

Foreword

I decided to write a novel in November 2021. I've tried this before and my previous effort only yielded 33,000 words. It was always painful, frustrating and a little humiliating since I know a lot of people (including my wife Heather) who have completed this challenge (she's done it twice!) . But I had an idea, a strong one, and I had a feeling I could do it.

I play a D&D character named Umbra Luna. When I made the character I set out to create someone who had deep roots in the Forgotten Realms (the "official D&D setting") and so she had a lot of story hooks from already published in novels, game materials, and adventures. Then, I played her in an ongoing game with a small group that only deepened her personality and nuances. I **know** this character. But during an adventure, for some reason I did something even I didn't expect.

I let an enemy go free. I could not explain to you why, at the time, I did it. It was the character asserting itself. But it left me with this huge gaping hole in my understanding of this character. It made me (as her) doubt her own motivations. It, in short, created a crisis for her (me). This, my friends, is the stuff of great fiction. But the campaign did not seem likely to veer into my navel-gazing self-reflection of this character. But I still wanted to know the answers!

WHY did she let the enemy go? WHAT happened as a result of that rash decision? WHEN was it going to come back and bite her? HOW was it going to affect everyone around her? I started to think about these questions and that's when I saw the NaNoWriMo Announcement. And so that was the motivation to write the novel. I seized the opportunity and started making notes. I announced my intention of writing this book and on November 1, 2021 I started typing it out.

I can write pretty fast when inspired and so my stats speak for themselves. I wrote on average 65 minutes a day, at 3 words per minute. I averaged about 2000 words a day and hit my "par" goal to keep ahead of the writing curve all but 3 days of the days I worked on this project. The only days I didn't hit par, I didn't write for various reasons.

I actually hit the NaNoWriMo goal of 50K words on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. I finished the novel on the 29th. It was just under 60,000 words and has 12 chapters. But I answered all my questions in the process. I have a better understanding of her and her faith, emotions, and motivations. It resolved her conflicts and hopefully it may become canon in our campaign.

For you, I've tried to fill in the backstory as much as I can without derailing the novel. There's a lot that is just sort of taken for granted because it is based on a character with some history. I don't always fill out all of that history in the story, but I hope you have enough to follow the story on its own. I wrote this because I had to know the answers to her questions.. I hope you enjoy it and don't be too critical.

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November 29, 2021

Chapter One

Umbra Luna sat quietly on the porch of the “*Lif your Spirits*” tavern at Trollskull Manor and drank her coffee. She watched the early morning sun on the damp streets of Waterdeep as people started their day. Her mind drifted back to her early life as a watchman in the city.

A simpler time, as she remembered it, but there was no shortage of trouble in those days. She idly fingered the small scar along her jawline: a reminder to her to never drop her guard, even around seemingly harmless halflings and gnomes. She was likely the youngest and smallest member of the Watch in those days. She had joined when she was just sixteen by lying about her age (“Elves don’t look their real age”). The older Watchmen had called her ‘little girl’ and they’d not been wrong.

Umbra was slight, half-elven of moon elf heritage. She had a pretty face even though she wore her hair in a utilitarian bob that did nothing to enhance her beauty. Rather it made her look severe. She had learned at an early age that people tended to underestimate her so she practiced speaking with authority, being direct, and forceful. It caught people’s attention. Nobody wanted to be seen as weak when facing down a woman who was only five-foot-four and weighed less than 10 stone. But they usually lost any confrontation.

If Umbra knew one thing, it was how to fight. She was faster and more precise than her brutish, thug-like watchmen. She had the presence to draw the attention of troublemakers and keep it. She had a way with words that told them that she was not going to suffer their shenanigans and if pushed would stop the trouble quickly and brutally. She earned the respect of the Watch. Until she pushed the wrong person.

She was dropped by the Watch and became an adventurer. An oddball profession that was as ubiquitous in Waterdeep as carpenters or sailors. She had formed a private bond with a group of other adventurers over a strange series of events that had them running through the city and acquiring Trollskull Manor and the distinction of being considered nobles as a result.

A coffee pot floated over seemingly by itself and waited patiently.

“Sure, Lif, top me up,” she said distractedly, pushing her cup and shaking away her nostalgia. The invisible ghost that gave the tavern its name poured another cup. She and her friends shared responsibility for Trollskull Manor and its ghost. She hesitated to say ‘owned’ but they operated it as a food and drink establishment. It had become a place to meet and greet and a sometimes place for wayward children to rest and get a solid meal in their belly.

The sandwich board sign out front read “Neighborhood breakfast” and a few of her neighbors had come over to grab one of the resident baker, Rohensia’s, signature ‘scones of Galorr’ and sit with the neighborhood shopkeepers and residents to meet and talk to them face to face.

This, like many of the things they did in *Lif your Spirits*, were all about keeping her and her fellow adventurers connected to this neighborhood. They wanted a reason to talk to their

neighbors. They wanted to look them in the eye and say *we are one of you*. If the price of that was a tray of baked goods and a few pots of coffee, it was worth the price.

A purring beside her chair made Umbra glance down only to see Renard the black cat sitting in the sunny patch of the porch. He was cleaning sausage grease off his whiskers. "You should stop eating such fatty foods, you won't be able to fit into your armor vest if you keep eating like that," she said.

He stopped his ritual cleaning to look at her sarcastically (did he ever look at anyone otherwise, she mused). "If the children you employ here are going to make food offerings to me," he said in his melodious voice, "then I am obligated to graciously accept them." He then resumed licking himself clean. That was, apparently, the last word on that.

The gang of misfit children known as The Horde busied themselves with their chores. Umbra and company had adopted the mob of urchins and offered to feed and educate them, treat them for illnesses and such in exchange for light labor. And sometimes they'd get treated with coins from the patrons for "helping" which gave them a path out of poverty in Waterdeep.

From sunrise to well into the night the inn at Trollskull manor was a bustle of activity. Business was good and the staff were happy. But Umbra felt as if she'd left part of herself deep inside Undermountain. A part of her that she both regretted and longed for. And she knew she'd be going back sooner rather than later.

Undermountain, the multi-level dungeon filled with monsters, perilous magic, and the mad mage Halaster was a big part of the city. It connected the fairly mundane city to the pirate port and criminal city of Skullport. It was an occasional source of danger as monsters or occasionally gangs of roving humanoids came to the surface to steal, raid, and cause mayhem. And of course it was a draw for would-be adventurers.

Like a daydream she remembered that particular mission to Undermountain. Seeing *her* for the first time. She had been with her adopted mother, Vlonwelv Auvryndar, the drow matron mother of House Auvryndar. Umbra and her friends had waged a devastating war on House Auvryndar. Four of Vlonwelv's natural children had paid the ultimate price during that war. And, although Umbra realized the inevitability of their deaths as the price of war she regretted it, nonetheless. Which is why it was so surprising to her when she felt such deep and confusing feelings upon seeing Zress Orlezzair for the first time while she was standing next to her adoptive mother.

Umbra patted the hilt of Imyrsil, her elven moonblade by her side. The sentient weapon had sent an emotion, a thought that had prompted her recollections. "Yes, old friend, I still feel bad about it."

It had been a just war against the drow forces of House Auvryndar. They were threatening to take over the upper levels of Undermountain on the way to attacking the city. Once Umbra and her friends had realized the scope of the endeavor they'd recruited allies, built defenses and pushed back to the Auvryndar stronghold known as The Gauntlet.

Imyrsil's mental images were unrelenting, flooding her mind with the moment her team had executed the plan she had formulated, the one they'd discussed and the plan she desperately wished she'd not initiated. She and her group negotiated a truce with Vlonwelv to destroy the monstrous tool of Halaster, Muriel, and as that creature fell they betrayed the truce and slew her, ending the Auvryndar family and clan's influence in Undermountain.

It had been her task to vanquish Zress. And even as she fought she had pleaded with the drow warrior to surrender. Umbra did not want to be forced to have to kill her. But even at the end Umbra pulled her final blow and rendered her unconscious. She took her mithril armor, the mark of her ties to House Auvryndar and left her a note pleading with her to forsake her allegiance to Lolth and the drow Matriarchy.

Then she and her friends left. And then the crushing feelings of loss, regret, sadness, and heartache flooded her heart. Even now, recalling it, she had to take a few deep breaths to control her urge to weep. She had spent many days weeping privately in the meditation rooms at the temple of Selûne. And, as ever, she thought that perhaps there would be no more tears to shed, but there were always more.

She had sought atonement for betraying her word to the drow matriarch. The priestess of Selûne had waved a hand dismissing her concern. "You cannot be beholden to evil, Umbra," she had said, "You, my child are the bright light of the ancient order; bearer of Imyrsil the moonblade and the chosen child of Selûne. You are unbound from evil."

Umbra had not relented, "I know that moon mother, but I did give my word and it is my vow that I will respect the ancient ways. It is my word that binds me, not hers."

The high priestess smiled at her. She understood that a paladin's vow was her identity and that this had rocked Umbra's foundation. Although in the church's eyes she had committed no sin, she could see Umbra felt she had violated her own vows. The priestess gave her a quest to find and defeat an enemy in Undermountain.

She and her friends had returned to Undermountain. They almost immediately began to hear rumours that Zress had joined the scattered forces of House Auvryndar and had founded their own faction. Umbra knew very little beyond that. She'd avoided any confrontation with her on that expedition knowing that if she ran into Zress she would not be able to rely on her inner strength to survive the encounter.

They'd delved deep into Undermountain and defeated the threat and completed the quest. They'd returned intact once more. According to the Church she had atoned for completing her quest. And yet, here Umbra sat, the weight of unfinished business still plaguing her.

A hooded man slid into a seat at the table on the porch. Renard's ears rose and he growled in a low tone. Umbra did not outwardly react, but every nerve on her skin was alive and alert. He held up two dark-skinned hands, "I am not here for trouble. I came here to return a favor."

Umbra searched the drow's face. He looked familiar; she remembered him as one of the many drow warriors they'd allowed to escape under vow of leaving the service of Lolth in

Undermountain. These had been mostly males who, on reflection, had decided that the matriarchy was unfair to them and that a new beginning in Skullport or even Waterdeep with the Bregan D'aerthe might be more advantageous.

"I remember you. House Freth, wasn't it?" Umbra said, not relaxing her guard, but keeping her voice even.

"Vanar Freth, yes. You allowed me to escape from Arcturiadom with my life. For which I am grateful. I made my way from there towards Skullport, but the remnants of House Freth captured me. I was questioned ruthlessly by the priestess of my house, Erelal Freth. She asked a lot of questions about you and your allies. And, I confess, I told them all I knew. I was resigned to die at that point.

"But I was rescued by an unlikely ally. A hobgoblin warlord and his companion flumph assaulted the Freth stronghold and I was able to escape by invoking your name. So, in a manner of speaking, you have saved me twice. I am here to repay you with all the information I can give you."

Umbra touched his hand gently, "I appreciate this, Vanar. Honestly, I do. Would you prefer to go inside? I know the sunlight can be ...irritating."

He did not flinch at her touch as many of the drow did. This small gesture told him that he was being honest with her and it allowed her to slowly unclench her muscles. She and Vanar headed into the tavern. Vanar kept his hood up but he still drew the occasional stare. Her fellow adventurer, the halfling druid Francene came in with two buckets of goat's milk. She shot Umbra a concerned glance, wordlessly asking, "Are you okay?"

Umbra gave the slightest of nods and a subtle hand gesture, "We are good, but be ready, just in case."

Umbra sat and Renard hopped into her lap, some for petting and some for backup. People often underestimated him as a common alleycat. Renard was anything but common. Vanar sat and a cup of tea slid onto the table from nowhere. He jumped slightly. "Where did this come from?" he asked, glancing around worriedly.

Umbra gave a slight smile, "Our resident ghost, Lif. He's very good. I think I recognise it as Bazi tea."

"Bazi?" Vanar looked impressed, "Up here. Where...?"

Umbra shrugged, "I have no idea. Before we took over the place he used to brew beer all by himself. Where does a ghost get yeast anyways?"

Vanar shook his head in amazement and took a small sip. He smiled and held up the cup to the room, "Thank you, Lif, wherever you are. I did not know how much I missed the taste of home."

Umbra allowed him to savor the treat and silently made a note to thank Lif personally for the nice touch. It had gone a long way to relaxing them both. When he finally started to speak she

did not interrupt him with questions until he had spoken his peace. She could tell Renard was listening as she gently stroked his fur.

“While I was imprisoned I could hear a lot of the guards talking. House Freth was reeling after the death of Erelal’s brother, Drivven. She consoled herself, knowing that her daughter would soon be born and that the house’s legacy could be secured.

“There is a household, formerly of Waterdeep, known as the Shadowdusk family. They reside deep within Undermountain in a place known as Shadowdusk Hold. They had been approaching Drivven to become an apprentice to Halastar the Mad. With his demise, apparently Halaster took more notice of you and your group. Your meddling has now earned you his spite.

“But in the meanwhile the shattered House Auvryndar’s forces were lurching through Undermountain seeking you and your companions. It was not long before the two forces with the most hate would pool that hate into one purpose under House Freth.

“The Shadowdusk family is aiding house Freth to unite what remains of Auvryndar. Zress Orleziir and the Yochlochol Chalizana have gathered the remnants of house Auvryndar as the *Ghost Spiders*, an elite fighting force allied with my priestess Erelal. They plan to capture you and offer you as a high gift to Lolth.”

Umbra felt a jolt of emotional electricity run through her as Zress’s name was uttered. She unconsciously rattled her teacup, so she released it. No need to give away more info than she needed to.

“Your friends’ lives will be forfeit, and they will do all they can to cause you the most pain and suffering they can by destroying your life here on the surface and any allies you may have below.”

Umbra sat silent for a long moment. She had worried that this might happen, but even knowing that Zress planned to kill everyone she loved and to offer her to her evil spider queen, Umbra could still not bring herself to hate her. Erelal, on the other hand, she could easily hate. She and her vile family had held her teammate Heulwen’s father, Edwin, prisoner for months. It was during his rescue that Drivven had been killed.

“How soon are they planning to move?” Umbra asked with a steadiness she did not feel.

Vanar looked at the remains in his cup, “They have already begun to attack Azrok’s Legion. It was their counterattack that allowed me to escape. I am not certain but they may have also retaken the fortress on the maze level. The Minotaurs were little threat to the concentrated effort of drow prepared for war.”

The two sat in silence for a long moment. Umbra stood, dumping an indignant Renard on the floor, straightened her sword belt and held out her hand to Vanar. “Thank you, Vanar. Any debt you may have held to me is released. I appreciate this information, and may you remain free to live your life in peace and autonomy. Selûne bless you.”

The drow mage took her hand and shook it matter-of-factly. He had no emotional attachment to this woman but he could not release his feeling of obligation to her. Twice, she had allowed him to escape from bondage. All he had done was warn her. But her gratitude was palpable and he felt as if he'd done good service to her.

"Thank you for the tea," he said with a bow, as was the way of the drow, "I may return when I feel a need to be reminded of home."

"You will be welcome," she said, and he believed her. After all, a paladin's word was her bond.

Umbra gathered her friends in the second floor lounge. Above her was Legs, the phase spider that Francene had befriended. When she first took it on as a pet it was about the size of a muffin. Now, it was nearing the size of a small cart. It lurked in the turret attic of the house and was good at deterring unwelcome visitors. However, he had a habit of spinning webs across the front door since Legs had a hard time understanding the difference between doors and windows.

While none of the adventurers besides Francene could communicate with the creature (not it, them) it did seem to recognise them as 'not food'. And was about as bright as the average small dog. So it was more-or-less house trained. Umbra didn't mind him so much, but he was getting very big and sooner or later the turret room to which he was confined most of the time would be insufficient.

Francene shooed the huge spider away from the lounge as well as the small bevy of rats, bats, mice, bees, butterflies, and all manner of creatures that sort of flocked around her all the time. While the tavern below was successful, the "inn" venture had been less so, mostly because of Legs and George, the giant fire beetle that lived under the porch. For some reason people had a problem spending the night in a building that was co-occupied by these other creatures.

Close by Francene was her son Rolfe. Rolfe was a human whom Francene had raised from a small child. But he was no longer a *small* child, in fact there was little about Rolfe that could be called small. He towered over most of the group. He was brute force incarnate with a dash of unpredictable magic thrown in for good measure.

It was clear that Rolfe had been helping with the animals as his large boots had brought in a healthy dose of manure and mud. Francene fussed at him and he waved a hand making the footprints vanish. Umbra smiled and waved at them both as she poked at the welcoming fire.

Renard curled up on his cushion and rolled over to expose his belly to Theren, the archer. The high elf obliged the cat with scratches which the animal directed expertly to get to the best bits. Renard did not need to claw or bite to say he was done, he just declared, "Enough!" and the scrithing stopped as the cat rolled over.

Theren was a fellow elf, although of the breed of high elves that considered moon elves (well, half-moon elf, in Umbra's case) to be lesser clans. But the two of them had built a base of trust and she was proud to call him a friend and trusted ally, as she was to him. Renard had been Theren's companion and he had made a point of awakening his intelligence as a way to help him survive the dangers of Undermountain. Now, Renard was a party member of his own,

earning a share and being a valued scout and ally. The two friends had grown even closer over the last months.

Heulwen wandered absently into the lounge and sat in the tall-backed winged chair she'd modified to include magnifying lenses, a lectern for books, a pocket for tools and who knows what all other gadgets had been attached to the upholstered contraption. None of the other adventurers wanted to seat themselves in it for fear of what it might do to them accidentally. She grunted a greeting as she plunked into the seat and leaned back. From experience, Umbra knew that she was paying attention even though it appeared the trinket she was fiddling with was the center of her focus.

Umbra made sure everyone was looking at her (in their own way) before she relayed to them her encounter with Vanar earlier that day. Francene was quick to offer to help, "Do you want me to send a bat to follow him? They won't mind."

"No thanks, Francene, he isn't my concern," Umbra said, "My real concern is that they might try something drastic in order to get us to go after them. I'm worried they might lead us into a trap."

Theren spoke in his thick accent, "Are you sure it is not already trap? Ze mage could be ze trap, giving you reason to return to Undermountain. Drawing you down."

"I can't rule it out," Umbra conceded, "But he seemed sincere and genuinely grateful for us getting him out. I'm going to say this is a heads up, but one we can't ignore. Azrok's Legion is taking the brunt of this. Doomcrown - or whatever he is calling himself these days - is hitting back at them with the Death's Head Phalanx, but that isn't going to last for long. He's brave, but he's not the commander he thinks he is."

Azrok's Legion had been their primary means of defending Waterdeep since their first encounters with the drow. A loose conglomeration of Hobgoblins, goblins, bugbears and other goblinoids had occupied the ruins of the ancient Melairkyn dwarf city of Stromkuhldur.

These goblins, hobgoblins, bugbears which lived in Stromkuhldur as Azrok's Legion had been in decline when they'd first encountered them. Now, fed by regular commerce from Waterdeep and emboldened by the friendship of a powerful group like Umbra and her friends, they were again in ascendance. The wayward son of the Azrok, Doomcrown, had left in disgust only to return to find himself welcomed and put to work defending the places that the Legion had reopened under their control.

Below Stromkuhldur was the Twisted Caverns. Doomcrown and the Death's Head Phalanx, the elite Hobgoblin fighters he commanded, had taken the caverns as their base and were conducting raids against the Drow and had pushed them back as far as the Maze level.

Stromkuhldur was located on the Saurgauth level where their friend "The Alchemist" created his special salve. That salve had been a financial boon to the party since it converted the relatively common water orb fungus into a source of a mead-like alcohol. The party established an exclusive on the concoction buying it in bulk and using it to create a supply chain that ran through the upper levels of Undermountain and operated by the goblinoids that lived there.

The goblins of the trading post known jokingly as “Flavortown” was run by the Rustbone tribe. They were paid to smuggle the water orbs to the surface. Usually they’d be paid in weapons and armor. Items made in Trollskull alley by the genasi couple Avi and Embric, the “Smiths of Steam and Steel”. Food was also traded, food prepared by Rohensia the chef at Trollskull manor, or at least acquired by her. Sometimes they’d trade ale from their own cellars. The Goblins were amenable to barter as much as (perhaps even more than) gold. The Mutual partnership and alliance with Azrok’s Legion meant there was a level of protection for the city from threats from below.

But if the information that Vanar had provided was true, then Doomcrown was losing ground and the drow had reclaimed both the troglodyte caves and the Gauntlet. With a war, the buffer they’d built to protect the city was threatened.

The war against the forces of House Freth and House Auvryndar had been almost an accident. They’d been an obstacle to the reason they’d been in Undermountain to begin with. But after they’d killed enough of them, the target they’d drawn on themselves could not be safely ignored. And now there was a growing army of drow forces from below ready to blow a hole through the carefully cultivated defenses that they’d laid in order to exact revenge on this assembled group.

She pulled out her maps of the dungeon complex known as Undermountain and unrolled them on the low table in the room. They were heavily notated in colored pencils and chalk. Names, arrows and other marks designated the ways into and through the levels. She showed them the maps of the Gauntlet and the Maze level, and where House Freth had re-taken the fortifications there.

Umbra sat and let the group contemplate that for a moment. Heulwen looked up from the object she had been examining, “Perhaps we could add to the defenses from the other allies we’ve made: Zox, Wyllow, even the Sarguth Hags might be willing to help. None of them are particularly enamoured of Halaster.”

Theren chimed in, “Even the bullywogs of the swamp owe us, although I can’t say that they are particularly inclined to help anyone. They are selfish like that.”

Renard spoke sleepily from his cushion. He didn’t even bother to open his eyes, “What about Jhesiyra?”

The group turned to him. Rolfe muttered, “Who is that again?”

Rolfe stretched and yawned before elaborating, “The crystal entity that guards the gates. You know, ‘the voice of the gatekeeper’?”

Francene mused, “She’s got no love for Halaster, that’s for sure.”

Umbra had to concede the point, “And she’s a lot more powerful than any of us, individually.”

Rolfe had an idea, “What about the Blackstaff, or Laeren Silverhand from Waterdeep? Would they help?”

Umbra grimaced, "They've not helped much in the past. They are busy with Waterdeep's problems. They've given us a lot of latitude to operate our supply chain as long as it serves a purpose but otherwise, Undermountain is literally beneath them. Mirt might be our only ally. He at least understands what's at stake."

Theren said, "Yes, but it will not be free or out of goodness of heart. Mirt will profit or he will not help."

Umbra nodded, "Well, let's see what we can do up here before we make yet another trip into Undermountain."

She sighed. She had thought that she was done making this journey. I meant revisiting the very place where her shame was lurking. Her mind wanted to worry about what might happen if she encountered Zress. What would she say? "I'm sorry I betrayed and killed your mother?" or perhaps, "I don't know why but I love you. I can't understand it, but I want to try." maybe she could just start with "Ever since I met you I've been an emotional wreck." That concern would have to wait. They had things to do here and now.

The group divided up the tasks they could accomplish here in Waterdeep and set out for the day. They agreed to meet back up in a couple of days to share progress and plan the next steps. If there was one thing they'd learned doing this as often as they had, there was no way to be over-prepared.

Chapter Two

Task: Francene & Rolfe: The Blackstaff

The Tower of the Blackstaff was an unassuming black stone monolith on Swords Street. It sat quietly in a green patch uncrowded by the buildings around it (unlike most of Waterdeep which was shoulder-to-shoulder buildings just about everywhere). It was neither looming nor ominous (as large black featureless stones often are) but it still managed an air of importance. Francene hated this place. Wizards and their pretentious bullshit.

She looked up at her son Rolfe. He had arcane magic he could not completely control coursing through him. He lacked all pretension and just rolled with it, even though he preferred to use the strength of his arms over his wits more often than not.

As a druid, Francene was no stranger to magic, but it was a simpler magic, a more natural magic that flowed from her connection to the world and was not tortured from the fabric of the universe.

She and Rolfe approached the tower. Every time she'd come here the way to gain entry had been different. Sometimes it was a puzzle to solve, other times it was a test of abilities. And they kept changing it! It was like some fanciful decoration that they'd put out so that their neighbors could see how on-the-ball they were. "Wizard bullshit," she muttered.

“What did you say, Mom?” Rolfe asked.

“Nothing, son, just expressing an opinion,” she said as she approached the black stone.

Today the entrance seemed to be a normal door. Wooden with iron reinforcements. A pull-ring situated where it should be. But as she reached for the ring to pull it open the door morphed into a different kind of door. This one bronze with hammered bas-relief of some battle or another.

“Is that a scene from the Troll wars?” Rolfe asked.

Francene looked at him oddly. Where in the name of Yondalla had he learned about that? She barely knew of it herself and only because someone in Waterdeep had told her once. She doubted she could have identified it, and yet Rolfe recognised it. The boy was always full of surprises.

“Maybe,” she said, grabbing air since she had taken her eye off the door.

She looked back at the door. When it changed form, the position of the handle had changed. She reached for the new handle only to have it change again. Now it was a stone slab with a steel handle hammered into the rock. A handle that was unfortunately above the halfling’s reach.

“Rolfe, be a good boy...” she said.

Rolfe nodded and reached for the grip only to be disappointed as the door changed again into a pair of golden valves with twin handles in the center of each panel. “Well that’s frustrating,” Rolfe said.

“Yes,” Francene said through gritted teeth, “it is. Let’s figure this out. If we reach for it, it changes into another door.”

Rolfe nodded, “And it is different each time, so we can’t just grab at it blindly.”

Good point, Francene thought, “So if we can’t look at it and grab it and we can’t not look at it and grab it, what’s left?”

“Don’t grab it?” said Rolfe.

“Exactly,” Francene said, pushing the door.

The golden valves opened into the atrium of the Blackstaff’s tower. Inside, apprentices, pages, and the various wizards that served the Blackstaff bustled back and forth doing their arcane duties. Francene let herself in followed by Rolfe and the two of them stood expectantly in the center of the room until one of the wizards noticed they were there.

“Excuse me, can I *halp* you?” an grey-skinned elf with an almost impenetrable accent spoke to her in mangled Common.

Francene had to stifle the urge to shake the man. “We’d like to see the Blackstaff.” she said evenly, despite her frustration. Every time she came here it was the same game. Useless trivial

distractions to get in, dealing with underlings and then she'd have to tell them who she was and then they'd hem and haw over whether they'd even let her...

"Of *course*. I'll *tick* you to her. She *sid* you *mat* be *arruving*."

Francene blinked several times before nodding, "That was unexpected," she and Rolfe said in unison. She patted him on the arm, affectionately. He was a good boy.

The elf stopped in front of a set of double doors, pushed them open gently, and stepped back. "She is *throw* there." he said, continuing to torture the Common tongue.

Vajra Safahr, the current Blackstaff of Waterdeep sat sprawled on a chaise lounge next to a table piled high with books. She looked very tired. The Thethryian woman looked to be less than two score years old, but Francene knew that she was much older. "Hello, Francene. Rolfe." she said without looking up.

She pointed to a pair of expensive upholstered chairs nearby. Rolfe grabbed one for himself, but he knew his mother would likely sit on the floor - which she did. "A little bird told me you might be coming by. And, for the record," she said looking right at Francene, "Please tell your phase spider to stop eating my little birds."

"Legs can't tell your birds from any of the hundred of other birds in town. And I'm not going to tell him to stop eating the best source of protein he can find and start eating other things like orphans and hobos," Francene replied, "But I'll tell him to try not eating the talking ones and only eat the chirping ones. If that's enough."

Varja rolled her eyes, "I guess it'll have to do," she said sitting up. Clearly it took effort and she looked as if it sapped her strength to do it, "How can the Blackstaff help the New Moon Shepherds this day?"

"Shepherds of the New Moon," Francene corrected. She'd have corrected her in any case, the fluidity of their group's name was a running joke among them. That, and she just liked to annoy the wizard. "We have a problem brewing in Undermountain. It seems the drow are rallying around House Freth and may be planning to push upwards through the defenders we've been cultivating there."

Varja nodded, "My informants have told me as much. I can't say I'm surprised. You've left a trail of disgruntled drow troops in your wake every time you've headed down there."

Rolfe spoke up, "Killing every one of them is hard. And it's not nice. We only kill the ones we have to."

Francene loved that kid, adding, "And besides that, in the long run, the ones we've let go have been a useful resource. We might be pushing them back but we aren't committing genocide here."

Varja sighed, "I suppose not. But until you find a way to stop the drain on my power, there's not much I can do to help."

Francene had sort of expected this. For months something had been draining the Blackstaff's energy. They were looking for a way to help her - a rune shard - but it was so deep in Undermountain they had not been able to get to it yet. It made her actually feel sorry for the woman.

She knew how hard it was to hold together a community as a woman leader. She'd had to start over more than once as the male farmers in her community had pushed her and her brood of adopted misfits out of more than one settlement.

Francene hated the city but her family, her misfit family, was here. A misfit family in which she was a valued member and co-leader with Umbra. She and Umbra had pushed and pulled against each other over the months they'd been working together and had settled into an equal partnership.

Francene saw to the care and welfare of the members and Umbra saw to the business of others. Each recognised the talents of the other. Umbra, for all of her authoritarian -- and frankly intimidating -- presence was bad at relationships. Francene excelled at making and maintaining alliances but often would go soft in the early stages of meeting new groups.

But together they'd united their neighbors, managed to get the city to give them leeway to raise livestock (and some less-than farm friendly pets) within the city limits and helped them to build the supply chain that allowed Trollskull Manor to operate as a center of the community of Trollskull Alley. Francene was proud of that achievement.

Varya clearly recognized Francene as a person with some influence and treated her appropriately. Francene softened her tone, "Varya, I'm sorry we've not found what you are looking for. I promise you, we will. Hopefully, before it is too late. And I understand if you can't intervene personally. But maybe one of these...academics could help? Is there someone in your staff who could give us a little assistance?"

Varya smiled. She liked Francene. The halfling was always a motherly figure to her, and she appreciated the caring notes in her voice. She genuinely wanted to help her. But there were more things afoot than a threat from Undermountain and all of her people would be needed to face them. Even Force Grey, the so-called secret police of Waterdeep, were busy with an imminent threat.

"I wish I could spare anyone to help, but our resources are stretched too thin. I can pass along your request to Laeral Silverhand, if you want. She can be hard to reach directly, but, as Blackstaff, I do have a direct way to contact her."

"Tell her if you like, she should probably know. But frankly she's not going to help. If you are stretched thin, she's likely going to be the same," Francene's cynical tone spoke of her disdain for the Open Lord of Waterdeep. The woman known as Laeral Silverhand had cheated them out of a lifetime of treasure and had abandoned them in a lurch more than once.

Francene didn't care about the treasure as much as the betrayal. You just didn't do that to people who were counting on you. Francene wouldn't count on her ever again. Varya, on the

other hand had proved to be reliable when she did act, and even if she said she couldn't there might be things behind the scenes that would make this task easier. Varya had resources that were secret even from the Open Lord. And lastly she was up front. She didn't say she could help and then do nothing.

Varya frowned at Francene. She really hated to disappoint her, it was like disappointing your own mother. "I will see what I can do," she said solemnly.

Francene did her best 'mom voice', "Thank you, dear." Works every time, she thought.

Task: Theren & Renard - The Harpers

Ulbrinter Villa was spectacular in the sunlight. Its white-plastered walls and golden highlights picked up every ray of light and shone like a glowing palace, despite it being in an older section of the North Ward. Other villas on the street seemed decrepit and run-down compared to Ulbrinter.

Theren met Renard and a sun elf woman exiting the Villa. "Theren, my friend," she said, "It is good to see you. Renard, here, was telling me some of your woes."

Theren knew her well as Remallia Haventree, the head of the Harpers in Waterdeep. She'd worked tirelessly to unite the various factions to resist the Dragon Cult's mad attempt to summon Tiamat only a year ago. Since then she'd been trying to bolster the Harper presence in Waterdeep.

Theren bowed to her, "Remallia, thank you for seeing me."

She laughed lightly, "Thank your companion Renard. I cannot seem to resist his charms."

Renard looked smug and purred while rubbing against the woman's ankles. Theren waited for her to bend down and pet the cat between the ears. Shameless, he thought, but he's good at it. Remallia waved to Theren, "Come, I'd like you to take a walk with me."

They walked silently down the street to a small well-house that sat in a crossroads. There a stone structure covered an ordinary looking well with a winch and bucket that locals could use to draw water from the various springs and rivers beneath the city. It always amazed Theren that people knew there were vast sewers full of poisonous monsters and vile effluent beneath the streets as well, but somehow public wells delivered clean water.

Remallia looked around the streets and, seeing no one was watching, she slipped over the side into the well. Renard wasted no time leaping in after her and Theren, seeing that they had no hesitation slid over himself. Once he had passed the threshold of the well's edge he was in a room. Two guards were returning their weapons to their sheaths. They had teleported from the well to Harper's Hold inside Mount Waterdeep.

He looked down at Renard, "You knew zis way into Hold?"

"I know lots of things you don't know. One of us spends a lot of time exploring the city rather than sleeping and eating by himself, silly."

Theren could not resist answering to the subtle dig, "All I ever see you do is sleep and eat," he said.

"During the day," Renard replied, and left it at that.

Remallia finished exchanging signals and letting the guards know that Theren and Renard were with her. "Follow," she said, heading into the small underground complex. Mostly it consisted of several rooms for Harpers to hide and rest, but there was also a large meeting room capable of seating nearly 40 people around a large table-map of Faerûn. She led the pair there and sat in the large, and clearly the most important, chair at the head of the table. Leaning back she indicated they, too, should sit. Renard just hopped onto the table and sat upright as Theren pulled out a seat and started to bring her up to speed.

He'd been sending her regular updates on the situation in Undermountain and his information had allowed her to both insert and extract operatives in Skullport, Willowood and to build networks of Harpers (and informants) in the very supply network that Theren and his friends had been building beneath the city.

While she had shared none of the details of her operations with Theren - the Harpers were a secret organization after all - she'd casually let him know that his help had been appreciated. He would call in that favor today.

Remallia listened carefully as maps of Undermountain appeared on the huge map table as Theren spoke of them. He pointed to the places that they knew had changed hands and of the forces they suspected would be entrenched there.

She did not interrupt. She just sat, fingers steepled and surveyed the report. Renard eventually tired of being polite and just curled up on the table and closed his eyes. Theren spoke for quite some time. When he finally stopped Remallia leaned in and asked him point blank, "What do you want from me? Theren. Or, more directly, what do you want the Harpers to do?"

