

“Who goes there?” a Githyanki woman spat the moment she spotted them. “Istik, explain yourself!”

“Stand down!” Lae’zel barked. “Vlaakith commands that her faithful welcome each other, does she not?”

“I was not told that any would be coming,” the Githyanki muttered, relaxing slightly at the sight of Lae’zel. “Why are you here?”

“We seek the zaith’isk and have little time,” Lae’zel replied. “Show us the way.”

“You are infected by a parasite?” the Githyanki asked, her eyes narrowing. “Thralls of the ghaik are to be shown no mercy.”

“Unless your creche failed to instruct you properly, you know Vlaakith’s protocol for the faithful,” Lae’zel spat, her stance shifting slightly as she prepared for possible combat.

The Githyanki guard eyed her for a moment before clicking her teeth, and stepping back.

“Very well,” she muttered. “Report to the infirmary at once and let the ghustil deal with you.”

Lae’zel beckoned them to follow and led them into the creche.

“I will point out that she didn’t actually give us directions,” Shadowheart murmured once they were out of earshot.

“I hardly need directions to find my way around a creche,” Lae’zel scowled. “We Githyanki choose, if at all possible, efficiently built structures rather than the more labyrinthine ones found in some of your infuriating cities. My people would not have settled into this place if it were irritating to navigate.”

They continued to follow her, drawing strange looks from more than a few passing Githyanki as they went, but none called them out, realizing at a glance that they were following one of their own. The undergrown complex was rather straight forward and not entirely unlike the chapel in which they’d found Withers, though as they made their way through a rounded corridor, they came across something that definitely wouldn’t have been found there.

“Is that Vlaakith?” Luna asked as she spotted a portrait hanging on the wall.

“It is,” Lae’zel replied, pride creeping into her voice as she beheld the image of her queen. “It would be a very rare thing to come across a creche that did not contain at least one portrait of her.”

“Red eyes? Check. No nose? Check. Almost certainly evil? Check,” Harry thought to himself. *“Just lich things, I guess.”*

He’d been comparing Voldemort and Lae’zel’s queen in his mind ever since he learned that she’d made what was essentially this universe’s version of a horcrux, and seeing that there were actual physical similarities between them did little to improve his initial opinion of her. No good would come from picking a fight with an undying monarch, though, especially when one of his new companions was a devout follower of hers, so he chose to put the disturbing similarities out of his mind and continued to follow Lae’zel. Luna knew at once what he was thinking; however, and he took his hand, making him smile.

“It appears to be perfectly healthy,” they heard an older Githyanki man mutter to himself as they passed by a rather large-looking room. “I just don’t understand.”

“Is something the matter?” Luna asked softly, peering into the man’s eyes. “I love your beard, by the way.”

The Githyanki blinked at her in confusion, subconsciously running his fingers over his well-trimmed white beard, and said, “Nothing that concerns you, istik.”

It was the first time they’d heard any of them use that word without sounding like it meant something to be scraped off the bottom of a boot, and before Luna could comment on that, Lae’zel noticed the interruption and marched over.

“Luna, we don’t have time for...oh, this is the hatchery,” she murmured, peering inside. “I take it you are the caretaker here?”

“I am,” the man replied, visibly relaxing as he saw Lae’zel. “I am Ko'kuu. I take it this outsider is with you?”

“She is,” Lae’zel replied. “Pay her no mind; she can be rather curious, but she is a sorceress of great power and has proven quite useful to me.”

“You sounded like you were treating a wounded warrior who wasn’t getting better,” Luna murmured. “I am rather talented at healing magic if you’d like me to take a look.”

“When I say that I am a caretaker, I mean of the hatchlings and eggs,” Ko’kuu replied. “The infirmary is down that hallway there and to the right.”

“So you have an egg that isn’t hatching, I take it?” Harry asked. “I’m her husband and a powerful sorcerer in my own right.”

“They have the right of it,” Varsh Ko'kuu sighed, looking to Lae’zel. “I won’t burden you with the matter but I do have an egg that has fallen rather behind schedule.”

“I suppose it’s just rather weak then,” the Githyanki warrior said dismissively. “Weakness is not to be tolerated in any creche; better to cut a weak link early than allow it to ruin the entire chain.”

“That is what Kith'rak Therezzyn is increasingly pushing for, but I don’t think it’s a matter of weakness, and I am reluctant to just eliminate a potential warrior,” Ko’kuu sighed.

“What if we took it with us?” Luna offered, and both the man and Lae’zel looked at her like she was mad. “If you’re likely to be ordered to destroy the egg, then there wouldn’t be any harm in letting us try to hatch it.”

“Do you know the first thing about Githyanki eggs?” Ko’kuu asked.

“No, but I’m sure Lae’zel does and Harry and I have dealt with stranger eggs than this,” Luna replied. “We once hatched dragon eggs which required us to anoint them with special blood and then burn sacrifices alive.”

“Were these red dragons, by chance?” Ko’kuu asked.

“What are you doing?” Lae’zel hissed before she could reply. “I am not qualified to take care of an unhatched whelp, and this is hardly the time to take on such responsibilities.”

“We’ve nearly reached what you’ve been searching for since we met, and, if the egg hatched while we’re still dealing with the threat of the mind flayers around here, Ciri could always take the baby back here to be raised,” Harry offered. “If you decided after it hatched that you wanted to raise the baby yourself, we could help with that too.”

“I...I suppose it would be a waste of a potentially good warrior to just shatter its egg here,” Lae’zel murmured. “Rest assured, Varsh Ko’Kuu, if the egg hatches and the child inside is malformed in any way, I will not hesitate to follow protocol.”

“I would expect no less from a loyal follower of Vlaakith,” Ko’Kuu replied. “The egg is a fair distance beyond this door, and to reach it, you will need these boots which...”

“That’s okay,” Luna replied, flying out to grab the egg.

“Yes, these two can fly,” Lae’zel said as Ko’Kuu looked at her in shock.

“So, if the egg hatches, will that mean we can call you mommy?” Astarion drawled, and Lae’zel’s eyes narrowed.

“Not if you wish to keep your tongue,” she replied tersely, and he chuckled, backing off.

“There, it’s in my mokeskin pouch,” Luna replied. “We’ll take good care of him.”

“Him?” Ko’Kuu asked.

“I sense a male inside,” Luna explained.

“I...see,” Ko’Kuu nodded slowly.

“Come, the infirmary awaits, as does our salvation,” Lae’zel replied, and before the caretaker could question that, they had already left. “How much it pleases me to know that in a mere moment, there will be no further distractions to keep me from my cleansing.”

“It has seemed like every time we’ve turned a corner, we’ve come across some new task to be done,” Gale commented, “though I suppose that’s one of the hallmarks of a good adventure.”

