

Shadows of Amn / TOB (Good)

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	iii
Experimental Subject.....	2
The Circus.....	20
An Offer of Aid.....	30
No Good Deed.....	35
de'Arnise Hold.....	48
Government District.....	58
Harper Headquarters.....	63
The Unseeing Eye.....	72
Keldorn's Homecoming.....	84
Family Trouble.....	95
Disappearances in Imnesvale.....	101
Ceremonies.....	116
Jaheira's Choice.....	127
The Abduction.....	131
Anomen's Fall.....	139
Trouble with Druids.....	143
The Planar Sphere.....	152
Family and Friends.....	158
Child Murderer.....	163
The Windspear Hills.....	169
Common Cause with the Shadow Thieves.....	180
Brynnlaw.....	191
Spellhold.....	195
Irenicus.....	205
The Underdark.....	210
Ust Natha.....	215
Betrayals.....	228
Old Friends.....	236
Reunited with an Old Friend.....	242
Preparations.....	247
The Order of the Most Radiant Heart.....	251
Old Enemies.....	261
Final Battle with Bodhi.....	265
Suldanessellar.....	269
The Tree of Life.....	276
Death and Resurrection.....	281
Foreshadows.....	292
Abyssal Fortress.....	293
Preparation: Murder and Retribution.....	298

Saradush.....	303
A Traitor Unmasked.....	315
Entry's Secret.....	323
City Prison.....	328
Gromnir il-Khan.....	332
Watcher's Keep.....	334
Temple of Helm.....	338
Demon of Four Aspects.....	340
Portal Maze.....	343
Machine of Lum the Mad.....	349
The Great Seal.....	355
The Imprisoned One.....	358
Swamp Temple.....	363
The Hearts.....	368
Yaga-Shura.....	371
Preparation: Origins.....	372
Journey to Amkethran.....	378
Vongoethe.....	385
Sendai.....	390
Preparation: Prophecy's Fulfillment.....	396
Abazigal.....	399
Preparation: The Five.....	407
Balthazar.....	412
Preparation: Deathstalker's Betrayal.....	416
Apotheosis?.....	419
Epilogue.....	425
Appendix: Aerie Romance.....	429
Appendix: Jaheira Romance.....	448

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Introduction

In my opinion, the biggest improvements in Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn are the well developed personalities of the characters who can join your party, and the better developed main plot and generally interesting and involved side quests.

I thought it would be worthwhile to recreate the game's story in written form, in the game's own words. All of the dialog in the following is taken almost unchanged directly from the game itself, as well as some of the other material. In order to create a full story, I did have to invent a lead character, as well as pick a particular path through the game.

I am assuming you have already played the game itself, but you might want to read this to experience the story again, or to hear from characters you chose not to include in your party.

In order to cover all the characters in the game adequately, I have actually created two stories, despite the unavoidable overlap this causes. This story focuses more on the 'good' characters who can join your party. Another document focuses more on the 'evil' characters. Even with this decision, the game is so broad that not everything could be covered. In particular, I omitted possible romances with Jaheira and Aerie if you play a male protagonist, as well as most of the stronghold quests.

This story features the following characters, in order of appearance: Rolanna, the (invented) paladin party leader, Imoen, Jaheira, Minsc, Aerie, Anomen Delryn, Nalia de'Arnise, Keldorn Firecam, Mazzy Fentan, and Valygar Corthala. There are cameo appearances by Yoshimo, Viconia, Haer'Dalis and Cernd.

Thanks to the lead designers at Bioware, James Ohlen and Kevin Martens, and everyone else responsible for the dialog and story. I also found the Infinity Explorer by Dmitry Jemerov of some help, available from:

<http://infexp.sourceforge.net>

I ask that this document be distributed without cost, and unchanged.

Rhys Hess (rhys Hess <at> gmail.com)

February, 2001: Original version.

March, 2002: Minor corrections to Shadows of Amn materials, added Throne of Bhaal material, added appendices covering Aerie and Jaheira romances. Thanks to the team who created Throne of Bhaal (largely the same as those who worked on Shadows of Amn). A special thanks to anyone who actually reads through this entire document.

May, 2015: Minor corrections / removal of some material

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Shadows of Amn

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Experimental Subject

Rolanna shook her head, trying to clear it. She remembered pain, and the voice. The voice had spoken of power, and potential, during those moments the pain was not so intense she could concentrate on nothing else. The voice had also spoken of her as a child of Bhaal. The voice knew even that. Although the pain was mercifully absent, Rolanna had difficulty focusing on a time before the pain. She had been camping near the city of Baldur's Gate, on the Sword Coast. Before that had been a battle...her half-brother.

"Wake up, you! Wake up! Come on, we have to get out of here!" a voice, not *the* voice, said. Rolanna tried to focus on the young woman in front of her, standing outside the cage where she was imprisoned. She knew that face, that voice.

"What...Imoen? What's going on?"

"He messed with your head too, huh?" Imoen replied. "All I know is we were near Baldur's Gate and got jumped. I don't think I want to remember it all. He's been...doing things...to us. Rolanna, we have to get out of here!"

"I'm sorry," Rolanna said, still trying to overcome the lingering effects of the pain, "could you give me the long version of our history? It's like we just met."

"Oh all right, but then we have to get going. It isn't safe here. We lived at Candlekeep. It was the safest place, what with you having that Bhaal blood. You were with Gorion. I guess I came along later. I think they let us stay because Gorion had powerful friends. I wish he had said where I was before that, but he thought it wasn't important, so I didn't worry too much. Gorion was like a father, but I preferred old Winthrop. He was the innkeeper, and he taught me about keeping out of sight and such. We left when Sarevok killed Gorion. I was sorry I couldn't help, but we got him in the end. Remember that? That Sarevok turned out to be a child of Bhaal, like you? Anyway, now we're stuck in this place after getting captured by some creep that has been torturing us! Now, can we please go?"

"Doing tests? Torturing? What do you mean?"

"Come on, Rolanna, don't make me think of it. He did the same to you, I think. I heard you screaming like it, anyway."

"A little headache is not going to stop me."

"It isn't like a normal pain. Rolanna, it's on the inside, like my bones made a little dagger and it won't go away. Don't look at me like that, it just hurts, all right? Must have been the noise. There was a fight...assassins came after our captor, I think. There's people dead all over and the fighting is still going on. I could hear it." A touch of panic had crept into Imoen's voice. "Are you going to get moving or do I leave without you?"

"We won't get far on our own. Is there anyone here who can join with us?"

"Minsc and Jaheira are just northeast of us, trapped in cells sorta like yours. We should free them and then find some gear. We should look in that room to the west first, west and just a bit north. I think I saw some weapons in there. It's a room off the corner

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

of this one. I don't think it's our gear. They probably sold our best stuff, but anything is better than nothing. Now let's go!"

Rolanna opened the door Imoen had unlocked and exited her cage. Imoen was becoming more familiar. Rolanna could remember times when they had played together as children in Candlekeep. More recent events remained unclear, but it was enough for now. Rolanna moved towards the side of the room Imoen had indicated held others.

A woman, elvish by the cast of her features, stood in a cage a few steps away. As she saw Rolanna she started to speak.

"Quickly, we must get out of here before whoever did this returns. I swear, traveling with you is never dull."

Hearing her voice, Rolanna could associate a name with the face. Jaheira. Much was still unclear, however. "I may help, but refresh my memory as to who you are."

"Refresh your...?" Jaheira replied. "Perhaps you've taken a knock or two to the head. At the least I would say that not remembering me is a symptom of some deeper problem, though I would not rule out a bad attempt at humor on your part. No, we have traveled together too long for such games, and I will answer plain and true if it will help. Jaheira is what I am called, as you should well know. At the behest of your slain foster father, my husband Khalid and I have kept an interest in you, though you have proven to be your own person in all things. We remain in your company as friends more than guardians, and our exploits together have left the land for the better. We have earned many enemies, but we have dispatched them all. Whoever has trapped us now is certainly powerful to have done this so easily. Once we know, we will deal with them in due course, but for the time being it is more important we retrieve our friends and companions and leave this place."

Rolanna was able to place Jaheira now. She valued Jaheira's advice; Rolanna found it hard to work through the complexities of many situations, and Jaheira had helped on more than one occasion when she was making a decision. Jaheira and her husband were friends, second only to her childhood friend Imoen in Rolanna's remaining "family."

"Where is Khalid now? He is not with you?"

"I do not know where he is and it worries me. No doubt he was taken as we were, though it seems we were all meant for different fates. From the state of my head I think I have been drugged, though I have been spared any serious physical mistreatment. You, however, look as though you have been treated most unfavorably, and I should not like to think of Khalid receiving the same."

Rolanna fruitlessly tried the door of her cage, and looked at Imoen, who shrugged. "I will help, but your cage seems to be sealed magically."

"I don't know. If you are of sufficient strength, it is possible the cage may be broken. If not, you may have to search for whatever key it might need. Do try to hurry, I wish to be out of here before the owner returns. The ease of our capture suggests it may be beyond our power to resist. It would be best to face the culprit another day on our own terms, so go and be quick. We must free ourselves soon."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

A man, bald, with a painted head, occupied the cage next to Jaheira's. Rolanna figured she must be recovering, because she recognized him. The man was Minsc, a ranger from far off Rashemen. He had not been one of the encamped group, of that Rolanna was sure. She wondered how he had come here, and if his companion Dynaheir was here as well.

Minsc, noticing Rolanna's interest, gave voice to his frustration. "Ah! Minsc will be free! These bonds will not hold my wrath! Butts will be liberally kicked in good measure!"

"I remember traveling with you," Rolanna said, "but how did we get here?"

"Our travels are the stuff of legend! Our victories the subject of song! How could I not follow to find my friends after they disappeared? I know not who has done this, but I will avenge most viciously the wrongs they...the wrongs...Dynaheir! I will cave their skulls for what they have done!"

"Dynaheir? Is she trapped here as well? I have not seen her."

"Trapped?! Her spirit...her spirit is trapped in a cage created by my failure. I was to guard her, but she...she... They...they killed her as I watched, you see? I know not who they were, but...but I will redeem myself!"

"Minsc," Imoen interjected, "that is horrible! I am so sorry for you."

"I won't cry for the dead! I won't! OK, maybe a little, but I will staunch the flow of tears with righteous fury! Lullaby and goodnight, evil! Minsc will make you pay! Will you help me? We must join together once more, and our fury will be such that bards will run their quills dry! Yes, ink will be scarce where e'er we go!"

Rolanna examined his cell, but it didn't even appear to have a door. "I will try and free you, but I don't know how to open your cell."

"I do not know either. The bars have no lock at all, they are smithed together. I am proud that they feared me enough to imprison me permanently!"

"Permanently?" Rolanna replied doubtfully. "That's going to make this difficult."

"But you will keep looking, of course! You would never give up, I know this! A hero always succeeds and a hero never stops short of his goal!"

"She also needs the key or switch! I don't know where they are!"

"You...have brushed me aside with your words. You won't help... Boo can see it now! You do not intend to cut my chains!" Increasingly upset by Rolanna's inability to help him, he continued to work himself into a berserker rage. "You only intend to yank them! I will make sure you do not live long enough to abandon more friends! I will...I will...I will do all of this as soon as I get these bars open! *Rraaaaarrgh!!* The bars! They bend and twist with my berserker strength! Minsc and Boo are free! Now you will... Now..."

Minsc visibly calmed. "Ooh, you are a smart one. I understand now! You said what you did just to get me mad! Mad enough to break free! You are as smart as Boo

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

sometimes! Now we can resume our adventures together! There are friends to avenge and villains to smack about the face and neck! Right Boo?"

"Together we shall make our enemies answer for our fallen," answered Rolanna, glad of another companion.

"Answer they will, and my sword shall be the question! We shall have fistfuls of sweet, sweet justice, and our enemies will be stains beneath our feet! What...yes but... but...alright. Boo tells me that I am raving again. I did not notice a difference, but I shall heed his words nonetheless. Come, we must go now. Yes, Minsc and Boo and you, together again. Beware villains! I will force justice down your evil, evil throats!"

Belatedly, Rolanna remembered that Minsc, besides being skilled with weapons, was a little strange. Specifically in his relationship with his "companion." "Ah, I see you still have that...rodent. Dare I ask how you have kept it hidden from our captors?"

"Don't ask questions better left to aged sages. Boo is quick and evasive and there is ever so much of Minsc to search, there is no hope of getting us apart."

"Eww," Imoen commented, "I... really don't want to think about that too much."

"Minsc and Boo are Minsc and Boo, and we shall not be separated. Shall we go? The butts of evil await my boot-print!"

Minsc was also skilled at raising everyone's spirits. Rolanna smiled as she replied, "Right you are, Minsc! Where e're evil dost lay its dirty feet we shall mop the floor with its buttocks!"

"I have lost myself in your words but Boo thinks you're just ducky."

Rolanna, Imoen and Minsc made their way to the room nearby which Imoen had mentioned. Inside, they were surprised to find a construct, formed of soft stone and shaped into a vaguely humanoid form, although taller than any human. The construct began to ponderously speak in a deep voice.

"Prisoners...you must not escape...the master does not will it."

"Wow, a golem," Imoen said. "Powerful magic stuff. Odd that it's not hostile. I suppose its maker didn't expect us to escape so it never got orders for restraining us. They only do exactly what they are directed to, they don't really think. If it hasn't been told to keep quiet we might get some information out of it."

"What your master wills matters not to me, golem. Where are we and why have we been brought here?" Rolanna asked, trying out Imoen's advice.

"You are his prisoners," the construct replied. "He has brought you to his home because he owns you now. You must return to your cell. It is the master's will."

"Who is this master that you speak of?"

"I am not permitted to speak with prisoners. Return to your cells. It is the master's wish."

"I will not return to that cage. Do you think to stop me from leaving?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I am not bound to stop you. The guardian will stop you from leaving. Return to your cells. It is the master’s wish.”

“Who or what is the guardian?”

“The guardian will keep you from the master’s chambers. You must return to your cells. It is the master’s will.”

Realizing she was unlikely to get more from the golem, she and the others searched the room, turning up some armor, weapons, and a key! Rolanna quickly hurried back to Jaheira’s cage, where the key opened the door of her cage.

Jaheira practically bounded from the cell, full of suggestions. “Well that is a relief, and about time too. We should be going immediately. Not only might our ‘host’ come back, I simply must see the sun again in none too short a time. This dank place stifles me.”

“We will leave immediately, and celebrate once we are out of this hole.” Rolanna was anxious to learn more of their captor, but even more anxious to put herself beyond reach.

“As you would have it, though there are other friends we must find as well. It is good to share your company again.” Jaheira was obviously referring to her husband, Khalid.

Starting down a hallway leading from the room with the cages, there were bodies of several black-hooded thieves littering the hallway, evidently slaughtered by a massive release of magical energy. Distant explosions could now be heard; seemingly, whatever battle killed these men still raged. Minsc stared at the bodies, a disapproving expression on his face.

“A den of stinking evil. Cover your nose, Boo. We will leave no crevice untouched!”

They passed through a small room with a curious machine that had to be disabled, than came into a larger room, a close-range bow-shot across. Mineral deposits and crystals dominated the room. It was a natural cavern that this strange prison had been built around. The air held an aura of power and several pools with swirling lights graced the edge of the rough cavern.

Rolanna approached one of the pools. As she peered into the pool, a void opened and icy tendrils pulled at her awareness, demanding that she submit. In horror, she looked away and the tendrils receded. The pool once again was calm.

Despite her experience, Rolanna looked into another. The pool churned and swirled. Strange lights danced within. As she stared at the pool, she caught a glimpse of a cityscape. For a brief moment, with absolute clarity, she watched as the city changed. Ages passed and the inhabitants dropped their primitive tools and ways. Discoveries were made and the minds of the people changed and grew, everyday grasping a new fact or invention. The image slipped away until she saw only a pool.

Intrigued, Rolanna looked into the last pool. The pool drew her to it. Within its depths, she saw a wondrous sight. A strange and beautiful city rose before her eyes. Metallic buildings reached as far as the eye could see and people of all races mingled and

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

lived in harmony. Extraordinary machines carried them about their daily business. Reluctantly, she drew her eyes away from the serene image.

An inoperable door blocked one exit from the crystal room. Going down the other passage, the party came to a room off the corridor. It contained about a dozen clear tubes, mostly filled with what looked like failed experiments on humanoids.

As the party entered the room Imoen suddenly stopped. "I...I know this room. I've been in here...we both have. He...there are things in these tanks. They used to be people... What kind of monster is this guy? Captures us easy as pie, kills whoever he wants...that could have been us in those glass things."

"We'll get him back, Imoen," Rolanna replied. "We'll make him pay for all of this."

"We don't even know where we are, and my head is still doing funny things... He said something...something about potential. He said something like 'releasing power within you so it could be used,' but if it means taking part in horrible things... I don't like this place. Can we go?" If any of the creatures in the tubes still lived, they gave no evidence of it. Rolanna quickly granted Imoen's wish and left.

The next room contained one tube. Its occupant proved livelier, speaking as they entered. "Aaaaaa...who be thee...servants of the master?"

Rolanna was shocked that the...human in the tube was alive. "By the gods, what happened to you, man?"

"I am...dying...or dead... I remember not which. Where is the master?"

"Who are you?"

"It is difficult to...to remember... I was Rielev...dead, I think."

"I'm not sure that I understand what is going on here. Are you living or dead?" Was Rielev's master creating undead, Rolanna wondered?

"Neither, neither. I am...between...the master has forgotten me...not killed me."

"What do you mean by forgotten? Why are you in this...jar?"

"I was a...faithful hound to the master. A friend, even. I was...dying...or dead, I cannot remember which. Truly you are a stranger to this place. Eternal...life...was to be my reward for faithful service. The master has suspended me until he can cure me... return my youth to me..."

"He has forgotten you, then, hasn't he... But if you were a faithful servant, why?"

"I begin to understand." Rielev paused a moment, then continued. "The master has left my side for study of another. He seeks to awaken power...a study of life and death, but I cannot bear the roll of years. He has forgotten because he does not wish to remember...what was taken... I barely remember, myself."

Rolanna was filled with pity for the creature in the tube. "Do you want me to give you a release from this non-death?"

"Release, yes... Master! I no longer wish to come back! Let me slip into the oblivion that has been denied me! This...unit that contains me is powered by cells, by crystals.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Take them and I can sleep...die...again die at last. I know you are prisoners. Some things do not change. You must escape this place and the master's experiments. There are others...like me but of more recent experiments... They may know how the master exits the complex. Will you take these cells to revive them and learn what you can, in return for this path to freedom I have offered ye?"

Rolanna squatted down to examine how the cells were mounted. "I will take the cells and revive the other servants. Have peace at last."

"I thank thee...go and leave me to oblivion at last. Sweet sleep..." Rolanna removed the cells. The slow circulation of liquid within the tube abruptly stopped.

Imoen examined the tube, her hand shaking slightly as she ran it over the surface. "He's...he's dead now? This pathetic creature... I can't look away, Rolanna. I have seen death in our scuffles before, but here I did nothing but watch his life end... I can't look away."

Rolanna put a hand on her arm, drawing it away from the tube. "Death is not always to be feared, I guess. I would not wish to live like that."

"Death is...pretty. Why would I think that? Oh, Rolanna, I've got to get out of this place."

With the power cells they went back to the room with multiple tubes. There was no change in a couple of tubes when the power cells were attached. Rolanna tried a third one, and suddenly a tortured voice could be heard.

"Gwwwaaa...Master? Master, is that you? I can barely see. It has been so long and I have been so alone. All alone."

"I am not your Master," Rolanna replied. "Can you hear me? Do you hear me speaking?"

"I did not mean to go into the Mistress' room! I knew it was dangerous, so very dangerous, in there! I was not trying to steal anything, truly! I was not trying to steal anything of the Mistress'. I would never do that, I am faithful to you always! Why am I here, Master? What has happened to me?"

"You do not hear me, do you? How very sad what has been done to you."

"Was I hurt in the Mistress' room, Master? I can remember nothing. Is the Mistress' room truly so deadly? I am sorry, so sorry. I will never do it again, Master. Please save me! Please! I am so sorry, Master! I will never do it again! I serve only you!"

Rolanna tried the power cells on several more tubes before getting a response. Another tortured servant cried out.

"Ah, so long have I lain. Behind this prison of glass do I weep and rage."

"Who are you, may I ask? Can you tell me anything of this place?" When the tortured voice began again Rolanna realized this one also could not hear her.

"I have called out so many, many times to thee. Master! Master! Why hast thou forsaken me? Why hast thou left me in this bottle to wither? Why? Master, thou didst place me here out of kindness, but thou hast forgotten me! Have I simply slipped from

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

thy thoughts? Master, please hear me! Thou couldst not cure what was done, but surely thy magicks have increased, Master! Thou didst care for me once, let me help in thy search...do not forget me here forever! Pleaaaaase!"

Rolanna shook her head, muttering, "You poor creature, I can do nothing for you."

"Why hast thou forgotten? This is no boon, Master, please do not leave me! Ah... glass and thoughts for eternity, pain and loneliness for a destiny! Why, Master? I long only to hear thy words once more. Why? Whyyyy?"

"I would hate being forgotten in a bottle," Minsc observed. "It might depend somewhat on the type of bottle, but overall I expect the effect would be similar. It is not right."

Rolanna removed the power cells, trying them on more tubes. At the far end of the room she was rewarded for her efforts with a scream.

"Eeeeyaaah! The light! Ages of weariness, ages of burning! My Master, I beg of you! It is burning me! My skin is afire with the crawling of ants! Oh, please, Master, save me! I am not like your djinni to be coiled within a bottle for, for, ah!"

"What is burning you, friend?" Rolanna tried again to get some response. "And who is this djinni that you speak of?"

"Please, Master! The ants! Does your djinni have nothing of yours that may aid me? Ah! I, I will take the statue and speak to him, myself, if you will but let me! Please give me the statue, Master! Aah, the pain crawls along my skin! Aid me, Master! The djinni must have magic, must have something! Oh, please, the pain! Ah!

"Your long anguish has driven you mad, I see. I wish there was something I could do."

"Aah! The burning!" Rolanna removed the cells, muting the creature's anguish.

Rolanna decided they needed to take some time to rest, despite the danger. Jaheira needed a chance to replenish her druidic powers, Rolanna time to regain some of the stamina lost to the tortures she had undergone. She suspected Imoen did as well, although she hadn't indicated she was tired. The party retreated to one of the rooms they had earlier passed, and barred the door.

"I've got to hand it to you," Imoen commented, "you sure have some kind of courage to sleep in this place. I would have run screaming a dozen times over if you weren't here."

"It seemed safe enough," said Rolanna. "No one has taken serious notice of our escape."

"Seems like we're not important enough to worry about. I'm just not up to this like you. We're alike because of Gorion, but I prefer being in the background."

"Perhaps, though I remember you not hesitating to step up front when needed."

"Well, when people are in danger, sure. Winthrop taught me how to get out of trouble, but Gorion always said there are times when it's worth getting into it."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Back when Gorion was alive, Rolanna thought. Much happier times. "Do you remember much about him? My memory is still fuzzy."

"He was a great mage, and supposedly a great adventurer. It's funny; we lived with him for years and Jaheira seems to know more about him."

"Nonsense," Jaheira said, "he was secretive with everyone. We just had...mutual acquaintances."

Imoen glanced at Jaheira, then back to Rolanna. "I guess he was a big friend of the Harpers. Even got a visit from Khelben 'Blackstaff' once. Real powerful mage. Talked to Gorion like an equal. I wish we could go back to those days, before all this fuss and bother. Before I learned... Well, we've seen so much. Candlekeep seems so small now."

"There wasn't much to go back to with Gorion gone."

"We still had friends there. They were proud, even if they didn't show it. Winthrop said so. He always thought Gorion was too stuffy. I don't know though. Ooh, my head still hurts and I keep thinking I see...things in the corners. Too much death here for my liking. It's in everything, even us. We won't be able to just walk away, you know. The guy that captured us...he knows about you. He said something about potential, something about great power. Rolanna, say we won't look back. I don't care if he can 'tap the power' or access whatever avatar stuff. We've gotta get away from all this death."

"I have no intention of looking back. Our 'host' has proven his evil intent."

"Means a lot to hear that. I can't stand all these shadows..."

Refreshed by the rest, the party moved on. A short maze of passageways ended in a library. A quick fight defeated the goblins and mephits waiting in the room.

Imoen stared about the room. "Oh, this reminds me so much of Candlekeep. Dusty old tomes all over, bookcases nearly spilling, it's like we never left. But we did, didn't we. Rolanna, I just want to go home again. It doesn't matter where it is, just so long as I can call it home."

A quick search of the library revealed a few scrolls. The party then moved onward, coming to another room after about fifty steps. There were what Rolanna thought to be half a dozen dwarves in the room, although they were not as bulky as the dwarves Rolanna was used to.

One of the figures cried out. "Be alert, laddies! We've got company. Ho, prisoners! Ye've come to th' wrong place, I tell ye true! Ilyich and 'is boys'll stop you!"

Rolanna attempted to forestall conflict. "Would that I knew where this place was. I've no quarrel with you."

"Suffice to say," their leader replied, "this place is your doom. By the time the master returns you shall be dead and we shall be rewarded. At 'em lads! No mercy!"

Despite a mage among them, their opponents did not have the muscle to back their threats, and were quickly defeated. As the party left the room Imoen moved closer to Rolanna to make a comment.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Those dwarves that attacked us; I read about them when you were skipping out of lessons back in Candlekeep. Duergar, I think. Kind of evil, I guess, so I’m not surprised they would be working for our captor.”

“He tolerates some company,” observed Rolanna, “or are they little more than skilled packhorses to him?”

“I doubt he cares for anything more than the quality of knives they make. He has a lot of them... I’m going to have scars from this...looks like you will too. As if I need another reminder. Rolanna, I don’t care what power this guy thinks he can tap in you, he’s just sick to the core. We can’t ever look back.”

They followed a passage that ended in a sumptuously furnished sitting room. Comfortable looking chairs, a couch, even a fireplace.

The party stood gaping at the entry to the room when Rolanna suddenly had a sense of imminent danger. Something here was not what it seemed. She cautioned Imoen, who used her thief skills, slowly moving across the room examining everything carefully.

Imoen found several traps and disarmed them. Besides the way the party had entered, there were two exits from the sitting room. One led to a second room with a strange transportation portal, which the party could not activate. The other led to a small wooded area. The incongruity of a woods underground did not surprise Rolanna; it was already obvious they were dealing with a mage of considerable power. As the group entered the wooded area, three dryads in fact appeared.

“Protect me!” cried the first.

“Yes, help us!” added the second.

Rolanna quickly looked from one to the other. “Slow down! Who are you and what is going on here?”

“We are his possessions,” said the first.

“His servants,” added the second.

“His concubines. Please help us to escape!” pleaded the third.

“How can I help you?” asked Rolanna.

“If you can escape,” explained the first, “you must take our acorns to the Queen. Tell her of our plight in this creature’s lair.”

The second dryad looked at the first, then added “Take them to the Fairy Queen who lives in the south end of the Windspear Hills. This will be our deliverance from this...this Irenicus and his dungeon!”

“So,” interjected Jaheira, “I see we have a name for our captor at last. Irenicus, is it? Tell me, dryads, why this Irenicus would go to such lengths to keep you three here.”

“We are supposed to instill emotion,” replied the second, “but he is barren inside. I am not sure what he expects.”

“You can foil his plans for us at least,” appealed the second to Rolanna and Jaheira. “If you take the acorns to the Fairy Queen then she can regrow our trees and free us!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The third dryad became excited. "If you take the acorns to the Fairy Queen then she can regrow our trees and free us! She lives in the south end of the Windspear hills! Will you do this for us?"

"I will take your acorns to this Fairy Queen," agreed Rolanna. She remembered she had found seeds on Ilyich, showing them to the dryads. "I believe that I have the acorns you are talking about."

The second dryad commented, "We will help you escape! You must use the portals to travel up to the next level of the complex. This is how Irenicus travels. The portals are triggered by a certain key."

"He uses Her key," added the third dryad. "He still loves her, you see. He keeps her room just as it was, though well protected. We go there sometimes and look at her things."

"May the forest always open a path for you!" chanted the first dryad. The other two dryads disappeared back into their trees. Imoen looked longingly at the first dryad.

"So beautiful! I used to dream of dryads and their beautiful trees."

"You are welcome among us, girl," commented the remaining dryad. "Youthful exuberance is music that we have not heard in such a long time."

"I used to dream," replied Imoen, "but he doesn't. Your charms don't work on him anymore, do they?"

"How do you know of this? He has touched you as we, hasn't he? Irenicus searches for something he cannot find, and he looks within those that have no more idea than he."

"Irenicus..." mused Imoen.

"A name that is synonymous with death and ugliness," replied the dryad.

"No, death sounds different. He showed me..." Imoen paused, the dreamy expression vanishing from her face. "I spit on his name. I spit on this place."

"Live as you can where you must, young woman. You will not survive if you give in. We have learned this."

"I have learned...something different. So beautiful you are. I almost can't see you. I just want to go home. Oh Rolanna, when can we go home?"

Rolanna, too, wished she were home (although she wasn't certain what constituted home since leaving Candlekeep). But first they needed to escape this prison. The party returned to the room beyond the wood, the bedroom the dryads had mentioned. As they looked into the room Imoen was moved to comment.

"What...what is this place. It's beautiful. Oh, there is simply no way that this space belongs to the same person that owns those horrible glass containers."

"Perhaps it is simply a side of him we have not seen," Rolanna replied.

"No, it can't be. Not the person I know. This...this bed, that table... I know of them. He would...he would speak of them while...while he... It's for a lost love, kept in perfect condition. She...she despises him. This is his monument to her. He spoke of all of this,

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

but...but his voice was cold... No emotion at all, not even remembered. He spoke of these things even while he cut...he cut...and the spells that wove through my brain... cold, ugly things!"

Rolanna hugged Imoen. "He cannot hurt you now. You are among friends."

"It still hurts," Imoen said, her head pressed into Rolanna's shoulder, "his sick fingers are still in my head, doing whatever it was he started. I see blood...and death... behind my eyes... Irenicus... This room: if he could care for anything he would care for this room. Above the lives of all of us. It makes me sick. I feel...I feel...so much hate. I would burn this place, but it is nothing. Even as it means so much, it is nothing. Let's do what we must and get out of this place, it is making me sick."

After a moment Imoen was composed enough to continue. The room was searched for traps and anything that might help them escape. Among what was found was the portal key the dryads had mentioned. Returning to the nearby portal, the key was used to activate it. The party found themselves elsewhere.

They stood in another room, containing the mate to the portal they had just activated. A man already occupied the room, dressed in leather armor. His features had a strange cast to them with which Rolanna was not familiar. The man spoke.

"So there is sanity in all of this madness. If you are not in league with the evil that dwells in this unholy place, Yoshimo begs your assistance."

"We serve no evil mages," declaimed Minsc, "no sir! But Boo looks upon you with suspicion, little man. How is it you come to be here? Never have I seen Boo's whiskers quiver so!"

"I am not sure how I came to be here...like you, I suspect. I have been trying to find my way out, but I was wounded in my attempt to do so."

Rolanna regarded this Yoshimo with mistrust. "Tell me, how did you come to be trapped here?"

"It is actually quite uh...embarrassing. My profession does not leave itself open to those who are not wary yet, somehow I was caught unaware. I came to Athkatla years ago from Kara-Tur to seek my fortune. At some point, I went to bed in my room at the Copper Coronet and I awoke in a strange room with a very sore head. I do not know how long I was there before awaking." Rolanna knew Athkatla was the capital of Amn, south of Baldur's Gate.

"Do you think that we are in Athkatla?"

"I am unsure. I may have been drugged when I was brought here. I may have been unconscious...either way, I do not know how long. If it was the former, this place could be anywhere. If it was the latter, then I don't imagine that I could have traveled very far without noticing."

Minsc had decided he liked this man. "Then you too know the hardship of being set into a maze like a helpless hamster! We are comrades in peril! Boo asks what you propose we do next, little man."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I do not know a way to escape this place. Perhaps we could search for this exit together."

Rolanna, however, was not convinced. His appearance seemed too coincidental. He appeared to be a thief, possibly associated with the thieves who were attacking this place. Even if this were true Rolanna didn't subscribe to the theory that the enemy of her enemy had to be a friend. In the current circumstances she felt she needed to be able to rely on every member of the party.

Rolanna indicated to Yoshimo that he was not welcome to join. Doubtless, if he were anxious to leave he would skulk behind in the shadows as the party made its way forward.

The four of them moved into the next room, defeating more mephits in the process. On a table at the far end lay a body, horribly slashed. Everyone moved towards the table, drawn by a gruesome curiosity. Jaheira suddenly gave a horrified gasp of recognition.

"Kha...Khalid? Khalid! No...this...this is an illusion...a dream...a bad dream. Where are the mirrors...the switches to pull to...to show where he is hidden. Khalid... Damn...damn you... Damn you! I will have the heart of who has done this! I will tear their blackened heart from their... I will...I... no."

Rolanna was nearly as shocked. "This isn't real, is it? He couldn't be dead?"

"Shut up! No more words! Words are nothing!"

"A brave man has fallen here," said Minsc, holding little Boo towards Jaheira, "but that is no cause to hurl insults at the living. Here, Boo shall comfort you."

"Imbecile!" screamed Jaheira. "Affront to nature! What do you and your rodent know! What can you know! No words! No more words! Save your speeches, save your proverbs! The only voice I wish to hear is...is dead! No more! No...no... Sil...Silvanus guide the light...to the source. Take this man to what he justly deserves. By...nature's will, what was given is returned, what was turmoil is now...is now peace. Khalid of my heart, let my love...my love guide the way... We...we must hurry before we are noticed. We must get out of this...this grave...and seek the light above. Let us go."

Rolanna wondered if there was nothing to be done for Khalid. "There may be a way to get him returned to life. Should we not try?"

"He...Khalid...is dead, and has been so for some time! Beyond a point there can be no raising, especially when the body has been...has been desecrated! We live in a time of miracles, and nature allows the rebirth of many that have passed beyond the vale, but there is a time when...when it is better to let go." Rolanna would have been willing to try more, to attempt to carry the body with them hoping for a miracle once they left this prison. However, she was willing to follow what Jaheira wanted.

"Then we will not disturb his body further. We will honor his loss with future deeds."

"That is the way of things. There will be...there will be payment for this crime, and I shall not rest until it is collected. When we are able, there will be... Enough. I would leave this place."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Jaheira,” Imoen began carefully, “I want to say how sorry I am about Khalid...I... know this is hard...”

“No, you do not know. This is not the time for this conversation, child.”

“Stop calling me child,” said Imoen, a touch of harshness hardening her manner. “I’m as old as Rolanna, and besides, I can tell you that Khalid did not suffer.”

“What are you babbling about, Imoen? I am not in the mood.”

“I’m not babbling! I saw him do this! Khalid was dead when our captor started... doing those things to him!”

“You saw this? You watched as it was done?”

“He...he showed me. He cut and...and showed me. He forced my eyes open and made me look as he...”

“Stop, I don’t want to hear this.”

“He said I should see, so I would understand, but I don’t know what he wanted! He would cut and say ‘Do you see?’ Cut and say ‘Do you see?’ ”

“Be quiet, child! No more!”

The sound of breaking glass came through a doorway off the room the party occupied. Rushing into the room, the party saw a woman cast a spell at a thief before her, killing him. Light from above cast harsh shadows across the woman’s face, but it was still obvious she was very beautiful. More tubes filled with experimental subjects lined the walls; the one behind the woman was shattered.

Seeing the party enter, the woman turned to Rolanna, “Ah! Thou hast come once again to prey upon me, my ‘Master!’”

“I am not your master, dear lady,” replied Rolanna. “Is there aught that I can do for you?”

“Do for me?” The woman’s face reddened in rage. “Do for me?! After all that thou hast already done!”

Jaheira attempted to intercede. “We have done nothing to you. I see you are an elf... We are prisoners here, as are you, perhaps if we could—”

“Lies! Lies! Thou hast created me in *her* image, but I am not *her*! I am not! And I shall ne’er let thee touch me again! No more death to rise again not *her*!” The woman began to cast a spell. The party tried to retreat from the room, but she followed. Minsc swung his sword, catching the woman in the side. She fell to the floor, dead.

Looking inside the room, the tubes along the walls were each filled with a woman, some only partly formed. Where the faces were visible they matched that of the woman who lay dead.

“What a tortured creature that clone-thing was,” commented Imoen. “She was a copy? A copy of another person? I wonder why Irenicus made her? I doubt he took pleasure in her company; he’s beyond that. He’s fascinated with death. He showed me... over and over...”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The group continued through the complex. Looking in one room off a large hall, Rolanna saw a woman threatened by three of the invading thieves. Rolanna signaled the others to move forward to help the woman. Entering the room, she had a better view. The pale-complexioned woman seemed unafraid. The conversation that could now be overheard put the whole matter in a different perspective.

“Ah, excellent,” said the woman. “I see I am to be provided fresh blood, for once. Let me have a taste. Come.”

“Where is your master, fiend?” replied one of the thieves. “We seek Irenicus. Give us the upstart and you shall survive!”

“Already am I dead, thief. Join me in darkness...”

“Enough! Kill this creature and raze the guild. Irenicus shall learn of what it is to betray the Shadow Thieves!”

The thieves attacked the woman, but almost immediately she practically tore one of them apart with her hands. Recognizing the true danger, Rolanna and Minsc surged forward to help the remaining thieves. They managed to hack the creature down, but not before the remaining two thieves had died.

Before their eyes the woman's corpse transformed to mist, which floated away. Rolanna wondered whether Irenicus had created the undead creature, or if this was evidence of some foul pact. No answers were to be found here, that was clear.

The party found themselves moving down a passageway; they were on a platform, waters below. A thief stepped out in front of them.

The tall, rangy man in worn leather spoke, “Ahah! I knew there had to be reinforcements down here. Couldn't be that powerful by himself, I said! I'll just put an end to this here and now. We'll see the end of Irenicus and your little guild war before this day is through.”

“Guild war?” questioned Rolanna. “What are you talking about? I just want out of this dungeon.”

“You can talk all you wish, but it will do you no good. Everyone in this place has either attacked or tried to lie their way into my confidence.”

“I have no reason to lie. I just want out of here.”

“And I shall deliver you. Fall upon our blades and spells and you shall be free. You and Irenicus will fall and then the war is won!”

Several more “Shadow Thieves” appeared from the shadows and attacked. A vicious battle ensued, breaking into a series of individual contests with no front line. The party emerged victorious, but badly battered.

Fortunately, the exit to the complex was near. The party followed a tunnel, littered with the bodies of Shadow Thieves, which sloped upward into the welcome glare of daylight. Such was their relief that they barely noticed the debris at their feet, the remnants of a battle fought only moments before. Surveying the carnage the group heard a scream of rage, and a massive explosion collapsed the passage behind them. The sounds

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

of combat greeted them as they struggled to their feet. The fight, it seemed, was still going strong.

A figure who had to be Irenicus faced several Shadow Thieves. He spoke, "You dare to attack me here?! Do you even know whom you face?! You will suffer! You will all suffer!" He unleashed a storm of magic that slew all his opponents who were not quick enough to flee.

Rolanna was still stunned by the effects of the blast, unable to rise from where she crouched on hands and knees. Imoen was less affected, and despite her fear, she rose and faced Irenicus. The tall figure she faced, dressed as if trying to hide from the world in his ill-fitting robes, regarded her.

"So godchild, you have escaped. You are more resourceful than I had thought."

"You're not going to torture us any longer," replied Imoen.

"Torture? Silly girl, you just don't understand what I'm doing, do you?"

"I don't care what you're doing! Let us go!"

"I won't let you leave, not when I'm so close to unlocking your power."

"We don't want anything from you!" Imoen used what magical knowledge she possessed, flinging magical energy against the figure before her. Irenicus ignored Imoen's attacks, as though she were throwing soap bubbles.

"Enough, I will no longer listen to the babbling of ignorant children."

Suddenly, five cowled figures appeared about Irenicus. One of the newly arrived figures spoke.

"This is an unsanctioned use of magical energy! All involved will be held! This disturbance is over!"

Irenicus was obviously not impressed. "Must I be interrupted at every turn! Enough of this!"

Irenicus and the cowled mages traded magical spells. Again, Irenicus appeared unharmed. The mages he faced were not so lucky; several fell, new comrades appearing to take their place.

"This mage's power is immense," said one of the mages "we must overcome him quickly."

"Enough," said Irenicus impatiently, "I haven't the time for this."

"You will cease your spellcasting and come with us," said another cowled mage, although he and his fellows appeared unable to force their will upon the figure in front of them.

"Your pathetic magics are useless. Let this end." However, Irenicus, too was stymied, at least for the moment. Faced by so many opponents, it was hard for him to concentrate on one mage to take him out. Even when he did so, another would appear in his place.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Even if we fall,” said a cowled mage bravely, “our numbers are many. You will be overwhelmed.”

Irenicus suddenly stopped casting offensive spells. “You bore me mageling. You may take me in, but you *will* take the girl as well!”

“No!” cried Imoen. “I have done nothing wrong.”

A cowled wizard addressed her for the first time. “You have been involved in illegal use of magic. You will come with us!”

“I’m not going with him! I’m not!” Imoen turned to Rolanna. “Help me! Please!”

Rolanna stumbled to her feet, and interposed herself between Imoen and the others. However, it was too late. Irenicus, Imoen and the living cowled mages disappeared in a burst of magical energy.

“No, this cannot be!” cried Minsc. “The murderer of Dynaheir flees from righteous butt-kicking vengeance! And he takes Imoen with him, too! Something must be done, Rolanna! We must find this evil wizard! All that is goodness cries out for this! Even little Boo, although he cannot cry out quite so loudly.”

“I find it odd,” said Jaheira, “that this Irenicus would leave of his own volition. And why take Imoen, when it is Rolanna he is so obviously interested in? Perhaps he expects us to give chase? We must step carefully, then. We know little about him...who he was fighting, who took him or even where we are. We seem to be drawn into machinations not of our own making.

Minsc turned to Jaheira, violently shaking his head. “No! We must go quickly and save our friend Imoen! The wizard may be leering over her evilly even now!”

“Do not be foolish, Minsc,” replied Jaheira. “We must know our enemies, and the extent of our danger, here, before we rush into anything.”

Rolanna, Jaheira and Minsc were able to pay attention to their surroundings for the first time. They were in a large, oval amphitheater. The sloped sides, where normally seating would be located, was instead given over to stalls and shops literally carved into the walls of the amphitheater. The level center of the amphitheater contained platforms and gaily colored tents of a circus. The party was standing on a partly collapsed section in the perimeter caused by the recent fighting. Through the gap in the structure this left they could look out, seeing they were in a large city.

A man dressed in armor, one of the local garrison, approached them. “I don’t want any trouble from you, here. I saw you enter with those folk...just a good thing for you that only that girl used magic, otherwise you’d all be in prison.”

“I need to find that girl you mention,” said Rolanna, “do you know where the mages would have taken her?”

“She wouldn’t have been brought to the city’s prison,” replied the guard. “We don’t have the facilities to keep such powerful deviants. The Cowled Wizards, on the other hand, do. Where they would keep magic-using prisoners, I don’t know. No one does. And I doubt they would tell you...the use of magic is illegal, and that means she’s a criminal.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna wondered about the other group that had fought Irenicus. "What do you know about the Shadow Thieves here in the city?"

"They're nothing for you to worry about, citizen. I wouldn't suggest you involving yourself with their type."

Rolanna turned from him, looking over a small group of those either too curious or too foolish to flee the recent display of magic. Rolanna approached a noblewoman.

"Greetings to you," said the woman. "Did you have aught to do with the spectacle that I just witnessed, hmm? No doubt more warring peasants in that guild business."

"I'm a friend of the woman that was taken with the wizard. Do you know who took them and where they went?"

"The girl was a friend of yours? Well, she was a spellcaster, and so both she and the other were taken away by the Cowled Wizards."

"Take care, Rolanna," said Jaheira. "I have heard of these Cowled Wizards. Spellcasters of the highest order, the only magic-users allowed here in Amn, I believe."

The noblewoman agreed with this. "Undue practice of magic is forbidden here, naturally. Where the wizards would take your friend, however, I do not know."

"And where might 'here' be?" asked Rolanna. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"Ah, I thought you must be outlanders from your accent and garb. Welcome to Athkatla, the City of Coin."

Athkatla, the capital of Amn, thought Rolanna. So they *were* there. "I see. Did you happen to witness everything that happened here?"

"Not much, my Lady. Everyone here in the Promenade was quite frightened when the wizard began fighting those men, the ones in black. The fire and lightning had us all running, and much of the Promenade here has been destroyed. It is good that the wizard was arrested for his recklessness."

"The Promenade?"

"Yes. You are in Waukeen's Promenade. If you are looking for more answers, you will find others of your ilk at a place called the Copper Coronet in the slums. No disrespect intended, naturally."

"You mentioned guilds? Why would you associate that with the violence here?"

"I am not as distanced from the workings of the city as some nobles might be. I have heard the mutterings of our stableboy and his kin. Thieves rule the nights, and war against those that would take it from them. It would not be unusual for it to spill unto the day."

Rolanna thanked her, and turned away. Jaheira fell into step alongside her.

"I know this place...these buildings. Yes, that person was assuredly correct; this is Athkatla. We are in the state of Amn."

"I would have thought," replied Rolanna, "my enemies would have come from closer to home."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I was wondering the same, though we are not all that far from home and organizations can span continents. Perhaps it is not an individual that seeks our heads. Whatever our enemy, we should keep low for a while. Perhaps at the docks or out of town. I may know a few places.”

“You seem to know this place fairly well. How do you come by this information?”

“You may have never been here, but I have. Those who Harp tend to travel. Khalid...Khalid and I came here...well, let us just say I have been here before. I do not know the city well enough to give directions though. We will have to seek out the slums. Perhaps we may find who holds Imoen still. Khalid? Silvanus let him hear my vow... If I must, I shall empty this city of all within to find his killer... So do I swear.”

“A fine sentiment. I will aid as best I can.”

“It is my wont to do this, and I shall see that it is done properly. If you would assist, more the better. If not, be prepared to stand aside.”

The Circus

Jaheira considered Rolanna for a few moments before changing the subject. “Well, we have the whole of Amn around us. What course shall we take?”

“Are you asking for a geographical or moral answer?” replied Rolanna.

“Moral, most definitely. I must watch the overall balance of things, and you may figure largely in the tipping. It is because of...what you are. I was merely curious about how you are coming to terms with being a child of Bhaal? It is important for you to take the right path.”

“Who will judge what path is right for me?”

“Ultimately you will, but others like me have to deal with the outcome. I am Harper, you know this. I should hate for us to end up on opposite sides of a coin.” Rolanna didn't see how this could happen. She relied on Jaheira for advice, and considered her a close friend. They might disagree on short term tactics, but surely they agreed Rolanna's choice of the paladin's path was the best long term strategy to counter the effects of her tainted blood.

The party moved down onto the level ground at the center of Waukeen's Promenade. They moved around a long circus tent. Rounding the side, they saw the entrance, with an Amnish guard standing nearby. Rolanna attempted to peer past the soldier at the interior of the tent.

“Hold!” cried the guard. “This tent has been closed off for your own safety, citizen! The circus has been closed until this matter is resolved.”

“Why?” asked Rolanna. “What has occurred, here?”

“We are not exactly sure. There was no problem until a show was scheduled earlier in the morning. Apparently the show began well enough...and then something occurred. Nobody has come out of the tent who went in for the show...and everyone we have sent

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

in to investigate has not come out, either. Foul magic is, no doubt, involved here. We are waiting for the Cowled Wizards to arrive. They will be able to solve this, I am sure.”

“Nobody at all has gotten out?”

“Well...we have been told that one of the animal trainers darted out after the show began, but we have not been able to find him as of yet.”

Rolanna was intrigued by the situation. Here appeared to be a well-defined evil, which she was well qualified to handle. There was another consideration as well. Rolanna was unknown in Athkatla, doubtless save for rumors floating down from the north of a battle between children of the Lord of Murder. It would be well to associate her name with reputable actions.

“Hm,” she said after mulling these considerations over in her mind, “I can handle myself. Perhaps I can solve the problem, here, for you.”

“Very well, then. I’ll not stop you if you wish to risk yourself, citizen. You were warned.”

“It is no risk!” enthusiastically added Minsc. “Not so long as we have swords and braveness to the brim of the tall glass of goodness! Right, Boo?”

A child standing nearby who had overhead this conversation came up to Rolanna, previously shed tears still wet on his cheeks. “My momma’s still inside. They says she can’t come out.”

“What are you talking about, child?” asked Rolanna.

“My momma went into the tent to see a show. But somethin’ happened and now nobody comes out. There’s guards who won’t let nobody in anymore, too. But my momma’s in there! I want my momma!”

“I’ll go and see if I can find your mother, alright? Just calm down and be brave.”

“O-okay, ma’am,” sniffed the child.

“We must help this child!” said Minsc. “I will find who took his mother and teach them a thing or three about decency, respect, and keeping their hands off of peoples’ parents!”

Before going into the tent Rolanna decided to search out the animal trainer the guard had mentioned, one Fearghus. Rolanna found him nearby. He was muttering to himself, and did not notice her approach until she was practically next to him.

“Aiiieeeya!” cried the surprised Fearghus. “Oh! Ah, oh. You startled me, please forgive me.” He shuddered.

“What is the problem?” asked Rolanna.

“The p-problem? I was in the circus tent, and I g-g-got out just in time! Just in time to save my life!” He gasped, still trembling. “Oh, it was t-terrible!”

“Relax and tell me what happened from the beginning, friend.”

“Well, I g-go by Tatu the Tiger Tamer. I was g-going to put on my sh-show this morning, b-but it got delayed because of a special p-performance. I don’t know who the

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

performer was. I was so mad about b-being delayed, you see, I stayed in the b-back of the tent and p-prepared my tigers. Their bodies began shifting right before my eyes! The tent was disappearing, being replaced by...things I had n-never seen before! I ran for the exit. I escaped j-j-just in time! I'm the only one who c-came out, and no one who has g-gone in has come back. The th-things I saw. Horrible!"

"Are you sure you don't know anything about this 'special performance'?"

"N-no. Somebody came who the b-boss knew, and wanted to do something sp-special. I don't know who it was or why this happened."

"What kinds of things did you see when you fled, Fearghus?"

"I, I'm not sure. People were changing, I could see it with m-my eyes. Like their skin was m-m-melting. The whole tent was being replaced b-by something else, like we were b-being moved somewhere. I d-don't know." Fearghus visibly shuddered again, and turned away.

They returned to the circus tent, and entered. Rolanna was surprised to find she was standing on a winding path, leading to a larger tent than the one she had just entered. Behind her no exit was visible. Part of the powers granted to her was the ability to pierce illusions. She tried this power here, to no avail. The situation was worse than she had expected. She decided the party needed a short rest to recover magical energy and prepare for what might lie ahead.

After resting, they started forward. A short way ahead was a bridge, at the top of which awaited a djinni.

"Aha!" greeted the djinni. "I see a wayfarer has come to amuse Kalah! You must answer a riddle, naturally, ere I will allow you to pass this bridge. Are you ready to hear it?"

The name meant nothing to Rolanna. "I'd prefer to know who this Kalah is before I play any of your games."

"Kalah does not reveal himself to those who are not worthy. Are you ready to begin?"

"Before I begin, tell me why would I want to pass over this bridge." Rolanna wondered if her statement actually made sense. After all, there was an obvious reason to cross the bridge.

"Because it is symbolic of your progression to enlightenment and understanding, fool. Are you ready to proceed?" Rolanna hadn't considered these reasons, didn't even understand how crossing a bridge could equate to them. Nonetheless, she needed to cross.

"Very well, I am ready," said Rolanna.

The djinni launched into a complicated question about the ages of a prince and princess. Rolanna became lost before he was half through. What, she thought, did this have to do with enlightenment? And who was this Kalah to judge her, anyway?

"I surely don't know," Rolanna brusquely answered the riddle.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You will get nowhere, my friend, if you do not make an attempt. Being as benevolent as the mighty Kalah, however, I will allow you another opportunity. Here it is then, my friend: The poorest have it, the richest need it, but if either was to eat it they would certainly perish. Tell me what it is!”

Rolanna did not even bother listening to the question this time. “I do not know.”

“Fool! Can you not even guess? The answer is ‘nothing!’ If you eat nothing you will perish, naturally. And perish you shall, because Kalah suffers no fools!”

The djinni attacked, was quickly defeated, and the party moved forward, entering the tent before them.

An ogre stood inside the entrance. It addressed them, not with the deep, halting voice one might expect of an ogre, but with the high, lilting voice of a girl. “Who are you? Oh, whoever you are, you must flee this place at once! He...he’s killed everyone else who has come into this place, almost! Oh, please run!”

“Who are you talking about?” answered Rolanna. “Who’s killed everyone?”

“Oh, I don’t know what he’s done, exactly, or how...but everything here is an illusion! But it’s magic that can hurt you, if you believe in it... Oh, you probably don’t understand, do you? I...I don’t know what he’s done to the tent or with the others who have come in, but their deaths are real! You must run!”

“Just who are you? How is it a monster has the voice of a young woman?”

“I...I’m not a monster! I’m an elf, a winged elf...or at least I was... This...this covering you see is some kind of illusion, but if you believe in it then it becomes real! Please believe me! Now go before something happens to you, I beg of you!”

“I’ve never heard of a winged elf, what are you talking about?”

“I...I come from a race of winged elves...although there aren’t many of us left. From the Sundabar Mountains in the far North. My wings were cut off a long time ago, though... But...but that isn’t important! This place is too dangerous! Go back to the city and warn everyone what is happening here! You must flee!”

Rolanna had no intention of fleeing. “Who is behind all of this, first?”

“Kalah!”

“I’m not going anywhere until I get a full explanation,” interjected Rolanna when the girl ogre hesitated.

“Oh, I hope you don’t end up like...like the others! But, alright...m-my name is Aerie. I...work in the circus with my uncle, Quayle... I don’t know exactly what happened, but everything changed a few days ago...everything became chaos and turned into what you see here. Although it all isn’t real, it’s an illusion... The minions...they all say they serve Kalah, so I know he’s behind all of this... He’s an illusionist in the circus, but I don’t understand how he was able to do all of this! He must be stopped! Before he hurts any more people! Please...if...if you release me from my chains, I can help you stop him!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Why can I not just dispel the illusions of this place?” Rolanna was curious why her attempts had failed earlier.

“I don’t know...I tried, earlier, when this first happened. Kalah’s spells are too powerful, somehow. He’s...he’s never been that good, though, so I don’t know what he’s done... If you free me, though, together we can find out and stop him! And...and hopefully rescue my Uncle, Quayle...”

“But I don’t see any chains on you...” wondered Rolanna.

“The chains are invisible...covered by the illusion. And...and they are magical... they prevent me from casting my own spells and they maintain the illusion which is placed on me...”

“Very well, how do I release you from them?”

“You...you need the key to these chains. But...but it won’t look like a key! There are a couple of...commoners...in the north side of this chamber... Don’t be fooled by the illusion, though...they are monsters! They have a sword which is actually my key...if you get it from them, I can remove the chain and regain my normal form! But please be careful! You...you can’t trust anything you see, here!”

Rolanna led the group towards the area indicated by Aerie. Almost immediately they encountered a giant spider. It was not too surprising when the creature addressed them.

“P-please don’t hurt me! Oh, what am I to do?!”

“You,” answered Rolanna haltingly, “don’t seem like any creature I’ve encountered before.”

“I’m *not* a creature! Or, at least, I never used to be! Not until the circus and everything changed!”

“Well, who are you then?”

“My...my name’s Hannah. I came to the circus with my son, although he didn’t come into the tent with me. Oh, please help me!” Rolanna wondered if this was the mother of the boy she had seen outside. Yet another reason to meet this Kalah.

Continuing on they found a man and woman. Perhaps predictably, the only two creatures who looked human were in fact monsters. After defeating them Rolanna took the key-sword Aerie had mentioned off one body. When they returned the girl ogre was relieved to see them.

“You...you have the key! Or, rather...the sword! Please...please give it to me and I can be rid of this illusionary form at last!”

“Aye, as you wish,” answered Rolanna.

“I thank you for your trust. This sword...it is actually a key that unlocks the chain that powers my horrible illusion.” Rolanna handed over the sword. As Aerie touched it, she began to transform, becoming a young elf.

“My...My hands...my skin, it’s real again! Thank Baervar! Oh, we must find Quayle...and stop Kalah before he does any more harm!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Join with us and we will search for him together in this place,” said Rolanna. Surely Aerie would be as safe with them as anywhere.

“You would let me join you? Al-alright...come, let’s find Quayle. Who knows what they’ve done to him...”

It was good that Aerie had knowledge of magic. Rolanna and her companions were lacking in that area. It was also important that Aerie fully understand what she was involving herself with.

“I think you should know, Aerie, that my ultimate goal is to rescue a friend of mine...Imoen...who has been captured by the Cowled Wizards. It could be dangerous.”

“Oh, I would be glad to help you, truly I would...but we simply must help Uncle Quayle, first! We must!”

Jaheira and Minsc introduced themselves to Aerie. With Aerie, the group now numbered four. They proceeded to the exit from the tent, opposite where they had entered. A voluptuous woman dressed in a revealing garment stepped forward to greet them.

“Welcome, Lady, to Kalah’s realm. Be thee not of impure mind for surely Lord Kalah shall destroy thee. Be thee not of impure heart or thou wilt surely destroy thyself. Kalah is the one Ruler, the One True Being.”

“Who exactly is Kalah and where is this realm of his that I have come to?” Rolanna was getting increasingly anxious to find Kalah.

“Kalah is beyond thy ken, mortal! He is the Beginning. He is the End. He is our God and our King. Tremble before him and he may take pity on thee.”

“I am my own person and not this Kalah’s possession.”

“Bow before the will of thy betters, mortal! Kalah’s rage is awesome to behold. Let not thyself be found in its path.”

“Where can I find Kalah?”

“Worry not, Lady, for Kalah has already found thee. Continue on thy path and if thee should find favor in Kalah’s eyes then thou shalt surely be granted an audience.”

They passed through the exit, into a stone-walled room, not another tent. In the room were a few shadows and partly-illusionary creatures that they dispatched. As they took a quick break after the combat Aerie studied her new companions.

“This light makes your hair look really pretty, Jaheira,” said Aerie.

“Don’t be a fool, it does nothing of the sort,” replied Jaheira.

“But—” stuttered Aerie.

“Put your silly romantic notions aside, Aerie,” interrupted Jaheira. “This isn’t some childish fantasy, nor some grand adventure. Any one of us could die out here at any moment.”

“But we can go to the priests and—and they raise us from the dead again, as good as new, can’t we?” was Aerie’s innocent reply.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Sometimes they don’t come back! Sometimes some people, no matter how much you love them and no matter what you try to do, get...they get taken away. You’re young, Aerie... You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Rolanna put a hand on Jaheira’s arm. Aerie wasn’t to be blamed for not knowing about Khalid.

The party proceeded through more of Kalah’s illusionary realm. They came to a room that contained several more shadows and illusionary beasts, a gnome, and a jelly, one of a fearsome class of monster whose formless bodies were difficult to destroy. By the logic of this realm the jelly monster should be friendly and the gnome must be Kalah.

“Ah, my beast,” said Kalah, looking at Aerie, “you have led them here nicely...”

Aerie was confused. “What? I’m not—”

“You’re not what? You’re not my beast? Oh, but you are, all of you are, don’t you see?”

“Wha—What have you done to my Uncle Quayle?” asked Aerie.

The jelly was the one that replied to her. “Little Aerie, is that you? I have no eyes, no eyes!”

Aerie looked from the monster that was her uncle back to Rolanna. “Be careful, Rolanna. Some of these beasts are real and some are illusions. There’s no way to tell until they hit you.”

“Yes,” said Kalah, “it’s a regular three-ring circus, isn’t it, my beasts... Now go ahead and tear each other apart!”

In the melee that followed Aerie thoughtlessly moved towards her uncle, presenting an easy target for the illusionary beasts. Rolanna and Minsc moved to flank her, but they had difficulty keeping the creatures from attacking Aerie. Jaheira had a more direct approach. She moved up to Kalah, bringing her staff down on his head in a two handed blow.

Kalah collapsed. Suddenly the party was standing in the small circus tent they had originally entered. Quayle and several other circus patrons were standing nearby in their normal forms. Jaheira went to help the wounded Aerie, while Rolanna knelt down near Kalah.

“No!” coughed Kalah. “This isn’t what was supposed to happen! This isn’t what was promised to me! I have...planned this for...too long only to have my plans shattered by some inbred, northern adventurers! I...I just wanted to be respected...”

He coughed again, a trickle of blood running down his forehead. “You’ve...you’ve killed me...destroyed Kalah with your misplaced morals and beastly greed for adventure...”

“What has passed here, gnome?” asked Rolanna angrily. “You replaced the circus with your personal playground?”

“You fool! You...you truly know nothing... I am Kalah, an illusionist. I was made a clown-mage for the pleasure of the tall folk...but I bided my time...and I was...promised

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

a world I could rule... In Amn...a mage is a criminal and a gnome is a spectacle. In this tent...in my world...Kalah was the master, where none would dare to laugh..."

"What of the circus employees, Kalah? What have you done with all those that have disappeared into this tent?"

"Indifference killed those fools from the circus. I treat them in death as they were to me in life. A gnome gets no respect... I just wanted people to look up...to me. All that I have done..." The gnome slumped back to the ground, dead.

Meanwhile, Jaheira was treating Aerie's wounds. She was also dispensing free advice. "You mustn't let yourself get so wounded, Aerie. I won't always be here to bandage you, you know."

"I'm a healer too, Jaheira," protested Aerie.

"And what good are your spells now?" asked Jaheira rhetorically. "You should be more frugal and not cast them all at once."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," was the stuttered reply.

"And don't stutter, it doesn't become you."

Jaheira and Aerie moved over to where Rolanna crouched beside Kalah.

"What...what a pitiful little man," said Aerie. "Everyone did laugh at him...but they didn't deserve to die. I...I just can't hate him, despite all he's done."

Jaheira stared down at the body. "The gnome is dead. How he was able to perform these great feats of illusion will have to remain a mystery, it seems."

Aerie turned from the body to Quayle. Her frown became a wide smile as she saw he was alright.

"Uncle Quayle, you're okay!"

"Ha!" he replied. "I knew Kalah would trip over himself, eventually. I'm just pleased he despised me enough to play with me rather than dispose of me like some of the others!"

"Oh, Quayle!" said Aerie. "What would I ever do without you?"

"I...I think you need to find out, my dear. I've taught you everything I can. It's time, Aerie...time for you to learn the rest on your own."

"You...you're the wisest and the smartest and the kindest man I'll ever know."

"I wasn't always, my dear. You changed that, Aerie. But I can't keep you here for myself forever."

"Oh Quayle, I would miss you!"

"Then you shall have to come and visit me from time to time and tell me what you've learned. Go...go with my blessing, girl."

"Alright. Take—take care of the circus while I'm away."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Oh, don't worry about me. If you find happiness, maybe the pain of losing your wings will be lessened...nothing would please me more. Be well, my Aerie.”

Rolanna came over and took Aerie's hands in her own. Aerie was inexperienced, but no more so than Rolanna herself when Sarevok had struck at her. Perhaps Rolanna could in some measure pay back the guidance her foster-father Gorion had given her by helping the elf in front of her. Aerie would remain part of the group.

Rolanna looked over at Aerie's foster father. Rolanna had met a gnome named Quayle in Baldur's Gate, a sarcastic individual overly impressed by his own intelligence. She didn't think Aerie's foster parent could be the same one, but was unsure, since to her all gnomes tended to look the same.

A woman standing nearby came over to thank Rolanna. She explained the party had encountered her earlier in the form of a spider. She was glad to be free.

“Legs and hands, I have hands again! I am free of this horrible place! Thank you so much! I must...Giran! I hope my son hasn't gone far. Momma's on her way!”

Minsc was overcome with joy with the course events had taken, exclaiming, “Aaghghh! We are all heroes, you and Boo and I! Hamsters and rangers everywhere rejoice!”

Rolanna, Jaheira, Minsc and Aerie exited the tent. The Amnish soldier was still there. He greeted them.

“I just wanted to thank you, citizen, for doing such a fine job. You've saved us more than a little trouble with that gnome. The city thanks you, truly.”

Night had come to Athkatla while the party tarried in the tent. There were still a few lights visible around the perimeter of the promenade from businesses still open. As they hurried towards the nearest lights in hopes of finding an inn three figures became visible in the darkness ahead. Then one, no two, collapsed and did not rise.

Rolanna drew her sword and rushed forward with her companions to see what had happened. The two figures on the ground were dressed in hooded cloaks and leather armor. The standing figure was a woman, without visible weapon or armor.

“No,” hissed the woman, “you are not to see this yet. You have not chosen your side. When the time comes, obey. Obey, or you will join the thieves in death. Such is the will of the mistress.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Rolanna, “Why were you fighting these people?”

“Such things are not for you to know...yet. When the time comes you will know much, and if the Mistress bids it, you may also live.” She suddenly transformed into a bat and flitted away before anyone could react.

Rolanna examined the bodies. On one body was a note.

Proclamation of warning to all guild members:

The Shadow Council itself decrees that all chapters should be on their guard against the upstart assassins' guild usurping our membership. The lure of coin is

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

naught but bait, and it is suspected that the end of those that have defected has been most bloody. No guild can rival the Shadow Thieves, so any that claim as such must have darker motives. You have been warned of the cost of treachery.

Obviously the bodies were former members of the Shadow Thieves. Rolanna thought she could place the woman now. She must be a vampire, one of the most dangerous of the undead, and similar to one they had already encountered while escaping Irenicus' clutches. Rolanna wondered how the conflict of the Shadow Thieves and this new guild was related to her conflict with Irenicus.

They moved away from the bodies. After much searching Rolanna was able to find an Amnish guard, telling him of the location of the two bodies. She didn't bother to mention the vampire; there was little chance the city guard would be able to bring such a creature to justice. One of the lights they had seen earlier proved to be from an inn, by its sign the "Den of the Seven Vales."

While Rolanna and Jaheira arranged with the owner for rooms a commoner accosted Minsc.

"You there! You with all the scars and muscles! You look like you can heft a sword well, you should be joining the army and serving your country!"

"Minsc and Boo fight with swords and teeth for goodness," said Minsc, "not for countries. We are heroes, not soldiers, funny man."

As the group headed for their rooms a drunken Amnish guard made a pass at Jaheira.

"You! You're comin' wish me...to me room...or you're under arresht..."

"Perhaps you should go and soak your head within a bucket, guard, before you attempt to address me again." The guard attempted to grab Jaheira, but missed, and stumbled past her. She ignored him as she continued on her way.

Rolanna's sleep was troubled that night. She dreamed Imoen came to her, speaking of their shared past, of Candlekeep, Gorion and Sarevok. Imoen also spoke of Irenicus, probing her for whatever it was he wanted. Rolanna moaned. Irenicus, also, appeared in the dream, tempting her with...she wasn't sure. Not from him, Rolanna thought in her dream.

Rolanna awoke, starting half out of the bed, her brow beaded with sweat. She couldn't quite recall what had been said in the dream, except for one sentence of Imoen's. "You will come too late." Rolanna lay back down, concerned that the dreams which had troubled her before she defeated Sarevok had returned. She managed a fitful sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning the party ate breakfast in the common room of the inn. As they finished Minsc decided now was a good time to share his opinions with everyone present.

"We do good things here! All will remember the heroes that are Minsc and Boo and you!"

"Er, yes," said Rolanna, embarrassedly looking around at the other patrons. "Now let's get going before we draw a crowd. No need to flaunt our deeds."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Nonsense! All enjoy the sight of heroes. We’ll be the talk of the town for days! Wave to the nice people, Boo. Wave to the nice hamster, people. Wave!”

An Offer of Aid

Rolanna hurried the group outside the inn. Waukeen’s Promenade was busy with shoppers and those who catered to their needs. Rolanna moved through the crowds, looking at what the various merchants had on offer. As Aerie attempted to keep up she commented, “I...I never saw much of the cities from the circus. Are they all so crowded like this?”

A tout was shouting out the virtues of the shop in front of which he stood, The Adventurer’s Mart. Rolanna decided to go inside to see what they offered.

A few customers wandered among the aisles. Rolanna moved towards the proprietor, who was standing behind the counter. A dwarf standing in front of the counter was talking to another patron.

“I be fresh from the sailing ship,” the dwarf said. “I am. Recently come from the Moonshaes. Arr, choppy seas, it is.”

“Brelm,” interjected the proprietor, “you’ve never been on an actual ship once in your entire life.”

“Ye’re goin’ to keep openin’ yer mouth, ain’t ye?” Brelm replied.

The proprietor noticed Rolanna. He greeted her.

“Ribald Barterman at yer service. The Adventurers’ Mart is the finest shopping in all of Faerun...widest selection, lowest prices, and nary a fancy illustration. Just the goods, bare and plain.”

The dwarf, Brelm, turned to Rolanna as well. “I’ve known Ribald here since... hmm...since that l’il adventure there in Shadowdale. Isn’t that right, Ribald?”

“I never met you in Shadowdale, Brelm,” replied Ribald. “You got drunk here four months ago and haven’t left.”

“Arr, don’t be listenin’ to him,” said Brelm, winking at Rolanna. “What does he know?”

Jaheira stepped forward, nodding at Ribald. “Greetings to you, good sir. I trust all is well?”

“It is...well enough, Miss Jaheira,” said Ribald. “Ye’ll not bring Harper trouble to me doorstep, good lady... Might I remind ye that me days of involvement with yer kin are long over?”

“I am not here in an official capacity, suspicious one,” said Jaheira. “There is no need to worry.”

“With your kin there always be a need to worry...but I should mind me manners. Please excuse me.”

“I was wondering if I could ask you a couple of questions,” asked Rolanna

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You certainly can,” replied Ribald. “What’s on your mind?”

“A friend of mine has been taken prisoner by the Cowled Wizards. Do you know where she would be kept?”

“Ah, too bad. A friend came in from Riatavin about a year back, a mage named Terce. His mule had gone lame, and he’d summoned a floating disc to carry his supplies. They captured him, of course. Terce should have known better... I’m sure he thought a disc was harmless enough, but those wizards are strict about their licenses. I tried looking for him, but the Cowled Wizards aren’t easy to find...nobody knows where they stay, here. And they never let out where their magical prison is. It’s a travesty that the Council gives them so much power. Mystra only knows what they do with their prisoners. Wish I could help you more, but I never heard from Terce again.”

“You mentioned something about a license?”

“The ban on magic-casting only applies to the ‘disreputable’ masses. And in Amn there’s only one barometer for the well-to-do: coin. You got enough coin, the Cowled Wizards are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. And why not? They get rich and if you cause a problem they arrest you anyway. It’s not a bad deal, though...once you’ve paid them, they tend to ignore you. Try the wizard Corneil at the government building in the Government District if you’re interested.”

“What do you know about the Shadow Thieves?”

“It’s not an area I keep up with. They run the Docks...the man to talk to is called the Bloodscalp. Word has it they’re in some kind of fight right now, but who knows?”

“Ye should be wary if ye wanders into th’ Dock District,” interrupted Brelm, “‘tis an area ruled by the thieves, it is. Nary a guard in sight. Watch fer thieves in the slums and docks, me friend. Me...I be not worried. Killed three last week, I did.”

“You mean you were pickpocketed three times last week,” Ribald couldn’t resist correcting.

“Now, I don’t be telling stories about ye, now, does I?” objected Brelm.

Rolanna looked around at the selection in the Adventurer’s Mart. There were several items she thought might be of use, but the prices far exceeded her current resources. Regretfully, she left the shop.

Outside, Rolanna stopped at a stall displaying weapons. The proprietor, noticing her interest, said “Aha! Maheer thinks you are just the sort of customer he was waiting for. Perhaps you are interested in weaponry? Maheer thinks you are.”

“I take it that you are Maheer?” asked Rolanna.

“Indeed I am! Maheer yn Kadar el Saddith, most recently of Rashemen, at your service!”

“You are coming from Rashemen?” asked Minsc. “I remember it fondly and hope to take Boo to see it once I have completed my dajemma.”

“Aha! Boo is your witch, then, I take it?” asked Maheer.

“No. Boo is my hamster. And Boo is my friend,” was the reply.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Momentarily flustered, Maheer tuned back to Rolanna, who made a few purchases.

The party continued to weave their way through the stalls of the promenade, occasionally stopping to make small purchases. A red-faced customer at one of the stalls turned and fastened his gaze onto Minsc.

“You! Have you ever been cheated, here? I bet ye have!”

“Nobody cheats Minsc! If somebody dares to cheat me they are in for a boot-stomping adjustment to their moral value systems!”

They came to an exit from the busy area. It was time to have a look at the rest of the city. As the group exited from the promenade a man came up to Aerie, gesticulating violently.

“You! Another of that foul race of elves I see before me! How dare you walk openly amongst us!”

“B-but I...I have done nothing against you!” stammered Aerie. “Why do you rail at me so?”

“You are an evil creature! You and all your kin, lewd pagans among us! Admit your pride, elf! Admit it!”

“I...I do not understand why you do this, sir, but I have done nothing to deserve it. I will not stand to have you cast such insults at me.”

“Will not stand?” ‘Will not?!’ Yet more elven pride! You elves are like ants... mindless and alien as you crawl about us!”

“Rolanna, can we just leave, please?” she pleaded. “I truly do not like this man.”

Rolanna was furious, but for Aerie’s sake walked away without comment. The party wended its way through the twisting streets, each neighborhood they entered poorer than the last.

“Coo!” called out a man leaning against the wall of a tenement. “You’d be the one I be looking for, if I not be mistaken. Rolanna be yer name, aye?”

“Yes, I am she.” Obviously someone had been keeping track of Rolanna’s movements.

“‘Tis not what I want, but what I can be doing for ye. You might be wanting information about a young lass arrested by the wizards on your arrival here, aye?”

“You’re talking about Imoen?” asked Rolanna suspiciously. “What do you know about her?”

“Now, Imoen, aye...that be her name. Young lass made the misfortune of castin’ a spell or two in a city that frowns on such business. Bad timin’, it was. You be thinkin’ ye wants to find her, then?”

“Of course I want to find her! What do you know?”

“Coo! I knows very little meself, me Lady. I can, however, link ye up with a group that knows. Or can be findin’ out. But this be not the best place to hold such a dialogue. I

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

be having a place that would suit far better. It be just a short walk from here. Why don't I take you there right now? Unless you have some reason for not wanting to come along?"

Rolanna thought she might as well find out what he wanted. "Yes, show me to your home."

"Coo! Come with me then." He told her his name was Gaelan Bayle, and started down one of the garbage strewn streets. He came to a door in a house that didn't look quite as run down as its neighbors, and entered, Rolanna and the others following behind.

"Coo!" greeted Gaelan again when they were inside. "It's good to be seeing ye once again, me Lady! I see that ye were able to keep up with me alright, eh? I was afraid I'd lost ye there, heh..."

"Don't dawdle," said Rolanna impatiently. "I have to find Imoen and make sure she's all right."

"Aye, I'll be doing that quick as ye blink. I tell ye straight that I know a powerful group that can be helping ye. They can be findin' the wizard and the young woman both, they can. But they can be doing far better than the tellin', my friend. They can also affect the rescue of your lass, or the capture of the mage, to boot."

"They can rescue Imoen? Of course I'm interested!"

"Ah, good, but you should know that it requires my friends to cross the Cowled Wizards. Not something ye would be able to do on yer own. Tsk."

"All I need is to know where she is. I can handle the rest on my own."

"Ye might think this, but I be tellin' it isn't true. Without my organization there be nothing ye could do. Choose, then, if ye be wanting their help or nay."

"Very well. I do want their help in rescuing Imoen, then."

"Ye has the 20,000 gold pieces as a payment for it, then?"

"20,000 gold pieces! That's an outrageous sum!" Rolanna had just escaped from Irenicus' imprisonment, minus her gold and equipment. It could take months to raise such a sum.

"Outrageous, is it?" replied Gaelan. "'Tis a lot, but ye ask me friends to go against the wishes of th' Cowled Wizards. I told ye it not be a thing to be done lightly."

"Is there no way to lower the cost?"

"None. It be 20,000 gp or me friends canna' be helping ye."

"I do not have that much...how am I supposed to raise such an amount?"

"I am sure ye have spent as much in the past and will again. Surely there be work in the city for ye. Or perhaps some of yer expensive goods to sell?" He paused a moment, rubbing his hands, as though that detail was already almost disposed of.

"Brus'll be waiting for ye outside. He's me nephew, an' he'll show you to the Copper Coronet. Ye'll find work easily enough there, ye will. A Lord Jierdan was inquiring about you, I think. Fare ye well, then...an' give me greetings to Lehtinan if ye happens by 'im, heh..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The proposal was made, and Rolanna had a goal, albeit a distant one. Her new "friend" had assured her that passage to Imoen could be bought, though she was certain the final tally would include much more than gold. Any help was welcome, however, and while the cost might be steep, her path was clear. Finding Imoen would lead to Irenicus, and to answers long overdue.

Rolanna was sure this Gaelan Bayle must have some relation to the Shadow Thieves that were fighting Irenicus. She wasn't pleased by the thought of an association with the Shadow Thieves, and perhaps if she could find another means to reach Imoen it wouldn't be necessary.

As they exited Gaelan's home an urchin tugged on Rolanna's arm.

"Hoy! You'd be the one I's watchin' for, aye? Uncle Gaelan told me to give you a bit o' help to find some work. Listen up, eh! Yer some noble type, right? Hmm...I hears there's this rich feller lookin' to hire a hero like you to clear the monsters offa his land. He's in the Copper Coronet...some Lord Jierdan or other. I could takes ye there, if ye likes."

"Certainly," answered Rolanna. "I'll see what this Lord Jierdan has to say."

"Okay, then...make sure to stay close, 'cause I don't have time to wait for ya."

The boy, whose name was Brus, led them to the Copper Coronet, two worn doors and a weathered notice board the only indication of its existence to passers-by. "Here ye be. I'm sure ye can find the rest of yer way from here, aye? Off ye go."

* * *

Elsewhere, Irenicus and Imoen were led before a leader of the Cowled Wizards. Magical wards were carefully maintained by their guards, to prevent any use of magic by the captives. Imoen walked slowly, her shoulders slumped. Irenicus' walk was bold, as if surrounded by an honor guard, not jailers. One of the guards spoke.

"These are the prisoners from the disturbance at Waukeen's Promenade."

"What is known?" asked the Cowled Wizards leader.

"Naught but their names. The mage is Jon Irenicus. The girl is Imoen."

"I didn't do anything," protested Imoen, "he did it all, I had..."

"Silence, child," Irenicus interrupted. "Allow the fool to make his judgment."

The leader glared at the guards. "Why was this man not gagged? Did he not slay four of you?"

"We dared not approach," said one guard.

"Regardless, in the end he came willingly," temporized a second.

"What should be done with them sir?" asked a third.

"They are deviants. Let them rot in Spellhold," was the unhesitating reply. A momentary swirl of magical energy and the prisoners and their guards were gone.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

No Good Deed...

Rolanna entered the Copper Coronet. Jaheira cautioned her, "This place is not a friendly one. Be wary of who you deal with." Jaheira had some knowledge of the inn from her previous visits to Athkatla.

"Why, what would anyone here wish from me?" asked Rolanna.

"Perhaps not here as such, but you are still a valuable commodity. There are those that know of the Children of Bhaal, and they may desire...services from you. I do not wish to alarm, but always remember what you are, and that you may be tested from time to time. I feel it is my job to warn against such things."

Three ruffians standing near the door moved slightly to block the party's entry into the large common room. One glared into Rolanna's eyes. "Look at th' dolly girl, all sacked up like an 'adventurer.' Are ye supposed to be tough or something, aye?"

"Back off," growled Rolanna, "I've no interest in causing a disturbance."

"Oh, o' course not. Yer a goody-goody, ain't ye? An adventurer, prancin' through th' forests!" He glanced at his two companions, enjoying their approval of his joke.

"Enough of this. I've no wish to cause any trouble, sir." Rolanna had no desire to fight fools who had no idea what they were inviting.

"Oh, 'sir,' is it? Ha ha! I was right, yer a bleedin' coward! Admit it!"

"I'll admit to nothing," said Rolanna in growing anger. Her anger was a "gift" of her status as a child of the God of Murder. She throttled it back, in a routine with which she perforce had had to become familiar, steadying herself with a deep breath. Calmer, she continued speaking. "And I refuse to continue this sparring with you."

"Poor baby!" replied the ruffian, playing up before his comrades. "Poor little girl! Going to run home to yer mother, aye? Oh, yes, ye are a scary one! Ha ha!"

"Yes, I am leaving," replied Rolanna. "Wallow in whatever satisfaction that gives you."

"Ye are! Ye are! I bleedin' coward amongst us! Ha ha! Very well then, coward, be on yer way. Come back when ye're ready to face a real man! Ha ha!"

"Aye," said one of his friends, "come back when ye can face a real man, fancy girl! Ha!"

"You knows it, Amalas! You knows it!" said the other.

This was too much for Minsc. "You insult Rolanna and you insult Minsc! There will be liberal butt-kicking, now!"

Minsc moved to draw his sword, but Rolanna grabbed his arm, forcing his hand away from the hilt. She then forced him forward past her hecklers. Her great strength was another, more neutral, gift as a god child.

Another man blocked Rolanna's path. Young, dressed in armor, she also noticed he was quite handsome. He addressed the party. "Strangers! Perhaps you have more courage

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

than the worms that frequent this pit of corruption. I am Anomen, warrior priest of Helm. What is your name?"

"I am Rolanna. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Well met! Speak then! Is your heart filled with courage or be it steeped in cowardice?"

"When there is cause for courage, I have it in abundance." Rolanna hoped he hadn't overheard her altercation when entering.

"Tell me, then, Rolanna, be you a force for evil or good?"

"I am a force of righteousness."

"Perchance I have found worthy companions. I seek to be knighted in the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart and I must prove my worth, first. Have you need of a strong sword, my Lady?"

"I would be infinitely pleased to have you join me. Welcome!"

"Excellent! Adventure and honor await us both!"

Rolanna was happy to get another companion on her quest to free Imoen, but she needed to warn him what she intended. "I should tell you first, perhaps, that I seek to rescue an old friend who is being held hostage by the Cowled Wizards. There may be significant risk."

"Truly? It sounds like a worthy cause to pursue. But who is this friend that you speak of?"

"An old friend...Imoen. We grew up together at Candlekeep, and I'm not about to abandon her to these wizards."

"Ah, the rescue of a childhood companion! Come, then, my new friend! Let us strive to find this Imoen of yours and challenge all the dangers that bar our way!"

The party took a break at one of the tables in the room. It was an opportunity for everyone to introduce himself or herself to Anomen. Anomen seemed a trifle disappointed by the mutual introductions. When they had finished he took the opportunity to talk to Rolanna, who was seated next to him.

"I prithee, my Lady...it fills me with no small amount of wonder that you have not asked me of my journeys ere we met? We know next to nothing of each other."

"Alright, then," answered Rolanna, "tell me of your journeys, if you wish."

"There is precious little to tell, although my few adventures have been glorious, indeed. The path to knighthood is a long one, however...hence the need for my travels. But a few of my deeds have reached the ears of bards. Battle is commonplace enough throughout Amn, and the Order has fielded its army many times in recent years. Most recently, however...let me think...I was with our men when the orcs came down into the Ommlur Hills once again. In great numbers, they are a force to fear...but individually, they are no match for a warrior. I, myself, was able to fight through many of them alone and take the head of one of their foul chieftains."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“That sounds very impressive,” replied Rolanna, although she couldn’t help but think he was exaggerating his tale to impress her.

“Aye, it has been a struggle to prove my worth to the Order. I wish nothing more than to ride into battle with the crest of the Radiant Heart flying over my head. But I speak too much of my own deeds. One would think me preoccupied with pride. I would not blame you were you not interested in hearing tales of my prowess, truly. I am interested in hearing something of yours, however, my lady. I have been told a little of your deeds in the Sword Coast, albeit they do sound quite fanciful and exaggerated.”

“No more than your tales do, Anomen.” Rolanna had to admit he had a point. Would she believe her own tale if someone else was to tell it?

Anomen, however, was stung by her answer. “I suspect a taint of sarcasm in your voice, my Lady. I do not discount your deeds entirely, do not misunderstand me. Perhaps another time, Rolanna, when you are less suspicious of me, you might relent and tell me more of your former companions and a tale or two from your time in the north.”

Anomen, not put off by what he conceived of as Rolanna’s cold manner, changed topics.

“How much do you know of my Order of the Most Radiant Heart?”

“Not very much, I’m afraid.”

“Then you should be made aware of it, certainly. It is the greatest force for righteousness in Faerun...an army of knights and paladins ready to combat evil wherever it may be found. We exist to serve, but we follow no commands yet those of our hearts and our conscience. ‘Tis a rare thing that can stand up to the full array of the Order’s armies, my lady.” An order of knights and paladins. Rolanna nodded at his words; she wanted to know more about this subject.

“I do not understand,” continued Anomen, “why the Order does not take control of the Council, personally. It could do far more to turn this into a fair and equitable land, don’t you think? I mean...think of all the suffering your average commoner must endure. The hunger, the inequity and injustices...the rebellions in the south. All things of chaos. Surely these things would not occur with the Order placed in command...a force of true goodness and honest brotherhood? It baffles me why more people don’t see it.”

From what Rolanna had seen so far of Amn there was much that good had left undone. “I agree...there is a lot more that the Order could do.”

“Aye, you see the right of it, I think. It is something I shall keep in mind once I pass the Test...the Order must become more active beyond simply combating the most obvious evils.”

Rolanna became aware of a voice, a young woman’s voice. She was moving slowly among the inn’s patrons, a pleading expression on her face.

“Is anyone willing to hear my plea? Anyone?” the young woman called out. She paused, scanning the faces of nearby customers. “You all know me, I’ve helped some of you! Is this the thanks I get? I’ve helped lots of your kind!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Her finger suddenly stabbed out, pointing in Rolanna's direction. "You! Are you for hire? As a mercenary, I mean? You look capable and hearty, like you've had formal training."

"I might be able to help you," replied Rolanna. "Calm down and tell me what's wrong."

"I need a strong hand to help me. My land is under siege, and none of this rabble will aid me! And after all I've done for their kind, too! Please, can you assist me?"

"Who are we to be fighting and why are they attacking your land?"

"There is no time! I only hope that the attackers have not made it inside. If they have...if they have breached the inner courtyard they will be hard to rout. I will tell you what secrets I can. Perhaps you will be able to sneak in and attack from a more vulnerable spot. I hope Father is all right. He...would not leave."

"Should I travel with you?" the young woman nervously asked. "I've spent a few weeks slumming, and I am quite capable of opening the odd lock. I had to pick three just to get out of the main keep. Auntie doesn't like me leaving at night, but how else can I donate to the poor and not be noticed? They have pride too, and...I really shouldn't be seen with them."

"You can travel in the party with me," answered Rolanna. "I'm sure you will be a useful addition." In fact Rolanna wasn't at all sure that was the case, but the young woman needed help, and it would be better if they traveled together so Rolanna could keep an eye on her.

"Wonderful! Do you help people often? I have often wanted to get away from the keep and Auntie's rules. She doesn't understand that I just want to help people."

"A commendable spirit," commented Anomen, "to help others...although with maturity, girl, you will come to realize that not all are worthy of such attention."

"Helping others is good!" said Minsc, approvingly. "What a nice little girl you are. Would you like to see my Boo? I think he approves of you, too."

Jaheira didn't agree with Rolanna's decision. "You speak as if unaware of class distinction, and yet your manner exudes it. A sign of immaturity...perhaps adventuring is not the place for you."

The young woman explained that her name was Nalia de'Arnise, and that her family castle was a short distance outside Athkatla. She finished by imploring, "We should head there immediately. Be careful not to be spotted. I hope everything is all right!"

"Alright, I'll do as I've agreed," said Rolanna, adding her now customary warning, "but you should know that my ultimate goal is to rescue an old friend of mine, above and beyond anything else. Her name is Imoen, and she's been taken prisoner by the Cowled Wizards...and I'm not about to leave her to their mercy."

"If she needs help then of course I'm willing to help you find her, if you want me to. But we have to take care of my family's situation first, that's all I ask!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The party started for the door. A well dressed gentleman, out of place in this crowd, called out in a soft voice as they passed, "You there, I would have a word with you."

Rolanna stopped to regard him as he continued speaking, "I am called Lord Jierdan Firkraag, and I bid you stand a moment and hear what I offer. Word has come to me of your actions. I see you as capable and headstrong, with the ability to handle what e'er is thrown at you. Just the type of creature that I am looking for."

This was the man Gaelan Bayle had mentioned. He also had a curious turn of phrase, thought Rolanna. "You have done your research well. What do you need of me?"

"Certainly you understand that these are dangerous times, and that extreme measures are often called for. That is why I have need of you. I am Lord of a community outside Athkatla, and while I provide for my people as best that I can, there are some things I cannot do. Battle is not my strong point. There are marauders, horrid Ogres and Trolls that must be destroyed with fire or they regenerate. I need a firm hand to push them back. I need you, Rolanna. I offer a grand sum, worthy of a woman of your stature. I offer 10,000 gold if you can free my land of this scourge. It is a fortune, you will agree."

Rolanna was surprised by the sum offered. Was it coincidence it came at the same time she desperately needed money? "Why me and not some other company? You could have anyone at that price."

"Ah, but you would not lump yourself together with common mercenaries, would you? No, I require someone with finesse and skill, as well as strength. You are ideal. You are the choice I make, and the offer stands whether you go now or not. There is no other decision that makes sense. I have no doubt your service will be exemplary. If all goes well, we shall all receive exactly what we deserve. The Windspear Hills await."

"Ooh!" exclaimed Minsc. "To take swords against monsters of great evil! Already I feel Boo wriggling in excited anticipation!"

"I think," said Jaheira, "it would be an excellent idea to get outside of the city and administer justice on such evil creatures. Tyranny is best matched with equal force."

"I...I don't know, Jaheira," said Nalia, "I've heard about this Lord Jierdan. He's brutal; it's not like him to be so protective of his people. I don't like the sound of this."

Anomen rounded on Nalia. "Enough, girl! Whether the ogres prey upon the weak or upon this noble's businesses, it is still an evil that must be crushed! Let us deal the justice that is called for."

Rolanna wasn't at all sure she liked Lord Jierdan's manner. There would be time to investigate his story, but Nalia's need came first.

They exited the Copper Coronet. Rolanna suggested they ask someone the direction of the nearest exit from the city. Minsc reached out and grabbed the arm of a passing halfling.

"Y-you...you're awfully big, even for a big person," said the halfling. "You aren't going to hurt a little halfling like...like me, are you?"

"Me?" Minsc replied, "No, Boo would never allow such a thing! My sword is meant only for being firmly planted in the heart of evil!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Allowing Jaheira to ask the questions proved more fruitful, and soon they were headed towards the eastern city gate. Along the way Rolanna stopped to give a beggar a coin. No matter how little she had, she felt she could always spare something for those who had nothing.

Anomen commented, "I disapprove of charity. The man should be trained and outfitted that he might provide for himself."

"I would rather have given a sword," said Minsc. "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day, but teach a man to fight and he can chow down on the meaty marrow of evil!"

Rolanna wasn't sure whether Minsc agreed or disagreed with Anomen, or if he was off in his own world, as he often seemed to be.

As they neared a gate in the wall surrounding Athkatla, a young man in travel worn clothes came up to Rolanna, saying, "Actually...hmm...perhaps you can help me."

"Help you?" asked Rolanna. "Who are you and what do you mean?"

"I am a messenger sent by the High Merchant of Trademeet to find someone to help our town. You look like adventurers...you might be just the sort of help we need."

"What sort of trouble is this town in? What would I be expected to do?"

"The town is under attack by forest animals. The High Merchant thinks druids may be responsible, but we haven't the manpower to find them and stop it."

"Who is this High Merchant you're talking about?"

"He is Lord Logan Coprith, mayor and High Merchant of Trademeet. He's willing to offer a substantial reward for anyone who can help Trademeet out of its...difficulties." He explained the location of Trademeet, somewhat to the east of the de'Arnise castle. "Do you think you might be able to help us?"

"Yes, I think I can," replied Rolanna. "I've been known to deal with such things in the past."

"Excellent! I'll send word to Lord Logan to expect you. Thank you for your assistance."

"It cannot be!" exclaimed Minsc. "I would sooner tear out my eyes than strike down innocent animals! Well, perhaps only one eye...but do not think me any less incensed!"

Rolanna shook her head. She seemed to be accumulating quests much faster than she could complete them.

The land about the city was mainly given over to farming, mostly large estates. A few hours travel, and the road they followed now frequently passed through woods, with one or several small farmholds in each clearing they came to. As they walked Anomen struck up a conversation with Rolanna.

"I understand that Gorion was very much like a father to you. What was your relationship with him like?"

Rolanna didn't mind talking of Gorion with Anomen, although she was usually reluctant to do so with others. "He was a kind and patient man, and a great mentor."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I must admit, my lady, that I am rather jealous of you. My own father, Lord Cor, is nothing like your Gorion and he and I did not have a good relationship. If Lord Cor was not deep into his cups, he was demanding that I uphold the family honor...or telling me what a worthless son I had become. He was derisive of my choice to join the Order. He wanted me to take over his mercantile business...something I truly had no stomach for. I would have given much for my father to be my mentor...but, instead, I endured his abuse until I was able to squire for the Order. I fled as quickly as I was able to."

"Why are you telling me this?" wondered Rolanna.

"I...I suppose I am telling you this because you remind me a little of my sister, Moira. She is young and determined... I miss her...perhaps the only thing of my family I miss. I regret abandoning her to her fate, alone with Lord Cor...but there was...little I could do. She...I am sure she... No. Never mind. I do not wish to speak further about this, Rolanna...excuse me."

Rolanna felt concern for Anomen. She could appreciate the hurt a father could inflict on his children, and she rather wished she had a sister like Moira.

On Nalia's advice they left the road and moved cross-country towards her home.

Almost immediately they came across half-a-dozen unkempt, armored men, standing around a man laying on the ground. The men, obviously bandits, attacked, but were quickly beaten. Rolanna noted that Nalia's skill with magic was at least an equal for Aerie's, and that Anomen was skilled with a sword, as well as with clerical healing magic.

Once the battle was done Rolanna went over to the man on the ground. Although conscious, he had not attempted to escape during the battle. Rolanna knelt down beside him.

"H-help! Help me please!" he begged, still prone on the ground.

"Who are you?" asked Rolanna, "What has happened?"

"My...my name is Renfeld." He groaned in pain, then continued. "I have been poisoned... I beg you to take me to...friends...they have a building not far away from here...please, I beg you!"

"Here, I can attempt to heal you with magic."

"It is...no use, I am afraid. I have already attempted to neutralize the poison inside me. I...do not know...what has been done to me. Please...I must go to my friends..."

"Where is this building, then?"

"It is a large building...a large orange building to the southwest of the Docks District. There will be a man guarding the door...his name is Rylock. Please, take me to him..."

"Very well. I will take you there."

"Th-thank you. I...do not have long to live. You must take me there quickly." He groaned again in pain, whispering, "Take me to Rylock..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Poisoned and dying!” cried Minsc, who seemed to think anything worth saying was worth saying so all could hear, “The tragedy of it sings in my skull! We must hurry and deliver this man to safe harbor, Rolanna!”

“The fool is probably drunk and not even dying, Rolanna,” said Anomen suspiciously. “Why must you concern yourself with every delinquent we come across? Ah, do as you wish, if it concerns you so much.” Rolanna could tell the man was not drunk, and if he was faking it, he was doing an excellent job. Knowing now what she did of Anomen, Rolanna thought having such a brutal father could make anyone insensitive

Renfeld needed help immediately, so there was no choice but to head back to Athkatla. They were forced to take turns supporting Renfeld, as he could hardly walk. As they started back the sun was just setting, the reddened clouds dramatically hovering over the black silhouettes of nearby trees.

“The— The sunsets are so much prettier here than in the city, don’t you think?” said Aerie to Rolanna.

“Growing up in Candlekeep I would scale the ramparts in the evenings to watch the sun fall into the sea...” Rolanna smiled to herself at the memory.

“Our...Our childhoods were not so different, were they...”

Once they reached the city they hurried to the dock district in the southwest. As they entered that area Anomen commented, “A dank pool of base corruption, if ever there was one. If not for the Order, the gods would surely smite Man for such sins.”

Renfeld by now was unconscious, and was being carried. With some difficulty they managed to locate the orange building he had mentioned. Surprisingly, despite the lateness of the hour, there was a man standing in front of it, evidently Rylock.

“Yes? Is there someth...” he started, before catching sight of the burden they carried. “Renfeld! By Tymora! Thank you for bringing him to us, we were beginning to worry!”

“He has been poisoned, somehow,” said Rolanna, “but he said magic was not able to cure it. He seemed desperate to find you.”

“Poisoned? By the gods! Thank you...I must bring him inside immediately! Here is some coin, for your trouble. I thank you again, friend.” With that he went inside the building, shutting the door behind him.

Given the lateness of the hour Rolanna looked for a nearby inn. Not far away one was found, the Sea’s Bounty. Inside, one of the patrons addressed the group.

“Jaheira, my darling, so good to see you. Won’t you come sit and chat a while?” The speaker had on garments that had once been fine, but were now threadbare, with crudely attached patches at elbows and knees.

Jaheira looked over the speaker. “I... I am sorry? Do I know you?”

“You do not remember? Ah, but this is understandable. It has been years since we last spoke. Far too long, really.”

“Forgive me, but I will require a little more information. Your name again?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

He cleared his throat. "My name...is Ployer, Baron Ployer? Of the Calimshan Ployers? Come now, you must have some inkling?"

"No...no, I am terribly sorry but your face is unfamiliar. Perhaps if you told me what you do..."

"My name means nothing? Nothing?! I am Baron Ployer! *Ployer!* You ruined me! Not remembering is an even greater insult! You are why I am destitute today! You and your Harper kin accused me of breeding slaves in Calimshan! My businesses in Athkatla were taken! I was made a pauper and you do not even remember?!"

"I remember well, but I wanted you to say it, and I wanted others to hear. Quite the outburst, Mister Ployer, I assume you are still at odds with your new life?"

"You...you... This is the type of insolence I was talking about! It is not enough that you ruin a man, you must also berate him!"

"*Mister Ployer*, I wanted you *dead* instead of merely humiliated! The courts did not seem to think death was warranted, so they claimed your assets instead. That you live in poverty is gratifying, if you must live at all! I would suggest you change your tone. I am not in a mood for giving charity to old slavers!"

"Haven't lost your fire, I see. Still a Harper? This scrawny lout one too? That fellow Khalid you were once with was a better compliment. Is he here as well?"

"He is none of your concern. If you value your teeth you will not speak that name again. You dirty it."

"Er, yes. Very well. How about your companions, Jaheira? Do they count themselves among the Harpers as well?"

Rolanna had considered the advantages of fighting evil as part of a larger organization. Besides tackling problems that no single individual could hope to manage, to Rolanna the interaction with others working for a common cause was attractive. Although Jaheira had emphasized that the Harpers believed in balance, in Rolanna's experience what they did benefited the general good.

"I am not a member of the Harpers, sir," replied Rolanna, "though I would accept the offer if it was made."

"Perhaps I should include you in this matter then," said Ployer. "But first...Jaheira, my dear, I have not found you by accident. You ruined me, slandered my name."

"Well, the slander is going a bit far. You actually were a slaver, you know. It's not slander if it's proven."

"That is beside the point! What matters is that you ruined me, and now I'm going to ruin you!"

Suddenly three mages appeared in the room. One cast a spell at Jaheira; its effect was not immediately obvious.

"What have you just done, Ployer?! Speak!" cried Jaheira.

"It is my gift to you. You will be slowly destroyed, just as my family was. It is my curse, my nasty, nasty curse. A little something I had made just for you. I may not see

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

your lingering death, but I will smile, knowing it will happen. Tonight I sleep beneath rags so I could afford this wasting death for you.”

“Nobody made you a slaver; you just loved the profit! Now you blame those that caught you because you cannot take responsibility? You are a weak, weak man!”

“Ah, but I am a weak, weak man that will live, while you are a strong woman that will die. Give my regards to Belgrade when you see him. Hmm, heheh...heheha... Ha! Ha!”

The three mages and Baron Ployer disappeared.

“By the horns of Silvanus,” choked Jaheira, “I’ll plant him beneath the Stones of Aisath if I...if I...”

To Rolanna’s concerned gaze Jaheira already looked ill. “Are you alright, Jaheira? You look a little peaked.”

“No, I...I’m fine. I just felt a little strange for a moment. That...that fat excuse for a slaver, he’s cursed me! Damn him!”

“This is a simple matter,” said Rolanna hopefully, “We merely walk to a temple and have it removed.”

“I doubt he would have bothered if the cure were quite so simple. If this curse was tailored to me then we’ve no recourse but to exact its cure from his hide.”

“Then we should find this Ployer immediately. Any thoughts on where to look?”

“I have a few options. Ployer mentioned that he lived in squalor, suggesting he may be in the poor section of the city. Not likely to find him quick though. The mages with him wore odd colors that might be traceable. Ask at the Government Building, as all magic is regulated in Athkatla. If they will talk... He also mentioned Belgrade, a merchant that helped expose Ployer. He frequents the Copper Coronet, and the bartender Bernard might know his whereabouts.”

“To the taverns then, and we will seek out this Belgrade.”

“A good first step. Hopefully he can give us some idea where Ployer might...” Jaheira coughed, and a concerned look came over her face. “...might be,” she finished weakly.

The group left immediately for the slums, to find the bartender Bernard.

“What can I do for...” started Bernard when they found him. He paused, frowned, then started again, “Jaheira? Jaheira, no games now, you look like you’ve seen yer own ghost, or are about to. Young lady, you look about ninety! Are you ill?”

“I’m...I’m fine, Bernard. I just need...”

“The hell you are! These louts you traveling with running you ragged? I’ll have them fishing for shark in the bay with no net if they...”

“Bernard, I’m *fine*. I just need...need some information. I need to find Belgrade.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Jaheira, but he’s not around anymore. I ain’t had the pleasure of his company in nigh unto...”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“*Bernard!* Bernard, this is important. I need to contact him. I know you can connect with the network when you need to so...”

“Oh, Jaheira, you misunderstand me. Belgrade, he’s...he’s dead.”

“D...dead? When?”

“A while back. He got sickly just like,” Bernard suddenly realized what he was saying, “Oh my, just like you. What is it, a plague that only affects Harpers? I knew your lot would anger the wrong god or...”

“Bernard, please. I need to know where they found Belgrade. I also need to know if you have seen Baron Ployer.”

“Found Belgrade in the east slums. Too many tracks to tell if he was dumped there. And Ployer? He ain’t welcome here. Damn glad you exposed him, Jaheira.”

“I see... Thank you, Bernard. I...I really must be going now.”

“You take care now. Please.”

So began a desperate search of the worst slums of the city. Despite Jaheira’s attempts to deny it to herself and the others, her condition was steadily worsening. As they moved down one alley they became aware of three figures before them. They had not been noticed, and could overhear a conversation taking place ahead.

“You know this is the only choice. Be sensible,” said a female voice.

“You do paint a rather pretty picture, but I heard some nasty stuff about what happens to those that join,” replied a male voice.

“Rumors and hearsay,” said the female. “I am here before you as the proverbial horse’s mouth. You may take what I say at my word, or you will end like all the others will.”

“See, there you go threatening,” was the reply. “Though I suppose my own guild has threatened no less. I just don’t know.”

“You know. You just haven’t said it out loud yet.”

“Perhaps but I...” The male voice paused a moment. “Wait, someone is listening to us! Get out of here before they see us! Go! We’ll take care of these spies.”

Two male figures separated from the group and attacked the party; they were quickly dispatched. As the group approached the remaining female, Rolanna realized it was another vampire, which fled up the alley. Returning to the two corpses she saw they were Shadow Thieves. There was no time to attempt to follow the vampire.

Near sunrise the party stood outside an abandoned house, hours of searched alleys and questioning beggars behind them. Inside the house a familiar figure waited.

“Ah, Jaheira,” said Baron Ployer. “I see you have dragged your sorry soon-to-be carcass here to see me. Are you here to beg? Perhaps to grovel? I don’t mind. I have even cleaned my shoes.”

“Despicable,” Jaheira paused, coughing, “...despicable wretch! You knew I would come here?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Of course! I am your only link to life, so what choice do you have. Come now, grovel for your life before me. I haven't got all day!”

“I am...I am not here to grovel, Ployer. You would sooner get that from my corpse!”

“And I will, unless I get the satisfaction I want now. Come now, I can cure you if you drop your pretense of dignity and get your sickly carcass on its knees!”

“*I am not here to grovel!*” said Jaheira, although the force of her declaration was weakened by another cough. “I may be weak, even dying, but you *won't* get that! I have come to take what is mine! I will be free of you...of your...” She had to pause, gasping for breath.

“You are about to collapse, and cannot even speak,” taunted Ployer. “Now, of course, you will have to grovel in pantomime. What could be more degrading than that?”

“She may be ill, but I am not!” yelled Rolanna. “You *will* end this curse, and you *will* leave her be! Am I understood?!”

“Your threats are nothing,” replied Ployer. “You came expecting an old man in hiding, but I hoped Jaheira would come, because by the time she did she would be utterly crippled! I would enjoy crushing her, but I will settle for you! Meet my hirelings! My last favors paid for them, and they are well worth it! Kill them!”

Ployer's three hireling mages appeared, but their presence this time was not unexpected. After a short battle Ployer, and his three mages, lay dead. With the death of the mages, and the discovery of a lock of hair on Ployer that focused the spell, Jaheira was freed from the curse.

Rolanna asked how Jaheira felt, to which she replied, “I feel...weak, but better.” She coughed, gainsaying her words, then continued, “I thank you for helping me through this. You have earned my gratitude and...eh...and I should really get a full day of rest.”

“We will get to an inn as soon as we can. With the curse gone you should heal normally.”

“I certainly hope so. Such weakness...I swear, if I meet his like again I'll not let the courts spare him. I'll...I'll be better after a night's rest.”

The group left the house, meaning to head towards an exit from the city. As they walked down one street they could see an improbable sight in the light of the rising sun. A dull gray sphere was nestled among the tenements on one side of the street, interpenetrating the buildings around it. As the party stood gaping at this obvious magical construct an onlooker called out to Minsc.

“Hey! Hey you there! Fella with the painted head!”

“Yes? You talking to Minsc?”

“Yes, you! See this mighty fine sphere, here? You can have it for your very own for a mere 500 gold pieces! What do you say?”

“Boo says such a sphere will not fit into my pocket,” replied Minsc. “If I can't carry it with me, it's just not a good buy.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Oh, er...” The speaker seemed nonplussed, possibly never having been turned down by a hamster before, “the l’il fella says all that, does he?”

“Yes indeed. Boo is exceptionally smart for a hamster. Smarter than all the hucksters in Calimshan.”

“I see. What else does he say?”

“He mutters occasionally about fellow hamsters that will kill you all, but he is just moody, so don’t worry. See how he glares? Shh, we should leave him be.”

The party spent the remainder of the day at the Crooked Crane, near the eastern gate. The following morning they left Jaheira to rest, while everyone else went down to the common room for breakfast. When they came back upstairs Jaheira was awake and waiting.

“I will not tolerate this waste of time,” she said. “Let’s get moving! We’ve much to do!”

“Were would you have us go, exactly?” asked Rolanna.

“We must gather ourselves and what equipment we can for the war to come. We must be ready to avenge...and fight... I...I am sorry, I have been thinking too much of... of Khalid. I was in shock before, but...”

“You can never think too much for those departed.”

“I...I agree, though I shall try not to be fixated on such things. All will be dealt with in time. I will see to it.”

“We will have revenge for all wrongs in time,” answered Rolanna.

“Yes, in time. I will try to maintain my composure through this.”

They set out once more for the de’Arnise hold. As they were leaving Athkatla, Nalia, looking back, remarked, “I don’t like cities much. They are built on the backs of the unfortunate.”

As they walked Anomen initiated a conversation with Rolanna. “I...I wish to apologize for so abruptly ending our conversation the other day. I meant no offense by it.”

“There was no offense taken, Anomen,” replied Rolanna.

“I am glad to hear of it. I...I think of my sister, sometimes, alone in the manor with my father. From the last letter I received, it seemed as if she was bearing up well. I think she was merely trying to ease my guilt, though. It cannot be easy for her, and I wish that I could take her away and send her somewhere where she would be happy.”

“Why don’t you, then?”

“The Order does not pay well, my lady. And even had I the wealth, Moira would refuse to go anywhere. She stays to take care of him, even at his drunken worst. Since our mother died, I think she can hardly imagine doing anything else. I hope that old bastard does not treat her too harshly. I am told that you have something of a sister, as well, my Lady. Imoen, I believe the name is. You are close to her?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Imoen isn't really my sister, but we did grow up together and we are very close."

"That is good. It is a terrible thing, then, that she has been taken away. Let us continue your quest, then, and strive to seek her freedom."

de'Arnise Hold

The next day found them moving through a wood.

"Ooo, squirrels, Boo!" Minsc suddenly called out. "I know I saw them! Quick, throw nuts!"

"Minsc, could you please maintain a little grace while in nature's presence?" said Jaheira. "Sometimes I simply do not know how you came by your title of ranger."

"Do you wish me dour and sour like most others? No, I say not. The animals run and play without care, and I would too...if such a thing would not squish Boo flat."

"But your duties are serious things, Minsc. Do you realize that?"

"I am very serious! Boo would not let me shirk my duties! I would not want to shirk anything! No sir, no shirking!"

"Admirable Minsc, but you use that word like you don't know what it means."

"Eh, well...no...but it sounds sharp and painful and I always reserve such things for freaks that might steal those squirrels' nuts!"

"Good job, Minsc. You keep it up." Jaheira showed Minsc a smile that had rarely been seen since Khalid's death.

Soon afterward they came upon a small castle, west of their present position. Nalia cried out, "This is it...wait, there's a palisade here? Then our guards fell back and...the keep has fallen. It will be hard to save now." A crude log palisade was visible to the west, south of the castle.

"I think you should tell me just what we are up against," stated Rolanna.

"I should have told you previously," replied Nalia, "but others abandoned me when they found out. We are beset by trolls. The main assault began just a few nights ago. Worse still, they seem to have...some sort of snake creatures with them. I'd never seen anything like that, but I guess I'd never seen a lot of things. Trolls are dangerous enough...I have heard they are permanently killed only by fire or acid. I don't know a thing about the other creatures. Maybe they were driven here by elves, or by the new settlements south of Tethyr. I...I don't know their numbers, I only know we must rescue my family."

"We need more information. A frontal assault would be a slaughter." If the walls were held against them the party had no chance attacking the castle.

"Enter north of the palisade," recommended Nalia, "though a secret door along the wall of the keep. I used it to sneak out at night. Aunty never approved, but I didn't care. We should go soon. Waiting will just make it worse. I'll try to lead once we are inside. After we find Daleson we can concentrate on the trolls."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna decided to check the wooden palisade first. Two guards stood at a narrow opening in the log wall. They recognized Nalia; Rolanna asked them about the current situation.

"I cannot believe that the lord and his sister still live within," said one guard, "they must be dead, they must! And...perhaps that would be a mercy."

"I can barely believe that we got out of the keep alive!" said the second "So...so many of my fellow guardsmen were killed...slaughtered..."

Inside the palisade was the man in charge of the survivors. He greeted Rolanna.

"Aye, now...so you're the woman whom Mistress Nalia has brought to help us, eh? Well, you've got your work cut out for you, sure enough."

"Why?" asked Rolanna, "What exactly happened here at the keep?"

"Has Mistress Nalia not told you? We were beset by trolls and yuan-ti two tendays ago...had tunneling beasts with them, so we were attacked from above and below. 'Twas little that could be done, truly enough. We fought room to room, barricading ourselves in when need be. To the last man we fought, practically. Once Lord Arnise disappeared, it was hopeless. I tried to find him, but there was naught to be done. Leading what few soldiers remained out was battle enough. The trolls and those yuan-ti have shut the keep up tight. I'm hoping they will merely demand ransom for our Lord...but my hope has been quickly dwindling. If you can do as Mistress Nalia asks and rid the castle of the vermin, we'd be mighty grateful. As would Lord Arnise...if he still lives, within."

"Who might you be, that you are leading these men?"

"I am Captain Arat, garrison commander under Lord Arnise...until the trolls drove us out. Those you see here are all that survived." Captain Arat sighed, shaking his head, "Mistress Nalia may be all the family has left. I tried to find Lord Arnise and his sister, but I could not. Nalia may be the last."

"Why? What will happen if Nalia dies?"

"Pfeh! Then the land will fall to the family Roenal. Despite her objections, the Mistress Nalia is betrothed to a Roenal, and they will use that to lay claim. I've no wish to work for them, however. They be a family of a distinctly cruel bent. I could not take it, after serving an honorable man for so many years."

"If you enter the castle," continued Captain Arat, "there is one way that my men and I can assist you. If you lower the drawbridge from inside, we can draw out the enemy and engage them... The deeper you get within the keep, the more trolls and yuan-ti you'll find. Open the bridge and we will engage them. It may be your only chance. That will give you the time to search for Lord Arnise and Lady Delcia. I suggest you get to the courtyard and open the drawbridge as soon as possible. It's an offer, anyway...I dislike the idea of sitting out here while someone else goes within and takes all the risks. But you are free to do as you wish."

"That's an excellent idea!" said Nalia. "Thank you, Captain Arat, you have served my father well. Rolanna, we should open the bridge quickly when we've entered."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Just be sure you’ve acid or fire at your disposal,” added Captain Arat. “Trolls will not fall to anything else. May the gods go with you. Take these arrows, they might help.” He handed over some magical fire arrows.

They entered the castle through the secret entrance Nalia had described. Initially, they searched for a servant, Daleson, who Nalia had mentioned. He was located without difficulty near where they had entered.

“Miss Nalia!” exclaimed Daleson after they found him. “What are you doing here? You never come to the servants’ quarters, at least not in my memory.”

“Thank you Daleson,” said Nalia, “but now is not the time for secrecy. These people are not my family; these are my own hirelings. Keep no secrets here.”

“As you would have it, Miss Nalia.”

“Please, you needn’t display such deference on my account. My Aunty might prefer her servants cowed, but I do not.”

“Why do you have this man lie for you? What have you to hide?” asked Rolanna.

“A fair question,” replied Nalia. “I use the door to leave unseen. Aunty prefers no contact with the people we govern, but lack of breeding is no cause for bad treatment. I find Aunty is quite unreceptive to these ideas. She is old school, and believes lesser classes are best reminded of their position at all times. I disagree.”

Daleson nodded agreement. “Right, she’s one stuffed old biddy, isn’t she? We got a saying for her kind we do. South end of a north-bound ogre...”

“That will do, Daleson!” reprimanded Nalia. “You will not talk of her thus!”

“M-my apologies, Miss Nalia, I...I meant nothing...”

“I’m certain you didn’t. Regardless of her attitude she is still a noble in this house. Now then, we must set about reclaiming this place for my family.”

“I have news of them, Miss Nalia, though it ain’t all good. Lord Arnise was alive this morning, and I saw him taken into the keep by a real big troll, biggest I seen. Probably took him down to the...”

“Cellars! The ‘cellars’ is what they are. I won’t have them called otherwise in this day and age, despite their history. It is by my father’s order.” Rolanna wondered what the dispute was about. What was wrong with a cellar?

“Yes, Miss Nalia,” agreed Daleson. “He fought bravely, but didn’t make it to his flail, or perhaps didn’t get enough parts. There is one hidden around here somewhere, I guess, but he never told anyone where.”

“I’ve never seen it used. He never said why he didn’t wield it more often. We should seek it out if he didn’t have it with him. He was taken to the ‘cellars’ then?”

“As you would have it, Miss Nalia.”

“Yes it is. You are a good man, Daleson.”

“So we should find your father?” asked Rolanna. “I need to know what numbers we will be facing.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I seen maybe thirty trolls," said Daleson. "They were bossing something called a 'yuan-ti,' but I don't know how many of those there are. Weird things, but everything about this is odd. They seem to be going out of their way to not damage the keep. Never heard of careful trolls, but maybe they just like the cellar better. The cellar is..."

"Enough, Daleson!" said Nalia. "I...I will tell. The cellar is a relic, a leftover from a time when our family...was not as caring as it could have been."

