hand tightened on the handle of his weapon.

The room was the largest one he’d seen yet, thirty feet or more across with a high vaulted ceiling that rose up at least twenty feet above. The chamber was irregularly shaped, with deep alcoves and uneven nooks that were lost in shadow. The place was lit by a half-dozen glowing red globes that appeared to be cemented into niches in the walls; each shone with barely more light than a candle’s flame. There were a few exits, doorways warded by tall arches, but it was immediately clear why the succubus had brought him here.

The secret door opened onto a black alcove. The adjacent wall to their right was dominated by a massive gatehouse, a tunnel twelve feet wide and fifteen feet tall, flanked by a large winch apparatus that appeared to be linked by thick cables to the two black iron portcullises that blocked the passage. Benzan did not have to advance all of the way into the room to know that the tunnel led outside; he could feel the subtle shift in the air.

“There should be guards,” he whispered, as Kireen closed the door and came up behind him.

“Do you think that I would not have made preparations for your escape, before releasing you from Yeela?” she said, taunting him, but also finally acknowledging what he’d not been able to believe until now, that he was going to get out of here. What would come next was still unknown, but at the moment he considered that it had to be better than enjoying more of Graz’zt’s hospitality. “The citadel is nearly empty, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t eyes watching. This is a secondary entrance, but a patrol may be by at any moment. Come, let’s go.”

She led him over to the winch. The device looked to be too large for even the two of them together to manipulate, but she ran her fingers along the rim of the mechanism, muttering words of commands in the Abyssal tongue. The thing creaked to life, twisting the cables around it of its own volition. The portcullises creaked slowly upward, making a noise that wasn’t especially loud, but which sounded cacophonous to Benzan’s hyperalert senses.

“What happens after we get outside?” Benzan asked, while they waited.

“Someone will be waiting for my signal,” she said. “You will be delivered to...”

But Benzan never found out the identity of Kireen’s co-conspirator. Facing toward the back of the chamber, he caught the sudden movement out of the corner of his eye; the faintest warning that would not have been enough to save him, had he been its target. He stumbled back as a fiery beam of red-hot energy struck the succubus square across her back, splashing out in a spray of eager tongues of flame that transformed her wings to blackened char, and roasted her soft flesh. She screamed and staggered, but recovered quickly enough to lunge for the exit, still mostly blocked by the portcullis. Benzan, overcome, lost his balance and fell, the hard stone jolting him roughly, and could only watch as his “rescuer” abandoned him.

But the dark shadow that had lurked in one of the alcoves near the ceiling above was quicker. Even as the succubus started to dive forward, her body jerked roughly to the side, and her forward motion was immediately arrested as she was sucked back into the air. Benzan could only stare in stunned terror as she was lifted into the grasp of a huge black *thing* that clung to the arch above the exit. The succubus, impaled upon one of the creature’s long limbs, struggled feebly, then was ended as several more of the creature’s limbs stabbed into her, piercing her torso and rending her organs. Blood exploded down from her savaged body, splashing crimson upon the iron gate, the bare flagstones, and on the wide-eyed tiefling who watched as his prospects took a sudden and decisive turn for the worse.

Chapter 566

Cal folded the little book in his hands, leaned back in the plain stone chair, and closed his eyes. For a moment it looked as though he intended to drift off to sleep, then he let out a loud breath and looked back down at the book in his hands.

It wasn't his spellbook, but a much more compact volume bound in blue leather, just the right size for a large pocket. It had the look of a book that had been lovingly prized and read for decades, although it had only been in Cal's possession for a little over a tenday.

His fingers passed over the binding, which felt as familiar to him as if he'd owned the book all his life. As he'd done a dozen times already, he opened the cover and looked at the message scribed therein, in an elegant script that was both quick and efficient in its march across the page.

Archmage Balander Calloran,

I have been following your efforts for some time. Your pursuit of the higher talents of the Art we share has been admirable; for a time I too had to address how to balance the demands of magic with the needs of the practitioner.

I am sure you do not need any accolades from me to know that you are among the ten foremost students of the mysteries of the Weave extant upon Faerûn. From this point on, your perceptions will continue to expand outward, into new realities that are both fantastic and basic, in a core elemental sense. You will learn much about yourself, but never forget who you were; keeping yourself grounded will help anchor you when the flux of new possibilities threaten to tear you asunder from yourself.

I know that this is not the most convenient time to explore your transfiguration; like many who have journeyed into the realm of the epic, you face a tumult of danger. I do not imagine that you will have the time for study and contemplation that you would desire. I, too, lacked this pleasure when fate took me into her less than tender embrace.

Likewise you do not need me to tell you of the true nature of your foe.

I offer this book as a gift, to ease your way. It is not a book of answers, nor is it a key to the dilemmas you face. Rather, it is a guide, to help you to develop that which you already know lies within.

The message did not have a signature at the end, but embossed into the fabric of the parchment page was a sigil, marked in silver filigree so faint that the slightest movement of his eyes from it caused it to fade from view, as if it had never existed. He knew the symbol, had carried it with him long before he had come to own the book. One finger held up, as if to assert that there was only one truth, at the center of it all.

The book had come to him through mysterious circumstances. He had been studying in the library of the Guild in Waterdeep. Cramming, really, in the manner that young students had pursued since time immemorial. He was no longer young, but the threat that he and his friends faced from the dark Prince of the Abyss drove him more than any mere professor's final examination could. He still remembered those spells he had *forced*... yes, that was the only word for it, spells that he'd jammed into his mind, until their formulae popped into his mind during sleep and wakefulness, pushing out more mundane thoughts like the needs of the body. He'd paid a price for those spells, indeed. But even in the short time since then, he'd already grown beyond the power that had seemed so incredible at the time.

He tried to call up the man's face, but still could not. Perhaps someday, when he had the time for contemplation cited in the message in the front of the book. All he remembered was soft blue robes, a voice that seemed to radiate a calm competence, and the book. Left for him... he must have taken it, and while he remembered reading through it on several occasions, he could not recall actually thinking consciously about it, until very recently. Perhaps he had just not had the time... or maybe, he had not been ready for it, until now.

He turned the pages swiftly. The few spells within were almost absurd in their power. Several already burned within his mind, awaiting release. And there was much more... formulae that he knew he would spend the rest of his life delving, and probably only to understand a small fraction of them. Other bits of lore, fragments, really, each promising more knowledge if he could only tease them together to reveal their secrets. Just skimming the book, he had to fight the urge to fall into the pages again, only to rise many hours later, as weary as if he'd spent a day in hard march.

He did not have many hours, of that he was certain, at least.

He closed the book with some reluctance, and set it upon the desk before him. Like the chair and the bed, it was plain unadorned stone. The Bastion was a stronghold in truth, but it lacked much in the way of amenities. Fortunately Mole had dug out—of all things!—a down pillow from her *bag of holding*, and since she'd barely spent ten minutes here before slipping out to explore the citadel, Cal had made good use of it.

The candle upon the desk burned very slowly, but Cal judged that they'd been here at least a half-day, as they judged the passage of time. He'd spoke to Dannel briefly a short while ago, long enough to learn that their situation had remained unchanged. For now. The demons continued pressing their assault, but as long as the Warder remained intact, the fortress was probably secure. But Cal knew that the demonic horde gathered in the canyon outside represented only a small fraction of the forces brought here by the Prince. And he knew that while the magic Graz'zt had wrought had to have taken a lot out of him, it was only a matter of time before he unleashed his final assault upon this final safehold.

Their situation here was extremely tenuous. Saureya had known it as well as they; Cal had seen that the minute he'd seen the once-fallen deva. Or was he still fallen? Saureya occupied a unique position that defied classification. Morgan had given over leadership to him, or at least that was how the other celestials perceived it. The deva seemed to accept that role with the same resignation that he regarded the battle for Occipitus. Cal knew, of course, that Saureya had suffered in a way that he could not even begin to comprehend.

He sighed at the memory of it. They had not gotten off to a good start. Saureya had greeted them within a few moments of their arrival, once the hordeling and his weird passenger had veered off from their diving attack. They had the Warder to thank for that; the statue, barely identifiable as anything other than a rough-hewn pillar, was the source of the golden light they'd seen from the far end of the canyon. Cal had not had time to study it long. The figure occupied the rear of the cavern formed between the shield wall and the overhang from the mountain behind, thirty feet tall, a massive warrior whose features had to be left to the imagination. But the glow coming from it was real, as was the potent *antipathy* effect that blanketed the Bastion, driving away all that was chaotic and evil.

After what had happened in getting here, Cal might have hoped for a general mood of relief, but Beorna had immediately challenged the deva. “I am surprised to see you here,” she had said. “I would have thought that you would have turned your cloak again by now.”

Cal had winced, although the gesture had not been obvious in the silver dragon form he’d *polymorphed* into. But the deva had not responded to the dwarf’s challenge. He’d merely nodded to himself, as if noting their presence on a tally sheet in his mind, and then handed them over to his adjutants for assignment to quarters within the citadel. Even the dwarves had been too stunned (and beat up) to react before the deva departed with the Voice, the latter delivering his report as they left.

Everything after that was sort of a blur. They’d been fed, bland but nourishing food that satisfied the needs of their bodies. Then rest, at least for him; Mole had headed off almost at once and he suspected that Lok, at least, had probably spent most of the last half-day helping the defenders on the wall. He hoped that Umbar and Beorna had at least had the good sense to get some sleep; they would need the spells of the clerics before this was done. The demons were probably suffering heavy losses in their ongoing low-intensity assault upon the fortress, but he knew that they were just marking time until the main force of Graz’zt’s armies reached them.

At least in that sense, Graz’zt’s *lock* gave them some respite; if the demons could have *teleported*, the battle for Occipitus would have been over in a matter of minutes.

Of course, this way it was just a delay of the inevitable. Given the current odds, Cal could not see how it could turn out any other way. With that assumption, there were only a few options left to them, none of them very pleasant. He had some ideas, but he wanted to speak to the others before he made any commitments, even in his own mind.

His musings were interrupted by a potent thrumming, a vibration that momentarily shook the very core of the mountain in which the Bastion lay. *So much for the lull*, he thought, leaping up and reaching for his gear.

Chapter 567

The canyon that culminated in the white shield wall of the Bastion was crawling with demons, a dark mass that surged forward in an all-out attack upon the citadel.

Arrows, hurled stones, and other missiles flew down into the massed demons, accompanied by the occasional flash of a spell. But the defenders were few, far too few, to halt the onslaught. Only a few dozen angels, archons, half-celestials, and inevitables held the wall, slaying demons that were instantly replaced with fresh attackers from the horde.

From within the demonic host came the thrum of a trebuchet, a sinister device crafted of black metal, dragged here from some unknown source by the fiends. The engine was far enough back to avoid counterattacks from the defenders atop the battlements, and every few minutes the evil machine leapt into action once more, hurling a boulder—or occasionally, a demon or two—at the Bastion. The trebuchet was wildly inaccurate, and

thus far had inflicted little damage, but several cracks in the shield wall suggested that time and persistence would lead to additional destruction.

Small groups of chasmes made passes above the wall, casting *unholy blights* and other destructive magics into the ranks of the defenders. Occasionally one would flutter to the ground, pierced by holy missiles, but for the most part the demons were content to flit quickly back out of range, recovering position for another hit-and-run attack. Those few defenders with bows and ammunition, led by the half-celestial avariel, Abringen and Callendes, targeted the fly-demons when they could, but at the moment other concerns pressed for their attention.

At the base of the wall, a number of hulking forms heaved through the milling mob of fiends. They were goristo demons, seven of them, dominating their smaller cousins with their sheer size and fearsome mien. The huge bull-headed demons reached the wall and immediately started to climb, stabbing black metal hooks carried in their meaty fists into the white stone, using them to pull themselves mechanically upward. Each goristo carried several babau as passengers, the emaciated demons clinging to the larger demons' backs, screeching challenges at the defenders above.

A hound archon leaning out over the battlements spotted this new threat and shouted a warning to its fellows. Soon large rocks came plummeting over the edge of the battlements, tumbling down the nearly sheer face of the wall. One goristo took a boulder the size of a man's torso directly to the center of its face, and it lost its grip, falling back thirty feet to smack solidly into the ground, squashing a half-dozen dretches too slow to get out of the way. Several of the other goristos took hits but shrugged them off, continuing their slow but inexorable climb up the wall. Explosions of dark energies erupted along the length of the battlements, *unholy blights* and *chaos hammers* summoned by a dozen hezrous near the forefront of the demonic horde, and soon the barrage of rocks ceased, as the defenders fell back slowed and sickened by the fell power unleashed by the fiends.

From a dense cluster in the center of the horde rose a score of vrock, their wings beating furiously as they each lifted a pair of small, black-skinned demons, jovocs, in their hind claws. The vrock rose high up into the air, a hundred feet or more above the summit of the Bastion's shield wall, before cutting into steep dives down at the defenders atop the battlements. They let out terrible shrieks as they encountered the edge of the *antipathy* field generated by the Warder, and veered off, dropping their burdens with almost casual abandon. The hapless jovocs fell, some of them bouncing painfully off of the massive overhang that shielded the interior of the Bastion before landing hard atop the wall. A few missed even that broad target, and plummeted all the way to the floor of the canyon, another hundred feet below. Those that did manage to land atop the wall and survive the impact were immediately overcome by the *antipathy* effect, and fell back in disarray, toppling over the edge of the wall, or huddling miserably against the thick merlons of the outer battlement. Most of them were slain at once by the defenders, led by the compact and heavily armored form of a certain genasi warrior, but the jovocs' *auras of retribution* ensured that at least some of the damage wrought upon them was returned to their attackers. Lok saw three hound archons and an aasimar fighter go down, crippled by wounds that echoed those being torn in the jovocs. He himself altered the stroke he'd intended for another of the creatures, and instead smacked it hard with the flat of his axe, knocking it over the battlements to fall away into the vast open beyond.

He looked up to see a huge stone arcing almost directly toward him, and he hurled himself aside as the trebuchet stone struck the ground two feet from where he'd been standing, bouncing as it caromed into the cavern beyond the wall, stopping in a crash of stone shards and pulverized dust. Another dark shape followed it, and for a moment he thought that the demons had added a second trebuchet to their arsenal. But no, the figure resolved into the bulbous shape of a lesser demon, a filthy dretch, which flailed its thin arms and legs as it arced up over the wall, landing painfully in a heap only a few feet from him. It was not alone; others were coming now as well, mostly dretches, with a few babaus, rutterkin, and jovocs among them.

Lok could not see what was giving these demons the power of flight, but if he'd had the liberty to look down upon the demon ranks, he would have seen the glabrezu Aborathaz, summoning areas of *reverse gravity* into densely packed masses of lesser demons. The glabrezu's power was not enough to lift the demons all the way over the wall, but Aborathaz had a dozen bar-igura accompanying it, and as their cousins reached the apex of their vertical ascent, twitching as they floated seventy feet above the ground, they gleefully used *telekinesis* to roughly push them the rest of the way over the obstacle.

All Lok knew was that demons were landing all around him, as he decapitated a second dretch, and then tore into a rutterkin before it could pull itself to its feet. Again most were immediately falling back before the power of the Warder, but here and there a few managed to resist that repulsion long enough to attack, or fire off a spell-like ability against the nearest celestials. More *chaos hammers* went off, giving cover to those along the edge of the wall, maybe giving them a chance to regroup. A pair of warden archons, bright golden collars and bracers gleaming on their shaggy ursine forms, joined the genasi, tearing into a babau that was able to resist the power of the statue long enough to hold its ground for a moment, its body quivering in rage.

As if that wasn't enough, Lok glanced up to see at least two groups of vrock holding position outside of the radius of the *antipathy* effect, joined in frenetic *dances of ruin*. A scream drew his attention around, as one of the warden archons, already wounded with an arrow jutting from its shoulder, staggered, clutching its legs where blood poured out from deep gashes into his thick fur. Lok felt the same pang, a hot pain that felt like daggers being drawn across his thighs. There were no demons within reach at the moment, but Lok saw a trio of jovocs huddled between two of the merlons at the edge of the wall. He was surprised and dismayed to see the demons clawing at each other, opening gashes in their own legs that quickly healed, their *aura of retribution* inflicting the damage they suffered upon the nearby defenders. The demons regenerated quickly, allowing them to continue inflicting wounds upon themselves, and their enemies.

The genasi fighter started toward the demons, but was driven back as a pair of *chaos hammers* exploded right in front of him, dazzling him for a moment. As he tried to clear his vision, he heard a familiar noise, distinct over the insane cacophony of the demon host, a roar he would not soon forget.

Nax was returning to the fray.

Chapter 568

Demons tumbled off the battlements, falling to their deaths by the dozens, only to be replaced by others lifted by their flying kin, or hurled into the sky by the field of *reverse gravity* that shifted across the gathered mass. The majority of those failed to even reach the summit of the wall, slipping out of the narrow magical field to plummet back down to a painful impact, or failing to clear the wall and slamming hard into the battlements when launched up by *telekinesis*. Those that did make it over were almost always overwhelmed by the power of the Warder, or torn to pieces by those defenders of the garrison that still stood. The celestials had lost the edge of the wall, which had been turned into a deathtrap by the ongoing barrage of *unholy blights* and *chaos hammers*, and now fell back into a half-circle centered on the softly glowing statue, taking comfort in the reassuring rays of light that emanated from it.

Black arrows with pulsing red-iron heads arced over the battlements, fired from the powerful longbows of Graz'zt's half-fiend warriors, soldiers of his elite Blood Legion. The vast majority of those shots hit stone, and as many plunged into the bodies of the demons landing atop the wall as into the defenders. But while those that struck fiends inflicted little damage, those few that hit celestials ripped terrible wounds in the bodies of the assorted defenders. The hard-pressed garrison was falling back, now, overcome by the sheer violence of the fiendish assault, even though the fortress itself was still secure, bolstered by the potent aura emanating from the statue in the back of the cavern beneath the overhang. Another boulder rose up over the wall and slammed into the cavern, hitting a lantern archon that simply evaporated from the force of the impact, and then bounced into the far wall to the left of the statue, near where a pair of massive stone doors bound in brass stood open, the entrance to the interior portion of the fortress.

Out of the press of demons rose the massive form of the half-dragon hordeling Nax, its symbiant Yavuv clinging to the bony ridge that ran down its broad back. The hordeling had regenerated the injuries it had suffered earlier, but still bore scars that testified to the violence of its initial meeting with the companions from Faerûn. Now it spread its broad wings and flew, driving back dretches and other smaller demons with the backblast from its flight. As it ascended into the air, it drew up a framework of metal bars fixed into a half-moon shape, to which over a dozen lesser demons, mostly babaus, clung. The extra weight slowed the hordeling considerably, but sheer hatred fueled it, and soon it was rising toward the battlements of the Bastion. One babau lost its grip and fell back into the press, but it was just another casualty that was more than replaced by the ongoing rush of new demons that continued to pour into the canyon from the far end.

Lok started toward the knot of jovocs again, ignoring the pain that stabbed through his body. He was tired, but he drew upon that deep reservoir of fortitude that had stayed him through so many battles in the past. While several of his companions had spent time with the defenders on the wall, cutting into the ranks of the demons with arrows and spells, he alone had spent the full time—six hours? Eight? Ten?—since their arrival joined with the defense. Unlike the others, he had no spells to recover, and while Cal had urged him to take his rest while the ongoing demon assault had been more moderate in its intensity, he found that he could not simply withdraw while the celestial warriors were fighting and dying on their behalf.

A trumpet archon had *restored* him at one point, but he'd since used up the fresh energy granted him by the spell. He could not see the celestial among the defenders now, although he had not seen it fall. There had been no shortage of losses on their side; he'd seen a kolyarut inevitable firing off *enervation* rays from the battlements get hit by six *chaos hammers* in quick succession, leaving only a smoking heap of gears and rubble. The bodies of other celestials were strewn about the top of the wall. Those were the fortunate ones; a number of the defenders had fallen from the wall, and a few of those had survived long enough to be torn to pieces by the demons pressed up against its base. Everywhere he looked he saw death and destruction; here a zelexhut creaking mechanically on its side, half its body crushed by a glancing blow from a trebuchet stone, there a hound archon that lay where it had fallen, a violated unholy arrow jutting from its left eye socket.

They were few and getting fewer, Lok thought, ducking under the swing of a rutterkin, bringing his axe around into its back as he passed. The demon crumpled, its spine severed, but Lok was already focused on the jovocs. The demons shrieked as they saw him coming, but there was no place for them to run as the genasi barreled hard into them, driving them off the edge of the wall and into the open space beyond. Lok felt a pain jab through his upper body as the reflected force of the impact rebounded on him, but it was just a minor tally against the serious wounds he already bore.

The genasi caught himself well before he would have followed the demons into that void, but was still given a panoramic view of the battlefield that made his breath catch in his throat. Even with the losses they had taken, the canyon was crammed with demons, thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands. To his left and right, demons continued to mount the wall, as the rocks continued to shuttle more up to the top, and others rode up on a violent plume of *reverse gravity* and *telekinesis*. The wall shuddered beneath him, and he stole forward enough to see the nearest of the goristo climbers just fifteen feet below him, looking up with unconcealed malice shining in its eyes. The babaus riding upon it chortled in glee, their claws tightening in anticipation of rending his flesh.

And then he saw Nax, rising up with its burden of demonic passengers, already almost at eye-level with him, and for a split-second he was overwhelmed by the enormous intensity of it all, the chaos of a siege more dramatic than any he could have imagined upon—or under—the surface of his own world.

“Um, you might wanna, y’know, get out of here,” a voice came, from directly above. He glanced up, but saw only the merlons to either side, and the sky, empty for the moment, directly above.

Then a form shimmered, and Mole appeared for a second atop one of the merlons, winking at him before she became *invisible* again. “Sheesh, you’re going to draw their fire, clumsy!” her voice came. “Like I said, I’d back it up!”

Almost as if on cue, an *unholy blight* exploded around him. He fell back, picking up speed, just avoiding a second blight, and then a third, which erupted in close succession where he’d been perched.

More demons dogged his steps. He ignored for now the bulk of them, the ones that were falling back in disarray toward the edge of the wall, overwhelmed by the *antipathy* effect. A

dretch bounced hard on the stone behind him and caromed off his hip, screaming in Abyssal as it tried to arrest its momentum. A lantern archon blasted it with a pair of white beams, ending its torment. He passed the same rutterkin he'd taken down a moment ago; the fiend was dying from his stroke, but it still tried to grab his ankle as he ran past it.

"Behind you!"

He still couldn't see Mole, but he acted reflexively, weaving to the side as a babau came flying down from the sky, claws extended toward him. The demon landed awkwardly, the snap as its left leg broke under it clearly audible, but still it lunged at the genasi, gibbering madly as the *antipathy* washed over it. Lok readied his axe, but there was no need, as an arrow buried itself to the feathers in the demon's throat, and it collapsed in a quivering heap.

"At them!" came a familiar cry, followed by a dwarvish invocation to battle.

Reinforcements had arrived.

Arun, Beorna, and Umbar rushed forward to bolster the line of defenders, their armor hastily strapped to their bodies, but their weapons held at the ready to unleash carnage upon the attacking demons. Dannel fired another arrow from his fiendbane longbow, striking a vrock a moment before it was ready to drop another pair of squirming jovocs. The impact causing it to drop one of the black demons short, to smack into the wall and tumble down to its destruction below.

It was a slaughter, with the demons slain almost as quickly as they could reach the top of the wall. With the majority of them unable to advance against the aura projected by the Warder, the demons could not engage the defenders effectively. However, neither could the garrison advance back to the battlements of the wall, due to the magical attacks from the demons below.

"Where is Saureya?" Cal asked a nearby archon. The canine-headed creature shook its head, not knowing the answer, only that its hated enemies were nearby, needed to be destroyed. With a growl, it rushed at a rutterkin that had actually managed to regain its feet, having landed off to the far left end of the wall.

A hezrou materialized upon one of the merlons atop the wall, having flown up in *gaseous form*. It alone of its fellows had resisted the *antipathy* effect to get even this close of its own volition, and it quickly spoke a word of *blasphemy*. Not all of the defenders were within range of the dread utterance, but a pair of lantern archons were vaporized, and one of the warden archons and an aasimar cleric fell to the ground, paralyzed. The two avariels, who had retreated to the back of the cavern, almost to the feet of the statue, immediately opened fire upon the demon, but it withstood their initial barrage, letting out a triumphant croak at the damage it had wrought. The two paralyzed celestials were dragged back by their fellows, of whom only a little over a dozen remained.

Arun rallied Umbar, Beorna, and Lok, and led a charge toward the hezrou's perch. Unfortunately, their rush coincided with the completion of a vrock *dance of ruin* high above, and a twisting storm of unholy energy slammed down into them, inflicting heavy damage.

The blast failed to extend back into the cavern, where most of the rest of the defenders were gathered, but the hound archon that had rushed the left flank had been caught in the open, and was scorched into a blackened heap.

The hezrou cackled and hit the beleaguered dwarves with a *chaos hammer*, but all of them were able to resist the worst effects of the blast. Its glee evaporated as Dannel shifted his aim upon it and unleashed a rapid-fire barrage of arrows that slammed hard into its body. It took the first hit with a grunt, then the second, and a third, and finally a fourth that caused it to stagger back, slipping on the edge of the parapet. It hung there for a moment, off-balance, before a fifth arrow punched square into its chest, and it toppled over backward off the wall.

The respite was only temporary, as a meaty arm appeared over the edge of the wall to the right, followed by a trio of babaus that leapt up, hissing as they reached the edge of the *antipathy* effect and came to a halt. A second goristo drew itself up to the left, but it too could not advance against the power of the Warder.

The dwarves marked both foes, but before they could respond to the new threat, Beorna lifted her sword and shouted a warning. The combined forces of the garrison saw the huge figure of the hordeling Nax rise up over the wall, its wings beating furiously as it fought for more altitude. Another babau fell from the frame it clutched in its hind legs, but that still left nearly twelve others dangling from the crude conveyance. A few arrows flew out at the creature, but there were mere pinpricks as it lurched forward, swinging the lower half of its body forward, launching the construct and its passengers up over the battlements. One babau was run through by an iron rod as the contraption came apart from the impact, and the others screamed as the golden light from the Warder spread across them. One called upon an aura of *darkness* that shrouded them, but that did not protect them from the potent *antipathy* generated by the statue.

Nax, meanwhile, seemed content to hover in mid-air, perhaps kept at bay by the *antipathy* effect. Dannel shot it in the meat of its left bicep with a shot that had to hurt, but the creature merely roared, fixing all of the defenders with a contemptuous stare.

“What’s he doing?” Abrigen asked. Both of the half-celestial avariel had depleted their supply of arrows, but Dannel paused to toss the nearer of the two his reserve quiver, before returning to his own barrage.

Cal, shrouded within *greater invisibility* just a few paces from the elves, was thinking the same thing. A dark suspicion clouded his mind. The power granted to him by the god Azuth came to him without conscious thought, and although none of the mortals could see it, his eyes began to glow with a soft blue radiance as his sight extended deep into the realm governed by the Weave.

It did not take him long to see what he’d been looking for. But even as he tried to shout a warning, he knew it was too late. Within the web of glamer that hovered directly behind and slightly above the stationary hordeling, a powerful evocation was taking form. The spell materialized as a stream of intense, concentrated sonic energy that disrupted the air around it as it streaked over Nax’s shoulder, blasted across the cavern, and impacted the solid form of the Warder.

Chapter 569

Sound filled Cal's ears, the unleashed vibrations stabbing through his joints as he staggered back. In addition to the full force of the blast, which had impacted the chest of the statue, secondary detonations were erupting throughout the cavern. A hound archon simply exploded as the sonic pulse hit him, while Abrigen was flung backward, knocked unconscious as a blast erupted at his feet. Cal himself was fortunate, as the nearby door to the open tunnel beside him partially shielded him from being hit by the full force of the evocation. Even so, he felt a painful ringing in his skull, and could feel a thin trickle of blood draining down from his nostrils.

Sonics, he thought, grimly. *Clever*. A regular *chain lightning* would have had no effect on the celestial defenders, he knew, and a skilled caster could easily direct the blast to avoid any allies in the area of effect.

Of more concern was the effect upon the Warder. Cal could see a wide crack across its chest where the sonic blast had hit it, but the golden glow emanating from it seemed to be steady, for now.

Well. No time for half measures, then.

Cal immediately grabbed his rod, but almost at once reconsidered. While a *disintegrate* could take out the enemy caster, his *arcane sight* could not pierce the spellcaster's *greater invisibility*, only give him a general idea of where he was. Given also that he was partially shielded by the huge hordeling, the chances of a successful hit were balanced slightly against him.

Dannel took careful aim and fired off a *seeker arrow*, the empowered shaft slicing just over the hordeling's left ear before it suddenly stopped hard in a point in space. That shot decided him; Cal knew that one arrow would not do the job, and that it was likely that none of the defenders had the ability to see invisible objects, at least not with augmentative magic.

His *greater dispel* had the desired effect, ripping away the hidden spellcaster's magic. Their enemy was revealed as a youthful human, perhaps in his early twenties, with fair skin and fiery red hair pulled tight around his scalp, down into a braid that drifted behind him as he flew. He was clad in a skirt of silvery metal scales that flowed upward over his body as he became visible, reforming until it shrouded his torso and neck. Cal's spell had clearly not been either accurate enough or powerful enough to completely sunder the youth's magical wards; the gnome could identify a field of *death armor* and a *shield* spell about him, in addition to whatever spell or item gave him the power of flight. An arrow jutted from his hip, although it did not look to have penetrated far through the protective armor.

The youth sneered, and fired off a second chained sonic.

The spell was just as destructive this time, and Cal was expecting it this time, dodging back again behind the cover of the door a split instant before the full force of the secondary blasts hit him. For the celestials, however, the second sequence of blasts was absolutely devastating. Abrigen had barely gotten back up before a burst exploded just over his left

eye, knocking him back to the ground with a rough finality. Callendes fell, dead or unconscious, and Dannel avoided a similar fate only by leaping back into the relative shelter of the passageway behind him. The other celestial defenders lacked that avenue of escape, however. Only a handful of the original garrison were left standing; one of the warden archons stood over the blasted body of its fellow, and a chiseled hound archon bearing a flaming greatsword tried to help a crippled equinal guardinal that lay thrashing on the stone floor of the cavern, bright blood pouring in torrents from its ears and nostrils. The lesser archons, lanterns and hounds for the most part, were all down or obliterated, and those few aasimars, guardinals, and inevitables that had joined them had likewise fallen.

The dwarves, along with Lok, found themselves in a no-man's-land between the deadly sonic explosions and the line of demons repulsed by the power of the Warder. The four of them had not been caught in the eruption of secondary blasts from Malad's spells, but they were far from intact. In addition to the devastating blast of a vrock *dance of ruin*, they'd been hit with a number of *chaos hammers*, *unholy blights*, and the damage feedback from *jovoc auras of retribution*. Demons continued to land around them, hurled over the battlements by spell, mechanism, or host carrier, and while few landed in any shape to offer effective challenge to the four companions, they just kept on coming.

"We have to take him out!" Arun urged, pointing up at the comparatively little figure darting around behind the hovering hordeling. Umbar tried to follow the paladin's command, summoning a *flame strike* that came cascading down to engulf both the sorcerer and the hordeling. But while Nax's shriek indicated that the blast had at least inflicted *some* damage upon it, the flames cleared to reveal both foes holding their position, relatively intact.

Malad spared a contemptuous glance for the dwarf cleric, but it was clear where his focus lay, as he lifted his gaze again at the far side of the cavern, and the statue which continued to defy him. Nax seemed more upset, and actually started to turn toward Umbar and the others, but the sorcerer stopped him with a harsh command in Abyssal.

Cal knew that another blast would be coming, and another, and again until the Warder was destroyed. For all the power in that rough-hewn representation of a warrior, it was still just stone, and could only take so much abuse. And it was the only thing holding back the demonic horde, at this point.

Even now, Cal could see that the power of the Warder was beginning to falter. A goristo surged forward against the golden aura, the ground shaking beneath it as it stomped toward the battered quartet at the forefront of the rapidly collapsing defensive line. Arun did not wait, charging forward to meet it, his blessed warhammer held high above his head. The fiend swung a huge claw around to greet him, but Arun just raised his shield and took the strike hard, barely slowing as he came in under its reach and brought the hammer up in a powerful arc that drove solidly into the center of its pelvis. The demon let out a colossal roar and fell upon the paladin with an incredible series of attacks, laying into him with claw and horn and bite, hitting with such intensity that a blow from its claw that glanced off his shield struck the ground hard enough to open foot-wide cracks in the solid stone.

The goristo was among the strongest among the demonkind, yet somehow Arun Goldenshield held before that onslaught, even as his plate armor buckled beneath the titanic force of those impacts. The demon roared in anger and lifted both hands to smite the defiant knight of Good that defied it. But Arun did not give it a chance to unleash its attack. The paladin's hammer swung from the left, and then back again from the right, the two blows coming so quickly that the head of the weapon was a soft golden blur. The goristo staggered beneath the force of those hits, and as its head sagged, the hammer came up in a precise arc that culminated in the center of its skull. A loud thunderclap momentarily silenced the gathered foes, and then the demon tottered backward, landing hard and splaying out upon the ground, stone dead.

"Who's next?" the paladin spat, flecks of blood spraying out from his broken lips.

Cal knew that another chained sonic would utterly overwhelm them. But even though the sorcerer was now visible, he certainly didn't have an easy shot, especially with the hordeling still providing good cover in front of him. But they were running out of good options.

Cal lifted his wand, and fired off an empowered *disintegrate*.

For an instant, it looked like a dead-on shot. But then, at the last instant, the hordeling shifted slightly in its flight, as if prodded slightly by the wind, and its head slid into the path of the beam.

The green ray blasted away a swath of flesh, starting from the creature's left ear, and then passing along its head until it met the creature's eye. The eye, the surrounding socket, and a part of the skull beneath simply vaporized, transforming the hordeling's already fearsome visage into a true monstrosity.

Nax screamed, a primal sound of pure agony that was torn from its gut. Blood seeped from severed vessels that had been whole an instant previous, and an ugly gray mass was visible through the gap, almost a foot across, in its skull.

And yet somehow, the creature lived.

But any commitment that the hordeling had possessed to its mission evaporated. Its wings pulsing off-beat, the demon collapsed backward from its position above the wall, diving back into the open air of the canyon. For a moment it looked as though its flight would end in a doomed crash into the demonic horde, but a black shape rippled up its back and covered the terrible wound, and the creature seemed to regain enough control to manage an erratic but controlled flight from this place of ruin and destruction.

Malad, separated from his fiendish shield, hovered there in mid-air, and Cal knew that another evocation was coming. But a faint hiss from the adjacent corridor announced that Dannel was not out of the fray; in fact, the elf had been waiting for this moment to resume his assault. His arrows flew with pinpoint precision at his target, punching through the tiefling sorcerer's *shield* and the sentient armor he wore, piercing deep into his torso. He managed only two hits before the sorcerer recovered enough to slide back, with the third shot glancing off of the magical ward to fall uselessly into the canyon below.

But Malad, while possessed of a certain durability hard-won in the trenches of the Blood War, was not a front-rank fighter. The sorcerer spun and dropped, avoiding a fourth arrow that knifed narrowly over his head. In the instant before he fell below the level of the battlements, however, he smiled maliciously, and hurled his hand forward, launching a sonically-substituted *fireball* directly into the core of the cavern. The missile—a tiny flare of intensely concentrated energy—streaked inches above the heads of the dwarves, over the corpses of the dead celestials, and straight into the legs of the statue, where it exploded in a rush of pure sound.

Cal was blasted back by that impact, and he felt a fresh surge of pain envelop him. But even through that rush of power, he heard another noise that sent a true stab of dread through him.

Stone, cracking, giving way to a loud clatter of falling rock.

Chapter 570

The demons that had been cowering among the massive stone teeth of the battlements surged forward, eager for blood as the *antipathy* aura of the Warder collapsed along with the statue. With the defense of the Bastion in utter disarray, there was little standing in their way.

But that little included four in particular who were not going to do down without a fight.

Arun, Lok, Beorna, and Umbar met the first wave of charging demons, holding their ground, and for the first few seconds it was the latter who gave way, collapsing backwards to flail out the last instants of their lives upon the cold stone. Arun's hammer crashed left and right like the regular workings of a machine, and with each blow, a demon was crushed. Lok's sonic axe let out its thunder only occasionally, as the genasi scored a critical hit, but even the lesser blows left demons deeply gashed, or sent a limb flying. Beorna, calling upon the power of Helm, slew fiends with grim abandon, while Umbar swelled with *righteous might*, becoming a giant who crushed lesser fiends beneath his boot.

Yet even those incredible four could not hold long against the onslaught, and were soon falling back. Of all things it was a dretch that brought Lok low, seizing the genasi's ankle even as it died, putting him off balance for just a fraction of a second. That tiny interval was just enough to keep him from dodging out of the charging rush of a goristo, which slammed a heavy fist into the warrior's face. Lok, already beaten, battered, blasted by fiendish energies, crumpled. Arun quickly stepped in to defend the fallen genasi, slamming the goristo with a series of powerful blows that forced it to turn aside and engage him.

A babau leapt at the paladin's unprotected back, but Beorna was there to meet it, cleaving it in half with a single powerful blow of her sword. But the assault cost her as well, as the adamantine blade, too heavily damaged by the many engagements with the acidic slime covering those demons, snapped off just above the hilt as she completed her stroke.

She barely had time to draw her dagger before a pair of demons, a jovoc and a slaving rutterkin, were upon her.

Umbar's greater size made him a prime target for arial demons, including a quartet of vrock that dove eagerly at him, too impatient to continue their assignment of shuttling demons from the canyon floor to atop the battlements. The cleric held his ground, using his enhanced reach to smite the first demon with a two-handed blow with his axiomatic hammer. The vrock was knocked roughly backward, stunned by the force of the blow, and the other three quickly became much more wary, circling above as they summoned *mirror images*.

Cal pulled himself up, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it of the ringing that seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside his skull. One glance at the ruins of the Warder—now just broken stone, with nothing remaining above the statue's knees—and at the onrushing demonic horde, was enough to reveal the tactical impossibility of their position.

"Fall back!" he shouted. "To the tunnel!" There was little chance they could hold, but at least the corridor offered a fairly defensible position.