“It’s been incredibly annoying,” Lae’zel muttered.

“It will be nice to be freed of these things,” Wyll murmured. “Even with our...unique situation, knowing that I had one of them poking around in my brain hasn’t exactly been fun.”

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask, when they had it crawl inside you, did they at least have the courtesy to make it use your fake eye?” Astarion asked.

“No, they did not,” Wyll scowled.

“Shockingly, courtesy isn’t high up on the priorities of things that eat brains and turn their prisoners into more of them,” Karlach snarked.

“Wretched creatures,” Ciri muttered. “In my travels, I’ve come across many great and terrifying things, but I don’t think I’ve ever found anything quite like them.”

“They are an abomination,” Lae’zel hissed, “a plague to be eradicated without mercy.”

None of them found they could argue with that and as they came across a room at the end of the hallway Ko’Kuu had directed them to, she saw something scrawled into the wall that made her grin.

“The infirmary,” Lae’zel announced, throwing open the door and leading them inside. “I must say this creche is decidedly odd. Creche K’liir exists in a sunless void of the astral plane, silent and brutal. My sa’varsh would have had many strong opinions on this one, none of them complimentary.”

“We make do with what we have at our disposal, child of Gith,” another Githyanki replied, stepping forth. She was missing an eye and wore a dark leather patch over it, but otherwise she seemed remarkably unscarred. Her hair was darker than Lae’zel’s, and she seemed to be of a slighter build under her brown and blue robes, but she seemed to be of a similar age and stood about the same height. “I trust you came here for more than to simply waste my time.”

“Is this the Zaith’isk?” Harry asked, looking at the large device sitting against the far wall. It was a bizarre thing, a construct of flesh and steel. There was a part in the center that clearly appeared to be meant for people to sit on, and overhead it hung what looked almost like half of a large head, a domed stretch of flesh with numerous large knife-like protrusions that looked almost like giant teeth.

“I’m surprised you would know it at a glance, istik,” the woman murmured. “A masterwork; a testament to Githyanki brilliance, the zaith’isks are Vlaakith’s gifts to her faithful, a means by which, if they should be captured by our enemies, they might still prove useful to the cause.”

“This looks to be inspired by illithid technology,” Harry thought to himself. *“I wonder just how much it is.”*

“We have been infected by ghaik parasites,” Lae’zel explained. “For days they have existed in our heads, and yet we show no symptoms.”

“Days, you say?” the woman asked, looking at her more curiously, “And you’ve shown no signs of cerebral impairment in all this time?”

“Other than a short fever the first night, no,” Gale replied.

“Most curious,” the woman murmured. “Either there is something unique about these particular parasites or there is something unique about all of you.”

“Everyone here has one other than myself, Harry, and Ciri,” Luna murmured, pointing them out and then walking so that the woman had to turn her back to the Zaith’isk to look at her. “I’m Luna; what’s your name?”

“You may refer to me as Ghustil Stornugoss, if you must at all, istik,” Stornugoss replied, and Harry seized his opportunity to grasp one of the fleshy protrusions sticking out of the device and take a look inside.

“This is a thing meant to siphon energy,” he realized at once as he looked through it. “Presumably that is so that it can weaken the tadpole before extracting it, but I am more than a little perturbed by just how much this thing reminds me of the nautiloid.”

He pulled his hand back before anyone noticed and looked to Lae’zel, who was staring at the device covetously.

“Time is of the essence,” Stornugoss said, “take your place and we’ll begin at once.”

“Stand aside,” Lae’zel breathed. “My cleansing is at hand.”

“Actually, Lae’zel, if I could bother you for just a moment,” Harry said, peering into her eyes. “Have you ever seen one of these things in action before?”

“Never,” Lae’zel replied to his mental probe. “Why?”

“Doesn’t it look a little strange to you?” Harry asked. “This looks and feels like mind flayer technology.”

“Something taken from the filthy ghaik and repurposed, I imagine,” Lae’zel replied. “What of it?”

“Is it possible that it might have been tampered with in some way?” Harry asked. “It just feels...off in a way that I cannot really describe.”

“You suggest that the Ghustil might be hshar’lak?” Lae’zel asked, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“I suggest that something might be off here,” Harry replied. “Why not let one of the others test it out in your stead? If it works, my concerns were for naught, and you can go next.”

“I am...flattered that you think me less expendable than the others,” Lae’zel replied, looking at him in surprise.

“Gale, why don’t you try it first?” Harry suggested. “You were infected first, after all.”

The others all looked confused at that, knowing that he had no way of knowing it, but none of them said anything, and the wizard himself merely nodded and peered into Harry’s eyes as he made his way to the device.

“I think something might be wrong with this thing,” Harry explained.

“And you want me to be your test subject?” Gale asked, sounding hurt and pausing for a moment.

“Not at all, but out of all the infected here, you have the greatest magical senses, and between the two of us, I’m confident we’ll keep you safe if something goes wrong,” Harry replied. “Lae’zel, desperate and fanatical as she is, would have simply written off any unpleasant symptom as a test of faith.”

“I see your point,” Gale murmured, getting into position. “I’ll try to get a sense for just what I’m dealing with here and shield myself if it seems like something’s going wrong.”

“Thanks, Gale,” Harry replied, reaching out to the zaith’isk mentally as Stornugoss set it up.

“Should we be worried?” Astarion whispered, and Harry shook his head, not wanting any distractions just then.

“You will need to focus on the parasite the entire time,” Stornugoss explained. “The zaith’isk will handle everything else.”

“Alright,” Gale replied, trying to stay calm while the contraption moved with him in it, reclining until he was lying back and then lowering the skull-like portion down to hover over his head.

Two of the jagged protrusions came to rest on either side of his head, and a moment later, they began to glow brightly. Gale gasped, feeling searing pain in his skull as his eyes began to glow as well. It was a psionic blast unlike anything he’d ever experienced before, and it cleaved through his thoughts with all the subtlety of a rampaging giant. This wasn’t a scalpel carefully carving out an unwelcome guest in his head, but a psychic mallet. The others all gasped and staggered back, feeling what Gale was through the connection that the device in Shadowheart’s possession had given them.

“What...is this?” Wyll asked.

“Harry?” Luna asked.

“This feels more like something deserving of the title mind flayer than the illithid,” Harry thought to himself, reaching out and trying to sense just what the device was doing.

It seemed to be trying to rend Gale’s very mind apart, and while he might have stepped in then and there, it occurred to him that this might be for the means of weakening the tadpole enough to allow it to be removed. He hesitated, not wanting to interrupt things if that was what it going to do, though as it grew more and more powerful, he quickly realized that it would be fatal if nothing was done.

