The Story

A novel loosely based off current sessions with a Discworld / Warhammer style

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Chapter I: The Lighthouse at the End of the Road

OG Script

Wherein drinks are free, suspicions are plentiful, and a rogue mistakes stealth for interpretive dance.

The storm struck the Sword Coast with the fury of a drunk god. Rain hammered the stones, turning the cliffs into slick deathtraps and the road into a muddy memory. Thunder rolled like distant drums of war. Yet even in this tempest, a light burned steady—a crooked, sea-lashed lighthouse turned tavern, its warped wooden door swinging with every gust.

It was the kind of place one stumbled upon at the edge of maps and the bottom of bottles.

Inside, it was no warmer. A hearth sputtered defiantly against the damp, casting amber shadows over scarred tables and seaworn faces. The barkeep, a man with salt-whitened hair and a gaze like a rusted harpoon, grumbled at every wet footprint.

“Hell of a night to be sober,” he muttered, pouring spirits that smelled like regret.

The door creaked, and in walked trouble.

Garrick “Rigg” Dalhart entered with soaked boots, wild hair, and a wrench strapped to his back that looked better suited to knocking down walls than fixing them. His eyes swept the room with the practiced greed of a man who once charged interest on bandages.

“Evenin’,” he said, grabbing five mugs from the counter in one confident motion. “Put it on Sir Gwen’s tab.” The barkeep grunted but didn’t argue. Rigg nodded to himself—still got it.

He turned and handed the ales out to the scattered adventurers who had, by some strange alchemy of fate and misfortune, gathered here tonight.

“To new opportunities,” Rigg offered, raising his mug. “And to not dying in a ditch.”

The dwarf took his ale with a grunt. Lagerick Giffenhall wore his chainmail like a second skin and drank like a man who no longer prayed. He sniffed the brew, shrugged, and downed half in

one pull.

“Could use more hops. And less rain.” He set the mug down and leaned back with the contentment of a man who had made peace with every poor decision he’d ever made. “So... we all just waiting for fate to trip over us, or what?”

From the shadows, a voice purred.

“Some of us don’t wait.” The tabaxi stepped into the firelight—slim, black-furred, with gold-threaded sleeves and eyes like twin moons at play. “High Jinks,” she said, with the kind of smile you could lose a war to. “Warlock. Cosmic patron. Occasional bookstore arsonist.”

Rigg blinked. “Arsonist?”

“Allegedly,” she grinned, and sipped.

At the next table, a pale-skinned Githyanki leaned forward, yellow eyes glinting beneath a brow of stoic disdain. He hadn’t introduced himself—not properly. But his armor bore planar runes, and his fingers never strayed far from the haft of a weapon that hummed with faint, unsettling energy.

“Stranded?” Leydrick asked, trying not to sound nosy.

“Geographically inconvenienced,” the Githyanki replied. “Temporarily.”

“Well, cheers to inconvenient geography,” Rigg said, raising his mug again.

High Jinks purred, “I believe that’s called ‘Fay-Run.’”

And then there was the wizard. Valen Pyre stood near the window, his crimson coat hanging damp and dramatic, a wide-brimmed hat shadowing half his face. He hadn’t spoken all night, merely watched—eyes half-lidded, hands occasionally flicking to the warmth of his arcane focus as though testing a thought.

“So, you do talk,” Rigg prodded.

Valen said nothing, but a nearby candle burst into flame.

They weren’t alone in the tavern. The corner booth held a knight in armor too gold to be subtle, flanked by guards more interested in free drinks than duty.

Sir Gwen stood and addressed the room. “I seek hunters—skilled ones. A beast stalks the Sword Mountains. One eye. Many victims. Five hundred gold for the name, more if you bring its head.”

“A beholder,” High Jinks said immediately.

Gwen blinked. “Possibly. You’ll find out if you live.”

“Tempting,” murmured Valen.

The dwarf nodded. “Tempting and suicidal. Classic.”

Next came the miners, louder than the thunder outside. Ale on their breath, gold in their teeth, and fear in their eyes.

“Westbridge,” one slurred. “We’re headin’ there, up the Long Road. But folk vanish. Screams in the night. Guards won’t come. We’ll pay. Ten gold a day, hundred on arrival. You in?”

Rigg tilted his head. “How many of you are there?”

“Enough to get robbed,” High Jinks replied.

The last figure descended the lighthouse stairs—an elf in Lord’s Alliance colors, rain-slicked and sharp-eyed.

“Enough drinking,” he said, voice low but firm. “A caravan was due by sundown. We saw it shaking. No lights. No response. We need someone to investigate. Fifty gold now. Fifty after.”

The party exchanged glances.

“That,” Rigg said, finishing his mug, “sounds like it might involve stabbing. And gold.”

“Two of my better skills,” said High Jinks.

The Githyanki stood. “I’ll go. I tire of this world’s gravity.”

Valen simply adjusted his coat, a subtle nod.

Laydrick groaned and rose. “Can’t let you lot die without me.”

The elf handed over a pouch of coin. “Then go. And be careful. Something’s wrong.”

They left the lighthouse behind, stepping into wind and mud.

Ahead, the caravan loomed like a question asked too quietly. Guards stood in the rain, unblinking, mouths foaming, torches dead in their hands. The cart rocked violently.

“Subtle approach,” Rigg said, ducking low.

He moved like a shadow, then immediately slipped in a puddle and skidded sideways into a bush.

One of the guards snapped his head toward the sound. “Hey! You! Check the cart!”

“I’m jusht... taking a leak,” Rigg slurred, wobbling, ale mug still in hand.

Somehow, it worked. For now.

Behind him, the others crouched low.

“This,” whispered High Jinks, “is going to be fun.”

Chapter I
The Lighthouse at the End of the Road

The storm had arrived like a drunken god, blundering up the Sword Coast with fists of rain and a voice full of thunder. Wind flung seawater against the red-rock cliffs, scraped loose roof-slates from lonely farmsteads, and turned the High Road into a memory made of mud. Through that howling dark, a single lamp refused to bow: the beacon of a weather-beaten lighthouse whose keeper had long since decided that if he couldn’t stop sailors wrecking, he might at least sell them a drink afterwards.

Inside, the tavern-turned-beacon smelled of damp wool, brine, and a house spirit the barkeep described only as “South-of-Waterdeep Regret.” A peat fire spat and sulked in the hearth, carving amber caverns through drifting pipe smoke. Each new gust shouldered the warped door open and carried in another puddle.

Garrick **Rigg** Dalhart shouldered his way through that door with the air of a man who had recently presented a bad idea with an invoice. Hair plastered flat, boots streaming water, he produced a grin and, more improbably, scooped **five** tankards off the counter in one sweep.

“Sir Gwen’s tab,” he informed the barkeep—a salt-whitened veteran who measured customers in the same way carpenters measure timber. The man raised an eyebrow, decided he didn’t care enough to argue, and sloshed amber into the mugs. Rigg doled them out to the handful of other sodden souls clustered near the hearth.

“To new opportunities,” he declared, lifting his ale. “And to waking up *outside* any local ditches.”