A rumbling announced the approach of another goristo, which loomed large as it charged straight for him, picking up speed as it came. Behind it was a small cluster of demons, babau, jovocs, rutterkin, and dretch, surging forward eager for blood. Cal saw that the demons would reach the entrance long before the dwarves and Lok, even if his friends could instantly disengage and fall back.

"And so here we are, my friend," came a voice from beside him. Cal looked up to see Dannel, an arrow fitted to his bow. Behind him, the hound archon with the burning sword lay the unconscious Callendes gently upon the stone, before taking up his blade, and coming forward to stand before the two mortals.

The only other celestial still standing, the second warden archon, came barreling into the scene, letting out a guttural roar as its charge intersected that of the onrushing goristo. The bear-like creature was clearly seriously hurt, with one arm dangling uselessly at its side, but the sheer ferocity of its attack unbalanced the larger demon, with both falling to the side, rolling over each other as they struggled for an advantage. The hound archon tried to rush to its aid, but it was forced to defend itself against a pair of leaping babau. One dug a gash in the archon's side with a sweep of its claws, but it quickly fell, an arrow jutting from its skull, while the second had barely lifted its own claws to attack before the archon took its head off with a powerful two-handed sweep of its blade.

More demons came rushing forward, but several of them were distracted by a diving phalanx of winged men, shining sword archons. The archons split and dove in a sweeping arc around the onrushing demons, drawing off several, including two of the three vrock hovering around Umbar. The archons refused engagement, instead flying furiously just ahead of the pursuing demons, both the vrock and those afoot. By the time one actually got ahold of one, its claws passing harmlessly through the insubstantial fabric of the creature, Cal's illusion had done its work, buying a few precious moments of time.

“Take him!” Arun commanded, spinning to crush a charging rutterkin even as his second goristo fell with a loud crash to the ground. Umbar turned from the vrock he’d been fighting to lift the unconscious Lok with his free hand, using the other with the hammer to keep the vulture-demon at bay. Beorna, holding off her own attackers mostly by virtue of her heavy armor and the considerable resistances granted her by her templar status, took up Lok’s dropped axe, and used it to kill the babau threatening her. The axe smoked, but fortunately held together against the caustic acid covering the creature. She avoided attacking the jovoc, which could only scratch uselessly at her armor. Still, as she turned to cover Umbar’s back as he retreated, she spared it a quick kick that sent it flying. She felt a brief stabbing pain in her shoulder as her boot connected, but she judged it worth the cost as the little black demon splayed out on the stone, momentarily stunned.

The dwarves fell back, the demons threatening them with every step, but wary of the devastating attacks of Arun and Beorna. Cal aided them with a *haste* spell. Dannel kept up a steady barrage of arrows, dropping demons as they closed to leap upon his companions. The hound archon tried to move to the assistance of the embattled warden archon, ignoring a handful of dretch that tried unsuccessfully to block him. But before he could reach the celestial, the goristo pulled itself up, and seized its smaller foe in both meaty claws. The bear demon still fought on, smashing the bull-demon across the face with its fist. The goristo roared in fury, and lifted the struggling celestial above its head, likely intending to smash it upon the stone at its feet. But before it could finish its foe, the hound archon Avellos leapt in, drawing his blazing sword across the demon’s gut. The archon’s blessed nature empowered its weapon, allowing it to penetrate the demon’s foul resistances, and a great gout of black ichor erupted from the wound, a gash three feet across from which its entrails bulged sick and bloated.

The goristo staggered and dropped its victim, which fell awkwardly to the ground, still dazed from the beating it had taken. Dretch and a rutterkin bearing a dire axe set upon both celestials, but Avellos ignored all, grabbing the injured celestial by the shoulder and drawing it up, using his own strength to bolster the ailing warden. He paid for that, as demons cut into his muscled body, the rutterkin tearing a bloody wound in the archon’s swordarm before the distracted celestial could counter.

And then the goristo reared up, furious and eager for revenge. Eschewing any subtlety, it lowered its head and barreled forward toward them, crushing a dretch that was too slow to get out of its way.

The warden archon tried to pull away from the hound, but it could not stand on its own. Avellos lifted his sword in salute, and took up a ready position.

Arrows slid past the hound archon, whistling mere inches past its ragged and bloodied fur on their way to the charging goristo. One slammed into its shoulder, followed by a second that grazed its left eye, opening the bulb in a gush of white fluid. The demon, now critically wounded, did not falter in its charge, and even as the flaming sword of Avellos slammed down into it, it crushed the archon’s chest with the bony ridge of its forehead, knocking the valiant celestial backward a full fifteen feet, landing half-conscious upon the stone floor of the cavern. The goristo staggered forward and then fell, stumbling as the warden archon seized its ankle in passing. It tried to get up, but another arrow buried itself to the feathers in its throat, and it finally collapsed in a gurgle of blood as it drowned on its own fluids.

The dretch had been scattered by their huge cousin's assault, but the rutterkin now came forward eagerly, lifting its heavy and awkward weapon to deliver a finishing blow to the helpless warden archon. Focused on its prey, it never saw the hulking shadow that loomed over it, or the hammer that came crushing down into its body, knocking it aside like a discarded rag doll.

The dretch cowered as Umbar shifted the unconscious Lok over his shoulder, then bent to tuck the crippled celestial under his arm. Even with his strength augmented by the *righteous might* of Moradin, the burden of carrying both was almost too much for him, and he struggled with the weight as he made his way back toward the relative safety of the tunnel entrance. A vrock dove down toward him, but within a range of two seconds it was hit by both an arrow and a ray of *searing light* from Beorna, convincing it to pause long enough to summon *mirror images*.

With the shielding aura of the Warder gone, demons continued to surge over the battlements of the Bastion. Another two goristo climbers cleared the barrier, loaded down so heavily with passenger demons that they'd been slowed to a crawl in their ascent. As the huge demons struggled over the barrier, babaus that had clung to the larger demons for the ride up leapt off and rushed eagerly forward. Vrocks flew over, each dumping a few smaller demons on the stone; a few returned for additional passengers, but most, sensing that the battle was coming to an end, screeched and surged forward to join the attack. Dretch, rutterkin, babau, bar-igura, and jovocs, along with the occasional hordeling or fiendish creature, continued to land atop the wall, hurled by the trebuchet, the *reverse gravity* surge of the glabrezu, or even by simple virtue of having climbed the sheer face of the Bastion's shield wall. Most of those arrived in disarray, especially those flung by the trebuchet, and more than a few were killed by the impact of their arrival. But that still left dozens to press the attack. Three gaseous plumes slid through the crenels and took on solid shape; hezrou demons, eager to be in on the kill. Over it all flew a pair of chasmes, their hatred evenly divided between their celestial enemies and the other demons, which they despised.

Only one thing united this discordant, chaotic horde: a lust for the destruction of their enemies. Thus motivated, the demons surged forward in a wave, running, leaping, flying, and even crawling forward to the attack.

With their allies almost entirely wiped out, and their own strength depleted, already battered and exhausted, it was the companions from Faerûn upon which this Abyssal tide descended.

Chapter 571

The wave of demons crashed into the defenders hard. Arun and Beorna were at the forefront, and they were nearly overwhelmed by at least two dozen demons, mostly the smaller and weaker sort, but no less ferocious for it. The babaus in particular were cunning, setting up for sneak attacks, moving around their fellows to gain flanking positions. A bar-igura leapt over the two dwarves and tried to assail the weakened and incapacitated

foes in the second rank, but was momentarily held at bay by Dannel, who fired two shots into it at point-blank range, before ducking back out of its reach.

Umbar's oversized form shimmered and shrank back to its normal size, his *righteous might* cancelled by a miscellaneous *dispel* from within the demonic press. He saw Dannel pressed, but paused long enough to put down his two burdens, and to channel a *heal* spell into Lok. The hound archon Avellos had regained consciousness, but could barely hold his sword, let alone rush back into the fray. The celestial tried to revive the crippled warden archon, using an *aid* spell to bring the battered warrior around.

A loud crashing noise announced the arrival of the goristos, accompanied by the shriek of a half-dozen diving vrocks, the leaping hezrous, and at least a score of other demons.

It would have ended right there; even with the power that the companions had accumulated, they had taken too much of a beating to hold out against such overwhelming odds.

A clarion command issued from the passageway, and a grid of bright blue energy appeared that filled a perfect cube before the great doors. The unleashed power of *order's wrath* tore into the demons, slaying the lesser breeds, and briefly dazing the stronger. Several vrocks caromed off the cavern ceiling as their dives went off course, and they fell into the mass of demons below, causing more confusion.

A goristo that managed to shake off the power of the blast surged forward, intent on simply overrunning the defenders. But another figure emerged from the tunnel, a tall, scarred figure with black wings, holding a silver bastard sword that shone with a bright inner light. Saureya met the demon's charge, driving the sword named *Aludrial's Shard* into the fiend, darting nimbly under the powerful but clumsy swing of its claws. The sword erupted with holy power as it *smote* the demon, and it staggered back, staring down at the smoking hole in its chest.

Saureya looked back over his shoulder at the companions. "Back! Now!" he shouted, his voice full of the tenor of command.

The companions needed no additional urging. The demons were already coming forward again, those recovering from the dazing effects of the *wrath* joined by newcomers that had not been affected by it. Saureya held his ground for a few seconds, slaying fiends with the blessed sword. None could stand before him; for a moment it was as though the fallen deva and the blade were one, a storm of silver that formed a weave through which the demons could not pass.

But the companions knew that was only an illusion, one confirmed as Saureya was hit by a rapid-fire barrage of spells and other attacks. Two *unholy blights* enveloped him, and a pair of vrocks and a babau fell upon him, tearing at him with their claws. The injured goristo, followed by its companion, now recovered from its daze, lurched in as well, and while the gleaming sword took off one demonic limb at the elbow, a second tore long gashes in the angel's chest, driving him back.

“Saureya!” Arun urged, from the doorway. The others had fallen back, bringing with them Callendes, Avellos, and the injured warden archon. Lok, restored to health by Umbar’s magic, stood beside the paladin, holding his backup axe in a ready stance.

The Herald’s Voice started forward to join his master, but Saureya, as if sensing the sword archon’s intent, shot him a gaze that froze him in place. The deva smiled to himself, ignoring the demons tearing at his limbs. He rose up in the air, and spun, the *Shard* cleaving one of the goristos across the face, shattering its skull and driving back into the bodies of the lesser demons behind. Only then did the deva fall back, swooping into the corridor.

The demons were right behind him. The quickest found their way blocked by Arun and Lok, who laid into them with devastating effect. Then the deva turned, and conjured a *blade barrier* that filled the entry. Lok and Arun, surprised, staggered back just in time to avoid being caught by the blades. The charging demons were less fortunate, and a half-dozen were sliced to ribbons before they could arrest their rush.

“Through the tunnel, swiftly!” Saureya urged. “That will not hold them...” And indeed, the air around the blades rippled, as multiple *dispels* hit the magical barrier.

The tunnel was about thirty feet long, a cylinder that appeared to be simply blasted through the surrounding rock. Gouges lined the walls and ceiling, dark shadows that might have been irregularities in the construction, or part of the defenses. At the far end stood a pair of doors that were clearly built to last; three feet of stone covered in bronze plates several inches thick, set into the surrounding threshold on massive stone pivots recessed deep into the lintel. The doors were only narrowly open, and the companions headed for that opening now, and the safety it promised.

Saureya drifted behind Lok and Arun, bringing up the rear of their retreat. They’d barely made it halfway down the passage when the blades abruptly vanished, replaced by a wall of demons that surged after them. A *chaos hammer* exploded around them, but all of them resisted being *slowed* by the blast.

“Go!” Saureya urged the warriors, turning to meet a bar-Igura’s hop, the demon’s arms spread to swallow the deva up in its embrace. *Aludrial’s Shard* danced, and the demon fell, its left arm gone up to the shoulder. A vrock came up instantly on its heels, and Saureya gave it the same treatment, cutting into its body with a deep gash. It shrieked, but the deva was not affected by the stunning effect of that cry.

“Saureya, come on!” Arun shouted, holding position at the doors.

The deva glanced over his shoulder, and smiled a cold smile at them. The angel fell back, but slowly, as more and more demons filled the corridor. Even a goristo squeezed into the tunnel, although its bulk barely fit into the passageway. Behind it, over a hundred demons queued up to be next.

A babau leapt onto the deva’s back, tearing with its long claws. Arun started forward at once, but the deva stopped him with an outstretched hand. Ignoring the fiend, the fallen angel fluttered to the ground, where several demons immediately seized hold of him.

“Saureya!” Arun cried. He would have gone forward regardless of the angel’s orders, but several demons had slipped past the deva, and were now rushing toward him, and the door beyond. He lifted his hammer, ready to defend himself.

Saureya’s head came up. The deva smiled again, and this time there was something grim in that look, even without the gashes that marred the creature’s face. A babau tried to claw his eyes out, but even as it tore long red lines across his skull, Saureya’s eyes flashed with something unfathomable to the paladin.

“*Neya!*” he shouted, a command in Celestial that sounded clearly over the noise of the demonic surge.

Instantly at that call, sprays of liquid exploded out of the narrow slits in the walls and ceiling. Arun flinched as the cold fluid splashed across his face, but it was only water, pure and cleansing.

For him, at least.

The demons screamed as the holy water burned their corrupted flesh, sloughing off flesh and muscles, and even etching the black bones beneath. The demons holding Saureya simply evaporated into ruined hulks, and those behind let out a terrible wail as they tried to get back out. Unfortunately, the goristo was blocking the corridor, and while it tried to back up, splashes of holy water seared its legs and arms, inflicting a terrible agony upon it. A few of the demons tried to squeeze past it, only to be crushed by the larger demon’s struggles against the stone.

Arun lowered his hammer as he looked upon a scene of total carnage. Even with all that he had seen, he felt sick.

Saureya stood, shaking off bits of demonic hide from his body. Covered in blood and bile, his face streaked with garish red lines from his wounds, he walked toward Arun, his face expressionless.

“Come,” he said.

The two passed through the door, which swung ponderously shut, sealing with an iron clang.

Chapter 572

Benzan half-staggered, half-ran through a warped landscape of iron trees and dark shadows. His breath rattled in his chest like a coin in a glass jug, and with each step his stride grew more uncertain, as if his body was just waiting for the right moment to surrender its efforts, and embrace oblivion.

He saw a fallen tree ahead, a long gray log stretching nearly horizontal across the path. Wary, he ducked under it, careful of the razor-sharp edges that pervaded everything in this

place. He found a spot bare of dagger-like needles and jagged ridges and paused to recover his breath.

He felt at the crude bandage at his side, and was not surprised to feel a fresh wetness there. He didn't want to look at the wound, worried about what he might see.

He could not stay here. The only thing that had kept him alive thus far was the fact that his adversaries did not work together. He'd seen at least four different demons that he could recognize, but that meant nothing; one babau or vrock looked much the same as another to his eyes. The forest at least offered some modicum of cover, but against demons that could *teleport* at will across the landscape, no place could be considered safe for even a few seconds.

He didn't know why he kept running; there was no place to go, and he already knew that Graz'zt's citadel was perched on the side of a huge metal cube floating in space, massive but finite. There was no way to get to any of the other cubes he could occasionally see floating in the sky, and short of encountering a convenient planar gate just sitting around unguarded, no way off of this plane, which he now knew to be Acheron.

But even though his body cried for relief, he couldn't just give up; it was not within his nature. The demons would likely capture him again, or maybe just kill him. Benzan was not sure which outcome he preferred.

He clutched the weapon he'd liberated from one of the many battlefields that littered the cubes of Acheron; a rusty shortsword, with a single-edged blade about two feet in length. He still had Yeela's hooked knife, as well, but even though the sword was pitted and probably useless against even a lesser demon's damage resistance, he felt better holding it.

He started to put his hand against the nearby trunk of the fallen tree, but stopped himself. Even a moment's carelessness here could be lethal, he knew.

He was lucky to be alive at all. When he'd looked up at the monstrosity holding the corpse of Kareen, he'd thought that he was dead as well. The retriever had almost casually tossed the ruined body of the succubus aside, then had turned its full attention on the tiefling. One of its multifaceted, colored eyes had focused on him...

Benzan shuddered at the memory. He'd thrown himself aside a split second before the fiery beam had raked the stone where he'd fallen. The beam tracked him, but instead of intersecting with his defenseless flesh, it had struck the winch mechanism that had continued its slow lifting of the twin portcullises. Benzan had just kept on running, hadn't looked back even as he'd heard the Abyssal construct drop to the ground and follow him.

Maybe he'd been due some luck. In any case, he'd heard rather than seen the winch give way, and even before he saw the second portcullis falling toward him, he leapt forward and dove. The noise that had followed was cataclysmic, and he'd finally turned around to see the retriever pinned under the first portcullis, the black iron spikes piercing its body across the line of its torso. Its limbs flailed against the surrounding walls, but it could not get enough leverage to lift itself free.

For some reason, he'd stood there dumbly, watching it. The mistake in that was brought home an instant later as a blast of electrical energy shot from one of the construct's eyes, twisting through the second portcullis directly at him. He'd thrown himself to the side, avoiding the worst of the blast, but he'd landed on a rock with a sharp protrusion, which had pierced his side and left him with the oozing wound that continued to seep the life out of him.

But there had been no time to ponder the rude twists of his fate. Leaving the retriever to thrash against its prison, he'd run fast and far. The demons had started appearing right after he'd reached the borders of the iron forest, and since then they'd been everywhere, *teleporting* through the sky and through the woods in search of him. So far he'd managed to stay a pace ahead of his pursuers, but he knew that he would not be able to keep it up for much longer. His body was worn down, even without his wounds. Kireen had not offered him food or drink when she'd released him, and there was no apparent source of either in this place. Nor was there any sign of the succubus's mysterious contact, although Benzan would have been leery of pursuing him, her, or it even if it came down to it being his only option out of this place.

A sizzling noise cut through his musings like a knife, and he immediately ducked down low behind his rough shelter. He heard rather than saw the demon, and waited only until he could confirm that it was not moving toward him before he crouched low and quickly slipped off in the other direction.

He went about another fifty yards further before the path he was following opened onto a clearing, maybe twenty paces across. A metal spire with numerous spear-like branches rose up in the center, decorated by a fringe of rusted armor, assorted bones, and broken weapons lying around its base. The outer ring of the clearing was marked by over a dozen of the smaller metal trees, forming a dense and hazardous web for the traveler.

Benzan spotted what looked like another trail, and headed immediately in that direction. He didn't get more than a few steps, however, before another sizzling noise drew his attention up. When he saw the source of the sound, his heart froze in his chest.

The babau demon looked down at him from its perch atop the spire, and twisted its ugly features into an evil smile.

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Benzan hurled himself aside as the babau leapt at him, its long claws extended. He felt a rush of pain a moment before he hit the ground, his momentum carrying him forward into a roll that brought him up a few feet away, trailing blood from a trio of shallow gashes in his left side.

The babau seemed to be in no hurry, taking enjoyment in the dire situation that the tiefling faced. Benzan held his sword up between them, but the demon only cackled, feinting with a claw, sniggering as its foe staggered back.

“All right then, let’s dance, you bastard,” Benzan said, leaping to the attack.

The demon lunged, but Benzan dodged under its claw, sweeping past it, slamming his sword up into its side as he slipped past. The blade hit with a solid thunk, but instead of cutting the babau’s rubbery flesh, the ancient abused metal hissed at it hit the acidic slime coating the demon. Even as Benzan tried to reverse his grip and bring the weapon back down for a backstab, the weapon snapped off just above the hilt. He fell back, but too slow to fully avoid a raking sweep of its claws as it twisted rapidly around. One claw caught on his forehead just above his right eye, tearing a vicious gash that left blood pouring down one side of his face, partially blinding him.

Benzan shifted to focus his good eye on the demon, and tossed down the broken and useless sword, drawing out the hooked knife that was his only remaining weapon.

Except for his wits, perhaps.

The demon came at him, slowly, its casual pace driven less by caution of his defenses than a desire to drink in his foe’s despair. Benzan gave ground, and led his enemy around the pillar in the center of the clearing, avoiding getting close enough to risk getting cut on the jagged edges of the branches that jutted out from the central spire.

The demon danced with him, teasing him with feinting sweeps of its claws. It too avoided getting too close to the spire, wary of exposing itself to a bull rush that could potentially impale it upon the spines.

The two combatants did a full circuit around the spire before the babau seemed to grow weary of its sport. As Benzan dodged another feint, the demon abandoned all pretense of caution, leaping at him in a rapid rush. Benzan leapt to the side, but the demon pressed him, driving him away from the pillar, out into the clearing. It had not chosen the timing of its rush idly; the area it pushed Benzan toward was marked by a surrounding ring of iron bushes and bent trees that erupted with a spiky maze of low-hanging branches, with no trail openings visible for at least a quarter-circuit around the edge of the clearing.

The tiefling realized that he was trapped, and he held his ground, holding his weapon in both hands, ready for a last desperate defense.

The babau fell into a crouch, and leapt, arms outstretched to counter any attempt by its prey to slip past it again.

But Benzan did not try to evade. Rather, he too leapt forward, if only slightly, and as he came down he slid his feet out from under him, coming down onto his back with a jarring impact. The babau drew its claws in to seize the fallen tiefling, its jaws opening wide to deliver a deadly bite with its landing. The demon came down right on top of him, and for a moment it looked as though Benzan’s maneuver had been suicide, leaving him open to the full fury of his foe.

But as the babau reached the apex of its leap and descended upon him, Benzan kicked up with both feet, catching the demon on its chest with both heels. The babau’s claws tore into his arms, but before it could get a good grip on him, he used its own momentum and

kicked upward, flipping the demon up over his head. A terrible scream filled the clearing, and he struggled to his feet to see the babau impaled on one of the bushes, hanging upside down with its head a few scant inches above the ground. The demon's arms and legs thrashed as it tried to break free, but its violent moves only dug the sharp spines deeper into its body. Two long branches had pierced it entirely, jutting from its left side and right forearm, covered in black ichor, hissing as the babau's caustic gel seared the exposed metal.

Benzan didn't linger to taunt the creature or attempt to finish it off; he doubted that the bush would hold it long, and he likewise questioned his ability to harm it with the pathetic weapon he still had. Even as the babau continued to struggle to free itself, he was off and running, choosing the nearest trail opening that was opposite the one through which he'd entered the clearing. He had no idea where he was going, and knew that his reprieve was still probably only temporary, but there was no other choice, short of surrendering himself to his enemies.

And that he could not do.

The demon's cries of anger and pain faded behind him as he ran onward through the metal forest. Several times he heard echoing cries from the surrounding maze, and once something big passed above, the flapping of wings audible though the tangled thicket of branches that blocked out the sky above him. Fortunately whatever it was didn't appear to have detected him, and he only saw a dark shadow pass over before it was gone.

The battle with the babau had lent him a burst of adrenaline, but it had also added new wounds to his tally. He tried to clear the blood from his face with another piece of cloth torn from his garment, but ultimately had to give it up. His right eye was gummed up with blood, and the best he could do was wind a strip of fabric around his head, covering the new wound with a temporary bandage. His side began to throb too, both the older wound and the new scratches torn by the babau.

He knew that he was reaching the end of his strength, but he tightened his grip on the knife, and kept going.

Finally, he saw another open space ahead, but as he reached it, stepping out of the dense forest to see the open sky again, his heart sank.

This new clearing culminated a mere twenty feet away in a jagged cliff, a solid gray wall that rose up out of the forest to block his way. The cliff was only about thirty feet high, and would have been a trivial obstacle back on Faerûn, were he traveling with his friends and his usual gear. But here, it may as well have been a mile tall. Even with only one eye he could see the jagged edges that were no doubt razor-sharp, waiting for the foolish climber to attempt a summit.

A noise brought him around; creatures, approaching swiftly through the forest.

He looked for another trail, a path along the cliff to either direction, but the spiny brush grew right up to the base of the barrier, forming a dense and impenetrable thicket. He might

have been able to make it past, had he been wearing full plate and helm, but even then it would have been a dicey attempt.

He fell back toward the cliff as the noise of pursuit grew stronger.

Once they saw that they had him, the demons slowed, and they came almost leisurely into the clearing. There were three of them; a thick-bodied bar-igura, some sort of fiendish hound that regarded him with intelligence in its eyes, and finally another succubus, clad in a cuirass of red iron that flowed suggestively around her lithe figure. She carried a whip, which sparkled with occasional surges of evil red energy.

“You led us on quite a merry chase, little precious,” the succubus said. “I always did think that Yeela took it easy on you; I always said that you could withstand more arduous treatment and still... persist. Now we’ll get to see if I was right.”

She flicked her wrist and the whip uncoiled, its barbed head dropping to the ground as she gestured subtly, and the bar-igura and the hound-demon came forward around her, malice shining in their eyes.

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The mood in the small room was thick with a tangible sense of dread, as cold as the bare stone of the walls and the rough slab table that dominated most of the space.

The companions sat wearily in their seats, sagging under the weight of defeat and exhaustion. At least they were clean, for the most part, although the smell of demons and blood still clung to them persistently like a second skin.

All of them were there, but there wasn’t any idle conversation. It was as if none of them wanted to add reality to the dire circumstances they faced by talking about it. Even Mole looked subdued, as she sat playing with something in her lap that she’d fished out of her *bag of holding*.

When Saureya entered the room, however, the Herald’s Voice trailing behind him like a shadow, the mood quickly shifted. Perhaps the deva was just a convenient focus for the anger and frustration in the room, or maybe it was the cold look with which he regarded all of them, his eyes a void that somehow fueled the hot passions felt by the others.

Beorna slapped her palm down on the table, as she half rose out of her chair. “Did you have some other obligation that kept you while your forces were being slaughtered? Your presence on the wall would have been... useful. Not that you ever expected us to hold the line.”

The dwarf’s attack did not alter the deva’s calm façade. “A general does not lead from the front line,” he said.

Umbar took up the attack. “General? Is that what you are calling yourself now, Fallen? Some commander, to let himself be shoved back into a corner, to await slaughter...”

“Friends,” Arun said, silencing both of his companions with a raised hand. “This serves no purpose. We knew the danger, when we agreed to come here.” Umbar nodded, deferring to the Chosen, and while the templar’s expression demonstrated clearly her feelings on the issue, she too fell back into her chair with a loud clank of her armor. Arun turned back to Saureya. “What news?”

“The demons have realized that a frontal assault upon the main doors is fruitless. They are tunneling through the rock. It’s only a matter of hours, now.”

“Is there another way out?” Dannel asked.

“No. Beyond the few tunnels that burrow beneath the Bastion, there is only an expanse of dense rock, and then, the void. The boundaries of this place are absolute to one not able to shift between planes. This bolt-hole in which we reside, the Deepest Hold, is the final place on Occipitus not overrun by Graz’zt’s legions. And soon it too, will fall before the inevitable surge of the Abyss.”

“So what would you have us do, deva? Huddle here and await our doom?” Beorna spat.

“Sometimes, one’s fate cannot be avoided,” the deva said, but as he spoke he looked at Mole, who’s eyes rose to meet his. Something sparkled in those celestial eyes, but his expression did not change. Nor did the dwarves appreciate the sentiment.

“I’ll not wait idly for the headsman’s axe to fall,” Beorna said, while Umbar, at the same instant, said, “Let them in, then, and I’ll send a thousand demons back to the pit before I go.”

“You cannot break the *dimensional lock*?” Dannel asked Cal. The gnome shook his head. “Even if I had a *disjunction*, the odds would be long. Graz’zt has sealed the effect to the plane, and only a greater power would have a chance at sundering it, even in a localized area, even temporarily.”

“What of the gods?” Lok asked.

“They will not interfere,” Saureya said with a certainty that could not be breached. “The struggle for the fate of Occipitus will be decided here.”

“Why did we come here again?” Dannel asked nobody in particular.

At that point a general argument broke out, with more recriminations hurled at Saureya, and words thrown back and forth across the table. The deva’s calm replies only seemed to fuel the anger of Beorna and Umbar, and even Arun appeared to grow impatient. Dannel made a comment that Umbar took offense at, and soon there was a four-way quarrel raging around the table. Lok was silent, his head bowed, his eyes shut. And Cal did not engage in the discussion, but rather followed Saureya’s gaze, which kept returning to Mole. The gnome’s eyes fell back to what she held in her lap, and for a moment she just looked sad and forgotten, a child in a gathering of elders.

But only for a moment. She put away her toy, and then sprang up onto the table with a suddenness that momentarily broke off the row, drawing attention to her.

“Seems like there’s only one course of action left to us,” she said.

“Save your breath, gnome,” Umbar said. “I know what you would say, but even if we could sneak out of here, there’s no place left to hide. And I will not slink away from that rabble outside, in any case,” he said, hefting his damaged hammer.”

The gnome put her hands on her hips, looking down at the dwarf cleric with a perturbed look. But Cal said, “Go ahead, Mole. Say what you were going to say.”

“As I was about to, before I was so rudely interrupted. It does seem pretty straightforward, if you ask me. Graz’zt has locked the plane, so nobody can come or go. The demons all follow Graz’zt, and they won’t stop until we’re all dead.”

“So?” Beorna asked. “This we know, Mole.”

A sudden look of realization appeared on Dannel’s face. “You don’t mean...”

Mole cut him off, a smug look on her face. “As I said, one course of action. All we have to do is sneak out of here, past a few thousand demons, make our way across thirty or so miles of demon-infested terrain, and visit the skull one last time. And then, we get inside, find the big boss demon, and kill him. Seems pretty straightforward, actually.”

She folded her arms across her chest in triumph, taking some pleasure in the stunned looks that regarded her from around the table.

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“This is crazy. You know that, don’t you?” Dannel said, checking the dark opening in the rock for the twentieth time.

“The dwarves approved the plan,” Cal said, doing his own check of his magical paraphernalia, including the small bags sewn into his belt that held his spell components. The gnome nodded at the three dwarves, leaning against the wall on the far side of the opening. They held their weapons at the ready, and seemed to almost pulse with anticipation. Beorna, her own weapon broken in the siege of the Bastion, now carried a bright silver bastard sword that seemed to drink in the faint light of the tunnel. Saureya had given her *Aludrial’s Shard* almost casually, saying that he no longer had need of it. The templar had accepted it with equal aplomb, the gift of the artifact apparently unable to overcome the suspicion that she still obviously bore for the fallen entity.

“That only confirms my point,” the elf said.

“If there were another option...” Cal began.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Dannel replied. “While I may not be in your league intellectually—heck, I don’t even think I’m on the same *plane* as you, intellectually—I have enough smarts to know that your plan is probably the best chance we have. Heck, one in a thousand is better than zero in a thousand, I guess.”

“One in a thousand? I had actually set the odds at about one in four thousand,” Cal said.

The elf looked at the gnome with a wry look, as if trying to gauge whether Cal’s comment was serious. But Cal turned away as they heard the faintest scrape of leather on stone from the adjacent opening.

“Sheesh, I can hear you guys fifty paces away,” Mole said, as she became visible directly before them. Behind her, they could see the slender form of Callendes, his wings folded tight against his back. The half-celestial was very good at moving silently, but Dannel would have bet platinum to copper that the noise they’d heard had come from the avariel’s footsteps, and not Mole’s. “You do know that this part of the plan requires stealth, right?”

“In a few moments, it won’t matter,” Lok said. “Did you find it?”

“Yes, yes, Saureya was right,” the gnome admitted. “They’re close, too; another ten minutes, and this all would have been moot. Is everyone ready?”

“Let’s do it, then?” Beorna said, hefting the *Shard* in both of her hands.

Everything had been discussed in advance, and there was no need for discussion as the casters quietly and efficiently summoned a few protective wards. Cal had interviewed all of them before, and had offered suggestions on how to maximize their combined abilities. They had worked well in concert in the past, and had fought several desperate battles together already, but each of them knew that the current plan would require flawless execution—accompanied by considerable luck—to even have the slim chances that Cal and Dannel had been discussing.

“Dannel, signal the archons,” Cal said. The elf nodded, falling back a short distance back down the winding, uneven shaft that they’d negotiated to get to this point. “Take us in, Mole,” he said, motioning for the warriors to precede him. They made no noise; the last enchantment summoned by Umbar had been a *silence* spell, which he focused on a small dirk that the cleric passed to Lok.

Cal saw that Callendes remained close to Mole in the vanguard. Ever since the death of his brother, the avariel had taken on an almost frightening intensity. Cal recognized that the half-celestial was walking a fine line between commitment and insanity, but the fact was that they needed him, needed every resource they could possibly draw upon for this mission. Saureya had agreed to give them whatever they wanted, but he himself would not leave the Bastion. The deva had only a scant handful of surviving celestials left with him, a token force that would barely slow the demons when they broke through into the last few chambers of the fortress interior. If they failed, it would not matter; the fate of those remaining survivors was sealed.

Once the warriors had proceeded far enough for the effects of the *silence* to pass, Cal followed them. The dark opening gave way onto an uneven shaft that rapidly approached the vertical, but Mole had helpfully strung up a rope to assist their descent. Cal could feel the tension in the line that suggested that his companions were making use of it; the others ahead were barely visible even to his keen eyes. The spell would cover the noise of any of the warriors fumbling with the rock or slipping on the smooth stone, but if one of them lost their grip and fell outside of the range of the effect, then this effort would fail before it had begun. No sense focusing on that, Cal thought; there were any of a thousand ways that things could go wrong, and they'd be better off focused on just dealing with events as they occurred. If someone fell, they'd have to adjust; there was no going back.

But nothing untoward happened, and the shaft suddenly leveled off and bent slightly to the right before culminating in a roughly spherical pocket of open space, a bubble within the mountain. The only exits were tiny cracks and sinkholes too small for even Mole to attempt. It was unlikely they went anywhere; Cal made that deduction by the simple fact that the enemy's hezrou demons would have likely found any possible entry, no matter how small, by means of their ability to assume *gaseous form*. None of the toad demons had appeared within the fortress, which suggested that Saureya's assurance about the interior of the Bastion being completely sealed was likely accurate.

But that was likely to change, and soon, as the gnome heard a faint scratching sound that seemed to pass through the very rock surrounding them. The demons were digging, tunneling through the mountain itself to get to the last few survivors of the celestial inhabitants of Occipitus. The others, enveloped in the *silence* radiating from Lok, wouldn't hear it... but that thought was belied as Lok bent for a moment, running his hand along the stone. He looked at Cal, and nodded.

He feels them coming, the gnome thought. The companions exchanged a look. There was no need to share words; all of them knew the plan, knew what they had to do.

They gave Lok some room—but the dwarves did not go far, their weapons held ready—as the genasi crossed to the far side of the cavern. He placed his feet solidly on the uneven ground, and leaned against a slanted plane of rock. He pressed his face against the stone, closing his eyes for a moment. Then he turned back and looked at the others gathered behind him, and nodded.

Everyone tensed.

Lok shifted, and stepped *into* the stone, vanishing entirely from view.

The companions waited; it could be seconds or minutes now, depending on what Lok found.

They did not have to wait long. Cal barely had time to count ten heartbeats before Lok unleashed another of the powers he commanded, the power of Dumathoin, into the rock. The alien stone of Occipitus obeyed his command, and an opening appeared in the stone, as he *shaped* it to his will. The area of effect was not great, but Lok had maximized the efficiency of the *stone shape* by merely weakening rather than removing the stone ahead of

him. As the growing portal revealed the genasi, he slammed forward with his whole body, crashing into the seemingly solid stone ahead of him, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

Those fragments collapsed down into the tunnel being dug by the surprised demons, who fell back in disarray. There were over a dozen of the creatures crammed into the narrow space, mostly cowering dretches equipped with leather bags full of stone debris that they were trying to clear from the tunnel. At the forefront, obviously doing most of the work of digging, were a pair of muscled bar-igura, their foreclaws fitted with vicious metal talons, and a warped hordeling, a misshapen thing with a squat, almost headless body armored in bony chitin. Four thick arms sprouted from its body, culminating in huge black claws that apparently tore through rock as efficiently as softer flesh. It clearly hadn't been stinting in its efforts; those claws were bloody, and the thing wheezed terribly with every movement, only hatred—of itself, the demons, the celestials it was ordered to find—driving it onward.

The demons were caught off guard by the sudden development, but Lok didn't hesitate; without waiting for the others, he lifted his axe and leapt forward, landing in the midst of the demons in the crowded tunnel.

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The demons in the first rank of diggers were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of foes among them, but they were quick to respond. The two bar-igura fell upon Lok, trusting in their superior size and weight to simply overbear the genasi, to be torn apart at their leisure.

Unfortunately for them, Lok was far tougher than his size would indicate, and the two ape-demons were repulsed, bouncing off of the warrior. One tried to recoup by grabbing Lok's weapon arm, but Lok shifted his wrist out of its clumsy grasp, and drove the axe solidly into the demon's ugly face. The battle was entirely silent, but no less violent for that.

The hordeling lifted its bludgeon-shaped head slowly, white froth erupting from the gash in its face that formed its mouth. With a painful shake of its body, it extracted itself from the litter of stone that half-buried it and started to shift around to face the enemy behind it. The maneuver was aborted, however, as Arun appeared in the gap opened by Lok just a spare second before. The paladin leapt into the fray much like the genasi, but his course brought him down squarely upon the back of the hordeling. The creature opened its mouth wide and let out a silent screech of displeasure at the sudden burden, but its struggles were cut short as Arun brought his blessed warhammer down solidly into the back of the thing's skull. The hordeling was slammed down hard into the ground by the force of the impact, sending up a plume of stone dust around it. Its multiple limbs splayed out around it, quivered for a brief instant, and then fell still.

The dretch thralls clearly had no interest in remaining in the tunnel, and started to fall back in chaotic disarray, dropping their heavy burdens. They did not get far, however, before a maze of sticky strands appeared to block the tunnel. A half-dozen were caught in the *web*, and several others dithered before it, trapped between an unhappy choice of trying to force through the barrier, or turning back to face the deadly weapons of the enemy warriors behind them. One that hesitated too long suddenly pitched forward, the feathered end of

an arrow jutting from its splotched back. That decided the others, which leapt forward, trying to pick a way through the *web*.

One dretch, a loathsome little creature named Uzet, had been almost to the front of the *web* when it had been snared. Doggedly it picked its way forward, focused on the twisting, empty tunnel ahead of it. It heard a squeal, and glanced over its shoulder to see one of its bretheren a few paces back, hopelessly tangled. Then, suddenly the trapped dretch became silent, although its struggles continued.