“You should not have brought them here,” a deep voice rumbled in his head.

“Who are...you feel like the artifact,” Harry replied, his eyes flicking to Shadowheart.

“The lich queen does not offer salvation to the infected; only oblivion,” the voice explained. *“A zaith’isk is a death sentence for any who sit in it. I will save Gale here, but the result will be...violent. Pull him out when I say.”*

“Alright,” Harry replied.

“Now,” the voice said, and just as the machine blew up, Harry pulled Gale towards him, shielding them all from the blast.

“No!” Stornugoss cried as Lae’zel just stood in silent horror. “My life’s work!”

“That thing nearly killed me!” Gale shouted. “Good show getting me out when you did.”

“A device I’ve dedicated my entire life to is gone, and yet that istik and his parasite live,” Stornugoss hissed, glaring at Gale.

“No, it doesn’t,” Harry replied, telling Gale mentally to play along. “I can’t sense it anymore.”

“It...it died?” Stornugoss asked, looking between Gale and the ruins of the zaith’isk. “Such power it possessed; it’s a shame that it could not be extracted alive. No doubt it would have proved to be incredibly informative. Leave me now; there’s nothing I can do for the rest of you, and I have much to clean up.”

Luna gestured for them all to go, gently nudging Lae’zel when she remained locked in near-catatonic shock, and she practically ripped her shoulder away from her grasp, marching out of the infirmary while nearly shaking with rage. They came across a few Githyanki children staring down at a shaking chest in obvious glee.

“What’s in there?” Ciri asked.

“None of your business, istik,” one of the kids spat, sounding just as bratty as any human child would have just then.

Lae’zel, her nerves frayed to the breaking point, drew her flaming sword and, before anyone could breathe a word, brought it down on the chest, cleaving through it and the gremishka inside.

“Leave!” she roared, and the children screamed, tearing off as fast as their short little legs could take them. Seeing she was about to blow, Harry silenced the area just as she shouted, “I did everything I was supposed to! I followed protocol; I reported to a creche as quickly as I could, and the zaith’isk would have killed me!”

“I take it you all felt what I did then?” Gale asked. “I might have reached out across our odd little connection while that thing was trying to fry my mind like bacon, though I assure you it wasn’t intentional.”

“Lae’zel, what went wrong in there?” Shadowheart asked as gently as she could, her antipathy for the Githyanki giving way to genuine sympathy at the sight of how deeply disturbed she seemed to be.

“Sabotage,” Lae’zel hissed. “It is the only explanation. We must report to the Ch'r'ai at once and inform him that there are hshar'lak among the ranks here. I don't know if it was the Ghustil or someone else, but there must be at least one traitor here.”

“There aren't any other creches nearby, are there?” Astarion asked.

“Probably not,” Lae’zel replied, her rage almost entirely masking her fear at that thought. “We will be stuck relying on our present protection for the foreseeable future lest we become ghaik.”

“What happened back there?” Luna asked, projecting the question into Harry’s head. *“You seemed off from the moment we saw the zaith’isk.”*

“It reminded me so much of what we saw in the ruins of the nautiloid that I was put on edge at once,” Harry replied. *“I convinced Gale to test it out instead of Lae’zel, figuring that he’d react quicker if something went wrong, but I don’t think it was that necessary.”*

“Oh?” Luna asked as they followed Lae’zel out of the infirmary.

“That artifact Shadowheart has, there’s a living presence inside it,” Harry replied. *“It reached out to me mentally to tell me that the Zaith’isk was never going to work, that Vlaakith makes no effort*

to save her people if they become infected by illithid tadpoles. That device seemed designed to tear apart a person's mind and suck out their energy."

"I wonder if it wasn't meant to suck out their memories too," Luna murmured. "It did seem like a mind flayer design, as you said."

"So if a Githyanki warrior becomes infected in the field, they're instructed to report to a device that puts them down and extracts all possible intel they might possess in the hopes it might help the others, all while convincing them that they're going to be saved," Harry posited. "Ice cold, that is."

"To be fair, she wouldn't be the first red-eyed, noseless immortal we've come across who was a complete pain to work for," Luna replied, and Harry smiled slightly.

"Picked up on that too, did you?" he asked.

"What are we going to tell Lae'zel?" Luna asked. "I quite like her, and I don't want her to go on serving someone that cold and evil."

"You've heard the zealotry in her voice when she speaks of Vlaakith," Harry replied. "The lich queen has built a cult of personality that would make all the biggest dickheads of the twentieth century on Earth green with envy. Convincing her that her the woman is fallible, much less actively malicious will be difficult and we'd be more likely to leave than to believe us."

"If it can be proven that the zaith'isk wasn't tampered with and that that is its purpose, maybe that would help," Luna shrugged. "It's worth a shot, at least."

"I really should have just concluded immediately that Vlaakith was going to turn out to be evil when we learned what 'lich' meant, but with the process of making a phylactery being so apparently different than the process of making a horcrux, and with knowledge of it being more widespread, I wondered if perhaps things were different," Harry murmured mentally. "If she learns that we have the artifact, she's going to become a problem, especially since it's now the only thing stopping them from becoming mind flayers."

Luna nodded at that as they reached a corridor at the other end of the creche. Lae'zel, still furious, opened the door and peered inside.

"I don't want excuses," an older Githyanki man hissed.

"Forgive me, Ch'r'ai," an armored woman replied, nodding her head. "I did get something of value out of this batch of cultists, for though none among them knew where the artifact had been taken, they were, much like the last batch, trying to reach Moonrise Tower. That is where they are congregating; I just know it. Give me leave to assault it in force, and we will be able to pluck the relic from the ruins..."

"Be silent, Therezzyn," the older man commanded. "Your sole focus is the artifact; bring it to me before my patience reaches its end."

"Yes, Ch'r'ai," Therezzyn replied, watching him leave. The moment he had left the room, she plucked a stone from the wall, causing a shimmering yellow barrier to appear in front of it.

"How curious," Harry thought to himself, already deciding to investigate that later.

“Istik in my creche?” she hissed as she spotted them. Focusing on Lae’zel, she said, “Explain.”

“They are with me, honored kith’rak,” Lae’zel replied respectfully. “I need to speak with the Ch’r’ai; it is of vital importance...”

“The only thing of any importance to the Ch’r’ai or myself is the search for the weapon,” Therezzyn replied, narrowing her eyes. “Are these some of the mercenaries that we sent out to search for it? Have you located it?”

“No, kith’rak, but...” Lae’zel went to say, only to trail off as Therezzyn shifted her focus to Shadowheart, who had tensed almost imperceptibly.