A dwarf in road-stained chainmail lifted one bushy brow. **Lagerick Giffenhall** sniffed the ale, found it barely medicinal, and drained half in a single swallow. “Could use more hops,” he rumbled, wiping foam from his beard. “And less weather.” Settling back, he surveyed the tavern with the air of a man counting exits and debts.

From beyond the firelight a velvet purr answered. “Some of us don’t wait for opportunities.” A lean tabaxi—black-furred, sleeves embroidered with tarnished gold—stepped into view and offered an easy bow. “High Jinks, warlock of… complicated contracts. Former bookseller, occasional arsonist.”

“Arsonist?” Rigg echoed.

She spread her hands, claws catching the fireglow. “Allegedly.”

A chair scraped. A pale-skinned **Githyanki**—armor etched with planar runes—leaned his tall frame forward, yellow eyes assessing the room as one assesses a chessboard. He had offered no name, only the admission that the planet’s gravity was *“sufficiently tedious.”*

Rigg raised his refreshed mug in greeting. “Cheers to inconvenient geography, friend.”

A shadow near the rain-streaked window resolved into the crimson-coated silhouette of **Valen Pyre**. Wide-brimmed hat pulled low, he had spent the evening watching flame gutter along his gloved fingertips, as though warming half-remembered thoughts. Asked a question, he merely inclined his head; a nearby candle surged to a taller, bluer flame.

Thus the room’s temperature—social and literal—had just begun to settle when a knight in armour the colour of fresh coin rose from the corner booth. **Sir Gwen** cleared her throat; steel plates chimed. “Five hundred gold crowns for knowledge of a one-eyed horror in the Sword Mountains,” she announced. “Double that if its corpse accompanies your report.”

“A beholder,” High Jinks said before the knight could finish. Her tail coiled, pleased.

“Possibly,” Sir Gwen conceded. “You will confirm if you *live*.”

Lagerick exhaled through his nose. “Tempting *and* suicidal—my favourite pairing.”

Before debate could bloom, the tavern door thudded again. A cluster of miners, clothes sour with quarry-dust and recent ale, herded themselves inside on a gust of rain. Gold teeth flashed as the spokesman explained their trouble: disappearances along the High Road, fear gnawing at profits. “Escort us to Westbridge—ten gold a day, hundred on arrival,” he pleaded, palms up.

Rigg opened his mouth—barkeep slammed down a fresh keg instead.

And then the lighthouse stairs creaked. An elf in the blue-and-silver of the Lord’s Alliance descended, cloak dripping, spyglass still in hand.

“Enough drinking,” he said, voice steady but tight. “A caravan shook itself to silence not a mile up the road. Four guards posted—no lights, no answer. Fifty gold now, fifty when you tell me why.”

Five pairs of eyes met by the firelight.

“This,” Rigg decided, “sounds like an evening rich in stabbing *and* income.”

High Jinks rolled her shoulders; cosmic motes slid across her pupils. “Two of my better hobbies.”

The Githyanki simply stood. “I will come. For motion.”

Valen flicked rain from his hat brim. Silent assent.

Lagerick groaned to his feet, joints clicking like rusty hinges. “Can’t let you amateurs die unsupervised.”

The elf’s coin purse jingled as it changed hands, and the group stepped back into the tempest.

Wind tried to shove them off the cliff road; rain transformed every lantern into a trembling halo. Yet the caravan’s bulk soon emerged—dark wagon, collapsed canvas, oxen gone. Four figures ringed it, armour unmarked yet drenched, their torches drowned. They swayed but did not shiver, mouths bubbling with pale foam.

“Charming,” High Jinks whispered.

“Subtle?” Rigg suggested, stooping. “Or loud and direct?”

He attempted the former, melting toward the nearest crate—until one treacherous puddle betrayed him. Boots slid; he windmilled; bush and mud enthusiastically embraced.

A guard’s head snapped round. “You there! Check the cart!”

Rigg staggered upright, slurring, mug miraculously in hand. “Jus’ takin’ a leak, mate!”

The blank-eyed guard blinked once, failed to parse, and turned away.

Behind the bush, High Jinks bit her lip to swerve a laugh into a cough. Lagerick muttered a prayer none could hear over the thunder. Valen’s eyes tracked the rocking wagon, reading invisible runes in its sway.

Something *inside* clawed at the wood.

“This,” the warlock breathed, “is going to be fun.”

And with a crack of lightning that illuminated every jittering shadow, Chapter I shutters closed, leaving the night—and whatever waited in that trembling cart—to begin the story proper.

Chapter II: The Cave Beneath the Road

OG Script

Wherein torches flicker, minds unravel, and one wizard catches a child mid-portal like a stage magician pulling fire from his sleeve.

The rain had stopped—but only in the way a tax collector stops knocking after you open the door. The clouds hung thick and low, muttering threats, and the road had turned into something between a soup and a suggestion. The wagon loomed ahead, half-swallowed by mud, and the guards surrounding it stood stiff as scarecrows, faces blank, torches unlit. Their mouths frothed like bad ale.

"Right," Rigg whispered. "That's new."

"Possession," Valen murmured, peering out from under his dripping hat. "Psionic. Likely Illithid."

"Mind flayers?" High Jinks hissed. "I *hate* mind flayers. They're like librarians if librarians wanted to *eat* your overdue books *and* your skull."

The Githyanki said nothing, but his eyes narrowed. "Quaggoths are near. I smell them."

"You know," Rigg said, "I'm starting to worry you *enjoy* this kind of thing."

"I enjoy surviving," he replied.

"Well," Laydrick grunted, "let's earn our fifty gold before someone's face explodes."

High Jinks raised her hand and whispered a spell. A thunderous roar erupted from the cart—an illusory lion's bellow, somewhere between reality and nightmare. The guards twitched. One stumbled. The cart shuddered violently.

Then the gate flew open like a drunk flinging a saloon door.

Two Quaggoths hurled themselves into the mud. They were monstrous—seven feet of snarling fur, jagged claws, and wet fury. One shrieked with unnatural rage, charging blindly. The guards behind them jerked like puppets on tangled strings, eyes rolling back as they began to

advance.

Rigg moved first, because of course he did. His wrench arced through the mist and struck a guard full in the helmet. The clang rang like a temple bell, and the poor man dropped—whether from unconsciousness or embarrassment was unclear.

"Still got it," Rigg muttered.

The Quaggoth was on him before the next breath. It bellowed and slashed, claws tearing through the air with a wildness born of something deeper than rage. Rigg ducked, barely, and rolled into a puddle that might've once been a road.

"Less got it," he coughed, spitting mud.

Valen raised one gloved hand, and fire answered. With a flick of his fingers, a streak of flame shot forward and *punched* into the beast's side. It howled as its fur ignited, the fire burning with the righteous fury of a man who *really* needed a dry cloak.

"Next time," Valen muttered, "I wear oilcloth."

To the right, the Githyanki struck. He was a blur—a whirling dervish of planar steel and terrifying calm. His blade whispered through the air, slicing deep into the second Quaggoth's thigh. Blood sprayed across the mud. The beast retaliated, but its claws met empty space as the Githyanki sidestepped like a grim shadow.