A dim awareness of the significance of that sudden quiet pierced Uzet's little mind, and it redoubled its efforts to break free. However, as it lurched forward toward freedom, the *webs* suddenly vanished, and the dretch toppled forward to land in an ungainly heap on its fat belly. The demon tried to scabble to its feet, but fear engulfed it and tangled its scrawny limbs. It turned its head to look back, and that fear intensified a hundredfold as it saw the metal warrior coming toward it, its heavy footsteps utterly silent, an implacable stare fixed in the glowing gray eyes that were visible beyond the slits of the full helm that it wore. Uzet's gaze fixed on the axe the creature carried, a terrible weapon already drenched in the blood of its kin. Not that it cared about the bar-Igura or the other dretch, but it had a certain attachment to its own hide.

Self-preservation won out over fear, and the dretch leapt clumsily to its feet. It sprang for the safety of the tunnel—let Nax deal with this terror!

The dretch was still within the radius of the *silence*, and thus did not hear the whistle of the arrow that tore into the back of its head, ending its pathetic existence in a quite decisive manner.

Back behind the radius of the *silence* around Lok, Cal slid his wand of *enervation* back into its sheath, seeing that it was not necessary. He knew that Lok and Dannel would make sure that none of the dretches got out to warn of their presence, so he turned to grab Umbar as the dwarf cleric started to move past him.

"This is the point of no return," he said. "Regardless of whether we succeed, no demons can use this tunnel to get into the Bastion."

The cleric nodded. "Go ahead. I will see to it." The dwarf started back toward the tunnel breach, pressing up against the side of the tunnel to allow Avellos and the Herald's Voice to pass. Part of Cal's strategy had held the two celestials back in the rear for at least this first part of the plan; while all of them were shielded against causal detection, he was cautious of the demons sensing the presence of their traditional enemies, regardless. And, he admitted to himself, he was worried about the celestials betraying themselves to their foes as well. After all, such beings were not accustomed to dissembling, and deceit was central to their success.

The sword archon looked at Cal with a calm expression on its face, not even sparing a glance for the wreckage of demon bodies strewn about the tunnel. It was getting cramped, and time was passing; Cal knew that the chances of something going wrong increased with every second of delay.

“Time for our disguises,” he said, just loud enough for everyone to hear. Everyone except Lok, of course; the genasi had taken up a position further down the tunnel at a slight bend, alert for any signs of additional demons.

The spell took only a few seconds to cast; Cal had already prepared a set of mental images based on what he’d expected to find here. He used the forms of the demons around them when possible; Arun and Lok became bar-Igura, while he and Mole took on the form of dretches. The others became a miscellany of typical demons, vrocks and babaus and other types suited to the size and shape of the individual being *veiled*. One of the principles of effective disguises, Cal knew all too well, was keeping things as simple as possible.

Dannel got special attention; Cal lingered a moment on him, adding a *tongues* spell to the *veil* enchantment. Mole grumbled, although there really was no choice; not only was the gnome too small for what Cal had in mind, but she was also far more useful to them as a scout. And while she wouldn’t have admitted such, Cal knew that the elf was about as good at bluffing as his slippery niece.

Cal heard Umbar’s chanting coming from back down at the breach; almost immediately a faint tremor shook the tunnel.

“Let’s go!” he urged, moments before the roof of the tunnel, weakened by Umbar’s *soften earth and stone* spell, collapsed, sealing the route back into the Bastion behind them.

Now, there was only one way for them to go, and no avenue of escape left to them.

Chapter 577

Nax was not pleased. The massive hordeling spat, the gob of spittle hissing as it hit a nearby boulder. A dretch cowered away from him, acutely aware of the dangers of antagonizing the more powerful fiend.

The narrow valley, settled in between a nest of jagged black peaks, was smaller now than when the demons had found it. Huge mounds of crumbling stone extracted from the tunnel were scattered everywhere. A few dretches carrying empty sacks milled about, careful not to attract the slightest attention.

The hordeling’s skull was a monstrosity, with a gruesome concavity where half its skull had been, half-formed flesh still slowly regenerating over the spot where the mage’s *disintegration* had hit. The terrible wound had to be causing the creature incredible agonies, but like many fiends, Nax was used to pain, even welcomed it, in a way. The pain meant, at least, that it still existed, that it clung to what it could call a life.

The hordeling’s expression darkened further as a faint rumbling sounded from somewhere deep within the mountain. Well, that might explain the delay. He’d been prepared to messily execute another of the dretch “miners” for dallying; the steady stream of the wretched little demons coming out of the tunnel, dragging their heavy bags of crushed rock, had suddenly ended a few minutes ago. Nax’s first thought was that there had been

another clog; the demons were too stupid to avoid getting cluttered up in the narrow twists of the tunnel, and there wasn't enough space to send in babau overseers to keep them in line. But Yavuv had been suspicious, and the larger fiend had learned to trust the instincts of its symbiant.

The big hordeling gestured, and a quartet of babaus came forward. All bore grievous wounds that in some cases continued to ooze black ichor. The whole valley was like a giant... what?

Convalescent ward, the voice in its mind whispered. Nax nodded. It understood the concept, if not the logic of it; fiends in general and demons in particular didn't spare much concern for the wounded. In most campaigns it had participated in, such weaklings would have been torn apart after a battle, as old scores were settled... or in some cases, just for the thrill of slaughter. But Malad was unwilling to waste resources, even crippled ones, until the celestials were utterly and fully defeated. And since the sorcerer was the voice of the Prince, his mandate was obeyed. Unfortunately for Nax, that meant that it was saddled with a company of pathetic, injured demons. Fortunately they healed quickly; the cries of pain were really getting on its nerves.

The hordeling lacked the insight to recognize the irony in its feelings, given its own grievous hurts, but it felt a brief chuckle flit across its mind. Annoyed, Nax turned his attentions to the babaus.

"Go into the tunnel and investigate the delay," it ordered. Yavuv flittered across the hordeling's shoulder, and the fiend nodded. "You may feel a touch upon your minds; do not offer any resistance. Yavuv will watch through your eyes, and report back to me."

The demons clearly didn't like that command, and they offered weighing looks, as if considering their options. Nax did not stir, but simply fixed the four creatures with a cold stare. Even if they had been whole, four babaus were not a threat to him, and if necessary, he would tear these four to pieces and grab others from the milling throng scattered about the valley.

Perhaps the babaus were thinking the same thing, for they quickly skittered off toward the tunnel entrance, sending the dretches scurrying to get out of the way. But before they reached the black opening, a knot of demons emerged.

The reason for the delay was immediately obvious; the demons were covered in stone dust, and bore other obvious marks of a tunnel collapse. Several dretches staggered out and to the side, but only a small handful; from the condition of the larger demons, it appeared that most of them had not survived. As for those bigger ones, there were *more* of them than Nax had expected...

But the hordeling's attention was drawn to a certain figure who emerged from the press, and stepped forward. The babaus drew back in alarm, glancing back to Nax, turning the matter over to their nominal leader.

What is he doing here? Nax thought, as the figure looked around before focusing his attention on the hordeling.

“Lord Malad,” Nax said, the words rumbling deep in the fiend’s massive chest. “This is... unexpected.”

Dannel, in the guise of Malad, came forward, exuding a confidence that was considerably bolstered by his *cloak of charisma*. “The celestials were waiting for us; they collapsed the tunnel. You will have to begin anew.” He waved absently to the demons behind him. “I will take these with me to report.” He started to turn away, as if assuming that his command would merely be followed. And indeed, Nax would have had no choice but to comply, except for the sinuous voice that sounded softly in his mind.

Something is not right...

What is it?

He is shielded... they are all shielded...

“Lord Malad,” the hordeling thundered. “How did you get into the shaft? I have been here watching since you departed last.”

The expression of the “sorcerer” narrowed. All of the demons crowded about the valley were now watching the scene, some no doubt excited at the possibility of witnessing a clash between their liege lord and a not-quite-popular underling. None paid heed to a few dretch that slipped deeper into the center of the gathering.

“Your task is not to question me, hordeling. You will obey.”

The demons behind the sorcerer edged forward, as if eager for a conflict to begin.

But Nax merely dipped his monstrous head slightly. “As you command, lord,” he said. But the motion also revealed Yavuv, the thing that had once been a babau wrapped around the greater creature’s neck. Its eyes flashed red as it looked upon Malad, and it unleashed a tendril of power into him.

The sorcerer snarled, and raised an arm as if to launch a magical attack. But before he could act, the air around him shimmered, and his borrowed form dissolved, revealing the elvish arcane archer in all his natural glory.

Demons shrieked as the deception was unraveled. There were over a hundred in all crowded into the close confines of the valley: dretch, rutterkin, babaus, bar-igura, jovocs, and even a burning palrethee. Altogether it was a riot of sound and glistening alien bodies. Foremost among them was Nax, who recognized this archer, a foe that had stung it already. The hordeling rose up ponderously, the ground shaking beneath its massive form as it lifted its fists to smite this enemy that had been foolish to confront it for a final time.

Chapter 578

The valley echoed with the roars of demons as they leapt up, their agonies forgotten in the face of an enemy, and surged forward toward Dannel. But none were ahead of Nax, who lifted his clawed fists high above his body before driving them down in an arc that would pulverize the arcane archer into elvish paste. The *veiled* warriors rushed forward to intervene, but there was no way they could reach Dannel before that blow struck.

But an instant before Nax's attack landed, Cal cast his first ninth-level spell.

To the companions, all they saw was a haze of insubstantial forms that exploded outward from the gnome. During the exchange between Nax and Dannel, Cal had taken up a position roughly in the center of the compact valley, in the midst of the gathered demons. They ignored him, seeing only a pathetic, simpering dretch.

But now, those same demons saw terrors starker than even the worst nightmares of the Abyss. Demons are bullies by nature, but in their hearts they are motivated by fear as much as by the lust for violence. Their screams redoubled, but now they were cries of stark, unrelenting horror as Cal's *weird* took hold.

It lasted only a few seconds. When the images had dissipated, and the cries of the demons had faded, the little gnome mage from Faerûn was surrounded by the wracked bodies of nearly a hundred demons, their faces frozen in terrible rictuses of abject fear, the fear that had killed each and every one of them.

Nax was not slain, but even it had been seriously affected by the spell. The *weird* hit it in the middle of its attack, and it staggered to the side, its fists smacking harmlessly upon the bare stone several feet to the left of Dannel. The elf darted back from the stunned hordeling, speaking a word of command that caused his magical quiver to eject his fiendbane longbow. He took hold of the weapon and fell back beyond the charging warriors, stringing it with a practiced ease.

Nax recovered quickly, but not before Lok, Arun, and Beorna slammed hard into him, driving their weapons into his huge body. The hordeling possessed an incredible toughness and vitality, even injured as it was, but even it was hard-pressed against that onslaught. Lok's axe and Arun's hammer drove hard into its torso, and when it tried to knock them aside with a powerful sweep of its arm, Beorna stepped in with a two-handed swing of *Aludrial's Shard*, taking the limb off at the elbow.

A few of the other demons that had survived the *weird*—a half-dozen babaus, and the palrethee—began to stir, shaking off the stunning effect of Cal's spell. But they were broken, and any thought of continuing the attack fled their still-addled minds as they watched their champion being dismembered. The only routes out of the valley were treacherous, twisting paths up the sides of the valley that led to narrow gaps between the surrounding peaks. The wounded demons made for these exits, pushing each other out of the way when necessary, intent now on escape.

"None of them must get word out," Cal said calmly, blasting Nax with an *enervation* from his wand.

Dannel and Callendes nodded, and began plying their bows. The Voice had started toward the greatest foe, the hordeling and its symbiant, but Cal's words reminded it of its duty, and it flew across the valley to block the escape of a trio of fleeing babaus. The fiends threw themselves upon the celestial with a furious desperation, but the sword archon quickly demonstrated the futility of their efforts.

Umbar and Avellos rushed up to join in the pounding upon Nax, but the hordeling had clearly had enough of this one-sided melee. Its wings pounded as it started to lift into the air, narrowly avoiding a sweep at its legs from Arun's hammer.

"For Helm!" Beorna cried, as she lifted *Aludrial's Shard* in her hand like a spear, and hurled it into the hordeling's body.

The weapon buried itself to the hilt in the hordeling's chest. Nax screamed, its remaining claw clutching at the wound. Its wings continued to pound at the air for a few moments, and then the crippled creature plummeted straight down, landing with a colossal impact that shook the ground under the companions' feet.

The death of the hordeling brought a sudden quiet to the mountain valley. The last babau had fallen, pierced by four arrows, and none of the demons left scattered upon the uneven rocks stirred. Beorna went to recover her weapon, while Cal gestured for everyone to gather quickly around him.

"We don't have very long... even if they didn't hear that, these mountains are probably crawling with demons; a vrock or a quasit could fly over at any second."

They knew their roles, and their assignments; the companions quickly split into two groups, with half gathering around the Herald's Voice, and half around Umbar. The cleric began casting, and the sword archon closed its eyes as it called upon its own divine power.

Cal was casting as well, and just before the others finished he laid a *seeming* upon all of them, layered over the *veil*. Their demonic forms did not change in substance, but took on a pale, almost translucent coloration, and soft white robes appeared draped around them.

"Remember, stay together, and stay focused on the objective," he said, a moment before the *wind walk* spells took hold, and the companions began to dissolve into vaporous form. Within thirty seconds the transformation was complete, and the ten of them shot off into the sky, darting in between the gap between two of the rising peaks, and rapidly vanishing into nothing as they sped toward their destination.

For at least a full minute after they departed, the valley was silent. But then, a dark shadow shifted within a cleft in the rocks, half-hidden by the fallen mound that had been Nax. Red eyes gleamed within that amorphous mass, staring with malice at the point where the *wind walking* heroes had disappeared.

Chapter 579

Two tight phalanxes of vaporous forms streaked across the sky of Occipitus, making directly for the plane's dominant feature, the massive iron mountain created by its new ruler, the Demon Prince Graz'zt.

Cal was only dimly aware of the ground passing by far below them. Thus far they'd made excellent time, leaving the mountains behind and accelerating rapidly to a speed that should get them to destination in under an hour. They'd encountered a few flying demons, a few scattered flocks of vrock, an occasional lone quasit flitting on some errand, and once a pair of succubi carrying an iron chest between them. None of the demons had spotted them, though in each case they'd shifted their course subtly to avoid coming too close.

The gnome often looked back at the mountains, but so far there had been no signs that their departure had been detected, and that a pursuit had been ordered. To him it seemed inevitable that there would be one; the demons, or at least their tiefling leader, would quickly come to the realization that those who had left the devastation in the valley had not retreated back into the caverns under the Bastion. But without the ability to *teleport*, their foes would have a difficult time catching up to the ten raiders before they arrived at their destination.

Cal was worried about what they would find when they got there. They passed over a number of large groups of demons, most still moving in the direction of the canyon culminating in the Bastion. It looked as though Graz'zt had deployed the bulk of his army, however, and they saw no massive columns like the one that had assaulted the fortress, and breached its outer defenses. The Voice's words about the size of the force that the demon prince commanded continued to sound in his mind, and he wondered if they would arrive at the skull to find an impenetrable ring of defenders, including wary fliers equipped with *true seeing*. Or for that matter, if Graz'zt even now was watching them, preparing for their arrival at his sanctum.

There were defenders, that much was obvious even now, with miles left to go until they reached their destination. This far, all he could make out were tiny specks hovering in the air above the fortress, and black shapes that spread out across the ground at its base like splotches of ink, trembling slightly with movement.

Well, they would find out what was there soon enough.

Cal's musings were interrupted by a sudden unexpected to the side. He turned in time to see a wispy form, one of the four traveling behind the Voice, break formation and start descending in a steep dive. He couldn't quite make out its identity, with the distorting effect of the *wind walk*, but it was too big to be Mole, and probably not Dannel; the elf would not have broken with them without getting the attention of all of them first.

So it had to be Callendes or Avellos, the hound archon. Cal darted ahead of his group to get the attention of the others, and then pointed down. The other group had slowed as well, uncertain how to react. Already, the lone figure was almost halfway to the ground below, almost invisible against the stark backdrop. They were on the edge of one of the

fibrous forests that appeared on the landscape of Occipitus like wild tufts of hair, but other than that there were no obvious features to indicate why this section of the plane was special.

Damn it, Cal thought. He was tempted to ignore the break and press on, but before he could make a decision, the Voice spread its insubstantial wings and started down, the others following behind.

Hoping that they weren't making a big mistake, Cal followed them.

* * * * *

A dozen babaus cavorted the clearing, celebrating a climax of blood and suffering with an enthusiasm that only true demons could muster. The fibrous stalks of the weird Occipitan "forest" surrounded them, some still crusted with dangling gobs of ruined demonic flesh. Some of the slain demons had been strung up from some of the thicker fibers around the perimeter of the clearing, the garish decorations hanging several feet above the ground. A thick stench of battle and ruin absolutely filled the air, like a fog that the demons danced through as they experienced what for their kind passed as joy. Altogether the setting made the place a scene of horror, even if one did not consider the feature that dominated the clearing.

But even the gory scene and its grisly participants paled before the suffering embodied in the figure bound spread-eagled to a cluster of fibers at the far end of the clearing. The demons had lashed together over a dozen fibers to support the captive, but still they sagged heavily with its weight, until its feet dangled a mere pace above the ground. Blood both old and new puddled beneath it, the crusted splatter occasionally augmented by another drop that fell ponderously free from the ruined form. A babau would occasionally break from the circle and rush the dangling form, tearing new gashes in its already ruined legs and body with a sweep of its claws before rejoining the dancers, licking the bloody gore from its claws.

The disfigured captive was no longer identifiable as the leonal Ediir; even one who had known the celestial would have been hard-pressed to identify it. Most of the skin covering the leonal's legs and arms dangled in long strips, flayed from the limb by babaus careful not to unduly sever the blood vessels beneath. The celestial's torso had likewise been painstakingly cut open, the flesh and muscles parted layer by layer until the organs beneath glistened wetly in the open air. And the face—that was a sight best avoided, for there was little there now that reflected the strength and quiet dignity that had once been possessed by the noble warrior.

Distracted by their pleasure, the first warning that the demons got of the threat was when a loud cry drew their attention around, and the hound archon Avellos leapt into the clearing. The celestial was still covered by Cal's *veil*, giving it the appearance of a muscled humanoid fiend, but its hostile intent was immediately evident. The first babau still had a dumb look of surprise on its face when the celestial's flaming greatsword crushed into it in a mighty power attack. The demon's head came apart like an overripe melon, and the fiend fell to the turf in a gory heap.

The babaus shrieked and immediately fell upon the archon from all sides, but even as they rushed Avellos death began to rain down upon them. Arrows shot out from the fibrous forest, burying themselves to the feathers in the emaciated bodies of the demons. An explosion of holy energy erupted in the clearing, the *holy smite* blinding the fiends with its intensity even as the pure deluge of power seared their corrupt flesh.

Arun, Lok, and Beorna came charging into the clearing on the heels of the archon, but even as they started hacking at the disoriented babaus, Mole's voice sounded from somewhere, shouting a warning.

"Over on the right... incoming!"

The defenders had just enough time to look in that direction before the thicket of fibers spread open, and another dozen babau surged into the clearing, accompanied by a pair of massive howlers, each easily fifteen feet in length. The newcomers announced themselves with a ferocious roar that accompanied a violent charge, as they leapt across the clearing into the fray.

Chapter 580

Faced now with almost two dozen babau and a pair of oversized howlers, the companions found themselves engaged in yet another desperate battle.

The howlers relied on their sheer size and the momentum of their rush as they bowled into the melee, bearing down enemies and allies alike. The first slammed hard into Beorna, knocking her prone and pinning her under its several thousand pounds of bulk. The second tried to do the same with Lok, but the genasi brought up his shield and stepped aside, taking a hard but glancing hit that separated him from the babau he'd been fighting. He set his feet to counterattack, but before he could strike a pair of babau leapt upon him from behind. Twisting, he shook free the first, but bad luck confounded him and his boot caught in a corpses's ribcage as he turned. The second babau took advantage at once by dragging the genasi down to the ground.

Arun rushed forward to Beorna's aid, catching the howler's attention with a powerful swing of his hammer that caught the creature solidly on the side of the head. The howler responded by lashing out at the paladin with a violent thrashing surge, its movements grinding Beorna into the ground beneath it. The creature's bite failed to connect, but one of the sharp spines that jutted from its neck impaled the dwarf's weapon arm. Arun grimaced, but merely tightened his grip on his *holy avenger*, his jaw tightening in a promise of divine retribution. A pair of babaus recovering from the *smite* tore at him from his flanks, but he ignored them for now, focused on the larger foe.

Avellos continued to sweep his huge sword about with raging abandon. The babau were resistant to the flames that engulfed the magical blade, but that did not spare them from the edge of the divine steel. But despite the aid from the others, the hound archon was still assailed by five of the foul, cackling demons, which came on him from all sides. Their claws found vulnerabilities that they exploited through cunning sneak attacks, and within

just a few seconds the celestial's fur was matted with its own blood, draining from deep gashes in its arms and torso.

The second wave of babaus came crashing into the melee on the heels of the howler rush; or at least some of them did, for a few found themselves distracted as they crossed the clearing. One suddenly found its legs tangled up beneath it, and it pitched forward to land in an awkward heap upon the ground. One of its fellows turned to see a small figure leap up at its face, darting past before it could react, its rapid passage leaving a reminder in the form of an explosion of pain in its left eye. The demon let out a violent scream and spun around to attack its tormentor, but saw only another of its fellows, likewise twisting around trying to find the streaking foe.

Then a loud whistle drew both demons around, to where a mere dretch stood grinning at them ten feet away.

"Well, you guys coming, or what?"

The demons, joined by the third as it picked itself up off the ground, snarled and rushed toward the *veiled* Mole.

The last knot of babaus—four of the snarling demons—diverted their rush toward the far edge of the clearing, where the barrage of arrows continued to knife out at their fellows. Hoping perhaps to ambush the archers, they instead found themselves confronted by a dwarf cleric and another archon. Umbar, delayed slightly as he augmented himself with the *divine power* of Moradin, intercepted the leap of the foremost demon with his axiomatic hammer, crushing its chest and reversing its momentum to land hard on its back. The Herald's Voice moved forward to join him, its hovering sword materializing in the air before it, but Umbar forestalled it before it could join the melee.

"Help the hound!" he urged. "I'll deal with these wretches!"

The celestial nodded and lifted into the air, while the babaus, disappointed in losing a shot at one of their hated enemies, took out their frustrations on the dwarf.

Lok's kept an iron grip on his axe as he pushed his fist into the spongy turf, slowly levering himself up. The babaus grappling him were spurred into a frenzy as they tried to keep him down, but they may as well have been clawing at a stone wall for all the effect that their claws had on his heavily armored body.

Of more concern was the howler, which turned on him with a vengeance. Before it could unleash a full attack, a black beam shot out from the surrounding forest and struck it, weakening it. But that did not stop it from attacking; if anything its furious assault seemed to double its earlier effort. Its jaws closed on Lok's shield, tearing it from his grip and nearly taking his forearm with it, and a spine lodged in the shoulder joint of his left arm, poking through the layered mail and digging painfully into his flesh.

Lok ignored it all, and placed his feet with deliberation under him. His head came up, slowly.

This was his spot.

Arun felt a pain stab into his left hip as one of the babaus raging on him finally managed to work its sharp nails under his armor. The howler reared up, briefly revealing Beorna's struggling form under its chest.

"Get this damned thing off me!" she shouted, slicing her dagger out of its scabbard before the thing came down on her again.

The howler opened its jaws and twisted its head around, apparently intending to simply gobble up the defiant paladin.

Arun was waiting for just such an opportunity.

The holy avenger warhammer swept up and down in a blur, striking the howler solidly on the side of its jaw. Bone snapped under the impact; the howler started to rear back, but Arun wasn't finished. Stepping past the babaus as if they weren't even there, he drove the head of the hammer into the left front knee of the monster, pulverizing that joint, and causing the howler to tip over onto its side. The thing lifted its head and screamed, a sound that abruptly ended as the paladin brought the hammer up one last time, for a third consecutive power attack that crushed its throat. Now crippled, gurgling as it tried to breathe, the howler flopped over backward, sliding off of Beorna. A babau immediately leapt onto her, but she grabbed it and slammed her mailed fist into its face.

"I... am... not... in... the... mood!" she yelled, punching it with every word that tore through her lips.

Arun, seeing that she had the matter in hand, turned to deal with his own enemies. The babaus shared a look, and fled.

Avellos was now in a truly desperate situation. He had slain another babau, but four still threatened him, exploiting his open position to launch nasty flanking attacks. And his greatsword was smoking from more than the burning magic that infused it; the babau acid was having its corrosive effect.

But even as the demons gleefully chortled in anticipation of another fallen foe, the situation abruptly shifted. A long arrow caught one of the babaus in the back of the head, slaying the already-wounded demon. And then the Voice appeared, landing in a flutter of white cloth and soft wings, its sword coming down in a strike that cut another of the demons near in twain. The sword archon took up a protective position adjacent to the stricken hound, preventing either of them from being effectively flanked by the two remaining demons.

But faced with celestials, the demons did their best, and one actually managed to get its claws around Avellos's throat before the hound broke free, and drove his sword through the creature. Unfortunately the attack was too much for the battered blade, which snapped off just above the hilt.

Lok, meanwhile, met the howler's rush. The creature slammed into him again, but the genasi had taken up a *defensive stance*, and the howler's head was driven up as Lok took

its weight upon him. The image of the huge monster, thousands of pounds of abyssal horror, held up by a five-foot warrior, was almost comic. But then, Lok *heaved*, and the howler's feet were lifted up off the ground. The creature flailed for a moment, confused by this unexpected turn.

But then, Lok started hacking at its belly.

The melee was already starting to shift, sliding inexorably into a rout. The demons, confronted by the furious power of their enemies, started to fall, first by the handful, then in a deluge. Umbar, facing four babaus, slew two and had started on a third when his magical hammer, almost covered in glistening red slime, finally succumbed. The cleric spat a dwarven curse and grabbed the injured demon's head, blasting it with an *inflict wounds* spell that caused it to shudder in agony. Snapping its neck for good measure, he turned to face his last foe.

He was too late, he saw, as the demon was on the turf. It was hard to see the arrows in its chest; only a bit of the feathered ends was visible.

Those facing the dwarves were the first to break. Even as Lok dropped the dying howler to the ground, the two babaus attacking him decided that maybe they'd picked the wrong opponent. They fled, one unfortunately taking a path that led it too close to Arun. The demon went down, its skull crushed like an eggshell beneath an armored boot. The other one got away, disappearing into the fibrous forest, running with an abandon that probably didn't flag until it reached the far side of the plane.

Mole's foes were probably the last to realize that the battle was ending. The gnome had led the three of them on a merry chase around the entire far half of the clearing, over and under and around the fibrous stalks, making their swipes look clumsy as they grabbed only air. The gnome barely bothered to attack, managing a few minor swipes with her dagger that poked and prodded the demons into a greater fury. Each time the demons rushed her, they seemed to get *just almost* close enough to grab her, before she twisted or leapt or tumbled out of reach.

"Ah, it's been fun, but I think I'll sit out the next dance," she said to them, finally, coming to a stop in the middle of the clearing.

Behind her, Arun, Beorna, and Lok stood, covered in demonic ichor, their weapons bare and bloody in their hands.

The demons, enraged beyond the dictates of common sense, leapt to the attack.

And then, it was over.

As silence returned to the clearing, and the companions checked themselves and their gear for damage, Avellos approached the devastated form of his commander. The hound, its wounds forgotten, lowered its gaze, its hand opening to drop the broken sword to the ground.

There was no chance of any other fate, but the Voice verified it anyway, briefly brushing the leonal's hand with a gentle touch. The sword archon sighed, and lowered its head.

The great warrior Ediir was dead.

Chapter 581

A great sadness hung over the scene of carnage in the clearing within the fibrous forest. But there was also a fair degree of anger.

"What was that all about, celestial?" Umbar said, coming forward. Beorna was only a step behind him, grimacing as she favored limbs crushed by the weight of the howler.

"We don't have time to delay," Cal said, coming forward into the clearing, sliding one of his wands into the case at his belt. "More demons will be on us at any moment; don't think that the ones that got away won't be back with friends."

"I think we need to resolve this, and now," Beorna said, tucking her thumbs into her belt. "If we cannot rely upon a member of the team, we need to know it, before he gets us all killed in a crisis situation."

"Ediir was one of the great ones," the Voice explained. "Avellos was his second, and was ordered to leave him when one of the gates opened..."

"We do not question your loyalty, hound archon," Umbar interrupted. "But greater things are at stake in this than one man. If I were to fall, I would expect you to leave me, without hesitation, for the greater good. I would have thought that an archon, an embodiment of Law... duty... order... would understand this above all."

A few of the companions shared looks as the dwarf spoke. The archon, however, merely nodded in acquiescence. "Your words speak truth. I have twice failed in my duty," it said, its eyes falling to the shattered weapon at its feet.

Arun looked at Beorna, and there was a hint of reluctance in the way she met his gaze. "You would leave me behind, Beorna?" he said, quietly.

"Damned straight, paladin," she said. "And I would expect nothing less from you. I do not often agree with mister high holiness over there, but in this he is one hundred percent correct. Duty trumps all."

"Oh, for the love of..." Dannel said, coming forward, exasperated. "What is it with you lawfuls? I swear, I've seen orc drinking contests that weren't as competitive as this whole 'who's the most noble' crap! So Avellos spent some time with a leonal, and some independent thinking rubbed off on him. Good! Cripes, loyalty to your friends isn't a weakness, guys!"

"This is not some fairy elf game we are playing at, archer," Umbar began, "There is too much at stake..."

Lok interrupted him by stepping forward, and smacking the ground before him with the top of his axe. “Nobody gets left behind. Period. Some of us may not survive this quest, but we abandon *no one* while they yet breathe.”

For a moment, there was only silence, then the sword archon spoke. “Well said, voice of the Mountain.”

“Yeah, sheesh, what’s with you guys?” Mole said, but the others were already moving on, gathering their weapons, casting healing spells to treat the wounds suffered in the brief but intense battle. Umbar turned around and walked away, grumbling. Avellos had turned back to the slain leonal, and laid a hand gently upon its battered body.

“Go forward in peace, mighty warrior.”

The Voice gestured for the others to fall back, and then called down a *flame strike* that engulfed the leonal. The holy flame embraced the slain celestial, and although it burned for only a few seconds, the twisting white pillar left behind nothing but ashes and a few stunted stalks when it dissipated.

“Let’s get moving,” Cal prodded.

Beorna and Umbar quickly started healing the warriors damaged in the fray, while the Voice attended to the dire wounds covering Avellos. The others cleaned their weapons as best they could, careful of the damaging secretions that had come off of the babaus. As they were getting ready, Dannel came up to Umbar.

“I see you lost your weapon,” he said to the cleric.

“I do not need an elvish blade,” he said, with a nod to the longsword at Dannel’s belt.

“I had something else in mind,” he said, whispering a word of command to his magical quiver. The device produced his quarterstaff, which he offered to the cleric. “It’s name is *Alakast*,” he said. “It... well, let’s just say that it doesn’t like fiends much.”

The dwarf nodded, recognizing the potent runes etched into the length of the weapon. “I will see that it is put to good use.” Resting the weapon against his shoulder, he went over to confer with Arun.

“A good choice,” Cal said.

Dannel nodded. “I haven’t had much need for it of late. Although I am getting a little worried about arrows.”

“I thought you brought spare bundles in Mole’s *bag of holding*?”

“Yeah, ten bundles, two hundred shafts. Shot those, and the extra ones in my pack,” the elf said. “And I’ve already borrowed extras from Lok and Arun. I do go through them pretty quickly, and we’ve been in at least six major engagements since we arrived here. I also

gave two bundles to Callendes, before we left; he ran out before the end of the battle at the Bastion. I'm down to the ones left in my magical quiver; I've got a good fifty or so left, but once those are gone, my combat effectiveness is going to drop significantly."

"I think Beorna has a few left," Mole said suddenly from behind him, causing the elf to jump in surprise. "I'll go ask her." Smiling innocently, the gnome turned and walked over to the cleric.

Dannel grimaced. "I think she's gotten bored with just needling the dwarves," he said. "Bad luck for me, I think."

"I think maybe we're due for some good luck," Cal said earnestly. Dannel nodded, and turned as the others approached, still looking garish in their gore-encrusted armor. "Everyone ready?" Cal asked.

"Let's go," Arun said, already starting to become insubstantial as he drew upon the power of the *wind walk* once again. The companions became insubstantial, and quickly left another gory battlefield behind, speeding off toward the iron mountain in the distance, where ugly red clouds continued to roil in an uncontrolled storm of Chaos.

Chapter 582

Graz'zt's Iron Skull dominated the center of Occipitus like a boil upon a scabrous hunk of flesh. In just a few days of subjective time, the slow progress of the plane away from corruption had been undone, at least here, where the power of the Demon Prince reigned supreme. The once-golden sky had been completely obscured by a permanent storm of red and black clouds that spiraled in a wide halo over the place. Blue lightning flashed within that mass, accompanied by rumblings that sounded like the tremors of a building earthquake. Black specks filled the sky, wings of flying demons that included vrockes, chasmes, succubi, quasits, and fiendish humanoids mounted upon winged creatures that looked like a combination of dragons and giant dire bats. Altogether, it was a scene out of a nightmare.

The citadel itself was a terrible, garish pillar that still bore a rough proximity to its original shape, augmented now by jagged edges, sharp spikes, and leering fiendish faces cast in iron. Some of those decorations were not merely ornamental, as occasionally a fearsome-looking figure that appeared to be cast in black metal would shift position, staring out over the plain below with eyes that glowed an evil red. Every inch of the fortress was covered by the abyssal iron that Graz'zt had conjured with his epic spell, and no means of entrance were visible anywhere, save for the massive doors set deep within its base, surrounded by murder holes and dark slits beyond which shadowy figures occasionally moved. As if that were not enough, a pair of massive glabrezu, each standing nearly twenty feet tall, stood before the doors. The chiseled bodies of these fiends were covered in runes that glowed a feral red, and each wore an open-faced helm of black iron that sprouted a forest of bristling spikes.

Spreading outward from the spire in a chaotic *mélange* was a massive camp; or rather series of camps, for there was no overarching order or sense to the arrangement of

gatherings that covered the plain, nothing other than the presence of the spire in the center to give them any sense of common alignment at all. The camps ranged from small clusters of demons that appeared to have simply stopped at a random point upon the plain, to a more substantial enclosure walled in by a stockade of iron longswords driven deep into the spongy turf of Occipitus. These gatherings combined features of military outposts and refugee camps, and collectively contained over ten thousand fiends, nearly all demons, although a sprinkling of hordelings, yugoloths, daemons, half-fiends, tieflings, and others rounded out the anarchy. Only one thing kept this host together, one thing bound it to this unfamiliar and unforgiving place.

That one thing was the resident of the metal spire, the once-lord of Azzagrat, here to make his bid for a return to the ranks of the great masters of the Abyss.

Demons were what they were, however, and the camp was roiled with a constant din as the pure chaos and evil of its inhabitants played out. Every hour dozens of beings met their end in the camps, as old rivalries exploded and new ones were born, sometimes out of something as casual and stupid as a stray look or a slight bump in passing. Graz'zt's enforcers were out in the camp, a trio of hulking Nalfeshnees that each commanded a dozen hulking half-fiends encased from head to toe in dark red plate. Their task was to ensure that none of these conflicts exploded into a general conflagration. But these lords of demonkind were nevertheless of a kind with their fellows, and bribes occasionally passed to ensure that the patrol would be elsewhere, when the time for revenge came at hand.

The companions watched it all with stares of horrified amazement. They hovered high above the scene, about a mile out from the citadel, just outside the edge of the huge cloud. This was far enough away from the orbiting fliers so that their insubstantial forms made them virtually undetectable, but that did not give any of them any sense of security. The spell did not give them the power to speak, but no words could have expressed the diverse feelings that passed through them at this point. Each of them, mortal and celestial alike, battled a surge of feeling that combined fear and anger, hatred and resignation.

One of the ten, one of the smallest among them, drifted a bit ahead of the others. Deception and sneaking had brought them this far; from here on out, their approach would be... different.

Cal lifted his hand. The air around the *wind walkers* stirred, gathering in anticipation.

The gnome lowered his hand, and the ten of them shot forward, heading directly for the skull.

Chapter 583

Seconds passed, each one ticking off loudly in Cal's mind, like the rattle of the broken Lantanese clock that his aunt had insisted on keeping on the mantle of the Calloran home in Waterdeep. *Tick... tick... tick....* At about a mile distant, he figured it would take about a minute for them to cover the distance from their initial vantage to their destination.

It would be the longest minute he'd ever experienced in his life.

Fully ten ticks of the clock had passed, almost enough to give him a giddy hope that they might beat the odds, when the cry of a vrock shattered that musing.

None of the companions shifted from their tight formation, two phalanxes centered around Umbar and the Voice. Well, the formation was mostly intact, Cal saw, as he glanced back and saw that Mole was pacing him, her grin evident even through the *wind walk*. More seconds passed, as the companions streaked at high speed toward their destination. Several demons had changed course to intercept them, although the vrock that had first spotted them was already behind, and trailing further, unable to keep up with their rapid flight.

An *unholy blight* exploded ahead of them; gritting his teeth Cal shot through it, followed immediately by the others. None of them had flinched, and most of them, warded by layered magical protections, including circles of *protection from evil*, resisted the worst of the blast's effects.

Looking down, Cal scanned the massive camp below. They were still almost three hundred feet above the ground, out of range of most forms of attack, and likely impossible to see against the backdrop of the roiling storm above. With the chaos of the demonic horde, there was no way to tell if they were responding to the general alarm, or if they were even aware yet that an incursion was taking place.

He looked back up to see a pair of succubi swooping down from up ahead. He grimaced, bracing himself for an attack, but instead of assaulting the *wind walkers*, they drew up just close enough to fire off *charms* at several of them as they shot past. Cal felt a moment of uncertainty; if one or more of them succumbed, it could throw a wrench in their plan. But again the willpower of the companions, bolstered with magic, prevailed. By the time that the succubi were ready to strike again, they were past.

Another *blight* erupted, but this one was slightly off to the left, and they easily avoided it. Cal let himself hope that this was because the caster was getting farther away, and could not easily mark their position with the speed with which they were traveling.