"Now here, I'll respect yer wishes but I'll not have you dress it up none. Tell it for what it is."

"How dare you! I've done so much to make amends," started Nalia hotly. She reconsidered, continuing in a calmer voice, "No, no, you are right. The 'cellar' is...a dungeon. My father walled it up, but it had seen much use... I will not see it used as such again. There is no excuse. How did they...Daleson, did you tell these beasts of the cellar?"

"Never, Miss Nalia! They got but barest of service for me life. I would never..."

"Fine, I believe you, but how did they know? Father would not tell. Come, we must go. Daleson, prepare what others you can find for a return to service. Now get out of here. I don't want you getting hurt."

"Yes, Miss Nalia."

Nalia turned to Rolanna. "We'll have to find my aunt's bedroom. There is a secret passage within that leads to the cellar entrance. Down there is probably where the leader is."

There were only a few trolls on the ground floor of the castle, which were quickly dispatched. Opening the drawbridge allowed in Captain Arat and his remaining soldiers; they secured the courtyard, and would deal with any stragglers that attempted to flee the castle.

Rolanna led her companions onto the battlements of the castle. From there, they took a circular stair down to the upper floor of the keep. The party burst into a room, already occupied by several trolls and a reptilian creature with a snake-like lower body, a yuan-ti. Unfortunately for the party, the yuan-ti was also a mage, and from the moment it called out "Intruders! TorGal shall be pleased with the gift of your corpse... I do so regret that I shall have to dirty my hands in obtaining it," a vicious, close range combat ensued.

Rolanna, Minsc and Anomen attempted to hold off the trolls from the others, but that was impossible in such tight quarters. One troll pushed Anomen back, turned, and with one swipe of its clawed arm knocked Aerie into a wall, where she collapsed, only semi-conscious.

Nalia leaned over Aerie, and called out, "Could we get a bit of help over here? Someone in the party is injured and needs attention. Aerie, are you alright?"

"It—It hurts, Nalia," said Aerie, shaking her head and slowly coming back to herself.

"We need a cleric, here!" yelled Nalia. "She's injured!"

"It's alright," said Aerie, "I can—I shall heal myself."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Alright, Aerie... but be careful out there,” replied Nalia.

Nalia turned to rejoin the fight, but suffered her own problems. The yuan-ti mage, recognizing a fellow practitioner of magic, concentrated its magical energies on her. Not having had time to erect magical defenses, Nalia was staggered, then knocked off her feet by successive magical blasts.

Fortunately, enough of the trolls had fallen by this point that Rolanna was able to concentrate on the yuan-ti. Soon afterward, all the opponents had fallen, and it was time to heal the wounded. Minsc called out, “We follow the path that surely leads to glory! Boo is proud to be here, I can tell.”

Meanwhile, Jaheira was healing Nalia of her hurts. “You are quite unused to the pain of battle, are you not? I can see it in your face.”

“It shows, does it?” replied Nalia. “I hoped I would be of some help to those less fortunate, but I seem to be quite prone to bruising.”

“You will learn many harsh realities out here, but you will also learn to deal with them. Or you may die. One or the other.”

“Thanks for your support...I think,” said Nalia.

The party took a brief break to rest before cleaning out the rest of the floor. Anomen took the opportunity to talk to Rolanna.

“Speaking of my father has left me plenty of time to think,” Anomen said. “Perhaps too much. It is as if an ill wind has blown across my soul.”

“Why? What are you thinking of?” replied Rolanna.

“I speak of memories that are best put aside, Rolanna, lest they fester at my heart. I find, sometimes, however, that I cannot. I remember when I first achieved the rank of squire. It had been a difficult task...my father had refused to be my patron, so I was no better off than a commoner would be. Most knights would not take me in, since I had no coin to pay for my equipment. I had to prove myself. A knight by the name of Sir Blethyn took pity on me and had me squired. I was proud during the ceremony, and happy...but it was not to last.”

Anomen paused a moment, sighing. “My father, Lord Cor, stumbled into the Order’s headquarters...he was filthy drunk and full of rage. He began shouting at the knights...at Sir Ryan Trawl, no less...that I had been stolen from him. That I was a worthless and weak son who should not be in the Order. Sir Ryan Trawl told him that I had proven myself...but the old bastard would hear none of it. They were finally forced to drag him out of the headquarters, kicking and screaming. Leave it to Lord Cor to stain the one moment of pure pleasure I was able to steal during my time in the Order, the one thing I had achieved despite all of his opposition. Bah!”

Rolanna felt sympathy for Anomen, and wished there was some way she could provide some comfort. “You should not let your father eat away at you like this, Anomen.”

“‘Tis difficult, my Lady. Since the death of my mother, my father has been a cancer in my soul...a force against which I have struggled for years to prove myself. Ah, but

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

listen to me. What a pathetic knight I must seem, blubbing like a boy to you over such a thing as my father's disapproval. You must think me a fool, my lady."

"Don't be ridiculous, Anomen," she replied, trying to answer his doubts. "You've overcome many obstacles...you should be proud of your accomplishments."

"You are kind to say so, my Lady. Thank you."

Invigorated by the rest, the party continued to hunt down what trolls were still on the upper floor. In one bedroom they found Nalia's aunt.

Her aunt, the Lady Delcia Caan, was not impressed by her rescuers. "Oh, 'tis like a nightmare!" she said. "Yet more hooligans tracking their filth through the halls. We shall have to vacate for a tenday while the whole building is deloused. I'll tell you the same as your leader, you'll get no more from me than condemnation. Marching into a home as though you belong...what is the world coming to?"

"Aunty, please!" pleaded Nalia. "We have come to rescue you!"

"Nalia? Oh, my dear, what have you brought home with you this time?" Lady Caan looked with distaste on Nalia's companions. "I have told you about consorting with such creatures, you will only end up like your mother."

"Yes, yes, yes," replied Nalia, "you have told me a hundred times or more about my mother's death. I'll thank you kindly not to do so again."

"It bears repeating my dear. She would slum as you do, offering charity to those beneath her, and her reward was a pestilence that took her life. Do try to keep the dignity of your station above such things, will you? Ah, my words are for naught, or you would not be here at all. What dregs have you brought to our home this time?"

"Aunty! Treat them with respect! Would you rather die than accept help from the commoners? We could learn compassion from these people."

"My dear Nalia, I wouldn't turn down the chance to live another day, but living another day as...one of them... You soil yourself dealing with your lessers."

Rolanna couldn't help making a comment at this point, pretentious as it sounded. "The measure of a person is the quality of their life and how they live it, not how they are judged."

"Oh no, please don't get her going," said Nalia, rolling her eyes.

"Of course you measure worth that way," said Lady Caan, preparing to expound on her peculiar view of the world, "you have no choice. Realize however, that your scale is within the larger truth: Some are born to rule, others to follow. I merely wish that people respect the borders that fate has placed them within. I meant no disrespect other than that which you are already due."

"Fine...errr...milady," replied Rolanna. "Nalia, should we not be moving on? *Now* would be nice."

"You will be safe back the way we came, Aunty, but I cannot go with you yet," Nalia told her aunt.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“As you wish,” she replied. “Do try to stay clean, Nalia, and try not to get killed. I shall wait where it is safe, and we shall talk again. For now go with your...‘friends.’ And if you would, Lord Arnise is still at the mercy of the beasts below. He is Nalia’s father, and I believe they are trying to get him to reveal something about a cache of gold. I doubt he will say a word. He’s as soft as Nalia at times, but he does not lower himself to dealing with his lessors. Do rescue him, will you? It is your duty, I believe.”

After her aunt left, Nalia turned to Rolanna, saying, “Rather an amazing bit of restraint on your part, and I appreciate that. She is decent enough, but very set in her ways and hard to deal with. Come, we must rescue my father.”

The group moved on to the room of Nalia’s father. His bedroom was empty.

“I do not understand,” commented Nalia. “Aside from a few servants, we have seen very few dead. Where are the guards? They would have fought to the last. My father’s bodyguard, Glaicus, should have been here in the bedroom, yet I see no body.”

“How strong was their loyalty to you?” asked Rolanna. “Perhaps they simply decided it was not worth the fight.”

“I don’t think it was like that. The guards were well paid. It is more likely they are dead, but Glaicus would have given his life out of friendship for my father.”

Glaicus, at least, was located in a room nearby. He had been magically charmed; unfortunately, the only effective method of breaking the charm when he attacked the party was his death. The fate of Glaicus did not bode well for Nalia’s father, who must be on the only level of the castle not yet checked, the dungeon. Located there as well must be the leader of the trolls, TorGal.

They entered the castle’s dungeon. Using a stew made of dogmeat, the umber hulks the trolls had used to enter the dungeons of the castle in their initial attack were diverted, allowing the party to sneak past them and into the Arnise family tomb.

Rolanna cautiously led the group into the tomb, since presumably the troll leader was just ahead. The tomb itself was poorly lit by only a few torches. Rolanna slowly advanced, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness ahead a voice roared. “I smell you...I do... You gradunk no be hiding on TorGal!”

Seeing that stealth was no longer an option, Rolanna called out, “Stand forth and be judged, creature! Your reign of terror ends here!”

“I rain ‘cross many places, what think you gradunk leave here dry? I TorGal, and I trgank lead Rocksmash pack! We serve stronger, so who traag you to say no?!”

“You serve stronger?” said Rolanna, thinking that here was confirmation the troll’s attack had been carefully planned. “Who is that? Who directs your actions? Speak! I demand it!”

“You threaten, but we fight anyway! I tell nothing of Stronger! Should have taken Stronger’s gold like all other small-head guards! Now you die!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

TorGal and two companions charged from the darkness ahead. TorGal and his fellows were the largest trolls Rolanna had ever seen, but despite their size they were quickly defeated.

Even after TorGal was down and no longer moving, Nalia continued to cast magical spells at the corpse, crying "Dead! Die you beast! I will clear this place of any taint you left behind! I will...I will..." She stopped, shoulders slumped, turning away. A short distance ahead the party found her father, Lord Arnise, dead. Rolanna stared in sorrow down at the body. If only, she thought to herself, they hadn't been delayed getting here. They might have found him still alive.

"Let's get out of here," said Nalia. "I don't want to see my home in this state. We have done what we can... I must think... I will speak more when we have left this place..." Shining tracks left by tears visible on her face, she practically ran from the room. The others followed more slowly, carrying the body of Lord Arnise so it could receive a proper burial.

The party decided to have a night's rest before deciding what to do next. By mutual agreement they rested outside, the castle suggesting too many unpleasant memories to afford a restful night. As they were settling down Anomen once more sought Rolanna's side.

"Have I told you how I became a priest?" asked Anomen.

"No, but I'd like to hear the tale," replied Rolanna.

"As I've said before, I approached the Order without the benefit of my father's sponsorship. Most young lords come to the Order with patrons paying for their armor and such. I had possession of not even a sword, and the knight-trainers would not accept me without my father's permission. My mother, however, was a follower of Helm and known to Sir Ryan Trawl. She...petitioned the Knight-Commander on my behalf, begging him not to turn me away. So Sir Ryan Trawl allowed me to enter as a novitiate to Helm. I trained as a cleric and learned my sword arts from the guardians of the temple... and was able to eventually squire."

Anomen stared into Rolanna's eyes a moment, as if searching for something there. "A long road it has been for me, Rolanna...but I am pleased to serve in the Order under Helm's name. And I trust that Helm is pleased with me, as well. What of you, then, Rolanna? You are a force for righteousness and honor...why do you not join the Order of the Most Radiant Heart and achieve glory, as well?"

Rolanna still knew little of the order, but from what she had heard she thought it might provide the comradeship she desired. "I would be interested in doing so, if they would have me."

"Hmph! It is that easy, is it?" said Anomen, taking offense at her answer. "A simple desire to do so, and you think the Order would just take you in? You've got to do a lot better than that, my Lady! Bah! I tire of all this talk...let us just continue your quest, here, in silence for a while."

Rolanna stared at Anomen in puzzlement. He was unable to contain his inner conflicts. They continually boiled out, striking all those around them. Especially, thought

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna, anyone who attempted to become close to him. However, Rolanna was used to adversity, and she intended to continue her efforts. She was convinced there was much about Anomen which was worth better acquaintance, not least of which, she found herself admitting, a certain rugged handsomeness, brought into sharp relief by the burning fire of their encampment.

The next morning as everyone was stirring Aerie said to Rolanna, "Ha, it is—it is nice to have a woman in charge for a change. Men always steal the blankets!"

"And what do you know of men?" asked Rolanna, with a smile.

"Not...Not very much at all, Rolanna, but if I find one kind enough to share the blankets on a cold night, I think I would...I think I would like him very much."

Once the camp had been cleaned up Nalia came to speak to Rolanna. "It is done... isn't it? But what is left for... My father, dead. My home, in shambles. Someone put these creatures up to this...but...but who..."

"I feel as though my work is not done," said Rolanna. "I could not save your father and I am sorry."

"Oh, of course," replied Nalia. "You have done just as asked and I wish you well. I will see what there is to pay you and then I will...I will...oh no. Might I ask you to... No, no it is foolish to think such things. I will pay you and return to the life that I must."

"What is it?" asked Rolanna. "There is no harm in asking."

"It is the matter of what is to become of me. My...my father, Lord of this place, is dead. In the circles of nobility the title of lord falls to the male heir."

"And what is it that you wish of me?"

"I intend to leave. There is little else for me here. I am...betrothed to a brat of a man, who will certainly try to usurp control of this place from me. Perhaps it's best just to leave. My father always said you could tell a person by their actions, not their possessions. Quaint, but it will help me sleep at night."

"You do not wish to fight for your home? Is there nothing I can do?"

"Hostility would only bring soldiers. They are not criminals, just repugnant. If you were more a fighting sort you might serve as figurehead, but you are not. No, I should leave. Could I seek sanctuary in your adventuring company? I yearn to go out among the needy and help them. Life was so sheltered here."

Rolanna had been impressed by Nalia's abilities during the fighting in her home. Despite her inexperience, she felt she would be an excellent companion. "You can seek sanctuary with me, if you like. The road is a hard life though."

"Good, then. I will go with you. It will be sad to see this place go to bad use, but I've no choice. I will not serve the Roenal family in their snobbish deals."

They spent most of the day helping the other survivors pack what they could. Rolanna was not surprised that another noble family would grab the castle as soon as possible. It fit a pattern she was seeing of how the government and nobles of Amn, who worshiped coin, could be expected to act.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As they started the trip back to Athkatla Anomen walked by Rolanna, renewing his conversation of the previous night.

“My Lady...I feel most terrible about my burst of temper the previous day. Would... would you allow me the opportunity to apologize and try to explain?”

“Very well,” replied Rolanna “I will listen to what you have to say.”

“I am most thankful, Rolanna. Sometimes, you see...my zeal for justice and valor can become too much. There is an anger in my heart that I...cannot seem to control. I see injustices everywhere, my lady, and...and I wish to do nothing but strike out against them. But even when I do...I keep on striking out...the hate and anger only grows... When I spoke to you of fighting against evil...I became angry, but it...it was more anger at my own inability to...to be as good and lawful as I might wish to be. I am sorry, Rolanna, truly I am. I am unworthy of my vows.”

“Everyone feels at least a little as you do, Anomen... I am sure even the most noble paladin feels anger and hate.” Rolanna felt she herself counted as an expert on this subject, being a child of Bhaal.

“I...do not think that is true,” said Anomen. “The paladins in the Order speak only of contentment...and I have none of that. But I thank you for your kind words, regardless. Again you remind me of my sister, Moira. She, too, has a decent soul and a benevolent heart. You should meet her sometime, Rolanna...I truly think you would like each other.”

They had to make camp in a woods that night, the hour being late to press on to the city. As she slept Rolanna was troubled by another dream.

Irenicus appear in her dream, offering her power, telling her she was superior to the “common” people she championed. Rolanna rejected his offer, but he refused to listen. He told her she would accept, she had no choice. Rolanna would not accept this, she would not. She awoke, gasping.

Nearby, Jaheira was in the throes of her own nightmare, twisting and turning in her blankets. Suddenly, she called out “Nnn...no...nnn...No! No! Wh...what?” Jaheira was sitting upright, looking around, obviously confused.

Rolanna leaned over to her. “You must have had a nightmare. Relax, there is nothing wrong.”

“N-no, there is something very wrong,” replied Jaheira. “More and more I feel Khalid’s absence. I...I thought myself stronger than this.”

“There is no weakness in sorrow,” quoted Rolanna from a proverb, thinking to herself if it wasn’t for her, Jaheira would not have this loss.

“Only in depression,” said Jaheira, completing the saying. “Yes, I remember those parables in Alaundo’s prophesies, as well. Be sorry for your loss, but be grateful for what you have.” Jaheira was calm enough that at least she was able to return to the appearance of sleep. Rolanna, too, simulated sleep, but thoughts of her dream kept her awake the remainder of the night.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Government District

The next day they continued back to Athkatla, reaching the city as the daylight was growing dim.

“Nalia?” suddenly asked Aerie.

“Yes, my dear?” said Nalia.

“How come you care so much for people?”

“It has to start somewhere, Aerie.”

“What has to start?”

“Love...justice...the rights of people to choose their own destiny in this world.”

“But don't the gods choose our destinies?”

“Oh, Aerie, with the exception of Gond our gods are not clockmakers. They have made us living, breathing creatures with minds, emotions, desires. Only birth and death are destiny, all else is choice and consequence... Come, the sun is setting and it casts long shadows on our thoughts.”

The next day Rolanna, with her companions, walked to the Government District of Athkatla, intent on seeing what aid she could receive from the bureaucracy. As she approached the entry to a building holding offices for the major city officials, a tall, thin man dressed in an expensive robe approached her.

“Greetings,” said the tall man. “You are known to me. Or your deeds are known to those I serve. I think I should introduce myself. I am Madeen. I represent one of the masters of the Athkatla order of the Cowled Wizards. He seeks to employ you in a matter of some urgency.”

“The Cowled Wizards?” asked Rolanna. “They are the ones that arrested Imoen. I would be very interested in speaking to them about that.”

“I do not know anything about that. I represent one of the wizards, as I said, a Master Tolgerias. Perhaps you could speak to him of this Imoen?”

“Very well. How do I go about meeting this Tolgerias fellow?”

“He will be most pleased. Master Tolgerias can be found in the government building behind me...you may go within. Do not tarry overlong, my friend.”

Once inside the building Rolanna searched out Chief Inspector Brega, the head of the city's investigative services. Once introductions were done with, Rolanna got right to what she was most interested in, asking, “My friend Imoen was taken by the Cowled Wizards. Do you know where she is or where I could get help?”

“If you ask me,” Brega replied, “those damnable wizards have far too much leeway to come and go as they please. The Council gave an inch and they took the proverbial mile. And that also means, regrettably, that we can do nothing if we oppose their actions. And still the Council deludes itself thinking the Cowled Wizards obey them. Bah! You know better, I am sure. Allowing those wizards to take a man indefinitely or worse for casting a magic missile is hardly justice in my eyes! But I can't help you or your friend.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Nobody knows where the wizards keep their prison, either. All I can say is speak to the Magistrate, Bylanna Ianulin. She is in this room, but I doubt she can help much, either, despite what she might suggest. I...am sorry. I hope this Imoen is well and the wizards take pity.”

Rolanna next went in search of the Magistrate. She found her surrounded by a crowd of petitioners. Waiting until she was finished with her current case, Rolanna impatiently forced her way forward. Fortunately, the magistrate chose not to take offense at this action, politely greeting her, “Good business to you. Is there aught that I can help you with?”

Rolanna repeated her plea. “A friend of mine, Imoen, was taken captive by the Cowled Wizards for using magic in the city. Is there anything I can do to free her?”

“I see. But your friend used magic within the city limits. You are aware that this is a violation of Amnish law? We do not allow magic-users to go unchecked.”

“But how long is she to be imprisoned? Imoen is no evil sorceress!”

“It has been our experience that magic corrupts. Did you see the result of your friend’s battle in the Promenade? An entire section collapsed! The Cowled Wizards will have taken your friend for...rehabilitation. And she will not be released until that process is completed.”

“But Imoen wasn’t responsible for what happened in the Promenade. That was another wizard, we got there at the end of the battle.”

“Another wizard or your Imoen, it matters not. She used magic...the Cowled Wizards cannot stop to sort out who was directly responsible for the damage. But if this Imoen you speak of is a good and responsible user of her abilities, then...then I imagine that her rehabilitation would...not take long.”

“What is this rehabilitation you’re talking about? How long does it normally take?”

“It would...well...” the magistrate paused, sighing. “I will not lie to you, ma’am. We do not normally concern ourselves overmuch with the prisoners that the Cowled Wizards take. For the most part, these magic-users they capture are dangerous or psychotic... protecting us from these people is a valuable service. If...if they have taken someone out of zealousness, because she was a mage present at a major magical disturbance...well, I can do nothing. The Cowled Wizards are not under our command. They do us a service, but they do as they wish. Their prison is a secret, even to us, as are their methods. I am sorry, my good woman, but there is truly nothing that we can do for you. Hopefully, the Cowled Wizards will see their error and release your friend.”

Rolanna next searched out Tolgerias; the cowled wizard was not hard to find, even in the crowded confines of the building a space was open around him, as though people were uneasy approaching too closely. Rolanna went up to him and introduced herself.

“Ah, yes,” said Tolgerias, “I see Madeen has proven to be his faithful self, as usual. How do you do, my Lady, considering the city is so harsh on strangers, eh? Perhaps Madeen has let slip a little of what this is about? No? Hmm. Well, yes, I do have something I would like you very much to do, if you’d care to hear it.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"First I would like to know where Imoen is," demanded Rolanna.

"Imoen? Ah...the girl arrested along with the wizard. I do not have such inconsequential information on me, so put aside such demands."

"I will not put it aside. Either you tell me where Imoen is or you shall not receive my assistance."

Tolgerias shook his head. "I will look into the matter for you if you perform this task. However I can guarantee nothing. If this means we do not work together, so be it."

"It galls me greatly, and it is even worse that you ask for a blind leap of faith from me. How can I agree to something I am not even sure I can do?"

"Yes, it is a lot for even I to ask, eh? You are more than capable of performing this task and it will conflict with none of your current loyalties. And you would garner the goodwill of the Cowled Wizards...not to mention a substantial reward. But if you are determined to refuse, I certainly cannot stop you."

"I would know more of this reward before I agree."

"The reward...adventurers have much use for items the Cowled Wizards hold. It is sad that magic is so despised in Athkatla, for it has many uses. We will offer you an item of substantial magical power as well as a good deal of gold coin. But, again, I must have your word on the matter before I continue."

Rolanna did not trust the smooth talking mage. She had spoken of affection for a friend, while Tolgerias had replied with the lure of greed and power. She doubted whether Tolgerias would still be interested in helping her once she performed his task. She refused his offer and walked off.

As Rolanna finished her conversation a nobleman who had been idly watching remarked to Minsc "I grow weary of waiting here. If I stay much longer, I think I shall grow truly upset."

"Perhaps people just need a swift kick in the punctuals!" replied Minsc.

"Well, now, there's a novel approach," replied the man, obviously not used to such replies to casual conversation.

"No," said Minsc, "I seldom have time for reading. Too much work to be done!"

"Hmm," considered the noble, "We need more people like you on the Council, actually."

A woman dressed in plain clothing had been nearsightedly staring at Minsc. As his conversation ended she asked, "What's that you got there...you with all the scars. It looks like a scarf my son made me out of weasels a few years back."

"Boo is my stalwart companion," said Minsc "and he says that if you must wear the skins of a dead animal around your neck, the evil sharp-toothed weasel is a good choice."

Before leaving the building Rolanna purchased a license to practice magic. She was forced to pay what amounted to a bribe, but felt it was necessary, since she did not want to be put in the situation of fighting the entire city guard or risk losing more companions piecemeal after another magical "disturbance."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

She started across the square on which the major government buildings fronted. A passing noblewoman called out, "Oh, I see little miss Nalia de'Arnise has decided to regale the city with another of her visits. What will it be today, Nalia? Spreading bread crumbs for the paupers? Licking the heels of beggars?"

"Nothing you say bothers me, Oriona," said Nalia. "I could roll in cow dung all day long and still come out cleaner than a petty, upper-class whore."

"Vicious snippet!" snarled Oriona. "When I see Pehllus next I'll make sure you pay for that remark!"

The group continued forward. Through breaks in the crowds of people thronging the square, Rolanna could see a gathering in front of what she took for a prison. She moved in that direction, trying for a better look. Her pace suddenly picked up, as she had seen the gathering surrounded someone tied to a wooden stake, wood piled at its base. Despite the bright sun, the tied figure was dark, and Rolanna could not make the person out.

The figure tied to the stake was shouting, "Shar! My deliverance is in your hands!"

Suddenly she paused, looking at Rolanna, "Wait...I recognize you! Rolanna! It is I! Viconia DeVir! You must remember! My life depends on it! Please, Rolanna, I beg of you! Save me from these madmen!"

Rolanna remembered Viconia, not favorably, from a brief encounter near Baldur's Gate. However, Rolanna would not stand by and allow a lynching. She paused to be certain she knew what was happening around her before acting.

"Look ye all upon this foul drow that we have bound before ye!" yelled a man with burning eyes. "A creature of evil and darkness, my brethren! A creature of foulness and deceit, bent only on our destruction! This creature has foolishly come amongst us, my brethren, thinking that we would be lax in our senses! Tell me what should be done with it!"

From the gathered crowd came cries of "Burn it!," "Burn her!," and "Burn the drow!"

Someone from the crowd stepped forward, saying, "Aye, burn the elf! Her dark and fiendish kin rose up from their underground homes and killed my father and my brother! They are all evil, I tell you! All of them!"

"Then the drow shall burn!" said the fanatic who had initially spoken, drawing the crowd's attention back to himself. "Gather 'round, my brethren, and witness the will of Beshaba triumph over foul evil!"

Anomen showed little concern for Viconia's fate, remarking to Rolanna, "It seems a dark elf has been caught and is about to be put to the torch. Good. Such a fate is no less than the fiend deserves."

"You rивvin are mad!" yelled Viconia from the stake. "I have done nothing to any of you! I seek only to make my way without molestation! Why have you done this?! Why?!"

"Done nothing?!" a voice yelled from the crowd. "You are a drow elf, are you not?! That is as good a reason as any!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Ye shall be silent, evil one!” yelled the fanatic. “The power of the Maid of Misrule will be demonstrated here today!”

The crowd had now been whipped into a state of frenzy, cries to burn the drow echoing on all sides.

“No!” yelled Viconia, barely heard above the crowd. “Nau! Oloth plynn d’jal!”

“Spout your evil speech if ye must, drow” yelled the fanatic, “but prepare yourself for your journey into the next world! Beg for forgiveness, beg for salvation! And hope that the cleansing fire will save ye!”

“I have no love for drow,” said Jaheira, “nor for this drow in particular...but it seems that she has done nothing to deserve this fate other than simply be a drow. This is not justice.”

“Please, I beg of you!” cried Viconia. “Free me! I have done nothing to deserve this treatment! Please!”

Not needing to see anything further, Rolanna drew her sword and strode forward, to cut Viconia’s bonds. She motioned the others to surround the pyre.

“Praise the goddess!” said Viconia to her savior. “My thanks for your timely intervention!”

“What are ye doing?!” cried the fanatic. “Why have ye interfered with the judgment of Beshaba?! Her will must be shown to the people!”

“Allies of the foul creature!” cried someone from the crowd. “Allies of the drow!”

“This can never be allowed! The drow dies!” yelled the fanatic. He drew his sword and attacked the party.

The crowd suddenly awoke to the fact that rather than witness the promised violence done to another, they themselves might suffer from it. Someone yelled “Eek! Run for it!” That was all it took for the gathered people to scatter. Only a few were left who were willing to face the party, and they were quickly cut down.

“I owe you my life, abbil,” said Viconia to Rolanna, “you have saved me once again. I did nothing to provoke their attack, I tell you! I was passing through the city when the man guessed my identity under my hood. I was surprised and he called out to others, revealing me. I suppose they assumed I was here to spy on them...fools! They are so quick to fear, these rivvin! But, come...we must be on our way soon if we are to avoid drawing another crowd. I distrust these barbaric people too much to hang about. It would be both a privilege and an honor to join you, Rolanna. What say you to my proposal?”

“Truth be known,” said Jaheira, “I am not opposed to having Viconia travel with us. Remember, though, that many will think less of us simply because she is here.”

“D-don’t let her come with us, Rolanna!” said Aerie. “The drow...all of the drow... are cruel, terrible creatures! They kill the Avariel without mercy and cannot be trusted!”

“Do you claim to be an Avariel, girl? Where are your wings, then?” asked Viconia scornfully. “Or did they find you as pathetic and stammering as I do and fled you gladly?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Sh-shut up!” stammered Aerie. “Rolanna, you saved her...n-now make her go away!”

“Hah!” said Viconia. “I have nothing against you, wingless one, but from your quivering I have no doubt you would make a poor companion. Why do you keep her, Rolanna? Pity?”

“I had not thought the drow could be so...striking,” said Anomen. “A beautiful creature, this, if devoid of compassion as I hear. Bring her or send her away, it matters not to me.”

“The decision, ultimately, is Rolanna’s,” said Viconia. “Have a backbone, Rolanna...take me with you and I will fight by your side! Together we shall vanquish all!”

Rolanna rejected her request. If Rolanna had any doubts, Viconia’s scornful words to Aerie convinced her.

Rolanna escorted Viconia, once more securely wrapped in a hooded cloak, outside of the district, to make sure she was not being followed. Leaving her there, Rolanna decided to pay the docks a visit. She was curious if she could pick out the headquarters of the Shadow Thieves said to be present in that part of the city; as well, she was curious about the building to which she had earlier taken the poisoned Renfeld.

Harper Headquarters

As the group neared the docks a poorly dressed man called out to Minsc, “Aye, now, is that a rat yer carryin’ there, fella? He looks nice an’ plump. How’s about two coppers for ‘im?”

“No! Boo is not for eating!” cried Minsc in shock. “Boo is mighty and wise and probably quite stringy. Er, and he is my companion!”

The party found themselves on a narrow, raised path, built on the roofs of tenements, that led directly downhill to the sea. As they passed a halfling he suddenly called out to Jaheira.

“There once was an elf proud and fair,
men withered once under her stare.
But she loved one man true,
and he died...as men do,
and now there is naught but grief there.”

“Are...are you speaking of me? And Khalid?” said Jaheira, “How do you know of this, answer me!”

The halfling answered only with tittering laughter. Rolanna moved up to confront him. He stared at Rolanna.

“There once was a child of...of... Oh my...” he suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” asked Rolanna. “How do you know so much about us?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I... I," he stammered, giggling, "the gods speak! They speak and speak and speak and speak! To me! Hee hee..." He would say nothing else.

They continued down to where they had left Renfeld. Rolanna was disappointed to note the building was shuttered, no one entering or exiting. So intent was she on the building that she started when someone addressed her.

"You there! Unwashed one! I would have a word with you!" said a man in a brightly colored robe.

"I was wondering when you would turn up, Zhent," said Jaheira, recognizing the man. "I had suspected our parting would not be permanent when last we met, and it appears my suspicions were correct."

"I am not here to address you, heartless Harper wench," he replied. "I am here to appeal to your erstwhile companion, Rolanna."

Rolanna recognized him as well now. She had met this mage Xzar and his halfling companion Montaron soon after leaving Candlekeep. She had journeyed with them for a while, but eventually Xzar and Montaron had gotten into an argument with Jaheira and Khalid that resulted in Xzar's death. Obviously, Xzar had since been resurrected.

"Perhaps you don't remember the last time we met," said Rolanna.

"Hm. Mm. I remember working with someone rather inept who resembled you," said Xzar. "If Monty were here, he would certainly be able to remind me. No matter! I saw you dealing with those Harpers...but it is obvious you are not a Harper yourself. You would be willing, then, to render me a service regarding them."

"What Harpers? What are you talking about?" asked Rolanna.

"The Harpers you delivered the poisoned man to. Or were you too idiotic to know they were Harpers? I require your inadequate services for a job." Xzar must have been watching the building for quite some time.

"Be wary, Rolanna," said Jaheira, "the Harpers will not brook interference lightly, and this Zhentarim likely holds only the worst of intentions in his heart."

"Yes, yes, I am not asking you to walk in and slaughter them, now, am I?" said Xzar impatiently. "Tempting as that may be, I am not such a blundering fool as your friends might suppose."

"Exactly what kind of job are you talking about?" asked Rolanna.

"My friend Montaron has been taken captive by those irksome Harpers. I would have you enter their building and find Monty for me."

Rolanna had only really known three Harpers, Gorion, Jaheira and Khalid, and only Jaheira was still alive. She was quite interested to talk to some more Harpers, all the better if there was a chance to see the insides of their headquarters. She was sure Montaron must have been spying for Xzar. She was curious what penalty the Harpers had imposed on him; surely the halfling's crime wasn't so great that they had actually harmed him. She indicated to Xzar that she was willing to do as he asked.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Excellent,” replied Xzar. “Go to their building and return once you have found him. Short...halfling...thief...even one of your intellectual capacity can't miss him.”

As they walked away Jaheira remarked, “Well, if you wish to investigate what has happened to the spy, that is up to you, Rolanna. I suggest caution and perhaps some common sense. If the Harpers will even speak to us, which I doubt, they certainly will not reveal what they did with the halfling. Best not to ask about him directly.”

Rolanna knocked on the door, and was relieved that Rylock answered, who she had met previously. He greeted her, saying, “Hmm...you are the one who returned Renfeld to us, yes? Greetings to you again, then. Is there something that you need?”

“Yes. Could you tell me what manner of place is this?” asked Rolanna.

“This is a private residence...private, as in ‘it’s none of your business.’”

“Really? I thought this was the Harper’s headquarters,” said Rolanna.

“Eh? Harpers? What are you talking about?” said Rylock in badly feigned surprise.

“I’m saying that this is the Harper’s headquarters here in the city. That is what it is, isn’t it?”

“Keep your voice down! That’s supposed to be a secret! Where did you hear this? Who told you?”

“But it is the truth, is it not?” asked Jaheira. “I am a Harper myself, and we simply wish to be treated as guests. Rolanna did bring you your poisoned friend, after all.”

“Alright! You returned Renfeld to us, but I can’t let you inside based on that. Listen...if you do a small task for us, I’ll let you take a look around. Deal?”

“What sort of ‘small task’ are you talking about?” asked Rolanna.

“You look like the fighting sort...there is a house just north of here, near the center of the district.”

“I am a Harper, friend,” said Jaheira, “and I think I see where this is heading...is all this really necessary?”

“I’m afraid it is, Jaheira, Harper or no. Your friends are strangers...they must prove their good faith if we are to trust them with our secret in this city.”

Rylock glanced back to Rolanna. “The owner of the house performs vile experiments...creating beasts which threaten the city. Destroy them, and we’ll allow your wish.”

“Why not just deal directly with the owner of the house?” asked Rolanna.

“That is a separate matter and is being dealt with by another Harper. This is all we need help with, currently. Will you do it?”

“Very well. I will do as you ask.” Rolanna did not see why she needed to perform a service just to be permitted entry, but if the situation was as described she had no problem with the task itself.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Very well. Go to the house and kill the creatures there. We will watch you and know when you have completed the task. Return here once you are done.”

Jaheira sighed, saying to Rolanna, “If the Harpers have asked this task to judge your worthiness, then there is no way around it. Let us proceed and be done with these ‘creatures.’”

“We are to run errands for these Harpers, now, even after saving one of them?” said Anomen. “And all for that...that...necromancer’s halfling friend?! I say to the Abyss with them all!”

The group went to the nearby house and forced entry. Inside were a woman, a man, and several goblins.

“Eek! Prebek! Intruders!” cried the woman.

“No, Sanasha!” replied Prebek. “Remember what happened the last time? Our master is testing us!”

“Testing us? Again?” said Sanasha.

“Yes! You know that his cruelty knows no bounds! Why, just the other day he pulled three of my toenails for miscasting a cantrip!”

“Yes, I remember. Well, you may be right...perhaps we should ask them?”

“No! The master would skin us and do his strange little dance on our hides if we fail his test! Come on, let us attack!”

“Errr...alright. Foul intruders! We shall stop you for our master!”

“Yes! We shall stop you!”

Having convinced themselves that they must attack the intruders they sealed their fates. Although mages, they were of little skill and swiftly overwhelmed. Rolanna was gratified to find evidence of necromantic experiments, validating Rylock’s words.

They returned to the Harper headquarters, where Rylock said, “Excellent. I understand you have completed the task at the house. The Harpers are grateful. You may go inside...but I warn you to keep to the first floor. The second floor is far too dangerous...anyone but a Harper who goes there will be killed, and we couldn’t help you. At any rate...go on in, if you wish.”

“Hmm, I am surprised they are letting us in, even after all this,” said Jaheira. “I warn you, Rolanna, be polite. Our reason for being here is questionable enough as it is.”

Once inside Rolanna found several more Harpers. She greeted an attractive young woman, who replied, “Greetings to you, my friend. Is there something that I can help you with?”

“Who are you and what do you do here?” asked Rolanna.

“I am Meronia, a Harper stationed here. You can identify us by the amulets we wear, though that is only in this city. Exactly what I do here, that is Harper business.”

“I see. Could you perhaps tell me a little about the Harpers?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“A little, but it may not make total sense. Harpers follow the Code and maintain the Balance. Both great evil and great good must be kept from getting out of hand.”

“And the power that your fellows obtain while they maintain this balance means nothing?” asked Anomen suspiciously. “I find it hard to believe that all Harpers are capable of such altruism.”

“We respect wisdom, not power or station,” was Meronia’s reply. “A good king that expands his realm too far puts others at risk as surely as an evil king who terrorizes. We intervene to maintain balance.”

“You’re right, I don’t understand,” said Rolanna.

“As I said, it does not mean much to one that does not study the Code. We have a simple attitude on life and maintaining the balance, but not everyone agrees.”

“What is this place, then?”

“We use this building as our base in the city, of course. Don’t speak of it, as secrecy is our weapon. Many think us meddlers and would give much to end our existence.”

“Yes, this is an odd structure for the Harpers to erect,” said Jaheira. “I have never heard of an opulent base such as this. Secrecy has always been the watchword before.”

“But aside from secrecy concerns, this is the safest place for us to be,” said Meronia. “Powerful magic protects the building, and there are guardians to ward against intruders.”

“Guardians? What sort of guardians?” asked Rolanna.

“The guardians will attack any who are not Harpers, so I would stay off the second floor if I were you. They do not kill, however, unless it is necessary.”

“What do they do, then...say, to an intruder? Or a thief?” asked Rolanna, trying unsuccessfully to be subtle.

“I do not know. That is for them to determine for themselves, I imagine. I have never asked them.”

“I am a Harper, Meronia,” said Jaheira. “Might I be allowed to speak to these guardians? I assume they are spectral Harpists. Perhaps they could satisfy my...curiosity.”

“I would not advise it, Jaheira. The guardians may not recognize you without the proper...protection. It is best not to disturb them without a most vital reason.”

“A friend of mine has been captured by the Cowled Wizards...do you have any information on them?” said Rolanna.

“The Cowled Wizards? A powerful and influential organization, which is hard to believe with the attitudes that exist in Amn against the use of magic. Not that people don’t use magic. It requires a license from the Cowled Wizards, and they react harshly against those who practice without their permission. Their vigilance is likely just to eliminate competition, and they keep the location of their prisoners very secret. Wherever your friend is, no one will find them. But if you were foolish enough to move against the Cowled Wizards, now would be the time. They’ve snared the proverbial lion, a powerful wizard named Jon Irenicus. He’s caused them all sorts of problems, I understand, and

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

they've closed ranks so no one knows anything about their weakness. But it's there, believe me."

Rolanna moved off to talk to another Harper, named Berinvar.

"Hm? Oh, yes...you're that fellow who did us the favor with all the creatures," said Berinvar. "You, er, wanted something? I'm rather busy at the moment."

"I notice you're all wearing the same necklace here. Is there a purpose to that?"

"It signifies us as Harpers within the city, merely, and nothing more than that."

"I'm searching for a friend who has been taken by the Cowled Wizards... do you know anything about this?"

"Mm. Is this the person who was abducted at the same time as the wizard, Jon Irenicus?"

"Yes, her name is Imoen."

"Then your friend is likely in grave danger. This man, Irenicus, is extremely powerful...the Cowled Wizards have likely bitten off far more than they can chew by taking him captive. Our sources say the wizards are terrified of his power. Where your friend...or this Irenicus...might be, however, I do not know."

"What's so dangerous about the second floor?"

"You should stay away from there, my friend. The guardians will not recognize you as a Harper, and there would be no way we could protect you from them."

"The guardians? What are they?"

"I've no interest in talking about the guardians. You are not a Harper...and you are therefore not privy to our secrets, no matter what favors you might do us."

"Ah, Berinvar, Rolanna is not a Harper but I certainly am," said Jaheira. "Will you treat my guests as friends and answer? I assume the guardians are Spectral Harpists?"

"I am sorry, Jaheira, but it is just not appropriate to speak of this."

As we walked away Jaheira muttered to me, "He and the others seem preoccupied with the trinkets around their necks. I find it odd I have not heard of this before now. Harpers do not often wear symbols to make themselves more noticeable."

Rolanna next talked to a young man. He seemed the most open, and the only one honestly glad to see them.

"Hello, well met, and welcome to our little place. Not much to see, eh? Never you mind, because good company will fill any room. What can little Pace do for you?"

"A bit young, aren't you? For this type of work, I mean," asked Rolanna. Actually, Rolanna realized the question was somewhat unfair, since many would consider Aerie and Nalia, not to mention Rolanna herself, too young to be adventurers.

"What type of work?" asked Pace. "The Harpers do many things. Why, some of these old guys can spin a scheme to make your head spin. It's a wonder, it is...sorry, Berinvar is giving me a rather nasty look."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Care to give me a tour?” asked Rolanna.

“There’s not much else to see. The rest pales in comparison to the main room. I prefer the simpler surroundings of the old glade, but Galvarey knows best.” Rolanna noticed that Jaheira winced slightly at mention of that name, but now was no time to ask why.

“This is not your usual kind of base?” asked Rolanna. “Don’t you need a permanent home of some sorts to plan in?”

“Oh, we’re quite good at thinking on our feet. Usually we set up, do the job and move on before anyone knows it. We would have done that here but...eh...” he glanced over at Berinvar. “I’d better let you get on your way.”

Rolanna poked around a bit downstairs, but other than a statue of Mystra there was little to see. She finally decided to look at the upper floor. She and her companions climbed a staircase; she thought it must be obvious to the Harpers what she was doing, but no one attempted to stop her.

On the upper floor she entered a large room, nicely carpeted, with large, stuffed chairs and a roaring fire. Bookcases lined one wall. Of most interest were three spectral forms in the room. They made Rolanna think of spectral undead, but she sensed no evil from them.

As Rolanna regarded the figures Nalia stepped up beside her and pressed something into her hand. Looking down, Rolanna recognized the same necklace the Harpers had been wearing below. To her inquiring look, Nalia shrugged and whispered she had found it in a desk drawer while they were looking around earlier.

Rolanna donned the necklace. One of the spectral figures immediately spoke, “You bear the mark of one and the same. Here you are welcome and may rest in safety. Ask as you will what you wish to know, and the guardians will answer as best as can be. We have seen much and know the old songs, though the first singing be forgotten.”

“What is this place?” asked Rolanna.

“Here is where we guard the meeting. Here is where the membership may rest and be safe. Here is a Hold of the Harpers, one of many, one of few.”

“What manner of creature are you?”

“We are the past that guards the present. We harp as specters that others would find rest here.”

“How does someone become a Harper?”

“It is said that Harpers come from birth, that they are merely acknowledged when they join. A taint in the mind that lacks sense perhaps, but the desire to make things right in the long term. Patience and works of good that help the balance; these are their own reward, but in time they may foster recognition of the like-minded. There is no membership to seek, there is only your own path to follow. Harpers seek out their own in time.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“There was a thief captured here not long ago. What would the Harpers have done with him?”

“A thief? A thief that despoils Harper soil is forbade from touching it again until penance given. They are above the soil, that they might see it and know loss. As they take flight from the law, so we have given flight but nowhere to flee. A gilded cage for a form free to soar, that they might know loss in confinement. No possessions held or worn, a form that carries its own feathered coat. To show that material things come and go, and that some do not need them at all.”

“I will leave you alone to your musings.” Rolanna wondered what the figure had been trying to tell her.

“Solitary, but never alone. The songs of the past serve to shorten the years for the ears that dare listen, and bring memory back of the friends departed. Those who harp are never alone.”

Rolanna cautiously investigated the rooms on this floor. In one room was an elaborate, glass enclosed indoor aviary, filled with exotic plants as well as numerous strange birds. Rolanna saw a small bird flying through the branches of the aviary. Jaheira suddenly gasped. She pointed to the bird, indicating that was what the spectral harpist must have been referring to.

Catching the bird was surprisingly easy. When Rolanna reached for it, the bird flew straight to her hand and sat there calmly. Nalia examined the bird and agreed there was a magical aura about it. Rolanna could only conclude that the Harpers knew of the reason for her visit to their headquarters, and satisfied with the punishment the thief Montaron had suffered were agreeable to his return to his master.

Rolanna exited the Harper headquarters; Xzar stood nearby. “You’re back, are you?” said Xzar “Is it safe for me to assume that you have succeeded in your mission or am I merely subject to a grueling social call?”

“I have found out what happened to him, yes. He was turned into a bird...which I have with me, here,” said Rolanna.

“Finally Montaron will be returned to my side! This is excellent news...especially since some fools broke into my laboratory and slaughtered all my creations! They killed both of my apprentices, too, it seems.”

Rolanna started at this. Could Xzar be referring to what they themselves had just done? If so, that would make Xzar the necromancer leader, but if that was the case why did Rylock say nothing...

Xzar had continued talking while these thoughts passed through Rolanna’s mind. “Bah! It will put my work behind interminably! How excruciatingly annoying! Before I reward you, I’ll polymorph Monty into his proper form...just to make sure you’re not lying. Monty must have something interesting to say...”

Xzar cast a spell, but the bird was transformed not into a halfling, but a young woman.

“What in the...? You’re not Montaron!” yelled Xzar.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The woman killed Xzar with a single blow of a dagger, then recited a poem.

“And death will come on wings of song,
a song of long and winding guile,
and in the end your end I wend,
and in the end, a harp will smile!”

“What? I demand to know what has happened here!” Rolanna was confused, events having happened faster than she could follow.

“My blade in his hide should answer you well enough,” answered the woman. “Here I did strike at his defenseless heart with a poison magical! I have no quarrel with you. We made the path difficult, but not unknowable, and in the end this fool did perish, as well he should. “

“What was his crime? What is the reasoning for this murder?” asked Rolanna.

“Did you not think him strange? He was spying on the Harpers, an act that should make you question his alliances. You may not have known what he was, but we did. A necromancer in the service of the Zhentarim, creating abominations for sale to the highest bidder. Far from their normal range, but not an unexpected enemy. He could not lay low with such a flamboyant manner, and we knew of him quickly. You merely helped in the inevitable, and so you are free. You served well, if unknowingly, and your agreement to help him is forgotten. The amulet is worthless...the blessed bear only Harper pins. Begone, and hopefully your next dealings with the Harpers will be more pleasant.”

“My own Harpers have used us,” said Jaheira. “I should have suspected...the gaudy necklaces, the invitation. Ah, well. If Xzar was doing as she said, he deserved his fate.”

Rolanna was angered, more for Jaheira's sake than her own. Even if they hadn't trusted her, surely they could have told Jaheira what was happening. But Rolanna kept her thoughts to herself as the young woman walked away. On the whole, Rolanna was somewhat disillusioned with this glimpse of the workings of the Harpers. She wondered if she shouldn't have just flat out refused Xzar to begin with.

Night had fallen, and a light drizzle fell as Rolanna left the docks and headed towards the rest of the city. A figure suddenly ran into the street they were on from a side alley. Normally, at night in such a district, one would expect someone to flee if they encountered six heavily armed strangers. Instead, the man ran up to Rolanna, yelling, “Help! You've got to help! Please!”

“What? What is the matter?” asked Rolanna. She noticed the man was dressed in leather armor and a black cloak, garb she had learned to associate with the Shadow Thieves.

“Oh no. They're here! They've caught me!” he cried. Three figures ran up the alley behind him.

“Pretty pretty cattle, you cannot run,” said the lead figure, which Rolanna recognized as a female vampire. “Ah, you have found some helpers to aid in your chase. I wonder if your saviors will prove as useful as you hope.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The vampire stared at Rolanna. "Ah, I know of this one. Rolanna, I believe. You are spared our wrath because of choices to come. Leave this place, and leave this creature to us. You are allied to neither of us yet."

Rolanna was not about to walk away and allow them to satisfy their hunger. "I will not allow this killing. That I am uninvolved does not make it right."

"We are in no mood to be patient! If you must cower with cattle you will die with the cattle!" screamed the vampire. She and the two male vampires that accompanied her attacked.

Rolanna and her friends were able to defeat the vampires after a sharp battle, although only destroying the corpse in its resting-place could permanently end such evil.

The thief was extremely grateful. "I...I thank you for saving me. I thought I was dead for certain. Good to see that you are willing to risk your neck for a fellow ally of the Shadow Thief Guild. Looks like you were well worth the risk. Again, I thank you."

Minsc had been in the forefront of the battle against the vampires, and had suffered severely. Rolanna had been thinking about him for some time, and this battle decided her to act. Although Aerie and Nalia were young and inexperienced, Rolanna felt they had some idea of the risks they ran, and accompanied her by choice. Rolanna didn't think either was true of Minsc. She had decided that Minsc must leave the party.

When she told him to leave, he replied as if he didn't quite follow what Rolanna had said, asking, "Boo needs to know, did you want us to remain with the group?"

"No, I think you should go," Rolanna repeated.

"Boo does not like goodbyes, but I know we will meet again. Until then, I will seek the small and fuzzy to console Boo. Where do you want to meet up again?"

Rolanna told him to wait at the Copper Coronet, although she actually hoped he would return to his homeland, Rashemen.

The Unseeing Eye

The next day Rolanna headed to the temple district of Athkatla. Of course, smaller shrines were scattered about the city, but major temples to Helm, Lathander and Talos were located here.

Arriving in the district, Rolanna noted a large crowd gathered outside the Lathander temple. She moved closer so she could hear a speaker haranguing the crowd.

"Listen to me, my brothers and sisters," said the speaker, "heed my words. We have been chosen as the recipients of a most holy miracle, one that should neither be dismissed nor ignored! I, Gaal...I, who have been stripped of my eyes most mercifully, have been shown the truth that has eluded the sighted! The gods that you worship are false gods, icons that serve to increase the wealth of churches and heathens! Listen to them not!"

A man dressed in the robes of a priest of Lathander called out from the side. "Hold! You speak of blasphemy! The Morninglord Lathander has always shown His benevolence and power. His presence amongst us is unquestionable!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Is it, priest?” replied Gaal. “I ask all of you to question, for a moment, if what the priest says is true. Yes, his false god grants him power to fuel his spells, much as any wizard might possess. I say that the churches lie to you! They claim their gods are present when they do nothing other than require your coin to fill their pockets!”

“No! What you are saying cannot be true!” cried a voice from the crowd. “The gods have ever protected us!”

“Is that so?” said Gaal. “Have they protected you from famine? Have they protected you from disease? Have they wrought harmony upon Faerun? No, they have not! They lie and cloud your sight to gain your worship of their false images! I have stripped myself of their foul eyes and I see what is the truth! The truth, I tell you!” From where she stood, Rolanna could see only two dark voids where Gaal’s eyes should be. She wondered if his eyes had actually been plucked out.

“You lie! You lie! The gods exist!” shouted another voice from the crowd.

“Such words are a horrid affront to the gods! Surely you will pay for this!” added the Lathander priest.

“Quiet! Listen to what he has t’say!” yelled someone in the crowd.

“I call on you to abandon your false gods!” cried Gaal. “They have done nothing for you! Cast them aside and join me on the true path, join me in the calling of the true sight!”

“What does that mean? Shall we tear our own eyes out? Don’t be foolish!” came from the crowd.

“What shall we do, then? Who shall we turn to if there are no gods?” someone else asked.

“But there is a god! There is the true god!” said Gaal. “The Unseeing Eye is here amongst us! He offers the faithful a clarity of vision, the true path to the divine! He offers you protection and succor!”

“Do not listen to him! He seeks to poison your minds!” implored the Lathander priest, but many in the crowd had been swayed by Gaal’s words.

“Bah! What has your god ever done for me? I’m poorer and no better off than I ever was!” said someone in the crowd.

“Don’t speak to the priest in that tone! The gods will be offended!” cried another.

“Don’t you hear what he’s saying? There are no gods to be offended! I say we see what this Unseeing Eye has to offer!” said a voice.

“Aye! I wish to see!” said another.

So many in the crowd were now shouting that Rolanna could not make out what individuals were saying. Surprisingly, the crowd grew hushed again when Gaal resumed speaking.

“No, my friends,” said Gaal, “you do not wish to ‘see.’ Forget what the years of lies have taught your eyes! You wish to ‘know.’ You wish to ‘learn.’ These are the truths that the Unseeing Eye can offer to you. A truer gift that you’ll not find amongst any of these

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

other so-called deities. Come, witness the miracle of the truth! Come and behold the Unseeing Eye for yourself and see the true god that is present amongst us!”

“No! Do not go with him!” shouted the priest in a desperate appeal. The crowd once more became vocal, individuals arguing with one another.

“I’ll do as I wish! I want the truth! Show me the Unseeing Eye!” said someone near Rolanna.

“Yes! Show me!” agreed another.

“Come, then!” yelled Gaal, only barely heard above the general noise of the crowd. “Those of you who wish to become the truly faithful, to witness the magnificence of the Unseeing Eye and the truth he brings, come with me.”

“What are you doing? Are you mad?” came from a voice nearby.

“Quit yer mouth, wench!” answered another.

“Aye, if you do not wish to see the truth, that is your business!” added a third.

Gaal started to push through the crowd, telling those around him “Come, then, my faithful. Follow me.” The people dispersed, some following Gaal, others just leaving now that the excitement seemed to be over.

Another priest had come up behind Rolanna while she watched the proceedings. He introduced himself as High Watcher Oisig of Helm. “This must not come to pass,” he stated to Rolanna. “The everseeing eye of Helm must be made aware of what they intend. You. I would speak with you. I would hire you as mercenaries in the service of Helm. I would prefer a woman of faith, but you will be adequate. Follow me to the temple of Helm. I will discuss what is required of you there. Do not take too long; Helm requires you now.”

Rolanna decided she would talk more to Oisig, but first she wanted to see a little more of the district. As she walked, she noticed another sightless priest standing motionless. Even without eyes he somehow managed to divine her interest, calling “You shall cower before the dread gaze of the Unseeing Eye! Bow down and pluck out your monstrosities ‘ere you are thrown into the Pit of the Faithless!”

“Who are you?” asked Rolanna.

“I am your dreaded savior! I am the fire that shall light the path to your redemption, faithless one! Hear my words and tremble in the knowledge that you have been presented the chance to worship amongst the Unseeing! Once I was a worshiper of the false Helm, but I have been shown the true path and been stripped of my eyes! I will drag you onto the true path! Oh, quake you will in your boots if you refuse the benevolent gift of the Unseeing Eye! He will smite those who errantly hold onto their bulbous orbs of false sight and cast them into the Pit of the Faithless! All of you will shake with fear before Him!”

“Who is this ‘Unseeing Eye’?” asked Rolanna.

“The Unseeing Eye has come to us and shown us the true path! I have stricken my eyes only to see what has never been before revealed... The Master has called on us to

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

spread the word of He who shall cause the false gods to cry out in their folly before his sightless gaze!”

“He requires his followers to pluck out their eyes? What kind of nonsense is that? Then I would be as blind as you!” What strange faith would require such a sacrifice, wondered Rolanna.

“I see better than you, faithless one! I see the false god’s stink as it wafts from your soul! Cast aside your unholy ways and bow down before the Unseeing Eye!” This prophet of the Unseeing Eye had worked himself into a fury at Rolanna’s intransigence.

Rolanna had had quite enough of him. “I’ll be leaving now, excuse me.”

“Oh, ye shall surely burn, you will!” he called after her as she walked away. “The foul sight that you linger onto shall draw his holy presence before you and you shall be cast from this world as a blight of evil! The faithless shall beware his coming, and the faithful shall rejoice!”

Rolanna walked to the temple of Helm. Inside, she sought out High Watcher Oisig, who greeted her, “Good, you have arrived. Know first that I will give no more trust than you prove worthy of. Despite your fine reputation, you are unknown until it is verified by deeds. The task I ask will be treacherous but you seem capable. Serve well and you will be rewarded. Display any treachery and it will be seen. Now to the task. You heard that fool in the street? If what he says is true, it threatens to upset a delicate balance. A new power would only disrupt the way of things. If he is lying, then whatever cult he is proposing can only serve to hurt those it bilks into following him.”

“What signs point to this? I would not wish to upset a legitimate faith,” said Rolanna.

“Nothing points to the emergence of a new deity. It would be impossible to hide such an event from the Great Guard that is Helm. What does remain unseen is the fate of those that have chosen to follow. We have lost some of our younger faithful, and they must be accounted for.”

“Then I will help as I can. Can you detail what is required?”

“He of the Unsleeping Eyes must know of this cult. The blindness they promote is abhorrent to Helm. We ask you to investigate and identify what is happening. The Vigilant One informs that the cult is underground and close, but we cannot see past the sewers. You must infiltrate, as friend or conqueror. You must suffer the filth of the sewers to find the filth of the cult. They are not hiding amidst the pipes, so there must be a passage leading further away.”

“It is as good as done. I will return with the answers you seek.”

“May the Great Guard give light to all wrongs against you. You may seek healing and tools to aid you here as you need. Ask an acolyte and you will receive. Our resources are thin at the moment, but an ally of Helm and servant of Torm is awaiting you in the sewers now. Seek Keldorn to serve with you. Faith guide you both.”

As Rolanna exited the temple Anomen commented, “I know of Sir Keldorn. I do not doubt that he looks into this cult on his own. He is a veteran paladin of the Order, a fine warrior...if somewhat arrogant and over-pious.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I am glad that you have chosen this course, Rolanna," added Jaheira. "This cult stinks of wrongness, an affront against nature that must be stopped!"

Finding an entry to the sewers was easy. Traveling through them was less so. Besides the stink and detritus one would expect, there was an unusual concentration of creatures, both monstrous and human-like. After several encounters, the party finally came upon an armored knight, who Rolanna took to be the paladin Keldorn.

"Halt and go no further laymen!" said Keldorn. "There be a grave evil here, the source of which I have yet to find. Please, forgive the harshness of my tone, but state your business in this place."

"We have been sent by the church to search these depths for missing followers," replied Rolanna.

"Aye, then we are well met. I am a humble servant of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart, and I believe I am to meet you here. Our quests are linked. The evil of which I spoke, its presence is quite strong and, unsurprisingly, it emanates from somewhere deep below us. Come, let us seal our fates together and seek it out. I was instructed to await the group that I would aid in this matter. It is my duty to serve for the greater good."

"Your presence in my group would be most welcome. I accept your service," said Rolanna, glad to gain the assistance of such a strong fighter for good.

"Lead on then, I will direct my sword where you wish. Let us seek an exit from these pits that leads to the greater blackness below."

"I should tell you, I think, that I have another mission, as well," warned Rolanna. "I seek to rescue an old friend of mine named Imoen who has been captured by the Cowled Wizards."

"I know little of the wizards except that they meddle in the affairs of others far too often. Aid me first in this cause, my friend, and I will then strive to aid you in yours. Let us be off."

Heartened by this new addition, the party continued to search the sewers. Keldorn remarked to Anomen during a short break, "Young Anomen, it seems to me that you have been too long away from the fold. Perhaps this is a good time to continue your lessons."

"I assure you, noble Keldorn, that I am well-versed in the statutes and moral laws of the Order," replied Anomen.

"I doubt it not. However, perhaps it is time to re-memorize the virtues of chivalry and honesty."

"I know what you're about, Keldorn," replied Anomen, resenting Keldorn's interference. "Let me worry about training and you may worry about your own affairs."

"I am not 'about' anything," said Keldorn. "I've no ulterior motive outside the betterment of a squire. Best you listen to the wisdom of those who have gone before you."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I shall take, Sir Keldorn, what path I deem appropriate. I have not bothered you so it seems rude that you find the time to bother me.”

“Very well. I see that you are not prepared to learn.”

Rolanna had overheard this conversation, and couldn't help wondering if Anomen resented anyone trying to instruct him because it reminded him of his overbearing father. To keep the two of them apart, Rolanna engaged Keldorn in conversation as they searched. Rolanna found talking to Keldorn worthy in its own right, as she found much of interest of his tales of service to his order, as well in his observations of life. Rolanna also found herself telling him something of her past, of Candlekeep and the battles she had fought in Baldur's Gate.

After Rolanna had wound up her discussion of her past, Keldorn said, “A difficult life you must lead, my friend...always having battle and worry thrust upon you, never in the possession of sanctuary. I miss it, truly, the little that I have known of home and the Order.”

“Sanctuary of some kind would be a welcome relief. I wouldn't mind some safety and rest, myself,” replied Rolanna. Indeed, since she had left Candlekeep her life had been almost constant conflict.

“I have the sense that you are searching desperately for a touchstone of some sort: something solid to which you might cling,” said Keldorn. “You have an angry ambivalence about you, as if your very soul clings to some contested ground within you...is it something you wish to talk about?”

Rolanna was surprised by Keldorn's perceptiveness, since they had been talking only briefly. She trusted him, and decided to tell him of her heritage. Not that it was much of a secret anymore. “My father was a god of the dark pantheon. A little ambivalence can be forgiven, can it not?”

“I had thought as much,” said Keldorn, which left Rolanna wondering if he had heard something of her before they met. Keldorn continued, “We cannot help what we are but we can help what we become... The greatest peril of ambivalence is that it is temporary. When you fall from it, I...I pray you fall towards the light, Rolanna.”

Soon afterward, they found a secret door set into the side of the tunnel. Inside, however, was not the cult of the Unseeing Eye, but rather an evil wizard's lair. They managed to defeat the wizard's minions, but the wizard himself managed to flee. They also rescued a bard, named Haer'Dalis, who had been magically enslaved by the wizard.

It had been a long day, and Rolanna thought it best if they leave the sewers and rest, to continue refreshed later. Along the way they would take the bard as far as the exit to the sewers, from where he could join his companions in Athkatla's Bridge District.

Haer'Dalis seemed to take a particular delight in talking to young Aerie as they walked back to an exit from the sewers. He noticed that Aerie was having trouble keeping up, and called to Rolanna, “My raven, my raven, we must have rest if we are to keep this flock together.”

“I like how you always pretend people are birds,” said Aerie to him.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Pretend? My dear and mourning dove, ‘tis not pretending!” exclaimed Haer’Dalis. “We are all frail as birds and mad as hounds, each one of us... Aye, each one of us but you, somehow... You fly above us all, no anger, no rage to tie you down. Aye...you’re right Aerie. You are no hound, nor shall I ever name you one, you have my pledge.”

“You promise?” said Aerie.

“Aye, I promise, dove.”

After a short rest, Aerie was ready to continue, and soon enough everyone was out of the sewers. Before Haer’Dalis parted from the group he drew Aerie aside.

“Your heart is heavy, my mourning dove?” asked the bard. “Your eyes wander, I think, into dark and solemn places that others cannot see. Have a care, fair Aerie, lest they draw you in forever.”

“It...it is nothing, truly, Haer’Dalis,” she replied. “I am simply...thinking of a time when I still had my wings. Sometimes...sometimes the memory still wrenches my soul.”

“I think I understand your loss, sweet one.”

“Do you? I...mean no offense, Haer’Dalis, but I find that hard to believe, if you have never flown.”

“Ah, but there are more ways to fly than with wings, my dove. And the fall to mundane earth is similarly filled with agony.” Haer’Dalis chanted a poem.

“My fall was not the thing, my love,
I thought I bore it well
but to stare up into the heavens
from the darkened plains of hell
and think that I, too, once walked those
endless heights
is a pain I cannot tell.”

“That’s...that was very lovely, Haer’Dalis.”

“They are but simple words, my dove. For this bard to understand but a tiny fraction of your pain has cleft my heart in twain. You...have my deepest sympathy, sweet, lonely Aerie”.

“I...th-thank you,” said Aerie. She watched Haer’Dalis walk away until he turned a corner and was no longer in sight.

There was enough of the day left that Rolanna decided to visit the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart, whose headquarters were in this section of the city. The party approached one of the imposing entries to the headquarters, ceremonially guarded by a male and female knight. Facing them, perhaps uncertain whether to enter, were a man and a gnome. There was something familiar about the man; suddenly Rolanna recognized him as Garrick, a bard she had met near Baldur’s Gate. Rather than entering, in a dramatic gesture Garrick sank to one knee, only slightly marred by his losing his balance and wildly flailing his arms for a moment.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Lady Irlana! Oh, my fair Lady Irlana!" cried Garrick to the female knight, apparently the Lady Irlana.

"Err...Garrick, isn't it? What can I do for ye, Garrick?" she replied in an uncertain voice.

"I, uh...I, uh..." stumbled Garrick.

The gnome behind Garrick prompted him in a loud stage whisper, "I am here to pledge to you the love of a poet and an artist. Take my fragile love, my sweet, hold it in your hands as I gaze upon you admiringly."

"I am...here to pledge...to you the love...of a poet and an artist. Take my fragile love, my...sweet, hold it in your...hands as a gaze upon you admiringly. Er...yes, that's right..." Garrick attempted to repeat.

"Oh...I see. Well, thank you, Garrick," replied Lady Irlana.

The gnome was not the only one whispering, as the male knight leaned over to her and commented, "Are you serious, Irlana? The man's a fop!"

The gnome meanwhile prompted again, "Come with me, my lady and let me..." He suddenly slapped at himself, saying "Ow! Damn insects! Wait, fool, don't say that!"

"Come with...me, my lady...and let me out damn insects! No, you fool...don't, uh..." said Garrick, hopelessly confused.

"Heh...you've got a prize, here, my lady," the male knight pointed out.

"So I see," was the reply.

"Um...excuse me for a moment," Rolanna said to Garrick, interrupting his bumbled serenade.

Garrick looked at Rolanna, then at Jaheira, commenting, "Hmm...for some reason, you seem rather familiar, too, my dear."

"Are you trying to tell me, bard, that you do not remember us?" asked Jaheira. "You were working for that evil sorceress, Silke, when we ran into you."

"Hmm. Nope, doesn't ring a bell. Who's this Silke person?" replied Garrick, although it was unclear whether he was lying or merely unable to remember what he had done the previous day, let alone months back.

"Well, you didn't have many thoughts in your head, then," said Jaheira, "and it is obvious you do not have many now."

Garrick and the gnome left, although they could hear the gnome sigh as he walked away, saying to himself "I would court the Lady Irlana, myself, but I know she would ne'er have an ugly gnome like myself."

The female knight said to Rolanna, "Greetings to you, my Lady. I be Lady Irlana, Knight of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart. At your service."

Her companion introduced himself as Sir Cadril. He smiled when he noted one of Rolanna's companions, saying, "Hail, Keldorn! I have not seen you in some time! How fare you?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"It has been a struggle of duty and honor, good friend," replied Keldorn, "but the gods have treated me well, nevertheless, I think."

Cadril's greeting was much less effusive for Anomen. "Ah...Anomen. I see you are...back."

"I am, Cadril," said Anomen. "And there is no reason for your furtive, suspicious glances, either...whether you like me or not."

The party entered the building.

"So this is the guildhouse of the infamous Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart, is it?" said Nalia.

"Infamous?" said Keldorn, stung. "Miss Nalia, we servants of the Radiant Heart pride ourselves on bringing a little good into this dark world. Only the brightest, most upstanding knights of all the Holy Orders are granted the privilege of membership."

"Such as yourself, Keldorn?" was her reply.

"Humbly, Ma'am, yes."

"And the Order pays for your estate?"

"My lady Nalia, understand this: any soul of any social rank may join the Holy Orders and therein be judged by the purity of their heart, male or female. Unlike some who take it upon themselves to criticize, we were not born into wealth and luxury."

"And yet these halls and all your sacred vows are reserved only for us humans... Believe what lies you wish, Keldorn, but it shan't make them any truer."

Rolanna introduced herself to Sir Ryan Trawl, whom Keldorn had pointed out was in charge of the Order's external affairs.

"Greetings, Rolanna. I have heard of you," said Sir Ryan.

Anomen begged Rolanna to allow him to show her more of the Order. The two of them walked away from their companions, towards the rear of the building. Anomen pointed out paintings and what feat they commemorated, or a knight and for what acts of valor he or she was known. Rolanna noticed his manner becoming increasingly anxious as he continued, until finally he interrupted his tour.

"My lady? Might I bend your ear for a moment?"

"Certainly, Anomen, what would you like?"

"I have been thinking much on my Test, as of late. It will dictate my entire future, as the Order will decide whether or not I will be allowed into their ranks. It is everything I have strived for...after years spent proving myself. I...don't know what I would do if I failed the Test... And, yet, suddenly I am quite sure that I will fail it. It is my heart that will betray me. I feel faithless and worthless in my soul...and they will know of it. What do you think, my lady? Am I really so terrible? I have tried so hard, and yet it all seems to come to naught. Do you...do you think I will fail the Test, as well?"

Rolanna now understood what was happening. He had been showing her the valor and honor associated with the Order, and was worried he wouldn't meet his fellows'

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

measure. Rolanna could sympathize with his doubts; they mirrored questions she sometimes asked about her own path. However, despite his rough edges, she had come to believe in Anomen.

“You must be confident that you follow the right path, Anomen. If you follow your conscience, how can they refuse you?”

“Because I do not know my own conscience, my lady. I would not turn to others for guidance if I did...but I do thank you humbly for your council. You are most kind. Ah... the Test will come for me soon enough, I suppose. And I doubt there is much more I can do between now and then to rectify my failings. What will come will come.”

Rolanna asked Anomen to finish his tour, the final stop of which was the Order's barracks. A young man in there waved as they walked in, saying “Hoy, Anomen. What's th' good word, eh?”

Anomen sighed one word, “Melvin.”

“Aye, ya gots a fine look about ya,” said Melvin.

“By all that is holy, Melvin, do you not have a latrine to scrub?” asked Anomen.

“Nar, I's done 'em yesterday.”

“By Helm, Melvin! Why are you talking to me? The Prelate may be using a soiled latrine this very moment! To it, boy!”

“Righty, righty, knighty!” he replied brightly.

“Why do you test me so, Helm?” muttered Anomen to himself.

Melvin took note of Anomen's companion. “Allo there, pally. I'm Squire Melvin. It's nice t' meet ya.”

“The pleasure is mine, Melvin,” Rolanna gravely replied. “What is this place?”

“Dis here's th' Most Noble Order o' the Radiant Heart. I bees the Squire fer learnin' knighty stuff.”

Rolanna ignored Anomen's tugging on her arm, trying to draw her away. “What is the Order of the Most Radiant Heart?”

“Tis an order o' paladins 'n such. Truth, justice, honor, and courage, ye knows.”

“How long have you been a Squire of the Order?”

“Two days, give or take. Was cleanin' fish wot not but a week ago. I'm a thinkin' I wants t' be a knight, ye knows.”

“Cleaning fish?”

“Yar! They but seen me skill wit th' fish guttin' knife and they's gonna train me.”

“Well, good luck, Melvin.”

“Righty, righty! I'm a blue-bellied goober, then! Cheers!”

Rolanna felt much better after talking to Melvin, for despite Anomen's prickly manner he obviously cared a great deal about the young squire.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The next day they returned to the sewers, to try to find the location of the Unseeing Eye cult. At one end of the sewers, the party came across the access to the underground headquarters of the cult. When they tried to enter, they again encountered Gaal.

“Hold, you tread on sacred ground! Only those who serve the Unseeing Eye may enter. I am Gaal, High Priest of the One God.”

“I wish to know more. How does one serve your ‘Unseeing Eye’?” asked Rolanna.

“The One God has demanded that his disciples achieve a higher state of wisdom... you must remove that which is limiting and offensive. The unholy eyes are removed from your head during the sacred initiation. If you survive and are proven faithful, the Unseeing Eye accepts you into service.”

“And if you don’t survive?”

“Sadly, there are those who lack the stamina to serve the One God...their lack of faith betrays them. The bodies of these unfortunates are offered to the Pit of the Faithless.”

Rolanna was shocked that he described such a horrible process in such matter of fact language. She felt a growing anger, and attempted to throttle it back while learning more about the cult.

“Tell me about this ‘Unseeing Eye’ of yours, then. Who is he?”

“The Unseeing Eye has brought us enlightenment. Only by removing our eyes can we remove the veil of lies and deceit clouding our lives. He is the most ancient and wise of the race you might know as ‘beholders.’ We servants have flocked to him gladly, and his mighty power protects us. You would be wise to serve him as we do.”

“You serve a beholder with no eye? Can a beholder have power with no eye?” Rolanna had heard tales of beholders; without fail, they were described as creatures of great evil.

“Without his eyes, the One God is stronger, not weaker. He has made mountains tremble and easily destroyed those fools who have come seeking his destruction. Only those who serve Him are safe always.”

“What if I’m not interested in having my eyes removed?”

“Hmm. It is a sign of weakness to refuse the enlightenment. Would you walk about willingly without arms, without feet? I do not think so. Still, the Unseeing Eye could use the skills of one such as yourself. An exception...could, perhaps, be made in your case. There is...something that you could do that the great one cannot, despite His vast power. Assist in that and I will admit you into our ranks and into the Unseeing One’s presence, yes?”

“No, I refuse to do this,” said Rolanna. She felt she had learned more than enough about this cult, and had no desire to perform any services for them.

“The only other way into the fold is the initiation,” said Gaal. “Come, I shall relieve you of your unholy orbs as the first test of your new faith.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna had had enough of Gaal as well, and for once unleashed her anger, hotly replying “How about I destroy you and your cult, instead?!”

“You dare?! Suffer the wrath of the almighty, then, fool!” Gaal motioned to the guards who accompanied him, and they attacked the party. Rolanna and her companions defeated them, then moved into the room beyond.

A huge pit in its center, the bottom of which could not be seen in the uncertain light, dominated this room. Also present was the “Unseeing Eye,” a floating, eyeless beholder.

A low voice sounded within Rolanna’s mind, “Despair, sighted, for death is thy familiar...” Rolanna attacked the creature, flanked by Keldorn and Anomen. Their combined blades were too much for the creature, which despite its claimed divine status quickly succumbed. Rolanna returned with the others to the temple of Helm to report what had occurred.

Night had fallen when they left the sewers. They came across what Rolanna took to be a Shadow Thief, kneeling and mumbling to himself. Rolanna asked him what was wrong, but his reply was strange.

“Pretty pretty walks the night, pretty pretty fears the light. Pretty pretty has no soul. Pretty pretty black as coal.”

“Step in shadow, left a husk, killed in moments after dusk. Step in shadow you are prey, pray you live to see the day.”

“Sleep the street and see the dark, death becomes a lyric lark. Walk in Shadow as the guild, see the war that leaves them killed.”

“See the flow from wound and neck! Was that your friend? Well best you check! Members gone and guild will fail! Best you fight the tooth and nail!”

“Run you can’t, the war will find! To haunt your dreams and haunt your mind! Watch your friends and watch the death! Watch their eyes and hold your breath!”

“Join or die! You cannot flee! Watch the death...in front of me...in front of...me... Run you can’t! The war will find! Run you can’t! The war will find! AHHHHHhahahahah!!!”

The thief suddenly leaped up and sped off. Shaking her head, Rolanna did not attempt to stop him, instead continuing on to the temple of Helm. Inside, she reported to High Watcher Oisig.

“Your return was foreseen, though what you would say is unknown. Is this cult to be believed?”

“It was a beholder cult! I have destroyed the beast and all of its plans!” said Rolanna.

“A beholder cult in the very heart of Helm’s sight? You have done a great service removing it! We will send clergy to remove all taint of its presence. Such service would earn greatness for one of the flock, but you are occupied elsewhere and will have to be content with mere gold and trinkets. You will not be disappointed, though the spiritual rewards could have been much more. You are welcome here, so long as you maintain a favorable reputation.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Another long day, after which everyone was looking forward to a good night's rest. As they walked to an inn, Rolanna again found herself in conversation with Keldorn.

"Bit by bit and little by little, thus does innate goodness conquer the blood of an evil god," was his comment on Rolanna's actions.

"What does the Church have to say about us godlings, Keldorn?" asked Rolanna. "Is there any hope for us?"

"There is always hope, but no one can know what is in store for you or your kin. I have been in contact with my the Order, asking them to research prophecies." This showed again that Keldorn had been aware of her before they met, but Rolanna found she didn't mind. Keldorn's approach to her was reasonable and matter of fact, seemingly willing to judge her based on her actions rather than her heritage.

"Will there be a new god of Murder? Will you and your siblings enter into some new pantheon? Are you destined for the Abyss?" asked Keldorn. "I wish I knew, Rolanna."

"How many of us do you think there are?"

"Maybe a handful, maybe as many as all the stars in all the skies. No doubt Bhaal would have wanted to create as many of you as possible. The question comes down to time and opportunity. Cyric was hunting him, after all... You are a haunted Clan, I fear."

Keldorn's Homecoming

The next day they headed back to the Temple district, since Oisig had mentioned the temple of Lathander might have a task for the party. Entering the temple of Lathander, Rolanna made herself known to Dawnbringer Sain. He explained what needed to be done.

"The Morninglord takes great pride in the artifacts of his rule. We have many items on display, from new artworks to the aged relics of bygone days. Today we are one less. We are the victims of thievery, and our followers have been shaken by this vulnerability. Quick steps must be taken to rectify this."

"Treachery! What can be done?" Rolanna asked enthusiastically, glad to be given a straightforward task.

"We know the culprits, they have not concealed their crime. Talassans, slinking from their temple to degrade our worship, hired common thieves for the deed! They fear no retribution. The Morninglord cannot suffer his relics in the hands of such evil. Find these thieves before the Talassans receive the items. The spark of dawn has lit the way. Go to the filth of the Slums at night, and intercept the delivery of our Dawn Ring. Bring it back to its proper place. Expect resistance from the Talassans. Divination reveals their foul servant. Go, and relieve the one called Travin of our rightful property."

"I will aid you. You shall have your relic back."

"Go to the Slums during the night. If you can do this without bloodshed, all the better. But spare no wrath if necessary."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Since night was still hours away, Rolanna decided to let the others wander as they might through the city. Aerie found herself with Keldorn, walking through the temples in the district and hearing Keldorn's commentary on the gods and their relation to humans. After a while she stopped him, asking, "Keldorn, do—do you have a moment?"

"Of course I do, Aerie. What is it?"

"I...Quayle taught me to be a cleric but—but I know so little of the world... He taught me to worship Baervan Wildwanderer, god of the gnomes..."

"Baervan Wildwanderer: the Masked Leaf, the Forest Gnome. I have heard of him, but know little. I have dedicated my studies to the human pantheon, I fear."

"I remember a few of the elven gods but...oh, it was so long ago. And here I am, neither elf nor gnome nor human in my beliefs but a— a hodge-podge of them all... Am I wrong to be that way, Keldorn?"

"Wrong? No, to some you be the ideal. You have dedicated yourself to the Church in all its forms and to that purest form: your own heart."

"My heart?"

"We all have a tendency to divide the pantheons, to pray to deities that are easiest to appease or have the greatest impact on us and then ignore the rest... Your life has not been easy, Aerie, but it has taught you much, in its own way."

"Oh thank you, Keldorn... One of these days you'll have to teach me all the things you say I've learned."

"Or you me, Aerie. Or you me..."

Rolanna had paired up with Anomen, and they walked through the shops of Waukeen's Promenade. They were idly examining the wares of one merchant when Anomen asked, "I have come to understand a few things of your past, and I have a question, if I might be permitted to pose it..."

"Go ahead and ask," replied Rolanna.

"I have been told a few things of your travels in the north and in Baldur's Gate in particular. Your adventures are...impressive, my lady. The equal of any great heroine. Most in particular, however, I have been told of your defeat of the man Sarevok and the ruin of his plans for stirring war and strife in the area. This man, Sarevok...I am told he was your brother. Is this true?"

"He was my brother in that I am a child of the god, Bhaal, and so was he...if that's what you mean," replied Rolanna, not trying to hide anything from him.

"Yes, I know of this. And I can see the signs. I cannot imagine what it must be like... and I can claim no purity, myself, so I can only judge your actions. This Sarevok was a man of great power and of similar godly heritage...and yet you maintained the higher road and saved the north from great chaos and destruction. And yet surely the blood calls to you in some manner. How did you maintain your sense of good under such conditions? Did you see this as a test of your own, my lady?"

"I have always tried to do the right thing, regardless of any influence by my blood."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“But you have not always succeeded, yes? I suppose calls of the blood do not need to rule one. Your actions belie whatever motivations you might have...something to ponder. Come...let us continue on your journey so that I may think.”

They continued walking, but Anomen was deep in thought, responding to Rolanna's comments with one or two words. Eventually he spoke to her again.

“My lady, I have been pondering your situation for some time...this matter of your peculiar heritage...and I find myself filled with admiration and wonder for you, truly. The blood of the former god of murder flows through your veins...and yet you are an honorable woman. You have done many great things and have earned respect. How is it that you are able to do these things, my lady? Is there no internal struggle against urges you cannot control? Do you not feel awash in a sea of evil impulses?”

“There is always a struggle against my blood, but I do what I must,” said Rolanna, realizing Anomen had really been thinking of his own internal conflicts.

“Yes... always a struggle. And, yet, you always manage to come out on top, do you not? It must be so easy for you, my lady... you are a force for good and this blood seems to have no powerful influence over you.” Anomen scowled at Rolanna.

“Always a struggle?” Bah!” he spat. “If I had such evil blood in me, I would be writhing on the ground! I...I could not do what you do! Why must I constantly endure this?! Just...just stand away from me, woman! I stand on the precipice of a test that will decide whether my dream dies, and you are not helping! Away from me, so that I might think!”

Rolanna could have replied many things to this outburst. She could have pointed out that even as a child there had been unexplained bursts of anger, and ever since Sarevok had killed her foster father Gorion she had constantly been forced to prevent her dark heritage from expressing itself. But she recognized it was Anomen's own doubts that were eating at him, and it was best to remain silent and let him wrestle his internal demons by himself for a while.

It was also time for the party to meet at the Copper Coronet in the slums as earlier agreed, which was fortunate since Rolanna didn't relish continuing walking with Anomen and his stony silence.

Jaheira had impatiently been the first one to show up at the Copper Coronet, and was now paying for her lack of patience, nursing an ale at the bar and boredly scanning the room for the twentieth time. A patron took her presence for availability, and approached her.

“Ah, I sense you have an earthy wisdom about you, my sweet elf,” he said. “I find that most sensual.”

“Do you also find sensual my disdain for your disgusting manner?” asked Jaheira.

“Ah, such passion! You set me on fire with your words...and with your lovely body, as well...” he replied, not so easily dissuaded.

“I could set you on fire with more than that, if you truly wish,” was Jaheira's answer, casually casting a spell that caused a fiery scimitar to appear in her hand.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Well...er, no, not really,” he replied, rapidly backing away.

“The first thing of sense you have said. Now stay out of my way.”

Rolanna showed up soon afterward, and within a short time, the entire party was gathered together. They went outside to scout the slums for the contact the priest of Lathander had mentioned.

Although still early evening, the streets were not crowded. The beggars, of course, were still present, having nowhere else to go. After Rolanna gave a coin to one beggar Nalia remarked, “That was a nice thing to do, Rolanna. Although I’m sure you could spare a lot more...what are you saving up for? A golden sword?”

“Rolanna will do as she decides is best,” replied Jaheira. “While kind enough to give the beggar a coin, there is no need for her to give away everything she owns.”

They passed more beggars, in some cases entire families with nowhere to sleep but the streets. Keldorn remarked “Where men gather, a bustle of chaos ensues. I would save them all, if I could.”

Walking down another street they saw a man standing alone, impatiently taking several steps one way, then another, as though tired waiting for someone. Rolanna went up to him, assuming this must be Travin, the one they were looking for.

“Ere you, what do you want?” said Travin. “Can’t a man walk the streets at night without bein’ bothered? Get off.”

“Oh, but I think you and I should talk. Is your name Travin, by chance?”

“W-what of it? You...you from them Talassans? I gots what you be looking for, but only for a price.”

“Of course. Tell me what your fee is and I’ll make sure you get it.”

“I ain’t gonna wait for payment. Now or never, that was the deal. 400 gold or no ring.”

Anxious to get the information, and not wishing to be put in a situation where she might be forced to kill Travin over a simple theft, Rolanna agreed to his terms. “Fine. Here you go. Now, I will take the ring, please.”

“Thank you. Now, go to the red brick house with red shingles on the roof of the Copper Coronet and speak with Borinall. He will give you the ring.”

Rolanna made her way to the indicated house. Inside, Borinall was annoyed at her presence.

“What in the hells do you want in here? I don’t deal with common streetwalking trash. I got clientele that makes appointments, and I ain’t got time for you.”

“I thought you might want to talk to me. Travin said you have something I want.”

Before he would talk to her, Borinall insisted she do something to prove herself, saying, “This will only be but a moment. I must be sure I am giving it to the proper person; when dealing with Talassans a mistake would be the death of me. It is a simple matter, really. Swear your devotion to Talos.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“And what would you gain by my refusal?”

“It is a simple matter, really. I am to deliver this to a servant of Talos. If you are said servant you will not balk at declaring your allegiance; you would most likely revel in it. But if you are *not* a follower of Talos, you will not swear to him even in jest. To do so would be to deny your own faith, or even worse, to bring the attention of Talos upon you. So I ask you. Are you currently in service to Talos? Are you loyal to him and him alone? And may he strike you down if you are lying.”

Rolanna was not sworn to any specific God, although her status as a paladin was obviously due to some divine favor. However, she would not falsely swear to Talos, not out of fear of his retribution, but because of the dishonesty implied.

“I cannot speak the words you wish to hear,” she replied.

“Then you will not have the item. Leave me.”

It seemed Rolanna would be forced into a fight after all. She was not going to leave without the ring. “No! The item will be returned! You will give it or suffer my wrath!”

“I am not unprotected! If you wish a fight, you will have one! To my side!” Borinall called forth his confederates, but the party swiftly overmatched them.

Rolanna returned the ring to the temple of Lathander. She didn't feel any better over the killing she had been forced to do when the cleric Sain openly gloated over the setback the Talassans had been dealt.

Jaheira had picked up some rumors regarding what Tolgerias the cowled wizard might be after. Gossip indicated the wizard's interest in a minor noble; Jaheira had also found out this noble owned a house in the city, near the docks. Rolanna the next day went to his house to see what she could find.

A servant greeted them, saying, “Yes? May I help you? You are not a friend of the master's, are you?”

“No, I'm not. Can you tell me who lives here?” said Rolanna.

“Well, yes of course. This is the house of the good Master Corthala. Valygar Corthala. I am Hervo, his manservant, if you will.”

“Do you know when Valygar might be returning?”

“No, I am sorry I don't. Ever since that sordid business with the wizards, I don't know if the master will ever be returning.”

“Sordid business? Your master had some kind of dealings with wizards?”

“The ordeal with the Cowled Wizards was just awful. They came here two weeks ago, demanding to see Master Corthala. I was just shaking in my shoes. I heard them upstairs. They demanded that the master do something, and he refused. I remember poor Master Corthala was so upset he was shouting, he was. There was a loud crash...fighting. I was terrified when the wizards came back down the stairs alone. They said Valygar had committed murder and must pay. Master Corthala had slipped away from them. The wizards told me not to say anything, but I am desperate with worry. Do you think the master is alright?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As Rolanna had thought, the Cowled Wizards had no good intent towards this Valygar. She told the servant, "I am not sure, but if the Cowled Wizards are after him, it is likely that he is in great danger. Are you sure you have no idea where he has gone?"

"Hm. It truly puzzles me. I remember the family used to own some land in the Umar Hills. Perhaps the master has gone there. Is this helpful?"

"Not really...do you know of any friends that Valygar has?"

"Well, the master has friends amongst the woodsmen and rangers. He was in the scouts, you see, up until a couple of years ago. Very skilled. I don't remember any of his friends specifically. The Corthala family has a...a poor reputation amongst the nobles in this town, to tell the truth."

"Poor reputation? Why is that?"

"The Corthalas have always had a talent for magic. Many dangerous sorcerers in the line...a bad thing in Athkatla. Not Master Corthala himself, of course."

Rolanna offered to help, and asked if she could look around the house for any clues. Her open manner and the servant's extreme worry combined to allow what would normally be unthinkable, and Rolanna was granted her request. A quick search turned up nothing of interest except for a deed to a country house. Keldorn suggested looking up the deed in government records and attempting to match it to a specific location.

As they entered the government district Keldorn remarked, "Oh, to taste the airs of home... It has been a long time since last I passed this way."

"Home?" asked Rolanna in surprise. "But I thought you maintained your quarters at the Radiant Heart."

"My attendance at the Order is...it is oft required, but my servants maintain an estate in this district and it is there that I visit my wife and daughters... Would you like to come?"

"I would like that," said Rolanna, wondering why in the extensive discussions she had had with Keldorn he had never mentioned his family.

"Very well. I shall point it out to you as we pass its gates. As I said, it has been far too long since last I walked these streets."

It took the rest of the morning to match up the deed found in Valygar's house with government records, but eventually it was determined he had a house in the Umar Hills. Rolanna thought it unlikely, however, that she would have the time to look him up.

With that taken care of, Rolanna was interested in seeing Keldorn's home. As they walked a beggar came up and asked for coin; even in one of the richest sections of Athkatla, the poor were not hard to find.

Barely had the beggar made his plea than a city guard hurried over, crying out "Hold! You there! What have I told you about begging in the Government District?!"

"I...am sorry, sir...truly I am," stammered the beggar. "But all the people with spare coin are here...and..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Irrelevant!” interrupted the guard. “This is a decent part of town and I’ll not have filth like you littering about! I warned you the last time that this was your last chance!”

“Guardsmen!” intervened Keldorn. “I am Sir Keldorn of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. This man is destitute and you would imprison him for this? I will not stand for this!”

The guard was taken back, obviously not sure what to say to such a well-known knight. “Well...it is the law, Sir Keldorn, but...but I will...overlook it...this one time. Yes. Go on your way, there, beggar...er, begone.”

“Th-thank you! Thank you, you’ve saved me! My deepest appreciation!” said the beggar to Keldorn. Rolanna didn’t miss that Keldorn slipped the beggar a coin before he walked off across the square.

As they neared the far side of the square from the main government building, a man hailed Keldorn. “Why, Lord Keldorn...pleased to meet you, sir. I just came from droppin’ off Leona at yer estate, I did.”

“Is that so?” replied Keldorn. “I trust her lessons are still proceeding well, then. That is good to see.” Keldorn pointed out a nearby building to Rolanna. “Ah, here at long last is my estate. The servants have tended to it well this past while.”

Once inside Keldorn greeted a servant, “Ah, Peony, you have done a fine job with the flowers out front. Where is your mistress?”

“Why, Lord Keldorn!” said Peony. “It has been well over a month since last I saw your face.”

“And it has been as long since I have seen my Lady. Come, girl, is Maria about?”

“Lady Maria is—is in her chambers. I...I will fetch her for you.”

“If you could, Peony. And the girls, too.”

Keldorn’s two daughters entered the room first. “Ah, my sweet Vesper. How is your schoolwork coming? The priests are still kind to you for my sake?”

“Yes, father,” was the reply.

“Good, good, that’s good to hear. And Leona, the boys are letting you play with them now? They’re not teasing you anymore?”

“Not when the priests are there to hear it,” replied his other daughter.

“Good, good, that’s good...” said Keldorn as his wife entered.

“Mother, can we go now?” asked Leona.

“Of course, dears,” said Lady Maria. “Go on back to the sitting room while your father and I talk.”

Maria looked over Rolanna and her companions, frowning. “So who are these? Heathen you converted in Calimport, traveling pilgrims you stumbled across in Saradush?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Maria, this is Rolanna,” said Keldorn. “We are searching for her childhood companion who—”

“I don’t care, Keldorn!” suddenly blurted Maria. “It has been two months since you were here last, and then it was barely for a day! Not even enough to leave your scent about this place...”

“The work of the Order must be done, Maria. You know if I had my choice I would be here,” said Keldorn.

“Would you? Would you really? The guildhouse is right here in the city but even then I never see you. It’s always Radiant Heart this, Radiant Heart that! What about me... what about my heart, Keldorn? What if I don’t love you anymore?”

“Maria?” asked Keldorn, obviously completely surprised by her outburst.

“What if the girls can’t live without a father anymore? What if I can’t live without a husband?”

“You do not love me anymore? I...I have always loved you and I always shall. However well I hide it, every day I spend without you is a day that’s lost forever. I love you like I love the Church but the Church is the harsher taskmaster...we knew that when we married.”

“I know, I know, and I love you in the same fashion, with all my heart...” was her reply, softening a little towards him.

“Then if we have love, Maria, what could ever come between us?”

Maria looked away. “I...I’ve been seeing another man... The children and the servants already know... He—He took the girls out to the circus, twice...oh, Keldorn...”

“You...You what? What is his name?!”

“William—Sir William of Thorpe...I beg of you, don’t hurt him, Keldorn. If I can’t have you, at least let me have something!”

“This...this is bad, Rolanna,” Anomen said to Rolanna. “For Maria to have relations with another man is punishable by imprisonment. Keldorn must be tearing himself up, inside...”

Keldorn’s face had become like stone. He ground out, “Go—Go to your daughters. To look at you right now, Maria... To look at you is to go mad.” His wife hastily left the room.

“Curse the dictates of honor!” said Keldorn to Rolanna once she was gone. “Oh, the very gods demand that I bring this case before the courts. Sir William shall be hung and my love imprisoned. There is no other outcome.”

“Perhaps you should talk with her,” suggested Rolanna. She was distressed for Keldorn’s sake, but felt sympathy for his wife’s position as well. Certainly, the law if mindlessly applied to this situation seemed overly harsh.

“Seeing her face would drive me to madness, Rolanna,” said Keldorn. “To be in her presence right now is to abandon every virtue I’ve ever held sacred. I would become a

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

blood-soaked beast and damn my soul to the Abyss. You mean well...but it is not an option.”

“Then let us bestow some justice. He has challenged your honor. There must be a reprisal,” replied Rolanna, trying to think of some solution that would not involve the courts. Perhaps this other man deserved most of the blame.

“Sir William of Thorpe... He is a good man,” reflected Keldorn, “at least I always thought so until...until now. Oh, Rolanna, nothing is clear to me anymore... Come, I know of him and he is often at the Mithrest in Waukeen’s Promenade...let us go and see what sense we can make of this.”

The party made their way to the Mithrest inn. Inside, Sir William of Thorpe was not surprised to see Keldorn. “M’lord Keldorn...I was hoping you would come.”

“May I presume, then, that you know why I am here?” asked Keldorn.

“I was a husband to your wife and a father to your children, if that is what you mean,” replied Sir William.

“M’lady Maria has but one husband and it is I,” replied Keldorn hotly. “As for Vesper and Leona, how dare you defile them with your presence!”

“They yearn for a father—any father...even an imposter off the street in your stead! Be to them in your compassion what you are to them in blood, Keldorn,” said Sir William, not apologizing.

“So says the viper who will sleep in my bed, running his wretched fingers through the spun gold that is her hair? What do you wish, Sir William? To have a child that is not even yours?”

“Hmph! Unlikely—I have been a spent wick for many years. We sought some beauty in the midst of all her pain. I wish I could say you would have done the same.”

“What am I to do with you? You show no remorse yet, at the same time, you are so devoid of malice. What am I to do at all?”

“Lady Maria loves you deeply, but without expression love withers and dies. I was but a single drop of moisture, you are the oasis for which she searches. Love her, and I will be but wind-borne dust.”

“Are you asking for my forgiveness?”

“I am not fool enough to ask for that, m’lord. I’d much rather think that someday you will thank me.”

Keldorn turned a haunted face towards Rolanna, “I once believed that with age would come wisdom, but every day I seem to doubt it more... Much as it pains me to admit it, Sir William is right. It is time I spoke with my wife.”

Rolanna laid her hand upon his arm. “Spend some time and remind each other how to love. I release you from my service.”

“Thank you for both your understanding and your friendship, m’Lady. Your heart is kind and your soul is true. I shall not forget it.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Everyone in the party watched the old warrior head for the door with slumped shoulders. Just before the exit he straightened up, as if drawing on some hidden reserve, then continued through.

It was now late, and the party moved to the Den of the Seven Vales next door to spend the night. Whether by inspired chance or careful search, the bard Haer'Dalis also appeared at the inn. He and Aerie were soon sharing a table. Rolanna wasn't sure she thought this pairing entirely suitable, but had to concede if Aerie could be trusted in the party, she had to trust her in this as well.

As the table, Haer'Dalis was saying, "Was I mistaken, my dove, or have I heard a thought fall from your lips once or twice that you had aspirations of the thespian bent?"

"Oh...but you will surely laugh at me for such an admission," said Aerie.

"I never would, my mourning dove. My grim and oft-proud nature would never allow it. To act is a solemn profession and most worthy of thy beauty and grace."

"You flatter me, now, Haer'Dalis. But...yes, my mother used to tell me that I would be a fine actress. I...I used to dream of fluttering onto the great stage in Faenya-dail... A useless dream now, I suppose. My mother is long behind me, and likely thinks me dead."

"But your dream needn't perish, fair Aerie. I see a talent in your eye that tells this bard you could perform the great feats of stage, yet."

"Oh, I doubt that, truly."

"Nay, be not so harsh on yourself, pale one. This sparrow will take you under his wing and teach you the secret words that will match the strength of your aching beauty."

"You are funny and strange, Haer'Dalis...but I thank you for the compliments, nevertheless."

"I have been thinking, my mourning dove, of a role to compliment your first voyage onto the stage. And I do believe I have discovered it."

"Oh? Have you, Haer'Dalis? And to what manner of role shall I be subjected, then?"

"You wound me, fair one... I have deliberated over the choice for quite some time, now. I have weighed carefully each play that canters through my head and chosen one that compliments you most fruitfully. 'Tis the lead of a Sigil play called 'Tersis,' written, if I remember, by a rather haggard tiefling gifted with the madness of true talent. You would play the goddess, herself...fallen from favor and bearing the slings of accusation and scorn with grace and confidence. With chin held high, she strides towards her former peers and dares to challenge the false verdict of the higher powers!"

"That...that sounds lovely, Haer'Dalis...but it's hardly me."

"Ah, but it is, my mourning dove. You have suffered the cleansing torments, borne under the impossible strains...and I'll wager there's a steel in your heart that you've yet to lay claim to!"

"Oh, I don't think I ever could...I don't think you know me, really..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I know you better than you think, my dove. The true thespian reaches down into a well of dark waters within them...a place where others dare not look. And you've a deep well, fair Aerie...be not afraid to dive within!"

"You've a pretty way with words, bard. Well...I think I'll disappoint you surely, but if you wish to teach me your play I won't object to it."

"That's all I ask, my dove...and this bard cannot wait to see the results of this first act now unfolding..."

Haer'Dalis and Aerie continued talking for a few finger's width of a candle's height longer, before Aerie retired to her room, pleading fatigue.

That night Rolanna awoke in her room, aware she was not alone. A pale woman was there. Seeing Rolanna awoken, she said, "Hello, friend, might I have a word? I would impart a fine bit of business your way."

"Would you now? And what might this be?" asked Rolanna.

"Well, truthfully it is not for me to say. At least, not in full measure. My mistress would have words with you, about concerns you have no doubt developed on your own. She has watched you for a time, though she is not the only one. Those that you are asked to trust spy as openly or more so, and she offers a solution to your problems of privacy... among others. She is worthy of your trust. If you feel worthy of hers, come to the Graveyard District in the near future and she will speak her offer. Make your visit after the sky is darkened; she will not be there before then."

"Such an unseemly place. Why should the meeting be so inaccessible?"

"Questions, questions; all will be discussed in proper course. Meet where discussed and you will have your answers. Think on it, but the door is closing soon. Do not delay too long. Farewell."

The figure transformed into a bat, and vanished through a half-open shutter, leaving no doubt as to what had visited Rolanna's room. Rolanna would not be making the meeting in the Graveyard. Even the Shadow Thieves would be a preferable alternative to an alliance with vampires.

As they left their lodgings the next day, a young child ran up to Rolanna. She recognized him, Brus, Gaelan's nephew.

"I did nay think I'd be talkin' to you louts again," said the breathless Brus, "but I do what my uncle Gaelan says whenever I can. Anyways, Gaelan Bayle wants you to come see him before you go making any rash decisions. Says he wants to sweeten the deal."

"How would he know I've a decision to make? Am I being followed?" asked Rolanna.

"Don't look at me. I just do what I'm told. He said to tell you the offer is sweeter, so here I am. Anyway, just go see Gaelan before you go see..." He suggestively cleared his throat before continuing, "your new contact. I only get paid if I get you to see him, and it won't take long, you know."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna wasn't yet ready to ask these Shadow Thieves for their help, especially since she didn't have the coin they requested.

Family Trouble

As she was entering the Bridge District of the city a guardsman stopped the party, describing a series of gruesome murders that involved flaying the victims.

"That sounds...horrid," said Aerie. "I can't imagine anything so awful! Why would someone want to do such a thing?!"

"It sounds like the work of a very sadistic person," agreed Nalia. "We should look into this, Rolanna...perhaps we could find clues where others could not."

Anomen was not excited at finding a common murderer. He said, "These pathetic skirmishes of ours aren't worth the time I spend cleaning my weapons after the battle. The Order's campaign against the Hillgnasher giants...now that brought the blood up."

"You served in campaigns against the giants?" asked Rolanna, trying to show some enthusiasm for his sake.

"Aye, and a bloody campaign it was. I slew twenty of the beasts during that scorching summer."

"Very impressive. I can see how you might find these incidental skirmishes a bit easy," she replied, for once letting a trace of sarcasm enter her voice.

"This is true," agreed Anomen, missing Rolanna's tone. "Still, I should not complain. These incidental battles are a part of life and are over so quickly that they cause only a little inconvenience."

A messenger found them. His message, "Anomen Delryn, son of Cor, I come as the bearer of dire news. Your father requests your presence at his estate."

"Dire news, say you? What reason would I have to return to my father?"

"Your sister is dead. Most foully murdered, by all accounts."

"Dead? By Helm! Murdered? How can this be? Why would you say such a thing?"

"I am truly sorry, m'lord. Perhaps you should return to your home as your father has requested."

"Aye, and right quick. Rolanna, make haste! We must head for my fathers home in the Government District of Athkatla!"

"I mourn for the loss of your sister, Anomen. I am truly sorry," said Rolanna. "We shall make our way to your father's house with all haste."

"I must discover the truth about this murder. Let us go."

They hurried to his father's estate. As they entered, a house guard greeted Anomen, "Lord Anomen! Welcome home. Your father waits within. He is in the kitchen, deep in drink."

"He is angry with me?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Yes, m'lord. Nothing has changed. When your sister...died, things became worse."

"I'd expected as much. Let him vent his bile on me if he so wills it. I am not the child that I used to be. Rolanna, let us enter."

They entered the room. Anomen's father, Cor Delryn, had been drinking. The sight of his son did not appear to please him. "The prodigal son returns. Heir to his mother's foolishness as always. How far have you roamed, son, running away from me?"

"Speak not of my mother, drunkard," replied Anomen. "You were never worthy of being her husband."

"Yet I was, and your father as well. Never forget that, boy! Your mother would still be alive if you children weren't such a handful."

"Shut your mouth, father. We've had this conversation before and I've not the patience to listen to it again."

"You will listen to what ever I choose to tell you, Anomen. Respect your father, knightling. I am still the man of this family and you will obey me!"

"Yes, father...I lost my temper and I apologize."

"It took you long enough to get here. It wouldn't hurt you to come and see your father now and again."

"Father, where is Moira, your daughter? What happened to her?"

"Idiot boy! She's dead! Murdered by the Calimshite fiends!"

"How did this happen?"

"How do you think? It was Saerk the Calimshite. It was not enough for him to take my business; he had to take my Moira too."

"But why would he kill her? She has nothing to do with your enmity."

"Do you understand nothing? He killed her because he could! For years I embarrassed him amongst the merchants, undercut his prices and stole his customers. When my business failed he had a monopoly on the Calimshan shipping routes. He would not be happy until I had nothing. By the end, Moira was all that I had, and now he's taken her too."

"Where were the guards? Why was she not protected?"

"The guards left months ago. I had no money to pay them with. Soon I will lose my house as well. Saerk has taken all of it...all of your mother's and sister's things..."

"He didn't take it, father. You lost it... you lost it..."

"I lost it because you abandoned your family. If you hadn't run away, Moira would still be alive. You should have been here to protect her! To save her from the brigands!"

"I'm sorry. I... I did not know..."

"You should have been here, Anomen. Never forget that! It is too late to save her but your work is not yet finished, Anomen."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“What can be done? Moira is dead.”

“She can be avenged, Anomen. You must kill Saerk and his son. It is the only way that Moira’s spirit can be at rest. As for your friends, they would do well to help you for Saerk the Calimshite is a very wealthy man and his gold shall be their reward.”

“I must see Moira’s remains first, father. It will take but a moment.”

“Go then. She was cleansed on the pyre and her ashes are kept in an urn by the pool. It was the place that Moira loved most of all.”

“Rolanna, come with me to Moira’s urn. I would speak with you,” said Anomen, drawing Rolanna aside.

“Very well, I shall follow you.”

“I am well worried by what has gone on in this place. Though the choice seems clear and right I am hesitant to take it. Surely if Saerk killed my sister I must avenge her murder. Yet killing for the purpose of revenge is murder by the tenets of the Order.”

“Do not let these thoughts of vengeance cloud your judgment. Killing for revenge is murder,” pleaded Rolanna. “Saerk must be brought to justice, and you must be the one to ensure that it is done.” Rolanna thought of suggesting that they investigate his sister’s murder, but she was afraid Anomen’s rage would cause him to strike out as soon as Saerk or one of his henchmen came within reach.

“What you say holds truth yet, as my father says, I am honor-bound to find my sister’s killer and take his life.”

“You are honor-bound to the vows you made to the Order. The path you are considering is evil, Anomen...do not take it.”

“Aye. This is right. I feel it in my bones. I’ve lived under the bitterness of my father’s spirit my entire life. It has tainted me to the point where I am willing to partake in it. He can keep his hatred and drown his sorrows as he has always done. Yet the question of my sister’s murder remains.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure that I trust your father’s version of events. All that he speaks of seems to be colored by his hatred of Saerk.” This was another reason not to take hasty action. Surely, even if Saerk were responsible he had already taken the worst action he could; if he attacked Anomen he would face a trained fighter, not a young girl.

“They have always been mortal enemies. If my sister was indeed murdered then the magistrate would have investigated. My father’s revenge be damned! I have sworn to uphold the law and unlike him, I shall do so. Come, let us return to my father. He may yet be convinced to follow the lawful path. It is not my place to take revenge. Such an act would lead to chaos.”

“There are many who easily side-step laws through wealth,” commented Jaheira as they went back to talk to Anomen’s father. “Perhaps, in this case, it would be best to see why the law has failed so.” Rolanna could see the wisdom in this, but again did not see how to act in the present situation.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You have seen the lifeless ashes of your sister, Anomen," said his father. "Let not this terrible act go unpunished! Gird thy heart with righteous anger and slay thy sister's murderer!"

"Nay, father. It is time for this foolishness to end."

"What do you mean to say, Anomen?"

"Only that killing Saerk in vengeance would be murder as surely as my sister's death was."

"The destruction of evil is never considered to be murder. Do not these knights that you seek to join take such missions themselves?"

"Not in the manner that you suggest. We must take these charges to the magistrate. This is the only way to end this circle of violence that you have trapped us within."

"You fool boy! The magistrate will do nothing. She is a pawn of Saerk!"

"Bylanna Ianulin is a good and noble woman. You said this yourself before you slipped into the foul clutch of the drink."

"You dishonor Moira's memory! You would allow the killer of your sister to go free? You are despicable! You are an insect!"

"I will not allow him to go free! He shall be taken before the courts if he is indeed the one who murdered my sister."

"How can you doubt such a thing, boy? Saerk is the killer!"

"Do you have proof, father?"

"The proof lies in that fact that he has taken everything else from me! Killing Moira would complete my defeat."

"Aye, now I see. Such has always been the case in this household. This is about you and only you. Your daughter's death means nothing beyond how it affects your pride and your comfort."

"Boy, you've fallen in with evil! Step back from the line and honor your family before it's too late."

"I will not, father. I suggest no evil. I suggest the lawful path."

"Again I say, obey me, Anomen!"

"I have obeyed you all my life and received naught but bitterness in return. My friend and I shall take this matter to the magistrate, as the law requires. "

"If you step out that door then you must never come within again."

"Don't do this, father..."

"Shut your mouth! If you leave now you are forever banished from this place. You will be cast from this family and become a nameless dog, not fit to cower at my feet."

"I've been cowering at your feet for all my life. Goodbye, father. Perhaps I shall see you again before you drink yourself to death."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You are nothing, boy! Nothing!"

"Come, Rolanna, let us leave...we should go and see the magistrate in the Council of Six building and see if anything can be done, despite father's venom."

They immediately went to see the magistrate.

"Honorable magistrate," said Anomen, "I am seeking information on the murder of my sister, Moira Delryn."

"Ah...you must be the son of Lord Cor. Anomen, is it? I am afraid that there is very little I can tell you regarding your sister's death."

"What do you mean? Surely you have found evidence to link Saerk to her murder? The man will be brought before the courts to meet justice, will he not?"

"There is insufficient evidence to connect Saerk Farrahd to the murder. The only other person in your father's estate at the time was killed, as well."

"Yes, my father...cannot afford additional guards and servants, it seems. But...is there nothing you can do? Surely you know that Saerk is responsible!"

"I know of your family's feud with the merchant, but a motive is not enough without witnesses or evidence. The rule of law must prevail...surely you understand."

"No! There must be something that can be done! Moira's murder cannot go unanswered!"

"Answered? Take vengeance on the merchant and he replies in kind, and the feud continues unabated. Is it not time for this hatred to be put to rest?"

"I...I do not know."

"This Saerk may be innocent, Anomen," reminded Rolanna. "You cannot take vengeance on one who might be innocent...you are a knight, after all, first and foremost."

"Yes, you are likely correct in this, my friend. It wrenches my heart that Moira's death should go unpunished, but there is little that can be done. I should not take vengeance upon a man my father believes is guilty only because of his pride. It could just as easily have been a...a burglar, perhaps. And if it is this Saerk, the gods will punish him even if the courts will not."

"The law may not be able to do anything, Anomen," offered Jaheira, "but such men as this Saerk always trip over their own schemes. If he is responsible, he will pay, as you say."

"I wish I could return to my father and convince him that this is the best way, but I am sure he will not even see me. He is a stubborn, vile man. Perhaps, in time, he shall see the truth of this matter. At least...that is my hope. Ah, Rolanna...let us continue on your quest and leave this behind us. It leaves an ashen taste in my mouth that I would sooner forget."

Outside, Anomen rounded on Rolanna. "My anger has built to the point when I am shaking with pure rage! I...I must speak to you. I must gain some reassurance! My father...that rude, drunken bastard! He has cast me out of the family when I was only doing what I must! I cannot take vengeance when there is no proof, and he knows it! And

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

yet...my heart cries out for vengeance! That my sister should lie murdered and the murderer laughs, untouched! I am so full of hate I can barely control it! Please, my lady...you are the one I turned to for guidance when I was torn. Did I do the right thing? Should the dictates of honor truly overcome duty and justice?!"

"Of course, Anomen...how would you feel if you killed Saerk and found him to be innocent after the fact?" replied Rolanna, offering an easy reassurance. But this matter was complicated, with a dark and twisted history, and she feared would come to no good end.

"Aye...aye, that would be a stain to my honor I surely could not bear. But I still feel so helpless. Surely...surely Saerk will pay, eventually for what he has done. I feel a little better, now, my lady. My thanks for your consolation. Nothing, however, will take away this burning pain in my heart." He sighed, gesturing towards the exit. "Let us just move on."

Rolanna had tried to advise Anomen as best she could. She certainly couldn't support any move against Saerk without better evidence. She still felt she had let Anomen down.

Later that day Anomen spoke to Rolanna about his upcoming test to join the Order. She was glad that he was able to think about something other than his sister's murder.

"You must think me very odd to speak about my feelings and urges in such plain ways," said Anomen, "but in the Order it is paramount to control these things. They have been part of my training. And the more that time passes, the more I feel that I am not worthy to join the Order. My rage gets so out of control, often, that it shames me. What will the Order think?"

Anomen sighed, continuing, "I wish I had your strength of resolve, my lady. Sometimes I think it would be so much easier to just give up on my dream and spare myself the worry."

"Joining the Order is important to you, Anomen...you should remain vigilant and steel yourself."

"Your advice has always been constant, pointing me back towards the good. Saerk is alive, which is sad but is the lawful course. And...and the Order is my dream. I shall try to remain vigilant, my lady. I have come this far already, it will not be much longer, now. Thank you, Rolanna...your kind words gladden me more than I can say. Your advice means much...you are a...a dark flame, my lady, that I am drawn to almost against my will. But 'tis a most pleasurable experience. You have been kind despite my own boorishness. Perhaps one day...we will speak of other things. I...I think I would like that." Rolanna flushed at his words, but was glad she was responsible for lifting him from the worst of his mood.

That night Rolanna dreamed again. Irenicus came to her, tempting her with visions of her superiority over others. She awoke with a phrase Irenicus had uttered in her mind, "Follow, and receive the gift you are owed by the blood in your veins." She shook her head. That wasn't right. Whatever Irenicus wanted, he wanted for himself. She would get no gifts from him.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Anomen had also been busy that night, thinking of his upcoming test. He shared his thoughts with Rolanna in the morning. "My Test is coming very soon, my lady. I will need to go to the headquarters of the Order and speak to Ryan Trawl. I...I am not looking forward to the judgment. I shall receive there."

"I think I understand."

"I...have been thinking on what we have spoken of. I have studied to join the Order as long as I can remember, and suddenly I am unsure if I should even want to. What if I am accepted into the Order and I find I have no true place in it? And what if I am refused...and I discover the future has no place for me? I know, deep down inside, that I have maintained good faith. But...perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I will only discover too late where my heart truly lies."

"I'm sure it won't be that bad...everything will work out as it should."

"I hope that you are right, my lady. I have depended on your counsel up until this point, and it has always been good. Still, I am troubled within. Let us go to the Order's headquarters in the Temple District as soon as possible, Rolanna. I know it is time, and I would be glad to have it all over with."

Disappearances in Innesvale

Rolanna didn't immediately offer to go with Anomen to the Order for his knighthood tests. Instead, she followed a course she had previously decided on, heading east from the city to the village of Innesvale.

When the party arrived in the village the next day, a crowd of villagers was meeting with the mayor and his wife on the village green.

"Oy, mayor!" yelled a large man in the crowd. "When is this crisis going t' be solved, aye?"

"Aye! Me an' mine need t' get back to herdin', we do" said another, "'fore the wolves have gobbled me flock entire!"

"Errm...calm down, everyone, please," said the mayor. "I...I assure you that everything that can be done is being done..."

"And what is that?!" asked someone.

"Aye! You just hired a group o' those adventurers, didn't you?" said the large man. "Where in the abyss are they?!"

"Well...they haven't come back yet, no," admitted the mayor.

"Oh! We're doomed! Doomed!" cried a woman. "We must flee the village!"

"We must flee before more people go missing!" yelled another.

"Now, now, people...come, this is no time to panic," pleaded the mayor.

"Please...listen to my husband!" begged his wife.

"Yes...well...we are looking for another group of adventurers, here, to handle the situation," temporized the mayor.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"T' kill them ogres and evil kin, y' mean!" yelled someone from the crowd.

"Yes! Ever since that band of monsters moved into the area, we have had nothing but trouble!" agreed another. "They're eating people, that's what!"

"Ye're both daft!" yelled the large man. "'Tis the wolves that have been wandering the hills, sure enough! Hungry, they is!"

"It's not wolves, you fool!" disagreed a voice. "It's Umar herself, returned to haunt us and steal our children!"

"Umar? Don't be tellin' that folk tale now!" said another voice, continuing the argument. "Can't ye see that it's the ogres, plain as th' truth?!"