Theren had to admit, "I do not know, *mellon*," he said, using the Elvish word for friend. "We anticipate violence and perhaps some spillover into Waterdeep. But we do not yet know extent of House Freth's full forces. Or plan for revenge on us and allies."

"Fair," she admitted, "but I need a specific request. The Harpers in Waterdeep are sparse on the ground. It is a big city for the roughly hundred-fifty agents we have here. I can't allocate forces based on 'I don't know' even for *nin mellon*." My friend.

Theren took a deep breath, "Am only asking for eyes and ears, Remallia. Watch for drow activity. Listen to various streams of secrets. Any we need to know, pass along quickly. It is vital we do not head under Waterdeep without most pertinent information."

"Of course," she said, "But that is a small ask. You would not be here unless there was a big ask."

“Prepare every resource you have to fight. I suspect there will be a war in Undermountain. We must prepare to help goblinoids of Azrok’s Legion to defend surface. If drow take us out, there’s nothing to stop them charging right into Yawning Portal. ”

Pemallia sat up, “We don’t have anyone in place within Stromkuhldur that we can activate. We might be able to come from Skullport, but that still takes us right through Legion territory. We can only act indirectly there. You and your friends set it up that way, if you remember. I am not sure how you want us to move in an army or even guards.”

Theren pulled out a small carved wooden chip. It had a phrase written on it in dwarven letters and slid it to her, “This is a token from Preeta Kreepa. She is a mage that works with Azrok’s legion as advisor and sort of Shaman. She owes us favor for service we performed for her. Contact her and she will be your inside contact.”

Permellia picked up the chit and wagged it at him, “Holding out on me Theren? I thought I knew you better than that.”

Renard purred softly from his curled up spot, “You aren’t the only one playing your cards close to your chest, Remmy.”

“What do you know, Renny,?” she said, eyeing the black cat.

“I see things in the moonlight,” he hinted but did not continue.

Remalia shook her head and made a thoughtful “Hm” noise. She spoke, “You can count on me when the time comes, but not a moment before. This is a delicate balancing act. You are asking me to prepare for war without *looking* like I am..”

Theren nodded, “If anyone can pull off act, it is you.” he said.

Task: Umbra and Heulwen - Mirt the Moneylender

Umbra waited for Mirt’s valet to come and escort them inside. She should have expected this, arriving unannounced as she had, but Mirt had never failed to see them, even if he did like to remind them that he was an important and busy man. She shifted uncomfortable on the stone bench outside the magnificent villa manse. Heulwen stood, fiddling with some sort of gizmo or another like she always did.

“So, whatcha working on,” she asked out of boredom.

Huelwen did not look up and in her musically accented, but ultimately boring tone she explained, “This is a repeating function for Renard’s crossbow. I saw one being used by a drow some time ago and I was eager to see if I could retrofit his weapon to allow him multiple shots before reloading. As you know his feline limbs are not well suited...”

Umbra nodded and made “mm-hm” noises as she droned on. It was more interesting than watching Mirt’s grass grow. Huelwen was saying something about a selectable ammunition

chamber when the valet opened the door. "Mirt the esteemed merchant of Waterdeep will receive you now. Please follow me into the salon."

Umbra touched Huelwwen's shoulder to break her out of her explanation and tilted her head to the house. "Of course," she said, efficiently putting her tools and weapons into unseen pockets that clearly had more space in them than it appeared.

Mirt's house was magnificent. It held more marble statuary than Umbra had ever seen outside of a temple. Most of it was nubile, female, and (tastefully) nude, she noted. He had a particular taste, that was for sure. Paintings of him in various points adorned the walls including one that had to be at least eight feet tall and nearly as wide. It would have had to be, Mirt was a big man in more than just his power and influence.

As they entered the salon, a hugely fat man levered himself up from a comfortable armchair. He was tall at over six feet and practically eclipsed Umbra as he gave her an embrace, "Umbra Luna! To my absolute pleasure, and one of your friends, too. Which one is this? Rolfe? Theren?"

From somewhere near his armpit she tried to introduce Huelwin, but was muffled. Thankfully, the Artificer did it herself, "Huelwin, sir. Pleased to meet you. I'm one of the more recent members. Umbra and her friends rescued my father from the drow and now he's up in Neverwinter."

"Of course" Mirt boomed, releasing Umbra who sucked in air greedily after that bear hug.

He held out a meaty paw to Huelwen who looked at it for a moment oddly before taking it. "The Alchemist," Mirt continued without missing a beat, "You have done some brilliant work, my good lady. As has your father. I hope you have come to demonstrate some magical concoction you wish me to invest in."

He sat back in his chair and indicated for them to seat themselves as well, "So dear Umbra and Huelwen, what have you brought Mirt today on such short notice?"

Umbra swallowed her rising annoyance at Mirt. He'd done this to her even when she was on the City Watch. She was tiny compared to him. He was more than a foot taller than her and probably four times as heavy. He was overly familiar and patronizing to women. It just rubbed her the wrong way.

But Mirt was a powerful influence on the Lords of the city, even to the extent of being a likely Masked Lord himself. He had money, resources, contacts, and he could draw on them rapidly. She had no doubt he'd help although he might not do so openly. Still, he was an ally they needed to keep in the loop. It was part of the price they'd paid in their early days of their company when they needed a patron and he was the only one who volunteered.

"I've had some contact from Undermountain," she began.

Mirt immediately interrupted her, "Is this to do with the drow incursions into your so-called 'wall of goblinoids'?"

Umbra had to close her mouth and stare for a second. Mirt just smiled and winked at her. "I hear things, too, ladies." he said, "But go on, tell me your news."

Umbra laid out the situation and the danger of losing the line of defense they'd been carefully nurturing in Undermountain. Mirt, for his part, did not interrupt again until she had finished. He leaned back and flatly asked, "So have you informed my old pal, Durnan, yet? He might want to know if he's going to be the last line of defense to a drow invasion force."

Umbra added Durnan's name to the list. She figured he would know before she even got to him, he had a knack for that, much like Mirt. But she also knew that she and Durnan shared something else...a mutual feeling of connection to Undermountain. While she did not know the specifics of Durnan's connection to the place, nor did he know hers, they both recognised it in each other. And respected it.

"I will. I am fairly confident that it won't come to that. We have a few things working in our favor. We know that Wyllowood, The Slitherswamp and the troglodyte caverns are not aligned and so must be fought through. We do not know how much of the Gauntlet is occupied by the drow although we do know that they have recaptured the fortress on the Maze level."

Mirt nodded. He knew Undermountain as well as Durnan. "Back in the day" the two of them had crawled out of a hole in the center of the city--a hole where the Yawning Portal Inn stood today--each of them carrying a king's ransom in gold and magic items. Durnan had purchased the land and built the inn. Mirt had bought his mansion and begun to lend money to multiply his fortune.

But at his core--deep in those rolls of fat--was an adventurer who knew the dangers and the risks. And probably why he tolerated Umbra and her friends coming to him as often as they did. It kept him up to date on the situation below the city.

"So what is your plan, and how does humble Mirt factor into this?" Mirt asked. Ever the businessman, he wanted to hear the deal.

Umbra almost snorted at the word humble, but didn't. "First, we're asking you to prepare by hiring more city guards, and placing them at the Yawning Portal. The city can't afford it and Durnan won't accept it, but if it came from you, he might let it slide."

She slid forward and leaned in, "Secondly, if you have anyone that can help us, overtly or covertly please have them lend a hand. I have a bad feeling that this might be over our head."

Mirt did not say anything. He waited until she'd laid it all on the table, "And lastly, if you have any knowledge of ways around Undermountain that we don't already know...we could really use them."

Mirt sat down his wine glass and leaned forward as well. "I can do all of that, dear, but it will cost you."

Umbra swallowed, this is what she was afraid of. Mirt was generally aligned with them, but he was insistent on making a profit along the way. Mirt looked over at Heulwen who was sitting

quietly during the negotiation. "Heulwen, little lady, do you know the secret of that magical concoction you use to make the mead orbs, yet?"

Heurlwen looked at Umbra. This exclusive was the financial engine that fueled their efforts. It bought the weapons and supplies for Azrok's Legion, it lined the pockets of a dozen or more middle-men in Undermountain to insure the safe traffic of the goods in their supply chain. Everyone in their company knew it.

Umbra dropped her head. Heulwen answered honestly, "Mostly. There is a magical transformation constant that I am still attempting to isolate, but we have sufficient supply for our needs, and not much surplus. My father has also been working on it, but so far the complete formula eludes us."

"So we don't have any to spare, Mirt," Umbra blurted out, resentfully, "We can't just give it to you so every tavern and inn from here to Neverwinter can sell mead orbs."

Mirt held up his hand, "Not to fret, dear. This is not a shakedown. Really. Your genius friend Heulwen has provided me with the information I need for now." Mirt ticked off his points on pudgy fingers, "You have a way to get it, you can't make it without your source, and you are trying to duplicate the formula."

He spread his hands wide and smiled, "That's all I wanted to know. But I will ask you, as a friend and business partner, if you do manage to duplicate this miracle of mead manufacturing. You will let me in on your exclusive on it."

Umbra looked at Heulwen for some sort of feedback on what she thought of the deal. Heulwen could be counted on to crunch the numbers mentally. She'd been around their operation long enough to know their margins and the maximum flow of the salve, orbs, and distribution network. They were very careful not to exceed their supply and while they had some reserve, it was not enough to survive competitors.

Heulwen's rapid blinking told her she was working it out, and soon she looked at her (actually met her eye, which she didn't do that often). Then nodded. It would not make things break down if they did this. Umbra stood up, "I promise, Mirt. I'll offer you a first shot at an exclusive partnership if we manage to crack the formula ourselves,"

She held out a hand, "Do you want a contract?"

Mirt took her hand as he rose to tower over the slight woman. "No need. A paladin's word is their bond, after all."

As the pair departed the salon, both of them were inexplicably handed overflowing fruit baskets by a valet near the door. From within the mansion Mirt bellowed, "A parting gift for my friends! Don't concern yourselves, I made an amazing deal on them!"

Umbra quietly said to Heulwen trying not to drop the massive basket, "How confident are you that you might crack this formula anytime soon?"

Huelwen shrugged, "It is hard to say. The Alchemist of Sargoth is some sort of extraplanar being who employs transmutation magic to concoct his salve. Assuming he is not manufacturing it using his own glands then it may be possible to reverse-engineer his process within the year. If it is something he extrudes, we might have to find a way to harvest it from him directly. Which might prove more difficult."

Umbra shook her head as they departed the mansion, "I was afraid of that. It's both good news and bad news at the same time. He represents a weak-point in our defense. If he dies or is captured then we are humped."

She said that last word so forcefully that several passers-by turned to look at her sharply. She gave an awkward smile at them holding up a piece of fruit as an apology. The city of Splendors didn't appreciate that sort of language in public places.

When they returned to Trollskull manor, the lunch crowd and the early drinking crowd were just starting to arrive. Among those early drinkers was Volokamp Geddam.

He had several of his fellow layabouts, wastrels, hangers-on, or whatever you wanted to call them. She recognised Renaer Neverember and Floon among them. She set her basket on the table as Huelwen headed upstairs with hers.

Volo was effluent, "For me? My dear Umbra Luna, I didn't get you anything! To what do I owe this great boon of fresh fruit and," he poked into the basket, "Nuts, biscuits, and I think I see a jar of honey in there? It is too much, I can't possibly accept."

He might not have accepted but Floon and Renaer were already digging into the basket and stuffing their faces, Umbra stared at them until they at least stopped chewing, "It was a gift from Mirt. He's helping us with a problem."

Umbra waved at Rolfe and Francene who were just coming in. She pointed upstairs and made a wrench motion then pointed at the basket. "Huelwen is upstairs and he has a basket like this." the secret gestures said. It had paid to learn a lot of hand signals based on a mix of thieves' cant and Undercommon to make silent communications easier. Francene nodded and was nearly trampled by Rolfe who was charging up the steps to get to the basket.

Umbra swung back to the table. In just the time it had taken her to look away they'd eaten nearly half of it. Umbra scanned the table of six people. All of them had mouthfuls of fruit; juice coated their chins and their cheeks bulged like chipmunks.

She snatched a pear and a wedge of cheese from the bottom of the basket and said "Buy some ale or something so you don't choke," before walking away. She flopped into her favorite seat on the porch. A gentle chink sound of a teacup and saucer floating out to the table made her relax. "Thanks, Lif. That's a big improvement," she sighed and ate her pear.

As evening arrived she met with her fellow adventurers in the upstairs lounge. Long faces indicated their own individual lack of resounding success. There was some good news, vague

promises and half-hearted expressions of a recognised threat put them firmly in the 'maybe' zone of gaining support. But without any hard commitments, they were, again, on their own."

Theren mentioned the elephant, "How did we become sole defenders of Waterdeep from Undermountain?"

Umbra counted off her fingers, "Mirt, Durnan, Varya, Force Grey, Acquisitions Inc., all of them use Undermountain like their personal vault. They go in and raid it for treasure and get out. They don't build anything down there. They don't go in with any idea of the lurking threat it represents.

She began to pace as she got this off her chest, "We went in and built a community and a means of defending the city. We own it. We paid for it in blood and sweat equity. And so we have to maintain it. So far, these raiders have managed to respect our institutions.

She stopped and stared at her friends, "But what it has done is limit the adventuring in Undermountain to established heroes who will drive past the first few levels of the place where weaker heroes can't hack it.

"That's why we left the first couple of levels more or less as-is. We don't want people to get complacent. As long as adventurers keep climbing down the hole at The Yawning Portal, Undermountain will continue to be perceived as a threat."

She sat down and waited in silence. "So what now?" Rolfe asked.

Heulwen spoke, "We could build physical barriers, although there's no guarantee there isn't a way around them, that seems to be sort of an Undermountain thing."

Francene added, "And Halaster can just move them. He does that kind of shit."

Renard, from his customary pillow by the fireplace said, "I say we just go in and kill them all. Problem solved."

Umbra looked at the small black-furred murderer who did not even bother to open his eyes. She couldn't disagree that it was a solution, but she (tried to) hold herself to a higher standard. "Let's call that our final option, okay?" she said.

Late into the night they planned and strategized on how to meet the imminent threat of a drow invasion. It was very late when they finally decided to pack it in and head to bed.

Chapter Three

In the morning, the group sat in the lounge largely not speaking. They looked at maps, occasionally gave short clips of ideas only to trail off in thought. It was into that session that one of the Horde, Shaz'nill, the pre-teen drow girl who swept the floors, spoke from the doorway. She spoke in Underdark-tinged Elvish, as she often did when nervous or shy. "Pardon me, Lady

Luna. There's a visitor downstairs for you. She says her name is Laraelra Harsard and she is here on behalf of the Blackstaff."

"You can call me Umbra, Shaz'nill. It's okay." Umbra said, patiently.

She always had to tell the girl to call her by her name. "Let her come upstairs. Ask her if there's anything she wants to eat or drink, too. She's probably here since we visited the Blackstaff yesterday."

Shaz'nill curtsied with a faint, "Yes, Lady Umbra." and headed back.

Not long afterwards a woman wearing the distinctive half-black half-white robes of the Blackstaff's personal retinue entered. She was Human with remarkably long hair that reached the backs of her legs. "Hello, 'Shepherds'," she said, neatly bypassing the running gag about their group name, "I am Laraelra Harsard of the Moonstars. And I'm here to see if we can help you out."

Theren and Luna both indicated a place to sit on the couch. Francene was busy narrowing her eyes at the woman that Rolfe was openly staring at. "I thought you were from the Blackstaff's people. Your robes would suggest that," Francene said suspiciously.

Laraela helped herself to a cup of tea from the tray on the table before answering, "One might assume that based on your operation you were tavern keepers and farmers. I am more than my day job."

Francene wasn't impressed, Rolfe started to say something, "You're..." Francene then slapped him on the leg cutting off his (probably unappreciated or inappropriate) thought, "...a guest," Francene finished diplomatically giving Rolfe a bit of a mom-stare.

Laraela smiled at him and sipped her tea. "Thank you. I appreciate you hearing me out. The Blackstaff formed the Moonstars to be sort of an adventurer's auxiliary to Force Grey. Force Grey, as you know, is mostly a loose group of adventurers who work for and are paid by the Open Lord to do things the City Watch and City Guard can't.

She continued, "We, most definitely, aren't paid and aren't loose. We are volunteers, friends of Varya whom she occasionally calls upon to help when official sources are scarce."

Huelwen offered, "So a group of adventurers who do things for the Blackstaff that the City Watch and the City Guard can't do. Seems a bit of a nuanced point."

She pursed her lips and tilted her head, "I suppose, but it is what it is. Do you want our help or not?"

Umbra asked, "Who are the Moonstars exactly? You, obviously, but who else?"

Laraela confined her inscrutable smile, "Myself, obviously, Eiruk Weskur - also on the Blackstaff's retinue; Osco Salibuck a talented rogue from Neverwinter and...Renaer Neverember."

All of the Shepherds present groaned at that last name. They'd dealt with Renauer before and had found him to be useless and entitled. The fact that Umbra had left him a short while ago raiding her fruit basket with Volo downstairs had done nothing to help Laraela's position.

Laraela stared into her cup, "He said you'd feel like this. It's why I came up here and not him. He's actually quite a competent swordsman and without him we'd not be able to afford to continue working on behalf of the city without support. As good-folk of Waterdeep I am certain you don't realize how non-nobles have to struggle."

The assembled company all bit their tongues. Laraela had to know that it was only by virtue of their ownership of Trollskull Manor that they could be considered nobles at all. All of them had struggled prior to their banding together to save the city's coffers.

"How do Moonstars expect to help?" Theren broke the thick silence.

"No assault on the city can happen in a vacuum," she said, setting down the cup lightly, "Without spies, advance scouting, and intelligence gained from informants there is no effective attack. We have contacts and resources," she said casually, displaying a small enamelled pin shaped like a harp to Theren discreetly.

She continued, "We also have a lot of experience in the city because who would refuse entry to a member of the Blackstaff's circle? And those who would can be reached by other means by Osco, for instance."

She waited silently, letting the group trade furtive looks of "do we?" and "Don't we?" between them. She kept her eyes down, although she was aware that Rolfe was not trading looks with his friends, but was fixated on her. She turned slightly and winked at him. "I say let's get their help," he blurted out.

Francene looked at him, followed his eyes to Larael and then to Umbra who sort of shrugged. Francese sighed, "Why not. It's not like they can hurt. We are all sort of on the same team, here"

"I agree," Umbra said, "And it's not like we have a lot of options, either. Is this all about containment or disinformation?"

Laraela took a dainty bite from one of the biscuits on the tray, "Oh, a bit of both, I suppose. Any information you want to make sure they get?"

Umbra thought about it, "Let's spread the idea that the Horned sisters, Violence and Turbulence have agreed to help defend the upper levels...no, they've taken over Dwoemercore."

The Horned sisters were twin tiefling mages who had escaped the wizard school known as Dwoemercore. Umbra and her friends had freed them by killing the headmaster and several of the teachers before leaving the level in a mess.

Huelwen looked up, and tossed in her idea enthusiastically “Yes, that’s good. Let’s say Cephalosk is the new headmaster,” invoking the name of the Mind Flayer they’d briefly allied with when passing through that level.

Theren also added, “And that Halaster does not want it to be disturbed by warring factions.”

Rolfe leaned down to Francene, “What does all that mean?” he asked her

She scratched her chin, “It means that the wizard school we passed through might slow them down if they think there’s going to be resistance. If the drow think that Halaster doesn’t want them on that level they’ll have to go around it. And that might also slow them down.”

Laraela nodded, “That’s a good rumor to put into the mix, and I’m sure we’ll think of others. Consider that done. And of course if we find anything we’ll pass it along. When are you planning to head into Undermountain? Once you go in we’ll not be able to contact you. Message magics don’t work down there.”

“Day after tomorrow, most likely. We need time to gear up and head in,” Umbra said.

“That’s good,” Laraela said, “You might be able to use these.”

She twisted her wrist in a way that made a scroll appear in her hand. She rolled it out showing Trollskull Alley with a red circle on the street. She pointed at it, “This is an entrance into the sewers and it leads to here,” she said, reversing the scroll and showing the secret passageway that leads to an underground chamber.

She traced the path with a finger, “In there, you will find an archway gate into Undermountain. I don’t know where it leads or even if it works, but my Father is the Guildmaster of the Cellarers’ & Plumbers’ Guild. I found this while I was looking for possible entryways into the city. The guild bricked it up years ago, but a group as powerful as you should have no trouble bypassing that sort of obstacle.”

The mood in the room lightened considerably, This was an unexpected boon. Perhaps the Moonstars could be a lot more useful than they’d anticipated. They all thanked her cheerfully. And as she left she patted Rolfe on the arm. “It’s been nice meeting you, all. Rolfe, after this is over, perhaps we can get to know each other better.”

Francenes’ snort from behind him was plainly audible.

A hooded figure began to slide around the side of the tavern. He avoided windows and slid through the bushes towards the back of the tavern. Around the back of the tavern, the sneak tried to hide beneath the porch only to find it occupied by the largest fire beetle he had ever seen. The beast did not seem aggressive as the sneak backed up and tried a different route. He climbed the exterior stair towards a door above that probably led into a common area or private rooms on the second floor.

Legs, from the roof, had been watching the intruder, and gave him a mighty shove. The intruder sprawled on the floor beyond the door. To the astonished heroes, they saw a man fall on the

floor just inside the small atrium of their upstairs lounge. Before even he could react he was surrounded by weapons pointed at him. He held up his hands. "I surrender. I am not here for mischief, only approaching with caution. Please!"

Francene pushed back his hood with her staff. The black-skinned man with long white hair and red eyes stared back at her. The spider pendant at the throat of his cloak identified him as House Freth.

Francene cynically said, "That's a big ask, Freth. But I'll spare you six seconds. Talk fast."

The man held his hands up as he rose to his knees, "I am Hatchrin Alet'taz, former consort of Erelal Freth and the father of her eleventh child. You may not remember me, but you freed me from Spiderwatch Keep in Undermountain. I fled, fearing for my life. But I am a noble, if only a male, and was able to obtain some few mercies from my kinsmen.

"I have been making my way to the surface, hearing tales of you adventurers and your clemency, if not to the clans, to the individuals of Clan Freth and Auvryndar. It has been a long journey, but it has allowed me to explore the fortifications of my clan and I have come to offer my help to you."

Rolf lowered his two swords and Theren retracted his bow. Francene noted that Huelwen kept her hand ready on the many vials and bottles that she wore on her vest. Renard was nowhere to be seen (but she knew that did not mean he wasn't around, he was sneaky like that).

Umbra leaned back against the fireplace. This was all under control, she let her friends handle it. Francene grabbed the man's sleeve and pulled him to one of the couches. "Sit down, you've given a reason to be here, but now you have to convince me that this isn't some elaborate lie to infiltrate our group or to draw us into a trap.

Rolfe looked at his mother, "Is this a trap? It doesn't feel like one."

Theren stood behind the drow seated nervously on their couch and patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Have some tea, take moment to collect your thoughts, this may take time," he said in his thick accent.

Huelwen stood where she had a good line of fire, but didn't say anything aggressive, "We don't plan to hurt you if you cooperate. We just have too many people trying to kill us to lower our guard. I hope you understand."

It didn't relax the man who appeared to be in his late twenties. Of course as a drow elf he might be as old as seventy or eighty, it was hard to tell. The white hair was not helping either.

But he did have some tea. He took a few careful sips while gathering his thoughts, "After you freed me I fled Spiderwatch Keep. I wandered through the maze-like caverns before finding a gate I could operate. There are several. I spoke to a voice that allowed me to pass despite not being strong enough according to her. She specifically told me to seek you out. She said that you had angered Halaster and that had been her intent all along. She said she would help you, but only if you came into Undermountain.

“And so I followed her instructions which led me to Waterdeep. And perhaps the rest is obvious. Although,” he looked back at the doorway through which he’d been shoved, “I might not be here alone.”

Rolfe said, “That was probably Legs, he likes to ‘invite’ people in in his own special way.”

“Look,” Francene said, all three-foot eight of her focused on the drow, “I am not saying I believe you, but I don’t disbelieve you either. We are going to hold you here for a while until we have a chance to work out what is up and then we can decide if we are going to take your help or just cut you loose to the fates. Clear?”

Hatchrin nodded. He expected they’d shackle him or lock him in a cell, although he was not sure where they’d have such a place in this wooden building. But Francene took his hand and led him into the turret of the Inn and had him climb a cobwebbed ladder. At the top a green and purple spider the size of a horse climbed down from the rafters and Francene scritch it under the mandibles.

“Meet Legs,” she said, “I expect as a drow spiders don’t intimidate you, but this one is our friend and he’s going to keep you here. Can you speak with spiders?”

“He’s magnificent, but no,” Hatchrin said. He really was impressed, Phase spidersw could be trained as guards, but he’d never heard of anyone from the surface succeeding, much less a halfling.

Francene reached into a pocket and pulled out a handful of crawling mealworms and plopped them into Hatchrin’s hand. “He can have a snack if he gets hungry but he won’t let you leave this room. If you two play nice then it will go a long way towards us trusting you. Got it?”

Hatchrin nodded. He tentatively reached up to scritch the phase spider and was surprised to find it non-aggressive and even playful. This was an odd group indeed.

Francene climbed back down the ladder and rejoined her compatriots. Umbra came in from outside to report she’d not found any evidence of another intruder. Umbra addressed the group. “Listen, I have to get out of here for a bit,” she told her friends, “I’ll be back.”

She then headed out and walked down the street, headed towards the House of the Moon - the Temple of Selûne. Umbra had taken the stroll in order to ponder their next steps. People were rushing to help her and her friends, but none of it was direct help. No artifacts of vast power. No leagues of armed guardsmen or patrols of trained mages. Not even a handful of spying rogues. A lot of “I can give you info, but you are on your own.” In other words, you bear all the cost in gold and blood of this operation.

And the blame as well if things went badly, she expected.

Chapter Four

The smell of pine needles, soft spearmint and beeswax candles surrounded Umbra in the meditation room. It had taken nearly an hour for her to stop shaking in stress, frustration and pent up emotion. The softly glowing sand pit in the center of the room had been scattered around as she had fitfully slapped at it trying to wrangle the emotions she felt back into her mind.

A soft voice behind her said, "You should sweep all of this sand up before you leave, Umbra. Moon-sand isn't easy to come by and I'd hate to ruin the tranquility of this room because you needed a time out."

The Priestess of the High Moonlight, Naneatha Suaril, stood in the doorway. She smiled that sort of half-smile she seemed to reserve for Umbra that said, "I love you, but damn, girl."

Umbra shook her head and wiped tears from her cheeks and onto the sleeve of her uniform jacket. "I'll clean it up, Reverend Suaril, I won't be much longer."

"I trust you, Umbra," the tall human woman said. She spread her jewel-encrusted dress and sat on one of the benches near Umbra, but did not enter her personal space. She would let Umbra decide how much intimacy she needed, "You are a chosen of Selûne, I am no longer your Priestess or your Pastor. I am merely your friend. Call me Nanéa and tell me what has made you so angry."

Umbra rocked back on her heels and then slowly rose. Even standing she was only barely eye-to-eye with Naneatha. She took the boom from the corner and absently brushed the moon-sands back into the basin. She spoke softly and flatly with a voice that spoke of her emotionally draining day, "Why does it always fall back to me? When mom was injured, I was the one who cared for us, Lumin and I. And when the Cult of the Dragon came to Waterdeep, I was on the front lines."

She idly traced the scar on her cheek. "Now, the drow are coming for the city and I have to be the one leading the defense."

Naneatha stood and worlessly picked up a glossy black stone. It was rounded from its time in a stream, and still had the uneven shape that spoke to its natural crafting. She set it off-center in the basin. The glowing sands reflected from its glassy surface.

"The world does not play fair, Umbra. It always gangs up on you. Selûne knows I have had my share of troubles even as I occupy the high position I hold in this place. But I have also had my successes," she said gathering up a large white stone which she placed opposite the black one.

"That does not absolve the world for its sins," she said softly, "If anything it burns them onto our souls. But it does explain "why you?" As women, as holy people, as defenders of an ideal. There is a lot out there that is going to try to swallow us up."

Naneatha took the broom from Umbra and placed it in its niche and took out the wooden rake that hung next to it. She dragged it through the sands around each of the stones. Around the

white stone, the glowing sands began to darken, becoming a sea of black that slowly filled the sandpit.

“But what we find when we step back is that the darkness is also surrounded,” she said, drawing a circle around the black stone that flared with the cool moonlight that gave the moon-sands their name. “It is beset on all sides by the forces of light and good,” she intoned as if reciting a prayer. The glowing sands slowly spread in the spiral she had started until the dark shadowy side and the light side were equal, surrounding stones of opposed colors.

Naneatha set the rake back in its niche in a smooth step. “You will find, Umbra, that for every one of your problems, there is a solution waiting to present itself. And those who torment you are cursing your name for being one of theirs.”

The Priestess could hear Umbra’s sharp intake of breath as the revelation of her lesson began to sink in. She smiled fondly to herself. She and Umbra had often butted heads, but they had a mutual respect for each other. She was glad that this time she was able to help the young woman. She silently said a prayer to Selûne to protect her in her troubles.

“Thank you Pries...er, Nanéa,” Umbra said, “You’ve given me something to think and pray on.”

“May Selûne’s light guide you through the darkness, Umbra,” the elegant woman said as she left the chamber.

Back in Trollskull Manor, the other adventurers were assembling their gear. Weapons, rations, spell components and armor were all inventoried, packed and double-checked. Francene, who carried only enough snacks to feed any passing creatures she encountered and enough mistletoe for casting spells, was not occupied with such preparations. She was out in the street with a pack of stray dogs. They were trying to gain the scent of Umbra Luna.

They had one of her blouses to gain a scent from, since Francene had borrowed one from her room. They started to run as Francene struggled to keep up. Francene called after them to come back to Trollskull Manor if they found anything and she’d give them a treat.

The pack found Umbra walking slowly down the street back towards the manor. The dogs excitedly jumped up at her as Umbra (long used to animals accompanying Francene to be friendly) patted them and scratched them behind the ears. She followed them back to Trollskull manor. Francene was waiting like another whose children were out too late. “Okay, time to explain why you have been gone for the entire day,” Francene said in her best mom-voice.

So Umbra tried to explain. “Once I joined the City Watch I almost immediately discovered that those who serve are always asked to serve selflessly. It is unnatural and unrealistic because everybody serves for their own reasons and rarely because it is the right thing to do. The few who serve a higher calling for faith *or revenge* then lead the others into serving selflessly.

“Look at Huelwen, or Theren. Neither of them are particularly driven to continue to delve into Undermountain on these excursions. They’d gladly stay and become shop-keepers or apothecaries and would be happy. But they will follow us. Whether out of a sense of duty or

habit. Rolfe wants to find his lost friend. That dragged you into this nonsense. And me? Well, I have issues ”

Francene snoted, “We all have issues, dear. But I am starting to see your point. So what does that mean for our particular problems?”

Umbra tried to form words around the idea she was grappling with, “The Priestess Naneatha said something that opened my eyes. Few of these drow are really fighting us. They are fighting for their house. The only ones with a valid grudge are the remains of House Auvryndar since we effectively destroyed their house.”

Umbra deliberately didn't mention Zress out of fear. Surrounded by dogs who were licking her and vying for her pets she explained, “House Freth's head, Eledrel, wants us for killing her brother. But most of them don't want to fight. Especially not against us.”

“We have seen it time and again. Drow want the same thing we do: stability, respect, safety. Once they are separated from their leaders who are pushing them to fight then the fight goes out of them. Most of them anyways.”

Francene pondered, “Take out the alphas and the pack will back down, eh? I can understand that. Got any idea how that happens?”

“Nope,” Umbra admitted, “Eledrel Freth will be behind the walls of her fortress. I expect if we can crack that nut we'll be able to end that faction quickly, but it's the other guys I'm dreading. Zress and the *Ghost Spiders* are fanatics and they will probably come for us.”

Francene remembered the last time they'd encountered Zress and how that went. She remembered the useless pit of wallowing emotion that Umbra became. It took her days to become even functional again. She hoped this time it would be different, but she was worried.

“Probably. Are you ready for that?” Francene asked quietly.

“Nope.” Umbra said honestly, “But I will have to be when the time comes. Unless we want a massacre.”

“On whose side?” Francene thought to herself.

Chapter Five

Once back at the Manor, Umbra spent a few minutes talking to their captive drow consort. He provided them with what information they had and Umbra directed him towards Jarlaxle, the head of the Bregan D'aerthe.

The Bregan D'aerthe was not exactly their ally, but neither were they their enemy, and Jarlaxle was known to take in drow who were estranged from their homelands and houses. If nothing else he'd keep them out of trouble - serious trouble at least.

Armed with all the intelligence they could gather they made their final preparations. The other companions completed their preparations to return to Undermountain. Umbra stayed ready to leave at a moment's notice. She grabbed her pack and donned the mithral armor she wore unfailingly within Undermountain. Even though it was a cheery green color, the gold filigree formed a skull-like shape on the chest. Her moonblade shone with moonlight radiance as she slid it into the sheath on her belt. She was the Defender of the Ancient Ways, and Chosen of Selûne and looked every inch the part.

Secretly for all of her outward confidence and bravado, inwardly she was a mess. While she now had a plan it meant confronting Zress directly. Confronting her, she knew, while wearing the very armor she'd taken from her. Originally she'd done it to deprive her of any protection in case she came after their group. But once she'd managed to get far enough away she'd realized she could not part with it. It had remained a constant reminder of the drow woman whose mere presence had stuck directly into Umbra's heart.

She hoped that that feeling would be the seed that she could return to the one who planted it. She hoped that somehow Zress would see the love in Umbra's heart and it would spark something in her that would make her join their side against the very army that Zress was now leading against Waterdeep.

But the worst part of an already bad plan is it meant not being open with her friends. Umbra intended to confront Zress alone. She would try to reach the heart of this woman she didn't really know, and had not been near for more than an hour of either of their entire lives and try to convince her to release a vendetta for (actually) killing her entire family including the only mother she probably had known.

Even saying it in her mind made it feel like the stupidest idea ever. Even if Zress did not soften she hoped she'd be rattled. Hopefully. Selûne willing. It might give the others a chance to get at the sub-commanders of Zress' army and stop them. It was a supremely stupid plan, but it was all they had. Umbra trusted Selûne to make it work, but she felt bad for committing the success of any plan to faith, especially without telling her friends.