The iron mountain was now looming up ahead of them, its jagged spires filling Cal's vision as they dove straight toward it. Several forms had detached from the structure, lifting into the air on metallic wings, red eyes gleaming as they fixed upon the intruders.

Gargoyles, Cal thought. *Bad news; their claws can cut through our damage reduction.*

But the incredible speed granted by the *wind walk* came at the price of maneuverability. And slowing down was not an option; if they eased their speed, then the demons would be on them in moments. And if the mass of ground-based demons mobilized before they were in...

Then there was no more time to think; the gargoyles were upon them.

The companions shot through them in a flash, but not without being blooded. A claw slammed into Cal, penetrating his wispy form as though he were solid, but he was wearing a *stoneskin*, and the blow had no effect. But Avellos and Umbar were hit hard, the archon slowed momentarily as the impact from the gargoyle knocked it out of formation. But despite their efforts the gargoyle attack could not disrupt their passage, and they were through, with nothing ahead but the sharp spikes jutting from the summit of the skull.

Cal turned the lead position over to Mole, who led them down. Their course shifted into a steep arc as they sped into a powered dive, straightening out into an angled descent that took them within a stone's throw of the citadel walls. Mole led them into a narrow gap between a jutting tower and the main bulk of the citadel, the others slicing through the space toward the ground that was very rapidly coming up to greet them. They knew where they were going; the lower entrance to the citadel was the same one they had used to access the place long before, when Arun, Dannel, and Mole had come here to confront the Test of the Smoking Eye.

The ground in front of the recessed entry was clear of demons; the nearest camp was a healthy hundred yards or so away from that key location. The demons in the camp were starting to stir, now, although there still wasn't any clear sign of organization, or an obvious response to the threat. One of the nalfeshnee wardens, accompanied by its ring of armored guards, was moving toward the entry, although it was still a good distance off.

Cal had lost his count, but he knew that only a tick or two remained. He prepared himself...

And saw the two glabrezu guardians step out from the recessed entry, their gazes coming up as one to fix the diving heroes with cold malevolence.

Oh, crap...

Chapter 584

The unexpected appearance of two advanced glabrezu guards threw a twist into Cal's plan, but with the *wind walking* companions descending toward the ground at sixty miles per hour, there was no time for anything other than gut reaction.

Within the tiniest fraction of a heartbeat, Umbar and the Voice released their *wind walk* spells. With a sudden, jarring lurch, the companions materialized fully, still diving directly toward the ground—and the waiting guards—at an extremely rapid pace.

It was up to Cal now, and everything seemed to slow down around him as his magic flowed through him. The plan was for him to invoke the spell immediately after the *wind walk* ended, but with the glabrezu already starting to react, it was time to take a chance.

He heard a scream behind him, but his brain didn't have time to register the identity of its source as he invoked the *feather fall*, barely twenty feet from the head of the first glabrezu. The uncontrolled dive instantly became an easy descent, and Cal slid past the nearer of the two glabrezu to land in an easy crouch upon the turf.

The warriors followed only a second later, and unlike Cal, they had focused their dive directly upon the demon guardian. Arun hit first, although the demon's longer reach let it slam him with a long pincer-claw that should have sent the paladin flying. Instead, the gold dwarf twisted and took the hit on his shield, shooting past close enough to deliver a solid blow to the demon's shoulder as he fell. The demon roared as the holy avenger warhammer send a pulse of driving pain through it, but that hurt became all the more intense a moment later as Beorna drove *Aludrial's Shard* into its chest, opening a long, terrible gash down its left breast. Lok and Umbar landed behind it, the genasi failing to connect with a swing at the edge of his reach, the cleric striking it across the back with *Alakast* as he fell.

The group accompanying the Herald's Voice came down upon the second glabrezu. Dannel and Callendes were firing as they fell, and Mole unfolded her cloak, controlling her descent to swoop down behind it for a sneak attack. Avellos fell too far away to get in an initial attack, but the Voice dove directly at it, its sword materializing in the air before it.

For a moment it looked like they had secured a victory, but then, as it so often did, the initiative shifted against them. The first glabrezu invoked a *reverse gravity*, the potent magic overwhelming the spell resistance provided by Arun's hammer as both the paladin and Beorna went streaking back up into the air.

And five paces away, the Voice was likewise overcome as the second guardian hit the archon with a *power word*. The celestial plummeted hard into the ground at the glabrezu's feet, stunned.

Chapter 585

With Arun and Beorna at least temporarily out of the fight, and the Voice helpless before one of the glabrezus, the tactical situation had turned decisively against the favor of the companions. Together they still outmatched the two elite guardians, but that was not the problem that preoccupied Cal. The gnome felt the passing of seconds acutely, but could not help a quick look around.

Above. The gargoyles that they had engaged near the top of the spire were diving, their claws extended in anticipation of rending the foes that had gotten past them. They were just the first wave; behind them came vrocks, succubi, chasme, and other flying demons.

Behind. The demons in the surrounding camps were just stirring, but already at least several dozen were starting to move toward them, belatedly realizing that there were foes here to be torn apart. Cal's gaze landed on a nalfeshnee ringed by warriors in heavy plate bearing halberds of red steel, but they were not the immediate threat; there were several groups of babau, bar-Igura, rutterkins, hezrous, jovocs, and others that would be on them in less than a minute. Before that minute was out, there would be thousands of demons bearing down upon them, an unstoppable wave that would break against the fortress walls, obliterating anything in its path.

And forward. Cal's gaze came back around to what lie ahead, pushing past the raging battle with the guardians, to the massive steel doors recessed in the shadowy black tunnel that penetrated into the interior of the citadel.

Focusing himself to ignore the glabrezus, Cal started forward.

The glabrezu standing over the dazed sword archon lifted its massive pincer-claws to crush its enemy mercilessly. Its attack was interrupted by the snarling charge of Avellos, who leapt over the fallen form of its superior directly at the demon. The archon carried one of the group's backup weapons, Arun's adamantine battle axe, but the glabrezu's superior reach let it strike well before the archon got close enough to use it. The glabrezu slammed Avellos with a solid blow from its left pincer, knocking the archon roughly aside and slamming him to the ground. The demon brought its other pincer-arm around to finish the job, but Avellos shook his head and leapt up, darting under the demon's sweep and slamming the axe hard into its hip, the highest point on the fiend's body he could reach. Black ichor sprouted from the wound, but it was clear that it would take far more than that to bring down this foe.

The other demon, having taken two of its enemies out of the fray, turned to deal with the others. But its attack on Arun and Beorna had given Lok and Umbar a few precious seconds to prepare, and now they each unleashed a full attack upon the foe. Umbar drove *Alakast* into the fiend's left leg, smashing its knee with a powerful two-handed strike, and then following that up by snapping the weapon up into its calf. The glabrezu's armored hide cracked as the staff, specifically enchanted to harm fiends, unleashed its power in complete harmony with the righteous strength of the cleric.

And then Lok, standing by the creature's other leg, laid into it.

The genasi unleashed a full attack, hewing at the demon's leg like a mad lumberjack hacking down an offending tree. Lok abandoned subtlety, throwing his strength into the powerful swings. The first blow carved a deep gash in the glabrezu's armored knee joint, followed at once by a backswing that tore fully through the armored cap plate, exposing the pulsing red tendons of the joint. The genasi spun around, letting out a mighty yell as he brought the axe into the knee with the full force of his momentum and the strength of his arm behind it. A cacophonous retort erupted as the *thundering* axe unleashed a blast of sonic energy to accompany the force of the steel. Lok fell back, amazed himself by the perfect force of that blow.

The glabrezu was also impressed, as it suddenly felt its leg give out under it. The demon toppled over to the side, while its leg, no longer attached to its body, remained rooted where it had been standing.

Dannel landed gently on the turf fifteen feet away from his foe, another arrow already drawn and aimed at the other demon. The moment his feet touched the ground he released, the shaft joining the two others that already sprouted from the fiend's upper body. The missiles themselves did little damage through the glabrezu's damage reduction, but each hit was infused with the *fiendbane* power of the elf's bow, driving a tendril of magical hatred through the demon with each impact. The demon snarled and turned toward the elf, recognizing him as a greater threat than the hound archon hewing at its legs. Its long

reach meant that only a single step would bring the elf within range of all of its attacks, and there were few creatures that could withstand a full assault from a glabrezu.

Unfortunately, as it took that step, pain exploded through the limb, knocking it off balance, the demon roared and shuffled to the side, crashing up against the armored wall of the adjacent fortress. Jagged abyssal iron cut into its thick hide, further enraging it. It looked around for what had hurt it, but only saw a tiny, streaking form that darted out of reach, tumbling backward in a series of effortless backwards somersaults.

Cal strode forward, ignoring both glabrezu, heading straight for the doors of the citadel. The one still standing spotted him, and a black memory of a whispered command penetrated the battle-rage that filled its mind.

NONE SHALL PASS...

Pushing itself off from the wall, the demon slashed at the gnome as he passed with a pincer-claw. Cal was at the edge of the demon's reach, but nevertheless was clipped hard on the shoulder, hard enough to hurt even through his *stoneskin*. The gnome staggered and fell forward, clutching his magical rod.

But when he lifted the device and summoned his magic, it wasn't toward the demon.

Callendes had not joined Dannel and the others; the avariel had instead flown back upward, intending to recover Beorna and Arun. The two dwarves, hovering at the top of the *reverse gravity* effect some fifty feet above the ground, grabbed the hands that the winged elf extended to them, pulling them toward the edge of the area of effect.

A harsh cry drew his attention up briefly; the gargoyles were diving fast, now less than sixty feet above them.

"I cannot carry both of you down!" the avariel said.

"Slide us out of the effect, and drop us!" Arun ordered.

"That way... toward the glabrezu!" Beorna added.

The elf nodded, and complied, dragging the two to the edge of the effect. The success was immediately clear as the three of them plummeted straight down. Callendes held them for a second longer, directing them toward the demon, slowing their flight slightly as the air beat at his wings, then with a grunt he released them and followed them down.

Dannel fired more arrows at the glabrezu, scoring a pair of hits that slammed hard into its body. The demon, enraged by the painful pinpricks, turned and stabbed a pincer around the elf's torso. Dannel cried out as the demon dragged him up, tearing at him with the smaller claws protruding from its chest. The arcane archer, still holding his bow, tried to fit one last arrow to his string, but the demon reached out with its other pincer, and seized his left arm just below the elbow, crushing it in a tight grip. A scream was torn from Dannel as the demon crushed his bracer and the bones beneath it, and *pulled*. For a moment the limb held, then there was a sick *pop* as his shoulder was wrenched out of its socket.

The glabrezu's huge jaws opened, and the demon lifted its victim toward that waiting maw, intending to snap the elf's head off.

Chapter 586

"Aaaaahhhrrrrr!"

The scream brought the glabrezu's attention up from its victim, in time to see Beorna coming straight down toward it, *Aludrial's Shard* a shaft of silver fire in her hand. The demon brought its free arm up to intercept the descending dwarf, but was too slow to stop the templar, who slammed hard into it with the full force and weight of her adamantine-clad body, smashing through its iron helm and driving the blessed blade down to the hilt into the center of the demon's forehead.

The glabrezu fell hard, slamming into the wall, and going down like a discarded ragdoll.

Cal was taking fire as he pulled himself up, surrounded by a buzz of arrows as dark figures fired from beyond the arrow shafts that flanked the entrance of Graz'zt's citadel. A few struck him, chipping off from the *stoneskin*. While the spell held, protecting him from the hits, some had additional magical effects laid upon them that penetrated the magic. His arms burned from where corrosive acid had exploded from the point of two of the impacts, and he felt a sick twisting in his gut from a *violated* arrow had pricked the left side of his torso. But he ignored them, and the glabrezu that had struck him a moment ago. Lifting his rod, he channeled his power through it, unleashing a green ray of *disintegration* that struck the great steel doors about six feet above the ground.

The doors began to glow green, and then a round opening about eight feet across simply vanished, the destroyed metal turning into a coarse powder that drifted down across the gap.

"Go, now!" he urged, moving for the gap. Something shot past him toward it, which he sensed rather than saw to be Mole; the other gnome was moving too fast for his eye to clearly follow her. The roar behind him was becoming deafening, as demons drew nearer to them; a dazzling searing burst marked a *chaos hammer* that went off behind him, engulfing several of the warriors.

Umbar and Lok grabbed the stunned sword archon, carrying him between them as they rushed toward the gap in the door. Arun, limping slightly, had picked up Dannel, who lay where he'd been dropped by the glabrezu. He was followed by Beorna, who finally freed her sword from the glabrezu's skull with a mighty lurch, and Avellos, who brought up the rear.

Cal reached the opening in the door, and looked into the blackness beyond. He could already hear fighting ahead; it seemed that Mole had run into more guardians. Well, they'd expected this to be a hard slog...

As he looked back, he saw the warriors rushing forward, carrying their burdens. Behind them came a wall of demons, hundreds of them at least, with the promise of thousands more behind that. Gargoyles swooped down under the overhang that led into the tunnel, and dove at them with a loud screech. Avellos started to turn to face them, his axe coming up, but Arun barked a command, and the archon turned and ran for Cal's exit.

Cal moved through, and stepped aside to make room for the others. A pair of misshapen rutterkin armed with halberds with serrated edges were dancing with Mole; that was the only word he could think of to describe their futile efforts to come to grips with the gnome. As he watched another pair of the creatures, accompanied by four half-fiend humanoids clad in red metal breastplates and armed with longbows, emerged from around a curving tunnel that appeared to lead in the direction of the arrowslits he'd run past earlier. Lok and Umbar appeared through the opening just a moment later, and after laying the stunned archon down they rushed to engage the guards.

"Hurry!" Cal urged, as Arun, Beorna, and Avellos came rushing forward. Callendes dove above them, avoiding a gargoyle that still managed to tear a series of long gashes in his back. The avariel folded his wings, landed, and darted through the opening, followed a second later by Arun with Dannel, and the Beorna. Avellos was the last, harried by several gargoyles that tore relentlessly at the archon as he ran.

Cal knew that it had be now; the first ranks of onrushing demons had already reached the threshold of the entry tunnel, and they would be on them in just a few seconds. As he called up his magic, he thought, *How much did you know, of what we would face?* There had been three spells inscribed in the small blue leather book, and now he cast the second, and wondered at the meaning behind the last one, which still burned in a dark corner of his mind.

A gargoyle's claw clipped Avellos solidly across the face, gashing his forehead and stabbing into his right eye. The archon howled and toppled forward, half-diving, half-falling into the gap in the doors. A gargoyle, perhaps the same one that had crippled the celestial, appeared in the doorway just behind it, screeching in fury as it regarded them with a hateful stare. It clung to the edge of the six-inch-thick metal, and tensed to hurl itself forward, with a thousand demons just behind it...

Chapter 587

Magic poured out from Cal, coalescing into a barrier of bright, shimmering colors that blocked not only the gap in the door, but stretched across the entirety of the tunnel to seal off the side exits to the chambers that flanked the entrance of the citadel. Immediately the sound and sight of the onrushing demons were cut off completely.

Their side of the *prismatic wall*, however, was far from quiet as the companions did battle with a handful of guards that had emerged from the side chambers prior to the casting. The rutterkins were tougher than their usual kin, but they were easily taken down by powerful blows from Umbar and Lok. The armored half-fiend archers were a bit more durable, but they found themselves quickly outnumbered as the rest of the companions joined the fray. Mole tumbled behind one, coming up behind its knees as Lok bull-rushed

it, toppling it head over heels to splay awkwardly upon the stone. Its momentum pushed its left arm into the *prismatic wall*; the creature let out a scream that suddenly and abruptly ended as a flash of colors exploded around his body. When they could see clearly again, there was nothing left of it other than an ugly splotch on the ground.

One of the other archers tried to grab Mole and toss her into the wall, but it may as well have been trying to catch quicksilver in its hands. As Mole leapt on its forearm and vaulted over its back, Arun smashed the fiend in the chest with his hammer, knocking it down and leaving a round hole three inches across and a full inch deep in the middle of its breastplate. The archer tried to get up, but an arrow slammed into its throat, and it collapsed in a gurgle of blood and air.

Within a few more seconds, the corridor was quiet, save for a few momentary disruptions in the middle of the *prismatic wall*.

“They’re trying to get through,” Beorna said.

“Will they succeed?” Arun asked.

“No,” Cal said.

“What about a *dispel*?” Lok asked.

“That won’t be of any help to them, not with this. No, we’re safe for the moment, at least from this direction.”

“How long?” asked Arun.

“Just under four hours. But I wouldn’t depend on that; there may be other ways into the citadel that we don’t know about.”

“We’d better get going then,” the paladin said. He turned to Beorna, who was helping Dannel. With a *cure critical wounds* poured into him, he looked a lot better, although he was still favoring his savaged right arm.

“Are you okay?” Cal asked.

Dannel nodded. Through it all, he had not relinquished his grip on his bow, and as he switched out a new string, Cal could see the marks where the arcane archer’s fingers had actually left a slight impression on the dark wooden shaft.

“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about arrows anymore,” Mole said, bringing him two quivers stuffed with arrows she’d taken from the slain half-fiends. Dannel took them, offering one to Callendes, who shook his head.

“I will not use *violated* weapons,” he said. “Those are beyond foul; their corruption makes me feel dirty just being near them.”

"I think some of them are *corrosive*, rather than specifically evil," Cal said. He held up an arm, showing where holes had been eaten through his sleeves by the acid-tipped missiles. "In any case, take what you want, leave the rest, but let's get moving." He turned to the Herald's Voice, who was being helped to his feet by Avellos. "Are you okay to go on?"

The celestial nodded. "I am prepared."

The Voice eased some of their hurts with a *mass cure moderate wounds*; since all of them had taken at least some damage in the desperate surge to get here, that relief was welcome. Dannel tested his new string, and shoved a handful of arrows into one of the fiends' quivers, which he slung across his shoulder. Checking their weapons, the companions moved into the dark tunnel which they knew wound steeply upward in concentric circles, up into the center of the mountain. As they walked, those wearing boots made a soft clang on the iron floor with every step.

"It even covers the floors," Umbar remarked. "The quantity of metal here used in this place..."

"It wasn't this way last time we came," Mole said. "Remember last time, with the pulsing waves? Zenna said later it was like we were in the inter... intest..."

"Intestines," Cal said.

"Yeah, the insides of a giant monster or something. Creepy stuff. I don't know if I like all the iron any better, though. Hey, did you see how I took down that glabrezu, out there? Pretty darned impressive, if I do say so myself... set it right up for ol' Beorna to take out..."

"Quiet," Dannel said.

"Well, sheesh, just because you don't..."

"No, *quiet*," he hissed, holding up a hand. "Do you hear that?"

They came to a stop, listening. There was a faint groaning noise that had been evident since they'd entered the citadel, as if the metal that encased the entire place was twisting under some strain. But then they heard what had alerted the elf, a rattling noise, as though someone was dropping pebbles upon the metal, from very far away.

But it was getting louder.

"Incoming," Arun said, lifting his hammer. The sharp and constant bend in the corridor made it impossible to see more than fifty feet or so ahead of them, but it also meant that any foes coming from that direction would not see them either, until they were right on top of them.

"Form a defensive wall," Lok suggested. "Spellcasters and archers to the rear."

The clattering noise grew louder as the companions took up defensive positions, forming a line across the entire width of the tunnel. Avellos took up position in the front rank, up

against the right wall, while the Voice came up behind him. Lok, Beorna, and Arun made up the rest of the front rank, with Umbar just behind the paladin. Spells were cast, wards were laid.

“Damn, it sure sounds like a lot of them,” Mole said, hopping up to get a better look than she could get peering around Lok’s squat frame. “Maybe I should go take a look...”

“NO!” Beorna, Arun, and Umbar said as one. “Hold the line,” Arun added. “We’ll see what’s coming soon enough.”

The paladin’s words seemed borne out as the noise intensified, accompanied now by a gibbering din that seemed to amplify off the iron walls, until it echoed about them like the rumble of an avalanche. The companions waited, staring at the dark place where the corridor ahead rose and bent out of view.

They did not have to wait long, although the fifteen seconds after Arun’s comment seemed to last an interminable expanse of time.

And then, just as the pounding roar of sound seemed to reach an almost deafening crescendo, the wave broke over them.

Chapter 588

A flood of demons appeared around the bend, rolling and charging and crashing forward in a disorganized but overwhelming surge. They were vicious, alien things. Foremost among them were dozens of bulbous orbs about six feet across, with stubby legs and four thick arms, and huge jaws that literally erupted jagged teeth. Sleek, nimble demons that vaguely resembled emaciated apes—a semblance that instantly vanished when one got close enough to see their ugly hairless bodies or the heads that sprouted a snapping maw that ran from the top of their foreheads to the tips of their snouts. And within the dense center of the horde, huge hyena-like things the size of ponies, with greasy, matted brown fur broken by random black spikes, and a long tail that lifted high over their bodies, culminating in a nasty hooked stinger.

The abyssal creatures filled the tunnel, crowding together in a chaotic mass that actually hindered their advance. A number of the creatures stumbled and were instantly overrun by the horde, the demons idly trampling their brethren in their lust for blood and violence. The screams of the creatures redoubled as they spotted foes ahead, filling the chamber with an echoing roar that was enough to cause pain to the defending companions.

The warriors, however, were calm as they set their shields and weapons, established their stances, and met the onrushing horde. A terrible sound erupted as the front line hit, trying to simply overwhelm the defenders—and failing. The line held, and demons died as the warriors unleashed counterattacks with their deadly weapons. Arun and Lok, at the center of the line, held demons back with their shields held high even as they hewed and smashed below at the bodies behind the grabbing claws, the snapping teeth. The abyssal maws tried to seize limbs with their huge jaws, but none of them were able to get a grip on the armored bodies of the defenders in that initial surge.

But the demonic mass continued to press forward even as their van was obliterated. Demons piled atop their slain fellows, and others piled atop them, so that in a few cases the defenders faced attacks at their legs from below, and at their heads and arms from a second demon stacked above. This hindered the demons greatly, but they seemed not to care, simply focusing on the attack.

The second rank of defenders unleashed their own attacks into the mass. Arrows from Callendes and Dannel sliced past the warriors and plunged deep into the bodies of demons. Umbar thrust *Alakast* over Arun's shoulder, toppling an abyssal maw that was trying to leap over its fellows and come down upon the paladin. The Voice invoked a *prayer* that fortified them, while sapping the will of their foes. Cal spotted an abyssal stalker crawling up over the wall, poised to leap, and hit it with a *ray of exhaustion* from a wand that caused it to stagger and drop back into the second rank, knocking down an abyssal maw as it fell.

A wall of fallen demons built up in front of the defenders, as more of the creatures leapt into the carnage. Beorna on the left and Avellos on the right swept deadly arcs with their weapons, holding the surge at bay for the moment. One of the maws had gotten a grip on the hound archon's leg, tearing with its teeth, opening a vicious wound and threatening to bring down the celestial. But the Voice struck, driving its insubstantial sword through the body of the fiend, giving Avellos a chance to break free and regain his position as two more maws trampled the still-struggling body of their kin in an effort to get to the enemy. Their efforts only tangled them up with each other, leaving them open to blows from Avellos's axe, but neither was willing to withdraw, instead offering ineffective bites that the hound easily avoided.

In the center, Arun and Lok now had to focus most of their efforts upward, although they had to be careful of the occasional grabbing claw from the bottom of the mass of dying fiends in front of them. At least a dozen demons were now bleeding out their last upon the stone, their blood forming a slippery trail that ran down the slope of the corridor, staining the boots of the companions, splashing on their legs as they moved. Still the creatures came on, and still they died. The warriors hewed at the fiends almost mechanically, holding nothing back even as they dug deep into their reserves of strength and endurance.

"Look out!" came a warning from someone, and both Lok and Arun shifted their shields slightly to look up at the demonic wall.

The heap of abyssal maws rose almost up to the tunnel roof now, as the creatures piled atop the bodies of their kin both dead and living alike. Behind that line, the tunnel was packed with struggling demons, with the weakest or unluckiest crushed by the weight of their fellows. A few maws at the bottom of the pile apparently decided to eat their way out, and angry cries of pain emerged from the press, accompanied by the occasional spray of black demonic blood.

But the warning was directed at the center of the crowd, where a phalanx of fiends larger than the rest were pushing through. Even as Lok and Arun tensed, a quartet of abyssal ravagers leapt from the pack, piling hard into the front rank of attacking demons from behind. Their weight toppled that wall forward; Arun and Lok vanished beneath a half-

dozen bloated maws, and Beorna and Avellos were cut off as the surge spilled forward around them. The ravagers, flying forward with the rest, leapt again as the pile fell, and landed in the midst of the defenders in the second rank. Callendes took a stinger through the chest and was knocked back ten feet by the impact, while to his left Dannel had to dive to the side to avoid a similar fate. Umbar lifted *Alakast* to strike, only to be taken down under the weight of another ravager, while the last spun as it landed, thrusting its stinger toward the back of the Voice.

With the defense now completely collapsed, the demons now surged eagerly forward to finish the job.

Chapter 589

The defenders in the second rank found themselves facing four advanced abyssal ravagers, and with the warriors cut off or buried by abyssal maws, there was no immediate help forthcoming for them.

Dannel rolled and came up to his feet as the ravager that had almost hit him spun and snarled, its stinger dipping forward as it rushed him. The elf shot and fired, but even though his shot hit the demon in the shoulder, he almost immediately had to dodge again to avoid its rush. The demon slammed hard into the tunnel wall, but quickly recovered and shot out after its prey.

Callendes's chest burned, and he felt his strength flowing from his body as the ravager's poison did its work. His celestial heritage gave him a good resistance to venoms, and ravagers were generally considered among the weaker of demonkind. But these things... they were possessed of a fury and strength he'd rarely seen. Something had bolstered them beyond the usual potency of their kind, and he had a pretty good idea of what that something was.

But there was no time for idle musing right now, as the creature that had stabbed him came charging forward to finish him off. Biting back the pain, he rolled to his feet, drawing his sword just in time to meet that charge. He only narrowly missed getting stung again, and his counterattack, weakened by the poison, glanced harmlessly off the ravager's thick hide.

The Voice, separated from Avellos by the surging rush of demons, turned to deal with the ravager threatening him. The demon's sting glanced off his chest, but failed to penetrate his silver breastplate. The sword archon's blade in turn tore through the substance of the fiend, cleaving deep into its shoulder. The demon shrieked in rage, and bore down on the celestial once again. Once again its thrust failed to harm its foe, but the Voice in turn found itself distracted as a pair of abyssal stalkers wrapped themselves around his legs, tearing at its flesh with their nasty claws. The Voice had to shift to defense as the ravager came forward yet again, threatening to push him over.

Umbar struggled beneath the weight of the last ravager, which kept him pinned beneath its considerable weight. Its stinger shot down from the side, jabbing into the gap under its body, trying to pierce the dwarf's armoured torso. Trapped as he was, the dwarf could not bring *Alakast* to bear, and his first attempt to heave the demon off him failed.

The dwarf was in great difficulty, but suddenly the fiend reared back, shaking its head violently to reveal an eyesocket that had suddenly become a bloody ruin. The sudden movement gave the dwarf a brief opening, and he levered *Alakast* up so that the demon impaled itself on the weapon's shaft as it fell back down. The staff quivered but held as a loud crack announced that the demon, rather than the weapon, was the first to give.

"Coming through!" Mole cried, becoming visible as she leapt from Umbar's foe into the chaotic knot of demons that had collapsed onto Arun and Lok. A maw saw her too late to react as she landed upon it; its jaws opened wide and it tried to grab her with its stubby claws, but she was already gone, leaving behind a deep stab wound that jetted black blood in a thin spray up into the air.

The gnome danced around the press of demons, hopping from one fat body to another, with as much ease as a child skipping across a schoolyard. The demons were all too aware of her now, and she was forced to leave off sneak attacks and focus on avoiding the snapping jaws, the claws that tried to snatch her out of mid air. She barely avoided one leaping maw, twisting her body in mid-jump as the uneven teeth snapped together an inch from her body. The demon landed off-balance and toppled into one of its kin, and both collapsed on the uneven pile.

Mole landed smoothly in a crouch on the fat corpse of a dead maw, and smiled. The maws snarled and turned toward her together, but before they could rush her, the pile suddenly heaved. Several more maws lost their footing and fell awkwardly. The pile moved again before they could stagger up again, and a golden flash briefly appeared beneath the press, followed quickly by a hiss of pain.

"Sorry guys, I can only spare one dance for you," Mole said. "But my friends will keep you entertained." While she spoke, an abyssal stalker had crept up behind her and now darted forward, claws extended. But Mole merely hopped back, spinning in mid-air to land on the fiend's knobby back. Before it could realize what had happened, she'd sprung back, disappearing over the wall of slain demons.

A loud boom sounded from beneath the pile as she left, indicating that Lok's axe, too, was still at work.

In the rear of the battleground, the defenders were likewise still dishing out the hurt to their foes. Dannel's foe followed the elf as he retreated down the tunnel, picking up speed as it charged. But the archer's ploy shifted as he suddenly stopped and spun, an arrow fitted to his bow. The ravager snarled and hurled itself forward, willing to take a hit to get to its prey.

But it could not have anticipated what happened, nor could it understand what happened with the song filled Dannel, infusing him and his bow with magical power, binding archer and weapon together. The elf's hands moved in a blur, and it seemed that with each step the demon took, another missile sprouted from its shoulders or neck. Finally the demon just leapt forward, stinger flashing ahead of it; but the elf fired once more, the arrow piercing the demon's left eye, vanishing entirely as it exploded through its skull into what passed for its brain.

The sting fell limp as the creature collapsed dead at Dannel's feet.

Callendes found himself hard-pressed by his own foe. Unable to bring his own bow to bear, too weak to fly out of its reach, he held off the creature with feeble swings of his sword. His arm bore another bleeding gash, from a grazing hit from the stinger which had thankfully failed to inject him with additional poison. But his own strikes were having little effect upon the creature.

A twisting violet beam lanced out from a point in space behind the creature, piercing its hide. At once the demon's violent movements became less certain, as a considerable portion of its strength was drained away. The demon snarled and twisted to see who had attacked it, its stinger already poised to strike. But there was nothing there, only empty space and demon bodies. It could *smell* something there, and it was canny enough to know that a hidden enemy was nearby, but even its powerful senses could do only so much over the reek of blood and gore that crowded the tunnel.

Given another moment it might have noticed the bloody footprints in the ground that betrayed Cal's location, but before that moment passed Callendes lunged in and stabbed his sword deep into the demon's neck. The ravager spun and returned its attention to the more immediate threat.

That proved to be a poor strategy a moment later, when a second beam hit it from behind, *enervating* it.

The Voice tried to surge forward through the press of demons toward the trapped hound archon, ignoring the fiends that continued to press the attack upon it from all sides. A wounded maw rose up before it, blocking its advance, and the stalkers continued to tear at its legs, their claws leaving the pristine celestial flesh ragged with bloody slashes. The ravager had fallen back, critically wounded by the celestial's blade, but as soon as the Voice had turned away it returned to the attack, stabbing it again with its stinger, this time avoiding its armor as it pierced one of the thick muscles of its wings. But the Voice was a pureblood celestial, and the toxin imparted by the sting held little threat for one such as it. Even so, there was a limit to how much abuse the archon could take, and once more it was forced to defend itself.

Just a few paces away, the piled heap of abyssal maws shifted again, those few that were still alive tumbling away as their footing became unsteady beneath them. Most of those that remained were dead, their bodies cut open or smashed into unrecognizable lumps. A few still struggled within the press, still biting at the two warriors crushed under the weight of the pile.

And then, finally, one side of the mound bulged outward, and two dead maws toppled away to reveal Lok, covered in gore, his axe thrumming with power in his hand. One maw reached for him, weakly, only to draw a backswing that split its body wide open, ending its efforts for good.

The genasi turned to help Arun, tugging away the corpses piled atop the paladin.

The demonic surge had begun to abate, and while there were demons still alive beyond the initial wall of slain attackers, most bore injuries that hindered their mobility, or were trapped under the bodies of their kin. A few maws and stalkers clambered up over the wall of their dead to join the attack, but they found themselves under renewed attack from below. Callendes and Cal had delayed the ravager threatening them long enough for Dannel to finish it, and now the arcane archer's deadly arrows found demons that belatedly joined the attack, knocking them from their precarious perches back to where they'd started. Umbar had gotten free of his foe, finishing it with a final crack to its neck, and he quickly helped the Voice by snapping the spine of the last ravager, before moving to aid Arun and Lok.

Of Beorna and Avellos, there was still no sign; the two were still cut off from the rest of the group by mounds of demons.

Demonic shrieks, accompanied by occasional comments from Mole, continued from the far side of the corpse barrier, as the gnome continued to harass the foe. She'd gone to help Avellos, but there was no sign of the archon.

It took the better part of ten minutes to find out what had happened. Arun and Lok had to physically heave away a half-dozen maws before they saw Beorna, pinned under the weight of three of the creatures, her face twisted in a grimace of pain. One had come down head-first onto her when the wall of the slain had collapsed, engulfing her entire upper body in its jaws. She'd cut her way out with *Aludrial's Shard*, although bits of the creature still clung to joints in her armor, and a long, broken tooth jutted from the visor of her helmet. Another maw had gotten a firm grip on her leg, and while her armor had kept it from tearing off the limb, its crushing jaws had broken the bone. Unable to move, she'd still managed to kill another two maws and a stalker that had thought her easy prey.

On the other flank of the tunnel, they found Avellos. Like Beorna, the hound archon had been crushed under the weight of several demons.

But unlike the templar, the celestial had not weathered the assault as well.

The first sign was a slain maw, clearly killed by repeated blows from an axe. When they lifted the creature off the pile, they found Avellos under it. At first, the archon appeared to be relatively unhurt; there were puncture wounds in its left leg, and one ear had been torn off by a maw's eager bite. But when they gently lifted Avellos's body, they found that its right arm was missing at the shoulder. Eventually, they found the limb in another of the maws, crushed deep under the pile by the weight of its allies. They never did find the axe; it was probably buried in another creature deeper under the pile, and none of them felt up to that level of excavation, not with the minutes darting swiftly by.

While the companions lifted the slain celestial from the wreckage, Mole stood atop the tallest point in the heap of demon corpses, high enough so that she could have touched the ceiling with only a bit of stretching. Looking around, she counted over eighty demons, and that was just the ones she could see. The corridor was so cluttered with them that they'd had to climb over the slain just to make it further down the passage.

"Damn," she said, shaking her head as she hopped down to join the others.

Wrapping Avellos in a blanket, they laid him within one of their larger *bags of holding*. They lingered only a few moments longer to heal their injuries, and then made their way down the open tunnel, rising higher into the interior of the Skull.

Chapter 590

“There was a clay golem in here last time... remember?”

Dannel nodded in response to Mole’s question. “I remember,” he said. He and Arun had escaped serious damage in that encounter, but Morgan and Hodge had taken a beating from the construct, before Kaurophon’s magic helped them overcome it.

The chamber was much the way they remembered it, save for the new skin of iron plates that covered the floor, walls, and ceiling. There were even some clay fragments scattered along the perimeter of the chamber that might have been remnants of that battle. The later celestial inhabitants had apparently not made any efforts to rehabilitate this part of the citadel. There were plentiful signs of the new owners, however, including a layer of disgusting ooze that gathered in clumps about the floor, and a stench that was almost thick enough to see.

“This way,” Mole said, directing them toward the spiral stair that rose upward at the far side of the room.

“Hold on,” Arun said. “No rushing off ahead. This is serious stuff, Mole.”

The gnome looked back at him. “Just because I don’t act scared, doesn’t mean I’m not.” She shrugged. “I’m the scout... I’ll go scout.”

The others followed her, making their way to the stair, then starting up.

“There is a nexus of dark power within the chamber above,” Dannel reported. “Last time, we confronted a lich there, which took shelter within it.”

“Let us hope that it currently stands as empty as this chamber,” Cal said. “The main chamber is the next one after that, correct?”

Dannel nodded.

“Then he’ll be there, most likely,” Umbar said, pausing momentarily to adjust the straps holding one of his greaves in place.

“He must know we are here,” Lok said. “I wonder why he has not taken action against us?”

“Are you forgetting the legion of fiends that we just slaughtered?” Umbar asked.

“No, Lok’s right,” Cal said. “We’ve faced the Prince before... he’s tricky, be ready for anything.... Look, Mole’s signaling.”

They looked up to see the gnome at the top of the stairs, stepping into the light cast by their weapons and items for a moment to wave an all-clear, then she vanished from view.

“Well, here we go again,” Dannel said, bringing up the rear as their column wound its way up the stair.

The dark cavern at the top of the stair was dark, and there was something malevolent about the darkness, as though the shadows around the edges of the uneven chamber were actively resisting the press of their light. The nexus that had dominated the center of the room was gone now, and Mole stood in the middle of the room near where it had been, facing away from them. She did not turn as they entered, nor did she move forward, just standing there as if her boots had suddenly become rooted to that particular spot.

“What is it, Mole?” Cal asked, sensing at once that something was wrong. But before the rogue could reply, Arun and the Voice both shouted, “Taint!” and “A foulness is here!”

The companions tensed, weapons and spells at the ready, as something moved in the shadows at the far end of the room. The darkness seemed to bleed away slightly, revealing a quintet of individuals regarding them.

They were an unusual grouping. Some were immediately familiar to the companions, such as the sleek, bat-winged succubus, or the leonine and sinister lamia. A woman that was obviously a tiefling was clad in armor of black laquer that seemed more seductive than protective, revealing as much as it warded. The woman beside her wore almost nothing save for an intricate costume of beads, metal strands, and bangles, which almost certainly contained various magical enhancements. Her skin was blue, her eyes a solid aqua, and she was likely a genasi, or some similar alien elemental being.

The last of the group, however, defied description. She was so slender as to suggest that a casual gust would catch her up and bear her away. Faint wings of the lightest gossamer drifted from her back, and her hair likewise fluttered loosely around her head, although there was no breeze in the chamber. But her face belied the soft grace of her form, with blood-red eyes that shone with malevolence, and slightly pointed teeth that protruded noticeably from her pouting lips.

All five were beautiful beyond belief, radiating a seductive air that gave all of them, even the celestials, pause. But then the Voice lifted a hand in warding.

“Your foulness gives your appearance the lie, deceivers!” the sword archon intoned. “Let the Light reveal the truth of you!”

