

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 wagged 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.

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