The sun was slowly sinking below the rooftops of Waterdeep Mountain as the group walked to the end of Trollskull Alley where the sewer entrance lay. They'd decided that this was the time most of the city was having dinner and would be inside and not in the street where spying eyes could blend in or people might ask questions.

They'd not entered via this route before usually preferring to go in through the Yawning Portal or an archway in the Mistshore region of the city that they'd discovered but neither of those was clandestine enough. This was an unused entrance according to Laraelra Harsard. They crawled down the iron rungs that led beneath the cobblestones streets and pulled the stone slab covering the hole back in place.

Spells were cast to insure that all of them could see in the dark and they proceeded to follow the map that laraela had provided. It was not long before they found themselves facing an unadorned brick wall. Theren seemed to be the only person complaining about the smell during

their journey. Heulwen was used to the acrid odors of her reagents and catalysts. Francene and Rolfe were immune to the smell of manure. Umbra just ignored it, as she did many discomforts. As for Renard, he was known to lick his anus when he didn't think anyone was looking.

It did not take the group long to detect the hidden mechanism that opened the passage through the wall. They prepared for any potential defenders, but they were almost disappointed to find nothing but dust in the small chamber.

A large round stone had been mortared into place over what they presumed was an archway mounted into one of the walls. Huelwen and their homunculus began to seek ways to remove it without damaging the arch beneath. While they did this, the rest of the team spread out to quickly search for other potential hiding places.

Before they even finished their search, there were the sounds of precision hammer-blows striking iron chisels and Heulwen directed everyone to stand clear. She inserted a crowbar between the slab and the arch and pulled. With agonizing slow motion the slab fell and shattered.

"There you go, easy as a pasty," Huelwen said.

Rolfe said, "Don't you mean easy as pie?"

"You enjoy your own pastry-wrapped treat, and I'll enjoy mine," Huelwen replied.

The archway was adorned by plain granite stones and at the top of them was a crescent moon carved into the keystone.

"It's an outhouse?" asked Rolfe.

"Maybe it takes darkness to open it," Thereon postulated.

"Or moonlight," Umbra said, drawing the moonblade Imyrsil.

The pale luminosity of the blade touched the archway and it sparked to life with a swirl of energy. A pale rune appeared as if floating on the surface. It was not one they'd encountered, but they'd been doing some research. The rune which vaguely appeared like a key passing through a barrier was *ullathar*, the rune of passage.

Umbra thanked Selûne silently. The moon gate, the rune of passage; these were good omens. Knowing they only had a minute to enter before the gate closed again for who knew how long, she waved her hands and pointed using the silent signals they'd drilled over long hours of delving in Undermountain and lined up in two columns and took a deep breath before entering the swirling gate.

There was a brief disorienting lurch. And they stepped out into darkness. Even with the vision of elves it took a moment to adjust to the complete absence of light after the dim light of the sewer chamber. Umbra did a quick count and everyone was present. Rolfe said, "Did anyone else feel like they were hardening in cement?"

Everyone looked at him, "Okay, just me then." he said, shaking out his limbs as if shucking off the remaining concrete.

They'd known that the runes could bestow curses as well as boons. They seemed to have avoided this one by dumb luck. The room they'd entered seemed to be a laboratory of sorts. Wooden trestle tables covered in dried blood were in the center of the room. Workbenches were near the walls with glassware, copper tubing and other containers coated with useless dried and cracked ingredients. Piles of bones and bits of rotted flesh were heaped in the corners. The stench of death hung in the air.

Luna looked at the gate through which they'd entered. The stone framed mirror had eyes of all shapes and descriptions surrounding it with an inscription in the common tongue "The gate cannot hide from those it cannot see."

It did not match the gate they'd entered. On one hand it was concerning that they'd not be able to retreat back the way they'd come. On the other hand, it was also concerning that elsewhere was a gate that might lead to a room directly beneath their home and there was no way to know where it was.

Umbra cursed, making Francene cluck at her. "Language," she admonished. That was until Umbra pointed at the stone-framed mirror and Francene also realized the implications. It did not take long for the wave of realization to pass through everyone in the company. Just then a pile of remains shifted.

A grey-toned arm rose out of the gorey pile followed by more limbs from the other piles. These limbs dragged out grey-skinned beings with razor-sharp teeth and lolling tongues "Ghouls," Rolfe said, drawing his shortswords.

They came in pairs from the corners of the room meaning the adventurers were surrounded. The room was small which left little room to maneuver. Umbra waved a hand and uttered the word *isilmë* and a beam of pale illumination shone down on the creatures in one corner. She shoved the table from the center of the room in front of them to slow them down. They writhed as the divine moonlight seared their flesh and hurt their eyes.

Rolfe charged forward to another corner, letting a blast of energy loose as he closed the distance. It struck one of the ghouls and it was reduced to ash in seconds. Francene traced a line with her staff. A pack of wolverines appeared on the ground and charged forward, ripping a pair of the ghouls into scraps of bone and skin as they swarmed over them angrily.

Theren and Heulwen, the former with a longbow and the latter with a crossbow fired at the remaining pair and splattered them like bags of gore with a single volley. The two Umbra had cast her spell on melted in the light and she canceled the light with a wave of her hand. Rolfe was just finishing off the last ghoul as they surveyed the room.

Francene discussed sending the wolverines to scout around in the hallways. They seemed amenable to that idea and so they cautiously opened the door. Renard started to object that it

was his job to scout, but then he realized that meant doing work and he withdrew his objection. This room proved disappointingly barren of clues as to its location within Undermountain.

The wolverines returned in short order and reported (via Francene) that the corridor beyond was a “U” shape with two sets of double doors, and little else. Francene asked them to hang around for a while and they formed a sort of protective huddle around her, snuffing and growling at the others.

Out beyond the laboratory it was much as they’d described. The two sets of doors were remarkably similar. They easily recognised the spider motif of drow occupation. Even with wide and tall hallways of clearly Dwarven construction the drow felt a need to decorate with spiders and webs and monstrous combinations of female and arachnid anatomy on the doorways and walls.

Quietly they proceeded to one of the doors. It was unlocked and beyond were more hallways. They turned at sharp angles and there were no long lines of sight in order to ambush any wandering creatures they might encounter. So, naturally, the group was alert and ready to attack. Which could be exhausting if kept up for extended periods. Francene encouraged the furry defenders surrounding her to sniff the air and scout ahead as they brought up the rear.

One, then another of the wolverines scampered back to Francene as they rounded yet another bare corner. She chittered and snarled at them for a moment then spoke in Common, “They say there are scary ladies ahead and they smell dead bodies.”

The pack of wolverines gathered around Francene as the group of adventurers assumed their usual battle formation. In front, Rolfe and Umbra with Francene and Renard in the middle and Theren and Heulwen behind. Renard and the wolverines eyed each other suspiciously but they all seemed focused on mutual protection for now.

The group rounded a corner in the dark and were taken aback by the enormous column carved in the likeness of a spider with a female elven head. In the dim light of their darkvision the colors were pale and dark greys. Although Umbra expected that to a drow there would be fluorescent colors that would be visible.

Beyond this monstrous effigy there seemed to be another column, this one carved as a 60’ tall elven woman who was fondling a scourge (there really was no other word for it, it was quite suggestive). Stone carved spiders crawled over her anatomy covering just enough to perhaps call it modest, but even that might be a stretch.

Despite the disturbing imagery, you had to admire the craftsmanship of it, it was a magnificent--if unnerving--sculpture. Umbra held up a hand. Ahead she could see an altar of sorts, the pale grey stone carved to resemble a tangled mass of spiderwebs and to the side of each were two blackened brass braziers, each belching a purple flame.

In the flickering light Umbra could see three figures kneeling before the altar as if in prayer. But what gave her pause was how the light from the flames did not cast a shadow for them and she could almost, but not quite see through them. They were clearly spirits.

She turned back to her friends, using gestures and quiet whispers for the most part she outlined a plan. Once they nodded their consent they took their positions and launched against the trio of undead. The wolverines bravely charged forward, they waddled but with some speed towards the creatures. As they did so Umbra closed her eyes and held her shield emblazoned with the multi-eyed symbol of Selûne. She chanted in the ancient sylvan tongue.

*Ortírielyanna rucimmë, Aina Eruontari
Alalyë nattira arcandemmar sangiessemman
Ono alyë eterúna me illumë ilya raxellor
Alcarin Vendë ar manaquentá.*

All three of the female forms turned in alarm as the first of her words crossed her lips. She completed the prayer and a faint aura surrounded her. From the shadows Theren fired two arrows which punched into one of the creatures. Her form tore like gauze as each hit drove through her. Heulwen fumbled through her vials unsure as to what might affect these creatures. She settled on the green viscous acid she preferred. Affixing it to a bolt, she fired the projectile at one of the other creatures. The bolt passed through harmlessly although the vial shattered. Sadly the acid dripped almost uselessly to the stone floor and sizzled ineffectively.

One of the banshee opened its mouth and wailed. Suddenly it was as if the group could see her for the first time. Every eye was both drawn to her and repelled by her visage. Several of the wolverines twisted themselves into knots of pain making screaming sounds of pain and then lay very still. Rolfe grabbed at his ears, dropping his swords and staggering. Even Umbra had to fight to concentrate amidst the din of that wail.

Francene looked terrified and she hid behind the stone pillar of Lolth. Rolfe struggled to make his hands pick up the swords. Huelwen and Theren seemed to have weathered the assault. And Umbra held her shield strong against their attacks.

One of the creatures threw itself at her. Its hands passed through the shield to grab at Umbra's throat and chest. Her armor and shield seemed ineffective, but the prayer to Selûne that seemed to shroud her made the creatures struggle to stay close. It seemed to pain them to be in such close proximity to Umbra.

Umbra whipped out Imyrzil and slashed through the creature. She opened the inner chamber of her soul that contained the light of Selûne and funneled it into her strike. Radiant energy flared along her blade and the first of the creatures was rent asunder by the silvery light of righteousness that the Chosen of Selûne wielded.

Rolfe funneled a blast of fire that engulfed one of the spirits. The heat from the flame made the air ripple as a blistering column surrounded the pale apparition. But it passed through the fire virtually unharmed. Rolfe slashed at it which seemed more effective but that did not stop it from wailing as its sister spirit had.

This time Rolfe's skin went pale and blood ran from his nose. His eyes went flat and he toppled to the ground. Umbra charged over and ran the sprint through channeling as much energy into it as she could spare to vanquish it quickly. Theren and Huelwen fired additional missiles at the

third, keeping it at bay, but Francene snapped out of her terror long enough to run to her son's side.

She pulled out a small bag and extracted a ball of herb-covered putty. She rolled it into a neat ball and flattened it, then slapped it onto Rolfe's chest. Rolfe coughed and spit out a wad of blood then rolled over and groaned. Umbra patted the big man on the back and turned to face the last of the creatures.

The creature's form was in tatters. There was only a wisp of it left, but it still opened its mouth to cry out, Umbra lunged, driving Imyrail into the center of its remains. The flash of radiant energy obliterated the spirit once and for all.

The group sat on the steps before the altar and panted from the exertion. "Everyone alive?" Umbra asked.

A voice from the darkness a fair distance away said "Yep, The smart one is still alive because he stayed away and hidden." Renard.

Rolfe said groggily, "I'll live," and Francene, looking less terrified, nodded that she too was okay. Huelwen and Theren stepped forward from the shadows and began gathering arrows. Theren looked up, "I think that there is a hole in the ceiling here."

He leaned over the altar to get a better view but as he touched the altar, a panel in the top of it sprung open. Thousands of spiders swarmed out of the hidden interior. They flowed over Theren an instant. He slapped at them trying to get them off.

Rolf uttered a syllable and snapped his fingers. In an instant all of the spiders just dropped off of Theren and ceased to move. Rolfe, as well, slipped into unconsciousness. Theren moved quickly away from the pile of spiders not caring how many of them he crushed beneath his boots as he did so. He moved over to Rolfe and shook him, even as his mother was checking him for injury.

Rolfe's eyes flickered open, "Sleep spell, I guess I was wounded enough to be affected by my own spell. Sorry."

The group sighed collectively and moved away from the altar and sat next to one of the pillars while they recovered some. Umbra and Theren poured over the maps they had and decided they had to be back on the Gauntlet level. There was a temple that matched the room they were in, but the map was vague on how you got from this temple to the areas they knew.

Huelwen and Renard were examining two corpses they found in the shadows. They were clearly adventurers of some sort that had run afoul of the banshee here. The saying in Waterdeep was you could not swing a dead adventurer in Undermountain without hitting a dead adventurer. Umbra crouched next to one of them.

She pulled out a small stick of incense and lit it. She lifted the stole she wore under her armor and kissed then ends and spoke the word *loicolícuma* as she touched the dead's forehead. The corpse opened its eyes.

"I can't move!" it said, disconcertedly.

"It is okay, friend, you are in no danger. I am Umbra Luna, Chosen of Selûne and champion of the old ways. You have sadly died, but I hope to find out what brought you into Undermountain to see if it might aid our quest. When we are done, your ancestors will be glad to take you back to the next life."

"Yes," the corpse said, "The next life. I think I remember."

Umbra rolled her eyes, the dead were sometimes hard to keep on focus, "Your journey into Undermountain. What did you find out?"

"Okay," he said with some annoyance, "I came down here looking for the Shadowdusk family. I found an old reference to them as a family of wizards who opened a portal into the Far Realm. I had been researching that myself..."

Huelwen behind her muttered, "Idiot, that's a recipe for madness," before Umbra shushed her.

"I was looking for where they went to hide. There were a lot of rumors, but most of them pointed to Undermountain. So I started looking for them. Say, did you find a half-elf rogue wandering around? He was traveling with me."

The adventurers looked over to the dead half-elf a few feet away, "Nope no sign of him," Francene said. Nobody contradicted her.

"Thank you friend, I'll release you now. Follow your heart to your final reward and all that. Selûne's light...ah screw it."

The semblance of life fled the corpse as quickly as it came the moment Umbra snuffed the incense. "Useful to know, but not just now." she said. Rolfe was looking better and so they geared up and started back down the hallways. This time, without the distraction of the creatures in the temple they spotted a secret entrance.

It opened into a straight hallway. As they passed through it they could see they were stepping out of a floor-to ceiling frame. Mirrored glass was scattered across the floor. They had barely traversed a few feet before Renard was yelping, "Hey! There's someone in the glass!"

As they looked down into the shards they could see their own reflection in the dozens of pieces that they could see, but a few, one or two, reflected the visage of an old bearded man wearing robes. He had a skull-topped staff and his piercing black eyes stared back at them.

Rolfe stomped one of the shards. "Come out through that, Halaster" he said.

For a few moments they busied themselves smashing the shards reflecting the mad mage into powder. They had no idea if it accomplished anything, but it made them feel better. Rounding a corner, Umbra stopped dead in her tracks. Standing in the center of the hallway was a skeleton wearing a tattered robe.

It pointed a wand at her and its jaw moved up and down. The creature made a dramatic gesture and Umbra winced. But nothing happened. The creature raised its other arm which terminated at the elbow and flapped it up and down and again pointed the stick at her. And again, nothing happened.

Rolfe, next to her, shrugged at her puzzled look. He walked up, snatched the wand from the skeleton's grip and shoved it to the ground. He stomped its head into powder to keep it from continuing to move. Rolfe examined the stick and pocketed it. "It might come in useful later," he said and continued on.

They continued down the corridor walking gingerly on the shattered mirror glass until they reached a dead end. It only took a moment's searching to discover yet another secret door within an emptied mirror-frame.

Opening it revealed another hallway. A smaller amount of mirrors (and this time not sporting Halaster's grinning face) was spread on the floor. A narrow staircase led up at a sharp angle beyond where any of them could see. The wide corridor also continued around a corner.

They discussed travelling up the staircase, but ultimately decided the corridor was the better choice and pushed on. Around the corner was more corridor. It extended to the limits of their vision, but there was an offshoot corridor from the main direction.

Franine sent her remaining handful of wolverines down the offshoot while Umbra and Rolfe continued down the main avenue. At the end of that stretch was what had clearly been a dining room. Now it lay in ruin and dust. All of the wooden furniture, with the exception of the massive wooden tables was smashed to splinters. A tangled collection of wrought iron chairs sporting the familiar drow spider motif was piled in one corner.

A set of double doors led to a kitchen area where pots, pans, utensils (including some knives) and a broom floated as if weightless around the room. Rolfe, excited, ran forward and grabbed the broom before Umbra could stop him. When nothing leapt to attack either of them she let out a breath. "Careful there, buddy. You could have set off a trap."

Rolfe was trying to ride the errant cleaning tool but it was being uncooperative. Whenever Rolfe would sit on it it would just hang there between his legs, unable to lift his (relatively) enormous weight. "It's broken," he said.

Behind them Huelwen had entered the room and was experimentally moving the various spoons, forks, and knives around. "They don't seem to be sentient or direct, they just float," he mused, "That might be useful in certain circumstances but not practical for daily use. I wonder what happened?"

Rolfe gave up on the boom and said casually, "Wild magic. I can feel it on my skin like ants."

Umbra and Huelwen both looked at the big man who was trying to get a pot to stay on the cast-iron stove. "You can do that?" asked Umbra.

Rolfe gave up on that pursuit and started to hunt for food. "Sometimes, if it is strong enough. But not usually," he said off-handedly. He wandered into a storage area where a workbench was covered in gear and three cabinets stood around in silent witness. Rolfe casually lifted a small knife and dropped it and it fell back to the table. He picked through the gear casually admiring some of it and putting carefully back where he'd found it.

Huelwen and Umbra examined the cabinets. They sported glass panes with etched spiderwebs on them and it was clear that they'd been thoroughly looted. Huelwen, however, had found something in the bottom of one of the cabinets.

She dragged out the box and examined it carefully. It was a plain box. After determining it was locked she pulled out their lockpicking tools and easily sprung the lock. Picking through the contents, Huelwen began to chuckle. "Look at this!" she said holding up a tube of red fluid, "Blood, and it's not dried or coagulated. There's also fresh casting ingredients for a half-dozen spells at least in here, perfectly preserved. And I'd recognise these anywhere," she said holding up a fist-sized flask of amber fluid, "Alchemist's fire. Five of them. I think I might keep this if you don't mind."

Umbra saluted the alchemist, she was welcome to it. Rolfe had assembled the collection of junk on the table into several piles. It was a considerable amount of gear, and would come in handy, even if it meant lugging it through the dungeon. You could not be too prepared.

The three carried the finds back to the dining room where they distributed it among themselves. Looking around, Umbra said, "It looks like this might be a dead-end, So it might be worth remembering this place as a fall-back position. It has an escape route up the stairs and lots of debris to use as cover."

Rolfe said, "There's a well in the kitchen we can use for water and a fireplace we can cook on, even if the pots and pans float around."

Francene reported from the wolverines, "They say the offshoot passage goes 'a long way' which to wolverines means they had to walk for about a minute to get to the end of it. It ends in big doors."

Umbra noted this location on her map and headed towards the corridor. The others fell in behind her. The corridor was really quite long and rounded a corner where it terminated at a set of large doors. A crossed set of sword and mace was embossed by a black iron spider set in the middle of the doors. Behind her she heard Theren say, "What is this?"

He was standing next to an open doorway clearly disguised to match the stone wall. Theren had pulled it open and was staring into a relatively small chamber. "It whispered to me," he said, "in Elvish."

"What did it say?" Francene asked.

"This way," said Theren, "I got curious."

Umbra had long ago given up on establishing any sort of process for approaching the unknown with this crew. They poked, touched, tasted anything they found. It exasperated her, but she said a silent prayer to Selûne for peace. "What is inside?" she asked.

Theren said, "An ugly statue of an elf, probably a drow."

From inside the room a quiet voice whispered in elvish "Who are you calling ugly?"

Every one of the adventures simultaneously pulled a weapon and poked their head into the room. At the far end was an oversized statue carved in black basalt of an elven woman. She wore a scowl of hate and vengeance and leaned forward brandishing a scourge. She was wearing nothing but spiders. Whether they were portrayals of a garment made to resemble spiders or something that represented living spiders was left to the imagination of the viewer.

In elven, Umbra spoke to the statue, "Who are you?"

The whisper came back, "Rightly I should ask you who you are, invading the temple of Lolth, but since I am trapped here, I have no idea what has gone on outside that door. I am Xyrxian Vandree, priestess of Lolth and heir to the House of Vandree may they forever reign supreme!"

Umbra translated the elven language for her friends before replying, "I have no idea about that, but why are you a statue? And how can you speak to us?"

The mouth of the statue did not move, but the sounds of the whisper were clearly emanating from it as it spoke, "I was accused of aiding a rival house and my sisters of the priesthood captured me and executed me at the base of this statue. Presumably they performed a ritual to bid my spirit here as punishment for something of which I was not guilty. I was not aiding another house, I had fallen in love with a young spider-master of House Kenafin. His name is Dran'l, do you know him?"

Umbra indicated she did not, "No matter, He had been planning to come back to be my consort under my House when we were captured. I have heard nothing since. I presume he escaped. He might be worried about my fate, but if you find him, assure him I still love him, even from beyond the veil. And I will continue to love him even as my soul is sent to the Abyss to serve Lolth in her demonweb."

When Umbra translated that Francene just mouthed, "Wow" as Rolfe wiped an empathetic tear from his eye. Theren asked from behind Umbra, "How can we break this curse and release you?"

The female voice whispered back, "You could destroy my soul's prison. I cannot see it so I don't know its form, but it is capable of being destroyed, I can sense that."

Theren looked to his compatriots as he relayed this information. They seemed willing to help so they began to draw weapons and prepare spells, but Umbra and Rolfe were primarily close combatants. They drew their swords and marched up to the statue. Simultaneously they connected on either side of the massive sculpture and disappeared.

No further blows were sent, no spells completed as the assembled heroes stared in shock at the empty floor where the pair had been standing. "What happened?" asked the spirit.

Chapter Six

Umbra and Rolfe's weapons slid through thin air. They both whirled around only to see a large statue of a male drow. It wore a long open robe etched with thin spiderwebs baring its chest. Its face was full of rage as it howled silently and motionlessly at the ceiling. A whisper of a male voice emanated from the statue, "Who *dares* enter this chamber?"

Rolfe did not take his eyes off the statue, "What did he say?"

Umbra said softly, "He wants to know who we are. A lot like the other statue did."

She said louder in elvish, "I am Umbra Luna, Chosen of Selûne, defender of the old ways. I am here on a mission with my companions."

The voice said dourly, "I only sense one other. Neither of you are drow. Although you are at least an elf. Likely from the surface. What has happened to the temple?"

Umbra considered how much to tell him, "It has been a long time since the temple was active. What do you remember?"

Rolfe waited, although impatiently. He looked back and forth as they were speaking, understanding very little except for certain words: drow, temple elf.

The statue did not reply immediately, "I have no reason to trust you surface elf. But I can find no harm in sharing my tale. I was grabbed by the priestesses of the temple from my post in the spider pens. I can remember the venom burning my veins as they injected me and I woke up here unable to move or see. I have some awareness of the space and motion around me, but it is not quite the same as seeing."

Umbra looked at Rolfe who raised his eyebrows in expectation. She explained it to him and he said, "Isn't he the one she was in love with? Dran'l?"

The statue spoke, "Dran'l. Yes, that is my name. What do you know?"

Umbra sighed, this was not going to go well, "Dran'l I'm sorry to tell you that we met Xyrxian. She was also captured by the priestesses and killed. Her spirit was bound to a statue. Like yours."

The spirit was shaken, it began to chant "No. no no" over and over. It soon devolved into weeping. Umbra felt bad for the couple. "My friends and I attempted to free her, but the statue she is bound to cannot be touched. It sent us here, wherever that is."

She then repeated her statements to Rolfe who nodded, "Yep, that's how I remember it. I wonder if I touch this--" He disappeared.

Umbra put her hand over her face. Every time. One of these days their recklessness would get them killed. She spoke to the spirit, "She said she still loves you and hopes to meet you in the afterlife. If we can free both of you, we will."

He blubbered, "Please, please, if you can do this I'll be in your debt for eternity! Free me! Send me on to meet her!"

Umbra made a noise, "Uhhhh, about that. You are bound to a large, very hard statue that is enchanted to teleport anything that touches it. I use a sword. You can imagine my frustration, here."

Dran'l growled, "Your frustration! I am bound here for--"

Umbra never heard the rest of his rant as she touched the statue. Rolfe was just finishing his explanation of where they'd been. The group decided that they'd come back if they did not find the other room and do what they could for them, but not to waste time on it now.

Inwardly, Umbra promised herself she'd do it herself if only to reassure herself that even the drow could experience love and devotion. She needed to believe that. She needed to think that Zress could feel that for her.

They assembled outside the double doors and prepared. Rolfe pushed the door open and they entered the next chamber. As the doors opened they could see that every surface of the room was covered in skulls. They were mortared to the walls and the floor was cobbled with them. Francene said, "First, their decorator needs to be fired. Second, be wary of traps."

A wolverine headed into the room ahead of the group. He snuffled at the skulls on the floor and chittered. Francene said, "Really?" in common, "It is saying that the skulls move. Like they are loose."

Umbra took a tentative step into the room. The skull under her feet, dried with age, crushed into powder and her feet dropped a half-foot into the pit of skulls. She wobbled and took another step, but the rounded surface was uneven and she could not balance well. Once she'd managed to regain her equilibrium she shouted over her shoulder, "Be really careful, it's hard to walk on."

They tried to be quiet, but between their armor and the clattering sounds of skulls knocking and crushing together it was impossible to be inconspicuous. Umbra stepped up out of the room at last with relief and turned back to assist the others.

A short walkway led into a larger vaulted chamber. Fortunately the skull motif did not continue. Inside there were eight lifelike statues of drow warriors, four males and four females, positioned around the room. Above them nestled in the vaulted ceiling was an enormous upside-down iron spider that looked like a tarantula.

The heroes walked in slowly, ready for an attack. They looked at each of the statues without touching them, examining their features. The sculptures were very lifelike, and having had some

experience with such things they surmised that they had been living drow who had been turned to stone.

Rolfe looked like he was ready to cast a spell when the statues attacked. Instantly the appearance of stone disappeared and a barrage of drow spells descended on them. Purplish haze blossomed into the air around them, coating all of the surfaces and the group in the middle of the circle of drow and simultaneously the room went completely dark.

Umbra cursed, if they'd been affected by the faerie fire the drow could negate the effect of the blindness on them. They would be able to attack the group while not suffering the penalty of complete darkness that they had. Even though the drow could not see in the magical darkness either, their highly attuned darkvision could sense the faerie fire.

Even as this thought was crossing her mind a short sword clattered off her armor. The drow signaled to each other using codewords but Umbra could hear them call names: Dhuurak, Seidax, Zilviss, and others.

She swung Imyrsil broadly and was rewarded with a yelp of pain from one of the drow. She attacked again where she felt the first hit and heard the attacker hit the floor. She could hear chattering noises and realized that the wolverines could smell and feel the footfalls of the drow and she called out to her friend, "Francene! Tell the wolverine to pair up with us, tell them to point out the enemies!"

Umbra heard Francene making sounds she could not understand, but a furry creature brushed up against her boot. It nudged her to her left. A sword slid off her shield almost simultaneously. Umbra jabbed hard in that direction and was rewarded by a grunt and the meaty feeling of her blade entering a body.

Around her she could hear the drow now shouting to each other to eliminate the vermin. Umbra assumed she meant the wolverines. Rolfe began swearing but Umbra could hear the big man cleaving through the attackers.

Theren was swinging his sword, his prowess with bows being almost completely negated by the sphere of darkness. He was connecting although his effectiveness was somewhat reduced. Umbra could not hear Heulwen within her sphere of awareness, until a metallic 'clink' sound of a ball landing near her feet alerted her. She squeezed her eyes shut as the grenade exploded, dispelling the darkness around them.

Suddenly she could see how the battle had shifted, there were two drow at her feet and one each at Theren's and Rolfe's. Francene and Huelwen had scurried out of the circle and had been directing her efforts at regaining control of the battle.

Renard was clawing at a drow who was struggling to pull him free of his face. And Francene directed the three remaining wolverines to finish him off. He collapsed as the furred horde overran him and his screams trailed off as he expired.

The three remaining drow passed a concerned glance between them and then broke to run for the exit of the chapel. Two of them reached the door, although one of them had two arrows in his back and he was bleeding profusely. The third was on the ground as Rolfe tripped him and dropped atop the prone figure to hold it in place.

Despite trying, one of them still escaped. Theren ran after her, if only to follow her from the shadows. The captive, a male was roughly dragged over and restrained. Umbra's old city guard manacles being used, once again, to hold captives.

Umbra pulled his face close to hers, "Who are you working for, and how many of you are here?"

The drow smiled, his bright white teeth gleaming in his shadow-black face. "Umbra Luna. *Cáno* Zress said you'd return someday. Now that she knows you are back, the *Ghost Spiders* will put an end to you for your betrayal of House Auvryndar."

Huelwen said "Oh my." before Rolfe knocked the drow unconscious.

They did not have much time, the longer they delayed the more defenses Zress could activate. Umbra spoke solemnly, "Before we go out there and face Zress and her *Ghost Spiders* I should tell you something. Back when we betrayed our word to House Auvryndar, I really had a lot of trouble with it. I know it was my plan and it worked. But it messed me up. And to top it off I have feelings about Zress that I still don't understand. So I am asking you, regardless of how hard it is, please try to spare her."

Theren said, "I wondered why you spared her first time. It was most unlike you."

Francene was sympathetic, "I knew that something was on your mind even back then. Back when we came down here to do that *atonement* thing you said you had to do. I figured it was because you went back on your word. I mean, we had to, but I could see that really bothered you at the time."

Umbra smiled at the small motherly woman, "Thank you all, friends, I know it is a lot to ask, but it means a lot to me to have a chance to resolve my feelings about Zress rather than just killing her. It will be painful, but it is worth it to me."

Huelwen made a grim smile and Rolfe patted Umbra on the back supportively. Renard just licked his fur, apparently unconcerned, but he probably cared a little. Soon they were out the door following the drow who had escaped. He had less than a minute's lead on them but you could get quite far with a minute head-start.

Beyond the double doors leading out of the rotunda was a hallway with two further sets of double doors. Umbra paused for a moment to look at her maps. She stabbed a finger on the spot she recognised. "Here", she said, "We are in the middle of the Gauntlet. I know where we are."

The doors directly ahead of them led to a gateway they'd used many times. It led up to the highest level of Undermountain beneath the Yawning Portal Tavern. It was, essentially, the best place to stage an invasion.

At the end of the hallway was a doorway that led to a statue that was mercifully cloaked in permanent darkness. It had driven Rolfe mad one time when they had been here and none of the group was eager to repeat that experience.

There were, to Umbra's recollection, three chambers with statues to various gods of the Underdark. Each of them had locked doors that led to the other section of the Gauntlet where House Auvryndar had housed their troops and priests and the temple to Lolth that Vlonwelv had been renovating.

Between the two was the vaulted atrium with guest rooms where they'd fought the monstrous Muriel, the Mad drow/Scorpion Mutant. And also where they'd betrayed Vlonwelv and her troops. It wasn't a good day for anyone. Umbra swallowed the surge of feelings about it and showed the others.

"If you were planning an invasion of the surface, where would you put your troops?" She pointed to a large room past the statues of the gods and the large room with the gate."

Theren considered, "The gate room will certainly be guarded. So we should probably clean it out first. But this room is a good rally point and they can fall back or circle around from there."

Most of the others nodded approval (Rolfe and Renard were notably distracted by their own things) and so Umbra lined up on the doorway that led to the gate. She and Rolfe pushed the door open with a rush. Unsurprisingly the room was already blanketed in magical darkness.

Arrows flew out of the inky void which, fortunately, failed to hit anything. Umbra immediately wished that the wolverines had been able to stay, but such magical conjurations were only short term, and theirs had expired. They would have to figure this out themselves.

Theren returned fire along the path of some of the arrows and was rewarded by at least one grunt of pain. The moment of hesitation at the darkness cost them as a curtain of webbing unfolded from nowhere and blanketed the doorway.

The spell-conjured webs were sticky and tough and Renard and Theren both were caught in them. Umbra and Rolfe managed to pull free, but that placed them deep in the darkness. Behind her Umbra could hear Huelwen and Francene trying to cancel the magical void. Umbra swung blindly hoping to connect with something in the room.

Then her skin prickled as something passed its hand through the side of her face. It didn't bleed, nor did it cut, but the shadow demon touched her mind and the pain of her childhood trauma flooded her every nerve. Watching Eliath Craulnobar kill their caretaker and threaten her mother roared to life. It was every bit as painful as it was that night.

Something laughed at her angst and tears and licked its vile lips enjoying her anguish. Umbra closed her eyes and shouted at the top of her lungs "*Vanyarauco!*" Begone, Demon!

Even in the pitch black enchanted void there was a muted flash of light. The shadow recoiled and retreated beyond her reach. It knew her faith could not be shaken. There was a muffled

thump as one of Huelwen's grenades exploded, dropping the darkness in one part of the room. Unfortunately, not where she was.

She continued to move forward and heard the familiar chanting of arcane magics being woven. She did not manage to reach them before strong eldritch tentacles erupted from the floor and grabbed at her.

They grabbed at her shield and arms. Her legs were soon mired in the embrace of the conjured limbs. Her charge ended. She could hear the whipping noises of arrow fire being exchanged between the drow in the room and the rest of her group. She could also hear the muffled *whump* of a fireball very nearby. Rolfe had evidently decided that was easier than fighting though.

But the flaming discharge had not hit the mage that had cast this eldritch abomination on her. So she struggled to free herself. Although she had spells herself, they were useless if she could not see.

From beyond the darkness Umbra heard "*Aithorn!*" and a bolt of bluish electricity lanced through her. Her muscles twitched and spasmed and she frothed at the mouth uncontrollably as the arcls from her armor singed her face and hands. Behind her she heard shouts of pain and surprise.

"Enough," she thought. She closed her eyes and imagined the doorway barely thirty feet behind her. Using this spell in this way was risky, it usually required a clear line of sight, but she had passed through that doorway on many occasions, and could visualize it clearly in her mind. She took a step with her mind and landed her foot on the floor near the door. Theren, Rolfe, Huelwen and Francene were out there taking cover behind the door frame.

She pointed towards where she suspected the mage was and made the gesture to Heulwen to try to dispel the darkness. Huelwen nodded and chucked a brass orb in that direction. A muffled **whump** made the blackness disappear. The mage was very close to where Umbra had imagined him to be but the field of black waving arms was between him and her.