“You, istik,” she demanded, “you know something, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t,” Shadowheart replied, lying well, but the annoyingly perceptive Githyanki had already seen enough to grow suspicious.

“You lie,” Therezzyn said harshly, the two wolves lying in the corner immediately jumping to their feet at their master’s tone. Glaring at Lae’zel, she growled, “This istik you brought me has the weapon, doesn’t she? Did you attempt to deceive me or are you so incompetent that you didn’t know?”

“Kith’rak, Therezzyn, I swear to you I will bring you the artifact, but right now, I must speak with the Ch’r’ai. There is a hshar’lak in this creche...”

“And I am looking at her,” Therezzyn glared. “If you will not give me the weapon, then I will take it from your corpses. Kill these traitors!”

The four Githyanki who had been waiting in the room with the kith’rak when they entered all drew their weapons, as did the woman herself. Harry rolled his eyes and closed the door behind him while silencing the room to try and limit the number of reinforcements they’d have to deal with.

“Should have figured it would end like this,” Wyll muttered, drawing his saber and parrying a blow from the nearest man.

Lae’zel drew her blade and engaged the two directly behind her along with Karlach, while Ciri teleported over and took Therezzyn’s head with a single slash. The two wolves lunged at her, snarling as they watched their mistress fall dead, and Luna transfigured them into mice before compelling them to run.

“By the time my transfiguration wears off, they’ll be far from here and hopefully able to live their lives away from us,” Luna thought to herself, unaware that they’d ultimately be eaten by an unfortunate snake, who would explode the moment their bodies shifted back.

Shadowheart and Astarion had jumped back the moment the fighting began, drawing their bows and loosing arrows at the fourth Githyanki, who managed to knock the first arrow aside but staggered back as the second one lodged itself in his throat. Harry took his head with a slash of his hand just as Karlach lodged her axe in the chest of her foe. Lae’zel, still furious at the entire course of events that had happened that day, fought with greater ferocity than normal. Her foe tried to keep up, parrying the flurry of blows she rained down on him, only to miss a step and lose his head for his efforts.

“That,” Wyll murmured as he pulled his blade from his foe’s throat and watched the Githyanki woman collapse in a heap, “could have gone better.”

“Without the zaith’isk, the artifact is the only thing that can prevent us from becoming ghaik,” Lae’zel hissed, cleaning and sheathing her blade. “Loathe as I am to have to fight my own people, the moment she realized the truth, this was the only alternative to death or worse.”

“This device is fascinating,” Harry murmured, examining the source of the barrier between that room and the room the older Githyanki had disappeared into. “Its power source is far from here, meaning that I don’t think I could break it down if the key wasn’t on her body.”

“This stone,” Ciri murmured, pulling it from a pouch on the dead woman’s belt. As she tossed it to Harry, Astarion took Therezzyn’s sword and looked closely at it.

“This is of remarkable quality,” he murmured, “and the enchantments on it are no joke either. It’s not exactly my sort of weapon, but it might be worth a bit if none of you think you’d do much with it.”

“Let me see,” Lae’zel said, taking it from him. “I think this is better than the blade I took from that cambion.”

“If you want it, I could use the flaming sword,” Karlach murmured. “It’s a sight better than my axe and rather fitting, all things considered.”

“Here,” Lae’zel replied, handing it to her. “At least I got something out of this disaster.”

“We can still speak with the...what did you call him?” Ciri asked as Harry placed the stone in the groove in the wall from which Therezzyn had taken it.

“Ch’r’ai,” Lae’zel replied. “He is Ch’r’ai W’wargaz, one of Vlaakith’s greatest inquisitors. He must be the one who has been tasked with recovering the artifact. He may well glean the truth of things as this one did, but that is a risk I must take if I’m to have any hope of cleansing. If the traitor here can be rooted out, perhaps then the Chi’r’ai will be able to tell us where we could find another zaith’isk.”

“To be clear, though, you’re not expecting me to just hand it over, right?” Shadowheart asked.

“If we did, we would experience ceremorphosis,” Lae’zel muttered, “and it would not shock me if, after the days spent under the artifact’s protection, it didn’t happen far more quickly than normal.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if you were right on that front,” Gale replied, “and I know I speak for everyone when I say that I really don’t want to take that risk.”

“I would give my life for my queen, but to become ghaik when I need not yet either do so or slit my throat, that I will not risk,” Lae’zel sighed. “Come.”

Harry vanished the bodies of the Githyanki, hoping that they might still get out of here without having to kill everyone, and followed Lae’zel further into the underground facility. The one they sought was powerful enough that he could sense him, as they drew closer, being far beyond the simple rabble they’d met so far, yet he didn’t seem to be quite as dangerous as Voss, the dragonrider they’d met back on the surface, which made Lae’zel’s pronouncement that he was one of her queen’s greatest inquisitors seem strange.

The bald Githyanki was standing in the middle of a large room, attended by a few others, who all turned as he did to look at them. They all grew visibly tense, while he remained calm, his gaze focused entirely on Lae'zel.

"Therezzyn would not have let you in here willingly," W'wargaz said, sounding slightly amused, "and given that her blade rests in your scabbard, you clearly defeated her to reach me. That speaks to your prowess in battle, if nothing else."

"Chi'r'ai W'wargaz," Lae'zel breathed, nodding her head. "I would not have done so if it were not urgent. I fear that this creche is infested with hshar'lak."

"Traitors in our ranks?" W'wargaz asked, his demeanor shifting immediately. "What makes you say this?"

"My companions and I have been infected with parasites," Lae'zel replied, drawing greater interest from the older man. "I followed protocol and sought out this creche as quickly as I could, and when one of them sat in the zaith'isk to be cleansed, it exploded, leaving the tadpole unharmed. It had clearly been sabotaged."

"That is most serious," W'wargaz murmured. "You're the one who my scouts told me escaped the wreckage of a ghaik vessel, aren't you?"

"I am, Chi'r'ai" Lae'zel replied honestly.

"You are to be commended for escaping such a thing alive," W'wargaz said. "As you escaped it, I suspect that you recovered something they had stolen from us. A small steel weapon, inscribed with the runes of our people. You have it, don't you?"

"I..." Lae'zel went to say, when Harry beat her to it.

"Something's here," he hissed, looking around.

"What?" W'wargaz asked. "What are you talking about, istik?"

"I sense a presence," Harry replied, "something...powerful. You lot didn't awaken something down here, did you?"

"You're unusually perceptive," an old, proud, and cruel female voice called out, and they all looked in shock as a towering figure of a Githyanki appeared before them.