"People, please!" pleaded the mayor, trying to restore some control. "We must first find out what happened to our ranger, Merella...and then track down the source of these murders. More adventurers will come soon."

"Well, they can't come soon enough!" retorted the large man.

"Ye best be doin' something, mayor...or we need t' be fleein' to the city for our safety!" said another.

"I am trying to do something! I just... Everyone remain calm!" said the mayor. "Panic will not help! I...I am going to return to my home, now. Everyone go home... please..." The effect of the mayor's words was lessened by the doubt that had crept into this last utterance.

The crowd dispersed, still arguing among themselves. Only the large man remained motionless. Rolanna approached him. He introduced himself as Nelleck, and Rolanna asked what was going on in the village.

"I'll tell ye what is going on, me Lady," replied Nelleck, "the wolves that have been in the hills these past years are coming at us, they are! Fer weeks, now, they've been preyin' on us...sneakin' into the village at night and tearin' people apart. Then their bodies disappear the next night. 'Tis a gruesome sight t' be sure. I've seen 'em, too... them wolves look at me from afar with smarts in their eyes. 'Tis the truth! The rest of the village is full o' fools! Them ogres...I seen 'em and they ain't so bad. And the Umar stuff is nothin' but a load o' nonsense!"

"Has nothing been done to hunt these wolves?" asked Rolanna.

"Bloody mayor hired a halfling runt and her troupe to find out what's been happenin'. They haven't come back...wolves ripped 'em apart is my guess."

"Why would wolves come back to take away bodies a day later?"

"Don't rightly know. Ain't nothin' natural, that's for sure. They just seem to up an' vanish, as far as I can tell."

"What do you know about the ogres?"

"They used t' belong to that big rebel army down in the south o' Amn...deserters likely. Seen 'em on my patrols...don't look like they're up to anythin'. Led by a big ogre fellow...Madulf, I think. Wants to be left alone. Fact that he'd talk first rather than kill ye makes him not th' worst sort in my books."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“What’s this about Umar?”

“Just a load o’ bull, is all. Ye wants t’ know about Umar, go talk t’ Vincenzo at the inn. He loves t’ talk out o’ his arse, he does.”

Rolanna asked Nelleck for the location of the mayor’s house, or as the official local title would have it, the home of Minister Lloyd.

Rolanna entered the house, and explained to Minister Lloyd she had come after encountering a boy in Athkatla who had explained they needed help.

“You did? Then the boy did get to the city after all,” said Lloyd. “Ah, I am pleased to hear it! You...you have come to our aid, then, yes?”

“I would like to know more about what is going on here, first.”

“Herrrm...yes, of course. It’s a gruesome business. I’m sure that little Delon told you some of the story, but I should elaborate on it for your benefit. We’ve had a run of...killings and disappearances here, as of late. People murdered in their beds...their bodies disappearing...bodies found with the skins inside out. Normally we would turn to our local ranger-protector to aid us in a time like this, but our ranger, Merella, has vanished. Several men went to her cabin southwest of the village...and they found no sign of her. It is not like her to be absent for so long. I...I fear the worst. Soon after, shepherds and farmers from the outlying holds began disappearing. People heard strange noises at night...and we have no ranger to turn to! Everyone’s frightened...but they’re scared to leave, as well, else they get caught out in the wilderness by whatever has been doing the killing. And, of course, everyone has ideas on what’s behind all of this...”

“It’s the ogres, my husband...you know it is,” put in his wife.

“Errrrm...my wife, Eina,” said Lloyd, introducing her. “And, yes...many people think it’s that group of ogres who moved into the area just before the killings began. Likely is, too.”

“They’re in the hills,” said Eina, “too close to the village, I say!”

“Yes...you can find ‘em in the hills a bit north of here. ‘Course, others think it’s a pack of very large wolves that’s been ranging the hills for some years. And still others claim Umar, herself...the great witch of the hills...has returned. Legend has it she was responsible for deaths much like these ones.”

“Pfaw! That is just old legends!” interrupted Eina. “Umar has been gone for over five hundred years, my husband!”

“Yes...true,” agreed Lloyd, “I suppose I should warn you... I’ve already hired the famous knight, Mazzy Fentan, and her troupe...but they haven’t been back.”

“I don’t know much about this Umar,” said Nalia, “but it sounds like some kind of evil magic. Perhaps this ogre is a powerful mage? It’s a possibility we shouldn’t ignore.”

“If wolves were shadows and doing this, they’d have to be terribly evil,” added Aerie. “Dire wolves, perhaps. I...don’t think ogres would do this, but I’m not sure...this all sounds quite ominous...”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"To be honest, I think you should check on the ogres and their fellows before chasing after legends and such," said Lloyd. "So...will you...will you help us?"

"I will make the attempt, yes," agreed Rolanna. Obviously, the villagers desperately needed help.

"Oh, most excellent! Please, my Lady...go to Merella's cabin and find where she has gone," said Lloyd. "My...men are too frightened to go that far from the village. Or go north from here to the river and find that Madulf and his beasts. I have little doubt that they are responsible for all of this, but we must be sure! I am relieved you have decided to help us. You have the run of the village, my Lady. If you...need anything else...do not hesitate to come to me."

Rolanna also stopped at the village's Umar Inn. A patron at one table claimed to have seen shadowy forms moving through the village at night, but from the apparently habitual drunkenness of the speaker, Rolanna did not consider him very reliable

She went over to the innkeeper to ask his opinion. He greeted Rolanna, "'Allo to you an' a good day! I am Vincenzo and I offer you all the services of me humble l'il inn!"

"There're a lot o' things t' be said about yer inn, Vince," piped up a stable boy behind him, "but 'humble' ain't the one I would be pickin', aye?"

"Hush, boy! An' keep callin' me 'Vince' an' I'll have ye strapped o'er a log! The name's 'Vincenzo'!"

"'At's a lotta rot. Ye hears that name from a Sembian trader an' suddenly yer puttin' on airs. Pfeh!"

"Never mind the boy. He's an ignorant lout I took in out of pity. A simpleton who doesn't know his place. Is there aught I can do for you, my good Lady?"

"What do you know about the killings around here?" asked Rolanna.

"Ah, Vincenzo knows the truth! My family has been in this here area for a long, long time...an' the tales of the witch, Umar, have been passed down, they have!"

"Yer not gonna go into that rot again, are ye?" asked the boy.

"Silence, boy! Perhaps I should give you to the witch instead, as an offering, eh? Leave ye out on the doorstep with a lace of garlic tied around yer neck?"

"Well..." said the boy, at a loss for words.

"I thought that'd shut yer trap. Now, then, me Lady...I can tell ye all about th' witch, Umar...a tale sure to curl yer ears, if ye'd care to hear it."

"Go ahead...I've got the time," said Rolanna.

"Like I said...me family has been around these parts a long time. We were here back when th' witch herself plagued these lands o'er seven hundred years ago. Umar was a wicked one. No one e'er saw her except when she came down from the hills to steal some unfortunate soul. Shepherds, babes...anyone who weren't careful. She'd torture 'em, ye could hear their cries durin' the night. People tried to find her, but only the victims' bodies would turn up...mutilated an' dead."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Don' know why they jus' didn't kill her..." injected the boy.

"Cause they couldn't find her, ye stupid boy! Were ye not listenin'? An' besides, she were a powerful witch with plenty o' magic fer any fight. Strange thing is, me Lady, Umar jus' vanished one day. Maybe she were killed, maybe not. But every century or so, it's said she comes back to th' Hills..."

"Ha ha! This is whar it gets right funny, yer story!" said the boy.

"I'm warning ye, boy...ye'll be out on yer arse faster than ye can blink, if ye keeps this up! As I said, every century or so, she comes again. People disappear, tortured in the hills. An' only sometimes are th' bodies found. Once Umar's sated herself on blood she returns to whence she came. This is jus' like them other times...people forgets so easily. 'Tis the witch, I tells ye."

"Has nobody tried to find this witch in recent years?" asked Rolanna.

"Well, there was a group o' mages some years back who came. Young ones... apprentices, I gathered. Two fellas and a young lass, sure enough. They were sent by their master t' look into the Umar witch...or so they said. Nice enough group, but t'were obvious they expected nothin'. I remember 'em...ey were alright. Fer mages. Lots nicer 'an that Jermien feller. Now he should go an' soak 'is head. Aye, true enough. Them three went into th' Hills...an' they was ne'er found again. 'Cept for the lass' journals...I found those meself, out in the woods. More victims of Umar, herself, sure as daylight. Ye can read it in the lass' journal, sure enough."

"Do you think I might be able to take a look at this journal?"

"Aye, ye can...I had a copy or two done up by a scribe friend o' mine some months back. Ye can have one, if ye likes."

"A copy or two?" repeated the stable boy in a tone of disbelief. "More like ye gots a whole store-room full o' copies of that journal, ye bleedin' banana!"

"Well, so what if I have? 'Tis a good story, more or less! Make me bloody rich one day...an' then where will ye be, ye little rugrat?"

"More an' like ye wrote th' journal yerself, I'd wager!"

"I did nay such thing! Here ye go, me Lady...use it as ye will. But beware the witch if ye goes into the hills. She's not sated yet...not by a longshot..."

Rolanna examined the journal she had been handed. The binding bore the title "Umar Witch Project Journal." The journal seemed to be that of an apprentice mage, telling the tale of her expedition into the Umar Hills with two other apprentices in the search for evidence of the fabled witch. The tale was hard to believe, but seemed to relate the group's horror at getting lost and being hounded by an unseen predator during the nights. The script was in a panicky, feminine hand and the last page could barely be made out:

"...sorry to Joshellus' mother. I'm sorry about what happened to Michaelus. There's something out here with us. We thought it to be peasants but peasants aren't this clever. Joshellus says it's the witch. I hear her when I sleep. I don't want to sleep. I don't want to sleep. I don't want..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The journal ended here.

Rolanna questioned several more villagers, but learned nothing of interest save from a young girl, Kaatje, who said she had seen shadows around the ranger's cabin a few weeks back.

Rolanna set out from the village in search of the ogres. As they walked Jaheira remarked, "I am at peace in the outdoor places, though it never seems to last."

The party came upon the ogres encamped alongside a stream. "Hold!" yelled what Rolanna assumed was their leader, "You'se a human, but you'se not of human village! Why you come? What you'se wanting?"

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" asked Rolanna.

"Me Madulf...lead fellows from great army of Sythsill in the south. No want to kill races no more. Lead fellows in desertion. We just wants be left alone."

"What about what I have heard about your fellows being responsible for killing people in Imnesvale?"

"We no kill no humans in village! We no want trouble with you'se!"

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Always Madulf and fellows be chased and hated 'cause me an ogre! We just wants to be left alone. We come here one moon ago, tries to settle for a while, yes? Soon after we come, fellows begin to vanish. One, two, they go. Some turn up killed...skin missing. Some bodies vanish, too. Madulf no know who killing us. Madulf worried...numbers get smaller. We like here, but something bad is here, too, killing us fellows. Very bad."

"Something's killing your people, too? What do you think it is?"

"Madulf no knows. Maybe wolves. Maybe bad magics. Nobody see what kills fellows. Comes at night, though...maybe is the shadows."

"I see. So you're band is no better off then the village. I'll be going, then."

"Wait...you not attack us. We needs you bring word to human village...humans run when Madulf goes, so me needs you'se to do it for me. You'se bring word, yes?"

"What kind of word do you need brought to them?"

"Madulf no want death...Madulf no want fight. Just want peace. You tell villagers, maybe, that Madulf and fellows will protect village...protect from orcs in mountains, yes? Humans let us stay, then, and no call knights. Maybe let us come, once in a moon, to trade for food and goods. Madulf make deal with village, if you'se tell them...we no want trouble."

"Alright, I'll tell the mayor what you've said. But I can't promise anything."

"Madulf happy. Maybe fellows can live alone and eat good, be happy here. You do good thing...maybe humans agree. Madulf keep deal, you tell them."

Rolanna also sought out the cabin of the village's ranger protector, Merella. Inside the cabin, she found blood, but no clear indication of the fate of Merella. She also found a note from Mazzy Fentan, apparently left in hopes Merella would find it. Mazzy Fentan

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

was the leader of the group of adventurers the village had previously employed, who were still missing. She read the note.

Wallag

We travel this day to search out the wolf lair. My own scouting of the region has confirmed Merella's suspicions that there is a large pack of wolves acting in this area. On the map included I have indicated where I believe the wolf den to be located. Follow us if you can, but be cautious. We can ill-afford another mysterious disappearance. Until we meet again.

Mazzy

On the same sheet was drawn a crude but effective map which indicated the path to a forested area several hours north of the Imnesvale region.

They also found Merella's journal. Skipping to the most recent entries, Rolanna read them to herself.

Flamerule 7

Kaatje came to visit again. A sweet child, eager to learn my ways with the wild creatures.

Flamerule 12

Dark creatures roam the forests. Several townspeople have been slain by some unknown predator. Everyone seems to have their own opinion of what is doing the killing. The strangest thing is that the bodies are disappearing in the morning. This leaves me baffled, for most signs point to a pack of wolves that have been in the area for a long time. Wolves don't steal bodies.

Flamerule 13

Or perhaps I should say wolf-like creatures. At night while I've been patrolling I've often caught shadowy glimpses of these 'wolves' running alongside me. I've tried to attract their attention but they ignore me. I find this most strange, as if the pack is being controlled by someone else. Years ago I spoke with the pack leaders and they were cordial. Now they either flee from me, or, and I fear to say this, they stalk me.

Flamerule 21

It is near noon and still the wood outside my cabin seems full of shadows. I've been hard pressed to hear birds and most of the larger animals have long fled. I plan to find the wolf's den (this afternoon). I've drawn a map to it. All signs point to them as being the culprits, but what wolves act like these? They are wolves with the cunning of men.

And there is something else, a whispering in my mind. It is faint now, in the waking hours, but while I sleep I dream only of this voice and the face behind it. Whether it is connected to the voices, I do not know. I suspect by the time that the sun sets tonight I'll have answers to my questions.

Rolanna returned to the mayor to report her progress. "I have spoken to the ogre, Madulf, and I do not believe he nor his followers are responsible for Imnesvale's problem."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“But...but I was sure that those monsters were the killers!” said Lloyd. “What makes you so certain that they are not?”

“Madulf has had his own people going missing...much the same as yours. He is as worried as you are. Actually, Madulf sent me with a proposition...he and his people will provide protection for the village in exchange for peaceful relations and a bit of trade.”

“He...he has? I...I must say...that might not be such a bad idea. If this ogre can be... can be trusted, that is. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, my Lady. I will have to...go and talk to them, I suppose. We could both benefit from this.”

Rolanna and the party took a break, having a meal at the inn. When they returned to Lloyd, he had just returned from the ogres.

“Well...I’ve spoken with the, er...with Madulf,” said Lloyd. “They just want to live in peace, and in exchange we’ll have someone to protect us. And the...the merchants are looking forward to it, too. Madulf wants to come to town to purchase, ah, supplies and things. That should be quite a sight! But...thank you, Rolanna. I wouldn’t have thought of...negotiating...with those creatures. This will be better for Imnesvale all around.”

“I believe the wolves...or wolf-like creatures...are responsible for your problem,” replied Rolanna.

“If...if that is the case, my Lady, then I beg you to go and destroy these wolves! They cannot be allowed to continue their carnage! Please...you...you agreed to help my village and I ask that you not abandon us now!”

Rolanna agreed, and she, Jaheira, Aerie, Anomen and Nalia set forth to the area indicated on Mazzy Fentan’s map.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time the party reached the area of woods that must hold the wolf lair. Although there were few clouds, the sunlight was oddly attenuated, only barely providing enough light to make out colors in the woods surrounding them. Ahead suddenly appeared a human-shaped wolf. It cried out “You will not steal my vengeance!” before vanishing into a cave ahead.

Rolanna had heard of such creatures, that could assume the form of wolf or man and that led packs of wolves to attack farms or isolated travelers.

Entering the cave, the wolf creature cried out “Man-things! Curse you and curse the world! Can a wolf not enjoy her last meal in peace?”

“We’ve come to put an end to the evil of you and your wolves!” yelled Rolanna. “You’ve preyed on your last innocent!” Rolanna noticed the creature was feeding on what appeared to be human remains.

“My wolves? Hah! No longer, fool,” the creature replied. “The pack has fallen under the fell magicks of the Shade Lord. Your hunting has gone awry.”

“You suggest that this ‘Shade Lord’ is responsible yet here you gnaw on the carcass of a human? Why would I believe such idiocy?”

“I don’t care what you believe. I speak the truth. This place was not always like this...floating in a false and unholy darkness. It began only a short time ago. The ruins to

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

the east of the den have long been a place of foreboding to my pack and I. We had no desire to tread the ground of the fallen temple. The temple was once dedicated to Amaunator, a god of the sun, and a great prophetess is buried within. It was holy ground once, though now it is fouled. It is obvious that Amaunator's power has waned for if this was still his consecrated ground, my doom would never have arisen from the bowels of the temple."

"Go on," said Rolanna, sensing truth in what the creature had to say.

"Some weeks ago, muted rumblings were heard beneath the temple. We paid little heed to them until the skies darkened and the shadows deepened. It was high noon when it happened and the pack gathered so that I might calm them. I thought it to be an eclipse. It was not. The Shade Lord came among us then. He dominated my wolves, my children, with a glance. I changed form and leaped at his darkness but he merely laughed. 'Anath,' he said, 'Bend to my will. You shall be the means of my revenge.' He walked amongst the terrified wolves and killed them all with a touch. Once they were all dead his darkness reached out to the corpses of my children and animated them as shade wolves. Numb with terror and sorrow, I ran. I've hidden these last few weeks from the shades that once were wolves and from the darkness that creeps out from the temple that once imprisoned the Shade Lord. I will hide no more. This man I killed only to gather strength to face the Shade Lord. He wants only to kill and those he kills, be they man-thing or wolf, arise as shades in his army. Will you allow me this revenge or do I have to fight you as well?"

"The Shade Lord seems to be the true source of this evil. We will help you kill him," was Rolanna's reply. Once this Shade Lord was dealt with there would be time to consider what to do about Anath.

"Meet me in the temple to the east of this den. Be wary of the shadows that lurk there. Make sure you are prepared before you enter it."

A little east of the cave the party found the ruins of the Amaunator temple. Entering the grounds, they suddenly realized they were surrounded by shadows, malignant shadows filled with a fell vitality, which were closing in.

Anath suddenly appeared, crying out, "Rolanna, it's a trap! Use the mirror...to the left of the crystal, there...to gather what light is left and avenge my pack!"

Nalia rushed forward to use the mirror while the others protected her. The mirror did in fact seem to focus the weakened light of the sun, magnifying it a hundredfold and destroying the encircling shadows. Once the shadows were gone the party realized Anath had also been killed, having sacrificed herself to save them.

A narrow passage ran underground. As Aerie entered, she commented, "Ooh...we have such stories amongst my people. Being underground is just not for the Avariel..."

The party destroyed two more shadows in the passageway. This was too much for Ariel, who pleaded with Rolanna, "Please...it is so dark and late, and I am so tired... Is there no chance that we might stop and rest for a while?"

"It's just a little dark, Aerie...there's nothing to be afraid of," said Rolanna.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I—I'm not scared...I'm only tired, and maybe a little unused to traveling so late at night. N-never mind...I'll be fine..."

Rolanna took a little time to calm Aerie down. She did not want to stop long in one spot, for fear the shadows would gather and overwhelm them.

The party encountered more shadows. No area could be considered secure, since clearing a room was useless against an enemy that seemed able to seep from the very cracks in the walls.

A room near the entrance contained a ravaged tomb. Rolanna gathered up the bones of the child who had been buried there. She thought she could give them a burial outside when there was time, rather than leave them in this defiled place. The bones filled a pitifully small portion of her backpack.

In an adjacent room were three shadows that were larger than those encountered up to this point. One shadow spoke as they attacked, saying "You shall not free the master's consort, mortal!"

The shadow which had spoken dropped a key when it was destroyed. Rolanna picked it up, wondering what to do with it, when she heard a voice call out from behind a nearby door.

"Ho, noble friends! I beg your assistance in this evil place."

"Well met! Who addresses me?" answered Rolanna.

"Your grace, I am Mazzy Fentan, a valiant servant of justice and righteousness. As you can see, I could use your assistance."

"And you shall have it," answered Rolanna, and opened the door, finding a use for the key. "How did you come to be here?" she asked the female halfling behind the door.

"I am an adventurer," replied Mazzy. "I led my party here to discover the source of the evil that has befallen the area, which became abundantly clear when it slaughtered my companions at the Shadow Altar. You have fought my jailers, the shadows. Those unfortunate souls are the remnants of live victims whom have been perverted by the power of the dark fiend, the Shade Lord."

"Why is it here and what does it want?"

"It is here to dominate and to conquer. This Shade Lord seems to feed on the corruption of souls. If it is not stopped it will continue to build its army of shadows."

"We are here to get rid of the Shade Lord. Why don't you tell us of your attempt."

"My companions and I were hired by Minister Lloyd of Imnesvale to find the ranger, Merella, as well as look into the rash of killings that has plagued the area. We found Merella's journal, which mentioned the unholy darkening of this land. The local legends tell of how the Shade Lord was struck down by Amaunator ages ago. We entered the temple ruins and found it infested with shadow-magic. The Shadow Wolves, here, are from the wolf packs that roamed these hills mere weeks ago."

"Through tomes and other clues, my party learned of a perverted altar of Amaunator which can only be reached through the bowels of this place. We had to find sun gems so

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

the doors of darkness that the Shade Lord had placed along our path could be opened. They can be acquired if one passes Amaunator's tests. We searched for the three parts of the key to the door that leads to the horror that the Shade Lord commands. The Shade Lord commands a Shadow Dragon...a most deadly foe. We were struck down as he laughed, and I am unsure of how to defeat such a creature."

"Most horrible of all, the Shade Lord took the life force of my friends and turned them to members of his cursed army. My beloved Patrick has become a hideous shadow! I would gladly have sold my life with my friends but the Shade Lord would not let the dragon kill me. He wants me to be what he calls 'his consort.' He is not a creature of this plane and must possess a body, feeding on its life. He inhabits Merella, now...and planned to use my own body once Merella grows weak, I suspect. I have come to believe that this altar which the shadow dragon guards, is the secret of this place. A way must be found to pass this beast for he cannot be killed by such as us. The Shade Lord and his altar must be destroyed. I am uninjured and ready to fight with you if you will have me."

"We could use a valiant sword arm, if you wish to join us," said Rolanna.

"Then we shall travel together as companions. With Arvoreen's blessing, our partnership shall be a fruitful one."

"I should tell you first, perhaps, that I intend to rescue an old friend of mine named Imoen after this is done. It could be quite dangerous."

"Truly? Another is held captive below by the Shade Lord?"

"No, no. Imoen was taken hostage by the Cowled Wizards in Athkatla. I intend to free her from their clutches. But it doesn't matter right now...let's just go."

"As you say, then...we fight the dark evil that has infested this place, and then we stride forth as new companions to complete your quest."

Rolanna could already tell she was going to like Mazzy, and she was glad to have another person with which to share her journey. The other party members introduced themselves to Mazzy, and then they were ready to continue.

With Mazzy's help they rapidly penetrated further into the temple, fighting waves of shadows that would suddenly appear.

After one such battle, Anomen commented, "In truth, when the Order sees my worth, I'll no longer need to travel with lowly folk such as you there, halfling."

"It does not befit an aspiring knight to speak in such a manner," replied Mazzy.

"Never will I heed a lowly halfling!" said Anomen. "Hold your tongue lest I cut it from your cursed mouth."

"Listen you must, Anomen, if you hope to learn. You are only a youth, so I shall let your insults melt away. I say only what a paladin would say in my place."

"Your implication is correct. You are no paladin nor shall you ever be. Learn your place, for I shall suffer your delusions no longer."

"No more bickering," said Rolanna, angry with Anomen, "we are a party and should act as such."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“As you will have it,” said Anomen. “I shall hold back my blade for now.” Rolanna did not like the prejudice shown by Anomen for non-humans, common though it was among humans in Amn. Even the recent death of his sister and confrontation with his father did not justify venting his emotions on Mazzy.

Entering one room they faced two more shadows, but Rolanna stopped the party from attacking, sensing a difference about the figures.

“Oh Light! Can it be?” said one ghostly figure. “You come, woman, bearing the bones of the Child Prophetess Amuana! Her defilement is at an end.”

“Explain yourselves,” said Rolanna. “Who are you, spirits, and who is this Amuana whose bones you say I possess?”

“Once, long ago, this was a place of darkness,” replied the second figure, “and vile creatures that spilled into this world from the blackness. Amaunator invaded this place, brought his light to it and drove away the shadows!”

“The Yellow God set up temples here,” said the first figure, “and wards to keep the darkness forever at bay. Once there were priests who shouted his names to the heavens and kept the wards strong!”

“But our Amaunator has lost his power over the ages,” said the second. “The Keeper of the Sun is no longer worshiped as he once was...and the wards began to weaken.”

“Amuana was born to our people a child prophetess,” said the first, “the Child of Light who would fight against the darkness that was once more beginning to spill into these lands.”

“But it was too late...too late,” said the other.

“Amuana was overwhelmed by the Shade Lord,” said the first figure. “We could... could not protect her as he took her body and...threw her bones to his dark wolves... The bones of the Child you have brought to us!”

“Her defilement at the hands of the Shade Lord is now ended!” said the second. “Our duty is at an end. Please...Amuana...forgive us! Forgive our lapse and let us cross over at last!”

Rolanna placed the bones from her pack into the indicated coffin. The two ghosts before her wavered a moment, then were gone. From the coffin flowed a new ghost, the height of a small child.

“My bones have been retrieved from the jaws of the shadow wolves,” said the ghostly Amuana. “I am grateful to you. Badon and Dettseh have been relieved of their duty and crossed over...I will join them soon. I pray that you are in this place to strike a blow against the darkness that has engulfed it, a darkness that I had not power enough to defeat when I was among the living. But I have some power. I have power enough to elude the attention of their guardians, if necessary, and I can give this to you. A wardstone...carry it and the dreaded Shadow Dragon will not notice your passing. Do not attack the beast or otherwise draw its attention, and you shall be safe. Safe enough, at least, to stand against that foul Shade Lord that has spread his hand over my once-glorious temple. I...will go, now, to rejoin my Keeper of the Eternal Sun. I owe my

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

freedom to you, and will always be thankful. Live, my friends...live long and live well. May the Light be forever victorious.”

Amuana’s ghost then faded from view, leaving Faerun forever.

Trusting in the wardstone given them by the shade of Amuana, the party continued. In a large hall, they found the Shadow Dragon. It did not react to their presence. Rolanna stood still, watching the dragon, scarcely believing it was safe to move.

Rolanna stood still so long that Jaheira prompted her, “Oh omnipresent authority figure, what are your commands now?”

“Jaheira, there is a level of sarcasm in your tone that is perhaps unnecessary,” said Mazzy. “We have a leader that honestly tries to anticipate our needs...”

“‘Tries,’ Mazzy?” asked Rolanna.

“Excuse me,” said Mazzy, bowing slightly in Rolanna’s direction. “Rolanna is a good leader, and it is difficult enough to keep the group together. Perhaps you could be more constructive, and less...”

“Bitchy?” added Jaheira.

“If that is how you wish to put it, yes.”

“Worry not for the feelings of Rolanna, small one, as she and I go far back and have an understanding of sorts.”

“As you will. It was only a humble suggestion. I’ve no wish to intrude upon your relationship with Rolanna.”

Heartened by this exchange, and the evident fact that the Shadow Dragon would not attack, the party was ready to move on. Beyond the hall was a passage that led up to the surface. They emerged into the weakened sunlight. Before them was an altar once dedicated to Amaunator, but now the lair of the Shade Lord.

“My knight miniature has escaped and returned with more souls to feed upon. Welcome, all,” greeted the Shade Lord.

Also present was a second shadow. In its own way more horrifying than the Shade Lord, it had retained a fraction of the memories of its former existence. This shadow spoke in a sibilant hiss, “Sssssthhh...Mazzy...you left us here...no matter...join the delightful darkness...” The shadow then chattered in a most disturbing manner.

“Patrick...no, not Patrick, only his twisted spirit,” said Mazzy. “My poor friends, what has he done to you?”

“He’s given us back...our existence...sssthhh...” said the shadow Patrick, “we’re all here Mazzy. Join us...embrace the master...”

“Excellent, my servant!” said the Shade Lord. “Ha! Our Lady Knight shall embrace the darkness and give the gift of flesh that I might keep my hold on this mortal plane.”

“Twisted fiend!” cried Mazzy. “Only death will stop me from avenging those noble souls that you have stolen.”

“Gently, lady knight,” replied the Shade Lord. “You were to be my consort.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I would never join with you!" said Mazzy. "Every fiber in my being would resist."

"Hah, hah! So noble!" said the Shade Lord. "A night on this altar would have made you a worthy consort. Don't look so harshly upon me. You would be a most evil Shade. The Laws of Chaos subvert. The noblest souls in life make for deliciously evil undead..."

"You will be fully dead when I am through with you," replied Mazzy.

"Is this is how you will have it?" asked the Shade Lord. "Regrettable, however, we'd have ruled these weak fools together... Come my shades, make short work of them and they shall join our army if not our family."

Mazzy, recognizing the link that allowed the Shade Lord to remain upon this plane, attacked his shadowy altar, which surrounded a statue of Amaunator. The others engaged the gathered shadows, Rolanna fighting the Shade Lord itself. Mazzy's destruction of the altar weakened the shadows, and soon the fighting was over.

Rolanna knelt down by what had been the Shade Lord, but was now only the wasted body of Merella, her spirit all but consumed by the Shade Lord. "Uh... freedom from his domination...thank y..." gasped the ranger, before becoming slack in death. The damage wrought by the Shade Lord was such that Rolanna doubted a raise dead spell would be successful.

Mazzy came up to Rolanna. "It is done, though the vengeance is empty. Patrick and my companions had to serve in death as slaves to the Shade Lord."

"They died with honor regardless of what the Shade Lord did to them afterward," said Rolanna.

"A truly evil fate. I would that I could honor their restless souls...perhaps it would bring them some measure of peace. They were good people who fought always for justice."

Rolanna noted that the unnatural gloom of the surrounding woods had disappeared. She realized the party must have spent only a few hours in the temple, as the lowering sun to the west glinted off the now plainly visible golden statue of Amaunator. Suddenly Rolanna had an idea.

"The god that this altar stood for is long dead. Would it not make a fine memorial to your fallen comrades? We could make an inscription."

"Aye, it would," Mazzy instantly agreed. "This altar was once a place of light, so shall it be again. Let us make this a memorial for these fine and noble friends."

Mazzy paused, thinking of words fit for the occasion. "My lost companions, my boon friends. May your souls rest in peace. I shall always carry your courage and your honor with me. I shall strike down evil in your name! Know, noble heroes, that you are not forgotten. May this altar always stand as a monument to your unselfish courage. Farewell! Rolanna, the inscription if you would."

Rolanna and her companions helped Mazzy carve an inscription, creating a memorial to her friends. The woods now no longer threatening, they camped nearby, then returned to Innesvale the next day.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As they entered the village, one of the locals looked at them in shock. "Ay, now... aren't ye the wee halfling lass that the mayor hired? What happened to all yer other fellas?"

"Dead, good sir," said Mazzy. "An ignoble death, as well... I hope you appreciate that they died in an effort to bring your safety."

Minister Lloyd was also shocked to see them. "Eh? Rolanna...you have returned... and I see you have brought with you our lost adventurer knight!"

"These are honorable companions who freed me from the clutches of a most dreadful Shade Lord, mayor," said Mazzy, "which was the actual bane of your village. It seems the Shade possessed your ranger and committed his evil acts from her body. My own companions are dead...and Merella was killed with the Shade, sadly. But you have Rolanna, here, to thank for your salvation. I, too, would have perished were it not for her most timely intervention."

"Oh, this is most joyous news!" said Lloyd. "It is sad that Merella is dead...but we are most grateful to you, my Lady, for ridding us of this peril! As agreed, here is the armor of my ancestor ranger...it is leather, but I assure you it is most strongly bound with magic to make it as strong as plate mail! I am not sure if the armor will be of any use to you. Errrm...is...is this enough of a reward? I suppose I could offer you some amount of gold, as well..."

"No, no. The leather, itself, is more than enough," said Rolanna.

"You...you are very kind," said Lloyd. "It is good to know there are valiant and generous folk still in Faerun... My thanks to you again, my Lady...it is a great relief to know that Imnesvale will now be safe. I will tell the townsfolk immediately!"

The party dropped by the inn for another meal, where Vincenzo greeted them, "Welcome truly, me Lady! 'Tis grand t' have a hero of the village come into me good establishment! Anything ye wishes, I am pleased t' provide it!"

"Even if the culprit didn't turn out to be Umar?" asked Rolanna.

"'Tis a sting! A sting on ye, Vince!" crowed the stable boy.

"The name's Vincenzo, ye lard-arsed rodent! I never wished Umar to be the culprit, I only feared it. And she be out there still..."

Rolanna asked for a meal to be served.

"Of course, me Lady...more'n happy t' offer ye anything under me roof. Things will be kind o' quiet, now that the murders have ended...not that I'm complainin'."

"Maybe ye can make up th' business by rentin' rooms to them ogres, aye?" said the stable boy. "How about cleanin' up after them fellers, aye?"

"Shut yer yip, boy...or I'll offer ye to yon visitin' ogre as a noon-time snack, I will. Now...me Lady..."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Ceremonies

As the party entered Athkatla on their return from Imnesvale, a man in a messenger's garb ran up, and asked "Miss Nalia? Miss Nalia de' Arnise?"

"Yes? That is my name, what can I do for you, son?" said Nalia.

"I have a message for you, Miss Nalia from the residents of the Family Arnise estate. I must get an imprint of your signet ring to prove I found you." After this was done, he continued, "Thank you, Miss Nalia, though I do hate to be the bearer of somber news. Here is your message. Safe travels to you."

"Let's see what this says then, shall we," said Nalia. "Oh my...I must go to the Graveyard District in Athkatla at once. All other concerns must wait. I am sorry, but I must insist upon this."

"What is your concern? It must be quite grave to cause you such grief," said Rolanna.

"You are more correct than you might've wished, but I forgive your ignorance. The message is about my father's funeral. I must go to the Graveyard District."

"Then we shall go as soon as mortally possible. I would not dream of letting you miss it."

"Thank you, I do appreciate this. It seems I owe you another debt of gratitude."

They hurried to the city graveyard. The burial itself had already occurred, and the memorial was just beginning as Nalia and the others arrived.

"Welcome to this place for this somber occasion," Minister Adelain was saying as they entered the outdoor balcony where the service was being held. "Mingle and celebrate the life of Lord Arnise. He would have everyone speak as equals."

"It was good of you to come, Nalia," said the minister. "I know your father would have appreciated it."

"I hope so," said Nalia. "I'm sure quite a few of his business partners could do without seeing me."

"That may well be, but today is not the time for such things. We are celebrating a life in this place, and all grievances should be put aside."

"I will try, Minister Adelain."

"Again, your father would have appreciated it. Wander and speak with the others, and talk of how you felt about him. I have told everyone else to do as much. Your father would prefer the honest talking of friends over prewritten speeches."

They couldn't help but overhear a dwarf declaim "Damn ye for dyin', Arnise! Ye still owed me a keg and a hunt since me last visit. To your health, wherever you are!" No one standing near, he had apparently decided to talk to the entire gathering.

Nalia shook her head when she saw who was talking, saying "Bonchy? Is that you?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Who would know me nickname?” asked the dwarf in surprise, turning. “Little nally Nalia! Oh, you are a sight for my eyes, I tell you! Oh, but girly, I am sorry for what has happened.”

“Don’t be sorry. Father would love that you came. You scare the nobles something fierce.”

“That I do, and rightfully so!” said the dwarf. He continued in a louder voice, “Someone has to liberate the people beneath the yoke of the nobles! Soon comes the time to strike!”

“Bonchy!” said Nalia chidingly.

“Look at ‘em squirm around the room,” laughed the dwarf. “Oh, I don’t mean nothing, but they don’t know that.”

“Thanks, Bonchy. You’ve made me smile,” said Nalia. Indeed, Nalia was happier now than at any time Rolanna had seen her since they had discovered the body of her father.

“Then my work is done for the tenday. I will leave on this good note, before we start to crying and backslapping.”

“If you must, Bonchy. Safe travels.”

“Aye, I gotta. May your heart and troubles both be light, nally Nalia.”

Nalia next spoke to a man who she whispered to Rolanna was Lord Milsire Donderbeg.

“Strange that more have not come to the funeral, though the market has fluctuated lately and many nobles are absorbed in their figures and books,” said Lord Donderbeg.

“I would have hoped they could have made time,” said Nalia.

“Oh, Nalia, I quite agree. He may not have been the most cutthroat of businessmen, but your father deserved respect.”

“Thank you for that, Lord Donderbeg.”

“My pleasure, my dear, though the honor to say such is mine. I hope I can aspire to gauge my integrity by comparison to your father’s.”

“You always were one of the more understanding of father’s friends.”

“I thank you, my dear. Now go, and don’t let the dark cloud above this place seep into your heart.”

“Oh, Lord Arnise did fraternize with some...colorful company, I must say,” said a woman who Nalia whispered was Lady Tandolan of Um. “Not what I would expect from a gentleman’s funeral. Oh, Nalia, I have heard how you have been in dreadful straits since your father’s death. I can only imagine the horrors you have endured.”

“Miss Tandolan? I’m not sure what you mean,” said Nalia.

“But my dear, the wandering like a gypsy, the company you have had to keep...Isaea has painted quite the unsavory picture.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Oh he has, has he? He talks far too much for my comfort, Miss Tandolan. If you would excuse me?”

As the noblewoman started to turn away, she looked down, noticing Mazzy. “Well... will you look at that? A little halfling all dolled up in armor and such. Why, aren't you just the cutest thing?”

“You come perilously close to impugning on my honor, lady,” said Mazzy. “I am a warrior of virtue, not something to be mocked.”

A young man approached the party. “Nalia, my dear! I have been worried sick about you!”

“Oh no! It's Isaea! Let's get out of here,” said Nalia, rolling her eyes.

“No, do not turn away,” said Isaea. “It has been so long since I have seen your face. So regal and...uh...a bit dirty actually. Have you been slumming again? Naughty!”

“Kindly place a cork in it, Isaea,” replied Nalia hotly, “I do not 'slum.' Foppish fools looking for a thrill 'slum.' I help people.”

“Of course, one must have one's little hobbies,” agreed Isaea placatingly, “but it is just about time you honored our...ah...agreement? The honor of your house is at stake, you recall?”

“My house? What house?” asked Nalia. “Your family directs my father's holdings as though theirs. That suggests my name has...has lost what nobility it had. If my rights to control of my father's dealings are void then why are the conditions that built those dealings not? Do you plan to release control of the keep to me?”

“Well, I...ah...”

“I thought not. No, I don't think I will be marrying you, Isaea. I do not have to, nor do I need to, and, above all else, I do not find your company enjoyable.”

“You may be entitled to ruin your own reputation but I will not have you dragging me down as well by denying what is mine by rights! I will not stand for it!”

“How exactly is she ruining her own reputation?” interrupted Rolanna. “By being kind to those less fortunate?”

“It can speak!” said Isaea in mock surprise. “Nalia trained you well. Oh, did I provoke you? Your reaction will be violent, no doubt. On your first move I shall have my guard cut you to p...”

An older man walked over. “What is going on here? Who are these...oh, hello Nalia. My deepest sympathies to you this day. Your father was a fine man.”

“Thank you, Lord Roenal,” said Nalia. “He would be pleased to hear such praise.”

“Stop this 'Lord Roenal' business,” he replied. “I'll not have such formalities. 'Farthington' is my name among friends, 'Farthy' if out of sight of the missus. Hmph heh?”

“Lord Roenal, you are a positive cad!” said Nalia.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Oh! Isaea says you abandoned your home to wander as a peasant. Really, if your estate needs guards or accountants I would be happy to...”

“Isaea said what?! Abandoned?!” repeated Nalia, shocked. “It was wrest out from under me! What has...”

“Thank you father, but shouldn’t you be getting back to the guests?” Isaea hastily intervened. “Do not mind Nalia, she is still somewhat ‘lost’ without her father. You understand.”

“Quite, quite. All my best, my dear,” said Isaea’s father as he walked off.

“Isaea, what have you told him?” said Nalia. “That I was run off and afraid to go back? Is that how you intend to take control of my home, my life? I’ll not have it!”

“Nalia, descend further into these whims of yours and you shall be a laughing stock. Come now, our combined names would carry quite the weight. What do you say?”

“I say...I say take your name and eat it! I’ll not be your puppet!” she yelled back.

“Do not anger me, Nalia. I can help or hinder, I’ve done it before.”

“She said her wishes,” Rolanna pointed out coldly. “Whether you respect them or not, you will let them stand.”

“Your comment is asinine,” said Isaea, frowning. “Obviously she does not know what her wishes should be. Just look at her choice of company. I will leave...for now. This is unfinished.”

After he left, Nalia said “I am sorry for that extended exchange but he is such a bounder, such a...a manipulating...such a...oh, to hades with the manners, he is a complete bastard, and calling him that insults bastards everywhere!”

“He did say he could ‘help or hinder,’ and ‘he’d done it before.’ What’s that about?” asked Rolanna.

“What does any of it mean? That he is a rounder, and were he not the son of Lord Roenal I would think him capable of anything short of the criminal. This has been too much to take in. Let us get away from here and away from him. Lead on.”

It was now time to travel to the Order of the Most Radiant Heart for Anomen’s knighthood trial.

Upon entering the Order’s headquarters, Anomen announced “Sir Ryan Trawl! I have arrived and am prepared to be Judged.”

“Excellent, Squire Anomen,” said Sir Ryan. “The Prelate waits within. May Torm be with you on this day.”

“And also with you.”

“Step inside the hall. I shall speak with you when you are finished. Your party may accompany you if you wish.”

“I do wish it. Rolanna, follow me and observe the Judgment.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

In the main hall of the Order, Prelate Wessalen addressed him. "Anomen Delryn, son of Cor and Moirala, do you stand before me pledged to the service of justice? Do you stand before me pledged to the service of righteousness?"

"Prelate of the Order, I so stand," said Anomen. "I pledge my life to the service of justice and righteousness."

"Anomen Delryn, do you stand before me seeking a knighthood of the Order?"

"I do so stand."

"Do you stand before me prepared to accept the Judgment. of Torm? Are your actions and those you travel with laid bare? Shall I judge you as I have been judged?"

"My past and my actions I lay bare before you. I ask that you judge me as you have been judged."

"May the spirit of Torm enter this chamber! May my Judgment. be unclouded. Welcome to this place, Anomen. Is there aught that you would say before we begin?"

"Thank you, Prelate. I would say that all of my life I have dreamed of this day, and becoming a knight is the culmination of those dreams. Judge me as you have been judged."

"So shall it be. The Judgment. is clear. Anomen Delryn, you have proven yourself worthy. I dub thee Sir Anomen. Knight of the Order, arise and give your oath."

Rolanna had to suppress a shout of glee at the news. Surely, after all of Anomen's doubts, and the attempt of his father to force him into thoughtless vengeance, this day was a vindication of his path. She also admitted to herself that Anomen cut quite the figure, standing boldly before the prelate and assembled knights.

"Under witness of all gathered," Anomen solemnly declaimed, "I swear to uphold the honor of the Order for as long as I shall live. I pledge my dying breath to the service of good. In Helm's name, I thank thee, Prelate. I swear that I shall never falter 'neath the banner of Helm."

"Go then, Sir Anomen, and serve the cause. You shall serve beneath the Paladin Ryan Trawl, a righteous man. May Torm bless thee."

"And also thee. Rolanna, I must speak with Sir Ryan Trawl now."

They returned to where Sir Ryan was waiting. He greeted the new knight, "Sir Anomen, I congratulate you. As your new superior I welcome you and honor your knighthood."

"I thank you, Paladin Ryan Trawl. I am pleased to serve you with strength of arms and a faith in Torm."

"Normally you would accompany me as my man at arms, but while you continue on a righteous path you may escort Rolanna. Go well, Sir Anomen and Torm bless thee."

"I thank you. May Helm also bless thee."

As the party left the Order Anomen said to Rolanna, "It is truly a grand day, my friend."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You seem very pleased with yourself, Anomen," said Rolanna. "I see that knighthood agrees with you."

"It does. I am well content. When one's dreams have come true one cannot help but rejoice. So, as I said, it is truly a grand day. I have achieved my dream, and I owe much of that to your assistance and counsel. I...I am most grateful to you for it."

"Thank you...I was happy to help," said Rolanna quietly, staring into his eyes.

"And help you did. Meeting your group of fellows has affected me in the most fortunate way. To think I had such grave doubts...that seems like another time for me, now. I spoke to Sir Ryan Trawl before I left the headquarters...he wishes me to lead an expedition to the far south. I will have my own soldiers under my command, Rolanna! I was also told that they plan on giving me a squire or two, that I might teach my prowess to young initiates. That, and my own quarters within the Order building, as well."

"Sir Ryan Trawl also mentioned that my duties with the Order could be put aside for the moment so that I might continue my travels with you. Very few novices are given such permission after they achieve the rank of knight. I feel quite privileged. Come...let us continue your journey and save your friend, yes?"

From the Temple district, Rolanna led the party through the stalls of Waukeen's Promenade, restocking adventuring supplies. She also visited Ribald's Adventurer's Emporium. The dwarf Breml was also there; he and Ribald were in a conversation as the party entered.

"Ah, but I do miss me adventurin' days..." said Breml.

"What adventuring days?" asked Ribald.

"Me adventurin' days! When I was an adventurer, true, blast it! Does I have to be spellin' it out fer ye?"

"I thought you were a cobbler."

"Well...well, I does some cobblin' *now*, sure. But *before* that I were an adventurer!"

"Oh? And where have you been, oh mighty and experienced adventurer?"

"I...well, if ye must be knowin', I was well known in Scornubel for a time."

"So you must have met Lord Francis, then. Or Denal Sixfingers. They both lived there last I was in Scornubel."

"Er...well, I...no," Breml grumbled. "Sometimes, I really does hate ye, Ribald."

"Ribald? Ribald...is that really you?" asked Mazzy.

"I— Well, if it isn't me favorite halfling lass. How does ye be, girlie?" replied Ribald.

"Fairly well, good friend, thanks to Rolanna, here. See, she's a good woman at heart, and saved my life from a shadow fiend in the hills."

"Well, then I does owe yer friend a debt of thanks for keeping a fine lass like ye among us. I trust the adventuring goes well?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Well enough, although I might say that the Life misses your noble presence, Ribald.”

“Ah, yer sweet t’ say so. I don’t miss it much, though, to say fer certain. Have a look about me new venture, lass, and don’t be so long in yer visits next time.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, good friend.”

Unfortunately Ribald’s prices had not fallen, so Rolanna left his shop without making a purchase. From the promenade, Rolanna headed towards the Government District. Along the way the party passed through the slums.

As they walked Mazzy commented, “The corruption in the city is widespread, even amongst my own people. It is a pity.”

As if to confirm her words, almost immediately a passing half-ogre glared at Mazzy. “What this? Baby paladin? Girl play dress-up like big warrior?”

“Of whom do you speak, oaf?” said Mazzy.

“I talk you, pipsqueak. Go home to dolls, this big Gorf’s world. I show you difference in wimpy halfling punch and Gorf squishy hit. Watch me.”

To Rolanna’s surprise, Gorf lifted a fist the size of a quarter tun of ale, cocked it, and slugged a passing peasant. The peasant dropped to the ground.

“See difference, little nothing?” said Gorf. “Tiny gives Gorf hurt head. Gorf no like. Gorf will squishy you kind.”

Rolanna was still so shocked by this unexpected behavior that she couldn’t muster anything to say, but Mazzy stepped into the breach. “I can stand by and take your insults to myself but now you have struck an innocent merely to dishonor me. I demand satisfaction, brutish fool!”

“Huh?” was the confused Gorf’s reply.

“A duel, you idiot,” said Mazzy. “You have gone too far. My honor demands satisfaction.”

“You want fight Gorf? Hah, hah, hah!”

“That is what I said, stupid. Choose a battlefield.”

“Okay, girl-girl. I fight at Copper Coronet. In pits. You want go squishy, you come there. Gorf kill you.”

“I shall be there, oaf!”

As the half-ogre wandered off, Mazzy commented to Rolanna, “How dishonorable! The boorishness of the large peoples never ceases to amaze me.”

Rolanna had finally gotten her speech center back under firm control. “You told him, Mazzy!”

“As honor demands. Let us go within the Copper Coronet.” Before they entered, Rolanna checked the unconscious bystander. After a quick healing, he appeared to be all right.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Once inside, Mazzy called out “Ho, pit manager! I come to duel with the ogre, Gorf. Where is he?”

“Another idiot halfling?” said the pit manager. “Gorf knows how to pick ‘em. Beat it, twerp. Surly ain’t here to answer your stupid questions.”

“Will you stand here all day and insult me or will you tell me where he is?” asked Mazzy insistently.

“Fine, fine. I don’t give an elf’s arse. Check with his girl, Bunkin. She’s over there dressed in yellow. Maybe she’ll know where he’s at.”

“You had best begin the search for a new ogre. Gorf shall not win this fight.”

“Yeah, whatever. Go away. Surly’s got a bad hangover.”

They looked around the inn’s common room, finally finding the girl the pit boss had mentioned. She asked, “What you want with Bunkin? Be quick cuz Bunkin busy lookin’ pretty.”

“We’re looking for Gorf. He said he’d meet us here,” said Rolanna.

Bunkin sighed, “He ain’t here. Gorf baby said he’d be comin’ after the seventh hour, at night. You’s can talk to him, then, I guess.”

“Can’t you track him down? We don’t want to wait that long,” said Rolanna.

“I’m not gonna...oh, wait! There he is! Gorf! Gorf, baby, over here!” waved Bunkin.

“Uhg, that much good. Gorf ready to fight, pit man!” yelled the half-ogre.

“Shut up and get in the pit,” the pit boss said to Gorf and Mazzy.

Gorf and Mazzy fought in the pit. Mazzy’s experience as an adventurer proved more useful than Gorf’s as a bully, and she readily defeated him.

“There. Virtue has won the day, for once,” said Mazzy as she exited the pit, “and hopefully the lesson has been pounded into the lout’s head. Come, Rolanna...let us be away from this boorish place.”

The party moved to another inn in a somewhat better part of town for a meal and to spend the night. Once again, the bard Haer’Dalis showed up, taking Aerie aside.

“You’ve perused the play, have you, my mourning dove?” said Haer’Dalis once they were alone. “Why does your brow crinkle so, then?”

“I’ve read the play, yes,” said Aerie doubtfully, “but, Haer’Dalis, I still honestly don’t think I can play this Tersis character.”

“And I yet hold in my surety that you can, fair Aerie. What makes you say that you cannot?”

“Well...the scene where the goddess confronts Lord Jhovan, the ruler of the gods. She chastises him rather...forcefully...”

“Aye? And...?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Aerie giggled, "Oh, Haer'Dalis...I could never do that! The words would sound like a mouse were speaking them, coming from me. I've no such voice in me..."

"The voice is in you, my dove. You have but to cast about for it. Come...enact the passage for me."

Aerie sighed, saying "I...I'll try. 'H-hold, my Lord...I will n-not...not be judged..." She paused, shaking her head. "No, no...it's just no use."

"Then you are a mouse, my Aerie. A frightened little mouse who refuses to come out of her hole. Be satisfied with your stale cheese, if you will."

"Haer'Dalis! What a cruel thing to say!"

"Enact the passage, then. You have the ability."

"Fine. 'H-hold, my Lord...I w-will...n-not...not be...-'"

"Squeak, squeak? Is that a mouse this bard hears? You can do better than that, my dove..."

"'H-hold, my Lord! I will...n-not...not be...j-judged -'"

"What was that? Are you speaking, my dove? I am straining to hear you..."

"Then stop interrupting me!"

"Then speak, woman! I am the king of the Gods! Do you have something to tell me or don't you?!"

"'Hold, my Lord! I will not be judged by the lowest of my brethren, nor shall I be judged by my King! I refuse to be silent! I am Tersis! And I *will* be heard!' " Aerie stopped, surprised by the force with which she had uttered the lines. Not one stammer, either.

"Bravo, my dove! A most excellent wonder, to hear your thundering talent roll forth from such a delightful form! Bravo!"

"I...I did it, didn't I? Th-thank you, Haer'Dalis! That...that felt wonderful!"

"Ha! What is it now, my fair Aerie? You think I am not looking at you, but I can spy your desire to put the bard to the question. Go ahead, my dove...I'll not mind."

"Well...I was only wondering...my scenes that I read to you. Was I...was I any good? Please tell me truthfully."

"Truth is my mantra, fair Aerie, when it comes to matters of the stage. And, aye, you were a sight to make any man swoon, possessing a talent that many an actress I've known would envy."

"You...you aren't just saying that? I'm not that good..."

"Your skill needs to be sharpened, 'tis true, but the talent is plenty and full. And I do not exaggerate, my dove...your mother saw it true when she mused o'er your life upon the stage."

"Ha...it's too bad, then, that there's nowhere to perform our piece."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“But there is, my dove! There always is! We could shout out lines from the very streets of the towns, amazing on-lookers and filling them with envy! In the wilderness, we could draw a crowd of fearsome creatures and tame them with our entertainments! Paws and claws would clatter as they approved of our efforts and lauded your great talent, my lady! Word of our acts would spread...and we would be in demand all over Amn! Bugbears would stand beside great nobles, shouting out your name and mine! The toast of Kings and Queens, my dove...just imagine it!”

Aerie laughed aloud at the images Haer'Dalis had conjured. “You are a silly man, Haer'Dalis!”

“Was that the twitter of amusement I heard from your lips, my mourning dove? It is good to hear you laugh.”

“And it is good to laugh. Thank you, my comical bard.”

The next day Rolanna returned to Keldorn's estate. He greeted her, “I am the bearer of good news! Lady Maria and I have made our peace! Once I am no longer honor-bound to your cause, I shall settle down with my family on our estate and submit my resignation to the Order!”

Rolanna considered the gray in his hair; she also noted the tension missing from his forehead and about his eyes for the first time since she had met him. “I will not keep you from them. Go, with my blessing.”

“I promised my daughters that I would take them to the circus. Little did I know the chance would come so soon... Fare thee well, Rolanna. Your kindness shall not be forgotten.”

As they left the estate Nalia commented, “Look how these people squander their wealth. Children lie starving in the street while the wealthy concern themselves with acquiring the latest Calimshan silks.”

“You are angry, my friend,” said Mazzy. “This I understand implicitly. Injustice and indifference have always been the banes of our society and pose more of a danger to us than any dragon ever could. But with all things there are two sides. Oppose injustice, but do so wisely. Some rich may act as they do because in their lives they are told or even forced. “

“Ignorance has always been a convenient excuse for the rich to live out their lives in comfort.”

“The trappings of one's family and past are not easy to throw away. It takes more than a glimpse of poverty to bring an epiphany to someone.”

“It can be done. My noble birth does not affect my actions today, but I do agree that most nobility will not understand poverty until they suffer it themselves.”

“That may be true, but by casting the rich down, are we not merely creating a new impoverished class?”

“For a time, yes. But the poor understand what it's like to be trampled upon. They would show compassion.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Nalia...no offense, but you are not poor; your children will not starve. You empathize, but you may be blinded by the romance of saving the impoverished. Allow me to tell you a tale.” Mazzy paused to see if Nalia was paying attention, then began her tale.

“In a distant barony there was a village, lorded over by a cruel Baron given to excesses of body and spirit. Comely lasses of the village were taken for his personal harem, and he taxed heavily to pay for his pleasures. His guards kept order under threat of death. Now, it came to pass that a man named Kalos fell in love with a woman named Dana. A marriage was set for after harvest. Kalos and Dana were filled with joy. Soon after, the Baron came to the village collecting taxes. He saw the beautiful Dana, and he had his guards take her so that he could possess her. When Kalos heard Dana was gone, he and his friends took up what arms they could. They stormed the Baron’s manor unthinking, like men gone berserk. Kalos himself killed the Baron, and holding Dana, his rage passed. Then he saw the richness of the manor, and thought of how unfairly and poorly he had lived. He took the golden chain of rank, placed it on his own head, and sent his young men out to collect his taxes, for was not he now the Baron?”

“Anyone can be weak, Nalia. We like to hope that the oppressed never become the oppressor, that we would behave better than those above. Alas, it is not always so.”

“Perhaps this is something that I should think upon, but I still say there is no excuse for the actions of some.”

“That is all I can ask, Nalia. In the meantime, as I have heard it said, we be adventurers, let us adventure.”

Rolanna had not thought to hear a philosophical discussion, especially not from Nalia and Mazzy. It showed, she thought, that people were always more complicated than they seemed at first glance. Rolanna’s thoughts were interrupted when Anomen joggled her elbow.

Anomen held forth to Rolanna a flower he had found among the manicured planting beds. “You see this flower I have picked, here? ‘Tis a rare find...a crimson rhodelia, if I am not mistaken.”

“What of it?” asked Rolanna.

“‘Tis a most stately flower, my lady. Its color has the most fiery temperament, yet its aroma is sweet. It is the flower of lovers, yet it is also the flower of vengeance and warriors. It reminded me of you, my lady. Beautiful to look upon, yet with a powerful nature. I find myself drawn to its scent, giving myself over almost to distraction.”

“You are quite the flatterer, Anomen,” said Rolanna, flushing slightly, sure all of her companions were staring at her.

“Nonsense, my lady. Flattery would imply that I was exaggerating. I find, instead, that this flower is but a pale imitation of the attraction you hold for me. You may find what I say forward. And if you find it unwelcome, I shall desist. But I have discovered my feelings for you to have grown beyond that of mere friendship or alliance. I have said many times how grateful I am, but I have never told you that I was attracted to you from

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

the start...your heart and your bright soul, not to mention your beauty. Do...do my words offend you, my lady? Have I overstepped myself?"

"No, I take no offense. I rather like it," said Rolanna, taking his hand, forgetful of everyone beyond the man before her.

"I am pleased. I know little in the way of pretty women such as yourself. My experience being thus, I'll express myself as best I am able, and be thrilled by your response. Come, then, good lady. Let us continue on your quest...we can talk more at a later time and I shall be free to complement you at your leisure."

Jaheira's Choice

As the party was walking down a street near Keldorn's estate, a woman approached the group. "A word I would have with you, Jaheira. Listen carefully whilst I say what I must, for this brings me no pleasure."

"Do I know of you?" asked Jaheira. "Have you reason to subject me to your rude manner? I have no coin, if that is your wish."

"Charming, as I was told. No, Jaheira, you have nothing I require save your attention. You are bid to follow as I lead. Come, we must go."

"I do not follow by a stranger's command. Who are you?"

"Oh, you know me, as well as you should know yourself. We are one and the same, and I bear the pin that tells our name. Let your eyes not deceive you as you look upon this 'trinket.' "

"I...Yes, I see. If you would give me a moment I will do what needs be done."

"Make your farewells quick, you will not be gone long."

"What is going on, Jaheira? I need you here in the party," said Rolanna.

"I have obligations elsewhere. Worry not, I will return shortly. You will survive without me for a time."

Rolanna decided to wait at a nearby inn for Jaheira to return. Indeed, she did so after a short interval.

"Hail there! I said I would return, and I have," said Jaheira. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, but there were things I had to take care of. Now that we have met once again there is something I must ask of you. We must go...we must go to the Harper hold in Athkatla. I have been asked to bring you, and we must go soon. They will allow us to pass the wards of the door, but I must be with you, and I must be conscious."

"I will follow if you deem it necessary. Welcome back, by the way," said Rolanna.

"I am glad to be back in your company. I only wish it were not under such circumstances. Come, we must go. I will explain more when it is time."

Jaheira, Rolanna and the others returned to the Harper hold near the docks.

Inside, five Harpers awaited them. One said, "Jaheira, my dear, it is good to see you!" Jaheira frowned upon seeing him; Rolanna wondered what was wrong.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Your welcome is forced, Galvarey,” said Jaheira, “you know I am here at the bidding of the Herald. Why have you come to greet me; this is too important to waste time on you.”

“Ah, I know well the importance of this. It was I that called you,” said Galvarey.

“You! You are no Herald! What is going on here?” said Jaheira, her face darkening in anger.

“This area lacks a Herald currently, and I seek to establish one. You will help, by doing what’s right. You know what is right, don’t you?”

“I know you are an ambitious fool. You cannot be sanctioned to do this. Even this gaudy base is against our usual restraint. The position of Herald requires...”

“Herald requires the will to establish the position. The High Heralds will judge if it is deserved. Really, Jaheira, this is a matter aside. You know this.”

“Fine, set about with your questions so I can get on with my job as well.”

“Very good. You serve the greater cause that we all do. Now then, Rolanna, do you know why you are here?”

“I have no idea, though I am waiting to hear with great interest,” said Rolanna.

“Then I shall keep you waiting no longer, though I am certain you do indeed know why we are concerned about you. Let me ask you a few things straight away, Rolanna. Nothing too intrusive, I assure you. What are your earliest memories? Are they happy ones?”

“I remember running, but I am not sure from what exactly. My stepfather Gorion led the way.”

“Running, hmm? No doubt from your past. I remember Gorion...the idealist. I was with those who thought it was a mistake. Ah...I will clarify later. As a child of Bhaal, have you...violent thoughts?”

“That is a loaded question. Violence is part of our world. It is unavoidable in some measure,” said Rolanna suspiciously.

“Hmm...finds that violence is unavoidable. Certainly to be expected in a creature such as you.”

“You are twisting her words, Galvarey,” protested Jaheira. “That is not what she meant.”

“Deception is woven into her very being, Jaheira. Can you comprehend the thoughts of an illithid? Or a beholder? Your Rolanna is akin to these.”

“Only in your mind. This is a farce!”

“The questions will continue nonetheless. I do hope there will be no further outbursts. Now then, Rolanna, what is your favorite color?”

“What has that to do with anything?!” asked Jaheira in disbelief.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Jaheira! I question your loyalty to our cause. My method will become clear in the end. I ask again, Rolanna, what is your favorite color?”

“Green is my preference,” said Rolanna.

Galvarey pounced on the answer. “Green! Jealousy, or the gangrenous limb!”

“And also of the grass, or the leaves in the trees!” said Jaheira. “You are so intent on seeing what you wish the answer does not matter!”

“I suppose in part it does not matter. Obviously this person causes much disturbance where e'er she goes. My interview is just to clarify the matter.”

“But you were to see Rolanna as she is, not as you expected her to be! I was to bring them here so...” Jaheira looked at the other Harpers. None of them showed distress at Galvarey's tactics; Jaheira realized she was not among friends.

“You were to bring them here so that we might have them here,” said Galvarey, “nothing more. The course of action was always clear.”

“Excuse me, but I am still in the room. What is it you intend?” asked Rolanna.

“Indeed, Galvarey, what is it you intend? This is not as we had discussed...” said Jaheira.

“No, but you only needed to know enough to bring them here. Extraneous information would have endangered the mission. As Harpers we...”

“As Harpers we respect others!” yelled Jaheira.

“We have a greater duty to maintain the balance. How can you, as a Harper...as a *druid* sanction the freedom of this person. What will they do to the balance?”

“And what if they will restore the balance?” said Jaheira. “What if her intent is good?”

“It is simply not worth the risk. No, there is no choice in the matter. Rolanna, You are to be...confined.”

Rolanna felt anger flooding herself at his words. Not the quick, white-hot anger which motivated Jaheira to her sarcastic probes. It was a deep-seated, roiling emotion that called to Rolanna to strike out against all who stood against her. She exerted her will, controlling the anger, as Jaheira answered Galvarey.

“It is as good as death and you know it, Galvarey!”

“Nothing so barbaric. Imprisonment to contain the chaos she might sow, either intentionally or unwittingly. It is a humane solution.”

“And where am I to be locked away? I hope someplace with a view?” asked Rolanna ironically, calm enough to speak in a level voice.

“No, Rolanna, I mean the spell ‘Imprisonment.’ You will find yourself in a small container a few leagues under the earth. Quite peaceful.”

“You've no right to do this. I will not allow it,” said Rolanna, fighting a new rush of anger.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You have no voice here and little choice in the matter. Certainly, you can fight, but there are six Harpers to contend with. The odds are quite clearly...”

“Nay, Galvarey, there is but you and your four lackeys,” said Jaheira, moving to stand beside Rolanna. “I will have no part in this! Rolanna, you are my comrade in arms. I know you are good and true in heart. I will fight with you against this!”

“You have made a mistake, Jaheira,” growled Galvarey, his urbane manner at last slipping. “With her imprisonment I could get sponsored as Herald! But now you fight the Harpers with this monster!”

“Harpers may interfere but it is for the greater good! Not this! I don’t know you!” said Jaheira.

His face twisted with rage, Galvarey ordered his companions to attack. Galvarey had been as wrong in his expectation of Jaheira’s support as he had been in estimating the prowess of Rolanna and her companions, for he was quickly defeated. As was not unusual in such combat, Galvarey and all of his Harpers were killed. Jaheira refused to discuss what had just happened with Rolanna.

As the group walked back to a nearby inn, Rolanna reflected that this was not over. More Harpers could be expected to attack her, and likely they would consider Jaheira to be an outlaw. Rolanna, who had previously formed a deep respect for the Harpers, was greatly disappointed. She should have known that no human organization could be expected to be perfect.

Others were less affected by what had just happened, or let on that they were unaffected to cheer the others. Mazzy started a conversation with Aerie as they walked.

“Aerie, dear, I see that you begin to become more confident in this world...which is undoubtedly quite strange to you. You are learning what it is like to live and thrive here.”

“Yes, civilization is—is still a bit frightening, though.”

“Sometimes I am frightened by what I see as well. You are right to be. There is corruption everywhere. You must constantly challenge yourself to remain pure.”

“Challenge myself?”

“You are good by nature, Aerie, but perhaps a little naïve. Devious people will try to take advantage, especially in mercenary settlements like Athkatla.”

“How can you tell who to trust, Mazzy?”

“Seek those who value honor. Observe before you accept, especially in times of adversity. Watch companions in conflict, and you will see them as they truly are.”

“I— I’ll do what I can, Mazzy... I know I can always trust you.”

“Thank you, Aerie. You are truly a beautiful soul.”

This exchange brought a smile to Rolanna’s lips. Besides, she couldn’t stay depressed for long with Anomen at her side. She had only just realized the depths of her feelings for him, and looked forward to partaking in many future adventures with him.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Anomen whispered to Rolanna once they reached the inn. "Might I be able to draw you away from the others for a while as they prepare to sleep? I have something to speak to you of, and 'tis for your ears only."

"Very well, I shall go with you."

"Now that we are alone, I wish to tell you my adoration of you is sincere. I have met no one like you before, my lady, and I suspect that I will meet no one like you again. You have become the captain of my soul, and have kept me on the path of righteousness and good...and aided me in achieving a dream I had nearly thought to be impossible. I...I wish to become closer to you, Rolanna. I wish to feel you in my arms, to caress your skin and lay with you in the night. Am I being too forward with you, my lady? Would you find a poor knight such as I an acceptable lover? I...would not be offended if you did not, I yearn only to be with you."

"You are not being too forward, Anomen...I wish to be with you, as well."

"I am glad to hear it, my love. Come to me, then...I shall remove my too-worn armor and we can lay together for the eve...and I shall show you the love that I hold for you..."

In the morning Rolanna was first to wake, but she stayed in bed, looking down at Anomen's face. She thought herself very fortunate. Not only had she found love, and a lover, but a knight who could share her path. She allowed herself to imagine a future past Irenicus, when she had joined the Order and she and Anomen could fight together to uphold justice and the general good.

The Abduction

Early in the day, the party stopped by the Five Flagons Inn in the Bridge District. The halfling proprietor hustled forward to greet the large party entering his inn.

"Hello, my good smilin'— Mazzy! By Brandobaris' stealthy feet, I don't think I've seen you in ages!"

"Samuel...Samuel Thunderburp," said Mazzy. "Greatest fighter of Highdale and renowned rapscaillon. Yes, indeed, it has been a long time."

"How have you been faring, then? Last I heard, you had hooked up with Patrick and his band up in...what? Trademeet? Did you all part ways?"

"Patrick is dead, Samuel. They all are. I would be, myself, were I not rescued by Rolanna, here, from the clutches of a creature of most foul evil."

"Patrick is...oh, Mazzy, that's terrible." Samuel sighed, "May the Black Hound watch over them, then, and guide them to their final peace."

"Aye. May the Black Hound watch over them. They have been buried and honored, Samuel...for that, at least, I am thankful."

"That's good. Well, I have you to thank, Rolanna, for saving my favorite halfling paladin. Here, a pair of my old adventuring boots. More use to you than I. As for you, Mazzy, it's good to see you again. Say hello to Thalia if you get the chance...and don't be a stranger!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I won’t, Samuel. Some other time, then.”

Samuel greeted the other party members, “Here at the Five Flagons you’ll find a cheery smile and every beverage in Faerun available for your appreciation!”

Rolanna asked him if he knew anything about where the Cowled Wizards kept their prisoners.

“You know,” said Samuel reflectively, “I heard once, long ago, that the Cowled Wizards hired a bunch of Gondar engineers to build a prison to hold the magically inclined. But it wasn’t in the city, I recall. Hmm...let me think. It was in my adventuring days, and I was actually trying to get the location of a particular tomb. Well. I think it was somewhere in the Nelanther...the pirate isles to you, I suppose. But I guess that doesn’t help you very much. But even if you did know, how in Arvoreen’s name would you get there? The Cowled Wizards don’t take intrusion lightly. Sorry about your friend, my Lady.”

“You said something about having ‘all’ types of drinks...that isn’t true, is it?”

“It’s true as true, my friend! I may not keep it all on the shelf—not much call for Turmish beer, for instance—but I bet the fur on my feet I have it in the cellar!”

“Alright, you’ve piqued my interest. Let me look at what you have.”

“But of course! Take a look at the shelves...we have Tethyrian brandy, Sembian mead, Theskan dark ale...even a bit o’ dwarven grog, if that tickles your fancy! And if you haven’t already, do take a look at the theater established downstairs! I’m told the plays are a marvel! Ooo, but I prattle...let me get you a menu...”

As they were eating, Samuel’s wife, Thalia, stopped by the table.

“Mazzy! How is it going, my dear? I trust everything is well?”

“Well enough, thanks be to Arvoreen,” said Mazzy. “I see you’ve retired from the Life, then?”

“Surely enough...although it was difficult to drag my Samuel away. Sorry, dear... one of the drunks is hollering. Take care!”

As they were finishing their meal, a patron of the tavern interrupted them, staring at Jaheira and Aerie. “I suppose you flighty elven types are here t’ look at the plays downstairs, aye?”

“Not all elves are ‘flighty,’” replied Jaheira. “In their many years they learn all too well the responsibilities and pitfalls of this world. You would do well to remember that.”

As they were preparing to leave Haer’Dalis showed up. Aerie asked Rolanna if she could go off and talk to the bard by herself for a while. Rolanna was glad to agree, since she was anxious to talk to Anomen alone. The party agreed to meet back at the Five Flagons later in the day.

Once Aerie and Haer’Dalis were alone, he dramatically declaimed “‘You have come to me, my goddess! I have prayed for my love not to be denied, and my majestic queen appears before me!’ ”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Aye...Tersis has come to you, my Donner,” said Aerie, falling into the lines from the play. “Your yearning has called to me across the void, and against all sober advice, I have come.’ ”

“Then let me sing your praises while I can, my Queen. Let me tell you how I adore your flaxen hair, your porcelain skin...let me tell you how I long to brush my hand across your pale cheek...”

“Er...Haer'Dalis...?” said Aerie, looking confused.

“Your breathtaking beauty has captured my heart and I long to cradle your innocence in my arms for the breadth of eternity...”

“Haer'Dalis, your words...your words aren't in the play.”

“Forget the play, my mourning dove...I speak what is in my heart. My words come unbidden to my lips, for you have captured my soul in your innocent hands. I am yours, my sweet Aerie. Can you not see that? You blossom like a flower before me and I am entranced, swept away and caught in your fragile web all at once!”

“I...I thank you for your words, Haer'Dalis...but...”

“Do you not feel some spark, yourself, my dove? Does your heart not quicken in my presence as mine does in yours? I prithee, do not crush my fragile plea!”

“E-enough...please. I...I am flattered...but...but I was not expecting this. Please...leave me alone but for a while...”

Haer'Dalis engaged in small talk with Aerie for a time, but his impatience finally got the better of him. He burst out, “Aerie...my sweet dove...I have given you time to ponder my words, but my aching soul yearns for requitement. Do you not feel some measure of love for this solitary bard?”

“Haer'Dalis...this is all s-so...sudden...”

“It is not sudden, my love, but rather it is momentous...a revelation of affection that has stricken me like a most welcome affliction! Tell me that you feel similarly, my mourning dove, and I'll be yours forever more, my heart lain at your tender feet. Or tell me that you have no love and I'll be forsworn...but say it true!”

“I...I do not deny that I hold you in great esteem, Haer'Dalis. You have been most kind. It...it is just that...”

“But how can there be a limit to love, my fair Aerie? Is there another, perhaps? Is there another man that your heart sings for?”

“I...I don't know. I truly don't...”

“Then I beg of you to discover your heart's true intent, my dove. My own course has been set and it pains me greatly not to know if you will eventually be my own...”

Aerie hastily made an excuse, and fled from Haer'Dalis in confusion. She had made herself believe for so long that no one could find her attractive that she just didn't know how to react to Haer'Dalis.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Meanwhile, Rolanna and Anomen were walking the streets, pretending to have an interest in the sights they passed, but mainly talking to one another.

"I have been thinking of many things, now, as we travel," said Anomen. "I must admit that I have never felt happier and more content...and yet a week ago I would not have thought this even possible."

"Why are you so happy?"

"I am simply glad, my lady, that things have worked out as they have. I am a full member of the Order, as I have always wished, and my heart has never felt so calm. I have also been thinking of Saerk...and I am glad that you pushed me to refrain from taking vengeance on the man. There was no real evidence of his involvement, was there? It would have been wrong of me to listen to my father's ravings. Moira...she would not have wanted me to take bloody vengeance for her, not if it wasn't true. And, if...if Saerk did those things...well. Well, he will pay for them. Someday...I suppose. The gods will see to that."

"You don't sound very convinced of that," said Rolanna, concerned that Moira's murder was still unresolved.

"Hm? Perhaps I don't, at that. I simply find myself thinking of my father, alone in the mansion and drinking himself away with bitter thoughts of myself and my sister. I hope that he will find it in himself to forget about Saerk and rebuild what he has lost. Perhaps he can find a new wife...lose the hatred that festers in his heart as I have. Ah, it is a simple hope, is all. But not likely. Perhaps father will speak to me again when I next return to him. Moira...Moira would want me to, I think."

Anomen shook his head, then turned and held Rolanna in his arms. "But the thought saddens me, now, when I wanted to think of glad things. Such as you. Come, my love... let us move on, now."

Ahead they saw Nalia, who raised an arm in greeting. As they hurried forward to her, they noticed another group headed her way, at the lead Isaea Roenal.

"Nalia!" cried Isaea. "I would ask that you drop this foolishness at once and return to your proper duties! Honor the commitment you made to me!"

"I made my opinion of you quite clear, Isaea. I will not change my mind now," said Nalia.

"Then I have little choice but to forcefully show you the error of your ways. Nalia de'Arnise, I place you under arrest by order of the Amnish army."

"What!" said Nalia.

"You are a danger to yourself and your lands. You have not been thinking straight since your father died. It is for your own good!"

"Who are you to decide that! By what right!"

"I have every right. I am an officer in the army and a liaison to the nobility. It is my function to see that everyone is well in their proper station. You have demonstrated that you are under some strange influence, and I must act to protect you."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“This is madness!” said Nalia, pointing towards Rolanna. “Rolanna will stop you!”

“No, she will not. I act with full sanction of the military. Even if you were the type to attack guards, you would not survive the result. No, I am simply going to walk away, and there is nothing you can do. To attack would mean your death, as I am a respected officer.”

“I will find a way to stop you! This affects me personally now!” yelled Rolanna.

“Bleat as you must, but Nalia is under arrest,” said Isaea. “I will secret her away so that you and your ilk can no longer poison her mind. Don’t take it so hard; I am just better than you. Oh, feel free to lodge a complaint to the proper authority. That would be...me.”

Rolanna gathered the party together as quickly as possible, and explained what had happened.

“We must be calm, Rolanna,” said Jaheira after hearing the story. “Vengeance will only bring conflict with the guard. To help Nalia, we must prove that our cause is just... there is no other way.”

A guardsman came up to the gathered group. “Please Ma’am, I have something I wish to say, and none must overhear. I saw what happened, and I share your helplessness. Any complaints about Officer Roenal must first go *through* him, so you can imagine how many get through.”

“Have you something that can help? I am not in the mood for conversation,” said Rolanna.

“Of course, I shall be brief. You may feel better afterward though... I know a way to get back at Isaea, one that will hurt him deeply. Isaea is quite corrupt and more than willing to exercise his power. You are not monitored as we, so you can do something that I or another guard cannot. Look to the docks and a man named Barg. Examine him and what he does, and you are sure to see what I mean. You might also wish to pry into his personal records. They may reveal something of his fondness for gems. I did not tell you this...and I certainly did not say his records are in his home northwest of the main government building in the Government District.”

The guard looked around, seeing if any were paying undue notice. “Should anyone ask, I also wasn’t the one who arranged to have the door to Isaea’s estate unbarred. I cannot tell you more. They will question me if we are seen together. Remember—Isaea values his name over all else. Sully that and his life is in your hands. I must go. Think on what I’ve said, and bring anything you learn to Corgeig Axehand in the government district main building. He is Isaea’s commander.”

The party traveled first to the docks, looking for Barg. After searching the bars and wharfside streets for a while, they finally came upon a drunken sailor leaning against the sea wall.

“Yo ho ho for the lads now at rest! Yo ho ho so they say! We’ll drink for the lads that have sunk to their rest, and we’ll drink for the living just the same! Ooh, my head is barely on my legs today. Too much of the miller’s tales and his damn home brew.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Are you Barg? I am looking for a man named Barg,” said Rolanna.

“Let me think now...er...yes! Yes, that is my name. What can I do for you, friend?”

“You are not my friend. Tell me, who pays for your bottles?”

“My source is as true with me and my fellows as can be. Nothing under the table there. Simple business arrangement. Of course the whole matter is not viewed as such by the guards, but it’s an honorable trade amidst ourselves. Isaea foots the bill.” Barg hiccuped, and wiped his hand over his unshaven chin. “He’s a right gent, if a bit too much fop in the britches. Want me to set you up with a job?”

“What does the scoundrel pay you to do!” demanded Rolanna.

“Pirating, of course. Oh, the others’ll be all quiet about it, but,” he paused for another hiccup, “but I’m right proud. Keeps them merchants on their toes, hehe. Of course that Isaea is into other things too, but me and the boys don’t go in for slavery and such. Me, I’ve never talked to that slaver contact Dirth. Hey, what do you suppose they pay to get the guard to look the other way?”

“Well, I don’t...” started Rolanna.

“Must be thousands to overlook it,” said Barg, ignoring her. “Wow, that’s a lot. Anyway, I’ve never even talked to Dirth even though I spend hours in the Sea’s Bounty. Ain’t even far from here. Wanna drink?”

“You should think twice about your vocation. I’d hate to have to kill you for it.”

“Don’t go getting mad and all. Never harmed a soul in my life. Relieved a few of their purses, but never harmed ‘em. Ah, you wouldn’t understand.”

Since Barg was hardly a credible witness, Rolanna went in search of Dirth, who he had mentioned. Fortunately, he was in the Sea’s Bounty, as the helpful server readily pointed out.

“Move along now,” said Dirth when they approached. “I’m waiting for someone and I don’t need them scared off.”

“I wanted to speak with you. We have a mutual friend,” said Rolanna.

“I doubt this is so. Who is it that you claim you know?”

“Isaea Roenal. Certainly you know him.”

“Well, indeed I do know Isaea Roenal. I know him well enough that he would never tell our dealings to another person! Who are you! Some trussed-up guard trying to trick me? Trying to con yourself a slaver? Probably have the place surrounded, don’t you! Well, I won’t let this come to pass without a fight!”

Convinced he was about to be arrested and hung, he fought the party, seeking a death of his own choosing. He was obliged; on his body were documents incriminating to Roenal.

Next to investigate Isaea’s estate in the Government District. As the party walked, Anomen asked “Lady Jaheira, it seems quite strange to me that a woman of clearly noble

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

past would choose the life of an adventurer. What has brought you to this dangerous path?"

"It is a path of conscience. Some druids choose a contemplative lifestyle, but I sought a more active role in the furthering of nature's cause. And you? Did you become a priest of Torm only for honor and glory?"

"Of course not. The righteous path ever beckons. It is merely a dividend of the Order that a member can make a place for himself in this difficult world."

"I see. What place you choose to make for yourself remains to be seen."

"It does, but I assure you that you will not be disappointed."

To Rolanna, this indicated Jaheira was still not certain Anomen had firmly chosen the righteous path his knighthood implied. Rolanna was sure events would eventually leave her convinced.

At Roenal's estate, Jaheira sneaked inside backed up by Aerie to magically open any locks they might find. As the others were waiting outside, a passing nobleman commented in a loud voice, "I see they still allow you halflings to scurry about even in the wealthier portions of the city. Some things will never change, I suppose."

"I see they still allow you rude humans to crawl out of your holes," snorted Mazzy in an equally loud voice, "even here amongst us civilized peoples. I suppose some things will never change."

Shortly thereafter, Jaheira and Aerie emerged from the estate, having found more evidence. Rolanna thought they now had enough, and led the party to the nearby Government building.

Inside they looked up Corgeig Axehand, Isaea's superior. "Is there a reason you are here?" he asked. "You should make an appointment to request an audience, or speak directly with officer Roenal. He serves well as liaison to the nobility."

"You should stop and examine him a bit closer. He is not as he seems!" said Rolanna.

"So you are suggesting that one of my officers has behaved inappropriately? What is your evidence of this? What are your claims?"

"He imprisoned Nalia de'Arnise to force her submission to an arranged marriage."

"Serious charges indeed. However, I am familiar with the young woman in question, and she is hardly to be considered innocent by default. I also have it on authority of Isaea Roenal that Nalia was distraught after the death of her father, and that he has placed her under his care as a protective measure."

Corgeig sadly shook his head. "I am afraid it is his word against yours, and no matter what you think Nalia has said of her motivations, Isaea is the more credible claimant. I thank you for the concern you have shown, but in this instance it is misguided. Have you anything else I can help you with?"

"Isaea finances pirates. I have a witness to these events; a man named Barg," said Rolanna.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"A scathing claim, but not enough to pursue a man. Barg is a known scoundrel; his testimony is questionable. Have you other charges that cast further doubt?" asked Corgeig in a tone of bored interest.

"Isaea has possession of smuggled gems, a fact proven by his own records," added Rolanna.

"This may have been a simple clerical error," temporized Corgeig, examining the ledger he was handed. There was genuine uncertainty in his voice as he continued. "Combined with other charges it might warrant an inquiry, but alone it does not. Have you other charges to make?"

"Isaea Roenal deals in slaves. His insignia was used on slave documents," said Rolanna, handing over another document.

"Any hint of association with the slave trade can ruin a man, and your claims are all circumstantial, but there is enough here to warrant investigating officially. Remember that nothing is proven. Any number of factors could place his insignia there and not directly involve him. Whatever the truth is, we will be sure to expose it." Corgeig hefted the documents in his hands, as though their weight would aid in divining Isaea's guilt.

"It will take some time to fully investigate, but we should know tomorrow if an inquiry is warranted. I suggest you return then. If the allegations you have made are true we owe you a debt. Such bad apples are a very destructive influence on our effectiveness. If your allegations are false, however, you may find yourself indebted to Isaea. I will have Isaea summoned here and we will see what course must be taken."

As party left the building, a noblewoman just entering held out her hand to stop Aerie. "Oh...you look just like one of my maids, there, elf. Perhaps you would care to fill in for her? My wardrobe has just been ghastly to organize without her."

"I...I'm not a maid, even if I look like the one you know," said Aerie, with a lift of her chin adding "And I have the feeling that if you treated her nicer, she wouldn't have left."

Dusk was upon them as they headed for an inn. In the gathering gloom a nobleman asked Jaheira "You there, elven lass...you have the bearing of one of the lovely courtesans I have seen in this wealthy district. Might I be correct in that observation?"

"You certainly are not!" replied Jaheira hotly. "And perhaps you should think, sir, before you speak such insults so candidly."

The next day, just past noon, they returned to Corgeig Axehand. Isaea Roenal was with him, as well as Nalia.

"Rolanna, I have reviewed this matter extensively," said Corgeig.

"The indignity! I demand satisfaction!" protested Isaea.

"You have not been wronged here, Isaea," said Corgeig. "There has been no slander if the allegations are true."

"You believe the lies this ditch rat is spewing?" he said in disbelief. "Need I remind you how respected I am? I am Isaea Roenal."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“And if it turns out to be true that you have done what this person says, I will have you stripped of your rank, regardless of how ‘respected’ you may be,” was the reply.

“This is preposterous!”

“The matter is closed until further investigated! Nalia, you are free to go. Isaea, you are not to leave Athkatla.”

“An outrage!” Isaea continued to protest.

“Don’t whine, Isaea,” said Nalia. “It makes you seem even less of a man.”

“This is not over by any means!” yelled Isaea as they walked away.

“Thank you for your help,” said Nalia to Rolanna. “You have helped me again, and I am grateful.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“I will try to be less of a burden on the group in future. I...I trust you still want my company in the party?”

“Yes, join and we shall be on our way again,” said Rolanna reassuringly.

“Thank you, Rolanna, I needed to feel welcome.”

As they were leaving the government district a woman greeted Nalia. “Nalia! Nalia de’Arnise! It is so good to see you again! My dear son Filbert has been asking about you as of late...will you not come again and see the dear boy?”

“We had one luncheon together,” said Nalia with a sigh, “and he liked your attempts to mash us together even less than I. Besides that, he stepped on my toes.”

As they continued walking, Nalia laughed over the incident much more than was warranted, describing again and again to whoever would listen the look on the woman’s face after Nalia had complained about her son.

Anomen’s Fall

The party returned to the Seven Vales in Waukeen’s Promenade to rest. Anomen said to Rolanna, “We are going to rest here, are we? Then let us away to a secluded corner for a moment. I am eager to express something to you that I have been mulling over all day.”

“When I first met you, my lady,” said Anomen, staring into her eyes, “there are many things that went through my head. The possibility that you were not what you seemed, for instance. But what was most striking was the immediacy with which you afflicted my heart. I ignored it, denied it...until recently. And now it consumes my every waking moment. I am completely in love with you, Rolanna. I follow you into battle, trust your wisdom without reservation and would, without hesitation, give my life to protect you. There is so much chaos in your...in our...life, I find myself yearning for something that is permanent.”

Anomen hesitated, as if not able to come to terms with his ability to express himself in such tender terms. “I...would not ask you to promise anything you could not give, my

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

lady. There is death waiting around every corner for us, I know. All I ask, then, is that you accept me as your servant...that, in the days to come, we shall struggle to remain together... That we shall not abandon each other. If I continue to remain with you, my love...I could not bear our parting.

"If...you cannot see that for us...please...tell me now," he finished pleadingly, glancing away from Rolanna.

"I love you, too, Anomen," said Rolanna, holding his hands, "and I do not want us to part, either."

"That you say this...pleases me more than I can express," said Anomen, looking up. "Suddenly I have the desire to shout my love to the heavens, themselves. But I shall refrain...for now, at least. Let us return to the others, then, and spend the night together... and when we awake we shall continue on your quest."

The next day at breakfast the others avoided commenting on the fact that Anomen and Rolanna only had eyes for one another.

Instead, Nalia told the story of how a drunken guard had come up to her in the inn last night. She imitated his voice, slurring her own, "Heeey, baby! Ye knowsh what? I am the law!" Nalia with movements of her hands suggested his unsteady grab at her. Nalia had backed away, and gone up to her room. She finished by remarking to the others "This must be why thievery has never been a very hazardous practice in Athkatla."

As they left the inn, a messenger came towards them. "Wait, one approaches, and his appearance seems familiar to me," said Anomen.

"Sir Anomen, the former son of Lord Cor," said the messenger, "I have found you, at last. I have been looking for you for quite some time."

"Ah, yes...you are the messenger who brought me tidings of my sister," said Anomen. "'Tis not more grim news you bear, is it?"

"Aye, I believe so. I have a letter for you, here, from the Magistrate Bylanna Ianulin."

"A letter? You came all this way to deliver me a letter?" asked Anomen in disbelief.

"I did. The magistrate bade me to find you, wherever you were, so that her news might reach you before rumor did. I prithee, sir, take the letter and discharge me of my duty."

"Very well...give me your missive then, and be gone with my thanks. Now, as for this letter..."

Anomen scanned the contents, then crumbled the paper. "No...no, Helm's mercy, no!"

"What is it, Anomen, what's wrong?" asked Rolanna in concern.

"The...the Magistrate," he said in a choked voice, "she writes..." He straightened out the paper, and began to read.

"...it is my regret to inform you that your father, Lord Cor, was killed in an attempt to take vengeance of the merchant, Saerk, on his own..." He skipped further down.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"...your father was reacting to recent evidence uncovered proving that Saerk Farrah was, indeed, responsible for the hiring of the men that killed your sister, Moira. As a member of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart, I trust that you will not take vengeance into your own hands. The law will deal with Saerk Farrah..." Anomen paused, then continued.

"...I grieve for the loss of your family, and will do everything in my power to see that justice is done. I hope this letter finds you before rumor does. Sincerely, Bylanna Ianulin."

"That...that merchant was responsible for Moira's death, after all," said Anomen in a tone of shocked hurt, "and father...he took it upon himself to take vengeance. And...he is dead...all because of Saerk..."

"That's terrible, Anomen. I feel sorry for you," said Rolanna, attempting to put a hand on his shoulder.

"You...you feel sorry...nay!" he cried, shaking off Rolanna's hand. "I speak of Saerk's involvement in this disaster, and yet I forget about yours! It was you who pushed me not to avenge my sister when I had the chance! I abandoned my family when they needed me, and now they are destroyed! Destroyed completely! At the hands of an evil man who wished nothing other than to ruin my father!"

Anomen flushed with fury, and he shouted his next words at Rolanna. "I *told* you that Saerk was responsible, Rolanna! And...and you had me turn it over to the law! The law! Saerk has so much gold that the law will never touch him! Aah, I cannot believe I have done this! For the Order, for you! I turned my back on my family, on my duty...and look what has happened!"

"I never meant for this to happen, Anomen!" protested Rolanna.

"Aye, but it is happening anyway. I spoke vows to the Order, but they mean nothing, now, to the twisting of my heart. My drunken father...dead for doing what was my duty," said Anomen, calming a little. "You...you I can forgive, at least, my love. What you did...you meant well by me. But Saerk...Saerk I cannot forgive. The law will not provide justice on one as rich as he. We have a confrontation that is inevitable, he and I. I shirked my duty once, and I will not do it again. I...I must leave you, Rolanna, and do what I should have long ago. The Order and everything else be damned, Saerk will die when I find him. Fare...fare you well, then, my love. I...I am sorry to do this to you..."

Anomen hurried away, deaf to Rolanna's entreaties to stay, and talk about what should be done.

Rolanna wondered what she should do next. She considered going to the Order, but if Anomen would not listen to her, he would scarcely listen to them. What she needed to do was search out Anomen and talk to him again.

As she considered where he might be, a dark premonition settled over her. Anomen was hot-tempered, and he had talked of vengeance. What if he headed for Saerk's house immediately, looking for blood?

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna and the others left for the Bridge District. Upon reaching Saerk's house, the front door was ajar. With knotted insides, Rolanna reached out to open the door. Within, two of the house guards lay dead.

The party hurried up to the second floor, passing another corpse on the stairs. They reached the head of the stairs. Across a large room from them, Anomen confronted Saerk over the bodies of two more guards.

"Saerk! It is I, Anomen Delryn, son of Lord Cor and brother of Moira! You will pay for your crimes against my family!"

"Hah! You shall die like a mewling ass, then, just as your father did!" replied Saerk.

"I am no miserable drunk, fool. Nor am I an innocent girl," said Anomen in a deadly voice. "By all that is holy you shall pay for what you have done with your life!"

"I see that you are no paladin of the Order after all. Just as I suspected!" sneered Saerk. "A brutish lout who cannot handle the competition, just as your father was!"

"Speak not of my father! And I will not sit idly by and watch as you bribe and cajole your way into...into," Anomen suddenly faltered, noticing his audience. "What? Rolanna?! What are you doing here?!"

"I came to stop you from doing this," said Rolanna.

"Why, my love?! Tell me why this man should not die for what he has done?!" demanded Anomen.

Thoughts rapidly flashed through Rolanna's mind, arguments, entreaties. But she found she didn't have any clever phrase, no trick to stop Anomen. She only had the truth of her feelings.

"Because I love you and I don't want you to do this to yourself!"

"I love you, too...but 'tis already done. My family is dead and I am destroyed," said Anomen, unshed tears brightening his eyes. "I am sorry...but my black heart demands nothing less than this demon's death!"

Anomen turned to Saerk, who faced him with his own blade drawn. But Saerk did not face an untrained drunk, but a fully armored knight. A few passes while Rolanna watched helplessly and Saerk lay dead.

"It is done. The murderer of my father and my sister is dead," said Anomen staring down at the corpse. He looked at the party, "Rolanna...I do truly love you, as I have said so many times before. But it is not enough to assuage my dark heart. I...I have ruined myself in the Order. There is no place for me there, anymore. I...I am too much my father's son. I must go away, Rolanna. I must go somewhere into seclusion and see if I can live with this hate...try to...to quench it. But I cannot stay with you. I am sorry, my love. But there is no other way. Farewell..."

Rolanna stood stunned, her life shattered. Her halfling companion drew her sword and started forward, with a most un-Mazzy like curse. However, one glance up at Rolanna's anguished face stopped her.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna, motionless, watched Anomen leave via a side door, which she later learned led to a roof exit. Eventually, she led the others downstairs and into the street. She was disgusted with herself. She felt she should have done something, run after Anomen, rather than standing frozen like a raw recruit. If she had caught up with Anomen, though, she wasn't sure if she would have attempted to take him in for justice, which would have resulted in his death one way or another, or collapsed in tearful entreaties to let her join him, that somehow everything could be made right.

Trouble with Druids

Rolanna decided she wanted to leave the city for a while, to go somewhere that every sight would not remind her of Anomen. She recalled the request for help she had received from the town of Trademeet. She decided to travel to the town; before then, she would seek out the ranger Valygar in the Umar Hills.

When they found Valygar in his cabin, he was not happy to see them.

"Ho there! More Cowled ones or their servants, no doubt," he suspiciously greeted them. "By the gods, I swear you'll not live to take me to that damnable sphere!"

"I'm here on my own," replied Rolanna, "so before you jump to conclusions I would know your name."

"My name? My name is Valygar Corthala. I thought you knew this. You do not serve the wizards? Then I have hidden myself so desperately only to be set upon by chance? Ah, this is misfortune, indeed."

"You might still be able to help me," he continued more hopefully. "A planar sphere appeared suddenly in the slums of Athkatla several weeks ago, which you may have seen. My ancestor, the necromancer Lavok, built that sphere and disappeared with it over five centuries ago. It has not been seen since, until its reappearance. I have no desire to meet my ancestor, and even less desire to help the Cowled Wizards, who seem certain that my body is the only key to the sphere...alive or no. They tried to force my co-operation when I refused to aid them, and I had hidden myself away as a result. I thought I had been successful, as well, until you came."

"Who are you that I should believe?" asked Rolanna. "How do I know that you are not lying to me?"

"I cannot prove the truth of my words, my Lady, but compare my motivations to those of the wizards. And there is more. I am the last of the Corthala line. That may mean little to you, but it means plenty to Lavok. When Lavok left Athkatla in the sphere, he was already many centuries old. Lavok extended his life by stealing the bodies of blood relations. If he yet lives, you can imagine my concern. This is also why my blood may allow entrance to the sphere."

"I see. What do you propose we do?"

"My proposal is that we return to the city and enter the sphere. That way, I will know if Lavok lives. If he does, we can exterminate his ghoulish existence once and for all. You are more than welcome to whatever lies within the sphere, such as magical treasure and anything else of Lavok's. None of it interests me in the slightest."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna thought the party could use the fighting and wilderness skills of a ranger. She had also formed a good impression of Valygar. She agreed to his request to join her companions, and that they would investigate the Planar Sphere when time permitted.

“Most excellent!” replied Valygar. “My family swore an oath long ago to kill Lavok should he ever reappear, and perhaps I shall be able to fulfill it. My heartfelt thanks at your offer of aid.”

Rolanna gave him the standard warning about joining with her, that she was seeking to free her friend Imoen.

“There is strength in numbers with you,” said Valygar. “And if you wish to have my help in exacting a toll against the Cowled Wizards that stand in your way, you’ll hear no complaint from me. Let us be moving, then. More than likely the Cowled Wizards will hear of my movements...and the fact that you accompany me...soon enough. We shall have to be ready.”

They traveled on towards Trademeet. As they walked Jaheira remarked, “You scan the horizon as a hawk, Valygar, though with such an unnatural threat in your past I cannot say I blame you.”

“Unnatural...yes,” said Valygar. “I struggle to understand the differences in magic that have been presented to me. How do you feel about it, Jaheira? Are they not all cut of the same vile shroud?”

“Magic takes many forms, and only some dare circumvent the cycle of death. It is a power that draws from all things, and need not be feared for simply being.”

“I suppose not, though there is ample to fear in those that wield it.”

When the group reached Trademeet, they almost immediately found themselves helping the town militia fight off an attack of wild animals. Jaheira found this especially troubling, and they hurried to the Mayor’s offices to find out of what help they could be.

They first talked to Guildmistress Busya. She assumed they were either traders, or had come to purchase supplies. “You are a stranger to this town, are you not? I am surprised you were allowed to come within the walls. You will find yourself unwelcome here. And, indeed...if you came to Trademeet to take advantage of our excellent markets, then you have come in vain. Between the druids and...other problems...there is nothing to purchase here.”

They next sought out the High Merchant Logan Coprith. His greeting was friendly enough, unlike that of the citizens of Trademeet. “Hail, good people, I welcome you to Trademeet. Mind not the worried stares of our citizens while you are here. Strangers are not easily trusted these days. Yours is a decent face however, and I bear you no ill will. My name is Lord Logan Coprith, and I am the High Merchant of this place.”

“May I ask why you are High Merchant? You look more used to armor than finances.”

“I spent much of my career in the military, but other duties called me here. My family was influential and it fell to them to provide a mayor for Trademeet. Perhaps

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

finances are not my best skill, but the guard has benefited from my discipline and I have improved security. There is only so much that can be done, however.”

“Trademeet has been here for generations, but now we are harassed from the strangest of sources. It has been a very difficult time for the local merchants. The very land is against us. Animals attack, and even the foliage strangles. It began subtle, but now we suspect a dark mind behind it. Until recently we did not know where to place blame, but now the people have found a target. The last group attacked saw several figures directing the chaos. Druids, belonging to a group that has long been peaceful. The people apparently captured one. Had I not locked him up they would have quartered him in the street.”

“And has he confessed, or have the people condemned him for being a druid?” asked Rolanna.

“That is my dilemma. He claims he is here to investigate the druids, and I believe him. Unfortunately many of our citizens already believe him guilty. Nothing less than a public burning will satisfy an angry mob. This druid remains behind bars as much for his own protection as anything else. What I would have you do is escort him to his task, or see to it yourselves, whichever you prefer. I would seem to be collaborating if my men or I were to help him, and alone he may not make it out of town. Will you help?”

“I will speak with him and see if I can help. If there is anything I can do, I will do it.”

“I thank you. I will allow you to pass so you might speak with him. He may leave under promise of your care. Keep me apprised of the situation.”

The building had a few cells below ground. In one, they found the druid Coprith had mentioned. “Hello and well to you,” greeted the druid. “I am Cernd, though my identity is surely no secret after the fuss I have caused here. You look pleasant enough; are you friends of that charming Lord Coprith? I’ve made very few friends among the merchants.”

“Coprith sent me, but I don’t trust you,” said Rolanna. “What exactly are you trying to do here?”

“Coprith chose well: caution will win the day. I will endeavor to tell you what I know, but I did not have long to gather information. I am Cernd, as I said, sent from the north to investigate why the druid order of this region has severed its ties with the traditional hierarchy. It is not unheard of, but the attacks have me worried. It can only lead to greater evils; these people will eventually strike out as an animal cornered.”

“Yes, I see you have a druid with you,” he continued, then stopped while Jaheira introduced herself. “Jaheira, is it?” he repeated. “She will also be concerned, for she will know the danger of balance lost. I know many druids in this region and they would not support such actions without due cause. I suspect that there has been a change in leadership here. It is the duty of any druid to find this new leader and ascertain if this is for the best of nature. The attacks on the merchants only serve to alarm me. I might succeed alone, but I would much rather have the backing of a group, one that will also benefit from my service. Are you up for the task?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I will help as best I can, but I do not wish any more traveling companions," replied Rolanna. She still didn't fully trust Cernd. More importantly, she already had Jaheira, who she was sure was fully able to judge any druidic matters that came before the party.

"You adopt his cause but not his company?" said Jaheira. "As you wish, but I will make certain the matter is given due attention in his absence."

"Do hurry," said Cernd. "What transpires there will regrettably affect others outside the order." He gave directions to Rolanna so she would be able to find the druids' grove.

As the party neared the location of the druidic grove, a druid stepped into the party's path.

"I give you fair warning, interlopers," he addressed them, "that this area is under the protection of the druids of Tethir, and if you do not leave you will face nature's wrath!"

"This is not as it should be," replied Rolanna. "What has changed here to cause this hostility? Cernd said it has not always been like this."

"You have spoken with Cernd?" said the druid, his manner softening. "I had hoped he or another would be sent to help. He serves the Grand Druid in the north. He will know what to do with this Faldorn. She has seduced quite a few with her Shadow Druid wiles. Perhaps he could challenge her...she seems subject to the old ways even as she poisons our intentions. I must go. I cannot be seen with outsiders. Be careful, you will find few people to help you." Rolanna had met a druid named Faldorn in the north; time would tell if this were the same person.

They continued onwards, fighting several battles against local creatures. After the first battle, Valygar displayed all the distrust of magic so common among the human inhabitants of Amn. He had been shocked that Nalia, and especially little Aerie, handled magical energy so casually.

"I cannot understand it, Aerie," said Valygar. "Why this magic...why from you, of all people? You are too innocent and good to practice such things."

"But...but it is who I am, it is how Quayle taught me," replied Aerie, quite confused.

"I know, I know, but...magic corrupts. The very power of magic twists a mage's soul a little each day. There's always one more spell to learn or cast. Before you know it you've spent your life in the library, having never seen the light of day, never truly lived. Believe me, I know this only too well."

"But that is how I was in the circus when I was kept in a—a cage. It was horrible, Valygar, but Quayle came and healed me...healed my sores where... He healed where my wings had come off... He taught...he taught me magic, and it freed me. It's not spells that change people. Good people do good things..."

"I hope you're right, Aerie. For your sake and mine," replied Valygar, clearly not convinced.

They also encountered evidence that more druids did not support Faldorn. A group of half-a-dozen druids briefly fought the group, before abruptly halting. They declared they had fought only to satisfy Faldorn's command, and would now return to the woods for their real work of maintaining the balance.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Another combat with more beasts of the forest. As chance would have it, Jaheira was poorly placed when the creatures attacked, and was severely hurt before the others could support her.

“My injuries sting, but I think it mostly my pride that hurts,” said Jaheira ruefully after the battle. “But we did well enough in our last battle, did we not? I’ll wager we may outlive the season if we are careful.”

“That we might, though this was surely but a small scuffle,” said Mazzy. “Our battles will loom larger as we garner more enemies.”

“You do not seem worried at this prospect.”

“Our virtue will guide the way. We shall not falter.”

As they approached a circle of columns before a cave mouth that Rolanna hoped was the base of the druids, Cernd stepped from among the trees.

“Your investigations have been fruitful?” asked Cernd. “Let us examine them for possible solutions to this situation. Speak what you have learned of the local druids. How are they tainted?”

Rolanna was sure he already knew the answer, only testing if she knew. In any case, she obediently answered, “A woman named Faldorn has taken over. She is a Shadow Druid at heart.”

“Then it is as I feared. Shadow Druid violence is a disgrace to nature, and now that they have a hand in this area they will not stop their advance. Do you know of them? They have forsaken balance in favor of militant action. They believe they follow the Earthmother but blood is not fitting tribute. This must be stopped before forces from Trademeet seek revenge. The toll on the wood and the people alike will be horrendous. We must issue a challenge on behalf of the virtuous. Unfortunately, only one attuned with the ways of the druids will be able to face Faldorn. It is doubtful she will leave the sanctity of the druid grove, and if she has surrounded herself with its protective magics she will be nearly invulnerable. Such dark rituals are frowned upon, but Shadow Druids stop at nothing. We have but one option: she can be challenged, but only a druid can do it.”

Rolanna could think of someone who would challenge, in fact, someone who would insist on challenging. “Jaheira could challenge her. She is a very determined servant of nature.”

“Yes, I think she would be honored, as any druid should be. Go to Faldorn to challenge. All will become clear after that. Do you wish me to come as well?”

“No, we will do this on our own.”

“Very well. I await here in the dark for the dawn to rise. Go quickly.”

They defeated a group of Faldorn’s supporters outside the cave. During the battle Valygar was slightly wounded.

“Oh, Valygar! You’ve been wounded!” cried Mazzy when she saw what had happened.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Tis but a flesh wound, Mistress Mazzy," he replied.

"To the contrary, it is a serious wound indeed," she disagreed. "We must attend to it immediately."

"You are very kind, Mazzy."

"Truly, I should never have allowed you into harm's way. Worry not, friend Valygar, we shall have you healed in no time."

"I am flattered by your concern and I thank you," Valygar said, somewhat puzzled. "We shall watch over each other, for that is truly the task of friends."

"I am honor-bound to protect you, Squire Valygar," replied Mazzy seriously, although the others wondered when Valygar had become her squire. "I will not be derelict in that duty again."

They entered the cave to confront the shadow druid Faldorn. Rolanna realized it was the same druid she had previously met up north. At that time, Faldorn had vowed that one day she and Jaheira would settle their differences.

"Well, what have we here?" asked Faldorn contemptuously when they appeared. "Some fool come to stop the righteous force of nature? Laughable. Say what you must and then we shall purge the earth of your filth."

"We have questions about the druids," said Rolanna. "This is close to the heart of Jaheira, and she demands an answer."

"A name I remember for some reason, though not one I fear. Do you make claim to know better than Faldorn what should be done here?"

"I make claim that you are an affront to all nature," said Jaheira. "You are a disruption that will not be allowed, and I will fight with the power of my faith and conviction."

"I am stronger than ever with the aid of this grove. No harm can come to me here. Such bonding is frowned upon as it drains from the earth, but the mother feeds me that I might fight for her!"

"The rituals still govern this place!" said Rolanna as she had been coached. "As a druid it is Jaheira's right to challenge you!"

"You will accept this challenge and we will proceed!" added Jaheira. "I will not have this place remain in your 'care'! By the great mother, you will not leave the duel alive!"

"You are mistaken, of course. I revel in the combat of the rituals, and I welcome the chance to end your miserable existence. Come, to your death!"

Rolanna was not happy about Jaheira risking her life, especially when there was no way she could help her. She did resolve, however, to recover her body if she fell so she could be resurrected, whatever the other druids' wishes in the matter.

Faldorn may have had the greater strength due to her connection to the earth, but Jaheira was canny in the use of druidic magic, having honed her abilities through many years of adventuring. Jaheira emerged victorious from the contest; Faldorn lay dead.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“The scourge has been purged,” said Cernd after the contest was over. “The deed is done, for even now the land sighs relief. This has been a great service to nature and she shall not forget. Now to repair the land after the ritual that Faldorn performed. Her invulnerability was at great cost; her loss will cause the land to suffer immeasurably. Verthan will serve as challenge master and Great Druid until all the healing is done. His reverence for the land will not allow him to be corrupted. When the scars are healed things will be as they were...or very nearly. A new Great Druid will need to be chosen. More turmoil ahead, but for now we can rest.”

“I stand as Challenge Master,” said Master Verthan, “and all that seek ascension in the druidic order can come to me. And for you, I must formalize our thanks. For your bravery I present you with the Staff of Thunder and Lightning. Use it with wisdom and respect.”

Rolanna and the others returned to Trademeet. As they wended their way among the carts and wagons of travelers stranded at the town they came to an encampment of Rom.

One Rom called out to the travelers, “I greet you, strangers, on behalf of my family and in accordance with Rom tradition. I am Kveroslava, the mother of this family and its heart. If you wish, I can tell you something of your place in the future. A mere 10 gp, should you desire the benefit of my gift of insight.”

Mazzy, intrigued, agreed. “Certainly. 10 gp it is.”

“As you wish,” Kveroslava replied. “Come and sit beside me, good woman, and I shall take ahold of your hand. Close your eyes and let Kveroslava feel your aura... You seek a rare bond with your goddess, child. Virtue and honor you hold close to your heart. Cherish them, for they will protect you in the end.”

“I...see. Well spoken, gypsy woman,” said Mazzy. “It is almost as if Arvoreen, herself, were perched on your shoulder...”

Mazzy entreated Rolanna to let the woman look at her hand. With misgivings, Rolanna let the woman tell her fortune.

“You are a strong woman,” said Kveroslava. “You have powerful blood and a...a destiny that shines so brightly. It is...it is the blood of a god that flows in you... But you are not alone...there is another. Another who calls to you for help...and I see a man, a dark man whose life has been taken from him... I see this other...she screams! She screams! There is a beast...a beast of terrible power! And...a dark man...the Exile. He smiles! He smiles! I...I...no! No more! P-please forgive me, good woman. Your path has overwhelmed my limited gifts. You...frighten me. I wish you...good fortune.”

Mazzy regretted her suggestion, for the fortune telling caused Rolanna to brood over dark memories. Even in the celebrations that were to follow, although Rolanna tried to act as though nothing was wrong, the hint of black feelings was behind everything she said and did.

They stopped in a local tavern for a meal before reporting to Lord Coprith. Mazzy tarried outside to say hello to several friends among the townsfolk. Inside, a tavern patron came up to them and asked “You look familiar...do you know Mazzy Fentan? She’s a famous adventurer from here in town. I think maybe she’s mentioned you.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Another tavern patron added, "Mazzy Fentan is our best adventuress...a real fighter, and that's something...for a halfling. She grew up here, you know."

When Mazzy joined them, the others twitted her that within a week the townsfolk would be telling visitors that Mazzy Fentan had solved the druid attacks by herself. Rolanna remained silent during these exchanges, thinking her own thoughts.

When they returned to the mayor's office, Guildmistress Busya greeted them. "Ah! You are the hero who has saved us from the druids, yes? Already, things have begun to be restored to normal once again in our town. I, myself, have much to do at the moment. The caravans must be contacted and brought in immediately to give us the supplies we need. Thank you once again."

In High Merchant Logan Coprith's office he told them, "We are in your debt for whatever you did. I thank you, and Trademeet thanks you. Not only have the attacks stopped but we have received reparations from the remaining druids. I trust the Guildmistress showered you with rewards...and if not, she should! I, for one, think it is high time to give you the hero's welcome you deserve!"

Lord Coprith rapidly organized a meeting of the town's leading citizens. He addressed the assembled crowd.

"Citizens of Trademeet! We are gathered here today to honor the heroes of our small town, led by the Lady Rolanna. They have stopped the assault of nature upon us by removing the evil druid that had taken over our local grove! You are once again free to walk the streets of Trademeet, and new caravans have already been hired to bring supplies to our local merchants. It is good to know that even though we do not have our beloved Waukeen looking out for us, we still have people like this who we can turn to in a time of need! From this day forth, I declare that these companions be known as the Heroes of Trademeet! Their likenesses shall be displayed on the fountain forever more!"

The crowd clapped, and cries of "Bravo! Bravo!" and "You have saved us all!" were yelled from among the assembled guests.

"You will always be welcome here," continued Lord Coprith. "Obviously, you are deserving of your glowing reputation as a true hero. May the gods smile on your journeys. Don't forget to go and see the statues that have been conjured in your image. They're in the center of town at the fountain."

The party indeed walked to see their images located in the town's central square. Mazzy was especially embarrassed, a statue of her now a permanent part of her hometown. Rolanna couldn't help but feel she herself didn't deserve so much honor, having done nothing that any competent band of adventurers could have accomplished.

As they started the long walk back to Athkatla, Valygar interrupted Rolanna's thoughts by asking, "Tell me...what kind of family did you have?"

"Why do you ask?" said Rolanna.

"Family reveals much. Mine was plagued by our legacy; we have nearly destroyed ourselves. Others are not so extreme, and I am always curious enough to wonder."

"I was raised by Gorion, in Candlekeep. He is the only father I have known."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I see. He is a good man, then?"

"A very good man. He died, though...killed by Sarevok while protecting me many months ago."

"Ah, he's dead, then? My condolences. 'Tis hard to be without your father."

"Yes, I miss him quite a lot."

"I miss my father too, though he was taken from me years before his actual death. He was versed in the ways of the wilderness and gifted with a merry laugh. He showed me the ways of the forest and tried to woo my mother away from her magical studies, but she ignored both of us more and more as her obsession grew. My father grew ill and my mother realized too late what she had missed."

They walked in silence for a while, each with pleasant remembrances of their fathers. After a while, Valygar continued the conversation.

"Her magical efforts to sustain him made him undead, a vile mimic of what my father was. She grew obsessed with him, and with her own power, eventually joining him in his unliving existence. I was forced to slay them both to put them at rest. But I must sound like a mewling child. Enough, Rolanna...let us continue on our travels."

As night closed in, Mazzy suddenly called out, "Goodman Valygar! I tire. When we stop to rest, would you please prepare my bedroll and fetch extra wood for the fire. There seems to be a chill in the air."

"Um...as the lady wishes," said Valygar, puzzled but too polite to protest.

"My equipment needs a measure of cleaning as well," said Mazzy. "When you are through with your own preparations, would you see to this?"

"Mazzy, I have honored your requests as any gentleman would, but this is too much."

"I did not intend to burden. Indeed, I thought the role would flatter. Every knight needs a squire; I had hoped you would be honored."

"Well, I suppose I am in a way," admitted Valygar reluctantly, "but I wasn't aware that I had been chosen."

"Perhaps I should have made a formal request, but..." Mazzy trailed off, for once at a loss for words. She tried again, "I am new to this as well... There is none other more fit to be my squire. You are a gentleman...a friend."

"It's not that I am not flattered, Mazzy, but it's just that..." began Valygar doubtfully.

"Have I erred? Just what?" asked Mazzy anxiously.

Valygar looked at Mazzy's hopeful face, made a small, resigned gesture with his hand and replied "Ah...nothing. Nothing at all..." When camp was made a short time later he prepared her bedroll and saw to her equipment without further comment.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The Planar Sphere

Rolanna felt somewhat guilty over seeking Valygar out and including him in the party, as though in some way the party needed at least one male member with Anomen's absence. She therefore decided to fulfill Valygar's request as soon as they returned to the city, and investigate the planar sphere in the slums.

On Jahiera's suggestion, they first went to the government district to confront Tolgerias. This was to determine if in fact his interest in the party had been as a means to secure Valygar and entry into the sphere. As soon as he saw Valygar with them, he confirmed this suspicion, saying, "So...the fool shows his face amongst us. And he has allies, I see. So be it. The Cowled Wizards shall have their way whether you like it or not, ranger!" He cast a spell, disappearing from sight.

They walked to the slums. As soon as Valygar saw the sphere, he commented "Yes...this is it, this is the planar sphere here. We should climb the stairs and find some manner of entrance. If I am right, my blood, my presence should open the sphere..."

Valygar was proved right; with him in the party, there was no trouble entering the sphere.

The party found they could access a few outer rooms inside the sphere, but that a door leading further into the interior would not open. A control panel next to the door was suggestive, but they were reduced to experimentation. Nalia inserted a lever in the panel and proceeded to pull it. The lights went out for a few moments, then the ship rumbled. The party realized they must have initiated planar travel. The inner door would open, but now the outer door remained firmly closed.