She mentally stacked up the spells she wanted and took a quick breath before charging off to one side. It changed the angle and suddenly she had a clear line to the Mage. She turned and dragged Imyrsil's tip along the ground in a semicircle. Sparks flew from the moonblade's tip and as she whipped the tip up to point at the mage a line of fire lanced out from it and engulfed the mage.

He screamed and his concentration on the tentacled mass lapsed and it evaporated from existence. Umbra could still not quite reach the drow but she opened her palm and as Imyrsil fell from her palm a line of bluish electricity extended from her hand and wrapped itself around the mage. She drew him closer to her then reached down to grab her sword.

It was fortunate she did as a volley of arrows flew over her head. With the darkness gone she could see there were at least two mages in the room as well as at least a dozen drow commanded by at least two of their elite warriors.

One of those warriors was stomping towards her. The mage grinned at her, "You have really stirred up a spider's nest now, Umbra Luna. We are not weakened as we were against Muriel. You now face us as our sole enemy."

It was clear, once the darkness had cleared, they'd changed their focus to concentrate on her. They'd already suffered heavy losses. The fireball alone had felled at least five or six. But even just the two elites and two mages would prove a tough fight with her separated from her team.

Rolfe was moving in to back her up and the others were keeping the drow down with suppressing arrows and spells. But this fight would be all on Umbra and she could not allow them to win.

She drew herself up and opened some sort of internal reliquary. Divine light pulsed out from her and washed over the fighter and the mage. The mage collapsed to the ground. His eyes smoldering cinders in his skull.

The fighter's skin was tight and shiny from the blast but he continued to press in. He rained down blows on her with his black-metal shortsword. Umbra swatted at the strikes with her shield but one of the lightning quick blows slid past and scored her hand. It burned with the venom that had been applied to the blade.

The other elite intercepted Rolfe and shouted encouragement to his fellow fighter. The burly drow leered at her with pure malice as he grabbed her arm and floated 30 feet into the air then dropped her to the ground. She landed hard and it drove the air out of her lungs. He landed lightly next to her, ready to pound her mercilessly.

She rolled and stood. She stabbed Imyrstil at his stupid grinning face. The thin longsword slid easily through his skull and she ignited it with righteous fire channeling her rage and frustration at the necessity of this fight. As the sword slid out, he was amazingly still standing so she stabbed him in the heart once more to end his suffering. "There, you bastard, Lolth can have you back," she muttered.

She could feel the venom from the slice on her hand burning up her arm and holding her sword was both painful and took some concentration. Rolfe had managed to overpower his combatant with brute force and of the two mages only one was currently visible, the other having used a spell to escape.

Umbra pulled out a wand from her jacket and pointed it at the wizard. "*Paralizzo*" she said, and the Mage ceased moving. She then turned to the mirror as the others descended on the helpless mage.

She touched the wand to the frame and it swam with color. Umbra moved her face close to the energy of the plane of the mirror without touching it and whispered, "Jhesiyra, can you hear me?"

A voice that sounded like the chiming of bells softly emanated from the swirling field. "Yes, Umbra Luna, I can hear you."

“Have the drow used this gate?” Umbra asked, still whispering.

“They lack the power and skill to use this gate. *Unlike you and your friends.*” The emphasis on the last part was evident. “There is one of them, however, who is strong enough, but she alone has the power. She has yet to try. I have allowed you here through the hidden gate because I knew it would aid your attack with surprise, but you must press the advantage.”

Umbra whispered a soft “Thank you, Jhesiyra. That has been helpful.”

“Anything to thwart Halaster, which is exactly what you are doing right now.” the voice said. The mirror resumed its standard reflective surface.

Umbra walked over where the Mage was wounded and unconscious. “Kill any survivors, None of these guys are going to help us. Zress has made them fanatical fighters. They can’t use the gate, although she may be able to open it. We really have to finish this once and for all.”

Rolfe said, “Closure is important.”

Everyone looked at him, and especially Umbra. Was the unconcerned doofus persona just an act? She shook it off. But she reminded herself, yet again, that Rolfe was usually aware of more than he ever let on.

Chapter Seven

Zress:

I am taking your armor in order to take from you the responsibility to the family you carry with it. I am sorry we could not be friends as I admire your strength and sense of duty. But know that I respect you and by leaving you alive, know that it is the best I could do for you in the moment. I may contact you in the future if you will accept the hand I am extending to you and don't bite it like a rabid animal.

You can define yourself as anything you want to be. This is what I have left you: Your honor, your life and your future.

The bliss of the stars to you,

Umbra Luna

---The text of the letter Umbra Luna left with Zress when she let her live.

As they had previously discussed, the group traveled to the final double door. The ones that led to the three shrines of the underdark gods. They opened the doors with their eyes averted in case the monstrous maddening statue was unshrouded. Thankfully it was not. An orb of

blackness surrounded it. Beyond it they knew there was a locked doorway and similar doors in the rooms to either side of this one.

But the sealed door in one of those rooms had a secret that they had, on a prior encounter, uncovered. They entered the room where the statue of the male drow stood on a pedestal. The group gave it a wide berth as it was known to attack people within arm's reach on occasion.

The double doors exiting this chamber were tall and narrow and several smears of blood had been painted across its surface. Much of it was old and dried, but some small amount of it seemed fresh. Umbra called to Huelwen to bring up that vial of fresh blood he'd found.

He dutifully produced it from the box and she placed a few drops on her palm and wiped it on the door. A soft sound indicated that the door had released its magical seal. They gathered their things and prepared to push forward. The door swung open and they could see there were no combatants to greet them. The corridor beyond was straight to the limits of their vision.

Their anticipation grew with every forward step. Each one of the companions knew what was ahead, the two-layer chamber of Lolth where they'd fought Muriel. It was both an opulent display and perfect place for an ambush which is why it had proved such an effective battleground. But this time, they were the invaders and their opposition (she had a hard time thinking of Zress as an enemy) was entrenched, aware and ready for them.

Theren cast a spell to enhance their stealth as they approached a bend in the hallway. Rounding it, they could see into the large open space ahead. Renard, magically enhanced, was as quiet as a shadow as he prowled along the wall. The rest of them, armored and carrying gear were less quiet, but still significantly muffled and certainly almost undetectable.

A staircase to the side was the only way to the second floor of the open-air space, but it would almost certainly be guarded which would make it tricky to use without attracting attention. Magical stealth notwithstanding.

Huelwen called over Renard and placed a spell on him. Suddenly the cat was completely invisible. Huelwen touched their forehead, the sign indicating it was their concentration holding the effect and held up a finger to indicate it was only for a short time. The group withdrew to the corner and waited for their spy to return.

The seconds ticked past like hours, it seemed a terrifically long time from when he'd departed before Renard mewed softly to let them know he'd come back. He said he could smell the drow but he was unable to see them. They must have been invisible like him. The enormous spider statue that had attacked them before had been restored by some unknown means. It might still be a danger.

He could not estimate numbers. "A lot" was his best guess. On their first visit here, they'd been attacked by several mounds of bones. The bones still lay in piles on the lower level, but they appeared inert and harmless.

With potentially dozens of drow including, no doubt, mages and possibly priests the assembled forces were too numerous to face head-on. To try to tackle that many invisible, enchanted, and empowered troops would be suicide. And there was no guarantee the giant stone spider and perhaps even the piles of bones again might be added to the fight.

It was only because Muriel had killed so many of the drow in the battle that gave them enough edge to finish the job. It had been Umbra's sad duty to finish Zress herself in single combat. Tears streamed down her face that day as she begged Zress to just surrender. She pleaded with the drow woman to turn her back on Lolth and the Houses of Menzoberranzan and to live her life, free to make her own choices.

Whether it was pride, conviction, or duty, she did not back down. Umbra finished the fight by rendering her unconscious (not a simple task in and of itself, Zress was very tough), but had left her alive. Umbra could feel her face getting hot even as she thought about it.

"What if I just gave myself up?" she asked her friends, "It might diffuse some of these troops as they took me prisoner. It would certainly put them off guard."

Francene seemed likely to explode, "THAT was your plan? That's the stupidest thing you've ever suggested."

Theren nodded, "It does seem short-sighted. She may just kill you on sight."

Umbra could not disagree, "She might, but I'm betting she won't. She will probably do some monologging, perhaps threaten me with torture or suffering. And possibly even threaten your lives, knowing I am not down here alone. But all of that buys you time and gives you a chance to pick them off in smaller groups."

Francene grumbled, "It is still a stupid plan. How do you plan to keep her from just cutting your throat?"

Umbra winced at that graphic image. And she really didn't have a plan for that. "I have to try to reach her. I have to let her know how I --," she choked. She'd not even admitted to her friends exactly how she felt -- much less to Zress.

Huelwen placed a hand on her shoulder, "It is okay, Umbra. You have your reasons for wanting to face her, but bear in mind that we want to get you back, and that is why we are concerned. I fear the risk may be too great."

Rolfe said, "I can go in with you, if you want. Give you another ally if you get taken prisoner."

Renard said, invisibly, "I'd be the better choice, they won't know I am there."

Umbra held up her hands, "Look, I get it. It is a half-assed plan and even I know it. But right now, it is what we can do. Unless you know another way into the palace areas where she's holed up.

Rolfe rubbed his chin, "We might. The teleporting statues. We don't know where they lead."

Umbra stared open-mouthed. Again, Rolfe demonstrated awareness more astutely than any of them.. She seized on it though, "That may be the answer, then. Go back, find the way in the back door and go after them that way."

Umbra pointed back the way they'd come. "Let's go, they won't wait for us for long."

The group departed but it wasn't until they reached the blood-smeared doors that they realized Umbra had gone the other way.

Umbra stepped out into the open with hands raised in surrender. "Zress Orlezziir, I am here to surrender to you and you alone."

A voice that made Umbra's skin tingle came from the balcony above, "You have given me no reason to trust you. I should just slay you where you stand."

Umbra spoke sarcastically without thinking, "I'd rather you didn't," but she gathered her wits and proceeded, "I left you alive once when I didn't have to. I only seek the same courtesy."

"Courtesy?" the voice shouted, "The courtesy you showed my mother when you turned on her the instant she defeated Muriel? The courtesy you showed her devoted flock when you murdered them one by one so no loose ends remained? And as for leaving me alive, you stole my armor, my weapons, and you left me a *note*! A silly schoolgirl note full of nonsense about leaving the House Auvryndar and forging my own path."

The woman's invisibility spell disappeared as she spat at Umbra, such was the rage with which she directed it, "The only courtesy I should extend to you is a quick death."

Voices behind her murmured beyond Umbra's hearing. Zress shook with rage, her fists balled and she shook them at the unseen voices. She turned back to Umbra, "Take off my armor. Toss your weapons on the piles of bones. Do it without delay. This is not a negotiation. You are my prisoner, Umbra Luna, and you will divulge the whereabouts of your friends and the defenses of the city above before you are executed."

Zress spun and stormed off out of sight as armed elite fighters both male and female appeared around her dropping their invisibility so that she knew she was both outnumbered and overwhelmed. She tossed her sword onto the bones and began to doff her armor.

Further up the hallway, the group had passed the portal and had backtracked to the room with the statue inhabited by the spirit of Xyrxian Vandree. Closing the secret door, the group began to fret all at once. They wondered what she had been thinking, they wondered what would happen, and they worried about their friend.

Huelwen finished warding the door and said, "That should keep us relatively safe from pursuit. I did not see them using anything other than spiders so they shan't be able to track us by scent."

Theren observed, "This particular door was very cunningly concealed, in the darkness it is virtually invisible. Yes, I believe we can stay here and plan our next move."

Rolfe was over talking to the statue, Francene wasn't sure what they were talking about, but she assumed they'd find out eventually. She, however, had some choice things to say to the rest of them at that moment. "Why are you just planning to sit here while Umbra is being held prisoner? That crazy woman is going to interrogate her and kill her and in the meantime we are here having sandwiches and planning a picnic!"

Renard said, "I could use a sandwich right about..." Francene's look shut him right up and he muttered, "Right, not the point. Got it."

Francene glared at all of them, "So? What are we going to *DO*?"

Rolfe said from behind them, "Xyrxian says she thinks she might know where the other room is. Where Dran'l is."

Rolfe explained that this room had been a cell for penance. Which, for the drow, meant a torture chamber. Their description of the other room led her to believe it might be a servant's chamber for the guest quarters on the other side of the complex. It would take them to just behind the temples of the Dark Seldarine.

Huelwen asked, "What's a Dark Seldarine?"

Theren explained, "They are the full pantheon of the drow gods. Their names are used in ghost stories by High elves so they are well known to us. Ghaunadaur, Kiaransalee, Selvetarm, and Vhaeraun. I suppose Eilistraee would be included in that although she's not an evil god. The stabbing statue was probably dedicated to Vhaeraun and the statue surrounded by the dark was likely Ghaunadaur. There must be other shrines dedicated to the rest. I can only speculate on which is which, however."

"So that's the plan?" Francene shook her head, "Teleport to a place that a ghost says used to be a guest room and is now occupied by heaven knows what. Travel behind the shrines of the evil gods of the drow and sneak up on an army of pissed off commandos? Sure. Why not? Sounds simple now that I've said it out loud."

The sarcasm in her statement wasn't lost on the group. Theren added, "If you have better plan, I am listening. Umbra has put us in difficult position. I will have words with her once this is over. I expect we all will."

Renard said, "We could just go back and kill them all. We did it once before."

Theren picked up Renard roughly. And stared him in his furry face, "That was not plan. Now is not possible because we lose element of surprise. Be more helpful and less sarcastic."

Renard bristled as he was set back down. "I see, she gets to be sarcastic and I--" the rest of the party was staring at him. "I'll just go back to sleep shall I?"

Francene sat next to Renard and smoothed his fur, "Look, I know you are worried too. We all are. And we don't have a lot of options, but let's not be at each other's throats, right, Theren?"

Theren grumbled what was probably an apology and sat sullenly. They all did for a moment before trying, again, to come up with a plan of action.

Umbra, at that moment, was being dragged through the drow complex. Whenever she attempted to stand they kicked her feet out from under her. A drow behind her carried a sack full of her possessions. Zress was leading the way. She walked tall and with purpose, she was clearly in charge and the assembled army snapped to her charge. It was not the sort of *laissez faire* attitude it had been under her mother. This group was primed for war.

The procession ended in front of a room where a drow woman with a scourge was whipping a drow male who had been pinned to an x-shaped iron rack. She was whipping his back which was a mass of raw meat.

“So explain to me again which of the Bregan D’aerthe you conspired with to smuggle out those males?” she was saying.

The woman stopped and stood at attention as Zress entered. Zress addressed her, “Izzorvir, I trust this prisoner is about to divulge their contacts?”

“Imminently, *Cáno*,” the woman said curtly, “He has given us some information, but we have yet to get to the root of the conspiracy.”

“Good, I want our new guest to witness the collapse of the tissue-thin defenses that protect Waterdeep. Umbra Luna, you should get to know Izzorvir well, you and she will be spending a lot of time together.”

Izzorvir’s eyes widened, “You honor me with this prisoner, Commander!” She said adoringly.

Zress smiled at her, there was a hint of sexual energy in it which twisted Umbra guts even more. “Izzorvir, you bring me the best secrets, why shouldn’t I favor you?”

Umbra had little more on than the simple canvas pants and silk shirt she wore beneath her armor. All of her possessions including Imyrsil had been stripped from her. Still, she held her head high as they shoved her roughly into a cage and locked it shut. “Pay attention to this one, Izzorvir, she is still dangerous even without her gear. I have taken her holy symbol and components but she may still have surprises. I would be careful not to underestimate her.”

“Of course, Commander, you can count on me,” she said with pride.

Zress turned to Umbra, “I’ll be back to watch because I want to hear you cry and wail for Selûne to spare you. I want to hear how *you* feel about giving up everything that people told you to be so you can be who you want to be. I want to see how that works out for you.”

As she turned away she said casually, “Know that I respect and admire you for your ability to survive despite being stupid and sentimental. And hopefully you will vomit up your allies as you are tortured before the eyes of your god. Because you have no honor, no life and no future.”

Umbra hung her head at Zress using her words against her. They hurt, and she probably deserved them. She had acted in the moment and tried to speak her heart and what it was telling her, but she lacked the words. She still did. This wasn't war, justice, a code or a responsibility and that was all that she'd known.

And now she might die, leaving her friends stranded and Waterdeep in danger for a foolish notion. The male drow on the cross coughed. He looked at Umbra and said softly, "Waterdeep shall not fall as long as Jarlaxel lives. He told us you were coming."

Umbra blinked in shock. She'd never met him nor had they done business. He was, after all, a crime lord in the city. But he was a crime lord with a code and he was known to take in drow who were fleeing the noble houses of Menzoberranzan. Especially males. She'd directed more than one male out of Undermountain to contact him.

It would seem he'd gotten wind of her mission to stop the drow before they became a serious threat. But this man was literally nailed to a plank and Jarlaxel was all the way back in the city. How could he help?

The drow torturer came over to Umbra's cage with a pot and a brush. She began to rub the bars with a sticky black liquid. She didn't slow down as she began to brush the bars Umbra was leaning on and Umbra sprang back from them rather than get the foul-looking substance on her skin. "Good you not touch stuff," the torturer said in broken Common, "poison eats skin. No lean on bars for you."

Umbra stood in the narrow cage as the torturer coated all the bars around the edge of the cage. In elvish she said, "You can stand there as witness until *Cáno* Zress allows you to lie down after she kills you. The dead can rest all they like."

"As for you," she said to the near unconscious man in elvish, "I have a little wake me up"

She dumped a bucket of water on his back. Umbra could smell the salt in it from her cage. His screams were heartbreaking. Umbra looked away. With her eyes averted she spotted something small and silver on the floor behind her cage. It was tantalizingly close to the bars and so while the torturer did her worse to the man she reached out for it.

Pulling it inside her cage without touching the poisonous bars was difficult, but she was slight and limber. Had she been in here for hours or beaten she might not have easily succeeded. The item was a pendant barely as long as her little finger. It portrayed the circle of a full moon and had an engraving of a drow woman wielding a sword in a dance-like pose.

Umbra was terrible at religions, the sisters in the church had drilled her but time and again they'd flowed together in her mind. This one, however, rose in her memory: Eilistraee, The Dark Maden. A moon goddess, a good goddess. She was part of the Seldarine as well as the Dark Seldarine. She was worshipped by both elves and drow. And she was *an ally of Selûne*.

Umbra hid the bauble in the folds of her shirt. She might need it later, but she suddenly felt better armed. She whispered a prayer to her god to beseech Eilistraee to help her servant in her time of need.

The man's cries were getting very weak and she leaned close to the cage and whispered, "Eilistraee guide you to the afterlife. May her beams of light carry you above the darkness to the next life."

The look of relief in the man's eyes made it clear that her guess had been correct. The medallion had been his. "He mouthed a silent thank you" then collapsed. Their jailer cursed and threw down her scourge in disgust, "What did you do, you pale betrayer?"

Umbra looked at the woman defiantly, "Nothing but said a prayer for his soul. I have no hatred for drow in particular, but I do find their drive to conquer a problem. He was not my enemy. Neither are you."

Screaming, the woman grabbed a red hot poker and rammed it repeatedly into the cage, "You are a liar and a betrayer. But you allowed him to die before he gave up his co-conspirators!"

The tip of the red-hot brand burned Umbra's skin everywhere it touched her leaving stinging black sores. The woman raged at Umbra, "I will enjoy taking you apart. But I have to soften you up first."

Izzorvir turned to grab the pot of black toxin. She slathered it on her scourge and drew back to sap the cage which would pepper Umbra with dozens of spots of flesh-eating poison. Desperate, Umbra grasped the medallion and shouted "*Anducal!*"

Umbra's skin erupted with light. The torturer recoiled from it as it burned her skin. Umbra snatched the burning brand from her despite the pain as it singed her palm and with a word teleported out of the cage to the doorway. A thunderous explosion detonated where she'd been, twisting the cage and pulverising the woman. Snatching up the scourge as a backup weapon she fled the torture chamber and headed back into the complex.

Elsewhere, the other companions were trying to navigate their own dilemma. The statue Xyrxian had teleported them to the room with Dran'l. They opened the door and faced an empty corridor like so many they'd faced throughout Undermountain. They assured the trapped spirit they would not forget their pledge to free him and his love but for now they intended to leave them intact.

The corridor beyond the doors had an angular path that Renard scouted ahead. He returned to report the presence of drow and several rather large spiders that looked like their phase-spider friend, Legs. Francene knew that they might not be able to convince these adult spiders to not attack. Legs had told them about hearing "the queen's voice" and how hard it was to resist in places the drow inhabited. They had removed him as a very small hatchling. The rest of these spiders had grown up hearing her voice constantly. Not to mention they were fed and handled by the drow.

Francene let the group know that they weren't going to be friendly like Legs and that they might have to kill them. She hated to do it, but there were times when it was probably better that way. Better that her friends were safe than have them risk themselves to avoid hurting something on her behalf.

Theren and Huelwen nodded and smiled for her sadly. They knew it hurt her to have seen harm come to any natural creature, but they accepted that she'd carefully considered her advice. Rolfe tightened his grip on his swords and held up four fingers and counted down to zero before they rushed in.

They rounded the corner in a quiet rush and could see the four drow, two each on either side of the room. The ceiling was draped in stiff-looking cables of webbing and the familiar orange and green patterns of the phase spiders could be seen in them.

They were clearly on guard because they were instantly ready. One of the guards shouted a command in Elvish that made the huge spider, the size of a horse each, stir and focus their array of eyes on the intruding adventurers. But one of the guards hesitated. He held up one hand towards the adventurers and then turned and in a swift strike gutted the drow standing next to him.

The guard grunted and looked at him in shock and surprise. His victim's eyes turned slowly black as the venom on the other drow's sword did its nasty work. He continued to hold his open hand towards the adventurers as he struck again to finish the other guard.

But they were, aside from surprised at the move, already engaging the other drow in combat. One of the gigantic spiders had dropped down and was attacking Rolfe. Theren fired arrows with deadly accuracy, killing one of the other drow immediately. And Huelwen used their vials and potions to render one of the spiders immobile.

The traitorous drow launched himself towards the phase spider only to have it evaporate into thin air as it shifted out of phase with this plane. He stepped back to have room to maneuver and all of them turned to face the spider that was appearing from nowhere. Its fanged mandibles drove towards Theren who narrowly dodged them and rolled to jump to his feet a few feet away.

Francene's staff glowed a soft green light and she brought the crozier down in a smooth motion. It connected with the spider and it made a substantial thud. The spider recoiled from the strike but Rolfe had already come at it from behind and savaged it with his swords.

A second spider appeared behind him but the drow sliced at it making it pause briefly. Theren nocked arrows and let them fly. They buried themselves deep in the bloated creature's body and Huelwen fired a blast of eldritch energy from one of his many gadgets that put the creature down.

The drow raised his hands in surrender. "My name is Sornnozz. I am a Bregan D'aerthe spy who is here with my commander Xarann A'Daragon. We are part of a small team sent by Jarlaxel to infiltrate the *Ghost Spiders*."

Rolfe asked, "Who's Jarlaxel?"

Francene said without a beat, "Ignore him, he'll catch up. Why is Jarlaxel infiltrating the *Ghost Spiders*?"

Sornnozz shrugged, "I guess he heard that there was an attack coming for the city? I'd say his information was correct. Not sure who tipped him off, this is a tight unit. We've had to pretend we were part of House Auvryndar to get this deep into their organization. They don't trust any of the other houses, including House Freth, and they are working with them."

Theren pressed, "Why should we trust you?"

"Xarann A'Daragon and I are still under cover, but I think my cover is now blown. The last of our group, Tazirahc, our priest, was captured by Zress and sent to be tortured. Her torturer, Izzorvir, will sooner or later get him to give us up. So we can't wait. You may be the gift from Eilistraee that we need."

Huelwen muttered, "In for a nib, in for a dragon. Lead us to where you want us to help."

Sornnozz nodded curtly, "Follow me," he said and darted through one of the double doors and to a hallway beyond. The group moved after him, giving him a generous lead and moving quietly. He paused briefly. If impatiently at intersections so they could follow his path and they witnessed him duck into a doorway.

The hallway he left had piles of bones lying along the walls. Each pile looked to have been neatly arranged and contained no less than a half-dozen skulls each. A disturbing whisper of screams as if heard from hundreds of feet away echoed down the corridor. Sornnozz waved to them from the doorway to hurry.

Shaking off the disturbing tableau they entered a square shrine. The stone altar was carved of the deepest black marble with almost invisible lines of silver tracing through it. It has details showing a long-limbed elven woman dancing with her arms raised in careless abandon. Atop the altar was a stone harp, every string carved from stone. It was a feat of craftsmanship that few could ever replicate.

A faint melody echoed through the chamber. A light tune that lifted their spirits and eased their troubles. Theren knought he recognised the tune, "Is that *Bwaelan Dro*?" he asked.

A click from the back of the room was jarring against the delicate sounds of the music. Sornnozz smiled, "Yes, it was, and your knowing this hymn of Eilistraee is one more sign she sent you."

Rolfe said "I don't feel sent," quietly to himself but continued to follow the man.

Behind him Huelwen said, "Neither do I, friend, but you have to admit it is a terrific coincidence, no?"

Sornnozz stood in the doorway and held up a fist. A silent signal almost universally recognised as *stop and be alert*. Francene pushed between the man's legs to peer out of the crack as Rolfe, who towered over them both peered over his head.

In the hallway beyond they could hear sounds of fighting, but they were punctuated by the sounds of what sounded like orders barked in Elvish. Sornnozz pushed the door closed and leaned against it looking defeated. He explained, "That voice belongs to Drinrith--Drinrith Auvryndar. She is the niece of the late High Priestess and perhaps the highest ranking member of the Ghost Spiders. She is likely training the latest recruits. Mostly male soldiers they use as fodder for the front lines. Male drow are treated worse in the *Ghost Spiders* than even in most drow cities."

Francene put her hands on her hips in her best "Mom Pose", "So now what? We can't just sit here."

As if on cue, a thunderous sound like an explosion sounded from down the corridor beyond the door. Sornnozz stood by the door looking shocked. He spoke the phrase to unlock the secret door and watched through a sliver. Even without seeing what was in the hallway those closest to the door could see the shadows of figures rushing past.

After a tense moment Sornnozz opened the door and stepped out. He waved to the others to follow but as Rolfe was the first to exit the room there was suddenly a knife at his throat. "Sornnozz had better speak for you quickly or I will ensure my venom finishes you." the drow assassin said.

Sornnozz held out his hand, "Stay your blade, Xarann, I brought them here to help."

The blade withdrew and disappeared into some concealed holster. The drow man had close-cropped white hair unlike most drow males who favored a longer style. "I apologise, then. I did not know you were helping us. Who are they and how can they help?"

Sornnozz gave a quick run-down but it was clear by the time they got to the name Umbra Luna that he was completely on-board. Xarann kept glancing down the hallway, "I fear we may not be able to wait here any longer. We should see what is going on down the hallway. I think that sound came from the torture chambers."

Theren said, "If true, could be Umbra, she is known to bring big noise."

As the crew followed the hall to the training room at the end of it the double doors leading out were hanging ajar. Sounds of combat were coming from beyond. They approached with caution, not knowing what to expect.

Umbra Luna faced the dozen or so drow in the hallway. She was unarmored and armed with only an iron poker and a scourge. The forces facing her, although armored and armed, looked to be relatively inexperienced. And they all sported various cuts and bruises like they'd just come from combat.

She shook out her shoulders and said grimly in elvish, "I don't have time for this, boys and girls. I have places to be. Who wants to die first?"

To their credit they didn't run. She supposed she didn't look like much of a threat wearing her dirty shirt and pants. But she was no less deadly in combat. Reflexively she dragged the tip of the poker along the ground and brought it up in a violent swipe on the first target she could reach who went down with his jaw broken by the heavy club. She whirled and smashed a second on the top of his head making a sickening cracking noise.

She whipped the scourge at them and they howled in pain as the corrosive toxins splattered on their skin. She pushed deep into the mob until she could smell their sweat and feel the heat of their bodies crowded around her. Then she released her divine light. It sprayed out from her burning their skin and blinding them. Their screams were loud and when she opened her eyes she was surrounded by their bodies.

Only a couple of them remained. They turned to run, but as they did an armored figure stepped through the doorway and into the hall. "Umbra Luna," she said, "I knew it had to be you. I knew that that fool, Izzorvir, would underestimate you. I am not blinded by your strength or faith. I, too, have the power of my god to draw on. Lolth will see you fall today."

Umbra thought she recognised the woman, some lesser relative of Vlonwelv, she vaguely remembered, "Drinith Auvryndar, if I remember correctly. Where were you when Vlonwelv and Zress were fighting bravely against Muriel? Did you run? Did you hide? Where was your faith that day?"

Drinith's jaw clenched, "I was leading in a second wave under order from Vlonwelv. We were to come through and slay any of your team that had survived, but we were cut off. By the time we arrived it was over and my priestess--my aunt--was dead. You will pay for your betrayal of House Anvryndar."

A voice further down the corridor said, "Wait? She said Vlonwelve planned to betray us. Who is in the wrong here?"

Umbra and the drow warrior looked behind them to see Rolfe, Theren, Francene and supposedly Renard (he was hard to spot) just coming through the doors at the end of the hallway. Drinith launched at Umbra with a scream and anger. Her shortsword snaked back and forth and slashed through the lightweight shift and drew a trickle of blood. The edges of the shallow wound turned black and angry red welts spread from them.

Umbra tried to parry with her iron rod, but it was too slow against the sleeker weapon. Umbra slung the scourge's tentacles to grab at the weapon in the hope of disarming her, but the razor-sharp blade just sliced through the strands.

Arrows flew down the corridor and from Drinith's grunt of pain at least one of them found its mark. Green vines surrounded her but the broad shouldered warrior shrugged them off. Umbra side-stepped and swung the iron rod at the woman's head. As Drinith rolled her shoulder to take

the blow she cried out as a small, furry helper clawed her leg and she took her eye off the incoming blow long enough for Umbra to connect.

In an instant, the rod hit just above Drinith's ear and then it flared with white energy as Umbra channeled her divine energies into the blow. Drinith stumbled and fell to one knee with the force of the hit. Umbra's breath heaved, "You *planned* to betray us? And you are all angry about the fact that we acted to end the threat of House Auvryndar in Undermountain?"

Drinith shoved Umbra in order to regain her feet, "She was our Priestess! Our *family!*"

"You do not have to die over this. If you give up I will treat you fairly," Umbra said calmly, "My friends won't kill you if I ask them to give quarter."

"Dying for this cause is all I have left." She said, and I do not want you to treat me like you did Zress, leaving her honorless, houseless, and abandoned."

"I never..." was all Umbra managed to say before a slim black blade slid across the woman's throat and red-black blood spilled down the front of her armor. Left behind her was a drow man clad all in black with close cropped white hair. He carefully placed his blade back in the scabbard before holding up a hand, "Greetings, Umbra Luna,, I am Xarann A'Daragon from Bregan D'aerthe."

A moment later, Umbra was pulling on the dead woman's armor. It was slightly large, but the drow fashion of lots of straps and buckles allowed her to tighten it enough to be serviceable. It was better than underwear.

Umbra spoke to Sornnozz, "Your friend was very brave. In a way, he saved me with this," she showed the amulet of Ellistraee, "I was able to utilize it as a substitute for my own god, Selûne's symbol. He didn't betray anything while I was there, but Izzorvir did not live to tell anyone what she might have forced out of him. I gave him prayers at the end."

Sornnozz nodded solemnly. He and Xarann had little time to mourn their friend. They promised they would accompany this small group against the *Ghost Spiders* until the threat had ended. Once Umbra was completely outfitted and they had tended to their minor wounds they started deeper into the complex.

Retracing the steps that the drow had entered they passed back through the training chamber. From there they headed through a set of double doors into another abandoned hallway. Francene noted the presence of spider webs and indicated they should watch the ceilings carefully.

Sornnozz and Xarann led them to a featureless wall. They simultaneously traced an elven glyph which made the outline of a door appear. "Quickly," Xarann said, waving them forward, "It does not stay open long."

That door led into a long hallway they recognized. It seemed several years ago or more but, in fact, it had been only a few months. This hallway, collsed at one end extended into the huge throne chamber where Vlonwelv and her troops held the small ensemble of halflings for their

entertainment. They revelled while subduing the troglodytes in the warrens below this level and sent scouting parties to the levels above.

Even while Vlonwelv did this she cowered in fear of the monstrous Muriel, the mutated scorpion thing created by Halaster and his apprentices. A chill ran through Umbra's skin. The smell of desperation hung around this place. She was eager to get this over with and return home where she could have a hot coffee and a sweet roll and see a sunrise.

The group moved across the hallway and into a portion of the dungeon where there had clearly been a collapse. Two sets of double doors hung crazily on their hinges. From one, emanated the stench of death and decay. From the other the foul animalistic scent of troglodytes.

Xarann pointed at the door that smelled of trogs. "This way leads to a warren of tunnels that ends in a storeroom just off of Zress' private chambers. There are some troglodytes in there but they should not be a problem for you or your mates. The storeroom often has spiders - giant ones - in it. Also, probably not a problem. I only recommend this way because it gives you the best chance for surprise."

"Why can't we fight our way through the front like we did last time?" Rolfe asked.

Francene explained, "One, we can't just talk them into letting us in like last time. Two, they want to kill us already, and three, there seems to be a lot more of them this time."

Sornnozz agreed, "There are dozens arriving daily to join the fight. Auvryndar had many webs throughout Undermountain. Zress is gathering them home. If she is not stopped she may outnumber House Freth's forces."

Umbra checked her new kit again nervously. It wasn't as good as her normal armor, but it would suffice. What she really missed was Imyrsil. It felt almost as if her arm had been severed at the elbow. She felt confident she would get it back, but it was distracting to not have it on hand. "House Freth is next on my list," she said firmly, "But the *Ghost Spiders* come first."

Sornnozz asked, "I wondered why you left Zress alive. Surely you could have avoided this by killing her?"

Several of her friends tried to stop him before he finished asking, but the words had been spoken. Umbra sighed, "I thought she might understand that the drow under Lolth are a death machine that is destined to eat itself. All of that hate, all of that pain and suffering, it will eventually collapse under its own malice. I thought I was offering her a way out. You two should understand that there are other ways than Lolth."