The archon’s power rippled through the chamber, a shimmering glow that tore through the magical shadows, and with them the illusions that covered the five women. Their identities remained unchanged, but where there had been beauty, now there was utter corruption. All five of the women were disfigured, their faces ruined, bearing marks of acid, fire, the blade, or a combination of all three.

The lamia unleashed a readied spell. The iron walls within the recessed opening that led back to the spiral stairs began to swell, closing and coming together to form a solid wall blocking the exit.

The companions were quick to act; Dannel lifted his bow and took aim, while the dwarves were already starting forward, their weapons at the ready. But the half-fey *thing* whispered, and a cold swirl of air stirred through the room, bearing with it sinister whispers that drifted deep into the consciousness of everyone present.

You cannot succeed... there is no hope... throw down your weapons... submit to the Master...

That sinuous call was echoed by the others, who added their own power to the weaving of the first.

no hope... submit...

Someone cried out. A loud clatter of metal on stone echoed in the room, as Lok's heavy axe landed on the floor. Dannel and Callendes dropped their bows, while *Alakast* fumbled from Umbar's grasp. The Voice staggered, its magical sword dissipating. Even Arun stumbled to one knee, his hammer trembling in his hand, although he did not release his grip upon the weapon.

Beorna's response was rather more direct. Snarling, she shouted, "For Helm!" and she charged, lifting *Aludrial's Shard* high.

The succubus smiled. She lifted a clawed hand, which held a small metal orb. With a casual flick of her wrist she tossed it at the onrushing templar. Before Beorna could react, the ball exploded into a cascade of iron rings, which descended over the body of the dwarf woman. The *iron bands of binding* instantly tightened around her, claspng her arms against her body, and locking her legs together. *Aludrial's Shard* fell from her grasp as she fell hard to the ground, helpless.

The succubus chuckled and drew out a long whip; as it uncoiled dozens of tiny barbs in the weave began to twist eagerly, as if they could sense the distress of their victim.

Chapter 591

Seeing Beorna incapacitated seemed to shake Arun out of his lethargy; with a dwarvish invocation of battle the paladin hefted his holy warhammer and rushed toward their foes. The tiefling cleric hurled another spell at him, but this time the paladin's spell resistance held, and he shook off whatever fell effect was inherent in the hostile magic. But before he could reach the spellcasters, the water genasi darted forward to intercept him. The woman moved with an incredible speed and grace, and bore a pair of silver sais that spun around her hands as she moved, as though they themselves were alive. Without armor, though, and obviously giving up a lot in strength and weight to the dwarf, it looked like a one-sided clash.

Arun did not hesitate, stepping into a *smite* that should have crushed this foe in a single colossal impact. But the genasi woman darted smoothly inside the paladin's reach, catching the haft of the hammer with one of her sais, and directing it harmlessly around her back. She slid past the surprised dwarf, and almost casually punched her other weapon into Arun's side as she passed. Arun tried to spin around to catch her, a move that was itself impressive as the charging dwarf arrested his momentum and brought his hammer around in a quick backswing. But the woman was gone; she'd matched his movement, knifing across his back as he turned, and coming up on his far side. The sai in her left hand was slick with bright red blood down most of its length.

Cal's instincts had kicked in the moment he'd realized that this was an ambush, and even as the five women had appeared he'd covered himself in *greater invisibility*. The lulling whispers of the fey creature's *mass suggestion* had tugged powerfully at him, and he nearly succumbed to its lure. He had to marshal the full force of his own considerable will to overcome that lure, but he saw that most of his friends were not so fortunate.

As Beorna and Arun rushed forward, he tried to neutralize the enchantment with a *greater dispel*. But he found that the creature's magic was incredibly potent. The spell itself was obvious within the weave; it was well within his own potential, and he sensed that its caster's power did not exceed his own. But somehow, his efforts dissipated against the tendrils of energy that fueled the *suggestion*, and his own magic could not overcome the bindings that held his friends in their sway.

Then he looked up, and saw the gaze of the fey woman fixed upon his, and he *knew*.

She's countering me!

Beorna lay immobile upon the floor, held helpless within the *iron bands*. She quivered with effort as she tried to break the restraints, but even with the divine strength granted by her patron, they were just too much for her to sunder.

The lamia slunk forward toward the imprisoned cleric, an evil look on her face as she slid a long dagger from a black leather sheath at her side. The templar could do nothing but watch as the creature knelt beside her, drawing off her helmet and tossing it aside. As she leaned down to deliver a *coup de grace*, Beorna spat in her face.

With a smile, the lamia stabbed her knife toward the templar's left eye.

Arun was not in a position to intervene. Belatedly realizing how dangerous his opponent was, the paladin had abandoned power attacks and shifted to a more balanced assault. The genasi matched him pace for pace, but now her face was furrowed with concentration as she tried to dodge the deadly rain of blows from the dwarf's hammer. She dodged a quick swipe but failed to anticipate a sudden reversal as Arun jammed the haft of the weapon toward her face. She spun back out of the way, but the paladin's mailed fist clipped her shoulder, knocking her briefly off-balance.

But before the paladin could exploit his momentary advantage, a sudden crack announced a new threat, followed by an immediate explosion of pain as the succubus's barbed whip lashed around his throat. The barbs dug through his gorget as though the armor was not

even there, piercing his skin, nearly overwhelming him with waves of agony that radiated outward through his body.

The genasi duelist smiled and came at him again. He lifted his hammer to defend himself, but she easily avoided the ungainly sweep of the weapon, stepping once again inside his reach. Her right sai caught the haft just above his fist, and she stabbed the other into the dwarf's elbow joint. Arun's hand spasmed as the *wounding* weapon drained him again, and with a snap of her off-hand, the holy hammer went flying off to the side, far out of reach. The genasi leaned in close, close enough for him to feel her breath through the slot in his helmet.

"And now, paladin, it's time for *pain*."

Chapter 592

"And now, paladin, it's time for *pain*."

The genasi's left sai came up, but before she could slide it into a vulnerable spot, Arun's mailed fist shot out, catching the duelist solidly in the face. The blow, backed by a *smite evil* and by the righteous power of *order's wrath*, knocked the much lighter woman onto her back. She was fast, very fast, to recover; snapping her legs up as she flipped onto her feet less than a second after she'd hit. But Arun, ignoring the tug of the whip still snared around his throat, followed her, and as she got up he snapped his fist around her throat. The duelist, blood pouring down her terrible face from her broken nose, stabbed him mercilessly with her *wounding sai* as the paladin got a firm grip and squeezed. A hissing noise came from the genasi as her air supply was cut off, but she was quick to recover, bringing her legs up, and kicking off the paladin's armored chest. The two combatants separated, with Arun staggering back, and the genasi cartwheeling back into a ready—but now wary—stance a few paces back.

Beorna could not stop the lamia from stabbing her, but she invoked the power of a *protective ward* upon herself. But even she was not willing to trust entirely to Helm to save her; as the sorceress thrust, she snapped her head forward, head-butting the oncoming blade. She screamed as the dagger—poisoned, she realized—tore a long gash along her temple, laying her scalp open to the bone. But the weapon failed to penetrate her thick skull, and she lived, for now.

The lamia drew back with a hiss of frustration, and immediately began spellcasting.

"She's helpless... Get the wizard, you fool!" the succubus shouted, wrestling with the weight of the paladin on the other end of her whip.

Cal's mind raced as he faced off against the fey spellcaster. He knew that he could probably overcome her counterspelling if he persisted, but he also knew that even Arun would not hold out long against the other four women for long. For the moment he seemed to have escaped their notice, but he knew that an attack would quickly draw their attention to him—and he doubted that *greater invisibility* alone would shield him from detection.

The succubus's shouted warning destroyed anything remaining doubts.

So the gnome reached back to his magical haversack, and drew out his lute.

The instrument felt somewhat foreign in his hands; it had been some time since he had played. He'd almost forgotten the way that the notes felt when his fingers plucked the strings, but after the first few chords, the chaos of the melee fell away from him, and he felt the music surround him, filling him with the memories of more pleasant times.

His fingers danced across the strings, playing a song of camaraderie and true faith. The harmonies cut through the false whispers of the fey creature, destroying her *suggestion*, restoring their freedom of action.

They were quick to respond, grabbing up their weapons.

"They are free!" the succubus warned. The fey creature lowered her head, her wings drooping as if weighed down with a sudden sadness. But when she spoke, her whispers became a soft prologue of dread, and the lilting tenors of before became a promise of destruction as she hit them with a wave of *crushing despair*. Again Cal tried to rally them, intensifying his playing, but this time he was less successful, and most of them could feel the weight of the dark emotions buried in the spell seep into them, stealing their resolve.

But it was not enough to stop them. The Voice invoked *divine power* and stepped forward, ready to engage the genasi duelist, while Lok took up his axe and started toward the lamia. But before either of them could reach their objectives, the tiefling thrall summoned a *blade barrier*, cutting the room, and its inhabitants, in two. The lamia bolstered this with another wall, this time a coruscating *wall of fire*, the surging plane overlapping with the storm of spinning blades, the surging red tongues flaring with violated energy that made the fire seem almost alive, and malevolent.

And unfortunately, leaving Arun, Beorna, and Mole alone with the five servitors of Graz'zt on the far side.

Chapter 593

Mole felt a stinging pain that cut through the haze that had fallen over her senses. She remembered coming up here to the room where they'd battled the lich; the nexus had been gone, that she'd noticed at once. The place seemed otherwise empty, although the darkness... well, there was something *odd* about it. She'd started to investigate, but then, the ground where she'd stepped had suddenly started to glow. She glanced down—mistake!—and saw something inscribed there, some sort of symbol...

After that, it was all kind of vague. Someone had said something to her, and she'd done what it said, standing there in the middle of the room, serving as bait...

The pain came again, hitting her with as much force as the realization of what had happened. That symbol had been a spell! But she had a more immediate problem, as

another gash cut through her shirt, slicing deep into her arm. And it was hot, too. Really, really hot.

She was standing in the middle of a *blade barrier*, with a wall of roaring flames right behind it, sizzling hot against her back.

“Oh, crap!”

She leapt forward, and found herself in the midst of chaos. There were four—no, five Bad Guys, she saw... no wait, Bad Gals, looked like—what was up with that lady with the wings? Later... There was Arun, being beat on by a number of the Bad Gals. He didn't have his hammer, for some reason; that might explain why he was looking as badly off as he did. A few of the others were hanging back, spellcasting. Beorna was on the ground, imprisoned by some sort of metal wrappings.

Mole saw a blue-skinned woman running at Arun. The gnome leapt into a forward somersault and came down charging, her little rapier *snicking* out of its scabbard. With a battle cry—or a gnomish approximation of one—she bounced into the air, her rapier extended ahead of her like a spearpoint toward the duelist's face.

The genasi smoothly sidestepped, and Mole went flying past. The gnome flipped forward and landed in a roll, her momentum slowing until she came back up to her feet about seven feet away.

Arun grabbed the long strand of the whip that connected him with the succubus, but drew his hand back as the long barbs dug through his gauntlet into his hand. His neck felt like it was on fire, but the rest of his body was starting to feel numb. The wounds inflicted by the duelist's weapon continued to throb. Even with the bolstering power of *order's wrath* filling him, he knew that he could not take much more punishment.

“Give up, warrior,” the demon hissed at him, the words backed up by the power of another magical *suggestion*. “Yield, and you will be shown mercy.” The barbs in the wounds around his neck twisted, as if promising him a dire alternative.

“Not bloody likely,” Arun growled, resisting the effect. Avellos had used his backup weapon, an adamantine battleaxe; they never did find the weapon after the violent melee with the maws. That left him only a non-magical light hammer.

Well, that would suffice, if need be. The paladin started toward the succubus, but was drawn up short as the water genasi returned, stabbing him deep in the side with her sai. Arun grunted and turned, too slow to avoid a second blow that rang hard against his helmet, narrowly missing one of the narrow slots that would have meant big trouble.

“Arun! Heads up!”

He looked up to see a welcome sight; his *holy avenger*, flying right toward him. Mole's move against the genasi had not been an attack at all, but rather had placed her directly at the spot where the blessed weapon had fallen. The genasi's sai shot out to intercept the warhammer, but she was just an instant too slow. Arun's fist closed around the haft and

brought it down in one motion. The genasi saw it coming and tried to get out of the way, but the hammer clipped her—hard—on the side of the jaw, and she twisted into a spiral that ended with her on the floor, coughing up blood.

The lamia came forward again, intent upon finishing off Beorna once and for all. But she was distracted by a low rumbling, which became a roar of battle as Lok exploded through the layered *blade barrier* and the *wall of fire*. Ignoring the painful effects of both, he charged into the lamia. The fell creature darted back and to the side, but could not avoid a slash that tore deep into her shoulder. She stepped back and hit Lok point-blank with a violated *cone of cold*. The white blast, infused with swirling black tendrils of negative energy, enveloped the genasi, covering him from view for a long second. The angle of the cone intersected the *wall of fire* beyond, causing a violent explosion of gray steam that engulfed most of the chamber, instantly dropping visibility to only a few feet.

But the lamia L'haxia did not get a chance to appreciate the consequences of her action, for the next thing she saw was an axe that exploded out of her *cone*, followed by the frost-rimed form of the armored genasi. There was no time for any more spells as the warrior slammed that axe into her torso, once, twice, then once more again.

And then it was done.

The succubus snarled as the steam hit her, hiding the battlefield from view. The noxious, tainted vapors offered no threat to her, of course, but the concealment offered by L'haxia's foolish action provided a tactical advantage to their foes. But she still had a connection to one of them, at least, as she drew the taut strand of her whip toward her.

The dwarf paladin appeared, his golden warhammer ready to strike. He swept the weapon around in an arc that caught the succubus solidly in the stomach. The holy power of the weapon drove her back, and she crumpled, falling into a crouch. But she did not release her grip on the whip, and when she looked up again, an unholy smile appeared on her face as she licked her bloody lips.

"A solid blow, champion of Good," she said, drawing out a long black blade the size of a shortsword from a sheath strapped to her right thigh.

Arun lifted his hammer again, but before he could strike, the succubus blackguard beat her wings and lunged forward, stabbing the sword into Arun's chest, *smiting* him. The cursed steel pierced his breastplate, piercing the flesh beneath, entering his lung. Blood spurted from the wound, covering the succubus's hand. With a feral look on her face, she wrenched the weapon free. Arun staggered back, his hammer falling from his hand, but the demoness gave her whip a hard yank, and the paladin fell on his face at her feet.

"Evil triumphs," she hissed, lifting the sword to finish him.

Chapter 594

One of the five Servitors had been slain, the lamia sorceress L'haxia hewn by the earth genasi's axe. But the other four were still very much in the fight, and with two strong

adversaries down, and most of the rest separated from the battle by magical barriers, the outcome of the confrontation with the last champions of Good on Occipitus still teetered upon a stark precipice. Under different circumstances, these diverse creatures, brought together only by the fact of their service, would have slunk off into the shadows, to regather their strength and strike again at their enemies' weakness. But their mandate this time was clear; none were to pass this chamber to the Great Hall above, on pain of torments far worse than simple expurgation. And so they attacked, unleashing all of the considerable magical and physical arsenal they possessed upon the foe.

The tiefling cleric cast another spell, adding the potency of *divine power* to the multiple protections that she already wore. With wards now layering her in defense, she unclasped a light mace from her belt. With a twist of her wrist, wicked steel spikes snapped out from the head of the weapon, each smeared with a deadly toxin extracted from the venomous fauna of the Abyss. Jahaela was a creature of intrigues, deception, and sensuality, but sometimes more direct means were necessary, and when those times came she did not shy away from the occasional blood and gore of violent melee.

The fog confounded her darkvision, but she could hear the sounds of battle to her right. She started toward the warrior that had confronted L'haxia, but was interrupted by a stabbing pain that erupted in the joint of her right knee. The priestess staggered, but recovered in time to avoid a fall, and turned to see a diminutive creature standing before her. It was the same gnome thief who had fallen victim to her *symbol of persuasion*, earlier.

"Your sting is sharp, little thief... but mine has claimed many more!" She feinted with the spiked mace, but that was just a cover for her real attack, as she summoned the dark energies of her patron. A faint black glow began to shine around the fingers of her left hand. She waited for the gnome to attack, and it came almost at once, the little creature offering a feint of her own that was followed by a sudden leap high into the air. The girl moved fast, there was no denying that, and there would have been no chance to bring her mace around in time to catch her.

But using her weapon was not Jahaela's plan. She let the gnome get her strike—somehow, she found a weakness, and her little blade painfully pierced her shoulder—and quickly shot out her hand. All she needed was the slightest touch... but somehow the gnome managed to twist in mid-air, narrowly avoiding her hand. Jahaela followed her as she fell, thrusting at her again, again just missing as the gnome suddenly bent over backwards, the back of her head brushing the iron floor as the extended fingers swept a spare inch over her body. Before the cleric could adjust and strike again, the gnome had sprung back, just out of reach. The cleric waited, but this time, the gnome made no attempt to rush in.

"You are wise to be so wary, little thief," Jahaela hissed. "For my touch is death..."

Scyla, the water genasi duelist, rose to her feet in a barely-contained rage as the steam cloud washed over her. She did not need to see to know where that paladin was; she could hear him, from the clank of his armor to his labored breathing. Vrin'kaa had him, but she was *damned* if she was going to let that bitch fiend take *her* kill...

But she was not so focused on her prey to ignore more immediate threats. The foes on the far side of the Jahaela's *blade barrier* and L'haxia's *wall of fire* were coming through, heedless of the damage wrought upon them. Calyxia's weavings hadn't held them... but then again, Scyla was one of that few of Graz'zt's favored servants who had not specialized in enchantments, and she held little above scorn for spellcasters in general.

A broad shadow materialized out of the fog, and Scyla did not wait for it, darting in, lashing out with her twin sais. The foe—excellent, a celestial, with wings replacing arms—did not falter before the blazing speed of her assault, and soon she had it bleeding from a number of nasty punctures.

The celestial spoke the words of a spell, and Scyla chuckled inwardly; resisting magic was something she was very good at. But the spell turned out to merely be healing magic, closing most of the archon's wounds.

"I can kill you faster than you can heal, celestial," she said, launching another full attack that led her in a tight circle around it, her sais darting in and out in a blur. Within seconds, the holy creature sported a whole new set of wounds, including deep, draining punctures from her *wounding sai*.

The archon merely nodded, and summoned forth its hovering sword. Disarming it would be a challenge, at the very least.

Scyla smiled in anticipation of the dance.

The half-fey creature Calyxia rose above the melee on her gossamer wings. Her lips pursed into a frown as the hot steam swirled around her, scalding her delicate flesh. Without making any apparent effort she drifted over the battle. The fog held no secrets from her; to her senses, each of the living creatures in the room shone like a beacon. So many of those flickering flames she'd snuffed out in her terrible life, both in service to Graz'zt and in satisfaction of her own corrupted lusts.

She drifted over the genasi warrior, the one that had slain L'haxia. This one was strong... incredibly so, with a lifeline that extended outward beyond her ability to sense. He would give even Vrin'kaa trouble, she sensed.

Well, that was easy enough to handle. Drifting over him, she summoned her power, and enveloped him in a weave of whispers that seeped into his thoughts, building a wall of inaction around his conscious mind.

Held, Lok couldn't even look up as the creature flew over him and ascended up into the center of the room. The *blade barrier* had gone down, she saw, and as she watched the *wall of fire* joined it, sundered by magic. She could see the source of that as well, the gnome archmage that had disrupted her song earlier.

Well. Her whispers would not call to him, but there were other ways of dealing with such.

Her musings were interrupted as a driving pain pierced her. Calyxia released a terrible scream as the *seeker arrow* tore at the very fabric of her, a vicious, nasty arrow infused

with hatred of all that she was. The half-fey shifted her attention to the archer... or rather, two of them, although the first was much stronger, she saw. He had been the one who had fired the arrow, although it seemed he had lost her, now, his aim shifting through the cloud. There was something else about him... a song to match her own, but shining with a soft light, a contrast to the dark energies that fueled her own sinister melody.

The pain of her wound energized her, and she dragged that song into a place of agony and discordance. The harmonies of the whispers that she used to insinuate her control into the minds of others shattered, replaced by a terrible pulse of sound that exploded out of her like a stream of bile.

The *greater shout* hit the three with an obvious impact, knocking them back, the shining light of their life-force disrupted by the terrible disruption of the sound. Content that they were at least temporarily removed as a threat, she spread her wings and rose higher, almost brushing the ceiling as she brought her will to bear once again, rebuilding her harmonies into a *song of discord*.

All of these events swirled around the center of the room, where the succubus Vrin'kaa stood triumphant over the battered form of Arun Goldenshield, unable to save himself from the blackguard's victory.

"Go back to the pit, you evil bitch!" Umbar yelled, leaping forward over Arun's prone form to engage the fiend with *Alakast*. The staff shot out and clipped her on the forearm, knocking the handle of her whip from her hand. But the succubus was quick to respond, slashing out with her shortsword, the weapon crunching into his armored side, hurting him even through the layers of plate and padding that he wore.

"Your faith is weak, dwarf. Kneel before me, and yield to my dark Master!"

The command was backed by another *suggestion*, but this time the cleric's willpower was strong enough to resist, and he answered only with another sweeping strike from *Alakast*.

"I'll give your Master your head, when I see him!" the dwarf said, swinging the staff around again. But this time the end of the staff glanced off one of the curved adamantine plates that protected at least part of her body, and inflicted no damage.

The succubus snarled and met him again in a violent exchange of blows. It was hard to determine who had been hurt worse, but it was clear that the cleric, already damaged by passing through the *blade barrier* and the *wall of fire*, was in increasingly dire shape.

"You cannot stand before me alone, holy man," the succubus said, taunting him, her sword's point dancing in her hand as they circled.

"Perhaps you are right," the cleric said. He turned and knelt, opening himself up to the demon's thrust. He took the hit, which crunched hard through the armor covering the back of his right shoulder, but it did not stop him from unleashing a powerful healing spell into the prone form of Arun.

The paladin stirred, his hand finding, and tightening, around the haft of his warhammer.

The Herald's Voice healed itself again, drawing a contemptuous snicker from its adversary. Thus far, the archon had not been able to land even a single hit upon the darting form of Scyla. The duelist, on the other hand, even fighting defensively, had been able to inflict a number of additional wounds upon her foe. Long trails of blood ran down its body, and its movements now left bloody prints upon the iron floor.

"At least the paladin was a worthy foe," she said. "It is time to finish this farce." She shifted her stance as she came in again, lifting her earlier cautious advance, and focusing now on the attack as she came in with both sais diving in ahead of her.

The Voice did not retreat. It took several devastating hits, with droplets of blood spraying out around it as the sais worked their deadly work. But it got what had been waiting for; with the duelist no longer fighting defensively, she was at least slightly vulnerable. Scyla kept a close eye on the hovering sword, but the blade did not move, did not even flinch.

By the time she realized that something was wrong, it was too late.

The archon sighed, and dropped its wings down across its body. One brushed the duelist's shoulder, just slightly...

As it spoke a word of dread power, calling upon the power of Destruction to unleash a *harm* spell into the genasi.

Scyla screamed and staggered backward. Her body wrenched painfully, and blood exploded from her ears, nostrils, and mouth as the terrible spell wracked her form. Speed and skill were her weapons, not durability, and the spell took her to the brink of death.

The Voice looked up, fearsome with blood running down its perfect body, its wings unfolding to reveal a stern expression that brooked no mercy.

The celestial started forward.

The duelist ran, or at least tried to.

As the first discordant sounds of the half-fey's *song of discord* began to echo through the chamber, Dannel looked over at Cal.

"We've got to stop her!"

"Counter the song!" Cal said, already calling upon his *arcane sight* to find the source of the magic through the concealing fog. He saw the creature almost immediately; she was a beacon of magical auras, her very nature infused with magic, and layered with wards both recognizable and unfamiliar. The tug of her song impacted his consciousness, prodding him toward violence, threatening to steal away his volition. But Dannel's voice cut through that haze, the elf's sharp harmonies clashing with the discordance of that other song. She would quickly realize that Dannel was blocking her, and would counter. They did not have much time.

But Cal only needed a few seconds, as he lifted his rod, and *disintegrated* her.

Mole fell back as the tiefling cleric pursued her relentlessly, her charged *slay living* spell needing only the slightest touch for release. The gnome could have easily lost the priestess in the obscuring fog, but she knew that her friends were very, very busy right at the moment, and that the sudden reappearance of the thrall in the fray could turn the balance against them. She had narrowly avoided a sweep of that hand that had been so close she could feel the air from its passage against her cheek. Now, as she backed away from that near miss, the iron walls of the room closed in around her, and she realized that the nook she'd been chased into had only one exit.

And the tiefling stood in the middle of it.

“A merry chase, little thief, but it ends now... my sisters will require my aid.”

Mole heard something in the fog, and whistled loudly.

“What...”

She too heard the clank a moment later, and turned just in time to take a solid blow from Lok's axe to the center of her torso. The blow was partially absorbed by her armor, but it clearly hurt her. She touched Lok on the face, unleashing her spell; but against Lok's fortitude, she may as well have tried to slay a brick wall. Seeing that the spell wasn't stopping him, she brought up her mace, and smashed it against his shoulder. One of the spikes jabbed under his shoulder plate and drew blood. Jahaela's confidence started to return as she yanked the mace free and saw that; the poison on the weapon was strong enough to lay a dire elephant mewling upon the ground.

But Lok merely grunted, and brought his axe up one more time.

“Ah, you see, he's really, *really* tough to kill,” Mole said, walking forward as the genasi unleashed a full attack into the priestess. The gnome was ready to add in a sneak attack to finish her, but it wasn't necessary.

Vin'kaa staggered as another blow from Arun's hammer came crashing down into her body. The succubus was the one falling back now, her body already battered and bruised from the hits she'd taken. Her sword was slick with his blood, but with each exchange it seemed as though the holy warrior got stronger, and the demon got weaker. Finally, the succubus snarled, “The Master will destroy you!” and lifted her sword for one more desperate strike.

Arun cut her off with a swing that stove in her skull.

The room grew quiet. The steam was already beginning to dissipate, revealing a scene of utter carnage. The blood spattered liberally about the place was in good part that of the companions, but it was the five Servitors—well, four in any case, as the half-fey was just motes of dust floating in the air—that lay slain. The lamia and tiefling lay in hacked up heaps, the succubus's skull was a bloody mess, and the water genasi lay in a pool of spreading blood, an arrow from Callendes's bow buried in her back.

Arun and Lok turned to help Beorna from the *iron bands*; without knowing the command word for the device, they had to destroy it to free her. They had taken an incredible beating; this time none of them had escaped serious injury. Beorna's face was a mask of blood, the white of her skull showing where the lamia's knife had cut away her scalp. The other warriors had taken serious damage; Umbar could barely stand on his own, and as the surge of battle faded Arun had to prop himself up with his hammer to avoid falling. The Voice's wounds still trailed blood, even after an initial healing; all of his more powerful spells had been drained. Dannel, Cal, and Callendes had avoided the melee, but their hides were scorched by their proximity to the *wall of fire*, and blood trailed from the nostrils of all three, the effects of the fey creature's *great shout*. Even Mole was covered in gashes from the *blade barrier*.

"One more room," Arun said, taking up his hammer. His own healing was expended, but Beorna touched him and channeled positive energy into him, helping him even before addressing the terrible wound she herself bore.

"I'm completely out," Dannel said, as he used his song to weave a minor healing spell around the heavily battered Lok.

Cal nodded. "Don't hold anything back," he told the others. "Heal what you can, then let's go."

Mole had started looting the bodies. "We don't have time for that," Umbar frowned, as he went through his remaining spells, converting them into healing for himself and the others.

"I will be done by the time you are," Mole said simply. "And better that we have this stuff, than the demons that will come after us." She went on efficiently divesting the slain of their items, putting them into her *bag of holding* after only a cursory evaluation.

With the Voice adding his strength to Beorna and Umbar, they were able to heal the worst of their injuries. But as Cal had said, they didn't hold anything back, and so their powers were depleted as they companions gathered again, lifted their weapons with tired arms, and ascended the spiral staircase at the far end of the room.

Toward the Great Hall, and their final confrontation with Graz'zt.

Chapter 595

Flying demons screamed as they circled the Iron Skull, their cries amplified by the loud din coming from below, where the press of thousands of their kin pressed around the base formed a scene of pure chaos. Hundreds of demons had already perished trying to force their way through Cal's *prismatic wall*, and the attempts of others to tear away enough of the mountain to get around it had likewise failed. Demons hung impaled from the spikes that jutted from the fortress, and others lay trampled into the ground, crushed by their own kind. Order was threatening to break down entirely among the ground-based majority of the demon horde, with even the nalfeshnees appointed by Graz'zt barely able to assert any kind of order among the gathered mass. The heavily armored enforcers had created a perimeter around the entrance for now, their dictat enforced by the jagged weapons of

abyssal steel that they brandished. Within that circle the higher-order demons continued to work at the barricaded entrance, although it looked as though nothing would be entering until the *wall's* duration expired.

A new figure appeared in the sky above the fortress, flying fast from the direction of the Bastion. A wing of demons ascended to meet it, ready for battle, but they withdrew when the newcomer got close enough for them to identify. A few shouted queries at the intruder, but he ignored them all, flying directly toward the summit of the Skull.

Malad, mounted upon a fiendish griffon, descended upon that jagged peak. Once there had been an opening here, the Smoking Eye from which plasms had risen into the roiling sky. That had ended with the defeat of Adimarchus, and now with the ascendancy of Graz'zt the opening too was gone, sealed by an implacable barrier of iron. There wasn't even a clear place to land, as spikes and jagged ridges protruded everywhere from the fortress's apex. Malad barked an order to his mount, and as the creature hovered he leapt free, using his own powers to carry him safely down to a precarious perch on a jutting ledge ringed with spikes.

The tiefling bent into a crouch, and ran a hand along the rough surface of the structure. He felt a momentary sting as a small jutting edge sliced open his hand; there was nowhere on the Skull that was truly safe. But the sorcerer's focus was on other things, and he barely felt the pain as his blood oozed out over the metal.

I cannot feel Him, he thought. He closed his eyes and extended his perceptions, letting Synesyx feed him sensory input that went beyond what even his augmented senses could discern. But he did not detect anything more than the obvious and potent energies of Occipitus itself, which was focused on this place. Could that overwhelming aura be masking the presence of Graz'zt?

Of one thing he had no doubt; the intruders from the Prime were here, inside the Skull. Malad doubted they had already found his Master; *that* he would have felt, no matter what the distance or intervening obstacles filled the space between them.

The tiefling felt a tingle and shifted his attention to a particular spot. Idly he nodded; as always the sentience within his armor had anticipated his thoughts.

He spread his arms and rose slowly into the air. The griffon, sensing that something unpleasant was about to occur, immediately lifted off and flew away. A number of the flying demons had also begun to circle immediately overhead, curious about what was happening.

Malad seemed to vibrate with power, and the air around his hands began to shift and distort. The tiefling did not waste time reveling in his magic; unlike his dark lord, he was much more practical in his application of power.

He flung one, then a second, sonically-substituted *fireball* at the spot that Synesyx had indicated, where a seemingly impenetrable iron plate buttressed a squat, uneven tower. The structure jutted from the top of the skull like a wart, and seemed to have no purpose, lacking both windows and doors to the interior. But one familiar with Occipitus might

recognize its location as perched atop what had once been a gaping opening in the skull, the “smoking eye” that had been the plane’s most recognizable landmark.

The echoes of the blast exploded through Occipitus’s turbulent sky. Demons shrieked and drew further back, confused. Malad did not cease, firing off a sonic *chain lightning* that ran along the perimeter of the bulkhead, and then another sonic blast, and then another *chain lightning*.

The air around the target point was rippling with the distortions released by the tiefling magic, but the surface of the Iron Skull resisted the assault.

Malad began to slowly drift downward, firing off more blasts as he descended. Three more sonic explosions, and his last *chain lightning*, and then a rapid-fire stream of *sonic rays* that ended with him almost atop the bulkhead, blasting it at point-blank range. Blood was streaming down the tiefling’s face from his nostrils, as the backlash from the released energy washed over him. But the sorcerer’s expression was focused entirely upon the spot that he was hitting, pouring destructive magic against the iron bulkhead.

And the metal was clearly reaching its breaking point. The bulkhead was crushed inward, the iron rivets holding it in place twisted and cracked. A loud and ominous creak that sounded even over the energy of the sonics rose from deep within the structure, as the weight of the tower above began to exert an additional pressure upon the ravaged iron plate.

Malad fired off one last sonic, so close that he could almost have stretched out to touch the metal.

The bulkhead exploded inward, vanishing into the darkness beyond. The creaking noise became an angry screaming, as the full weight of the tower superstructure began to tilt over the new gap.

Malad did not hesitate, vanishing into the void.

A number of demons, watching the entirely scene, dove after him. A pair of vrocks reached the dark gap at almost the same instant, which was also the same moment that the tower collapsed, thousand of tons of iron toppling over in a crescendo of destruction. The vrocks were utterly obliterated, smashed between implacable masses of iron. The other demons drew back in alarm, one chasme failing to react quickly enough to avoid being spitted on one of the long spikes that rose from the new summit of the Skull. The others rose up and continued their orbit, looking for gaps that did not exist. The falling tower had completely covered the gap, leaving the fortress of Graz’zt as impervious as it had been a few minutes before.

Chapter 596

Malad slowly drifted to the ground, his bare feet touching the cold iron floor. The crushed bulkhead lay a few feet away, twisted into an almost unrecognizable mound of ruined metal.

The tiefling sorcerer did not have to search for his Master.

The Prince of Shadows, the former Argent Lord, the demon known as Graz'zt and a hundred other names on a thousand different worlds, lay insensate in the arms of his massive throne. His huge corrosive greatsword lay propped awkwardly against the step at the foot of the throne, and his long limbs were draped almost casually over the chair's protruding arms, as if he'd been tossed into it. The demon's head lay tilted far to the side in what would have been an extremely uncomfortable position, if he could feel discomfort. But it was immediately obvious that Graz'zt was feeling nothing whatsoever. His good eye was shut, and within the bare socket of his right, the Heart of Axion slumbered too, a dull gray orb deep within its nest.

Malad approached the seat of his Lord. The iron floor felt like ice beneath his feet. That was one difference that gave the lie to this place, which at the same time was so familiar and yet so alien to him. It would never be the same, he knew, no matter whether Graz'zt succeeded in his gambit here, no matter how far he went in trying to recreate what had been lost.

"My Lord, your enemies are upon you."

The unconscious demon did not react. The effort of his twin casting, the strain of unleashing a pair of incredibly potent epic spells within the space of a minute, had drained him. Piled upon that incredible effort, the struggle against his son, while it had ended in victory, had pushed the demon beyond his limits. It had been Malad who had placed him here, in this chair, and he had not stirred from this position since then. It might be hours before he recovered, or years, Malad knew.

The sorcerer stood before the throne. Even with Graz'zt incapacitated, he felt an almost overwhelming urge to kneel, to prostrate himself before the being that he'd served since he was old enough to discern the nature of reality. A part of him that had always been there whispered that a chance was being offered here; Graz'zt would never be as vulnerable as he was now. Perhaps a new Prince could be raised in this very room...

From deep within the Heart of Axion came a flicker of light.

Malad's expression tightened. He started forward, but suddenly froze in mid-movement as Synesyx flowed down over his legs, the scales claspng tightly to his muscled limbs. The sorcerer frowned and focused, but he could not move. Graz'zt was almost close enough to reach out and touch, but instead of leaning forward, the tiefling drew himself up and relaxed. The armor loosened enough for him to stand easily, but did not withdraw from its grip upon his lower body.

Malad closed his eyes, and made an offer.

The scales fell away, forming a loose skirt that flowed around Malad's legs as he came forward and knelt at the demon's feet. Reaching out, he touched Graz'zt's hand. The perfect skin felt cool beneath his touch. Malad took the hand, and lowered his head, settling the six long fingers upon it.

Synesyx stirred, but did not interfere.

Malad began to speak, muttering dark syllables that seemed to twist and refract, although his voice was not really loud enough to echo off the adjacent walls. The words he spoke were not the arcane speech of magic, but rather more ancient and sinister syllables that had been born ages ago in the deepest pits of the Abyss. They formed the basis of a ritual that Malad had only seen enacted twice, but which had burned into his memory like a brand. He had thought that he might someday participate in it, but never in the role that he was currently enacting.

But he did not pause, the words growing stronger, fueling the connection between himself and the Prince. The fingers upon his skull began to tighten, the long black nails digging into his skin. Wisps of black energy began to form around those points of connection, and still Malad spoke on, repeating the cadence of corrupted sounds, drawing deep upon the ancient heritage of the dark lords of the Pit.

Graz'zt stirred.

Malad's face twisted into a snarled rictus of utter agony. Yet still the words trailed from his lips, each syllable torn from between clenched lips.

Synesyx tightened around Malad's body again, but this time it was to keep the sorcerer from collapsing.

Finally, the flow of sounds failed. Wisps of black smoke rose from the shrunken body of the tiefling. Malad slumped to the ground, leaving streaks of flesh affixed to the demon's long fingers. He was naked.

Graz'zt's left eye opened.

The Prince smiled.

Chapter 597

The companions emerged from the final spiral staircase onto a scene of horror and wonder.

The chamber at the top of the Skull had been completely transformed. Only the presence of the burning pillar on the far side of the room identified this as the same place where they had completed the Test of the Smoking Eye, the same place where they defeated the demon prince Adimarchus.

The chamber now resembled a great hall, with huge thirty-foot pillars buttressing the vaulted iron ceiling above. Dark and sinister forms had been carved into the pillars, which separated huge windows of stained glass that depicted intricate scenes of vice and depravity. Those panes were utterly dark; the originals had opened onto the unholy skies of Azzagrat, but these were backed only by layers of thick stone and iron.

To either side recessed alcoves appeared to open onto further galleries. This was an optical illusion; the Skull simply did not have the physical capacity of the Argent Palace. But it gave the chamber the impression of being much larger than it actually was.

The room was not empty. To the left, a row of six massive figures stood, giants with thick wings spreading out from their backs, visages wreathed in smoke, and massive weapons in their hands—a whip in the left, and a burning sword in the right. These were Graz'zt's generals, six of the mightiest of the balors, the Fingers of the Dark Lord's Fist. They were so realistic that for a second several of the companions lifted weapons and spells to defend themselves... before the ruddy red glow of the pillar revealed them for what they were, representations formed in iron, copies frozen in poses of respect to the Great Throne.