Harry knew at once that it was a projection of some kind and, more than that, who it was. Even if he hadn't seen her portrait, he'd have guessed this was Vlaakith from the sheer power emanating from her. Some sorcerers were so powerful that, for those with rather heightened senses like his and Luna's, it was impossible to stand in their presence without feeling that power. The fact that even this simple projection, cast from another world most likely, was able to fill the room with presence spoke to just how powerful and dangerous she was.

"Queen Vlaakith, shkath zai!" Lae'zel breathed, dropping to one knee as W'wargaz did the same.

"You are permitted to look upon me, istik," Vlaakith said, looking out at them. "You are invited to kneel."

“*Play along,*” Harry projected to the others, except for Lae’zel, as he did as she said.

“You’ve taught your attendants well, Lae’zel,” Vlaakith praised, and the young Githyanki looked up at her in shock.

“You know me, my queen?” Lae’zel asked, and the lich smiled down at her.

“Your sa’varsh have spoken highly of you,” Vlaakith praised. “There is something about the artifact I seek that you should know. It is a weapon of great and terrible power, our last resort to prevent the return of the illithid empire, but it has been corrupted.”

“Corrupted, my queen?” Lae’zel asked.

“Tainted by the vile ghaik sorcery,” Vlaakith replied. “If it is not found and if it is not cleansed, they will return to their full strength, and all living things will be made either into them or into their slaves. You have it in possession, don’t you?”

“I…” Lae’zel went to say as Shadowheart tensed.

“I heard you say that you are infected,” Vlaakith continued. “I understand your fear at that, I do. The weapon has protected you, has it not? Even in its tainted state, it is powerful. Present it to me and agree to cleanse it for me, and not only will I grant you and your allies purification, but I will grant you ascension too.”

Lae’zel looked up at her in silent shock, and Vlaakith grinned, knowing she’d won her over.

“You will soar through the skies above Tu’narath atop a red dragon of your own and serve for the rest of your days as one of my most elite kith’rath,” the lich queen continued.

“She’s more charismatic than Voldemort, I’ll give her that,” Harry thought to himself. *“He ruled through fear alone, but this one seems to have learned how to inspire genuine loyalty in more than complete nutcases like Bellatrix.”*

The infected around him, save for Lae’zel, all stiffened, a reaction he’d come to understand meant that they were being mentally affected by the artifact. Whatever was in it didn’t want them to do this, but to disobey something as powerful as Vlaakith so openly while in what was essentially her domain like this would be hazardous.

“What to do, what to do,” he thought to himself. “What would this cleansing entail? I am a sorcerer of some power and would likely be able to assist.”

“It would require you all to travel into the weapon,” Vlaakith replied. “It contains a small pocket of the Astral Plane within and the corruption inside it is thanks to a being who has taken up residence there. I would require you to hunt this being down and slay it without mercy.”

“Then we shall,” Lae’zel breathed. “Shadowheart, present the artifact.”

“Lae’zel,” Shadowheart hissed through gritted teeth.

“Play along, please,” Harry projected into her mind. “Whatever is inside the artifact is clearly intelligent, and I think it’s high time that we met. Vlaakith has given us her side of things, and I would hear its.”

“We should never have come here,” Shadowheart replied as she reached into her bag and pulled it out.

“At last,” Vlaakith drawled, sounding utterly pleased with herself. “I will refrain from asking you, istik, how you came to possess what is ours, for if you assist in cleansing the Astral Prism, you will find that I can be quite forgiving. Place it on the planecaster here, and it’s power will allow you to enter it. Beware as you do, for the creature inside the Prism has been warped by the Illithid, and made a blight against all life, and they will try to deceive you.”

Luna moved the prism to the planecaster with a wave of her hand, giving Shadowheart a reassuring look, and watched as it came to hover above the round, glowing metal base. It started to glow, shaking slightly, and then a great golden portal opened.

“W’wargaz,” Vlaakith called out, “they are not to leave until they’ve completed their quest.”

“Understood, my queen,” W’wargaz nodded. “The Undying Queen has given you a task. You’d best complete it.”

“Come,” Lae’zel breathed, jumping through the portal first, and the others all swiftly followed, each wondering what exactly they were going to end up doing.

Once they were all inside, Vlaakith grinned down at her inquisitor and said, “The infected will become ghaik in the days following the successful conclusion of their task. Slay them all and, if the other three survive, bring them to me. They feel as though they are far from home, and I would learn more of how they came to be here at the same time as the Prism and the illithid.”

“Your will be done,” W’wargaz nodded, watching her image disappear.

“Bloody hell,” Harry breathed as he looked around the astral plane.

“I’ve seen a lot of different worlds over the years but never anything quite like this,” Ciri murmured.

It looked like they were on a floating asteroid out in space, albeit one with an atmosphere beyond what it should have. The stars were brighter than any of them had ever seen, save for Lae’zel, who sighed happily to herself.

“How I missed this timeless void,” she murmured.

“This is what your home is like?” Luna asked.

“We Githyanki spend most of our lives in the Astral Plane,” Lae’zel replied. “I will admit that Faerun has some charms, but I would trade them all for this perfect silence.”

“The Shadowfell must be somewhat like this,” Shadowheart murmured to herself.

“The what?” Harry asked.

“A plane of existence manipulated into its current shape by Shar, the Goddess of Loss and Darkness,” Gale replied before she could, his eyes narrowing at her. “Shar is a subject probably best discussed during a quieter moment. What exactly is the plan here?”

“It couldn’t be simpler,” Lae’zel replied. “We find this tainted creature, kill it, and then return to Vlaakith for cleansing.”

“You knew what my mission was,” Shadowheart hissed.

“And you never would have succeeded in it,” Lae’zel replied. “You heard my queen. The thing in this Prism is an agent of the Grand Design, a creature warped by the ghaik...”

“I will point out that it has kept us safe all this time,” Wyll said. “Why do that if it was on their side?”

“Wyll does have a point there,” Karlach replied.

“The most terrifying thing about the ghaik is their intelligence,” Lae’zel replied. “Whatever profane purpose this creature had for preserving us was to serve its ends, whatever they might be. Unless it wished for you to bring the prism to Baldur’s Gate as you wished, Shadowheart, it would have pulled its protection and let you become one of them before ever allowing you to succeed.”

“Let’s focus on finding it for now,” Harry said softly, stepping between them and gazing into Shadowheart’s eyes. “Once we do find it, though, I want to speak to it before we attack.”

“For what possible purpose?” Lae’zel demanded.

“It’s possible that it is what interfered with the zaith’isk,” Harry replied, turning around to look at her. “If that’s true, then there was no sabotage, and I’d rather not condemn anyone in the creche for its actions.”

“So we interrogate the beast first,” Lae’zel nodded, turning to look at a cave next to her, one shrouded by thick purple smoke. “This looks promising.”