Umbra flexed her hand unconsciously, "But I was wrong. If it had not been her, it would have been Drinith, or some other Auvryndar scion. Lolth is determined to make me grind them all down until there is nothing left but bone and blood."

Xarann nodded, "I believe you. But consider-- Is Lolth the one driving this extermination, or Selûne?"

Umbra looked at the medallion in her hand, "Or Elistraee? Or me?" she thought. No, she could not afford doubt right now. It was all or nothing. "Selûne, bring me strength," she said in her mind the prayer that she'd recited so many times before, "Shine your radiance upon your chosen child. Be the beacon against the darkness and light my path forward to truth."

Chapter Eight

The room had only a handful of troglodytes in the room when they entered. The smell was eye-watering and Umbra had to take shallow breaths through her mouth to tolerate it. She had her shortswords at hand just in case. The occupants grabbed weapons, but when faced with the group assembled, they put them down in defeat before the fight even started.

One of them, a scarred warrior, spoke in broken Common, "You return. What empty promise you make now? You tell us we are free to live our lives the way we choose. That truce last only three cycles until the dark ones put us back in chains. They give us one choice: wield pick or wield sword."

The warrior waved to the other troglodytes, "We chose to fight for the dark ones. But we shall not fight you. You promised us once that we'd be free. I still hope, by Laogzed, it will one day be true."

Umbra could not easily recognise individual troglodytes, but this might well have been one of the ones they'd liberated the first time they'd been here. Yet another promise she'd failed to keep. Umbra's guilt twisted in her guts. So many promises made, so few bore the results they'd wanted. Some of them, like the little halfling bards, were delivered safely to Waterdeep. Others, like these poor slaves were recaptured and forced into labor.

"I'm sorry. We had hoped that the drow--the dark ones-- would have abandoned this place and left you alone. We did not foresee them reoccupying it after their defeat."

The troglodyte made a noncommittal gesture. "It is what it is," he said, "Do what you must but do not make us more promises. I am done with your promises."

Umbra Luna turned and proceeded into the rough fissure at the back of the room, wordlessly. There was nothing to say, really. The others passed in silence, each of them nodding in respect to the warrior, but not elaborating on their intent. It was clear to all of them that, to him, it held no value.

The winding caverns were narrow, but not so narrow that they could not travel easily in single file. There were an alarming number of webs throughout the passages as well. Webs made up of thick ropy strands that indicated the presence of giant spiders. This wasn't completely unexpected as Xarann had forewarned them, but this was also a drow stronghold. As the saying went, "Where there are drow there are spiders."

Since they had no directions to guide them they moved into two different chambers. One of them, a hall of statuary, had been reduced to a collection of broken figures. None of the statues

remained intact. The other hall proved to be a storeroom full of weapons. Umbra outfitted a hand crossbow and a dozen bolts for it. She hung it off the hook on her purloined armor designed by the dwarf for that purpose.

Finally all of their back-tracking brought them through a hallway virtually choked with webbing. It had to be the small storeroom where the giant spiders were residing. Huelwen pulled out a vial of amber fluid. He fitted it into a slingshot contraption and flung it into the webs.

It flared into fiery life. The webbing, itself flammable, was encouraged by the flame-bearing liquid and was soon ablaze. They could see the fire travelling down the corridor and barely a moment later a giant spider, its bloated body filling the passageway came skittering towards them. It was both charred and angry.

Umbra took point and slid under the creature, whipping her swords back and forth. Wide cuts opened in the creature's underbelly as Rolfe pounded it with his axe. The giant terror died almost instantly and Umbra climbed atop it bracing for a second monster to charge at them. She was rewarded by a second spider who was moving quickly along the ceiling.

It stopped just short of her and fired a glob of sticky webbing at her. She reflexively raised a hand to block it but too late realized she did not have her shield to defend herself. The glob splattered on her holding her limbs in place. The horrifying creature finished advancing.

From behind her arrows arced from behind the carcass of the first spider and pegged the creature. Those were followed by a blazing ball of fire that hit the creature in the midst of its glassy black eyes. It recoiled, clearly in pain and fear.

Umbra slashed at the webs holding her and they parted from the razor-sharp dwarf blades and she followed with the second sword on the creature, finishing it. They stood, patient and ready for any more but after a few seconds it was clear that there would not be a further rush of monstrous spiders. It did not mean they were all dead, just they weren't going to die in a pointless charge.

The fire had removed much of the webbing, but as the rough fissure of a corridor ended in a small room the ceiling was many feet above them. It was more of a vertical shaft than a room. They could only see webbing up there. Francene whispered, "I can try to set that mess on fire if you want." She flexed her hand, ready to hurl another mote of flame.

Theren behind her had an arrow nocked, "I don't think is needed, Franzine. Seems willing to hide up there."

Huelwen seemed unwilling to take her eyes off the ceiling. "I would feel better if I knew either there was something or wasn't something up there. Not knowing is hard on my nerves."

Umbra approached the door leading out of the shaft. She held up her fist for the adventurers to be quiet and still. Umbra slowly opened the door a crack and peered out. She could see a single armored female dwarf in the room. She was seated in a chair that faced the other side of the room where Umbra could see a short corridor connected this parlor to an atrium.

Umbra recalled this arrangement when they came here to *parlez* with Vlonwelv. This parlor was sumptuously appointed and Vlonwelv had been attended by two drow male slaves who lavished her with attention. It frankly put Umbra off when she saw it. This time there were no attendants, there was no guard in the room beyond, there was only this one figure seated with their back to them.

Umbra held up a single finger then waved forward as she opened the door and rushed in. She brought the pair of shortswords down over the back of the seat to impale the occupant in the neck. Two arrows flew into the back of the seat and pushed through the front. A shadowy blade buried itself several feet into the top of the chair.

The figure in the chair disappeared in a puff of smoke, unharmed by the attack. The cloud of yellowish vapor moved to surround Umbra Luna who suddenly began to choke. Umbra dropped her weapons and grabbed at her throat.

A beam of silvery moonlight descended on the chair enclosing Umbra and the vapor cloud. The cloud suddenly solidified into a sickly yellow column of slime with a single malevolent eyeball. The light clearly burned its flesh and it retreated further into the room.

Rolfe said, "It's one of those demon things, The Handbasins of Lolth."

Huelwen gently said *handmaidens*, under her breath and fired her crossbow with the acidic bolts. This time the bolts homed true and the slimy creatures sizzled both in the light and from the caustic brew that coated it.

Rolfe's shadow blade dissipated into smoke and reformed in his hand. He ran past the demon both to cut off its escape and to slash at it as he passed. There was a sizzle as the moonlight briefly seared his flesh but his magical sword cut deep into the creature.

Umbra could hardly move, she struggled to pull herself to her feet, but could not even manage to get to her knees. She rolled back and forth being burned from the moonlight over her and the poison within her. Theren grabbed her feet and dragged her clear.

Francene moved forward and held out a hand. A hot wind blew from somewhere and swirled around the creature. The wind intensified and suddenly the creature screamed as it began to shrivel and dessicate before their eyes. When Francene finally inhaled the demonic slime was limp and rubbery and looked near death.

Umbra managed to stand and brought up the small silver symbol of Elistraee. Presenting it as a ward towards the creature. "By the power of the ancient ways, I bind you to this place," she said. Vine sprouted from the floor and walls and snapped around the being. Holding it in place. Sharp thorns buried themselves in the creature's flesh and ripped at it as it struggled.

Held from escaping and prevented from shape-changing by the moonlight it thrashed futilely until it finally fell reduced to a slimy stain that gradually faded away. The moonlight extinguished itself and the vines and thorns faded away like ghosts. A slow clap came from the corridor at the corner of the room.

Zress stood there. She was wearing Umbra's armor and shield. She wielded an ornate longsword similar to Umbra's but this one was different. The blade was not pale silver like a moonbeam like Imyrsil's. Instead, this blade was dull grey the color of clay and the runes down its length stood out in dark red metal.

"Well done, dispatching Chalizana so quickly. I barely had time to gather together the forces to eliminate you before you were done," Zress gloated, "So how many of my troops have you murdered today? A dozen or more perhaps? It looks like you treated Drinith to your special kind of assistance. I recognise her armor. Did you leave her alive with a note as well? No matter," Zress said, "It is just one more crime to add to the list. You and your friends have reached the end of your terrorizing the drow families of Undermountain."

There was a pregnant pause. Everything froze as weapons were gripped and spells readied when Umbra dropped her swords. "No, not like this," she said.

Umbra turned back to her friends, "Run if you have to, but don't fight them. I came here to finish something I foolishly started but left hanging. Their efforts are going to fail."

Umbra turned back to Zress who was looking annoyed, "Come on! This is the second time you surrender to me? Do you really want to die that badly?"

Umbra whirled on Zress angrily, "I don't want to die, I just know you are going to lose because I didn't realize how much is stacked against you until right now. Not just us, but the Blackstaff, The Bregan D'aerthe, the city watch of Underdeep, Azrok's Legion, Wyllow the druid, Harpers, Lord's Alliance, Order of the Gauntlet, and Undermountain itself which is rigged against you every step of the way."

Umbra softened her tone, "I don't want you to lose...to lose you."

Zress dismissed the warning, and shook with interrupted revenge, "We will survive, just like we have so far. You tried to eradicate us once and failed."

"No," Umbra said calmly, "I didn't try to eliminate you. I tried to hobble you. Undercut your command structure, reduce the number of resources under your control. I tried to make it so hard for you to keep going you would quit."

Zress opened her eyes wide in surprise, "Then why leave me alive?"

Umbra shouted angrily, "I don't know!" She hung her head, emotionally drained, "There is something about you that I can feel deep in my soul. Something that is connected to you in ways I can't understand or even articulate. It wants you to throw off this persona you wear for the benefit of those around you and it wants you to be free."

The assembled drow started to murmur behind Zress and Umbra's friends were making strange noises as well. Zress held up Umbra's symbol of Selûne, a pair of eyes surrounded by seven stars. "Is this some Selûnese nonsense? Some weird proselytizing to get me to renounce Lolth?"

Zress flung the pendant down to the floor. But it didn't land there. Instead it floated in the air between them. Umbra felt compelled and pulled out the symbol of Elistraee. It floated free of her hand and out to meet the Selûne symbol between them. Zress mouthed a silent, "No!"

The two symbols hung in the air doing a slow pirouette between them. Soft moonlight bathed the two women. Umbra held out her arms to her sides. "I am here, Completely open to you. I will not defend myself and I place myself at your mercy. Selûne has guided me here to say that I love you, Zress Orlezziiir. And now that I have released the person that I am, I ask you to release the person *you* are."

Zress lowered her sword. In a low voice she said, "My family, House Orlezziiir, was wiped out by Auvryndar twenty years ago. They were allowed to be destroyed because they worshipped Elistraee privately instead of Lolth. When they were exposed, Vlonwelv Auvryndar - the high priestess-took the 'honor' of doing the deed. I was taken in as a surrogate daughter by Vlonwelv and she raised me in the faith of Lolth."

"You are not Lolth's child, you are Elistraee's." Umbra said quietly, "And she wants you back."

The two symbols continued their slow rotation and Zress reached out to take the silver symbol of the dancing drow. Umbra reached for hers at the same time. And as they closed their hands in unison there was a brilliant flash of moonlit radiance from them.

The two women grabbed at each other instinctively for protection. The waves of light drove the adventurers back into the parlor and it knocked down the mages and soldiers of the drow force. Waves of light pulsed from the pair who held each other tight and squeezed. Umbra muttered repeatedly "It's okay, I have you protected. It will be okay."

Zress cried deep sobs into Umbra's embrace, "Why, Mother Matron, why did you take me away from the light? Why?"

As the drow woman's sobs and sniffles subsided and she started to collect herself she looked back to see that her forces had either fled or were lying unconscious on the floor. Behind Umbra she could see that the rest of her friends were getting to their feet but looked quite battered and bruised.

Zress hit Umbra hard on the jaw. It took Umbra so by surprise she staggered. She turned to Zress and asked angrily, "What was that for?"

Zress shook her head, her arms limp at her sides, "Twenty years I've been angry about what happened to my family. I had no idea. I just thought it was my drive to succeed. To make Mother Matron happy. To be the best. And now - because of you - I find out it was because I didn't get to express my anger? So now I am expressing it starting with you."

Umbra worked her jaw, it was pretty sore and she thought she could taste blood, "I suppose I should let this slide in the spirit of forgiveness. Now can I have my stuff back?"

Zress shrugged, her arms limp at her sides, "What does it matter? I've lost my taste for this fight."

She led them to her bedchamber where the rest of Umbra's gear was laid out on her bed. It had all been arranged neatly. Umbra gave Zress a look and she blushed. Umbra realized she, too, had strange feelings for Umbra.

"I hate you," Zress said as Umbra was donning her armor, "I really do. You are what I dream about at night and what I think about in the morning. You occupy all of my thoughts all the time. And, the worst part is, I like to think about you."

Umbra paused and was still as Zress confessed her feelings, "I used to think if I just killed you it would stop. Then I thought I would just enjoy the killing and would feel empty."

She walked over to a dressing table and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Look at this nonsense."

Umbra paged through drawings of her with a hateful scowl on her face. Many of them had deep black marks across them as they had been crossed through and others were torn.

"I am very sorry for what I did," Umbra said softly, "I didn't understand what was happening at the time, either. I had no way to tell you how I felt and no way to get you out of my heart."

Zress looked at Umbra strangely, "You think you love me?"

Umbra nodded slowly. Zress just shook her head, "That is fucked up, sister. I guess that is what you get for having a troubled childhood."

Umbra snorted, then giggled. She tried to stop it, but Zress caught it too. And soon they were both laughing. The two women finished stripping off their armor and donned their original outfits. Zress wore her own armor, a black-enameled set of plate armor that was similar to the suit that Umbra wore, only less ornate. Umbra reclaimed her sword, *Imyrsil*, and she immediately felt more at ease. She watched Zress handle her own weapon.

"Is that...a moonsword?" she asked, disbelievingly.

Zress held it out to Umbra, The dull grey metal with red runes made it look heavy, but the sword itself was light as a shortsword. Umbra felt a dark presence within the sword. "Is it, evil?" she asked and then realized that was probably not the right thing today. This was new to both of them.

Zress took back the sword, "No, not like you think it is. *Ungoecet* is motivated by purity of purpose. In my hands it drove me to assemble the *Ghost Spiders* and start a war against *Waterdeep*. That was my desire, it just amplified my drive to complete it. Now I feel as if I have lost a lot of that drive and as for *Ungoecet*? It is waiting for me to choose a purpose and a path."

Umbra nodded, "*Imyrsil* amplifies my feelings of conviction as well. It pushes me to achieve the purest purpose and align with the ancient Elven values. Your sword sounds like it takes its values from the wielder rather than tradition or culture. Interesting."

"We have time to talk about this later. What's the next step?" Zress asked.

Umbra had ideas about that, but not here and not now, "Please come with us to Waterdeep. Help us plan how to stop House Freth from trying to go through with the war that you planned."

Zress stood confidently, "Am I your prisoner?"

Umbra smiled and hugged the other woman who was stiff at first, but relaxed into it, "No," Umbra said, "You are nobody's prisoner. Come with me as a friend. A partner. My long-lost *sister*."

They chuckled privately at that. When they exited the bedroom they were met by the amused look of her friends. Umbra reddened and said, "Zress is coming with us to Waterdeep. There, we can plan how to stop House Freth from invading now that the *Ghost Spiders* are disrupted."

Zress also turned red under her pitch-black skin, "And nothing happened in there. We just changed clothes. Regardless of what you may have heard. Now follow me."

The others exchanged grins but didn't press, only Francene stopped and held Umbra's hand, "Did you find what you came for?" she asked.

Umbra nodded and smiled genuinely at Francene, "And more, I think," she said, following after Zress.

Zress strode at a fairly rapid clip. Exiting the private chambers, she entered a temple. The still-conscious members of her squad were there. They rushed forward yammering all at once "Are you okay?" and "What spell did she cast on you?", and "Lolth be praised you are okay!"

Umbra and her friends waited outside the double door while Zress addressed her troops, "The unexpected has happened. Umbra Luna revealed to me that House Freth and the Shadowdusk family have been deceiving us as to their intentions. They sought to have us break ourselves against the assembled might of Waterdeep while they sat back and watched us die. Then they planned to push forward against a weakened foe."

"It was a good plan," Zress said, adding "for *them*," as emphasis. "We were to be the sacrifice to Lolth for their victory. And I now see it for the ruse it was. So we are going to go back to House Freth and let them know in no uncertain terms who is the fodder and who is the army!"

A moderate cheer went up from the assembled. Zress gave them a stern look, "Are you House Freth's attack dogs? Or are you an *Army!*"

That finally roused them and they shouted gleefully. As they got caught up in the moment, Zress opened the temple door and waved to the adventurers and pointed at the other exit from the room.

Several of the shouting drow started at the group moving quickly along the perimeter of the room, but Zress walking through her troops individually touched each one of the drow watching Umbra and her friends and shook her head, "They are with me, now." she told them.

There were a few grumbles of discontentment, but none of them would dare confront her directly. She walked to the exit she'd sent the others through and stood at the large double doors "Gather the troops and rally them in the throne room. We will show House Freth that without us they are nothing!"

Zress then slipped out before anyone could press her on details. Deep in Undermountain the group proceeded back through the dungeon level. They back-tracked from the throne room through the secret doors and passageways until they reached the haunted statue of Dran'l.

The group stood before it and the spirit within whispered it's pleas to be freed of its torment. Umbra said, "I have spells that will shatter the statue without touching it. But I have to cast them from here."

Turning to Zress she said, "You can go with them or stay with me, but we'll have to go around the other way to get to the statue on the other side."

Frqancine held up her hand, "I'm not going with *her* without *you*." Her emphasis was clear and Umbra could see the others nodding in agreement.

Francene held up a stubby finger, "First, if you trust her, I trust you. But I don't trust her. Second, without you to pull her back I can't predict what she'll do, and three, no offence and all, who's to say she won't just run off."

Zress chuckled, "I can't say I blame you, and frankly there's a war going on in my mind about all this. But something about helping you feels right. You make valid points, small woman, if the situation were reversed I'd feel much the same."

Huelwen spoke up, "So we smash this statue and go around the long way to smash the other? That sounds reckless and dangerous."

Rolfe said gleefully, "It does! I'm in." He started to approach the statue but Francene held him back. Whispering to him that wasn't how they were going to smash it.

"Why are you bothering?" Zress asked, "You don't owe these ghosts anything. Just teleport and be done with it."

Francene and Umbra both started to speak, but Francene deferred. Umbra said, "This is a teachable moment. These spirits were wronged because of their love. And they helped us when they had no reason to do so. You don't see a parallel to anything? Perhaps something that happened less than ten minutes ago?"

Zress threw up her hands, "All this morality! It's exhausting! But I see your point. So how do we do this?"

Umbra continued, "The only other way I know is to go back through the throne room and up the staircase from the fungi cavern. Unless you know another way that isn't on my map?"

Zress glanced over the chart Umbra was holding out. “No, your map seems mostly complete. There are only a few chambers that are not here, but they do not connect to any useful routes.”

Umbra rolled up the chart, “Then we go back. Dran’l, I hope this does not hurt. We’ll send your love, Xyrxian, along as soon as we can. Good luck in the Abyss.”

Umbra visualized the spell in her mind and thrust her hand forward forcibly while rubbing a chip of mica in her other hand. A loud KA-KRAK sounded and the statue rocked. But it did not break. The others began to hurl magic and ranged weapons against it and slowly the figure began to crumble. Dran’l was silent through the barrage. A large fissure opened in the figure’s chest and the torso of the statue tilted and slowly fell to the floor.

Umbra cast a final spell, “The magic has dissipated. He’s gone.”

Zress had been leaning against a back wall while they were assaulting the inanimate statue. “You’ve created enough noise to summon the entire drow nation within Undermountain. We need to get moving.”

They moved at a trot back down the same corridor they’d used to get here. Soon they found themselves in the shrine to Eilistraee. The Stone harp was still playing its gentle tune. Zress paused. “My mother...my *real* mother used to sing this tune to me,” she said quietly. Then, in elven, she sang.

*Safe in my arms you are my love,
You are my shelter from dangers above
You are the light that brings a warm glow
That frightens the monsters that rise from below
It’s good to be alive
It’s good to be alive*

*Hold my hand and be my strong anchor
From hatred and war and spite and anger
Dance with me, spin in the music we weave
Together we pray, we sing, and believe
It’s good to be alive
It’s good to be alive*

The secret door at the back of the room unlocked. Umbra grabbed Zress’s hand and squeezed it to bring her gently back from her reverie. Then, they ran through the door and back through the hall to the featureless wall.

Umbra ran a hand over the blank surface. “There was an elven glyph, what was it? And they both did it at the same time...”

“Who did that?” Zress asked.

Umbra looked a little guilty. “Um, some spies that helped us. They both traced the same glyph and the door opened.”

“Tinco,” Zress said, “The first letter of the elvish word for queen. Lolth is a queen of spiders and queen of the demonweb pits. A double queen. The ‘double tinco’ is frequently used to signal a follower of Lolth.”

Theren nodded appreciatively, “I did not know zis. Useful.”

Umbra and Zress positioned themselves and traced the tinco rune on either side of the center of the wall. A doorway appeared and they rushed through it. On the other side was an assemblage of drow. They looked angry. Standing near the front of the group was a priestess. She was very young. “In the name of House Auvryndar, I, Nyleene Auvryndar, am placing all of you under arrest for later execution as offerings to Lolth.”

Behind her two males, also wearing House Auvryndar insignia, pulled her back to draw her back behind the group for her safety. Zress stood tall, “Nyleene, you are young and easily impressionable so I’ll forgive this betrayal. But you have no basis for arresting me. I am the heir of Vlonwelv and not you. The *Ghost Spiders* are mine to command as I see fit.”

“Not any more.” said a female voice. A tall, very thin drow woman wearing a metal breastplate and wielding a greatclub stepped out of a shadow. She had the longest ponytail Umbra had ever seen, it hung in a white flow to the backs of her calves.

Zress hissed, “Pellanonia. Nice to see you again, sister. I’d heard you died.”

Suddenly Umbra realized she’d seen this woman before. Although at that time she’d been strapped to a wooden wheel and was being whipped by her lover. They’d left them to their entertainment. She was an Auvryndar heir? How many children did Vlonwelve have?

“Is there a problem?” Umbra asked.

Zress said, in elvish, “Pellanonia is the second oldest daughter and so is above me in the succession of House Auvryndar. Her claim is stronger. The *Ghosts* are hers by right. She had the priest pronounce me an enemy to legitimize it so it isn’t just a case of family infighting.”

Many of the troops shifted to ready themselves for a fight and Umbra - even without looking - could hear her friends doing likewise. Pellonia seemed unaffected by the shift in mood, “I did not die, but was, in fact, left behind by your new friends. I’ve been biding my time gathering together some stragglers and killing a few of the deserting traitors they sent up through Undermountain. Thanks to their touchy-feely policies I was able to walk virtually unmolested through their allied market and where their defenses are strongest. It was as if I were their friend like you appear to be.”

She gloated, “All I had to do was say that Umbra Luna and her Moonpie Shepherds rescued me. And I was given a free pass.”

Francene shouted, “New Moon Shepherds!” and threw a bolt of flame at her.

Suddenly everyone moved at once. Umbra and Zress simultaneously brought out their moonblades and targeted Pellanonia. Rolfe ran past the pair and headlong into the fray with the rank-and-file troops. Theren pulled out a wand. He kissed the tip and pointed it towards the back.

A red mote of glowing fire streaked out to the point he'd targeted and suddenly bloomed into a gigantic fireball. There were screams and the smell of burning flesh. Rolfe, who'd been standing right at the edge of it as the heat blew back his hair giggled nervously.

Francene pulled out a small glass circle. She placed it in her palm and chanted the incantation. The glass circle became incandescent and threw a circle of bright light around her. Zress cursed and shaded her eyes as did most of the drow.

Umbra looked back and Francene seemed to be holding a miniature sun in her hand. Suddenly a beam lanced out and sliced through the drow in the pack of attackers. Many of them just vaporized, others staggered back and grabbed their eyes.

Zress seemed to be struggling in the light, but so did her step-sister. Umbra had no such handicap. Her sword slashed twice into the drow fighter and cut deep gashes through the exposed flesh of her arms.

Rolfe paused for a moment and cast a spell that involved eating something. Suddenly his motions were a blur. He struck a drow who was clearly blinded and moved deeper into the group, slashing like a threshing machine. Theren continued to pick off drow who seemed to be a problem and Huelwen fired his crossbow, dropping groups of drow who just collapsed like marionettes cut from their strings.

Almost as quickly as it had started there were only a handful of drow left. Between the lancing beams of light Francene was throwing and the sunlight that affected the drow so negatively, they were easy pickings.

Umbra shoved Pellanonia who fell to the ground. Zress stood over her with her sword at her throat. She squinted at the back of the group of bodies of unconscious and dead drow and said, "I see our cousin Nyleene has fallen back there. I don't know if she's dead, dying or just unconscious. All of your fighters are defeated. If there is anything left of House Auvryndar it is hundreds of miles from Undermountain. Do you want to apologise? Or just die pathetically?"

"You will never..." the woman spat before Zress ran her through.

"Pathetic it is." Then she sighed, "Can you please turn out that light?" she said exhaustedly.

The group walked through the carnage and those who could still move were dispatched quickly. They left no survivors. They piled the bodies along the walls of the throne room and walked in silence towards the large fungus cavern that led to the vaulted chambers that would be their way out.

Umbra leaned towards Zress and said quietly, "Is there anything I can do? Anything to make it easier?"

“Just be here, Umbra. Your presence is a comfort. But I have killed the last of my sisters today and it is going to hurt for a while longer. But, strangely, it still feels like I did the right thing.”

Umbra said, “Not all of your sisters. I am still here.” which earned her a sly grin.

They followed the hidden staircase up to the vaulted chamber with the pillared gallery. It was clear that the garrison of troops here had come down for that final fight. It was abandoned once again. They climbed down the stairs and through the empty hallways to the room where the haunted statue of Xyrxian Vandree was hidden.

The spirit whispered to them questions about Dran’l. They reassured her that he had gone to Lolth and then they proceeded to bombard the statue until it, too, was reduced to pieces. Once the magic had subsided they traveled to the gate and used it to leave the dungeon.

Needless to say, there were a lot of strange rumors coming from the Yawning Portal about what crawled out of Undermountain that night. Durnan’s reaction to the drow was less than polite, and only Umbra staking her reputation on Zress’s behavior was enough to stay his hand.

While the rest of the companions headed on to Trollskull Manor, Zress and Umbra walked a few blocks further to the Castle District. There they walked to an unassuming antiques shop named Curious Past on the corner of Keltarn and Swords Streets. They walked up the steps and Umbra unlocked the door.

Her apartment--which had once been their families home for many years--was musty and still. She had not been here for months. She guided Zress in and showed her the privy and bedrooms. She promised to bring food and some drinks for her and pointed to the common well in the center of the alley behind the shop.

As Umbra turned to leave, Zress grabbed her arm. “So that’s it? You just murder all of my fellow drow, drag me out of Undermountain and dump me here?”

Umbra could hear more of the uncertainty and fear in her voice than the anger and outrage she was trying to project. She hugged the dark-skinned woman. “I am not far away. I will be here in the morning. But I have to talk to my friends and figure out what comes next.”

“And I am supposed to wait here while you do that?” Zress said, crying. “What have you done to me? What have you made me? I was the head of an army. I could have had my own house. What am I now?”

Zress collapsed to the floor hugging at Umbra’s legs. Umbra, full of tears herself, sank to the floor with her. “What are we?” she asked, “My fate and yours are tied together. I am as lost as you.”

Long moments passed as they clung to each other until the tears were drying and each of them had a headache from all the tension. Umbra got some fresh water from the well and helped Zress find some of Umbra’s clothes that might fit her.

Umbra searched through the drawers and found a paper message bird she had not used. Scribbling a message to her friends she folded it and pitched it out the window. She watched it only long enough to ensure it was flying towards Trollskull before returning to Zress.

“I am going to get something to eat. I’ll get enough to share and we can both stay here tonight. I think you need to be with someone tonight. Will you be alright alone for a half-hour or so?”

Zress nodded limply. She looked drained. Umbra felt the same way. She stripped off her armor and put on clean clothes over her sweaty body and headed out into the street to get food. She returned with soup-noodles and some chicken-wings to find Zress looking through the contents of Umbra’s desk drawers.

Seeing the papers, letters and sketches she had pulled out Umbra explained, “Those were my Mother’s before she got sick,” she explained.

She pulled out a few select sketches, “This is me as a girl, and this is my twin brother, Lumin. He died last year. This is my mother and this is the woman who runs the shop downstairs, Alice Tinker.”

They talked about their family with each other. Zress, talking about the times her step-mother had been kind to her but also remembering that she’d been very hard and sometimes cruel as well. She also remembered her birth family although she had been very young when they had fallen.

Umbra talked about the night her father had come to this very house and attacked their family and how it had inspired her to join the city watch. She talked about her brother’s interest in increasingly more dangerous magic until his final quest had cost him his life.

The moon was high in the sky when they finally decided to sleep. But they walked out on the tiny balcony and looked up at the silver orb. Each of them said a prayer to their goddess. Umbra’s unwavering light and Zress’ new light which she had never seen until now. Then they wandered back into the apartment and without much discussion slid into the bed together and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Umbra Luna sat quietly on the porch of the “*Lif your Spirits*” tavern at Trollskull Manor and drank her coffee. She watched the early morning sun on the damp streets of Waterdeep as people started their day. Her gaze drifted over to her breakfast companion. The dark-skinned woman with the white hair and red eyes had her hood pulled up to shade her face. She stared at the cup of brownish fungus tea known as Bazi.

“Where did you get the Bazi?” she asked.

Umbra shrugged, "Common question. I don't know the answer. Lif gets it from somewhere. But considering its rarity I may advertise we have it in stock. There's enough drow in the city to make it worth building a market."

Zress held up the oblong pastry, "And this thing?"

Umbra took a bite from her similarly shaped pastry, and spoke between bites, "A *scone of Golorr*. Local treat. You might like it."

Zress took a tentative taste and made an odd face, "So sweet. I might not be able to eat it all."

Renard padded out silently, "The others are up and waiting for you upstairs. So this is the new normal, is it?"

He and Zress eyed each other suspiciously. Zress shook her head, "There is nothing normal about you or your friends."

Renard sneezed, his form of a shrug, "I'm just the messenger." and he padded back into the tavern. Umbra took one last large bite of her scone and washed it down with the bottom of her coffee and headed inside.

Zress grabbed her teacup but left her scone virtually untouched and followed in her wake.

As they entered the upper parlor she could see the others were there, including Legs, the giant phase spider who lived in the attic. Umbra sat on the couch and Zress sat next to her, nervously eyeing the assembled heroes and clutching her teacup.

"Handsome spider," she said, "Good breeding. Looks well-cared for."

Francene muttered, "Thanks, he also left Undermountain to come live with us. Looks like that's something we do."

Rolfe blurted out, "So is she part of our group now? Is she, like, Umbra's girlfriend?"

Umbra held up a hand, "No, she's not part of our group, but she is helping us. And two..." she looked at Zress who was blushing, "We don't know yet. We are figuring it out. Just give us time to sort it out okay?"

Theren set out the maps and diagrams they had of Undermountain, "So we start planning counter-offensive today. We know House Freth has reclaimed Spiderwatch Keep and we know they are getting help from Shadowdusk family. What do we know about dem?"

Umbra said, "I sent a message to Volo asking about them. He said he'd find out what he could."

Zress said, "I have heard they had been a Noble family in Waterdeep but consorted with beings from the Far Realm and were exiled to Undermountain. They have close ties to Halaster."

Huelwen said, "It is a rumor, but perhaps a good working position. Thank you, Zress."

Umbra could feel the other woman relax a little with the positive feedback. This might work, she hoped. Looking back at the map, "Do we know where they are operating from?"

Zress shifted through the charts they had available and apparently did not find what she was looking for, "They have a stronghold deep in Undermountain. I don't even see charts here for the levels that deep. They may be unassailable directly. Your only hope may be, for now, to eliminate their operation closer to the city."

Rolfe spoke up, "House Freth. I got that part. So why aren't they gone like House Auvryndar? Didn't we kill their leader, too?"

Umbra made a noncommittal noise, "Kind of. We killed Drivven Freth. He was the magical brains of the outfit. He was apparently being groomed by Halaster to become one of his apprentices. His sister, Erelal, we let go because she was pregnant."

Zress looked alarmed, "You people let a pregnant high priestess of Lolth and a the head of her House slip away from you?"

"Calm down," Umbra said softly, "We did the same to you."

Zress sat back and crossed her arms, sulking, "Look how that turned out. Believe me when I say that Erelal is not going to have a zero-hour epiphany and change sides like I did."

There was dead silence, then Renard laughed. There were shy smiles around the table and finally Zress shook her head and smiled, too. "Okay, tantrum over. It was a poor decision, but can't be undone. You cannot put the silk back in the spider, as they say."

Francene and Umbra nodded. Much of the prior tension evaporated. Tea, coffee and food flowed into and out of the room, much of it carried by the army of orphans known as the Horde who were all curious to see the "drow lady" they'd heard about.

The sun was high in the sky and Zress had asked to shutter the windows as it hurt her eyes. She was not even used to the *idea* of a sun yet. She excused herself to go down to the cellar for a little while to try to get away from it.

While she sat down there in the dark and damp feeling much more at home than up in the warm bright light she heard a small noise. She whipped out her blade, Ungoecet and pointed it in the direction of the sound, "Come out so you can face your death."

A young drow girl slid out from behind one of the crates of supplies, "Don't kill me," she begged in elvish.

The girl was thin almost to the point of emaciation and her silver hair was unkempt and wild. But she had the distinctive red eyes and dark black skin of a full drow. Zress put away her sword and motioned for the girl to come closer. "What is your name, child?"

"Shaznill, my Lady," she said politely as she'd been taught.

“Call me Zress. If you feel a need to give me a title, use *Cáno*. It means Commander. That is what my step-mother called me. Do you know your house, child?”

The girl shyly shook her head, “Then you may have my house name. Nobody but me is using it anyways. You and I are now all that is left of the House of Orlezziir. Do you know what happened to your family?”

“No, *Cáno*, I was too young. I have been in the city as long as I can remember.”