Passing through the now open inner door, the party encountered three fully armored knights, unfamiliar heraldic symbols on their shields. They were prepared for defense, the one woman stepping forward to address the party as she saw they were not monsters.

"Stranger, identify yourself before you come any closer," said the woman.

"Rolanna. It appears that I am as trapped as you and your companions."

"Trapped indeed. I am Reyna. Myself and my fellow Knights of Solamnia, Onvo and Anca have been imprisoned in this strange dungeon for a long time."

"Knights of Solamnia?" asked Rolanna. She had never heard of a land in Faerun by that name. Looking around at her companions, she saw the same puzzlement.

"We are the knights of honor and good upon Ansalon, a world far removed from this one."

"Are there any traps up ahead that I should be wary of?"

"Traps no, but in the dark rooms of this place I have witnessed horrors. These terrors I am loathe to discuss, but if it helps your cause then I shall. When we first arrived here, my fellow Knights and I thought to explore our new surroundings. I wish we hadn't. To the west we were ambushed by small creatures, children in size but not in appetite. We were hard pressed to battle our way out of the trap."

"Perhaps they were halflings?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Halflings? If halflings seek to rip and rend the flesh from your body, to swallow your flesh and suck the marrow from your bones, then halflings they may be. You must be careful if you encounter them. They are crafty and the worthy foe of any Knight. Fare thee well.” Hearing this, Rolanna was glad Mazzy hadn't been the first one through the door.

They pushed on, finding the “halflings” the Knights of Solamnia had mentioned. They killed several that attacked without warning. A short walk forward, a bloodied halfling sat, chewing on a human leg bone still partially covered by dirty leather armor. It looked up, smiled, and said, “More to feast!” before running off. Rolanna wasn't sure what the knights of Solamnia did for food, but evidently these creatures fed on anything that was sucked from its own plane by the sphere's passing.

After one more vicious encounter, they had defeated all the “halflings,” or at least any remaining had learned caution. After several other encounters with creatures that had slipped in from various planes, they reached the main control room, where Lavok awaited them

“You!” yelled Lavok in rage. “You are the ones who have caused the sphere to travel once again! You fools! I was close to escaping!”

“Lavok!” yelled Valygar, equally enraged.

“You will die, mortals! You and your kind have stood in my way for far too long!”

“You will not pass!” replied Valygar. “I shall fulfill my family's vow and end your hideous life once and for all!”

“You understand nothing, mortal! I am not who you seek...this be merely the body! And your intrusion has caused the sphere to leap back to my own dimension! I have been denied the material plane! I will have my revenge!”

Lavok but not Lavok? Such philosophical questions had to wait while the party desperately countered the magic cast by the figure before them. With Nalia and Aerie breaching the creature's defenses and the others charging, led by Valygar, they felled the creature.

As they stood around the fallen foe, he turned a bewildered face up at them, devoid of rage or hate. “Wh-where am I?” he asked. “The...the force that possessed me is...is gone?”

“What is this, some manner of trick?” asked Valygar suspiciously, preparing his weapon to deliver the deathblow.

“Who might you be? I...I can barely see you...” was the reply.

“I am your descendant, Lavok. I am Valygar Corthala, and I will not allow you to take my body to extend your life. Since you yet live, I shall end it now!”

Lavok seemed unconcerned at Valygar's threat. “Corthala...yes, I remember this now. My family. Oh, I am dying, Valygar Corthala, of that you can be certain. Nothing would bring me greater relief.”

“Eh?” said Valygar. “I warn you, necromancer, I shall not be fooled!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Nor do I intend to fool you, young one. I have been imprisoned in my own mind by that strange force for half an eternity. Death would be a blessing.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you are not evil? That you are not the sorcerer who preyed upon his own family as a ghoul would, whose legacy has haunted my family always?”

“No, no, I am he. I am all those things that you have said and more. I have spent half an eternity keeping that force from prying the secrets of the sphere from my mind. I could not unleash it upon...my home. Thank you for ending its existence.”

“And this should redeem you for all you have done? I say it is a fitting punishment!”

“Indeed it is. I have had years of pain and anguish to consider my sins. I can offer to you nothing other than my sorrow, Valygar, if I have brought you pain.”

Valygar tried to choke out words, but he was so surprised by what Lavok had said that he couldn't decide which of his many questions to ask. Lavok resumed speaking after a moment.

“If I could call it all back... Ah...if I could go back and convince the man I once was that the sphere was a mission of pride doomed to failure. But I cannot. Death shall release me soon enough from my overlong life. I would ask one thing of you, Valygar Corthala, although I know you have no reason to grant it to me.”

“I...I don't...what would you ask of me?”

“I would wish to see the sky of my homeworld one final time. To be at peace, knowing that I have died in the place I was born so long ago. I am dying...and I wish to die there. Under my own sun. In return...in return I shall tell you how to return the sphere to our own plane. I...I am glad that you entered the sphere when you did. I was able to keep from the force...the fact that the sphere had a defense against intrusion. It would automatically travel to another plane... A trap...that would allow me to deal with the intruders...at will. But...that was another time. Bring me home, Valygar Corthala, and I will tell you how...”

“This...this is not a trick?”

“It is no trick, my descendant. I have no strength left for tricks, nor any desire. I humbly beg it of you.”

“You are not the man I expected, Lavok. I...I shall do as you ask.”

“Very well. The sphere...the sphere is powered by the heart of a powerful demon. Our last trip, now, would have depleted the power source of the last heart the sphere had... You need to go out into the plane...and acquire the heart of another demon. I... know not how, but you must... Bring the heart to the engine room of the sphere and place it inside the golem there...and I will preset the controls while you are gone. But go quickly, Valygar...there are things that will stir in the planes and take notice of the sphere now that it is here! Go! And I...will try to hang on long enough...”

They exited the sphere, finding themselves in a land like nothing they had experienced before. They quickly found, or more literally stumbled, upon a demon. After a short battle, they dispatched the creature, taking its heart back to the sphere.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

They followed a passage they had not traveled before, heading for the engine room Lavok had mentioned. Opening the door at the passage's end, they found in the room beyond a familiar figure, Tolgerias, along with a compatriot. Tolgerias had evidently followed them inside the sphere. The fact that Tolgerias was now trapped on another plane like the party did not seem to be uppermost in his mind.

"Fools! Did you believe that you could betray the Cowled Wizards with impunity?!" stormed Tolgerias at them. "Now you will be rewarded with nothing but death and Valygar will be ours!"

"Never! You shall never have me and you shall never have your precious sphere!" retorted Valygar.

"Idiot! You should have run much further! We have followed through the doors you opened, using you as we saw fit! Now suffer our wrath!"

Tolgerias and his companion were defeated, opening the path to the engine room. Once in the room, Nalia and Jaheira were able to determine how the demon's heart should be attached to the engine. With a shudder, the sphere transited planes again. The party hoped Lavok had correctly set the coordinates so they now were in Faerun.

They returned to the control room. Lavok stated, "We...we are returned to our own plane. Please...please, stranger. As per our bargain...let me see my sun one last time..."

"Aye, I will do as you ask," replied Rolanna.

"If...if you could but carry me, my strength has all but fled...my last moments...are upon me..."

They carried Lavok outside the sphere, the light of the noon sun shining on his face. The Knights of Solamnia accompanied them outside as well.

"Ah, it is the sky, after all," said Lavok, "I had forgotten how it looked after so long. I thank you...I...I wish..."

"He is dead," said Valygar. "Lavok the necromancer is finally dead. I can scarce believe it. My family's vow has been fulfilled, and I am now safe, and yet I feel no satisfaction. I had no idea that it would be like this. Could he actually have been redeemed? After all that time? Did he actually fight that demon to prevent it from escaping the sphere? If you had asked me such a question even a day ago, I would have answered that such redemption was impossible. Now I am not so sure."

"I think, perhaps, that I do not know all that I think I do. I have not seen as much of the world as I thought I did. A disturbing realization. I would continue to travel with you, if you would allow me. If there is so much I am not aware of, I must discover it. Will you have me? "

"I would be glad to have you in my company, Valygar," replied Rolanna.

"My thanks, Rolanna. I will not fail you."

Reyna asked for the Knights of Solamnia, "Have you good tidings for us?"

"We are returned to my world," said Rolanna, "but this sphere can no longer travel between the planes."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Then we are trapped here,” said Reyna. “As Knights of Solamnia we shall bear this with good grace. We will travel your world and lend our swords and our souls to the cause of the right. Perhaps we may meet again.”

Rolanna suggested they present themselves to the Order of the Most Radiant Heart. She thought they might find a home there; perhaps someday they would be able to return to their home plane. The knights, hearing the tale of Lavok, agreed to see to his burial. With mutual good wishes the party and the knights parted.

As the party walked away from the sphere, hoping to break their fast at the Copper Coronet, Mazzy said to Valygar, “I have been thinking, squire Valygar. Once this is all over, perhaps Waterdeep would be a good place for us to travel.”

Valygar sighed, then patiently said, “I am not your squire, Mazzy.”

“I’ve heard many fine things about the city,” said Mazzy, ignoring his comment, “and I would like to see it at least once. We can stop at Dragonspear on the way.”

“Why would you want to go to Waterdeep?” argued Valygar. “It’s a crowded, dirty place filled to the walls with humanity. I can’t think of anything less appealing.”

“Well, have you ever been there?” asked Mazzy.

“Well, no, but—” Valygar admitted.

“Then there’s no harm in seeing it at least once, is there?” insisted Mazzy.

“I’ve no intention of setting foot inside the place, Mazzy,” said Valygar. “And I’ve given no thought as to where I will go once this is done.”

“But...that’s not how a squire should talk...” Mazzy said, then after a moment’s hesitation, added in a quieter voice, “not to a real knight...”

Mazzy had a pleading look in her eyes that Valygar had come to recognize. He cast a resigned look at the other party members, then began, “Mazzy, I...” he paused, staring at her, then sighed again. “Very well, if you wish to go to Waterdeep I will at least accompany you part of the way...though I would prefer to travel to Neverwinter.”

“A fair trade!” said Mazzy, her spirits instantly revitalized. “Thank...thank you Valygar. I am lucky to have your aid.”

When they reached the Copper Coronet, the bartender, Bernard, said “Jaheira! You shouldn’t be showin’ your face around where it ain’t safe. Not that you ain’t safe in my sight but...”

“But...what?” asked Jaheira.

“But I’m on good terms with Harpers and I don’t want that to change. Word’s got around about what happened. Jaheira...it ain’t true, is it?”

“Not the way they tell it, Bernard. You know me, so trust in what I do.”

“Good enough fer me. Business as usual between you and me then.”

Rolanna was pained to be reminded of how much Jaheira had sacrificed because of her. After eating a meal, since it was late in the day they decided to get a fresh start tomorrow. They agreed to meet later at the Seven Vales in Waukeen’s Promenade.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Aerie decided to find Haer'Dalis, since he had told her where he would be working. She went off alone, and when she found Haer'Dalis he sat her down at a table so he could talk to her. "Aerie...this bard can wait no longer for your thoughts to settle upon his heart. I...I must know now what you feel, my dove."

"Oh, Haer'Dalis...I...I am not ready to..." prevaricated Aerie.

"Wait, my sweet Aerie. The touch of a moment on your lips, if you will. Lend your ear to a poem so that this bard might express himself more clearly."

"Rainbows blackn'd, flowers wilted, songs discordantly rung
for my love has come before me, my heart is flung
at her feet with his hope barely neigh
that his love might let this poor sparrow fly."

"Why...that's sweet, Haer'Dalis. I'm...I'm honored."

"Be more than honored, my dove. Be in love with this bard. You are full of sorrow that you once knew the freedom of flight, while I have never known it at all. But I will know it, sweet Aerie, if you but declare your love for me. Allow me to salve your wounded heart, Aerie...allow me to caress your pale skin and show you that my love is true."

"I...I do love you, Haer'Dalis. You have swept me off my feet...and I can no longer deny it."

"Then I am finally content, my love. You have made me most happy with your declaration. Let us walk together for a while and talk most earnestly of what now might come of it."

The two of them talked for a long while, Haer'Dalis' entertainment duties forgotten. When they finally left the tavern at which Haer'Dalis was performing it was early evening.

"Is there a moon in Sigil?" asked Aerie, looking up at the night sky.

"A moon? Why, no, there never was," said Haer'Dalis. "Just a city that stretched in all directions, curling in upon itself to sometimes block the sky. The moon is better, don't you think, my dove?"

"I have been to too many cities and...and every one of them the same. The moon is better because it's always changing."

"Ha ha! Well, Sigil is like no city you have ever seen but, truth be told, I would trade it in a second for your smile."

"You don't have to trade a city for it...I want to smile and—and you make it so easy, Haer'Dalis."

"I am glad, my dove, but if you won't let me trade Sigil, then I would even trade the moon and all its changes! Come, the night is still young and our spirits still free to fly."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Family and Friends

The following morning, as the party was exiting the inn where they had spent the night, another group of adventurers halted them. One yelled out, "Hold! And let justice take its rightful measure! You will know this day that you have suffered Harper justice!"

"What is this! Reviane!" said Jaheira, recognizing the speaker. "What are you doing here? It is I, Jaheira!"

"So I can see. It pains me to do this, but a traitor's death is what you deserve!"

"What? If this is about the attack at the Harper Hold, you know I would not do such a thing if I had any alternative! They left me no choice!"

"I know not of what you speak, Jaheira. Explain yourself!"

"It was Galvarey; he had me bring my companion there on the pretense of determining her danger, but he had no intention of letting Rolanna leave once there."

"The Harpers know only that there was an attack, and Galvarey is dead. The loss of such a promising person sent waves through the ranks and..."

"Bah! He was a fool bent on advancing his own station! His intent was to use Rolanna as a trophy, hoping to gain enough influence to become a Herald!"

"This seems far-fetched, Jaheira. You are well known to have hated Galvarey...and why should this woman command such value?"

"Tell her what I am if it will help your case, Jaheira," said Rolanna. "I will not keep secrets that can harm you."

"As you wish. Reviane, Rolanna is of interest because she is one of the Children. Galvarey wished to capitalize on the fear around the prophecies of old."

"This is a Bhaal child?! And you trust her over one of your own?"

"You must do as you will, Reviane. I have told you my circumstance, there is little more for me to say."

Rolanna was touched that Jaheira was willing to fight even more Harpers on her behalf, but she hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Stand down your weapons, Jaheira," she said, laying a cautionary hand on her arm. "We need not shed any blood here today."

"I will not draw arms against you, Reviane," said Jaheira in a calmer voice. "This has been a huge mistake, and I will not be party to making another."

"I know you to be truthful, Jaheira, and I have heard good things of Rolanna," said Reviane, anxious not to fight as well. "I will try to sway the others, but passions run high in this matter."

Reviane and the other Harpers departed, but Rolanna knew this wasn't finished.

As they walked down a nearby street, they had another encounter. A male halfling hurried up to Mazzy, saying, "Oh, Mazzy! Thank the gods that I've found you! I've hurt Pala!"

"Slow down, Danno," said Mazzy. "What's happened? How is Pala hurt?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You have to save her! I didn't mean to do it. I bought a love potion from Wallace the peddler at the market square. I just wanted her to love me. She only had a sip of it and she collapsed." Rolanna realized he was referring to Trademeet.

"Danno, you fool, you need no potion!" said Mazzy. "She's always loved you. We must go to her. Where is she?"

"She is with your mother, Mazzy. How was I to know it was poison? Oh, please hurry!" said Danno.

"Please, Rolanna, we must go to my mother's home," said Mazzy, turning to the party leader.

"Why should we?" asked Rolanna, not sure what was going on. "Who are these halflings, Pala and Danno?"

"Pala is my sister and Danno is her betrothed. She may be dying, we must go to her."

After all that Mazzy had done for her, Rolanna was not about to force her to go off on her own. "We shall accompany you. Lead on."

The party and Danno Fairfoot hurried to the town of Trademeet. Once there, they rushed to Mazzy's home.

"Mother, what happened?" asked Mazzy anxiously when she entered.

"Mazzy, I'm so happy you returned!" said Vara Fentan, Mazzy's mother. "Pala's been poisoned by the old gnome peddler."

"Wallace? Why would he do such a thing?" asked Mazzy.

"I've no clue, Mazzy. You need to find him. Perhaps there is yet hope for Pala."

"This is too much. I must find Wallace and unravel this mystery."

"I believe in you, daughter. Go now, and save Pala. May the gods be with you."

Standing by the bed holding her unconscious sister's hand, Mazzy said, "I will save you, sister. I swear it!"

"Rolanna, this is something we must do, and quickly," said Mazzy. "This gnomish peddler, Wallace, will most likely be found near the market square. Let us seek him out there."

"We will search the town until we find the fiend!" agreed Rolanna.

"I thank you. Let us depart forthwith."

They walked to the southern edge of Trademeet, where many merchants had set up their stalls. They found the gnome peddler exactly where Mazzy expected to find him.

"Hold, gnome! I would have words with you," said Mazzy.

"Mazzy Fentan, is it?" asked Wallace the gnome, appearing puzzled at her tone. "Aye, it's been a long time, it has."

"It has, though not such a long time for Danno and Pala," was the reply.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Why no, I’ve seen them just this week,” agreed the gnome, still confused by Mazzy’s anger. “I expect wedding bells’ll be comin’ for the two of them.”

“How so if you’ve murdered my sister?” snarled Mazzy.

“Murdered!?! What do you speak of?” said Wallace, stepping away from his accuser.

“The potion that you’ve sold Danno is poison. Nothing can cure her. She’s been in a coma since she had a sip of it.”

“Mazzy, I’ve known your family for a score of years. I’d never do such a thing,” said Wallace, his contrition seemingly genuine.

“Then who would?”

“Why, I’ve a new supplier for potions. A young cleric here in town.”

“What is his name and where is he to be found?”

“Barl is his name. He lives in the Temple of Waukeen. I am very sorry, Mazzy. I had no idea.”

“I believe you, though I’d suggest that your discretion is lacking. Any responsible businessman would be sure that his products were safe. Your products certainly fell well short.”

“You’re right, Mazzy. I’m very sorry.”

“Very well, Wallace. You didn’t know. It seems surreal, Rolanna. It truly does. That my sister’s life is truly at risk.”

“To the temple then, Mazzy?”

“Yes, my friend. I thank you again for your support. I suggest that we seek out the Temple Superior, Overgold Renwellyn. We’ve no proof of Barl’s guilt other than Wallace’s word and my suspicions.”

They walked to the temple on the west side of the town, and quickly located the Temple Superior.

“Good day to you, wanderers,” greeted Overgold Renwellyn when they found him. “What humble assistance can my Church and I offer?”

“We have come to speak with you about Barl, your grace,” replied Rolanna. “My small companion here, Mazzy, has good cause to believe that this fellow is an agent of evil.”

“Evil? Among us? Surely you must be mistaken! Barl is a terrible acolyte, I admit. But I shouldn’t think him to be evil.”

“I assure you this is true. Barl supplies Wallace, a local merchant, with potions...and one of those potions poisoned Mazzy’s sister.”

“This is a highly unusual request. Barl’s privacy must be respected,” Overgold stated. He absently tapped his fingers on his staff of office as he considered, then continued, “but if it clear things up, perhaps I could search his chambers. Let us, then, put

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

this matter behind us. I shall look into Barl's chamber right now. If I find hard evidence we will call Barl and see what he has to say about it. Wait here, if you would."

A short time later Overgold returned.

"Perhaps your idea is not so ludicrous after all," said Overgold. "I have found some suspicious paraphernalia in Barl's chambers. An alchemy set and a symbol of Talona, the Mistress of Poison. Members of the faith have strayed during Waukeen's Absence but never to these sorts of depths."

He turned to Mazzy. "I know not what to say, Mazzy. Let us summon Barl and see what he has to say about this."

He called out through a side door, "Barl, approach us please! These good people would speak with you."

"What is it, Overgold? I am quite busy," replied Barl, entering. Obviously Overgold had already summoned him and he had been waiting nearby.

"Barl, I have just returned from your chambers. What do think it is that I've found?" asked Overgold.

"You should never have entered my chambers, old man," said Barl, in a low, dangerous voice.

"But enter them I did, Barl. I found alchemists poisons, bottles and a holy symbol of Talona. You have betrayed Waukeen."

"I refuse to listen to this. Get rid of these fools, Overgold."

"Barl, false cleric! You stand accused of attempted murder," Mazzy's voice rang out, no longer content to let Overgold run the proceedings.

Barl turned to Mazzy, and snarled "This is ludicrous! Who in the Hells are you?"

"I am Mazzy Fentan. Wallace the Peddler bought 'potions of love' from you... poisons, in reality. You can no longer claim innocence as the Overgold has found your tools of evil."

"I shall not leave myself in your hands," said Barl, his eyes scanning from side to side, seeking a place to run. "You'll not take me alive, halfling wench!"

"You've all but admitted your guilt, Barl. I no longer need to take you alive," was Mazzy's calm reply.

Barl, out of options, spread his hands and looked beseechingly upwards. "Talona is my mistress. She will save me."

"You have committed the ultimate crime, Barl." Mazzy's voice was cold and deadly, making Barl's earlier attempt at menace seem like a mummer's silly caricature. "You have turned your back on goodness and embraced the evil. Talona cares not for her bumbling slaves, as you will soon discover."

"All of you shall die! The glory of affliction shall anoint you and your fall will add to Talona's black glory!" Having decided he had no other recourse, Barl attacked the party, in his last act.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Justice is served," said Mazzy when he was dead. "Perhaps Barl has a cure for this disease on his person. We must obtain it and return to Pala."

She searched his body, and held something up. "Indeed! Here is a bottle! It may not work but what other choice do we have? The poison resists normal and magical cures."

"I am very sorry, Mazzy," said Overgold. "We had a viper in our midst and did not know it. I wish Waukeen's Blessing upon your sister. Perhaps that bottle is indeed an antidote."

"That is our only hope. Rolanna, let us return to my house."

They rushed back to the Fentan household.

"Welcome home, daughter," said Vara Fentan. "Do you return bearing good tidings?"

"We've found a potion that could cure Pala," said Mazzy

"Are you sure it's safe, Mazzy?" asked her mother.

"No mother, but we have no other choice. Pala is at death's door."

"I trust in the gods, daughter. Use it on your sister and pray."

Mazzy administered the potion. Shortly, there was a noticeable change.

"She breathes easier and color returns to her features. It may be working," said Mazzy.

"Praise the heavens," said her mother.

"She is resting, now, and I am most relieved," said Mazzy to Rolanna. "If all goes well, I shall be ready to leave when Pala awakens again. I shall understand, however, if you cannot wait."

"We can wait. Take care of your sister. We will return."

Mazzy thanked them, and they left, to spend the night at a local inn. As they walked, a child said to Aerie, "You're an elf! We had lots of elves in the forest! They were real nice. I don't remember any of them being sad, though...why are you so sad?"

"Sad? Oh...oh, what a darling boy you are," she said, ruffling the hair on his head. "I'm not that sad, really...it is not for a young boy such as you to worry about. You should think of happier things."

The next day they returned to the Fentan household.

"Welcome back," said Mazzy. "I am ready to leave if you are."

"Pala is better, I see," noted Rolanna.

"Indeed. My thanks for your assistance in this difficult time."

"Then let us depart. We have much to accomplish out in the world."

"I am happy to join you."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As they traveled back to Athkatla, Valygar took the opportunity to talk to Nalia. "I wonder, Nalia. Why is it that you struggle to be so different from what your family asks of you?"

"I am uncomfortable with their wealth, Valygar," said Nalia. "There are so many who live in squalor, and yet we are supposed to hoist ourselves above them because we are nobles?"

"You cannot solve all problems with wealth, Nalia."

"Tell that to a starving peasant."

"I do not think they are as unhappy as that, really. Was your father a cruel man, then?"

"Well...no, of course not. But that has—"

"My family was afflicted by our curse; I knew little affection or care. I would have given up all our wealth for the sane, loving parent your father was."

"I...I suppose..."

"Believe it, Nalia. One day it will truly be too late."

Child Murderer

Rolanna decided to visit several sections of the city to see if anything new was to be learned. As they neared the Temple district a passing commoner eyed Mazzy in evident surprise, then remarked "Aye, now, I didn't know they made little warriors in yer size. Yer just a little scrapper, aren't ye?"

"I'm a fighter true of heart and striving towards wisdom and perfection," said Mazzy. "I don't really think my size has anything to do with it."

Since it was late, Rolanna decided to rest for the night in Waukeen's Promenade. Haer'Dalis again showed up, and he and Aerie were soon off talking by themselves.

"Your countenance has the air of dark thoughts and concern, my love," said Haer'Dalis. "Might I ask what has brought this mood about you?"

"It is nothing, Haer'Dalis," said Aerie. "Just...just some errant thoughts."

"Tell me anyway, my love. Your poorest word is a sweet poem to this bard's ears... and I would not have you experience a moment of fluster, if there was aught I could do for it."

"Well...I was just wondering, Haer'Dalis...where do you see us in the future? You have spoken of plays and acting...have you been serious?"

"Ah...the future. I see."

"Your love has given me new hope, my bard...I want to see what life has to offer, no matter my lack of wings. I...I want to travel, to see this world. Will you...be there with me?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Time holds its own counsel, my love...and destiny plays such a game with this sparrow that even I cannot foresee the outcome. I have never paid much heed to the future, myself, preferring to experience things in the moment, as it were. To do otherwise is to concern oneself needlessly."

"Live in the moment? I...I have always done that, Haer'Dalis. I want to live for the future, now...don't you?"

"I could not, even if I cared to, my sweet dove. Here...let me sing to you..."

"When Man was made it was said
he would have eyes in the front of his head.
But the first Man was scared,
as he saw before him, lay bared,
the future...and in it, he was dead."

"Hmm. A limerick for every occasion, Haer'Dalis?" said Aerie, not impressed with his answer.

"Aye, my dove. And I've a ready quip and a belch, as well, if it'll put a smile on your sweet face."

"Ha ha! Very well, my bard, I'll smile for you. Today, at least." Aerie still wanted reassurance about their future, but was willing to put that aside for now.

"I can pray for nothing more, my love."

The following morning Haer'Dalis again sought out Aerie; he found her in the Inn's common room, looking over a script he had given her.

"Ah, my dove," said Haer'Dalis. "I see you have finished perusing my latest play. Would you care to act out a scene or two?"

"Actually, Haer'Dalis...I have a question. All your plays...they seem to end in tragedy or destruction. They are all so...so dark. Have you no happy plays?"

"Ah, my sweet Aerie. I write my plays as befits the creed of the Doomguard. All things end in destruction and tragedy...to think otherwise would be foolish."

"Foolish? You...you can't honestly think that. Is there no room for hope in your world?"

"Even hope is eroded, my dove. All things break down, over time...all things come to an end. 'Tis the natural order of the multiverse. Who am I to question this?"

"But...but you can't embrace destruction...you have to fight against it, don't you?"

"On the contrary, one must assist the multiverse in attaining its goal. One day, all things will cease to exist...this is the way it shall be. The Doomguard stands to assist this goal."

"But why would you...why would you even build a home or...or fall in love...if you thought that way? If all things decay, why start anything?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Haer'Dalis theatrically sighed. "Often the act of creation is one of entropy, itself. The earth is mined and chipped away for the metals that men use to create, is it not? And love is but a brief and pleasant flutter."

"A brief and...? No...no! Love should be enduring! It embodies hope and strength... are you saying that you expect it to end?"

"Of course I do. Ah, but I see I have upset you, my dove. Let me reassure you that the multiverse shall not end in my lifetime...at least I do not expect it to. And while I know that our love must end, I do not expect it to do so soon. The Fates will decide, and until then I shall love you truly and with all the heat I can muster. I know my Doomguard thinking may be strange to you, sweet Aerie, but it need not intrude on your happiness. If it pleases you, I'll not mention it again."

"No...no, I...I just want to know that you'll love me...and that you'll be there for me...that is all."

"But I do love you. And I am here for you. As for the future, I cannot say."

"I...I guess that'll have to be enough." Aerie was troubled, only now realizing that the unconstantness that was at the core of Haer'Dalis' character directly opposed her own desire for permanence. She was glad when Rolanna was ready to depart the inn, as it provided an excuse not to think about Haer'Dalis for a while.

Meanwhile, Valygar had sought out Rolanna, asking when he found her, "May I ask you for your opinion on something?"

"If you wish," said Rolanna.

"What is your opinion on redemption? Can one who has committed evil acts ever become good again?"

"I take it you're referring to Lavok?"

"I have thought of his death much, and it raises a question to me. I had thought that evil...true evil...was absolute. Now I am unsure if such a thing exists."

"I think that we all have the opportunity to redeem our actions. We are judged according to what we do." Rolanna still believed this, although she wondered if all her recent actions were taken into account whether she, herself, would receive a favorable verdict.

"That seems very optimistic of you, Rolanna. I wonder if that is truly so." Valygar paused a moment in thought. "I am curious. How much experience have you had with magic?"

"I have had considerable encounters with magic throughout my travels, Valygar, if that's what you mean."

"So you, too, are drawn into its wake? Sometimes I believe that my life is so caught up with magic that there will never be an escape from its foul presence."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you of Lavok: his influence did not end with his disappearance. Like a curse, my family has been afflicted with magic, and it has brought us only ill."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Do you mean there have been many within your family who have been magic-users?”

“The talent seems to run rampant. My mother was a wizard, as was my grandfather and many other relatives beyond that. All of them came to a bitter end. Perhaps it is fortunate that I am the last of my line. It might be fitting that the family and the fortune that paved the path both end with Lavok’s death.”

“You would not consider retiring from the Life and having children?”

“And know that my own children would be likely afflicted? Aside from that, who would have me? Magic is frowned on, here, and too many know of my heritage. But... perhaps, Rolanna. Perhaps I would consider it. Somewhere else, who knows? But enough talk. We should be going.”

Rolanna thought that Valygar’s attitude towards magic and its practitioners had undergone a fundamental change, but he was probably right that he would do better in a land without Amn’s prejudices towards magic.

Rolanna also worried about Nalia. She had only begun to openly use magic since joining Rolanna, and if she continued, she could expect the same treatment Valygar had found. Of course, with the death of her father and the loss of his holding she only had her aunt to keep her in Amn, so she did have the freedom to travel as well. Rolanna thought she and Valygar had much in common, but it wasn’t up to Rolanna to act as matchmaker.

The next day, the party was in the government district. A passing noblewoman stopped Valygar, saying “Oh, how absolutely delicious! If it isn’t Valygar Corthala! How is your mother, darling boy?”

“Dead,” snarled Valygar. “She turned into a lich and I beheaded her. Anything else you’d like to know, you nosy harpy?”

They left the woman standing there, mouth open in shock. Valygar had an even more abrasive manner with his fellow nobles than what Rolanna had come to expect from Nalia.

Soon after, a young boy commented to his mother “Wow, this hairy lady’s no taller than me!”

“One not as patient as I might see that you grow no taller, either,” retorted Mazzy.

“Eek! The hairy lady’s scaring me!” said the boy, swiftly putting his mother between himself and Mazzy.

Mazzy winked at Rolanna. Rolanna realized Mazzy had teased the boy mainly to try to bring a momentary break to the sadness Rolanna still felt over Anomen.

Rolanna decided to follow up on murders in the Bridge District, which she had heard were linked to a dwarf who lived there. His name was said to be Neb; Rolanna thought they might have met before.

As they entered the Bridge District, a beggar came up to Rolanna. “Excuse me... might you have a coin to spare my poor, venerable mother? She would ask for herself, but she lays in a cold, cold room nearly sick to her death, alas...”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“She’s sick, is she? Perhaps you could bring me to her,” suggested Rolanna. “I might be able to offer her some help.”

“Hmph,” the beggar replied disgustedly. “You could just say ‘no,’ you know...” He added under his breath, “Always has to be me that runs into them good Samaritan types.”

“Well, I don’t understand,” said Nalia, displaying the obtuseness she seemed to reserve for dealing with the poor, “why wouldn’t he want us to actually go and cure his mother? Then he wouldn’t have to stand out here and beg, right?”

“Are you serious, Nalia?” said Valygar. “Are you being sarcastic or do you seriously not know what the hell you’re talking about?” Perhaps, reflected Rolanna, his family’s history of magic use was not the only reason Valygar got on so poorly with his fellow nobles.

In the house that had been suggested to them, they found a dwarf, who asked as they entered “Have you reason to be here? I do not recall summoning such as you. Do I... know you? I do not think it is so.”

“Is your name Neb?” asked Rolanna.

“Why friend, who told you my name?” asked the dwarf suspiciously. “Who...who is it that sent you here?”

“I hear that you are on the run from Baldur’s Gate,” said Rolanna. She was sure now she recognized him.

“So, my former life does come back to haunt? So be it, though I shall miss the children so. Ah yes, the children... Come then, attack! And your deaths shall be a riddle for some other fool to solve!”

“Rolanna! This...this is the same child-killing dwarf from Baldur’s Gate!” said Jaheira, suddenly connecting him with a dwarf they had met while imprisoned in the Flaming Fist headquarters in Baldur’s Gate. Rightfully jailed as a child murderer, he had been instrumental in both his own and the party’s escape. “I remember! For the greater balance, his head must be brought to the authorities!”

“Come, my pretty children!” said Neb, cackling as he drank a potion and disappeared from sight.

To everyone’s horror, the spirits of children that Neb had slain attacked the party. Fortunately, the potion of invisibility that Neb had taken proved useless versus the magical scrying ability of Nalia, and a surprised Neb was quickly found and killed. With his death the spirits were freed, a thin, piping voice in their minds calling out “Thank you! I am released!”

Following Jaheira’s suggestion, they removed the head of Neb. It was the custom in Athkatla to prove a fugitive’s demise by presenting his or her head to the authorities, originating no doubt from the practice of employing bounty hunters to supplement the regular guards.

They bought the gory head to Chief inspector Brega in the Government District.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I have the head of the child-killer Neb," said Rolanna. "He is dead and will bother no one any longer."

"Let's see what you have, there. Yes..." replied Brega, peering into the sack they had brought, "despite the, ah, condition of the head, it is obviously the criminal we've been seeking. You have no idea what a despicable creature this Neb was. Or perhaps you do. Regardless, we're thankful for your help. I hope this reward is sufficient. I understand the Flaming Fist was looking for him as well. I'll send them a note explaining your deed, so they can stop looking now. Thank you again, citizen. You've done well."

They passed the building of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. They were surprised to see Garrick and his gnomish prompter, and the same two guards as before.

"Lady Irlana!" declaimed Garrick as they came by. "I wish to, uh, proclaim my undying love...for you. Yes, for you!" Glancing at one another, the party by mutual consent stopped to take in the show.

"By Torm, not again!" said Lady Irlana to her companion.

Her companion, Sir Cadril, muttered "Patience, my lady...this could be amusing."

"Well, get on with it, then," said Lady Irlana to Garrick.

"Yes...um...okay..." replied Garrick hesitatingly.

The gnome murmured to Garrick, "Lady Irlana, I am bedazzled by your beauty and awestruck by your nobility. What I would not do to spend an evening in your arms."

"Lady Irlana," repeated Garrick ineptly, "I am...bedazzled by your...beauty and yawn-struck...by your nobility. What...I would not to do...spend an evening...in your barns."

"Arms, fool, arms!" whispered the gnome urgently.

"Arms, fool!" repeated Garrick obediently. "I, uh...I meant arms. Yes, your arms."

Sir Cadril unsuccessfully attempted to suppress his snorts and chuckles.

"Did you now, good sir?" asked Lady Irlana. "And what makes you think you be worthy to spend an evening in my arms?"

"Well...it's easy...I, uh..." started Garrick, obviously waiting for his coach.

"I can never truly be worthy of a true lady of virtue, my love," whispered the gnome. "I only desire that you see past my faults and give me a chance!"

Garrick turned to his assistant. "Why not tell her how handsome and studly I am, Cyrando?"

"Oh, get over yourself, boy!" replied the gnome Cyrando in disgust.

"I can never...truly be worthy of a," stumbled Garrick, turning back to continue his fumbled wooing, "blue lady of virtue...my love... I only desire you...that you see past... my faults and give...me pants!"

"Give you pants, good sir?" asked Lady Irlana in mock surprise. "Are you, perchance, missing a pair?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Well, perhaps the gnome fellow standing behind our good Garrick has the answer to that,” added Sir Cadril. “What say you, sir gnome?”

“Eek! Discovered! Run for it, boy!” said the gnome, and both Garrick and Cyrando quickly retreated.

Lady Irlana, noticing the audience, said to Rolanna “Garrick be an amusing man, but he’ll hardly take my heart. For a bard, he seems to have a hesitant and awkward grasp of courtly words.”

“It is quite amusing to watch Garrick perform these endeavors in his efforts to win the Lady’s heart,” added Sir Cadril. “I cannot wait to see what he does, next.”

As the party continued walking, they found Cyrando seated on a bench staring forlornly towards the entrance of the Order. Garrick was nowhere in sight. As they passed, Rolanna heard the gnome mutter to himself “My heart goes out to the Lady Irlana...but this is as close a simple gnome such as I can ever hope to come to a noble beauty like her.”

They stopped at the Temple of Helm to report the successful conclusion of their mission. Rolanna also took the opportunity to pray in the Temple of Lathander. Although she had not pledged herself to any specific god, Rolanna took the opportunity to pray at the Temple of any good god when she had the chance.

As the others waited inside the temple for Rolanna to finish, Mazzy commented to Aerie, “Ah, my spirit always flies so free in this place.”

“Really?” asked Aerie.

“It rides the skies with the Solaris, Aerie... One day I shall be a paladin atop a white griffin, and you will be a valiant flying squire. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“I...I don’t have my wings anymore, Mazzy, and...and I’m never going to get them back. They’re gone.”

“Dream a little, girl, especially here where the gods are listening. Faith is such a beautiful thing to hold on to, Aerie.”

“But it won’t give me wings...”

“No, it probably won’t... But it gives you a chance to dream, at least, doesn’t it? Look, an imaginary griffin beats an old nag any day and...a friend like you beats any halfwit squire who would stoop so low as to help a halfling on her horse... You see?”

“I...I see, Mazzy... And—And thank you.”

“I thought you might... Now come, we’ve got a world to face, don’t we girl?”

The Windspear Hills

As the party walked back to Waukeen’s Promenade to rest for the night, a man approached the party. A man Jaheira recognized, saying, “Der...Dermis? Is that you? It has been some time.”

“Indeed. It has been a very long time,” replied Dermis coldly.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“What is the matter, Dermis? You would not have let me walk on by, would you?” asked Jaheira, put off by his manner. “I know we did not always see eye to eye, but I assure you the respect...”

“I may well have let you pass, for there is no joy in my visit today. Jaheira, do you remember the lessons I taught you?”

“Of...of course, you were the one that introduced me to the Harpers.”

“Yes, yes, but the lessons?”

“What...what are you getting at, Dermis?”

“I am not here to rehash our friendship. Jaheira...I have been sent to kill you, or otherwise seek your downfall, and I do not relish the duty.”

“I see. And what power has decided that I should be killed?” replied Jaheira, starting to show some of the anger that surfaced whenever her judgment was questioned. “I serve nature and protect the good of the land through my work as a Harper. Who have I offended?”

“Who...? Jaheira, you travel with a killer of Harpers. I do not wish to think you had any complicity in those acts, but here she is and she is still alive.”

“I have washed my hands of the incident in the Harper Hold. Galvarey was in the wrong and brought his fate upon himself.”

“We know nothing of this. There is only the fact that you...you and your friend were the cause of many deaths. This cannot be ignored.”

“He was in the wrong! Of that I am certain!” said Jaheira hotly. “Galvarey sought to imprison Rolanna for his own gain and I took the side of right. I could do no other!”

“It is not seen that way, Jaheira,” replied Dermis. “Exact the necessary justice. That is the only route to redemption for you. The others...will not accept you otherwise.”

“This is wrong, Dermis. This is not the right solution,” said Jaheira, still disagreeing.

“I cannot see this ending otherwise, Jaheira. Your own have died. What do you intend to do about it?”

“Jaheira, do what you must,” said Rolanna. “I have been the cause of too much trouble for you.”

“Dermis...I...Dermis, I cannot do as you ask,” said Jaheira, obviously pained to be so at odds with her former teacher. “You are in the wrong, as was Galvarey. I was right to choose Rolanna’s side, and it is your loss if you cannot see this.”

“Consider carefully what you are saying, child. You have a duty to justice.”

“This is not justice,” said Jaheira firmly. “This is revenge for a lie, a falsehood that none seem bothered to find the truth behind. If this is Harper justice then I...”

“What are you saying, Jaheira?” asked Dermis.

“If this is the justice you represent then I,” started Jaheira hesitantly, then continued more forcefully, “I renounce you. I renounce...I renounce my life as a Harper.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Jaheira, you cannot mean,” protested Dermis. “Think this through.”

However, Jaheira only gained more confidence as she continued. “It would seem I am the only one that has thought any of this through. You do not, Galvarey did not, and now the Harpers out for blood do not. I mourn many fellows of the Harp, but they died fighting for balance and truth. Galvarey did not, and this matter cheapens their loss. I will not be party to it.”

“So be it then. I will take your words to those that will listen,” replied Dermis with evident sadness. “Do not expect your life to be peaceful with this choice.”

“It shall not be peaceful, but it is clearer than the course you are on. Goodbye Dermis.” Shaking his head, Dermis walked off.

“You have a place here, Jaheira, regardless of this mess,” said Rolanna, concerned that Jaheira had lost not only her husband in aiding her, but now her Harper membership as well. The only thing missing, thought Rolanna bitterly, was for Jaheira herself to die fighting off more Harpers for Rolanna’s sake.

“I thank you, Rolanna,” said Jaheira, “but part of me is gone. I...I will speak no more of this. This is behind me. I must go forward. Come, we have friends to avenge.”

Rolanna now had enough funds to satisfy the Shadow Thieves’ request to help her, but that would so drain the party’s finances that there would be little left to equip them before setting out to find Imoen. Rolanna was also disappointed that she had found no one else able to help her locate her friend.

Rolanna recalled Lord Firkraag, and his request for help. Although Rolanna hadn’t fully trusted him, he had offered a lot of money. She thought they might travel to the Windspear Hills and see what they could do. Rolanna hoped that Imoen’s value as a hostage to Irenicus was enough that he would not kill her; Rolanna figured a few more days of delay should not alter that consideration in Irenicus’ mind.

They traveled east from Athkatla, taking about a day to reach the Windspear Hills. As they moved through a small pass between two hills, ogres, orcs and gnolls suddenly confronted them. These must be some of the creatures Lord Firkraag had mentioned.

“Beasts! Curs! Your terror ends here!” yelled one ogre in surprisingly good common.

“Wait! I would speak at you!” protested Rolanna.

“No more words!” yelled the ogre. “Your lies will taint this land no longer; your crimes will trouble the people not a second more!”

Rolanna was mystified at the creature’s words, but there was no time for puzzled reflection as the party was attacked. It was only after they killed the creatures that the horrid truth emerged, for the bodies of the slain transformed to that of armored knights. To Rolanna’s further dismay, one of the dead was the paladin Ajantis, who she had adventured with for a while up north. The illusionary magic responsible reminded Rolanna of what she had seen Kalah use at the circus.

As they stared at the bodies of those they had killed, a man walked forward, pushing through the bushes that had hidden him. “What goes on here? I’ve seen many a strange

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

thing in my time, but the events of the past few moments tops them all. Who are you that can change shape so readily, and why have you slain these beasts that become men?"

"My name is Rolanna. What do you imply, friend? What did you see?"

"I wonder if I saw what I think I saw. You were all ogres fighting, yet deaths yielded human bodies. Now there are no monsters, only you and these slain knights."

"You must excuse me if I do not accept your version of the events."

"Despite your manner, I have sympathy. You were tricked, and I doubt the priests of Helm will believe it. They will seek justice, and only your heads will suffice."

"That is dire news indeed. What do you suggest that we do?"

"I suggest that you take sanctuary with me until you can discover how this unfortunate event came to pass."

"I shall be honored to accept your hospitality."

"Follow behind me. My cabin is but a short distance south of here. I will meet you there."

Once at the nearby cabin, the man introduced himself as Garren Windspear. He then continued the conversation he had started with Rolanna over the bodies of the slain knights.

"Best that you learn all you can of your situation before you go off getting killed. You have been cruelly tricked."

"Your kindness is welcome. How did you come to happen by when you did?"

"You are not the first to suffer because of falsehoods and trickery. I have undergone the same, though my trial was less bloody. I was once lord of this land, and had many holds across the heart of Amn. Taken from me, it was. It was almost overnight, and I still bear the scars in my dreams. I am content now, having found solace in the quiet of the wood, but I will forevermore curse the name of Lord Jierdan Firkraag."

"I know this name. It was he that bid me rid his land of its ogre menace."

"It is true to his style, organizing an elaborate plot to discredit a rival. I do not understand why he would target you, however. My case was obvious. He sought my lands, so he discredited me. There were missing people only he could find, banditry only he could stop. Solutions to problems I am sure he caused. "

"Now I remember why I had heard of him!" said Nalia. "He became wealthy and powerful too quickly to be legitimate. I wonder why he's turned his attention to us?"

"In the end my properties were razed in a single night," said Garren. "The people lost faith in me, and my influence crumbled. Now, it would seem, he has targeted you."

"So he undermined your barony, but why would he come after me?"

"I do not know. Perhaps you slighted him in some way, without even knowing. He seems quite single-minded in his purposes. What I do know is that he is not the worst of your worries. The Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart will seek your death if something is not done quickly. I have friends among the order. I will speak with them as

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

quickly as possible. Perhaps I can persuade them to look on you with mercy. I can but try.”

“I thank you for this. You are most kind.”

“It is not a problem. I have found peace where I am, but any enemy of Lord Jierdan’s is a friend of mine. Make my home yours until I return with good news.”

Garren introduced his son Taar to them, then set off for Athkatla.

“My lady, you honor us,” said Taar. “Forgive the stars in my eyes, but you are just as I imagined a Bringer of Light. Father has told of your shame, and I offer sympathies. It must be horrible for you, a paladin, to suffer this abuse; to have your will corrupted with trickery must be a great affront. Know that I wish you well in this. Ah, but I must seem a simpering fool. Forgive me, but I have long admired those called paladin. You are as impressive in person as in story.”

“Your words flatter, but I am undeserving,” replied Rolanna, uncomfortable with Taar’s words. If Taar wanted to admire anyone, thought Rolanna, he should look to Mazzy, not her.

“You may be downtrodden,” said Taar, “but remember what it is to be a paladin. You suffer that others might not. You live a life of hardship that others might enjoy freedoms.”

“Your words ring true, but as a dishonored paladin I am limited in what I can do,” said Rolanna, not openly protesting further her worth.

“You are never limited,” said Taar, continuing in the same vein. “You will fight on, as a warrior of light should. I am sorry if I sound melodramatic, but it is beings like you that have inspired me. My lady, I would restore your faith if I could, but all I can offer is lodging and perhaps my prayers. Have you a betrothed? If not, perhaps that is all you lack?”

“You are not suggesting that you will fill the role, are you?” asked Rolanna, relieved to find something to smile at in his words.

“I would never presume to make such a designation, but it would be a very ‘paladin’ thing to do. Smiting evil in the name of your unattainable love. Or so I’ve read. I do not seek to establish a relationship; I only sought to exercise a time-honored paladin tradition. I have not the means to organize a joust, you understand.”

“Then I shall take heart and strive on, knowing you believe in the acts I do.”

“I know you will persevere. I am sure of it.”

Rolanna fretted, forced to wait in the cabin while Garren intervened on her behalf. She was used to helping others, not being helped, and she found the experience disagreeable. She could not even go and bury the bodies of the knights she had killed, for she might run into more knights sent to investigate their disappearance, with regrettable results.

Their sleep one evening was interrupted when a halfling rushed into the room, shouting, “Ah! Run! Hide! There is trouble, I am sure!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Quiet yourself, Jum,” said Taar, coming into the room. “you don’t want to alarm our guests. What is the matter?”

“Bandits! I saw them!” yelled Jum excitedly. “Coming! They try not to be seen, but I saw them! Nearly here! Hide and run!”

“I wonder what they are up to. I’d better go look,” said Rolanna.

“Good and good!” said Jum. “Garren away, so no one here to guard the home. I’ll go hide in the hills I think!”

“I am not incapable of defense,” said Taar, “though this might be a task more suited to our guest. She has a score to settle, perhaps? I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Jum did not wait to see if everything would be fine, but ran back out the front door of the cabin. Barely had Rolanna and the others finished donning their armor when a group of mercenaries burst into the cabin. As they did so, Taar vanished in a burst of magical energy.

“We have taken Garren’s child!” said the leader of the mercenaries. “Now it is time for his bothersome friends to die!”

“Can we not talk? Why have you stormed this peaceful home?” asked Rolanna.

“To shatter the peace, to ruin your name, to torment that old fool Garren. Above all we are to deliver a message, a message to you! A challenge is given! Your ruin continues with the devastation of Garren Windspear in your name. Away goes his child from under your nose, and I wonder who shall bear the blame! Lord Firkraag watches with amusement as you die a public death again and again! So much more entertaining than simple killing!”

“But what have I done to offend him? What crime could be so great?” asked Rolanna.

“That friends of yours wronged him is all that matters. The magnitude is irrelevant! Now you are destroyed, and your reputation fails! Revenge against you is revenge against those that are safe in the arms of death!”

They fought off the mercenaries, but Garren’s son was not nearby, as a quick search showed.

Garren returned about this time, as no doubt the abductors had planned. “My son is gone!” he cried. “I left this place in your care! I...”

“No, no, I know it was not you,” he continued, calming down. “I know my enemies. Damn Jierdan Firkraag, what is his grief with me?! This must end! I cannot live under his shadow; under his heel!”

“I would see it end as well. I will rescue your child, no matter the risk,” said Rolanna.

“I thank you, though I don’t know where you will find him. His hooligans prevent searching. I don’t know... Perhaps the ruins in the north east? I don’t know...”

“I will find your kin, rest assured!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I thank you. You will travel unmolested, for my pleas of your virtue were heard at the Radiant Heart. They demand justice for the slain, so that is your task now."

"We have to find Garren's child!" said Aerie. "He...he's cleared our name with the paladins, it's the very least we could do! We have to try!"

About this time the halfling Jum appeared. He had been captured by another group of mercenaries outside the cabin, and given a note to take back.

Rolanna and Garren together examined the note. It read:

Firkraag's Challenge

Rolanna, I give you the opportunity to earn back your honor, and more. This game is interesting, but it drags on and on. Come, let us meet and decide who is the better 'person.' In the Northeast is our battleground. You will know it to see it. Yes, I think you will know.

They waited a few hours for dawn, then set out in search of Firkraag's "battleground." As they were searching the surrounding hills, they saw a small pool ahead set among engirdling rocks. Rolanna remembered a task she had undertaken back in Irenicus' lair, one that in the press of events she had forgotten. She wondered...yes, a dryad stepped from among the rocks.

"A pretty one? Have you come to join the merriment for all eternity?" asked the dryad.

"I apologize for bothering you," said Rolanna. "I have brought some acorns from your dryad sisters. They have been trapped by an evil mage for many years."

"I've been waiting for you. Ulene, Cania and Elyme must have their trees replanted so that they might be free. Give the acorns to me sister."

Rolanna gave the seeds to the dryad. She made magical passes over the seeds, and suddenly the three dryads they had met in the lair of Irenicus were present as well.

"Sisters! We've longed to see you again, loves!" said the original dryad.

"My Queen!" said Ulene, one of the formerly trapped dryads. "Rolanna has saved us. Can our trees be saved? Has Irenicus doomed us?"

"Nay, little sister," her queen replied. "You are not doomed."

"Come Llyna!" called the queen to another dryad who came forward. "Plant our sister's seeds that they may again taste the wind. Ulene, Cania, and Elyme. Follow Llyna and she shall bring you back to the safety of the forest. Go well and know that I shall protect you forever more."

"Thank you, my Queen," said Ulene.

"Thank you, Rolanna. The forest welcomes you. There has been evil near here and I pray for your safety as you travel. Good bye!"

As they walked away, Mazzy commented, "Call me a halfling, if you must, but I find myself incredibly hungry at the moment."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

After a quick meal, the party continued their search for Firkraag. The party came upon ruins, perhaps of a temple. An entry led underground. Rolanna was sure they would find Firkraag somewhere below.

As they entered, they encountered a group of orcs. A particularly large orc yelled out “Garh! You early! Troop need kick in arse to get ready! Firkraag be warned, though I think he not care!”

The orcish leader displayed the typical bravado of his kind, fleeing while his troops were slaughtered. As the party continued pushing into the cave, they encountered hobgoblins, half-ogres, sentient mists and exploding kobolds. In one section of the cave it opened into a chasm, much too steep to climb down. A disquieting smell of sulfur wafted up from below.

However, there was a second exit from the caves the party was in, a stonework door leading further into the hill. The doorway led to passageways and rooms carved out of rock. They faced more orcs, breaking through an entry guarded with arrow slits and locked gates. In a room beyond they came upon two orcs.

As they entered, one orc called out “Pleeze, mercy on us! Me sorry. Don’t kill. Me just following orders. Didn’t want to eat children or kick old people. Just job!”

“Flee from here, foul creature, and never harm another!” said Rolanna, putting up her weapon.

“Tank yous tank yous. I promising, no more killings here. Not as job, anyway. Maybe hobby. That OK, I think,” said the orc, slinking from the room.

“No kill, no kill!” yelled the other orc, seeing the mercy granted his fellow.

“And why, pitiful creature, should I let you live?” asked Rolanna.

“I tell you secrets! Things about place you not know! You get good secret here, I tell you!”

“Then cease your whining and speak!”

“Firkraag run the place! He hidey-hide in special place with Garren child. He wait in dere for yous to comes.”

“More! I would know more of this place! Tell me what defenses Lord Jierdan has!”

“Defenses? Lord Firkraag no need defenses. You silly to think so. We hunt the feed an guard the home, but he not need us protect him.”

“Then I shall be especially careful when I face him. He sounds sure of himself.”

“He sure you gonna die. Me sure too. Me sure I should run other way so I not killed too by accident. He get mad, bad things happen.” This orc, too, slunk from the room.

In another room they found the orc’s cook, a troll. “Hello there foodthing,” the troll greeted them. “You are just in time. Please just jump onto the grill over there.”

“Pardon me?” asked Rolanna in disbelief.

“The grill. That big metal thing. Jump on. Be careful, its hot!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You speak well for a troll," babbled Rolanna, momentarily stunned by this unusual behavior.

"My mother tried hard to give me good learning. She sent me to live with these hobgoblins here. They smart. Trained me how to cook real good."

"Do you like these orcs?" continued the troll in a conversational tone. "They smell bad, but they're OK. They can be mean sometimes. Chief DigDag sometimes cuts my fingers off and throws them onto the grill. Says they taste like sausages."

"Doesn't that hurt?" asked Rolanna, still flailing around.

"Yep. But I'm a troll. Fingers cut off. Fingers grow back. Now quit talking and start broiling! Chief DigDag doesn't like me talking to the food."

"I'm not letting you cook me, you crazy troll!" yelled Rolanna.

"Uncle Cajum, he was crazy," said the troll calmly. "Me, I'm not crazy. I'm a cook. Now get on the grill!"

"Why would I want to be on the grill?" asked Rolanna, now wondering if it was possible to argue the troll around to making some sense.

"Geez. It's impossible to get good help nowadays. If you're not on the grill, how am I going to cook you?"

"I don't want to be cooked."

"If you didn't want to be cooked, then why did you apply for the job? I think you'll all make a tasty snack! Boys! Get 'em!"

The troll, having ended Rolanna's internal debate on his sanity by calling in hobgoblin helpers, attacked the party. After the troll and hobgoblins were defeated, Rolanna glanced at the troll's cookbook. A typical entry read:

Slice Onion, crush garlic, peel chestnuts, and cut boar into tiny cubes. In a greatpot over large flame heat oil; when it begins to smell hot, toss in the elk feces, then pour in horse urine. Mmmmmm...can you smell great food already?

Maybe use different stuff for stew if boar not available. Flesh of genies from tomb would work well. Could use wolf men in west dungeon. Hmm. If only I could avoid air monster in the well, then the well treasure would be mine! Then could buy any stuff for stew I wanted!

With a shudder, Rolanna tossed the cookbook onto the cook's fire. The party continued further into the tunnels. After passing wolfweres and an air elemental, they came to a room with several figures. One was the orcish chieftain they had encountered before, attended by a few underlings, as well as an armored ogre.

"Now we make stand!" said the chieftain. "Make Firkraag proud he served by Stuck in Craw Clan!"

"Ah, you did come!" said the hulking ogre. "He said you would, but I thought you too much a coward. My swaddling kin will have your flesh after all!" Rolanna recognized the ogre. It was Tazok, who had been with her half-brother Sarevok when she fought him in Baldur's Gate. Where could Firkraag possibly have found him, wondered Rolanna?

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Weren't you at my battle with Sarevok beneath Baldur's Gate? Aren't you dead?” asked Rolanna.

“Sarevok took too much for his plate,” said Tazok, “left us in a bad position. You'll find my new master much smarter, and me much harder to kill! Seems Firkraag has a special treat in store, brought me here just for you. Got a special bug in his craw about seeing you perform. Who am I to disagree if it means I get to put my foot to you once more! Fight! And know that behind Tazok is a power greater than you have ever seen!”

Tazok may have been tougher than when he had faced Rolanna before, but the orcish chieftain with him was no Sarevok, and the party's opponents were quickly felled. They found Garren's son Taar in a cell opening on this room.

“Thank the gods! Free me and we shall away!” said Taar. “I fear the locks are magical; the mage that brought me had some sort of key. I don't know how you might obtain it. I have seen Firkraag, do not risk yourself for my sake. Find a way to get the key from the mage and we shall flee this place.”

They continued on, entering a large cavern. Mazzy commented, “You can...feel the wrongness in such a place. It has seeped into the very rocks, themselves.”

Inside the cavern was a human mage. Also present was Firkraag. A red dragon. Rolanna groaned in dismay. She hadn't been prepared for this.

“Welcome. You have come as I wanted,” boomed the voice of Firkraag. “It has been an interesting game, but to tell the truth, I tire of it.”

“Monster! Why have you done this to me? Why try to ruin my reputation?” yelled Rolanna bravely, privately relieved the dragon wished to talk, at least for the moment.

“For my amusement, for my curiosity, and for my memory of transgressions long since past. All of this spurred me on, but I grow bored with you.”

“This tells me nothing. You meander around the truth like a cat taunting a mouse.”

“Very well, an in-depth response. Your fathers are my interest. Your lineage crosses the mortal and spiritual, and both concern me somewhat. Gorion raised you. I know this from my spies and followers. They are subtle when I wish it. Gorion was as much your father as anyone. He was also an adventurer in his day, and crossed my path long ago. Him and his Harper friends. I bear the scars of that meeting. He is beyond my revenge, being dead as he is, so I settled for the next best thing. I can torment his spirit by destroying you. Wherever he is, he is seething.”

“That cannot be the whole of it. Such an old debt must seem hollow,” said Rolanna.

“I had toyed with forgetting the transgression, though it has not been that long in dragon terms. It was your other father that made me curious however. You are a child of Bhaal. What an interesting subject to study, or so I thought. Really, you are not so different, despite your little personal struggles. What will be interesting is your conflict with Jon Irenicus. That is something I would very much like to see. So I leave you your life. Do with it what you will.”

“What do you know of Irenicus!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I will have no dealings with that creature. I am merely interested in *your* confrontation with him. Yes, that will be something to see. For now, you bore me. I will taunt you no more. This has been such sport that I bear you no ill will. You may go."

"I cannot leave without Garren's child. You know this," said Rolanna. She realized Firkraag must already have realized this, that he had been playing with her. Rolanna imagined the fiery blast about to come, the failure of her quest to rescue Imoen, the death of her friends, a termination of her attempts to repudiate her heritage from Bhaal.

The fire did not come. Instead, the dragon arched its long, sinuous neck, shaking its head from side to side.

"Do I know this? Do I really? Oh, very well. The brat was but a byproduct of my scrutiny of you anyway. The child has proven no more interesting than its father. I had finished taunting him some years ago really. It was only your arrival that brought him into this."

"I think he is actually happier now," continued Firkraag, "that the burden of leadership has been lifted. Such resilience took all the fun out of his downfall. All that is left for me to do is kill him and take the deed to the land. Here, rescue the child from my servant and feel fulfilled. Do not think it will be easy. I test my subjects thusly all the time, and they know that failure is death."

Firkraag turned to the mage standing near him, all but forgotten so commanding was the presence of the dragon. "Conster! Go to the child! If Rolanna fails to take it from you, kill it."

Conster disappeared in a burst of magical energy.

"I will save the child and return for you in the future, Firkraag. I swear it," said Rolanna, but her words rang hollow. How could she possibly justify risking her companions to face the evil creature before her? She feared the only way she would fulfill her vow would be on a fool's errand, a hopeless attempt to face the dragon by herself to prevent Firkraag's enmity towards her from spilling onto her companions.

"Do as you must," said Firkraag, "it does not interest me until the 'future' becomes 'now.' If you wish to make a confrontation inevitable you know where I lie in wait. Now walk away, and see to your little rescue efforts. Take your time. Enjoy life. You have much to face."

The party hastily retreated from the cavern. All of the others had been shocked to see what they faced, and they all, Jaheira, Aerie, Nalia, Valygar and even Mazzy were glad they didn't have to fight it that day.

They returned to the room containing Taar's cell. Conster awaited them, saying as they entered, "Come then, fool, and let me prove my worth to the beast I serve!"

"Could we not talk about this?" asked Rolanna, although she knew it was useless.

"There is nothing to discuss!" said Conster. "I will make my fortune here or die! Watch me, Lord Firkraag! Watch!"

They killed Conster, and freed Taar with the key they found on his body.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Thank you!” said Taar. “We must away from this place!”

They returned to his father’s cabin. Garren was there.

“Your honor and my child are restored. I thank you,” said Garren. “The creature lives; I will not rest easy at night, but I have my child and I could not ask for more than that. You have shown great compassion placing yourself in danger for my sake. I have no reward to offer that would suffice. Perhaps I can grant a service instead. Go to the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. Speak with the Prelate. I have no doubt they would gladly accept you into the Order, if you are willing.”

“We are safe once again,” added Taar, “but for how long? Something is...unfinished in this. A powerful evil lurks in the dark. I shall sleep restless from now on, I think.”

Rolanna thanked them for their words, and departed. She wondered, however, if the Order would really desire her as one of its members.

Common Cause with the Shadow Thieves

The party returned to Athkatla. Rolanna no longer had any reason to delay, and sought out the Shadow Thief representative, Gaelan Bayle. When they found him, Rolanna asked if the price of the Shadow Thieves’ help was still the same.

“Aye, 15000 gold,” said Gaelan. “So there is the final tally. Are you happy with the price? We are certainly the least offensive ally you could choose in this matter.”

“I’ll pay the 15000 right now,” said Rolanna.

“Very good. Just so you be knowing, you be goin’ to the Shadowmaster Aran Linvail. Step carefully, me Lady, the Shadowmaster does not suffer fools gladly. Here, a key to the Shadowmaster. Find the secret door on the first level of the Shadow Thieves’ guild in the Docks, an orange brick building west of the area entrance. Remember, it’s northwest in the Docks district. As unlikely as it seems, the Shadow Thieves will prove to be the least of all evils you will encounter.”

“Shadow Thieves?” commented Jaheira. “Perhaps we shall finally get answers as to their interest in us.”

* * *

A week earlier, in the Institution for the Magically Insane, Spellhold, two Cowled Wizards were talking.

“The girl they brought in,” said one, “she’s a cute one, isn’t she.”

“I do believe I’ll have to practice some enchantment spells on that one,” replied the second.

“Haha!” said the first. “Hold...what was that sound?” A faint, muffled explosion could be heard.

Another cowled wizard appeared, yelling out “You two! The new prisoner, he’s escaped!”

“What! When? Where is he?” clamored his two fellows.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"He's in the lower..." started the third mage, who then blanched in dismay. "Gods, no! He comes! He's here!"

Jon Irenicus appeared. His plans were nearing fruition, and he was ready to turn Spellhold into his own personal magical laboratory. All he needed to do was to eliminate its current curators.

The three Cowled Wizards vainly cast magical spells at Irenicus, seeking to bring him down.

"I cannot be caged," said Irenicus, killing the first mage.

"I cannot be controlled," he said, killing a second.

"Understand this as you die, ever pathetic, ever fools!" he said, killing the final mage. He then walked to Imoen's cell, opening it with a gesture.

"Hello, little one," said Irenicus. "You and I have a great deal to do."

"Wh—what are you planning?" asked Imoen fearfully.

"Not to worry, nothing worse than what I shall do to your friend."

* * *

Rolanna and her companions entered the Dock District, seeking the Shadow Thieves' Guildhall. As they walked, a dirty boy stared at the passing group. Nalia stopped to pat his head; Rolanna wasn't sure, but she thought Nalia slipped the boy a few coins as well.

"My mother and father leave me alone a lot. They are really busy," said the boy.

"I know how you feel, little boy," said Nalia. "You will find some way to express yourself as I did, I am sure."

They entered the Headquarters of the Shadow Thieves, and asked directions to the office of Aran Linvail.

They entered a small room deep within the headquarters, filled with tables and chairs, a scattering of people about the room. A young woman walked over to Rolanna, and remarked "Hmm...so you're that Rolanna that Aran was talking about. My, my, but aren't you a cutie! I just love pretty things...don't you think I'm pretty?"

The young woman giggled at her own humor, then continued, "Aran's in his chambers, yummy little woman...go ahead and talk to him. I'm finished with him...for now." She giggled again, and waved goodbye to Rolanna as she returned to the table where she had been sitting.

"Hoi, greetings to ya," said a halfling who had also sauntered over to greet them. "Me name's Mitsu, an' don't go tryin' to make it rhyme with any funny nicknames, now, because I'm small an' such. I'm a Shadow Thief, just as you are."

"You are mistaken," said Jaheira. "I do not bear that name, and I will not. The greater balance bids me here."

"Well, now that that business is out o' the way, let me give ya a proper greetin'. Welcome to the guild, right an' true. I suppose yer here to either train or meet Aran, eh?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Me, I'd take the trainin'. Aran Linvail is not a man t' be messed with, an' it's best to avoid him altogether just in case yer messin' with him by accident, see? But I'm sure ya will do just fine."

"Heh...welcome to the guild, friend," said another Shadow Thief attracted by the commotion. This thief was human. "We haven't met, yet...me name's Cuchul. Burglar extraordinaire. Best rooftop crawler this side o' Waterdeep, aye."

"Rooftops!" exclaimed Nalia. "I would slide along the odd wall but never had the will to go higher."

"I could show you a thing or three, M'lady, if you wished. Perhaps...over dinner?"

"Er, no, thank you," replied Nalia hastily.

Since they had been promised free run of the guild, Rolanna decided to do a little exploring. She thought it only fair that her companions see what manner of allies she had chosen.

She quickly came across the Shadow Thieves' dungeon. Not a moldy cellar converted to a different use, but a specially constructed prison. There were no individual cells, just shackles lining the walls to hold the prisoners. The shackles could be adjusted to limit the prisoner's freedom of movement as much as the jailers desired.

They talked to one of the prisoners. "Hmph," he said. "I suppose that you must be one of Aran's new favorites. You don't have the look of one who's worked her way up through the ranks of the guild."

"I'm here to acquire Aran's help, not that it's any of your business," said Rolanna.

"Aran's help? Aran's help is like his harm, there is little difference between the two, for the most part. He'll turn on you in a second if it amuses him, mark my words. I am Achon...I was once Aran's lieutenant, his chief assistant and right-hand man. I was loyal to the guild above all, and that was my greatest fault. I thought I was doing the guild a favor by trying to assassinate Aran. Perhaps I was right, perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps Aran will not destroy our guild. Perhaps the other guild run by that...that woman...will be eliminated. I suppose I shall never know. The only thing I am certain of, now, is that my punishment shall be more agonizing and prolonged than anything you can dream of. Now leave me be, newcomer. There is nothing you can do for me or to me, and I have nothing left but to await my fate at Aran's whim."

Rolanna and the others moved to two other prisoners, chained near one another.

"Eh? Is it dinner already?" said one prisoner, wakening at the party's footsteps. "I haven't scratched my nose, yet, and I always scratches my nose before dinner..."

"Come on, mate...does she look like Bingham?" said the second. "You think she's bringin' ye food?"

"Ye never knows," said the first. "They changes the guards, sometimes. It happens."

"Yeah, I s'pose so. Like Rickard...member him, twenty years ago?"

"Yeah...he were a good fella. Slipped us extra bread, now an' again."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“‘Til Aran locked ‘im in here, with us. Fat boy, I ‘member...looked mighty tasty. Er...if’n you’re into that sorta thing...”

“Yeah...but ye sure she ain’t here wi’ food?”

“Yup. Don’t look like it, none.”

“Then go away, you,” said the first one to Rolanna. “Now I don’t know if’n I’m gonna scratch me nose or not! Look what ye’ve done!”

The party moved to the final prisoner, a dwarf. “Eh? Who are you? I don’t recognize you? Are you here to take me to me execution, finally? T’would be a relief, I think. Aran’s had me here for over a month. At least...I think it’s been a month. I’d hate to think I’d just be left here to rot, forever...”

Rolanna and her companions left, no one saying a word. Near the dungeon, naturally, was the torture chamber. As they entered, a prisoner cried out in pain.

“Now, what’s all th’ bloody noise about?” asked the torturer rhetorically. “It’s not like I’m goin’ to remove the red-hot poker simply ‘cause you start pleadin’ for mercy, now, is it?”

“No! No, please! I’m begging you! Don’t do this!” screamed the prisoner.

“Now, now, ye should have thought about that before you went and murdered your guild partners and their families. Now careful, your moving might cause real damage, here, an’ then where would I be?”

“N-nooOOOO,” gasped the prisoner, “Gggh...ngh...uuuhhhHHHAAIIIIIEEE!”

“Tsk. I don’t think you really appreciate the level of craftsmanship you’re receiving, here. We’ve been at this for, what? Four days? And you’ve only passed out twice. Do you know how hard that is? Ah...the lack of appreciation, sometimes. Hmm. Douglas... find me th’ pliers. Time our guest, here, found some respect for the craft.”

“Oh...oh, oh...I...I don’t think I can,” said the boy standing by the torturer. The boy scampered off into a corner of the room.

The torturer took note of his guests, saying “Oy...I’m Booter, th’ official torturer of th’ guild, here. ‘Tis a foin job, ye sees...an’ it requires more skill then anyone thinks, aye? But...ye don’t wanna be listenin’ to me talk, I be sure. Yer here t’ talk to the Shadowmaster, ain’t ye? He’s not much fer me skills, but he appreciates ‘em, shore enough. I wouldn’t get ‘im mad, aye? If ye want ‘im, though, ‘e’s in his room...probably with ‘is little girl, there, Tassa. Mmmmm...I’d shore like t’ listen to ‘er scream... Oh! Er...excuse me. Drifted off, fer a moment. Ye just goes off an’ sees ‘im now. Booter will be gettin’ back t’ work.”

“This person makes me ill,” said Jaheira. “Rolanna, I suggest we move on before I ignore the greater balance and return him to the dust.”

As they left the room the boy stumbled into them, also trying to exit. He turned a white face up to Rolanna and mumbled “Oh, you really must excuse me. I just,” he paused, gulping, “don’t have the stomach for this, much...”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna had long ago realized that no one person could right all wrongs, defeat all evils. Nonetheless, it galled her that she could do nothing about what she had seen here. Nothing, that is, if she wished for the Shadow Thieves' help.

They finally made their way to Aran Linvail's chambers. "Welcome to this place," he greeted them. "I've looked forward to seeing you. I am, as you know, Aran Linvail."

"And I am Rolanna, as you know. Now, could we please do what we must?"

"Right to the point, eh? That is fine with me. You are a very capable person, and I wish to propose a trade of services."

"I propose that you give me what I have coming already. I have paid."

"I apologize if you feel you have been done wrong. I assure you, all that you have paid is being put to good use."

"Where? Where exactly is it being put to good use?" demanded Jaheira. "We are not to be played with, Linvail. I should like to see results and I should like to see them soon."

"But these things take time," said Linvail placatingly. "In truth, we have been working long before you gave us the gold. Only a few minor points remain, but they must be addressed. First and foremost, you will be compensated for the gold you have paid. I will give you several magical items; they are yours to keep regardless of what comes."

"Oh, how generous," said Jaheira sarcastically. "Do you expect that to compensate while you delay our more important concerns? We have friends in need of rescue and vengeance both!"

"Now, I know you are eager to set off after Imoen," said Linvail, "and I assure you that the time will come soon. It takes time to allocate the funds however."

"This delay troubles me," said Rolanna. "Is there some problem that I am not aware of?"

"No, no, no, everything is as it should be. There are merely some added difficulties that we have encountered. I regret that I must ask a few tasks of you."

"I hardly think this is the time for it," said Mazzy. "We are on a mission of mercy."

"And vengeance!" added Jaheira.

"I know, I know, you are tired and have worked hard already. I apologize, but this guild war...it prevents us going further. Strange things are afoot on the Docks. Shipments are disappearing, as are my employees with them. We are significantly weakened by this. I think it unlikely you would be captured or wooed to the enemy. If you go to the docks and bolster the guard on the shipments it will strengthen our position. Go at night, and you will find my present guard captain there already; a woman by the name of Mook. Take note of anything odd that happens and report to me."

"And what is the nature of the shipment?"

"Ah, Rolanna, I must admit that the goods aboard would not be met well by the city guards. Weapons mostly, but I defend their use. The guild we are warring with are not like we. As dark as the Shadow Thieves are, we do not overstep our bounds. This new guild is different. If you seek the moral high ground in this matter, it is indeed with the

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Shadow Thieves. A surprising thing, but I assure you that I am true to my word. Examine your options here. By joining us you have closed other doors. Attending to the tasks I ask is the only way to achieve your goal. I will leave you to decide, but the docks await. Go there when you come to the only conclusion possible. Go at night and find Mook. Good hunting. Report to me if anything happens. Oh, and the bonus we talked of... Take these items. You will find them useful, I am sure."

"We are bought off, yet again," said Jaheira to Rolanna as they departed Linvail's chambers. "I do not deny that they are the best chance we have to find our quarry, but we had best do their little chores quickly."

It was already night when they left the guild. They found the thief Mook on the docks.

"Tis a grand eve to be sittin' on the docks," said Mook, "rank with the smell of fish guts. You must be Rolanna, the one that Aran was gonna send."

"That I am. You must be Mook," said Rolanna.

"I am. Bloody fine to have some backup. I've heard a bit about you. Been makin' a name for yourself as an adventurer."

"Thanks. I do my best," answered Rolanna shortly, wondering if she was being mocked.

"Aren't you a bit too heroic to be guarding shipments for Aran?"

"Tis merely a path on the road to another heroic feat," said Rolanna sarcastically, not caring for Mook's tone of voice.

"I'm glad I could play a part in your little drama."

"Could you tell me what the situation is?" asked Rolanna, tired of trading barbs.

"The situation is that I've seen the same man pass by four times. He looked a bit different each time but I knew it was the man."

"How did you know?"

"I'm trained to know, Rolanna. I've been watching him from the shadows here all day."

"Did you notice anything else odd about him? He may live here."

"He was casing the area and studying me. Now that you're here to stay with the product, I should be able to learn something from him next time he passes."

"That sounds like an excellent plan."

"If this is the man we want, it shouldn't be too long until he shows up again."

A short time later, the man appeared again.

"We've got our answer. Here he comes again," said Mook. "He looks different at night. Kind of creepy. Wait here. I'll find out what's going on." Mook walked over to the figure.

"Hail, friend! 'Tis a fine evening for a stroll, no?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Mook...I've been looking for you," said the figure.

"Who is it that speaks to me like an old acquaintance?" asked Mook suspiciously.

"It is fitting, Mook, for I have been watching you."

"Have you? What might your purpose be?"

"Truly, my beauty, it is time for you to leave this life. Guarding the spoils of another man's crime is no way for a woman to live."

"You're welcome to your opinion. Perhaps I choose to stay right where I am."

"Choose not the difficult path, weak one. You will come with me regardless. Expect no help from these dregs. Their death as written in the stars shall be fulfilled tonight."

"To me Rolanna! Treachery is afoot!" yelled Mook.

Rolanna and the others hurried to Mook's aid. Too late, as Mook crumpled to the ground. Rolanna realized the party was dealing with a vampire. They fought the creature, destroying its material form.

As the vampire faded into mist, it said "Damn thy soul, upstart! I've not finished with you!"

They hurried back to the Shadow Thieves.

"What have you to report?" asked Linvail.

"It went as you expected though I regret to report that Mook was murdered," said Rolanna.

"That is...unfortunate. She was a friend. I had hoped your support would prevent any deaths. Too many of my people have been killed or gone missing recently."

"They seemed to know her, though she did not know them."

"These events prove what I feared: this rival guild knows our actions well, likely due to the traitors that joined them. We must stop any more from leaving us. Two of our men, Jaylos and Caehan by name, are planning to leave our little community and join with our enemies. Greener grass and all of that, I suppose. They are to meet their contact on the second floor of the Five Flagons Tavern in the Bridge District. Go there and pose as one of our enemy's new recruits. I want to know where our enemy's lair is. We have yet to find it. This recruiter could arrive at any time so I suggest that you go to the Five Flagons now. They may prove unreasonable, so prepare yourself for hostility. Return when you have the information we need."

"Not just thieves, but traitorous thieves," was Jaheira's comment this time as they left the guild. "Our associations sink ever lower in Aran's service."

They caught up with the two turncoats in a private room at the Five Flagons.

"Who are you? Damn, I knew we'd be followed!" said Jaylos, a dwarf, as they entered.

"Ease up, Jaylos," said Caehan, a human. "Maybe they is just here for the same reason we are. Lots were talking about making the switch."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Could be, I suppose,” said Jaylos. “You there! What are you doing here? Speak, and be quick about it.”

“You...you here to meet with the contact too?” said Rolanna, taking her cue from what the two had already said. “I was worried you were here to kill me.”

“You too?! I thought we’d be...” started Caehan loudly.

“Keep your damn voices down!” said Jaylos. “Cripes, you’d think the whole guild was going. We’ve just got to sit and wait then. You keep your mouths shut and stay still!”

“Sorry, Jaylos,” said Caehan, “I was just glad to see someone else doing the same thing.”

“Stop using my name, dammit!” said Jaylos. “Maybe they are, maybe they aren’t. We’ll just have to see. All right, friend, just who is it you think we are going to meet?”

“Come on, stop playing games,” replied Rolanna, unable to give a name she didn’t know. “The contact. The one for the other guild.”

“Yes, the contact for the other guild. What is his name?” asked Jaylos. “You know, the name that is to be used as the password? The one you should know if you are really here to meet him?”

“Aw cripes, they don’t know the name!” cried Caehan. “They are spies sent to kill us! Aw, we are so dead!”

“Oh, you are funny,” said Jaylos. “Think we’ll just lay down and die?! We’re getting out and we’re doing it while the getting is good!”

“Kill ‘em before Gracen gets here or they’ll never take us!” said Caehan excitedly.

“Caehan, you are SUCH an idiot!” said Jaylos, as he and Caehan attacked the party.

A few minutes later the contact walked in, to find the party standing over two bodies. “What is the meaning of this?” said the contact. “I could hear this fight from the street outside! What is going on here?”

“Nothing,” said Rolanna, while Jaheira urgently whispered the name “Gracen” behind her. Rolanna continued after a moment, “Gracen, just some spies that had to be dealt with before we could meet.”

“I see. Well, a necessary commotion then,” said Gracen, “though we should not wait here long. Your new berth is beneath the graveyard district, behind the blue stone doors.”

“Might I ask what our reward was to be again? I would like it clarified,” asked Rolanna.

That was one question too many, as they found out as Gracen said, “You have been well schooled in this already. You are not who you say you are! You will die here before you can tell what you have learned!” Gracen, too, soon joined the bodies on the floor.

“What have you to report of Jaylos and Caehan?” asked Linvail when they returned to the guild.

“The contact and your defectors are dead. They spoke of the Graveyard District.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“The Graveyard District? Undoubtedly they have made their lair within the crypts below. From what we have seen of their dark nature, I am not surprised. You were not the only ones who were busy last night. The leader of this rival guild, Bodhi by name, made a daring attack upon us. She can only be a vampire and I suspect many of her servants are as well. The time has come to strike back to protect our people, and the city she has invaded. Go to the Graveyard District and find their hideout. There is a network of tombs beneath the graves where another spy tracked one of Bodhi’s servants. There you shall find a set of blue doors just north of a spider den. The doors are too heavy for any mortal to open, but the vampires likely pass with ease.”

“I assume you have some plan other than me banging my head against it?”

“I shall send a mage to meet you there and arrange for the doors to be opened. Here, you shall need these stakes if you are to truly finish these creatures. When you have destroyed their evil, return to me and I will fulfill our bargain. Do this job well and you may see Imoen by the morning. What say you?”

“I’ll go to the Graveyard District at once. These vile creatures will not escape.”

“You have my best wishes, Rolanna. I wish you well.”

An eventful night. One more task and the party would be on its way to finding Imoen.

The party traveled down to the crypts under the graveyard. There they found the promised mage, Haz. “At last you’ve arrived. These spiders were starting to make me nervous. Allow me to open these doors for you. Fleshy! Go forth and open the doors! Now, you stupid creature! Now! Rolanna, I trust you’re prepared.”

The flesh golem with the mage moved forward, and forced open the doors. Haz foolishly rushed forward as the doors opened, followed by Rolanna and her companions.

Inside a vampire waited, the same one Rolanna had seen on the docks with Mook. “Fools! The mistress knew you would come! Fight then, and know you die for nothing!”

“No! Stay Back!” yelled Haz, but the vampire killed him.

“Come then, come to your doom!” yelled the vampire to the others. “Dare you breach the inner sanctum! I think not!” He then dropped back, while several other vampires attacked the party.

After the party destroyed the others, the male vampire called out “One ambush you have survived but the battle is far from over. Find me upstairs in the room of blood and blades.”

After tracking the male vampire to where he waited, he taunted them “Think yourself brave enough to stand before me? Perhaps bravery is not enough!”

“It shall be enough this day to end your evil life, beast!” said Rolanna.

“You cannot destroy me! I am your better in all things! Your blood will fill the halls of this place! You are not worthy of feeding upon! For mistress Bodhi I will eviscerate you! She shall have tapestries of your sinew and bone! Come! Come to your end!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

After a short fight this vampire's form was destroyed as well. Stakes in hand, they tracked the vampire to his coffin, putting a stake through the heart of his resting form to destroy him.

"Hmm...I had hoped it would not come to this, but you are set in your path, aren't you," said a voice behind them.

They whirled. A female vampire stood before them. To Rolanna, her features were slightly different from those she had seen up to now, with perhaps an elven cast. Rolanna thought this must be the mistress Bodhi the male vampire had mentioned.

"What would you know of my 'path'?" asked Rolanna.

"I know about many things; about you, your employers, what they intend. Can you say as much? Do you truly know these people cloaked in shadow?"

"You must know I will view anything you say now with great suspicion."

"You may believe what I say or not, I have little concern about the matter. It would seem you are determined to make a nuisance of yourself regardless. Tell me, have the Shadow Thieves done more than promise? Have they delivered anything, or have they simply made certain you are always within reach? I imagine they are confused as to what their goals are. Have they said why they sought your service? Why they offered to help you?"

"Their service has not come cheaply. I have paid more than enough for it."

"Have you? Was the gold so important to them? Or were you being observed; your capabilities mapped and charted. Ask yourself what you bring to the equation. Gold? Gold is never in short supply for long. Service? Possibly, but there are others that would serve as well."

"And what would you suggest? That I join with you instead?"

"Oh no, I am quite sure this will end in violence. You are too volatile for my purposes. I merely wondered if you knew the extent to which you were being used."

"The Shadow Thieves seem to be honest in their dealings so far."

"Do they really? Are you certain? What if their interest in you was more than simply mercenary? What if they knew full well who you are...and what you are? You look surprised. I know what you are, child of Bhaal. Irenicus told me. He might have learned more, awakened your power, but the Thieves interrupted him."

"What do you know of my capture!"

"I know more than your brain could hold in a lifetime. There is so much beneath your nose; so much you do not see. Why, even Imoen escaped your notice."

"Imoen was taken from me! I will find her! And I will find this Irenicus!"

"You may have done both were circumstances different, but now I am afraid there is only one possible end to this discussion. I grow tired of this conversation. You have asked your questions and made your threats, and I have indulged them both. Now this will end."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“So you are to destroy me? Has this Irenicus lost interest in me then?”

“There is much to be learned through duress. Such a curiosity you are. Come, let us both learn a thing or two.”

They fought the creature before them, but she had unexpected vitality, barely seeming to notice their blows. After several minutes of struggle, Bodhi lithely jumped on top of a casket, momentarily out of reach.

“Well, that certainly was...educational,” said Bodhi. “I have seen enough, and I am done with you...for now.”

“What manner of creature are you? Is this all a game to you?” asked Rolanna.

“Perhaps, but games can be deadly serious, especially when I keep the rules to myself. Fight on, and seek your lost Imoen; I have seen what I came to see.” Bodhi transformed into mist, floating out of sight.

Once more, they returned to Linvail.

“So you have returned,” he said. “My advance spies said that you confronted Bodhi in her lair. It must have been a bloody affair.”

“It was, though I am more interested in what she had to say.”

“I see. And what was it that she said? I trust you are aware of the deceptive nature of her kind?”

“That is why I am asking gently. Why did you attack Irenicus? It was that fight that took Imoen from me.”

“You have proven worthy of an explanation. Certainly you have fulfilled all that we have asked, and I shall answer as best I can. It was the Shadow Thieves that attacked Irenicus in Waukeen’s Promenade. We have followed you ever since then.”

“You were in league with him? No, he was fighting hooded figures.”

“I am sorry I have not been fully honest, but we had to be sure you were not working for him. I assure you that we are still on the same side. We knew of your capture almost as soon as it happened. Very little occurs in this city that we are not aware of. We paid little mind. Even though it was done outside of the Shadow Thieves, we thought that a simple kidnapping was nothing to be concerned of. But soon after that we started losing people. That was when Bodhi appeared, though we did not know her name at the time. Members were threatened or seduced into her guild. None were seen again. We still don’t know where most are. Even her cadre could not have fed on them all. By chance a body was found in the sewer, leading us to Irenicus and his strange dungeon. We battled and lost, but the Cowled Wizards took him, as you saw. “

“I saw your efforts. It was a slaughter.”

“We must take partial responsibility for your loss of Imoen, but our chief concern was Irenicus at the time. We still don’t know why he killed our guild members. So we followed you. You were the only living thing to emerge from his prison. We watched your every step and made sure you would be close to us. “

“So why all the money then? Why not just interrogate me?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“We could not let an enemy into the guild when we are so weakened. In truth, your gold was much needed as well. We thought you could lead us to him, and you can. You seek Imoen and Irenicus, and we seek answers. They were taken to the same place, you see. The Cowled Wizards took them to the one place that mages in Athkatla truly fear, a place where power is stripped and examined, where minds are laid open for study. I have heard it called a ‘Residence for the Magically Deviant,’ but mages just call it Spellhold. It is an asylum, where people are sent to disappear.”

“What sort of place is this that no one knows of it?”

“You must realize that it is not as simple as launching an assault. Spellhold is a fortress asylum, designed to hold mages and other...talented people.”

“I have heard some in the Harpers speak of it,” said Jaheira. “It is more than a prison or supposed asylum, it is a place to forget people that are ‘troublesome.’”

“The island it is located on is under its own rule, and even the Cowled Wizards are not certain what becomes of those sent there. No one wanted to be associated with it once it began. It is difficult enough just to book passage. That is what your gold was for. Once on the island you will be on your own to contend with the asylum defenses and the pirates that run the place. Return with Imoen as you wish. Kill Irenicus if you can.”

“If Irenicus is in the asylum, isn’t he no longer a danger?”

“We are not sure. Spies within the Cowled Wizards tell us that they have not had direct contact with the isle for some time.”

* * *

Inside Spellhold, Jon Irenicus came to Imoen. “Awaken, child. It is time for another...test.”

“Please...I can’t take this...” weakly protested Imoen.

“Patience, Imoen. Soon it will all end,” said Irenicus. He directed that Imoen be strapped into the device he had prepared. Around the room, former Shadow Thieves waited in clear tubes, fearfully eying the mage.

“No...don’t do this...I don’t want to die,” begged one of the prisoners.

“Silence, dog!” snarled Irenicus. “You have no purpose but to die by my hand.” Irenicus cast specialized spells, starting the apparatus he had created. Around the room, the prisoners died in their tubes, in each case the apparatus somehow capturing their spirit as it fled the body. Then it was Imoen’s turn. She cried out as something left her, slumping motionless.

“You are nearly ready for her, Imoen,” said Irenicus. “She will be pleased.”

Brynnlaw

The party prepared for their journey. Valygar decided not to join them. He planned to travel back to Imnesvale, and assume the position of their murdered ranger. The solitude involved would give him time to think over his situation. Rolanna also thought

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

he hoped the separation would cause Mazzy to forget her desire to make him into a squire, although Rolanna, knowing Mazzy better, thought that unlikely.

The rest of the party, with Aran Linvail, walked down to the docks to the ship that would take them to their destination.

"This shall be your ship to the island," said Linvail. "The bulk of your gold purchased your passage, as well as the silence of the crew."

"Though a silence more symbolic than anything," said the ship's captain, "as you may well find my men a boisterous lot at all hours. I encourage general revelry."

"The personal habits of the crew are your business, Captain," said Linvail. "Just as long as they perform as they should and deliver my people in good time."

"Never a fear nor worry should cross your thoughts this eve, m'Lord," said the captain. "I have traveled this sea a good many times, and I foresee no troubles."

"Then let us proceed to introductions. Rolanna, this is Captain Saemon Havarian. He and his ship will... Mr. Havarian, what is your ship called?"

"Ah, the name changes as do the winds, mainly as I never seem to affix the plate with the proper resin. She is the Galante for now, until whim takes me elsewhere. As for the voyage, heed my words, Rolanna, as there are dangers to the sea you may not be aware of."

"I am all ears, captain," said Rolanna, knowing nothing of the ocean. "Yours is the voice of experience and I will listen."

"A sudden squall or hidden reef could prove deadly to the unwary," said Saemon, "though we are more likely to encounter pirates of ill repute."

"That is why I have included some protection for this voyage," said Linvail.

"Protection? I was not aware of any such plans," protested Saemon. "The captain should be consulted on all such matters."

"Certainly. I am providing an extra crew member," said Linvail, "one that will attempt to improve the overall safety of the voyage. This is Sime, and she will be staying very close to you, Saemon Havarian. For your safety, of course."

"Of course," said Saemon. He looked disgruntled at this suddenly added passenger, but made no protest.

Sime, a young female thief, stepped forward. "I shall make certain that, should we be surprised at sea, death will not come from a surprise source. Do I make myself clear?"

"As clear as clear could be, m'Lady," replied Saemon, "though I am not sure I approve of your tone. I assure you, nothing untoward will happen during our crossing."

"Sime shall also advise you, Rolanna," said Linvail. "She is acquainted with a few of the inhabitants of the island."

"Then we are fully staffed and ready to sail," said Saemon. "Best that we get underway as soon as possible. Disembark, m'lord, and we shall away. Hold fast, the journey begins."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The party was soon under sail with the flamboyant Saemon Havarian at the helm. The journey was uneventful, and if there were other ships on the same course they must have kept a discreet distance. The ship made good time, and soon there was a sizable island on the horizon. It might have been considered a pleasant place, but a grim shadow extended the length of it. The asylum, Spellhold, loomed from a cliff side. The sun was rapidly disappearing beneath the western horizon.

“We have arrived, and in good time, I might add,” said Saemon. “Congratulatory remarks for all the crew, and to our visitors for their delightful company.”

“Delightful company?” said Nalia. “This ship is filthy, falling apart, and your crew has been nothing less than boorish. Ick...I’ve never felt so in need of a good bath!”

“A particular congratulations to you, captain,” said Sime. “It was fortunate you distracted those other ships we saw in the distance. Your signals in the night; were they some type of warning?”

“Yes, well, I thought they might be pirates,” said Saemon, glancing uneasily at Sime, “so I merely displayed a series of lights that mirrored their own. I wished to appear as though I was one of their own.”

“Again, my compliments,” said Sime. “It did seem that they truly believed your signal meant there would be trouble if they attacked.”

“It merely proves how short of wit they can be,” said Saemon heartily. “One must always be a step ahead of their adversaries. Regardless, we have arrived. I leave you to your mission, whatever it may be. It has been a pleasure sailing in your company, but now, I take my leave.” Saemon walked away towards the bow of the ship.

After the captain left Sime said, “I do not trust this pirate, Rolanna. His manner is that of a fool, but his behavior during the voyage betrays a cunning mind beneath.”

“He has delivered us as promised,” said Rolanna. “There are more important things to worry about.”

“Agreed,” said Sime. “Be prepared, this place is dangerous enough even without my suspicions of Saemon.”

Sime told them they should seek out a man named Sanik for help in entering Spellhold. She then disappeared below, and the party moved to the doubled planks that the crew had finished laying to allow access to dockside. As they left the ship and moved onto the dock Saemon hurried up beside them.

“I fear I cannot allow you to leave my presence just yet,” he said. “While I must admit to a certain fondness for you all, I have little choice in what I must do.”

“I do not like the tone of your voice. What do you intend?” said Rolanna.

“My apologies, as I said. This was not my intention at all, but one must do what good business dictates. You will recognize those that face you now. I do hope they make short work of this encounter; I have no tolerance for violence, really.”

They could now see three vampires running towards them in the yellowish light of wharf oil lamps. Saemon had started running at his best speed away from the party.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“A mere apology for such an atrocity will do you no good, pirate!” yelled Mazzy after him. “You associate with the most evil of undead, and you shall perish along with them!”

They defeated the vampires, by which time Saemon was long out of sight. The party decided to find an inn to spend the remainder of the night, since they did not trust sleeping on the ship with Saemon’s crew.

There was nothing along the waterfront, so the party tried the next parallel street inland. As they walked, a young woman approached Rolanna. “Please ma’am, do you have any money to spare? I can’t go back to the Guild until I have something.”

“Of course I can spare a coin,” said Rolanna. “Why is it that you worry about returning home empty-handed?”

“You seem like a good person, ma’am,” said the woman. “I will tell you if you promise not to tell Chremy.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.”

“I should begin with my name...Ginia. I grew up here in Brynnlaw. My father was a tailor until he was killed, and my mother is long dead. My Lady, things have not always been like this. Brynnlaw was once a pleasant town, though my memories may be influenced by happier times in my own life. Regardless, life was hard...but it had its pleasures. We lived on fish and our produce. The asylum offered employment to many of us. Then the pirates arrived, led by the despot Desharik. Desharik had lost a war with another pirate king. Forced to this island, his ships invaded the town. They took our homes. Desharik killed our mayor and dumped his body into the sea. We were forced out into the streets.”

“We begged the Asylum to offer us shelter but the wizards within locked the doors against us. My father could take no more injustice. He tried to get back into our house and was executed for breaking the law of the pirates. Once they’ve stolen something, the owner has no claim on it. Desharik said that we would have to pay for our father’s ‘crime.’ He gave us to Chremy, his lieutenant, as a reward for service. He put me to work as a courtesan for the drunken pirates. It’s horrible, ma’am! He says that he’ll kill my brother Ason if I don’t do it.”

“Why have you not gathered your brother and run away from this man?”

“There is no escape for Ason and I. There is a smuggler who will take us but we cannot afford to pay him. There is nowhere to run on this island.”

“Where is this smuggler? I will pay for you and your brother’s passage.”

The smuggler Calahan was hard to find, but Rolanna managed to locate him near the waterside. His greeting was friendly, “‘Allo mate! W’as the good word, then? Calahan I be, scourge of the seven seas!”

“Hello, Calahan,” said Rolanna. She was surprised to recognize him, having previously met him in the small village of Ulgoth’s Beard near Baldur’s Gate. “I’m here to speak to you about Ginia and Ason.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Aye, good kids...sad tale. Ye be involved in this somehow? ‘Tis the first that I be hearin’ of it if ye are.”

“I want to help them escape this island. Can you offer them passage?”

“That I can. For 100gp per head. If ye can pay, I’ll take ‘em to Ulgoth’s Beard. Therella will take care o’ ‘em.”

“That sounds fair. I’ll pay for their passage.”

“Then we be agree’n. There passage is assured if ye can get them away from that bastard Chremy. Send ‘em to ol’ Calahan when ye’ve got things arranged.”

Rolanna returned to Ginia, and told her she had arranged passage for her and her brother.

As they watched Ginia walk off, Mazzy commented “I am most pleased with the efforts this party is making... I am proud to be a part of it.” Rolanna was also pleased by the outcome of this small deed, but she felt it had been like tossing a pebble into a pond. After a short time even the ripples would disappear, and everything would be as before.

In a local inn, the Vulgar Monkey, they found Sanik, who Sime had mentioned. However, he was murdered before they got any information from him. They learned the murder was ordered by a local brothel-mistress, since Sanik planned to run away with one of her courtesans.

They tracked down the brothel-keeper, who died after a short fight, and arranged for Sanik's love to escape on a ship. They learned from the ship's captain that only “deviants,” people with special conditions of the mind, were admitted to Spellhold, the Cowled Wizards' prison.

There was one Cowled Wizard living in town, named Perth the Adept. He had some way of entering Spellhold whenever he wanted.

Spellhold

They saw Perth the Adept, the Cowled Wizards representative in Brynnlaw. Before they could even introduce themselves, he attacked, muttering something about a test. From his body they removed the wardstone that would permit them to enter Spellhold.

Once inside, the Asylum Coordinator of Spellhold met them. Not sure what had happened inside Spellhold, or the status of Irenicus and Imoen, Rolanna decided to act firmly but not forcefully until the situation clarified itself.

“I trust you have good reason to be entering this place? It’s Rolanna, isn’t it?” asked the Coordinator after they entered. Anymore, Rolanna reflected, nearly everyone seemed to know who she was.

“Spare your words!” said Rolanna. “I am here for Imoen! Where is she!”

“I know why you have come,” said the Coordinator. “You have been observed since you arrived on the isle. No doubt you are brimming with concern for your ‘Imoen.’ She is in good health, and if you will permit me, I will direct you to her. This is not a prison, but an institution of healing and learning.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Then why the overzealous security measures?” asked Rolanna.

“We deal with dangerous subjects. Imoen was brought here for her own safety, and it would not do for her to be endangered while here, would it? It is not as simple as that, though it never is, is it? Still, I’m sure you will understand more once I have explained.”

“I understand plenty already!” said Jaheira. “This place reeks of corruption and deceit!”

“Please, you have worked so hard to come here. Allow me to show you what I mean. I shall let you examine the facilities, and Imoen, for yourself.”

“Lead on then, but I shall be wary of any treachery,” said Rolanna.

The Coordinator led them into the section of Spellhold where the prisoners, or wards as no doubt the Coordinator would term them, were held. Rolanna thought it odd that they saw no other staff as they walked.

“The Residence for the Magically Deviant houses many people,” said the coordinator, “all of whom can benefit from a structured environment. They can also be studied, such that what they are capable of is understood better. Take young Dili here. She was cast from her family for her talents. At a remarkably young age she learned how to shape magical energy, allowing her to change her form as she wishes.”

“Have you a new face today?” asked the girl before them. “I think you do. I can see the real one. Tomorrow I will be you, OK?”

“Here she is safe,” said the Coordinator, “and others have learned something of what she does. It is invaluable information.”

He walked on, to another cell. “This is Wanev. He used to be the Asylum Coordinator before I took the post. Too much exposure to magical forces, I suspect.”

“What?! What do you want?!” yelled Wanev. “Is this not enough? I want this hall cleaned!”

“His mind could not handle the energies that circulate in this place,” said the Coordinator. “A bad reaction to a particular spell unhinged him quite dramatically.”

“A bad reaction indeed if he resists all attempts to cure the damage,” said Mazzy. “Unless damage was the intent?”

“No one foresaw it,” was the Coordinator’s response, “but with study we can prevent it from happening again. His career is over though.”

“This is Naljier Skal,” he said, walking on. “Once a great bard of some repute, though now he is little more than a child. His last research project was into the nature of the universe, and what lies beyond the gods. Something apparently didn’t like him looking.”

“I used to have pretties piled high to the sky,” said Naljier Skal in a child’s voice, “don’t remember where they are though...pretties...”

“Somehow he retains his spellcasting abilities, however,” said the Coordinator, “and is incredibly dangerous if unsupervised.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Coming to another cell, he said, "This is Aphril, and she sees a bit too much as well. Experiments with planar travel have given her sight that extends beyond the world we know. Unfortunately she can also see the denizens of those other realms. They are quite numerous apparently, and she is never truly alone."

"All around...All around!" said Aphril, darting glances all about. "Behind! Above! All around!" she yelled, the last words rising to a scream.

"She does not sleep much," said the Coordinator. "What use are eyelids when you can see through the planes? She will be studied so that some good may come of her condition."

"This is Tiax," he said, introducing an unremarkable looking gnome. "Not too much is known about him. He was found raving on the side of some road."

"Tiax rules all! You are but grease for the wheels of his rule! Silence the squeaking of those that protest! He rules all!" Rolanna was shocked to recognize a dwarf she had met wandering about Baldur's Gate.

"Obviously a danger, as you can see," said the Coordinator, before moving on to another cell.

"An aged elven mage is this cell's occupant. Very powerful, though he is incapable of trusting a soul. Dradeel is his name."

"Bad dog! Bad dog!" said Dradeel. "Werewolves all! Back! Back with you!" Rolanna was again surprised, recognizing him as well. He was the last survivor of Balduran's final voyage, freed by Rolanna on an island far out in the western ocean, overrun with werewolves.

"Obviously he had some sort of traumatic experience in the past," said the Coordinator. "He cannot be allowed to roam with the power he possesses."

"And lastly, the one you seek," he said, coming to a cell containing a young woman. "She is quite well, considering the circumstances."

"So empty...empty..." murmured Imoen, staring off into infinity.

"Imoen! It's Rolanna! I'm here for you!" said Rolanna desperately, but Imoen did not react.

"She does not seem willing to respond right now," said the Coordinator. "Her consciousness comes and goes. It is fortunate you arrived when you did."

"Yes it is. I'll be leaving with her right now!" said Rolanna. She feared Imoen had been drugged, and urgently wanted her gone from Spellhold.

"Oh, you misunderstand," said the Coordinator, his voice changing, deepening. "It is fortunate for *me* that you arrived when you did. I am quite through with her for the moment. It is you that I am after. I knew you would seek her, and so the path was difficult, but not impossible. All designed to test your potential." Rolanna was sure she knew this new voice, knew and feared it, but if this was truly Irenicus, the situation was as bad as she could imagine.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“What are you talking about? Is this another Cowled Wizard trick?” said Rolanna, hoping that this was all it was.

“The Cowled Wizards no longer run the asylum,” was the reply. “With Bodhi’s aid I was able to take control quite quickly. She is a fine sibling, if a touch predatory. I trust you remember my name now?”

“That I do. You are Irenicus, and I owe you a great debt of pain,” said Rolanna. She felt fear. Not only was Irenicus here, but he had thoroughly taken charge of Spellhold, facing no internal opposition. He must have monitored their arrival on the island, and no doubt felt he was well prepared for whatever they might attempt.

“You are intent on revenge or justice, or whatever. I care not,” said Irenicus. “You can do nothing I do not wish. Your fate has been sealed since before you arrived. A simple addition to rations and meals by a master of herbs, mister Saemon Havarian.”

“What is this? I will defeat your treachery!” cried Rolanna reflexively, but inside she quivered. Irenicus had out-thought them all, had already employed Saemon Havarian before Aran Linvail approached him. He had probably suggested that Saemon make himself available to begin with.

“You will find you are powerless,” said Irenicus. “I have taken precautions that you will not be damaged. Rage would be wasted. There is no battle; no heroics. Only sleep.”

Irenicus made a gesture, and the entire party succumbed to a magical slumber, dropping where they stood.

Some time later Rolanna awoke, strapped into some sort of apparatus. She could only turn her head a small amount, but she could make out the figures of Irenicus, Bodhi and Saemon before her.

“It would seem that my visitor has awakened,” said Irenicus. “It is as I predicted. It all has been. I fear I have had an advantage over you. I have planned your coming from the start. It could be no other way. A bit of treachery by Saemon and a spell component goes into a soup or some other dish. Undetectable, and nothing more than a seasoning until my casting. But don’t worry...you won’t have to think about any of this or that. Your life ends today.”

“Where is Imoen! What have you done to her!” raged Rolanna.

“Don’t worry, Imoen has already suffered what she must for my cause. She even survived, and this bodes well for you. You are stronger, more focused, and you are *aware*.”

“So you used her relationship with me to get me here, but why torture her?” asked Rolanna.

“Imoen was more than bait, and has served just as you will. She is like you in many ways, and in one very special one.”

“Are you suggesting that she is a child of Bhaal as well? That is just not possible,” said Rolanna in disbelief.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You must have suspected. Perhaps she felt no symptoms, but the taint was there. She is a similar age, and was apparently secluded as a child, just as you were. This Gorion of yours should have told you about yourselves early on. You might have learned not to fear what you are. Imoen is indeed a child of Bhaal. I suspect her innocent charm and humor suppressed the darkness. She showed no symptom because there was no place for shadow in her spirit. I had to show her some very dark shadows indeed. It is unfortunate that it had to be done, but it was necessary to get what I needed. Now I must focus on you.”

“Why turn to me? I won't help you.”

“You assume you are a volunteer, but I don't need your cooperation. I will take the essence of you regardless. Do you see the Shadow Thieves in the other chambers? They are the fruits of Bodhi's guild war, and their deaths shall force the divine soul from you. Don't be afraid, Rolanna. I suspect this will be mercifully quick.”

Rolanna could see several of the thieves Irenicus had mentioned in tubes before her. Their faces suddenly twisted in agony, and they collapsed in their tubes. Then Rolanna felt a pulling, a tearing. She screamed, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Rolanna awoke, although she knew quite clearly that she was dreaming. She was standing at the inner gates of Candlekeep, her childhood home. A patchwork Candlekeep, irregular holes visible, filled with a gray nothingness.

Imoen appeared before her, reached out and spoke, “Do...not fight...to fight...is to lose...come to me...find me...”

“Imoen? Where are you?” asked Rolanna.

“Within...find me within... You cannot fight alone...you cannot... Find me within...” With that, Imoen faded from view.

Imoen must mean the main keep, thought Rolanna. She rushed forward, only to find a demon blocking her way.

“This path is to the core,” said the Demon. “The depths of your soul. Only through sacrifice can you achieve such insight. Do you give of yourself that you will know yourself? Do you let go of what you are, that you might see from a distance? Choose what you will sacrifice to know yourself, to walk within. Give of your skill, your health, your mind, your wits, or your youth.”

“I give of my wits and the wisdom I have learned,” said Rolanna.

“Then you shall come to know yourself through your mistakes, when you undoubtedly falter with foolishness. A fool can learn much that a scholar does not see. You shall know more of yourself through what you have lost. A gesture of your intent within. Pass as you should, and do not fear what comes.”

Rolanna passed within the keep, finding Imoen again.

“I...I can see you there... Wait...and we can win...” said Imoen.

“What are you doing here? Last I saw you were incapacitated.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Shh...before the shadows return to me... I have seen what is to come... One alone cannot fight... Together we must battle...your instinct... Alone you would fall...whether you win or lose...but here, in my sight...we can defeat it... Lead the creature here...lead it to me, and we shall fight it together. Together...he does not expect us together...but he has shown me how... Go, and lead the beast here...it is your only chance...and my last...”

Rolanna found the thought in her mind that the other Imoen referred to would be found outside. She exited the keep. Nearby stood a figure. She recognized it as Sarevok, but saw it represented the murdered God of Murder, Bhaal.

“Fall to your knees!” said Bhaal-Sarevok. “You can do no other! I am within you! I am your essence!”

Never, thought Rolanna. What had Imoen said? Lead it to her sight. “You wish to battle within me? Catch me if you can!” she taunted, running away.

“You cannot run from yourself; you cannot defeat yourself!” said Bhaal-Sarevok, chasing after her. “I am the blood! I am the instinct!”

Rolanna ran inside the keep, her opponent not far behind. She saw Imoen ahead.

“Now! It is in my sight!” cried Imoen. “I will add my will to yours...he has shown me...how to make it vulnerable!”

Rolanna turned, drawing her sword. She fought, somehow strength flowing to her from Imoen, while her opponent weakened with every blow.

“I am your instinct, yet you deny me!” raved Bhaal-Sarevok. “Fight me within your own mind! I should devour you! How do you stand! I sense...your soul...it has taken form to guide from within! You are strange among your kin!”

Bhaal-Sarevok seemed to diminish, to be moving away from Rolanna even as it stood still. Before it vanished it cried out, “But it...it is weak and will not help again! You are empty inside! There is nothing within...but the instinct!”

Rolanna whirled to face Imoen, who held her head with her hands. “Something is wrong,” said Imoen. “I...no...not again! Not again!” Imoen screamed, and Rolanna echoed her as she felt something precious, something she had never known was divisible until that moment, ripped from her.

Rolanna awoke, still strapped to the apparatus.

“Well! You are a strong one indeed!” said Irenicus. “You resist beyond all reason! A pity you are dead on the inside.”

“You cannot turn me against myself. I have strengths you cannot see,” said Rolanna.

“I don’t know what you faced while mired within the spell, but here in the world of the living my plans have gone just as I wished. I have drained you, drained you of the very thing that made you special. It is the worst of curses, and I should know.”

“I will not let you harm Imoen further. I will free us both.”

“I have no doubt you would, but you are no longer a living threat. I have taken your very divinity, and drained you of your soul. The curse that was wrought against Bodhi

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

and I has now ceased and yours has begun. You will wither, you will wane, and you will die. Bodhi! Remove this nothing...and Imoen as well. We are restored at their expense and need them no longer. Our revenge to come is now all the sweeter.”

“As you would have it, my brother,” said Bodhi.

“Of course. See to it as quickly as possible. I will tell our friends in the dark of our coming. We will plan our assault from here. I bid you farewell, child of Bhaal. We shall not meet again.”

Rolanna was bound, and carried from the room by vampiric servitors. She was hustled down hallways and through a door. She was unbound, and pushed from a platform. As she got to her feet she saw her companions about her, seemingly unhurt.

“And so your life does come to an end,” called Bodhi from the platform. “A pity. You have proven resilient beyond all expectation. It is...appealing to me.”

“Appealing enough that you should allow me to live?” asked Rolanna.

“Not quite so much as that, though I am quite willing to postpone your death for the sake of my own goals. Your abilities have piqued my interest, and since you are to die, I would have you do it in an entertaining fashion. Irenicus can be so dour when he wishes. He is set upon revenge for his banishment, and can think of nothing else. A failing of his mind remaining flesh, I suspect. Undeath has given me focus, and an interest in the abilities of powerful creatures. An interest in you. I will make your death glorious, as well as entertaining.”

“Do your worst, Bodhi. I do not fear you,” said Rolanna. That was true; all she felt was a burning anger, toward Bodhi and her brother. She saw she still had all of her equipment. So Bodhi and Irenicus feared her so little. Let them come within range just once and she would test that assumption with her blade.

“You should. You must run my gauntlet to prolong your life,” said Bodhi. “You must do so knowing you have but the slimmest chance to make a difference. Do you see this passage before you? It is the darkest part of the asylum and its history: a test of clarity for its prisoners, by a director that delighted in dissecting the mind. Now he is under my...influence, and this place is mine to control. It is a masterpiece of madness, one that you will come to know intimately. It has been some time since I have given chase to a worthy foe. Enter the maze of this place and seek an exit. I give you time to run, after which I will come to feed. But you are not running solely for my benefit. I give you reason as well, to make the hunt more desperate. You may yet foil Irenicus, though the chance is small. His plans will take time, just about as long as my hunt. Run my gauntlet and your life ends...or is freed. The hunt begins.”

Bodhi moved back, disappearing from sight. As Rolanna looked around she saw Imoen was also present.

“Are you all right?” asked Imoen. “I was so scared...you came all this way to get me and we were almost... I’m sorry Rolanna, I was just so worried...”

“Never mind that. Are you hurt? What did he do to you?” asked Rolanna.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I...I don't know, really. Same thing he did to you, I guess...since we're...the same? Rolanna, he showed me what you are and...what I am. And then he took it away. I don't know who I am now, Rolanna. You may not feel it yet, but the spell for me made me feel hollow. He took something vital...he says it was my divine soul? I find out I'm a child of a god and now I'm empty and dying. You are too..."

"We'll survive by helping each other, like you helped me in the dream during the spell."

"The dream? Rolanna, I had no dream during my ritual," said Imoen in puzzlement. "Just blackness, and my will draining away. Has this affected you different than me? You have been dealing with the Bhaal essence longer...perhaps you are more focused... Or perhaps it is more focused upon you."

"I don't know. Regardless, we have to get back what Irenicus took from us."

"I agree. Divine soul or not, there is a deadly threat to our mortal lives. I do not look forward to what is coming. I have been getting weaker, Rolanna, and it has only been a few days since they performed the ritual on me. If we don't reverse what was done...if we don't restore our souls...we will probably both die."

"Then let's get going. Join with me and we will escape this place immediately."

"Good. I have missed traveling with you, Rolanna, even when times were bad."

Rolanna did in fact feel a little strange, but then anyone might who had experienced what she had. She introduced Imoen to those of her companions who didn't know her, and then led the party from the room.

Her step faltered, her vision spun, and she felt something was very wrong. For an instant, she was conscious of nothing but the rushing of her blood. The feeling passed, but far too slowly for Rolanna's liking.

"Whoa, stop for a bit," said Imoen. "How are you feeling? You looked really sick for a moment there."

"I don't know. Have you felt any ill effects since the spell they cast on you?" asked Rolanna.

"I've been getting weaker, I think, but it hasn't made me all that ill yet. You take care, all right? It's really odd that you are sick."

They wandered about in the area Bodhi had left them. If in fact it had been built by a previous director, Rolanna could not see the point of the puzzles and monsters that littered the place.

To exit they found they needed a stone and the hand of the builder. The stone they found guarded by a group of kobolds. The builder was something else, another vampire.

"Stand and speak, that I would hear your lies!" said the vampire when they found it. "That Bodhi sent you, didn't she! Are you to kill me, or are you as damned as I?"

"She sentenced me to this place. We should work together to escape!" said Rolanna, ready to work with any creature, no matter how foul, to free herself.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I work here alone against all that would come! I have sealed the way, and only my hand can open what is now closed! We shall battle in this place I created and forever more it shall be sealed! If I do not have control then no one shall! Only my hand can open the way!”

“You are mad! Are you even listening or do you simply wish to fight whomever you can?” retorted Rolanna, rage twisting her voice.

“I removed the crystals that focus the magic for the door!” raved the vampire. “Left it to rot in a pile of refuse! The kobolds have taken it now. They worship it, the fools! No way out for you! You’ll starve here! Starve!”

Snarling in fury, Rolanna drew her sword and attacked the vampire, the party perforce following her. After they had dispersed its form, Rolanna moved to its coffin, driving a stake into the corpse within to permanently destroy it. Above the coffin formed an apparition, which whispered “I thank you...Rolanna... I am free in death...I must rest...” before disappearing.

Within the coffin, the body had collapsed to dust, all but a hand, which they took. With the hand and the crystal liberated from some kobolds they were able to pass to a new section of the maze. They found more puzzles and monsters, slowly pushing forward.

As Rolanna led the party down a corridor, Bodhi and several of her vampiric coterie appeared ahead.

“Here, mousey mousey,” called Bodhi, “the hunt draws to a close here and now.”

Rolanna saw her tormentor through a red haze. She felt that if she didn’t already have a drawn sword she would be able to tear Bodhi apart with her bare hands.

“I expected you to come,” snarled Rolanna. “You’d be a fool to let me reach Irenicus.”

“I know I’m early, but I just couldn’t bear to see you leave,” said Bodhi. “You were amusing, but the game is over. One last time, let our paths cross in blood!”

Rolanna felt the rage consume her. She suddenly transformed, becoming a nine-foot tall scaled beast, armed with razor-like claws and teeth. The beast launched itself at Bodhi.

“What is this?!” cried Bodhi in shock. “A creature of pure death and darkest shadow! Child of Bhaal, what have you become?! Away! Irenicus must know of this! We will observe from a distance!”