“I sense a presence beyond it,” Harry nodded, reaching out to try to sense what the smoke was.

“*You came,*” an oddly familiar voice called out. “*I warned the others against this, though perhaps it was necessary. I will allow you through, but only you.*”

“Hmm,” Harry murmured. “I think that it’s possible to pass through here, but only one by one.”

“A curious defense,” Gale replied, joining him at the cave entrance.

“*I’m going to head in, and it will close behind me,*” Harry projected into his mind. “*Help Luna keep the others distracted with convincing attempts to get through, and I’ll return once I get answers about what we’re dealing with and what actually happened with the zaith’isk.*”

“*Understood,*” Gale replied. “*This entity saved me, I know that; it was the zaith’isk that tried to kill me.*”

“If I’m to resolve this peacefully, I’m going to need something that can convince Lae’zel of that,” Harry replied. *“Wish me luck.”*

“Good...” Gale went to say, as Harry let himself be sucked into the cave, “luck? Harry!”

“The barrier’s gone solid, “Astarion murmured, pressing his hand against it.

“Open up!” Lae’zel growled, drawing her sword.

“Everyone back!” Luna called out. “I’ll handle this. Gale, if you could assist me.”

“Of course,” Gale replied.

“Harry’s doing something, isn’t he?” she asked, peering into his eyes.

“He’s hoping to,” Gale replied, *“and he’s hoping that we’ll buy him time and stop the others...let’s be honest, Lae’zel, from doing something stupid.”*

“I figured,” the blonde nodded, preparing for a bit of mummery.

Harry, meanwhile, stumbled into the cave and came to an instant halt. In every version of the dream he’d seen from the others, when this entity had saved them from their fever, it had taken on a different form, and that proved to be no different for him, much to his instant outrage.

“Show yourself as you are!” he growled, his eyes alight with fury as he saw just what form the entity had taken. “How dare you?”

“I’d have thought you’d appreciate this form,” the entity replied, running her fingers through her long red hair. Her green eyes took on a disturbingly maternal softness as she said, “I couldn’t see everything of your mind as you entered here, but I saw enough to know that you have all too few memories of your mother.”

“Your real form, now,” Harry hissed.

“I can’t do that,” the entity sighed, leaning back against the cave wall. “It’s my curse, you see. I can show those I interact with a form they find pleasing, or a form they find horrifying, while my form as it was before I was cursed is lost to me.”

“Did Vlaakith do this to you?” Harry asked, relaxing slightly as he detected no deception in her voice.

“In a way,” the entity replied. “If not for actions she and the others who share her name took, what happened to me may well never have happened, but you aren’t here to hear my backstory, and neither are you here to kill me as the lich commanded.”

“I’ve come for answers,” Harry replied, “something that I suspect you have in abundance.”

“Ask your questions,” the entity said.

“Why is Vlaakith so desperate for you to die?” Harry asked. “You’re not an agent of the mind flayers prowling around this are, I assume.”

“I am not,” the entity replied. “The reason Vlaakith wants me dead is because I know something that she cannot afford to let spread, a secret that would bring her entire stolen empire crashing around her ears.”

“It’s that terrible?” Harry asked.

“If her people knew, even her admittedly impressive efforts to indoctrinate them would not be enough to stop them from turning on her,” the entity replied. “It is a betrayal of the gravest sort and one which could be their doom.”

“Doom the Githyanki?” Harry asked, and she smiled slightly.

“This is why I wanted you to be the one whom I spoke with,” the entity replied. “You distrusted her from the moment you met her.”

“I’ve had bad experiences with liches in the past,” Harry replied, “and I could see her desperation in how she was manipulating Lae’zel. She’s a queen, one who has ruled for centuries, from the sound of it, and yet, while faced with a servant of hers who follows her edicts with absolute devotion, she still chose to butter her up and offer to make all her dreams come true rather than just command her. That speaks of terror, and when I see someone that powerful that scared, I grow intrigued. So what is this secret of Vlaakith’s?”

“Vlaakith presents herself as a goddess, and while her people worship her as one, she has not yet achieved that aim,” the entity replied. “That is the least of her deceptions too. She claims that she knows how Gith managed to destroy the illithid empire, but the truth is that she had no idea. If it were ever to return, she would be utterly powerless to stop it.”

“So she’s lying to them about the extent of both her power and their protection,” Harry murmured, scratching at his beard. “If they were to learn of that, and if they came to believe it, it would sow panic.”

“It would sow revolt,” the entity smiled. “That power of Gith’s was a gift, one that she did not bestow upon Vlaakith any of the Vlaakiths, and it is a gift that I stumbled upon.”

“You?” Harry asked. “It’s how you’ve managed to protect the others.”

“It is,” the entity nodded. “As long as I use it, the tadpoles in their brains will remain inert, unable to develop or force them through ceremorphosis. If Vlaakith succeeds in killing me, though, that protection will vanish and they will be lost.”

“She can’t cure them,” Harry said grimly.

“Even if she could, I doubt she would,” the entity sighed. “She’s a cruel, capricious creature, one obsessed with godhood above all else. She’d let her whole empire burn if it gave her what she wanted. Just after you entered the prism, she ordered her inquisitor to kill the infected and capture you, your wife, and your mistress if possible.”

“You saw that?” Harry asked.

“I see what happens just beyond the prism,” the entity replied.

“Show me,” Harry commanded. “I was going to verify all this by peering into your mind anyway, something you’d know if you had seen as much as me as you say, so let me see that memory.”

“You think it might sway your Githyanki companion,” the entity nodded. “Very well, take what you will of my thoughts.”

Harry peered into her eyes, his mother’s eyes, and said, “Legilimens.”

The entity’s mind was strange; that was the first thing he noticed. It seemed quicker and sharper than that of the average human, almost to the level of the mind flayer he’d tried to read the mind of before, but without the decidedly alien nature and nigh-incomprehensible vastness. He saw the image of a human man in his head, a fair-skinned warrior who had been felled in battle and awoke changed. The form it had been given was monstrous, an oily, inky mass of roiling shadows and tentacles, possessing dozens of eyes and no limbs. It floated through space, seeking aid, and then stumbled across the Astral Prism, getting unwittingly sucked into it, wherein it discovered the power it took.

Shaking his head, he pushed on further, verifying that everything he’d heard from it was true, as he’d thought in the moment, and then finally he witnessed the memory of Vlaakith’s final order and grinned. If he were to have any hope of convincing Lae’zel of what her queen truly was, it would be with that.

“What in the world happened to you?” Harry asked as he slipped out of the entity’s mind.