Zress turned the child around, examining her, “Since you and I are now family, now, we can help each other. This city is strange to me and nothing like the home I knew. You probably know next to nothing of the drow or their gods and culture. And while I am sure Umbra has taught you to read and write in both Common and Elvish she would not be able to help you with knowing how the world below the surface works for the likes of us.”

Zress looked her in the eyes, “Will you be my cousin and help me in the city? Umbra is very busy and cannot be bothered to teach me the simple and complex things. And I can make you become strong, beautiful and proud.”

The girl hugged Zress, she had never belonged anywhere. Even among the horde she was “the black bean in the peas” as they called her. Zress had, in a single act of kindness, given her family, place, and a mentor she could admire.

Zress, inwardly, was cheering with joy. This is what Umbra meant. This is why she did what she did. Just this simple act of trading favors would benefit this child immensely. A child, like her, who needed someone to show her how to thrive. “Let’s see if we can’t do something about that mop of hair first, shall we?” Zress said, pulling out a wooden comb she carried with her for her own long locks.

When she and Shazmill exited the cellar several of the Horde did a double take. Zress had straightened her clothes and combed her hair. She had washed the girl’s face and helped her stand upright. She looked like a completely different person. And standing by her side was the tall and fit Zress with her hand on her shoulder smiling with pride in her cousin.

“This is Shaznill Orlezziir, and she is now my cousin. You, Larth will no longer push her around nor call her ‘black bean’, understood?”

The lanky elven boy nodded meekly and took a step back, intimidated. “And you,” Zress said pointing a finger at a young half-orc holding a tray full of dishes and wearing an apron, “Zekher, are to ask to pass her instead of pushing her out of the way.”

And she whirled her gaze over to a dwarven girl, “And Thadri Gravelpile, you and Shaznill can come to me any time these males bother you. We girls will sort them right out. Does everyone understand?”

Shaznill shouted “Yes, *Cáno*!” The others did not know what to do so they did nothing. Zress repeated the prompt, “Understood?”

A chorus of “Yes, *Cáno!*” rose from the Horde. Zress nodded. Yes, she might be able to find a place here after all. She handed Shaznill a few coins and directed her to find some nice clothes for herself. And, if she wanted to buy some treats for her friends, that would be okay. Zress had no idea what a ‘treat’ might be to a child in this city, but she figured she needed to establish Shaznill as her lieutenant to the Horde. Bribery was a good way to do that.

Zress turned to head up the stairs and saw Umbra smiling at her from the top. “How long were you there?” she asked.

“Long enough, *Cáno,*” she replied, “I had hoped you and Shaznill might get along. She’s been a tough one for me to reach out to. She seems to think that I would not understand her.”

“It has yet to be proven that you can,” said Zress, “But you are willing to try and that is why I am starting to trust you. But thank you for not stealing my moment with those children. They admire you greatly even though they rarely see you ”

As Zress walked up the stairs Umbra stood back to allow her to pass, “I really wish I could spend more time with them. I have done my best to help them with tutors, books, and training. I overpay the darling little mooches, too, but don’t tell them that. I want them to feel a sense of stability.”

Zress nodded, “I get that, but they need more than that to be strong enough to survive. You are giving them a way to get by. A team to fall back on, and all of that is important. But they each need to know that in a pinch, they can stand alone against the world. I am prepared to try to give that to ...some of them.”

“Maybe all of them, in time,” Umbra said.

They pair returned to the group discussion. “So what is the plan for tomorrow?”

Francene raised her hand, “Rolfe and I are going to see Jereth Phaulkon to see if the Emerald Enclave can offer any assistance.”

“Is that the lady in the cave?,” Rolfe asked.

“Yes, Rolfe, that's her.”

Theren spoke next, “Renard and I are going to see if can find Jarlaxle or someone from Bregan D’aerthe to talk about spies in Undermountain.”

Huelwen walked over to Zress, “This lovely lady and I are going to see what we can do about her sensitivity to sunlight and her rather striking appearance.”

Zress said, “What is wrong with my appearance?”

Huelwen said, “Nothing, to us. But a drow in Waterdeep can draw a lot of unwanted attention.”

Zress made a scoffing noise, “Let them stare, it doesn’t bother me.”

Umbra said, "I'm headed to the big three: Durnan, Mirt and Vajra. Just checking in and updating them. Right, final updates and planning tomorrow at dinner and plan to head back down in two days."

Zress looked lost for a second, "When will we...? I mean, where should I...?"

Umbra put an arm around her, "You can stay here or in the apartment. It is up to you," she pointed at a doorway, "That is my room there. You can lock it from inside if you need to hide. You have the keys to the apartment. I let Alice, the shopkeep downstairs, know I had a drow guest staying there."

Zress touched Umbra hand tenderly, "I want to be with you. Nothing here feels safe or comfortable except you."

Umbra said, "Stand tall. You are proud and strong. You can face anything by yourself, but you should also know that I will defend my sister to the death."

Zress squeezed Umbra's hand in solidarity, but pointed at the rest of the adventuring company gathering their things and heading out on their errands, "Will they?"

"Before long, I expect they will. Right now, they are following my lead," Umbra said, "I'll be back here tonight and hopefully I'll see you."

Zress silently resolved that she most certainly would.

Task: Francene and Rolfe: Jeryth Phaulkon

The walk up the hill in Phaulkonmere was arduous. Francene, used to wandering the pasture lands of her native home barely broke a sweat, but Rolfe, long accustomed to short bursts of energy followed by longer periods of sedentary life, struggled somewhat. But huffing and puffing he kept pace with his adoptive mother.

They passed the wide green swaths of land where Francene kept a small flock of sheep. The attendees of Phaulkonmere recognised Francene's work in the city and with the many beasts she'd rescued as a valuable part of her mission and supported it where they could.

Francene, for her part, did a few tasks on behalf of the Emerald Enclave, the loose collection of rangers, druids and sylvan creatures who sought to protect the wild and sylvan places and their part in the balance of the world.

Jeryth had been the *de facto* head of the Enclave for nearly a decade. Ever since her ascension to a demi-power she had few to rival her amongst the druidic circles. And she and Francene had developed a rapport over the last year since the halfling had relocated to Trollskull Manor.

Rolfe had decided that "the cave lady" (as he called her) felt like Francene was doing work she wished the Enclave would be more active in, but for various reasons could not do directly. Her little secret weapon. As usual, Rolfe's insight was closer than anyone suspected.

The attendants at Phalkonmere were reluctant to let Francene approach “the presence” as they referred to Jereth, but Jereth’s disembodied voice gently reminded them that Francene was always allowed, even if her son or other companions might not be unless she summoned them.

Rolfe was guided away and distracted by a menial task. On this visit it was shearing sheep. The muscular sorcerer was tasked with holding the beasts as they were shorn of their fleece. This was something Rolfe knew well from his days as a boy when he helped his mother with her flock. It was how he’d gotten as strong as he had because wrestling sheep took a good firm grip.

Francene approached the arched cairn atop the hill overlooking the city. She settled on the grass next to the smallish structure and sat. A disembodied voice emanated in the form of the sound of the wind, the chirping of the insects and the rustle of the grass and trees. Together they formed words that Francene enjoyed listening to. Jereth’s voice was a soothing balm for the jangle of noise within the city.

She felt grateful for her time spent here in Phalkonmere. Her flock was well-tended and she was allowed the freedom to visit and commune with nature within this small but powerful circle of undespoiled space so close to the artificial, constructed, cold and unfeeling city. Even so, Francene had learned that the city itself had life within it, life she could communicate, reach out to and encourage to grow. And she’d done that.

“Monumental decisions and troubling events gather on the shores of Waterdeep.” the voice said.

Jereth spoke like this sometimes when she was channeling her demi-powers. Francene preferred to speak plainer, “Yep, the shit needs some shovelling, it’s true.”

Jereth’s laugh sounded like the cry of a distant bird, “Francene, you came here to ask something, please feel free, friend. I will do what is within my power.”

“I witnessed something within Undermountain between Umbra Luna and the drow woman Zress. To most it would have seemed a magical and mystical spell of the love between two people manifesting in a beautiful display. But I have to tell you, something deep inside me made me almost want to look away. There was something else, ...*meddlesome*...in the lives of these women. Something I was hoping your connection to the Gods might give me some insight into.”

There was a long silence, “I can feel your concern, but I feel no malevolence in your friend--or her friend. There is a lot of emotion and confusion and questions between them, but they do trust each other.

The voice continued like a breeze, “You know that Umbra Luna was chosen by Selûne. That her destiny is guided by the Moonmaiden. I can see this other woman is also chosen. I can see that her destiny is at the heart of a struggle between Lolth and Eilistraee. Who has seized the reins of her fate is still unclear.”

Francene spoke, her own voice sounding jarringly loud compared to Jereth’s “That’s what I was afraid of. I thought it might not be settled. It seems evident that Zress is still not sure which side

she's on. And for Umbra's sake I hope she chooses the right side, otherwise Umbra may follow her the wrong way."

Jeryth's voice drifted, "When two plants grow next to each other they may cross-pollinate. Keep them close and this can be assured. Umbra and her patron are not an inferior strain and Zress and her newest patron may be strengthened by the other pair."

Francene nodded, this made sense. Keep Zress close and she'd be protected long enough to become confident in her association with the light of Elistraee as opposed to the darkness of Lolth.

Francene waited and sat quietly for a few moments until her thoughts returned to a peaceful state. "What can *you* do about a war? Do you have the power to stop it?"

Jereth's melancholy sigh was an omen of rain, "Nothing, friend. Wars happen and even the gods are powerless to stop them. Although too many of the gods like to start them. If war is coming I can contact the people within my reach and prepare them. But other than that I'm as powerless as the shore to stop the waves."

Francene stood and leaned on her crook. She whispered, "Without the shore there are no waves, only the rolling sea. The shore can stop the sea. The waves are where they meet."

Jereyth was silent and Francene smiled. She'd finally managed to get the last word in with this divine being. That sort of made her day. She trotted off lightly to see what trouble Rolfe had gotten into, but her mood was a lot better than it had been.

Task: Huelwen and Zress: Preparing for life above ground

Huelwen opened the doorway of the roughshod shed built next to Trollskull Manor and invited the hooded woman into the space. It was cramped with two as it was really only designed for Huelwen to tinker with her devices. She pulled out a stool for Zress to sit on and pulled a few lines attached to shutters to close the building off from light.

Huelwen pulled down the goggles she wore atop their head and looked into Zress's eyes. "What?" Zress asked, uncomfortable by the scrutiny.

"Oh nothing, dear, I am just examining you. If I am to try to make your life in the sunlight as comfortable as possible I need to know more about what makes it so difficult for you."

Zress squirmed on the bench, "It is very bright, and it stings my skin. It is a constant distraction. It is only when I am shaded or covered that I can focus enough to think. Also the lack of a roof is very distracting, even the largest caverns feel enclosed, but out there," Zress pointed towards the door, "It is ...", she kept widening her hands, "...so...big."

Huelwen suppressed a chuckle. She didn't want to upset their guest, "Yes, I can see how that might be disconcerting. So you know I do not have darkvision, naturally, correct?"

Zress looked at Heulwen, "I wondered. You seem human."

"I am, dear," she said, "But I created these lenses to allow me to see in the dark like your eyes do for you."

Rustling through a box of parts and such they pulled out a pair of goggles similar to the ones they were wearing. "These are welding glasses. And they are capable of filtering out almost all visible light except the very brightest. Try them on, please."

Zress took them suspiciously. She fitted them over her head and positioned the round brass tubes over her eyes. "It is very dark, I can hardly see at all."

Huelwen said, "This is what darkness looks like to a human. Now my dear, let's see what it does in the light."

Pulling the lines opened the shutters that kept the shed dark. Sunlight poured in and illuminated the shed's content. Zress paused, "I can see fairly well wearing these. Not as clearly as not wearing them, but the light no longer hurts my eyes. They do not make me look silly or anything do they?"

Huelwen pointed at her own goggles, "I am not fit to judge, dear," she said, "Can you see the sign across the street? Can you read it?"

"I think it says *The Bent Nail* although I am not certain, it is quite dim."

Huelwen made a note in a notebook while muttering, "About sixty feet in sunlight, that's good."

Zress was looking around the street. "Wearing these is much like it is in the darkest places underground. I can see a fair distance, but it is not unlimited vision like it is in the lit corridors and caves."

Huelwen, pulled another lever and one side of the shed rolled up and Zress was suddenly bathed in direct sunlight, She hissed and recoiled. Heulwen immediately dropped the panel back in place, "I am so sorry, I had no idea that it would cause you such discomfort!"

Zress rubbed her exposed flesh. "It is like the stinging ointment made from the firelichen that is used to soften stiff muscles. It stings and burns some and can be very intense."

Huelwen nodded, she knew that paste well, "That helps, knowing what it feels like for you lets me know what I can do to alleviate it. Do you feel it under your clothes? Not to be indelicate, I mean."

Zress considered, "Not as much, it is mild, but not as distracting. I would know I was in sunlight even if I was covered."

Huelwen considered. They pulled out a length of white fabric. "Not your usual color, but this might help keep you safe from the direct rays of the sun. Wrap this around your arms and when you are ready I'll lift the side door again."

Zress draped the fabric lightly over one arm and tightly over the other. She did not think she had ever worn an outfit that was completely white. It seemed unnatural, although white-skinned creatures did abound in the Underdark. She nodded at Huelwen who pulled up the sliding panel door on the side of the shed.

Again, the Sunlight flooded in bathing both of them in light. Huelwen did not react at all, instead focussing on watching Zress. Zress, prepared for the light this time did not flinch, but faced it head on. "Remarkable," Zress said, "Both of my arms cannot feel the light at all. This is no ordinary fabric!"

Huelwen smiled large, "No, it is something I created from the silk of our friend Legs. It has phasic properties, and while it appears white in the darkness it appears completely different in the light."

As they pointed, Zress could see that the fabric shifted between white in the shade to almost completely black in the light. Huelwen held out a bolt of it, "I really had no idea what to do with it, but it occurred to me that shifting the light might make it less harmful to you."

Zress blurted out, "This would mean that sunlight no longer would give the surface world an advantage against drow!"

For a moment Zress considered that, "You have to make sure they never find out how to make this. Swear to me!"

Huelwen patted her arm, "No worries, dear, I won't. It is not just Legs silk in this, there's a long chemical process. It can be fabricated, but it takes a lot of time. I can make you a suit, if you like. I have some designs you can look at."

Zress marveled at the strange fabric and this odd person whom she had not even known before just a few days ago. And the lengths to which they were going out of their way to help. It seemed extraordinary to her. Huelwen busied themselves making measurements of Zress as she paged through a book of designs. Clearly Huelwen had been planning to make an outfit out of this fabric as there were sketches of it in white and dark modes.

Once she had decided on a design she liked, and Huelwen had urged her to keep the goggles, she left and looked around Trollskull Alley. She felt a little silly wearing these heavy black lenses but they did reduce her eye-strain. She did not feel a need to squint all the time and the headache that accompanied the strain had not appeared.

She watched as a few townsfolk gave her a quick stare, then look away, only to hurry on about their business. She realized she must look more than a little strange, a drow in plain clothes walking down the streets wearing goggles. But few people seemed fearful, just curious, then conspicuously avoiding staring.

A familiar scent caught Zress's nostrils and she looked over to see a shop called "Fabulous Fungi". Although the word *shop* was probably generous, it looked more like a small shack that

was covered in vines. She might even have thought it abandoned if the doorway and footpath leading to it had not been meticulously swept and the door painted a welcoming bright yellow.

She stepped up, following the scent into the building. An odd halfling woman that Zress swore looked like she was wearing a cape made of moss turned around and said "Welcome! A drow! Oh, lovely, you have come to the right place. May I interest you in some Bazi or perhaps some Bluecap flour or Fire lichen sauce?"

Zress smiled to herself. *So this is where Lif is getting his stash of Bazi, good to know.* Zress smiled, She pulled up the goggles to see clearer, "Greetings. I am new to the neighborhood, but I smelled ripplebark and had to see if I was imagining it."

"Oh not at all! It is one of my favorite things to grow, probably because it is so challenging. If it is exposed to direct sunlight it will kill it outright, you know." The cheery shopkeep said.

Zress did not know, but was interested to hear more, "How much for a half-pound?" she asked.

The woman leaned in and grinned, "A taste of home, eh?"

Zress smiled in spite of herself, "Let's say that surface food is richer than I am used to."

The woman nodded and stepped into the back. Zress closed her eyes and breathed in the sporey, musty smell. It was almost but not exactly like home for a moment. The woman returned with a paper bundle and a smaller bag. "This is a concoction I used to give to my children when they ate too much. It'll settle your stomach if you get off. No charge, just mix it with water. About a teaspoon should do you."

Zress was genuinely touched. Again people going out of their way to be nice was not something she was used to. "I insist I pay something for it," she said.

The woman waved her off, "Look, why not buy one of my fortune-tellings? I haven't sold many and would like to keep my hand in. They can be very illuminating."

The woman had pointed to her sign which listed services of divination with the one at the top marked "Fortune telling, Tarot/Tea Leaves/Palmistry 5gp."

The other services seemed to be more spells, such as those used to identify magical items, finding lost items or people and communicating with higher powers. This first item, however, seemed more of a novelty. "Why not?" Zress said, "I would like to know my future."

The woman invited Zress back to sit at a small table with an elaborate cloth over it. The shopkeeper sat on a tall stool next to her so that their heads were nearly even. "Which service would you like?"

"Tarot, I think," Zress said, "We have something similar in our culture. Cards that can be used to provide insight."

The halfling woman said, "Sounds good, let me charge up, first." She then pulled out a flask and when she opened it the most amazing smell poured out of the tiny container. Zress would have

said it smelled like purple with green swirlies in it. The woman took a generous draw and muttered, "Yeah, that's the stuff."

Zress watched the woman's pupils dilated until her eyes were almost completely black. She took the deck in her two hands. She passed it to Zress and said ritualistically, "Move the cards. Feel them. Shuffle if you like. If a card falls out, leave it. And hand me the deck when you are ready."

Zress took the cards and fanned them out. She glanced through the images on them. One of the cards slipped free and landed on the table. The Halfling woman quickly slid it aside and said nothing. Zress did not even get a chance to see what was on it.

She casually sifted the cards into a new order and handed them back. The woman took the pile and set the deck on the table and slid it out so that they were arrayed in a face-down arc on the table.

She moved her finger over the array and paused on one. She deftly slid it free and put it with the other card and then gathered them back into a pile which she moved to one side. She then moved the two cards to the center of the table. She flipped over the picture of a woman wearing armor and seated on a throne. She held a sword but her other hand was outstretched, beckoning. "This one is the Queen of Swords. She represents confidence as well as unorthodoxy. It is a message of independence and truth to oneself. Do not let someone mold you into someone you are not."

Zress could see both Umbra and her mother in that card. One of them had offered a chance to open herself to her truth and the other had tried to obliterate the truth into something that served her. It could also be her. This was good to see and hear, it reinforced something she'd been beginning to suspect. She was beginning to realize she had a larger destiny.

The fortune teller flipped over the other card and Zress's heart went cold. It was the Lovers card. "This is the card that slipped out," The woman said, "this is something that cannot be denied. It speaks to a partnership or alliance of some sort. It does not have to mean romantic love. Although, I feel it might, It can also mean a choice between two things. Often it is a tough choice and that refers back to the chosen card - the Queen of Swords. Choose what feels right, dear, it will serve you best."

Zress paid for her goods and the service and left without further conversation. She headed to Trollskull Manor all but ignoring the strange looks she was getting. As she entered she was pleased to see several of the Horde stand up and nod to her. Some of them greeted her with a curt "*Cáno*". The little girl, Shaznill took her packages without comment and carried them up to the lounge and placed them in Umbra's quarters. Zress followed and for the first time, entered Umbra's room.

Once inside with the door firmly locked she sat on the floor and held her knees. She could hear her foster Mother Vlonwelv telling her to stop being weak and to push down the feelings and be hard. She could hear Umbra's voice as they clutched each other tightly in Undermountain

saying everything would be okay. And a third voice a new voice saying that she had been chosen to take a beautiful journey in the light.

She disrobed and climbed under the heavy covers of the bed and into the darkness and wished that someone would come and hold her.

Task: Theren and Renard: Talk to Bregan D'aerthe

Theren walked down the Way of the Dragon towards the City Docks. Theren had on reliable authority that Bregan D'aerthe maintained a vessel there called *Eyecatcher* as a legitimate front to their criminal activities. He hoped they would lead him to Jarlaxle (or some other member of Bregan D'aerthe) to whom he could exchange information. The *Eyecatcher* was not hard to locate and it was moored at the city docks with its gangplank down. From the dock Theren called, "Permission to come aboard?"

An Illuskan man stepped into view. He wore short pants and an open shirt but had a scimitar at his side and sturdy boots. "Oo's askin'" he said in a rough accent.

"I am Theren Wolfsbane. High Elf. Member of New Moon Shepherds. You hear of us, Yes?"

The man scratched his bandana-covered head, "Nope, but that don't mean nuffin'. Aye, come up so'sn I can see yas and we ain't shouting all over de place."

Theren walked up the sturdy incline. Renard tightened his claws into the elf's shoulders as they passed over the water. Theren was glad he'd had the leather padding on that shoulder thickened, Renar's claws were very sharp. He gave a reassuring scratch to the black cat, reminding him that he was well aware of Renard's aversion to water.

The sailor looked Theren up and down, "Nice pussy," he said unironically, "Are ye's here fer business or just to shoot the shit?"

Theren smiled indulgently, "I am here to talk to man about horse. I am certain you know what I mean. Can I talk to someone in charge?"

The man squinted at Theren. Renard stared back as well as Thereon and neither blinked for a long time. "I expect the cap'n might be available to talk about horses." he finally said. He pointed at a smallish door towards the aft of the ship "Is cabin is through them doors and straight aft. C'ain't miss' 'em. I suggest you walk slowly, though, stranger, the Cap'n don't like surprises."

"Understood," The high elf said. He had come relatively lightly armed today only bringing his handaxes. And his wand of fireballs, because you can never be too careful;. He opened the door that had been indicated. It was not even four feet tall, but there was a short step down into a cramped, but serviceable space. Inside there were four toughs. Each of them was armed as had been the sailor on deck with scimitar and a lot of attitude. This time, however, of the four, three were drow. Theron had to fight the urge to snatch out his wand and fry the lot of them.

"I am here to speak with ze captain," He said, doing his best to keep his voice even and unconcerned. Renard tightened his grip on Theren's shoulder again.

One of the drow spoke in elvish, "Pale-skin, why do you wish to see the Captain? Is it because you wish to complain about the drow like a whiney housewife? Or do you have *real* business?"

Renard hopped down from his perch and stretched nonchalantly. He rubbed Theren's legs as Theron said, "I have no fight with you who have left the hell of Undermountain. Or even you who fled the spires of Menzoberranzan. But if you wish a fight I will most certainly end it quickly as I have things to discuss with your captain. So will you let me pass or is this to be massacre?"

Theren was neither beefy nor imposing. But neither was Umbra Luna. He'd watched all five-foot-four of her carefully in their time as friends and allies and it was all in the attitude. Speak in a normal voice. Speak with utter sincerity. State the consequences of pushing a fight in the most graphic and shocking manner you can. And be prepared for them to call you on it and act with lightning reflexes.

Two of the sailors lifted their hands from the hilts of their weapons and showed their palms. The other two soon followed. "The cap'n is in there" said a sailor nodding his head to a heavier door behind them. One of them knocked on the door, "Someone to see you cap'n. He's with..."

He paused waiting for Theren to speak, "New Moon Shepherds"

The name was repeated and there was a mad scramble and the door flew open. "Really? What are you waiting for! Come right in! Brandy?"

The Illusken man was deeply tanned with warm brown eyes and dreadlocked hair held in place by both a wide beaded bandana and an impressive leather tricorne hat. His fingers were festooned with rings and his arms a tapestry of tattoos. His leather vest and tight pants were capped by tall knee-high boots with floppy tops.

He grabbed Theren by the arms and practically dragged him into the cabin. "Hold all my meetings, Boys, don't disturb me until our guest leaves. You know, unless the ship is on fire or something."

Once they were inside, he slammed the door shut. "Thank the gods you've come! I am actually a damsel in distress and in dire need of rescue. Thanks to this magical disguise I've been able to fool these yokels for a few days, but I don't know how long I can keep it up."

Theren blinked, "Really?"

From somewhere behind him in the shadows he heard Renard also say, "Really?"

The strange person looked under the chair and smiled broadly, "You have a talking cat? That's brilliant! All I ever managed to find was a gossipy parrot. How fortunate for you, I love cats! No, Theren Wolfsbane of the New Moon Shepherds, I am not a princess and am not in danger. But it is always fun to start off with the other person on the back foot. So to speak."

He flopped into a cushioned wing-back chair and plopped his outrageous boots on the desk. "I am Zardo Zord, Captain of the *Eyecatcher* and commander of a relatively successful trading fleet. And I am curious why a deep dungeon delver like the New Moon Shepherds would come to me since I cannot get a ship into Undermountain except through Skullport...which, for the record I would never ever do," he winked conspicuously at Theren as he said this, continuing with a wry tone, "because there's a lot of criminal elements down there and stolen goods, and smugglers. Of which, of course, I am not one."

He finished by handing Theren a small glass of brandy. He pulled out a small fish from a drawer, something like a sardine, and tossed it behind the chair. Theren could hear Renard snacking on it loudly. *Way to be inconspicuous, friend*, he thought, rolling his eyes.

"Zardo," Theren said, formally, "Will be direct. Am here looking for Bregan D'aerthe. I haff information for zhem and need to make sure gets to zhem directly."

"Theren, mate," the captain said, shaking his head, "You disappoint me. I want you to beat around the bush. I want you to dance among the fireflies and wander through the willows. I want to see you squirm uncomfortably as you ask a complete stranger if they know a notorious criminal gang--much less a highly placed member. Throw me a bone, Theren, and don't leave a dead fish under my chair for me to find a week later. *I am talking to you, cat. Eat it all or leave it where I can find it.*"

Thereon remembered his training. His old archery master pulled these tricks. Putting up two targets and telling him to hit *the* target. Regardless of which target he hit he would be told he had hit the wrong one. Until the day he fired two arrows in one pull and shut the old man up.

Theren held out his hands, "Perhaps we are on wrong foot. Perhaps I am barking up wrong tree, I was told you know lots of people and have drow on your crew. One of these things is true, I can verify. But the other? Perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps you are blowhard who brags about connections he does not have. My cat and I apologise for wasting time. We will see ourselves out."

The odd man laughed, "Okay, I admit, I blinked on that one. I tipped my hand and you totally peeked at my cards. I might be able to help you. But the question is why should I? I mean, seriously, you guys are better connected than Laeral Silverhand. Oh wait...you have connections to her too."

Thereon had to admit they'd made some powerful and influential friends, "Is true. We do lots of things for people who want deniability, separation, and sometimes even alibi. But, sometimes, we do things because is right thing to do. Like directing liberated drow to seek you out."

SHIT. He'd laid it on the table. "Seek you out". Theren's suspicion that this was Jarlaxel himself was now sitting there like a dropped egg during breakfast. Zardo scratched his nose idly. "I see," he said, "For what it is worth, I do appreciate that. But I owe you nothing for it. It is a shot in the dark at best. I don't know how many you've sent, but I've gotten some good crewmen over the last few months out of Undermountain, thanks to you lot. Even if I was Jarlaxel."

Well that was about as much of a confirmation as I'm going to get. *I might be him or I might not.*

Theren leaned back in the uncomfortable chair and tried to look casual as he sipped the brandy. "Can you help or not? I need to find new contact if not." He nodded appreciatively at the alcohol, however.

Zardoz steepled his long fingers, "Let's say I do know a way to reach them. Would you trust me with your information?"

Theren smiled, He'd hooked him. "You care for crew, even drow. Bregan D'aerthe inserted three spies into Ghost Spiders. One is dead, a cleric; the other two are still alive and finishing the job we started. They've been mostly wiped out and last heirs of Auvryndar are now gone. Only Zress Orlezziir remains and she is with us."

Zardoz looked a little angry and confused, "What do you mean, 'She is with us'?"

Theron remained calm outwardly, but inside he was ready to defend himself if needed. "I mean she is on our side. She has forsaken her allegiance to Lolth and Menzoberranzan and has now turned to Eilistraee."

Zardoz narrowed his eyes, "Do you know what Auvryndar and the Spiders do to drow males? Do you know how they are enslaved, mistreated, tortured for fun, abused physically? Sexually? Why shouldn't Zress pay for the crimes of her family?"

Theren was trying to work up a defense when an object slid across the floor from behind some furniture. Theren picked it up. It was a bloody House Freth insignia badge. Theren set it on the desk, "Why shouldn't everyone pay for their crimes. Regardless of their motives for committing them? I have delivered message, sir. Have good day. Please relay information and sincere message that Zress is with us. No harm comes to her. We clear?"

Zardoz waved a hand sullenly and Theren wasted no time picking up Renard and hustling off the ship. As they reached the dock Theren said, "I am glad you found badge in cabin. It gave me perfect reason to leave."

Renard purred and licked his fishy lips, "I didn't find it, I pulled it out of my pack and put some blood on it. I figured you could use it. Which you did, by the way, brilliantly."

Theren laughed, "Let me get you treat, comrade, you deserve it!"

Renard licked the fishy residue off his whiskers, "No need, but I won't say no."

Task: Umbra Luna: The Lords of Waterdeep

Umbra entered the Yawning Portal just before midday. Crowds of people lined all three floors of the balconied establishment. It was a popular hangout for all sorts of people. She waved to Durnan as she entered and saw him take off his apron and put one of his staff in charge of the bar.

She spotted one of the booths in the back where Mirt was seated with a hooded figure she surmised was The Blackstaff, Vajya. She slid into the booth followed by Durnan. "Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. I wanted to keep you up to date on the happenings below the city streets."

And for a solid ten minutes she detailed the rising drow threat in Undermountain. She filled them in on the destruction of the Ghost Spider army and the spies allied with Bregan D'aerthe (without revealing who they were, of course). And she asked again for support.

Mirt swirled his tankard, "It would seem you did get some support, my dear."

Noted, she thought, Mirt had contacts with Bregan D'aerthe. That was worth knowing. Durnan gruffly snorted, "Not sure what I can do to help."

"Durnan, if anything comes out of Undermountain, it is coming right through here," Umbra said. We have a fairly well-established trade route that most of the first three levels of Undermountain already know. It isn't a secret. Even though we take most of it out through Mistshore these days. That bloody great pit is the easiest part of the dungeon to find."

Durnan looked around the tavern, she could see him silently counting the number of adventurers, city guard, city watch, and members of the criminal underground in the establishment. He leveled a gaze at her, "It had better be a big army."

She smiled at him. She liked the gruff old dude despite his demeanor, "So keep the place busy. That's gotta be good for everyone."

"Especially, Durnan's purse," muttered Mirt.

Vajya said quietly, "I, specifically my team, have been scrying as best as they can but Undermountain is largely blocked from divination within the hallways. That devil Halaster has bent it to his will. We've identified several places that the city could be breached from Undermountain, the largest being through Skullport. Your message mentioned something about the goddess Eilistraee being a factor? How so?"

Umbra detailed, "Devotion to Eilistraee is on the rise among the drow of Undermountain who are feeling somewhat ignored by Lolth. She, apparently, is not as influential within the walls as she would like them to believe. Eilistraee, on the other hand, has been spotted near the walls of Waterdeep."

Varjya slid a slip of paper to Umbra, "All is as you say, but perhaps you and your new friend should travel to this place. There may be more for you to find."

Umbra blushed slightly at the mention of Zress, "Yes, my new friend. My drow friend. She's under my protection."

Mirt muttered, "Under more than that, I hear," only to be kicked under the table by Durnan.

Umbra continued, "I feel like Eilistraee has some greater purpose for her, one that Selûne is facilitating through me. I am willing to trust my god, and ask only that you trust my judgement on this."

Varja said, "We, the Open Lord and I, have placed so much trust in you already, this seems like such a minor thing."

Durnan just said "Aye."

Mirt did not answer verbally but nodded.

Umbra looked them all in the eyes, "I know you do not represent all of the Lords of Waterdeep, but I trust you will convey to them the solemn duty we feel about this matter and assure them that we are counting on their support, but hope it is not going to be needed."

Mirt patted her hand, "Come and see me when this is all over and we can talk about that more. But for now, I'm on your side."

Durnan shook her hand and headed back to the bar wordlessly. Varyja leaned over to Umbra and nodded at the departing barkeep, "He likes you, I can tell. He'll be there as well if you need him. As for the Blackstaff, we only serve the city and the Open Lord. But she knows about this situation and is pledged to defend the city at all costs."

Umbra smiled thankfully at the woman whose frailty was beginning to show, "That's all I am asking."

Umbra finished her drink and glanced at the paper as she was leaving the Tavern. "North Ward?" She looked at the address she'd been given, Trollkill Street and Phulle Lane. That was along the old Troll Wall. She didn't remember any building there, that area had been abandoned when she was on the Watch. She walked back down the length of the city until she was in the vicinity.

The houses here were old, and many of them had become run down. More than a few were boarded up. As she walked down Trollkill Street she spotted a block where the houses had just plain given up completely. Tall tree canopies grew out of the shells of several houses and even the normally solid cobblestone streets gave way to rough dirt and mud puddles with tufts of grass filling in for the missing stones.

She looked and this land that had been ceded to nature was at the corner of Trollkill and Phulle. She had no idea what the Blackstaff wanted her to see here. Until she spotted a glimpse of movement within the shells of one of the buildings.

She carefully approached and entered through the missing doors of the facade. Inside, a tree that she could see from the street grew from the center of the space. All of the floors and walls had completely disappeared and had been replaced with a verdant swath of green grass with wildflowers blooming throughout.

Around the sturdy trunk danced six women with pitch black skin and long flowing white hair that hung down their legs and in one case trailed the ground behind her. They were naked except for their elaborate swords which they waved as part of their dance moving in unison around the tree. They stepped so lightly that nary a flower or blade of grass was crushed.

Umbra was mesmerized. The woman with the ground-sweeping tresses caught her eye and nodded to Umbra and through some unseen (or unnoticed) signal the women simultaneously folded themselves down and laid their swords at their feet and sat in the grass with heads bowed. All except the one who'd looked at Umbra.

As she walked over she pulled her hair into a ponytail and braided it deftly until it hung to her ankles and pulled a green cape from some unseen locale and draped it modestly over her shoulders. "Greetings chosen of Selûne; defender of the ancient ways; daughter of the moon and sister to our latest child. The Avatar of Eilistraee told us to expect your coming. Although I had not expected it so soon."