Of those six lords of demonkind represented in metal, two had been in Zelatar when the Disaster had struck, and had been vaporized along with much of the city. Another had been slain seventeen seconds later, when a *gate* on one of Graz'zt's vassal worlds had opened, and sixty cornugons had stormed through. One had actually been missing for years; it was believed that it had been trapped by mortals upon one of the Primes where Graz'zt had been struggling for dominance. The last two balors, true to their kind, had turned coat the moment the magnitude of the Disaster had become known, switching allegiance to two of the Prince's many rivals.

On the other side of the hall, another row of creatures recreated in iron paid homage. These statues were less distinct: twenty mariliths, their features only vaguely represented in the metal. These effigies too represented the fallen, either in the Disaster or in the desperate struggles that had followed, when Graz'zt's legions had been fallen upon by eager foes from every quarter. Few of those had even survived long enough to betray their allegiance.

There was a last group slightly behind the throne, to the side. They represented only a small fraction of Graz'zt's fabled harem, but their features were precise, their faces perfectly captured in the cold iron. They were the only fully distinct features in the chamber; everything else was slightly *off*, warped and imperfect. All of those depicted had been destroyed within the first second of the Disaster.

The throne itself was empty, although there was a shriveled husk of something on the floor beside it.

"He's here," the Voice said, moving into the room, the celestial's sword hovering in the air before it.

"Spread out," Lok whispered, walking slowly forward, his axe at the ready. The others followed behind, their eyes and their magic peering into every corner, every shadow.

"Show yourself, demon!" Arun shouted, his voice echoing in the sepulchral emptiness of the hall. "Or do you fear suffering the same fate as Adimarchus?"

"I am here," came a voice from everywhere, echoing throughout the chamber, and inside their heads. All eyes turned to the throne, where the air rippled, and a tall figure stepped through the distortion to face them.

It was the Prince, his wrecked face revealed, his wavy-bladed greatsword dripping acid in his hand. The gray shine of the Heart of Axion shone from the cavernous socket of his ruined eye, and a suit of silvery scales rippled over his muscled torso; Synesyx had found a new Master.

“I have long waited for this confrontation,” the demon said. “At last the architects of my downfall are within my grasp. Along with a new set of champions, who cheated me out of enjoying the torments of my favorite rival.”

“You brought your fate upon yourself,” Lok said. “All we wanted was our friend.”

“And you lost him as well, in the end,” Graz’zt said. “For nothing that is Mine shall I relinquish, even unto its utter destruction.”

“Looks like you lost a big chunk of your fa...” Mole piped up, only to trail off as the demon’s one eye fixed upon her.

“Your rule is at an end, demon,” the Herald’s Voice said. “Occipitus rejects you.”

“Occiptus is mine. As are you.” His gaze shifted slightly, to Cal. “Your thoughts already betray your despair. Do not place hope in your missing companion; the priestess of Selûne has already fallen into a snare that I laid, with your little demonspawn boy as bait.”

“You’re forgetting something, fiend,” Beorna said, lifting *Aludrial’s Shard*. “We’ve already taken down one Prince, in this very room. One more won’t be that much of a bother.”

“We will finish the job that Delem began,” Lok said, with finality.

“Yeah! Ah... you’re toast, Grazy!” Mole added.

The Prince chuckled. “Mortals. You are always so amusing.”

“Delem was mortal,” Cal said. “And yet he destroyed the world that you’d created. Centuries of effort, torn down in an instant.”

“Millenia,” Graz’zt responded. “And that is how long I will extend my torments of each of you.”

“Might as well get started then,” Dannel said, lifting his bow and firing his readied arrow in a single fluid motion.

The missile streaked across the room toward the Prince, its path perfectly aligned to intersect with the demon’s remaining eye. But Graz’zt spoke a word of power, the Heart of Axion flared, and a surge of dark energy erupted outward from the fiend. Dannel’s arrow hit that wave and froze; the missile hung in midair for a split second before it shattered and evaporated. The spellsurge hit the companions like a wave, knocking each of them down.

Graz'zt seemed to hover within a black halo of roaring energy that swirled around him like a breaking tide. "THE HOUR OF YOUR UNDOING IS AT HAND!" he said, each word filling the chamber, echoing off the walls and building until they formed a crescendo that drove all else, including conscious thought, fleeing before them.

Chapter 598

Benzan clutched his pathetic little knife, and stood his ground before the impenetrable barrier of the cliff behind him. "All right, who wants to die first?" he snarled, sweeping the weapon menacingly before him, his gesture of defiance undermined somewhat as he staggered under a sharp new wave of pain from the puncture in his side.

"Oh, bravo," the succubus chuckled. She gestured, and the bar-Igura came at him, lunging at him to snap him up in its long arms.

Benzan screamed and leapt, accepting the agony that his body inflicted upon him for the movement. The ape-demon, surprised, tried to intercept him, but the tiefling got within its reach, the hook-knife jabbing up and catching it on the corner of its jaw. As he darted under its right elbow he yanked hard on the weapon. It must have caught on something tender, for the demon roared in pain and twisted around after him.

The tiefling tried to slip the knife free as he got around the bar-Igura, but the point was snagged on the hard bone of its lower jaw, and he had to let go to avoid a backswing from a muscled arm. It hit him anyway, the demon's forearm slapping him so hard across the back that he nearly fell flat on his face. But that impact probably helped him avoid being pinned by the hound, which slammed hard into him a moment later. The hound's neck contorted as it snapped its head around at a violent angle, and as it flew past it locked its jaws onto Benzan's left hand. The two foes spun for a moment, connected by that bloody link, and then the hound's jaws came together in a meaty *crunch*, and Benzan and the hound fell back.

Benzan tried to rise, but his head felt woozy, his movements lethargic as a red haze began to fall over his vision. He looked down and saw that his left hand was missing three fingers.

His world returned to clarity a moment later as a new, intense pain exploded in his chest, driving away the welcome fog of semiconsciousness. He looked up to see the succubus grinning ferally at him, then he looked down to see the ruin of his chest. The blow from the demon's whip had taken a strip of flesh six inches long across his left breast, including his nipple, leaving torn muscles that oozed bright red blood.

"Such passion," she said, the way that a starving man might comment about a haunch of roasted beef placed before him.

The bar-Igura—spitting out the hook-knife—and the hound demon circled him, wary of any more tricks.

For Benzan, it was too much. He slumped back to his knees, unable to even summon concern as the succubus drew back her whip for another strike.

“Get your filthy hands off of him,” a familiar voice sounded from behind him.

“Well, well,” the succubus said.

That voice had a power for the tiefling; he had heard it thousands of times since his capture, whispering promises of hope deep within the hidden recesses of his mind that Graz’zt’s minions had sought to extinguish. He turned, painfully, to see Dana, beautiful and terrible with the soft glow of layered magical wards about her, framed in the shifting chaos of a *gate* that had opened directly in front of the cliff wall.

“Pleased you could join us at last, Dana Ilgarten,” the succubus crooned. Benzan turned back, and saw what he’d sensed before confirmed. His time of captivity had given him some insight into the thoughts of the demons that served Graz’zt; he realized that the succubus’s words were not bravado; she had not been surprised by Dana’s appearance, and if nothing else, she was... pleased.

“Dana, no,” he croaked, turning back to his wife. “It’s a trap...”

Dana did not shift her attention from the demoness, her face a barely constrained map of determination warring with fury. The bar-Igura grunted and leapt at her, but she shifted her gaze upon it, *imploding* it.

“A bit of overkill,” the succubus commented.

“I am just giving you a chance to see what I am going to do to you,” the priestess said.

Nonplussed by the fate of its comrade, the fiendish hound crouched and leapt at Dana from the opposite side. Its leap suddenly arrested in midair, and it hung there a moment, snarling and thrashing, before it flew across the clearing, landing in an iron bush that collapsed in an eruption of sharp thorns and jagged-edged branches. Laertes Leonidas appeared as his *invisibility* faded, the werelion’s claws bloody.

“And you brought a friend for us to enjoy as well,” the succubus commented. She had still made no move to attack or defend herself. “How nice.”

Dana hit the succubus with an *implosion*, but the power of the spell flared against an amulet that the demoness wore around her neck, and dissipated. The succubus smiled. The werelion started forward, but Dana stopped him with a raised hand.

“Tell Graz’zt that we’ll be back for him,” Dana said, coming forward to stand protectively beside Benzan.

“You can tell him yourself,” the demoness said, as she brought her hand up.

“No!” Benzan cried, but it was too late.

A beam hit him, enveloping him with a soft green glow that seemed to sink into his skin, permeating him. He looked up and saw that Dana had been hit by one as well. He had

enough experience with magic to recognize a *dimensional anchor*, and as he looked behind his wife he saw the *gate* close as well, dissolving to reveal the cold implacable reality of the cliff wall behind.

Several female demons appeared in the sky above, half-fiends or succubi by the look of them, clutching wands.

A familiar hiss sounded around the perimeter of the clearing, as demons *teleported* in. Ten of them, all hezrou demons, fat and leering.

Another noise drew his gaze up. Atop the cliff, a familiar noise of eight massive legs scraping on metal.

The retriever appeared at the edge of the cliff, its beam-eyes pivoting in their sockets as they fixed upon the mortals below. The creature was flanked by another pair of fiends, massive thick-bodied humanoids the size of ogres, armed with longbows and greataxes. They had barbed arrows with heads the size of his fist drawn and ready to fire.

Turning back, Benzan met the cold stare of the succubus. “Did you think you could just creep away from the grasp of our Master, little tiefling? No... this is just the first task you will perform in the service of the Great Lord. And as a reward...”

Her gaze rose to meet Dana’s. “As a reward, you will get to watch the suffering of the woman you love, knowing that *you* betrayed her to us.”

The demons all started laughing, a sinister sound that filled the clearing, echoing off the cliff face until the distorted cackles surrounded them on every side, stealing hope like the thrust of a blade.

Chapter 599

The Voice was the first to recover, rising and spreading its white wings as it lifted off and dove straight for the Prince. Its sword rematerialized in front of it as the usually-calm face of the celestial took on a tinge of righteous rage against this embodiment of everything that it stood against, this most foul of demons. The archon moved with great speed, the sword singing as it clove the air, striking the demon in the chest.

Black energy roiled as the blade of holy energy intersected Graz’zt’s *unholy aura*. The archon was rebuffed, the backlash of power overcoming it, but it quickly recovered, its sword coming up again to strike.

But Graz’zt did not give it the chance. The demon lifted his massive sword in both hands, and with an exultant snarl he clove the blade downward, through the celestial’s body. The Voice did not even have a chance to scream as the great sword *ended* it, cutting a vertical slash through it from the center of its skull through the bottom of its torso. The two halves of the archon fell apart, landing in a heap of white cloth and red blood and flesh that continued to sizzle as the acid from the Prince’s sword continued to eat away at it.

“By the gods!” Dannel exclaimed, overwhelmed despite himself.

“Take him!” Arun urged, taking up his hammer and rushing forward. Beorna was already a step ahead of him, with Lok only a pace behind. As they ran, they picked up speed, as Cal’s *haste* spell lightened their steps.

The Prince smiled, lifted his sword, and waited for them.

Beorna had called upon the *divine power* of Helm while Graz’zt had addressed them earlier, and her booted feet seemed almost to fly across the floor as she charged. With divine strength flowing through her, she rushed straight at the Prince and *smote* him.

But the blow never landed. Whether through a moment of self-doubt that distracted her from her attack, a dark power inherent in the desultory glance from the Prince, or merely a slip on the slick trail of the Voice’s insides splattered across the floor, the templar fumbled her swing badly. *Aludrial’s Shard* hissed through empty air, the dark trails of the *unholy aura* barely stirred by its passage. Off-balance, Beorna stumbled and fell, the sword clattering loudly upon the ground.

“The champions of Good,” Graz’zt sneered. “How very impressive.”

“Burn in the Pit, fiend!” Arun shouted, slamming his holy warhammer solidly into the Prince’s side. The blow rang hard through the *unholy aura* and struck sparks as it clashed off of Synesyx. Had Graz’zt been a mortal, the blow would have caved in his torso and knocked him flying across the room.

The Prince merely grunted as he turned to face the paladin.

“My pretties might enjoy the embrace of such as you,” he said, smacking the dwarf in the chest with an open palm, and *heaving*.

Arun went flying, lifting into the air and traveling almost fifteen feet to slam hard into the iron figures of Graz’zt’s harem. Several statues were heavily damaged by the impact of the armored paladin, and an arm broken off of one of the female images went skittering across the floor. Arun was not seriously hurt, but as he started to pull himself free from the wreckage, he felt resistance on his arm.

Looking down, he saw that one of the arms of the statues had twisted around his own.

And with a creak of metal, he felt another solid grasp tighten on his right leg. Looking up, he saw a sculpted face turn slowly to face his.

Lok had to divert his charge to get around Beorna and Arun, but he swung around to come at the demon from the flank, his thundering axe ready to strike. His weapon lacked the holy powers of those wielded by the dwarves, but Beorna had *aligned* it as they neared this chamber, in the hopes that this would give him a chance at penetrating the Prince’s considerable damage resistance.

But while the genasi's first swing was a strong one, the axe glanced harmlessly off the demon's armored torso, inflicting little more than a light sting.

Arrows knifed across the room, but the first shots from Callendes and Dannel likewise seemed to have little or no effect upon the demon lord, bouncing off his body or vanishing within the *unholy aura*, leaving no mark upon him.

Umbar had hesitated during the initial rush, not from doubt, but rather to call upon the power of Moradin to fill him with *righteous might*. As the dwarf grew to over ten feet in height, he started forward, lifting a greatly-enlarged *Alakast* to strike down the demon lord.

Beorna, spitting a curse, grabbed the *Shard* as she rose to one knee, thrusting it up into the demon's side. A white flare of light erupted from the weapon as its head drove through the *unholy aura*, penetrating the armor and the thick hide beneath. Graz'zt snarled and turned back to her; as her weapon tore free from the wound black ichor smoked upon the tip of the blade.

"You dare to strike me, bitch!" he snarled, whipping his own sword around. The greatsword slammed into the side of her head with enough force to both dent her helmet and knock it flying from her head. Staggered, blood oozing from a deep gash in her scalp, she nevertheless managed to bring up *Aludrial's Shard* to meet a follow-up thrust that was aimed for her throat. The holy bastard sword clanged against the abyssal steel, and while she could not fully parry Graz'zt's thrust, she did manage to avert the killing thrust. The Prince's sword still drove through her shoulder, piercing both the front and rear plate of her armor. Beorna screamed, and was driven to the ground as the demon kicked her in the chest, knocking her off the blade.

"A pity you are so unbelievably ugly," the demon said, as Beorna, half-conscious, mewled in pain.

Ignoring Lok's attacks, which continued to be ineffective, the demon turned to face the charging Umbar. The cleric, looming over the Prince, brought *Alakast* down in a potent blow that erupted in a white flash as it glanced off the demon's head. But if Graz'zt was harmed by the attack, it wasn't obvious to look at him.

"Have you slain many fiends with that staff, priest of Moradin?"

"I'm about to slay one more, demon!"

Umbar swung the staff in an all-out strike, but Graz'zt moved faster. The Prince brought up his sword, and with a powerful swing of his own he sundered *Alakast*. The staff released a sick crashing sound as the abyssal steel clove through it, driving through to smash into the base of Umbar's breastplate. Umbar was knocked roughly back, stunned, his breath driven from his lungs by the force of the blow.

"I thought you dwarf priests were supposed to be *tough*."

A dark green beam lanced out across the chamber, slicing past the stunned cleric toward the fiend. The ray looked like it would hit the Prince in the chest, but at the last instant it *curved*, vanishing into the Heart of Axion. Cal's *disintegrate* had no effect.

"Spell absorption," the gnome cursed. "Magical attacks won't hurt him!"

"Well, we'd better find something that will!" Dannel said, firing another arrow that vanished harmlessly into the *unholy aura*.

Lok roared as he laid into the Prince from behind, unleashing a full attack at point blank range. Even Graz'zt could not merely shrug off such an assault, and as the second blow exploded with a thundering critical hit, the demon actually was driven a half-step forward.

"The mighty warrior," Graz'zt said, turning his gaze toward the genasi. "What do you fear, Lok? What stirs the terrors that creep within your soul?"

Lok felt a surge of dire, unrelenting panic flow over him. The last time that Graz'zt had held him and his companions, he'd tormented them with images of their personal fears and doubts. Then, he'd experienced firsthand a drow attack on the home of his people, the urduunnir. In the vision, the attack had succeeded because he'd abandoned his people to help others. Now, what he saw in that moment of connection was far more dire; the West in flames, with demons pouring through *gates* to lay waste to the lands of Faerûn. Over it all, Graz'zt watched, reveling in the destruction that was his personal payback to the realm that had produced his more dire enemies.

And all because Lok had been too weak to stop him.

The genasi was a dedicated fighter, but he could not resist the power of the demon's gaze. His axe fell from nerveless fingers, and he staggered back, his arms lifted to shield himself from that relentless stare. He fled, cowering in the alcove behind the Prince's throne.

Graz'zt laughed. "And you would become a god? Such bravery."

Umbar rushed up and grabbed hold of the demon, snapping his enlarged fists around Graz'zt's arms. The cleric's strength had been augmented considerably by the *righteous might* of Moradin, but it seemed almost trivial for Graz'zt to shake himself free, and slam his sword up over his shoulder. The point of the blade pierced Umbar's breastplate, the impact driving him back again. A fountain of blood erupted from the terrible wound as Graz'zt pulled his sword free, and the cleric fell hard to the ground with enough force to shake the hard iron surface.

He did not stir.

Graz'zt turned around. "You are pathetic. None of you fools are even a minor threat to such as me. Enjoy your last few instants of free thought, for soon, even your dreams shall belong to me."

The demon lord laughed again, a terrible and deadly sound that promised worse to follow.

Chapter 600

Dana uttered a *holy word*.

The power of the blessed syllable blasted out from the priestess... and died, as the hezrous countered it by the utterance of numerous *blasphemies*.

The succubus's eyes glowed with an almost feral intensity as she regarded the priestess. "The Great Lord is quite familiar with your tactics, blessed of Selûne." The way she said it, the appellation sounded like a slur. "Your fate was set the moment you decided to come for your little pet there."

Something flashed in Dana's eyes. "You are not the only one to know your enemy," Dana said. She made a small gesture with her left hand.

There was a noise in the clearing behind her, accompanied by a slight rush of air as *something* filled that space. The succubus was the only one to have seen the other *invisible* figure that had come through the *gate* with Dana; a diminutive creature, smaller even than a Halfling, clad in a simple cloth tunic, carrying a hammer somewhat too large for him, tucked through his belt. The demoness had watched the creature intently, expecting some sort of surprise from it. But even she was not prepared for the little thing to suddenly grow to over twenty-five feet tall, putting it almost on eye-level with the demons atop the cliff. It became visible as it lifted a muscled hand and uttered a cry that shattered the mottled sky of Achaeron.

The titan Corumbos was ready for battle.

"Destroy them!" the demoness snarled, but her minions were already rushing to attack. Most of the hezrous leapt forward, several of them hurling *chaos hammers* and *unholy blights* at their foes. The energy surges unleashed confusing storms of energy that filled the clearing, but did little real damage against their heavily warded enemies.

Benzan lacked such protection, and while the *hammer* failed to affect him, the *blight* was enough to nearly do him in. But then the pain of his wounds suddenly fled, and he looked up to see Dana kneeling beside him. She had a sword in her hand, which she thrust into his.

"Can you fight?"

"You'd better believe it," he said. Although getting up proved a bit more challenging than he'd expected, he was still on his feet when one of the hezrous leapt at him, reaching for him with its huge claws.

The clearing exploded into a chaotic melee as the demons and their enemies engaged with every spell and weapon they had at their disposal. The succubus tried to sunder the enchantment that had bound the titan to service, but despite her considerable magical abilities, those paled before those of Dana. The titan completed his spell as the demons atop the bluff blasted him with arrows and energy beams. Two hezrous leapt onto his legs,

tearing and clawing. But Corumbos was one of the Ancient Scions, an entity of surpassing power, and not likely to fall to the initial attack of a few demons.

Laertes Leonidas tried to charge the succubus, but was forced to defend himself as the fiendish hound, its matted hide covered in slashes from its encounter with the iron bush, leapt back into the fray. The werelion ripped his arm free of the hound's jaws before it could get a solid grip, and in turn seized it around the throat, and twisted. The hound struggled and thrashed for a few moments, before a loud snap announced the end of that confrontation.

Like the hezrous that had hung back, keeping readied *blasphemies* to counter another *holy word*, the flying demons above had orders to remain vigilant, to maintain the *anchors* on Benzan and Dana lest they try to dispel the enchantments and escape.

But escape was not on Dana's mind, as she unleashed her own magic upon their enemies. Demons all around her screamed as her *inflict critical wounds* spell tore into them. Three hezrous crowded forward and surged over her from the front and sides. As they pressed her, however, a glow that surrounded her like a halo began to brighten, building in intensity until the demons howled in pain. Two managed to hit her despite the *holy aura*, although both immediately fell back, blinded by the intensity of the light.

The succubus hit her with a spell, and Dana felt wracking pains erupt in her lower body, threatening her equilibrium. But the priestess had passed through trials of agony and terror to get to this point, and she merely ignored the pain, pushing it to the side like an unwelcome thought.

Stepping away from the hezrous attacking her, she turned to Benzan. Her husband was giving as good as he got with the hezrou he was fighting. The sword he had was a decent magical weapon she'd picked up in the household of Barrat Ghur, but with the *align weapon* she'd laid upon it shortly before opening the *gate*, it sliced open the demon's flesh as effectively as a normal blade might that of your typical ogre or orc.

Thus far, she'd kept herself walled up within an iron wall of discipline. She could not let herself accept the reality of Benzan being right next to her, close enough to touch. If she did, the hard shell she had constructed around herself might break, and if that happened, then they would all be lost.

So she touched him, but only to deliver a spell.

"It's going to get real hot in a moment, love," she said, then shouted, "INFERNUS!"

Corumbos heard the shouted word, and nodded. A streak of blackened char marred his tunic across the breast, and a half-dozen arrows jutted from his upper body, including one that had pierced his cheek. But the two rocs he had summoned had snared the flying demons and flown off with them, and the retriever listed perilously, two of its legs smashed in from a devastating blow from the titan's massive hammer. The two archers he'd recognized as merely half-fiends, rather than truebloods, and the quickened *chain lightning* he'd hit them with had been more than payback for the arrows they'd shot him with. The hezrous tearing at his legs he had ignored; neither had managed to hurt him yet.

At Dana's command, though, he summoned his magic, and called down a *fire storm*.

The succubus Brajia staggered back through the inferno, her earlier certainty shattered. Her demons were being torn apart, and Dana Ilgarten had been far from the easy prey she'd expected. In a part of her mind, she was already anticipating the terrors that her Master would inflict upon her for failure. While she could imagine her own failure, conceptualizing the defeat of Graz'tz, even with the example of the Disaster fresh in the minds of all who served the once-Argent Lord, was beyond her grasp. Such was the power of the being known as the Lord of Shadows to shape the realities of those around him.

But Brajia was not without resources. Even as his flesh began to crinkle from the raging flames all around her, she reached into her pouch and drew out a scroll. The parchment was flayed from the hide of a devil, but even so it almost immediately began to smoke as the heat hit it. But she only needed a few seconds to read the incantation scribed upon the scroll.

A shadowy form emerged through the flames. Brajia did not need to see her clearly to know it was Dana Ilgarten. She was untouched by the flames. A pair of nunchaku dangled from her right hand.

"Time to end this, demon."

Brajia laughed, a cruel sound that changed as the spell took hold. Her body began to shift, her limbs contorting in unimaginable pain as the magic coursed through her. The spell that had been upon the scroll was similar to the *transformation* spell practiced by mages upon Faerûn, but this incantation had been born deep within the bowels of the Abyss, where incanters did not feel the need to spare the caster the price of invoking powers beyond their ken.

The flesh covering the succubus's arms, legs, and back split open, revealing armored plates of chitin that oozed an ugly black slime. The bones of her hands grew and burst from her fingertips, forming jagged claws that formed razor-sharp blades at their ends. Her muscles swelled until the skin covering them began to snap under the strain. And her face... the once-beautiful face of Brajia, that became the monstrous visage of... something else.

As Dana Ilgarten looked up in horror at what her foe had become, the demon-thing started forward, logical thought replaced by a feral desire to taste the flesh and blood of the woman standing before it.

Chapter 601

As Graz'tz tormented his foes with promises of destruction, a tiny figure slid across the ground, coming up alongside Beorna. The dying templar's struggles were growing weaker, and her entire left side was covered in the blood that continued to flow from the terrible wound in her shoulder.

Mole had a tiny vial in her hand, which she upended into the dwarf's mouth. "I kept a little holdout for emergencies, don't tell the others," she whispered.

Graz'zt detected Mole, of course, but as he turned to deal with her an arrow caromed hard off his forehead. The shot had penetrated his *unholy aura*, and as the arrow clattered to the floor a few paces away—its head seemingly melted—a small gash could be seen trailing ichor from the good half of the demon's face.

The demon snarled, as more arrows pinged off of his armored body. Callendes and Dannel were firing arrows as quickly as they could fit them to their strings, and while the avariel had yet to penetrate the Prince's defenses, Dannel's *fiendbane* bow gave his shots enough added potency to do at least some damage. A second arrow thudded into Graz'zt's arm, penetrating a fraction of an inch through his tough hide.

The demon's malevolent gaze shifted slightly. A gray beam erupted from the *Heart of Axion*, splashing over the body of one of the iron balors, the last one in the line of Graz'zt's honor guard. The ray lasted only a fraction of a second, but the result was immediate, as the huge construct shuddered and came to life, its metallic body creaking as it turned and slowly, ponderously started toward the archers.

Beorna returned to consciousness, groaning as she tried to lever herself up. The wound in her shoulder had stopped bleeding, but it was clear that she was not far from death's door.

"Heal yourself first," Mole whispered. "You can't face him now."

But Beorna shook her head; she had no healing magic left to her, no spells at all, save for a few weak orisons. Ignoring the gnome, she reached out and closed her hand upon the hilt of *Aludrial's Shard*. She knew that Mole was right, but Duty held her in an iron grip as she pulled herself slowly up into a crouch.

A familiar roar sounded from the far side of the demon, as Arun returned to the fray. Behind him, the statues of Graz'zt's harem lie in an unidentifiable wreckage. The paladin sported a few new wounds; some of the animated statues had jabbed him with sharp edges of metal left from sundered arms and legs. But that didn't stop him from charging headlong at their enemy, sheer will driving him forward against seemingly impossible odds.

Graz'zt turned to meet him, but before either could strike, Beorna thrust *Aludrial's Shard* deep into the demon's back.

A scream of utter horror erupted from the demon as the blade sank a full foot into his body. As he stood there, transfixed, Arun leapt forward, with his hammer sweeping before him toward the center of the Prince's head. Despite his horrible injury, Graz'zt managed to intercept the paladin's swing with his blade, deflecting it. Graz'zt drove the sword down into Arun's shield, hitting it hard enough to leave a deep dent in the metal. Arun grimaced as his arm absorbed the force of the impact, but he refused to give ground.

Another arrow sliced past the demon's head, clipping his ear, but doing no real damage.

Cal knew that they were fast running out of options. He had tried to *dispel* the magical fear affecting Lok, but his spell had failed against the potency of the Prince's magic. The demon was insanely powerful, and augmented by at least one artifact. With his *arcane sight*, Cal could see the true power of the artificial eye in the demon's right socket, and he recognized the shifting suit of armor he wore as the former possession of the tiefling sorcerer that had participated in the assault upon the Bastion.

The archers continued their fire against Graz'zt, calmly shooting even as the animated statue drew close enough to strike. The statue creaked loudly as its massive sword came down at them. At the last instant Dannel leapt aside, and the weapon slammed hard into the iron floor, opening a six-foot gash in the plating. Callendes went the other way, falling back, flapping his wings to help give him clearance.

The balor loomed over Cal as it lifted its sword ponderously from the damaged floor, preparing to strike again.

Graz'zt stared down at Arun, who met that cold gaze through the slits of his helmet. Amusement flickered through the anger that shone in its one living eye.

"Say goodbye to your love, Arun Goldenshield."

Arun's eyes widened, and he lunged forward, his hammer coming down into the demon's body. But while his shot connected, he could not stop the Prince from pivoting his upper body almost full around, his sword continuing where his torso had to stop. Beorna was still trying to thrust the *Shard* deeper into the demon's back, and while she saw the swing coming, she could not get out of the way quickly enough.

"NO!" Arun screamed, as the blade of the Prince smote the templar on the side of her head, just above her left ear. Her head came apart in an explosion of blood and bone, and after hanging for a split second in lifeless animation, her body collapsed upon the cold iron floor of the chamber.

Chapter 602

Benzan dove into the storm of fire, coughing as the acrid smoke burned his lungs. Around him, the iron undergrowth of the metal forest was melting into glistening pools, and the thick branches of the surrounding trees were beginning to soften and droop. Fortunately Dana's *protection from fire* ward held, and he was not harmed by the raging flames of the titan's *fire storm*.

The screams of the hezrous began to fade behind him. The demon he'd been fighting had been hit hard by the initial surge of flames, which had overwhelmed its fiendish resistances. One of the others had tried to grab him as he'd headed after Dana, but Laertes intercepted it, delivering a punishing blow to its side.

Corumbos finally released his magic, and the flames quickly died. The smoke remained, obscuring Benzan's view, but he was drawn forward by an ominous sound of something big moving ahead.

As he stumbled forward the haze parted, and he saw a creature of nightmare battling Dana.

The thing was humanoid in only the vaguest sense; armored plates covered its arms, legs, and torso, and sharp blades protruded from its fingers. Wings jutted from its back, but were obviously far too small to have any chance of lifting the huge thing aloft. It walked huddled forward, its spine bent at a sharp curve, but even so it had to stand at least ten feet tall. Its face was a horror, with thick ridges of protruding bone over its eyes and along the lines of its jaw, which spouted curved teeth that jutted out a good six inches or so from its face.

Dana was moving like a zephyr, avoiding the powerful but clumsy swings of the creature as she slammed it with her adamantite nunchaku. She still shone with the bright light of her *holy aura*, but that did not seem to faze the demon as it relentlessly dogged her evasive movements. She was wounded, he could see; bright red gashes showed in her left torso as she spun around and leapt over another vicious swing.

Benzan ran forward, a guttural cry sounding in his throat, his sword at the ready. The thing either did not detect him or did not care; it lunged at Dana, bringing one long arm down to block her path, its claws digging into the hard ground. The priestess darted back, but the fiend brought its other arm down behind her, giving her the choice of full-on retreat, or facing it head-on.

The priestess, dropping into a crouch, looked up at the monstrosity looming over her, her nunchaku swirling in one hand.

The other hand started to glow red.

The fiend lunged, its head darting down, its jaws opening wide.

Dana grinned, and leapt to meet it.

Its jaws snapped shut, closing hard... on empty air.

The fiend reared up, revealing Dana, the chain of her nunchaku looped over one of the teeth protruding from its jaw. Swinging around, she touched it with her other hand, unleashing her *harm* spell.

Tendrils of negative energy surged outward from her touch, opening vicious wounds in its throat and chest as the potency of the magic spread. The creature seemed to sag before the onslaught of power.

But then it abruptly snapped its head forward, sending Dana flying into the open air before it.

Benzan reached the demon, and slammed his sword hard into its knee. His stroke avoided the dense armor plates that protected its thigh and calf, but its hide was like boiled leather, and he barely managed to gash the skin covering the joint.

The demon, focused on Dana, ignored him. Its jaws split open wide, the flaps of its cheeks folding back, revealing an opening large enough to swallow a human skull. Dana reached the apogee of her flight and began to fall...

Three long tentacles shot out from that dark opening of the fiend's jaws. Each terminated in a small sucking maw surrounded by several inch-long fangs the color of ashes. Dana tried to shift in mid-fall, but could not avoid being impaled by two of them, which stabbed into her body. The last twined around her ankle, yanking her roughly upward, her feet lifting above her head as it turned her upside down.

Dana screamed as currents of black energy trailed from her into the creature, as it sucked life energy from her. She tried to break free, but her movements were feeble, and she failed to untangle herself from the iron grip of the suckers digging into her torso.

Benzan hacked again at its knee, desperation adding strength to his swing. The blow cut deeper into the joint, releasing a jet of steaming ichor, but the damage was not enough to cause it to lose its footing. It swept its arm around, hitting him hard in the gut with its elbow. The tiefling went flying, his sword clattering from his grasp as he landed hard on his back.

Looking up, his vision was filled by the sight of Dana, dangling from the monster's grasp, her life fueling its dark strength.

Chapter 603

Arun screamed and swung his hammer with all his strength at the demon prince. The powerful blow was poorly aimed, however, and Graz'zt's scale armor seemed to gather to meet at the point of impact. The head of the hammer glanced harmlessly away, doing no damage.

Graz'zt, meanwhile, returned with a backswing that easily penetrated the paladin's guard, the head of the weapon crunching solidly into Arun's arm. The plate protecting the limb buckled, and Arun was knocked sideways, nearly losing his grasp on his hammer. The sizzle of burning flesh filled the air as the acid coating the demon's blade fed eagerly on the dwarf's arm and neck where it had splattered.

"You are pathetic," the demon said. "You are so easily manipulated, it is barely worth the effort it takes."

Arun let out a ragged growl that did not sound like anything a normal creature would make. His broken shield fell from his grip, and he brought the hammer up to strike again, telegraphing his intent.

Graz'zt almost casually brought up his blade to block.

At the last instant, Arun shifted, and brought the head of the hammer down *onto* the sword, just above the hilt. A flash of energies erupted, accompanied by a spray of acid and a sound like the cracking of the world. The two combatants fell apart, and when the glow faded, Graz'zt was revealed holding only the hilt of his shattered sword.

A loud clang filled the room as the rest of the blade clattered noisily upon the cavern floor a few feet away.

“I do not need a sword to put you down, dwarf!” the demon hissed. It came at him in a sudden rush, its claws growing and thickening until they formed long black tendrils that hung at its sides. The Prince’s hiss, like Arun’s earlier growl, was something basic and bestial as he lashed out at Arun. The black claws pierced his armor as though the shining mithral was woven lamé, digging deep into his flesh, drawing out blood and life in equal portions. Arun was staggered; no mortal, not even the divine champion of Moradin, could have taken that assault and not faltered.

The rest of the companions were in little position to intervene. Callendes went down hard as the balor statue’s backswing clipped one of his wings, the jagged metal that represented a flaming sword snapping the bones and tearing half of the wing clear off him. The statue walked with a slight limp, where Cal had blasted it with a *disintegrate*, but the thing—construct, animated object, fiend, whatever!—had apparently resisted the bulk of the effect, for the spell had only vaporized a small portion of the leg where Cal had hit it. The statue ignored the *invisible* archmage, focusing upon the archers. While slow, the thing had a reach equivalent to a real balor, and it used it effectively as it swung its huge weapon at the nimble elves.

Dannel had darted back out of its way, but as he saw Callendes go down, he immediately spun and ran back toward it, firing as he went. Several cracks already spread across its chest where the arcane archer had scored hits, but the damage did not appear to impair the animated monstrosity.

“Dannel, the leg!” Cal urged.

The elf saw immediately what the gnome had indicated; at the point where the golem-thing had been blasted with Cal’s *disintegrate*, its limb had been shorn until only a concave band of metal supported its weight.

The song filled him as he drew and fired. The corrosive arrows he’d taken from the guards below slammed with precision into that weak point. The statue lifted the leg ponderously as it stepped forward to deliver a finishing blow to Callendes, but as its full weight settled upon the damaged limb, it snapped with a loud crack. The iron balor started to fall, but as it went down, it lunged forward in a last attempt to take at least one foe with it.

Callendes, crawling away, put on a last burst of speed, and darted out from under a smashing blow that again cracked the iron floor with the force of it.

The statue collapsed under its own weight, lifeless once more.

As soon as he saw that the avariel was clear, Dannel spun back to Graz’zt. He called upon the power of his quiver, and an arrow popped out, ready to be fitted to his bow. Almost reflexively, he checked within, where the ends of arrows within the extradimensional space could be tallied with a glance.

Only three missiles greeted his query.

Three shots left.

Arun felt his strength draining from him as Graz'zt dug his black claws deeper into his body. But then the dwarf's expression hardened, and Arun pulled himself up, staring into the hateful eye of the Prince.

"You have strength," the demon said. "I like that... it means you will be of that much more use to me when you finally break."

"I may break, demon, but I will never yield," Arun said. But as Graz'zt probed deeper, the black tendrils twisting inside the paladin's body, a scream was torn from him.

But then Graz'zt stiffened, and his claws were yanked out of the dwarf's body as his body arched. Behind him, Mole had taken up *Aludrial's Shard*, and dragged the heavy blade across Graz'zt's hamstrings. In the diminutive hands of the gnome the sword did not cripple the demon lord as had been her intent, but the sneak attack had nevertheless provided a slight opening for the beleaguered paladin.

Before Graz'zt could recover, Arun brought his hammer up in a sudden motion that struck the demon at the base of his ribs. The blow straightened the demon, but it did not knock him off his feet.

"NOW!"

The hammer came down, slamming into the Prince's left leg just above the knee. The blow landed with a solid thwack, but the limb held.

"YOU!"

Arun snapped the hammer up, driving it into Graz'zt gut. The fiend's armor absorbed part of the strength of the blow, but as the holy energies of the weapon blasted through the Prince, he grimaced slightly.

"DIE!"

Arun all but screamed the last word, as he whipped the hammer around in a short arc that culminated in the demon's face. Graz'zt's head was knocked around, by the force of the blow, and he actually staggered back a step. When he turned back to face the paladin, the demon's face was further marred by a trail of blood from the corner of his mouth, and a gap in his smile where several teeth had been jarred free.

"Your anger is delicious, *paladin*. But like everything else, ultimately futile."