The vampires fled. The beast that had been Rolanna, balked of its prey, turned on its former comrades as they came up behind her. They desperately defended themselves, afraid to counterattack in case something of their leader was left in the beast they fought.

Bodhi gone, Rolanna’s blood cooled, and mind and body were reunited under her control. Rolanna’s will had faltered, and the essence of Bhaal was there to take advantage. The void where her soul once was overflowed with murderous fury, the mark of a deity that no longer existed. It was mindless and horrible to behold. The taint of Bhaal had affected her differently than Imoen, reacting with her strength of will.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna suddenly came to herself, back in her own form. Jaheira and Mazzy supported her.

“Rolanna? Are you...yourself?” asked Jaheira. “That was...the Slayer! You became a form of the avatar of Bhaal...but the god is dead... Rolanna, this is not right at all.”

Rolanna only vaguely recalled what had happened when she had become this slayer. She looked at the gashes on Mazzy and Jaheira, and realized she must have attacked them in her madness. She had always fought against the rage that was part of her heritage, but this time it had overwhelmed her.

Rolanna felt weak and ashamed. She experienced an old fear, that her abilities as a paladin were not granted by the divine favor of the good gods, but were a mockery, a shining shell hiding the evil demon within.

She realized she would eventually lose herself unless her stolen soul was restored. She vowed to fight the rage, to never again allow herself to slip and become the slayer. She thought it would be better to be destroyed utterly than become the tool of a dead god.

Rolanna stepped away from those supporting her, in control of herself again.

“It’s good to see you again, little sister,” said Imoen. “Ha! I rather enjoy calling you that. So, you ready to go?”

Rolanna managed a smile for Imoen’s benefit. Yes, she must continue. Somehow, Imoen must have her soul restored.

They passed on, into another section of the maze beneath Spellhold. An apparition appeared before them, speaking, “Here begins the tests of madness, of sanity and clarity. Presented with nonsense how will you proceed?”

“You wish to test me? But this place is derelict. The directors are dead,” protested Rolanna.

“The procedures laid down proceed regardless of time or circumstance. Such is the nature of this place. Protests are futile. This area works on its own, allowing the directors to watch in safety. You are here, and there is no other way out. Comply or die. You are sane enough to understand that. Now, when madness beckoned, how did you answer? Now comes the judgment, when we decide your fitness for life outside.”

“Very well, do as you must, specter. I will not protest if it is pointless.”

“Very good. Restraint is a good sign. Perhaps you are closer to release than I thought. We shall see.”

They fought a battle. When finished, they were asked a riddle. And so it went. Rolanna couldn’t tell how answering riddles proved her sanity, but she was glad she had her companions to help her with the questions.

Finally, through use of some unknown scale, they were done.

“And now comes judgment,” said the apparition, appearing again. “Have your thoughts been focused by your ordeal? Have you gained clarity? Who can say. It has been quite some time since the process has been refined. Really, I do not think you were intended to survive. But I will fulfill my purpose as best I can and use your own words to

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

judge your fate. Your will is satisfactory. You have passed what test I had to offer. This session is now done. You are free.”

Irenicus

At the top of a stair they found Saemon Havarian. He greeted them as though nothing was wrong, saying, “There you are. I see that you have weathered the storms of this place with reasonable pluck and health. It does me good to see you alive.”

“I face treachery at every turn! Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you!” replied Rolanna angrily.

“Such hostility, and I wager it is well earned,” said Saemon. “It is, however, misdirected. I do not wish to be your enemy here. Irenicus pushes ever forward, though I cannot see how I will profit. The blade he gave me is hardly compensation. Better that this place were free for the looting. I offer advice to foster a trust, and you may determine the value as you wish. It is simple enough for the moment, and will save you in the long run.”

Rolanna firmly clamped down on her anger, knowing where that could lead. “Speak then, and I will listen,” she said, although there was nothing he could say that would lead her to trust him.

“Irenicus is a power, indeed,” said Saemon. “I have seen no chips in his armor of spells. You would need an army to face him, and I suggest that there is one to be had. The inmates of this place are a resource to be tapped. Release them and their anger and frustrations will strike at Irenicus. That is my suggestion, and I leave the workings of it to you. Upstairs your army awaits. Use it, or you will perish.”

Saemon vanished, he having only magically projected his image, not being sure of the reception he would receive.

“As much as I should not trust his advice,” said Jaheira, “he may have a point, Rolanna. There are powerful mages above who may be the difference between life and death.”

After climbing the stair, Rolanna recognized this level as the laboratory of Irenicus. Doubtless, he was still inside the room where she had had her soul stripped away, but Saemon’s advice made sense in this respect. Her previous experience strongly suggested she and her companions could not face him alone. She needed assistance, and Saemon had provided the only suggestion.

She bypassed this level, and continued up another floor, to where the ‘magically deviant’ were confined.

There they ran into the fellow responsible for keeping everyone locked away. He was not happy to see what he considered escaped inmates.

“What? What are you doing here?” he cried when he saw them. “You should be in your cells with the rest of the wackos! Lonk the sane takes care of you, but you had better show respect! Everyone gets locked down tonight. Too many people getting agitated. Always happens when the boss experiments. Makes them angry, I guess.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"Makes them angry, does it? What would happen if they got loose?" asked Rolanna.

"You're one of them, what would you do? Individually they can be bullied around, but all together? They get too excited to control!"

"What would it be worth to get you to release them?"

"Worth to me? How much is a life going for these days? That new director Irenicus would have me quartered in his experiments. He's done it before."

"You only follow him out of fear," suggested Rolanna. "I'll destroy him with the help of the inmates."

"You think...you could? Hmm..." Lonk the sane considered briefly, coming to a decision. "That's a new way to look at it. I don't like him much, and he's never been less than rude to me. You know, I really preferred Wanev as director. It was a shame what Irenicus did to him. I will help you, I think. You may do as you wish with the inmates. I'll be back when this mess is cleared up."

With Lonk's keys, they quickly freed the prisoners and gathered them together. It was about that time that Rolanna began to lose control of what was happening.

"Tonight I am someone free? What face should I wear for this?" asked the child Dili.

"You will wear what face Tiax orders!" said the dictatorial dwarf. "Today he rules all!"

"Silence yourself, diminutive one!" yelled Dradeel. "Do you not hear the howling! Around on all sides they are!"

"You will regret the day you crossed the will of Tiax!" was his reply. "My conquest of all is not something to be mocked!"

"Is that the rule of all you survey, or beyond?" asked Aphril, casting a frightened glance where Tiax stood. "What of those that walk inside, and around, and through? That stand where you stand now?"

"None stand where Tiax stands, lest he walk atop them!"

"As I see you do now," said Aphril, "and beneath others. Do you not see? See them inside and behind and beyond!"

"N-no...you speak too much of what can be seen," the bard Naljier Skal said in a trembling voice. "I wish to see only my pretties again... I won't look too far, I promise..."

"Bah! Tiax is surrounded by fools and madmen! Who is to blame for this outrage? Whom shall Tiax smite!"

"Settle down, all of you," interrupted Rolanna. "If you want out of here we have to confront Irenicus!"

"Irenicus? I...I took his face once. His punishment was..." cried Dili in consternation.

"To look at him is to see too far...I cannot look to him," added Naljier Skal fearfully.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"He is cold through all the planes," said Aphril, "none walk where he does, though they see him not."

"I would prefer to face the dogs of fire themselves!" said Dradeel. "This Irenicus is surely a tool of the Gibbering Twelve!"

"Heheheeee...he did this... He did this!" said the former directory Wanev. "I will... We must find him! He is the cause! He is the one that brings the tests! I will not rest until his head is mine and mine and mine alone!"

That was more the spirit Rolanna was looking for. "He has tortured the lot of you! Aid yourselves and help me defeat him!" she cried.

"Tiax shall face him alone! Tiax judges you not worthy of helping him! Though you may watch if you wish!"

One of the mad crew before Rolanna cast a spell, and before she and her companions were prepared they all found themselves teleported to the presence of Irenicus.

"What is this? You have released all of my test subjects?" said Irenicus. "How wonderfully mad of you. I didn't expect this in the least, so dangerously risky it is."

"They have rallied around me! We shall all defeat you!" yelled Rolanna, more to bolster her disparate followers than for any worry it might cause Irenicus.

"As over-eager as ever, but your boasting is wasted on me," said Irenicus. "You are no threat, not even with your army of madness. Your fate has been sealed with the curse I transferred to you. I have the souls from both you and Imoen, and they have healed Bodhi and myself. You will die in our place, or worse. Bodhi tells me you have exhibited a... transformation. With your will slowly fading perhaps the essence of Bhaal will rise to take you. That would be a sight, I am sure."

"I'll take back what is mine now! I'll take it back!" yelled the former director Wanev. "You perverted this place and I'll take it back!"

"You tortured those here long before I arrived," said Irenicus. "I merely had more purpose to do it. Bah, I speak with madmen when I should be at my revenge!"

"What revenge do *you* have, wizard?" demanded Jaheira. "You killed my Khalid with no more thought than one would give to a fly! I shall have *my* revenge! Nature's fury shall strike you down!"

"You...you used me!" added Imoen. "You tore apart my soul and then you ripped it from me! I'll kill you for that, Irenicus! I'll kill you!"

"Bah! Your pathetic mewlings mean even less to me than Rolanna's!" replied Irenicus. "Die! All of you! I have restored my soul and will work my revenge without your interference!"

Rolanna and her companions attacked Irenicus, backed up by the magical abilities of the insane inhabitants of the asylum. Rolanna saw magical spells released which she had never seen before, well above the abilities of Imoen, Nalia and Aerie.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

For once, Irenicus was overmatched. He spent most of his time fending off the attacks of the others, only fitfully casting offensive magic of his own. He finally yelled out in disgust.

“Damn you all, why do I fight over this place when my plans may be laid anywhere! I must start anew! Here! This place is yours! I hope it is your tomb!”

Irenicus disappeared. The prisoners Rolanna had released, her helpers, were all caught in a massive release of magical energy. Whether it was a last spell triggered by Irenicus before he left, a defense installed by the builders of Spellhold for just such an emergency or a simple backlash from the number of potent spells cast in a confined space, all of the ‘magically insane’ were killed. Fortunately, Rolanna and her companions were not harmed.

After such a battle, Rolanna and the others needed to rest. They barricaded themselves in a storage room on the same floor, to get what sleep they could.

Rolanna dreamed, a dream of particular clarity. She was in Candlekeep again, facing Imoen.

“You came too late,” said Imoen. “Didn’t I say you would come too late? You will learn to trust me. Don’t be afraid. You are safe here...if you behave. I will show you what fills the void. What is now free.”

Rolanna felt a strong pressure to let the dream take its course, but she resisted, asking a question. “You are not Imoen,” said Rolanna. “She said she has not had any dreams like these.”

“I lurk behind your soul, in the very fiber of your being. I am the only thing left when mind and reason are stripped away. I will show you what you can be, what you can do...if you simply let yourself become what you are. I can show you all of this, because I am within. I am what fills the void. I am you.”

“I’ll show you a bite.” The form of Imoen proceeded to murder sleepers that Rolanna hadn’t noticed until that moment. She had the feeling the sleepers were important to her,

“You are to be given a gift. It is a valuable prize, one that you had better appreciate. You worry for your comrades perhaps? Leave them, abandon them, and become what you must. There is great power in your heritage. Use it, and you will become closer to who you are...what you could be. Feel what is in the void. Use the tools that you are given.”

Rolanna struggled to wake up, rejecting this choice. But she was caught fast, and could not escape.

“Become part of something greater,” continued the image of Imoen. “I am in you, and I know what is best. Each time you use it, each time you accept it, you move a little closer to the evil within. Perhaps you lose yourself in the end, but you will go to a greater reward than you can know.”

Rolanna tried to cry out, to reject this choice, to refuse to become a tool of Bhaal, but could not.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"After all, what does an eternity of nothingness matter," said the image before her, ignoring Rolanna's struggle, "when you can destroy all that would oppose your development as easy as 'one'..."

An image of Sarevok died.

"Two"

An image of Bodhi died.

"Three"

Irenicus, too, died.

"Four"

The figure of Imoen died. Rolanna tried to cry out that never would she sacrifice Imoen.

"Five!" echoed a voice from all around. Rolanna felt as if she was dying, she couldn't breath.

She awoke, her cries having awoken all of her companions as well. Since they were all awake, they decided they might as well continue.

On the ground floor of the Asylum they ran into Saemon Havarian again, or at least his image. He warned them that the exit to Spellhold was sealed, and unless they were willing to essay a portal leading to the Underdark through which Irenicus and Bodhi had passed, they should accept his help in finding Irenicus.

Rolanna had no desire to enmesh herself in more of his schemes, and refused his offer. Instead, they searched the ground floor. The exit was indeed sealed, but they found a key that would allow access to the portal Irenicus had used to escape. They also found a journal Irenicus had kept. Rolanna paged through the journal, stopping at entries that caught her interest.

No doubt these texts will prove to be an embarrassing legacy, but I must order my thoughts herein, lest they spill from my accursed mind.

Spellhold is in my control. Once recovered from my torpor I made short work of what defenses there were. Coordinator Wanev conveniently removed himself, suffering a peculiar reaction to a spell of mine. I forget what it was; perhaps something I heard in the temples of Suldanessellar...does it even matter now?

My condition grows worse, and what I remember of my 'home' is fleeting. I see images of family whose names I cannot recall, and dream of emotions I no longer feel as vividly. On occasion I sense nature as if she is my mother, as though never removed from her bosom, but such moments are few. I bear the hallmarks of senility with the rage and power of a young elf to lament it.

Rolanna paged to another entry.

Bodhi endured the curse much better than I do now, but she was more focused and, more importantly, undead. She is now thoroughly seduced by her vampiric condition, despite its previous failure to counteract the death sentence she was under. She had embraced her mortality, excited by the urgency of it, but now she

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

is confused. Imoen's soul has restored her, but her motives remain transparent, even simplistic. She revels in her carnal nature, even as the elf within despises the creature she has become.

I would pity my 'sister' if I was capable, but emotions come to me only in violent outbursts. Ellesime has taken my ability to truly feel, and I am left with the threadbare heart of a human, or some other short-lived vermin. I will not suffer this much longer.

Another entry:

Spellhold has met my needs quite well. They had made a practice of experimenting on inmates here for quite some time, though in a barbaric fashion. I refined their instruments, and have finished preparing the necessary rituals. I am quite through with Imoen, though she can still serve as bait. I am certain Rolanna will make an appearance sooner or later.

Another entry:

Bodhi has delivered more assassins than I had asked for. I disposed of some in advance, but it seems such a waste. I think she has done this on purpose, as she has taken to releasing the extras in the maze below and hunting at her leisure. I marvel at her hunger, and how she seems so *alive* in her undeath. Perhaps it is the soul of Imoen. Soon I shall see for myself. Rolanna had best hurry.

The final entry:

Victory! I am restored! Rolanna has given exactly what I needed, exactly as I demanded, and now I see where Bodhi has found such fire! I feel the essence of the gods within me! Damn Ellesime's curse for the weak minded spell that it was; now I am free. Rolanna did not make proper use of the heritage given her.

Now comes the time of retribution. I will not allow such a crime to go unpunished. The audacity of Ellesime, claiming my punishment was just, and the hypocrisy of 'my' people, accepting such an act while decrying mine. I will not let this rest. I will take what I intended, and those that would stand before me will fall as they should. Today is a much better day. I will act at my leisure.

The Underdark

Jon Irenicus and Bodhi stood with several female drow inside a room underground. One of the drow commented, "Things go well on the surface. The temple of their false god has been defiled."

"I am pleased," said Irenicus. "My revenge will soon come."

"We did not act for your benefit, Irenicus," the drow corrected sharply, "though you did offer some...interesting opportunities."

"Yes, Matron Mother, excuse my careless words," said Irenicus.

"Our first prisoners arrive, Matron Mother," said one of the other drow as several surface elven prisoners were brought forward.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“These two rank high among the surface scum, Matron,” said one of the guards. “What is to be their fate?”

“Their presence sickens me. Kill them,” said the Matron Mother.

“Perhaps it would be better to interrogate them first,” suggested Irenicus.

One of the elves, drawn out of his apathy by the realization that not only was the speaker not another drow, but known to him, protested, “Joneleth, what are you doing with these monsters! You are one of...”

Irenicus cut him off permanently, casting magic that killed both prisoners instantly.

“An odd way to question, Irenicus,” said the Matron Mother, unperturbed by what she had just witnessed. “Did you not like his tone?”

“I...reconsidered, Matron. Your command was the wiser,” said Irenicus.

* * *

Rolanna and her companions, Imoen, Jaheira, Aerie, Nalia and Mazzy, appeared on the far side of the portal they had taken from Spellhold. The great depths of the Underdark stretched before them, and as they adjusted to the dim light, the reality of where they were began to sink in. It was a realm of countless legends, where evil lurked behind each shadow, and though they had traveled far in pursuit of Irenicus, never had any of them felt so isolated. As black as their situation may have seemed, it somehow grew darker still.

“This...this is the Underdark,” said Aerie, shivering. “Ooh, I don’t want to be here, I don’t! This place is death for my people! I, I feel as if I’m going to suffocate here!”

“I need you to be strong, Aerie. This is a harsh place,” said Rolanna.

“Yes. Yes, you’re right,” said Aerie, recovering some self-control. “I...I must sound so silly. You’ve had your soul stolen from you, and I’m crying about being here...in this place. Let’s go, then, and do what we must. I’ll...control myself. Just don’t abandon me here, Rolanna, I beg you. I’d go mad!”

They had appeared in a side chamber to a great cavern. There was a dim light, mainly from phosphorescent growths on the ceiling above. They walked cautiously into the main cavern, which stretched away beyond sight ahead and to their left. There were faint noises coming from a side passage to their right, which they cautiously investigated.

In the dim light ahead, they could make out a collection of carts and stalls. Several short figures were moving about among them. Seeing no obvious danger, Rolanna led them forward.

When they got closer, they could make out three individuals, evidently duergar. The duergar had also noticed them by now.

“Cor der noror rrin doth samman?” asked one.

“Ol raugh corl sargh? Xunder to thuldin sonn? Thuldul ol torst?” questioned a second.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I am sorry, but I cannot understand the tongue you speak," said Rolanna, her hand dropping away from the hilt of her sword at the friendly if unintelligible reception.

"Gordul! Ta jarge," said the third duergar.

The first duergar cleared his throat. "Ah haha. You must excuse my fellows. It is not often we encounter surfacers down here," he said in strangely accented common.

"Yes, very seldom. They do not live long," said the second.

"Well, unfortunate things can happen in the depths," said the first, "but we do not partake in such events. I am Carlig, a trader of sorts."

"I am Rolanna. I am looking for a couple of other 'surfacers,' as you say."

"I haven't seen many strangers around here," said Carlig, "and I talk to everyone. Well, almost."

The second duergar introduced himself as Uder Mordin, adding, "Those two creepy ones were back, Carlig. You remember, the neck-biter and the mage."

"Oh yes, those two," said Carlig. "Bad news, I would wager. I've seen them near the drow city. Must be up to dirty dealings; those ol morogh dark elves don't usually let strangers live."

"Those are the two I'm looking for!" said Rolanna excitedly. "Bodhi and Irenicus! I'll have to go after them!"

"Well then, I'll wish you luck," said Carlig, "though you won't be able to simply walk into the drow city."

The third duergar said, "That place will come down on your head harder than a llargh tunnel unshored."

"That's their choice to make, Finderlig," said Carlig. "No need to worry them more. Ask about before you go assaulting that place. Might be a better way."

Finderlig barked out a "Ha!" as his comment on any chance to enter the drow city.

"Well, in any case," said Carlig, "I've wares to sell if you are interested. Always looking for fresh faces to trade with. No matter the color of shadow in you."

"Been pretty busy these last few days," added Finderlig. "You come through; those other two; bad sign, it is."

"Why do you say that?" asked Rolanna, sensing that Finderlig was someone who always extrapolated the worst possible result from the present situation. Rolanna had run into his type before on the surface; Finderlig would probably be happiest the moment before the doom he had always predicted expunged him from existence.

"Common sense. Outsiders always cause trouble," said Finderlig. "Nothin' more to say about it, really."

"I assure you that we will be no trouble to you," said Nalia.

"People around here are very...careful...about who they let wander about," said Finderlig, adding, "I wish you luck in your travels."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"It is appreciated. Thank you," replied Mazzy politely.

"We shall need it," added Aerie. She turned to the others, stating "Rolanna, I restate that I do not want to be here. I just don't like it..."

After restocking on arrows and sling bullets from the merchants, they continued their exploration of the cavern. Rolanna had no plan for what they would do if they found the drow city, let alone how they could defeat Irenicus and Bodhi if they stumbled upon them.

They did encounter a few individual drow not too long after this. Consistent with the stories they had heard, the drow attacked without asking any questions. Rolanna and the others were able to defeat them without undue effort, but it was still extremely unlikely that they could take on a city filled with drow.

They found a small settlement of underground gnomes, who helped them and told Rolanna of a friendly dragon nearby.

They followed the instructions to find the passage that led to the dragon Adalon. Near to where they had been told lay the drow city they indeed found a shadow cloaked entry through which the faint phosphorescence from the ceiling did not penetrate.

They walked into the tunnel. It descended, rapidly expanding as they walked forward until they were in a large cavern. Rolanna froze when she saw what awaited them at the other end of the cavern. A dragon. Silver in color. Rolanna relaxed fractionally when she realized the dragon did not radiate the intense evil that the red Firkraag had.

"Welcome, welcome to my lair," boomed the voice of the silver dragon Adalon. "I have watched your progress with great interest."

"My lady, you honor me with your words," said Rolanna, carefully following the gnomes' instructions to be polite.

"I'm sure I do, but flattery is not why I have allowed you to come here. Do not think me too generous; I am not as tolerant as others of my kind. I am Adalon, the guardian, and I have done my duty as well as I have been able for many a century. I was not the first, but I know the history. My charge is the elven ruins above, an ancient temple that marks the gateway to the Underdark. There are others elsewhere, but this was the first."

"The first what?" asked Rolanna.

"The temple marks where the elves of dark hearts first descended, truly separating from Elven kind and becoming drow. The drow keep the outpost of Ust Natha here as a symbol, one that is fought over regularly, though I have governed the hostilities and seen peace for decades at a time. But there has been a crime here recently, and I can no longer honor my commitment. I will ask your assistance, and in return I will aid you."

"Speak on. I will listen and see what I can do."

"Silence!" roared the dragon, spreading her wings until the tips brushed each side of the cavern. "I..." said the dragon, emphasizing the pronoun with a shake of a head the size of a cart, "I will tell you when you may speak. This is a very important matter, and I will not be interrupted."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Of course, my Lady Adalon,” said Jaheira firmly. “Rolanna, do keep quiet.”

“The drow respected the borders of this place for centuries, only venturing out for sport and small skirmishes. That was the balance. The two you seek, this Bodhi and Jon Irenicus, I believe they have made a deal with the drow for their own safe passage and offered a way to tip the scales against their Elven enemy.”

“It is unfortunate that they did not offend you in some way,” commented Jaheira. “We might have been spared the headache of this journey if they had to face an angry Silver.”

“You may ask why I do not extend my influence. I cannot. Irenicus bargained with my most prized possession. He violated my lair and stole from me. They have taken my eggs.”

“Vile creatures! Such a crime is unthinkable!” Rolanna quickly said, before Jaheira could make another comment.

“I have been informed that to move from my lair is to cause the destruction of my eggs,” said Adalon. “It is the final straw in a long list of atrocities I have been witness to. You must retrieve them for me. Do this, and I will reveal a safe escape route to leave the Underdark, one that emerges close to where Irenicus plots his next move. In addition to placing you near your target, I will also make a gift of an item from my hoard. It will be powerful, and worthy of your service.”

“I would offer to help you even if there were no reward,” said Rolanna.

“Very noble, though I have had many a person give up on such vows before,” said Adalon, eying them suspiciously. “My term here has soured me on the company of non-dragons. I am grateful however, and will see to your success. I do not ask you to assault the city, rather to enter it with subtlety. You will take the identity of a group of drow I dispatched recently, a party from another city destined for Ust Natha.”

“To become such a hated thing,” murmured Jaheira. “I do not look forward to that.”

“I will transform you, and you will be able to pass among the drow with ease. They will not see through the fiction I create. When you arrive at the gate, tell them you are from the city of Ched Nasad, and that you seek sanctuary within Ust Natha.”

“I question the logic of this,” said Rolanna uneasily. “I do not know the ways of the drow as well as I should.”

“Improvise. They are in the turmoil of war at the moment and will overlook much. They will not turn away extra hands. You will not be discovered by any other means than your own mistakes, so be careful not to make them.”

Rolanna raised no more objections, not wishing to anger the hot-tempered Adalon further. She didn't see how they could expect to pass as drow for long, but at least it offered a way into the drow city.

Adalon cast her spell. Where had stood six individuals of varying races, heights and weights, now stood six drow, alike enough to be sisters.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“It is done,” said Adalon. “You now resemble the denizens of the drow city, complete with a house insignia that will not draw undue attention. I suggest you act like drow when speaking to anyone you meet. You will also have knowledge of the language of the drow, and your speech will be heard as though you have spoken their dark tongue all your life. The illusion will last as long as it needs to. Trying to leave the city through their main gate to the surface will dispel the magic. You will be on your own against impossible odds. I am sorry, but I must protect my interests. The only safe escape is through my influence once my eggs are recovered.”

“I will do what I can, Adalon,” promised Rolanna.

“I thank you. Remember, you are from the city of Ched Nasad. Take a drow name as well. Use ‘Veldrin,’ it is commonly used.”

Ust Natha

Rolanna conferred with her companions on what little lore of the drow they knew, the better to blend in among those they would soon meet. They then set out for the nearby city of Ust Natha.

As they approached the gates, a male drow called out, “Who is there! You are drow, but there are no scheduled patrols this day! Identify yourselves! Intruders without cause will be killed where they stand! Speak your purpose!”

“Stand down, male worm!” Rolanna yelled back. “I am Veldrin from the city of Ched Nasad. Let me pass!” One fact they had known was that female drow controlled drow society. Rolanna hoped she had taken the proper tone, and they would not be denied entry.

“My apologies, I merely follow my duty in questioning you,” was the reply from the gate, verifying Rolanna’s greeting. “You are welcome to pass, Veldrin of Ched Nasad. There would normally be an extensive questioning of you, but we were expecting your group from Ched Nasad. Your late arrival has delayed the plans of Solaufein. Enter quickly, and be sure that you seek Solaufein’s counsel. He of the Male Fighter’s Society will instruct you on your conduct within Ust Natha. Be aware that your welcome is conditional, and that if you fail to meet with him or fail him in any other way, you will be hunted for sport by all that care to join in. The Male Fighter’s Society is in the North end of the city, past the Female Fighter’s Society and just before the Spider pit.”

Just beyond the gates was a small square, or rather a circle, the passages and buildings they could see avoiding straight lines. The circle was actually a platform; Rolanna noticed the ‘streets’ of the city were winding walkways above the floor of the cavern that housed the city. The lighting at this level did not extend down to the cavern’s floor. Merchants lined the edges of the circular platform. Just ahead, a male drow was yelling at a dwarf. Or rather, a duergar Rolanna saw as they walked forward.

“That’s valuable merchandise, you fool! Be careful!” raged the drow.

“Please, master! I haven’t eaten in a week,” replied the duergar slave, cowering before the drow.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"No more of your idiocy! You've outlived any usefulness," said the male, drawing his sword and cutting down the slave.

Rolanna was enraged at this callous act. For a brief moment she teetered on the edge of letting the rage consume her, bringing forth the slayer aspect of Bhaal. She closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths until the worst of the rage passed. When she opened them, she saw a female drow had approached the male drow standing over the corpse.

"What is going on here, Leathel?" demanded the female drow.

"The slave never listens and I tire of it," said Leathel defensively.

"The slave is not your property. He is mine," said the female.

"I'm sorry, my mistress. The slave got out of hand and was punished."

"Understand this, fool. You are easier to replace than a trained slave. I have other sons."

"But—mistress, please! No..." protested the male drow. With a blast of magic, the female drow slew him. His body dropped to fall alongside the dead slave.

"Idiot!" she yelled at the corpse. "Where shall I find a slave now?"

It galled Rolanna that she could do nothing about what she had just witnessed. She was tired of having to compromise her principles at every turn. She started walking, still carrying on an inner conversation with herself.

Rolanna noticed two non-drow off to the side. Curious, she examined them. They had pale, yellowish skin and small, black centers to their eyes, glittering like polished jet. Behind the figures was a small ship. A ship similar to those she was familiar with, except it floated on the air. Rolanna approached one of the figures. If she had any hope of finding Adalon's eggs, she would have to start somewhere.

"Be standing back, drowling," said the figure as she got closer. "Ship almost ready is...will not have dark hands of yours defiling it, will I."

"Who are you?" asked Rolanna.

"Speaking you if to me, polite will you be, drow! Having no need I for your vile kind!"

"May I ask, then, who you might be, please?"

"I be of this ship the Captain, drowling. Ahmaz, my name be, wanderer of the astral seas."

"Then may I ask you what kind of ship this is?"

"Hmph. This ship on the astral seas does travel, between the thoughts of gods, and seldom to the prime."

"Could you please tell me, then, what was wrong with your ship that it should be here?"

"Encountered we a vortex in the astral seas, and damaged we came limping to the prime. Restored and sealed, the hull must be, before we can be leaving."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Away with you, drowling,” said Ahmaz, tiring of the questioning. “Disgusting me, you are, and harming vibrations of my ship, will you be. Away!”

Rolanna glanced at the second creature, which immediately said, “Having no interest in your tongued conversation have I, drowling. Stepping away from my ship will you be, before skinning you alive am I!”

Rolanna later learned the creatures she had been talking to were githyanki, who seldom visited Faerun. After passing several buildings she came upon the male drow she had been told to meet, Solaufein.

“Ah. You are the newcomers that have been sent my way, I see,” said Solaufein. “As if I do not have enough to accomplish in a day without suffering for the welfare of the weak. There is no ‘refuge’ to be had in Ust Natha, fools. We pay for our existence here with blood and you shall do the same. My name is Solaufein, and for now you shall do as I say to prove your worth to the Matron Mothers. Failure is death.” He paused a moment, deliberately staring at Rolanna’s breasts, which made her shift uncomfortably.

“And just because you are female, do not think to challenge me. You are a foreigner, here, and no better than a slave until the Matron Mothers think otherwise. Pfeh! I suppose I should get your shepherding underway. Have you a name, vagrant? Or shall I simply refer to you as the female?”

“My name is Veldrin,” said Rolanna meekly, using Adalon’s prepared cover.

“No backbone, just as I suspected. Am I to be saddled with a drow who has all the fierceness of a jelly? If I find out who is behind this assignment... No matter. One of the Matron Mothers has taken an interest in your arrival and wishes to avail herself of your skills. She has sent a Handmaiden to speak with you at the entrance platform to the city. I shall be there, no doubt, to herd you on your mission like a nursing mother. I will go to seek her out now. If you are intelligent, you will go to the entrance platform quickly. The Handmaidens are notoriously impatient.”

“We must be subservient, Rolanna,” said Jaheira after he walked away. “To them we are lesser drow and no doubt under suspicion. Any sign of disobedience would bring scrutiny upon us. The drow have a harsh culture, one I am not overly familiar with. We must harden our hearts if we are to blend in. The alternative is discovery and death.”

Rolanna and the others returned to the market area at the entry to the city. She saw Solaufein standing next to a female drow. Rolanna went to the female drow to ask instructions.

“Do not address me directly, worm!” stormed the female drow. “Any more impertinence from you and you shall feel the lash of the tentacle rod as it flays the flesh from your bones!”

Rolanna was glad her dark skin could not show the flush she felt at another error. Solaufein highlighted Rolanna’s mistake in insulting detail, “When you are in the presence of one of Lolth’s favored...or a Matron Mother...you do not speak until spoken to, fool! Where is your sense?! Forgive me, Handmaiden Imrae...this is the worthless excrement from Ched Nasad. I knew she was worthless when I first laid eyes upon her! I

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

shall see to it that she is tortured most severely for this! I shall attempt to find others who may serve the Matron Mother's will far better!"

"You shall do nothing with them, male," Imrae said disdainfully. "They will have to do. You will be punished later." Rolanna realized Solaufein had cause to be insulting. As a male, it appeared the handmaiden could easily blame him for Rolanna's lapses.

"For now, I will address the female personally," said Imrae, speaking directly to Rolanna. "Your story has been verified so far, Veldrin of Ched Nasad, and that is why you have not been sold as a lowly slave or made an amusement in the tavern...but you still have no place, here! You are fortunate, indeed, that many of our finest warriors are busy with...preparations. Elsewhere. Fortunate enough that a Matron Mother has decided to make use of you. Cling to that sole hope, worms, and do not fail the Matron Mother... for if you do, the horrors of your punishment shall be far more terrible than had we beset you at the gate! Explain what has occurred, Solaufein. And be quick about it, male, for the Spider Queen demands my attention."

"At once, Handmaiden. If I were to speak of the devourers, Veldrin...you would know what of I speak, yes?"

"Er...are you talking about an otyugh?" Rolanna replied, wondering what creature he could be referring to.

"No, you doltish fool! I speak of the devourers...illithid! Tentacled psions that devour brains...although in your case they may overlook yours. A Matron Mother's eldest daughter ran afoul of devourers while scouting. Her fool companions fled or were slaughtered, and she was taken captive. They know a prize when they have one, the devourers. They will bring the daughter to their city, and should they reach it she shall be lost forever. With the...preparations...of the armies, we are the only ones who can intercept these devourers. We must go to their cavern entrance and wait for them. Handmaiden Imrae has given me a blessed item of Lolth that will pull the devourers from their astral travel there...and it is there we must pounce. The Matron Mother has no desire to see her eldest daughter become a snack for the devourers, so we must not fail! Do you understand, Veldrin?"

"I am to meet you at the entrance to the illithid caverns and ambush some illithid who have a Matron Mother's daughter captive."

"Exactly. The illithid tunnels are in the southeast portion of the main Underdark cavern. I will be scouting and you will find me there when you arrive. We do not expect the illithids for some time, yet, so you have the opportunity to rest and resupply yourself, if that is what you wish to do. You must meet me at the entrance to the illithid tunnels within the next twelve hours, no more. Do not be late."

"Indeed. There are many exquisite horrors that may be found for you in the Demonweb Pits, should you fail," added Imrae. "And if you decide to run, the driders will eventually track you down. As for you, Solaufein...the Matron Mother expects even better from you. Report to the temple before you leave the city." A look of dismay flitted over Solaufein's features at these last words.

"As... as you wish, Handmaiden."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As Rolanna walked away she suddenly had an insight into the drow character. From the little Jaheira knew of the drow, they were organized into houses, each house controlled by a matron mother with dictatorial powers. While the party had been outside the city, any drow they encountered would assume them enemies, to be attacked on sight even if they appeared to be fellow drow. Once inside the city, they were assumed to belong. Unless they made a grievous error, any individual encountering them would ignore them once they parted, drow unaffiliated with any individual house being unimportant in their internal power struggles.

Being unaffiliated with a house had its disadvantages. Any drow could challenge them without hindrance, while if they defended themselves, they risked drawing the challenging drow's entire household down on them. If they could affiliate themselves with a drow house, then the same protection from challenges would apply to them. At that point, they should probably only fear discovery from another member of the house, although they would also face the possibility of being drawn into the internal power struggles their previous powerlessness had let them avoid. Rolanna thought that Adalon's plan was not as poor as she had originally thought.

The party left the city, eventually finding the right section of the caverns after several false turns.

"Finally you show yourself!" Solaufein greeted them irately. "I thought I would have to search for you in this forsaken cavern, or find your useless carcass dead at the hands of a svirfneblin! The illithid draw near with their captive, and soon I shall draw them out of the astral plane for our ambush. I do hope you fight better than you think. Have you a question before the battle, Veldrin? Make it quick."

Rolanna could see blisters on his skin, blisters that had not been present during their talk. So, the Handmaiden Imrae had blamed him after all. Rolanna spoke the thought that was in her heart, not stopping to think about what she was about to say.

"I'm sorry about you being punished, I didn't mean to anger the Handmaiden."

"You are not very drow, to show such a weakness as sympathy," said Solaufein, which seemed to Rolanna a very mild response.

"Keep your heart as steel and destroy the illithids," he continued. "This will please me more than an apology. But enough talk. I sense the illithids' approach. Wait and I shall bring them out of the astral plane when they come close."

Solaufein activated his device. Suddenly, a half-dozen figures appeared around them. Rolanna caught her first glimpse of illithids. Their most distinctive feature was the fringe of tentacles where the mouth should be. The illithids' psionic abilities made them dangerous foes, but despite this unfamiliar talent, the party was able to defeat them and their umber hulk servitors. A female drow had also appeared with the illithids; she recovered enough to aid them at the tail end of the combat.

"It is about time that my captors were finally defeated," said the female drow. "Hmph. I was beginning to think that they would reach their illithid city, after all."

"Greetings, Phaere, daughter of Ardulace. I trust you are uninjured?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Who is that? Solaufein? So...Matron Mother sent you, did she? How that must gall you, risking your life to save mine.”

“I did as I was commanded.”

“Yes, you did...as any male should. You have done well enough, I suppose, you and your...assistance. Hmm...who is this female with you?”

“That one? That is—”

“I am sure she can speak for herself, male. Am I correct? You have a tongue, yes? Who might you be?”

“I am Veldrin of Ched Nasad,” said Rolanna.

“Indeed? A foreigner? How very odd. We shall have to speak more, you and I, once we are back in Ust Natha. I shall head back to the city on my own and inform the Matron Mother of your...successful service, Solaufein. You have proven useful. You should be grateful.”

“You are going to return on your own?” asked Solaufein in disbelief. “No! What if you encounter danger once again?! I shall not be responsible for—”

“I appreciate your touching ‘concern,’ but I can handle myself, Solaufein. And it is my command, so you have no choice. Farewell.” Phaere deliberately turned her back on him, as if daring him to strike, and stalked away.

“Blasted, arrogant wench!” raged Solaufein after she was gone. “May the Spider Queen bite at her black heart! I shall follow her, to ensure her over-confidence does not endanger us all. Return to the city on your own, Veldrin. I shall meet you at the city’s entrance.”

Once Solaufein was gone, they could tend to their own wounded. Only Aerie had been badly hurt, an amber hulk putting several deep gashes in her side.

“I see you are hurt, child,” said Jaheira. “I will carry what extra I can if it will lighten your load.”

“I am not weak, Jaheira, and you were as likely to be hurt as I,” protested Aerie.

“I have more experience in battle, Aerie. Any wound I received might have killed you comparatively.”

“So you say, but I shall not learn avoidance of such by cowering behind you,” replied Aerie, her voice rising in anger.

Rolanna considered Jaheira’s protective attitude. She felt responsible for the hurt Aerie, who she considered an innocent, had suffered. Rolanna had also been surprised by the anger in Aerie’s tone; perhaps she was no longer quite the same person they had met in the circus.

When they returned to the city, they found Solaufein and Imrae waiting for them.

“You have returned, finally,” said Solaufein. “Good. Bad enough that I had to worry over Phaere’s safe return, I was not about to start concerning myself over yours.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Yes,” said Imrae. “The daughter of the Matron Mother is safely returned. You have done an excellent service. I am told the Matron Mother is pleased. Phaere has also sent a command to you which must not be ignored. You are to meet her in the tavern here in the city. She wishes to speak with you, although I cannot wonder why. She asks for you, too, Solaufein. You are all to rest and relax in the tavern as a...reward...for your service.”

“But, Handmaiden, I have no wish to—”

“Do you wish to earn punishment a second time, male? You shall do as she says. She shall see all of you at the tavern within a day’s time, no more. That is all.”

Rolanna decided to explore the city a little. The city streets were mainly empty, the occasional drow, slave or other creature passing them. She was especially nervous of the spiders that freely roamed the streets, wondering what would happen if one decided to attack. She had a feeling it would be a fatal mistake to fight back against such an attack.

Rolanna felt exposed, seeking out the tavern, although it was too early to meet with Phaere. This would give her and her party time to rest. She told the others to get a room, while she tried to gather some information. She sat down at a table occupied by only a male drow.

“Ah! I didn’t see you approach,” said the male occupant. “My failing eyes shall net me a blade in my back soon enough, I swear it. I should be at home, dying properly like an old male drow, rather than here listening to tales so often.”

She introduced herself, and learned his name was Nym Khalazza. Rolanna asked him if he had any tales to tell.

“I have many tales of my past, but I have told them so often I do not care to repeat my words. Let the younger drow boast and beat their chests as they wish.”

This old male seemed pathetically eager for company. Rolanna thought she could get some information out of him without his becoming suspicious. “Can I ask you some questions, then?”

“Go ahead and ask if you need to know something. I suppose I am old enough that I can sit still and answer a query or two.”

“Tell me of Lolth.”

“Ah, I’ll not be one to talk overmuch of the Spider Queen. She is a proud one, Lolth is, and she rules her cities with a careful eye. If you’ve any sense, you’ll never mention any of the...other...gods.”

“Other gods?”

“Oh, yes. Vhaeraun, the thief god, and Ghaunadaur, the slime god of the caverns are two of her most implacable foes. And then, of course, there is Elistraee... The Dark Maiden is a good deity of our kind, if such a thing exists. She seeks to turn us from our path of darkness, you see. Hah! But such gods hold little truck with most of the drow. Lolth is paramount. The Spider Queen is a jealous goddess, reserving all worship for herself. Most drow will not even breathe the names of the others for fear of retribution. Myself, I am old enough to care little any longer. But surely you know all of this. I am

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

not saying anything that any drow would not know, yes? Overlook my long-windedness, if you can.”

“Tell me of House Despana,” asked Rolanna, eager to learn more of Phaere’s house.

“A strong House, branches of which you’ll find in cities other than simply Ust Natha. Many of the great families have their beginnings here in the first city, yes? Despana is high in Lolth’s favor, and many say that it schemes to place itself above all others, here. I know little of such plans, however.”

“Do you know anything of dragons in the area?”

“Hm. I know of only one dragon that inhabits the near caverns of the Underdark, and that is the ancient silver beast, Adalon...she who was sent by our surface cousins to guard the old passages.”

“Yes, that one...what can you tell me about her?”

“It is said that the silver dragon once had a mate, long ago...a mate who was captured by our people when we were still dwellers of the southern reaches. The heart of her mate was ripped from its body whole, as I hear. The Queen of the drow used its heart in a ceremony of great darkness, one that angered an old, pale god of the surface elves... I know not which one. Does it matter? When we were driven beneath the surface, sentenced by our fiendish cousins, their god made a pact with Adalon. In return for her vow to guard the old passages to the surface, he would give her what she desired most. At a time of her choosing, when she had grown old, Adalon could call on the god and he would grant her children...eggs that would be made real by the soul of her lost dragon love. Or so the story goes. I hold little truck with it, myself...but, then, I would never venture into those old passages just in case the tales of her presence are true.”

“Is there any news more recent? Perhaps you’ve heard of her eggs?”

“Well...I have heard the passages to the surface are open once more. At least the Matron Mothers certainly believe so, gathering their armies as they are. Perhaps Adalon is dead, I know not.”

Rolanna left to join the others in the room they had procured. When the party was done resting, they found Phaere and Solaufein had arrived in the tavern. Phaere greeted Rolanna when they appeared.

“Ah! So Veldrin arrives at last to greet the female that she rescued so valiantly from the clutches of the filthy devourers!”

“Ah. I must have been invisible and uninvolved during that encounter, I see,” added Solaufein sourly.

“I was speaking to Veldrin, Solaufein. When I speak to you, it shall be to command you to lick my boot. Keep your bitterness silent or lose your tongue. Now, ignore your emasculated commander’s outburst, Veldrin, and consider this a time for reward and enjoyment. Mother Ardulace was pleased by your performance. Solaufein’s abilities are known to her, but she was delighted to learn you are such a powerful fighter. Ust Natha could use such as you, Veldrin. Amongst the drow, only the strong survive... You could have slaves at your beck and call, rewards at your fingertips...the favor of Lolth. How

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

does this sound?" Finally, thought Rolanna, a chance to get inside a major drow house and learn some word of Adalon's eggs. She realized, however, that Phaere would expect something in return for her offer.

"What's the catch?"

"The catch is that you have to earn that favor, Veldrin. Favor and comforts are not given out lightly...they must be purchased with blood and sacrifice."

"Why don't you go ahead and carve out her heart now, Phaere?" asked Solaufein cynically. "You will get to that part eventually, won't you?"

"Silence! Not all drow forget that sometimes a reward is worth spending a part of yourself...or everything. It is a lesson you would do well to re-learn. Seeing as you are so capable, Veldrin, you and Solaufein have been given another task to complete for the greater glory of Lolth. You will meet me on the city platform, away from curious ears. But not right away...rest and amuse yourselves for a time. I shall be here awhile. After I leave take no longer than a few days before you meet with me on the platform. This is as the Matron Mother commands, and so shall it be." Phaere got up and left. Rolanna felt her sudden decision to leave rather than share the drinks she had ordered with Rolanna and her friends was due to Solaufein's presence. Rolanna decided to try to find out why.

"What is it, Veldrin?" asked Solaufein. "I wish nothing more than to be left on my own and beyond the clutches of that Despana witch."

"What's the deal between you and Phaere, anyway?"

"That is something I would rather not discuss, Veldrin. With you or with anyone. Suffice it to say that I have had dealings with Phaere and House Despana once before. Due to my own alliances, however, they cannot take proper revenge. Yet." Solaufein got up, taking his own leave.

Rolanna and the others discussed the situation in low voices for a while, then left to meet Phaere at the city gates.

As Rolanna entered the market platform, a duergar slave approached her.

"Most powerful of drow, forgive my insolence in speaking before being told to do so, but I must beg your attention a moment."

"What is it you wish? Are you being mistreated?"

"Oh no, I am most happy in the employ of my master. I could not wish for better. No, my message is on his behalf. He would speak with you. I beg that you come close to the tank, that he might make contact with your mind."

"Tank? What manner of creature is your master?"

"The tank is a hindrance that my master would rather do without, but it is more comfortable than the coldness of the stonework in the city. Come close to him, and he will speak to your mind. It is the way of his kind. Please do not tarry, he will announce an alarm to the city if you keep him waiting."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna walked to where the duergar pointed. A great cylinder of water filled glass was suspended over her head. Within, she could vaguely make out movement, as if a great fish of the sea had been captured for the amusement of the drow below.

Rolanna heard words, but she realized they were not actually sounds coming from outside. Somehow, they were being implanted directly inside her head.

“Hear me...hear my thoughts in your mind... I am ambassador...but I have a service I demand of you...one that you will perform discreetly and with haste.”

“What kind of creature are you that can step through my thoughts so easily?” murmured Rolanna, finding it easier to form thought-words if she also spoke them.

“I am superior. That is all you need know, *surfacer*! Yes, I see what you are. It is printed across your transparent mind. You will do the task I set before you, or your identity will appear in the mind of every drow within this city. Are my thoughts clear? Good. I ask of you...I command a deed of violence. I call for a death, that I might learn more of this place. It is simple, brutal, and more suited to you than my petty servant here. Qilue...a priestess...I would learn of her faith and the power it grants. Her mind is the prize, and I would have you bring it!”

“There is no way for me to drag a drow Priestess to you. Everyone will see!”

“I do not require her as a whole. As I said, it is her mind that I require. Kill her. Slay her in her home and temple. Retrieve her brain, and bring it to me. That is the task. That is the command I give. You will obey, or I reveal you, and you die. That is your choice.”

“So you contend to hold me in service against my will, to perform this evil task?”

“That is what I have just directed, yes.”

Rolanna felt the familiar fury rise at the creature’s words. This time she did not try to dampen it. She would see the cylinder before her cracked open and its occupant gasping for air on the ground before she agreed to such a request. She used her anger like a weapon, letting it color her next words.

“No, no, I don’t think that is how this is going to work, fish.”

“Fish? Perhaps I have not made my thoughts clear.”

“Perfectly. I’m simply going to ignore you. Threaten as you will, but I refuse.”

“I have outlined the threat I intend. I do not bluff. Fear me.”

“Fear you? You are a fish in a tank. I am through taking threats that mean nothing.”

“I have warned you!”

“And I have listened. I do not fear you, and I will do nothing for you.”

“What?” The words in her mind up to now had been emotionless, the mouthings of a golem. Now Rolanna thought to detect horrified surprise.

“I refuse. Call your alarm and I will make sure you die as well. I am through talking.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You are a strange individual. I release you to avoid trouble for us both. Leave me, volatile one.”

“You’d better believe it,” said Rolanna, spinning on her heel and continuing towards her meeting with Phaere. When she found Phaere, Solaufein was with her. Solaufein did not appear to be pleased.

“Bah! I have nothing to do with this expedition! Do not talk to me about it!”

“Ah, you have finally come. Good,” said Phaere, ignoring Solaufein. “Your timing is excellent, as I had just arrived here recently, myself. I trust you are ready to leave presently.”

“What, exactly, are we to be ready for, Phaere?” said Solaufein. “Why have you brought us out here? Is this some fool ambition of yours?”

“None of my ambitions are foolish, Solaufein. And we are here to perform a service for the good of the city and the Matron Mother.”

“I wasn’t aware Mother Ardulace did anything ‘for the good of the city.’”

“Silence! You will obey, male! An eye tyrant...a beholder...is in the city, smuggling adamantine. The Matrons have decided we are to kill it.”

“What is this?! Did you say ‘we’?”

“I did. I am to join you in this duty. The eye tyrant has come on his Spelljammer ship, near here. Solaufein and I will go and scout it out, alone. Veldrin...I trust you can find your own way to the ship. It is off one of the platforms in the southeast of Ust Natha. Do not take too long to catch up. Come, Solaufein. We can catch up on ‘old times.’”

Phaere and Solaufein disappeared in bursts of magical energy. Rolanna and her companions were forced to follow more slowly, on foot. They reached a deserted platform, another floating ship moored to its side. Deserted, except for the two figures awaiting them.

“Veldrin! Finally!” exclaimed Phaere. “We have been watching the crew leave the ship for their rest, and I suspect the eye tyrant is soon to follow! We must be ready!”

“Make sure none of your attacks harm either myself or Phaere. Such ‘accidents’ happen far too often...and you are not trusted, here,” added Solaufein, although Rolanna suspected his words were more for Phaere’s benefit.

“Hmph. Indeed...although I can—” started Phaere, before her head suddenly whipped around. “Wait! Wait, be still! It comes, I sense it! Be ready!”

An eye tyrant, a beholder, floated off the ship. Rolanna had seen only one before, a crippled version leading the cult of the Unseeing Eye. After that encounter Rolanna had made one expensive purchase from her hoarded funds, a shield said to protect the wearer from a beholder’s attacks.

It proved most effective in the subsequent combat, reflecting the rays which sprang from the beholder back at itself.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“A most brilliant victory! The Spider Queen smiles on us today!” exulted Solaufein over the beholder’s corpse. “We have spat in the great eye of the eye tyrants and live to tell the tale!”

“Indeed. Well done,” said Phaere. “Do not disturb the carcass, however. There will be several acolytes coming to deal with it.”

“Deal with it? What do you speak of, Phaere? Why would acolytes wish to do anything with the corpse of an eye tyrant?”

“Ask me no questions, Solaufein. We shall return to report to the Matron Mothers. Veldrin...I will see you again in the tavern in three days.”

“What is going on, here, Phaere? This is too suspicious.”

“Do as you are commanded, male, and live. Veldrin, journey about the city at your will...but remember our meeting. Do not be late!”

Rolanna resolved to wait out the three days until Phaere needed them in the inn, rather than risk random encounters in the city. When they again met Phaere and Solaufein in the inn, Phaere greeted them.

“It is good that you have come, Veldrin. Up until now I have only had the company of Solaufein, and his pathetic melancholy has nearly drained my patience. So I shall be brief and send you on your way. You would like that, Solaufein, yes?”

“Just spit it out, if you must,” replied Solaufein, obviously not pleased to be forced again into Phaere’s company.

“Very well. The Matron Mothers have decided the deep gnomes, the svirfneblin, have not shown enough fear of the drow as of late. So it is time to teach them a lesson. Mother Ardulace has volunteered you for this particular service.”

“You...you want me to kill svirfneblin?!” sputtered Solaufein. “Gnomes?! Such a minor task, and I am to waste my time on it?! I have better things to do, woman!”

“You have better things to do than to serve the Queen of the Demonweb Pits? Mother Lolth, herself?”

“Bah! As if the Spider Queen would care what we do with the deep gnomes! Send Veldrin, if you’re so interested! I’m sure she can do it without me, I assure you!”

“No. You will go with Veldrin. Argue again and it shall be your tongue, Solaufein. Approach the svirfneblin village in the great caverns and await a patrol. Slaughter them... and bring back proof of the deed. Return here in a few days.”

“Surely the deep gnomes are no threat to the drow,” protested Mazzy, falling out of her drow character at such unjust orders, “they are harmless and neutral beings. Surely such a drastic measure is not necessary to instill the fear you wish into them!”

“An odd sentiment, for a drow,” said Phaere, narrowly eying Mazzy. “What would you propose? Mercy? How would that look to our true enemies? You shall do as I say without a further word.”

Solaufein and the party exited the city, stopping near the svirfneblin mining camp.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“We shall wait here for the patrol to come to us,” said Solaufein. “One will come soon, I expect, and then we can get this over with.”

“I can handle this myself, Solaufein, if you would prefer to return to the city,” suggested Rolanna, having formed a plan while they marched.

“Leave you to deal with the deep gnomes alone?” snorted Solaufein with suppressed laughter. “You would trip over your own feet and be lost. Why would I even consider such a thing?”

“I can handle the deep gnomes, but if you would prefer to dance to Phaere’s tune, that’s up to you,” replied Rolanna, dangling Phaere’s orders in front of him like a red cloth to a bull.

“Hmm. Perhaps I will take you up on your offer, then. Phaere enjoys making me dance, and I have no desire to comply. Are you sure you can accomplish this?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Very well, I will go. Once the deed is done, take the helmet of the leader and return to the tavern in Ust Natha... I will meet you there. Do not fail, Veldrin.”

The party waited for a deep gnome patrol to come near. Rolanna had explained her plan to the others; they agreed with it, and would allow her to do the talking. After several hours, a file of svirfneblin marched into view. Rolanna, Jaheira and Imoen stepped out in front of the leader. Mazzy, Nalia and Aerie stepped from their hiding place midway along the file.

The leader made a statement in their tongue, which Rolanna requested he repeat in drow.

“Ah...I had be thinking most drow knowing simple tongue of the stone,” said the leader. “Let me be talking the tongue of dark ones, yes? We be greeting you, dark ones. And we be asking for your purpose this place for being. Respecting you the peace as we?”

“I was sent here by the drow to kill you and your patrol...but I do not wish to do that,” said Rolanna simply.

“Most alarming, this is! Why would the dark ones be killing us? We be at peace, we is!” The leader had whitened. His troops were nervously eying the drow standing practically next to them, not liking their chances.

“They feel you don’t fear them enough, and want to send a message to you and their enemies,” said Rolanna.

“We be fearing dark ones plenty! Always could they be all killing us, if they be wishing to! Grateful, we are, for your mercy!”

“I just need some proof for them that I have done as they bid. Can I have your helmet?”

“My helmet?” asked the leader, gasping in surprise. He recovered, saying, “If it be saving my life, yes...here it be. We will be going, now, and telling deep lords that much

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

bowing and scraping to dark ones is to be done, if war to be avoided is. Thanking you for your mercy, we are. May the Deep Brother be smiling on you kindly, always.”

Rolanna returned to the city. When she found Phaere, she approached her with the leader’s helmet held in her outstretched hand.

“Ah...you return, and with a svirfneblin helmet, no less,” said Phaere. “Good. I am sure the gnomes are scrambling as we speak to provide a tribute to the Matron Mothers.”

Solaufein seemed to have become even more sullen, Phaere’s company not agreeing with him. “Hmph. Ah, yes, I am sure the gnomes were suitably impressed by our display of viciousness. No doubt they had no inkling we were capable of such a feat.”

“What is this? Are you losing your stomach for blood, Solaufein? The Spider Queen would be displeased to hear such, I would think.”

“I save my wrath for the drow’s true enemies. Lolth knows this, as does the Matron Mother of my own House.”

“It is not for you to decide, male! I shall have your bloody heart ripped from your chest on the altar if you continue to speak!”

“I call your bluff, arrogant one. Act and you risk war between your House and mine. How would Mother Ardulace see that, I wonder?”

“It is almost worth it to silence your impudent tongue! If a Handmaiden were to see you speak to me such, she would flay you open without a second thought!”

“You should be so lucky, Despana bitch.”

“Bah! I will listen to no more! Veldrin! Meet me within my private quarters in the Female Fighter Society tower. Within one hour, Veldrin...do *not* be late.”

“Why? Why your private quarters?” asked Rolanna.

“Because I wish privacy, worm!” screamed Phaere, suddenly showing how much her favor was truly to be relied upon by Rolanna. “Fail to attend me and I shall have you dragged there screaming by hooks!”

Betrayals

“You are lucky that my mood is improved, female,” said Phaere when they reached her quarters. “I was pondering having you tortured for my amusement, but the whim has passed. You are aware of my relationship with Solaufein, yes? You do not need to stare at me blankly. Our animosity is open and obvious. His insolence is beyond all endurance. I cannot tolerate it further without risking my position in Lolth’s hierarchy. But I also cannot take action that would be traced back to myself or my House without risking war. So you shall take action for me. You will kill Solaufein.”

“What? I cannot do that!” said Rolanna in shocked surprise.

“You can and you will. You have bloodlust in you, Veldrin, do not deny it. And what do you owe Solaufein? Or do you object out of some strange morality? We are drow, and the drow show no mercy. My opportunity is nearly upon me, and I will not be distracted

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

by a gnat at my back.” Phaere seemed almost to be pleading with Rolanna to help her, as if she needed the trust and loyalty of someone, which no drow could expect to find from her sisters.

“Solaufein has been given time off from his regular duties...you will find him in his quarters in the Male Fighter’s Society, sulking as is his wont. He will not be expecting you...but nor will he suspect your true intentions, I imagine. He will greet you, and then you will kill him. Those of my House would be the first questioned for his death...but you, without allies of any House, can get away with his murder. Once you are done, take his...hmm...take his piwawfi cloak and bring it back to me here. It shall make an excellent trophy. That is all. Do you understand what I ask of you, Veldrin? Telling anyone will bring death down upon yourself. I shall keep your secret if you keep mine.”

“I suppose I have little choice in the matter,” allowed Rolanna sullenly. She was already determined to consult with Jaheira and the others as soon as possible to try to subvert these orders.

“That is true. Oh, it is not all bad, Veldrin. In Ched Nasad did you have the favor of a House’s eldest daughter and the promise of riches? I think not. Go, then. You have three days to hunt down the fool and return with his cloak. Do not fail me, Veldrin.”

After they left her quarters Jaheira echoed Rolanna’s thoughts. “Despite what she says, Rolanna, we may be able to use this situation to our advantage. Perhaps there is no need to kill Solaufein. Consider this, at least.”

Rolanna and the others talked. They would reveal their task to Solaufein, and see what led from there. They found Solaufein in his quarters.

“Veldrin?! What are you doing here? The Matron Mothers have not given me another task so soon, have they? I was given leave to rest!”

“Phaere sent me to kill you, Solaufein, but I’m not going to do it,” Rolanna said bluntly.

“I see. It was only a matter of time before she acted, I suppose. No alliance of mine to any House could prevent the unseen dagger from plunging into my back. Phaere and I were...lovers once. Mother Ardulace felt Phaere cared for me in a most un-drow-like fashion and had her taken by the Handmaidens. They tortured her with tentacle rods... tortures I can only shudder at the thought of. When they were done all that remained of Phaere was her ambition.” A look of pain and loss settled on Solaufein’s face, something he could not have permitted himself while in Phaere’s presence.

“And I...I remained only as a constant reminder of her weakness.” He sighed before continuing. “I have been expecting this for a long time. So, then. If you are not going to kill me, what do you propose that we do?”

“You can join with us, Solaufein...and leave this place,” suggested Rolanna, although they would have to find some way to hide him until they found the eggs.

“Join with you? Leave? To where, Ched Nasad? No...I can see that you do not mean that place. In fact...in fact, you are not from that place, are you? You are not drow. I should have suspected it sooner, perhaps... Who are you, then? Why are you masqueraded as such?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“My name is Rolanna, and I’m a surface human. I have been sent here to retrieve the stolen eggs of the silver dragon,” said Rolanna, deciding to fully trust Solaufein.

“I know a little of this. The Matron Mothers claim the great silver dragon guarding the entrances to the surface elves’ temple would no longer be a hindrance. In fact, it was Mother Ardulace that made that announcement. I believe she would hold the eggs you seek...but I do not know where such things would be kept.”

“A...surface human?” he repeated in disbelief, shaking his head. “It explains much, including the mercy you show me now. No drow would do such, I suspect, and I shall not betray you, Rolanna. I cannot return to Ust Natha without endangering you...and myself. Since you are from the surface, I will tell you something I would tell no other... The Spider Queen holds no sway over my heart. I worship Lady Silverhair, Elistraee, and like her I believe that my people have strayed from the path. I will remain in the shadows, and seek out others like me. There must be more...I am sure of it. Perhaps my people can yet be saved from themselves. Thank you, Rolanna...for your mercy. Perhaps one day I will stand on the surface and see the moon of my Elistraee... Until then, farewell.”

They took his cloak, and departed, returning to Phaere.

“Ah, I see you carrying his piwawfi, my darling Veldrin. He...Solaufein is dead, yes? Yes...of course, he...he is dead.” For a moment, only a moment, Phaere looked at the cloak Rolanna held, regretting her orders.

“Here...give it to me. ‘All love is foolish,’” said Phaere, the second phrase obviously a quote of some kind. Her lip curled in a sneer, perhaps at her momentary weakness. When she resumed speaking, her voice was emotionless.

“You have done well, Veldrin...you have earned a place of honor in this House by serving me well. This shall not stop, naturally. It is time to introduce you to the Matron Mother of House Despana, Veldrin. Mother Ardulace is anxious to see the female who has done so much for Ust Natha. You will go to the temple and meet the Matron Mother there.”

They entered the temple of Lolth with Phaere, a building Rolanna had not dared try before. Phaere introduced them to the waiting woman, “Matron...this is the female that I spoke to you of, Veldrin.”

“I can see her well enough, fool girl,” said Matron Mother Ardulace. “You think I am blind? Eh...I see nothing special about her. What fascinates you so?”

“Matron, she is an excellent fighter...and she is the one that rid House Despana of its...other...problem.”

“*This* is that one? Illithids, eye tyrants, gnomes...and the mighty Solaufein! Are you sure? To me she looks scrawny, and there is...something...odd...”

“I am positive, matron, that she could prove of great use to you.”

“Eh...perhaps. Let her prove it, then, if she is to become so favored in the eyes of Despana. You, girl! You there...Veldrin, is it? Pay attention. The eye tyrant you killed coming from their so-called city. It was not the right type. I told the girl, here, which type I required and that was not the one.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“But, matron, I...” Phaere tried to protest.

“Silence, girl! I’ll not swallow your lies! Speak again and I’ll send you into the pits of Lolth...would you like to deal with the driders again so soon, girl? Now, Veldrin...you have proven yourself as competent. This is good. House Despana needs competence, a rare commodity when one is surrounded by fools. House Despana is about to embark on the path to greatness, Veldrin. You can tie yourself tightly to us. Mother Lolth approves of the successful. But I require something rather rare to begin this path. You might acquire it for me. So I shall give you the task and see if you can earn Despana’s favor. I need the blood of one of the neighbor races, Veldrin. The noble races only, and blood from one of their most powerful members. A dangerous task. Your first option is to acquire the blood of an Elder Orb, most powerful of the eye tyrants. Its blood or its eye. I bade the fool girl do this, but she failed.”

“The Spelljammer tyrant was supposed to be an elder, matron! I swear that is what the spies had reported! They must have exaggerated!”

“Silence! You should have checked on it yourself, girl! Do you rely solely on this female to be your strength and your wits?!”

“No, matron, I do not.”

“Enough! Should you go after the Elder Orb, you will no doubt find one in their tunnels in the southeastern portion of the main caverns. Bring me the blood of one of these creatures. House Despana awaits your return...but do not tarry. This is my command.”

Rolanna assured her she would do the task, and hurried from the temple. They found the caves of the eye tyrants. When they entered, they almost immediately stumbled upon two of the creatures. Again, Rolanna’s shield that reflected their rays proved useful. But the combat was still hard fought, since the creatures quickly divined the purpose of her shield, and turned their attacks upon her companions. Still, they were defeated, and the necessary alchemical component taken.

They returned to the city, there being no need to further risk themselves in the caves.

“Ah...the Spider Queen smiles upon us,” said Matron Mother Ardulace when she saw what they had brought. “Our gamble does not go unwasted, daughter. Your champion has brought us the blood that we need!”

“Praise Lolth! The ritual may finally be begun!” echoed Phaere. “Despana will rule Ust Natha without question as the preeminent House!”

“Indeed. But we must be cautious, daughter, ever cautious. The ritual may be disturbed before it is completed. The silver one may get desperate.”

“You are going to seal the city, matron?”

“Yes. We cannot be disturbed from the outside. I shall go, now, and begin the proper preparations. This shall be a glorious day, indeed, Veldrin! You have done House Despana the greatest of services. You will be a female without equal...riches and slaves shall be yours. I shall see to it as soon as the ritual has been completed. Now is the time for you to rest, strong one...there is nothing more for you to prove to me.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Well, I am not done with her just yet. Veldrin...come to my personal apartments. I expect you to meet me there within the hour...this is not a request.”

Again, they met Phaere in her private quarters. Rolanna had little doubt another betrayal was to be planned.

“Veldrin? Good. I have a plan...a plan that will place me as the head of House Despana even as we take our place as the rightful ruling House of Ust Natha. My plan includes you, Veldrin...without your timely arrival here none of this would have been possible. Do as I say and your rewards will be unimaginable. Refuse and...well, why would you refuse? You have everything to gain, Veldrin. Everything. In order for this plan to be successful, however, you must betray the Matron Mother. Are you willing to do this? Think carefully on your answer.”

“I would prefer to know, first, exactly what I’ll be doing.”

“No. There are too many things that cannot be said without your agreement, first. I will hear it from your lips, Veldrin.”

“I doubt I have much choice. I agree to do as you command,” said Rolanna, unable to force herself to fake any enthusiasm for Phaere’s plan.

“Hmph. I desire no halfhearted agreement. I must have assurance you will not betray me for your own benefit. I suggest you convince me of your loyalty.”

“Ah...when I said I had no choice, I meant I had no choice but to serve you, Phaere. The Matron Mother means nothing to me.”

“Hah! You are a flatterer, Veldrin. But your statement has the ring of truth. I will allow you to aid me in my plan...and I shall forget your hesitation. You heard matron speak of the ritual? Matron will summon a demon of terrible power, Veldrin...one to aid the drow in our attack upon the surface elves.”

“So...a war?” whispered Jaheira. “Open battle between the drow and the surface has not occurred in...eons. With a greater demon to back them... I truly wonder why Irenicus would do this.”

“The blood is a component in this ritual, used to draw the demon’s attention and bring him before us. But, most gloriously, House Despana has acquired the eggs of a silver dragon. The one guarding the route to the surface that we drow descended from so long ago. Holding these eggs hostage keeps the silver dragon from interfering. Even better, Matron plans to use them as an offering to the demon to enlist its aid. Indeed, what demon could refuse? House Despana will have opened the way for the war and summoned its most powerful warrior. We shall become preeminent.”

“But there is no rule that states Ardulace must still be Matron Mother of such a powerful House. Go to the treasury, Veldrin...steal the dragon’s eggs and replace them with the convincing fakes that I have had made. You will then bring the real eggs to me. Matron will offer the fake eggs to the demon and be killed. Then I shall offer him the real eggs. The ritual will be completed and I shall be Matron Mother. Here...here is the key to the treasury room and the fake eggs. Take them. Return with the real eggs before the ritual is ready to begin. I give you one warning...the guards will try and stop you in the treasury, if they see you. Kill them only if you must. Use stealth, Veldrin...now go.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna left the building, coldly thinking, as ye sow, so shall ye reap.

As they neared the temple, Solaufein stepped forth from the shadowed wall of a building.

“Surfacer! I have found you! I have been hiding in the shadows of the city for some time, now, and I believe I may be able to repay you for your mercy. You mentioned your mission to me...and I believe I may be able to help you. I recently followed Phaere as she went to have copies of the dragon’s eggs made. I have surmised her plan...and, no doubt, it involves using you as well. I believe I have a way that you can fool her, if that is what you wish. I had an additional copy of the eggs made. Phaere marked hers so she could recognize them...these are not. She will be fooled, if you give them to her. I care nothing for the drow war on the surface elves, and I spit on Phaere and her House. I can give this extra copy of the eggs to you to foil her plans.”

“Yes, give them to me. This should work perfectly,” said Rolanna, realizing Solaufein’s was a much better plan than what she had been working on, which was to tell Matron Mother Ardulace about Phaere’s intentions.

“Excellent. I wish I could be there to see the look on her face...and tell her that it was I who fooled her. But it is well enough that I am not. Fare you well, surfacer. I shall praise your name when I hear of Despana’s wretched fall.”

Rolanna had to kill two drow guarding the temple treasury. Inside, golems stood guard, but they did not move until Rolanna touched the receptacle holding the eggs. She was able to slip in Phaere’s replacements in exchange for the actual eggs, and dodge the golems leaving the room. She hoped when the dead guards were found it would be assumed the would-be thief had been scared off by the presence of the golems. In any case, she thought Ardulace would still wish to commence the ritual as soon as possible.

Phaere was pleased at their return. “Ah, you are a marvel, my brilliant female. You are, indeed. You have done as I asked and returned to me with the eggs. Where are they?”

“Here you go,” said Rolanna, giving her Solaufein’s false eggs.

“So these are the silver dragon’s eggs? Yes, they must be. Thank you, Veldrin...you have performed well. I will go to the temple for the ritual...I expect you to be present for my victory. Go to the temple to meet me and do not delay, or I shall be most angry.”

Phaere disappeared in a blaze of magical energy. A small creature fluttered down from where it had been hiding near the ceiling. Rolanna recognized it as an imp.

“Ah, here am I, here am I. Wondering you who I am must you be, yes? Servant loyal to the silver one, forever! The silver one serve you, or her bidding do you, matters it does not. Watching you, have I been. Most interesting a time, watching you. Tricky, tricky, tricky! Deceit upon deceit, the silver one’s eggs safe from immediate harm, they be. But get them out of city, you must! Closed magically, sealed, the city is. Dead the Matron Mother Ardulace first must be, if leave you wish to. Once dead the Matron Mother be, fleeing with eggs you should. Much anger from priestesses there will come...minutes you have, maybe, before revealed your disguise is. Quickly leaving you must be. Failing the silver one if you do...coming to you, she will. Liking that, you will not. Saving eggs you

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

must. To the Matron Mother's daughter, go you must...waiting in the temple for you she is. Of the essence, time is very! Wishing you luck, am I, manling..."

Phaere met them when they entered the temple, saying, "You have come! The ritual is about to begin...and my ascension shall be sweet, indeed. Let us attend, Veldrin."

They entered a room that had been specially prepared for the summoning ritual. Matron Mother Ardulace was dressed in ceremonial costume, props to be used in the summoning near at hand. When they entered, Ardulace closed and sealed the door.

"Very well. All preparations have been made," said Ardulace, "it is time for the ritual to begin. In moments the drow will stand supreme with House Despana first among them. Ensure nothing disturbs my casting. When the demon appears, do not interfere. Mistakes from any of you will earn you a quick death and eternal torment. Now...I shall begin."

Ardulace spent long minutes in ritual, at times casting powders into a brazier before her, and other times making stylized passes with a heavily carved wand.

Rolanna began to have the uncomfortable feeling that something was looking at her. Then she noticed a shadow had appeared on the floor, one cast by no one in the room. Not that anyone in the room had the bulk to cast such a shadow. A form slowly solidified over the next several moments, the form that cast the shadow. It was a demon, larger than the one she had fought in the svirfneblin encampment. It radiated intense evil. The demon spoke.

** I HAVE COME...YOU HAVE WRESTED ME FROM MY PLANE, DARKLING... HAVE GOOD REASON, OR I SHALL TAKE MY PRICE IN DARKLING BLOOD...**

"I have good reason, lord of the nether pits!" said Ardulace. "I beseech you to aid the drow cause in the war against our hated surface cousins, to carve their pale flesh!"

** AND WHAT MANNER OF TITHE WOULD YOU OFFER ME FOR SUCH A DEED, DARKLING? WHAT MANNER OF PAYMENT WARRANTS MY AID? **

"I offer you *these*, lord of fiends...eggs of a silver dragon, a self-righteous creature of light. Yours to do with as you please, in return for your aid."

** FOOLISH DARKLING. DO YOU THINK I WOULD BE TAKEN IN BY SUCH A SIMPLISTIC DECEPTION? I? **

"Wh-what do you mean, o dark lord? These...these are—"

** THEY ARE FALSE, DARKLING. I WOULD TAKE SUCH A TITHE, WERE IT REAL, BUT NOW YOU HAVE OFFENDED ME. PERISH, LITTLE DARKLING WOMAN. **"

"No! No! Lolth Protect Your Faithf—" Ardulace got out before the demon's power struck her down.

** HOW DARE YOU CALL ME FORTH! HOW DARE YOU TEMPT ME WITH EGGS OF HATED SILVER, BUT THEN DECEIVE ME! I AM TEMPTED TO RAZE THIS CITY TO ASHES! **

"Hold, demon!" yelled Phaere. "I am the daughter of the one who has summoned you...and I have the eggs that you seek. I offer them to you as the tithe!"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

** HAAAAHA! A GREAT JOKE HAS BEEN PLAYED ON YOU, DAUGHTER-DARKLING. THE EGGS YOU HOLD ARE ALSO FALSE. **

“What?! No, it’s... Veldrin? Veldrin?! What have you done to me?!”

** THE BHAAL-CHILD HAS MURDERED YOU, DAUGHTER-DARKLING. MOST AMUSING, IT IS. HAAAAHA! COME, NOW, AND BE MURDERED. **

“No! I will destroy you, Veldrin! I will find you and eat your beating heart! I will—” Phaere stopped, her gaze sweeping Rolanna and her companions, searching for some hope, some chance of escape.

“Hah! You’ll do nothing but die,” said Imoen, “and hopefully you’ll know that it was Rolanna that beat you, too.”

The demon gestured, and Phaere was blasted where she stood.

** NOW...IT SEEMS THERE ARE NO ACTUAL DRAGON EGGS TO BE HAD. A PITY. UNLESS THERE IS A BETTER OFFER, I SHALL DEPART. **

Rolanna and her companions remained silent.

** SO BE IT. MORTALS ARE EVER FOOLS. **

The demon vanished back to its plane. Rolanna and her friends quickly left the city, returning to Adalon the silver dragon.

“You return! You have returned victorious!” boomed Adalon in joy. “I sense my beautiful eggs on your person. I shall take them and give you the reward I promised. May it serve you well in the time ahead. Ah, but I also promised a safe escape, did I not? One that will lead you nearer Bodhi and Irenicus? I shall transport us there, and see you safely away. Truth be known you might have gone there yourself, but it would have been all the bloodier.”

“I am simply glad that the ordeal is over and now I can return to the surface,” said Rolanna.

“I am relieved that this is over as well, though I will not be returning to my previous duties. I have seen too much of this evil to continue guarding a peace that does not exist. My last act here will be a few selective deaths perhaps, a lesson for those responsible for my strife at least. They will know not to cross my path again. But that is for later. I shall help you as I promised and then see to my own concerns. Before I take you to the way to the surface, I must transform myself into a more suitable form.”

Mazzy stared at the silver dragon, and then turned and gazed at Rolanna with a grin of delight. She grasped one of Rolanna’s hands in both of her own, and gazed up into her eyes as she spoke.

“I must say, in the time that I have traveled with you, you have proven yourself to be a person with your heart in the right place. I salute you and reaffirm that I shall always stand by you while you stay on this path.”

“Why, thank you, Mazzy. It is nice to know that I am appreciated.”

“I merely speak the words that beg voicing. You deserve my support.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Adalon transformed them back to their normal forms, then took on the form of a female elf, and teleported them to a gate leading to the surface. She helped them defeat the drow guards, then took her leave, thanking them again for their help.

The party passed through the gate, coming up behind a drow war party heading to the surface. Defeating them, they then entered the underground rooms of a surface elven shrine, finding the drow and surface elves locked in combat. They helped the surface elves defeat the drow. The surface elven defenders told them to proceed to the surface, and report to Elhan.

Old Friends

As much as they had traveled, the last few feet to the surface seemed the longest trek by far. The party's relief at seeing the light of the sky was palpable, even though they were not really fleeing the black of the Underdark, rather the constant treachery. Unfortunately, although the setting had changed, their immediate future still looked to be far from peaceful. The area where they emerged had been the staging ground for many recent battles, and judging from the faces of the beleaguered elven soldiers that now approached, there might be more to come.

"I speak the common tongue that you might hear and be warned!" said one of the elven soldiers. "All that breach the surface will be fought back! Wait, you...you are no drow! You should not be in this area! Are you a collaborator? Have you betrayed the surface world to the devils below?"

"My name is Rolanna. I have fought through the drow to find Irenicus!" declared Rolanna.

"You know of Irenicus? You will speak with Elhan, immediately. He will determine your relationship with the fiend!"

"By all means. If this Elhan can tell me of Irenicus I am very eager to meet him."

"Your fate will be decided shortly. You will remain under guard until Elhan sees you. Make no move; you will be watched closely."

A half company of elven soldiers was set guarding them. After a short time, General Sovalidaas, their commander, came by to inspect them.

"Welcome. Yes... welcome," said the general, although the harshness of his gaze and the lowered spears of his soldiers contradicted his words. "I'll have you know I do not trust you. I have no reason to trust you. I do not feel that I *have* to trust you. No doubt the same applies from your perspective."

"I will be happy to aid you while on my own search for Jon Irenicus," stated Rolanna.

"You mention some very interesting names, names you could not know unless you were enemies of our enemies...or their friends. I am undecided. Elhan will see to you. He will make sure you are comfortable, and that you reveal what you must of yourself. He is experienced and...and he has knowledge of the enemy. Mind that you obey him.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Regardless of your intent, if you attack any of my elves here, I will have you killed on the spot. We are legion, rest assured.”

Considerably more time passed before they were finally taken before Elhan and two others. His greeting was warmer, almost as if they were not in effect prisoners.

“Well, I thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for proving friendly,” said Rolanna. “I was not looking forward to another fight.”

“Yes, well, I am here to determine exactly what it is you were looking for. A battle may yet be warranted. I shall keep this brief, as I have little time to waste on you. A few questions are all I need, regardless.”

“Ask what you will. I have nothing to hide from you.”

“I will ask some things of you, and you will speak what you know. My sages will detect any falsehood. They are very good at that sort of thing. Now then, something simple and direct to begin with. You emerged from the home of the drow. Were you fleeing or are you in league with them?” Rolanna did not blame him for not trusting anything coming from the Underdark. However, it was as she had said: she had nothing to hide.

“I was fleeing their dark realm.”

“Truth,” said a sage.

“I concur. Truth,” added the second.

“A truth. Well, a good start,” said Elhan. “You are currently not an ally of the drow. This tells me nothing of your motives though. Let us continue. A name, then, that you may know something of. Irenicus. Do you know of him?”

“Of course. He is the reason that I have come all this way.”

“Strong Truth,” said the first sage.

“Very much so. The association is clear,” confirmed the second.

“So you admit to knowledge of a fiend and criminal,” said Elhan, as if this were a very damaging admission. “I will have to push this further. Perhaps you are a window to his plans. Shall we try to determine how much you know, how far your association goes? Are you in league with Irenicus?”

“No I am not. He is our common enemy,” stated Rolanna firmly.

“Truth.”

“Truth. It seems she believes this wholeheartedly.”

“I am glad to hear as such,” said Elhan, gesturing to the elves surrounding the party to put up their spears. “My guards have better things to do than be waiting to execute you. This has put me more at ease. Whatever manner of creature you are, we are on the same side in this instance at least.”

“Are we done then? No offense, but I have things I must do.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"You are certainly less of a threat than I first imagined, but do not think you are welcome as of yet. This area is still at risk, and I will not take chances. For now, I will apprise you of the situation, and you will realize why travel in this area is to be restricted. You might have received a warmer welcome, but Irenicus has triggered the strongest of emotions where e'er he has tread. He has stepped beyond all bounds of decency, and our very city is under the weight of his thumb. Suldanessellar is simply gone."

"That can't be possible, can it?" asked Nalia. "An entire city, especially one as ancient as yours must be, cannot simply vanish."

"It has only been concealed, but we cannot penetrate the magics that have hidden it. We are forced to remain here, pestered by drow while supplies falter."

"Drow that were incited by Irenicus and the bargains he made in the Underdark," added Rolanna.

"Truth," said the first sage, apparently still feeling he was needed.

"Yes, she knows much of this," added the second, not to be left out.

"It would seem," said Elhan, "your travels have given you quite a bit of insight into the plans Irenicus has made. I wonder if you might be of service to us."

"I might be," said Rolanna, eyeing the two sages. "If you think you can trust me."

"You obviously bear no love for Irenicus, making you the enemy of our enemy. Classically speaking, this might make you our friend. And even if you are not, you cannot reach Irenicus without helping us. He is untouchable, save for one possibility. Within the temple was an artifact of great power: the Rhynn Lanthorn. It is an ancient lantern, etched with the oldest of runes. The Lanthorn is attuned to the Elven nation, and no magic can bar its return to elven lands."

"We could simply walk to Suldanessellar if we had possession of it. Someone stole the relic when the temple fell to the drow. Obviously it was a servant of Irenicus capitalizing on the chaos of the battle. We have not been able to determine where the thief went, despite the best efforts of our sages. It makes me think that the Lanthorn is no longer in elven territory."

"It must have been Bodhi," said Rolanna. "Only she would have been trusted with such a thing."

"Truth," said the first sage.

Rolanna bowed towards the sage, then stated, "As I said. I cannot help if you don't trust me."

"Bodhi..." mused Elhan, "Hmm, you may know more than we about this situation after all. I propose we exchange our services."

"It would help if I knew what was really going on here."

"I cannot say more than I have," said Elhan; if the sages had been monitoring his utterances, Rolanna thought they would have said 'false' at that statement.

"Perhaps if I had access to the city," continued Elhan, "I would have insight, but as it stands, I am in the same situation you are. The attack came without warning, born in the

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

mind of a human we did not know. This was not in the realm of possibility, and it remains as such. He has dealt with drow, defiled our temple, and violated our city. His name is to be spit and spoken of as rarely as possible. He is all that elves are not! If you know how to find the treacherous servant of this fiend, I suggest that you do it. You seek Irenicus, we seek Irenicus; to help us is to help yourself. Find the Lanthorn. Seek outside elven lands in whatever location you think an important servant of Irenicus would be. Only then will we reach this man.”

“I will need supplies, and I might need help facing Bodhi.”

“We cannot march on human territory. As great as our problems are, they would only get worse if we appeared to be sending agents into the cities of Amn.”

“Is there no more help you can offer?” protested Mazzy. “I will fight evil until the end but...but we have fought this fight before and were basically dismissed.”

“You have traveled extensively; return to the groups you have already encountered and ask their aid. I am sure you will find some among them to help you. They need not know the nature of the emergency, only that a great evil must be routed. The less who know of the shame brought by Irenicus, the better.”

“Shame? What shame has he caused you?” asked Rolanna, following up on his misstatement.

“It is not your concern. His deeds will be apparent when we reach him. Until then, you should begin your task.”

Elhan gave them water blessed in the elven temple for their fight against Bodhi, and wished them well. After he departed one of the sages remained behind. Rolanna asked him about the Rhynn Lanthorn.

“The nature of such things is necessarily vague,” said the sage. “Their origins are lost to time, and we only know that they must be treasured. Legends of the Lanthorn maintain that it was perhaps once a mere carriage light, but that our ancestors did light the way to new lands with it at the fore of their processions. It was enchanted such that it dispelled the darkness, forcing the fell creatures of the void to relinquish their hold on nature. At least, those are the stories of old.”

Rolanna and her companions left, heading for the city of Athkatla. It was just past dusk and they were looking for a campsite when they encountered another party of adventurers. One of them made a loud comment, and Rolanna was relieved to realize she knew the voice, from an encounter near Baldur’s Gate. It was Drizzt Do’Urden, most unusually a drow who had chosen to live on the surface.

After Rolanna’s encounter with him she had been surprised to learn that he and his companions were famous in the north. Fascinated, she had listened to as many tales about him as she could find. She now thought she could place a name to all of his companions. They were so busy talking to one another that they had not noticed their onlookers.

“I tell you, Bruenor,” said Drizzt, “we have been on this path previously. Are you sure you know where you left it? I have no desire to keep traveling about in circles.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Blast it, boy,” said a dwarf, who must be Bruenor. “I may be old but me memory has not left me head just yet! And we would not even have to look for it had Wulfgar not knocked it out of me hand!”

“I did no such thing, dwarf,” declared a tall, rangy man, who Rolanna identified as Wulfgar.

“But ye did, me boy!” pointed out Bruenor in annoyance. “Ye were not looking where ye were flying about in the battle, and I were too distracted by the trolls to run after it. And then I forgot that ye even did it, after.”

“Well, of course we be trying to help ye find it,” added a female voice, who must therefore be Catti Brie, “but all Drizzt was wondering was—”

“He be wondering whether I have a wit left in me head, girl!” said Bruenor. “And I tell ye we’ll find me hammer soon enough, I’ll not leave it fer goblins to steal. Hmph.”

“Um...be that as it may, Bruenor, Drizzt,” said a voice near at hand, from a figure Rolanna could not make out. The voice had seemed to come from near the ground, so she thought it to be the halfling Regis. The voice continued, “We’ve got company. Maybe they found your pretty little hammer, Bruenor.

“I know of this one, Rolanna, from the Harpers,” said Jaheira. “A drow of good alignment and heroic reputation. He is deserving of respect.”

“One more comment on me hammer, Rumblebelly,” stated Bruenor, obviously considering any possible threat from their encounter to be no reason to end a good argument, “and ye’ll be the first it squishes when I gets it back!

“Peace, my friends,” stated Drizzt, “there is no need for us to fight over this. Ho there, travelers! I am Drizzt Do’Urden, most recently of Ten Towns. Are you friend or foe?”

“I am a friend, Drizzt. I have heard of you,” said Rolanna.

“Well met, then, friend,” said Drizzt. “Tell me, have you perhaps seen a, ah...a pink war hammer in the vicinity during your travels?”

“Blast ye, Drizzt, me hammer be not pink!” protested Bruenor.

“Well, you have to admit, Bruenor,” said Regis, “since Cirine cast that enchantment on it, it has been glowing a little on the pinkish side...”

“It be red! Red, I tell ye!” he yelled at his new tormentor. “Call it pink again, halfling, and ye’ll have yerself a one-way ticket to the Abyss!”

“I’ve been there. It was nothing special,” said Wulfgar dismissively.

“Red, then,” said Drizzt. “Might you have seen something like it, stranger?”

“Yes, uh...I have. But I don’t remember where,” said Rolanna, thinking she had seen a flash of red a while before, which she had dismissed as the glow from some insect.

“See? I told ye all I have not lost me wits!” said Bruenor triumphantly. “It be close, just as I’ve been saying all along!”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“We’ll look for it a while longer then, Bruenor, have no fear,” said Drizzt. “We are not expected back in Ten Towns for a fortnight, yet. Tell me, though, stranger...have we met before? I feel as though your face is familiar, but I cannot attach a time or place to it. Should I know you?”

“We met only briefly. I helped you defeat some gnolls near Baldur’s Gate,” confirmed Rolanna.

“That was you? Glad I am to meet you again, friend, it is good to see others of decent nature travel these roads, especially with all the rumors of danger. If you are in need of assistance I will be glad to offer it. If not, I will wish you well and we shall be on our way back to the far north.”

“I have a proposal for you, Drizzt, if you will wait for a moment,” said Rolanna, suddenly thinking of what Elhan had said. If one of the most famous adventurers ever to walk Faerun would help her, she would feel much more confident over her coming encounter with Bodhi.

“A proposal? Very well, stranger...I have no objections to hearing you out. If I can assist you, I will.”

“I am Rolanna and I seek to defeat a vampire in Athkatla too powerful to face alone. Will you help?”

“I had heard rumors of this creature, but I also heard that she and her cohorts were destroyed. Are you claiming that this is untrue, that she yet exists?”

“I was the one who destroyed her guild, but she got away. She has returned now, and is stronger even than before.”

“I have had experience with such creatures in the past, and I know well their power. If what you say is true we cannot allow it to continue to exist. I will join you in your battle, Rolanna, although there are things that we must do before that time. Where does this creature reside in Athkatla?”

“In the crypts beneath the Graveyard District.”

“I think I know the area you speak of. Very well...we will meet you there when you are ready to venture beneath the surface. Until that time, Rolanna...”

“An excellent idea, Rolanna,” said Jaheira warmly. “Adding Drizzt and his companions to our battle against Bodhi will certainly tip the scales. You show great wisdom.”

They camped for the night, and continued on the next day. Soon after they entered Athkatla, an old friend met them as they walked. An old friend of Jaheira’s.

“Jaheira! I would have words with you!” said Dermis Courtierdale.

“Dermis? What are you doing back here?” asked Jaheira. “I am glad to see you, I had thought our friendship...”

“I am not here for a social call. This is the last time we will see each other peacefully. I have come to speak a warning.”

“What are you talking about?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“It has been decided. You are a killer of Harpers and a traitor. You have collaborated with our known enemies. Your execution has been ordered.”

“What? Such a thing has never been done!”

“This is a very special case. You have faced little opposition from the Harpers so far. From here on the attacks will increase in severity, unless you come with me now.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is an internal matter of justice, and does not involve this Rolanna. You can spare her the attacks if you submit.”

“What sort of deal is this?” protested Rolanna.

“The only sort she will get,” said Dermis. “Think on it, Jaheira. You will receive the hearing you wish.”

“Very well, Dermis. I will think on this,” said Jaheira.

“You do that, Jaheira. There will be no other warnings.”

Reunited with an Old Friend

Rolanna wasn't sure where she wanted to start in Athkatla. Since it was late, the sun was already set, she decided to spend the night at the Copper Coronet in the slums. That was centrally located, and should prove a good place to start in the morning, whatever she decided to do.

As they walked Imoen glanced at the people they passed and sadly commented, “I don't feel like I fit in with people in the city anymore.” Rolanna reached out and gave Imoen's hand a squeeze with her own. She hoped Imoen would feel better once they got her stolen soul back from Bodhi.

Rolanna entered the inn. As she was crossing the common room, a patron yelled out “You there! You with all the scars and muscles! You look like you can heft a sword well, you should be joining the army and serving your country!”

Rolanna's head snapped around when she heard the reply, “Minsc and Boo fight with swords and teeth for goodness, not for countries. We are heroes, not soldiers, funny man.”

So Minsc had not left for Rashemen. Rolanna suddenly felt guilty. She had in effect thrown Minsc out of the party, and he had been hanging about the city, probably trying in vain to get some word on Rolanna and her companions. For all he knew, they could all be dead.

Rolanna walked over to the table at which Minsc sat, followed by her companions.

“Where goes the stench of evil, so goes the cleansing wind of Minsc and Boo! Stand your course, armored louts, and state your business in this place!” said Minsc, rising from where he sat and raising his two-handed sword to the ready. He suddenly started, recognizing his heavily armed visitors.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Wait, I know of you! O happy Day! You have come to collect Minsc and Boo and together we shall put our collective boots to our enemies!”

Rolanna indicated that she would once again like his help, to which he replied, “Minsc and Boo and you! There can be no greater team in all the Realms!”

Minsc had given this matter considerable thought while the others had been away adventuring in the Underdark. But now that the time had come, he found himself hesitating, which was unusual for Minsc. Instead of speaking directly to Aerie of what he wanted, he found himself talking of his home.

“This land is fine, but I wish I could show Boo the fields of Rashemen. We could run free through the snow, though Boo would look some funny in a drift, I tell you.”

“You are from Rashemen?” asked Aerie. “I had—I had thought such a land was the stuff of fable.”

“No, it is as real as Minsc, though even larger! It lies far in the direction of the sun at morning. Ah, but it has been long since I left it.”

“Why would you ever travel so far from home? I—I was torn from mine and had no choice.”

“I was on my dajemma, a journey to prove my manhood! Oh, we were a pair, me and my witch! I was to watch over Dynaheir and bring her home in...in safety. Oh Boo, I can never return to Rashemen! I am proven unworthy! I am no man and you are no hamster... we are lost! Oh the sorrow!”

“Oh, don't cry. You and Boo have fought bravely! Who could count the foes you've vanquished! Dynaheir would be proud of you...”

Minsc, in speaking of his homeland, found he had come round to what he actually wanted. “You have been good friends, you and Rolanna... Minsc would ask something! Will you be my witch, Aerie? Boo and I are nothing without a witch...”

Aerie considered what Minsc had asked. She had been around him long enough to know his offer did not mean merely physical protection for herself. She would be taking responsibility for Minsc as well, guiding him through the mystery that each day of life was to him.

“If you will be my guardian, Minsc, I shall be your witch. Your dajemma has not been for nothing and Dynaheir's death shall not go unavenged.”

“My sword, my soul, my hamster...all of these I pledge to...to Aerie, my witch... HEAR THAT, EVIL?! MINSC HAS A NEW WITCH! WOE IS YOU!”

Aerie asked if he would go up to his room, since she needed to do some thinking. True to his new charge, Minsc only retreated to a table on the far side of the room, where he could keep her in sight.

Aerie thought of her new position, and what must be accomplished to restore the souls of Rolanna and Imoen. Aerie thought that Rolanna might have originally taken her on because she felt sorry for her, or out of pity. But she realized the others had come to

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

depend on her. She no longer constantly received advice, but was trusted to prepare and cast the right spell any situation demanded.

Someone sat at her table. As Aerie looked up, she saw Haer'Dalis, who asked, "Aerie, my dove...are you well?"

"I've...I've just been thinking. About all this death, all these horrifying things Irenicus has done. He actually stole a soul and...and all these people died for nothing... And for what? Some 'vengeance' that Irenicus wants! For that he throws people aside like mere objects?!" As Aerie said the words, she realized she was furious. What Irenicus had done to Rolanna, Imoen, others, it must be stopped.

"I...I cannot believe that such evil is allowed to exist! Haer'Dalis! We must scour the face of Faerun of such foulness! The very stink of it clogs my every breath! No mercy! No mercy must be shown to such evil!"

"Aye, my love! 'Tis grand to see you transformed into a maiden of destruction! Turned from innocent chrysalis into entropic moth! I hail your arrival!"

"I am not here to destroy, Haer'Dalis! I want to stop Irenicus! I wish to fight against evil that exists in this world! I will not sit idly by and be pathetic! I have paid too much attention to my own sorrows and experiences...and not enough to the evil that has surrounded me!"

"Speak as you will, my love, but you serve entropy, nevertheless. Your innocence has faded, as it should, and you have become a maiden who shall bring the end of others...my philosophy proven!"

"I don't care a whit for your philosophy, Haer'Dalis! I am so full of anger that I cannot control it...and this callous evil that I see, it will pay!"

"As I said, my dove...and pleased I am to see it."

Aerie considered Haer'Dalis, and all the misgivings about him she had suppressed before rushed back.

"Well, I am not pleased! And it is obvious that you do not really care for me, after all! We are through, you and I!"

"Again, a natural end that has come...no less than expected, though I'll mourn its passing."

"So be it!"

Aerie added to herself, "Come, then, Rolanna...let us go and complete your quest. I shall fight by your side until this is over...and then I shall make my own way in the world for once."

Haer'Dalis got up to leave the table. Aerie suddenly noticed Minsc standing behind him. Her protector had appeared, to make sure she was all right. She smiled at Minsc, ignoring Haer'Dalis, and placed her slender hand on the massive forearm of Minsc, letting him guide her from the room.

The next day the party assembled in the inn's common room. A few patrons were still present from the celebration the freed slaves had engaged in the night before. One

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

individual, who had somehow managed not to succumb to the many drinks he must have downed, snagged Mazzy's arm as she walked by.

"Now, there...aren't ye just the sweetest halfling a man's gotta lay eyes on. Ye comes here often, does ye?"

"Oh, please," said Mazzy. "I may not be much of one for taverns and other such places like this, but that must be the lamest approach I have ever endured. Return to your spirits, lout."

Rolanna decided to make a detour to the sewers, since she had heard of an odd hermit living down there. It would be a chance to integrate Minsc back into the group before they came to any hard blows with Bodhi.

They found the hermit, had several small skirmishes, after one of which Minsc gave Mazzy a hearty clap on the back, which nearly bowled the diminutive warrior over.

"Minsc has had the pleasure of standing next to many a warrior in battle, but I swear I have not been as impressed as I am with you, Mazzy."

"And what follows now? A comment of how grand I am for one so small? Your compliments are insults lightly veiled."

"Minsc does not insult those that fight with honor on the side of right! You may not be as big as Minsc, but very few are. Besides, Boo would nay speak for a week if I picked on the tiny. I am not good with words, but I will fight by your side at a hat's drop."

"You speak plain and true despite your battles with language. I apologize for thinking your tone a harsh one."

They had also found an obviously magical sword. Rolanna had carefully grabbed the sword with an old tunic and thrust it into a pack when she first received it, since it was potentially dangerous. She now decided to investigate it more thoroughly.

She decided she should be the one to handle it, since she should have the most protection from any evil influence the sword might possess. The other members of the party gathered around her, ready to act if the sword attempted to control Rolanna's mind, or gate in some evil creature.

Rolanna took the sword from her pack, holding it straight-armed, both hands on the hilt. The sword flashed for a moment, then audibly sighed since she was not impressed with its magnificence. "So... are we gonna kill something now?" asked the sword brightly.

"What's your status, sword?" Rolanna asked cautiously.

"What's my status?" replied the sword in disbelief. "Well, since when do you care about me, unless I'm impaled in something's guts? Oh, well, fine, let me think for a minute..."

The sword was silent for long moments, during which time Rolanna wondered if it was planning some devilry. It suddenly broke its silence.

"I think you need to take better care of me. I've got more chips than a blind beaver... I look like a second-rate pig-poker."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Exchanging a puzzled look with her friends, she tried again.

“Might you have any advice, o Sentient Sword?”

The sword whistled incredulously. “Advice, eh? Well, besides working a little on your swordsmanship. Well, besides that, I’d have to think.”

After a moment, it said “I’m sharp, I can come up with something... OK...find someone who knows what you want to know and threaten to kill them! Yeah! Then kill them! Woo-hoo!”

Rolanna choked in disbelief, and asked the sword if that was the best help it could provide.

The sword sighed. “I refuse to answer any more questions until I’m cleaned and polished thoroughly. C’mon, grab a rag already...”

Rolanna looked at the sword. She could see only one resolution. Silently, she handed the sword to Minsc.

Rolanna later learned the sword was known as Lilarcor, a name not unknown to the tellers of tales.

Lawrence Lilarcor was well known, not for being brave, but as an idiot. As the tale goes, the boastful Lilarcor left his village at the urging of his friends so that the “great hero” could do battle with a devious Treant. He walked for days in the dead of winter until, feverish, he found his target and began an epic wrestling match. Unfortunately (or perhaps luckily), the “Treant” was nothing more than a craggy old normal oak. His friends had been jesting, not actually expecting that Lilarcor would go fight the fictitiously dangerous tree. That might have been the end of it, but Lilarcor, not really knowing what a Treant was in the first place, didn’t realize the truth. He eventually uprooted the oak and, marching proudly home, he declared himself a hero. Thus was born a laughing stock of epic proportions, and over time the name of Lilarcor became the sacrificial fool in many tales of “less than brilliance.”

Rolanna found some knowledge of the sword itself, but not whether this enchanted weapon was Lilarcor himself, perhaps imprisoned by an evil mage or some other odd coincidence of fate. From the tales, it certainly acted in a manner consistent with his level of competence. If it was he, he had never bemoaned his captivity. He might not realize, or care, that he was no longer a human.

As a weapon, Lilarcor had its uses, but many a warrior had eventually given it away. Banter such as “Ouch, that musta hurt,” “Oh yeah! Got ‘im good,” and “Beware my bite for it might...might...might really hurt or something” was a constant barrage on a warrior’s psyche.

As they were leaving the district, a young boy commented, “By Helm, ye have fuzzy hair all o’er yer feet! Why does ye not wear shoes, then, t’ hide it?”

“I’m rather proud of my hair, child,” Mazzy harrumphed. “And my halfling feet are stouter than any leather shoe, I’ll have you know.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Preparations

The party traveled to Waukeen's Promenade to stock up on supplies. Jaheira pleaded that she had things to think over, and sat at an outdoor table while the others went from merchant to merchant.

When Rolanna and the others finished their purchases, Jaheira was not where they had left her. As Rolanna prepared to divide the others to search the promenade, an old man interrupted her.

"Good morning, my child. How are ye this morn? I did not wish to startle ye, but I was walking by and could not help but notice this note blowing in the wind. It looks important, and I should not wish anyone to lose what is really important. Do ye hear what I am saying to thee? I thought so. Good luck."

Rolanna stared at the man in confusion, then at the note he had thrust into her hand. The note read:

Goodbye. No sappy farewells or crying over how things must be; I do neither of these things well, nor would I wish to. I have made a decision; one that is not ideal, but it is necessary. I can go nowhere without this shadow, and I wish to leave it behind. I am returning to the Harper Hold that I might face judgment there. I will plead the case as we saw it for whatever they accuse, and if they do not see reason then I will suffer what I must. Galvarey had detractors as well as allies, so I believe I can end this in my favor. If not, at least it will be an end.

I do not ask you to follow. I do this for myself, and there will be little or no gain for you. You may still be a target of violence, but perhaps their interest in you will wither beside the capture of a 'traitor.'

For better or worse, I am taking control once more. I hope to see you again in better times.

With Nature's love and mine,
Jaheira

Rolanna read the note through twice, to be sure she understood it. When she looked up, the old man was gone.

Rolanna had learned to rely on Jaheira's judgment, and usually went along with what she wanted. Not this time. If it weren't for Rolanna, Jaheira would not be in trouble with the Harpers.

They had fought together when facing Galvarey, and if the Harpers thought Jaheira deserving of punishment, Rolanna thought she should suffer the same penalty. And if the Harpers sought to impose an unjust punishment on Jaheira, Rolanna would be there to prevent that as well.

Rolanna and her companions traveled to the Harper headquarters in the docks district. On the first floor they encountered a few mercenaries, who attacked as soon as they entered. On the second floor they found their friend.

"What are you doing...why are you here?" Jaheira said when she saw them.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Your troubles are my troubles, Jaheira, and you will not face them alone!” declared Rolanna.

“Rolanna, you magnificent bastard! I would kill you for following me if I were not so glad to see you!”

“Jaheira, I don’t care that...” started Rolanna before the import of what she had said registered. “What? Glad? I thought you wanted this?”

“I wanted to atone with the Harpers, but these are not they. I think revenge is more a factor here. The true Harpers have abandoned this garish place. Notice the lack of Spectral Harpists? They were here at one time, and they would not leave their post unless it was no longer to be guarded.”

“But it is guarded, just not by Harpers. Our fighting is not done.”

“We may still be hunted. I must ask Dermis if I see him again. He told me to come here, so I need to know if his allegiance has changed or not. Those we kill in self-defense may look like Harper allies, even if they are not. We have no choice, and I will not feel guilty over this tangled web any more. Let’s get out of here, but take care: if their tactics are as simple as their motives then you may have been allowed to pass. Our exit may be treacherous.”

“Then we will go together. Rejoin and...and walk with me.”

“I am glad too. We will talk later, Rolanna.”

When they returned to the first floor more mercenaries waited in ambush. However, they had underestimated their prey, and were easily defeated. Although Rolanna could understand Jaheira hoping her friend and former instructor Dermis had not knowingly been involved in the ambush, Rolanna now considered him an enemy.

“You are a sight in battle, young Mazzy!” commented Minsc as the fighting ended. “Boo has keen interest in the small, and Minsc takes great joy in the honor of combat, so you are doubly worthy of our company.”

“I never know,” said Mazzy, “if I can take your words as they are, Minsc, or if they carry some hidden meaning or riddle that must be solved. I trust you are approving of my skills then?”

“I could not be more so! Don’t look for subtle messages, I keep nothing hidden. I help the weak and leave evil in my boot print. You are similar...Boo can tell.”

“Ah yes, Boo. Your animal companion and guide. I have had friends with such attachments before, but never have I met someone so...absorbed in the relationship. Still, you seem all the better for it.”

As long as they were in the docks district Rolanna decided to pay the Shadow Thieves a visit. While heading for their headquarters, a halfling stopped Mazzy.

“Wow! Mazzy Fentan! I remember you!”

“Ah...Jerry,” said Mazzy. “I remember you, too, from that rather...tiresome... encounter we had in Scornubel. Still attempting to learn magic, are you?”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Yup. You just wait...I’ll be renowned as the greatest halfling sorcerer around Faerun in years to come! Just you wait!”

Once inside the Shadow Thieves’ headquarters they were quickly allowed to see Aran Linvail.

“Ah...you have returned, after all,” said Linvail. “And far sooner than I expected. After you left on Havarian’s ship, I must admit that I half-wondered if you would reach the island, never mind return.”

“I half-wondered that, myself,” said Rolanna, “considering the fact that your captain betrayed me.”

“He betrayed you? I’m not surprised. Oh, don’t look at me like that, it was not because of me. Saemon Havarian was not one of my men in the slightest.”

“Yet you took all our gold and hired him,” pointed out Nalia, “and didn’t even tell us what a scoundrel he was! You even made us work for you for the privilege!”

“I did tell you that few ships dare to visit Brynnlaw, and you saw the type of person that haunts the place. Havarian was the best available, I am afraid. And I see that you have your companion back amongst you. That was your goal, wasn’t it? I trust you are no worse for the wear, my dear?”

“Other than the fact that Bodhi has my soul, sure...I’m just fine. How about you?” replied Imoen dryly.

“Ah...I see. Would that I had a spare, but that’s not the commerce I traffic in. My sincere regrets at your condition. I would not wish such on anyone. If you wish, I could have the good captain tracked and punished for his...misdeeds. I did pay him extra to keep you safe, gold that apparently was wasted.”

Rolanna indicated that Havarian should be ignored, anxious to get on to other matters.

“Then he is left to his own fate, which is good enough. Havarian has a habit of turning up like a bad copper, so I doubt this is the last I’ve seen of him. I need your help in dealing with Bodhi. You were successful destroying her guild, of that I am glad, but the mistress herself seems to have survived.” Rolanna was glad that Linvail was bringing up the matter she herself wished to discuss.

“I don’t know why she returned to Athkatla, but I can’t take the risk that she will rebuild and take revenge on the Shadow Thieves...and myself, of course. I would like you to end her existence permanently. I won’t fault you for your failure last time. Obviously both of us underestimated the extent of her power.”

“I intend to do it anyway. I came here looking for your assistance in attacking her.”

“Then you shall have it. You have proven yourself to the entire guild, and from your reputation you are certainly to be trusted with the lives of my men. I will have Arkanis and Yachiko and others, our best assassins, join you when you enter Bodhi’s catacombs. I want to be sure Bodhi is forever out of my hair. Go to the catacombs when you are ready, then. Your assassins will meet you there. And, incidentally...good luck.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna left his presence, walking to the temple district in search of more support against Bodhi. She would have only the one chance to recover Imoen's soul, and she didn't intend to waste it. As she walked, she heard Minsc's sword complain, "Wanna go kill that over there? C'mon, let's kill somthin'!"

Rolanna first went to High Watcher Oisig of Helm, since she had helped the temple in the past. She asked for the assistance of Helm's faithful.

"I must do battle with a powerful vampire here in the city, and I cannot face her alone. I ask for the church's aid."

"I know of this vampire...Bodhi, yes?" said Oisig. "Helm knows that she endangers all. We are guardians, servants...I wish we could join you in this struggle. But we have nothing to aid you with. I would suggest you approach the paladins of the Radiant Heart if you have not already. I have given you my decision. Now you may go."

Rolanna did not think she would get a different reception in the other good churches of the city, so she next went directly to the Order. Outside the entrance, they came on Sir Cadril, Lady Irlana and the gnome Cyrando. Cyrando was standing with the Lady Irlana; Garrick was not present.

"I would like to congratulate you both on your wedding," said Sir Cadril. "I have ne'er seen an odder pair, but your love is both obvious and endearing."

"Thank you, sir knight. I am most fond of the Lady Irlana," said Cyrando "and am pleased that she was able to accept love from a simple gnome such as myself."

"It was your words, little gnome," said the Lady Irlana, "that stole my heart. Placing them in Garrick's mouth did naught for me. I love you for it, regardless."

"And just where is that Garrick fellow, now?" asked Sir Cadril.

"Well, he was playing at the wedding," said Cyrando, "until one of the bridesmaids caught his fancy. A headstrong Calimshite lass... he's returning to Calimport with her."

"If she takes charge of his life, he'll be the better for it," added his wife.

"Yes, well, congratulations, again. And farewell to you both, for now... I shall see you on your return."

"Thank you, Sir Cadril... I shall see you soon," replied Lady Irlana.

Inside the Order they ran into a young man who seemed to know Rolanna.

"Greetings to you, Rolanna, in the name of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart. Allow me to introduce myself...I am Squire Catheras, assistant to the Prelate Wessalen. I am also something of a follower of tales of your exploits, even though you are not a member of the Order. They say your deeds are...most impressive. I am pleased to finally meet you in person. I apologize, however...you likely came here with a purpose, and I am keeping you from it. Did...did you have business with the Order, Rolanna?"

"I intend to enlist the aid of the Order in battling a powerful vampire that is in the city."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“A...a vampire? Such a terrible creature truly exists? Here in Athkatla? I...I had no idea! You must tell the Prelate about this immediately! If there is such a pervasive evil in the city, I am sure the Order will do all it can to assist you. Come!”

They walked to Prelate Wessalen’s office. “Ah, Rolanna,” said the prelate. “I greet you on behalf of the Order of the Radiant Heart. Be welcome here in our Hall. Do you have business with the Order?”

“I do. I intend to do battle with a powerful coven of vampires here in the city and I wish to request the Order’s aid.”

“I have heard of this vampire. Her name is Bodhi...but did you not destroy her and her guild at the beckoning of the Shadow Thieves?”

“I destroyed her guild because I needed the aid of the Shadow Thieves, but I could not destroy her. She has returned to Athkatla and has regained her strength.”

“Then she and her brood must be stopped, without question. Very well, Rolanna, the Order shall fight alongside you against this evil. When you go to the graveyard to face this creature, I shall send a group led by Sir William Reirrac to fight by your side. They will meet you in the catacombs. In Torm’s name, I pray that this is enough to defeat this evil once and for all. Go with my blessing, Rolanna.”

The Order of the Most Radiant Heart

Prelate Wessalen brought up another subject. “I have heard much of your deeds, Rolanna. You have done well as a paladin without a patron. Garren speaks well of you, and he had a recommendation. His wished you to be recognized for your heroics. You truly exemplify the paladin spirit, and I would have you demonstrate it further.”

“I follow the path that I must. There is no other for a paladin,” said Rolanna simply, although she had to admit to herself that sometimes the path had been hard to discern.

“Then you shall continue under the guidance of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart. You could ask for no better a patron. Go, I bid you speak with William Reirrac. He shall be our liaison. The tasks you are given shall be for the causes of justice. Give them the attention they merit.”

Rolanna knew the Order was not perfect, she had had experience with fallen members of the Order. In Anomen’s case, she had direct experience of a member betraying its ideals. But she thought she could do more good as part of such an organization. And frankly, she was not coming to the Order as a hopeful novitiate, but as an experienced paladin. She would work with the Order, but ultimately she would be responsible for setting her agenda. She also thought that having asked the Order’s help, it would be unfair not to follow up on their offer of membership now, rather than make a lame promise to consider it at some future time.

“I will follow as I must, as long as the cause is just.”

“The cause shall be just if you perform as you should. Do not neglect your own quests, but treat your assignments with urgency. Go to William Reirrac now.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Welcome, I have been awaiting you,” greeted Sir William when she found him in the main hall. “You should know the particulars of your service here, and what being a member of the Most Noble Order of the Radiant Heart really means.”

“I am ready to serve in whatever capacity is needed, no matter how humble.”

“Oh, you are not meant for humble service. We have many a hopeful squire for such duties and that. No, you are of a caliber that demands challenge and sacrifice. I will make short mention of what you will receive here, as I have but a small amount of time. Your first task is urgent; you must set out within the hour. Behind me is your private room. Not all members get such a privilege, but you are an honored guest as well. Stow what you must, as more important things await.”

“I will do what I can. Speak what you would have me do.”

“You are aware of the conflict with the Sythillisian Empire? There have been invasions into Amnish lands. We have been monitoring outposts, and all is not well. One outpost reported an imminent attack because an enemy unit needed their supplies. A runner barely made it with the information, and we fear the worst. You must leave immediately for the furthest lengths of the Umar Hills. You must join the combat and rescue our knights, for they are surely outnumbered.”

“I will go this instant! Others of the order will not fall while I stand idle!” replied Rolanna, perhaps a trifle over enthusiastic in her new calling.

“Good. We would send others as well, but we have concerns about a suspected war between the churches. Go, and rescue whom you can. You have little time.”

As the party left the city Nalia smiled at the others, and commented “Another day of freedom. I never felt like this back in the ballrooms of home.”

They traveled to the Umar Hills, where they came upon Sir Alynar of the Order.

“Rolanna! A runner told of your coming!” breathlessly greeted Sir Alynar. “I am to direct you to where you are needed! We must hurry if we are to save our besieged knights! Come, this way to the battle!”

As they followed him, they soon heard the sounds of battle ahead. A small group of members of the Order was beset by a mixed group of orcs, ogre mages, even a few ettins.

“Here! Here is the fight!” said Sir Alynar. “I regret that I cannot join the fray, as I must report to the Order the enemy’s numbers and tactics! Even if all my friends should fall, someone must live to report of this. Fight well, Rolanna, and see our brethren safely home.”

Rolanna was a trifle annoyed that Sir Alynar would not stay and help them, but she quickly forgot her irritation as she and her companions rushed forward to help the beleaguered defenders. They managed to kill or scatter the attackers before any of the defenders fell. One of those they rescued, squire Elotte, thanked them.

“Thank you ever so much for coming to our aid. I shudder to think of the result of the area if none of us were here. Even now the cost has been too high. I thank the Watcher that all my comrades will return from the battle today. I have you to thank. Are you one of the Order? I do not recognize you.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I am new to the order. My name is Rolanna."

"Rolanna...I do not know it, but I am just a squire. You must have impressed the prelate if you are a full member. I...I should go. There is much to report..."

Rolanna found out that the group she had defeated was the only organized remnant of a force from the Sythillisian Empire that had penetrated deep into Amn. The forces of the Order already present could easily handle the scattered individuals that were left, so she started the return to Athkatla.

On the journey back the sword Lilarcor described in excruciating detail every cut and thrust from its usage during the battle. Minsc didn't seem to mind, but the others found it hard to take. The sword was obviously obsessive. After it finished going over the battle, Minsc asked the sword if it needed anything. The reply was, "Well, since you asked, I would like to register a complaint. I want to kill a dragon. Right now. No, don't look. Go kill one now. Go find one and kill it. Kill. Now. That would be so cool."

"You have returned, as have our observing runners," said Sir Reirrac when they reached the Order's headquarters. "The battle was bloody and fierce, and the outcome all but certain. With drive and conviction we have prevailed! All our fine warriors have come home, leaving the despotic to scurry away and lick their wounds! You have the respect of your peers today, for those you saved were well liked. Elotte is a particular favorite; her exuberance has proven quite catching. But we cannot rest upon our laurels for long. There is still much for our kind to do, as the villainous do not rest while we do. Rolanna, we have been commissioned by a local barony. Such service to political figures is good for the Order, and you will serve quite well in the task."

"Of course, I shall do what I can."

"It is necessary for us to be accessible in local concerns, lest we seem above the people. In this case, a Baron has petitioned us to solve a land dispute. Baron Metrich wishes some squatters removed, and has cited violence against his men as reason for it. Go to his lands, restore order, and bring favor to us. The Baron waits in a neutral meeting place. He is in a tavern in the Umar Hills, in the village of Imnesvale. Go now."