“That is a story for another day,” the entity replied. “Before you go, I have a question of my own. Why have you and your lovers become so fixated on this crisis? You aren’t infected and have no reason to continue taking part in it.”

“As I’m sure you heard us explain to Withers, it’s just something we enjoy,” Harry replied. “Coming across new worlds, getting embroiled in their messes, and having fun with them is just something we’ve really taken to.”

“True adventurers,” the entity chuckled, sounding wistful.

“You’ve known the type before, I take it?” Harry asked.

“Intimately,” the entity replied. “There’s one more thing. This Cult of the Absolute that you’ve heard about, I would wager everything that it is not only related to every terrible thing you’ve come across since you found the wreckage of the nautiloid but directly connected to the illithid as well.”

“You think that they’re behind it?” Harry asked.

“Inserting themselves into powerful organizations for the purpose of furthering their Grand Design is what they do,” the entity replied. “You won’t know for sure until you’ve confronted their goblin servants, but if I’m correct, you’ll find illithid thralls among their number. Lae’zel should be capable of recognizing them.”

“So, we’re going to end up at odds with both the Githyanki and the mind flayers,” Harry sighed. “Fun.”

“You have already come across one clue that I think will prove useful,” the entity said softly. “This Moonrise Tower that the Githyanki knight mentioned sounds important. When you assault the goblin fortress to try to rescue the archdruid and Archduke Ravengard, see if you come across any other references to the place.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry replied. “I’m glad that we finally got to meet. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Lost to time, I’m afraid,” the entity replied, and Harry kept his face blank as he recognized the first blatant lie he’d been told since he got there.

“I see,” he nodded. “Well, I’m afraid I have to go break the heart of a young fanatic.”

“Best of luck with that,” the entity murmured, watching him leave.

“Maybe if we bounce the graviton particle beams off the main deflector dish...” Luna went to say.

“What in the world are you...” Lae’zel went to ask, only to go silent as Harry appeared. “Harry.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Luna sighed. *“I had already resorted to song lyrics; if things had gone on any longer, I might have needed to turn to gobbledygook, and my accent is terrible.”*

“Did you do it?” Lae’zel asked. “Did you follow my queen’s command?”

“Lae’zel, there are a few things you need to know,” Harry replied. “I have proof that Vlaakith lied to you.”

“What?!” Lae’zel hissed. “Lies! Vlaakith does not lie to her faithful servants. You allowed yourself to be deceived by that creature. Step aside, and I will do what you could not.”

“Lae’zel,” Harry said softly, grasping her shoulder and earning a fiery glare from her. “Look into my mind and judge for yourself.”

Lae’zel flicked her teeth in annoyance and said, “Fine, show me what lies took you in.”

Harry peered into her eyes and projected his entire memory of the encounter to her. The two stood still, silent as the grave, as the young Githyanki sifted through the thoughts given to her.

“That...you show me madness,” Lae’zel spat. “Vlaakith is Mother Gith’s true heir, successor to her previous namesake and all others before her. To suggest that she lacks the power to stand against the ghaik is to suggest otherwise, and that is not possible.”

“What about the memory?” Harry asked. “She ordered the inquisitor to kill you...”

“A fabrication made up by an apostate,” Lae’zel spat. “We must return to the Ch’r’ai. He will summon Vlaakith so that she might learn of these lies. Our prisoner is held here and can be slain once I’ve heard her words.”

“She desperately wants it not to be true, but she’s not so blind as to strike against the entity without giving her queen a chance to refute him,” Harry thought to himself, nodding. This would lead to a

fight, one that he hoped wouldn't involve the entire creche, but once it was done, he hoped it would finally convince Lae'zel that her lich queen didn't have her best interests at heart, or indeed those of her people, as it turned out.

"We must return to the creche, now!" she insisted, turning on her heels and marching away.

"So we're heading into battle, aren't we?" Astarion whispered, and Harry just nodded.

As they all followed Lae'zel back to the portal, he asked, "How did things go while I was in there?"

"Luna and I *tried* to get through," Gale replied. "While Shadowheart, Astarion, Wyll, and Karlach went around looting random chests that were in here for some reason."

"You wouldn't believe how far we can jump here," Karlach grinned.

"Gravity does seem to be rather lighter," Harry murmured.

Figuring he could ask Lae'zel whether or not her people suffered bone loss in the Astral Plane when she was less focused on her treacherous queen, he followed her out of the portal, where W'wargaz awaited them, surrounded by the others who had been there before. He hadn't called in reinforcements, an oversight that was going to cost him dearly.

"Lae'zel," he spat as soon as he saw her, "you have been declared hshar'lak. Surrender for execution, and I will take your head quickly."

"What?" Lae'zel breathed. "Ch'r'ai, you must summon Vlaakith; time is of the..."

"Be silent, thrall," W'wargaz spat, drawing his blade. "The Undying Queen has spoken her decree, and you will die."

Lae'zel staggered back, realizing, to her horror, that the memory she'd been shown was no fabrication. Whether she succeeded or failed in the task she'd been given, Vlaakith had wanted her killed, and the truth of that betrayal was like a blade in her heart.

"Kill the ghaik thralls!" W'wargaz shouted, "But try to take the sorcerer and his wives ali..."

He was cut off as Ciri teleported behind him, trying to take his head in a single quick slash. Ducking under the blow instinctively, he twisted around, bringing his blade up in a powerful arc that forced her to sidestep. As those two began to trade blows, Wyll rushed at the warrior to his right, his blade at his side, and hurled an eldritch blast at his head. The Githyanki dodged to the side but stepped into the path of Wyll's blade, which skewered his sword arm through the gap in his armor by his elbow, making him drop his sword. The warlock slit his throat a second later and looked to see Shadowheart preparing a firebolt.

"Ignis!" she cried, hurling it at an archer who was taking aim.

She missed by about three feet, and Luna stepped in the way of the arrow that was loosed her way, blocking it with a quick shield spell and frying the archer with a bolt of lightning.

"Remind me to check your eyes when we're done here," the blonde said, earning a frustrated glare from Shadowheart.

“This is a perfect opportunity to test out a spell I finally managed to relearn the other night,” Gale grinned, forming what looked to be an oversized firebolt between both his hands.

Harry watched him send it flying at three Githyanki who were rushing to join the fray, seeming to miss completely, and just as he was beginning to wonder if bad aim was just the norm for magic users, the fireball hit the ground and exploded, engulfing all three of them in fire. Two of them were burned to a crisp, while the third managed to jump out of the way, being knocked down by the explosion. His helmet was knocked clean off, and before he could rise, Harry hit him square in the head with a piercing curse, spraying the floor with his brain.

“Lae’zel, snap out of it!” Karlach hissed, her flaming sword a blur as she fended off the blows her Githyanki foe was unleashing at her.

