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?”

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