As they were heading for the eastern gate to the city a young man in battered armor stopped before Minsc, making a slight bow and saying "Excusing me, please! You be looking like a good fellow. Can you be helping me?"

"I am always willing to help those in need!" said Minsc. "I will give your troubles the one-two boot-stomp of goodness!"

"Oh, no, no, it is being nothing like that. I am great adventurer from Calimshan, great warrior. But I be lost, here, in this odd little city."

"I sometimes feel lost, but Boo tells me where to go. Boo points, I punch! Well, Boo actually just kind of runs, but I still punch! Yes sir!"

"Oh, that is being most excellent! I am trying to be finding directions out of this strange city. Maybe you ask this Boo point way to Calimshan, yes?"

"Boo knows everything, and is ever so willing to help others. You...you are kind to animals, aren't you? Rodents in particular?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Eh, to the best of my knowledge, I try. Maybe I hurt a rat once or twice, but they infest the farms of home.”

“Boo doesn’t like rats either. Something about their tails makes him...edgy, and you don’t know creepy until you’ve seen an edgy hamster! Anyway, go out of city that way... keep on the road, turn right at big church and you will be out.”

“Most excellent news! That be one intelligent little Boo you having!”

“Yes, Boo is friend to all. Such greatness, packed into a small furry bundle of goodness.”

“I must be getting one for myself. Okay, thanking you and farewell!”

Rolanna again set forth for the Umar Hills, thinking that if the Order had a better system of communications she and her companions might have been spared some aching feet. When they arrived in Imnesvale a representative of the baron met them.

“You, you are Rolanna, are you not? I am Crolus, and I am to direct you to the meeting with Baron Metrich. If you would follow me, you are expected. Keep close by my side. The Baron would prefer it if you did not speak to any of the squatters before the meeting. He fears your view of him would be...tainted.”

Rolanna ignored Crolus’ attempted deflection. The only way she could think of to reach a decision was to hear all sides, and then try to come up with the best solution she could.

Rolanna noticed a man standing near the inn where the meeting was being held. His studied nonchalance practically shouted out that he did not belong there. Besides, Rolanna knew most of the villagers from her previous stay in Imnesvale and she did not recognize him. When Rolanna and her companions approached him, he gave a shrug as if to say he knew he had been made, and told her his name was Moreno.

“I should’a headed north instead of hiding around here. You spotted me clear as day. You’re too bright to be Metrich’s men...are you hired swords sent to kill us off?”

“What grievance have you with the Baron? I was told he has been attacked,” asked Rolanna.

“Oh, we attacked his men when they burned our fields! Lanka won’t even acknowledge it happened. She’s not the woman she once was. Baron Metrich took over just recently. He’s been trying to run us out, preferring private hunting grounds to our farms. He’s taxed, burned, and raided! I’d be at the meeting now, but the Baron’s men have orders to kill me on sight...don’t like me organizing people. I was surprised to find the Order siding with him.”

“It seems we have been given only half the story. I will discuss this at the meeting.”

“Discuss it until you’re blue in the face. We’ll continue to fight. We will oust this pretender. Violent talk, but there is little left we can do.”

Rolanna noticed others she did not recognize hanging around outside the inn, and she moved to question them.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Aw, blazes!” said a broad shouldered man in disgust when she talked to him. “It ain’t enough that the Baron has all his thugs here, he’s gotta hire outside mercenaries? You ain’t gonna be too welcome among the farmers if the Baron gets his way.”

“I am of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart, and I will support the side of right.”

“Are you now? Then maybe you’ll be a voice of reason. Not like anyone has cared up until now. Brush the squatters away, even if they were here before. Bah, my word don’t matter, I didn’t see nothin’ first hand, but others did. Not even Lanka can speak true. She’s kept her nose clean and missed it all. You want the whole story, you ask around. Go to your meeting with all sides known and make your mind up then. Do that, and maybe we’ll get what we deserve.”

“What?! What do you want?” asked another man nervously when she approached him. “Just a simple farmer here, nothing to worry about. All the important people are in the meeting. Yes sir, in the meeting.”

“I am supposed to be in the meeting as well. Have anything I should bring up?”

“Why would I? You spoke to Moreno, didn’t you! What did he tell you? Lies! I never...we didn’t...oh, what’s the use? The Baron will have me killed regardless.”

“I will do what is just. I am from the Noble Order of the Most Radiant Heart.”

“You are from the Order? Then we are not forgotten? I...I was so worried! The word was that the Baron had mercenaries coming, but if you are here, perhaps we will get a fair shake after all. Right?”

“If you can justify your actions, then yes. Explain yourselves.”

“You...you really wish to know? Then listen carefully. I know we have not been behaving well, and we have, in fact, killed a number of The Baron’s guards, but it has not been unprovoked! Our lands were ours before he expanded his rule, and now he wishes us forced out. We are taxed and taxed, and if we do not pay, our crops are burned. Moreno has had us...take action, and it has been bloody. I just wish the whole situation was over with. Over and done.”

“I will see what can be done at the meeting. You have my word.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. The Baron has his gold so his word carries all the weight. Good on you if you do help us, but I’m not holding my breath.”

Rolanna was not sure she approved of Moreno’s role, but she saw that the squatters seemed to have legitimate grievances. She would have to see what the baron had to say. When Rolanna entered the inn she saw tables had been moved together, a man and a woman sitting at one end in conversation.

“Who are you? Who dares interrupt our meeting?” asked the woman. “This is a private discussion for the lord of this land and his advisers.”

“Calm yourself, Lanka,” said a man who must be Baron Metrich. “They are the dedicated knights of the Radiant Heart, and they...er...you look a bit less ‘ornamented’ than I had pictured.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna wondered what he had expected. Did he really believe the Order would just automatically accept his claim, and send a knight in gold-encrusted armor to provide a good show?

"The Order has sent me in response to your call. I am to assist in this matter."

"Good, good, good, I thank you for coming," said the baron. "Now I can have my lands cleared with authority, since *others* in my employ are not capable of the task."

"I done said it weren't our fault, it's them attacks by the farmers what slowed..." protested one of the baron's footmen standing at his back.

"Try not to speak unless spoken to, young man," the baron dressed down his servitor. "You are now expendable. Now that the Order is involved I am sure these pesky squatters will leave quickly."

"I will do what is right once I have heard the circumstances," calmly replied Rolanna.

"Yes, it is a simple matter now that you are here. I require some squatters removed from my lands. They will respect the word of the Order and go. My own people have received nothing but scorn, and recently they have even been attacked. It has been a difficult time and I would like this matter closed."

"More than one source told me that you are trying to take land that is rightfully theirs."

"Who have you spoken to? Moreno? Pardo? Hooligans! Mere bandits! They have attacked my men and harassed me!"

"They make claim that they were here first, and that you have been burning their crops."

"Lanka? Is this true?" asked a young man attending the meeting.

"I...I don't know. Metrich, is what he says true?" asked Lanka. "Have you been attacking their homes? This was to be as peaceful as possible."

"What would be your concern?" asked Metrich. "Your hands are far from clean in this matter, my dear. Your precious animals and environment have made you a turncoat." Rolanna realized Lanka must be a druid concerned what uncontrolled migration of squatters into the area would do to the land.

"The state of the land is important, but I did not agree to this," said Lanka.

"My...my father was injured in one of those fires," said the young man. "You did this?" he asked Lanka in disbelief, then pointed at Metrich and said "He did this?!"

"This is not open for discussion!" stormed Baron Metrich. "What matters is the land I want and the people that must get off it!"

"I think this is a matter of you trying to pirate this land away from its rightful owners," observed Rolanna.

"You are not here to think! Leave the thinking to your betters!" yelled the baron, gesticulating to include everyone in the room.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I begin to think you are not such a good steward for the lands after all," said Lanka.

"Are all of you imbeciles thinking, now?! Who asked what you think?!" demanded Metrich. "I've bought and sold better than you at market! No, this will go no further! I tried to play the caring figurehead, but you just kept pushing! Fine! We'll do it the old-fashioned way! I claim this land because I'm bloody rich and you're not!"

"You will not threaten anyone else in my presence!" yelled Rolanna back. No matter what the Order thought, she would not stand by while the baron solved his problems by killing or driving off all his opponents.

"You will respect my authority!" yelled the baron, his face reddening. He made his final mistake, drawing his sword and ordering his retainers to attack.

Lanka stepped back from the conflict, refusing to become involved. Rolanna was forced to kill the baron; several of his retainers were also killed before they saw the fight was hopeless and gave up. The remainder Rolanna allowed to leave the village, taking the baron's body with them.

Outside the inn, the broad shouldered man commented, "Well, the side you have chosen to support is now quite obvious, I think. I would have preferred a peaceful solution, but if this is the way it must be, I do appreciate being on the winning side."

"What Brunson is trying to say is," interrupted Moreno, "thanks for killing that son of a bi—"

"Ah, what Moreno is trying to say is," interrupted the farmer, "thank you for ending this."

"Regardless, this matter is resolved," observed the broad shouldered man. "We will try to bring our lives back to some semblance of normality. We will also try to resolve what guilt we feel for what we did during this incident."

"Neither side was without fault, though the Baron was the source of much of this," observed Rolanna, purposely eying Moreno. She did not have enough information to know what his exact role had been in all of this, but she thought it was something the normal Amnish authorities were capable of looking into.

"True, though we let ourselves sink to his level. Everything will be fine in time. Thank you again."

Rolanna returned to the Order's headquarters in Athkatla, wondering how they would react to her resolution of the problem.

"You have returned, though not quite as I expected," said Sir Reirrac. "I must say that your visit to the Metrich Barony has yielded some surprising results. The Baron is dead, and it will shock the business community of Athkatla. We must ready to defend against the scrutiny to come. Did you have cause to kill him?"

"I did. His claim was a lie. The 'squatters' were farmers on land he wished to steal."

"Then we will stand by you. If what you say is true, and I am confident that it is, then we have done a service to the land despite the confusion it will bring. You will have no time to experience any unrest, however, as we have a vital mission for you that must

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

take precedence over all else. We have received word of a great atrocity, one that must not be completed. There has been...murder is too weak a word. An entire family has been decimated. The Athkatla Morningales have been a model of decency in this city, and their work in opposing the slave trade has earned them renown across the land. It also earned them many enemies. This past tenday has seen the family murdered in their homes, almost to the last. It would seem they were made examples of.”

“What is it you wish from me? Am I to deliver retribution?”

“The time for justice will come, but what is important now is that someone survived, praise Helm. Tyrianna; she hid in a cellar while all others were executed. She must be protected until escorted from the city. Her survival will be a symbol to persevere in the fight against slavery, despite the ferocity of the enemy.”

“She will not come to harm while in my care.”

“I am certain she will not. It would be a tragedy if she did, one that we would be hard-pressed to explain, so you will take great care in her wellbeing. You will go to a safe-house we have set up, and you will make sure she remains secure. It is as secret as we could make it, though nothing is ever absolute. In the morning her godparent will arrive. He is from Baldur’s Gate, and will accept no other guards besides his own. You will see that she reaches his care.”

“She will have nothing to worry about.”

“When she is safe with her godparent you will have succeeded. Go to the building beside the temple in the Docks and await him. She should be safe in his care. Hurgis Baltezan is his name, and a more upright citizen you will not find. He earned the title ‘Hand of Torm’ in his service to the God of Duty.”

“He shall not be disappointed with my service. She will be safe.”

“Do what you must, but do not expect great reward from him. He has high expectations of people. Deliver the girl when he arrives and that shall be enough. Once again, the house is directly beside the temple in the Docks district. Helm watch over you and Torm guide you.”

Rolanna and her companions headed to the dock district, the lowering sun casting long shadows as they walked. On the first floor of the house that was their destination, they met a knight of the Order.

“Halt! You will go no further while I am...” he started, then recovered. “Oh, forgive my outburst, Rolanna. I was told you were coming to relieve me but I have been getting rather edgy. It has been a long day.”

“Has the threat of attack been that constant?”

“Ah, but it is not merely that. You shall understand, I am sure. I formally transfer responsibility for the situation to you, Rolanna. May Helm watch over you in this. And Tymora as well.”

A young woman came down the steps from the second floor, saying “Franco, what was that...oh, he has been relieved. Good, I found his manner insulting. Be a dear and fetch me some ale.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I am not to leave this place, Tyrianna. To do so would mean your death," replied Rolanna.

"I'll die of boredom before this night is through. Mother just couldn't leave well enough alone. Better things to spend our gold on than stupid slaves. Stuffy old paladins are all alike. Same as father, and my uptight godparent, Hurgis. I am not looking forward to living with him. Stupid 'champions of morality.'"

"You should be grateful that he would take you in. He can keep you safe," said Rolanna, in what she hoped was a reasonable tone.

"All you people got my 'best interests' at heart, but I don't want to be a symbol... I just want to get on with my life! Whatever. Stay doggie. Guard. Heel." Tyrianna went back upstairs. Rolanna thought she now knew what the knight had been referring to.

Most of the night passed, with no greater challenge than trying to stay awake and alert. Rolanna started at the sound of rapid footsteps coming down the stairs.

"You awake or what!" said Tyrianna excitedly. "I saw something go by outside! Do your job and kill it!"

"Get back upstairs and keep away from the windows!" Rolanna said sharply.

"Stow it, bucket-helm," said Tyrianna. She disappeared back upstairs quickly enough, however, when Rolanna rose from where she was sitting to compel compliance by force.

A few moments later four assassins slipped into the room. A fierce fight erupted, made more difficult by the necessity that the party keep the assassins away from the stairs. Rolanna thought they had gotten them all when the combat ended, but she hurried upstairs to be sure.

"Don't just stand there!" Tyrianna greeted her. "Go downstairs and see if there are any more!"

Rolanna returned downstairs. They could only move the dead assassins off to the side, and were forced to stand guard in the gore-splattered room.

Rolanna thought it must be close to dawn when Tyrianna came downstairs again, commenting, "Eww, there's blood on the carpet. Shoddy tapestry anyway. You couldn't clean this place up a bit, could you? Doesn't matter, I guess. I'll be leaving now anyway."

"You'll leave when I say it's safe and not before!" said Rolanna crossly.

"You are no longer required," she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "There's torches outside...my godparent is here. As bad as living with him will be, it's better than this! Be a dear...ferry my belongings outside. Then you can go back to polishing your helm, or whatever it is you paladins do when you're not saving the helpless girl."

"I would appreciate it if you would go back upstairs. It is for your own safety," said Rolanna, trying to reason with her.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Whatever. Got some real control issues to work out, I think. Sound like mother, you do.” As Tyrianna finally went back upstairs she commented, “I’ll probably get more from Hurgis too. Moralizing old coot.”

There was knock upon the door. A man, who Rolanna assumed she was supposed to take as Hurgis Baltezan, stood there. “Good morrow, to you. I have been informed that this is where I am to take custody of my goddaughter. I trust she is well.”

“She is safe and sound, as promised. I trust you can verify your identity.”

“You may refer to me as Lord Baltezan, or Sire. I will not accept any delay in the delivery of this child into my care. Tell her it is time to go.”

“Yes sire, I will tell her immediately. Will she recognize you when she sees you?”

“I doubt she will, though I attended her birth. No, you have only my word and the word of your superiors. That should suffice for a creature of duty such as you. Now inform the child that I am here for her. I do not wish to tarry in this place, for it is known to her enemies. Be quick now.”

“I must insist on some verification of your identity. I must be sure.”

“Have you no instincts? Do you serve the Order without your heart’s guidance? Bah, I have no time for doubters. Be swift and bring my goddaughter.”

Rolanna was silent, assessing the man before her. His manner was abrupt, but could be explained by concern for his ward. She concentrated, trying to discern if there was any evil in him, or behind his intentions.

Impatient, he said “I cannot wait long; assassins will be rallying. True safety will only come back at my estate in Baldur’s Gate. Deliver my goddaughter as ordered.”

Reaching a decision, Rolanna went upstairs.

“What now? Is he finally here? Can I go?” asked Tyrianna.

“Yes, he is here. Go downstairs and he shall take custody of you.”

“At last. His place will be little better, but at least I’ll be away from the Order. What a bunch of stiffs.”

Rolanna followed Tyrianna downstairs. As Hurgis left with her, he said “I thank you for what you have done here. I have been served well, and will say so to your superiors. Tyrianna will be safe, you can be sure of that.”

Her duty done, Rolanna and her companions rested a few hours at an inn. As they were leaving an elderly man commented to Aerie, “Ah, lass, yer a sight fer old eyes, lovely as ye are. Mayhap ye’ll sit with a lonely man?”

“I do not think much of myself without my wings, but thank you for your kind comment, sir.”

They returned to the Order.

“This has been a confusing matter with the Morningale family,” said Sir Reirrac when they presented themselves, “one that bears close examination.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I delivered the child to her godparent just as was planned. I see no trouble,” said Rolanna.

“We were lucky. He did not say at the time, but Hurgis informed us after that a group intent on delaying him had confronted him. That was why he was so curt with you. All turned out well, though he said it was mere fortune that got him to the house. Things could have been very different, Rolanna. Tyrianna is safe, and she will be a symbol to those that strive against slavery...even if she is perhaps not the best voice. We all have our duty, though. You are free to pursue your own goals for a time. The Order requires no more service from you just yet, and rewards you with a suit of powerful armor for all that you have done so far. Carry on with your good works, Rolanna.”

Old Enemies

Sir Reirrac hesitated a moment, then continued, “Unless...Rolanna, you are now a true force of righteousness, and I believe it is time for you to perform one final task, if you are willing. There is an item, a holy artifact, that lies within the hands of a great evil. You have felt his presence before, and now I ask you to address it with finality. Firkraag, the great Red Dragon, looms over the Windspear hills. His reign must end, and from his lair you must retrieve the most holy of blades, the Avenger. This tool of good has been in his possession for too long. Rolanna, I call upon you to slay the dragon, and make a statement for right and justice.”

“The blade will be rescued, but so shall the lands that he rules,” said Rolanna. Since winning through the Underdark she was more optimistic about the ultimate success of her quest against Irenicus. She had also thought about Firkraag. She would have been forced to deal with him eventually. This time the dragon would not be a surprise to her; she would face him prepared.

“This is a great risk,” said Sir Reirrac, “but it must be dealt with sometime. Go, and may the forces of good be your salvation.”

The party traveled to Firkraag’s lair in the Windspear Hills. Rolanna and the others had spent many hours planning how they would face the great beast on the way. They would confront him with magical protection from fire and the fear dragons engendered in those they fought. Rolanna, Minsc and Mazzy would surround and melee the dragon, so it could not attack all of them at the same time. The others would encircle the beast as well, at a greater range, using their magical abilities to injure and distract the dragon.

Before entering the cavern that was the dragon’s lair, the defensive spells that had been agreed to were cast. As they walked into the cavern Firkraag was there, towering above them.

“You return? Why do you insist on bothering me,” boomed Firkraag. “You would think that the children of the gods would have something better to do.”

“I have returned, as I said I would. Your menace must end!” yelled Rolanna, drawing its attention while the others encircled it.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“It is, as they say, your funeral. Now I am afraid that you must feel the wrath of the most ancient of Faerun’s species. Do you think your divine blood enough to match? I highly doubt it.”

The magical protection proved effective versus the flaming breath of the dragon, and Firkraag had difficulty deciding which tormentor to concentrate on as attacks came from all directions. Not everything went the party’s way; they had not counted on the mighty wing buffet the dragon could deliver, powerful enough to send individuals crashing across the cavern. However, in the end, Firkraag lay dead, defeated by the overconfidence that had allowed Rolanna to escape their first encounter. Rolanna hacked the horns from the head of the dragon as trophy of her victory.

In the dragon’s hoard one weapon stood out, a mighty two-handed sword. When Rolanna picked it up, she somehow knew the blade was suited to her. She later learned at the Order that this was the fabled holy avenger sword known as Carsomyr.

Carsomyr was a weapon of legend, perhaps one of the most powerful blades ever forged on Faerun, though its origin and history were thought purposefully forgotten, such that the sword itself never overshadow the importance of the struggles that must be fought today. It was infused with the very essence of virtue, and required as much from any paladin that would hope to wield it. The evils of the Realms must truly stand aside when this weapon was brought to bear, their magic dispelled with a word, steadfastly resisted with ease. Carsomyr also harbored a special distaste for the forces of evil and chaos, and such creatures must fear additional damage from its touch in battle.

Rolanna visited the cabin of Garren Windspear, to tell him his nemesis Firkraag was no more. His young son Taar was also present, and heaped praises on Rolanna.

“I cannot believe that it is over! You have done the unimaginable! My rescue, and the destruction of Firkraag...it is astounding! Your honor is no doubt restored, and your name will inspire generations! Such an epic; I knew you had it in you! You shall be the bringer of light in my storybooks now.”

When Rolanna returned to the Order, rumors of her deed had preceded her. A crowd of novices and knights gathered to witness as she handed the dragon’s horns to Sir Reirrac. He solemnly received them, and addressed Rolanna in front of the others standing there.

“You have done a legendary thing this day, Rolanna. You are truly an epic force for good, and an inspiration for the ages. I can think of no one more worthy of wielding the holy avenger. In your hands, such a blade will strike deep to evil’s heart.”

Rolanna and the others left for the Seven Vales inn in Waukeen’s Promenade to get some rest.

Rolanna was troubled in her sleep. She dreamed, but this time not of Irenicus or Imoen. Instead, a woman spoke to her, a voice she didn’t know. She couldn’t remember much of it in the morning, other than a warning that she must face Irenicus, for her sake as well as for the sake of others.

Rolanna remembered she had agreed to go with Jaheira and witness a druidic ritual, performed at the rising of the sun. There was no truly wild growth close to the city, but

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Jaheira remembered a copse of trees from a previous visit where she thought they would be undisturbed.

Although everyone had agreed to be present the previous evening, Nalia and Imoen in particular grumbled at being roused while it was still dark. Nonetheless, everyone managed to get to the small woods in the false dawn before the sun had quite managed to peek over the eastern horizon.

“Stop. Do you see him?” Jaheira suddenly said, surprising the others. “Ready yourself.”

While everyone else looked around, trying to determine what Jaheira had seen, she called out “Dermis! I would speak at you!”

“As sharp-eyed as ever,” said Dermis Courtierdale, walking forward with several others, “though your choice in companions has not improved. Is your treachery not enough that you must consort with a killer? I thought you better than...”

“Shut up! I said I would speak *at* you! This matter is finished! I will not acknowledge this again! If you press it I will be forced to deal with you!”

“As you were ‘forced’ to deal with the Harpers that died in Athkatla?”

“Yes, actually, and you well know it! Galvarey was no more a Harper than a treant. His actions betrayed him, and all those that followed him! The garish Hold, his political agenda; he was merely using the weight of the Harper name to promote himself. Tell me: what did he offer you?”

“You don’t know what you are saying, Jaheira. Your association with this Rolanna has poisoned your judgment.”

“Then I am better for it. Call me traitor, but I have followed the spirit of the Harpers. You are the traitor, and if the events were known others would see!”

“Ah, but the events are not known. What is accepted is that you have killed your brethren and taken up with a known murderer. There is no evidence existing to the contrary.”

“Of course not. Despite the ambushes you will still be able to claim the moral high ground for your actions. What happened to you, Dermis? I do not know you.”

“One grows weary. We would have done good works, Jaheira, just from a more profitable perspective.”

“At the cost of the innocents. That is always the way.”

“Innocent?! Is that what you call Rolanna? But she is a child of Bhaal! Whether her nature is good or bad it will certainly be disruptive!”

“It certainly disrupted you. The innocents also include Harpers that have died thinking they were fighting for the right cause. Galvarey’s cause. Your cause.”

“Regrettable losses.”

“As was yours, though I suspect you have been gone for years.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Ah, your wit is still the most dangerous trait about you, Jaheira. I told you to cultivate it. Little did I know I would be on the receiving end one day.”

“Save it, Dermis. I have no more guilt about facing you, or any other sent on this Fool’s Crusade. You are the betrayers, not I. I know this in my heart.”

“You’ll pardon me if I have a look for myself!”

Dermis and the others attacked Jaheira and her companions, hoping to eliminate all the witnesses to his betrayal of the Harpers’ ideals. But Jaheira now surpassed her former teacher Dermis in fighting ability as in other areas. Dermis fought bravely even when he saw he would not win, refusing to surrender. All of their opponents were killed.

“I did not wish to do this. I did not,” said Jaheira sadly, staring at Dermis’ body. “We are in the right, Rolanna, but why does it still hurt?”

“You know the answers to such things better than I. I’ll spare you my clichés.”

“Heh, a wise move. I will not have this situation made trite. I may be in a foul mood for a while, you understand? Yes, I think you do. Thank you.”

Rolanna acceded to Jaheira’s request that they bury the bodies of Dermis and the others where they lay. Although by her own word no longer a Harper herself, Jaheira wanted no more tales of Harper dissension to feed rumor. Jaheira asked the others not to mention what had happened to anyone; she would describe what had happened when she ran into another Harper, which must happen eventually.

Rolanna was happy that at least Jaheira had learned she had been right to oppose Galvarey. It was unfortunate that it took the death of her former mentor Dermis to learn this truth. Rolanna wondered if the Harpers, not having any certain word on the events in Athkatla, would continue their vendetta against Jaheira. Once done with the burial, the party sadly looked at one another.

Minsc broke the silence, suddenly realizing he had cuts and bruises which should have been treated. He turned to the nearest person, Mazzy, and said “Aargh, Minsc could use a healing touch. Poor Boo; the sight of blood does make him tremble so.”

“With Arvoreen’s blessing such a touch may come to me,” said Mazzy, “but for now we had best get your wounds dressed by another.”

“You would seek the path of Paladin? A difficult road, and you will find many barriers that sword will not break.”

“Through acts of kindness and by living the example, I see no reason I should be denied this. Do you think me not fit because of my parentage?”

“Ah, Boo, Minsc has placed his feet where his head should go once more. No, Mazzy, I meant only that it is a path that is difficult regardless. I could not do it, despite my hunt of all things evil. I don’t think anyone suspects but...but I am not the smartest person.”

“No, Minsc, rest assured I did not suspect such a thing,” said Mazzy, trying to suppress a snicker. “Your heart is pure though, and that will see you through.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“You are more like Boo than Minsc. Boo is small, but he is more than people would believe. Evil will see you like they see Boo, and that will help you in the end.”

“Minsc, you are a constant surprise to me. And Boo is just the cutest little fuzzy wuzzy.” Mazzy reached out to scratch little Boo under his chin. “Fuzzy wuzzy wuzzy.”

Final Battle with Bodhi

Rolanna decided it was time to face Bodhi. She sent word to the Order and the Shadow Thieves that she would attack at dusk that day. She also sent word to a priest of Helm Drizzt had mentioned. The priest would get word to Drizzt, who had promised he would be near the city.

As they entered the graveyard at the appointed time Bodhi's voice called out to them. She was hidden from view, among the tombstones.

“You are becoming an impressive pest, one that I am finding difficult to ignore! Honestly, Rolanna, I simply do not know what to do with you. I grow tired of seeing you in my shadow.”

“You are all shadow, Bodhi. I am the light that will mark the new day,” Rolanna called back.

“What in blazes are you blathering on about? You speak as though someone is scribing your words for some pompous book of history. Regardless, I have not the time to stand here discussing what you will or will not do. I have more important duties to take care of. A simple warning, one that you would do well to heed. Follow Irenicus no more, Rolanna, or your end will be dire indeed. I will speak no more to you. Fight, and if you survive, be thankful and go home.”

Four vampires attacked, which they drove away. They knew this was but a foretaste of what was to come, and continued grimly onward. Rolanna overheard the sword Lilarcor talking to Minsc, saying, “You know, my last owner always said I was sharp and edgy. Heh heh. He was such an ass.” Rolanna was surprised the sword was not talking of combat and killing; perhaps even it was nervous about the upcoming confrontation.

The companions continued underground, to Bodhi's lair. At the foot of the steps underground they found a group of knights. Their leader greeted them.

“The paladins of the Order of the Radiant Heart are here to fight at your side, Rolanna! Glorious shall our victory be if this great evil can be brought to an end!”

Following the corridor that stretched from the foot of the steps, they came upon two vampires.

“My mistress bids you welcome, Rolanna,” called out one.

“Join the wretched darkness, fools,” added the other.

They attacked, and were defeated, with the aid of the knights of the Order.

“My knights, you may return to the Order house,” said their leader, Eric VanStraaten. “Rolanna and I shall go to face Bodhi.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

They moved through several side rooms. As Rolanna entered a room dominated by a raised tub filled with blood she found Drizzt and his friends, probably having entered by magical means.

"Rolanna, you're late. We've started without you!" greeted Drizzt. There were half a dozen vampires in the room besides Drizzt and his companions.

"I'd expected more from vampires. I've barely broken a sweat," said Wulfgar, laying about himself with his ax.

"'Tis hungry work, Drizzt. Can we eat after this?" asked Regis after stabbing a vampire from behind.

"Always the same with ye, Rumblebelly," commented Bruenor, downing the last of their opponents.

"Rolanna and I can handle the rest. My thanks friends," said Drizzt. "We shall meet in the graveyard when I've finished the work."

Rolanna had thought to see a great cat helping Drizzt, but as she looked around she realized she must have been mistaken, there being no place such a creature could hide.

"Always ye be gettin' to have all the fun, elf," said Catti Brie.

"We are here... and right you were, I think, in asking for our aid," said Drizzt to Rolanna. "These crypts crawl with the undead. This shall be a difficult battle for us all."

Jaheira emptied a flask of the holy water they had gotten from the elf Elhan into the pool of blood. They then moved on to the main meeting hall on this level. Inside they found Arkanis and the other promised reinforcements from the Shadow Thieves. They had forced the main doors, and were engaged with numerous vampires.

"The assassins are here to support your battle, Rolanna," said Arkanis, "as the Shadowmaster has commanded. We will do what we can."

Arkanis turned back to the fight, only to call out upon recognizing one of his opponents, "Wh-what?! Kachiko! But...but she just died! If the dead can be turned so quickly by this creature, we must defeat her, Rolanna, we must!"

One of the vampires called out to Rolanna, "Thy audacity is impressive, Rolanna. It does thee little good for my mistress has ordained a baptism of blood and pain for thee."

With the addition of Rolanna and her companions, Drizzt and Eric VanStraaten, they overwhelmed the vampires. At the end of the combat Arkanis spoke to his fellows.

"Well done, rogues! You may go. I shall continue with Rolanna to face Bodhi."

They went downstairs. Rolanna knew the stairs they followed opened onto a corridor, which led to a square chamber, with two smaller chambers opening off it.

Rolanna's visit to the temples in the Temple District had not been entirely in vain, as she had obtained a magical scroll which should make her immune to the attacks of the undead. Rolanna would face Bodhi, drawing her attention. Jaheira would use their holy water on any pools of blood they found, since they suspected Bodhi was using them to help sustain her unnatural vitality. The others were to concentrate on Bodhi's companions, destroying them and leaving Bodhi without defenses.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

As they walked down the corridor, Arkanis pointed at the floor ahead. "Careful, Rolanna. 'Tis a well made trap but no match for me." He disarmed it, then motioned them onward.

When they reached the square chamber Bodhi was waiting for them, with more vampires and undead knights. As planned, Rolanna moved forward to confront Bodhi while her companions hung back.

"And so it shall end here," said Bodhi. "Welcome. You have been very resourceful in finding me, although I did not go out of my way to hide. I'm sure your reasons for coming are all very important to you. Do spare me the boredom of hearing them."

"I will avenge what you have done to me and Imoen. You will pay for your crimes."

"That old tune? I grow tired of being judged by those inferior to me. First Suldanessellar, now you. They...they told of the theft in their temple, didn't they! You help those treacherous elves?! They deserve all they receive, and more! They will not even approach us while we destroy them, such is their arrogance! Let them shiver in fear that they will die between me and Irenicus! They would not even acknowledge us as their own, and now we will bury them all"

"Elhan did not even know of you! How could he acknowledge you as his own?"

"Fool! They would have you think we are some foreign intruders, attacking their city for no reason! Their shame is that Irenicus and I are very familiar indeed! No *elf* would dare turn against the others, no *elf* would endanger the very fabric of their society, no *elf* would do as Irenicus and I have done! Who was it that plead their case? Elhan? He stood by while they echoed our crimes in their punishments! I should almost let you live so that he could have the shame of an outsider questioning him about this whole matter! Almost! Your part in this ends here, Rolanna. I shall feast on the blood of the gods, while you enter death with questions unanswered!"

Bodhi attacked Rolanna, but Rolanna ignored her, striking down any of her minions who tried to come to her aid. When Bodhi did get a clean strike at Rolanna, she hissed as she discovered her attack was deflected by Rolanna's magical protection. She instead turned on another nearby opponent, Eric VanStraaten.

Behind her, Rolanna heard Minsc call out, "I will protect my witch!"

Rolanna now concentrated her attacks on Bodhi, seeking to fell her, but her vitality was incredible. Eric VanStraaten was now down, and Rolanna focused on Bodhi's legs, carving chips out of them as though plying an ax to a tree trunk, seeking to keep her from moving away and attacking any others.

Minsc called out, "No-oooo! Aerie! Aerie!" but Rolanna could not spare attention from her task. She wondered how long the magical protection she had would last, for surely if it failed Bodhi would drink her blood.

Suddenly, Drizzt was by her side, his twin scimitars raining blows. Between them, they knocked Bodhi to the ground, but still she writhed, trying to rise. They practically cut her to pieces before she called out "No! No! It's mine! This life is mine!" Bodhi changed to gaseous form, seeking her coffin.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Grimly, Rolanna moved to a side chamber, which held Bodhi's coffin. Rolanna hefted a stake, driving it through Bodhi's heart. The corpse never moved, although suddenly the stink of corruption wafted from the coffin. Rolanna thought she saw a nearly transparent mist rise from the coffin and move towards the next room, but she wasn't sure. Nearby, Rolanna found the Rhynn Lanthorn.

"So it ends," said Drizzt. "The evil is slain. You have done well, friend. I bid you fair journey!" Arkanis as well bid farewell.

They had suffered two deaths. Eric VanStraaten had died, drained by Bodhi. Rolanna would take his corpse back to the Order, although she doubted they could do anything for him.

Aerie was also dead. She had been charmed by one of the vampires. Drizzt, in an attempt to prevent her from using her magic on her friends, had attacked her, accidentally causing her death. Minsc had been enraged at the sight, and had to be magically restrained.

Fortunately, Aerie could be helped. Jaheira cast a spell, returning Aerie to the living.

Minsc had calmed down by this time, and asked, "You are okay, Aerie? Boo tried his best to save you."

"You and Boo did all you could, Minsc," said Aerie. "Oh, cheer up, you two, I'm back aren't I?"

"Wine, everyone! Song! The witch lives!"

Finally, Rolanna talked to Imoen.

"I feel...I feel better now. I feel whole again. Thank you for everything you have done. I am restored...and I hope your own healing is not too far off."

When they returned to the Order, Prelate Wessalen said, "I understand your force and ours were victorious. A blow has been struck against evil today...the valiant dead have to be mourned. Well done, Rolanna."

They also stopped by the Shadow Thieves, where Aran Linvail commented, "So... finally, Bodhi is dead, is she? I am very pleased. The Shadow Thieves at large can breathe a sigh of relief, now. A job well done, Rolanna."

Rolanna saw no more need to delay. They were needed in Suldanessellar, for a final confrontation with Irenicus. They left the city that night, continuing to travel through the daylight hours of the next day. They made camp on the edges of the Forest of Tethir when night came.

As they made ready to break camp the next day an old man wandered into their camp site. Rolanna recognized him as the same one who had given her Jaheira's note when she went off on her own to the Harper's Hold. The old man did not appear to be a threat, but this second appearance could not be a coincidence.

The old man approached Jaheira, saying, "Hello, young lady. Might I have a word or two?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Do I know of you? Your voice is familiar, but I cannot place your face,” said Jaheira.

“Perhaps we have met. We traveled in much the same circles, though not at the same time. Terminsel is the...ah...name, and I should like to ask ye a question.”

“We met among the Harpers, did we not? I am through with them. Many a decent person I met, but damned if I’ll be crucified for the failures of their own.”

“Yes, well, calm down for the moment, if ye will. I am well versed in the events that have occurred, and I have but a simple question to put to ye.”

“Then do so. I wish this matter behind me, once and for all.”

“Oh, this will clear up a great many things. I care little for the specifics of what occurred in the Harper hold. No, Jaheira, I’ve a question of a different sort to ask. For better or for worse ye have thrown thy fate in with this Rolanna, and she is, among many other things, a child of Bhaal. Yes, I know of this, so look ye not surprised. In the end ye have gone against thine own fellows guided by your heart; ye have seen Rolanna’s actions, and served with her through battle and peace. Ye have done what ye have done, the reasons for which are thine. I trust they are valid... This is my question, Jaheira: did ye do the right thing?”

“Undoubtedly. I would do as such again without hesitation. Rolanna is proven decent and others are all the more fools for not seeing so.”

“Then that is the measure from which the incident shall be judged. Think no more of it. Oh, and before I forget, this little item was meant for ye. I believe it was forgotten in all the excitement. Wear it with pride, will ye? And get back to work.”

Terminsel handed Jaheira something. Jaheira stared at what he had given her. To Rolanna’s surprise, there were tears in Jaheira’s eyes as she continued speaking.

“I...I believe I have placed a proper name to your manner, now that I have experienced it up close. I should not have thought you fond of anagrams, ‘Terminsel.’”

“Yes, well, one must keep amused in one’s old age. Good luck, Jaheira, and do not think thyself abandoned for the actions of a few. We simply do not work like that.” Terminsel slowly walked from the camp.

Rolanna approached Jaheira. Jaheira unclenched her hand, allowing Rolanna to see what the old man had given her. Rolanna recognized a Harper’s pin. She was confused, wondering who the old man was, and how he could have reinstated Jaheira back into the Harpers.

Jaheira laughed at the expression on Rolanna’s face, and asked her if perhaps she had heard of the name “Elminster” before?

Suldanessellar

“You return. All has been relatively quiet here,” Elhan greeted them when the party reached him later in the day. “I believe the drow were mostly satisfied with the

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

destruction of our temple. They have made no further serious advancement. Yet.” Rolanna pulled something from her pack, which he recognized.

“You have the Lanthorn! It is in the hands of the murderous vampire Bodhi no longer! I feel the tide of this crisis is certainly changing.”

“Yes, and she talked a lot before I killed her. You have been withholding information,” said Rolanna.

“Anything said by her or the Exile Irenicus must be treated as suspect! You would do well not to repeat their tales to those that do not need to know them!”

“I can’t help if I don’t know what is behind all of this, Elhan. Talk to me.”

“No! This is... This is not for you to know. I can’t tell you, Rolanna, it is not my place to do so. The Exiles, this Irenicus and Bodhi, are criminals. Their crime was great, their punishment greater.”

“And so he has returned for some sort of revenge. I fail to see the great shame in this.”

“You do not understand, and I am not prepared to make you. If you wish to know more, you’ll have to talk to one of those involved. Demin the high priestess, she will tell you. We will have to breach the city to find her. Fortunately my sages have instructed me in the use of the Lanthorn. We must go, but most of my elves must remain to hold the drow. We must not be struggling on two fronts when we face what is in the city. Follow, Rolanna, we must let the Lanthorn lead us to Suldanessellar. I can only hope that the Exile will have left us a city to find.”

Elhan, anxious to free the city, quickly gathered a small group of elite elvish warriors. Everyone was then teleported to a spot in the Forest of Tethir near the city. Elhan raised the Rhynn Lanthorn high, letting its light spill over the trees in front of him. Reflections ahead sent thin beams of the Lanthorn’s light back among them. One beam illuminated Elhan’s face, mixed longing and dread visible to all.

“Ah, sweet Suldanessellar. I have been away too long. I must determine what Irenicus has done within the city. Walk with reverence when you step. You are going where precious few outside of the elven community have even seen.”

Guided by the light of the Rhynn Lanthorn, they passed effortlessly through what had seemed an impenetrable wall of trees. The city that greeted them as they emerged was at once inspiring, but also profoundly troubling, for amidst the majestic architecture were dozens of bodies, elves that had fallen while defending their home. Suldanessellar was in the grip of Irenicus and his minions, and it would not be relinquished without a fight.

Surveying the city, Elhan grimly said, “It is as I feared. The madman Irenicus has unleashed his anger upon the city. And worse yet, I now recognize the magic he has employed. Corruption magics, illusions from a race of spirits, the Rakshasa. Such creatures are very predatory. It would appear that there is no depth to which Irenicus will not sink. Suldanessellar is under siege. With this number of beasts under his command, Irenicus will be very hard to unseat.”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"I would not wish to damage the city. What would be the best course of action?" asked Rolanna.

"We must proceed with caution. Not everyone in the city can withstand an onslaught like this. Their safety must take priority. You must seek out Ellesime. She will know what to do. She has a link to the divine not unlike your own, though through a much more benevolent spirit. Failing that, find the high priestess Demin. If anyone had warning of Irenicus and made preparations, it would be one of those two. Go, Rolanna, I will garrison this area with my elite War Guards. We will shepherd people to safety as you secure the inner city."

"Move out men! The enemy is everywhere! Watch for survivors and beware of magical illusions," Elhan commanded.

"Yes, my liege," commented one of his guard; some then fanned out to form a safe perimeter to protect returning survivors. Other would penetrate further into the city. As they moved to their duties first one voice, than all the guards called out "For the Queen!"

The city of Suldanessellar consisted of a series of buildings in mid-air, supported by living trees growing beneath and through them. Suspended walkways connected the platforms about each building.

At the Temple of Rillifane a group of Rakshasas guarded the exterior, while inside they found a powerful mage Irenicus had left to guard the temple. Rolanna wondered why there was such a heavy guard, since after defeating their opponents she found nothing in the temple that seemed useful against Irenicus.

They moved onwards, towards the largest building in the city. Near this building they came upon a few of the original defenders of the city. Their leader, Captain Aduo'on, hailed them.

"Greetings, stranger. You have fought your way through the city, have you? How is it that you came here? I thought the Exile had hidden the city from all view."

"I am here with Elhan...he is evacuating people at the city gates," said Rolanna.

"Elhan? Good to know, but I cannot take all these wounded to the gates...we are safe for the moment. These creatures must be stopped soon or we are all doomed!"

"Do you know where the Exile is?"

"We all saw the Exile arrive on a black dragon. The dragon landed outside the city to the northwest...but we were too busy fighting golems to notice much else. Last we heard, the Exile entered the palace and sealed the gate. Nothing can break through. Queen Ellesime is within, as is the Tree of Life...no doubt his target."

Frustrated with their attempt to enter the large building, the palace, Rolanna continued to search the city, hoping to find the priestess Demin.

Finally, outside another house, they encountered a drow, guarding the priestess Rolanna wished to see.

"At last! Guard duty grows tedious," the drow greeted them. "Let's get down to killing you. Oh, I suppose I should be official about this...uh... You there! All citizens

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

must stay indoors under threat of death. The High Priestess is being punished for her part in our Master's curse. You shall be slain for even thinking to approach her house."

They defeated the drow and three rakshasas guarding the priestess Demin inside the house. At the end of the combat she spoke to them.

"Th-thank you for your assistance, strangers. Forgive me, also, if I reward your effort with questions. How do you come to be here? Our city is not usually found by outsiders, doubly so with the Exile employing his magics to hide us. It is beyond fortuitous if you stumbled here unknowing."

"I seek the one you call 'the Exile.' Irenicus has taken much from me," explained Rolanna.

"It is our folly if we think his terror would be isolated. I apologize if he pained you, for we are partially to blame for each act of evil he survives to commit. I begin to feel it is a mistake to keep this amongst us exclusively. The consequences have been far reaching and have proven especially difficult to dispel."

"I would help for the good of both of us, but I do not know what has triggered this."

"I am not so concerned with the shame of our people over Irenicus and Bodhi. What good is our silence if the city is crushed because we would not seek help? You are not an elf. It must be difficult to fathom why we are so hesitant to speak of this. Hopefully you will come to understand. The Exiles were not always as you know them now. They once had names that I would have been proud to speak, and were as worthy as any other of praise."

"Then they have fallen far from that lofty perch. I see no trace of worth in them now."

"Certainly you are entitled to your misgivings. You would not be here if you were not driven by powerful emotions, and the Exile is good at provoking a reaction. He has garnered the strongest of reactions from we, his own people, for he wronged us greater than any other. He is a criminal that knows no bounds. Yes, he was elven as we are, but no longer. Queen Ellesime cast him out, for he had proven he was not elven at heart."

"And Bodhi? Was she involved in this too?"

"She and he were well known in the elven court of Suldanessellar. He, at least, was a great asset to our kind and kin. He was the greatest of our mages, as skilled as any of elven blood could be without divine assistance. He even had the favor of the Queen. It was not enough. Of the two, the 'sister' was the insatiable one. She was not as regarded, but she held great influence over her 'brother,' and pulled him into her madness. Together they sought more than was possible; they wished the power of the gods, and they were not concerned about the consequences. He of the Exiles performed a dark ritual, and committed a grave offense against the greatest symbol of our longevity: the Tree of Life. He sought to merge his essence with the divine tree, draining it and stealing its energy. He failed, but there was a price to pay for the rest of us. He disrupted the elven connection to land and nature. There was a great shock that ran through Suldanessellar, and many of our weaker citizens lay near death. That he would endanger so many for he

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

and his sister's selfish goals was one thing, but to threaten the very nature of what makes us who we are was unfathomable."

"Then why was he not killed outright? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"It fell to Ellesime to judge the crime, and she was harsh. Having forsaken everything elven, they would be outcast so they might learn how precious our ways are."

"So you made a valiant attempt to redeem him," Mazzy said. "You cannot be blamed for at least trying."

"Of spiritually high regard, Ellesime petitioned the gods and a divine curse was placed upon the Exiles. All their connection to the elven spirit was severed. Ellesime thought it a punishment worse than death. A life no longer than a human's, and their elven spirits banished from the paradise all elvenkind are entitled to. The sister exposed herself to vampirism to try and counteract the divine curse, but gods are not routed so easily. The brother did not risk the same. A better man would have learned to appreciate what he had lost, perhaps learning humility and seek to make amends. He did not prove to be a 'better man.'"

"I should say not. I have experienced the hatred that drives Irenicus."

"We had hoped this would turn out better. The Exile has found a way to restore himself, has made pacts with our most despised enemies, and has resumed his original plot."

"I seek him because of his restoration. He has harmed me and those dear to me."

"I have no way to accurately measure the cost of our decisions on you. Reparations will be made, if there is anyone left here to make them. I...I am still in shock that this happened. So much of Suldanessellar's defenses were away, battling the drow and their incursion at the temple. We were left weak. One group of exiles helping another, both so full of their petty hatred and jealousy that they would stop at nothing to strike at our hearts. The Exile brought to the city magical constructs and demons, and a...a black dragon, which landed to the northwest. I have been trying to fight, but there are too many."

"Elhan spoke of Ellesime, and how she might be able to help."

"The Exile has seeded the streets with his minions, and taken Ellesime into the palace. I have made an attempt to enter, but it is sealed tight. Whether you search for the Queen or seek the Exile for reasons of your own, you will have to get into the palace and also deal with the monsters in the streets. And I believe there is a way to do both at the same time, though it will not be easy. No, we have seen to it that it will not be easy."

"Of course we'll help!" affirmed Aerie. "I can feel the Tree of Life calling out in pain...and the pain of the elves is its pain as well! We must do what we can, Rolanna!"

"Do...do we even have time for this?" said Imoen. "We're here to get Rolanna's soul back. Maybe if it wouldn't take too long. It's horrible to see this place suffer."

"I obviously do not have the strength, myself, to complete the task. I think perhaps you do. If I tell you what is to be done, will you do it?"

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“I will. How can the creatures be stopped?”

“The temple is dedicated to Rillifane Rallathil. He can summon the spirit defenders of the forest to protect us...and has the power to break the seal on the palace. But the Leaflord must be awakened, his avatar summoned, in order for the spirits to come. The Exile's creatures have desecrated the temple and stolen the artifacts I need. The artifacts are lost in the city, held by the Exile's minions, perhaps even the black dragon in the northwest. There are three: a talisman of Rillifane, a golden cup, and a moonblade. Go into the temple, which will most likely be guarded, and place the items on the statue in the center. This will summon the avatar to our defense.”

“Are you certain this is the solution?”

“I believe so, stranger. I cannot be sure, but only Rillifane has the power. Go, please...the longer you wait the more elves will suffer. Quickly!”

In searching the city they had found two of the artifacts Demin mentioned. The golden cup was missing. Rolanna thought she knew where Irenicus had placed it.

They left the city to the northwest. In a clearing nearby they found a black dragon.

“Food! Irenicus has sent lunch at last,” the dragon boomed when it saw them. “It is well. I grow tired of this, treasure or no. Nizidramanii'yt is no pathetic soldier to guard duty over a tarnished cup.”

“Evil wurm! You shall slay no more innocents in this city! Die!” cried Rolanna.

“Excellent! I do so enjoy it when they struggle!”

Using the same tactics that prevailed over the red dragon, Firkraag, the party had cast protective magic on themselves before the combat, and surrounded the dragon to fight it. Nizidramanii'yt was defeated, with no loss to the attackers. Although Rolanna didn't intend to become a professional dragon hunter, she thought her companions had become skilled at facing the most dangerous of opponents.

Now that they had all the needed items, the party returned to the Temple of Rillifane. Rolanna carefully placed the artifacts on the altar. A gentle wind blew through the chamber, and a mixed green and golden light sprang from the altar. An indistinct humanoid form, nearly as tall as a hill giant, appeared beside the altar. When the apparition spoke, the rustling of leaves and tinkling of brooks underlay its words.

** THE AVATAR OF THE GREAT OAK STANDS BEFORE YOU, MORTALS. WHAT TRANSPIRES HERE THAT REQUIRES THE ATTENTION OF THE LEAFLORD? **

“The sorcerer, Jon Irenicus, has—” Rolanna started.

** AH...THE EXILE HAS RETURNED. HE WHO ONCE WAS OF THE ELVES BUT IS NO LONGER SURVIVES YET. ONCE AGAIN HE COMMITS HIS SACRILEGE AGAINST THE TREE OF LIFE. **

** THE EXILE PROTECTS HIMSELF WITH POWER THAT CORRUPTS NATURE. I CANNOT TOUCH HIM. HE HOLDS SHE WHO IS OF MY BLOOD IMPRISONED WITHIN CORRUPTION. HE USES HER LINK TO THE TREE OF LIFE TO DRAIN ITS POWER. **

“Why? What's he going to—”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

** THE EXILE SEEKS TO JOIN THE SELDARINE. THE EXILE SEEKS TO BECOME A GOD, AS HE SOUGHT ONCE BEFORE. **

“He...he seeks to actually join the Seldarine?” echoed Aerie in disbelief. “The elven circle of the divine? But...Corellan Latharian would never allow it! He is mad!”

“The Seldarine?” Jaheira said simultaneously. “The collection of elven gods led by Corellan Latharian? How would he ever propose to do join such ranks? Mad! Mad!”

** THE FIRST OF THE SELDARINE WOULD NEVER PERMIT IT. THE TREE OF LIFE MUST NOT PERISH, OR OUR CHILDREN WILL SUFFER. THE SPIRITS OF THIS WOOD WILL BE CALLED TO DEFEAT THE EVIL THAT THE EXILE HAS BROUGHT INTO OUR MIDST. **

** RISE, SPIRITS...IT IS I, RILLIFANE RALLATHIL OF THE SELDARINE WHO CALLS YOU. DEFEND OUR CHILDREN THIS DAY. **

The wind in the room briefly rose to a howl. Human-sized wispy spirits seemed to appear on the wind, letting it take them from the temple. Then the air stilled.

** AND YOU, MORTAL... **

As the Avatar of Rillifane’s gaze settled on her, Rolanna suddenly felt refreshed. She knew she and her companions would now need no rest despite their exertions in the city.

** YOU SEEK TO DEFEAT THE EXILE. FREE SHE WHO IS OF MY BLOOD FROM HIS CORRUPTION, AND SHE WILL SEVER THE LINK HE USES. **

“But Irenicus has sealed—”

** THE EXILE BLOCKS YOUR WAY, SEALING THE GATES TO THE GREAT PALACE. I SHALL UNSEAL THEM... IT IS DONE. I CAN DO NO MORE. **

Rolanna left the temple, headed for the palace. She met Captain Aduo’on outside the doors.

“The old guardians! Raised up against the creatures the Exile brought with him! A... a magnificent sight! Well done! Well done!”

Inside the door of the palace was a living tree. The tree shimmered slightly as Rolanna looked at it. A palpable feeling of magic emanated from it. The unusually large nuts in the branches above were a tempting sight. As soon as Rolanna touched the first nut, a shock ran through her hand and all of the nuts fell to her feet.

Rolanna gathered the nuts, feeling they would be needed.

They moved to another room. On one wall water gushed from above into a pool. There was an odd play of shadows deep within the pool. Somehow, Rolanna sensed she needed to manipulate the statues of two musicians nearby.

The ground shook and the water that poured through the living walls slowed to a trickle. The pool began to drain. An entry to the area beneath the palace was now open to the party.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

The Tree of Life

Rolanna felt a tingling as she approached the stairs; a familiar touch which she instinctively recognized as her own soul. Irenicus was near. Rolanna paused, knowing that she might not survive the battle to come. She had little choice, however; without her soul, her fate was a grim and certain one. She turned and regarded those who remained in the party. She felt a need, perhaps, to ascertain their loyalty, their friendship, or to offer a chance to reconsider.

Imoen, her sister and steadfast friend, who had changed so much in the time Rolanna had known her. Shadows circled her eyes, but she smiled as she noticed Rolanna's gaze.

"Imoen, you're my sister and my best friend. I'm going to face Irenicus now...you don't need to come if you don't want to."

Imoen shook her head slightly, as if to say there could be no question of her accompanying Rolanna.

Mazzy, determined and valiant, who yearned to be a true paladin of Arvoreen and had accompanied Rolanna since she freed her from the Shade Lord.

"Are you ready for this fight, Mazzy? I need to know that you are willing to continue."

"I can no more abandon you now than I could have my old friends in the Shade Lord's dungeon, Rolanna. I shall remain honorable...even unto death, itself."

Nalia, young and naïve, yet she had come a long way since Rolanna first met her. She kept a generous spirit and youthful attitude, and Rolanna wondered if she belonged here.

"Nalia...you've seen Irenicus and you know his power. There's no need to endanger yourself further."

"I...I've come this far, haven't I? I refuse to let someone like Irenicus get his way. If he gets the power he wants, the suffering will only get worse. No...no, I'm ready to fight, Rolanna."

Jaheira, proud and resolute; she had been with Rolanna since the beginning, practically. Jaheira knew Rolanna well, and had suffered loss at the hands of Irenicus, as well.

"Are you ready to face Irenicus, Jaheira? I need you by my side, unwavering and ready to die, if necessary."

"Long ago I promised to assist you if your adopted father fell. That promise has not expired, nor has your worthiness. I stand with you if you will have me."

Aerie, at times innocent, at times determined, the young elf had come far since Rolanna took her from the circus in Athkatla. Was she ready for what was to come?

"Aerie...you don't have to continue past here. This isn't your fight."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

"If...if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have escaped from Kalah. I...I wouldn't be out here, and I wouldn't have the chance to face this evil. I won't stop now no matter what the cost."

Minsc didn't wait for Rolanna to say anything when she turned to him.

"Minsc owes much to the killer of Dynaheir! I stand with you! Nowhere shall I go until the heel of justice has been firmly imprinted once and for all into the wizard's evil backside! Nowhere!"

There was nothing more to be said. Without a further word, Rolanna turned grimly back to the stairs before her. Her soul awaited.

Rolanna and the others went down the stairs. Rolanna felt a sudden queasiness, which just as suddenly passed. At the bottom of the stairs was a huge, multi-limbed tree. Rolanna felt the size of an insect as she stepped out onto a branch. She didn't know how the tree could possibly fit within the palace; not that it mattered. Irenicus was ahead.

The party had just started walking forward on a tree limb when a shimmering figure of an elven female appeared before them. When it spoke, Rolanna recognized the voice from her dream.

"Wait! Who comes? You...you are the Child of Bhaal, aren't you? The one that Joneleth...Jon...boasted of stealing power from? He claimed to have slain you!"

"Yes, but...who are you? And what is Irenicus doing?" asked Rolanna.

"I am Ellesime, Queen of Suldanessellar. Joneleth has me at the center of the tree, trapped in a cage of corruptive magics. This is as far as I have been able to send my image. Joneleth, the one you know as Irenicus, he...is drawing power from the Tree of Life into himself. There are...parasites attached to the Tree, draining it for him." Rolanna had seen a many-times life size head of Ellesime carved by the disturbed artist Prism in Nashkel, but his idealized vision did not closely resemble the figure now before the party.

"Parasites?" asked Rolanna. "What manner of creatures are these?"

"I do not know what manner of parasites these things are, but they are formed from corruption itself, I fear! They feed Joneleth the power and maintain my cage! Whether you are here to save my people or simply kill he who has tormented you, I care not. One thing must be done; the parasites on the Tree of Life must die! Do that and I can sever Jon's connection to the Tree. Then, and only then, may he be killed! I...believe he has protected the parasites somehow...I do not know. Hurry!"

"How do I reach the parasites? There is no route I can see amongst all these branches!"

"Yes...he has severed branches. Use the nuts...the nuts from the palace gardens! They will grow new branches on the tree! You can use them to cross! Do it quickly, Child of Bhaal! If Jon drains the Tree of Life, all of Suldanessellar is doomed...and Jon will have the power he craves! Please, you must stop him!" Her image faded away.

Rolanna found the Queen's advice to be true. When they came to a damaged section of the tree, placing one of the smaller nuts in her pack on the limb before them caused it

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

to begin to grow and extend. It grew and twisted at an alarming rate, soon melding with the Tree of Life. The Tree grew to form a path to branches beyond.

They came upon the first parasite, a thing that was like nothing Rolanna had ever seen before. Four snake-like appendages protruded from its swollen body and had driven themselves through the branch of the Tree. The parasite was sucking the very life out of the Tree. Rolanna and Minsc moved to hew at it with their swords.

At the first sign of hostility the parasite swelled with energy and summoned guardians, elemental beings of fire. The party defeated the guardians. The parasite, now defenseless, was easily destroyed.

They found and destroyed another parasite. Off in the direction of the main trunk they could see the shimmer of magical energy, and assumed Irenicus must be there. Following Ellesime's advice, they had to first finish off all the parasites.

When they destroyed the next parasite, the voice of Ellesime sounded around them.

"Yes! Excellent! Already I can see this cage beginning to fade! I will begin to sever his connection. You will need to come to the center of the Tree where Irenicus and I are quickly! The energy he has stolen from the Tree will be torn from him. I know not what effects this will have...but Jon will be disoriented, so you must kill him quickly! Finish it quickly! I feel the Tree of Life dying! Jon is drawing too close to his goal!"

They ran towards the center of the tree, to find Irenicus, and Ellesime, no longer imprisoned.

"what...who... *Who dares!*" roared Irenicus.

"By all that is righteous, I am here to destroy you!" cried Rolanna.

"You...you live *yet?*! You have less than a fraction of your soul and yet somehow you *continue* to oppose me? The power...the power of the Tree is gone from me. You have been successful in your little scheme, insect, but now this ends! I will take great pleasure in eradicating such a nuisance as you. And then I shall...re-establish my link, join with the Tree once again... I shall find a way, I shall *have* the power—"

"No, Joneleth. You shall not," said Ellesime.

"Who...? Ellesime?"

"Yes, it is I, your Queen. Twice, now, you have attempted this sacrilege and nearly destroyed us all. You will not do this again, Joneleth."

"Do not call me that! I lost all right to that name when the Seldarine stripped me of everything that was elven, as you well know!"

"And what shall I call you instead? 'Irenicus'? 'Shattered One'? Yes...it was a terrible punishment. But you violated everything we hold dear. You nearly destroyed us all! And for what? Power? Is that all that you exist for now, Jon?"

"It is all I have now, Ellesime. There is nothing else beyond my revenge. Revenge for what you did to me, what the Seldarine did to me!"

"And your revenge has poisoned your heart. The Tree touched you once, long ago. Do you remember nothing of it? Is there nothing in your heart that remembers love? Is

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

there nothing within you that remembers *our* love? What we once shared before this obsession doomed you?"

"I...I do not remember your love, Ellesime. I have tried. I have tried to recreate it, to spark it anew in my memory. But it is gone...a hollow, dead thing. For years, I clung to the memory of it. Then the memory of the memory. And then nothing. The Seldarine took that from me, too. I look upon you and feel nothing. I remember nothing but you turning your back on me, along with all the others. Once my thirst for power was everything. And now I hunger only for revenge. And...I...*will...have it!*"

"Then I pity you. Would that you had used your stolen mortal years to *earn* your return to this sacred place. I could have loved you anew, as I loved the man you once were. But I see nothing of him here. You are Irenicus. And all that awaits you now is death."

"We shall see, my former love. We shall see."

Ellesime vanished.

"So she goes to rouse Elhan and the others while I am still weak. So be it, I shall crush them all, if need be."

Irenicus turned to regard the party. "I retain your power, yet, Rolanna. Your soul still courses through me. Come and make your attempt to reclaim it, if you like. I have power enough to deal with you!"

"Your soul is borrowed, and it shall be returned," said Jaheira. "You are a blight upon nature and you shall be destroyed!"

"We're going to take back Rolanna's soul if we have to rip it out of your chest, Irenicus! And you are going to hell... *Where you belong!*" Imoen cried, a darker, loss-tempered Imoen created by the meddling of Irenicus.

Rolanna, Minsc and Mazzy attacked Irenicus with their weapons, while the others tried to dispel his magical defenses. Although weakened by the power bled from him when his connection to the Tree of Life was severed, Rolanna could see that her blows were having little effect. A magical barrier swirled about him, deflecting most of the force of the strokes Rolanna laid on him.

Irenicus unleashed a wave of magic against them. Rolanna was staggered, her sword drooping as she attempted to recover from the effects of the spell. By her side, Mazzy slumped to the ground, her sword falling from her flaccid grasp.

"Noooo!" cried Minsc. "Such a vile act will not go unpunished! Minsc will see this paladin's heart avenged! Boo shall burrow through your black little soul!"

Irenicus reached out, touching Rolanna. She suddenly found herself elsewhere. She was in a narrow passage. The walls, floor and ceiling blazed with light, nearly blinding her. She moved forward, came to an intersection, went forward, came to another. She realized she was in some kind of maze.

She moved through the maze, desperately trying to find some exit, too anxious to escape to try to discern a plan to her prison. Finally, she turned a corner and was back on the Tree of Life, at the exact spot she had been standing before.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Irenicus was gone; Jaheira was kneeling over Mazzy's body, muttering a spell. Rolanna asked the others for the current status. Only Minsc was missing; amazingly, he had remembered something of the planning they had done, and had led Irenicus away from the others.

Jaheira finished her spell. Mazzy, her life returned, woozily sat up. Jaheira started to prepare another spell to heal Mazzy. Meanwhile, Aerie cast a spell to heal Rolanna's hurts. Imoen and Nalia discussed among themselves the best spells to use when they faced Irenicus again.

Minsc came into view, bounding around the main trunk of the tree. He greeted the now standing Mazzy with a glad cry.

"Mazzy! You walk with the living once more! Minsc was so scar...uh...well...Boo! Boo was so scared you were lost to us, but miracles have brought you back!"

"Stand easy, Minsc, all is well," said Mazzy. "Though I am a bit...woozy. Praise The Defender, I have been brought back."

"Of course, brave little one. See, Boo, she is well and as she was. You were foolish to have been worried. Yes...you were."

Irenicus followed Minsc in a few moments. But the party was refreshed by the brief pause that they had, while it looked as though Irenicus had bled even more energy, almost all of the wavering shield about him having disappeared.

Rolanna and the others again attacked. This time, every one of Rolanna's blows visibly staggered Irenicus. Blood was flowing from shallow cuts on his body, and he was too hard pressed to use many of his own spells. With a final blow, Rolanna caught him in the side with her sword, deeply cutting into his abdomen and throwing his body to the ground.

Irenicus tried to raise himself on his hands, whispering in disbelief, "I...you k-killed me... T-this is not...this...is not..."

Irenicus crumpled, unmoving, and a strange quiet enveloped the scene. Rolanna began to wonder if she had finally won, if it was all truly over.

"A bitter end to a terrible man," said Jaheira. "We did well, I think, but I am not certain that all has been restored to as it was. Rolanna? Do you feel any different?"

"It...it's finally over, then," said Imoen, stirring the body with her foot to see if somehow they hadn't all been fooled. "All those terrible things he did to us, and it's finally over. Or...or is it? Rolanna, something's not right..."

If this was victory, there was a question burning in the back of Rolanna's mind: What about what he stole from her. What of her soul? She felt a small tug inside herself, a pull that seemed to come from the apparition that rose from Irenicus. It was gentle at first, but quickly became urgent. Within seconds Rolanna could not breathe, drawn inexorably to where Irenicus fell. She was still connected to her stolen soul, but it was no longer among the living. Released in death, her stolen soul did not return to her. It was falling away from the mortal world, and Rolanna was being dragged along with it.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

Death and Resurrection

The pain subsided, and Rolanna opened her eyes to horror beyond imagining. It was an assault on her senses, a collection of nightmare sensations. This, surely, was Hell. Rolanna slowly realized that she was not alone, that others were apparently so wounded in the battle with Irenicus that their souls were dragged to a similar fate as her. She doubted they would be pleased with their present circumstance, when Rolanna herself didn't even know why she was here.

"I...I feel so strange," said Imoen. "I felt myself coming apart, my essence... I don't know. And there was this pulling, this force, and...and I knew it was you. I had to come with you, I just knew I had to. We're dead, aren't we? If I'm a Child of Bhaal, shouldn't I be...be gone, then? Just like Sarevok? Irenicus said I was different, but...I don't know. But I know I'll follow you wherever I can. But...but why didn't I follow Bodhi into... into wherever she went when she died? Unless it's because she was a vampire, with no soul of her own. She just...died, and there was only my own soul left? Or maybe it had something to do with your dying at the Tree of Life. I don't know."

"This...this place is terrible!" said Aerie. "I...I felt something pulling at me when I died, and I just knew it was you. I...I had to come. You may need my help, here..."

"It...it is not finished, is it?" asked Jaheira, looking around at the others. "This is death...and your strange power has dragged me here with you. So be it, then. We stand together until the end."

"We died, indeed," agreed Mazzy. "I...would not be here, normally, except I knew this was not finished. I felt your tugging and I came willingly... Mazzy Fentan has never backed away from a battle."

"This is...some kind of plane we're on?" said Nalia. "I...oh, I feel so strange. We died, didn't we? There was all that pain, and then a pulling, like...like being drawn into a whirlpool..."

"Oh, such a glorious death in battle for Minsc and Boo!" said Minsc. "We were well on our way to the great fields and halls of Rashemen, but we felt you needing us, so we came!"

They were standing beside a wall, a door twice their height set into it. Five eyes surrounded this hellish door, as if part of the very stone itself. The eyes followed the party as they moved, and a palpable aura of evil emanated from them. They guarded this door, and if Rolanna wished to pass through, she must find some way of bypassing their guard.

Besides the straight wall next to them, the other wall of the chamber they were in formed a semicircle, curving in at both ends to meet the straight wall. Entries to five passages broke the semicircular wall.

Picking a passage, the party descended steps, ending in a small chamber. Waiting for them was someone Rolanna knew. Sarevok, or at least his wraith. This wraith-Sarevok recognized Rolanna, and spoke.

"So we meet again. How fitting that our reunion should be in this place of retribution."

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Sarevok?!” cried Rolanna in disbelief.

“It is I. Or an echo, perhaps. My essence joined that of our dead father after you murdered me, after all...but in the end, all the Children of Bhaal end up here. You have finally joined us, to claim your heritage as I had attempted. A pity that you arrive in pieces, weak and pathetic. My death was far more final than yours.”

“Claim my heritage?” asked Rolanna. “What are you talking about?” Despite the absurdity of questioning Sarevok for information, Rolanna had to know what was going on.

“You don’t know? This is Bhaal’s realm, and since your essence has not joined with our dead Father, you are still partly alive and your blood holds sway here.”

“Holds sway? What are you speaking of?”

“Your soul is tainted by the touch of our father, fool, and it is that part which rules over this realm. But you share your soul with another, don’t you? The mage, he stole most of your soul, but not all. You are tethered like a helpless calf, dragged into hell after him. Neither of you is truly alive, or truly dead.”

“Irenicus? Do you know where he is?”

“Bah! Have you heard nothing? You have *power* here. Already you search, and already the mage obstructs you. The Tears of Bhaal are your only choice.”

“The Tears of Bhaal?” echoed Rolanna. She still didn’t grasp why she was here, and not fully dead.

“A tear fell for every murdered soul, every torment paid by our father, and he kept each one. They can show the path to your wizard...if you gather them all, that is. I have one of the Tears of Bhaal you will need. I will not hand it over to you, however. You do not deserve it.”

“Deserve it? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you are a pathetic worm, a sniveling little cretin. I relished spitting Gorion on my blade, and were there true justice our positions would be reversed now!”

“You dare speak of Gorion!” yelled Rolanna, mention of her foster father jolting her out of her numbness.

“Ah, yes. Stoke that infernal wrath of yours. I can feel the anger within you, boiling like a pit of sulfur in the crevices of your heart. You feel it, do you not? The taint that surrounds your soul like a serpent, squeezing it, spreading its venom. That taint, that wrath, exists in all the Children of Bhaal...but few know how to use it. You have become the Slayer, have you not? The avatar of our dead father. The blackest expression of murder... I see it behind your eyes. Summon your wrath for me...if you can.”

“No! I will not give into the taint!” said Rolanna. She had made a vow not to transform into the slayer, and would not do so for anyone, least of all for Sarevok.

“I can teach you how to use your wrath. You can control the taint, direct it, summon it at will!” yelled the wraith-Sarevok, summoning his own rage. “You can become the Slayer at will and become the weapon of murder that you were meant to be! So think of

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

me! Think of how I destroyed your precious Gorion! How I plundered the lives of your Candlekeep! Summon your rage, stir the depths of your black heart! Summon wrath! Summon wrath and *become* it! Because if you cannot, then you are not worth your destiny!”

“It should have been I!” raved Sarevok. “It should have been I!” He stopped, raising his sword above his hand. He bellowed a challenge to Rolanna.

“Attack me, worm, if you dare!”

Rolanna gazed upon Sarevok, realizing he had always been the weak one. He had blindly followed the design of his dead father, to his own destruction. “I don’t feel the wrath you claim, Sarevok. I pity you and what you have become, but that is all.”

“THEN YOU WERE NEVER WORTHY OF BHAAL’S BLOOD AND I SHALL CRUSH YOU WHERE YOU STAND!”

Rolanna and the others fought Sarevok, defeating him, denying any control the Bhaal heritage might wish to exert over Rolanna.

Taking the Tear of Bhaal from the corpse, they returned to the main chamber, picking another exit. Steps led down to an opening, hot air blowing past them up the stair. A demon greeted them when they entered, a fitting door warden, since steaming vapor arose from hot lava to either side of a narrow, rock walkway stretching ahead.

“One of the Tearssss doessss lie near thissss very place. It iss in the possession of another, one with sssso much power. Sssso difficult to defeat, it iss. But all thingss, even the most powerful, can be overcome, yess? You have defeated many whosse claims of power were so hollow. You tore them from their thronesss...”

“What does that have to do with the Tear?” said Rolanna.

“Ah, alwaysss you have used the right toolss to defeat your foesss, yesss? And I am givingss you, now, the right tool to defeat thissss one. Here it iss...gaze upon the sssword that is named ‘Blackrazor.’ Mosst powerful, it iss. And it iss the tool you needss to defeat the one who holdss the Tear. It iss for you to decide, Child of Bhaal, how to ussse the tool you have. I leavess you to your choice, then, young Lady of thissss place...”

A sword appeared in Rolanna’s hand, as the demon vanished. She could feel the evil of the weapon through her gauntlet, and in disgust threw it to the ground. There it stuck, point first, vibrating slightly, as if tempting her to pick it up again.

Ignoring the sword, Rolanna walked forward along the short path to a djinni. The creature said, “I see the ruler of this small plane has come to me. Perhaps my eternal torment shall be relieved at long last! Oh, I can only hope.”

“Eternal torment? What do you mean by that?”

“It is a punishment,” it sighed. “I have been brought to this plane to hold the Tear of Bhaal, and I shall remain for eternity until certain...conditions...are met.”

“And what conditions might those be?”

“I...cannot tell you directly, my Lady. It is a condition of my punishment that I can only tell you of its nature in a riddle. Listen carefully:”

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“Ye who hold the razor’s blade
forged of darkest iron
quenched by blood and fear,
know that ye hold the key
to the one who guards
Bhaal’s sacred murdered tear.”

“So...let me get this straight,” said Rolanna. “The sword Blackrazor is the key to getting the Tear of Bhaal from you?”

“I cannot answer that, my Lady.”

“So if I were to give you Blackrazor, would you give me the Tear? And that would release you from your punishment?”

“It would, my Lady.”

“Take the sword, then. I have no need of it,” said Rolanna, pointing back the way she had come.

“I am most grateful to you, then, for my release. Oh, may the Heavens sing your praises for this charity you have shown me, my Lady.”

The djinni floated off; it grabbed the sword, and disappeared. When Rolanna returned to where the sword had been she found another tear.

Another demon greeted her when she entered another room off the main chamber. “Know you, Child, that there is a Tear of Bhaal in this place before us...yet there are two paths that lead to it. Two doors, two paths, yet both lead to your goal, yes? You have made many choices on the journey that was your life. Many paths have you taken, and always they have had an effect on those around you...even when that was not your intention. Such is the fate of those born with Destiny...the consequences of the actions they take ripple about them throughout all that is reality. Perhaps the fate of others concerns you little. Perhaps it consumes your soul. That, too, is a choice...an action taken...a ripple set into the pond of reality.”

“What does all this have to do with the Tear, then?”

“The path that you take to the Tear will affect another this day. Another who is innocent of the action you take, and yet affected by it just the same. One of those who travels with you, who orbits your destiny and yet is innocent of your taint...will do nicely. Remember, Child of Bhaal...a choice must be made, and you must live with the consequences of that choice. Go to my left and sacrifice for the innocent. Go to my right and save yourself.”

The demon vanished, as did Imoen. Rolanna forced down anger at this test’s putting one of her friends in danger, since she had little choice but to follow through with it. She opened the door to the vanished demon’s left. She felt a slight loss of ability, mirrored as she opened two more doors. Passing through the final doorway, she saw the demon, with Imoen.

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

“A selfless act,” said the demon, “from one who willingly shoulders the burden of Destiny and its effect upon others. Your companion is returned to you, Child of Bhaal. The Tear of Bhaal is yours, Child.”

Imoen was unharmed. They returned to the main chamber, took another passage leading from it.

“A Tear of Bhaal lies very close to here, Child of Bhaal,” greeted this demon, “just beyond either of these two rooms before you. You have encountered many times in your existence where you have been forced to swallow your fear, no? You have fought off terror that would overwhelm a lesser being and shown courage, instead. Pass through either of these rooms and your vaunted courage shall be challenged, Child of Bhaal. I have something I will offer, however, which will make it so much easier for you, Child. You know, like so many with power, that items of magic can do much that the ordinary man cannot...such as this cloak, for instance. Stitched together from the flayed skins of lovely nymphs. Wear it and be soothed by its powerful magic...panic will never overcome you again. With this cloak you could easily gather the Tear of Bhaal and worry not of your courage. I bow to the power of your divine soul, Child, and offer this cloak up to you...if you wish it.”

“A cloak stitched from the skin of nymphs?” asked Rolanna in disgust. “I can feel its evil from here. I wish nothing to do with it, despite its power.”

“Then you choose to rely on your own power and bravery. It shall be as you wish, Child of Bhaal.”

As the demon vanished, she cautiously moved ahead. Seeing beholders, she readied the magic shield that she had used to deflect their attacks in the Underdark and attacked. The others cautiously aided her from a distance, except for Minsc, who also rushed forward to engage the beholders in melee. Fortunately, no one sustained any significant damage in the battle. As Rolanna reached to grasp the tear that was her reward, the demon's voice rang out one final time.

“You have faced your fear without resorting to the protection and power of evil. The Tear of Bhaal is yours.”

Rolanna entered the final chamber. The waiting demon called out to her.

“Ah. So the Child of Bhaal comes to me, finally, for the last of the Tears of Bhaal. You have come very near to locating your quarry, o young Lady of Murder. Yes, indeed you have.”

“What are you talking about?!” asked Rolanna, mainly concerned with getting the last tear. “All I have done is been subjected to a series of strange tests!”

“Tests? Of a sort. Remember that the mage holds power here too, and seeks to prevent you finding him. The tests are of your own making, from your own power.”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you find your soul, Child of Bhaal? Do you find it on a stroll? No, you must know yourself, the depths of your passion and the heights of your depravity. You come to know what you are capable of, and that shall open the way to your soul. It is

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

yourself, your essence, that you seek...whether you know it or not. And because this is what you seek, your power fights against the mage and brings you closer to your goal. Soon you shall open the eyes with the Tears of Bhaal.”

“And what then? The door will be open and Irenicus will be there?”

“The way to your soul shall be revealed, but you only perceive it as a door. A pity that mortal minds can encompass more power than their faculties can comprehend. I hope you have been careful, Child of Bhaal. The Nine Hells are a place of retribution...the Tears sting as easily as they soothe.”

“Why are you speaking so cryptically? What does that mean?”

“I obscure the truth because it is my nature to do so, o Lady of Murder. But I bow to your mastery, here, and answer your questions nevertheless.” The demon paused, sweeping one long, clawed, arm to point behind itself.

“It is a good thing you have come to me, Child of Bhaal. Only you hold the power to vanquish the terrible creature that holds one of your dead father’s Tears here. I have heard of your prowess, Child...most impressive, for a mortal life. Creatures of great power thrown aside as if they were nothing! Beings any other mortal would quake before you have fought against valiantly! You are a wonder of destruction, Child of Bhaal! Go, then, and defeat the creature that lies in the cavern! Crush it beneath your heel and claim another victory!”

“What manner of creature do you speak of?” questioned Rolanna, wondering what foul beast held the final tear.

“It is a powerful creature, Child of Bhaal. One that only you can destroy! I am confident in your ability to deal death to such a creature as this and take the Tear that is yours!”

“It’s powerful,” echoed Rolanna, “but what manner of creature *is* it?”

“It is a creature that deserves death, Child of Bhaal. You are such a wondrous fighter, I simply thought that you could defeat it where others failed.”

“Why does it deserve death?” demanded Rolanna.

“Because...because it exists. It stands in your way.”

“I do not kill things just because they are in my way,” said Rolanna. Surely she didn’t need to go through any mysterious tests to know that about herself.

“You do not? Then perhaps you consider carefully the place that your terrible power will focus upon? Consider the reason behind every blow? I see that despite your great deeds you have no pride in you, Child of Bhaal. So be it. Humility serves well those who wield it well.”

The demon vanished. Cautiously, Rolanna moved forward. She saw a dragon; when the dragon saw her, it dipped its head in acknowledgment, saying, “You have mastered your Pride, Rolanna. The Tear of Bhaal is yours. Go well.”

Now having the five Tears of Bhaal, Rolanna returned to the door in the main chamber surrounded by open eyes. As she touched a tear to an eye, the tear disappeared,

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

and the eye closed. When the fifth eye closed the door disappeared. A wave of force burst through the opening, pushing Rolanna and the others back, away from the opening.

When the force dissipated Irenicus was standing before them. He was flanked by four demons.

“So, we are to battle one last time,” said Irenicus. “No more hiding for either of us. I will enjoy destroying you, Rolanna. To die in this place is to cease to exist!”

“I am ready to face you. I have seen the depths of my soul and I am not afraid.”

“Yes, perhaps you are focused within yourself, despite the loss of your soul. But I know as much of myself as well, and I, too, have no fear! As horrific as this place is, it merely mirrors the soul we now share. Shrink from it if you will, but I have grown to appreciate what it can offer! Now defend yourself! One of us is not truly dead, and may be restored if the other is left here to rot! I will be free with what I have taken!”

“There is only one possible end. You will fall here, Irenicus. That, I promise.”

“We shall see, Rolanna. We shall see!”

“We came all the way to Hell to stop you, Irenicus, and we will!” yelled Nalia.

“I came to Hell to help my friend!” said Aerie. “Who helps you, Irenicus? Demons? You’re going to die alone in Hell and you know it!”

“Arvoreen give me your strength so that I may rectify a great injustice this day!” said Mazzy. “In Hell I stand against this evil... I shall not fail!”

“No more platitudes, Irenicus,” said Jaheira. “You have taken much from all of us. Now you die your final death!”

“This is the last stand, here in Hell. We fall or we win,” said Imoen.

“I grow tired of shouting battle cries when fighting this mage,” said Minsc. “Boo will finish his eyeballs once and for all, so he does not rise again! Evil, meet my sword! *Sword, meet evil!*”

Irenicus changed form to the slayer avatar of Bhaal, relying on the heritage of his stolen soul in his battle with Rolanna. But Rolanna thought he had made a mistake. The evil of Irenicus was cold and emotionless, a reasoned calculation based on collected facts to reach the desired result. The evil of Bhaal was thoughtless, a burning emotion to smash and murder whatever was nearby.

So it proved. The spells of Irenicus were weak, the attacks of the slayer form awkward and easily dodged. Whether Irenicus had reached for the Bhaal heritage because his other magical resources had been emptied, or the shock of this semi-death had shattered his control, allowing the Bhaal taint of his stolen soul to manipulate him, the result was the same. Every time Rolanna had faced him, she had become stronger, while he had become weaker.

Rolanna and the others first concentrated on destroying his demon companions, then on the slayer form. When Irenicus realized he could not win, and tried to flee, they surrounded him, raining blows. When the slayer form collapsed to the ground, still they

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

cut. Irenicus could make no effective defense, only writhe under the blows. Finally, in bitter frustration, he called out.

“Curse you, Rolanna! I shall not be defeated by you!”

The slayer form vanished, replaced by the human form of Irenicus. A white mist rose from him, in the shape of the slayer. The mist re-formed as it floated away, becoming the image of a young woman. As it approached Rolanna, everyone present could see that it had her face.

“What is happening... my magic... No! No!” cried Irenicus. Through a bright haze, as her soul settled around her, Rolanna could just make out the body of Irenicus. This time he was finished, his resources exhausted.

Her soul merged with Rolanna. She forgot all else, reveling in the sensation of the union. Rolanna thought of Gorion. He had gathered the Bhaal children to him, raising them, rather than destroying them as would have been so convenient. Rolanna was glad that he had, she was glad for this life, despite the taint. She remembered one of her fondest memories of Gorion. She had been quite young; she had brought him her newest discovery, a caterpillar. He had tried to tell her that the caterpillar would become a butterfly, just like a little girl could become anything she wanted. She wished, just once, she had told him, what he had done, it was right...

* * *

Rolanna looked up into the face of the elven queen Ellesime.

“Ah...I see that you have finally come to. I almost did not believe it when the priestesses told me that your body was showing signs of life again. We resurrected who we could, but it seemed nothing would draw your spirit back. We were about to give up when you began to stir this morning.”

“H-how...how long was I...?” said Rolanna haltingly, realizing she was in a bed. She tried to sit up, realized she couldn't, until Ellesime helped her, offering her arm. Ellesime sat back down on a chair, smiling at her.

“Dead? A couple of days, no more. However you managed to find your way back, it is good that you have done so. You have done a great service for Suldanessellar. You saved the Tree of Life and myself, ending Irenicus' threat. To lose you would have been tragic. I have planned a ceremony to reward you and to show our gratitude for your actions. You are a hero to the elves...perhaps even a legend in the making. But enough of that, for the moment. You will need to rest and regain your strength. I will send a priestess to awaken you when it is time.”

A day later, Rolanna and her companions were present at a great gathering of the elves, honoring their saviors. Ellesime addressed the crowd.

“Those of you who have survived the return of the Exile to Suldanessellar know me, your Queen...but only some of you know the hero beside me who was most instrumental in saving our city and the Tree of Life.”

The queen turned from the crowd, to direct her words towards Rolanna and her companions, but loudly enough that everyone could hear. “Such selfless acts almost

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

resulted in the loss of your life, and perhaps much more than that. These deeds were not performed alone... Suldanessellar also extends its gratitude to those who have traveled with you and fought by your side to help save our city. There is no reward adequate enough for one who has done so much. Let us offer, then, the eternal thanks of our people...and an Amulet of the Seldarine to remind you forever that you are welcome here amongst us. As for the man whom we once knew as Joneleth, I can only say that he died...long ago. He lives in my memory still.”

“To the man he became...the Exile, Irenicus...he who performed atrocities on you, the Tree and his former people...to him I can only send my prayer that he finds the peace in death he never found in life. I feel I must...apologize...on his behalf. For what he put you and your friends through. For his madness, we stripped Joneleth of his elven immortality and exiled him...only to create Irenicus, instead. I cannot help but feel we are partly responsible. It is something I shall have to ponder on.”

The queen continued in a quieter voice, marking her words only for them. “As for you, I am sure you will be...leaving soon. As wanderers, I imagine you are eager to resume your travels. Go with the best wishes of Suldanessellar.”

A few days later Rolanna was feeling nearly normal. She was glad her quest was over, but at the same time saddened. With Irenicus defeated, the party was sundering, her companions seeking their own way.

Aerie and Minsc were traveling, allowing Minsc to finish his dajemma. Rolanna thought Aerie would accompany him home to Rashemen. She only hoped Aerie would have the strength to return to her own people, to let them know she still lived.

Mazzy had been describing all the towns of the Sword Coast she had not yet seen, anxious to leave as soon as Rolanna was well. Mazzy also talked of finding her “squire,” Valygar. Rolanna thought it likely Mazzy would be the first paladin of Arvoreen, whether the god wished it or not.

Nalia would be returning to her aunt. Rolanna felt Nalia would now feel even more out of place, her experiences with Rolanna not at all typical of a member of her “class.” Nalia would have to find her own path, but what it would be Rolanna didn’t know.

Jaheira wished to seek out old friends among the Harpers, as though to reassure herself that she still had this one immovable rock when all else about her shifted. Rolanna knew Jaheira still had an active interest in her, and she was sure she would meet up with her again in the future.

Imoen. Rolanna wasn’t sure what Imoen’s plans were, but Rolanna hoped she would stay by her. Now that Rolanna knew Imoen was her sister, she felt even closer to her. She thought they had much to talk about.

Anomen, her lover. Some day, Rolanna knew she had to find out what had happened to him. No matter how painful, she had to know.

As for Rolanna herself, she found the elven city, even in the midst of reconstruction, quite peaceful. She intended to rest. Oh, eventually she would leave. Her sense of duty would cause her to seek out the Order of the Most Radiant Heart and see if they had any

Shadows of Amn: The 'Good' Side

missions for her, or some fool like Irenicus would force adventure on her because of her Bhaal heritage. But for now, her deeds entitled her to a little relaxation.

* * *

Robed, hooded, figures sat around a table, an all but forgotten symbol embossed in metal on the table's top.

"Gorion's ward has become too powerful," said one. "We should have acted long before now."

"There is no reason to be concerned," another disagreed. "The fate of this fool has been sealed."

"But can we be so sure?" whispered a third.

A new voice decisively spoke, ending the discussion.

"This spawn of Bhaal is doomed. There is no escape."

Throne of Bhaal

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Foreshadows

Days slipped into weeks, and weeks into months, but Rolanna's thirst for the peace of Suldenessalar was not quenched. The unaccustomed absence of conflict gave her plenty of time to talk to Imoen, and to think.

She thought about the prophecies of Alaundo, and her place in them. From the little she could remember, she was sure the destruction she had witnessed up to now was but a foretaste of what was to come. She would be able to do little to prevent it, but what little she could do, she would. Rolanna also reaffirmed a vow she had made long before, that she would sacrifice her own life rather than see Bhaal reborn. Much harder, she also resolved to let Imoen die if saving her might bring about this alternative.

It was a sunny morning when Queen Elessime stopped by to see Rolanna. Of course, all days in Suldenessalar were fine, elven high magic reducing even a violent thunderstorm to gentle rain. Elessime had been troubled by dark dreams the night before. She suggested Rolanna seek advice from the spirits of the forest which manifested in great stone heads, said to predate the city itself.

Rolanna was not unaware of the rumors which had reached the city, of stirrings of the forces of the Sythsillian Empire in southern Amn, and of another army, further south in Tethyr. It was time she switched from contemplation to action. She and Imoen set out for the glade.

The great stone heads were not hard to find. As Rolanna and Imoen stared at them in confusion, wondering what ritual was needed to activate them, the heads suddenly began speaking, in multiple deep tones that resonated within them.

“The wheels of prophecy e'er turn,
Gorion's ward hath come.
Crossroad of past, present and future,
The one foreseen, the one foretold.
That which hath past is ne'er truly gone,
History repeats, though mortals choose not to see.
War and bloodshed be not new to the Realms,
A God that once hath been may be once again.
Armies march and cities burn,
The rivers froth with tainted blood.
The corpses of those born not innocent
Feed the inferno of boiling hate.
Bhaal's Servant deceived, Five led down a false path,
A hidden traitor lurks in thy midst.
The Servant of Bhaal knows death and destruction,
The face of an ally, the mask of a foe.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The Children of Bhaal bring death to the land,
They slaughter each other, and feed their Father.
Death and betrayal walk together,
A river of tainted blood doth not cleanse.

The storm approaches, we speak no more.”

Rolanna and Imoen had been driven to their knees, not just by the deep bell tones of the voices, but also by the response of their Bhaal-tainted souls to the words. When Rolanna finally lowered her hands from her ears, and looked about, she noticed a woman staring at her from the edge of the clearing.

“So I have found you at last!” said the woman. “It was an effort to track you down, Rolanna, in these woods. Too many old wards for my liking...but here you are.”

“And just who are you?” wearily asked Rolanna. She didn’t ask what was wanted, having been through this too many times not to know that answer.

“All that you need to know is that I’ve been given the pleasure of ending your life. I may yet mount your head on the wall with all the other Bhaalspawn I’ve killed...I haven’t decided.”

“You hunt Bhaalspawn?!” This, at least, was surprising. “Why?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? I am Bhaalspawn myself, dear woman.”

“You can try, if you like. I am no ordinary Bhaalspawn.”

“Not all of us have been wandering Faerun like witless cattle, like you and pathetic Imoen and so many others of Bhaal’s blood. Some of us have far greater aspirations. The time of Alaundo’s prophecy has come, Rolanna. These rhyming ghosts, here, should have told you that much. Great things are afoot...and your contribution will be your death. It has already been decided, Rolanna. I am Illasera the Quick, Child of Bhaal, and I have been chosen to perform this deed. You cannot resist us.”

“I can...and you are a fool to think otherwise.”

“We shall see, Rolanna.”

Illasera attacked, several followers appearing as well. Rolanna drew the great blade Carsomyr, readying herself to meet her, relying on Imoen to hold off the others. Illasera wielded magic Rolanna could not, but she was no match in personal combat. Rolanna quickly scored several times, sending Illasera staggering backwards. A final flexure of her arms and the sword carved deeply into Illasera’s side. Rolanna could momentarily see the disbelief in her eyes, before death dulled that gaze. As Illasera’s body began the dissolution that befell all with a significant portion of Bhaal’s essence, Rolanna felt a wrenching, tearing force affecting her body. The forest dimmed around her.

Abyssal Fortress

Rolanna found herself elsewhere. Her attention was immediately riveted on a figure before her. The nine-foot tall woman had skin of pale azure, great white-feathered wings,

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

and topaz eyes that seemed to glow with an inner light. Rolanna could sense extreme goodness, radiated as if from a bonfire; as she stood gaping, the figure spoke.

“I greet you, god-child, you who are of divine blood. I have awaited you.”

“Where am I? Am I dreaming?” replied Rolanna tentatively. Forcing her gaze from the figure, she noted Imoen had been transported with her, standing just as dumbfounded. The surroundings in which Rolanna stood provided quite a contrast, drab grays and browns. Although she was sure she had never seen this locale, it still seemed quite familiar.

Meanwhile, the figure continued to speak. “How would you define a dream? If as a fleeting path without true substance...then this is no dream. I have brought you to this place and it is real.”

“Who are you?”

“I have existed since the first strand of fate was woven, a servant of the paths and the gods. I have watched your own path most carefully. Our own servant, who was the mortal Alaundo, spoke the truths that became prophecy. It tells of your coming and of all the others who are the progeny of Bhaal. The spark of the divine rests within all of Bhaal’s children and the time for their joining is nigh. I am here to aid you, god-child.”

Rolanna thought she could guess at the identity of this being. Not her specific name, but her type. She must be a solar, one of the most powerful of the celestials, the good counterparts to such evil creatures as balors and pit fiends.

“What is this place?”

“This? This is the layer of the Abyss once ruled by your sire, Bhaal. You have been here before, although it was altered, then, by your own consciousness.”

Rolanna looked around again, realizing why this area seemed so familiar. Not only had she been here before, but she recognized the outward manifestation of her own tainted soul, the dull, boring sameness that hid behind the red-tinged, murderous fury. However, her presence and that of the winged figure were still unexplained.

“How do I know this isn’t some sort of trick?!”

“I am not here to fool or harm you, god-child. I may only teach, and you are free to consider my words and deem them false, if you wish. There is no consequence.”

“Tell me what you know of the prophecy.”

“The progeny of Bhaal are many...and now they are quickly being extinguished, their spark returning to its source. An Event unfolds of divine significance, god-child. You are central to this Event. Many are the strings of fate that start or pass through you. The end I cannot see. I must shepherd you through this time as best I can.”

“What can you do to help me?”

“I cannot interfere. I can only prepare you, god-child...aid in your education, you who are most unready to assume your destiny.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I mean only that you are unready for the possibilities that await you. Your mortal mind does not readily comprehend the power in your blood. When you were last in your sire's realm, god-child, it was altered by your own consciousness without you even forming the intent to do so. You are not ready for the power. You must be ready. It is your presence which determines the outcome of the prophecy, although even I cannot see it yet. When the time comes, you will be ready... I will make certain."

"What do you know about my power?" Rolanna had never wished for this power, but it seemed she must learn to use it, or others would use it for her.

"Power comes with knowledge, god-child. It shall come to you in time, as your destiny unfolds. I shall see you soon. Until then, hold your heart close and know that you are not alone."

The solar disappeared. Rolanna stood and considered her words. She wondered how this "knowledge" was to be imparted to her, and just how she was supposed to leave this pocket plane. Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

"So. You have finally arrived. I have been waiting for you."

"Sarevok!" cried Imoen in shock. "What are you doing here?! Get away from us!" Rolanna glanced around. A blurred, indistinct form, but undeniably that of Sarevok, floated a few feet away.

"Silence," commanded the shade. "I have waited for Rolanna and my words are for her only."

"Sarevok?! Didn't I kill you for the last time in Hell?" Wild speculations chased themselves through Rolanna's mind. Rolanna had thought the wraith-sarevok she had faced the last time she was here had been wholly a creation of her own mind and Bhaal's power. Was it possible some shred of Sarevok had survived even when stripped of his divine component? This opened new prospects for Rolanna herself.

"You did, indeed...although that was no fault of mine," said Sarevok. "It was you that summoned me, then, even if the words were my own. I have done nothing but attempt to re-form myself, since."

"Well, shadow or not, I'll destroy you again!" Rolanna prepared for battle, although she was unsure how this ghost could be a threat.

"You cannot destroy me, Rolanna, as I am nothing but a shade. And I wager you don't possess the power to force me to leave your home."

"What do you mean, 'home'? I don't live here!"

"You...you do not know where you are, do you? You did not come here on purpose?" The ghost mimed laughter, but horrifyingly, no sound issued forth. "What a bitter irony this is! You who stumble about nearly blind to your true power continue to survive while I, Sarevok, am reduced to this. Bah! Very well, Rolanna...I shall tell you where you are. You are within our father's abyssal realm, sister. That plane once ruled by Bhaal and now shaped by the taint present in your soul...but no longer present in mine. You have been here before. This is a...a cocoon, of sorts. A miniature version of our father's larger realm, sort of a plane-within-a-plane. I assumed your mind formed it to

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

protect you from the power of this place. Rather ingenious, dear sister...I wouldn't have thought you'd had it in you. Regardless, I spotted it forming and guessed at its purpose. So I came here and waited, knowing that eventually you would come...and that then we could discuss my...deal."

"What kind of deal?" asked Rolanna, alert for some trick. "What could *you* want?"

"What do you think I would want, dear sister? I wish to exist...I wish to be alive again. You can do that. The smallest fraction of your soul, my sister...given freely, with the taint of our dead father within it. That would recreate my flesh, restore my mortality...Sarevok would live again!"

"I killed you once before...what makes you think I would want to return you to life?"

"I do not come to the table empty-handed, Rolanna. You think me a fool? You are stronger than me...I do not contest that. But I can help you. And that has its price."

"And just how is it that you can help me?"

"There is the knowledge of how to leave this plane of yours, Rolanna. That is one thing I can give you, although I did not know that when I came here. No, what I offer you is knowledge that is much more relevant. Something that dates back to my mortal days when I was gaining power within the Iron Throne. Something that you will find...most intriguing. I know where your destiny lies, Rolanna. I know where you must go to find it. Search about on your own and it will soon be too late...the time of the old prophecies is upon us. Or upon *you*, at least. What say you?"

"And just what do you intend to do with your...new life?"

"I...do not know. Avoid crossing you, dear sister, certainly that. My ambition was everything, once. Now that the taint is gone, I...am unsure. But I wish to live."

Rolanna considered this answer, which she was sure was truthful, even if nothing else he had said was. Once before, preceding their final climatic battle in Baldur's Gate, Rolanna had offered him the chance to forgo his enmity. She realized she wanted it very much to be the case that, if he had not been tainted by Bhaal's essence, he would have turned out differently. For a moment, she even envied him, wishing she was the spirit, and he was the one still oppressed by the taint.

"Very well, I agree to your demands," said Rolanna.

"So I have cheated death!" crowed the ghost. "Thank you, dear sister...no gift could please me more."

Although Rolanna felt nothing, the ethereal form of Sarevok solidified, became real. He drew a long, shuddering breath.

"I...live! Flesh and blood and bone! I am alive!" He laughed, this time a loud bellow. "I swore I would scratch and crawl my way back into the world of the living... and I have done it! Though my sword and armor have not appeared. No matter. Without the Bhaal essence to channel their powers, they are of little use. I shall make do without them, as I once did. Thank you, Rolanna. I am pleased."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"That's odd...I don't feel any different," said Rolanna puzzledly.

"Did I not say it was only an insignificant portion? I suspected that doing it here, in this place, it might work...but I was not sure. It is good to see that I was correct after all."

"You weren't sure that it would work?!" asked Imoen in disbelief. "I knew it. You were bluffing the whole time!"

"I did not get to where I did in life without risk, fool. It was no bluff...I knew enough to suspect that it might work, since our heritage was the same. But none of that is important. I imagine you are eager to hear what I have to say."

Sarevok grandly gestured about himself, drawing Rolanna's attention back to her surroundings.

"The first thing I shall tell you of is how to leave this pocket plane that you have created. It is an extension of your will, Rolanna...it exists because you need it to exist. It is this plane which creates the portal out, but it will not take you where you wish to go. It takes you where you need to be. Or, perhaps, where you believe you need to be. But I cannot give you the ability to make this plane create such a portal. There are many barred passages in this plane of yours that I know little of. One, however, I can open...and beyond it lies what you seek. Watch..."

Rolanna had earlier noticed five energy barriers in the wall of the roughly circular area where she was, but had dismissed them since there was no obvious way through them. Sarevok gestured with his hand, and a spark of energy flew from it. It struck one of the barriers, which disappeared.

"Enter that room and face your challenge, Rolanna," said Sarevok. "It will be difficult...you may not want to do it alone. There is a...spirit...here which can summon those companions you require for your party, if you require such. Regardless, once you have completed that challenge, you will be able to leave this plane of yours. It does not, however, take you where you wish to go...it takes you where you need to be. And I, as I said, know where that is. In my youth, I spent much of my time looking into the old lore of the dead Bhaal priesthood. I unearthed one of the old prophecies from an uncooperative sect of Cyric...one that spoke extensively of this time now upon us. The Sword Coast will run red with blood, yes...but the battles will culminate in a great struggle within a city to the south, the Tethyrian city of Saradush. It is there that you *must* go, where the first step of the prophecy will unfold. Although, naturally, you must face your challenge first."

"Aren't you still a Child of Bhaal?" asked Rolanna, trying to be sure about him.

"No. Bhaal's essence left me as I died...and that which has been given to me now maintains my mortality only. Some might still consider me a Bhaalspawn, but it is solely a matter of history and memory."

"How do I know I can trust what you say?"

"Of course you cannot trust me. Why would you? Take me with you, Rolanna."

"Take you with us?!" said Imoen. "So you can betray us, stab us in the back? Why would we ever want you with us, Sarevok?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I once was sure that the old prophecies centered around me." Sarevok looked Rolanna in the eye, and the presence that had caused so many to follow him to destruction in his previous life was in his words. "Even if that is no longer the case, I know more about them than perhaps anyone. I can help you, Rolanna. With the challenge in that room and more. Of course, I do this for no selfless reason. There is power in your wake, Rolanna. I am sure I am not the first to tell you this. And there is no better opportunity for me elsewhere. Besides...you defeated me long ago. You have earned my respect. Think of it, Rolanna! Brother and sister, side by side!"

Rolanna, possessing considerable presence herself, was not swayed by theatrical tricks. "And what use might you be to me?" she asked.

"Aside from the knowledge I retain, I am a warrior of no small ability. You fought me, Rolanna, you would know. I have only become stronger from my time in Hell. Under one such as you, I could be greater, still."

"And how would I know that you wouldn't turn on me as soon as it suited you?"

"I will take an oath to follow you, my sister, if that will satisfy. Here...in this place...such an oath would have power, like a geas. I could not betray you."

Rolanna decided she would rather have Sarevok near her, where she could watch him. She was also frankly curious what he would do. Besides, Sarevok was as much her brother as Imoen was her sister.

"No, there's no need for an oath. I'm satisfied. Join me and let's go." Rolanna wasn't at all sure Sarevok wouldn't have found some way to slip out of any oath. Anyway, this could only truly be a second chance for him if he was free to make any choice he wanted.

"You...will not require an oath?" For the first time, a trace of doubt had entered Sarevok's voice, and he stared at Rolanna strangely. "An...odd...choice, sister. I would have required it of you. If I had even let you live. As you wish, then...let us attend to your challenge. Remember...consider that you may need more companions to complete it."

Preparation: Murder and Retribution

Rolanna turned away from Sarevok, considering his reminder that she needed companions. She haltingly called out, asking for help. Despite Sarevok's words, she was still surprised when a disembodied voice answered her.

"Greetings to you, Child of Bhaal. I am an aspect of your fate, the thread that leads you unerringly along your destiny. In a way, I am a part of you."

"An aspect of my fate? Can you tell me of the future?"

"I only follow the strands of fate that you weave with others, Child," said the fate spirit. "You tug at the entire pattern of the tapestry, such is the strength of your own destiny. You also end the threads of many. Threads that touch you and get woven around you are cut short, dead, their future ended. Such is also your fate."

"So can you help me or not?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I cannot touch your own thread, Child...nor can I tell where it leads. I can, however, alter the threads of those whose lives are intertwined closely with your own, those whose destinies are tied to yours."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"There are those who are tied to your fate and your future, whether they know of it or not. If their threads are within my reach, I can bring them to this place."

"You can bring people here?"

"If they are meant to be part of your future, yes. They will fall into your wake because their fates are tied to yours. Is there a thread you wish me to search for, Child of Bhaal? I will bring them to this place, if I can."

Rolanna thought about her former companions. She was sure they would wish to be here, to join her in the culmination of her quest. Rolanna requested the spirit summon Aerie.

"Rolanna?" asked the surprised Aerie after she appeared. "It...it *is* you, isn't it? Ever since I left the circus, I wondered when I...I...that's odd. I...don't remember when I left the circus. What is this place?"

Minsc had also appeared, apparently still on his dajemma with Aerie as his witch.

"This is...part of the Abyss, I guess. I summoned you here," Rolanna said to Aerie, concerned that she seemed so bewildered.

"You...summoned me? I...haven't I been traveling with you? No...no, I haven't, have I? But it seems so confused..."

"I know this is odd, Aerie, but I need you to join me. I can explain later."

"Join you? I...that does sound right, somehow. My own...abilities have grown since I last saw you. I had to leave the circus...the Cowled Wizards were growing angry with me, at my magic. I guess it didn't matter, not really. I was helping people, when I could...but...but every time I helped someone, there was always more despair. It...it was terrible. So I had to leave all my friends behind. I...I was thinking of traveling north to the mountains to search for my people. But...but this is just as well. I'll help you, Rolanna, if you want me to."

"Certainly. I could use the help." Rolanna was heartened by the fact that Aerie seemed to be quickly regaining her sense of who she was.

Minsc, meanwhile, had been staring around in his own bewilderment. He held up his tiny furry companion, directing his remarks that way. "Eh? Where have you brought us, Boo? I am duly impressed by your show of great powers, but a little forewarning would have been nice. No matter! Wherever evil treads, Minsc treads louder!"

"It's good to see you again, Minsc," said Rolanna.

"Ooo! Look who you have found, Boo, with your unerring sense of hamster direction! It is our good friend, Rolanna! A reunion of heroes! May all that is evil quiver before us like so much rancid jelly!"

"You don't seem very surprised to be here."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Why would I be surprised? Boo points and I follow! Boo is the navigator and I am the ship! Boo is the sword arm and I am the sword! Well, I have a mighty sword arm, too, but you get the picture.”

“Sure do. Let’s go, Minsc.”

It was hard to tell if Minsc was any more confused than usual. Rolanna decided to next call someone she could always rely upon, Jaheira.

“It is...good to see you again,” said Jaheira hesitantly, glaring around. “Things with you are always complicated. I have heard much, as of late, of the cries against the Children... I expect things have only gotten worse with you, haven’t they?”

“I don’t know about worse, but I do need you in the party.”

“I am willing to fight at your side, Rolanna. You will need loyal companions if you are to face the time that is surely ahead... I hope it is not as dire as I fear.”

Rolanna next summoned Mazzy. She was surprised when Valygar appeared with her.

“This...this is a strange place that you have brought me to, my friend,” said Mazzy. “I have little doubt that it is for a good reason. Do you require my assistance? Or is there some other purpose to your summoning?”

“Well,” added Valygar, “There’s quite a few things that I could have named off as being possible to happen before the end of the day. Meeting you again wouldn’t have been one of them. Where are we?”

“It’s a long story, Valygar,” answered Rolanna.

“Oh, of that I have no doubt. I always get dragged into events full of strange magic, whether I like it or not.”

“I need your help, Mazzy,” said Rolanna, turning back to Valygar’s half-sized comrade.

“You have often proven yourself a decent person and a worthy companion, despite your heritage,” said Mazzy. “I am willing to aid you and travel together again, if you are.”

Rolanna talked to the two of them for several minutes. She realized Mazzy had sought out Valygar after leaving her. Convincing him to become her squire, they had been traveling north along the Sword Coast when Rolanna’s call interrupted them.

Rolanna next summoned Nalia.

“I see we meet again,” said Nalia confidently when she appeared. “I had foreseen that such an event would take place... I should have known that it would be soon, with the Bhaalspawn incidents increasing so rapidly.”

“Nalia? You seem...different.” The force and certainty with which she had greeted her unexpected arrival surprised Rolanna.

“I am not the frightened girl you remember meeting. Or do you? I perceive that I have not been transported here so much as my history has been slightly altered... including my own experience of it. You are more powerful than I thought if you are able

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

to do this. I suspect, however, that you are not yet fully in control of your abilities. What a terror you will be when you are. As for myself, yes...I am changed. In the short time since I knew you, I have become an archmage with real power. It is those talents you need, is it not? I presume that is why I am here.”

Rolanna was used to hearing such criticism only from Jaheira. It would take time for her to adjust herself to this new Nalia. Somewhat plaintively, she said, “I think I liked the old, caring Nalia better.”

“I still care, Rolanna. The Cowled Wizards and my noble relatives might oppose my delving into the arts, but I can do far more for the common good, now, than before.”

“Well, I need a good mage in the party.”

“I am a bit...wary...of involving myself in your struggle, Rolanna. To try and avoid it is to fight fate, however. I suppose I can only hope that good comes of it in the end.”

Finally, Rolanna considered Anomen. It was true he had murdered Saerk, but how many could she be considered responsible for murdering? Where better for him to find redemption than in her service? Besides, she admitted to herself, she didn't want to face what was to come without him at her side.

“Bring me Anomen,” she called out to the spirit.

Anomen appeared, his anguished gaze quickly fixing on Rolanna. “Rolanna...my lady...the order has refused me! Cast me out! *Cast me out!* And all for killing the murderer, Saerk! I cannot...please, my lady!”

“As you wish...join with me again, Anomen.” Rolanna took his right hand in both of her own, holding it, staring into his eyes. Then she hugged him tightly, until the shivering almost sobs that racked his frame had ended, so he could compose himself before facing the others.

Rolanna addressed her companions, explaining where they were, the presence of Sarevok, and the test she needed to undertake before traveling to Saradush. She then led them through the entrance Sarevok had opened. At the end of a short corridor, a figure waited for her. He appeared to be no more than a slightly overweight merchant; he could have been dropped into any city in Amn and drawn no attention whatsoever.

“You're...you're one of us,” he said. “You're one of the Bhaalspawn, aren't you? Oh, but you...you needn't worry about me. I'm dead. I'm a nobody. I grew up in a small farming village... I didn't even know what I was until they came for me. But I knew I was different. You can hear the screams at night, can't you? You can feel the blood of the murdered, how it flows all around you...a thousand different pains and you're nothing but a solitary echo. But it's not terrible. It's inviting. It calls to you. And if you give into it, if you offer your entire heart up to it, everything becomes crystal clear. One murder, two, a thousand...it all becomes part of you. I murdered three of the local girls until I was...driven out. And then I went to the city. Murder was easier there, and I felt the call every night. You can taste life, you know...and it is divine. I can feel the same in you...”

The figure paused, studying Rolanna, as if he saw something different about her.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“But...you resist it, don't you? Why would you do that? I can feel you've murdered many, and yet you resist all the good that we alone, the Bhaalspawn, can appreciate. After all...the only thing you need to fear...is retribution.”

He disappeared. Almost immediately, groups of kobolds appeared, attacking the party. Gnolls, sahuagin, and drow followed them. After the party had cut down several score they stopped appearing, and the original Bhaalspawn reformed.

“So...you survived retribution. I didn't. But then, you know how to kill a lot better than I did. Strange thing is, the longer you survive, the more blood you have on your hands. And there's never an end to the retribution. Or is there?”

The Bhaalspawn disappeared for a final time, the entire chamber, its purpose done, transforming to resemble the main room in which Rolanna had appeared. Rolanna shook her head. She didn't understand the point of this lesson, since she had been resisting the call of her Bhaal-blood for senseless murder ever since it had been awakened.

Rolanna decided to rest in “her” pocket plane before seeking out Saradush. Whether or not it was her unconscious will which had formed it, at least here there was no danger of attack, and no watch needed to be kept.

Rolanna woke some hours later to a whispery voice. She looked around; the voice seemed to be coming from where the party had piled their gear. Propping herself up on one elbow, she could make out movement among the belongings. Concentrating, she was able to make out what the voice was saying.

“Dum-de-dum-de-dum...I'se looking through stuffs that ain't mine...de-dum-dum...” The voice paused a moment, then said, “Um-de-dum-de-dum...eh? A shower curtain? Oh...is only a cloak. Nasty pattern, that.”

Rolanna silently grabbed her sword, and moved nearer. An imp was squatting before her pack, half her belongings scattered about him. As she watched, the imp thrust its upper body completely into the pack, muttering, “Back to rummagings in stinky backpack.”

Holding her sword only with her left hand, Rolanna suddenly put forth her right arm, grabbing the imp from behind about its neck. She pulled the imp out of the pack. The imp struggled briefly before giving up the futile effort. Rolanna hefted the small creature so it faced her. The imp managed a tremulous smile, and said, “Er...hello.”

“Hello yourself,” replied Rolanna, smiling back.

“I ams the little butler for the great Bhaal, oh yes,” said the imp, emboldened to loquaciousness. “Or I was...it has been very lonely for me. No more master to serve for a very long time. Until now, that is.”

“You're a...a 'butler'? What is it exactly that you do?”

“Oh, I does clean things. I goes and I collects the little things that finds their ways to the Abyss. And when my master requests, I uses the recipes to making the shiny ones for her, oh yes!”

“The 'shiny ones'?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Yes, oh yes. Call on me you may. Use my recipes for you will I, make the shiny ones. Have not done this for some time, no...no new master have I. Cespenar gladly serve the great one! Cespenar make good butler, yes? Would you like me to make you shiny ones? I have many recipes!” The imp's eyes widened as he shifted his gaze from Rolanna to the two handed sword she held in her left hand.

“Ooooo...holy avenger sword, huh? Nice. There is pommel jewel called Eye of Tyr...you finds it and I can use recipe on Holy Avenger, oh yes.”

By this time, the others had woken as well. Rolanna assured them that the imp seemed harmless, besides being potentially useful. It was time Rolanna got back to her quest.

Saradush

In Saradush, an assorted group of townsfolk confronted half-a-dozen soldiers before closed double doors. The guards stood at the top of a grand flight of steps leading up to the doors. The townsfolk at the foot perforce had to look upwards, which further emphasized the disparity between the two groups.

“The general is too busy to meet with the likes of these commoners,” said one of the guards. “Move along and no one gets hurt.”

“These people represent the concerns of the entire town,” begged the leader, a woman in fine robes. “Please, good soldiers, hear their case.”

“Our food is almost gone,” added another woman, “our children cry out in hunger! Your master must hear our pleas.”

“The plight of peasants is not Gromnir Il-Khan's concern.” The guard was unmoved. “Stand aside, townsfolk!”

“If you know what's good for you, you'll all head back to your homes.” The orcish guard who had uttered this laid one hand on the hilt of a scimitar at his side.

“The army outside the city will surely kill us all!” yelled another of the townsfolk. “Your master cannot just turn his back on us!”

“Clear these gates—you won't get another warning!” The orcish guard drew his scimitar, brandishing it at the unarmed group below.

“Threats are not the answer here,” said the well-dressed woman. “Everyone stay calm and we can work together to find a solution.”

“Our orders are clear—move these peasants along or we'll move them along ourselves,” said the guard coldly.

“No one do anything rash,” said the well-dressed woman. “Perhaps if we return later, when it is more convenient for Gromnir Il-Khan to see us...”

“No, Melissan!” said one of the other townsfolk. “We will not be bullied this time. We will stay right here until they take us to Gromnir.”

“We demand to see Gromnir—take us to Il-Khan!” was yelled from the group.

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“There’s just no reasoning with you people—you only understand the edge of a sword!” said the soldier coldly, drawing his own longsword.

“I told you to clear these gates!” The orc grinned. “You brought this on yourselves!” He took one step forward, raised his other foot preparatory to taking a second as Melissan yelled, “No! Put down your weapons! This is not necessary!”

Rolanna and her companions appeared between the two groups.

“What’s this?” asked Melissan in surprise. “A child of Bhaal appears from nowhere? Impossible! Unless...”

“Intruders!” yelled the soldier. “Spies! The walls have been breached!”

“Slay the invaders! Attack!” cried the orc, attacking Rolanna’s nearest companion, Minsc.

“No! Hold your weapons! These might be allies, come to help!” Everyone ignored Melissan’s words.

“Don’t fall for their tricks!” The lead guard moved to attack Rolanna. “Kill them all and let the Gods sort them out!”

Although surprised, Rolanna and her friends easily defeated the guards. When they were done, all the townsfolk had scattered. Except for Melissan.

“Greetings, Rolanna. I am Melissan—a friend. Welcome to Saradush. I regret your first encounter in this town was so...bloody.”

“How do you know my name?” Although Rolanna had become somewhat used to meeting those who knew almost as much about her as Rolanna herself.

“I have watched the events of your life quite closely, Rolanna, as I do with all the progeny of the Lord of Murder. I have seen many of your kin slain over these past months.”

“Why are Bhaal’s Children of such interest to you?”