"Could someone *please* get this thing off me!" High Jinks shouted. She danced backward as a frothing guard lunged for her, claws out.

"No touching the merchandise!" she snapped, and let loose a pair of eldritch blasts. The first seared a black line across the guard's chest. The second sent him sailing into the cart, which promptly collapsed on top of him in a soggy heap.

Laydrick stood calmly amid the chaos, humming an old dwarven hymn and slapping one hand onto his holy symbol. Light blazed around him, and a bolt of golden fire lanced downward from the heavens, striking the wounded Quaggoth in the back. It screamed—a sound that echoed too long for comfort—and crumpled to the earth, steaming and very, very dead.

The last beast turned and roared, charging straight at Valen.

He didn't flinch.

Instead, he extended one hand, palm open, and whispered: *"Fall."*

A thunderous *blast of force* erupted from his fingers. The Quaggoth lifted off its feet, crashed into a tree with a sickening crunch, and didn't get back up.

Silence fell. Only the rain and the smell of scorched fur remained.

"Everyone still got their limbs?" Rigg asked.

High Jinks glanced at her tail. “Define ‘still.’”

They found the trail easily—drag marks, torn fabric, and muddy prints leading off the road and down a slope to a cave mouth so hidden it might as well have been embarrassed about existing.

It exhaled foul air. Wet stone. Mold. And something underneath, like... thought that didn’t belong to *you*.

“This smells like a trap,” said Rigg.

“Everything is a trap,” the Githyanki replied.

“True,” Laydrick added, stepping in anyway.

Inside, the cave pulsed. That was the worst part. It wasn’t the unnatural blue glow. It wasn’t the twisting walls that looked like they’d been grown, not carved. It was that they *breathed*.

“Anyone else feel like we’re in the digestive tract of something smarter than us?” High Jinks whispered.

“That’s because we are,” Valen said grimly.

Then they saw it.

A chamber opened ahead, lit with pale psychic light. At its center floated a child—levitating, unmoving, suspended by violet tendrils of psionic energy. Below it, an Illithid. The Mind Flayer turned slowly as if it *knew* they had arrived. Its tentacles writhed with hunger.

“Nope,” Rigg whispered. “No thank you. I’m out.”

Jinks leapt forward without hesitation. “Drop the kid, you octo-nerd!”

The Mind Flayer twitched a finger. A portal opened behind it, swirling and bright.

Then everything exploded.

The first Quaggoth came from the left—screeching, fangs bared. The Githyanki intercepted it mid-lunge, driving his sword through the creature’s shoulder. It shrieked and swung wildly, claws scraping off armor, drawing blood.

To the right, a second beast emerged—this one faster, meaner. It collided with Laydrick, who braced himself like a stone wall. The dwarf grunted as claws raked down his shield, then responded by bashing the Quaggoth in the snout and calling down divine wrath. Golden flame engulfed the monster, searing its eyes.

Meanwhile, the Mind Flayer began to chant.

“Uh oh,” Jinks muttered, and launched herself toward the floating child. She skidded under a beam of psychic energy and let loose a blast at the flayer’s feet, kicking up dust and distortion.

“Valen!” she shouted.

The wizard was already in motion.

Time slowed. Or perhaps it didn’t—perhaps Valen simply ignored it.

He sprinted across the room, boots slamming into the psionically carved floor. The portal began to shimmer. The child started to vanish. And then—

CRACK.

Valen leapt, coat billowing behind him, and *snatched* the child from mid-air a heartbeat before the portal snapped shut. He landed hard, cradling the boy, eyes smoldering.

“Got you,” he whispered.

Behind him, Rigg took the opportunity to do what he did best: hit something very hard with a wrench.

The last Quaggoth dropped.

The Mind Flayer, snarling in alien rage, vanished into the darkness—its spell unfinished, its prey lost.

They found the others in the back tunnels—eight villagers, bound and dazed, their eyes flickering with latent magic. One child clung to Jinks and whispered things in her mind that made her fur stand on end.

“We were going to be *fed* to something,” one muttered. “They said we had ‘potential.’”

The elf from the lighthouse met them at the edge of the road, breath catching at the sight of survivors.

“You actually came back,” he said.

“With bonus villagers,” Rigg replied. “That’ll cost extra.”

“I suspect this isn’t over,” the elf said grimly. “Not if the flayers are involved.”

High Jinks stretched. “Oh good. I was worried we’d run out of eldritch horrors.”

Valen remained silent, cradling the wand the Mind Flayer had dropped. It pulsed faintly in his grip.

Overhead, the stars blinked into view—alien, watchful, waiting.

Rain rattled across the high-road like dice in a malicious god’s cup.
It sluiced from the half-collapsed wagon, drummed on Rigg’s already-ruined boots, and turned the Sword Coast mud into something that would have sold well as industrial glue.

“Still got it,” Rigg muttered—just loudly enough for the others to hear, and just softly enough that no one could ask *what*, precisely, he thought he still had.

The Quaggoth chose that moment to disagree. It burst from the hedgerow in a blur of claws and foam, shrieking with a fury more *borrowed* than born. Rigg’s answer was a roll through the puddle, a grunt that sounded suspiciously like *less got it*, and an upward swing of his over-sized wrench that caught the beast clean in the knee the-story .

Valen, soaked and increasingly incandescent, raised one gloved hand. A bead of fire spiralled from his fingertips, hissed through the downpour, and detonated against the Quaggoth’s flank. Wet fur became burning pitch; the monster howled; Valen winced at the scorch-mark blossoming across his own sleeve.

“Next expedition,” he growled, “we requisition oilcloth.”

The Githyanki was already moving, blades whispering through the rain. One cut hamstrung the second Quaggoth; a second flick severed its roar halfway through the word. Somewhere behind him, High Jinks back-pedalled from a frothing guard whose eyes were milky with psionic residue.

“No touching the merchandise!” she snapped, and twin lances of violet force propelled the unfortunate fellow through the wagon’s rotten sideboards. The cart collapsed on him with a relieved sigh, as if grateful to lie down at last the-story.

Golden light flared. Laydrick—who believed in smiting as a form of polite introduction—called dwarven fire from the sky. It landed on the wounded Quaggoth with the finality of a tax audit, leaving only steaming rainwater and the faint smell of barbecued regret the-story .

The last beast lunged at Valen.

He didn’t step back. He didn’t even blink.

He merely opened his palm and said, with the lethal courtesy of a man correcting grammar, “Fall.”

Thunder answered. The Quaggoth hit a tree hard enough to dislodge future firewood and slid down in an untidy pile the-story.

Silence followed—broken only by rain and the sizzling of Quaggoth fat.

“Everyone still got their limbs?” Rigg asked, counting his own to be sure.

High Jinks waggled her tail. “Define *still*.”

Drag-marks led from the road into the undergrowth—scrapes in the mud, torn cloth caught on brambles, the unmistakable grooves of something being taken where it would very much rather *not* go. They ended at a cave mouth so retiring it seemed embarrassed to exist the-story .

“This smells like a trap,” Rigg observed.

“Everything is a trap,” the Githyanki replied, which was comforting in the same way a falling roof is *tidy*.