Arun roared and leapt forward with the hammer coming up yet again. But before the dwarf's first step could land upon the floor, the Heart of Axion came to life.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

A gray radiance exploded from the gem in the demon's eye socket. It seemed somehow... *alive*, the shining glow overlaid with what seemed like wisps of spirit that twisted in protest as the light drove them outward. They expanded outward and took on cohesive form, forming sinuous cables that connected the Prince and his foes as they plunged into the bodies of Arun and Mole. The dwarf and the gnome stiffened and screamed, paralyzed by the touch of that raw power. The gray tentacles flexed and pulsed with energy that flowed from the bodies of the two adventurers, through the Heart, and then into the body of the Prince. As those pulses flared out through Graz'zt, enveloping him with an echo of that gray shining light, his wounds began to knit shut. The demon lifted his head and shouted in exultation as the power of another epic spell filled him, the cost paid by the life force of his son, trapped in the Heart of Axion.

Or now, perhaps, the Heart of Athux.

The radiance, fueled by the energy stolen from Mole and Arun, continued to spread. It found Lok, covering behind the throne. It found Dannel, even as the elf fired one of his last arrows. It continued to spread, its light dominating the great vaulted hall, forming a hemisphere centered on the Master of this place.

And within that sphere, Graz'zt laughed, as the doom of Occipitus was sealed.

Chapter 604

The titan Corumbos felt a piercing chill spread through his chest as another beam from the retriever penetrated the last lingering remnants of fire and stabbed into him. The insectoid construct seemed to have grasped through whatever weird intellect that it possessed that he was not vulnerable to fire, so it was focusing exclusively on cold blasts as it skittered back and forth across the cliff top on its damaged limbs. The titan had extended the area of both *fire storms* to include the top of the cliff, but the thing had backed away and had managed to avoid being snared in the second.

The half-fiend archers, on the other hand... Well, there wasn't much left of them; a second quickened *chain lightning* on top of the two *fire storms* had converted them into greasy smears on the iron stones.

The two flying fiends had likewise never come back; one could hope that the rocs had enjoyed their repast in the brief moments before they returned to their plane of origin.

The titan had taken his own share of abuse, however. The hezrous clinging to his legs had sank their vicious teeth into the muscles at the backs of his knees, inflicting painful wounds even despite his considerable resistance to physical damage. Both had survived the *fire storms*, and a third kept harassing him with *unholy blights* that kept popping up around his head, doggedly trying to penetrate his spell resistance.

But first, the retriever.

The titan raised a hand into a fist, and with a white flash a shaft of cracking energy formed, poised to hurl. Corumbos threw the javelin with unerring accuracy, piercing the spidery construct through, knocking it backwards into an ungainly heap.

With that threat taken care of, he turned to the little demons worrying at his legs. One of them was working at the lower parts of his half-plate armor, trying to get to something vulnerable.

With a grimace of distaste, Corumbos slammed the head of his gargantuan warhammer down into its skull.

The second one looked up just in time to get swatted like an annoying fly.

Another *blight* exploded around the titan's head.

Annoyed, the titan started to look for the last demon. While he'd taken a good amount of punishment, they weren't a match for him, not really.

But they were keeping him busy.

Benzan pulled himself to his feet, fighting a sudden surge of disorientation that threatened to pull him back down to the ground. But the sight of Dana, caught in agony in the grasp of the giant fiend's tentacles, gave him the strength he needed to overcome that weakness. He bent to recover the sword Dana had brought him, and staggered toward the monster's flank.

Dana could feel her life energy ebbing from her body, drained along with her blood by the tentacles that pierced her. Most of her higher-order spells were gone, depleted in the battle or in the preparations she'd undertaken before opening the *gate*. Each day for the last tenday she'd begun with the same ritual, trying to determine Benzan's location through powerful divinations, including *discern location*. Just a few minutes ago, she'd finally succeeded, getting a positive lock on his presence here, upon one of the floating cubes of Achaeron. It had taken all of her will not to immediately open the *gate* and charge through at that instant. But she'd learned much about Graz'zt from her interrogations of Barrat Ghur, and so she forced herself to be deliberate, casting spells for almost a full minute, culminating in one gate through which she'd called Corumbos, before opening a second directly to Benzan's location.

But now, it seemed as though all her preparations had been for naught; the creature that had been created from the succubus was incredibly strong, and she lacked the power to defeat it.

That wayward thought caused her to snarl, and all doubts disappeared as she drew a new and intense focus.

Summoning the power of Selûne, maintaining her concentration through a supreme effort of will, she grabbed one of the tentacles holding her and unleashed an *inflict critical wounds* into it. The twisting appendage turned black and withered, leaving a tattered remnant that drooped from the creature's jaws. The tentacle around her ankle tightened its grip in

response, and as the other attached to her body continued to drain her, weakness began to creep over her like a warm exhaustion.

No! her mind screamed, as she refused to give in to that soft and deadly call. With a cry of pain she grabbed the edges of the tentacle piercing her side and tore it free. Blood—her blood—sprayed out from the terrible wound, and the long pincers slashed at her hands, already trying to reestablish the connection she'd broken.

Before she could attempt another escape, however, the creature lifted its arms and closed both hands around her, crushing her body, its claws digging into her flesh. Dana tried to summon the power of Selûne, but that pure source of energy seemed to be on the far side of a vast haze of pain that clouded her consciousness. She knew she was diminished, drained by the demon's touch, but there seemed to be nothing she could do to stop it.

Benzan was thinking the same thing, as he came up behind the demon. He knew that he would have only one chance to strike; from the force of the glancing blow he'd taken before, the demon could tear him to pieces in a few seconds. The sword felt heavy and alien in his hand, and his reflexes felt awkward; after all the time he'd spent in the "care" of Graz'zt's minions, he felt like a child taking its first steps.

But then he caught sight of the humanoid lion that had been at Dana's side earlier. The were-creature was covered in blood, but rushed forward at the demon with a clear purpose, its claws poised to strike.

The demon saw him too, and transferring Dana to its left claw, it slashed down at the lycanthrope with its right. The werelion leapt forward, absorbing a pair of long slashes down its back as it darted under its arm and came up directly before it. The creature did not hesitate, letting its momentum carrying directly *into* the demon, leaping up onto its chest, tearing and slashing with both its fore and hind claws.

The demon, however, was more heavily armored than the most splendidly outfitted knight, and the werelion's violent assault merely dug gashes into the hard chitinous plates that covered its torso in a thick belt. The demon drew its right claw back in, seizing the werelion around the neck, tearing it off of its body. Dana tried to use the distraction to break free again, but her movements were growing feeble, and all she could do was pound uselessly against the thick fingers that held her pinned.

But the werelion's sacrifice had bought Benzan a second's opening, and he used it to good advantage as he rushed up behind the fiend. He unleashed a furious yell that invoked all of the rage and frustration that had built up during his torment, slamming the sword to the hilt into the gap in the creature's armor at the base of its spine that he'd marked.

The demon jerked up, and as its body straightened its vertebrae locked around the blade of the sword, tearing it from Benzan's grasp. It lurched forward, a terrible scream exploding from its jaws. Laertes and Dana went flying as it released them suddenly. The creature fumbled about like a drunken man, as its body tried to adjust to the reality of its nearly severed spine. Finally, however, it stumbled and toppled over onto a half-melted tree that had sagged almost to the ground. One final hiss was torn from it, as it fell limp, impaled upon the iron branches.

Benzan managed to make it to where Dana had fallen, and he all but collapsed at her side. “Dana! Dana!” He dragged her into his arms. The priestess was pale and limp, and he started to dig in one of the pouches at her belt for a healing draught when she groaned.

“Stop shaking me so,” she said. He looked to see her conscious, if still woozy.

“Gods, that was crazy,” he said, as relief flooded into him. He opened his mouth to say... what? He was literally overwhelmed, and a dark, nagging whisper continued to menace at the edges of his thoughts, insisting that this could be yet another trick of Graz’zt’s, to further break down who he was, to do to him what had been done to Delem, those years ago.

But now, with Dana in his arms, he didn’t care. He tried to say that, but his wife stopped him with a hand raised to his lips.

“We’re not safe here,” she said, her face taking on a look of intense concentration as she fought through the fog brought on by the battering she’d taken. Finally she uttered words of power, and a flush of life reappeared in her skin as she *restored* herself.

“Help me up,” she said.

“Dana...”

She silenced him with a raised hand. “First we get out of here. Are you badly injured?” When he shook his head, she *healed* herself, and all of her wounds instantly closed.

The werelion had gotten to his feet, likewise somewhat the worse for wear, and it now came over to join them. “Are you all right?” she asked him.

“I’ve been better,” the creature said, his voice—human, even somewhat cultured—sounding odd to Benzan coming from its bestial mouth. “And you would be Benzan, I presume?” he said, offering a claw to the tiefling.

Somewhat bewildered, Benzan shook it.

The werelion grasped his forearm. His grip was like iron, although he was careful not to scratch Benzan with his claws. But he did not release the tiefling, and after a moment Benzan began to feel a sudden sense of unease.

He turned to look at Dana, surprised to see a fearsome intensity in her eyes. “Dana, what...”

He never got a chance to finish his question, as Dana unleashed a blast of white fire directly into his face.

Chapter 605

Within a storm of power, Graz’zt exulted.

Cal watched in horror as the expanding radiance engulfed each of his friends, paralyzing them, drawing their life energy along the insubstantial but very real links that connected them to the demon prince.

He had a *dispel* left, but he recognized the magic being wrought as an epic spell, and knew that his own paltry powers would have no chance against it. If only his patron had seen fit to include a *disjunction* in the blue book, then he might had a tiny fraction of probability...

Unless...

There had been one more spell in that book, an incantation of the highest valence, the summit of magical power that few mortal mages ever met. That spell now burned in his memory, taken in anticipation of this confrontation. But while he could possibly save one of his companions with it, what would that gain? There was nowhere left for them to escape to, no place they could run to hide from the dark lord of Occipitus.

But then, he looked deeper.

Callendes, lying on the ground, his ruined wing hanging over him in a bloody mess, stiffened and screamed as the wash of the epic spell caught him. Cal was now the last, and the gray radiance continued to expand, a last tendril of energy already creeping outward to engulf him as well. That sphere filled his vision, with the Prince just a dark blotch deep within.

There was no time left.

Cal cast the spell.

The spell vanished into the maelstrom. It was drawn to the Heart of Axion, the currents of magical power vanishing into the tiny gray orb, which flickered with the life of a tiny sun trapped within.

Cal sagged as the strain of the casting left him drained, and he stumbled back, falling upon his backside. He could only look at the light that expanded over him, promising oblivion.

But then, the power of the Heart flickered.

For Cal had cast his spell not at Graz'zt, but at the Heart itself. A spell that was the culmination of all of his years of study and craft, a spell of the highest arcane valence.

Freedom.

The epic surges around Graz'zt exploded outward in a new violence, but now they were wild, uncontrolled. The Prince screamed as several of the gray tendrils pierced his body, cutting swathes through the very core of his being. A gray fire surged from the Heart, which blazed now with an unrestricted fury and intensity, like a smoldering fire that had suddenly found a cache of fresh fuel.

The surviving companions were hurled back as the connection between them and the demon was suddenly and traumatically sundered. They rolled to a stop in an expansive ring around the Prince, whose screams grew as he clawed at the raging inferno burning within his eye socket. The skin around that opening began to melt and run, the ruined flesh abused once more by the intensity of a greater power. Graz'zt began to rise, drawn up by the flows of power, which grew more insistent and substantial as the entity within the Heart escaped the bonds that had held it captive.

And then, all at once, the glow, the surrounding power surge, it all just abruptly vanished. Graz'zt fell back, and something fell from a bloody claw, plummeting toward the ground.

The Heart of Axion struck the iron floor, and shattered.

Arun was the first to stand. Reaching down, he picked up his hammer, the heavy head sliding on the floor as he slowly started toward the crippled demon.

But before he could reach Graz'zt, the Prince stumbled back, falling into the embrace of his throne. The demon drew aside the iron seat, and manipulated something in the hollow space beneath.

Arun brought up his hammer, and charged.

Graz'zt turned, and hissed something, a sound that bubbled between the ruined hole that had been his mouth. The flesh covering the right side of his face had melted, dripping in long trailing bulbs that occasionally parted to reveal the white skull beneath. There was no way he could have still lived, had he been a mortal creature. His other eye was thick with a milky film, but somehow he still sensed the approach of danger. A dark opening appeared in the air beside the throne, which the demon hurled himself through, vanishing from view. Arun rushed forward, apparently intent on pursuit regardless of where their foe fled, but just before he reached it, the portal slid shut and dissolved.

Graz'zt was gone.

* * * *

Author's Note:

Regarding Graz'zt: I used the version in the Book of Vile Darkness as a starting point, with some modifications. I gave him the same DR as Adimarchus; i.e. 15/good + cold iron. Beorna and Arun could do full damage when they hit, but everyone else almost needed a crit to do anything more than token damage. He was weakened somewhat from epic casting and his fracas with Athux; draining Malad's life force brought him almost back to full strength, but he still had 5 negative levels when this encounter took place. He did not have his magical shield; this was lost in the destruction of Zelatar, and I bumped his natural AC bonus down a few points. This was more than compensated for by the addition of Synesyx, which in addition to its intelligence is a suit of +5 morphic light fortification scale mail.

Finally, the Heart of Axion was obviously a major artifact in its own right. In addition to possessing the power of a rod of absorption and a gem of seeing, it provided a constant mind blank effect and could fuel the casting of epic spells, as we saw in the story.

So Graz'zt ended up being a pretty tough hombre in the end, even diminished as he was. As he appeared here, I would have put him around CR 25. His AC was in the low 40s even without his unholy aura, and even with the negative levels factored in he could still muster 4 attacks per round that were almost guaranteed at least 3 hits against any of the companions. Basically, anything that faced a full attack from him was in serious trouble.

Chapter 606

Benzan tried to pull away, to dodge, to evade, but with the werelion holding him fast, the creature's own strength far outweighing his own, there was nothing he could do.

The white fire did not burn, but it pierced him with a chill that plunged down to the core of his bones. He would have fallen, had not the lyncanthrope continued to hold him firmly.

And then it was gone, although it took a few more seconds for him to be able to see clearly through the brilliant afterimage of light that blazed across his vision. The werelion released him, and as he did Benzan could see that a soft white glow lingered around him, replacing the ugly green nimbus of the *dimensional anchor*.

Dana was there, the aftereffects of the spell on his vision giving her a white halo as well. Or was she glowing too? He could not be certain, but he thought he saw relief in her eyes, shrouded within a hard exterior that she kept carefully neutral.

"Why?" Benzan asked.

"I'm sorry. We... I... had to be sure. The *moonfire* reveals all falsehoods; I'm sure I don't have to explain further, given our foe."

Benzan nodded, but a lingering twinge of disquiet lingered. Clearly he hadn't been the only one changed during his captivity; Dana was like a dagger, its hard steel edge barely constrained in its sheath. He wondered what had happened to her, what had happened to all of his friends, in the time that had passed since he'd been taken. For that matter, how long had that been? His own mental processes had become a jumble, and he knew enough to understand that the process of being tortured had likely stolen a good part of his reason, his sanity. At times, it felt as though it had been mere days that he'd been in Graz'zt's fortress, but seconds later, it seemed like it had been his entire life, with the memories of what had come before just vague outlines.

"Come on, let's get back to Corumbos," she said, leading them back toward the clearing, the werelion at her side. Benzan followed.

The clearing was still shrouded in haze, lingering wisps of smoke from the *fire storms* clinging to the ground. Globes of melted iron that had been part of the foliage of the cube

formed a rough hemicircle around the blasted interior, where the bodies of demons lay splayed in scorched and bloody poses.

The titan was there, waiting for them. Corumbos had returned to a smaller form, only slightly taller than Benzan, a perfect human ideal with features chiseled and defined. His half-plate was gone, replaced with a flowing white tunic, and despite having been in a violent clash just a few moments ago, there was not a spot of blood or gore upon him. He still bore his hammer, though, the oversized weapon at rest in his right hand.

“Is it done?” he asked, his voice melodious.

“It is done,” Dana said. “Open the *gate* to the Prime as I specified, and then our compact is concluded.”

The titan nodded and gestured, summoning a swirl of magic that even Benzan, with his limited magical abilities, could see like a beacon. Corumbos directed that magic into a tight wedge that sundered the barrier that separated worlds, opening another *gate*.

Without further comment, Dana took his hand and led him through, followed by the werelion. Benzan glanced back to see the titan already casting again, and then the *gate* closed, revealing a blank wall behind it.

He turned around and stared in amazement. They were in a vast, open chamber, beneath an ivory dome that reached its apex nearly eighty feet above them. Huge pillars of white marble rose up to support the dome, the space between them filled with huge open windows that let in soft natural moonlight, or arched corridors that led to additional wings of the building.

The place looked somehow familiar to him, but he could not identify what it was.

His attention was distracted as he saw that the great chamber was occupied. A dozen figures, men and women of several races, clad in silver robes, looked startled to see them—understandable, Benzan thought. A few cast spells, surrounding themselves with pale auras or summoning globes of glowing white light around the intruders. As Dana threw back her cowl and stepped forward, Benzan could see that her appearance had an equally dramatic effect upon them.

“Dana Ilgarten!” an elven man exclaimed. “What are you... I mean, why are...”

“Benefis, rouse the High Priest at once, and have him gather the Court of Stars in this chamber. I want a *dimensional lock* on the temple sanctuary, and magical shielding on each of us.” Almost as an aside to herself, looking at the shafts of pale moonlight that shone through the high windows, she added, “Highmoon would be better, but I guess we’ll take what we can get of the Lady’s blessing.”

The elf was just standing there, his mouth drooping open. “Well, did you hear me?” Dana exclaimed. “At once!”

The elf turned and ran, followed by the other acolytes. Benzan had finally realized where they were, as his eyes drifted up to see the sigil etched into the dome above, a glowing design in silver that shone brightly in the reflected moonlight.

They were in the Moontemple, in Iriaebor, Dana's city of origin. In the Western Heartlands, in Faerûn, on the world Abeir-Toril.

Home. Just the thought of it almost overwhelmed him.

Dana did not turn back to him. The werelion walked a short distance away.

Benzan did not know what to do. The woman standing before him was like another person, one he had never met. She lacked the soft warmth he remembered of his wife, replaced by an iron shell of cold, emotionless purpose. He remembered how hard she had taken the loss of Delem, and the thought that he might have been the reason for that change broke something deep inside him.

"I had to do it," she said, as if responding to his thoughts. "I had to focus on one goal, one thing alone, and drive out all else. I would have gone insane, otherwise."

"Dana..."

"All that matters is that I got you out," she said. "You're safe, and..." She trailed off, and Benzan could see that her body was shaking.

Suddenly, none of it mattered. None of the torments, the anguish, the wall that had been driven between them by that terrible tragedy. He took her into his arms, just holding her.

"It'll be all right," he said, and for the first time in a long time, it felt true.

"Oh, Benzan!" she cried, the tears bursting out of her, as the shields and defenses she'd painstakingly built around her loss and grief came crashing down. Benzan found himself crying too, and with each tear it felt as though a part of the stain clouding his soul was washed away.

She turned into his embrace, and held him there in the soft moonlight, under the silver dome.

Chapter 607

Graz't was gone.

A terrible quiet returned to the great hall. Arun fell to his knees in front of the iron throne, his body shaking. Dannel and Mole stood, a bit unsteady still from the aftereffects of the power of the Heart. Lok slumped to the ground, freed from the grip of the terror that Graz't had cast into his heart, replaced by an overwhelming weariness. Callendes lay where he had fallen, amazed to still be alive.

But for the others, there would be no respite. The Voice, torn asunder by the Prince's black blade. Umbar, returned now to his natural size, lying in a pool of his own blood, his heart pierced by a deadly thrust. Beorna... Their gaze did not linger there, until Mole mercifully covered her head with a spare cloak.

Cal came forward. The others turned to him, all save Arun, who did not move, his head bowed in grief.

"It's gone," Cal said. "The *dimensional lock* on Occipitus."

"So we can go home?" Mole asked.

Cal nodded.

"This was supposed to be the end," Arun said, not lifting his head, his voice pitched low so that the others had to strain to hear. "It was supposed to end here."

"Arun..." Dannel began.

"This was supposed to be over!" Arun shouted, his rage exploding out of him as he leapt up, his hammer springing into his hand. "It was supposed to be over here!"

The paladin lashed out, slamming his hammer into the throne. The iron buckled before the holy power of the blow. The companions could only watch as the paladin unleashed strike after strike, with all of his strength behind each impact. Within moments, all that was left of the throne was wreckage, until there was nothing left to destroy but a misshapen lump of metal. Arun sagged to the ground, his hammer falling from his fingers to clatter on the ground.

"We can *raise* them," Cal said. "Umbar and Beorna..."

A faint tremor shook the chamber.

"Uh oh," Mole said.

The tremor returned, building in strength. The floor began to shift beneath their feet, and a loud creaking of protesting iron sounded all around them as the movements of the Skull tormented its iron skin.

"What's going on?" Dannel asked.

"This place," Cal said. "It too was held together by the epic magic... it's coming apart!"

Dannel helped Callendes to his feet, and turned toward the exit. But the iron plating surrounding the spiral stair was already beginning to buckle. "No time... we need to get out of here right now!" the elf cried.

"To me! With the *lock* broken, I can *teleport* us out of here!" Cal shouted.

“Not without them!” Arun said, gesturing toward the limp bodies of Umbar and Beorna. The noise around them was becoming deafening, until even their shouts could barely be heard. One of the iron balors toppled over, crashing loudly upon the floor.

“I cannot take everyone!” Cal replied.

“The *bag of holding*!” Lok exclaimed as he rushed over to rejoin them, already holding the large cloth sack.

“Quickly!” Dannel urged, as Arun and Lok slid Umbar head-first into the *bag*. He barely fit, but once through the mouth of the sack he quickly vanished into the extra-dimensional space within. They turned to Beorna, but were nearly crushed as a large plate fell from the ceiling, smashing into the floor a few feet away.

“Never mind!” Cal shouted. “Hold her... I think I can get all of you! Mole, get back, join the circle!”

The gnome rejoined them, dragging *Aludrial’s Shard* behind her. She’d also grabbed a black gem that had emerged from the ruins of the throne when Arun had destroyed it; that prize vanished into a pocket as she reached the others, touching Lok just as Cal was summoning his magic.

“If this doesn’t work, we’re going to have a real big problem,” Dannel said, looking up as a massive segment of the ceiling buckled and began to collapse downward.

The air shimmered, and they disappeared just as thousands of pounds of metal came crashing down, obliterating the chamber.

Chapter 608

The companions materialized on the open plain of Occipitus, with the cracked marble columns and crumbling walls of the celestial cathedral forming a backdrop behind them. Their gaze was drawn to the skull, which was continuing a general collapse, its iron skin sloughing off in great pieces that plummeted down to the ground below. Demons by the thousands were being crushed by those massive shards, and more were charging away in a blind, chaotic rush.

“Looks like they haven’t figured out that they can *teleport* again yet,” Mole observed.

“They will,” Dannel said. He looked up at the sky, where knots of flying demons could be seen in scattered groups in every direction. “And they’ll know we’re here, in a moment or two.”

“I have one more *teleport*, and can take us to the Bastion,” Cal said. “Maybe Saureya can *plane shift* us back home...” The archmage silently cursed himself for not memorizing the spell himself; both Umbar and Beorna had possessed it, and he had not planned on a contingency when both of them had fallen, and yet he remained alive. He could gain it from

his spellbook, given time, but time was likely something that was not going to be available to them in great quantities.

“If he’s still there,” Dannel returned. “If anything’s still there.”

“Even without Graz’zt, his legions remain a potent force,” Callendes said. The avariel had lost his bow in the battle, and with Dannel supporting him, he looked thin and frail.

“If they come at us, we’ll deal with them,” Lok said, tightening his grip on his axe. Coming from anyone else, the statement would have been bravado, but from the genasi it was a simple statement of fact.

“Look!” Mole shouted, drawing their attention back to the Skull.

White flashes erupted in the sky around the collapsing mountain. When those bursts faded, they revealed white-winged beings that shone with a golden radiance that was clearly visible even miles away. Their nature and intent was immediately obvious, as the newcomers and the demons started to exchange *holy smites* and *unholy blights* even as more of the flashes continued to disrupt the Occipitus sky.

“Celestials!” Dannel said. “Dozens of them...”

“But... who is bringing them? Did Saureya get a call for help out?”

Callendes shook his head. “No,” he said. “The Herald.”

A loud noise like an earthquake reached them, drawing their attention back to the mountain. Slowly, but picking up momentum as it progressed, half of the upper portion of the Skull broke away and slid down the ruined mountain’s face. As it fell clear, the pillar of burning fire within became visible as a bright flash that extended upwards into the sky. The pyre twisted and touched the dark clouds that had gathered around the dark presence of Graz’zt, and as the flames pierced that shroud, the darkness fell back. The sky above, streaked red with chaotic surges of energy just a short time before, was revealed as a golden dome that unleashed a soft pleasing radiance upon the plain below. As that light fell upon the fleeing demons, they grew disheartened, and fled cowering. There were dark flashes as those that could *teleport* realized that they could escape, and they vanished from the mass to seek shelter in the far corners of the plane.

Unfortunately for them, there was no place upon Occipitus where the gaze of the celestial host could not find them.

The companions watched in amazement as the demonic horde was routed, as the celestials, now numbering over a hundred that they could see, unleashed righteous destruction into their ranks.

“I don’t believe it,” Dannel said. “We did it... we won!”

“Heh, I never doubted it,” Mole said, with a wide grin.

But Arun did not smile, and his gaze did not shift from the ruins of the Iron Skull, his fists locked around the shaft of his warhammer.

Chapter 609

The name of the world was Agamatheo, which in a now-dead language meant, “Orb of Beauty.”

If anyone alive had still spoken that tongue, they would have thought the name ironic, or at the very least tragically inappropriate. The world Agamatheo was mostly ocean, with only a few rocky spires where the tips of great mountain chains jutted out from the vast expanses of blue. Under those waves lay the ruins of civilizations, places where quiet and somber humanoids had lived out their lives in the way of most sentient races across the multiverse. That was before the waters had risen, as the world’s rising temperatures had melted the great sheets of ice that had floated atop its poles. The people of Agamatheo, while they lived upon the land, had been creatures of the sea, building their towns and cities upon the border of land and water, enjoying the many and diverse fruits of the great ocean of their world.

Now, nothing was left of that race, and little survived within the planet’s waters. The few things that remained were twisted and warped monstrosities, foul creatures that remained in the lowest depths, living in a state of constant and voracious hunger, with only each other to prey upon.

Great slicks traveled across the ocean currents, and where they went a great stench accompanied them, and nothing lived. Some of them burned as they moved, filling the sky with great plumes of black smoke. Violent storms covered the sky, blasting what few land masses remained, and churning the ocean into an angry froth as they crossed back and forth across this ruin of a world.

The largest of the remaining land masses was a vast black spire that rose up out of the waves on the world’s southern hemisphere. It had no name; back in the old days of Agamatheo it had been a sacred place to the world’s inhabitants, but that reputation had fled long before its current inhabitant had arrived here. The mountain was cold, barren rock, and nothing clung to it save for toxic black sludge and acrid crusts of minerals that burned bare skin. The highest point atop the mountain was a jagged spike that rose a thousand feet above the waves, overlooking a jutting bluff a mere few hundred feet high, perhaps a thousand yards square. Upon that rare bit of flat terrain stood a fortress of black rock.

The place was well-suited to the surroundings of Agamatheo, with stark, angular walls surrounding a trio of thick towers that formed a tight cluster within. The only openings were narrow slits in the walls and high upon the towers, all of which were sealed with heavy iron shutters, and a dark passage at ground level that was deeply recessed into the base of the wall, a dark mouth that seemed to radiate malevolence. No lights shone from the shuttered windows, no guards patrolled the walls or crenelated tops of the towers. The place seemed deserted, a lonely and eternal witness to the death of an entire world.

The empty solitude of the place was shattered as a portal opened in the air a few inches above the rough wind-swept surface of the bluff. Eight individuals stepped through the *gate*, which closed behind them.

“Dana?” Lok asked.

“He’s here, or he was when I opened the *gate*,” the priestess replied.

“He’s here,” Benzan said, almost in a whisper.

“Want me to go inside and take a quick look?” Mole asked.

“The entire fortress is warded against magical transportation,” Dana said. “Or I would have taken us directly to him myself.”

“If he knows we’re here, he may have already fled,” Dannel said.

They looked to Cal, who was already casting. The gnome had brought with him a short staff, perhaps four feet in length, which he placed before him on the rough black stone. The staff, which appeared to be crafted of a pale, gnarled wood, stood perfectly balanced as he withdrew his hands and wove them in a complex gesture before him.

The spell took almost a full minute. Finally, the gnome clapped his hands together, and sagged backward, almost falling before Lok gently caught him. “Are you all right?” the genasi asked.

“Sorry. I guess I’m still not used to these epic spells.” The wind gusted, and toppled the staff; as it fell it dissolved into a fine ash that formed a plume across the bluff, and then was gone.

“Will it hold him?” Arun asked.

“I don’t know. I think I got the entire perimeter. You were right about the wards, Dana; they are infused into the very fibre of this place.”

“It won’t help him,” the priestess said, leading them toward the dark opening that gaped before them.

Mole sidestepped to avoid a small puddle of black goop. “Ugh, this place stinks,” she said.

“Agamatheo was once a place of beauty and peace,” Dana said, her voice taking on a distant tone. “Another world destroyed by Graz’zt, just to satisfy the evil lusts of his corrupt ego.”

“It is in the nature of fiends,” Beorna said. “They destroy all that they touch.”

“It’s worse than Karoth,” Dannel said. “I thought that I would never see a sight more depressing than those corrupted trees, but this place, somehow... it’s more sad.”

"I miss Umbar, he'd have something pithy about 'duty' to say right about now," Mole commented, as they drew near the entry. Dana slowed, letting the others fall in close behind her.

"Cauldron needs him more than we do," Arun said. The paladin looked troubled.

During their absence upon Occipitus, the troubled city had befallen new woes that threatened the success of its rebuilding, and it needed strong leadership more than ever. None of those present questioned Arun's commitment, or Beorna's, to their quest. If anything, Arun had become all but obsessed with tracking down and destroying Graz'zt. But as the chase had continued across the planes, with the fallen prince leading them from one bolt-hole to the other, it had become obvious that Arun's focus was masking a deeper weariness, or even a blossoming despair. After Graz'zt had escaped them in the sinister forest of Karoth, Arun had insisted that Umbar remain behind, to help those who were working to rebuild Cauldron. Beorna shared his concern as well; not only had the humanoid incursions from the Alamirs intensified, but there were reports that another access point to the Underdark had been opened near the city.

Umbar had not taken the news gracefully, but ultimately an order from a Chosen had to be obeyed. As for Beorna... well, Mole's comment that the argument between her and Arun could be heard in Almraiven was not that far off.

"Well, let's get this over with," Dana said, starting toward the entry.

"Wait," Benzan said. The companions froze, weapons and spells held in readiness.

"What?" Mole asked, after a long pause.

But then they heard it, a faint creaking that sounded deep within the bowels of the fortress. Fully alert, they waited for a long minute, but the noise faded and nothing emerged from within to menace them.

"All right, let's go," Arun said.

The dark tunnel was oppressive, the air thick with a musty dampness that clung to the bare stone walls. Fully thirty feet inside they encountered a set of huge doors of black metal, which stood slightly open. They creaked loudly as Lok pushed them wider, enough for them to pass into the space beyond.

"Not very good security," Beorna said. "You are sure he's here?"

"He had the power to block the spell, before, but I don't know of anything that can send a false positive for a *discern location*," Dana said.

"Again, he might have left when we arrived, leaving a trap for us," Dannel said.

"If it's a trap, we'll find out soon enough," Arun said, pushing past Lok into the chamber beyond the doors.

The room was roughly circular, with a very low ceiling around the edges that rose to a buttressed dome in the center maybe twenty feet above. Dark shafts penetrated the ceiling around the perimeter, from which a constant drip of moisture sounded. The floor was uneven, with dips and ridges forming a miniature landscape that was slick with frequent puddles. The construction was all of huge stone blocks, slammed together with rough edges that the builders hadn't bothered to trim. The only exit, other than the potential of the narrow shafts, was a recessed doorway opposite the entry. An iron portcullis had apparently once blocked that route, but now only rusted remnants of broken metal lay smashed on the floor.

"Creepy," Mole said, summing up the feelings of the companions quite effectively.

The situation got a whole lot creepier a moment later, when a scraping sound drew their attention to the dark doorway.

"Something's coming," Arun said.

"Y'think?" Mole said, before she shimmered and vanished. Benzan, too, disappeared, as he cloaked himself in *greater invisibility*.

Communicating only with a few subtle gestures, the warriors spread out facing the doorway, while the spellcasters remained back in the cover of the entry. They had layered multiple wards upon the group prior to coming through Dana's *gate*, but in anticipation of combat they quickly summoned a few more short-term magics, including a *haste* spell from Cal.

Dannel infused one of his arrows with a *light* spell and fired it into the shadowed archway.

The arrow embedded itself into the stone a short distance beyond the arch, its radiance revealing a broad staircase that descended as far as they could see. As the darkness receded, it revealed the source of the noise they had detected.

It was a creature, formed roughly like a great cat, albeit one that stood six feet tall at the shoulder. Its body was covered with silvery-gray scales reminiscent of dragonhide, covering massive muscles that rippled under its hide as it moved. Its face was an expression of ferocity, dominated by huge jaws that trailed gobs of saliva that sizzled when they hit the damp floor. It moved with a sinuous grace, and by the way its claws clattered loudly on the floor with each step it took, it had to be incredibly heavy.

Revealed by the light, it appeared unconcerned as it slowly treaded forward toward them. Its stare was nothing short of malevolent, and it impossible to mistake the creature's intent.

"Only one... we'll take its charge, and strike from the flanks," Arun said, lifting his hammer. The other warriors nodded.

"No... wait!" Dana cried, but before any of them could react, and creature opened its jaws wide, and unleashed an incredible roar.

The blast of sound reverberated out of the tunnel and resounded with incredible potency throughout the chamber. The very stones of the fortress shook, and each of the companions was staggered, stunned by the intensity of the sound.

None of them could react as the creature leapt forward. It seized Arun in its jaws, lifting the paladin from his feet as it jerked him to the left and right, its teeth crushing deeper into the metal plates covering his torso. Then it snapped its body suddenly around, releasing the dwarf and sending him flying across the room. Arun crashed into the wall with a loud crash of metal on stone, and then slumped to the ground, dazed.

The monstrous beast had already turned upon its next foe. Lok tried to bring up his shield to deflect it, but the creature merely brushed the feeble defense aside with a claw. It bore the genasi down, digging its claws into his shoulders, its weight driving the points through his armor. Lok could do nothing as the creature drew back, but only long enough to seize the genasi's left leg in a solid bite. It snapped its head up and down, slamming the warrior into the ground once, twice, three times, before hurling him aside much as it had done Arun, launching him to the opposite side of the room to land in a heap.

Having taken down two of the group's most powerful warriors in a matter of seconds, the creature fixed its attention on where Dannel, Dana, and Cal stood bewildered in the entryway, just inside the metal doors.

Chapter 610

The creature coiled to leap, but before it could resume its deadly assault Beorna roared and laid into it from the side. She had returned *Aludriel's Shard* to Saureya before leaving Occipitus, but her new blade, a bastard sword of solid adamantine, acquitted itself well as she slammed it into its flank. The hit, backed by the templar's considerable strength, should have crippled it, but the sword merely opened a shallow gash in the monster's thick hide.

And what was worse, it almost immediately started healing, the edges of the wound knitting shut almost as soon as it had been opened.

But Beorna had definitely gotten its attention, as it spun and launched itself at her.

"What in the hells *is* that thing?" Dannel said, as he shook his head to clear it. He fired an arrow at it, but even though the shot was nearly perfect, it glanced off of its armored skull without any apparent effect.

"It's a sirrush!" Dana exclaimed, having guessed the identity of the being from the brief education she'd received on Sigil.

"What?" Dannel asked, as his second arrow duplicated the ineffectiveness of the first.

"Dragonstalker! The thing *eats* dragons for lunch, very tough, Very Big Trouble!" Cal said. The gnome hit it with a *disintegrate* empowered by his rod, but was not surprised when the

beam dissolved on impact. "It's got damned good spell resistance," he announced, in case any of them had missed the obvious.

Arun and Lok had gotten back to their feet, somewhat the worse for wear from the nasty greeting they'd gotten from the sirrush. Their armor had been dented by the force of the creature's bite, and Lok grimaced as he put weight back on his savaged leg. But neither warrior faltered, rushing immediately back in to reinforce Beorna, and rejoin the melee.

A small figure leapt out of the shadows and appeared suddenly atop the sirrush's back. Mole rushed along its armored spine as if she'd been strolling a country path, smoothly adjusting to its rapid movements as it attacked Beorna. A final skip took her up to the top of its skull; the gnome's hand darted down, and she stabbed her rapier toward its eye.

The blade nicked the bony protrusion above its eye, doing no damage. The creature reared suddenly to knock the unwelcome passenger free, but Mole merely somersaulted backward, landing perfectly balanced once again upon its back.

Beorna lifted her sword to strike again, but the sirrush slammed its head back down, smashing her in the face with its heavy chin. Beorna staggered back, followed by the creature, which reared and slashed her with first its left claw, and then its right. Its claws did not penetrate her adamantine armor, but the impacts clearly had an effect, crushing the heavy plates against her ribs. The last hit knocked her clear around, and she fell to one knee. Blood splattered on her breastplate as she met the thing's terrible stare; the bash to her face had crushed in the front of her helmet, splitting her lip.

"Come on then, you bastard!" she snarled, lifting her sword.

Arun and Lok hit it from opposite sides, slamming their weapons hard into its body. Lok's axe, even augmented by Dana's *greater magic weapon* spell, could not penetrate its hide, but Arun managed a solid blow that penetrated its resistances. The sirrush felt that one, but it kept its attention upon Beorna, who *smote* it across the breast, to little effect. She followed with a backhand that came up at its neck, but the creature's armored torso formed a tight seal against its throat that protected it like a gorget. Her blow clanged harmlessly off that shielded joint. The sirrush exploited the attack by twisting its head around and biting down hard on the templar's head. Her helmet, caught in its jaws, crunched as the adamantine buckled before its incredible strength. Beorna screamed as she was yanked off her feet, before the strap gave and she was torn free. Falling to the ground, blood pouring from several gashes in her skull, she was almost decapitated by a claw stroke that still grazed her head, knocking her to the ground.