Umbra bowed respectfully and the other woman grabbed her and hugged her affectionately, "I am Trelasarra Zuind. The others look to me for leadership, although I am little more than the mouthpiece through which Eilistraee speaks. The Dark Maiden did not grace us with your name, however. How are you called?"

Umbra was a little taken aback. *The Avatar of Eilistraee?* She stammered, "I am Umbra Luna, chosen of...well you already know that part. What is this place?"

Treslana hooked arms with Umbra and waved with her other hand, "This is the Dancing Haven. It is a sacred space for the moondancers and others who worship Eilistraee to come and commune. We were practicing our celebrations for tonight's moonrise. As chosen by the Night White Lady you are welcome to attend. Will you bring our new sister?"

Umbra felt an urge to protect Zress, even though this was a drow, and they likely were zealous in their faith, Zress was already suspicious of strangers, and these - lovely, caring, open and enthusiastic followers might scare her off. "What do you know of her?" Umbra deflected..

Treslana spoke reverently, "We know she was chosen, as you were chosen by Selûne, by The Dark Maiden herself for a great task. We know she was wrested from the grasp of Lolth's web and delivered by you to bring to us."

Umbra remembered when she was chosen. She had already embarked on her oath as a defender of the ancient ways. In fact she'd been into Undermountain several times but one night while in the House of the Moon, Selûne spoke to her. She told her that she had a great purpose for her and that Umbra would forevermore be marked by that destiny.

She had, at first, believed it was a dream, as it had that sort of a quality to it, but soon her abilities manifested as a chosen one. And she finally embraced her destiny, despite a lot of fear and uncertainty at first. She suspected Zress may have the same feelings. She would bring Zress here, but only when she was ready.

She took the other woman's hand in hers, "Treslana, your welcome here is a blessing to me. I will tell The Dark Maiden's chosen one of this place, but I will leave it to her to decide to come. I am going to ask that you respect this. She is new to this life and I promise you I will not let her stray, but I also want her to be ready to receive your love when she arrives. Do you agree?"

Treslana looked like she might cry, "I understand, and I am in no position to force you. Eilistraee has placed this person in your care and entrusted you to bring her to us. She made no mention of when that would happen. But I was so excited to see you, knowing that it would soon be time to fulfill the prophecy we were given."

"It will be fulfilled," Umbra said more confidently than she felt, "These things all happen according to an unknowable chain of events."

Treslana nodded, "Yes, I suppose. After tonight's ritual we'll be returning to the church in Skullport where our sisters and brothers await news. I will have to disappoint them."

"Wait, How many congregants are in Skullport?" Umbra asked.

Treslana blinked, "Perhaps forty or fifty, A dozen priests, and an equal number of temple defenders," she said, "Many of the drow who have fled the feuding families have come to our sanctuary. A few other races as well, Eilistree accepts all who come to her. I and these women are but a few of the Moondancers, the defenders of the temple, but there are all manner of people who devote themselves to the Dark Maiden."

Holy shit, they have an army. And Zress is set up to lead it.

"Treslana, I may be here tonight after all," Umbra said happily.

Chapter Ten

When Umbra returned to Trollskull Manor she stopped briefly to talk to Francene, Renard, Theren and Rolfe. Mostly just to check in and plan supper when they'd share all their findings. It was late in the afternoon and she wanted to change into something more comfortable like a uniform or jacket and pants rather than her armor.

Umbra's armor was ornate, form fitting and light as cloth, thanks to the Mithril of which it was made. She hardly felt it, despite it being a full set of plate armor. But it did mean she could not relax. She always felt as if she was ready to fight when in armor.

But Umbra didn't really do "casual" either. So often when she was home and wanted to relax she'd put on a nice jacket and perhaps some jodhpurs or her old city watch uniform with its high collar and brass buttons. For Umbra that was her idea of casualness.

She opened the door of her room and without looking tossed her sword on the bed and began to remove the lightweight armor. She had removed her gauntlets and vambrace, the greaves,

culsses and vaults and had loosened the straps on her cuirass when she heard a voice of someone clearing their throat behind her.

She lunged for the sword only to find its point aimed at her. Zress was in the bed. She was wearing one of Umbra's nice silk shirts and little else from what Umbra could see. "You should not present your undefended back to an enemy," she said grinning.

Umbra smiled, "Good thing you're not my enemy, then." She said letting the final bit of her armor free. She placed it on the stand in the room designated for this purpose. She wore the simple shirt and canvas pants she'd worn in the dungeon. Umbra knew it was ripe, she'd not taken time to bathe or wash her clothes since they got back. She'd hoped to do that quickly before the dinner meeting.

"I borrowed a shirt," Zress said, setting the sword aside. And I used the basin to wipe down. I didn't feel comfortable using the big bath in the turret. Despite Legs' excellent company it was just a little too exposed for me."

"I get it," Umbra said, replacing the water in the basin and beginning to clean herself under the shirt with a towel, "I feel the same sometimes. Washing in the field just feels more natural with a basin and cloth. You are welcome to what few clothes I have. Did you and Huelwen come up with anything?"

She nodded and headed to the cabinet. Umbra bit her lip trying not to stare at the muscular, attractive woman wearing her shirt and concentrated on wiping off the sweat and dried grit. "He has this amazing fabric made of spider silk. It should make for both a useful and protective garb. She pulled out Umbra's long black jacket. It had a military cut with epaulets and wide satin collars. It had a wrap-around vest-like middle and long tails that flared dramatically.

She held it up. "How does this look? Can you spare it tonight?"

Umbra braced herself and turned to look. She had pulled on the jacket over the loose silk top. It made it gather at her neck in a cascade of frills and made Umbra's knees go weak, "It's um, ... It looks good on you. In fact, you can keep that one."

Zress nodded in thanks and continued rustling in the wardrobe and pulled out some leather pants that Umbra kept from before she was on the watch. She liked how they fit even if she didn't wear them much any more. Zress pulled them on and tucked in the silk shirt. She was, in a word, stunning.

She walked over to Umbra, "Here, let me help you get those filthy clothes off. I can reach the spots on your back."

Umbra's heart was pounding, and she had to be beet red. But Zress ignored it. Among the drow matriarchal society, they had little use for modesty and being uncomfortable around women. She pulled off Umbra's top and paused briefly to look at the naked half-elven woman before her.

Umbra had her share of angry red scars, many of them from her time on the watch, but some few before. She was no stranger to a fight. The worst was a puckered hole in her abdomen and its matching one on her back where a monster had impaled her and nearly killed her.

Zress traced them with a finger, "Do your healers not know how to remove scars?" she said innocently (or perhaps less innocently, Umbra was still not sure she could read Zress, yet).

"I decided to keep them. Each of them came with a hard-earned lesson," Umbra said.

Zress made a noncommittal noise and turned Umbra around and washed her back for her practically and efficiently. It only took a moment, but Umbra wished to herself it would continue forever. She headed to the wardrobe and chose her jodhpurs and uniform coat. She wore one of the fine silk shirts she'd paid so much for in order to attend some ball for five minutes before a fight broke out and she had to leave.

Zress leaned back and admired her, "Very smart. We make quite the pair, don't we?"

Selûne I hope so! Umbra thought. Zress grinned at her and suddenly rushed over and gave her a tender hug. Umbra grabbed the other woman and returned it, but still asked, "What is this for?"

Zress sighed, "I have not felt so much like myself as I did today. I was not hiding myself or trying to be what people expected of me. I got to be who I am. Even though I am in a strange place, separated from my people, surrounded by those that are distrustful, at best."

She waved off Umbra's protestations before she started, "It's true, your friends are nice to me because you trust me. And, believe it or not, I trust them. But it will take time for them to really welcome me. And I am okay with that. But being outside, above ground, seeing people, smelling the air, seeing the colors. It has opened up things inside me I never knew were there. And I want to thank you."

Umbra buried her face in the other woman's neck, tears welled in her eyes, "Thank you. I knew I was drawn to you, but I could not explain it. I knew I had to reach out to you, but I could not define why. It was not until you and I met again that I could finally release my feelings for you."

Zress pulled Umbra away and held her face. She gently kissed her lips and tasted her tears. "It is okay to feel this way, Umbra. You and I are connected in spirit, and in heart as well. We do not have to hold back our true selves from each other."

Umbra kissed Zress back as hard as she could. Zress was taken aback, such displays of affection weren't really part of her culture, despite what she felt. But it felt so good and so right she could not help but kiss Umbra back.

A knock on the door snapped them out of the moment. Rolfe's voice called from the other side, "We are all waiting for you guys." They stared into each other's eyes, shared a private smile and headed out, hand-in-hand.

As they exited the room Francene blurted out "Aw, so cute!" and Huelwen said, "It is about time"

Umbra waved a hand, "Get over it, we have work to do."

During dinner they quickly turned to their tasks from the day, summarizing them for each other.

Theron let them know that Bregan D'aerthe knew about them, and that they had been warned off from retaliation against Zress. Renard got lots of appreciative scratches for his clever thinking. Huelwen shared their fabric idea, although they said it might take more than a day to get it ready. She did present Zress with some less clunky goggles, however.

Francene talked about her encounter with the demi-power known as Jeryth and how she had confirmed Umbra's thoughts that Zress was a point of contention between Lolth and Eilistree. But her fate was still undecided. But she also added that the gods do not control anyone's fate. They may manipulate forces or make it hard to decide, but ultimately we alone decide what lies ahead for us.

Heulwen offered a thick jerkin for Zress to wear made of the remarkable spider-fabric. It was lightweight enough to wear under armor and stylish enough to be a garment on its own. It had a cleverly concealed hood that could be pulled up to protect the face. Zress felt moved to hug Heulwen in gratitude. She wore it through the rest of the meeting.

Then Umbra shared what she had found at the Dancing Haven near the Trollwall. She glanced out the window where the sun was just nearing the horizon. She turned to Zress and asked her if she was ready to meet the church of Eilistraee.

Renard interrupted, "I saw this place a while back while prowling around. I also saw Ramalia Haventree near there. I did not see drow there, however. She knows something about that place, I'm sure of it."

Umbra nodded, "I'll leave that to you, Renard. Theren, you too. You guys are closest to her. Find out what she knows. Zress and I are headed to the celebration of the moonrise in The Dancing Haven."

With the sun falling rapidly, Zress did not need the protection from the sun's rays. Since Umbra did not put on her armor, Zress resisted the urge to put on hers, although she did don her moonblade, Ungoecet. She kept on the spider-fabric jerkin, however, which faded to white as the light faded as well.

The two women walked down the wide thoroughfares of Waterdeep towards the Trollwall. They occasionally hugged each other, or held hands playfully. To Umbra, it felt both very natural and bizarre at the same time. To share this level of connection to someone felt unnatural. But she remembered not that long ago she was this close to someone. Her twin brother Lumin.

She and Lumin suffered a mutual trauma that had marred both of their lives. They had this common bond and an unshakable love for each other. Even as Lumin was drifting further away from his humanity he still maintained his connection to Umbra. The last few months before she lost contact he would send her paper birds about once a week with just a heart or a smile on it. Just to let her know he'd been thinking about her.

She had kept them and even though she had no way to contact him because he had isolated himself deliberately she would focus her love and pray to Selûne to protect him. She felt the moment her connection to him was gone. She knew he must have died and she would never see him again.

That was months ago. Her grief had hardened over, leaving a void. Now this new person had come and was moving in to fill it. And that may have been the uneasy feeling she was experiencing. This was likely the reason Zress's affections felt so alien. Her body wanted her to reject it as a replacement for her feelings for Lumin. But she was aware enough to know this wasn't a replacement, it was something new and that her feelings for Lumin wouldn't ever fade, they'd just be set aside for a time until she needed them again.

Zress, on the other hand, seemed freed from a burden she had not known she was carrying. She felt weightless in this city with no ceiling. She idly wondered if there wasn't a roof could she float away forever. She reveled in the mysterious golden glow of sunset and she looked up and marveled at stars she'd only ever heard tales of.

The woman by her side both reminded her that she'd not been orphaned, but freed from a tyrannical presence. That it was House Auvryndar that had murdered her family and destroyed her House and that Vlonwelv herself had killed her parents. How could she have not known all those years? Now, next to Umbra with the cool glowing presence of Eilistraee within her and bathed in the luminescent radiant glow of Umbra's affections she felt levitated to new emotional heights.

The streets of Waterdeep weren't dark to their elven eyes and when they came upon the shell of the building known as the Dancing Haven they were met by a group of drow women. Umbra pulled Zress towards a woman with an ankle sweeping braid of white hair. "Trelasarra, I'd like you to meet Zress Orlezziiir, formerly of House Orlezziiir and House Auvryndar.. Former leader of *The Ghost Spiders*. Chosen of Eilistraee and Seeker of her own destiny."

Trelasarra took Zress' hand and bowed deeply, pressing her forehead to the woman's hand. "I am humbled to meet you, Zress, I am Trelasarra Zuind, Moondancer, speaker of the community and humble priest of Eilistraee. I and my fellow priest moondancers have come here to celebrate the rising of the full moon tonight. Would you care to join us?"

Zress was reluctant, "I don't know anything about Moondancing, although I have heard of it as a path of worship. I was taught it was a perversion of Spellsgiving taught by heretics and subversives."

A few of the other moondancers laughed. Trelasarra smiled, "We are subversive in that we oppose Lolth and her priestesses, but we are no heretics. You may join as you feel moved to. The motions we will perform tonight are simple and easy to follow, but if you feel inspired to move on your own, as many of us sometimes are, you are welcome to do so."

It was then that Telassara noticed Zress' sword. "You carry a moonblade? I thought them only for the noble families of Evermeet!"

Zress withdrew Ungoecet from its scabbard. "It was gifted to me after the death of my Mother by the Shadowdusk family and Halaster in Undermountain. I have no idea from where they obtained it. It was bonded to me in a ceremony presided over by Eledrel the High Priestess of House Freth. It accepted me based on my need for revenge. It has been strangely silent, however, since I accepted the calling from Eilistraee. I suspect it may have abandoned me since I abandoned my revenge."

Telasarra touched the dull grey blade and ran her fingers over the red runes. "It seems lifeless to me."

Umbra pulled out her moonblade. In the pre-moonrise dark, its blade softly glowed. The runes on the bright silver blade had a bluish sheen to them. Trelassara touched Umbra's blade. "Yes, I can see it recognises me as a force of good. How odd that your sword does not."

Trelssara shook her head, "Who would have thought I would be so fortunate to meet two moonblade wielders as well as the chosen of Eilistraee tonight. I am very blessed indeed."

The other women took off the flowing robes they had worn and were folding them and setting them aside. Trelsana excused herself and joined them. Each of the women carried a long thin blade and wore nothing in the darkness. Their pitch-black skin and long, flowing pale hair made them seem like comets in the sacred grove.

Umbra chose to stand to one side. And Zress stood awkwardly alone. She looked unsure what to do to observe and not participate or to fully embrace the calling she'd been given and join in. Umbra pointed to the women circling the tree growing in the center of the grove. She nodded, encouraging Zress to join in.

Zress walked over to Umbra, "I can't. I don't feel comfortable."

Umbra whispered, "I can go with you, if you like. These priests won't mind my pale skin dancing with their dark skin. I don't think they will, anyways. Look!"

Umbra pointed to the sky and the first curve of the moon, Selûne itself, was rising above the wall of the roofless building. Zress gasped. She'd never seen a full moon before. It was so much larger than she'd imagined it would be. It filled her vision. The Moondancers all turned to face the luminescent arc climbing over the walls and bowed with swords outstretched.

Umbra had to admit she was also struck by the particular beauty of the moon tonight. But not more so than the awestruck beauty of the moonlight striking Zress' face. She could see Zress almost absently unbuttoning the tight jerkin and pulling off the form-fitting leather pants as she stared --literally moonstruck--by the rising moon.

Soon, bereft of her clothes She took Ungoecet and joined the women dancing about the tree. Her movements were those of a warrior's training, slashes, cuts, lunges. A training exercise to build speed and reaction. The other women were moving more like a flowing wave or a breeze. But soon, Umbra could see Zress's movement mimic the other women. Joining them rather than moving independent fto them.

The procession intensified as the moon rose. The sword moves blurred with their speed and beauty. There was a moment when Umbra swore she could see that there were eight women around the tree. She knew there had been six including Trelsarra, and Zress made seven, but it seemed that eight were dancing with abandon among the wildflowers.

The moon climbed higher and higher until the full face of Selûne was beaming down upon them. Umbra stared at the face of the moon and thanked her for everything that she'd been blessed with. She then looked over at Zress whose face was pure bliss. She had begun to spin and whip Ungoecet in broad arcs leaving a trail of red light as an afterimage. It appeared that her blade had recognised her new obsession and had accepted that in the place of her revenge.

When the moon was fully risen and the women were beginning to sweat with the exertion, the dance began to wind down. The pace slowed and ended with all seven (yes, Umbra re-counted to make sure there were only seven) women prostrate on their knees before the moon, their blades placed before them.

Trelsarra spoke a prayer of thanks for Umbra, for Zress, and for the blessing of the grove. She rose and the women hugged each other in celebration and returned to their robes to don them once again.

Zress was full of smiles. "I heard her. The Dark Lady spoke to me. She spoke to Ungoecet as well. She said I was hers and that I would become of her elite Silverhair Knights--a sin eater of their order. I have no idea what that means, but I am excited to learn. She told me about an army and said you'd explain. I am not sure what surprised me more, the knowledge that I have a new army to lead, or that Eilistraee knew who you were!"

Umbra was sort of shocked as well, "I'm honored she mentioned me!" she said, "But Trelsarra could probably explain more. This place has a sister church in Skullport with at least forty other priests, fighters, refugee drow, and other adventurers who are followers of Eilistraee. I hope they will be the army we need to defeat House Freth."

Zress looked over towards Trelsarra, "She said I could come with them to Skullport, that must be what she meant. Are you going to go with me?"

Umbra smiled, but it was a melancholy smile, "I can't. I have responsibilities to my friends and to making the initial assault. I was hoping you would go and bring them to us."

Zress started to cry, her emotional armor completely dissolved in the wake of her ecstatic dance. "No! We have only just found each other. All we have is a few moments together and then we are dragged apart?"

Umbra was crying too, "I didn't want to bring you here tonight for exactly this reason. I knew this might happen."

Zress was pacing, "I can stay with you. I'll go to Skullport later, I know how to get there. It's not that hard. We can have more time together."

Umbra had to stop her pacing by grabbing her. She placed her arm around Zress' shoulders, "It's okay. We have not lost each other, it is just a little bit longer until we can be together. I know you don't want to leave me, but something tells me that this is the guidance you need. I trust Eilistraee to make this sacrifice pay off later."

Do I trust Selûne to do the same for me? I think I do. I should. Umbra pushed all that doubt down, she would be strong now for her friend. Zress put her arms around Umbra and just held on. Trelsanna stood quietly waiting off to one side.

Umbra picked up Zress's chin and kissed her gently. "I love you and I will see you soon. A few days or so. We'll be fighting side-by-side in no time."

Zress laughed ironically, "Not the physical activity I had in mind, but I hear you. I'm keeping your outfit, though. Tell Heulwen to hold the rest of that suit for me, I'm coming to get it. Give Legs a good scratch and tell the others *thank you* for putting up with me."

She finished dressing and with a last hug and went with Trelsanna out into the moonlight.

Chapter Eleven

The following two days passed so quickly Umbra could not remember what she'd done. She had a vague memory of preparing, packing, taking care of a few odds and ends. She remembered being busy with maps and planning. But now, deep in Undermountain, she really could not fix any particulars in her mind.

She and Rolfe were leading the group down one of many dark caverns. This time they had pushed past the Gauntlet and through the troglodyte warrens to the Maze where Spiderwatch Keep was back under the control of House Freth.

Like last time the caverns on this level were full of mists. Mists that Halaster had enchanted to make odd noises and mirage-like visions. But they had yet to find a living minotaur. Umbra had imposed on Francene to use animal messengers to send updates to Zress in Skullport. Because of Halaster's wards there was no method for her to reply. Umbra just had to trust she would be able to come and with force.

In the meantime, they were here to make a base of operations, spy on Spiderwatch Keep and determine the forces that they would be facing. Umbra felt good, this felt like a solid plan. Her friends were, if not as confident as she was, at least on board.

Francene, particularly, was uncomfortable having Zress as a "silent partner" who might leave them high and dry in a crucial moment. Not that she didn't trust Zress. She actually had come to appreciate the life-changing epiphany she'd undergone. But they just could not know if she'd be there on time.

Thankfully, getting here had not taken more than a couple of hours. Utilizing a gate they already knew to take them to the "Lost" level of the Melairkin Dwarves and then using a gate that

Durnan had known of they were able to come out in a relatively isolated alcove of the maze of caverns that gave this level its name.

Having spent a few days here in the past they had a relatively complete map of the twisting passages and the areas of Spiderwatch Keep to avoid and they made their way through to the center of the Minotaur colony.

The first Minotaur bodies they encountered were under the mists. The smell of rotting meat (not uncommon around the bloody, savage, and thoroughly carnivorous minotaurs) led them to find the giant creatures' bodies under the mists. Their bodies had been crushed as if stomped on by a gigantic weight. Soon more of them were found in a bloody trail that led to their sacred chamber.

Inside a lone Minotaur stood over the long dead fire and the shattered remains of a bone altar. Maku, the priest with whom they'd struck a bargain in order to defeat House Freth the first time, looked broken. He held a flattened brass horn in one hand and a shattered spear in the other. He looked up at the adventurers as they entered the massive cave.

Umbra started to say something sympathetic but Maku threw down the horn and shouted in his thick common, "Spare me your mewling sympathy, food creatures. Baphomet failed us even as we were victorious. After you left we had free reign. We basked in the heady power of owning this place that the enemy mage Halaster had placed us in. We had won. Even if we had to make a bad bargain with you to do it.

"We had orgies of food; feasting on the entrails of the drow. But it did not last. Barely a cycle had passed when the accursed dark skinned ones came and began to slaughter us. They did so using darkness and sparkles, swords, and numbers. They would lure us away from our kin and slaughter us one at a time.

"By the time we were half our number the dark ones known as Freth returned and with them, the iron spider. Instead of just sealing the caverns it came to our doors and squashed us like mealworms under its iron hooves. They left me alive, impotent, and abandoned by my god. I am alone with no tribe because they are cruel and sadistic creatures." He held up his broken spear, "They did not even leave me the dignity of a self-death."

He looked at the group, "Will you give a former ally a death he can tell his god he was proud of? Will you give me bloody combat to end my miserable existence?"

Umbra nodded and drew Imyrsil even as the others drew their weapons wordlessly. Maku snorted and charged. Gone was the broken, pathetic figurehead and in its place was a fearsome giant creature of myth and legend. Arrows hit him and had no discernible effect, Vials of arcane substances hit and he only trailed a stream of smoke and vapor behind him. Shadowy blades flew from Rolfe's hand and sank deep into the mass of muscle charging towards them. Umbra sent a line of fire that hit him dead center, singeing hair and flesh before driving Imyrsil into his heart. Even so the momentum of his charge drove her back a dozen feet or more.

Maku fell. He rolled onto his back and opened his mouth to utter a cry to Baphomet in his native tongue before falling silent.

Umbra pulled herself (painfully) up. She used her inner magic to heal the bruises and wounds he'd done to her (they weren't inconsiderable). And sent a silent wish for him to head swiftly to his god, even in defeat he was a force to be reckoned with.

Huelwen was the first to speak, "So, what is an 'iron spider'?"

On their last trip here they'd not explored much north of Spiderwatch keep. The demons posted as watches had proved more than a deterrent. They'd only barely defeated them. It was the arrogance of Drivven Freth that had lured him into the fight and they had managed to dispatch him as well. But many of the Freth forces had been left behind since they had already obtained their objective, Huelwen's father.

Their group had removed the obstructions holding back the Minotaurs and had softened up the defense of the tower enough to allow the Minotaurs to mop things up. And, by Maku's confession they'd succeeded.

Clearly the *Ghost Spiders* work was what finished the Minotaurs. Certainly a smart commander like Zress would try to kill the minotaurs in small groups using superior numbers and spells. Later, House Freth brought in another large force and massacred the remaining Minotaur and reoccupied the fortress. But, as Huelwen asked, what was an *iron spider*?

Umbra longed to ask Zress, but she might as well have been back in Waterdeep; she was so unreachable. They'd have to discern it for themselves. "Let's burn these bodies, it might help with the smell, we can use this place as a base for when Zress arrives. We can use that secret room they showed us before as a sanctuary while we start scouting around the fortress and seeing what kind of defenses they'd put in since we left."

She bent down and picked up the flattened brass horn, "Maku must have valued this, so Huelwen, can you determine what it...was...and maybe fix it?"

She tapped Rolfe and the two of them kindled a flame in the giant fire pit and began dragging the enormous corpse to the pyre. There must have been some natural chimneys at work because the smoke did not leave the chamber, but the smell was indescribable. Fortunately it was only slightly better than rotting flesh and so, eye watering as it was, they tolerated it.

Theron and Renard and Francene became a scouting party. Francene utilized the thousands of bats and, despite their reluctance to be helpful, they were easily bribed with food and informed her that there were lots of the "food bringers" and they fed them every day. They described the "rotting ones" which were likely Minotaur Skeletons like they had been using before as sentries.

So far it was a basic replay of the prior defenses. But then they mentioned the "hard thing". They lacked the references to describe in terms more than "very big", and "hard" and "not alive" but even those words, coupled with the fear in their squeaky tones was enough to let Francene know it was scary and dangerous.

Some of them indicated it came from the north end of the fortress. Others said it came from the south. There was some confusion among the bats on where it was located. Francene let that slide as Bats had a limited situational awareness beyond about sixty feet. It was only if they strayed while hunting into other areas that they would notice anything, and because the drow were feeding them there was not much incentive.

Renard and Theren planned to use their superior stealthiness to walk the perimeter of the fortress. They anticipated this might be fairly easy because of a ledge that rose 40' above the central cavern floor. But the defenses of Spiderwatch Keep were complicated by the iron wall that rose 30 feet up with buttresses between the ledge and the wall that also surrounded the cavern floor. Then, along the length of this iron curtain were towers spaced ninety feet apart, just far enough apart for a drow watchman to see unaided in darkness. The tops of these towers were exactly even with the ledge.

This meant that for their entire journey around the fortress they would be visible (if they were not hiding) to watchmen on the towers, and in many cases, might not be able to see who was watching them themselves. Rolfe helpfully bestowed them with invisibility, but it would only last a limited time so they would have to hurry on their reconnoiter.

As they climbed the steep incline of the ledge they came to a natural alcove. The first time they'd come here a winged fiend had been here. These demons summoned by the Archmage Drivven Freth had been used as guard dogs in strategic positions around the fortress. Knowing this, Theren had an arrow ready and Renard padded as softly as he could on his paws.

Rounding the edge of the alcove they peered inside and both of them sucked in an involuntary breath. A floating orb, perhaps four feet across with a single giant eye in the middle and half-dozen eyes on waving stalks drifted in a lazy circle. It occasionally extended an eyestalk down to the floor to examine some particularly interesting rock it had spotted. Or whipped one of the four tentacles that dangled below it to launch a pebble into the darkness. Its toothy maw opened and closed spasmodically as if it were talking to itself. It looked bored, but terrifying nonetheless.

Renard tapped Theron's foot using a signal they'd agreed upon. "I'll go first, cover me if it moves. Then follow after."

Theren tapped his foot to acknowledge the signal and then he waited. He counted silently until he had counted to thirty and then started across himself. He neither breathed nor made any unnecessary movements until he was beyond the alcove. He felt Renard brush against his leg. They moved a further fifty feet beyond the alcove before Renard asked, "What in the name of Bast was that?"

Theron whispered, "I haff no idea. Some abomination from far realm, perhaps. It was too small to be beholder, that is all I know."

"We killed their summoner, Drivven. So, who summoned that thing, then?" Renard wanted to know.

Again, Theren was at a loss, "Ze Shadowdusk family is helping House Freth, perhaps they have sent someone with them to do zis."

"That's a problem," Renard said, "That Drivven guy nearly wiped us out."

"I admit we got lucky," Theren said, "But have to find zese things out in order to fight. Last time was far too reckless."

The next opening they approached was where they had breached the webbing barricades that kept the minotaurs out of the fortress. Even from the limit of their vision they could see the cave entrance had been hammered by some terrific force. Rocks and debris and strands of severed cables littered the floor.

Moving as silently as possible they passed the open entrance of this cave. Floating in the center of it was another of the strange orb creatures. This one was spinning slowly in place and pointing its eye-stalks randomly and making "pew" noises as it fired varied colored rays randomly.

A beam lanced towards the pair who jumped out of the way. Theren landed behind a rock, but he could see the distinctly cat-shaped outline of Renard in the dust. He leaned forward and picked up his animal friend with one hand and scooted his boot through the imprint.

The orb creature made a "Hm?" noise and floated towards Theren who moved as quickly and silently as he could away. The creature examined the spot with its eyes and tentacles before returning to its post.

Theren's heart was pounding in his chest. Renard was not moving. He was breathing, however, and Theren hoped this was just some sort of temporary effect, "Come on, buddy. No time to be sleeping," he said desperately while gently shaking his small invisible pal,

It took a few long seconds but soon he began to stir. Renard purred nervously, "Thanks, I didn't jump fast enough. It paralyzed me. We can add that to the handful of things we know about them."

Theren hugged the cat despite its protests and set him down gently, "Am just glad wasn't permanent."

"Not more than / am," the cat said.

They continued around the fortress. Several hundred feet down the ledge the wall abruptly ended. Below they could see cultivated fields of fungi. A mix of troglodyte and hobgoblins were tending to the crops under the gaze of a single drow.

Moving carefully along the ledge they spotted yet another orb-monster looking bored. As they watched one of the Hobgoblins decided he'd had enough and grabbed a tool to attack the drow. He'd barely taken two steps towards him when a beam lanced from the orb and the hobgoblin shriveled before their eyes and fell dead on the ground. The drow indicated that the remaining slaves chop him up and use his body as fertilizer.

The orb ahead had a pile of limbs it had collected from slaves and bodies it had found. It had dismembered them and sorted their limbs into piles. Including a pile of heads. There did not appear to be any torsos. Theren shuddered to think what had become of them. Renard suggested going down through the garden and up the other side to bypass this guard.

Theren reminded Renard that, unlike Renard, he did not have claws and so could not just “climb down” easily. Renard’s only response was, “It is only forty feet or so,” and headed down.

Renard slung his bow and proceeded to climb, grudgingly, down the rock face. He did slip the last ten feet or so which attracted the attention of some of the slaves, but not the guard. They wandered over to investigate the noise but the overseer called them back to keep working on the spot they had been tending. They did not say anything further and Theren stiffly stood up and moved quickly to the other side of the fields.

He climbed to the top of the ledge and spent a moment to recover his breath while Renard sat on his lap and purred. “It would be easier if had claws, you know,” Theren said.

Renard just said softly, “You should get on that.”

Their momentary respite expended, they continued their circuit. They could see several side caverns that did not appear very deep filled with steel cables like they had removed on their last visit. These didn’t seem to do much, but one of them led to a reasonably large cavern. Renard ducked into it passing perilously close to a floating orb. But it seemed more intent on the slaves below so Teren followed him slipping easily between the cables to the chamber beyond.

As he was approaching he could hear the sounds of thousands of crickets. Their chirping was an incessant blanket of sound. But as soon as Theren placed his foot on the floor, despite being invisible and virtually silent, the crickets knew. Instantly, all sound stopped.

Behind him he heard the orb make a grunt. He knew it was coming to investigate. So Theren moved as far as he could from the opening of the cave and flattened himself against one wall. The ball thing floated in. It looked around carefully with all seven eyes and then left the chamber. Theren peeled himself off the sticky wall which was covered in bat guano and larvae. And again the two of them moved to the far end of the cave where a web-choked exit awaited.

Through the grid of cables they could see the back of another orb creature. Off the side of the ledge they could see the iron wall had resumed along with watch towers and presumably draw guards. There was literally no place to sneak past the orb. And the wall prevented using the cliff face as an escape.

They would have to inch past the orb-monster, passing within mere feet of it, without alerting it to their presence. Theren was reasonably certain Renard was capable of such a feat as he could literally walk underneath the monster. But he, on the other hand, was less stealthy and less compact.

He considered whether he could kill the “watchdog”. But that would open him to attack from the drow watchtowers. He could see one tower and suspected a second tower lay beyond his vision, but not theirs. And once he attacked he would lose the protection of his invisibility.

He told Renard to go ahead. At least their information would get to the rest of the group. Theren planned to wait until Renard was well out of his sight before attempting to pass. This gave him the best possible chance of getting back. Theren, on the other hand, was prepared to make a running retreat if needed and try to lose any pursuit in the tunnels.

Renard headed out and once he was clear Theren moved glacially slow trying to slide past the multi-eyed monster. At the point where Theren was closest to it, the sound of a whip from the fields made it turn. It flew back up the ledge and Theren wasted no time fleeing the spot at his fastest speed.

They followed the tunnels outside of the patrolled areas while returning to their base. The invisibility had worn off in the interim and were warmly welcomed by Umbra and Rolfe who were filthy from moving bodies. Francene was tossing bits of food to bats that would not leave her alone.

Huelwen joined them. In her hand she bore a very battered horn. “This item,” she said, “Is the Abyssal equivalent of a Horn of Valhalla. It still retains its magic despite having been stomped flat. I’ve done my best with the materials I have at hand to return it to a usable shape. I am not sure what, or how many creatures it will summon, but should someone use it, it will summon...something. Could be anything. Could be nothing. What do I know? You might not even be able to make any noise on it. I was afraid to test it.”

They retired to the secret side room with the ominous blood-covered gate and ate a meal and recovered from the individual ordeals. There was not much else to do except make occasional patrols to see if the situation had changed or to possibly see Zress and her army coming to help.

It was two days before anything happened. By then they were all on the edge of their nerves. Poor sleeping conditions, the relative closeness of the enemies, the everpresent mists and strange noises made it far more stressful than just waiting. All of them hated spending more time in Undermountain than was necessary.

The drow apparently had regular patrols through the caverns looking for any lurking threats, possible escaped slaves, and saboteurs. They just wandered into the sacred chamber. In the group was a single male mage and four rank-and-file drow.