“You might consider me to be a...guardian, for want of a better term. I know the prophecies of Alaundo, I know some feel they allude to the return of Bhaal to the Realms. By taking an active interest in the fate of Bhaal’s offspring—you, and those like you—I hope to prevent the Lord of Murder from returning to the Realms, in any form.”

“So you are just another person meddling in the fate of Bhaal’s children.”

“I do not know how you came to be here, Rolanna, but I fear you are now trapped here in Saradush like the rest of us.”

“Trapped? By whom?”

“Beyond the walls of Saradush awaits the army of Yaga-Shura. They have laid siege to this town, seeking the death of all those here who share your tainted blood.”

“Is there any hope of stopping this slaughter?”

“First we must deal with General Gromnir—the man who now runs the city of Saradush. Gromnir is also a Child of Bhaal, and was once a powerful general. I brought

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

him and his loyal men here to protect Saradush and the many Bhaalspawn gathered here seeking sanctuary. But Gromnir is mad. He has barricaded himself in the castle throne room, and his troops run amok through the town with no regard for the lives and rights of the citizens of Saradush.”

“Such a betrayal is worthy of death!” The solar had said Rolanna would be transported where she needed to be. If it wasn’t to defeat the army besieging the town, perhaps she needed to deal with this Gromnir.

“The actions of Gromnir and his soldiers have caused dissension within the town, and made it almost impossible for the loyal Saradush militia to defend the walls. We must first defeat the enemy within before we can end this siege. You must find a way to get inside the castle to Gromnir. Perhaps you can reason with him...but I fear he is beyond reason. I am afraid you will have to kill the General to give Saradush any hope of surviving the siege.”

“For the sake of the town I will try to reason with this mad general.” Rolanna wasn’t ready to concede that he needed to be killed.

“I may be difficult to find after this, Rolanna. The town suffers, and my hours are spent doing what I can for the people. If you have another question, I suggest you ask it now.”

“I like to know who my enemies are—could you tell me more about Yaga-Shura?”

“Yaga-Shura is a Bhaalspawn, Rolanna—perhaps as powerful as you yourself. He and his army will not rest until every child of Bhaal within these walls lies dead.”

“Why is Yaga-Shura so intent on destroying the Bhaal spawn?”

“Until you prove yourself there are some secrets I must keep to guarantee the safety of the people I have sworn to protect. If you wish to save yourself from Yaga-Shura you will aid me, regardless.”

“Is there somewhere I can go to get provisions and supplies?”

“Understandably, most people will resent the presence of yet another Bhaalspawn in Saradush. But the innkeeper at the Tankard Tree is more tolerant than most, and the Temple of Waukeen will turn no one away.”

“Can you offer any tips on getting into Gromnir’s castle?”

“I can offer little advice in this matter. Gromnir’s own mages make approaching the gates hopeless...you will have to find another way in. I just pray one exists.”

“I will do what I can to help. How long until the walls of Saradush fall?”

“The siege could last a few days, or a few months. Act quickly, Rolanna, and may fortune shine on your mission.”

Melissan hurried away. Rolanna stood and considered her next move. While she thought, Jaheira moved over towards Nalia. Jaheira had noticed in the brief battle that when a soldier confronted Nalia, rather than retreating, she had cast several spells in quick succession that killed him in a most final and bloody manner.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Well, little Nalia,” said Jaheira, “it would seem you have grown quite accustomed to the power you now wield.”

“Why do you bring this up now, Jaheira? You have that tone in your voice again.” Nalia, herself, had a sharp tone to her retort.

“‘That’ tone? I do not understand what you mean,” replied Jaheira, pretending not to know what she meant.

“Yes you do. It’s that ‘time for an unnecessary lecture’ tone that means you are about to caution me on the use of the power I have earned.”

“I see. And what do you think the outcome of such a conversation would be?”

“Well, I believe that I would tell you I have found my true calling, that you should probably butt out, and that I would really prefer you to refrain from calling me ‘little Nalia.’”

“Determined to do good works no matter what the world thinks, is that the gist of it?”

“Yes, that would be the gist of it.”

“Then I agree that the lecture would be unnecessary. I need say nothing.”

“You...what?” Nalia stared a moment, her stinging retort swallowed unused. Then she bobbed her head, saying, “Thank you, Jaheira.”

Sarevok, meanwhile, had taken the opportunity of Rolanna’s indecision to move close enough to make a comment.

“So. I yet remain at your side. I am surprised. But from your constant wary glances it seems that you do not trust my presence, yet.”

“And you’re surprised by that?” asked Rolanna coolly.

“You have grown in power, so I do not expect you to fear me as you once may have. But I do expect the lack of trust, the suspicion that I might betray you. If I were you, I would feel so. It eats away at me, then, as to why you would agree to take me with you and not force some form of compliance from me through an oath. I told you that oaths had real power in our father’s realm.”

“I don’t believe in enslaving the wills of others. Your destiny is your own business.” It was obvious to Rolanna that many of the Bhaalspawn had been overwhelmed by their divine “gift,” turning to murderous evil whatever their mortal side may have wanted. It was just barely possible that Sarevok should be counted among their number. An even slimmer chance, but still a chance, existed that he might repudiate his past.

“So you...allow me to make my own destiny by your side,” said Sarevok, “trusting I will not betray you...why? Your vengeance aside, why would I not do so, if I thought I could gain advantage?” It was obvious that Sarevok was trying to justify Rolanna’s actions with a reason he might have used in his previous life, and failing.

“You might. But everyone gets a second chance, Sarevok. Even you.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“An...interesting view, Rolanna. Perhaps it shall be your downfall. I shall have to think on it.”

Rolanna led the others to the city walls, to look out at the besieging army. Large numbers of fire giants, even larger numbers of humans, siege engines, it looked to her as though they could roll over the defenders any time they chose.

Rolanna decided to explore the town. As they walked, Anomen talked to Aerie.

“A question of you, Aerie. I have heard something of your people, the avariel... hunted to near extinction by mages merely for the use of their wings. How is it that you are not more outraged about this?”

“I think it is a terrible thing, Anomen. But what can I do about it?”

“You could defend them. Make it your life’s work to oppose the predation upon them. Something, at least, would be better than nothing.” Rolanna, overhearing this, was pained. This was the old Anomen, tormented by his inner demons, who lashed out at others who did not meet an impossibly perfect standard.

“My people are disappearing because they are isolationists as well, Anomen, not just because they are hunted. And they are certainly not helpless...my aid would be meaningless. And I doubt they would even accept my help. They...would not think of me as an avariel, anymore, because I have no wings. It is...it is probably just best for me to avoid them altogether.”

“I am sorry, Aerie...” Anomen’s tone was no longer challenging, and he did not meet Aerie’s gaze. “It was not my intention to open old wounds. I am too clumsy with my words, at times.”

“No...no, it’s alright, Anomen. I probably should face up to the fact that I will have to return to Faenya-Dael one day. To face them, if nothing else. But certainly not now.”

Perhaps Anomen had learned something from the terrible experiences he had been forced to undergo, thought Rolanna. As she mused on this, a woman called out to the passing group, “Uh...hey, mister...uh...are you...uh...you looking for...uh...you looking for a good time?”

“This girl cannot like what she is doing!” protested Nalia. “This siege has forced her into this horrible life!”

“Uh...what I mean is...um...you know...I’m just saying that...” continued the woman hesitantly.

“You haven’t done this before, have you?” asked Rolanna bluntly.

“Oh...oh...I’m sorry! I’m not a...I just...I just didn’t know how else to get your attention. I saw you talking to Melissan. I heard her say you were trying to find Gromnir. Please...he had my parents murdered—I want someone to kill that bastard!”

“I’ll do what I can,” answered Rolanna simply, not sharing the doubts she now had about any contemplated action, wondering whether it would aid or hinder the rebirth of Bhaal.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"You...you will? Oh, nothing would make me happier! But...how will you get inside the castle?"

"I don't know. Do you know of a way in?"

"No. I wish I did. There's some people that say that the old prison underground leads to the castle. But they're all sealed up, now, just like the sewers. I heard that some of the army outside the walls tried to sneak in that way, and that's why Gromnir had everything sealed up. I...I wouldn't know how to get down there at all..."

"Well, I'll find a way in, somehow."

"That Gromnir killed my parents...he deserves to die!" The woman, having made her point, hurried off.

As the others were walking away, Nalia suddenly rounded on Rolanna's newest companion, "Keep your eyes off me, Sarevok. I don't know what you are, but I don't want you near me."

"Ah. So the sorceress can sense the difference in me, can she? Do I alarm you, girl?"

"I know that you're not truly alive, and not undead. You're flesh, but not truly alive no matter what Rolanna did to you. So keep away."

"You show curiosity in every other matter related to magic, and yet I make you nervous? Are you sure it is for the reasons you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, to you, I am evil. I am powerful and forceful and authoritative...and you fear these qualities within yourself."

"That's not true! I...I'm a good person!"

"And where has it gotten you? Have you vanquished evil, yet? What gets results, better, from all that you've seen?"

"It...it isn't like that. Results aren't everything."

"Your mouth words you don't understand. Once you get over this delusion you shall see things as I do, girl. As they truly are. It is called 'reality.'"

"You can't fool me. I know what it's called, and I know where your path ends! So stop trying to play mind games with me!"

"As you wish. You shall see the truth soon enough."

Rolanna tried to ignore the looks the others were giving her, refusing to explain why Sarevok was along. Fortunately, a man they soon passed drew the others' attention.

"How did I come to this?" the man complained to no one in particular. "I'm just a simple farmer! Is it my fault my father was the Lord of Murder?"

"You are one of Bhaal's Children?" questioned Rolanna of this very ordinary looking man.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Bhaal may have been my father, but I want no part of this! I came to Saradush to escape persecution in my home town, now all I want is to try and blend in with the normal folk.”

“I know it’s hard when you learn your father was a God of pure evil,” commiserated Imoen. “You just have to find a way to deal with it... I did. Eventually.”

Jaheira, as usual, had only blunt advice. “Alas, your desire to be what you are not counts for little; that door is closed to you now. You cannot escape your fate...you must learn to accept it.”

“Just leave me alone. I can’t tell you anything, I’m just a simple farmer! All I want is my normal life back—damn this cursed immortal lineage!” The man turned away, ignoring them.

Aerie, reminded of Imoen’s heritage by this exchange, asked, “I have a question for you, Imoen...you have the taint of Bhaal within you? Does this mean that you will turn into the Slayer as well?”

“I certainly hope not. I...I’ve been thinking more and more lately about that, myself, though.”

“It must be an awful feeling. I can’t imagine how Rolanna deals with it.”

“Yeah...she’s been living with it longer, too.” Imoen’s voice dropped. “Sometimes, when it’s quiet...I can hear the taint in my heart whispering to me. It says awful things and I almost want to scream to shut them out.”

Aerie gasped at this news. “You...you haven’t done anything that it’s said, have you?”

“Well...other than that time I got up in the middle of the night to snatch a bag full of cinnamon cookies, heck no.”

“Oh, goo— What? Cinnamon cookies?” Aerie glared at Imoen.

Imoen laughed at her expression. “Oh, come on, Aerie! Lighten up, willya? I’ll tell ya what...if I have any desires to murder you in the middle of the night, you’ll be the first to know, okay?”

“That’s not very funny, Imoen. Rolanna never makes fun of her condition in that way.”

Rolanna, as always buoyed by Imoen’s presence, couldn’t resist interjecting, “Well, it’s been so much easier since I discovered all the Slayer really wants is a sandwich...”

“Oh, fine,” said Aerie. “Everyone seems determined to make fun of me. I’ll stand back here, thank you.” Aerie ostentatiously stalked to the rear of the group, although she couldn’t hold back a giggle from her lips.

Their wanderings through the streets of Saradush had brought them to the Tankard Tree Inn Melissan had mentioned. Rolanna entered, immediately encountering two soldiers confronting a female employee.

“Why won’t those soldiers leave me alone?” said the woman to Rolanna, sobbing. “They must enjoy torturing us townsfolk. I wish someone would stand up to them...but

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

everyone's afraid of Gromnir." She sniffed, trying to hold back more tears. "I guess I'll just have to put up with it."

"What do you want?" one of the soldiers drunkenly protested to Rolanna. "Can't you see we're busy with this cute little lass here?"

"You cretins must apologize for your rudeness," said Mazzy, "or we shall be forced to defend the honor of this virtuous young maid with all our might!" It took the drunken pair a moment to realize where the voice that was addressing them came from, and to look downwards.

Rolanna approved of Mazzy's words, but judged the two soldiers to be so out of it they might not back down. She had a different idea. "What would it take to get you to leave this young lady alone?"

"Leave her alone?" The soldier paused to think, then with a triumphant smile said, "Tell you what—fork over a thousand gold pieces and we'll head back to the barracks for the night."

"I'll give you five hundred," said Rolanna. The soldiers just goggled at her for a few moments, unable to believe she had actually agreed.

"You've got a deal! Wow...I was just kidding. I never thought you'd have that kind of coin on you! Easiest money we've ever made. Thanks, sucker." Rolanna had plenty of gold to spare. Given the siege, the soldiers would have to spend their money quickly, or likely die with it still on them.

"Gromnir's soldiers are nothing but gutter trash!" said the woman after the two soldiers left. "Maybe it comes from spending all that time running around the sewers."

"Why are Gromnir's soldiers running around the sewers?" asked Rolanna.

"All I know is a few rumors. They say Gromnir locked all the entrances to the sewers because the invaders could come in through them, but I bet you it's because you can enter the castle that way. But the sewers are sealed...and I have no idea how you'd be able to get down there, sorry. I want to thank you for what you did...it's a relief to not have to worry about those soldiers pawing at me anymore. But I better get back to work now."

Rolanna went over to talk to the barkeep. As she did so, the entire inn shook from a nearby explosion. The barkeep commented laconically, "Another close one. Any damage this time?"

Sarevok and one of the group were standing to the side. "I see your eyes upon me, cleric," said Sarevok. "Quit your glares or I'll pluck out your eyes with my sword, I swear."

"You could try, abomination," said Anomen. "I doubt you would succeed. I merely wonder at how, exactly, you managed to worm your way into the ranks of this group." Anomen had been watching Sarevok ever since he realized what Rolanna had done. He was sure Sarevok would betray her at some point.

"By being useful," said Sarevok shortly. "Something you would know nothing about."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Well, you blackmailed Rolanna in return for your information, that’s true...but I fail to see what use you provide, now. Perhaps Rolanna should simply kill you again.”

“My use is in my sword and my skill. I have no whining petulance to draw on, as you do. And my sister shall do as she pleases, so quit your mewling and begone.”

Rolanna, done talking to the barkeep, decided to see if the other patrons had anything useful to offer. A young man who seemed vaguely familiar stood up to greet her.

“Ah, my sister. I should have expected it would all end like this.”

“Viekang...didn’t I run into you in Trademeet?” Rolanna remembered him now. She had entered a tavern in Trademeet, and a man by the bar had called out something like “Not again.” He had then vanished, magically transporting himself away. Questioning others there had revealed his name.

“Perhaps,” said Viekang. “I spent a brief time there, between jumps.”

“It was you in Trademeet! You vanished in a flash of lightning right in front of my eyes.”

“The curse of my Bhaal tainted blood. Whenever I was afraid, I would suddenly be teleported to a completely new part of the world. Most disruptive, especially while I was being hunted.”

“Hunted? By who?”

“By other Bhaalspawn, of course. Yaga-Shura, for one. Others. Whenever I tried to build a life, the hunters would show up and poof—I’d jump. Or teleport, if you rather. It’s not a very comfortable thing to live with.”

“So how come you haven’t jumped out of Saradush?”

“It’s kind of ironic, actually. I ran into Melissan during my...travels. She helped me, as she tries to help all the Bhaalspawn. She helped me cure myself so my fear wouldn’t make me jump anymore. At first it was a great relief. Knowing you can be snatched away without any warning is a little upsetting. But now, trapped here, I pray every day that my curse will manifest itself again.”

“You must resent Melissan for putting you in this situation.”

“Melissan was only trying to help me. She had the best of intentions, though obviously events have not worked out as we all hoped.”

“I may be able to provide a happy ending to this remarkable story if you tell me how to find Gromnir.”

“I can’t imagine why you would want to meet with Gromnir—he’s rather unstable. Paranoid even. But he isn’t hard to find. He’s in the throne room in the castle, or so I hear. That’s all I can tell you.”

She moved over to where a well-dressed man stood, surveying the room.

“Pyrgam Aleson at your service.” He nodded politely. “I hope we have what you need. A stiff drink, perhaps? Dark times call for dark ale, am I right my Lady?”

“Not too many friendly faces in this town, are there?” replied Rolanna.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Saradush was a nice place not too long ago. Then the Bhaalspawn started showing up, Gromnir took over and now we’re under siege. Can’t blame folks if they’ve taken a dislike to strangers. Still, life and business go on. For a while. All a man can do is carry on and hope for the best, that’s my philosophy. Anything else I can help you with?”

“What can you tell me about Gromnir Il-Khan?”

“Bah! I should spit in disgust every time I hear his name, but he’s not worth the effort. Gromnir Il-Khan’s nothing but a bully—a cruel, cowardly little despot. It was bad enough around here with all these refugees showing up these past few months. But at least they didn’t bother nobody. Gromnir’s a different story. First his troops ran off Count Santele, then they started terrorizing the townsfolk. Next thing we know we’re caught between a tyrant we hate and an army outside our walls that wants to kill us all just to get at him!”

“Do you know anything about a woman named Melissan?”

“Melissan? Wish I’d never heard her name. Nothing against her as a person, you understand. She’s a fine woman, always looking to help out the less fortunate.”

“I applaud her efforts,” said Nalia. “It’s the duty and privilege of us of the upper classes to aid the less fortunate by taking them under our protection.”

“But that’s the problem, see?” said Pyrgam. “She brought these Bhaalspawn to Saradush to try and protect ‘em, and now the whole town is doomed. Good intentions, bad results.”

“Do you know any way I might get inside the castle to speak to Gromnir?” said Rolanna.

“Don’t know why you’d want to go meet with Gromnir Il-Khan—most of us do our best to avoid him and his troops. But I just might be able to help you out in this matter. For a fee.”

“Isn’t the fact that I’m here to help Saradush enough for you?”

“It goes against my basic nature, but I guess you make a good point. Okay, listen up and I’ll tell you a little story. There’s an old, abandoned jail in the city where Count Santele could imprison his political enemies. Rumor holds there was a secret passage from the jail into the castle. But the jail never got much use, and nobody bothered to look after it. Eventually, it became overrun with undead and the Count secretly asked Sister Farielle at the Temple to seal the entrance.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Sister Farielle and I have a very close relationship, if you get my drift. If you talk to her she might give you the key to the sealed door of the jail, seeing as how we’re all doomed anyway.”

“You aren’t much of a gentleman!” said Mazzy. “You could have told us this without disclosing your relationship with the Sister.”

Rolanna was about to leave the inn, but there was one nook in the back she hadn’t looked into. She walked into it; leaning against a wall was a man nursing an ale. Rolanna

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

could hardly credit who it was. Volo, the famous author, who she had last seen back when she was still adventuring near Baldur's Gate.

"Ah, I knew you would turn up here eventually," he greeted her. "Volothamp Geddarm, I said to myself, rest assured...wherever history is being made, Rolanna and her companions are close at hand."

"Volo? What are you doing here?"

"Come, now...surely you know that wherever history is being made I, Volo, will be there to chronicle events. You don't become the most famous historian on Faerun without finding yourself right in the thick of things! Of course, this time I'm a little closer than I normally like to get. But don't worry about me...I always find a way to get out of these tight situations."

"What can I do for you, Volo?" asked Rolanna. Behind her, she could hear Jaheira explaining to the others how she had met Volo before.

"Oh no, Rolanna...the question is: What can I do for you? The answer, of course, is immortalize you and your companions in my historical records. Here's a little preview of what I've got so far." Volo cleared his throat before continuing.

"Raised as a child in the cloistered confines of Candlekeep, Rolanna emerged from these humble beginnings to become one of the most powerful mortals to ever set foot upon the face of Toril. Saving the city of Baldur's Gate, defeating the mad mage Jon Irenicus, preserving the Tree of Life...such heroic accomplishments are mere footnotes in the epic tale of Rolanna, greatest of the Children of Bhaal!" He cleared his throat again, took a swig from the mug in his hand, then deprecatingly waved his hand.

"That's just a small taste of my entry on your exploits. Of course, the ending is not yet complete. And this is still a first draft. But you get the idea. And that's not all... If you care to listen, I can give you a small preview of what I'm going to say about those people who have the glory of adventuring with you."

Fascinated, Rolanna gathered her companions about her so they could all hear what Volo had to say.

"Combining the might of a fierce warrior with the compassion of a true priest of Helm, Anomen Delryn's fame and accomplishments have brought honor and glory to his family name. As a young man, the Delryn heir desired nothing more than to join the Order of the Radiant Heart. But then he discovered the human Rolanna...and learned there are some things he cares about even more than his lifelong dream."

"Hmph...a commendable recitation," allowed Anomen, "although I've no need for such flattery. You did spell my name correctly, did you not?"

Volo moved on. "Jaheira combines the talents of her warrior training and her druid beliefs, making her one of the most powerful guardians of the balance to ever walk the world."

"Well, at least the balance was mentioned," said Jaheira. "So long as your tale does not turn into some tawdry bundle of lies existing solely to titillate the common reader, perhaps your relation of Rolanna's tale will have some merit, Volo."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Tawdry? My dear miss Jaheira...I have never once been the slightest bit tawdry with my lies, I assure you.” Volo appeared to consider adding something to correct that statement, but decided not to, seeing Jaheira’s scowl.

“Not even an attempt to feign honesty, is it? No wonder Elminster speaks so highly of you. I shall have to see this work of yours once it is done... I so wonder if Rolanna will even be recognizable.”

“Believe me, my dear...in the case of Rolanna, here, exaggeration is not exactly a requirement for an exciting tale. It will be all I can do to convince my readers that I tell the truth, I would wager.”

Volo hastily turned to another. “With a thundering bellow and a mighty sword, Minsc and his faithful hamster companion Boo have worked their way into the lexicon of the Faerunian vocabulary as true heroes. Evil beware!”

“Oh, Boo, he is going to mention you in his book! Isn’t he a nice man?” Minsc beamed proudly.

Heartened by this more favorable reception, Volo continued. “Those who knew Aerie as the frightened little girl in the circus would be amazed at her transformation. Few beings in the history of the Realms have become as powerful in both priestly and wizardly magics as this innocent elf.”

“Oh, I don’t think I deserve all of that,” said Aerie, “there are *so* many opponents we face who seem to have more power than us, no matter how much we all grow. But it *does* sound nice.”

Volo struck a pose, before declaiming, “Never has a member of the halfling race stood taller and prouder than the most valiant of Arvoreen’s faithful warriors. The stalwart Mazzy Fentan has earned a legendary amount of fame serving the cause of good. If ever there was to be a paladin beyond the ranks of humanity, no warrior could be purer of heart.”

“Pretty words,” allowed Mazzy, “though the only one who needs to be assured of my purity is myself. And perhaps Arvoreen, of course.”

Volo turned to another companion. “Nalia has grown from the roguish young daughter of the de’Arnise Duke, barely trained in the magical arts, to one of the most fearsome mages to grace the land. Lady Nalia challenges the likes of Elminster and Alustriel for both power and a desire to do good.”

“Oh, good grief.” Nalia rolled her eyes. “You *must* be kidding me.”

Volo considered his next victim. “The last member of Amn’s infamous Corthala family has made an even greater impression than his necromantic ancestor...the grim Valygar’s prowess as a ranger the likes of which have only been told in the oldest of legends cannot be denied. Single-handedly, the ranger may turn what was considered a cursed bloodline into one of the most respected names in Amn.”

“I would prefer that you not mention me at all, writer,” said Valygar grimly. “Not that you’ll listen. You rumormongers never do.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna asked Volo to describe what he had on Keldorn, the paladin and her former companion.

"The most powerful and revered member of the Order of the Radiant Heart to walk Faerun, Keldorn is a veteran warrior whose deeds for the good of all men shall be remembered long after he is passed. No one man could serve Torm with greater dedication... I understand a statue is already being erected in his honor in Athkatla."

Imoen, who had been impatiently tapping her foot, pushed forward, eyebrows raised questioningly.

"From an anonymous childhood in the monastery at Candlekeep Imoen stepped forth, a young woman with the blood of an immortal in her veins, and the power of an archmage at her command."

"Ooo, an archmage!" said Imoen, pleased. "I like the sound of that! But you forgot beautiful. All of the sorceresses in Winthrop's books were beautiful and terrible. Watch, see? See how I flip my hair and glare at you...don't I look evil?"

Rolanna, a wicked smile on her lips, said, "Tell me about Sarevok."

"Er...Sarevok? You mean *the* Sarevok? He's with you?"

"Sure he is. He's right there."

Volo looked around, noticing for the first time the tall figure who had been standing silently at the back of the group. "Amazing! I had heard that a warrior of masterful skill was sighted traveling with you, Rolanna, but even I could not guess at such a convolution! Imagine! The very man who once tried to kill you now fights by your side! I shall have to write that down now, so I don't forget. What a fantastic tale this will make!"

"It was a good enough tale when I was alive the first time, sycophantic fool." Sarevok walked away. Rolanna, realizing there were tasks that needed to be attended to, reluctantly led the others off as well.

"Thank you, Rolanna," called out Volo as they left. "I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am to meet you while you are in the middle of an adventure that will change the shape of the Realms! Truly I only hope I can do your tale justice."

A Traitor Unmasked

The captain of the Saradush militia stood in his headquarters. Beside him was a woman, by her dress noble. Two men, one young, one old, faced them, flanked by two guards.

"Countess Santele," said the captain, "I know this is difficult for you. But you have to make a positive identification."

"Yes. He is the one...Mateo." She pointed at the young man. "He is the...traitor."

"No, the Countess must be mad with grief!" he protested. "There must be some mistake!"

"You are certain, Countess?" asked the captain. "There is no mistake?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I am certain. Before my beloved son Ardic...disappeared, he told me he had witnessed...Mateo...opening the gate."

"There," said the older man in satisfaction. "Surely you now see, my over zealous Captain Samand, that your egregious accusations have needlessly vilified my impeccable character."

"Why are you doing this, Countess?" The young man flung his arms wide in a gesture of entreaty. "I am Ardic's friend! Your son and I grew up together!"

"Captain, I stringently demand you incarcerate this heinous felon immediately!" said the older man.

"You make no demands of me, Kiser Jhaeri!" replied Captain Samand in disgust. "I fulfill my duties as I see fit! Men, take Mateo away. And escort the Countess to her quarters."

"Yes, please...take me away from this place." The countess left through the front door, while the guards took Mateo to the cells below.

"Well, Captain?" asked Kiser Jhaeri. "Am I free to go now? Is this travesty of justice, this witch hunt, this...this fiasco finally at an end?"

"You are free to go, Kiser. Get out of my sight—I'm in no mood to see your unscrupulous face right now!"

"I suppose such abuse is the best approximation of an apology I can expect from an uncouth cretin such as yourself, Captain Samand."

* * *

Rolanna had decided to seek out whoever was running the defense of the city, since it was obvious Gromnir had withdrawn from that task. Asking a militia member, she quickly found their headquarters. Inside, they found the militia captain alone, startled by the entry of so many armed individuals.

"What? Oh, you must be the ones Melissan told me about. Just what our town needs—more Bhaalspawn." He sighed wearily. "My name is Captain Samand, and I'm a very busy man right now."

"I need to ask you a few questions," said Rolanna.

"Well, you better make it quick. I can't stay for long—I must see to the defense of the walls."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about Gromnir."

"Gromnir isn't much of a soldier—abandoning the city like he did. And as a ruler, he's even more of a tyrant than Count Santele. The townsfolk are better off since Il-Khan locked himself in that castle. Me and my soldiers have served as the Saradush militia for years—we don't need Gromnir's help to defend the town."

"What can you tell me about Melissan?"

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“Saradush would have been better off if she had never brought all those Bhaalspawn here. Sure, she tries to help during the siege—but it’s too little, too late. The damage is already done.”

Rolanna asked the captain about the older man who had been leaving as they entered. She had sensed evil in him, instantly forming a strong dislike for him.

“That? Oh...a most unpleasant matter. A few days ago someone opened a secret gate into the town—Saradush could easily have been overrun. We just discovered the traitor was a young man named Mateo.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that someone betrayed us. The enemy came through a small sewer outlet that was protected by both a locked iron grate and several powerful magical wards. There is no way to open that entrance from the outside. But Mateo is a faithful soldier, not the type of man to betray Saradush.”

“Maybe he didn’t. Are there any other suspects?”

“An alarm was raised and my soldiers arrived only a few moments after the gate was opened. We found three people in the area: Mateo, Ardic Santele, and the merchant Kiser Jhaeri. When we began our investigations, I strongly suspected Kiser. He’s a greedy, self-serving weasel who would sell his own mother if the price was right.”

“What changed your mind?”

“We didn’t get a chance to complete our investigations. Ardic, the son of the Countess Santele, disappeared. He was our primary witness.”

“But somehow you still made an arrest.”

“Our attention was focused on the vile Kiser Jhaeri, but had no proof. Then the Countess told us that Ardic, her son, had implicated Mateo before he disappeared.”

“That’s a pretty weak case, if you ask me.” Despite the fact that Mateo’s fate had nothing to do with finding Gromnir, Rolanna’s couldn’t resist scratching her itch to right injustice. Besides, she consoled herself, if the real traitor were still at large the entire city could be in danger.

“If you knew the Countess,” said the captain, “you would know her word is beyond reproach. And she has nothing to gain from a lie—Mateo was Ardic’s closest friend. Accusing him was very traumatic for her. Still, I have to admit this does not sit well in my gullet. I was so sure Kiser Jhaeri was the culprit. To discover it was one of my own men...I’m shocked.”

“So now you just sit back and wait for the executioner?”

“Mateo will not be executed—not while we are under siege. The defense of Saradush is my first concern...but if I had more time, I would investigate further. I just want to find the truth.”

“Perhaps I could delve deeper into this matter for you.”

“If you wish to investigate further, I will not stand in your way. Speak to Mateo in his cell. The jailer will let you see him.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I will go visit Mateo in the jail at once. I will right this injustice!"

Rolanna and the others went downstairs to speak to Mateo.

"Who are you?" he asked when a guard led him out of his cell. "Are you here to further torment me, to heap more scorn upon my head?"

"My name is Rolanna. I think you've been framed." Rolanna had leaped to this conclusion, mainly based on her dislike of Kiser Jhaeri. She was relieved that at least she could detect no evil in Mateo.

"Praise Waukeen, someone who believes me! I cannot understand why she would falsely accuse me. She is a good woman. When I was growing up with Ardic, her son, she was like a second mother to me."

"Maybe that merchant, Kiser Jhaeri, is involved?"

"I do not know if Kiser is involved, but if he is the Countess herself may be in as much danger as I am. Kiser is devious, and maybe he has some hold over her. The Countess did seem to be acting strangely when she spoke to Captain Samand. At first, I thought it was grief over Ardic's loss, but now I think there may be something more sinister afoot. I regret that there is nothing more I can tell you. You must speak to the Countess at her home to find the reasons behind her actions."

Rolanna left, to seek out the countess. Jaheira grabbed Imoen's arm as the group filed out of the militia headquarters.

"A moment, Imoen, if you don't mind?"

"I suppose, Jaheira. What is it you want?"

"Well, that is just it, isn't it? You have been so formal to me, so distant. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't...I'm not... Well, actually, I have been a little nervous around you because of...well..."

"Because of my association with the Harpers? I thought so. Rolanna has suffered at the hands of many groups because of her lineage and now that you share it..."

"I don't mean to be a stranger but...people will see me differently now, I just know."

"Let them see you however they wish. What can you do but just be yourself? I know these are only words but...you will be fine."

"I know. Thanks though."

Rolanna entered the home of the countess. She was alone, her servants having fled when her husband was ejected from the city.

"Please, I have nothing to say to you," the countess said to the group which had barged in.

"Please, my Lady. I have spoken with Mateo," said Rolanna.

She broke down at the news, sobbing, "Oh, Mateo! Forgive me—I had no choice. I could not bear to lose my son."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“How does accusing Mateo of treason and murder help your son?”

“I...I was forced to do this. By Kiser Jhaeri. He has kidnapped my boy, Ardic! He said if I accused Mateo, he would return my son to me. But now he has gone back on his word. He says he will keep my son to guarantee my silence. I fear...I fear the worst—that Kiser has no intention of ever returning my son.”

“What treachery! Kiser Jhaeri must face the wrath of justice!”

“No! Kiser must not be harmed, I beg you. He is the only one who knows where my son is.”

“Letting Kiser get away with this is not going to get you your son back, Countess.”

“I...I don't know what to do. I wish Mateo to be free. I wish Kiser to be punished. But most of all, I just wish my son was safe by my side. I have little to reward you with, but perhaps...perhaps you could go to Kiser's home and speak with him. Maybe somehow you can convince him to release my son.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“I have nothing else I can tell you. Please, go to Kiser's home and speak with him.”

With the directions the countess gave her, Rolanna sent out to find Kiser. As the group walked Imoen fell into stride beside Minsc.

“Minsc, I want a hamster.”

“What? Well, an admirable decision but Boo is not for sale.”

“Not Boo, you goof. My own hamster. I just see how calming he is for you, and as a pet he seems very easy to maintain. I just thought...”

“Oh! Well then, by all means! And yes, very little requirements. Food, shelter, and perhaps the little wheel. I have heard nothing but good things about the little wheel.”

They found Kiser's house with little trouble. He was inside, alone.

“Interlopers in my abode?” Kiser didn't seem worried by the large number of people facing him. “Perhaps you have mistaken this edifice for an establishment of commerce. I assure you, you are mistaken. If you vacate these premises forthwith I shall exonerate you for the transgression of your intrusion.”

“I have some questions for you, Kiser.” Rolanna ignored what he had said, most of which she hadn't understood anyway.

“I am at a distinct disadvantage. You have the privilege of knowing my appellation, yet your own moniker remains something of an enigma.”

“Why do you use so many big words? Are you trying to make me feel stupid?” One advantage of associating with Nalia was that Rolanna had learned to stop being intimidated by those smarter than her. Intelligence was just another ability, like strength or dexterity. No individual could excel at everything, all the more reason to rely on friends like she did.

“My utilization of complex locution is more a reflection of my own superincumbent mental acuity than an aspersion on your circumscribed lexicon.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Well, it makes you sound like a pompous ass.”

“Uh...ahem...well...what can I do for you?”

“I want to ask you a few questions about Mateo.”

“Sorrowing circumstance, to be sure. Who could have conjectured that Mateo was a traitor?”

“Save it, Kiser—Countess Santele told me you kidnapped Ardic.”

“So the Countess has violated her covenant of discretion. Before you vault to spurious conclusions, however, I suggest you hear my exegesis of the extenuating circumstances, Child of Bhaal. Ah, your visage registers surprise—did you presume I did not know both your identity and ancestry long before you stumbled into my dwelling? I present you with an offer, Bhaalspawn. I admit my culpability in Ardic’s abduction, yet this does not implicate me in the betrayal of Saradush. Ardic did indeed see me near the gates, but I was not the guilty party.”

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Go on.”

“The real traitor is a wizard named Errard. He poses as a stalwart defender of Saradush, yet in truth he is a seditious prevaricator. The mind of that mage is convoluted beyond comprehension.”

“This just proves what I’ve said all along,” noted Valygar, “the only good wizard is a dead wizard.”

“If this is true, why didn’t you just tell Captain Samand?” asked Rolanna.

“No one would believe my account—not without substantial proof. Captain Samand is driven by a perverse desire to ruin me, and he was willing to convict me based on Ardic’s speculative testimony. I was compelled to secure my own liberty so that I could pursue my investigations against the sorcerer, and uncover the evidence that will implicate the renegade mage.”

“But why did you frame Mateo?”

“I could not let Errard know anyone suspects his involvement, or the wizard would destroy the evidence I need to procure. And the only other people in the vicinity were Ardic and Mateo. I had to kidnap Ardic, then use him to coerce his mother to point the finger of blame at Mateo. Only in this way could I keep myself from prison without alerting Errard of my intent to expose him.”

“A far fetched tale. How do I know you are telling the truth?”

“Ah, the eternal curse of the successful merchant. People see my affluence, and are instantly predisposed to doubt me. I have no proof to offer at this time. But I do hold one card yet. If any harm befalls me, I guarantee Ardic will never be found alive. If you desire to aid the Countess, you will help me exonerate myself.”

“I assume you want me to find evidence implicating Errard?”

“Alas, such an elementary resolution is not possible. While Errard lives, he is able to obfuscate investigation into his own actions. Only his demise will allow me to clear my own name.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“So you want me to kill the wizard Errard?”

“Regrettably, yes. I could not attempt such an endeavor myself—but you might prevail where I would falter. If not for me, consider how this will benefit Ardic, the Countess and even Saradush itself. Do we now have a full understanding of the situation? May I rely on your absolute cooperation in this matter?”

“What’s to stop me from telling Captain Samand what I know?”

“Without some proof, no one would believe your tale. And it would be extremely detrimental to the health of Ardic.”

“So what’s to stop me from just killing you now?”

“You might make the attempt—but my death will not bring gain to anyone involved. I suggest you save your violent impulses for other individuals. Errard comes readily to mind. Return only once your task is done. Until then, we have nothing further to discuss.”

Rolanna, although she had no intention of following Kiser’s plan, decided to seek Errard out. He might possibly have some information. Errard was not hard to find, he was on the city walls, aiding in the defense of the city. Rolanna went with Anomen to talk to him, leaving the others at the foot of stairs leading to the top of the wall.

“What is this I see?” commented Sarevok, taking advantage of Rolanna’s absence. “A wingless bird. How fitting that you should flop along with this group, eager to prove your worth.”

“I’ve already proven my worth,” said Aerie. “To everyone as well as myself.”

“Brave words. But I think your mouth platitudes you can’t even understand.”

“It...it doesn’t matter what you think. I am no frightened elf within the circus, anymore. I’ve learned enough so that evil like yours makes me only feel pity.”

“Pity, is it? You should feel fear instead, girl. Were Rolanna not your companion and protector, you would be nothing before me.”

“Think what you like. It is you who are nothing before my god and before my faith. Baervan and Aerdrie Faenya would both sweep you as if you were dust before them.”

“Bah! They come at your beck and call to protect your miserable life, do they?”

“They protect me. But seeing as even Rolanna was once enough to defeat you, and that was a long time ago, you shouldn’t go asking for more than you can handle.”

“Keep thinking that, girl. You haven’t a clue what true evil is.” But Sarevok was troubled. Aerie was right. Despite the innocence that still hung, aura-like, about her, she had proven herself a competent mage and cleric, and no longer feared what others might do to her.

“The defense of the walls of Saradush demands all my attentions,” said Errard impatiently when Rolanna found him. “I cannot spare the time to speak to you.”

“Kiser Jhaeri sent me to kill you, but I’m not going to do it.” Rolanna could easily tell that Errard was evil. She had decided to be frank, and gauge his reaction.

“Kiser Jhaeri? Why would he do such a thing?” Errard appeared honestly puzzled.

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“He claims you betrayed Saradush by allowing the enemy into the city.”

“Impossible! Everyone knows Mateo is the traitor. Ardic was a witness—he caught him red handed, or so I hear.”

“Mateo is just the fall guy. I think Kiser is the real traitor.”

“The word of a Bhaalspawn counts for little here in Saradush. But for the safety of the city, I must investigate the truth of your accusations. We must find Ardic.”

“Kiser swears he will never reveal Ardic’s location until you are dead.”

“Now that I know Ardic lives, and that Kiser was involved in his disappearance, I may be able to use my powers of magical divination to reveal where Ardic is being held. Alas, I will not be able to do much more than this. As urgent as Ardic’s testimony is in discovering a traitor in our midst, I cannot leave my place on the wall for more than a few minutes.”

“Reveal Ardic’s location, and I shall thwart Kiser’s evil scheme!”

“Hold—my enchantment begins.” Errard’s familiarity with the city enabled him to cast a divination that the more powerful mages Nalia and Imoen could not. After a few moments concentration he turned back to Rolanna. “My spell is complete. Ardic yet lives, as you have claimed! But this is most strange. All the signs point to the home of Kiser Jhaeri. I suggest you investigate Kiser’s home more thoroughly. It is there you shall find the son of the Countess.”

It was time to trek back to Kiser’s house. Rolanna rejoined the others. Mazzy used the short trip to express something she had been considering.

“Goodman Valygar, I must admit something to you. The fact that we continue our travels together has been nothing short of a joy for me.”

“I’ve got to admit, Mazzy,” said Valygar, “that being your squire has been far more pleasant than I thought it would be. I assumed I was well-versed in the fighting arts, but you’ve taught me a thing or two.”

“Did you assume that such would not be the case? Simply because I am a halfling?”

“Certainly not. Vanity, more like. And you needn’t be defensive with me. I’ve often wished I was shorter, after all.”

“Oh? This is a new one.”

“It’s true. Part of my profession involves the use of stealth in the wilderness, and I’ve felt like nothing more than a giant, clumsy lummoX compared to some of the graceful halflings in my old unit.”

Mazzy chuckled appreciatively. “That is good to hear. But a clumsy lummoX you are not, Valygar. Your skills are impressive. There’s not a ranger in Trademeet who could perform half so well.”

“Now you flatter me. Careful, or we’ll make the others gag.”

“Truly spoken, my squire. Fair enough, then...let’s get moving.”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

Arriving again at the dwelling, Rolanna allowed Imoen to go in alone first, to check it out. Imoen quickly reappeared, stating that the ground floor was clear, but steps led downwards. Imoen led the way again going down the steps, checking for traps, while the others followed. At the bottom was an L-shaped room. From where she stood, Rolanna could only see the short leg of the L.

Motioning to the others what Rolanna wanted them to do, she prepared to enter the room. She rushed forward into the long side of the L, her companions moving to flank her on right and left. They surprised Kiser Jhaeri and two henchmen.

“So you tried to betray Saradush to its enemies and failed,” commented Sarevok in his deep voice. “Evil schemes to destroy a city are never as simple as they first seem, are they? I learned that hard lesson at Baldur’s Gate.”

“Rolanna,” said Kiser, “for endeavoring to divulge my machinations I shall repay you with the gruesome demise of both Ardic and yourself!”

Despite his brave words, Kiser’s position was hopeless, and he was quickly cut down. However, Ardic was not present. Rolanna yelled out to the others to fan out and search the room.

Imoen quickly found an inconspicuous lever. Disarming its protecting trap, she pulled it, opening a hidden door. Rolanna quickly led her friends through the door. They were in a hallway that appeared to encircle the room they had just left. Rolanna told Mazzy to lead half the group left, while Rolanna led the others right. The two groups killed a few more of Kiser’s followers. Rolanna also found Ardic, alive.

“And so the foul traitor dies!” cried Ardic when he had been freed of his bonds. “I thank you, on behalf of all the citizens of Saradush. There is much I must do—I cannot stay. But thank you once again.”

Entry’s Secret

Rolanna sought out the Temple of Waukeen in the city. When she entered, she found a single woman tending the shrine.

“Greetings, my sister,” she said, “and welcome to the House of Waukeen. I am Sister Farielle. How may I serve you?” Despite her polite words, Rolanna suspected the sister must have already heard of her exploits in the city.

“Can you tell me anything about Gromnir Il-Khan?” asked Rolanna.

“Gromnir is a tormented man, afflicted in both spirit and mind. The taint of Bhaal poisons his blood and tortures his soul. I would feel more pity for him, but he has been... very cruel. Gromnir trusts no one and has locked himself away in the palace to await the inevitable end of this siege, though I fear that he will first bring destruction to us all.”

“What do you know about the woman named Melissan?”

“A virtuous woman, a truly kind and compassionate lady. She brought the Bhaalspawn to Saradush, to find them sanctuary within its walls. It is not her fault that Gromnir took advantage of our hospitality...she meant well. Alas, this siege has thwarted

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

her noble efforts. When the walls fall, as they surely must, all the Bhaalspawn will be slaughtered and her efforts to save them will be for naught.”

“Pyrgam Aleson tells me you have a key that can get me into the castle.” Rolanna finally came to her main purpose for being here. She ignored the disapproving look from Mazzy at her bluntness.

“What? How do you know about...? Ah. Of course, rumors travel about Saradush as they would anywhere else. There is a key to get into the castle, yes...though it may not be what you think.”

“If I am to help this city, that is where I must go, sister.”

“You...you do not seem like an evil person, sister. Very...very well, I will help you with your task. Though it will not be an easy one. Several years ago I was asked to seal the entrance to the city jail, to keep a great evil from escaping into the city. As a cleric of some power, I was the only one who could do so. I am loathe to re-open the entrance, lest the evil escape into the city. But if you think you can reason with Gromnir or aid the city somehow, perhaps it is worth the risk. I sensed that powerful undead creatures had taken up residence in the abandoned jail cells. More than this I cannot say, though I would suggest you bring Holy Water with you before going down there.”

“This key will open the door to the jail...the door, itself, has been warded against the undead, but once you are below you will have no protection against them, yourself. You will find the door across the street. I wish I could tell you where to go once you are down there... I know it connects to the castle, but not how. Take the key and be safe, sister.”

Anomen asked Rolanna for a private word as the others filed out.

“Perhaps this is not the place for this discussion, my lady...but I must ask. Does it not seem an injustice that even as you vanquish your enemies others instantly spring up to take their place? Have you no regrets about what has become of your life?”

“I have regrets, my love. But the struggle against evil never ends, Anomen.”

“You speak only the truth, my love—as always. I have no doubt in your ability to face your enemies and emerge triumphant. And so we venture ever onwards, Rolanna. Perhaps it is your destiny to be forever embroiled in conflict and strife.”

“Does this bother you?”

“I prayed we might find a brief respite from the fighting and enjoy each other’s company in a time of peace, my love. But it seems the fates have decreed otherwise. When you convinced me to spare my father’s life you taught me that bloodshed is not always the answer. Yet I know it is naïve to imagine we may set aside our blades forever. Forgive my mood. I did not mean to trouble you with this. Regret is a luxury of the weak. Simply know that I love you, Rolanna, and I will always be by your side...in peace and battle. Come, my lady, let us continue on our journey and speak of this no more.”

Rolanna didn’t wish to try to use the key for the jail until nightfall, to avoid any confrontations with Gromnir’s troops. She decided to spend a little more time looking around the city.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“You don’t look like one of the locals,” commented a man they were passing. “Are you a Child of Bhaal as well, lured here like the rest of us to face our inevitable end?”

“Yes, I am one of Bhaal’s offspring,” admitted Rolanna.

“I myself am one of Bhaal’s progeny—or so I’ve been told,” said the man in a carefully neutral voice. “I guess Bhaal’s blood runs thicker in some of his children than in others.”

Sarevok could hardly believe he shared the same heritage as the worm before him. “By your sniveling manners I would say Bhaal’s blood runs very thin indeed in your veins. Bah—why do I even waste my breath tormenting this cowering cur?”

The man nervously eyed Sarevok, before turning back to Rolanna. “Uh...is there anything else I can help you with?”

“How did you get here, exactly?”

“I wasn’t brought here by Melissan, like some of the others. I fled here from Sembia. My home village was burned to the ground by a dragon who claimed to be hunting for me. My friends...my family...they threatened to give me to the dragon if I didn’t leave. So I did. And I heard a lot of other Bhaalspawn were coming here.” He sighed. “Now I almost wish I hadn’t come.”

Jaheira wasn’t the only one who had noticed a change in Nalia. Aerie commented, “Nalia, I’ve noticed that you’ve been very quiet as of late. Grim, even. Is...something wrong?”

“Just because I don’t feel the need to express every thought that crosses my mind, this is supposed to mean something is wrong?”

“Well, no...it’s just that you used to be friendlier.”

“I’ve got a lot on my mind, Aerie. I’m not the same girl desperate to save her castle. I’m an archmage, now...I could have handled those trolls myself, now, if I needed to.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to change, Nalia. You’re still the same person, inside, aren’t you?”

“When you have the power to disintegrate someone with little thought, it means you have to be more careful, Aerie. You should know this just as well as I.”

“There’s no need to talk down to me like that. I know what you mean...you just used to care more.”

“I do care. Whining about how things should be better will not improve things. Attaining the power to make real change might, however. But enough...we’ve things to do.”

Rolanna entered the shop of Lazarus Librarius, purveyor of magical scrolls. He complained that his spellbook had been stolen, preventing him from replenishing his stock. Rolanna was about to tell him that she was sorry, but more important matters prevented her from helping him. She then realized the others were expectantly waiting. Mazzy, Aerie, Minsc, Anomen, even Valygar and Jaheira, relied on her to provide the moral compass for the party.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna bowed her head, in her imagination the expectations of the others momentarily more of a burden than her Bhaal heritage. She forced a smile, and told Lazarus she would be happy to help him.

He told her he suspected a well-known local thief, although the only clue at the scene was small, muddy footprints. Since she had met no halflings in Saradush, Rolanna determined to question any children in the neighborhood.

As they searched, Imoen decided to assuage her curiosity regarding Anomen, who she had not previously met. "So. You're part of that Order of the Radiant Heart, right, Anomen? The paladins and clerics that run around Amn getting outraged at everything?"

"Hah! An apt description of those blowhards, if ever I have heard one. No, dear girl...I am no member of the Order. Why do you ask?"

"Well, a full hundred of them marched all solemn-like up to Candlekeep about ten years ago, all to donate a single book to the monks. Did you know about that?"

"No, but it sounds like something the Order might do, depending on the book."

"It was a big book, as I recall. I stole into the archive to look at it...did you know it had all sorts of pictures of naked men and women? Total filth! I'm surprised the Order even had something like that."

"You don't say? Well perhaps the Prelate was finished with it and gave it to the head of your monks as something of a present? Those paladins are quite the repressed lot of stuffed shirts, you know."

"Oh, they're not so bad, I guess. Better than some of the evil I've seen...they can just be kinda pompous, as I remember. You're not as bad as I figured you might be, though, Anomen."

"Well, I'm glad you think so. I escaped from their clutches just in time, I suppose, eh?"

Rolanna was able to find the child the thief had hired to steal the book. With this evidence, she sought out the thief himself, returning to the Tankard Tree. After she entered, Nalia pulled at her arm. Viegang was still there; Nalia whispered that seeing him had given her an idea. She explained it to Rolanna, who agreed to try it.

"You again?" greeted Viegang when she approached him. "Anything I can help you with, sister?"

"I think I may have figured out a way to get your power back."

"Really? How?"

"Melissan removed your capacity to be scared, right? Literally?"

"I think so. She doesn't know how to return it, either. Not permanently."

"But all you need is to get scared once and you'd at least be away from here, right?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"So a Horror spell or something similar should do the trick!"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Hmm. Maybe. I’m either immune or resistant to a lot of magic, but you never know. Too bad I don’t know any spells or I’d try it out.”

Rolanna signaled Nalia, who cast a horror spell on him.

“Wh-what?” cried Vie kang. “It...it’s working! I’m starting to feel fear! That...that means I’ll teleport away! Oh, thank you! Thank you!” He stared at the others, joy and fear mingled in his features. Then he disappeared.

Rolanna thought with satisfaction that questing to recover Lazarus’ spellbook had done some great good after all. At least she had saved one Bhaal-spawn from the army besieging Saradush.

The thief, when confronted, agreed to give back the spellbook on one condition, that Lazarus give him a scroll of teleportation so he could leave the city. So it was necessary to go back to Lazarus. As they walked back, Minsc made sure to place himself next to Sarevok.

“Eh, so, ‘Sarevok,’ if that is your real name, what do you remember of our previous battles?” Even for Minsc, who was used to seeing the world as bizarre on a daily basis, it was hard to accept Sarevok could actually be a member of the party.

“What are you getting at, ranger? I remember you well enough.”

“I am not completely convinced that you are who you say you are, standing there saying you are.”

“And I am to feel bad that I do not have your validation? No, if my identity is a problem for you then let my actions speak instead.”

“Boo agrees. You are welcome beside us if you effectively apply the boots of goodness.”

“Your deluded comments are unnecessary. Rolanna directs my wrath as she sees fit.”

“A fine choice of mentor, but again, you do not seem like a ‘Sarevok’ to me. Too much ‘humble,’ not enough ‘*Raaaagh*, feel my unholy rage.’ ”

Lazarus agreed to provide a scroll of teleportation, but pointed out it was useless, since Yaga-Shura’s mages had magically sealed the city, preventing all such transportation. Rolanna was horrified, since she may have sent Vie kang to his death. She hoped his Bhaal-powered magical ability was different enough to bypass the barrier.

Rolanna returned to the thief, giving him the teleportation scroll, warning him not to use it. She took the spellbook he gave her back to Lazarus.

Rolanna had found she had the knowledge to transport herself and the party to the pocket plane whenever she wanted, although she didn’t know how she had come by it. She decided it would be good to return there now. They could rest before trying to reach Grommir, and return to Saradush when it was full night.

When she appeared in the pocket plane, Rolanna asked Jaheira to explain to the others that they would need to rest away from her and Anomen. Rolanna then sought out Cespenar the imp, and bluntly threatened to rip off his wings if he disturbed her. Rolanna thought it was time that she and Anomen resumed their physical relationship. She was

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

sorry the others didn't have access to the same release (at least, she didn't think there were any other romances going on in the party). However, she wasn't about to deny herself.

To her and Anomen's surprise, it was almost as if it had been hours, rather than months, since they had last slept together. The many events since then hadn't dulled their love for one another. When it was time to prepare to return to Saradush, everyone, even Sarevok and Minsc, had sense enough not to say anything. There were, however, more than one smile directed Rolanna and Anomen's way, and several knowing looks were exchanged behind their backs.

City Prison

Melissan, flanked by several guards, faced Gromnir in his throne room, formerly that of the Count Santele. Bhaalspawn that Gromnir had enrolled in his service stood about the room, watching the proceedings with interest.

"Your guards threatened me with arrest if I did not accompany them," protested Melissan. "I do not take kindly to threats, Gromnir! What is it you want?"

"Gromnir knows a stranger came to Saradush, pretty Melissan." Gromnir, an orc, scowled, displaying his prominent fangs. "Another Bhaalspawn. You must think Gromnir too stupid not to remember there is no way in or out of the city, hmm?"

"You fool, Gromnir! That 'stranger' may be our only hope of escaping this siege alive!"

"Bah! Gromnir knows the truth! We is no idiot! Melissan has brought this outsider in to kill Gromnir! Bhaalspawn means nothing! Yaga-Shura is Bhaalspawn—he wants Gromnir's head, too!" He laughed, a deep, rolling laugh. "Foolish Melissan is plotting against Gromnir. Melissan is plotting the ruin of all the Children of Bhaal!"

"You are mad, Gromnir. Have I not always aided you and all the other Bhaalspawn? I brought you here to protect you—it was your paranoia that brought Yaga-Shura upon us!"

"Mad? Paranoid?" Another deep laugh. "No! Gromnir finally understands how Melissan lied! Melissan lured Gromnir into a deathtrap! Tell Gromnir where the Bhaalspawn assassin is hiding!"

"Hiding? The stranger is not hiding, Gromnir! If you were not holed up in this castle, you two could have had a meeting when the stranger first arrived!"

"Gromnir will never meet with this Bhaalspawn of yours! Hah! Gromnir is wise to Melissan's schemes. Melissan wants to turn Bhaalspawn against Bhaalspawn until all are dead!"

"Your madness will be your death, Gromnir, nothing else...the death of you and all those who foolishly follow you."

"Take Melissan away—but watch closely. Gromnir knows that Melissan is tricky; Melissan lies; Melissan deceives."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The guards led Melissan away. She made no move to resist, although a slight smile may have momentarily quirked her lips.

* * *

Rolanna exited the pocket plane, reappearing in the Tankard Tree at the exact spot she had left. The barkeep merely grunted at the party's appearance; the siege had worn away his ability to react to the exotic. A patron at the bar was not so blasé, losing half the drink he was holding in his startlement.

The man at the bar glanced over at the far side of the room, then back at the party. "I'm not insane, I'm not!" he announced.

"Err...excuse me?" Rolanna politely answered.

"Nobody believes me. Why would they? After all that's been going on in Saradush, why even think about the fact that there are monsters amongst us, preying on us?"

"Whoa, slow down. What are you talking about?"

"The vampires! The courtesans...some of them, anyway...they started disappearing after the siege began. No-one knew where they went. And then...they started to reappear...changed... Nobody noticed because of the siege, but it's true! They've moved down into the old prison. Their lair is there, I swear! And they come to this bar at night to feed on their customers! I have no idea how many there are, now. So many people die every day, here, what's a few more? I was taken down to the prison, myself...but I got away. And now they hunt for me. I know I sound crazy. Nobody wants to listen to me, but it's true! I'm a dead man!"

"If they come here to the bar to feed, then what are you doing here?" Rolanna asked reasonably.

"I...I don't know. I...you're right. What am I doing here? Why did I come back?! I've got to get away! I've got to get away!" He ran out of the bar.

Rolanna looked over at the far side of the room where the man had been staring. There were two figures standing there, male and female, by their dress courtesans. Their extremely pale skin certainly fit the profile of a vampire. Concentrating, Rolanna could also sense they were evil.

She quickly outlined a plan to the others. She would go with one of the courtesans, and turn the no doubt planned trap back against them. The others should wait a short while after she left, then enter the prison using the key from Sister Farielle.

Rolanna approached the male courtesan, who said, "Well, aren't you a succulent specimen of the female persuasion. Why don't we slip away alone together? Only fifty gold coins. I promise you won't regret it tomorrow."

"Fifty? That's outrageous! I'll give you twenty." Rolanna, not being experienced with this sort of thing, thought she had responded with an appropriate amount.

"Normally I won't work for less than fifty...but for you I'll make an exception. Come with me... I know a place we can be alone. It's not far." The vampire was

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

practically slaving in anticipation. Obviously, Rolanna's skill at acting would not be an issue.

Rolanna followed the vampire to the city jail. The vampire opened the door—clearly, the wards had ceased to affect him. She followed him down a short flight of steps.

"We've arrived. This should be enjoyable!" said the vampire when they reached the bottom.

"So the madman was right," Rolanna calmly said.

"Silence! The blood of Bhaal's children is a nectar we will risk much to claim! Overwhelm her, my brethren!"

Three more vampires attacked from adjacent rooms. Rolanna drew Carsomyr, continuing the same motion to completely cut through the neck of the vampire beside her. One of the vampires leaped on her back, claws scrabbling to find a chink in her armor.

Rolanna ignored it, flicking her blade right and left at the other two vampires who were on either side of her. She feinted left, forcing the one there back, then drove at the one on the right, cutting it down. She then turned back to the other one, pinning it through the heart despite its feeble attempts to block.

The vampire on her back had managed through sheer strength to open a small gap in her armor. Rolanna felt a sharp pain as the vampire bit into her neck. With a thrust of her legs, she leaped backward, crushing the vampire against the wall. It lost its grip, falling to the floor. With a sweep of her sword, Rolanna separated its head from its body.

Rolanna had lost any fear of vampires while fighting Bodhi, and had not doubted her ability to defeat them. She knew the slight amount of vitality the one had drained would be restored by Anomen or Aerie as soon as the others arrived.

Shortly thereafter, when the others did arrive, Rolanna organized them to search the jail, and destroy any vampires lairing there, breaking everyone into several groups due to the narrowness of the passages.

Imoen and Nalia were in one group. As they walked, Imoen asked, "Nalia, do you intend to go back to your castle once all of this is over?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. If I do, though, things will have to be different."

"Different in what way?"

"There'd be changes in the laws and taxation...and some real alterations to the system of land ownership. There's a base inequality amongst people that I can begin to address in my land."

"Wow. Sounds like you've given this some serious thought."

"Making changes in my father's duchy wouldn't be enough. I'd have to get onto the Council of Six, as well...although that plan is a bit more complicated."

"That'd be a neat trick, bringing change to all of Amn. Wouldn't those Roenals still be a thorn for you, though? And what about the Cowled Wizards?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“I’m an archmage, Imoen...just like you. The Roenals won’t stop me from doing what I know is right. And I could always join the Cowled Wizards...how many of them are as powerful as I?”

“OK, somebody’s getting a little scary...”

“Nonsense. It’s called growing up. I have a responsibility as a noblewoman and a mage, both, and eventually I will have to live up to them.”

The groups met up again on the far side of the jail, having destroyed a few more vampires. Rolanna led them into a large room, a change from the many small cells they had examined. Several vampires waited them there.

“What?! A Child of Bhaal? Here?!” cried a female vampire in rage. “Damn the wenches for their lustful hearts...they were warned to stay away from the blood of gods, no matter how sweet!”

“Die, vampire scum!” cried Rolanna, leading the others forward.

“You...you are a powerful one of your kind,” she said. “I can smell the murder in your heart. You shall never let us live, I would think. Come, then, my children...we die this night, once and forever, throwing ourselves on the merciless blade that is this godling!” It was as the vampire said; the undead in the room were destroyed almost as soon as they came within reach of the blades of the party. Rolanna quickly had the others search the adjacent rooms, so they could destroy the vampires’ resting forms in their coffins, permanently ending the threat.

Sarevok found Minsc following him as he walked into a cell to search it. He turned on him, “Ranger! Turn your rodent’s gaze another direction! I will not be scrutinized as though by some ridiculous divining rod!”

“Boo has an uncanny judge of character, but you...you give him trouble,” said Minsc.

“I shall give him more than that if this continues! I nearly conquered a nation! I will not be judged by a creature that stores nuts in its cheeks!”

“Food storage aside, Boo controls himself far better than you do. Do you see him ranting about mere glances? Let’s look.”

“What?” Sarevok cried in rage. He was tempted to use the sword in his hand on the annoying ranger before him. But with Rolanna’s presence not far away he hesitated. From what he had seen, Rolanna had not softened at all since he had last faced her. He didn’t doubt if he fought her in single combat he would lose. He wasn’t even sure he could win against Minsc. Sarevok was forced to admit the overwhelming confidence in himself, which had been his greatest asset during his previous life, had deserted him.

Minsc, oblivious, continued speaking, “There, you see? No rant. In fact, right now we see him snuffing about for a comfy place to sleep. Admirable restraint.”

“I’m still in hell, aren’t I? This is insanity.” Sarevok, defeated, gave his head a rueful shake.

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“Ah, finally a calming look across your face. Boo’s handiwork, no doubt. Doesn’t that feel better?”

“Let’s...let’s go kill something. Soon.”

Gromnir il-Khan

Imoen found a secret door. It led into the basement of the palace. Barely had the party entered the passage when they met a woman coming towards them.

“I see I am not the only Child of Bhaal who is seeking an escape from Gromnir’s madness.”

“You are a Child of Bhaal?” Given their concentration in the city, Rolanna shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Of course. And, like you, I’m trying to find the secret entrance out of the palace.”

“I’m not trying to find a way out—I’m trying to get in to see Gromnir.”

“You might want to rethink that. Gromnir is mad. He’s randomly executing anyone he thinks might be a traitor. Most of the Bhaalspawn just go along with his wild accusations, trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves. But I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Now I understand why you’re trying to escape this place.”

“Executing innocent people just isn’t right. And how long until Gromnir points his finger at me? I just want to get as far from that madman as possible.”

“Can you give me any advice on how to get inside to see Gromnir?”

“There’s a host of patrols just down this corridor. They’re guarding some prisoners Gromnir plans to execute. If you’re careful you could sneak past them and into the castle. But watch out...there’s traps and alarms all over the place. Most of them are so sensitive they go off if you even get close to them—keep a wide berth if you know what’s good for you. Of course, I think you’re mad if you want to get in to see Gromnir. I’d recommend you turn back and get out of here...like me.”

Rolanna and the others pushed forward, leaving her there. The basement of the palace was a prison. They were forced to kill the guards there, incidentally freeing the prisoners as well. On the next floor up in the palace they encountered more guards, who attacked, and were in turn killed. Going up to the next floor, they found the throne room.

Gromnir was there, surrounded by his closest Bhaalspawn supporters. His spies had brought him news of Rolanna, which allowed him to pick her out and address her.

“So the assassin is here! Ha ha! Rolanna has come to kill Gromnir, eh? Hah! Good fun!”

Gromnir ordered his followers to attack. Rolanna moved to engage him, while her friends fought the others. A short time later Gromnir and his Bhaalspawn lay dead. The party had barely finished healing their wounds when Melissan made a dramatic entrance.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Gromnir! Rolanna! Lay aside your weapons! We must work together to... No! I...I see I am too late to stop the bloodshed. You have slain Gromnir and many other Bhaalspawn, as well.” Melissan looked around at the carnage. “Gromnir’s men left me in my cell when the battle started. I escaped as soon as I could, but I was too late. I... suppose this was inevitable. “

“I knew the chance of Gromnir joining you was slim, Rolanna, but I thought he might listen to reason. I was desperate to end this siege, and I...I was wrong. I’m sorry. Now I fear we are all doomed. There is no way out of Saradush. Between the army and the strange imprisoning magics, even our wizards are trapped here.”

“I might be able to help, Melissan.” Perhaps Rolanna could evacuate the city through her pocket dimension, although it would take considerable time. “I know a way to escape the city.”

“You...can leave Saradush? Yes, of course...you found your way into the city, it is only logical to expect you can find your way out. Why didn’t I think of that earlier? If you can leave...then the city can still be saved! They have endured so much, we must help them! Rolanna, if you can leave, then only you have the means to do that!”

“Why do that? I could always try to bring you and the Bhaalspawn elsewhere. You could flee.”

“Understand, Rolanna, that this siege is but the beginning. Until this threat is ended, it doesn’t matter where we go...we are in danger of being exterminated by Yaga-Shura and his allies. Eventually, even you would be overwhelmed by their power. I...I know more about them, Rolanna. More than I’m saying. But...I won’t tell you everything unless you try to save Saradush.”

“It is not my first choice to do this, Rolanna. However, in my dealings with the Children of Bhaal I have learned that...sometimes...the ends must justify the means.”

“Tell me what is to be done, Melissan, and I shall strive with all my power to bring it about.”

“The army itself is immaterial. If you fought your way to Yaga-Shura, himself, and defeated him, the force would collapse. But that’s...not a simple matter. He is a powerful fire giant, to begin with...”

“Eww! That’s disgusting,” commented Imoen. “I don’t even want to imagine Bhaal mating with one of those overgrown monsters.”

“Is it any more an abomination than a Bhaalspawn human?” asked Melissan. “Bhaal was a God of pure evil—his taint is an abomination in any form.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Rolanna. “But a giant is no more difficult to kill than any other creature.”

“It is not that simple, Rolanna. Like you, Yaga-Shura is one of the most powerful Bhaalspawn to walk the Realms. I know not what ‘gifts’ your blood has passed on to you, but I can tell you something of his.”

“Oh, Rolanna,” said Aerie, “why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like what she says next?”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“The giant seems to be invulnerable to harm. Arrows, blades—even the most powerful of our spells and enchanted weapons leave no permanent mark. He heals faster than we can wound him.”

“Are you saying Yaga-Shura is invincible?”

“Yaga-Shura was not born with this immunity. He developed it...learned it... somehow during his childhood spent in a secret glade in the Forest of Mir. I can show you where that glade is...but it is only speculation. The key to the giant’s invulnerability might lay there, but it might not. There may be nothing there at all.”

“And if that’s the case?”

“Then there is only one other place to look, though it is far more dangerous. Yaga-Shura has attracted a large number of fanatical devotees of his kind. They worship him as a god, as you can well imagine. They built a temple to him in the Marching Mountains. Many of them are in his army, now...that may mean the temple is vulnerable to your attack. Perhaps Yaga-Shura’s secret lies there, I don’t know.”

“This all seems pretty iffy. What makes you think any of this will pan out?”

“Because if it doesn’t, Rolanna, then all the poor Bhaalspawn that I have tried to aid, including you, are doomed. Yaga-Shura and his allies will have their way. We must have hope.”

“Fine. I will accept your mission and find a way to destroy the ‘invincible’ Yaga-Shura.”

“I...know it is much to ask of you. Whether it means anything to you or not: thank you. Now...I must attend to the wall’s defenses. However you leave, I suggest you do so as soon as possible. Godspeed, Rolanna. I pray you succeed in your mission, for all our sakes.”

Rolanna moved to her pocket plane, where everyone rested. When they were done, she left...

Watcher’s Keep

Rolanna found herself in some woods. No temple was visible. As she was considering that her claimed ability to go where she needed to be was overrated, a voice hailed her. Looking around, to her surprise she saw Keldorn, the paladin of Torm. She had left him months before in Athkatla, after he had retired from active service.

Keldorn came over to her. He explained he had decided he had to be by Rolanna’s side while the Bhaal prophecy played itself to its conclusion. He also brought other news, of a fortress known as Watcher’s Keep. Its custodians, the Knights of the Vigil, had appealed for aid. Keldorn wasn’t sure what the keep guarded, but in prayer to Torm he had gotten the feeling that Rolanna’s presence was critically important.

Rolanna had a deep respect for the aged paladin, and agreed to interrupt her current quest to travel to Watcher’s Keep. It was nearby, and she hoped to finish any task there within a few days.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

As they traveled, Keldorn unburdened himself on another matter, saying to her, "May I have a moment of your time? There are matters of great importance I wish to discuss."

"Yes, Keldorn," said Rolanna. "What is troubling you?"

"It appears your destiny may be far greater than perhaps even you at first suspected. Great power awaits you, and I cannot help but remember that you carry the blood of Bhaal within your veins. I do not condemn you for this, Rolanna...you did not choose to be an offspring of the Lord of Murder. And yet the fact remains, there is evil within you. I cannot ignore it."

"There is evil in all of us, Keldorn. Even you." Of course, Rolanna knew he was referring to the divine evil that was part of her heritage.

"You speak the truth, Rolanna. Each of us must struggle with our own personal demons. But I cannot help but believe yours are...stronger...than most. I fear for you, Rolanna...and I fear you as well. I will stand by your side as long as you walk in the light of truth and justice. And I will help you resist the evil within yourself."

"And if I feel myself falling to the evil within?"

"I will say a prayer for you, Rolanna, and ask Helm to guide our steps down the path of your destiny."

Rolanna was surprised. Keldorn had mellowed; she had expected him to say he would be forced to kill her if she lost her internal battle. She wasn't at all sure that wouldn't be the better reaction, either.

Early the next morning the keep came into view. Above the tops of the trees about it was visible a truncated pyramid of masonry. A set of steps led up the outside to the top. As the party moved closer they came upon a man-high stone obelisk, inscribed with symbols. Keldorn and Imoen examined it, noting mention of the "Imprisoned One," and that Helm's symbol was prominent among the runes of warding which covered it.

At the base of the steps leading up the side of the keep they found half-a-dozen individuals waiting for them.

"Ah!" called out one. "The Child of Bhaal has come! We had hoped that our call for aid would draw you here...praise to the Watcher for hearing our prayers!"

"Praise be to Helm!" echoed another. Rolanna sourly noted that again she had instantly been recognized as a Bhaalspawn.

"Does this mean we have a chance, Odren?" asked a woman to the man who had first yelled out. "Does this mean our duty is not lost to us?"

"Be at peace, Sister Garlena," replied Odren. "Rolanna has yet to hear our story, let alone agreed to aid us. We get ahead of ourselves, here. Please accept my apology, Rolanna. The Watcher's Keep is a long journey from any nearby settlement, and your trip could not have been an easy one."

"I would be happy just knowing who you are and what you want," said Rolanna.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Brother Odren, currently the leader of the Knights of the Vigil. We are...a small sect that was given a most solemn charge by the Vigilant One, Helm, Himself.”

“A charge we are unable to fulfill, sadly,” said another.

“I have heard of your Order,” said Anomen. “If you are unable to do as Helm has asked...that must be a cause for great sadness and concern, I would imagine. The God of Duty asks much of His followers.”

“Indeed,” said Odren. “Helm appeared to us during the Time of Troubles, when all gods but He walked Faerun as mortals. A great evil had been imprisoned, He said, and we were to be its keepers. Watcher’s Keep, this ruin you see before you, was once a great prison for the most terrible foes of the gods. It was abandoned for many, many centuries until Helm came to us with His news. The old prison would not hold this great evil for long, He said. Our order would have to maintain a vigil, to watch for the day when the evil would begin to break the great seals and escape. That day has come, Rolanna. The great evil struggles within, and has infected the Watcher’s Keep to the point where we cannot bypass the creatures and foul magic that blocks our path.”

“Unpleasant as the task might be, my friend, the solution seems simple enough.” Mazzy proceeded to explain her point, “Can you not merely enter the dungeon and begin the task of clearing its many horrors?”

“So enter the dungeon and do as you must,” agreed Sarevok “Kill. What is so difficult?”

Odren shook his head. “It is our shame that we are too weak to get to the lower vaults and enact the ritual that will strengthen the old seals once again. Our need is obvious, then. We need a group to enter the Keep and descend to the lower vault so they may repair the mystic seals. Might you...might you do this, Rolanna?”

“Just what kind of creature is imprisoned here?” Rolanna asked.

“We do not know. Helm called it the ‘Imprisoned One’ only, saying it was a being of great cunning and power. Enough so that Helm, Himself, was forced to deal with it.”

“Interesting,” commented Jaheira. “A god was forced to deal with your Imprisoned One? No ordinary apparition, this.”

“If enough of the seals remain unbroken,” said Odren, “the Imprisoned One need not even be encountered. We just...do not know. That is why our need is so dire, Rolanna.”

“I’ll help you...but I need to know what to do.” Rolanna had, after all, already decided she would aid them before she started the trip here.

“You...you will aid us?” Odren asked hesitantly. “Ah, praise to Helm!”

“Praise Helm, He has answered our prayers!” echoed Sister Garlena.

“Thank you, Rolanna! Brother Pol will give you what you need and explain... Come, let us ascend to the top of Watcher’s Keep.” Rolanna and her companions followed the Knights of the Vigil up the steps.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Here...we are atop the ancient prison at last,” said Odren when they reached the summit. “Before us is the entrance into its first level, the first obstacle towards reaching the lower vault. In order to enter...as well as leave...you will need the proper holy symbol. Talk to Brother Pol...he is our elder and can give you what you need as well as answer any of your questions.”

“Aye,” agreed Brother Pol. “I know a fair amount of lore about the old seals within. The evil that has infected this place, however...that I know little about.”

“Any supplies you need can be acquired through Sister Garlena,” added Odren.

Sister Garlena bowed to the party. “You may have access to all the resources of our Order, Rolanna...at a fair price, of course. Would that we were wealthy enough to offer it to you for free.”

Odren bowed as well. “May the Vigilant One walk by your side, Rolanna. I pray that your godsblood lends you power enough to ensure your success...we all do.”

“As Brother Odren said,” started Brother Pol, “there are two things you will need within and I shall give them to you now. The first is the holy symbol that shall allow you to pass through the seals of the prison. Do not lose it, child. Without it you cannot enter the Keep...or, if you are within, you will be trapped forever. The second is the ritual scroll which will repair Helm’s seal upon the Keep. It need only be read aloud in the presence of the Imprisoned One...you require no special training to do so. Reaching the Imprisoned One is the difficulty. The Watcher’s Keep was built many ages ago to contain great horrors that walked Faerun, but it was abandoned centuries before Helm restored its purpose. When Helm came to us, he asked half of our order to sacrifice themselves...to become spirits guarding the Keep and adding to the ancient seals that were already in existence. The spirits will guard against all who enter...they cannot be reasoned with. Add to this the evil which has been drawn to this place by the infection of the Imprisoned One. All these obstacles must be bypassed. When you finally reach the lowest level, you must open the final seal to gain access to the Imprisoned One, himself. I...do not know what state he will be in. Read the ritual quickly before he attacks.”

Rolanna asked him to explain the layout of the Keep.

“I believe there are five separate levels within the Keep, the fifth of which is the lower vault that allows access to the Imprisoned One, himself. Each will have a seal that prevents access to the next level. I know little of what manner of seals are in place, however, nor how they might be overcome. They are meant to prevent simple access, however, so unlocking the seals will not be simple.”

“Why do I just not destroy the Imprisoned One and get it over with?” Rolanna wondered aloud.

“Oh, no no! The Imprisoned One must not be killed! If, indeed, he even can be. Helm has strictly forbidden us from even attempting...although I do not know why. Perhaps death, too, would be a form of freedom.”

Rolanna decided to take a short rest before entering the keep.

Mazzy sat next to Imoen. As soon as Mazzy was seated she turned to her companion.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Forgive me, Imoen, if I am being too inquisitive, but I simply must know. Are you...feeling any ill-effects from the taint on your soul?”

“What kind of ill-effects? Irritableness, nausea, tone deafness, sudden cravings for pasta in the middle of the night? That sort of thing?”

“I’m being serious. Rolanna became the Slayer, once, under stress...we must watch for similar signs in you.”

“There’s no guarantee that I’ll do anything like Rolanna, Mazzy. It may be too early to tell, even, for me...and even then I may not gain any of the powers Rolanna has.”

“So are you saying you feel no different?”

“Well...a little, maybe. I won’t say it’s been easy, but I don’t know how you can help me, Mazzy.”

“Having an extra friend certainly couldn’t hurt, Imoen.”

“I suppose you’re right. Thanks.” Imoen reached over and squeezed Mazzy’s shoulder in appreciation. Mazzy replied with one of her famous smiles.

Meanwhile, Anomen and Rolanna were talking.

“Ah, my love,” gushed Anomen, “your beauty and wisdom are ever shining, an eternal flame for those who would walk at your side.”

“Thank you, Anomen. To what do I owe this particular compliment?”

“I know your uncertain destiny must weigh heavily upon your heart, my love, and I merely sensed you were of despondent spirit. My feeble words were meant to comfort you.”

“Your words are a comfort, Anomen...as is your presence.”

“I am at my lady’s service—in heart, mind and especially body.” He grinned. “Your slightest wish is my command. Rest assured that I will prove my fealty this evening, my love.” They shared a long kiss before Rolanna got up and announced it was time to enter the keep.

Temple of Helm

The first level of the keep was an abandoned temple to Helm. In the entry door, strange runes of warding were inscribed on the floor and walls around the doorway—though whether the purpose was to keep people out or keep something in was unclear. There was an inscription above the door, which Nalia translated as “Caged within these holy walls, the Imprisoned One forever lies beneath.” The symbol given them by Brother Pol allowed them passage without trouble.

The front of the temple was divided into small rooms, each containing rotting furniture, shelves, and decaying books. Aerie, Keldorn and Imoen examined the books in each room, hoping to gain insight to the temple’s purpose, and how to pass the next seal.

In one room they found a ghost, but it ignored them. As it passed, they could hear a whisper of “Cold, so very cold...”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

While most of the party stood and waited in one room while some books were studied, Valygar sidled next to Rolanna.

“Something has been troubling me...may I talk to you?”

“Certainly, Valygar,” said Rolanna. “What’s on your mind?”

“We tread a dangerous path together. You already have more power than most mortals ever dare dream of. I wonder if you are ready for it?”

“I am well aware of the responsibilities that come with such power, Valygar.”

“Perhaps. I do not know what destiny awaits you, I have seen how power can destroy those who lust after it.”

“I do not lust after power, Valygar. It is thrust upon me.” Rolanna thought this was true, although how could anyone claim to know how they would act if godhood were within reach?

“Your words reveal much about your character, Rolanna. I suspect that when the time comes you will do what you must...as will I. I will trouble you no more about this.”

The party also met creatures that had infiltrated the temple, but they were no match for the group. By the time they reached the main hall, which was lined on both sides by statues, Aerie informed Rolanna a description of an important ritual had been pieced together from several fragments. The ritual’s description was:

“Place the Book, Bell and Candle upon the Altar!
Celebrate the Holy Name, forever praised and renowned!
Summon the Faithful, gather at the Altar!
Witness His glory and triumph, Ring the Sacred Bell!
As it is written, the Ritual has begun.

Let the Bell ring forth a second time, in honor of the Holy One
As His name shall forever ring across the lands.
Let the Ritual Candle be lit, in honor of the Holy One
As His name shall forever be a glowing beacon to the faithful.

And the Sacred Book shall be placed open upon the Altar.
Let the consecrated wisdom of the Holy Word bless the Faithful,
Let the Bell ring forth a final time in joyous celebration of His name,
Praised and triumphant to Eternity’s end, the Ritual is complete.”

This might be the ritual needed to open the seal. But although the altar was in the main hall, the sacred book, bell and candle needed to be found.

Aerie had also found a book, titled “History of the Imprisoned One.” A portion read:

“He also serves who stands and waits and watches carefully.

Such is the lesson of the Great Guard, Helm of the Unsleeping Eyes.

Let the events of this forgotten temple serve as an example to all who would follow the Vigilant One. Beneath this hallowed earth the avatar of the Watcher confronted great evil, a Prince of the Underplanes.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Through steadfast perseverance Helm, Guardian of the Gods, fulfilled his sacred duty and bound the creature in the bowels of the temple that it might walk the world no more.

Speak not the beast's name, ye Knights of the Vigil, but guard this place. Protect the wards which seal the Imprisoned One within, and remain ever watchful.

Never betray your trust—such is the will of Helm.”

They searched and discovered the items needed to perform the ritual, along the way finding a pair of slippers for the ghost they had earlier seen, who then helped them out.

As Rolanna and Aerie fussed at the altar in preparation, Keldorn stood staring at them, absently rubbing his face.

“Keldorn?” asked Jaheira, laying her hand on his shoulder. “You look pensive. Are you well?”

“I am well enough, Jaheira, though our circumstance gives me reason to pause.”

“Hmm. I have been thinking as well. It is hard to draw a line in the sand and say ‘this side represents balance, this other side does not.’ ”

“Balance? Would that balance was the worst of our worries.”

“Ah. Having trouble with the black and white aspects?”

“That would be an understatement. I am quite certain of what evil lies ahead, but I am finding problems with identifying the ‘good’ path around it.”

“I’m not sure what to say. We do what we can when the opportunity presents itself.”

“That would be all that can be asked. Torm guide us, we need his wisdom.”

Rolanna performed the ceremony, which opened the seal to the next level. Unexpectedly, the statues in the hall turned out to be guardians, animating and attacking the party. Everyone withdrew into a small side room. The statues could only enter a few at a time, where they met Rolanna, Minsc and Sarevok, backed up by the others. Eventually, all the statues were destroyed.

Demon of Four Aspects

The party stepped through the no longer sealed portal in the Helm temple. They appeared in a large room, with four doors. In a cage was a winged demon. As they watched, it changed form, to that of a being made of living ice.

“More suicidal fanatics willing to die in the service of Helm, I see,” the demon called out to them. “Or have you been forced into service, as I once was a millennium ago?”

“I am not a follower of Helm,” replied Rolanna, “though I willingly serve him in this cause, foul creature!”

“Hmm...sounds like you have been tricked into doing Helm's dirty work. Looks like we are both unwilling participants in this little drama.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"All lies!" Rolanna wasn't about to take lessons from a demon. "Stand aside and let me descend to face the Imprisoned One!"

"Listen, friend. We can help each other. The fact of the matter is, you cannot get through the gate to the next level unless I open it for you. So I'm not going to let you through the gate unless you help me end the enchantment that has kept me bound in this infernal dungeon for the last thousand years. Do we have a deal?"

"Why should I care?" answered Rolanna hotly. "You will not be freed by me."

"You are as stupid and stubborn as those fanatical Helmites who stumbled in here forty years ago! Come back and talk to me when you are ready to see reason."

Rolanna turned away. She and the others would search this level, ignoring the demon, to see if they could figure a way to open the seal by themselves. Rolanna told the others of her decision, and asked them to examine the four doors leading from the room, to see if there was any reason to go through one rather than another. As the others scattered she noticed Imoen approaching her. She wasn't too surprised; Imoen had looked troubled ever since they had awoken from their last rest.

"I...I've been having some nightmares." Imoen was plainly frightened. "Really strange ones, like sailing on rivers of blood. So *real*. You...you used to dream a lot. Right before Gorion died. Was it...was it like that?"

"Yes, it was. Worse, sometimes."

"Worse? Then I...I don't know how much longer I can go on like this. The images... they keep coming to my mind when I sleep no matter how hard I try to block them out. And I've started to...develop powers. Powers that reach down into the taint within me, and have nothing to do with my magic."

"What sort of powers?"

"Minor spells...like what you developed after you left Candlekeep. Healing...curing poison, things like that. But that means...that means I'm following the same path as you! That means that...that things could get worse. It means that I could become the Slayer..."

"Let's just see how it goes. We can help each other." Rolanna had confidence in Imoen. If she could survive what Irenicus had done, she wouldn't fall to the awakened Bhaal blood.

"I...I hope you're right. The more I discover about this taint, the more I don't want it. I don't know how you ever dealt with it."

After examination, there was nothing to pick among the doors, so they chose one at random. On the other side was a mage's laboratory. After defeating the guardians, they realized the mage was long gone, although his notes were present.

The mage had mastered air studies. The other three doors led to the labs of other mages. More, the four mages had created the demon in the center room, imbuing it with the ability to switch forms, each form emphasizing the mastery of one of the mages.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

They searched the other labs, of mages who emphasized slime, ice and fire. Studying their papers, although they had worked together to create the demon, each had also introduced vulnerabilities in the demon to their own specialized magic.

As the party searched one lab, Nalia paused to talk.

“Minsc, I wanted to take a moment to say something to you.”

“Boo and I always have time to speak with our friends, right Boo?”

“Eh, yes. Well, I just wanted to say that your unwavering fight for goodness has been a great influence on me.”

“And now you would like a hamster.” Since his talk with Imoen, Minsc assumed everyone in the party wanted a small furry friend.

“What?”

“Just a guess.”

“Well, no, I just wanted you to know that I’m thankful for your example...perhaps excluding the hamster part of it.”

“As you wish, but I couldn’t imagine a Minsc without a Boo. We are two peas in a pool, two fists in a face, two feet on the floor, and too much for most villainy.”

In the final lab they searched they found an imp. Or rather, the imp allowed itself to be found, as it called out to them after they entered.

“Hey, you! Yeah, I’m talking to you! Only the Masters are allowed in the libraries... What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” replied Rolanna dryly.

“I’m just the resident whipping imp! A menial servant. A serf. A slave. A vassal. The Masters couldn’t care whether I live or die!”

“Your masters are dead and gone,” said Rolanna, pointing out the obvious.

“Dead? Huh...not surprised, I guess. I knew trouble was brewing. The Masters must have finally killed each other off. You know, I bet that explains all those screams and explosions I kept hearing a while back. At least now I know why the fans shut down—nobody left to start them up.”

“You mean you’ve just been sitting here for centuries, doing nothing?” asked Rolanna in disbelief.

“Hey! One of the Masters told me to wait right here for further instructions, so I waited *right here!* I’m smart enough to know better than to disobey an order from one of the Masters.”

“So how long were you going to just sit here and wait?”

“Look...I’m an immortal spirit, okay? What’s a thousand years to me? And if you knew how the Masters punished disobedience, you wouldn’t have moved for a thousand years either!”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Imoen chuckled, "I'm not sure whether to be impressed by your unshakeable devotion to duty, or appalled at your complete lack of initiative."

"With the Masters dead, I've got no reason to stick around anymore. But since you did bring me the news that I'm free to go, I'll help you out." The imp proceeded to repeat information they had already figured out, such as how much the four masters hated one another. He also pointed out the four scepter keys they had found in the labs would free the demon from its cage. The imp then vanished.

The demon had been right in at least one respect. They would never open the next seal without releasing it from its cage. The party returned to the central room, and prepared themselves. Rolanna, Keldorn, Sarevok and Minsc inserted the four keys into receptacles at the four corners of the cage, which vanished.

"After a thousand wasted years, I'm finally free!" yelled the demon in triumph. "And now to spread some seriously bloody carnage to make up for lost time. I think I shall start with you."

Since they had studied the mages' notes, Imoen, Nalia and Aerie knew exactly which spells would damage the demon no matter what form it assumed. The others kept the demon away from the mages while they cast their spells; shortly, the demon was destroyed. The portal to the next level was unsealed.

Portal Maze

The party appeared in a square room, a portal before each wall. Also in the room was an elf, dressed in a tattered robe. He squealed in fright at their appearance.

"Wh-what?! Yakman...Yakman sees people before him...but they must be illusions! Yes, Yakman is seeing illusions! Delusionary Yakman!"

"Yakman?" asked Rolanna in a gentle voice. "Is that your name, elf? Yakman?"

"W-wait! You speak? Illusions that speak?! No! Demons covered in illusions! M-must get away from the demons, sneak away! Sneaky Yakman!" The elf turned, and ran through one of the portals.

Rolanna led the others through the portal he had entered. They found Yakman there, in another chamber, at his camp formed of odds and ends. Yakman had obviously been here for quite a while.

"Please don't hurt me, demon!" cried the elf when they appeared. "Don't hurt me! Helpless Yakman! Frightened Yakman!"

"Oh, you poor, poor man!" said Aerie. "It's alright...I won't hurt you, I promise. I'm not a demon, honestly."

"Oh, well that's okay, then," said Yakman, calming fractionally.

"Just who are you, exactly?" asked Rolanna.

"Yakman not remember. Forgetful Yakman. Yakman has been Yakman for so long, wandering here, he cannot remember being anything other than Yakman."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Well, just how long have you been here?”

“Yakman here a long, long time. Yakman come with friends long time ago, friends who want to look for treasure. Yakman want treasure, too! Rich Yakman! Friends get things for ritual as Yakman watch. Statues come to life, then, and poor Yakman escape through portal. Cowardly Yakman! Friends die. Yakman stuck here. Lonely Yakman.”

“You mentioned something about demons.”

“Lots of demons, yes. Lots of scary demons! Frightened Yakman! Yakman run run run away when demons close...that not so hard because demons are always fighting each other!”

“Why are the demons fighting each other?”

“Some demons just hate other demons. Demons have own reasons, Yakman guesses. Yakman not mind. Being second on lunch menu means Yakman survive.”

“What can you tell me about this level?”

“Yakman run run run around all the time. Yakman knows this place really well, yes indeedy. Knowledgeable Yakman! Maze of portals, portals lead to rooms rooms and more rooms! Some rooms have demons. Scary demons. Demons come through portals, sometimes. Demons angry, can't get out. Yakman know way out, though. Smart Yakman!”

“The way out? To the next level?” It had taken a while, but Rolanna had finally realized Yakman must not have always been so crazed. He must once have been a competent mage, and might know something useful. “How does someone get out?”

“Yakman know...know way out, but...um. Way out is broken. Yakman not mean to break it, but is broken. Stupid, stupid Yakman!”

“What's broken? Is it fixable?”

“Maze lead to big cavern with portal, portal is way out. Yakman know this! Smart Yakman! But...Yakman trip and break portal. Portal broken! Clumsy Yakman! Now portal broken. Demons come through portal. Demons come and be trapped in maze because portal broken. Portal must be fixed with rod, Yakman knows!”

“Fixed with a rod? What rod are you talking about?”

“Yakman has rod, but...rod broken, too. Rod need three gems and gems fall off when Yakman run. Yakman not know where gems are. You can have rod...in junk pile, it is. Generous Yakman!”

“Thank you, Yakman. Why don't you...go to sleep or something?”

“You want Yakman to sleep? Yakman never sleep!”

“You never sleep? You must sleep. If you didn't sleep, it would drive you...oh.”

“Yakman used to sleep, long time ago. But it get cold, so cold. Frozen Yakman! Demons come and it get cold. No sleep make Yakman go crazy, Yakman knows. Crazy Yakman!”

“We could destroy the demons around here...then you could sleep.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“That would be nice, but more demons would come. More demons always come. This Yakman knows.”

“Maybe a Heal spell will help restore your sanity?”

“Yakman has no idea. Yakman not know such a spell.”

Rolanna nodded to Anomen, who cast heal on the elf. The transformation was instantaneous.

“Wh...what? Who? ...who are you?” The elf looked around in confusion, although his voice no longer quavered, and his demeanor was much more assured.

“I think the spell may have worked. How do you feel, Yakman?”

“‘Yakman’?” scowled the elf. “That...that was that ridiculous nickname that atrocious little halfling kept calling me. My name is Tamorlin. Wh...where is my party? Where am I?”

“This is the Watcher’s Keep,” calmly explained Rolanna. “You’ve been here alone for quite some time, by the looks of it.”

“The...Watcher’s Keep. That all seems...so long ago. I remember I tried to use the Staff of Radiance to restore the damage done to the portal, and...and that’s it. Thank you, truly, for restoring my mind to one piece. I...I would have wandered here, forever, I think. I must get out and return to my life, whatever is left of it. Is the level above clear?”

“Yes, I believe it still is.”

“Then I shall go through the entrance portal and leave. I do not know why I didn’t, before...too afraid, I suppose. I cannot thank you enough, my Lady, for freeing me. Fare you well!”

Tamorlin left. The party searched his camp, coming up with his journal. The disjointed ramblings of a disturbed mind, it still contained tantalizing clues to the location of the exit to this level. Rolanna gave it to Valygar. He would map their progress through the portal rooms, and try to guide them towards the exit.

They left the room, returning to the original chamber. The party entered a portal they hadn’t tried before. They were in a maze of portals, rooms connected to one another in a complicated web. In many rooms they found creatures who were lost in the maze, with no way to escape. They also found their magic was affected. In some rooms magic would not function at all. In others, spells would go wildly wrong.

When they entered one room seven demons confronted them, the largest of which fixed its baleful gaze upon them.

“What are thee, mortal?” it cried. “Another crusader sucked into this dire prison along with the tanar’ri? Bah! Die, mortal, and be grateful!”

Rolanna without hesitation charged the demon leader. She found that Mazzy had thought the same thought, and fought at her side. Between the two of them they were able to defeat it, although each suffered some hard knocks. The other party members defeated the remaining demons. Aerie had noticed Mazzy’s brave conduct, and came over to comment to her friend.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Mazzy? Do you think you’ll ever be a true paladin for Arvoreen?”

“I am a Truesword for my god, Aerie. That is as close as I can expect to come. To hope for otherwise would be foolish and naive of me.”

“Yes, but I was told that there was a time that halflings were rogues only...that you would never find one that was a cleric or even a warrior such as yourself anywhere.”

“That’s true, if unfortunate. But that was a long time ago, Aerie...things have changed since then.”

“But maybe things could change again? Maybe your people could become paladins and rangers and even mages one day, without limitation. Wouldn’t that be exciting?”

“Yes, yes, and maybe my people will become skinny, wear shoes and have big, long skulls. Really, Aerie, you needn’t keep your head in the clouds all the time.”

“Well, it was just a thought.”

“And it wasn’t a bad one. But it’s not likely that the gods are going to revamp the halflings and come out with a ‘third edition,’ as it were, now, is it?”

“Oh, you never know. The gods do strange things, sometimes.”

In another room they found a balor fighting three cornugon. That wasn’t what was unusual. After they had permanently ended the combat by destroying the combatants, there was time to inspect a plinth of rock in the center of the room. Carved in it was an inscription.

“With my last breath I place my greatest prize

forever beyond the reach of the evil all around me”

Something prompted Rolanna to reach forth her hand. It sank into the solid stone; she felt no resistance until suddenly she grasped something. Pulling it forth, a sword was revealed; she instantly knew it was a holy weapon. She handed it to Mazzy, the one among her companions she judged most fit to receive it.

Picking a portal, they entered, transported elsewhere, facing off with a group of devils. The largest devil thrashed its tail in agitation as it sensed what had appeared.

“A gleaming knight with holy purpose, I see,” it hissed. “When holy knights and baatezu meet at all, one or the other is sure to fall.”

The handful of devils attacked, but the party had grown powerful enough that they were little trouble to defeat. They moved on, passing through several more rooms. In one, after defeating a wraith, which had enslaved the spirits of others as lesser wraiths, they found a journal among the scattered remains of previous victims.

The booklet was an extremely old and tattered journal of an adventurer by the name of Sir Kalthorine ut Wistan. The pages were yellowed with age and had been damaged by taloned feet walking over them...but various pieces were still readable. Sir Kalthorine commented more specifically on the dangers of finding his way past the demons and devils of this level of the keep, noting especially the “dead magic zones” in the blue rooms and the “wild magic zones” in the red rooms and that he had mostly reassembled the needed “Scepter of Radiance.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Beyond this, the only lengthy part seemed to be Sir Kalthorine's utter disgust at the "betrayal" of the Knights of the Vigil for his predicament. Nothing more detailed could be found about this, and it seemed especially odd as the journal appeared to be perhaps half a century old or more. Rolanna considered the implications of his words regarding the present Knights of the Vigil, but concluded it in no way changed her mission.

The portal the party then entered led not to another constructed room, but to a natural cavern. Awaiting them were five humanoids, accompanied by two fell cats. One of the figures, rather than attacking as they had come to expect, called out to them in a hearty voice.

"A Prime, is it? I *thought* we'd been drawn into the Prime Material Plane, but I couldn't be sure with all this...interference."

"My name is Rolanna. Ah...pleased to meet you, too." She had noticed demonic characteristics among them, especially in the speaker, but she sensed no great evil. Of course, she had run into those in the past who could mask their evil nature, but she was willing to take them at face value for now.

"Well, now. Nice to meet someone pleasant, instead of a host of frustrated fiends. Had to destroy several after we found ourselves here, the rude beasts. But what does one expect from the lower planes, eh? Me, I'll take Sigil any day, and avoid the Blood War entirely. But that's neither here nor there. We found ourselves in this place after being... drawn, somehow. I imagine the magic of the broken portal on the east side of this cavern has something to do with that. Wherever this place is, it allows me to gate in things... minor things...but not to open a gate back out. Interesting, no? I could gate out of this place, but the magic here is very powerful and specific. Likely I need some manner of key to pierce the shields of this place. Do you know of such a thing?"

"I might. Why should I let you out?"

"I wouldn't expect you to let me out of here based on the goodness of your heart... but I'll play you for it. Allow me to explain: I have a certain penchant for games of chance. I enjoy all kinds of gambling, but today I have something with me of particular interest. You see, I just finished winning a Deck of Many Things from a relative of mine, Duke Rowan. It's a beautiful deck, a variation on the norm by a genasi wizard of some repute. "

"So he wants to play a game?" Minsc's statement was made without concern, in full confidence of his companions' abilities. "Minsc and Boo are fond of all sorts of games, although Boo is far better at the ones that need strategy. I am sad to say that I am far better at straight-forward butt-kicking."

"Uh-oh." Imoen was more cautious. "You've *got* to be asking yourself what the stakes would be in a game some demon would want to play with you. Wouldn't you?"

"I'm eager to try it," said the leader. "I'll play you for the item that exits this place... or other things, if you've something of value. What do you say, Rolanna? Pique your interest at all?"

"I might be. I'd have to think about it."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Well, here’s something to entice you. I have a gem.” He held up a glowing red gem. “I believe its magic has something to do with the broken portal behind me. I’ll wager it for the way out of this place. But you’ll probably wish to prepare yourself and so forth. Take as much time as you need. It is a Deck of Many Things, after all, and not for the faint of heart. If you or some companion of yours is ready to play, come and speak to me. Unless, of course, you’re too frightened...”

Rolanna recognized the gem. She had already found the other two, fitting them into the staff. She couldn’t advance further without either fighting or playing his game. Temporizing, she decided to see what his companions had to say.

The first blew her off, saying, “Mind yer own, clueless.”

The second was nearly as short, replying, “Shut your bone-box, berk. Speak to the cambion if you wish anything.”

The third was frank, if unhelpful, commenting, “I just want out of here. Heard nothin’ good about the Prime.”

Only the fourth had anything useful for her to hear.

“We are tieflings...planars with fiendish ancestry, if you’ve never met such before. We exist to serve Aesgareth. Aesgareth is a cambion...a half-fiend...who is our lord and master. Not a bad sort, really, though truth be told he’ll do anything for a good gamble.”

Rolanna decided there was really no alternative but to play his game. She approached Aesgareth, asking him to explain the rules.

“It’s rather simple, actually. We’ll use the rules established by the renowned match between Tandem the Sensate and Bal’evoreth in Sigil. Each of us draws a card from the deck. Whichever of us survives the effect and has the higher card wins the draw. Simple, see?” The cambion paused, removing from a pouch at his side a deck of cards. Both the top and bottom of the deck displayed the same back, a grinning demon. “Alright, my friend...I shall allow you to draw from the deck first.”

Rolanna took the deck and cut it, showing the card which was revealed to Aesgareth.

“‘Guile,’ is it?” he said. “An interesting draw, although not a high suit. I expect you’ll have a fight on your hands in a moment, Rolanna.”

Five assassins appeared around Rolanna; she and her companions fought them off, as each was killed the body disappeared.

“Interesting. Most interesting,” said the cambion approvingly. “The genasi was a genius, if you ask me. Now, of course it is my turn. You may wish to step back...just in case.” He cut the deck. “‘Triumph’? Ah...I sense a fight oncoming. Give me a few moments, my friend.”

Four fighters appeared. He and his companions had little trouble defeating them.

“The card I drew is, however, of a higher suit than yours,” he crowed. “I win the draw! I have won my freedom! The way out of here is mine! You may have the gem, regardless...it means nothing to me, now. May I have my prize?”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“So long as I get it back, here you go,” said Rolanna, handing over the now completed staff, the final gem fitting in place to complete it.

“Thank you! For a Prime, you aren’t so bad. Come, my minions...let us return to the planes before someone actually begins to miss us! Onwards!” Rolanna argued that he could use the staff to leave, but he must leave it behind, since it contained the gem he had given to Rolanna. The cambion, fair when it came to his gambling debts, agreed.

After the cambion and his followers had departed, Rolanna declared a period of rest before moving on. She stood by herself, fretting, regretting the time this was taking, but knowing she could not leave the job before it was done. Mazzy came over to stand next to her.

“Forgive my intrusion, but you have seemed troubled lately. Are you finding the responsibilities of your divine heritage somewhat overwhelming?”

“I fear I might not be ready for this kind of overwhelming power—and the responsibility that comes with it.”

“Your very uncertainty shows you have given this matter much thought. That in itself is a step in the right direction. I will stand by you, Rolanna, whatever may come. And I will strive to help you walk the path of righteousness.”

“I am grateful for your support, Mazzy.”

“I will leave you alone with your thoughts, and pray to Arvoreen that they are noble ones.”

Machine of Lum the Mad

A man stood before a control panel covered in knobs, dials and switches. The control panel was part of a machine, a massive contraption of pistons and whirling rods, shedding steam, of uncertain purpose. The man himself was behind a clear barrier that smoothly merged with the metal, almost as if he also had become part of the machine.

He manipulated a control on the panel. A dozen githyanki and illithids materialized, immediately attacking one another.

“Absolutely marvelous!” yelled the man, delightedly laughing. He watched their conflict for a few moments, his glee draining away.

“Enough! I’m tired of this!” he raged, manipulating more controls. Lightning flashed forth from the machine, slaying two of the combatants. More monsters appeared, forcing the original combatants to flee, the monsters following.

Rolanna and the others appeared on this level, just in time to witness the departing creatures.

“What? Where did you come from?” The man in the machine was surprised. “I didn’t conjure you up, did I? No...of course not. Only planar creatures get summoned. Must be more foolish adventurers.”

“I’m Rolanna. I have been sent by Odren to find the Imprisoned One. Who are you?”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“Odren? Imprisoned One? Those names mean nothing to me. Who you are is not really important, anyway. I’m the only one who matters around here. I am Carston the Magnificent, Lord of the Level!”

“Why were those monsters attacking you? And how did you manage to drive them off?”

“Glad you asked. This fascinating device beside me is the Machine of Lum the Mad. With it I can summon creatures to entertain me, and then unleash my wrath upon them when I get bored.”

“How did you get here in the first place?”

“About ten years ago I was an adventurer, much like you. I came with my apprentices to explore this dungeon, seeking fame and fortune. What I found was this machine—the most amazing creation I’d ever seen.”

“But how did you end up in that glass prison?”

“Ahhh...the glass casing. Well, you see, I didn’t actually mean to create it. The Machine of Lum the Mad can be a fickle mistress. Actions have consequences which cannot be undone.”

“Since you are trapped, do you want me to try and release you?”

“Trapped? You misunderstand—this glass protects me. It makes me impervious to harm. I need neither food nor sustenance. Even the ravages of time can no longer touch me. I have become immortal!”

“So when you ‘became immortal’ what happened to your apprentices?”

“How dare you ask about my apprentices? Maybe this will cure your curiosity!”

He manipulated a control, again causing lightning to spring forth from the machine, hitting Rolanna. Nalia and Imoen tried spells in return, but Carston was correct, he was completely protected. Carston, having made his point, ignored them. Rolanna perforce had to do the same, concentrating on investigating the rest of the level.

She quickly found that Carston must have summoned many githyanki and illithids over the years. A series of chambers opening off one side of the large room holding Lum’s machine had been taken over by the mind flayers. A similar grouping of rooms on the opposite side was the base of the githyanki.

Rolanna and her companions investigated the illithid area first. The magical skills of Nalia and Imoen largely protected them from their mental abilities, so the illithids were easily dispatched. In one room they found a young human male, lying on a simple pallet, barely alive from the effects of repeated mental rape by the mindflayers.

“No...no more. Have mercy,” begged the man as they entered, thinking his torturers had returned. “I will never tell you. Please...just let me die.”

“I am not here to hurt you.” Rolanna knelt beside him, gently cradling his head in the crook of her arm. “I’m here to help.”

“I told you fiends—Carston deserves to stay in that glass forever! I will never let him escape!”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“Don’t speak—I can help you if you just lie still.”

“You—you are not one of those...monsters.” The man looked away. “You cannot help me. Just let me die in peace, I beg you.”

“Please, just a few questions.”

“My wounds run deep, my time is almost done. But...I shall answer your questions if I am able.”

“How do you know Carston?”

“Carston was...my master. He brought me, and his other apprentices, to this horrid place many years ago, seeking long forbidden knowledge buried within the depths of this dungeon. He led us through the traps and guardians of the upper levels of the dungeon. When we came across the Machine of Lum the Mad, he knew it was the only way to open the gate to the lower dungeon.”

“I knew that machine was the key to getting out of here!” yelled Rolanna in triumph, momentarily forgetting the victim before her.

“Carston was foolish enough to think he could master the machine. He studied the controls, then flipped a switch—and was instantly encased in that magic shell of glass. Before we apprentices could come to his aid, that idiot Carston flipped another switch. Instantly we were surrounded by a horde of ravaging demons from another plane.”

“And yet somehow you survived.”

“We might all have survived, if that fool Carston had let us work our spells. But he panicked, and began flipping switches at random. Between the fireballs, lightning and monsters he unleashed it is a miracle I escaped with my life. My companions were not so lucky. Torn limb from limb by demons, or burnt into ash by the magic of that infernal machine. Yet Carston was unharmed, completely protected inside his glass bubble.”

“What a gruesome fate!” Nalia shook her head. “It’s madmen like Carston that give all us magic-users a bad name.”

“Just another wizard lusting after power...and not caring who gets killed in the process.” Valygar, predictably, saw this as another justification for his long held beliefs. “I’ve seen this far too often to be surprised anymore—but it still disgusts me!”

“But even though Carston survived,” continued the man, “he was trapped inside his prison; helpless to escape despite seeing the...no, I will not speak of that. I could have released him, but instead I left him there to rot.”

“A fitting fate. But how did you end up here?”

“Using my wits and cunning I have survived these past ten years in this dungeon, seeking a way out. I have seen Carston grow more and more mad. He summons creatures to amuse himself, so he can watch them suffer. A few years ago he conjured up a group of illithid locked in battle with a githyanki war party. Since then the two groups have survived in this place—the illithid in the northwest and the githyanki in the south.”

“Couldn’t you all work together to find a way out of this place?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“The creatures waste their time battling each other, or launching futile attacks upon Carston in his glass case. I avoided the monsters until some months ago, when the illithid finally caught me. The illithid sensed I knew the secret of Carston’s cage. They tortured me in body, mind and spirit—but I would not talk. Carston will never be free.”

“Is there nothing I can do to help you?”

“I am beyond your power to either help or harm. The tortures of the illithid cannot be undone. I...embrace the darkness.” Resistance to the illithids had become his reason to live; rescued, he voluntarily relaxed all barriers, drawing his last breath moments after his last word. Respecting his wishes, Rolanna did not suggest to Aerie that he be resurrected.

Rolanna next led the party to the area inhabited by the Githyanki. In previous encounters she hadn’t found them to be as evil as the illithid, although they were certainly unpredictable. They managed to sneak into the chamber holding the Githyanki leader.

“Githyanki, arm!” commanded their captain when Rolanna and the others were discovered. “Invaders to lair! Not Illithid, but agents? Or seek you gold beyond the double doors, the hoard of The Ancient?”

“I am no one’s agent, and I seek no hoard,” assured Rolanna. “The illithids are dead. I have killed them all.”

“A debt to you. We repay with your lives. Surrender and live to serve Githyanki.” Obviously their captain considered this a great concession.

“Are you saying my reward for killing the Illithids is to surrender myself into a life of slavery?” Rolanna didn’t have to tell the others to prepare for combat.

“No parlay—blades for tongues.” The githyanki before them drew their weapons. “All answers found in death! Githyanki attack!”

The combat against the Githyanki was much more difficult, but it ended in the same result. Rolanna and her companions stood with stained weapons; the githyanki lay scattered where they had fallen.

“Keldorn,” said Minsc, staring fixedly at him, “yet again Boo and I are in awe with how deeply you plant the footprint of justice on the villainous buttocks we encounter so often!”

“And as always, Minsc, you have fought with the righteous strength of many knights.”

“And hamsters! Let us not forget Boo and his furry fury.”

They searched the chamber. Among the treasure they found was the diary of Carston’s apprentice. One passage in particular was helpful, revealing what he did not have time to do before he died.

I curse Carston daily for trapping me in this infernal place. My only solace comes from the knowledge that my old master is powerless to escape his own glass cage. I have hidden the crystal mallet to ensure no one will ever be able to use it six times to shatter the bell jar and release Carston. May he rot forever!

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

They entered a door leading beyond the Githyanki area. It opened into a large natural cavern. As they crept cautiously forward, Nalia whispered to Rolanna that she could sense a presence ahead, powerful both physically and magically. Rolanna hesitated, her spirit plummeting, for she suspected what was ahead. Then she heartened, remembering she had faced such danger before, and lived to tell of it.

Indeed, a short distance ahead they encountered a fully grown red dragon. The dragon chose not to fight, but spoke to them, its booming voice waking echoes.

“Greetings, puny one. I am Saladrex. I assumed the disturbance I heard earlier was another attack by the mindflayers, but I see now that you must have been the cause. It is nice to see a new mouse stumble into my lair.”

“What’s a dragon doing inside this dungeon?” Rolanna had no wish to fight him, if she could avoid it.

“My story is truly a grand tale! Of course, every story about me is going to be grand simply by virtue of the main character.”

“That goes without saying, oh mighty Saladrex. Please continue.” Rolanna hadn’t forgotten the value of flattery when dealing with dragons.

“Like most of the unfortunate creatures on this level, I was summoned by the mad magician in the glass cage. However, unlike most of the others I have no real desire to escape this place.”

“Why choose to keep the grace and beauty of your form hidden from the world, Saladrex?”

“I have only been here a few years—an insignificant time for a dragon. But I choose to remain for a number of reasons. For one, I find the antics of Carston and the other lesser creatures on this level amusing. Plus, I have been able to acquire a fair hoard of treasure from the endless supply of beings Carston conjures up with that machine. And usually I have little to fear from thieves and looters in here.”

“I don’t like the implication in that look you give me when you mention thieves.” Rolanna noticed that Imoen had disappeared, she hoped to avoid drawing the dragon’s attention rather than to try to steal from his treasure.

“Perhaps I am paranoid, Rolanna. The Machine of Lum the Mad has had some small effect on all the creatures trapped in here. We sometimes behave irrationally.”

“They say there is a fine line between madness and genius, great Saladrex.”

“Too true, I’m afraid. But I grow weary of this conversation now. Perhaps you could return another time?”

“Please, wise Saladrex, may I ask you some questions?”

“Very well, ask your questions and I will share my knowledge with you.”

“Do you know how to get down to the next level of the dungeon?”

“I would imagine the Machine of Lum the Mad is the key to descending to the next level. Other than that, I could not really say.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Do you know where the crystal mallet can be found?” Unfortunately, the diary of Carston’s apprentice had not contained this information.

“From the comments of the Githyanki leader, I know it was recently in possession of the Illithid in the northern part of the dungeon. Where it is now I could not say.”

“What can you tell me about using the Machine of Lum the Mad?”

“I cannot tell you much about the devious contraption, but I do know this: There are notes scattered about this level that may give you the combinations to the machine. Seek them out.”

With more thanks for the dragon, they backed away, leaving the cavern. Outside Imoen was waiting for them. She admitted to sneaking off to examine Saladrex’s hoard, searching without luck for the crystal mallet. Logically, the mallet, if it still existed, must be behind one door they had not investigated before.

Opening the door involved solving a puzzle involving six braziers. The combined brain power of the party solved such conundrums almost as soon as they were posed, and the door was quickly opened. Inside were two minotaurs.

“Ha, brother!” roared one. “Fools have come for our treasure!”

“I shall split their bones and drink my mead from their skulls!” answered the other.

Much more powerful than any minotaurs they had encountered before, they were still easily overwhelmed by Rolanna and her numerous companions. The mallet was among the treasure recovered.

With determined stride Rolanna approached the machine of Lum the Mad, crystal mallet in hand. Carston loftily ignored her. She struck the barrier about him precisely six times, each succeeding blow amplifying the vibrations created in the barrier by the first strike. Seconds after she stopped, the barrier suddenly shattered into thousands of pieces. A surprised Carston fell from the machine to sprawl before them.

“Eek! No—spare me, please!” he sobbed. “I beg you, don’t hurt me! I never meant any harm! It was all the machine’s fault, I tell you! I’m just a poor old man who got stuck inside a glass case.”

“Tell me how to use the Machine of Lum the Mad and I will let you live,” demanded Rolanna.

“All I knew was how to summon monsters and shoot off fireballs or lightning bolts. I was too afraid to try anything else. It’s the truth, I swear!”

“If you cannot help me then just get out of my sight, you cry-baby.” Rolanna had suspected he would be useless.

“Thank you, kind ma’am! You are truly noble for sparing my wretched life! Take my journal—it may help you discover the secrets to this infernal machine.” He scrambled from their sight before anyone had a chance to change their mind.

Rolanna gave the journal to her companions. After a short period of study, Anomen came back over to her, pointing out several passages.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

I would so like to escape! It gets ever so stuffy and I miss Mumsy ever so much. There is a deactivated portal and I know that the machine will open it but I'm frightened to try.

If my research is correct, pushing the triangular button, turning the red wheel and pulling the medium lever will activate the portal...but it will not free me from this wretched glass case!

Rolanna glanced at Anomen, who smiled and gestured for her to go ahead. She found a triangular button on the control console, pushing it. There was one red wheel, which she turned to the right as far as it would go, hoping that was the correct direction. Finally, she pulled the middle-sized lever among three. A portal activated not far away.

The Great Seal

The party appeared in a large chamber, a great seal set into the floor before them. Evenly spaced about it were three mystical locks; obviously, they would need to search out their keys.

Rolanna led the others towards three closely spaced doors in one wall. As they approached a ghost faded into misty visibility before them.

"Hail, brave Lady! Rest assured, I know your mission. You seek the path to the Imprisoned One. But beware—the path before you is difficult, the danger great."

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I am the Keeper of the Key, the One Left Behind. Duty compels me to remain, to stand guard over one of the keys to the final seal."

"Such honor, Rolanna" gushed Mazzy admiringly, "even death cannot break the vow of this noble knight! Perhaps someday we ourselves will be as worthy as he!"

Imoen, more practical, said, "Why do I get the feeling this ghost's sense of duty is going to make things harder for us, Rolanna?"

"You must be worthy in heart, spirit and mind before the final seal will be unlocked. My solemn task is to test the perseverance, courage and wisdom of your heart."

"How do I prove myself?"

"Behind me are three doors. I may not speak of the gauntlet of ordeals which lay beyond. Complete all three challenges and return to me here—only then will your heart be proved worthy."

"As I feared, Rolanna," said Jaheira, "we must prove our worth to this spirit before we can complete this quest."

"Ah...I knew this was coming!" Imoen was disgruntled that her fears had been validated. "Everybody's always giving us tests, challenges and trials. You'd think someone would trust us just on reputation by now!"

They entered the first door. Inside was a small room. An imp sat at a small table, a pile of coins before it.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"Guests! Welcome to my domain," gushed the imp. "No doubt you seek a challenge. But are you worthy of it, or merely fools? We shall soon see."