Laydrick marched inside anyway. Clerics, after all, are professionally opposed to hesitation.

The passage pulsed—walls of slick stone that expanded and contracted like the throat of some thoughtful leviathan. Blue luminescence oozed across organic ridges. Thoughts not their own brushed the party’s minds, testing, tasting.

“Digestive tract of something smarter than us,” High Jinks whispered.

“That’s because we are,” Valen answered.

The tunnel widened into a chamber where logic went to lie down. A child floated at its centre, suspended by violet filaments of psionic light. Beneath him stood an Illithid. It turned, every motion suggesting that it had been expecting them since before they were born. Tentacles writhed in anticipation the-story.

“Nope,” Rigg breathed. “No thank you. I’m out.”

Instead, High Jinks was *in*, sprinting forward with the manic confidence of someone whose survival strategy involved shouting at problems until they went away.

“Drop the kid, you octo-nerd!”

The Mind Flayer flicked a finger. Reality folded neatly behind it, forming a portal that smelled of salt and misplaced memories. From the flanks, two more Quaggoth emerged—one leaping for the Githyanki, the other slamming into Laydrickraised shield the-story.

Chaos blossomed.

The Githyanki’s blade found bone; Laydrick's mace found snout; Rigg’s sling sent steel bearings ricocheting off cavern walls with deeply personal intent. High Jinks juked under a psychic bolt, unleashing eldritch fire at the Illithid’s feet and filling the air with grit and distortion.

“Valen!” she called.

Time complied. Valen ran—boots skidding on living stone—towards the fracturing gateway. The child began to fade, sucked into the swirling void.

CRACK.

He leapt, coat a crimson stain against blue light, and wrenched the boy free a heartbeat before the portal slammed shut. They tumbled across the floor; Valen rose, breathing hard, child cradled to his chest.

“Got you,” he whispered, as though the words might convince the universe to behave.

The surviving Quaggoth, seeing its employer distracted and its colleagues on fire, made a practical decision to expire. The Illithid—now alone, wounded, and minus one hostage—stared at the adventurers through eyes like frozen stars. Its tentacles twitched, not with hunger now, but with a mathematic assessment of odds.

It decided it disliked those odds.

With a hiss of psionic static, it vanished into a second portal that tasted of copper and unfinished nightmares.

They retreated to the cave mouth in bruised triumph, dragging the unconscious child and what fragments of dignity remained. The storm had relented to a sullen drizzle. Rigg inspected the group’s collective wounds with the air of a foreman tallying breakages.

“So,” he said, “next time we escort a caravan, can we specify *no subterranean horrors* in the contract?”

High Jinks flicked water from her whiskers. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Valen adjusted his ruined coat. “Remind me to invoice Sir Gwen for hazard pay.”

The Githyanki sheathed his sword, eyes fixed on the dark horizon. “The Illithid will regroup.”

“Then,” Laydrick said, planting his mace like a surveyor’s stake, “so will we.”

They turned back toward the road—muddy, battered, but carrying a rescued child and the first undeniable proof that something vile was stealing minds along the High Road.

Behind them, deep in the cave, psionic light flickered—like a heartbeat that hadn’t yet decided whether to stop.

> “It is a little-known fact that Quaggoths, when removed from the Underdark and introduced to Sword Coast weather, develop an odour best described as “fermented badger”. This was of no tactical relevance, but did explain why nobody wanted to sit next to the corpses on the return journey.

Chapter III: Whispers of the Woods

OF Script

Wherein trees whisper secrets, dwarves debate economics mid-looting, and a warlock confuses a dragon with a polite tourist.

It was supposed to be over.

The villagers were safe—well, most of them—and the Mind Flayer had vanished, presumably back into its interdimensional lair of body horror and smug superiority. The party had earned their coin. They'd even been thanked, which, among adventurers, is rarer than clean socks.

So they returned to Rassalantar expecting stew and sleep.

Instead, they found silence.

No barking dogs. No clatter from the blacksmith. No lanterns. No voices. Just empty homes and cold hearths, all frozen in mid-life. A steaming kettle sat abandoned on one doorstep. A child's doll lay face-down in the street, its painted smile chipped.

Rigg stared around, brow furrowed. "Okay, this is either a haunting or a very elaborate surprise party."

"No bodies," High Jinks noted, crouching to inspect the ground. "Just… vanished."

"Footprints," Valen murmured, pointing. "Two hundred people don't just disappear. They *walked* out."

Lagerick squinted into the gathering dusk. "They headed west. Into the woods."

The Githyanki adjusted the grip on his blade. "We follow."

High Jinks sighed. "Of course we do. Into the creepy forest. Again. Maybe next time, evil can just write us a *letter*."

Before they left, Rigg made a beeline for the general store.

“What are you doing?” asked Lagerick, arms crossed.

“Resupplying. Emergency salvage tax.”

“You mean looting.”

“I mean ensuring our survival with redistributed assets.”

“Ah. Thievery, but with paperwork.”

They emerged with 700 gold in trade goods and temple offerings. Lagerick insisted on blessing the stolen items, muttering prayers to cover their moral tracks.

“I’m not a thief,” he grumbled.

“You’re just holding it until the rightful owners return,” said High Jinks. “Which is adorable.”

As they prepared to leave, the miners—former clients—handed over a small pouch of gold.

"Guess we won’t be going to Westbridge after all," one mumbled. "We’ll head back south. You lot... good luck. You’ll need it."

The forest swallowed them shortly after.

Kryptgarden wasn’t just *a* forest. It was *the* forest—the kind that made trees in other places feel inadequate. Towering, ancient, and wrapped in mist like a blanket of secrets. Vines hung like nooses. Every bird call sounded a little too intelligent. And the shadows didn’t wait for nightfall.

They pressed on, boots crunching on roots and fallen bones.

“Do trees... usually hum?” Rigg asked.

“Not unless they’re bored,” Jinks replied.

Then they found the shrine.

A half-collapsed ruin, its walls etched with fading elvish script. A statue of Corellon stood, cracked but serene, offering a bowl filled with water clear as crystal. Moonlight filtered down, painting the clearing silver.

High Jinks approached, ears forward. “Offerings,” she whispered. “It’s still active.”

They each left something behind—a coin, a token, a whispered prayer. The forest stirred in approval. And from beneath the bowl, something clicked.

Rigg reached in and drew out a sword.

Long. Elegant. Its blade glowed with a soft white light—moon-touched.

“Claimed!” he called, grinning. “Finders keepers, blessed by divine accident.”

“Don’t wave it around,” Valen warned. “It’s *glowing*. That’s basically a torch that screams ‘stab me first.’”

At the edge of a clearing, they found a wagon.

It was more of a traveling circus cart, if said circus specialized in bad decisions. A man in wide robes stood beside it, holding up a tunic stitched with what looked like owlbear feathers.

“Adventurers!” he cried. “Just the clientele I was hoping for!”

"Great," Rigg muttered. "A bard who sells pants."

The merchant bowed. “Olavryn of Oakhollow, purveyor of the peculiar, collector of the uncanny. May I interest you in some wares for your *dangerous journey into certain doom*?”