Lae’zel just stood still, staring into space as her world seemed to crash down around her. It didn’t make sense; nothing made sense. All her life she had been raised to know that Vlaakith was her people’s salvation, their divine queen who led them against their mortal enemies. She was a harsh mistress, yes, one who tolerated no weakness or insubordination from her people, but she was also generous to those who pleased her, rewarding the greatest of them with ascension.

“Lae’zel!” Karlach shouted, snapping her out of it, and as she saw one of the Githyanki tasked with taking her head fighting her new companion, she saw red and drew her own blade.

As the warrior brought his sword down in a wide arc, she caught it with her own, and Karlach immediately took advantage of the distraction, reaching out and grabbing his throat. He screamed in pain, feeling his flesh sear under her burning touch, and he frantically tried to escape her, but it was no use. She was a barbarian, stronger than most warriors, and her grip was just as great and terrible as anyone would have thought at a glance. As Lae’zel slashed off his arm, Karlach squeezed, crushing his throat, and he fell to the ground, clutching at his blackened, ruined throat as he suffocated to death.

“Your queen made a terrible mistake,” Ciri grinned, parrying W’wargaz’ slash and riposting with a thrust towards his throat.

“My queen is immortal,” W’wargaz spat, twisting out of the way of her thrust and feinting towards her legs.

He sneered when she knocked his thrust towards her head out of the way and tried to slam his head into her nose, only to stagger forward as she disappeared in a flash of green light. Harry, who had been watching the fight, vanished his cuirass as Ciri appeared behind him and in his shock over that, he didn’t manage to dodge in time to avoid being run through. The air was forced from his lungs, and his legs went limp as she stabbed through his spine, forcing him to the ground.

“Why?!” Lae’zel hissed. “I have served Vlaakith faithfully for my entire life! Why did she order my death?”

“You are...a ghaik wretch,” W’wargaz wheezed, trying to hold himself up on his sword, only to fall on his face when Luna plucked it from his hand with a wave of her own. As Ciri pulled his head up and forced him to look at Lae’zel, he glared balefully, adding, “You didn’t even...do as she ordered...did you? Filthy traitor.”

“I am no traitor!” Lae’zel roared. “I followed her protocols perfectly; I did everything I was trained to, and she declares me hshar’lak!”

“Killing me...will not save you,” W’wargaz panted. “We will hunt you...for the rest of your days.”

“AHH!” Lae’zel roared, grabbing him and punching him as hard as she could. Again and again her mailed fist slammed into his face until it was a broken ruin, his nose shattered, his teeth scattered about the floor, and his eyes swollen shut. By the time she stopped, he was dead, and they all looked in shock as she, with her eyes damp with unshed tears, stared off where Vlaakith’s projection had stood before. “Vlaakith! Vlaakith!”

“Lae’zel,” Luna murmured mournfully, heartbroken by just how devastated the Githyanki sounded.

“I have served you faithfully since I was a child,” Lae’zel said. “I have been your blade, I have been your fury; I have slain your enemies. I followed the path you set out for me and hardened my heart until it was stone, and you shatter it? Why promise ascension only to leave me crawling in dirt as the lowest of the low?”

“I’m so sorry,” Luna sighed, pulling her in and hugging her.

“Let go of...me” Lae’zel muttered, struggling against her.

“It’s okay to need a hug, sometimes,” Luna whispered in her ear, and Lae’zel stilled, finding herself neither willing to leave the blonde’s embrace nor admit that she was right.

As those two embraced, the rest of them looted the bodies of their fallen foes and looked around.

“Wait a moment,” Lae’zel breathed after a moment, pulling away. “What if this is a test of my faith?”

“Wait, what?” Luna asked.

“Yes, Vlaakith, she...she must want to see how I’ll respond to this,” Lae’zel said, fanatical desperation creeping into her voice as she slipped into easy denial. “I will find a way to prove myself to her.”

“Lae’zel, if that were true, it would mean that she willingly sacrificed one of her greatest inquisitors just to test you,” Ciri pointed out. “Does that sound like it makes any sense?”

“I...” Lae’zel stammered, faltering at that. “I must give this thought.”

“Um, pardon me, but you might want to see this!” Astarion called out, and they all turned to the storeroom he was in.

“What is it?” Gale asked, slipping in first and cocking an eyebrow as he saw Astarion panting like he’d just strained himself as he stood between a pair of statues of a man holding a golden star.

“These statues are very special,” the vampire grinned.

“They’re...lovely,” Luna murmured, “but I don’t think we’ll be able to stuff them in our makeskin pouches.”

“What? No,” Astarion chuckled. “This might be hard to believe, but I’ve been a...bit of a rogue over the centuries. I know a hidden entrance leading to treasure when I see one, and I’d be willing to wager that these statues are hiding just such an entrance.”

“I will point out that the rest of the creche is still alive and could come here at any point,” Ciri said.

“Then just teleport out, grab that stone key, and teleport back,” Astarion suggested, and she blinked at him.

“Oh, yeah, good point,” she replied, disappearing and reappearing holding the stone. “We’re good now.”

“So what do you figure the secret is?” Harry asked.

“Well, this statue here can turn around,” Astarion replied, demonstrating, “while this one is stuck. I figure Karlach might be strong enough to move it.”

“I can give it a shot,” the tiefling shrugged, cracking her knuckles.

“Hold on,” Harry said. “Years of grime and dirt are likely what’s made this one stick. Let me try to clean it, and that might help.”

He cast a quick cleaning charm on the statue and then gestured for her to try.

“Alright so...oh, this is easy,” Karlach chuckled as it spun without difficulty.

“Alright, so now we just turn them around until they face the right way,” Astarion murmured. As he and Karlach did so, he added, “I’ve seen things like this before, and they generally hide quite the substantial treasure hordes. This being a former monastery of Lathander, who knows what kind of...”

He trailed off as the far wall disappeared into the floor and let out a triumphant cry.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Karlach grinned. “Anyone up for a treasure hunt?”

“Always,” Shadowheart grinned.

“This could prove to be quite enlightening,” Gale murmured.

“It will probably be dusk soon, so there’s no harm in checking this out before returning to the Grove,” Wyll said. “Tomorrow, though, I do want to begin searching for my father.”

“Of course,” Harry nodded. Seeing Lae’zel standing in the back, her expression stormy, he murmured, “Lae’zel?”

“Ignore me,” she muttered. “The Astral Prism is keeping us safe, and all other forms of cleansing are lost to us, so we may as well focus on everything else that’s piled up over the past few days. I won’t deny that I could use a distraction just now.”

With that, they all entered the hidden passage, wondering just what they were going to find.