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.

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