Gold changed hands quickly.

- Lagerick bought a full suit of plate armor so polished it doubled as a breakfast mirror.
- High Jinks claimed Boots of Elvenkind and immediately tried walking silently *on* Lagerick’s shoulders.
- Valen took a wizard’s hat—wide-brimmed, crimson, and theatrically unnecessary.
- Dino (the Githyanki) scowled but eyed a longbow with rune-etched limbs.

By the end, they were better equipped and much, much poorer.

“Dino owes me 122 gold,” Rigg announced cheerfully.

“I owe *no one*,” Dino replied.

“Exactly what someone in debt would say.”

The forest grew darker. Wilder. And wrong.

They found signs—burned trees with no source, pools of water that rippled without touch. Once, they glimpsed a silhouette between trunks: a woman tall as a stag, robes of green flame, eyes glowing faintly yellow.

She was gone before anyone could speak.

“Did anyone else—?” High Jinks began.

“See the ominous forest queen radiating arcane power?” Rigg finished. “Yeah.”

They did not follow her. Not yet.

Finally, the trail of the villagers reappeared—bare feet, small shoes, dragging gaits. All heading toward a low stone rise choked in roots.

“This,” Valen said, “feels like a trap.”

Rigg unsheathed the moon-touched sword. “Which means we’re going in.”

“I hate that this makes sense now,” High Jinks muttered.

They passed under moss-covered stones. The air grew colder. And then—

A hiss. Then skittering. Then eyes.

Three spiders dropped from above like nightmares given gravity. Their legs clacked on stone. Fangs glistened.

The first landed beside Valen and reared back.

He snarled. “Not today.”

A wave of fire *blasted* from his palm, catching the beast mid-lunge. It shrieked, twisted in air, and slammed against the wall smoldering.

Another spider shot a line of web—ensnaring Rigg’s arm and yanking him skyward.

“Nonononononono—!”

THUD. His body hit the ceiling. The wrench went flying.

High Jinks leapt up the wall with feline grace, slicing the web with a glowing claw. Rigg dropped like a sack of potatoes.

“Graceful,” she quipped.

The third spider lunged for Leydrick. The dwarf met it with a roar and a flash of radiant light. His holy symbol flared like a miniature sun, scorching the spider’s face before his mace caved in its skull.

A shape stepped from the darkness.

Slender. Dark-skinned. White-haired. A drow, blades lowered, eyes gleaming with caution.

“Stop,” he said. “We are not enemies.”

“Depends,” said Rigg. “Are you with the brain-squids?”

The drow grimaced. “No. We hate them more than you.”

“I find that unlikely,” Valen muttered, eyes still glowing.

But they didn’t attack. Not yet.

The road back to Rassalantar should have smelled of wet earth and horse-sweat; instead, it smelled of absence. The gate stood open, the watchman’s lantern guttered out mid-swing, and every door in the village yawned as if the town had only just inhaled and forgotten how to breathe the-story.

Rigg crouched beside an overturned stew-pot. A skin of broth clung to the iron like last night’s arguments, and the flame beneath it had died without bothering to lick the rim clean.
“Whole place has the courtesy of a thief who wipes his feet,” he said. “No blood, no scorch marks. Just… gone.”

High Jinks dipped two fingers into the mud that passed for a main street and raised them to her nose.
“Tracks,” she murmured, tail flicking irritation from her words. “Men, women, children—all walking, none running. West, toward Westwood.”

Valen Pyre, rain dripping from the brim of his crimson hat, traced an invisible line through the air. “Two hundred souls under a compulsion strong enough to keep step and leave kettles boiling? Mind Flayers, or something that reads bedtime stories to Mind Flayers.”

The dwarf—Laydrick now, by stubborn declaration and legal writ of grumble—adjusted his freshly polished plate and crossed himself with a gesture equal parts prayer and expletive.
“Westwood,” he muttered. “Forest full o’ things that think dwarves taste like nostalgia.”

Dino the Githyanki stared at the horizon with the unhappy suspicion that it might stare back. “We follow,” he said, as though the point were not in doubt. Follow they did—and not without preparation.

A village without occupants is, to Rigg’s philosophy, merely a shop without staff. By the time the others finished a circuit of the empty cottages he emerged from the general store with two flour sacks of coin and minor trade goods.
“Emergency salvage tax,” he announced.
“Redistributed assets,” High Jinks countered.
“Loot,” corrected Laydrick, blessing each item in case morality could be retro-fitted session-03-whispers-of-….

Their haul—seven hundred gold once the temple’s offerings were liberated—made them briefly wealthy and eternally guilty. The miners they had escorted this far pressed twenty gold apiece into their palms.
“Westbridge can wait,” the foreman said, voice thin with fear. “You lot find the folk. Come back alive if you can.”

Night swallowed the Long Road long before the forest did. Wind knifed through their cloaks, and the rain returned, drumming on Valen’s hat like impatient fingers. They camped a mile inside Westwood, a single lantern throwing nervous silhouettes onto the trees.

The cat slept; the rest did not. Somewhere beyond the fire, a merchant’s voice bargained with emptiness until Rigg stepped into the dark and discovered a peddler from Red Larch too stubborn—or too foolish—to recognise terror.
Boots of Elvenkind, gloves for snaring missiles, half-plates and spellbooks changed hands faster than introductions the-story. By dawn the party was better equipped, very nearly broke, and Dino owed Rigg one hundred twenty-two gold—an obligation both men recorded and neither intended to forget.

Kryptgarden greeted them two days later, an ocean of mist and moss that made lesser forests feel like potted plants. Vines drooped like trap lines; blossoms the colour of bruises opened at their approach.
Laydrick trudged up a rise and stopped cold. “Bones,” he said. Cow bones, gnawed clean and scored by teeth that curved like sickles session-03-whispers-of-….

Dino crouched, gloved fingers tracing the marks. “Green dragon—adult, maybe worse.”
High Jinks brightened, because of course she did. “Imagine the conversation! ‘Oh mighty wyrm, could we borrow your lair and maybe a cup of villagers?’”
No-one laughed. Even the wind chose silence.

They pressed deeper and found a shrine half-devoured by ivy: Corellon’s smile weather-worn but patient. Each left an offering—inked calligraphy, a silver coin, a murmured spell. The forest sighed, and somewhere a hidden spring chimed.
A click echoed beneath the shrine. Rigg lifted a moon-touched longsword, its pale glow turning raindrops into falling stars the-story.
“Subtle,” Valen remarked. “Nothing says stealth like portable moonlight.”

Near evening, the trail of the vanished villagers reappeared—shuffled footprints, some large, some heartbreakingly small, all leading toward a stone rise tangled in roots.
High Jinks flexed her claws. “This smells like a lair.”
“Or a mouth,” Laydrick added.

They slipped through a cracked archway and the world tipped. The air chilled; the moss grew fur that writhed at the corner of sight. Three ettercaps skittered from above, silk spitting from their jaws.

Fire blossomed in Valen’s palm, incinerating one mid-leap. Laydrick raised his holy symbol; radiant light seared another. Rigg swung the new sword in a silver arc that carved the third creature from mandible to belly.