The sirrush's momentum carried it forward, and it stomped on her back with another claw, crushing her with its weight.

"Aaaah!" she screamed, blood spraying from her mouth upon the black stone floor.

Arun, driven to fury by watching Beorna's decimation, unleashed a furious full attack upon the sirrush. As *order's wrath* filled him with righteous power, he slammed his hammer down into it in a flurry of powerful blows. Only one really hurt it, but that one was a critical hit that shattered a rib. The sirrush snarled in pain, and turned from Beorna to surge at the

paladin once again. Its movement almost, but not quite, dislodged Mole, who was still trying to find a vulnerable spot for her rapier. An arrow glanced off its head, scratching it, but Dannel's effort failed to divert it. A clang rang off its hind quarters as something bounced off its hide, but that too did not distract it from its foe.

A shimmering in the air solidified into a trio of avorals, who turned at once to Dana.

"Distract the sirrush, but ware its attacks," she ordered. "All others are allies; heal them if you can."

With an joint cry of assent, the three outsiders leapt into the air. They started blasting the creature with *magic missiles*, but none of them penetrated the sirrush's spell resistance.

The sirrush descended upon Arun like an avalanche. The dwarf raised his shield, but the sirrush's jaws closed on it, crushing it as if it was a piece of bark, rather than a slab of magical steel. Only the fact that the straps gave way saved the paladin from losing his arm along with the shield. As he tore free from its grasp, he lifted his hammer to strike it in the head. But before the blow landed, the creature's left foreclaw came down hard on his left knee.

Arun screamed as his leg twisted, and he went down hard. The creature clipped him with its other claw, driving him down. Arun fought to hold on to consciousness with his leg bent under him at an angle that hurt just to look at.

Cal felt a momentary thrill of anticipation as his magic penetrated the creature's spell resistance. But he could feel his *baleful polymorph* run up against a solid wall.

Damn, the thing has the fortitude of a god! he thought, trying to think of a way he could affect the creature.

The sirrush seemed to be gloating as its wedge-shaped head loomed over the broken body of its adversary. But before it could finish Arun, Lok drove into it from the flank, smashing it under the chin with his shield in a gesture that did not harm it, but which drew its attention. Just in case that wasn't enough, the genasi followed that with an uppercut with his axe that did manage to cut a small notch in the side of its jaw. A sharp tooth, jarred loose from the impact, went flying, but the creature still had an ample supply of those to spare. It was continuing to regenerate. Although it had taken a serious amount of punishment from the attacks that had penetrated its armored hide thus far, the thing seemed little fazed by its wounds.

The genasi's attack had the desired effect, drawing the creature's attention away from the crippled paladin. But even as he established a defensive stance, the creature lifted its head, and opened its jaws to unleash another stunning roar.

A roar that none of them could withstand.

Chapter 611

The sirrush prepared to roar again, but as it lifted its head Dana was already moving. “Dannel!” she yelled, causing the elf to hesitate as he drew another arrow to his cheek. The elf held his shot, glancing at her sidelong as she came up to him.

“Don’t miss,” she said, touching the end of the arrow, and uttering a spell.

A globe of *silence* enveloped them, but quickly disappeared as Dannel fired his arrow. Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps the elf had drawn deep into another reservoir of skill, for this arrow pierced the sirrush’s hide, stabbing into the flesh of its back just behind its armored neck. The creature’s jaws stretched open, but nothing came out, just a silent roar that failed to penetrate the bubble of Dana’s magic.

“Well, that shut it up, but how in the hells are we going to stop that thing?” Dannel asked.

“We have to overwhelm it, just mangle it faster than it can regenerate,” Cal said. “With our spells of little use, we’re going to have to support the warriors, and hope they can bring it down.”

But with two of the warriors down, that looked to be a difficult prospect. Arun, at least, was still conscious, although he could not stand with his broken leg. The paladin, blocked from reaching Beorna by the bulk of the creature, dragged himself away from the sirrush’s reach before he used his *lay on hands* power to heal some of the injuries he’d suffered. Arun grimaced as he straightened he mangled leg to let the healing magic restore the crippled joint.

Lok faced the creature’s full fury as it unleashed another full attack upon him. The potency of the assault was not diminished by the fact that it was utterly silent; if anything, to those watching the blows that fell upon the genasi seemed more powerful than before. But Lok stood his ground, tearing free from a bite that snagged his shoulder, absorbing punishing rakes that added more damage to the heavy armor covering his body. Somehow, when it was over the genasi held his stance, although his armor was covered with streaks of his own blood, and a thin trail of red ran down his left leg from a deep puncture somewhere beneath his torso plates.

A wise combatant would have withdrawn at that point, but Lok knew that while he could not withstand another full attack, his friends were likely to die if he backed down. So he stood his ground, and took the attack to the monster, hacking at its legs with his axe. The *thundering* power of the weapon would not function within the *silence*, but the edge was sharp enough, and within a few seconds Lok was not the only one trailing blood.

Mole, still holding court upon the creature’s spine, ran forward again to the bony ridge of its neck. But her rapier was in its sheath, and instead of trying another futile attack, as she leapt up over its head, she whipped something out from her *bag of holding*. It was a heavy cloak, which she swept across the creature’s eyes, using it as an anchor as she swung beneath its head, catching the far end and holding on, keeping it taut.

Her lips moved soundlessly as she shouted something clever, a bit miffed that the *silence* kept her friends from fully appreciating the maneuver.

Under normal circumstances, the sirrush would not have been inconvenienced in the slightest by being blinded; its senses, honed by hunting dragons many times its size, were incredibly sharp. But the *silence* neutralized its keen hearing, and there was a musty, earthy smell that infused the cloak, making it difficult for the creature to sort out the distinct odors of its enemies.

Snarling silently, the sirrush darted forward, snapping its head to the left and right, trying to dislodge its unwelcome passenger. Mole held on, swinging up to avoid a claw that tried to knock her free. One of the avorals swung down and raked at the creature's back, but its claws might as well have been scratching the stone floor for all the effect they had upon it. Another landed beside Beorna, and tended to the fallen templar. Lok slammed it again with his axe as it passed him, but while he added another gash to its tally, the wounds it had taken were clearly not especially serious.

And it continued to regenerate.

Dana, just outside of the bubble of *silence*, cast a *mass heal*. At once the wounds of the companions knit shut, and the vitality lost to the creature's claws and bite was instantly restored. Beorna recovered her sword and charged, while Arun, his leg fully recovered, came at the creature from the opposite side.

The sirrush dropped its head solidly on the floor before it. Mole swung around, avoiding getting pinned, still holding onto the flapping ends of the cloak. But the effort was made moot a moment later as it pulled its claws down over its armored face, shredding the garment. Mole fell free and tried to somersault backwards away from it, but the creature swept its head sideways, butting her solidly and knocking her roughly across the room. She landed on the far side of the chamber, flipping at the last instant to land on her feet, grimacing where a cracked rib throbbed in her side.

The creature's gyrations had failed to dislodge the *silenced* arrow stuck in its neck, and once again no sound followed as the warriors charged into the distracted creature. Arun, Lok, and Beorna, reenergized by Dana's potent spell, laid into it with a violent fury of attacks. The paladin pounded it with his hammer, while on the far side of it Beorna's adamantine blade cut gouges in its scaled body. Lok, meanwhile, continued to hew at its legs with its axe. Dannel's arrows continued to zip into it, until a small forest of feathered shafts jutted from its back.

Cal focused his arcane power and reached out with his magic. Using one of the newer secrets of arcane lore that he had discovered, he extended that link between himself and Arun, laying a *displacement* ward upon him without having to touch the paladin. Once again, such a mundane ruse would not normally have fooled such a canny hunter, but with its hearing obscured, its claws passed harmlessly through the false image raised by the spell.

The sirrush was starting to show the effects of its wounds, now, as the three warriors launched full attacks into the creature from all sides. The sirrush still had a lot of fight left in

it; as Beorna scored a critical hit upon its flank, it suddenly spun around and unleashed a devastating series of attacks upon her, driving her back. But a moment later the templar's wounds closed again, as Dana channeled another *mass cure* into them.

The sirrush seemed to be possessed by a furious rage as it focused on Beorna, pressing its attack. The dwarf held her ground, hewing at the creature's armored head with her sword. Her blows glanced off its thick hide without effect, but her efforts still paid off as her allies punished the increasingly savaged hunter. Arun drove his hammer into it, one two-handed overhand strike after another, while Lok had laid one of its hind legs nearly bare, with its ruined scales oozing blood. Even Mole got back into the fray, darting under its hindquarters, and stabbing her rapier into a slightly more tender spot.

The sirrush started to flail about it almost blindly, still scoring hits on its tormentors, but failing to overcome any of its foes. With a final stroke of his axe Lok took off the leg he'd been working on, and the creature staggered and fell. Still it attacked, trying to seize the genasi in its jaws. But Lok tore free as Arun brought his hammer down onto its spine. They didn't need to hear the crack to know that the blow had done serious damage; the creature quivered and began to spasm.

Dana approached the creature from behind, her hand glowing red. She touched it and unleashed a *harm* spell. The potent magic failed to overcome its spell resistance, but it increasingly appeared that this was unnecessary. Dannel, too, had approached to almost point-blank range, and now was sending one arrow after another into a gap where a scale had been torn away from its body.

With her face covered in her own blood, a fearsome look etched upon her features, Beorna stepped up. The creature sensed her and started to turn to face her, sweeping out a claw. The claw gashed her armored belly, but she ignored the blow as she lifted the sword high above her head, and brought it down into the center of its face. The blow did not appear to penetrate its skull, but the creature's body shuddered once, a mighty tremble that shook it like an earthquake, and then it slumped down to the ground, defeated.

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The companions did not let down their guard, nor did they assume the fact of their victory until Arun had wrenched the creature's head aside, exposing enough of its neck to allow Lok to hew the head from its body. Only then did they relax—or more accurately, all but collapsed.

Arun found the *silenced* arrow and plucked it, tossing it aside. "By the fire of the Forge!" he exclaimed, leaning up against the creature's flank as he fought for breath. "That thing could take a beating!"

"And dish it out, as well," Lok said, wiping blood from his face with an old rag.

"What in all the Hells *was* that?" Beorna said, likewise slumping back against the wall. The warriors looked like they had been hurled into a grinder, with the plates of their armor bent and punctured.

“It was a sirrush,” Cal explained. “They are hunters... their favorite prey is dragons, which they take down in packs.”

“Wonderful,” Beorna said.

“Let’s just hope that there aren’t any more of them,” Dannel said. “It was almost invulnerable to magic, and only Dana’s quick thinking kept us from being stunned again by its roar.”

Benzan became visible as his *greater invisibility* faded, a look of disgust on his face as he hurled his sword to the ground with a clatter. “Damned useless,” he said. “I may as well have stayed home, for all that I added to that fight.”

“We can do without your whining, tiefling,” Beorna said. “We all knew when we agreed to continue this chase that there would be things that tested us.”

Benzan’s eyes narrowed, but Dana interrupted them. “Benzan... we’re here, in the *now*... we need to come together, against this threat.” Her voice was soft, cool, and she fixed the full force of her presence upon him, like a hunter trying to calm an angry beast.

For a moment the tiefling looked about to respond in fury, but then his shoulders slumped, and his eyes admitted defeat. “I am sorry,” he said. “We had better get going, before the Prince sends another one of those after us.”

As he turned, Cal and Dana exchanged a glance. Dana had done her best to ease her husband’s return from captivity, but they had all experienced enough of Graz’zt’s “hospitality” to know that Benzan’s suffering would not soon ease. With his wife’s blessing, Cal was working on a spell that would selectively blot out Benzan’s memory, allowing him to move ahead with his life without forever dwelling under the shadow of what had been done to him. It might be the only solution, Cal thought, but for now, they had to press ahead.

“Ah... sorry about your cloak, Mole,” Dannel said, as he offered her the shredded remnant of the garment.

The gnome shrugged. “S’okay... It was Umbar’s, anyway. I never remembered to give it back to him.” She grinned, as the companions formed up and headed warily into the dark exit, and the stairs that descended deeper into the fortress.

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A massive set of double iron doors stood within darkness. Rust and time had pitted the thick metal slabs, in some cases carving out depressions over an inch deep. But this did not steal anything from their imposing durability; if anything, the doors seemed eternal. Multiple reinforcing bands were affixed to the heavy slabs with thumb-thick iron rivets, culminating in not one but two bars, thick slabs that rested in long grooves built into the

substance of the doors. These were portals designed not only to withstand siege, but a cataclysm.

A muted clang penetrated the doors, then another. The metal quivered, but held. But then the stone threshold to either side and above began to shift, the black granite *moving*, drawing back, as if abandoning the barrier it had supported for so long. As the retreated stone revealed the recessed hinges, the doors clanged loudly again, and pocked iron creaked as it gave way before a superior force. The bars held, but the doors in their entirety tore free of their weakened moorings, plunging down to slam onto the ground below with a terrible noise.

Lok was the first to step through, with Arun and Beorna flanking him. All had their weapons at the ready, the others close behind.

The chamber beyond the doors was much more irregular than those in the rest of the fortress, more like a natural cavern that had been generally shaped and expanded than a proper chamber of worked stone. The air was thick with dampness, and the slightly irregular floor was broken by frequent pools that ranged from a few paces across to as wide as eight feet. The water was dark and brackish, and shone with a glistening slick in the light cast from their spells and weapons.

The place extended backward for quite some distance. Cal lifted a hand and uttered a brief melody that called a *light* spell into being along the ceiling. The light drew back the darkness, and while the long shadows could have concealed much, they could now see what occupied the rear of the chamber.

The Demon Prince Graz'zt sat upon a throne that resembled a knot of coral. The demoni did not seem to notice them, despite the flickering light that played upon his features.

"Wow, he's really in bad shape," Mole commented.

The gnome's assessment was impossible to deny. The Prince was only barely recognizable as the fiend that they had battled inside the great iron skull on Occipitus. His features still bore the mark of the eruption of the Heart of Axion; half of his face was melted like a wax candle left too close to the hearth, with a puckered black sore gaping empty where the Heart had once resided. His other eye stared blankly out into space; the orb was a milky white, and it was doubtful whether the Prince could see at all. Graz'zt still wore *Synesyx*, although the scales only covered a narrow strip between his belly and his hips. The rest of his flesh was drawn tight against his bones, and a red sheen covered his skin, as though he had been sweating blood.

"It's a trap," Dannel said quietly, an arrow ready in his bow.

"Well, naturally," Beorna said. "But do we spring it from here, or get closer?"

"I will do it," Dana said, as a silver glow sprang into being around her. She lifted her hand, and a surge of white *moonfire* erupted from between her fingers.

Cal, who had called upon his *arcane sight* as soon as they had come in, tried to stop her, but was too late. The blast of energy formed a knife that lanced across the chamber, pulsing toward the supine form of the Prince. But as it neared the coral throne, the *moonfire* sprayed against an invisible barrier, a shield that flickered in striations of deep aqua and sinister black. The flows of power interacted for a second, and then both faded, leaving the scene as it had been a moment before.

Dannel had lifted his bow to fire, but on seeing the failure of Dana's effort, he held his shot.

Graz'zt looked up. His voice was a faint rasp, but somehow the companions heard each syllable clearly from fifty feet away.

"So. You have come to finish your work, have you?" Just the very act of speaking seemed to drain the demon, and thin streams of viscous fluid trailed down his mangled chin with the words. "You are persistent, and your hatred of me has given you strength. But I am not without resources, and I will not passively await the slaughter!" The last words were spoken with a hint of the Prince's earlier fire, but that faded as the demon bent in the chair, caught in a violent spasm of coughing.

"Lo, how the mighty have fallen," Dana said, her voice echoing through the chamber without need of magical augmentation. "It is you who have let hatred consume you... and it has brought you to this end, fiend."

"Have you identified it?" Dannel whispered to Cal.

"It's analogous to a *cube of force*," the gnome responded. "Emitted from the throne, I think."

"Can you *teleport* through it?"

"No. It extends through the ethereal... and even if I could, my *lock* still holds."

"There's no place left for you to run, fiend," Beorna said, lifting her sword with one hand, the point of the heavy blade steady as it pointed straight at Graz'zt's chest. "Your enemies have taken what little you had left, and soon you will be naught but a memory, a foul taste in the mouth."

Graz'zt laughed. "I do not think I will be forgotten so quickly." His eye—seeing or not—focused on Benzan, and his chuckle took on a sinister undertone. The tiefling, almost overcome with emotion, began to tremble.

"I will forget you, demon," Benzan whispered.

"I see you restored your ugly wench, paladin," Graz'zt said. "A pity... I believe that my blade improved her appearance."

"Enough banter!" Arun shouted. Lifting his hammer, he started forward, Beorna at his side.

"So how do we get through it?" Dannel asked.

“We hit it with everything we got,” Cal said. He put his words into action, lifting his rod, and channeling a *disintegrate* through it. The green ray splashed against the shield, which roiled with chaos as it absorbed the destructive energies of the spell.

The companions added their strength to Cal’s effort. Dannel’s bow sent arrows infused with electrical energies into the shield, while Benzan, his own *fiendbane* bow restored to him as well, sent several shots into it as well. The warriors formed a wedge and rushed forward, their weapons lifted high to send sheer strength and determination against the barrier. Dana walked behind them at a slower pace, a dark look on her face, and Mole, naturally, was nowhere to be seen.

“The fury of Agamatheo take you!” the demon screeched, and he held up a claw that was still scorched black where the fires of the Heart of Axion had blasted it.

Dark waters rushed up through the holes in the floor at the Prince’s command, surging into the chamber with explosive energy.

“He’s trying to drown us!” Dannel exclaimed.

“No... look!” Cal said, as the waters rose into discrete shapes, massive figures that were like crashing whitecaps that had been frozen into a roughly humanoid form. They were the ancient spirits of the seas of this world, once pristine and somber, now corrupted into foul mockeries of what they had been by the being that now sat broken in the coral throne.

The huge creatures, a half-dozen in all, surged forward to attack, while Graz’zt, secure behind his shield, cackled madly.

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By unspoken agreement, Beorna and Lok turned to face the onrushing elementals, while Arun surged forward toward the shield protecting the Prince. Several of the creatures surged forward toward the warriors, who looked insignificant in contrast to the massive walls of water descending upon them, filling the room almost up to the cavern roof forty feet above.

Dana spoke a *holy word*, but the power of the utterance could not overcome the ancient potency of the warped elder elementals. One of the creatures slammed into her, carrying her off in a wild surge.

“Dana!” Benzan exclaimed. He rushed after her, but the elemental plunged back into one of the gaping holes in the floor, dragging its captive down with it.

“Look out!” Dannel warned, as another elemental rose up behind Benzan, sweeping forward like a black tide. The elf fired several electrically-charged missiles into the elemental, which kept on coming toward its target.

Cal had considered and discarded the *prismatic wall*; while the spell would have likely kept several of the elementals at bay, it would also have been easy for the others to bull-rush his friends into the barrier. And it was likely that the holes in the floor were all connected with a larger body of water below, which would have made the *wall* an only temporary obstacle. He did, however, have another new spell, one which was particularly suited to this circumstance.

He hit the fiendish elementals with a *horrid wilting*, blasting through their spell resistance easily. The spell vaporized a good portion of the creatures' substance, and they seemed to pulse with what might have been agony, had they been normal mortal beings. The last of the elementals had been surging toward Cal and Dannel, but it now drew back from the tiny but deadly archmage, a primordial instinct for survival overcoming the urge to destruction that filled its being.

That didn't help Benzan, however, as he turned around to take a punishing blow from a heavy surge of water that plunged into his face and chest, knocking him down. The water that made up the creatures was thick and polluted, and where it splashed against the tiefling's skin, it seared his flesh like acid.

Beorna and Lok likewise came under heavy attack. The templar cut a deep swath into the first surging wave with her sword, but was struck hard and overborne by an impact that knocked her roughly back. Lok, facing the opposite direction, set his feet heavily upon the stone, taking up a defensive stance. Two elementals surged into him, but while the waves crashed against his shield and armored body with the force of a tsunami, they broke to reveal the warrior, holding his ground, hewing at the substance of the elementals with his axe. Like Benzan, both were affected by the caustic touch of the water, against which armor and clothing were of only marginal protection.

Arun splashed through water that had risen to his knees, and lifted his hammer. He had marked where the shield began, and slammed the holy weapon into it with the full force of his considerable strength behind it. The shield flashed but held, rebuffing him as a backblast of energy surged through the weapon into the paladin. Arun fell back, staggering to one knee. Within the shield, Graz'zt sat waiting, his features indistinct through the distortions still trembling through the shield from the fury of the dwarf's attack.

Grimacing, he lifted the hammer and came forward again.

"Get the shield... I'll keep them off!" Dannel said to Cal, as he unleashed a rapid-fire barrage of missiles into the nearest of the elementals. He continued to target the one that had attacked Benzan, sending arrow after arrow into it, aiming high so as not to threaten the tiefling, who was all but immersed in its bulk. The substance of the watery creature roiled madly as the empowered missiles tore through it. Critically wounded, it turned toward the elf, but then suddenly sagged, and disintegrated into a spray of water that quickly drained toward the nearest of the holes in the floor. As the elemental came apart, Benzan was again revealed, swinging his sword blindly around him. The rapidly receding waters pulled at his legs, dragging him down again. Dannel was there in a moment to help him up. He looked to be in bad shape, his eyes swollen and red, his skin seared a harsh pink from the pollutants in the water.

“Dana...” he managed to say.

“She can handle herself, trust me,” the elf said. *And in any case, there’s nothing we can do for her*, he didn’t add.

Lifting his bow, he shifted his aim toward the next foe.

Lok was surrounded by a vortex of swirling water as the elementals continued to bash at him. One reared up over him, forming a white crest that brushed the ceiling, but that huge wave disintegrated as Lok slammed his axe through it, opening a gash that tore through its entire “body”, slaying it. The other surged through the gap and buffeted the genasi heavily, but his stance held, and he maintained his position even as the caustic water rushed around him and sizzled against his armor.

Beorna was in a less enviable position. Her foe had knocked her down in the initial clash, and the elemental continued to smash at her, dragging her toward the hole in the floor through which it had emerged. Thus far, only the templar’s considerable weight, a fair portion of which was comprised of the adamantine shell that she wore, had kept her from suffering Dana’s fate. But the elemental was strong, and each surging rush of water drove her closer to the dark opening.

She tried to stand, only to stumble again as another wave overbore her, and the rushing water around her feet made standing difficult.

“Bloody bast—“ she began, only to be cut off as a surge of water flushed over her face. Tendrils of smoke were rising from her, as the toxins in the liquid seared her gear and skin. The water withdrew, but she was another three feet closer to the hole. Looking up, she saw the wall of water reforming again, with twin points of blackness in the surge that seemed to stare at her with a cold malevolence.

“By HELM!” she shouted, invoking the divine energies of her patron. The power of *righteous might* filled her, and she rapidly grew in size, feeling the strength pulse through her body as the magic took hold.

The wave rushed in, twin “arms” of water extending to pummel her. She did not even bother to try to stand, instead sweeping her now-larger bastard sword around in an arc that slashed through the base of the elemental. The creature quavered as the sword tore through its life-essence, and while it still managed to unleash its attack, the blows landed ineffectively upon the templar’s armored legs.

Pulling herself up, she said, “Now we see what’s what, you oversized sludge-bucket!”

The elemental swept forward, trying to knock her down again, but it found the task considerably more difficult with Beorna’s enhanced size and weight facing it. She held her ground, and as the core of the elemental blasted her, she swept her sword through it. The blade intersected something that resisted the blade’s tearing path, and then it just came apart, draining away into the gaps in the floor.

While he was not insensitive to the melee that raged around him, Cal's attention was focused on the shield protecting Graz'zt. Drawing out a wand, he touched it to his arm before sliding back into the magical quiver at his belt. Rising a few feet above the swirling, unstable ground, he started forward across the room. As he watched, Arun readied himself for a second attack upon the ward. Above him to his right a threatening wave gathered, but Dannel blasted it with a rapid-fire barrage of arrows, each punching a fist-sized hole in its center as the potency of the arcane archer's magic tore into it. Still it came onward, but Benzan met it with a running slash of his sword, cutting a swath eight feet long in its base. The wave toppled over, coming apart as it hit the floor. The tiefling and elf were pulled from their feet by the explosive surge of water, but it only splashed the gnome's robe as he pressed forward.

Lok, meanwhile, was doing for his second foe. The elemental, already shorn of huge swathes of its substance by the genasi's axe, abruptly abandoned its assault, falling back to the nearest gap in the floor, and then vanishing through it. The genasi turned to see if Beorna needed his help, but the templar had already handled her opponent, and was now moving toward the last elemental, which wisely elected to join its companion in retreat.

Arun took hold of his hammer, and unleashed another all-out attack upon the shield. Once again, the invisible barrier took on solid form for a moment as the clash of energies sent roiling waves of black and aqua across its surface. But it held, and again Arun was driven back.

But Cal had been waiting for that moment. Before the shield could reform itself, he blasted the same spot that Arun had hit with another empowered *disintegrate*. The green ray spread outward from the point of impact, forming striations in the ward that thickened and twisted through the threads of the barrier. Behind the shield, Graz'zt threw up his arms.

And then, after a second that seemed much longer, the shield collapsed.

Arun strode forward, his hammer at the ready. But Graz'zt drew out his good hand from behind his back, something concealed in his fist.

The paladin hesitated, wary of another devious stratagem.

"You shall never have me!" the demon screeched, hurling the object he'd hidden. As it left his hand it split, into a spread of tiny balls that scattered outward. None of them reached as far as the paladin, landing in little splashes upon the puddled floor.

At once *things* began to grow from the fell seeds. The little balls swelled, sprouting long, segmented legs, and ugly gray hairs. They took on oblong shapes that became distinct, with a head emerging from the front, dominated by multifaceted eyes and huge, dripping fangs.

Graz'zt, leapt from the throne, and darted toward a hole in the floor a short distance from the coral seat.

Within the span of a heartbeat over a dozen monstrous spiders, each larger than the paladin, stood before Arun. As soon as their explosive growth had finished, they let out a collective screech and rushed forward, moving faster than a charging warhorse.

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Arun lifted his hammer to defend himself, but never got the chance.

“Enough!” Cal shouted, his voice echoing loudly despite his small size. Electrical energy erupted from his fingertips, as he hurled a *shadowed chain lightning* at the surging vermin. The anarchic spiders, while far tougher than their mortal kin, were nevertheless utterly obliterated by the devastating cascade of secondary blasts that streaked through their ranks.

Arun rushed to intercept Graz’zt, but the Prince had too much of a lead on him. As he reached the seeping gap in the floor, however, a spray of water exploded from the opening, and Dana appeared, hovering in the air above the hole, blazing with the white light of a *holy aura*.

“Going somewhere, Your Foulness?” she asked.

Graz’zt tried to dart around her, but the hole was blocked by the bulk of a celestial orca, which had propelled her up through the opening.

“You will pay!” he screeched, spreading his hands and unleashing a spray of black energy into her. The tendrils flared against her *holy aura*, and died, somewhat to Dana’s surprise.

“Aaargh!” Graz’zt screamed, as Arun slammed him with his hammer from behind. The blow knocked the Prince roughly sideways, to land in a heap against the nearby cavern wall. He lay there squirming in pain, his right arm dangling limp at his side at a clearly unnatural angle.

The rest of the companions came running up as Dana and Arun faced the fallen demon lord.

“That was too easy,” Arun said.

“That magic he threw at me, it was barely up to the strength of a nalfeshnee,” Dana said, wary for any more tricks. But Graz’zt seemed to have had the fight knocked out of him, at least for the moment.

“It’s not him,” Arun said. “Another trick. Once again, the bastard has eluded us.”

“No,” Cal said, as he floated up to join them. His *arcane sight* had enabled him to discern the truth. “That is Graz’zt... or what remains of him.”

The demon snarled, but the movement caused another surge of pain to shoot through him, and he twisted again in agony.

“The Prince had to invest a great deal of himself into the assault upon Occipitus,” Cal said. “The loss of Azzagrat, and of the seat of his power, had already diminished him. And the exercise of so much epic magic, even with the augmentation of that artifact, further drained him. He had hoped to restore much of what he had lost by binding himself to Occipitus, but that clearly didn’t work out quite as planned.”

“You fools!” Graz’zt hissed. “I shall rise again... One such as I cannot be so easily obliterated!”

“He seems rather... pathetic, now,” Beorna said, looming over them still in her enlarged form.

“Look at that,” Dana said. She gestured to Arun’s hammer, which the dwarf lifted to reveal an ugly red slick hissing as it ate away at the metal. Then back at the demon, whose emaciated form, his black hide stretched tight over a bony frame, was now familiar to them.

“He’s a babau,” Lok said. “That’s all he was, what he began as, and to what he has returned.”

“Eww, yuck,” Mole said. The gnome, inconspicuous during the battle with the elementals, had reappeared among them, her nose wrinkled.

“It is time to end it,” Arun said. He took a step forward, but paused.

Turning, he offered the haft of the hammer to another.

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Benzan took the proffered weapon. The holy weapon seemed heavy and awkward in the tiefling’s hands, but as he approached Graz’zt, the sigil of Moradin burned into the head began to glow. As he stood over the demon, the glow became a shining radiance, brighter even than when Arun wielded the hammer against evil foes. It cast Benzan’s features in stark effect, and to the others it seemed as though a golden halo surrounded the tiefling’s body.

Graz’zt shielded his eyes from that glow with his good arm. “No! You cannot...”

“Oh, I think we can,” Beorna said. The companions had spread out, alert to any treachery, blocking any possible route of escape.

“There are others who plot against your world! Do you think that I am the only lord of the Abyss who covets your Forgotten Realms? Orcus forgets not his humiliation of Bloodstone... nor Tiamat’s successor... nor the bitch queen of the spiders! And these are only the ones that you may know of... there are other Powers of the Darkness, entities known only to me, that plot to bring you and all you love under their control! My knowledge is infinite... I can aid you, give you what information you need to defend yourselves! Strike me down, and you put to risk all that you hold dear!”

“Those who would plot against us shall learn from your fate,” Lok said.

“Zenna!” he exclaimed, focusing on Benzan. “Your daughter... I know where her soul is. I can give her to you. Do not be hasty, Benzan.”

For a moment, Benzan hesitated. In that instant the demon’s fear transformed into a sharp look, and he drew something out from the small of his back, beneath *Synesyx*. It was a dark blade, which dripped foulness. Behind the radiance coming from the hammer, none of the others saw the maneuver.

“He *is* lies, Benzan” Dana said, softly. “Remember Delem.”

Graz’zt tensed; the dirk was hidden by his body, ready to strike.

Benzan lifted the hammer; the demon’s hand shot out with the dagger.

But Benzan, suddenly, was not there. The blade passed through empty space. The demon fell forward, splaying out upon the ground. None of the companions moved.

Twisting his head around, Graz’zt saw Benzan step up to him. Anticipating Graz’zt’s attack, the tiefling had *dimension doored* a few feet away. Graz’zt tried to stab him with the knife, but Benzan smashed the hammer down onto the demon’s fist, crushing it.

“Aaaa!”

“Now it ends,” Benzan said.

“No, wait! I can—“

The demon’s protests ended abruptly as Benzan brought the warhammer down onto the center of his skull.

“Vengeance,” Mole said.

“No,” Arun said. “Justice.”

Chapter 617

EPILOGUE

The last rays of the setting sun laid a splendid glow upon the walls of the city of Cauldron. Far to the west, the bright ball was just fading beyond the seemingly endless green line of the Forest of Miir. The people below, toiling in the city, were just vague specks at this distance, but Mole imagined that she could see her friends, far down there.

The gnome sighed. Her perch allowed for a magnificent view, although most sane people would have felt terrified rather than exhilarated being perched on a rocky outcrop that jutted

above a gorge that fell several thousand feet into rocks and swirling water below. Normally Mole would have smiled at the thought, but at the moment, the gnome was in a rare introspective mood.

The city looked a lot better than the last time she'd seen it from a distant vantage. The bridge was finished now, a glorious span that had seen more than a bit of magic infused in its fashioning. Lok's people, a full two score of the mysterious urdunnir, had visited the city for a little over a month, adding their unique skills with the crafts of metal and stone. They joined the ranks of over a thousand shield dwarves, humans, moon elves, and others who had come to Cauldron to help in the rebuilding of the city. Mole knew that there were still ruined buildings to be rebuilt, sewer lines to be relaid, and a thousand other myriad tasks for the city's leaders to attend to. But from way up here, it all looked perfect.

She finally did smile. Arun and Beorna were going to be busy. Both of them had refused the title of Mayor, but the fact was that they were the defacto leaders of the New Cauldron. Their marriage had been a happy event that had given the people of Cauldron hope in the future; Mole had counted at least two thousand people at the reception that Dannel and Cal had organized. The new joint temple to Helm and Moradin was the largest in the city, and two other new structures had joined it, centers of worship for Selûne and Azuth.

Arun and Beorna were still down there, somewhere, but it seems like the rest of them had just drifted away, over the last few months. Umbar had gone back to the Great Rift, intent upon clearing Arun's name. Arun had actually been glad to see him go, she thought; hero worship could be a burden at times, and Arun was much too modest to take all this Chosen business too seriously.

Dannel had left as well, returning to the Wealdath. He'd seemed sad since they had returned, and Mole thought she understood. Dannel needed time to sort things out, but she hoped that he'd be back, someday. If nothing else, she could always go visit him.

Lok had returned with his people to their home in the far North. He'd married the shield dwarf cleric Gaera, and while he too was not much for titles, she gathered at the wedding that his people were referring to him now as the Warder Under the Mountain. Something to do with their religion; she wasn't really all that sure. The urdunnir were all right, but pretty dull; she hadn't stayed there long.

She and Uncle Cal had traveled the length and breadth of Faerûn, for a time. Archmage Calloran was becoming quite the muckety-muck in the Waterdeep Guild, and she'd gotten to visit a number of interesting places in his company. But after a while he had to return to Waterdeep to attend to Very Important Business, and while she imagined she'd return there eventually, she'd asked him to drop her off here, at Cauldron, for a time.

She kicked at a protruding rock, sending it over the edge of the outcrop. She watched it fall for a moment, but it was quickly lost in the shadows that were deepening in the gorge.

A figure walked up from behind her, and sat down next to her on the edge of the outcrop. The newcomer was a young-looking gnome, clad in a practical but festive tunic and trousers in deep colors that caught the rays of the shining sun.

For a minute, the two enjoyed the view in silence.

“You know, I’m rather cross with you,” Mole finally said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I mean, all my friends, they’re all Chosen. What do the gnomes get? Well, Uncle Cal got Azuth, I guess, but he’s pretty much a *human* god, right?”

“I’m not so much into that whole ‘choosing’ thing. Sort of believe that mortals should choose for themselves, don’t you?”

Mole grunted something noncommittal.

“In any case, I’d say you’ve had a pretty unique path. Even for a gnome.” The last was said with a smile, belying the content of the statement.

There was another pause.

“So what now?”

The other gnome leaned back, putting his hands behind him on the sun-warmed stone. “There’s always more to learn, more to explore, new bad guys to be shown up.”

Mole considered.

“You don’t agree?”

“I guess I’m sort of down on exploring. I mean, I’ve been in on killing *two* demon princes, dracoliches, elder undead, dragons, giants, fiends, a bunch of Cagewrights...”

“You’ve had a busy year.”

“Yeah, well. I guess after all that, searching an old ruin for some magic trinkets, running a thieves guild, or putting down a bandit ring... none of it really seems to *do* it anymore.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Settle down, maybe.”

The other gnome raised an eyebrow.

Mole chuckled. “Yeah, maybe not. I don’t know.”

“Well. It’s not for me to set your path, Mole. I don’t really do that, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m just getting a few thoughts out there.”

“Hmm... yes. Well, there is one thing you might consider.”

“Oh?” Mole said, trying to appear disinterested, and not fooling the other in the slightest.

The other gnome smiled. “There are other realities beyond those that you know. Other games with different rules.”

Mole looked uncertain. “What you’re talking about... I’d have to leave my friends.”

“Not forever, Mole. We’re not talking about *that* kind of trip. You could come back, visit this Prime whenever you wished. Although time might move a bit *differently* than you are accustomed to.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” But as she looked back toward Cauldron, there was something of a farewell in her eyes.

“Well then, maybe I can offer another incentive. Not that I’m trying to make your decision for you or anything.”

“Because you don’t do that.”

“Right.”

“What is it? One of those cloaks that lets you fly? Because I could really use one of those.”

“It’s not an item, Mole. Rather, an old friend who’s been waiting for you for some time.”

Mole turned, and saw that the area at the far end of the overhang had become indistinct, a soft blurring beyond which only a gray oblivion extended. She could sense the reality of her world around her, but in that one direction, something *e/se* existed, another reality beyond limits.

And in that fog, a slender figure was approaching.

Mole looked at the other gnome, who nodded with a soft smile. The girl leapt up and ran into the shroud, which embraced her. For a moment she too was vague and indistinct, but then she broke through some kind of barrier, and she was in that other reality. And the figure she’d perceived was there, real, solid when she leapt up and wrapped her arms around her.

“Zenna!”

“Glad to see you, too.”

“I missed you... Where have you been? What happened to you?”

“I was lost for a while, Mole, really lost. But I found my way back, with the help of some friends.”

“So much has happened... Oh, I have so much to tell you!”

Zenna looked down at her with eyes misted with tears. “And I want to hear it all. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up; I have no plans to go away again anytime soon.”

They turned as the other gnome appeared. Behind him, Cauldron and the rest of Faerûn faded from view. “Are you ready, Mole?” he asked.

“Can she... I mean, can both of us, together, ever go back to Faerûn?” Zenna, still holding her, looked as though she was waiting for the answer as well.

“Perhaps someday,” the gnome said, after a brief pause. “That part of the story is still unwritten.”

“Like my uncle’s book,” Mole said. “I don’t think he’s ever going to finish it.”

“Exactly,” the gnome said. “But for now, at least, another chapter comes to a close.” His eyes sparkled. “And what lies ahead... well, that will be something now, won’t it?”

Mole jumped down from Zenna’s grasp, and taking Garl’s hand in one of hers, and Zenna’s in the other, the three turned and walked down a new road that stretched endlessly before them, until they had faded completely from sight.

THE END OF *THE SHACKLED CITY*