

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 *ferocious*.

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.

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