Silence reclaimed the corridor—until a shape untangled itself from shadow. A drow, cloak torn, blades low.
“We are not of the Spider Queen,” he said, voice brittle. “They took your villagers. Ours, too.” His name was DeSeth, and desperation clung to him like wet silk the-story.

The party followed deeper and soon the forest fell away, replaced by a pool still as glass under an impossible sky. Starlight shone where no stars could live—and at the water’s edge waited Her.

The Green Witch of Kryptgarden looked like every story ever whispered around a fire and none of them at once: woman, serpent, storm, tree the-story.
“Children of surface dust,” she said, voice wind-sharp. “Your villagers walk below. Follow, if you cherish futility.”

Laydrick stepped forward, plate softly glowing in her presence. “Why warn us?”
“Because the Underdark eats minds, and mine taste sweet,” High Jinks muttered.
The Witch’s smile flickered. “Because the forest tires of screams.”

With a gesture, the pool opened upon a stairway of roots. She left them gifts: a ring that made whispers travel like drums, two potions thick as garnet, and a vial of swirling green taken by Valen without a word the-story.

They descended. Earth clenched behind them. Light died. And the real hunt began.

Underdark stone pressed close, sweating secrets. Once, they found a villager’s body—skull neatly opened, brain gone.
Laydrick crossed himself. “Moradin keep us.”
“No, thank you,” came an echo neither dwarf nor god.

The ceiling shifted; spiders dropped in hungry silence. Chaos bloomed—fire, steel, eldritch light. Rigg’s wrench rang like a cracked bell; Jinks scampered across webs like a nightmare’s house-cat; Laydrick’s mace met chitin with a sound halfway between sermon and hammerfall Spelljammer-session-7-r….

When the last spider twitched its last, DeSeth re-appeared—bloodied, hopeful, terrified. “Portal,” he rasped. “One level down. Mind Flayers feed them through.”

No one cheered. Some battles promise victory; this promised only another staircase. But the road behind led nowhere except an empty town and guilt that weighed more than coin.

Rigg tightened his grip on the glowing blade. “All right. Let’s go do something profoundly stupid.”

High Jinks flexed her ring-hand; the air hummed, carrying her whisper down the endless tunnel. “Knock knock,” she told the darkness. “Dinner’s here.”

And the darkness answered.

Chapter IV: The Green Witch’s Warning

Wherein dragons speak in riddles, elven ruins reveal more than dust, and a dwarf attempts diplomacy by glowing angrily.

The drow’s name was DeSeth, and he had that curious air shared by all creatures who walk ancient caverns with daggers tucked into places knives don’t belong.

He claimed peace, which was odd for someone coated in spider guts and followed by shadows. But his words held weight—and the party was in no shape to argue, covered in blood, webbing, and whatever it was that leaked from Quaggoth spleens.

“We are not of the Spider Queen,” DeSeth said, offering a hand to Leydrick, who wiped his mace clean and ignored it.

“That’s what the last guy said before summoning a squid god,” muttered Rigg.

“They hunt the surface now. Took your villagers. Took many of ours too.” His eyes narrowed. “But we know where.”

Valen, still cradling his burnt spellbook, looked up. “You’ve seen their portal?”

DeSeth nodded. “We know where they took them. But it is not a place of life.”

“Perfect,” said High Jinks. “We’re allergic to comfort.”

They followed DeSeth deeper until the forest broke open like a wound—revealing a pool of still water so clear it reflected stars never seen on this plane. At its edge stood *her*.

The Green Witch.

She was tall—taller than a human, but not quite elven. Her form shimmered between shapes: woman, tree, serpent, storm. Robes of woven leaves draped her like a second forest. Her eyes—yellow, lidless, eternal—met each of theirs in turn and saw too much.

“Children of surface dust,” she said. “You tread in root and blood.”

“Hello,” said Rigg. “We brought sarcasm and unresolved trauma.”

The Witch’s smile flickered like candlelight. “Your villagers are not here.”

“Dead?” asked Leydrick.

“Taken. Below. The ones who lived... are food for the ones who don’t.”

There was silence.

Then High Jinks stepped forward, tail flicking. “Why tell us?”

“Because the Underdark is a hungry place. It does not need more minds to chew. Go after them, if you must. But do not bring more.”

Valen, eyes unreadable beneath his wide-brimmed hat, asked softly, “And if we do?”

The Witch blinked. “Then the forest will stop you.”

Before she left, she gestured to a twisted tree behind the pool. With a sigh, it opened like a blooming wound.

Within were ruins—elven stonework, vines grown over memory, and at its center, a shattered altar.

They stepped carefully, reverently. It felt sacred. And old. Older than any of them could name.

On the altar were three things:

- A **silver ring**, etched with vines, still warm. When High Jinks slid it on, the wind whispered *“Speak, and be heard.”*
- Two **potions**, bright red, thicker than blood—greater healing, thick with forest magic.
- And a third potion, dark green, swirling slowly in its vial. Valen took it without comment.

“Loot with purpose,” Rigg said. “The best kind.”

Then, with a deep breath and the forest watching, they descended into the Underdark.

The earth swallowed them. The light faded. And suddenly, the world was made of pressure and whisper.

They walked single file through tunnels wet with time. Once, they found a skeleton—a villager—his skull opened, his brain missing.

“Lovely,” said Rigg. “Very welcoming.”

“Better than missing your *soul*,” muttered High Jinks.

The path twisted. Stone became bone. And then the ambush came.

They had just entered a domed cavern when the ceiling *moved*.

The spiders dropped silently. No hiss. No warning. Just weight and hunger. One landed atop Valen, pinning him beneath long black legs.

Another snapped at High Jinks, whose Boots of Elvenkind did not squeak—but her voice did.

“OH GODS NO—!”

She darted backward, claws flashing, slicing across mandibles.

Rigg struck like a bolt from the blue—his wrench swinging in a brutal arc that *caved* in the spider’s abdomen. Its body cracked and crumpled like wet wood, and it collapsed in a heap.

Another spider lunged at Leydrick—but the dwarf didn’t flinch.

“Not today, you eight-legged bowltrap,” he roared, brandishing his holy symbol.

Radiant flame burst from his hands, and the creature shrieked, legs curling as it dissolved into ash.

Valen pushed the spider off with a growl and flung a *Firebolt* point-blank into its face. It exploded in a shower of ichor, and the smell was... unfortunate.

Then the Drow appeared—one wounded, darting from behind a stalagmite, blade flicking toward Jinks.

She danced back. “Oh come on! Aren’t we *done* with surprises?”

Dino, quiet all this time, raised his longsword—now glowing faintly—and drove it *through* the Drow’s thigh. The attacker collapsed with a groan.

“We keep one,” Dino muttered. “They always know more than they tell.”

The cavern quieted. Only the sound of dripping water and tired lungs remained.

They bound the Drow. He hissed but spoke.

“You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

“Oh we *do*,” Rigg said. “We just choose to walk loudly and armed.”

The Drow’s eyes darted to the glowing ring on High Jinks’ paw. “That belonged to my mother.”

“Then she had excellent taste,” Jinks said, and turned away.

