

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*.

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