Renard, who had been on watch (if you can call sleeping with one eye open “on watch”) signaled the others of the company. They watched through a spy-hole as the group approached slowly. It was clear they were on edge. This was probably due to the lack of corpses that had been there when they arrived.

Once they were fully inside the chamber, Theren popped open the secret door and fired two arrows as Umbra and Rolfe charged forward. It was over in seconds. They had made it a point

to keep the mage alive. Although they had stripped him of his components and bound his hand and mouth thoroughly. Once they were ready to question him they loosened his gag.

“So, you finally found us. Sorry you won’t be able to tell anyone about it.” Umbra played up her gloating. Best to present an image that their enemy would expect.

“House Freth will dance on your corpses, defiler. We are not weak like Auvryndar. We are not conflicted like the *Ghost Spiders*. You will regret taking on the might of Lolth and her loyal followers!”

Umbra let him rant for a little. It helped to have them get in the rhetoric so they would have less to fall back on once she started to grill him in earnest. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, “Are you through? Got all that off your chest? Good because we are going to go through a few points. One, I don’t have to kill you but I will if you won’t cooperate. Play nice and you might get to live. Two. You are going to answer all of my questions completely and truthfully. You might not want to, but I will make sure you do. This may involve pain for you. And third and lastly, I am not your enemy. I don’t hate you nor do I want you dead, particularly. You and your House represent a threat to Waterdeep that I aim to stop and if that happens without anyone getting hurt, more’s the better.

She got right down in his face, “Are we clear? Please nod or something to let me know you are aware of what I am telling you. You don’t have to agree, just acknowledge it.”

He nodded, sullenly. Umbra was already breaking him down, “Okay, we know that the archmage Drivven is dead, but you have some creepy eye monsters guarding your fortress, who summoned them?”

“I’ll never tell you.OOOWWW!” Umbra was crushing his foot with her metal boots. She held up a finger and wagged it at him while scolding him.

“Remember, you will answer all my questions. This does not have to be painful for you. And knowing you are drow I won’t make it a *good* pain either. Who is your summoner?”

The mage considered her demeanor for a moment and made a decision, “Your knowing matters not as it will gain you nothing. The blind archmage Vertrand Shadowdusk has come to Spiderwatch to restore the summoned defenses you and your intruders destroyed. The death of Drivven left most of our magical defenses nullified. I can assure you that Vertrand has restored them and added additional defenses you will not penetrate.”

Behind her, Theren asked “Where is Erelal Freth? What happened to the baby?”

The mage narrowed his eyes at Theren and Umbra poked him to keep the focus on her, “Answer him. Where is she?”

The mage’s look was pure daggers, “She is in Spiderwatch Keep. Lolth’s Handmaidens guard the scion deep in Shadowdusk Hold. She wanted to ensure our victory against Waterdeep, herself.”

Francene muttered, "That's one good thing about the Church of Lolth, excellent childcare."

Umbra tried not to roll her eyes and break the mood, "Ready for round three? What is the iron spider?"

The mage laughed, "Your biggest mistake. You failed to destroy the device on your first assault on the keep. And now we have brought another. The iron spiders are war machines that will break your bones and smear your entrails underfoot."

Rolfe said, "Make a note to avoid the iron spiders."

Umbra nodded, "Well you upheld your end of this, despite a rocky start. You have two choices. You can flee the area and live or we can keep you tied up here until it is all over."

He looked shocked, but he recovered his attitude quickly enough, "You may as well kill me. I will help you no further and it is foolish to leave an enemy behind you."

Umbra looked down on him, "You aren't my enemy. I told you this before. You do not represent a threat. I'm letting you live. Be a little grateful, okay?" and she rendered him unconscious with a blow.

She refitted his gag and insured his bonds were secure but not a threat to his circulation. Then moved him to one of the many side-passages around their base. When she got back the others were having a discussion about what to do about the iron spiders.

Huelwen was of a mind to try to capture one. "If we find out where it is located, we may be able to examine or even capture it. It will certainly be a big help in the fight and we can try to find weaknesses."

Rolfe was more of a 'destroy it' mentality, "Why do we have to capture it? we can just beat it into scrap like we did with the metal grindy worm thing. It can't be that hard. drow are squishy."

Umbra corrected him, "Most drow are squishy, but not all of them. Any delay getting to it means they can use it against us. We got the metal worm because we didn't have to fight anything else at the same time. We can't fight it and a bunch of drow at the same time."

Francene seemed to think they could avoid it altogether, "It never showed up last time, it might be too slow or awkward to move it quickly. If we keep moving we might just miss it."

Again Umbra had to remind her, "That's us, what about Zress and her forces? Armies are just as unwieldy, they don't move anywhere quickly."

They discussed it further and finally Umbra had to go with Huelwen's idea. Capture or disable an iron spider (or better, both) before the fight. That meant finding one. That meant waking up Renard and getting him involved in the discussion, which didn't really appeal to him, but he could not argue the need.

They soon had a course of action and Huelwen, Renard, Rolfe and Umbra were on their way to find an iron spider. Looking at their maps the north east section of this level was largely unexplored. So they opted to start there.

Passing through several of the caverns they travelled the perimeter to stay as far from the fortress as possible and likely patrol routes. As they neared one spot they knew led up to the prior level they slowed. It was quite possible the drow would seek to protect this avenue of entry on this level.

The ever-present fog was particularly thick through these passages and the four moved as quietly as possible through the vapor. Renard, who could not see over the fog stayed close underfoot, but since they could not see him either there was a lot of bumping the small furry companion and he was beginning to not appreciate it. Finally he just leapt up to sit atop Rolfe's broad shoulders.

Rolfe, however, lacked the nice soft pad that Theron had on his armor and so the cat had to grip the straps holding his breastplate in place. He expressed his discomfort in a low growl. Umbra whispered, "Keep it down!" as she passed close enough to hear.

Huelwen had been doing well at maintaining a relatively quiet pace, her boots muffled her footsteps to near silence and were it not for the subtle jingle of the metal plates of her armor on the glass vials and grenade-like bottles festooning her attire she would have been completely silent.

Not that Umbra had much room to complain, her plate armor being of Elven manufacture was relatively quiet, but it was not silent. The combined noises of this small scouting group, then, added up to something detectable by the drow checkpoint that was hiding in the mists ahead.

A cloud of sparkling motes appeared around the four adventurers signaling a spell being cast. Umbra waved them off with her shield and Rolfe and Huelwen managed to avoid being touched by them but Renard passed right through a patch of them as he dove off Rolfe's shoulder.

Umbra could see his glowing outline, even under the fog. He would be useless at hiding or sneaking for a while. She called to him, "Get behind us, cat!" as she darted forward to take the fight to their attackers. Rolfe stayed right by her side pulling out a short sword and a shadowy blade that materialized in his hand.

There were four drow figures in the mists, they were rising out of hiding to make the attack, the second one, like the first, spread his sparkling lights in an effort to make the group easier to hit. Umbra, again, used her shield to dissipate the mists and Rolfe, standing near her, benefitted from the protection.

Behind the front-line were two other drow. They were unarmored males marking them as slaves or some sort of spellcaster. They were amazingly handsome. And Umbra, despite not having much interest in men, still had to admire their fitness.

Rolfe, on the other hand, seemed enthralled. It nearly distracted her from attacking as she realized he was magically enthralled. He had stopped rushing forward and was gawping at one of the figures.

The drow raised an eyebrow and Rolfe's magical blade evaporated. The other shortsword was dropped. The two drow in front moved to separate Umbra from Rolfe. Behind her she could hear Huelwen preparing one of their miscellaneous artifacts to throw, propel or otherwise hurl into the melee.

Umbra consciously invoked her connection to Selûne and dropped her barriers and a blast of divine light exploded from her. The two drow who were approaching were caught directly and she watched as the radiance buffeted them causing scorch marks and angry red patches on their ebony skin but it did not deter them.

They closed on her, flashing twin blades in each of their hands, darting at her like angry fish in the darkness. Imyrsil's blade whipped around and punched hard into one of their chests and she withdrew it and plunged it in again with a speed borne of many years of practice. On the second strike she pushed her righteous fury into the strike and Imyrsil exploded in light within his chest. Chunks of meat exploded from the wound and he fell back, smoking.

A vial of sickly green flew in a line past Rolfe and into one of the two beautiful drow behind the one remaining combatant on Umbra. It exploded with a thick sound spraying viscous green goo over one of the pair. It screamed as smoke began to roil off it and its flesh puckered and blistered.

The other one, however, was focussed on Rolfe. It walked up to him calmly and put a hand behind the big man's neck and pulled him down for a passionate kiss. Umbra had to fight not to stare and lower her guard against the other drow who was stabbing repeatedly with its short-swords. Even so, he managed to nick her arm. The sting of venom on the blade helped her tear her eyes off the spectacle.

Renard leapt up to Rolfe's shoulder and scratched at the drow kissing Rolfe. His claws hit squarely on the man's jaw but left no deep gouge. Instead the merest red welt rose and began to dissipate. Rolfe began to squirm and attempted to pull away from the kiss. He was clearly not enjoying it but the drow held him in place despite Rolfe being at least a foot taller and many more pounds heavier than his abuser.

Renard cried out, "It's not a drow, it's something else! And it is draining Rolfe"

Umbra had yet to finish the opponent she was fighting, but she pulled back, focused her will and held the eye-shaped pendant aloft, "Selûne commands that you withdraw from those she protects!"

The creature that Huelwen had covered in acid sprouted wings from its back and launched itself straight up through the ceiling as if it were a pool of water. The one holding Rolfe hissed at Umbra and stood its ground.

The drow warrior who was engaging her whipped its sword around her defenses as she changed her focus and drove a blow deep into her gut. What felt like liquid fire ran through her body as the venom touched organs, nerves, and her veins carried it throughout her body.

Huelwen fitted a bolt into his thrower and fired it. It struck the false drow in the center of its chest and began to inflate an orb around it. It struggled and tried to flee, but the bubble expanded until it completely surrounded the thing.

Rolfe, clearly compelled, began to pound on the barrier, but all that resulted was a dull drumming sound. Renard turned and clawed at the leg of the drow still pressing its attack on Umbra, the drow glanced down for just an instant and Umbra used that to her advantage and drove her moonsword deep into his heart. Not wanting to waste the opportunity she again channeled her connection through the strike and a bright flash of light made the drow's inside briefly glow with divine energy.

Her attacker dropped to its knees and fell over. The entrapped being, like his partner, sprouted wings and directed Rolfe to prevent the others from approaching. Umbra reached up a hand and drew a small silver eye on Rolfe's forehead. As she passed her hands over the sigil, it flashed and Rolfe's eyes began to clear.

At first, he put his hands to his lips and scowled at the being then he said clearly, "You should not have done that. You hurt me."

Umbra could sense Rolfe's hurt was pretty deep, his very life essence had been withdrawn, and that would affect his stamina and ability to fight. The being tried several times to escape the bubble but failed. Umbra turned to Huelwen, "Is there some way to make this problem go away?"

Huelwen muttered while checking their pockets and pouches and finally pronounced, "I'm not sure that there is unless I drop the sphere."

Umbra pulled out a wand. She rarely used this magical stick, but this would seem to be a good time to do so. "Drop it," she directed as Renard, Rolfe and even Huelwen prepared an attack.

The bubble abruptly disappeared and the winged being dropped to the ground. It tried to lunge, but Umbra pointed her wand and uttered the command *rembailecë*. Cold blue energy flowed from the end of the wand and enveloped the creature. It stopped dead in its tracks, unmoving. Even its tail was rigid.

The others lunged into it with reckless abandon; stabbing, scratching, shooting and soon Umbra was adding Imyrsil's strikes to the mix. In seconds the creature lost its form and began to melt back into the abyssal ooze from whence it had come.

Umbra examined Rolfe. He had no external wounds, but she could feel his life-force was ebbing. The creature had drained him mightily. It would be a danger for him to continue. "Rolfe, you need to go back and have your Mother do what she can for you. I lack the spells to fix what that thing did to you."

Rolfe said, "All I really need is a rest. I'll be fine if I can take a nap."

Umbra smiled, "Yes, that would probably do it, but we are not really in a place that's safe. Go back to our base, you can rest there. I'm sorry, pal, you are benched for the rest of this."

Rolfe looked disappointed, but he complied. Huelwen looked worried, "Are you and me enough to take on this Construct?"

"And me!" Renard said from under the mists, "I'm here too!"

"Maybe not to destroy it, but certainly to see it and make an assessment. We can always run." Umbra replied, "And I am counting on you, Renard, to do a lot of the scouting for us."

"Of course you are," he said as Umbra stroked his fur, "I'm the best at it."

From down the hallway they heard a commotion. Sounds of metallic pistons and murmurs of fighters were approaching. They ducked down into the mists and Umbra pushed Renard to climb up a wall and use his natural sneakiness to blend into the shadows above the fog.

Renard observed as four drow carrying short swords and hand crossbows walked down the corridor. They were evenly spaced around a seven-foot tall spider made of steel. They glanced into the cave in which they were hiding but proceeded along a different passageway.

Umbra tapped Heulwen on the shoulder and pulled her sleeve to follow. She held up one hand above the mist and pointed for Renard to scout ahead. Renard scabbled along the rough rock and was remarkably quiet even in the difficult terrain. The other two stayed low under the mists and moved along the wall rising up only to get their bearings and follow the sound.

Rounding a bend, they spotted the guard contingent. They all seemed to be drow soldiers. The spider operated without much supervision, and none of them appeared to be controlling it. The spider was pulling the steel cables out of the walls one at a time and left them hanging on the floor as it did so.

It was making a lot of noise. That was why Umbra wasn't too alarmed when she heard Renard say "Got it!" as he launched off a wall and grabbed something in mid-air, dropping under the mists.

Umbra crawled on her hands and knees to get close enough to see what it was Renard was holding. It didn't look like anything to her, just an empty space under the cat's claws. "It's invisible, but I saw it moving the dust around," Renard said, "I can feel it trying to move, but it can't slip past my claws."

Umbra whispered, "Heulwen, do you have a jar? Preferably one with a lid?"

There were some rustling noises and a jar held in Huelwen's hand appeared beside Umbra in the mist. Umbra unscrewed the jar lid and pushed the invisible orb into it and then quickly sealed the jar.

Huelwen moved close to the jar. She shook it a few times and then set it back down, "It would seem to be an Arcane Eye. Something to monitor the situation remotely. It can't hear us, and can only see above the mists. And the violent takedown and subsequent shaking won't have helped the owner's perception any."

Umbra said, "Do they know it is us?"

Huelwen held out their hands, "Not sure, it does not seem to have impacted the spider's work."

Taking a quick glance they could see the spider continued removing the strands across the cavern. The three ducked back under the concealing fog. Umbra said, "Let's make some assumptions. The spider isn't 100% autonomous. It has to be directed. But it is dumb. It does the last thing it was told to do."

Huelwen added, "It also appears to be somewhat limited defensively. Otherwise why provide a guard contingent. Looks like they use it more for the fear factor. I can't speak to its offensive abilities, but I also suspect they are limited."

Renard also piped up, "It's big, and so it won't be coming down a narrow passageway very easily. That's probably why they are taking down these cables. They were supposed to stop the minotaurs. But you need room to bring in an army."

The other two looked at the cat, appreciatively. Renard seemed casual, "What? I pay attention even when my eyes are closed."

Umbra then asked, "So the big question is, can the three of us get rid of it before the owner of that eyeball sends someone out to investigate?"

Huelwen paused, but nodded. Renard nodded as well. So Umbra gripped Imyrsil and they prepared to attack.

With a rush of speed, Umbra dragged Imyrsil along the ground creating a spark and then flung it towards the spider. It blossomed into a line of fire that passed through two of the guards before striking the construct's leg.

Huelwen fired an acidic missile at the tank-like object and was rewarded by sounds of corroding metal. Renard pounced on a guard as Umbra continued her charge to stand amidst them and then released her burst of divine light. The three guards fell around her, scalded and burned. The spider did not react to the fire or the acid, it just continued to pull out the strands of steel webbing in the cavern, moving a few feet forward just enough to reach the next strand. The three heroes pounded, clawed, and shot it repeatedly until it was a pile of useless gears and metal.

Even as the last pieces were dropping, ahead of them, they could hear shouts of approaching troops. They moved quickly and low, retreating the mists deeper into the southwest caverns.

They moved as quickly as they dared, the drow fanning out to cut off their escape. They neared one cavern and Umbra pushed Heulwen and Renard to enter it. She moved over to a far wall and laid face down on the floor, directing the others to do the same.

She listened as the drow moved quietly into the room. She heard one of them fire a few of their hand crossbow bolts into the mists. One of the other drow admonished him for shooting at "Halaster's stupid tricks" and they left.

After a long silent wait, Umbra pulled out her map and showed Heulwen and Renard her map. She had written "Mist faces" on her chart from their last trip. They had a quiet chuckle at their good fortune and headed back to the base. They had some good news...and some warnings.

Chapter Twelve

The group was glad to hear that the iron spiders weren't as big a threat as they'd initially sounded. But the idea that someone knew they were there was particularly worrisome. Umbra pressed Francene to send yet another bat in search of Zress to inform her that the forces here might be aware of their presence.

But it was still a one-way conversation. There was no way to know when they would arrive., or even if they would arrive. The nature of Undermountain was always a gamble. It had been five days since they left Waterdeep. They had estimated it would take at least that long for Zress to organize the church of Eilistraee --The Promenade of the Dark Maiden -- to come to their aid.

Now with the new archmage aware of their presence, if not their location, she expected the patrols would intensify and even more of those eye-orb things not to mention drow would be patrolling the caverns. It was imperative that Zress was able to deliver the forces required to take out the fortress.

Francene could polymorph a member of their group, as well as wild shape herself. Renard was small and stealthy by himself. But that still left two members unchanged. Umbra and Theren were the only members of their group who spoke elvish, making them the best candidates to pretend to be drow, but they lacked the spell and magic to effect a disguise.

Francene suggested burrowing in as they had last time. There was not a lot they could do defensively against that. Theren pointed out that the eye-orb guards were a lot more perceptive than the prior demon guards had been. Theren indicated the back side of the fortress where the farms were located. But Renard reminded him that as many as three of the floating sentries would also have a view of those same fields.

Huelwen, uncharacteristically, suggested using some sort of an assault to leap over the walls from the ledge surrounding them. It would involve eliminating one of the eyeball sentries then leaping the fifteen foot gap and landing safely after a forty foot fall on the inside of the fortress wall.

A long silence ensued where everyone considered the ramifications of that plan. Executing it was within their resources, surviving it was another story. Alarms would be sounded, forces would be sent and spells as well as crossbows would be deployed. Huelwen pointed to a slave pen that Theren had spotted on his and Renard's reconnoiter.

"This is a twenty-foot tall enclosure with a webbing roof. You could leap onto that and it would absorb your momentum. It may be sticky, however, but I trust you could worm your way free before too much attention is drawn. It looks like this tower blocks the view of the orb to the west and there is only one arrow-slit that overlooks the pen."

Reolfe pointed to the tower on the map, "Don't they have mages on the top of these?"

Huelwen said, embarrassed, "I hadn't thought of that, but yes."

Umbra examined the map, "That tower is a lot closer to the ledge than most of them. I think I could jump to the top of that tower and take care of the mage and any guards while the rest of you go over the slave pen."

Renard placed an extended claw on the chokepoint of the ledge, "That leaves this thing. We watched one of these do a lot of damage to slaves. One of them completely paralyzed me with a look. I do not look forward to going up against one of them."

Francene said, "I can try to polymorph it into something less harmful."

The general consensus was it was worth the risk and so that became the start of their plan. They identified the places they needed to take. The front tower. This was the only outside entrance to the fortress. Umbra and Theren would head there to try to secure that point. Francene and Rolfe would attempt to free as many of the slaves as possible in order to increase the mayhem. They also planned to use the unflattened horn. They would also support Heulwen and Renard who would attempt to sneak in and remove as much of the leadership as they could within Spiderwatch Keep.

They gathered up their belongings and prepared to set out. Umbra sent a final message to Zress and prayed to Selûne it would arrive in time for her to join them in the assault. They could wait no longer. Either this worked, or it did not. Either way, it was to be a righteous effort.

The fog-filled caverns seemed especially treacherous. Using magics to muffle their approach the group snuck up towards the watchpoint overlooking the fortress. From the cover of the fog they could see the floating orb creature.

Francene snuck under cover to the closest she dared and cast a spell. The creature whirled on her and scowled, it appeared to shift momentarily and then began to resume its normal, if hideous, form. But behind Francene, Rolfe closed his eyes and twiddled his fingers. Using his special connection to the fates, the creature lost its grip on its own form and suddenly transformed into a giant snail.

Slow, and unable to verbalize a warning it waved its eyestalks as threateningly as it could manage as the group rushed past it onto the ledge. Huelwen pulled out the horn. "Here goes nothing," she said and blew into it.

A near comical sound emanated from the brass instrument and figures began to appear within the compound. Squat, broad-chested with battle axes and horns these mini-taurs just popped into existence and began to charge and attack overseers, slaves, and guards.

In the chaos, Umbra sprinted towards the tower at the back of the fortress. The others prepared to breach the walls. Huelwen and Renard went directly by leaping. They easily cleared the spike-covered iron wall and floated gently to the ground thanks to a spell Huelwen cast on them both. Theren and Rolfe both opted to teleport, dissipating in puffs of smoke and reappearing on the ground inside.

Francein transformed herself into a giant toad which leapt into the compound easily and landed without harm. From their vantage point they could just barely see Umbra leaping onto the tower from the ledge. She landed with a roll and rose with Imyrsil point-first in the Mage who was struggling to react to the speed of the assault. She pushed her divine energies into the first strike and watched with satisfaction as the Mage's insides blew outwards in a brilliant flash of light.

The guards inside the tower, focussed on firing on the miniature minotaurs charging around their compound, barely aware that there was someone atop the sturdy stone edifice before Umbra had dropped down to the center floor. She waited a moment for the four to converge on her before igniting her inner light and incinerating them en masse.

Outside the intruders watched as first a flash appeared atop the tower then the second floor flashed seconds later. But they did not have time to watch the fireworks for long. Angry sounds were coming from several of the towers and despite their relatively sheltered location, they could still hear running boots approaching.

Renard leapt atop Theren's shoulder and the high elf faded into the shadows. "Giant toad" Francene, Rolfe and Huelwen headed towards the giant spider-like keep inside the fortress. They had found a rear entrance to the structure the last time they were here, and knew that it was magically locked. Fortunately they also knew the magic required to unlock it.

Renard and Theren slid alongside the Iron wall and watched warily as drow troops rushed past them. The Pair passed close enough to one of the towers to hear the guard captain's order to the troops to keep a close watch out through the arrow slits.

Theren tucked into a corner of the tower and the wall and kept an eye on the barracks that they still had to pass. Across the grounds he watched as a door opened in the side of the Spider keep. A drow warrior wearing the distinctive spider-themed plate armor of an elite warrior with white braided hair and two of the razor-sharp, black-bladed shortswords and a hand crossbow hanging from her belt. Theren thought she looked familiar and then he realized she looked like a younger version of Erelal Freth.

Realizing she might be a military commander, he pulled out an arrow and prepared to fire. Making a mental image in his mind he placed a mystical mark on the commander and let his arrow fly followed closely by another.

Both arrows struck hard since the commander was completely taken by surprise. She instantly pulled a shortsword and crossbow. She scanned the surrounding field and spotted Theren in the shadows. She started towards him, unhesitatingly firing her crossbow as she went.

Theren pointed his mind to his planar warrior training as he focused on her and again took a deep breath. He then paused for just a second, waiting. As if carefully coordinated, the warrior looked down in surprise as a black-furred creature darted between her feet. Her eyes no longer on her target, Theren fired his shot when she was barely ten feet away.

The first shot hit her like a battering ram. It stopped her forward momentum completely and thorny vines erupted from the ground and encircled her legs. Theren fired a second shot. This one struck her dead-center. Her plate armor buckled as he hit the structural weak spot and the arrow penetrated her sternum.

Theren was reaching for his weapon when a bright streak entered from the edge of his vision and struck at the warrior. Her stamina was impressive as she batted off one of the blows but a second still managed to wound her. She ripped her feet free and lunged towards Theren.

Umbra slashed a third time and hit something vital and the life fled out of the commander as she fell at Theren's feet. Umbra patted the high elf's shoulder, "That was impressive shooting, let's hope you can keep it up, we have to get into that tower" she said pointing.

The barracks to their side, however, were just emptying their occupants. They had seen their commander fall. Nearly a dozen male drow were clutching at their weapons and preparing for a fight. Umbra's grip tightened on her sword and she tensed for battle but Theren alongside her had pulled out a charred stick and pointed at the mob.

A bloom of flame blossomed amidst the drow and expanded rapidly enough that it blew Umbra's hair back and she could feel the dry heat evaporating the sweat on her forehead. Bright light surrounded them for an instant and she blinked as her vision adjusted to the dark once again. Where there had been ten soldiers were now ten smoking corpses.

Theren replaced the stick in his jacket and said, "Is showy, but efficient," as he began to dash towards the front tower followed by Umbra and Renard.

At the back of the keep Rolfe, Heulwen and "Frogcene" waited at the door. It would only be a matter of time before it would open. They were rewarded for their patience almost immediately as the door opened to show a sumptuous chamber and a drow woman dressed in the manner of a Priestess of Lolth.

Rolfe punched her hard in the face while sweeping his leg under her. She tilted crazily, hitting her head on the door frame and collapsed at their feet. Huelwen pulled out a plunger-type device and pressed it, sending a stream of greyish-green fluid which splashed all over her.

She began to retch and choke and then Francene bit her. Her first bite grabbed her head and shoulders. She lifted the woman's body up and opened her maw and the rest of the woman's torso and legs disappeared into Francene's gullet.

Huelwen and Rolfe both looked horrified. "Mom, did you just swallow that lady?" Rolfe asked.

"Frogcene" didn't answer but hopped into the room and tossed her head for the others to follow. They rushed in hesitantly but closed the door behind them. The woman's struggles inside the frog's stomach were animated and, from Francene's perspective, uncomfortable. She had tasted very bad and while initially Francene had thought she'd just hold onto the priest, her animal instinct just made her swallow her instead.

Francene made a distressed croaking noise and an arm pushed its way out of her mouth. Soon, the priestess, dripping in digestive fluid and poisonous goo, hauled her way out of Francene like climbing out of a sack. "You miserable sub-beings!" She ranted, "You will pay for this insult!"

"Not yet," Rolfe said and a barrage of glowing black motes of energy just appeared in front of him and darted into the priest.

Huelwen had pulled out her flinger and had placed a bright-green glass container in the chamber. "Agreed, it is not your time, yet," they said, firing the missile.

The missiles shook the priest but the vial shattered and coated her with green acid which sizzled. Her ebony skin blistered and smoked and she screamed in rage and pain. Francene, still in frog form, tried to bite the woman again, but lacking the surprise they had before she was less effective. This suited Francene who was not eager to eat this woman a second time.

Knocks and concerned shouts came from the interior door. A trickle of greenish black smoke also began to seep in from under the door. The trio did not give it much thought at the time, which they probably should have as it began to solidify into the form of a tall human figure with no eyes. His long delicate fingers were tipped in black and he said, "It would seem, Erelal, that death has come for you today. Just as it comes for us all."

Erelal screamed defiantly and the room went completely dark. There were murmured spells coming from the location of both the priestess and the archmage. Huelwen began scrambling to try to dispel the darkness filling the room while Rolfe headed towards the priestess. Even swinging madly in the dark he was liable to hit sometimes.

A mental fog descended upon Huelwen and Rolfe. Rolfe pushed against it mentally and finally twisted the strands of destiny that would allow him to break his fate. He worried it would soon come back randomly to hurt him, but he could not afford to lose this fight.

He summoned a shadowy blade to his hand. He could feel something else happen in addition to the feel of the shadow force in his hand. Soft fibers on his neck and shoulders and cheeks. *Great*, Rolfe thought, *my hair's fallen out again*. Well, it could have been worse.

Rolfe swung wildly towards where he remembered the priest had been and struck nothing. He heard her alarmed gasps however and felt the presence of more combatants. Something she

had summoned, no doubt. His suspicions were quickly confused as two attacks from venomous fangs bit at him.

Huelwen was struggling to throw off the effect of the mage's spell. His mind flipped and flopped between scenarios. Huelwen decided to finish what he had planned and dispelled the darkness. Suddenly he could see. Rolfe had two giant spiders between him and the priest. Huelwen glanced confusedly at the frog. He thought it was Francene. Suddenly, it was Francene, seated on the floor.

Francene pointed her crook at the Priest and the drow armor under her vestments began to glow red while her robes smouldered and ignited. The spiders winked out of existence almost immediately. The Mage turned an eyeless face towards Francene. "You are troublesome, halfling." he said, and a blue-white arc of electricity leapt from his black fingers towards her.

It struck her soundly and she spasmed and jerked painfully as the current flowed through her. When the bolt had stopped she stood and with pure anger on her face told that mage, "You will have to try harder than that, bat-boy."

Behind her the priest clawed at the armor trying to remove it but was failing and in moments fell to the ground accompanied by the smell of burning meat. Rolfe hurled his shadow blades at the mage who waved a hand making them stop several inches before they reached him.

Huelwen still struggled to clear the mental cotton in his head. Scenario after scenario played through his mind but none of them seemed a clear course of action. He stood, actionless while Rolfe and Francene faced the archmage alone.

"This is tedious," The archmage said and raised his arms, prepared to level this room in order to finish the adventurers. Suddenly the door behind him flew open and a dull grey blade with glowing red runes came through the open doorway and sliced deep into the mage's chest. Huelwen's mind instantly cleared and Francene shouted, "Zress!" both in relief and surprise.

Zress pulled the blade free and drove it again through the mage's temple. His body went limp, but that did not stop her from stabbing him repeatedly after he was on the floor. "Just to be sure," she said.

She examined the body of the priestess and wrinkled her nose, "Nasty way to die," she remarked, "The rest of the sisters are cleaning up, let's get out of here."

Moments ago, as Francene and the others were entering the keep, Umbra, Renard and Theren were approaching the front tower. Theren entered the tower by walking through the walls, surprising the occupants. He opened the door from inside allowing Umbra in to dispatch the occupants quickly. They ascended the tower killing the guards and finally reached the top of the gate.

The final mage looked back at them with tears on his face. Behind him wave after wave of House Freth guards lay defeated on the ground of the enormous cavern and approaching them

was a line of Moondancers of Eilistraee. There were nearly a dozen of them and behind them an assortment of drow who had liberated themselves from the matriarchal tyranny of Lolth.

The moondancers did not kill drow as a rule, but they also did not take long to render them unconscious, incapacitated or crippled as they drove through the horde of defenders. Umbra offered the mage mercy and received his surrender. She took his House Freth medallion, left him with Thereon and Renard, and headed back down the tower to open the gates.

The first person through was Zress. They had one moment to share together before the war would begin again. Just one moment to express their lifetime of longing, their loss and hopes for a new beginning. Just one moment. They did not waste it.

The two of them led the charge through the tower and into the compound. Zress and Umbra headed directly for the Spider-like construct in the center of the yard. They easily bypassed the magical wards on the doors and entered. Zress had charged towards the Priest quarters while Umbra had headed for the archmage's residence.

Their arrival had corresponded with the archmage's threat and eventual dispatch by Zress's strikes. The group did not waste much time on cheers or congratulations although Francene hugged Zress unexpectedly. The drow woman did not know how to react and so she patted Francene on the head. Francene stepped back and looked her in the eye, "You will have to work on that," she said in a motherly tone.

Rolfe and Huelwen thanked her on the way past as they moved quickly to compel surrender or offer a quick death to the House Freth forces. The death of the archmage had corresponded to the disappearance of the weird abominations guarding the ledge and the remaining slaves and captives were freed, fed, healed and soon gathered into a caravan to take them out of captivity.

The entire assault went fairly quickly. Zress and Umbra gathered all of the plans and notes from the fortress before Francene summoned an earthquake and collapsed it completely. Using a magic ring discovered on the archmage the Moondancers used the remaining iron spider to begin to dismantle the walls.

The followers of Eilistraee had not wanted to kill the drow but they carefully separated those that wanted out from those that wanted to continue to serve the House Freth. In all it was a poor showing of captives. Trelasara said they'd be taken to Skullport and sold back to the drow of Menzoberranzan.

After the end of the day there was little left to be reoccupied should House Freth wish to try. Zress and Umbra took over one of the barracks on the side of the fortress for their own use. The door retained its arcane lock and only a drow with a House Freth badge could open it. And while the sisterhood were all drow themselves they seemed content to leave these two women alone.

They hugged each other for a long time in silence. Zress placed small kisses on Umbra's neck and Umbra's fingers played in Zress's long white hair. When they finally released each other and looked into each other's eyes, they had so many questions. "What next?" "Where do we go

or live?" "How can we grow and move forward together?" "CAN we move and grow forward together?"

They fell onto the sofa side by side and held hands. Umbra spoke, "I know things are changing for you. And you know how I feel about you. What do you want? How do you see your life going?"

Zress sighed, "The moondancers in the Promenade said they will train me in the ways of their Knighthood. Trelassara says I may even be able to wield one of the sacred Singing Swords."

Umbra whistled, "With a moonsword in one hand and a singing sword in the other? You'd be a force to be reckoned with. Where do I fit into that life?"

Zress started to sob, "Trelassara says you don't, according to Eilistraee. But I want to find a way."

Umbra held her and cried with her. "I worried this might be true. Eilistraee and Selûne are like a coin. Two sides, back-to-back and never facing each other. I will always have your back even if I cannot face you."

Zress pulled back, "So you would give up, just like that? If the Gods say it is so, it must be so. You'd drop a trite metaphor and say goodbye?"

Umbra gritted her jaw, she fought down the anger that rose so easily for her. "No. I love you and I will always be in love with you. I am not forsaking my love for you. But if it means we do not live together or get to have a life together it does not mean we cannot be together."

Umbra wiped her hot tears on the back of her arm and sucked in the snot running from her nose. It was gross and mortal. But that's what she felt. Gross. Mortal. At the whim of things she could not control. But she would have what her heart wanted and the Gods be damned. "You and I will be partners. Bonded hearts. We will love each other in stolen moments under the eyes of the very gods we serve. We have defied the might of Lolth this day and we will stand up to the celestial Mothers who think they know what is best for us."

Zress was smiling, "I am so glad you said that. I didn't want to walk out of here alone."

Umbra said, "You will never walk alone, again. And neither will I."