Chapter V: Prisoners of the Deep

Wherein the walls have teeth, the Modron finds purpose, and Rigg meets a monster worse than debt.

The tunnels narrowed.

Gone were the broad stone passages of ancient elven design. Now the air thickened with damp rot and psychic pressure. The deeper they went, the more the Underdark whispered. Not words. Not sounds. *Thoughts*—slippery, secondhand thoughts that wormed through the skull and asked impolite questions like *Do you matter?* and *What is your flavor?*

Even the Githyanki scowled.

“This place stinks of predator,” he said.

“That’d be Rigg’s socks,” muttered High Jinks.

“Oi!” Rigg called ahead. “They’re enchanted!”

“Yeah,” she said, “with mildew.”

The cavern opened without warning—a wide, domed chamber rimmed with stalactites and unnatural stillness. No air moved. No moss grew. Just silence... and tension.

At the far end, a pile of bones—villager-sized, stacked too neatly.

“Definitely a warm, welcoming ambiance,” whispered Jinks.

Then the ground moved.

No. Not the ground. A *stalagmite* shifted—slowly, imperceptibly—and split open into a gaping maw rimmed with yellowed fangs. Four tendrils slithered out, each ending in barbed hooks slick with moisture.

Rigg blinked. “That’s not a stalagmite.”

The Roper struck.

A tendril *snapped* across the cavern, latching onto Rigg's torso. With a cry of surprised profanity, he was yanked off his feet and dragged toward the monster's gullet.

"I regret every choice I've ever made!" he yelled.

Valen didn't hesitate. Fire blossomed from his hand, arcing over the battlefield and slamming into the creature's hide. The blast seared a black scar across its stone-like flesh—but the Roper *screeched*, a sound that came from nowhere and *everywhere*.

The second tendril caught Leydrick, wrapping around his waist. The dwarf roared and slammed his mace against the ropey limb—but it held fast.

"By Moradin's beard, I will *not* die to a glorified stalactite!"

Then it caught Dino.

He didn't shout. He didn't panic.

He *clicked*.

His steel defender—hitherto quiet—suddenly leapt forward, glowing blue runes illuminating its form. It latched onto the tendril dragging its master and *bit down*. Sparks and blood flew. The Roper screamed again—shaking stones loose from the ceiling.

"NOW!" shouted Dino.

High Jinks took that as an invitation. She dashed forward, leapt off a loose boulder, and slammed both eldritch-charged paws into the Roper's hide. The blasts dug deep, lighting the creature from within.

For a moment, it spasmed, light pouring from its toothy maw. Then it fell *still*.

Rigg tumbled free from its slack grip and landed hard.

"Is... is it dead?"

Lagerick walked up and calmly bashed it twice with his mace. "Now it is."

They didn't hear it arrive. They *felt* it. A sudden shift in the room's... logic.

From the shadows floated a metal sphere. Not round—more like a cube that had lost confidence. It had spindly limbs, blinking eyes, and a faint mechanical whir that echoed with unnatural rhythm.

It tilted its head. "Biologicals. Greetings. Query: am I still abducted?"

"Uh... what?" Rigg asked.

“I am designator Mono,” it continued. “Modron designation: quadrant-level logic node. Escaped hostiles via extraplanar gap. Ship: broken. Sky: incorrect.”

High Jinks stepped forward, eyes wide. “…You’re adorable.”

“I am *not* for cuddling,” Mono replied indignantly. “Designated functions include navigation, fault reporting, and structured diplomacy via thermodynamic recursion matrix. Not hugs.”

Lagerick knelt beside it. “Can you help us?”

“I am not a healer,” Mono said flatly. “But I possess the following knowledge units: Underdark topography, hostile protocol identification, and banishment safety protocols.”

“Sounds like a yes,” said Valen.

Mono blinked. “…Yes. Also: you smell like fire. I approve.”

With Mono’s guidance, they avoided three more ambushes, one pit trap, and a room filled with glowing spores that whispered in halfling voices.

Eventually, the tunnels opened into a bioluminescent sanctuary—moonlight that had never seen a moon, waterfalls that hung sideways, and a people who lived in defiance of Lolth.

The Drow enclave of Eilistraee—the Moon Dancer goddess—was a place of silver and sorrow.

Priestesses met them at the threshold, weapons half-drawn. DeSeth spoke quickly, in Undercommon.

“They’re with me,” he said. “They fight the ones who took our kin.”

After a long pause, the guards stood down.

They were led through a city of carved stone and glowing crystal, to a dais flanked by guards in ceremonial paint. An elder priestess stood at its center—her hair pale, her eyes softer than expected.

She spoke like moonlight.

“The surface stirs,” she said. “The Illithid grow bold.”

“We’ve seen their work,” said High Jinks, gently holding the hand of a rescued child.

“They have turned an old war den into a prison. They harvest minds. Your people are inside.”

“And you won’t help?” asked Valen, voice flat.

“We cannot. Not yet. But we can show you *where.*”

Mono projected a map. It unfolded in pale blue light. Two locations pulsed: the prison. And a second...

“A portal,” Mono explained. “Used by the hostiles to transfer captives. Location: unstable. Temporal feedback detected.”

Rigg stared. “So either we go to jail, or jump into a wormhole.”

“Well,” said Lagerick. “What’s an adventure without existential threat?”

Chapter VI: Vault of the Illithid

Wherein walls whisper lies, prisoners are found but sanity is misplaced, and a wizard considers setting the entire Underdark on fire.

Mono’s map pulsed with blue light, suspended in midair like a thought no one wanted to finish.

Two glowing markers floated before the party: one labeled *Containment Node: Prison Cluster 11A*, and the other—flickering erratically—simply read *Transference Gate - Inactive/Fractured*.

“What do you mean ‘fractured’?” Rigg asked.

“Portal structure compromised,” Mono chirped. “Destination: unknown. Integrity: insufficient. Thrill factor: high.”

“See,” High Jinks said, “this is why I hate science. It’s always daring you to die.”

“I like it,” Dino murmured.

“Of course you do.”

They chose the prison.

It took two hours through twisting Underdark arteries, the air thick with spores and the psychic residue of former screams. They passed stone walls grown like coral, glowing veins of crystal etched with nonsensical patterns—except to Valen, who paused more than once to study them.

“These aren’t just Illithid markings,” he murmured. “They’re hybrid. Cross-woven with something... older.”

“How much older?” Leydrick asked.

Valen didn’t answer. But his hand rested tighter on his wand.

Mono beeped. “Warning. Five minutes from target. Scouting formation advised. Heroic one-liners optional.”

The prison didn’t rise from the stone. It *sank* into it—embedded in a cliffside, its walls not built but grown. A fusion of stone and steel and something slicker, darker, and living.

Four towers—all humming faintly—circled a central pit that led underground. In the distance, a Mind Flayer silhouette shimmered, vanishing behind a wall of greenish psionic mist.

“I hate that thing,” whispered Rigg. “I hate the way it walks like it knows something about me I don’t.”

“It does,” said Valen. “That’s the problem.”

Dino turned to Mono. “Entry plan?”

“Plan established. Step one: breach side hatch. Step two: avoid alerting guardian constructs. Step three: recover captives and any loot that isn’t bolted down. Step four: *don’t* die.”

“You forgot step five,” High Jinks said. “Panic.”

Mono rotated. “Panic is inefficient. Recommend denial or sarcasm instead.”

They breached the side hatch using a combination of magic and wrench-based diplomacy. The moment the door peeled open, a wave of cold air hit them—metallic, sterile, and tinged with something like burnt thoughts.

Inside: metal catwalks, hanging chains, and glowing panels of translucent psychic barrier fields. Cages—some suspended, some opened. Inside a few: limp villagers, barely breathing.

In one corner, a terminal pulsed with runes.

“Rigged,” Valen said.

“Technically it’s *Rigg’s,*” Rigg corrected.

“No, I mean the terminal is—”

A blast of psychic energy erupted from the panel. Rigg was thrown backwards, skidding across the floor and slamming into a railing.

“—trapped,” Valen finished.

“Thanks for the update,” Rigg groaned.

A hiss. A pulse.

The guardians activated.

Three *constructs* floated down from the upper tier—not Illithid, but forged in their image: long-limbed, eyeless, and crowned with crystal orbs that flickered with psionic charge.

“Kill the intruders,” they said in perfect, mechanical unison.

“Mono?” shouted Leydrick.

“Combat routine: RUN OR BURN,” the Modron declared.

The first construct fired a bolt of psychic force. It hit Valen full in the chest, lifting him off the ground. He crashed down hard, coat smoking.

The second lunged toward High Jinks, claws swiping. She ducked, twisted, and countered with a twin blast of eldritch energy that *ripped* through its midsection. Sparks flew. It stumbled.

The third reached Rigg—but the rogue was already moving, wrench in hand. He ducked low, slammed the weapon into the machine’s knee, and leapt aside as the construct crumpled forward.

“That's right!” Rigg roared. “*I fix problems!*”

Valen, groaning, pulled himself up. Blood smeared his lip. Fire danced in his eyes.

“No more restraint,” he growled.

He lifted his hands.

BOOM.

A fireball erupted in the center of the room—tight, controlled, and merciless. Flames surged out, consuming the remaining constructs in a split-second inferno. One tried to scream.

It didn’t make it.

Ash drifted through the metal chamber.

They raced to the cages. Some villagers stirred. Others did not.

Lagerick called on his divine magic, hands glowing warm gold as he restored breath to two unconscious men. Jinks slipped a lockpick into one door and popped it open in under five seconds.

“Come on, darlings,” she whispered. “You’re not soup yet.”

Mono hovered over the remaining terminal. “I can unlock the rest,” it said. “But the noise will attract more attention.”

Rigg glanced around. “How *much* more attention?”

The walls answered.

A deep rumble echoed up from below.

Not a tremor.

Not footsteps.

Something... *thinking*.

Chapter VII: Engines of Limbo

Wherein the vault awakens, minds are tested, and a Modron learns what it means to panic.

The vault rumbled with purpose.

Not a collapse. Not structural. This was rhythmic—like breath. A sleeping god slowly inhaling.

The rescued villagers clutched at the party with trembling fingers. They were half-starved, their eyes flickering with psionic residue. One kept muttering something about *machines behind the sky.* Another simply wept and pointed downward.

Mono hovered in place, jittering faintly.

“The core is activating,” it said. “You should not be here.”

“We get that a lot,” Rigg replied.

“But this time,” Mono continued, “I *mean it.*”

Valen stood over the terminal. He had one hand braced on the wall, the other tracing a trail of glowing symbols. His crimson coat was scorched, and blood seeped through a tear in his sleeve—but his eyes were lit with determination.

“They’re using the villagers as psychic fuel,” he said. “Draining latent arcana to power a transference gate.”

“So what?” High Jinks asked, helping an elderly man sit down. “Teleportation? More abductions?”

“No,” Valen said. “*Exploration.* The Flayers are mapping unstable planes—testing the limits of a network too dangerous for their own kind.”

“Which means,” Leydrick growled, “they’re sending *us*.”

Dino's voice was flat. “Or what’s left of us.”

They followed the pulse downward.

The lowest chamber opened into a dome of impossible geometry. Gravity bent. Angles refused to behave. Panels hovered, suspended in blue static. At the center: a dais surrounded by floating crystals, each housing a suspended villager—nude, trembling, and wrapped in strands of psionic energy.

And standing before it all—

Three Mind Flayers.

Their robes drifted as if underwater. Their eyes glowed like dying stars. They did not speak. They *imposed.*

Mono shuddered. “These are Elder Designates. Extraplanar research caste. They should not exist on this plane.”

“Too late,” muttered Rigg.

One Flayer raised a hand.

The world screamed.

They didn’t attack with blades. No claws. No lightning bolts. No fanfare.

Instead, the Mind Flayers spoke into *thought.*

Valen staggered, clutching his temples.

“*He sees you still, Ember Sleuth.*”

“No,” he growled. “Stay out.”

Rigg heard whispers in his own voice. A vision—himself, alone, old, wrench rusted. Forgotten.

High Jinks gasped, her patron *growling* into her ears, offended, furious, but also... intrigued.

Dino dropped to one knee, eyes twitching as memories of Githyanki war-rituals flooded back—*and twisted.*

Only Leydrick remained upright.

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD,” the dwarf roared, slamming his holy symbol to the ground. Light *exploded* outward in a pulse of divine energy that shattered the nearest crystal. The suspended villager fell with a scream—but alive.

The Mind Flayers *hissed*.

Now came claws.

Now came pain.

Valen spun into action. Fire burst from his hands, licking across the battlefield like a hungry tide. One Flayer caught full in the blast staggered, tentacles burning.

Rigg vaulted over a shattered console, wrench swinging. He collided with a Flayer mid-levitation, knocking it sideways. “This one’s mine!”

High Jinks struck next, eldritch energy swirling in her paws. She danced between pillars of psionic force, her laughter manic, her strikes *furious.*

Dino raised his arcane blade, charged with electrical hum. He called to his Steel Defender, which lunged forward and *bit* one Flayer’s leg. It shrieked.

But the third...

It reached the dais.

The central crystal flared—bright, then brighter still. The villagers screamed. The platform beneath them shifted, split into floating fragments.

Valen turned. “No—NO! They’re forcing a jump!”

Mono’s voice crackled. “Chrono-logic instability detected. Reality fold in progress. Portal destination: *undefined.*”

“Can you stop it?” Rigg yelled.

Mono hesitated. “I... I can’t.”

“You *always* can!”

“I am scared,” Mono whispered.

For the first time, the Modron trembled.

The third Flayer’s hand sank into the crystal. A surge of psionic energy *ripped* outward.

Everyone screamed.

Rigg saw stars blink and turn away.

High Jinks felt her patron *reel,* hissing, “Not this way—”

Leydrick glowed with divine light, shielding the nearest villagers.

Valen raised both hands.

“Not. Yet!”

He channeled *everything*—fire, force, sheer will—into a final spell.

A shell of blazing energy wrapped the party.

The portal *detonated.*

Light swallowed everything.