"I'm sick of games and puzzles and tests," said Rolanna disgustedly.

"Sadly, you do not make the rules here. This is my realm, my little world. So we do as I say."

"I shall prove my worth to you, imp." Rolanna squared her shoulders. "I await your challenge."

"Let us see if that lump between your shoulders does more than hold up your hat."

First, the imp asked a riddle. Although Aerie gave the answer, the answer was also obvious to Rolanna.

"Correct." The imp perched on the seat of its chair and bowed to them. "Perhaps you are a worthy mental adversary, despite your doltish appearance."

The imp explained the rules of the coin game. Rolanna didn't understand quite what they were supposed to do, but she noticed Nalia and Imoen were grinning. Imoen played for their side. After a few moves they had won. To Rolanna's questioning look Imoen just shrugged and commented that victory was assured from the first play.

"You may have won," snorted the imp, "but I'm not going to stick around here and listen to your gloating!" With another snort the imp disappeared. They left the room, returning to the ghost.

"Your wisdom has allowed you to triumph over the cunning and trickery of the imp! I hope it will be so when you face the Imprisoned One."

They entered the second door. Inside, they had to fight a green dragon. Although the dragon had a few tricks, it did not match the mighty drakes they had defeated in the past. After it was slain they emerged once more to be congratulated by the ghost.

"A truly fearsome foe defeated, brave Rolanna. Your courage is without question. You have completed this challenge."

The third door led to two dozen orcs. Rolanna was surprised at the ease of the challenge. The challenge's true nature was revealed when she found that any orc slain disappeared, to reappear a short time later, alive again. Rolanna quickly rapped out orders to the others. The fighters, herself, Anomen, Mazzy, Valygar, Jaheira and Sarevok, would seek out the orcish mages and clerics when they reappeared, killing them before they could cast any spells. The other members of the party were to protect themselves, using up their magic only when necessary. The orcs, although numberless, were weak fighters, and few blows damaged anyone. After a dreary length of time, the dead stopped reappearing. When the last orc died they exited, to hear the ghost's words.

"Your stamina is great, your perseverance admirable. You have survived the Horde, and completed this challenge." The ghost nodded its immaterial head to them. "You have completed the challenges of the gauntlet and proved your heart is worthy to face the Imprisoned One. The key to the final seal is yours." The ghost disappeared, leaving behind the magical key, the first of three.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna decided it was a good time to rest and regain their strength. Aerie sat by her, gently laying her hand on Rolanna's arm.

"I've...I've been watching you a little since you got your soul back from Irenicus. There's something different in you. I can feel it. There's something evil growing within you. The part of me that is devoted to Baervan reels from it...even though I know that it has nothing to do with the person you are, that it's separate. You're basically a good person. Obviously you fight the urges that Bhaal's taint must put within you...but how long will that continue? Won't the desires in your heart just get worse and worse? There's going to come a time, according to the prophecy, where the Sword Coast is going to run with blood...and I intend to do everything I can to prevent that. And I hope you will, too."

"I intend to keep fighting this taint, Aerie...no matter what it takes." Rolanna was troubled by Aerie's words, since they mirrored thoughts of her own.

"I'm glad to hear that, Rolanna. I'll pray for you and remain by your side...and hopefully we will see this through to the end, together."

They approached an altar in another part of the chamber. After placing a skull on the altar, Rolanna found her consciousness partly transferred elsewhere. She controlled a spirit warrior as it moved through a dungeon. She successfully guided the warrior through traps and past opponents to the exit from the dungeon. She fully awoke, no longer part of the spirit warrior, discovering the second key on the altar.

The party moved to another part of the room, where there was built into the floor a strange machine with four large colored buttons. An inscription on the machine read: "Those who serve must be worthy in mind, heart and spirit. Only the worthy may unlock the final seal." A scroll lay beside the machine. Curious, Rolanna glanced at the scroll, which seemed to have been written by a previous investigator. She skimmed through to its conclusion.

It would seem that the purpose of this machine is to dispense glass globes of four colors. The globes have two purposes. Firstly, some of the globes contain magical liquids that can be used as potions of varying degrees of power. Other globes have no practical use and are probably meant to be placed in the containers that match their color. The intelligent thing to do would be to get all of the globes that one can and then place the ones that are of no use into the colored containers to obtain the prize. The globes that cannot be used are always the last ones dispensed. The problem is, every time a globe is dispensed something nasty....

Rolanna grimaced at what she had read. Her experiences had beaten all desire out of her to investigate lesser paths to power. She manipulated the machine only enough times to obtain the globes needed for the four cylinders. The creatures that were created along with the globes were easily dispatched. Rolanna now had the three keys.

Rolanna, Sarevok and Anomen manipulated the three keys simultaneously. The great seal irised open. Simultaneously, guardians appeared.

One looked like a succubus, although doubtless much more powerful. A second was a demon with the upper body of a woman, the lower body of a snake, and six arms, each

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

brandishing a weapon. Also present was a hive mother (a beholder variant), a drow, a sirine, and a humanoid of an unknown race, wielding twin swords.

“Come, my sweets!” cooed the succubus. “Serve Nalmissra as you should!”

“Hsss! Your end is nigh, foolish godling!” spat the woman-snake.

The combat was difficult, their opponents skilled in both magic and physical arms. However, the appearance of guardians had not been unexpected. Preparatory spells had been cast, everyone prepared as best they could for what might come.

Rolanna found herself paired with Sarevok in the fighting. Whatever might be going on inside, he was skilled with the two-handed sword, and those they faced could not long fend off the attacks coming from two sides. After killing the hive mother and Nalmissra, Rolanna realized the combat was over, the other opponents having been destroyed by her friends. Rolanna declared another break to rest.

“Mazzy?” greeted Valygar, approaching the diminutive halfling as she cleaned her blade. “You and I are close friends, right? So, I...hope you won’t take this question the wrong way...”

“Hmm. To begin with a warning can’t be good...but I trust you, Valygar. Ask your question.”

“I’ve seen how you launch yourself into battle. Headlong, heedless of the danger to yourself and putting all others before your own safety. It’s commendable, Mazzy, of course, but...”

“But what? I should think the actions you describe to be commendable.”

“They are, they are. Heroic, even. But it strikes me sometimes that you are...overcompensating, a little? That you are a little embarrassed, even...to be a halfling.”

“What? How...how *dare* you—”

“You know me, Mazzy. I don’t say things idly. But if you say it is none of my business, I’ll mention it no more.”

“There...*may* be some merit to what you say, Valygar. It has not always been easy to travel in human lands as I am. There are so many preconceptions of my kind. I find it all very offensive.”

“And I just wanted to say that you are the most valiant knight I have ever known, human or otherwise. I think it’s important that you know that.”

“Words like that mean...much coming from one I respect. Thank you, Valygar.”

The Imprisoned One

Refreshed, the party entered the portal revealed when the seal had been opened. As the group appeared in a new chamber, a feeling of palpable power washed over them. Rolanna got a sensation that *something* had turned its attention towards her, gaining an alien interest in her presence that forced her insides to clench reflexively.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

She did not see anything physical within the chamber...but nonetheless felt its presence all around her. A phantasmal hand brushed her cheek, a curious gesture that startled her and was gone just as quickly.

“There is...something here, Rolanna,” said Keldorn unsteadily. “Something I cannot quite put a name to. It is unsettling, but I...I do not think it is evil.” It was rare for him to show any doubt.

“I sense something, here,” added Aerie. “A...presence. It’s so powerful! So powerful, I can’t sense anything else about it at all! Baervan preserve us!”

“Best be wary, Rolanna,” said Anomen. “There is a presence that fills this room that I can tell little about. Ancient. Powerful. Evil? I...do not think so.”

The presence then moved away slightly, as if considering. Rolanna heard it speak within her mind. Its speech, however, was not in words. It was a mix of indecipherable emotions that burned across her brain, leaving an impression that was clear:

“I am the Imprisoned One. You intrude upon my solace, mortal.”

“Get out of my mind! Show yourself!” Rolanna yelled, determined not to give in to the presence

Impressions assaulted her mind briefly...knowing amusement combined with bitterness and images that her mind’s eye refused to recognize and turned away from. Deeper impressions instilled a sense of one name that the being preferred...one that applied to Rolanna and it both: prisoner.

“I am no prisoner, here!” said Rolanna aloud, although a simple thought would have been sufficient. “What do you imply?”

Low power suddenly thrummed throughout the room as the presence gained a measure of respect for her willingness to listen. Faint anger and outrage flooded through her, directed towards something other than Rolanna. It was simple, her mind interpreted...she was being deceived.

Another image formed in Rolanna’s mind, and she recognized dour men in armor... and further, behind them, lurked a sinister purpose. Helmites, she was told, the Knights of the Vigil. There was bitterness and anger in the presence as it conveyed its unjust imprisonment by a sect who did not worship Helm at all, but secretly took succor from Helm’s darkest enemies. She was told that this was why the Imprisoned One was kept here, to keep their secret.

Echoes stirred in Rolanna’s mind as it asked why she thought the Knights would send her into this place instead of coming themselves. She was told to ask herself what would occur when the seals were strengthened. Impressions of amusement swirled as she was asked if she believed the holy symbol would truly let her leave, then?

“You are merely trying to dissuade me from reading the scroll!” Rolanna had doubts about the present day knights, but she was convinced that Helm was responsible for imprisoning the presence. Therefore her duty was clear.

An alien chuckling rang through her head as the presence drew closer. It smelled murder on Rolanna and correctly named her as the spawn of Bhaal...a being to be feared.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

What better a pawn for the false Helmites to send for this task? Why imprison only one dangerous being? Why not imprison two?

"I shall read the scroll, then...I trust you less than anything else." Although what the presence said made sense, Rolanna was wary of the half-truths she was sure were present. She drew forth the scroll.

The presence reeled from her mind with disdain and outrage, settling to amused acceptance. It calmly told her to read the scroll of the false Helmites, but warned her not to be surprised if the results were not what she expected.

"And that's exactly what I'm going to do!"

All of the impressions in Rolanna's mind become more vague as it withdrew from her, waiting for her to commit the act. Rolanna did so, carefully reading the words from the scroll. At the end, the words faded from the parchment, although she felt no different. Despite her determination not to be dominated, the conversation with the imprisoned one had taken all her attention. Only now did she look around, noticing nearby a bell twice her height, swinging soundlessly, supported by some invisible force. An inscription on the wall read:

Beware, o mortal, and heed these words
Keep well the ritual, and still shall sit the bell
But, should the Imprisoned One break his bonds,
This bell shall ring out warning to Helm.
He shall know thou has failed in thy duty
And His anger will burn like the midday sun.

The presence reentered the minds of everyone there. The currents in the room wavered as feelings of resentment laced with amusement washed over Rolanna. She interpreted the sensations as the Imprisoned One's congratulations...the seals were renewed. It told her to attempt to exit, now...and to come back to it when she failed.

"Oooo, I have a bad feeling about this..." said Imoen.

"Oh, you have a bad feeling now, do you?" replied Nalia crossly. "It's a little late for that. It may be a little late for anything."

"I didn't see *you* piping up with any useful information either," Imoen shot back hotly, "so keep your big yap shut! Jeez. Let's just go and try to find a way outta here, okay?"

"This is what comes of trusting those Helmite fools." Sarevok scowled, fingering the hilt of his sword. "I have little doubt this...'presence'...speaks the truth. What has it to lose?"

They tried to leave the chamber. Nalia and Imoen attempted every trick they knew, to no avail. When they finally admitted their failure to one another, the presence, which had faded to a faint background feeling of oppression, returned in force.

The presence danced about them with amused chitter. It knew that the exits were closed to Rolanna, now. Bhaalspawn and Imprisoned One together, two dangerous

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

entities locked away for the price of one. Perhaps now she was convinced that the false Helmites intended this all along...

"Alright, then, what do you propose?" asked Rolanna in resignation.

The presence was now far more intent, hope seizing upon opportunity. She had been deceived, she was told...she knew that now. Deceived by the unworthy false Helmites, just as they imprisoned it. It wished to be free...and it also wished revenge.

More images flooded in, telling Rolanna that the Imprisoned One had been slowly marshaling its power to free itself...a process that would take an eon all told. But it had enough power now to open the smallest of holes in the seal...not enough for it, but enough for her.

Pleased images swirled in Rolanna's mind, telling her to go to the Knights of the Vigil and tell their leader that the Imprisoned One was destroyed. Then it may have its revenge. With his death, it would be free...and it would reward her handsomely. Indeed...various fleeting images hinted to Rolanna that it had knowledge of how to unlock the powers of Bhaal within her.

"Very well, I will do this." Rolanna still did not trust the imprisoned one. She did not try to hide this from it; after its long imprisonment she was sure it was eager to use any tool, no matter how likely it might be to turn in its hand.

The presence was pleased and hopeful that Rolanna would do its bidding. An image formed in her mind that she was to leave through the door on this level...the Imprisoned One would ensure that the seal was clear for her.

The entire party could now leave the chamber. Rolanna led them back to the top of the keep that imprisoned the presence. She found the Helmites there.

"You return!" Odren was surprised, exactly as if he had never expected to see them again. "We...we sensed that the lower vault had been breached! What has occurred? Did you not cast the ritual?"

"Oh, I cast your ritual all right," assured Rolanna. "Imagine my surprise to find myself entombed along with your Imprisoned One."

"But if you are here...that means the Imprisoned One is destroyed? No! Helm's mercy, no! To destroy him is to free him...to send him back to the Abyss! Rolanna, tell me this is not so!"

"The Abyss, eh? Just how much did you not tell me about this Imprisoned One?"

"It is true, Rolanna. I deceived you, for I believed it was necessary. But if you have destroyed the Imprisoned One, then all is for naught. He will be free and Helm's wrath shall be great! Come, my brethren! We must venture into the lower vault now that the Bhaalspawn has cleared the way...we must see for ourselves if the Imprisoned One is truly dead or not. You knew not what you did, Rolanna, so your foolishness can be forgiven, I am sure. Farewell to you."

"Your foolishness can be forgiven?" echoed Imoen in a dangerous tone as the Helmites entered the keep. "Hmph. He's just askin' for trouble, now."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna, trembling with anger, said not a word as the Helmites entered. They would indeed find out for themselves whether the imprisoned one had been destroyed. She suddenly noticed another had joined them, a ghostly apparition, which spoke.

“Ah, a Child of Bhaal. So the time has come for thee already, has it? How sad that it is mine own brethren of this time that have fallen so far from Helm’s path. When Helm came to us so long ago, we could not refuse our duty. I and many of my brethren gave our own lives willingly to guard this place, a task now almost finished. The Brother, Odren, has shown cowardice and dishonesty in his dealings with thee. In the eyes of Helm, his fate is sealed. Will you aid a Knight of the Vigil true?”

“What is it that you need?” asked Rolanna.

“The Knight, Odren, has not been honest with thee...thou knowest this. The ritual repairs the old seals, trapping the Imprisoned One as well as the one who reads the ritual. Odren intended it be thee to sacrifice thy life, rather than make his own sacrifice willingly. He also failed to tell thee the scope of the evil that lies within...the Imprisoned One is Demogorgon, Prince of Demons.”

“Such foul treachery from those who claim to revere the Watcher demands harsh and swift punishment!” was Anomen’s immediate response.

“Odren and his followers deserve to die for this betrayal!” said Keldorn, even more adamant. “Their actions are a disgrace to all who follow Helm’s teachings!”

“Odren cannot win in the battle below against the demon,” said the ghost. “The ritual is Odren’s...with his death, Demogorgon will be free to leave the Watcher’s Keep. Imagine, if thou wilt, what such a creature would do, then.”

“What do you propose, then?” asked Rolanna.

“Thou hast three options. One is to leave...I cannot deny thee this right. The second is to rescue Odren below. Thou dost owe him nothing, it is true, and battling the Prince is a deadly task. Should the Prince of Demons be destroyed, he is returned only to the Abyss. This is better, however, than freeing him loose upon this land. A third, and better, option is also possible. Helm the All-Seeing has granted me a scroll...a version of the ritual you carried before. But this is Helm’s own. It may be used to seal both Odren and Demogorgon within, and you need not enter the Keep to do so.”

“The natural order will scream in protest,” said Jaheira, “should this demon prince be allowed to walk freely through the Realms. To preserve the balance, we must imprison the creature—or send it back to the Abyss.”

“Take this ritual scroll as the Watcher’s...apology...to thee, Child of Bhaal, for the disobedience of His followers. The choice, however, is still ultimately thine. What dost thou wish?”

“Why don’t you just use the scroll yourself?”

“I cannot use the scroll, Bhaalchild. I have no existence beyond this shade...and Helm offers the scroll to thee, alone, so that the ancient prison might be resealed...should that be thy choice.”

“I will seal the Keep with Helm’s scroll, if that is His wish.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Take the scroll...and should you wish to use it, do so out here in the open outside of the prison. Read it aloud and thou art done, all entrances to the prison will be sealed. Go with Helm’s blessing, Child of Bhaal. Be safe...and be wary of thy destiny.”

Rolanna took the scroll, reading it aloud, sealing the Helmites in with the demon prince. She ignored the small voice that told her, she who believed so strongly in self choice, that she had sent them to their fate uninformed, without the chance to choose another way.

Swamp Temple

Rolanna was uncomfortably aware of how much time had been spent at Watcher’s Keep, and what that might mean to the siege of Saradush. Still, she was now back on her original quest.

Valygar assured her they must be close to the temple they sought when Rolanna and the party intervened to disperse a group of soldiers attacking a caravan. The only merchant who survived gladly spoke to Rolanna after the battle.

“Th-thank you, thank you kind Lady! An honest merchant cannot even travel the roads anywhere in Tethyr without running into armies and vagabonds, it seems!”

“Glad to be of help. There is supposed to be a temple near here. Do you know of it?”

“I have heard that the glade was once home to a temple of the old god of murder, Bhaal. At least until his death. When he died, he took most of his followers with him, and that temple is no exception. All of his clerics and assassins are supposed to have died horribly, and so they haunt the glade and Bhaal’s old temple. Spirits and other things seem...drawn there, as well. It is a frightening place, my friend. I wouldn’t stay there any longer than you needed to, if I were you.”

A short march ahead they found the temple. No one was visible as they approached. Two leaning pillars of stone, untrimmed bushes growing about their bases, marked the entrance. A figure suddenly appeared before them. Rolanna wasn’t sure where he had appeared from, and couldn’t quite make out his face in the shadow of the hood pulled over his head. The figure spoke.

“Halt. Go no further. I wish to speak with you, my old ward.” The figure pulled the hood back, revealing his head.

“Gorion?!” said Rolanna in shock, recognizing her foster father who had been killed by Sarevok.

“Yes. Gorion. Have you forgotten all that I had taught you, brought you up to be? Have you forgotten me?”

“I have not forgotten you at all!” Rolanna scarcely believed it could really be Gorion, but after all, as Sarevok’s presence proved, anything was possible.

“I tried to save you from your destiny, Rolanna. I tried to turn you into a force for good. And what have you done? Carved a path of blood and murder wherever you go! You are a disappointment. You were supposed to be so much more, Rolanna. You were supposed to be something greater, and yet in the end you murdered even I!”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"Gorion would never say these things. You are not he!"

"You dare to presume too much! You ignore the truth, and you *will* be made to acknowledge it!" A ball of fire formed about Rolanna, startling more than harming her.

"I saved you, Rolanna." The maybe-Gorion pointed his finger at her. "I hid you from those who would hunt you. I taught you and enabled you to become what you are. I *died* for you. And you have failed me and everything I hoped you would be. That is why I am murdered by you. You think this animal, Sarevok, is responsible for my death? I expect no better from him. He is a slave to ambition, and yet you resurrect him and hail him as comrade."

"And Imoen...my second hope." Gorion's stare bore down on Rolanna's half sister. "You have turned her into a conspirator to your own failure. All her potential...lost. How both of you disgust me so."

"No! No, Gorion, don't say those things! Please!" Imoen begged, convinced at least for the moment of his authenticity.

"Where have you come to, my ward? What have you done? So many bodies left in your wake, so much pain and destruction that you have caused. Why? Why?!"

"I have killed only when necessary, to defend myself or others," protested Rolanna, although she was aware she herself had questioned the necessity of the deaths of some she had killed.

"Then you know nothing of yourself! You have learned nothing! You grow ever closer to being a slave of your blood...you will murder all that you love and die a monster! I will not allow it!" Another spell, more flash than bang, affected Rolanna.

"How many more must come to grief before you see I am correct? How many must die? What of your many former companions...how many are dead, now, because of you? What of the inevitable pain you must give to the one you love? The man you call 'Anomen.'"

"What is so inevitable?!" protested Anomen. "Rolanna has fought the greatest foes... there is nothing that could come between us!"

"You know nothing of what you speak," said Gorion. "You belong with my failed ward, however, you who are a murderer as much as she."

Another figure, a woman, appeared. "Anomen? My brother, is it...is it really you?"

"Moira! Dearest sister, you...how can this be?!" Anomen's voice was anguished, causing Rolanna to glance at him in concern.

"I am here because I am murdered, Anomen. I am murdered, and justice has not been done."

"Robbers ended your life, my sister, but I could not...I could not take vengeance upon them!"

"No, my brother. I may have been killed by another, but it is you who murdered me."

"No! No, Moira, do not say such a thing! I never..."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I stayed to care for Father, as you asked. All those years, I labored as you fled from him. I would have been married and happy...but you failed me. It was you who slid the knife into my heart."

"I...didn't mean to fail you! Please...please, Moira, I loved you! You...you didn't want to leave Father!"

"You lie, my brother. You didn't want me to leave. And now I am dead at your hands."

"No! No, no! I...I never...by Helm, no! Rolanna, I beg you! Make this stop!"

"Stop, Moira!" commanded Rolanna. "He isn't responsible for what happened to you!"

"I will not allow you to be the one who causes the prophecy to become true!" stormed Gorion. "I won't allow it, Rolanna! I will see you dead, first!" An earthquake occurred, centered under Rolanna's feet. Again, it did no injury.

"You will not be the one who causes the prophecy to come true, my ward! Bow before me and renounce your life!"

"No! You are in my head, I can feel it! This is a lie!" Rolanna clutched at her head, willing herself to see through the illusions she had realized had been placed in her mind.

"Ah, your power is too much!" The form of Gorion wavered. "Cunning god-child! It shall be a pleasure to feast upon your soul!" Gorion disappeared, replaced with its true form, an undead shade. The party found themselves surrounded by undead, which attacked.

Fortunately, this was a danger they knew well how to handle. Anomen and Aerie called upon their gods, Imoen and Nalia summoned powerful angelic allies, while the others drew weapons and attacked. A short, intense battle ensued. Several of the party had been drained of vitality by the shades, but the clerics soon cured their hurts.

"Damnable spirit!" yelled Anomen afterward. "How dare it utter the virtuous name of my sister! How dare it accuse me of such...such... DAMN THAT GHOST!"

"My love," said Rolanna, "that creature was a being of pure evil! Everything it said was a lie!" She grasped his head in her two hands, forcing it up so she could look into his eyes.

"It will take more than comforting words to dispel these demons from my past, Rolanna! Moira is dead, and her death was never properly avenged. In that, at least, the spirit spoke the truth. I failed my sister! I should have tried harder to take her with me when I left our father's house!"

"She made her own decision, Anomen. You could not make it for her. You can only live your own life."

"I...I know Moira is gone. I know there is nothing I can do about it. But it eats at my soul and it tears at my heart. I failed her, Rolanna! What if I fail you?"

"You won't fail me, Anomen. You have proved yourself time and time again."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I...I suppose you are right, my love. Once again, I must beg your forgiveness. I guess...I guess I am not yet at peace with Moira's fate. I will always honor my sister's memory, but I must learn to look to the future. My future."

"Yes, my love. The past cannot be changed. And your future is with me." Rolanna didn't notice, but Anomen frowned at these last words. However, he made no protest when he replied.

"Thank you, my lady. Once again you have shown me the wisest path. I shall not let my past destroy what we have built together. I...I shall be alright. Let us continue with the task at hand." Rolanna lightly kissed him on the lips. She led the party into the dilapidated temple.

Inside, a smaller group of undead awaited them. One skeleton cocked its head, as if trying to get a better view of them. It lifted a trembling arm before its eye sockets, cowering.

"It...it is the Master...the Master come again!" The arm lowered. "No...hold... No, it is but a vessel for the Master's power! An abomination! Kill it! Kill them all in the name of Bhaal!"

Much less powerful than the group outside the entrance, the undead were swiftly destroyed. The party moved on the what must have been the main fane, an outdoor altar that still pulsed with energy. An elderly woman stood before it. She cackled at the sight of visitors.

"Hee hee! You have come! Come, you have! The powerful one who is the spawn of the dead master! Hee hee! Nyalee knew you would come, she did!"

"Beware, witch!" said Rolanna, now alert for deception. "I will brook no tricks from you!"

"Tricks, yes! Nyalee knows many tricks! Witch of the Glade, they calls me, for many good reasons. Hee hee! But so many questions you have! Answer all your questions, Nyalee will! Oh, yes! Nyalee has been waiting for you, and she knows why you come, she does!"

"Careful, Rolanna," warned Nalia. "This old woman is no ordinary hermit... I can sense her power even from here. Perhaps she can help us, but be cautious, still."

"It is the boy...that traitorous fool of a half-giant boy of mine. You come because of Yaga-Shura! My boy has been a pain for you and I both, and you wish his blood, yes?"

"What do you mean 'boy of mine'? Yaga-Shura can't be your son."

"Nay, the boy did not spring from Nyalee's loins. Nyalee did see him for the spawn-child he was while but a babe and stole him from the crib! Raise him here in this temple as her own did she!"

"Why would you wish revenge on your own son, then?"

"Because a betrayer is the boy! Did Nyalee not raise the boy? Did Nyalee not teach the boy the old tricks, yes? And the boy did leave Nyalee here to rot! Steals her heart, even!"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Then tell me how to kill him.”

“That Nyalee will do. Hee hee! The traitorous boy will not even see it coming, oh no! Nyalee will have her revenge! Listen closely, then, spawn-child... Once a great cleric of Bhaal was Nyalee! But then great Bhaal is dead, and Nyalee is forced to turn to the older arts to survive. Nyalee steals the spawn-child Yaga-Shura to raise in this temple, did she. A new Lord of Murder did Nyalee hope to create! Foolish old Nyalee. Teaches the boy the old tricks did she, teaches the boy to remove his heart did she. The boy has removed his heart, and he will keep it afired and bathed in magical flames. While his heart burns, no harm may come to Yaga-Shura. No death may come until his heart is quenched!”

“So I must find his heart and quench it. How?”

“Only Nyalee knows the words and the arts to extinguish the boy’s heart, she does. But Nyalee needs her own heart to use the arts...and the boy stole her heart years ago. Keeps it, he does. Finds Nyalee’s heart and Yaga-Shura’s heart both, spawn-child... brings them both to her. Nyalee will quench his heart forever, then! Hee hee! So surprised, so shocked will he be!”

“Where would I find these hearts?”

“The boy has collected followers...live with them in the fire-mountains, he will. Nyalee knows not where. He will keep her poor heart there, in hiding. His, as well, Nyalee is sure!”

“Very well. I shall seek out these hearts and return.” Rolanna was annoyed at this additional delay before she could return to Saradush.

“Yes! Hee hee! Nyalee will have her revenge, oh yes! Go, spawn-child...go and find Nyalee’s poor heart! Bring me the boy’s, as well! Nyalee cannot wait!”

As the party started to leave, Nyalee took note of Rolanna’s young companion.

“You...you is a spawn-child, Nyalee thinks, oh yes. But so young! So young is you! So full of life! Hmph...Nyalee would love to have found you long ago instead of the boy.”

“Um...not to be rude or anything,” said Imoen, “but I’m rather glad you didn’t...”

As the party walked away Jaheira found herself walking alongside Valygar.

“I find it surprising we have so little to say to one another, Valygar.”

“I have little to say to anyone, usually, and that is by my design.”

“I understand. Still, we share much as druid and ranger.”

“Yes, we share misconceptions and stereotypes. You know as well as I that our outlooks differ fundamentally.”

“Perhaps. As a druid, any encroachment of civilization on the wild places is a loss to be mourned.”

“I have seen communities destroyed because they did not fit the ‘balance’ of a marsh or woodland.”

“Destroyed?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“‘Encouraged’ to relocate, but these are just different words for the same thing.”

“I’m sure it was a dire circumstance.”

“Someone thought it was. Responsible use was apparently not an option. I bear you no ill-will, Jaheira, but druidic ‘big-picture balance’ can spawn very intimate hardships.”

“Well, we shall have to agree to disagree.”

“As you see fit.”

The Hearts

A day later they were in foothills, searching for the fire temple local farmers had told them was in this area. As they rounded a bend in the trail they were following, a most unusual band of adventurers was encountered. Rolanna recognized a goblin, a kobold, a xvart and even...a rabbit (were-rabbit)?

“Oh, no!” yelled one of the figures in dismay. “We’ve been discovered, my Bhaalspawn friends! Fight! Fiiiighhht!”

Rolanna immediately cried out that they were hers, mainly to restrain Sarevok. She ran forward, lashing out with her foot, booting the xvart into the air and over the bushes lining one side of the path.

“Run! Run! They’re too much!” yelled the goblin.

“Let’s get out of here!” added the kobold. “Run, my furry brothers! Run!”

Rolanna watched the scattering creatures, wondering if they could really have been Bhaalspawn. Anomen and Sarevok burst out in laughter. Rolanna thought it an opportune time to take a brief rest.

“You know, Aerie,” said Valygar, taking advantage of the break, “I should confess something to you. You didn’t turn out at all like I expected you might.”

“Ha ha! If I didn’t know you better, Valygar, I think I’d have to take that the wrong way!”

“I suppose it didn’t come out quite like I meant it, did it? I’m sorry Aerie...I only meant that all my warnings of your impending corruption by magic have been proven false. Fortunately.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Valygar. This doesn’t mean that I’ll never be corrupted by my magic...just not yet.”

“You shouldn’t joke about such things, Aerie. Your heart is purer than I gave it credit for, and that gladdens me. But I’ve seen good, honest people turned to greed and hate by magic...it’s a fate I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”

“I...didn’t mean to joke about that. I know about your past...and I don’t think I could ever be like that. Magic is a power I can use to help people, and that’s all.”

“That’s good to hear. Let’s hope it remains that way.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The path they were following joined another, much wider. They began encountering small groups of fire giants, invariably hostile. Soon, they came to the doors of a temple.

Inside, they encountered numerous fire giants, and igneous creatures, such as salamanders and elementals. Each room they penetrated inside brought more encounters. Finally, after clearing the main hall, they found the two hearts they sought, along with the journal of Yaga-Shura. The more interesting passages were as follows:

Finally found the little human Bhaalspawn who's been evading me for two weeks in the Calim Desert. Was almost a shame to eat his heart, but rules are rules.

The wraiths that were loaned to me turned out to be useful. I have the old hag's heart, now, and she's helpless against Yaga-Shura! Foolish, presumptuous woman! May she rot in that infernal swamp of hers!

Most of the spawn that are left are collected in Saradush, now, where we want them. Only a few stragglers to pick off once the city walls are overcome...which is only a matter of time.

Illasera was chosen to be the one to go after the powerful Bhaalspawn, the straggler. What is her name? Rolanna? Hmph. Yaga-Shura should have been the one chosen. The fool would have stood no chance. But now is not the time to disobey orders. Yaga-Shura can bide his time."

Rolanna looked up from the journal she had been studying with Jaheira, who knew the giantish language in which most of it was written. She noticed Anomen standing beside her.

"My lady, I ask a request of you. Though my lips desire to steal a kiss from your cheek, may I instead whisper a matter of grave concern in your ear?" Jaheira prudently stepped aside, taking the journal.

"Yes, my smooth tongued knight? What is it?"

"I know there is much that is uncertain in your destiny—even the Gods cannot say what lies ahead for you. For us. Have you given much thought to...our future?" Anomen was looking away, unwilling to meet her eyes.

"I have, my love. I hope we can stay together forever. Why do you ask?" Rolanna looked at him in concern.

"I do not presume to know what lies ahead, Rolanna." Anomen now met her gaze, but Rolanna saw only despair. "And if it is within my power, I will ever remain by your side. But such choices may not be ours to make, my lady. We are among the most powerful beings to currently walk the Realms. I have far exceeded all but the greatest knights of the Order of the Radiant Heart. With such awesome power comes grave responsibility. Yet even unshackled as I am from the restrictions of the Order, I cannot help but feel something is expected of me. Of us. And I fear what is expected will not allow us to continue our relationship."

"Are you...are you saying we should end our relationship, Anomen?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Nay, my love...I will hold you close for as long as I can. Forever, if it is possible. But we are now legendary people, and the forces aligning against our relationship are legendary as well.”

“We can overcome any obstacle together, my love!”

“Your words are noble, but naïve. Our love is everything to me, Rolanna. But what is that in the face of your destiny? You are a shaper of history, perhaps even someday you will become a god. Can you truly say you would give that all up for me? I...I am not asking you to make a decision, Rolanna. I pray you never have to choose. But I want you to be ready should that decision ever come. I...I should speak no more of this. You alone can decide the path of your future, when the time comes.”

The party returned to the temple in the swamp, swiftly covering the distance back to it thanks to the potent magics of some of Rolanna's companions. Nyalee was there to greet them.

“Most anxious, Nyalee is, oh yes! Have you founds her precious hearts, spawn-child?”

“I may have,” said Rolanna, “I have two hearts, here. Are they what you need?”

“Tis Nyalee's heart, it is! The spawn-child has found Nyalee's poor heart! And, yes...this be the boy's heart, as well. Gives Nyalee her heart and she will extinguish the boy's, she will, oh yes!”

Nyalee performed a ceremony, drawing on the residual magic still present in the ancient fane to Bhaal. She restored her own heart to her chest and removed the magical protections which prevented harm from coming to Yaga-Shura.

“Yes...yes, at last Nyalee has her heart. Nyalee had forgotten how it feels to have a heart, she had. Many old memories. It makes Nyalee sad. And...there. It be done, a simple thing, it is. The boy's heart is cold, now. As...as cold as his mother's old heart.... You...you will hurts my boy, won't you? No...no, what has Nyalee done?! My poor boy, the spawn-child will hurts him! Nyalee must stops her!”

“It figures,” commented Valygar caustically. “Crocodile tears. Let's tear that useless thing from her chest, again, and be done with it!”

“I don't understand,” said Minsc. “The witch has her heart back...why is she not nicer to us? What? Oh...yes, I see. Uh-huh. Thank you, Boo. Boo is so smart.”

“Come, spirits of the glade!” cried Nyalee. “Come, woodsies of the forest! We...we must protects my boy! My precious Yaga-Shura!”

Creatures of the forest and swamp answered her call, nymphs, shamblers and spiders. But the power represented by the party was now so potent that it was a simple matter to defeat them, including Nyalee, who they left bleeding her heart's blood, staining the stones of the former temple to Bhaal.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Yaga-Shura

The party arrived in a clearing. The first thing that drew Rolanna's attention was the plume of smoke billowing from nearby Saradush. Its walls had been breached in several places, and its utter devastation showed a city that had been completely sacked by invaders. Bodies of soldiers were everywhere, as was the stench of death. The screams of the innocent attempting to flee could still be heard. Yaga-Shura and his army must still be nearby. Rolanna led the others to the ruined city, but a quick check among the devastation revealed only bodies.

Too late to save the city, Rolanna grimly led her companions towards a nearby bridge over a stream. A dozen refugees from the city passed them, some crying out as they ran by.

"Help us, someone!"

"Run for your lives!"

"The army will kill us all!"

On the bridge itself they encountered a few soldiers from the giant's army.

"That's the Bhaalspawn that was supposed to be in the city!" cried one, pointing out Rolanna.

"Get them! There's a reward!" yelled another, his last words, as Valygar put an arrow in his throat. Rolanna and Sarevok cut down the others, then they all moved forward to cross the bridge.

In the near distance was the camp of the victorious army. It was disorganized, its soldiers enjoying the spoils of victory, with no thought of nearby enemies. Rolanna led her companions into the camp, slaying any they came across.

They had little trouble until Yaga-Shura himself led a force forward, composed of his personal guards and high commanders. Rolanna let free her Bhaal-anger, screaming in bloodlust as she ran towards the giant, sword held high.

She engaged the guards who interposed themselves, killing one, another, a third. Then she stood before the giant himself.

"What a disappointment you created for me, worm!" boomed Yaga-Shura. "I redoubled our efforts to crush this worthless town when I heard you were within, the Terror of the Sword Coast...only to find you gone! I thought I would have to content myself with slaughtering all the weakling Bhaalspawn in the city and forgetting about you. But here you are! Ha ha ha! I should have been the first sent after you, and now I shall prove it! Yaga-Shura shall become even greater still!"

Rolanna dodged a blow of his massive blade, then riposted, her sword cutting a bloody line down the giant's right arm. Yaga-Shura laughed in contempt. Then he looked down. The wound hadn't immediately closed as he had expected.

"What...?! No! No, this cannot be!" He backed away. "I...I am wounded! Yaga-Shura cannot be defeated! Men...men, destroy them! Rip the hearts from their chests and make them suffer! I will return with reinforcements!"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The giant turned and ran. Rolanna engaged a commander who interposed himself. Several blows delivered with her great strength tore his weapon from his hand. A final blow separated his head from his shoulders. Rolanna looked around. Her companions were gaining the upper hand here. She ran off in the direction the giant had taken.

She found him a short distance away, giving orders to gather his entire army to crush Rolanna.

“You...you have weakened me!” A tremor of fear was in his voice. “You and that foul witch, I know it! *No matter!* Yaga-Shura will defeat you yet! RAAAAUUUGHHH!”

With the energy of desperation he slashed at Rolanna with his sword. Rolanna carefully dodged his blows, since doubtless his strength exceeded even her own. She bided her time, waiting until he had overextended himself in a swing. She struck, driving her two-handed sword into his chest, into the position his heart used to occupy. As she withdrew her sword he slumped full length on the ground, his glassy eyes upwards, no longer seeing. Rolanna stumbled, the camp around her dissolved. She found herself back in her pocket plane.

Preparation: Origins

“I greet you, you who are of divine blood.” The solar had been waiting for Rolanna to be drawn back to the pocket plane. “It is time for your education to continue.”

“Your timing is not very convenient,” commented Rolanna.

“You have been brought to this place because you are ready, god-child. The first step towards the fulfillment of your destiny has been taken. Yaga-Shura is dead by your hand, and the forces in play now move swiftly toward conclusion. Now you must know yourself and your past to reveal your future. Listen and be judged.”

“Very well...I will listen.”

“To look upon oneself and ask, ‘What is my nature?’ one must know one’s origin. Your own origin is a mystery to you, god-child. You have no beginning...and without a beginning, how can there be an ending? What do you know of your birth? What do you know of your mother, of your life before Gorion brought you to the safety of Candlekeep?”

“I know nothing of my life before Gorion.”

“Your past unfolds. You would do well to heed it closely.”

A young woman appeared.

“I am your mother. I am Alianna, a disciple of the great Lord of Murder, a priestess of Bhaal. In the Time of Troubles did Bhaal, himself, come and whisper in mine ear. I was to give birth to one of the Children. To you. I rose my arms up and hailed my Lord of Murder with great joy at my fate. Others of Bhaal’s order took me away, to hide us in the darkest temple away from prying eyes. Others of the Children were there...and when our great Bhaal died did we begin our task.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Gorion also appeared.

“Her task was to slay her own child, sacrifice her babe upon the bloodiest of altars.”

“I would slay you, my child,” solemnly agreed Alianna. “So Bhaal could live again.”

“But I and several of my colleagues had discovered the location of this temple. We attacked and stopped your mother from performing the sacrifice.”

“We resisted. This was the will of Bhaal, father of my child.”

“They were many and their magic was strong. We had little time. I killed the priestess...”

“He slew me, your mother.” For the first time, Alianna looked directly at Rolanna. But there was no common bonding in that gaze, no hint she regarded Rolanna as other than a commodity to be disposed of at her master’s will.

“I rescued you,” said Gorion, “and fled from the temple even as many other Bhaalspawn babes died.”

Alianna fell to the ground, then disappeared. A young child appeared, who spoke.

“But not all of us died. Some of us used the chaos to escape, to flee.”

“Yes,” agreed Gorion. “Not all the Bhaalspawn children died that night. I saved the only one I could.”

“He could only save one,” the child concurred, “there was no time for more. But I was there, as well.”

“I chose you, Rolanna.” Gorion nodded at her. “I could not save both of you.”

“He left me behind, saving you instead. And so I fled on my own, raised by foster parents in the Iron Throne. It mattered not. I killed Gorion in the end.”

Both Gorion and the child disappeared. Rolanna realized the child must be Sarevok.

“And so your past is made plain,” said the solar. “Your mother, a priestess of Bhaal, killed by Gorion.”

“I feel sorry for my mother. Gorion did what he had to.” Despite Alianna’s lack of feeling, Rolanna could not find any hate in herself for her mother.

“And what of your brother, Sarevok?” asked the solar. “What if fate had not intervened, and Gorion had raised him rather than you? Would you have become as he was? Would Sarevok be in your place, now, if but for the smallest twist of fate? Is there a debt between you, then, that is yet unpaid?”

“Yes, there is a debt.” Out of the corner of her eye Rolanna could see Sarevok stiffen in surprise. “I could have just as easily have had his life, and he mine.”

“We are finished, then, for now. Return to your cocoon plane... You will find part of it now open to you. Investigate, as you wish. Consider what you have learned here, today. Farewell, god-child.”

Rolanna unbuckled her pack, setting it beside her and gratefully stretching. She looked down, noticing movement beside her.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Ooo! Needs must I to look through your belongings!” was called out in a high voice. It was Cespenar the imp, the self-proclaimed former butler to Bhaal. Curious, Rolanna didn't protest as he opened her pack and stuck his head inside. “Match them to recipes, must I! Let me see... You sure you not just want dump everything out? Easier that way...” Suddenly, his head shot up, as he audibly sniffed.

“Ooooo...you like this one, maybe...like little smack on the tush, heh heh...” At Rolanna's glare he hastily withdrew his hand before touching her posterior.

Cespenar ran over to Mazzy. Mazzy plainly found his presence distasteful, but when she saw Rolanna shake her head, Mazzy allowed the imp to trail his finger down the scabbard holding her new sword.

“You has holy sword, does you?” said Cespenar. “Hell isn't place for you, maybe, eh? I could makes Purifier holy sword better, oh yes. You needs to find pommel jewel...Eye of Tyr. Then I makes better.”

Rolanna decided now was a good time to look into the new area. She led the others down the passage no longer blocked by an energy barrier.

The passage debauched into a chamber. In the chamber were four figures. Rolanna recognized Tamoko, Sarevok's one-time lover who she had let live. Also present was Angelo, Sarevok's lieutenant who had seized control of the Flaming Fist, and who had died during her final confrontation with Sarevok. A mage, whose name Rolanna never had learned, who had died then as well was also in the room. The final figure was even more familiar.

“Look on me, Rolanna,” said the figure, whose visage visible in the demon-maw helm was a twin to Rolanna's own. “See yourself as you might have been, had Gorion taken Sarevok instead of you...had your path taken a different turn. Look on me and know that I despise you and resent the ease in which you lived. I would have given much for a home and a father such as Gorion. I shall not allow you to exist. Stop me...if you can.”

Rolanna killed her twin, while her companions took care of the others. After the combat Rolanna noticed Sarevok eying her speculatively. She wondered that he had never considered what might have been if their places had been reversed. She had thought on this long before, so this test had held no real surprises for her, although she was glad to have gotten a glimpse of her mother.

It was time to sleep. Rolanna tried, unsuccessfully, to get some rest.

“My love...what is wrong?” Anomen had woken and noticed her trouble. “Can you not sleep?”

“I can't help thinking about Saradush.”

“The destruction of the town haunts my mind's eye as well, my lady. The screams, the bodies, the heat from the fires driving us back and blistering our skin. The thick veil of choking smoke that blinded our eyes and stung our throats... Death and suffering on a scale I have never seen before. And yet...and yet I cannot help but feel some small thrill of exhilaration knowing we have survived the carnage. My love, seeing so much death has made me feel...more alive.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I know what you mean, Anomen. It's the thrill of adventuring." At least, she hoped it was that, and not some echo wakened in her by her father's blood.

"I do not revel in the deaths of the innocent, Rolanna. But the raw power unleashed on the city—did it not make your skin tingle? Could you not feel a charge in the air?"

"Yes, I...I felt it, too."

"Your enemies are strong, my love. We have but tasted their power. Power you yourself might one day claim, and even exceed. This is truly a dark time, but it is also... intoxicating."

"Finally you understand what I have felt since learning of my true identity."

"Of course there is danger with such intoxication. It can be addictive. We must be careful not to let bloodlust and battle glory blind us to the true horror of what we have witnessed. I suppose that is the sinister seductiveness of power."

"Now you understand the dilemma I must face every day."

"Truly, my love...I cannot even imagine what this must be like for you—one who has the power of a God in her veins. I am glad we were able to discuss this, though I feel there is much we both need to think on. But our conversation is keeping you awake. You must rest now, my love. I imagine we have many long days ahead of us."

As everyone was preparing to return to the ruins of Saradush after their rest, Imoen came to Rolanna. She had obviously had trouble sleeping as well.

"I've...been developing some more abilities," started Imoen hesitantly. "Bhaal abilities, like your own. I don't mean to...they just come...although I don't think they're very strong."

"What kind of abilities?"

"Just some...minor spell-like powers. Although they're nothing I could do normally with my own magic... I think they're spells only priests could cast, usually. Plus I've been going through some...physical changes, as well. I notice I'm getting stronger and faster, for instance. But they aren't natural changes."

"But these are good things, aren't they?"

"I...I suppose. Maybe. But they come with such bad dreams. And I have these thoughts all the time...they cloud my mind and make me angry. I don't like it. It's not me. I guess I shouldn't whine so much, though. You've gone through all this, and worse. I'll...try to keep up with ya, okay? With luck, this will be over soon, anyway."

Ready, the party exited the pocket plane, returning to the battlefield near Saradush. The remnants of Yaga-Shura's army had scattered. Melissan was there to greet them.

"Rolanna! You live! I had heard the sounds of combat and returned this way only to find the giant dead and you gone!"

"You live? Do the other Bhaalspawn survive, then, as well?"

"I tried to get the Bhaalspawn out...but it was too late. Yaga-Shura seemed to think you were in the city and was eager to seek you out. He...slaughtered them all, and there

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

was nothing I could do. A mere handful of peasants and myself escaped the destruction and fled. I was at a loss...I had no idea where you were until I heard your battle, when I returned as quickly as I could. Saradush...destroyed. And everyone I tried to protect for so long, all dead. At least you killed Yaga-Shura. May he rot in Hell as he deserves!"

"You said you had information on Yaga-Shura's allies?" It seemed a little strange to Rolanna that Melissan had not been able to save even one Bhaal-child, but then Rolanna had not done any better.

"Yaga-Shura did have allies. They were all Children of Bhaal...and they number amongst the most powerful of your kin in all of Faerun. One of them was named Illasera. It was she who hounded my protected Bhaalspawn earlier and forced us to flee to Saradush, but she left weeks ago and disappeared into the elven forests."

"That one I also killed. What others are there?"

"I know them by name only—Abazigal and Sendai. They are intent on killing all other Bhaalspawn in the land, and with their combined power they are unstoppable."

"Why are they doing this? Do you know?"

"I wish I knew. It could be that they believe they will gain power. Perhaps they intend to become gods, themselves. Regardless, they will bring only chaos if they have their way."

"How can I believe any of this?" Rolanna's suspicions were aroused. For someone who had been concentrating so long on Bhaal children, Melissan was rather uninformed. "You seem to know little about them."

"You were attacked by Illasera and Yaga-Shura both. Judge for yourself what their intentions are towards you and whether or not they will continue to hunt you, Rolanna."

"That doesn't explain why blame is falling on Bhaalspawn everywhere."

"It does, actually. Bhaalspawn are responsible for the destruction, after all. And they spread the rumors further so that fearful and panicky people do half their job for them."

"But wouldn't that put them in danger, as well?"

"How much are you in danger from a mob of peasants, Rolanna? Panic endangers the helpless. These are powerful Bhaalspawn, and together they could overwhelm even you."

"So what am I supposed to do about them, then?"

"You...you are a powerful woman, Rolanna. Perhaps they might be a match for you together, but individually...individually you could possibly defeat them. You could stop all of this! I know of two places here in Tethyr where Yaga-Shura's allies have their power centered, where they are building terrible armies for whatever ultimate purpose they possess. I...I can show you where these enclaves are. Yes! And surely you could enter these places and attack these monsters individually! It is dangerous, but it is the only way!"

"Very well...I will do what I can."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I have one more ally that I can call upon, although I have been reluctant to involve him in the past. If there is a chance that all this killing can end, however, then I have little other option. He runs a monastic order in a remote village in the Calim Desert... It will serve to both hide you from retribution as well as serve as a base from which you can attack the enclaves of Abazigal and Sendai."

"I suppose that will have to do."

"It is called Amkethran. I will go there now and speak to my friend, Balthazar, and try to arrange things for you. We cannot linger here. We will speak further in Amkethran. Make your way there as soon as possible. Be careful, Rolanna. You are my last hope... and perhaps the last hope of anyone in Faerun, whether you care about it or not. I will see you in Amkethran."

Melissan disappeared. Rolanna put aside her doubts about Melissan. Balthazar and Sendai had a plan to recreate Bhaal, or to take for themselves his godly power. They must be stopped. Jaheira was familiar enough with the land of Tethyr that she could lead them to Amkethran, and so they set off.

"Keldorn, tell me," asked Nalia as they walked, "you have served in the Order for a very long time. Do you still truly believe that what they do is relevant? That it's worthwhile?"

"Of course I believe that is the case. I could not serve if I lacked the faith that that was so. Why do you ask such a thing?"

"It...just seems so pointless to me. I don't mean to offend, but it seems no matter how much evil gets vanquished, there is still so much horror in the world. It doesn't get better."

"Aye. Sometimes it is enough to make the soul weary, child, just to think of it."

"And some of the worst acts are committed by those people who aren't even considered evil. Nobles and clergy, for instance...gross injustices against people who don't even know any better."

"True. The Order can only do what it can, Nalia. We try. And perhaps the fact that we try and do not give up is just as important as the good we do accomplish."

"I...I suppose. It just seems hopeless sometimes. Like nothing will ever change."

"'Tis only the impatience of youth, Nalia. Things will change, in time. But only if truly good folk such as yourself do not despair and give up completely. The world needs your courage."

"Th-thank you, Keldorn. I think I needed to hear that."

That night, when they made camp, Sarevok left aside his usual taciturnity to approach Valygar.

"Valygar, you have not yet condemned my presence. Is not my very existence here an affront to you?"

"Nay, Sarevok...I am not troubled by your presence. Should I be?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I am no longer part of the natural order. I was resurrected with powerful magics, which you so obviously despise. My...unnatural...existence does not repel you? You do not see me as an abomination?"

"I see you as a warrior, Sarevok. You may have a cruel and violent streak, but you are not alone in that fault. You do not use foul magic; you wield true steel as do I. We are brothers in arms, Sarevok."

"That...is true. Your words surprise me, Valygar. But I thank you for them."

Journey to Amkethran

Several days later, the party was traversing a desert in eastern Tethyr. Nalia had scryed an oasis ahead, where Rolanna hoped to rest for the night. Instead, as they approached, several dozen soldiers appeared. Someone on the other side must have done their own scrying, discerning their approach, and magically hidden the soldiers until they walked into the ambush. Rolanna noted the soldiers were dressed in the colors of the land of Tethyr. A man in plate armor addressed the party.

"Hold! I am General Jamis Tombelthen, representative of the King and Queen of Tethyr. You, Rolanna, are accused of crimes against our nation and, indeed, all of humanity!"

"Is there to be a trial? May I defend myself?" Rolanna asked sarcastically. She was tired of trials in absentia, although realistically she bore some blame for what had happened at Saradush.

"You are guilty, Rolanna. Of this there is no doubt. And we will not risk your further endangerment of us all. You are a spawn of Bhaal and responsible for the destruction of the city of Saradush. Your execution has been ordered, Rolanna. May the gods have mercy on your soul."

"For your lands and homes!" Jamis yelled to his troops, leading the attack.

Rolanna had no desire to see the deaths of more innocents. She ordered the others to retreat. Sarevok rebelliously took a step forward, but at Rolanna's repeated command he backed away as well. Nalia summoned an air elemental to raise a storm of dust to hide their flight, while Jaheira summoned an earth elemental to slow the pursuit by shifting the sand under the feet of their pursuers.

They managed to lose the general in the approaching darkness. The party traveled the entire night, this time with better protection from magical divination, thanks to Imoen.

Near the end of the next day they reached Amkethran. A village nestled into an outcropping of rock amidst a desert so dry and sparse of life that Rolanna wondered how such a place could survive. Dominating the village and seemingly carved out of the stone face of the rocks themselves was a large and ornate fortress, its purpose unknown.

They entered the village. Nearby was the fortress, surrounded by a wall of iron grillwork. As they neared the only entrance in the grillwork wall, a monk guarding the gate called out to them.

"You there! You must be the one that Balthazar is expecting."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"That's right. Is Melissan—?" started Rolanna.

"Any questions you have you can direct to Balthazar, himself. Gather any of your friends...Balthazar comes."

Another monk approached, Balthazar himself. To Rolanna's experienced eye, the burning devotion visible in the gate guard's face told her that Balthazar's followers were fanatically devoted to him.

"So," said Balthazar. "You must be the Bhaalspawn Melissan told me of. I have been expecting you."

"Yes, I am she."

"I am Balthazar, head of the monastic order here in Amkethran and its ruler, as well, although that is not an official position. Melissan preceded you and told me of your coming. Melissan has already left the village, and did not say where she was going. She has left with me directions for you to reach these...enclaves...she mentioned. Is this what you expected?"

"No. She said she would meet me here."

"I do not know where Melissan may have gone, nor do I care."

"How can I trust you to give me proper information? I know nothing about you." Rolanna could sense no evil in Balthazar, but still, there was something about him which made her uncomfortable.

"And I know little enough of you, Bhaalspawn. Melissan has vouched for you, however, so I'll tolerate your presence and give you what you need. Here are the maps to the enclaves Melissan mentioned. Neither of them are very far from here, as you can see. Do with them as you wish, Rolanna. Amkethran is available for your supplies and rest... do not disturb my own activities and we'll not come to grief, is that understood?"

"What sort of activities are you talking about?"

"That's none of your business. You'll not be allowed into my fortress...anywhere else is open to you. Good day and good luck to you, Rolanna."

Balthazar walked away. The guard closed the gate. Rolanna decided it wasn't worth worrying about his cold reception, and turned away to find an inn. Anomen struck up a conversation with Keldorn as they walked.

"Sir Keldorn, as an initiate of the Order, I heard many a story of your prowess and courage. At one point, Sir Cassius made reference to your heroism on the Giant's Plain. He stopped abruptly and, with a dark look, would say no more. What happened there?"

"Heroism, he said? Cassius gives me more credit than I deserve. The days on the Giant's Plain were dark days and the deeds performed, darker still. We were captured by Grinning Rath in an ambush after being betrayed by Sir Taerga. Rath and his band caught us in a strand of deadfall as we picked our way through, leading our horses. The archers made short work of our horses and nearly half my men. Stumbling about in the deadfall in full plate, we had no chance. Rath stripped us naked, dead or living. I had an arrow

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

through my shoulder. His ogres were kind enough to tear it out along with a great chunk of flesh before the Dance. It pains me still.”

“The Dance?”

“The Dance was Grinning Rath’s signature. Each living knight was bound to a dead companion, head to head, hand to hand and foot to foot. He drug us to the open plain and tied us thus so that we could not move save dancing with the dead. We lay there ‘neath the blazing sun and, as our friends began to rot, my men began to die of exposure. I managed to grind through the bonds on one wrist using stone that stuck from the ground. I saved those that could be saved, Cassius included. Some of the men had died during the Dance, some had lost their wits as the flesh of their friends melted in the sun. I tracked Rath, snuck into his camp and killed him and all who participated in the atrocity. There was no heroism, Anomen, only slow brutal death and grim deeds. We shall speak no more of this.”

Despite the tone of the tale, Rolanna grinned. It seemed that Anomen had made his peace with Keldorn, who he had always resented as everything he believed he could not achieve. Keldorn, as well, seemed willing to ignore the fact that Anomen was a fallen member of his order.

The path into the heart of the village they were following had brought them to the opening of a cavern. Curious, Rolanna took a few steps towards it, looking into the darkness, wondering if the villagers used it for anything.

“This cavern is sealed by order of Balthazar,” said a monk who had come up to her. “I do not suggest you enter.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“This is where the town’s dead are buried and lately there have been disturbing reports of...the dead having risen. Powerful creatures have awoken inside, although we are not sure why.”

“Why don’t you do something about it, then?”

“I am not at liberty to discuss Balthazar’s reasoning with you. Ask him yourself, if you’ve the chance.”

Annoyed, Rolanna started to walk off. Balthazar seemed to be doing nothing to help the people of the town. A boy fell into step beside her.

“You don’t wanna go in that cavern. That’s where we bury our dead, but now it’s full of really bad creatures, my momma says. The priestess says they’re all undead, but she can’t do nothin’. And Balthazar won’t help and kill them for us. My poppa says the stranger man brought the creatures here, he does.”

“The ‘stranger man’? Who’s that?”

“I don’t know his name. Said he was just passin’ through, but his little girl got real sick right after he arrived. Then he started actin’ all spooky and scared, sayin’ the dead were coming for him. Sure enough, I guess they did. An’ papa says that’s why Balthazar sealed off the cavern. I can’t even go an’ see mama’s grave.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Where can I find this stranger?”

“I hears he rented a house in the village, but I don’t know which one. Papa says he drinks like a fish...maybe you can find him at Zakee’s tavern maybe? But I, um...I didn’t say nothin’ to you about anythin’, okay? I gotta go.”

Rolanna felt annoyed again. She wondered why she had even bothered asking about the stranger. She needed to stop worrying about individuals and concentrate on the larger picture.

Mazzy had noticed Sarevok watching her, not the first time this had occurred. She decided to call him on it.

“What is it, fiend? Why do you continue to stare at me? Out with it.”

“Do not presume to order me about, small one. A fighter’s skill you may have, but it is still contained within the form of nothing but a mouse.”

“Insult me if you wish, I have no fear of you. You would have plenty to fear if you were not one of Rolanna's companions.”

“I would crush you like the insect you are.”

“I have no fear of that, either, even were it such a simple task. Which it would not be.”

“I suppose you claim you have no fear of death? I have encountered many who have made such a claim. All entered the beyond pleading like old women for their worthless lives.”

“Only the evil truly fear death. They spend their lives collecting power over others, clawing for anything they can get that is not theirs. But when evil dies, there is nothing left for them but their hate.”

“Bah! And what awaits you at your death, little paladin? An eternal reward by your favorite deity?”

“Peace. The peace of a clear conscience and a life well-lived.”

“I have never known peace. I doubt I would even want such a useless thing.”

“Then for your sake, Sarevok, I hope all the more that you one day find it.”

Rolanna had taken note of the conversation, but had felt no need to enter it. She had long before taken Mazzy’s measure, and knew she was amply capable of defending herself.

Rolanna eavesdropped on a knot of townsfolk nearby. They were talking among themselves. Rolanna began talking to Jaheira, over whether they should go after Sendai or Abazigal first. Meanwhile, she strained to overhear what the townsfolk were saying.

“Something must be done, don’t you think?”

“We should demand to see Balthazar!”

“Let’s be reasonable about this...”

“Nothing is being done about the cave of the dead!”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“We have no supplies, except what the smugglers can get for us.”

“All these mercenaries concern me greatly...”

“Don’t you believe a word anyone says. Balthazar is no child of Bhaal. He hates them! All of them! I heard the man say it himself, I did!”

“How can we be going to war? Against who? This makes no sense!”

They found the only inn in town without difficulty, and entered. As Rolanna walked inside, one of the patrons confronted her.

“Excuse me, I...I do not mean to be rude...but you are one of the strangers that all the locals have been talking about, aren’t you? An adventurer from the north? Yes, yes of course you are. Anyone can see that you are an extraordinary woman, please forgive me.”

“And you must be the man the boy by the graveyard spoke of.”

“You have heard of me? Yes, I suppose this is a very small town. And very remote, I thought...remote enough so that no-one would find me here. How wrong I was! I would not bother you, stranger, but I am in terrible peril! I need your aid! I beg you for a boon, my Lady, or I and my daughter both shall surely perish!”

“The boy mentioned undead in the graveyard. Does that have something to do with it?”

“I...cannot speak more of this, here. Please come to my home on top of the cliff, my Lady, I beg you! We can speak freely there!”

“Very well. Where is this home of yours?”

“It is atop the east cliff, my Lady. It is a simple dwelling but...safe, for the moment. My name is Marlowe...please meet me there and I shall explain everything, I swear.”

The man left. Rolanna smiled, shaking her head. She had tried to ignore an individual injustice, and here it had come seeking her out. Perhaps it was just as well. She had trouble imagining the pain and suffering of thousands, but she could appreciate it one on one.

Rolanna and her friends quite filled the inn, which had only a couple of other guests. In the early evening Rolanna stood at the bar, questioning one of the guests and some locals about any rumors they might have heard.

“The King and Queen of Tethyr are gathering their own forces in Myratma.” The traveler claimed to have just come from that town. “Posted a big bounty on some woman who destroyed a town in the east. There’s bound to be war all over Tethyr soon, it seems.”

The locals had a number of rumors they were quite willing to pass along after Rolanna bought a round of drinks.

“The army of the great Calimshite general Gromnir Il-Khan was heard to pass nearby...many fear that Il-Khan is planning an attack on Amkethran, and this is why Balthazar has been gathering troops.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"A terrifying sight was reported by several villagers over a week ago...a flight of actual dragons was reported to pass overhead, heading northward. A dark omen, it is said."

"The mercenaries brought to Amkethran by the monks seem to be restless. They want to fight, and complain that Balthazar is waiting too long. Waiting for what, however, is unknown."

"A trader came through town recently, bringing word of riots in Waterdeep touched off by the presence of a Bhaalspawn barbarian that was subsequently killed in a duel with one of the city elders."

"Several of the village elders have been spreading word of the old prophecies of Alaundo, and of the terrible destruction and savagery that will be visited onto the Sword Coast by the Bhaalspawn. Everyone is terrified!"

"It is said that several of Balthazar's secret guests have been Bhaalspawn, themselves...but that after their arrival they have never been seen again."

"The sky turned a deep red only two days ago. Elders said this was from a great spell being cast in the eastern lands. What effect this will have on us, we cannot say."

Meanwhile, Nalia had struck up a conversation with a mage, sitting at one of the tables. Nalia just had to nod her head occasionally and smile, as the man seemed quite happy to do all the talking.

"You seem a learned type. Are you part of the Twisted Rune hired by Balthazar? I don't recognize you..."

"They say Balthazar is a Bhaalchild with great powers. Perhaps he plans conquest? It does not appear so...although appearances can be deceiving."

"The Rune is getting impatient. Balthazar claims we will be fighting an army of dragons soon, but refuses to send us out or tell us when the battle will begin. And he seems to despise working with us...why he would even bother is beyond me."

"I have heard that there are numerous prisoners being kept in the fortress. Bhaalspawn, even. They say that Balthazar is hunting his own kin and imprisoning them. Interesting, no?"

Jaheira had convinced the proprietor of the Zephyr inn, Zakee Rafeha, to share a bottle of firewine at her table. She asked him first about Balthazar.

"Balthazar is the leader of the monastic order within the fortress, and has been for quite some time. He is...not overly popular, as I'm sure you're well aware."

"Perhaps. Tell me what you know."

"The monks have always been supportive of Amkethran, providing guidance when it was necessary and even protection from the creatures that sometimes come out of the Calim Desert. We have always been grateful for their presence, they and the smugglers who bring us supplies to live. Since Balthazar assumed leadership of the order, however, nothing has been the same. The order ignores us. They apply restrictions on the smugglers and have even killed some, restricting the supplies the village can be brought.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

And then there are all the mercenaries... It...it is to be expected, I suppose. Many say that Balthazar is one of the terrible spawn of the dead god, Bhaal. He prepares for war, no doubt, and we simply pray that this war does not come to Amkethran.”

“Balthazar is a Bhaalspawn?” asked Jaheira, pouring him another slug from the bottle.

“So it is said. He was brought here long ago by the mage, Melissan, who protects him. We fear that the old tales of destruction brought by the children of Bhaal may come true, after all.”

Jaheira asked if he knew any more of this Melissan.

“Melissan is a protector of all of Bhaal’s children, it is said, just as Elminster protects those who harp. Why such a mage would protect godspawn who only bring terror and destruction I do not know...nor does anyone. I know little else of her, however, my friend. No-one has told me of seeing Melissan the mage for many months, now.”

Then Jaheira asked if he knew anything of Sendai.

“Hmm. I may, indeed, have heard such a name, dear woman. A few of the mercenaries that pass through the Zephir so often have whispered it more than once, and always with great fear. Sendai is a drow, a dark elf...or so I understand. They say that Balthazar is mobilizing his army to attack her, and that they fear the denizens of the Underdark that such an attack would bring them face-to-face with. Some have said she is a powerful Bhaalspawn and an assassin, but few seem sure. She lives beneath the earth like all drow, however. I...do not know much more than this, however.”

Logically, she next asked about Abazigal.

“Abazigal? I have heard that name, I am sure. Is it a person? I am unsure...there was a group of captains in here once before, and they were talking in hushed tones about an ‘army of dragons.’ I believe it was during their talk that this name of yours came up. I thought at the time that it was the name of the mountains this army was supposedly in, though I had never heard of such a range. The thought of fighting dragons is a sobering one. If Balthazar is planning on battling such creatures with this army, he...well, I would wonder at his state of mind, perhaps.”

Jaheira asked about the monkish order.

“There is little to say. The order built their fortress in this remote place long ago. It is said they are an ancient order of warriors that once fought for an ancient Shah and were exiled when he was murdered. The village grew up around the fortress, depending on their goodwill and guidance...which was received in abundance. At least, that is, until Balthazar became their leader. Now we are strangers.”

“How does one get inside this fortress?”

“I do not know. Balthazar sees no-one, and has not for months. The gates are well-guarded and even protected by spells placed by Balthazar’s hired sorcerers. To force entry would be foolish. Perhaps the smugglers know of a way in, it is hard to say. Word carries of boasts by a few of them that they have stolen into the fortress secretly for acts of thievery. This may be nothing more than idle tales, however.”

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

Finally, Jaheira asked what he knew about Marlowe.

“Only a little. He is a stranger to Amkethran, arrived only weeks ago. I do not believe he intended to remain... Indeed, I suspect he has been traveling for some time... but his daughter fell ill, or so I hear. He has been a little crazed, as well. He blames his daughter’s illness upon the undead creatures that are said to have arisen in our graveyard cavern. Poor soul...he drinks much, but it seems to do him little good.”

Late that night Rolanna and Anomen shared a table. Almost everyone else had sought their beds, leaving the common room almost empty. They sat silently, considering their own thoughts.

Anomen sighed. “Another awkward silence between us, my love. I fear I have not the words to entertain and amuse you as a proper courtier should.”

“The silence didn’t feel awkward to me, Anomen. I feel comfortable around you.”

“Ah, perhaps the problem is mine. I was raised in a culture of chivalry—romance was an art, a craft of specific forms and patterns. Poetic professions of adoration and flattery were the expected ways for a knight to show his love. But now I see how hollow and stilted such conversation is. Forced flirtations hardly seem fit for one such as you. You are no mere lady in waiting, gossiping and wasting away her days in the courts of the rich.”

“I’m glad you noticed.” Rolanna smiled.

“You are unlike any woman I have ever known, Rolanna. With you, these platitudes of love cannot express my true feelings. And without them...I don’t know what to say. I am like a warrior without armor or weapons—vulnerable and defenseless.”

“Just say what you feel, Anomen. Sometimes sincerity is better than poetry.”

“Then...then let me just say I love you, and leave it at that.” Anomen gently grasped one of Rolanna’s hands, smiling as well.

“And I love you, Anomen.”

“This is much easier, Rolanna—I fear I have been wasting valuable energy in my efforts to elevate my speech to the language of love. Perhaps tonight you will be the beneficiary of my sudden extra reserves...”

Vongoethe

The next day Rolanna wished to accomplish two tasks before leaving Amkethran. The first was to visit a small temple to Waukeen to try to gather information. The other was to finish a quest that she knew otherwise would bother her like a stone in her boot.

First to the nearby temple. Aerie, who as Minsc’s new witch was closely followed by the ranger, turned to him.

“Minsc, why don’t you tell me a little about Rasheman? You’ve talked about it before, but never described it...and I’ve never heard anyone else mention it at all.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“This is because Rasheman is a very far ways away. Once Boo kept track for me of the number of steps I have taken since beginning my dajemma, but Boo has since forgotten. Boo claims that the number is very large. Larger, maybe, than the number of butts that Minsc has deservedly kicked along the way. I find this hard to believe, even though Boo is usually very reliable in these matters.”

“Yes...so Rasheman is very far away. But what sort of place is it? Did you like it?”

“It is a wonderful place with many fields. It could only be better, maybe, if every ranger of the Berserker Lodge had his very own hamster. Just think of the implications!”

“But what of the witches? You said Dynaheir was a witch, right?”

“Yes, Dynaheir was a good Rashemani witch. But I am not so certain that the witches have need of their own hamsters. Dynaheir never approved of Boo...she used to glare at Boo so it frightened him sometimes.” Minsc thrust out his chin, and lowered his brows, mimicking the legendary glare, which caused Aerie to giggle.

“Oh, never mind, you big galoot,” said Aerie. Minsc looked to Boo, struggling to figure out what “galoot” meant.

Inside the temple to Waukeen, Rolanna questioned the priest Chyil on several matters. She first asked about Melissan.

“Ah, Melissan. I know the lady, but I have not seen her in some time. She used to be here quite frequently, and often stayed as a guest of Balthazar and his monks. In fact, there are those who blame Melissan for the misfortune that has befallen our town. Some feel she is the one who convinced Balthazar to turn his back on us to serve some... other...purpose. But I lay the blame for what has happened with the monastery at Balthazar’s feet. He is the one who makes the decisions there, not Melissan.”

On Balthazar and the monastery.

“I have little good to say about them! Once the monks cared for the people of Amkethran, helping them to survive in the harsh desert. But since Balthazar took over, things have...changed. Suddenly the monastery is more concerned with gathering mercenaries than looking after the people who have come to depend on it for survival. Balthazar is preparing for war, but he is neglecting his true responsibilities. But I should not say more. For the sake of the townsfolk I cannot risk angering Balthazar or his followers, lest Amkethran suffer even more.”

While Rolanna was asking her questions, Imoen had moved to place herself besides Sarevok. She had noticed he was avoiding her, and wished to ask him a question.

“What...what was it like to die, Sarevok? Seeing as you’ve been through the experience repeatedly I can’t help but wonder if you’ve developed some perspective on it.”

“Do you intend for me to believe that a weakling such as yourself has never needed to be revived by a priest? Bah! I imagine this group has gained a discount at the temple of Helm for you, dear sister.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. That’s just some blackness and it’s like, ‘oops, here you go!’ I don’t think I’ve ever been really, really dead like you have.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Keep prodding me and that could quickly change.”

“Oh, you don't fool me. I'm an archmage, after all...and you're nothing but bluster. Tell me what I want to know!”

“The knowledge would do you no good, now, dear sister. And by the time you need it, it will be too late. Now leave me be...your constant chirruping is giving me a headache.”

He moved away. Imoen looked after him, wondering if it was really her presence which bothered him. Maybe it was just because she reminded him of Rolanna, and the choice Rolanna had made to allow him to live again.

Rolanna's last question to the priest was for the location of the stranger Marlowe. She now led the party to the small house he was renting in the village.

“Welcome to my humble accommodations, my Lady,” greeted Marlowe when they entered. “Will you hear out my tale?”

“Go ahead.”

“As I said before, my name is Marlowe... I hail from Calimshan to the south, where I was a merchant. A successful one. I...suppose that is where I first came into contact with Vongoethe.”

“Vongoethe?” asked Rolanna. “Who is that?”

“A lich, my Lady. A powerful one. In Calimshan, there are many strange wonders of magic, and Vongoethe is not out of place. It is he who has chased us here, hunting us mercilessly.”

“Why would a lich be hunting you?”

“Vongoethe desired my poor Malla, my daughter. She is the young woman here on the bed. A...a good girl, a virgin and pure of heart. He desired her soul, he said, so I fled Calimshan with her. But he caught up to us, nevertheless. And somehow he has taken her soul despite my efforts! She...she lies near death, and there is nothing the local priestess can do to help her. I know Vongoethe is in the cavern that serves as a graveyard in this place. I told the monks about him...but they sealed off the cavern rather than somehow getting my daughter's soul back, as I had hoped. Malla is the world to me, my Lady! And I do not know how much longer Vongoethe will remain trapped in that cavern...he could already be loose! He will kill me and keep Malla's soul, I am sure of it! I beg you, my Lady...please help us!”

“How do you propose I get inside the graveyard if it's sealed?”

“I...paid the guard, there, what little money I have left. I had thought to...try and get Malla's soul, myself. But the guard will let in whoever I ask him to.”

“Just how dangerous is this Vongoethe?”

“I cannot judge such things as the powers of archmages or monsters. I imagine that you have more than enough power to stand up to one such as Vongoethe, but I do not know.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Shortly, Rolanna was standing in front of the cave. The guard, in fact, had given no trouble about lowering the ward. Rolanna entered with the others.

They stepped into a roughly circular chamber. Two levels of doors, which must lead to burial crypts, lined the far wall. A figure appeared in the center of the room. The desiccated skin stretched tightly over bone, the glowing sparks in otherwise empty eye sockets, the feeling of dread that suddenly gripped the living, all indicated what this was.

"Ah" drawled the lich Vongoethe. "I had sensed that one with great power was close by. And here you are, come to my little prison. What do you wish, godling? Vongoethe has no quarrel with you!"

"I'm here to talk, Vongoethe. No need for violence."

"That is good. I have no wish to fight one as powerful as you are, human. But... hmm, do let me guess. The lying merchant, Marlowe, has sent you? Yes, am I right?"

"I have come only for Malla's soul. I would avoid a fight, if I could."

"It is Marlowe's soul I want, as we agreed! He could avoid all of this uncomfortable detente if he would simply live up to his side of the bargain!"

"Wait...what are you talking about? What bargain?"

"So it is as I thought. Marlowe lied to the godling to save his own skin, did he?" The lich laughed, a horrid sound of bones rubbing together. "Did he tell you nothing of our deal, then?"

"No. What deal is this?"

"Twenty years of fortune and success, he asked me for...in exchange for the voluntary surrender of his soul. Well, he had his success! Wealth and power both! But the human became arrogant, and when his time came due he refused to surrender his soul as payment! Refused! So I took the soul of his wife. I told him she would die without it. And still he refused me! He fled the city with his daughter and left his wife to die! He evaded me for years until I found him here! I have his daughter's soul, now, and he will live up to his promise or she shall suffer the consequences! He had his desire...now I want mine."

"Why not simply steal his soul, then? Why steal his wife's and daughter's?"

"For my purposes, I need a soul freely given and not stolen. And Marlowe knew this. The girl's soul is stolen and useless to me...she need not perish, should Marlowe do as he promised! He may throw others in the way of his fate, but I will hound him until I have what is rightfully mine!"

"Will you restore his daughter, then, if I bring him here?"

"I would give the soul of the girl to you, godling, were Marlowe brought before me. Restore her with it or keep it for yourself...it is a valuable thing for many, a soul, yes?"

"Very well. I shall return with Marlowe, then."

It would be very lawful to force Marlowe to comply with his bargain. Lawful...and evil. Rolanna didn't wish to see Vongoethe get his soul. But even more, she was

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

determined to save the innocent daughter, and the only sure way to do that was with Marlowe's help.

When they returned to Marlowe, she told him bluntly what the lich had said. "He agreed to restore your daughter...if I bring you to him."

"I...I see."

"So what Vongoethe said was true?"

"Yes. I'm...not proud of what I've done. I didn't tell you the truth because I didn't think you would help me. My wife died because I was too frightened to pay the price of my deal. But I...I cannot let what happened to my wife happen to Malla. Everything I did, I did it for her...for her future. And now the fortune's all gone, anyway, spent on hiding and running from Vongoethe. I would never forgive myself if Malla died. Perhaps it is best if I end this now. Please, my Lady, let us...let us go to Vongoethe now and have this done with."

Rolanna, the party, and Marlowe returned to the cave. The lich was there to greet them.

"Ah," drawled the lich, bowing, "so, Marlowe, we meet again at long last."

"Yes. Yes, we meet again." Marlowe's voice came out as a squeak, but at least it was steady.

"And is it time, then, for you to give me that which I am due, Marlowe? Freely and of your own volition?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I suppose it is. I have lost everything you gave me, now... I...do not wish my daughter to pay for my mistake, as well. I could not live with that. She will be restored, then?"

"I shall give the vessel with her soul to the godling, fool. What she does with it is her business."

"My Lady...?" Marlowe turned to Rolanna. "You...you will restore Malla, will you not? I beg you, do not let her die because of me! I have earned my fate, and more. She has not."

"Yes, I will restore her."

"Thank you, my Lady. I...I am ready, Vongoethe."

"Most excellent. As I live up to my bargains, here is the mortal girl's soul, godling. Take it and begone. Now, for what is long overdue, Marlowe..." The lich handed a package to Rolanna.

"No!" declaimed Rolanna. "I have the girl's soul, now, and I will not allow you to do more harm!"

"You dare! This is a legitimate transaction, one *he* agreed to!"

"Legitimate? Bargaining with souls? Don't make me laugh!"

"Hissssss! Then you shall die! Then you shall all die!"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Dozens of undead appeared around the lich, both corporeal and non-corporeal. Rolanna and her companions drew weapons or prepared spells. Marlowe jumped for the cover of some boulders near the entrance.

Rolanna engaged the lich, battering at it with her sword so it had no time to cast spells. Several non-corporeal undead tore at her. She could feel their strikes weakening her, but she ignored them to concentrate on the lich. Behind her, Anomen chanted a prayer to Helm, suddenly causing the destruction of most of the undead.

Rolanna's powerful blows drove the lich back against a wall. A thrust through its chest pinned it to the wall. While keeping pressure on the hilt so the lich couldn't escape, Rolanna reached out with her hand and grasped the lich's head. With a wrench, she pulled it free, dropping it to the ground where she stamped on it, shattering it into thousands of pieces.

The others had finished off the rest of the undead. Nalia had died from the death wail of one of the creatures. Aerie had already resurrected her, and Rolanna was sure Nalia would forgive her. However, it bothered Rolanna. She was tired of constantly having to make important decisions, with the knowledge that one error could be disastrous for her, her companions, and many others besides.

Amazingly, Marlowe had survived. He came forth from his hiding place, going over to Rolanna.

"You...you saved me..."

"I couldn't let that evil creature get its way."

"And...what of Malla? You hold the receptacle for her soul...will you not use it to restore her?"

"Take it and restore your daughter, Marlowe." Rolanna thrust the package into his hands. "And think carefully on what you have done."

"You are...most gracious, my Lady. I...I thank you, more than I can ever say!"

Sendai

The area where the entrance to Sendai's realm lay was gently forested. After a day of searching, Rolanna was worried her information was bad, or the entry was guarded by magics even Nalia and Imoen could not penetrate. Others had their own problems.

"Aerie!" Minsc called out during a break. "Boo has been mulling over a question for you. Never have I seen a hamster concentrate so! He has been so very quiet I thought perhaps I rolled over him last night, which caused me great concern."

"If 'Boo' wishes to ask me a question, Minsc, then he should feel free to do so."

"But Boo's question is of such a personal nature...well, the thought of it makes me blush right down to my buttocks."

"I...see. Perhaps Boo should ask me anyway to get it off his chest. We...wouldn't want a hamster to bottle up all that anxiety, now, would we?"

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“You are very insightful! Such bottling could lead to all sorts of un-hamster-like explosions! Well...Boo wonders why you do not perform all your duties, since you are our witch?”

“My duties? I thought you were supposed to protect me...I didn’t know there were any duties involved. And what’s so personal about this?”

“Well...a Rashemani witch accompanies a ranger on his dajemma and teaches him the lore of herbs, among other things. Well...Minsc and Boo have discovered a need of some of this lore, maybe. After frolicking in a bush that we now consider to be of suspicious nature, both Boo and I have contracted the Calimshite Itch in rather...private places. A salve would be most joyously anticipated!”

“I...I...ah, I’ll do what I can, Minsc.”

“Many thanks, Aerie! Soon, maybe, Boo can return his little mind to thoughts of butt-kicking instead of butt-itching, and I for one shall be very relieved!”

Although they found no drow, late in the afternoon the party came upon the shack of a woodcutter. He told them that in a clearing nearby he had thought to hear the sound of many, although he couldn’t see anything.

When they went to the clearing, there were two carts at the southern edge. When the party approached, they could see signs of a struggle near these woodcutter carts. Piles of things that might be human remains lay in stinking heaps. Someone had been slaughtered here.

As they were examining the remains, two drow, a hive mother and a couple of large umber hulks appeared and attacked. Although they were disposed of without trouble, the fact that they were able to magically hide themselves as they approached was worrying to Rolanna. With the illusions and protection magic doubtless covering the forest she might walk right by the entrance to Sendai’s realm and never know it.

She returned to the woodcutter. He professed great regret at the attack, and opined that the shadows had shifted oddly the last time he visited the graves of his parents, which were located quite nearby. Although Rolanna wondered why the drow had killed the woodcutters in the clearing without dealing with him, she decided to check out his story.

Again, they were ambushed by drow when they reached the area. After the party had killed the attackers, Rolanna and Valygar examined the graves. The gravestones appeared to have been hastily and recently erected to give the two graves the illusion of being older. Though carefully placed, she noted that the sod of the graves was laid to cover the fact that they’ve been only recently dug.

She returned to confront the false woodcutter. His reply to her accusations made no attempt to hide the truth.

“What is it you surfacers say? ‘Curiosity killed the cat’? Here’s your answer, little kitty—the woodcutter’s body lies beneath! By Sendai’s will, you shall join him!”

The “woodcutter,” actually a powerful male drow, attacked. His guard had been around them all along, magically transformed to resemble woodland creatures. Although

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

skilled with a sword, the drow was no match for Rolanna's supernatural abilities. Nalia had been prepared for the ambush, and cast a spell that penetrated the resistance to magic natural to drow, killing many of the guards. Rolanna's companions easily handled the remainder.

"I feel your steely gaze upon my neck, Valygar." Nalia turned to look behind her. "Does my presence still anger you so much?"

"I would be lying if I said I was not wary around you, Nalia. You have become far greater in the arcane arts than all but a handful of mages who have walked the Realms."

"I thought you had learned to set your unfounded prejudices against mages aside, Valygar. I am sorry to see I was wrong."

"I have learned to accept that magic may be used for both good and evil, Nalia. But I have not forsaken my belief that such power can corrupt if a mage is not constantly on guard."

"I know who and what I am, Valygar. Magic cannot change that. And I refuse to spend my entire life 'constantly on guard' against this corruption you feel is so inevitable."

"That is why I am wary. I must maintain a vigil against the corruption that you refuse to acknowledge as even possible."

"And if you see signs of this corruption in me? What then, Valygar?"

"We must both pray it never comes to that. I will leave you be, Nalia. But my eyes are ever watching."

With the deaths of the disguised drow, the web of illusions covering this section of the forest unraveled. The party easily found the entrance to Sendai's underground domain.

* * *

Meanwhile, Sendai, attended by a drow priestess and a mindflayer, was meeting with a monkish emissary.

"Your answer will not sit well with my master, Sendai," said the monk.

"You dare threaten me here, in my own enclave?" Sendai casually asked, fearing no danger behind the multiple levels of defenses that protected the room where she stood.

"Balthazar's army grows stronger with each passing day, Sendai," warned the monk. "You know how this will end!"

"Begone, and tell your master I know who my true allies are!"

"So be it. Your fate is sealed, Sendai...you and all your kind."

The monk vanished. The captain of Sendai's guard almost immediately rushed into the room.

"Damn that Bennon and all the..." started Sendai before noticing the captain. "What is this?"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"F...Forgive me mistress. An intruder has entered our underground complex, and the sentries have not yet reported back."

"Sniveling maggot! I cannot waste my time with such petty annoyances! Set the slaves in the north tunnels and release my pets into the south. That should put an end to this intruder!"

"Yes, Mistress Sendai. It shall be as you command."

* * *

Rolanna and her party had penetrated a short distance into the complex, killing a dozen drow guards along the way. Now the choice lay between two doors before them. Nalia magically scryed ahead, saying each door led to a tunnel. In one were mainly armed duergar, probably slaves of the drow. In the other she could see only webs, although doubtless spiders hid among them.

Rolanna chose to fight the spiders, rather than kill slaves. Although the tunnel was only several hundred paces long, they had to advance carefully, since small groups of spiders would suddenly spring to the attack from the shadows.

They had advanced two-thirds of the way along the tunnel in this fashion when Imoen suddenly let loose a great cry of rage. She caused an explosion of fire ahead of the party, clearing the remaining webs and spiders all at once. Rolanna called out a brief rest, and sought out Imoen.

"You know," said Imoen, seeing that Rolanna wanted to talk, "I've been thinking a little about the last fight we were in."

"What about it?"

"I felt something come over me, Rolanna. A...viciousness I've never felt before. I just wanted to tear someone's throat out with my bare hands. And when the fight was over, I was disappointed. Angry, even. For a moment, I found myself *this* close to snarling and jumping on your back. It was all a bit unsettling."

"That's not good. The Slayer may be next." Rolanna said this last lightly, concerned that Imoen was not her usual cheerful self.

"Yeesh." Imoen actually shuddered. "I don't know...I'm starting to forget what I used to be like. That's almost worse." Imoen smiled. "Oh, but don't mind me. I guess I'll just have to handle it until all this ends. It's not like I'm sprouting four extra arms and wailing like a banshee, right?" Imoen gave a short laugh, but Rolanna could see she was worried. If Imoen was that anxious about herself, Rolanna wondered what she actually thought about Rolanna's situation.

* * *

Sendai was talking to the drow priestess, momentarily expecting the guard captain to enter and report the death of the intruders. Soon after, the guard captain did enter, excited and out of breath.

"Mistress! Your plan has failed...your servants have been slaughtered, and the invader continues to advance!"

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Slaughtered? And the intruder yet lives? Impossible!”

“I swear it is true, mistress. And...forgive me, mistress, but there is something else...”

“If you value your life you will cease your stammering and speak, Captain!”

“I have learned that the intruder is a B...B...Bhaalspawn. We are under assault from Gorion’s ward!”

“No!” For the first time Sendai’s calm was troubled. “Why was I not told of this immediately? They must be stopped!”

“Y..Yes, mistress. What are your orders?”

“This Bhaalspawn is far too powerful to trust their destruction to your incompetent hands, Captain! You are of no further use to me!”

She gestured, a bolt of magical energy flying from her hand to kill the captain. She turned to the priestess.

“Diaytha...destroy this intruder. Gorion’s ward must not be allowed to reach this chamber!”

“Yes, mistress,” replied Diaytha confidently. “I will do as you command.”

“Do not underestimate this invader’s power! Stop them at any cost! If you fail, Diaytha, you will share the same fate as the unfortunate Captain!”

“Of course, Mistress Sendai. I will unleash all of your drow forces against our foe.”

* * *

Rolanna and her companions entered a small room. A female drow was there to greet them.

“I know you Rolanna,” said the priestess Diaytha, “and you have power, but you are not drow. By Sendai’s will you will be slaughtered in this place.”

“Who are you?”

“Fool! I am drow. You are naught but iblith—filth! Sendai need not be bothered for I shall destroy you! Enter Ogremoch’s chamber if you dare. Defeat him, and I shall face you myself.” She disappeared in a burst of magical energy.

Ogremoch proved to be an earth elemental prince. His ability to shake the chamber he was in was impressive, causing crevices to appear in the floor which threatened to swallow several individuals. However, he was no match for the combined power of Rolanna’s party, and was swiftly hacked to pieces. Rolanna then went in search of the drow priestess.

They found her with several summoned demons and other foul creatures.

“You may have fought the elemental prince and won but I am not so easy to kill,” she called out arrogantly. “Destroy them, my minions!”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The party was experienced enough by now that they automatically concentrated on the most dangerous opponents, ignoring the lesser demons and creatures. So it was that the drow priestess was the first to die, her minions following her soon thereafter.

* * *

Sendai, who had heard nothing from Diaytha, drew the right conclusion. She turned to the mindflayer who was still with her.

“Diaytha is dead, and the rogue Bhaalspawn draws ever closer! Mithykyl, my mind flayer ally...you must stop the fool before this goes further!”

The mindflayer imparted a telepathic reply.

“Do not wave your tentacles at me, Mithykyl! I have no other choice...my minions are slaughtered, even my priestess has been destroyed. If you wish to feast on the brains of those that Bhaal enslaves, you will unleash your illithid on the Bhaal-child that invades the enclave. You must not allow this interloper to reach my inner sanctum!”

* * *

Rolanna was surprised to next enter a series of rooms inhabited by mindflayers, since they were normally foes of the drow. They were quickly dealt with, since between the party's magical protections and Rolanna's own innate abilities their mental powers were largely ineffective.

Rolanna pushed on with the others. They entered Sendai's chamber. The drow Bhaal-child was there, alone. Rolanna quickly nodded to Nalia, who cast a spell to prevent magical teleportation in or out.

“My army has been slaughtered,” said Sendai, “falling helplessly before your might. You would have made a great ally to our cause. Alas, the time for such possibilities is past. But the lives of my servants and slaves have not been spent in vain...they have bought me time to prepare a special surprise for you. Prepare to meet your end, Bhaalspawn!”

Sendai cast a spell. Her form vanished, then reappeared divided into six copies, each formed into a statue in a separate niche located around the periphery of the room. One of the statues animated, coming alive, crying out, “Taste the fury of Bhaal!”

Rolanna ordered Keldorn, Minsc, Valygar and Jaheira to guard the entry against any of Sendai's bypassed minions who might try to enter. Everyone else would concentrate on defeating Sendai's statues. The animated image of Sendai cast a spell. Instantly, a cloud of biting insects appeared about Nalia and Imoen, effectively taking them out of the fight. Rolanna and Mazzy reached the statue, cutting it down. As soon as it was destroyed another statue animated, attacking.

Each statue somehow embodied a strengthened facet of Sendai, some strong in magic, others in melee. The next to last statue proved proficient in assassination, backstabbing Mazzy with a blow that drove her to the floor. Rolanna and Sarevok cut the statue down. Rolanna immediately raced to the final statue as it animated.

The statue cast a spell on Rolanna, which took full effect. Rolanna nearly fell down, drained, realizing she was but a hair's breadth from death. Sendai's features lit with a

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

grin of triumph, she raised her hand, casting a bolt of energy. As the bolt struck her, Rolanna felt a new surge of vitality, enough to fight off the bolt and strike the statue asunder. She turned around, seeing Anomen, who had cast a healing spell just in time.

As the last statue was destroyed, Sendai, the real Sendai, reappeared in the center of the chamber.

“Damn you, Rolanna! The statues have fallen but I shall not!”

Rolanna and Sarevok struck at her from opposite sides, hewing great gashes in her body. She collapsed to the floor, crying out in disbelief.

“No! No! My Bhaal essence is ripped from my very soul! Damn you! But I may yet rob you of the glory of your victory. Know this even as I die...the return of our father is inevitable. Though I fall, the others will ensure Bhaal is reborn!”

Rolanna felt the expected wrench, as she was transported back to her pocket plane.

Preparation: Prophecy's Fulfillment

“I greet you once again, god-child,” said the solar. “The second of your revelations await you.”

“There is a point to this, I hope?” answered Rolanna.

“Have you never questioned your origin, as you might question your future? Do you truly believe that beings with godly power have no sense of themselves, or put no reason to their actions? As a being such as yourself grows in power, the universe strives to teach and make them ready. Choices will have to be made. Be unprepared and you will have an eternity to regret. But no matter. I have explained these things to you already. I will repeat myself no further...listen and learn, or do not. As you wish.” The solar stared at Rolanna a moment before continuing to speak.

“This time we are not concerned with your past, god-child. Now we will look at your present. The prophecy proceeds towards its climax, as I am sure you are well aware. Your place in this prophecy is what is in question, perhaps. This question will be answered, this once, by yourself...”

A figure appeared. It was Rolanna's twin, although a careful observer would have noticed the wrinkles about the eyes and upon the brow were slightly deeper.

“I...I am Rolanna, spawn of Bhaal,” said the twin. She glared at the solar. “Why am I here?! Answer me!”

“You are here to tell yourself of the prophecy and your own place in it,” said the solar.

“I would prefer to find a way to avoid my destiny, if I could,” commented the original Rolanna. Especially if that destiny involved the recreation of Bhaal.

“Destiny may not always be avoided,” said the solar. “If you are to have a say in which path is taken, listen as you speak.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“So...this, this is a copy of myself that I address, solar?” said the twin, ignoring the original Rolanna, as the original Rolanna was avoiding eye contact with her other self.

“It is a piece of you. Perhaps from another time, another dimension...but you, nevertheless. Speak to yourself of Alaundo’s prophecy, I bid you.”

“Yes, I...I suppose it makes sense. I was once taught of the prophecy in this way, wasn’t I? It only makes sense that I would do it myself in the future. Listen closely.” The twin for the first time talked directly to Rolanna. “You are the center of the prophecy. But not in the way you think. You bring murder to all you touch, that is true...the ones you hate, the ones you help, even the ones you love. This is part of your nature. But this is not what the prophecy speaks of. The Bhaalspawn shall bring chaos and destroy much of Faerun...but this is not done by you. You have already killed several of those Bhaalspawn who the prophecy speaks of, those who would bring this destruction. You bring death, yes, but it is nothing like what they would do if they are successful. You are here to stop them, Rolanna. Whether you intend to or not, you exist to prevent the prophecy from coming true. The prophecy warns of your failure...not of you.”

“That is a relief,” said Rolanna, acknowledging her other self’s existence by addressing her. “I had no desire to cause the destruction the prophecy tells of.”

“I felt as you do, once. Brace yourself for what comes next, Rolanna, I’ll tell you that much.” Rolanna’s other self disappeared. Rolanna wondered, if she really was master of her own destiny, if the other self had somehow come from an alternate future that might never happen. This was a disturbing thought, for it offered no guarantee of her success.

“You have been counseled by your own self,” said the solar. “You are now aware of your place in these events, and why you are here. Not every soul gets such an opportunity.”

“Thank you, solar.” Rolanna had come to appreciate the solar’s part in clarifying her destiny, although she hadn’t quite come to terms with the idea that everything here, the pocket plane included, was the result of her unconsciously using her Bhaal-power.

“Then there is but one more question before you may return to your path. When you return to the waking world, you will continue to speed towards your purpose...stopping the prophecy from coming true. My question...why will you do this?”

“I will prevent the destruction of the land because it is the right thing to do.” Rolanna did not have to think about this response; it was embedded in everything she had done to avoid the path down which the Bhaal essence wished to lead her.

“Perception is truth in this one instance, god-child. Consider what you have learned...and farewell.” The solar disappeared.

Another figure fluttered down from above. It was Cespenar the imp. He impatiently gestured towards Rolanna’s backpack. With a smile, she undid its buckles, lowering it to the ground where he could get to it.

He briefly pawed through her belongings, then turned to stare at Rolanna, stating, “I keep lookings. You shoulds maybe clean pack more often.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

The imp suddenly jumped high in glee, triumphantly holding a gem in his hand. "You has Eye of Tyr...I adds pommel jewel and I could makes Purifier holy sword better, OK?" Rolanna looked questioningly at Mazzy. Mazzy grimaced, but drew Purifier and handed it to the imp. Cespenar touched the jewel to the end of the pommel, somehow fusing them together. Mazzy took the sword back, giving it a few test swings. It didn't appear to have been damaged, and might have gained some new powers. The next combat would tell.

Another energy barrier had dropped in the pocket plane, allowing Rolanna to enter a new chamber. Inside, waiting, was another twin of herself. This one was dressed in simple clothing, not armor. This fact, combined with her slight, untroubled smile and slightly softer features led Rolanna to understand this was a younger version of herself.

"I am a part of you that you have forgotten, Rolanna," said the younger self. "I am a piece of you that you have set aside. It was I that grew up in Candlekeep, unaware of my heritage...unaware of the base evil that lurked in my soul. I left my home long ago with bright eyes to face the world. I am your innocence, Rolanna. I need not be lost forever. You need not drive me from your heart, Rolanna. Your struggle against the taint of our father has eroded me, but I am not gone yet. You can still reclaim me!"

"Reclaim my innocence?" asked the older Rolanna. "And how do you propose I do that?"

"This plane is an extension of yourself, as am I. You have a need to address your dwindling innocence, and so you have brought me forth. What you decide, here, has power, though not all decisions are conscious ones. Were you to decide to restore me, it would be so. You would be an innocent anew, just as the day you left Candlekeep so long ago...the horror of recent events would be forever behind you."

"And what of all my good experiences? All the knowledge and power I have gained?"

"Gone. They must be sacrificed so that the clock may be turned back, so that I may be reclaimed. Do you not understand?"

"No, I don't. Why is my innocence so important?"

"Do you wish to keep fighting the same, endless battle against the nature you were born with? Think, for a moment, at how much you have changed since that fateful day in Candlekeep. You have killed many, bathed yourself in blood. And the darker portions of your soul have come forth whether you have liked it or not. Do you not believe this will only continue? Let us return to a time when such trials did not have to be faced. Reclaim me, Rolanna...cast off your tribulations and let us both be born anew."

"There is no going back to what has already passed. What you offer is no answer." How many times had Rolanna wished the burden she bore could be taken away? Yet when actually confronted with the choice she refused. Despite other changes, her sense of duty was still as strong as ever.

"I see." The untainted Rolanna nodded. "So there is no room for innocence in the heart of an immortal? Such is as it was meant to be. With innocence dead, the path to that

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

which is immortal within you lies one step closer. Face it...if you dare." This aspect of herself disappeared.

There was yet another Bhaal-spawn to destroy. But first, the party needed to rest. Anomen came up to Rolanna after she made this announcement.

"My love, may I speak to you? In private. It is a matter of...greatest importance."

"Of course, my knight. What is it you wish?"

"My lady, if I had my choice I would not do this here. I would wait, and do it properly as tradition dictates. But I fear if I do not act, the opportunity may be lost. But you have taught me that pomp and ceremony are insignificant beside the honest simplicity of our feelings for each other. I...I love you, Rolanna. I love you deeply."

"Are you...are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I have pledged my love and allegiance to you, my lady. I have sworn to stand by your side—whatever may come. And now I wish for the whole world to know how I feel about you. You deserve more than what I can offer, Rolanna...but even had I the riches of all Faerun to bestow upon you it would not be worthy. And so, all I can give you is my heart and my hand. Rolanna...will you marry me?"

"Anomen, my love...of course I shall marry you!"

"Rolanna! You...you have made me the happiest man in the Realms! I want to have a grand ceremony to celebrate our love—a wedding to rival that of the richest noble house of Athkatla! All our friends shall attend and join us in this joyous occasion."

"We cannot possibly have a wedding now—not while the Bhaalspawn are being slaughtered all around us!"

"Of course it goes without saying that we must finish the task at hand before we can consecrate our love with a marriage ceremony. But until that time, Rolanna, I want you to accept something from me now. Take this ring—it was my sister's. I keep it near to remind me of her. It is not much, my lady, but let it serve as a sign of our love, and a symbol of our commitment to each other. Keep the ring near to your heart, my love. It shall bind us together when the forces of the world try to tear us apart. A single kiss to seal the deal, my lady." The couple embraced in a lingering, passionate kiss. "Your lips as ever taste of sweet nectar, and my skin tingles at their touch!"

Rolanna stayed awake several hours. First, she removed from her pack a chain used to help tie it closed. She threaded it through the ring Anomen had given her, then carefully opened the link at one end, joining it to the other end of the chain to form a loop. Rolanna donned the necklace, the ring Anomen had given her dangling between her breasts, near her heart. When covered by her armor her newest, most precious possession would be well guarded.

Abazigal

Abazigal's lair, unlike Sendai's, was blatantly obvious. A difficult trek into the mountains, it was true, but the main entry was carved out of the side of a cliff. Double

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

doors as high as four men standing on each other's shoulders could have admitted Rolanna's entire party walking abreast.

A wide, level area had been created before the doors. A single individual awaited Rolanna and her followers.

"Who dare disturbs Draconis?" he called out. The figure was tall, with skin so dry it was almost scaly. "More pestering emissaries from the cloistered monastery? Surely when the last batch did not return, Balthazar would have learned his lesson. No...I see I am wrong. You are not brothers of the tattooed one." The figure audibly sniffed. "I smell the taint of Bhaal on you."

"Stand aside, Draconis," warned Rolanna. "This is between me and Abazigal."

"My father warned me of you, Rolanna...the Bhaalspawn kin who would steal his destiny. And my birthright!"

"Your father? Are you Abazigal's son?"

"As if a mere human were even worthy of having an immortal's essence flowing through their veins! My kind are the only creatures deserving of Bhaal's taint!"

"Your kind? What are you talking about?"

"You cannot stop this, Rolanna! The Lord of Murder shall rise again, and I shall prove myself worthy to Abazigal by bathing in your tainted blood!"

Surprisingly to Rolanna, Draconis attacked them. A few blows exchanged with Rolanna, Sarevok, and Keldorn dropped him to the ground, bleeding from several deep cuts. Draconis, lying on his back, propped himself up with his arms.

"You think I can be defeated so easily? More evidence of your species' inferiority! Witness the future, Rolanna!"

Draconis changed form, becoming a true dragon. Rolanna cursed, realizing the battle would be much more difficult. But not impossible, since they had faced dragons many times before. Rolanna, Minsc, Sarevok, Mazzy, Valygar and Anomen surrounded him, so he could not concentrate on them all at once. Nalia, Imoen, Aerie and Jaheira concentrated initially on casting defensive spells over the party, also summoning creatures to assist in the attack. The fight quickly turned against Draconis; the dragon turned invisible, seeking to flee, to no avail. The dragon when it collapsed this time did not rise again.

Rolanna and Imoen quickly moved to examine the doors, trying to open them before Abazigal could prepare his defenses. Nalia was standing motionless, not really watching what was happening at the doors, when she felt a sharp poke in her lower back.

"Ow!" Nalia turned around. "What was that for, Mazzy? Why did you bump me?"

"To remind you to keep your eyes on the road ahead. You were far away from here, Nalia, and in our current life that can mean death in an instant."

"I was *not* day-dreaming, Mazzy. I was considering several spell incantations... spells which might serve to save you, someday, I might add."

"I didn't say you were day-dreaming. But there is little difference."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"There is *plenty* of difference. I am no longer the dreamy, pathetic girl that could barely put together a cantrip. I'm an archmage!"

"You needn't prove anything to me, Nalia. You were never pathetic, and I know how powerful you are now."

"It takes a lot of work! I have to be careful with spells of this magnitude!"

"But do you know, Nalia, that you aren't responsible for the death of your father? Just because you weren't powerful enough, then?"

"I...I wish..."

"So do I. But there's nothing to be done. I am a much greater warrior now...I might have saved Patrick had I been greater, then. But it wasn't to be. Learn to reconcile that. Keep your eyes on what lies ahead...it's the only way to find peace with yourself."

"I suppose you're right. You're a good friend, Mazzy."

When they breached the outer doors they found three inner doors closed, locked and magically warded. Fortunately, several pools of water led to other portions of the complex through twisty, narrow submerged tunnels.

Rolanna wasn't as sure it was an advantage after swimming to several other areas, all without any indication of Abazigal's location. In one area, after defeating some Kuo-Toa, Imoen picked the lock of a cell. Inside was a tortured man in robes, one of Balthazar's monks.

"Don't touch me with your scaly claws!" said the man when Aerie gently turned him over to examine him. "No more torture...I beg you."

"Are you hurt?" asked Rolanna. "How can I help you?"

"You...you have no scales," he said in wonder, finally realizing he had been rescued. "You are no fish man! You are a human! Please, you must listen to me. Abazigal must be stopped!"

"That is why I am here."

"I...I can help you. Help you to defeat Abazigal. I know the secrets of this place. I feared my knowledge would die with me, but now I can pass it on to you! There is something you must do before you can face Abazigal. The entrance to Abazigal's inner sanctum is protected by a dragon."

"Worry not. I'm quite used to killing dragons by now."

"The dragon does not serve Abazigal willingly." He paused to let a coughing fit pass. "She is under a geas which compels her to defend the entrance to his inner sanctum. Yet even should you defeat her, the spell which seals Abazigal's gates will not be broken. When Balthazar sent me here on my...mission I brought a powerful Scroll of Reversal to break the geas and open the entrance to Abazigal's private chambers. The scroll was taken from me, but it cannot be destroyed. I suspect it is still in the possession of Abazigal's minions. You must find that scroll to break the geas and gain access to Abazigal himself."

"I still want to know why Balthazar sent you here alone in the first place."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“That you shall not know. My mission dies with me. I now accept that I shall never leave this place alive. My injuries are too severe, my tortured body defiled so that even healing magics can no longer save me. I resisted death’s soothing embrace only out of duty to Balthazar. But now you will kill Abazigal, and I am freed from my obligations in this world.” The monk closed his eyes, and relaxed. His breaths became shallower and shallower, stopping altogether after a short period.

“Look at those horrible marks on his body!” said Aerie. “They’ve defiled him...even if I wanted to, I don’t think I could help this poor man.”

As the party reformed to leave the area, Imoen dropped back to where Valygar was guarding the rear.

“So, Valygar...word on the street is that ya killed your parents. Is that true? Sounds pretty horrid, if ya ask me.”

“You consider *this* acceptable casual conversation? Just walk up and ask someone if they killed their parents?”

“Would you prefer to let the rumor mill have its way?”

“I could care less what people have to say about me. People have talked about my family all my life.”

“Well, that’s a pretty sour attitude. You know, they say your face freezes like that.”

“For someone who supposedly has her soul tainted by the evil of a dead god, you remind me considerably of a chipmunk with a sugar high and a death wish.”

“Ooo! Funny! That’s good!”

“I try my best.”

To Rolanna’s relief, the next essay of the submerged tunnels led to the entry the monk had described, including its draconic guardian. Rolanna noticed something odd about the dragon as they approached. Its blank eyes stared straight ahead, oblivious to her presence. As they approached, the beast spoke...though it did not seem to be speaking to any member of her party in particular.

“On your knees before you enter the presence of Abazigal! Bow before his ruthless might!”

Rolanna had no desire to kill the dragon if it could be avoided. She decided to do some more exploring, even if it involved swimming through more tunnels. As Rolanna stood considering which pool to try entering, Nalia took the opportunity to speak with Aerie.

“Aerie? Do you remember anything about your home?”

“Faenya-Dael? A...a little bit. I remember my mother, mostly. I remember missing it so much in the circus that my heart ached. I remember that the avariel used to make these open-aired buildings with great columns of marble. There were sculptures of glass that would burst with colors when the sun broke from the clouds.”

“Do you ever intend to go back there?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“That...that’s a cruel thing to ask. How could I?”

“There’s no reason you couldn’t, Aerie. You’re a powerful mage and cleric both. Finding it would be no trouble, now, and you deserve their respect wings or no wings.”

“It’s not like that, Nalia. The avariel...they would never accept me, like this. I wouldn’t be one of them.”

“You could make them accept you. It isn’t right. You’ve been through so much...”

“I...wouldn’t want to make them do anything. I don’t belong there anymore. I belong down here, as I am...accepting that was far harder.”

“I wouldn’t feel the same way...but, then, it’s not my home. As long as you’re happy, Aerie.”

Swimming through the tunnels brought them to an odd cavern. Not that there was anything strange about the rock walls and floors. The inhabitants, however, were essentially large eyes. Large eyes which attacked them, forcing the party to destroy the several dozen infesting the area. Behind a secret door they found a more normal inhabitant, a human.

“You there! Intruder type!” the man demanded when Rolanna led the others through the door into his laboratory. “Why do you pester Lord Abazigal’s most favored servant?”

“Who are you and what are these...servants of yours?”

“Well, I am Lycanth the Enlightened, most favored wizard of Lord Abazigal, ruler of Toril! These lovely creatures are my latest experiment and most trusted friends.”

“Your closest friends are eyeballs?” Rolanna wondered if his name wasn’t actually Lycanth the mad.

“Note, young woman the lack of mouths or other word spewing orifices on the orbs. You would do well to evolve so finely. Now, what do you want?”

“I seek a Scroll of Reversal. Do you know of one?”

“An Untherian delicacy? About yay wide and served with leeks?”

“Um...no. A Scroll of Reversal. A spell to remove a geas?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I might have one floating about my underwear drawer like a weasel. And twisting them into the most frightful knots. You get the picture.”

“Yes.” Actually, Rolanna had no idea what he was talking about, but she pressed ahead. “Can I have the scroll?”

“I don’t know how they do things where you come from but here in Abazigal’s Enclave, we work for our Scrolls of Reversal.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“To be honest, I can’t really leave my experiments. They’re quite fragile. Plus they smell nice. Like cheese.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"Why do I continually find myself subjected to these inane conversations?" complained Anomen. "We should focus on shaping the destiny of all Faerun...and not discussing cheese!"

"Several days ago," continued the mage, ignoring Anomen, "I caught a gauth beholder lurking around my eyes. He seemed to have a bit of a crush on one of them. Regardless, he had lovely eyes. Needless to say, I took a dagger and tried to harvest an eye for my experiments. The little bastard dived into one of the pools just east of here and disappeared. I need that eyestalk. Unfortunately, the cavern he dove into has become infested with kobolds."

"Kobolds?"

"Or perhaps it was Elder Orbs in that cave...I can't remember which. No matter. Get me the eyestalk and you can have the Scroll."

"This really isn't worth my time but I guess I'll do it."

"Well, excuse me! If you're too precious for the job, why don't you subcontract?"

"To whom?"

"These men here." Iycanth pointed to three statues that Rolanna had earlier noticed just outside the secret door. "They seemed interested in 'Quests' and 'Adventure' earlier."

From their detailed appearance, Rolanna realized the statues must actually be petrified adventurers. She also noticed they seemed to be carrying every possible variety of adventuring gear, including the kind of trash usually jettisoned after one actual experience in the field.

"They appear to be rank amateurs."

"Yes, I suppose they do." Iycanth shrugged. "You seem resourceful. Find some way to help them and I'm sure they'll take the 'Quest.' Come to my lab when you have the eyestalk. One of the other pools should get you in."

Iycanth hurried them out of his laboratory so he could return to his experiments. Rolanna considered the statues. She supposed they needed to free them. Rolanna nodded to Nalia, who cast the needed spells to return stone to flesh once again.

"Die, cursed eyeball!" yelled the halfling, finishing a stroke started perhaps months before. "Wha? Uh...? Do I, uh, know you?"

"I have freed you from your stone prison, young adventurer," Rolanna assured him.

"Uh, thanks. Guys, are you OK?"

"Yeah," answered a hulking human dressed in furs.

"Yes," added the third individual, an elf dressed in robes. He added in an undertone loud enough for everyone to hear, "No thanks to you...can't even backstab an eyeball!"

"Shutup, Tim!" said the halfling. "Greetings, my, uh...Lady. I am Bondari Quickhand, a thief. These are my companions Nanoc the Barbarian and Tim Goldenhand. He's an elf. And a mage."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“So young and eager,” said Aerie, sighing. “I can hardly believe that I was ever as naive and innocent as these three.”

“Truly, Rolanna, I am amazed,” added Jaheira. “Rarely have I ever seen anyone so obviously in over their foolish heads as this young trio.”

Rolanna agreed. She told the three to stay right where they were. She and her companions fetched the needed component, killing several elder eyes in the process. When Rolanna returned to the lab the three young adventurers were gone. She hoped they had the sense to flee the caves rather than getting themselves into more trouble.

“You again! What do you want now?” demanded Iycanth angrily when they reentered his lab.

“What is all this equipment for?” asked Imoen innocently before Rolanna could speak.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” said the mage. “I make eyes. Floating ones. Both deadly and lovely.”

“What about the eggs?” Imoen quickly prompted, ignoring Rolanna’s glare.

“That is where my precious orbs are incubated. My finest batch yet is currently in incubation. Do *not* touch them.”

“You work for Abazigal. Do you realize how evil he is?” There was a point to Imoen’s questions after all.

“Lord Abazigal is my patron. If he wants to take over the world and slaughter all of his siblings, that’s no business of mine. Sure, I’m developing a super army of deadly orbs for him but it’s really not my place to judge the morality of it all. I am merely a student of arcane lore.”

Valygar couldn’t resist pointing out the obvious. “Another wizard who cares nothing about the consequences of his mad experiments on the rest of the world. Am I the only one not surprised by this?”

“That still doesn’t excuse you from being held accountable for your actions.” Rolanna had decided to take charge of the conversation before they all forgot why they were here.

“Actually,” replied Iycanth, “I think it does that quite nicely. Now, leave me be!”

“I have the gauth’s eyestalk,” said Rolanna simply, tired of dueling with him.

“Ah, most excellent! Here then, is your Scroll of Reversal. Now, you must excuse me. I have a new son to raise.” Iycanth shoed them out of his lab, closing the door behind them.

“Valygar, I have no wish to offend you,” started Keldorn, “but I can remain silent no longer. You are a great warrior and a true defender of what is moral and right...”

“Why should that offend me, Keldorn?”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“I think you jest, Valygar...though with you I am never sure. Of course those words will not give offense. But these may: I have once again been pondering your atheistic beliefs.”

“Keldorn, do not waste your breath trying to convert this heathen. I respect what you stand for, but I have no need of a God to serve...even one as worthy as Helm.”

“So you say, but your actions say otherwise. You defend righteousness and justice as nobly as any knight of the Order. Perhaps you serve the will of Helm despite your protests to the contrary.”

“I will take your words as a compliment, Keldorn...and not as a high handed condemnation of my own beliefs. If you find comfort believing I unwittingly serve Helm, I shall not object.”

“And since you take comfort denying you serve—though your actions say otherwise—I shall no longer let it bother me, friend Valygar. I am glad we had this discussion.”

“As am I, Keldorn. As am I.”

The party returned to the geased dragon guardian. This time it took note of them. Within the dragon's eyes Rolanna saw a look of great suffering, as if the beast were in unfathomable pain. It opened its jaws and spoke in its strangely unnatural voice:

“You have the stench of the Bhaalspawn...the same stench as Abazigal, though he tries to hide it behind the more palatable scent of his wyrm-kind heritage. Perhaps you have the power to break Abazigal's spell, Bhaalspawn. You have the Scroll of Reversal. I feel...its power. Free me from...my bondage!”

“What is my reward if I release you from this geas?” asked Rolanna.

“I will...give you...the wardstone...to pass. You can...kill...Abazigal!”

“Very well, I shall free you.” Rolanna chanted the phrases from the scroll.

With the geas broken, the dragon's glazed eyes cleared. Its mighty voice rang out through the cavern, sure and strong.

“The enchantment is broken! I am free from accursed servitude to that bastard half-breed! Free to leave this place and never return!”

“You promised to give me the wardstone to pass these gates. Remember?”

“You are a fool, puny human, to bargain with a dragon. We care little for promises made to the likes of you. But you are in luck, tiny woman. Abazigal must pay for what he did to me, but I am not eager to allow myself to fall victim to his snares once more. Therefore, I will honor our agreement and give you the wardstone before I leave this vile place. May you extract unholy vengeance on the mongrel half-breed's head!”

Using the wardstone, the door to Abazigal's chamber was readily opened. Abazigal was inside, waiting. The power possessed by the Bhaal-spawn often made them arrogant, unable to believe they could be defeated, and therefore unwilling to flee.

“Welcome,” said Abazigal, who appeared to be no more than an average male human. “I have watched your progress with great interest. For a lesser creature you are quite amusing.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Vile Bhaalspawn!” Rolanna, fed up with the endless swimming through narrow tunnels, was unable to fully control her anger. “I shall wipe your taint from the earth!”

“Save your taunts. You are not worthy of having Bhaal’s blood within you! Only a dragon is worthy of containing the Lord of Murder’s immortal essence!”

“A dragon? From what I hear, you’re nothing but a mongrel half-breed.”

“Those insolent words shall be your last!”

Abazigal shifted form, to that of a blue dragon. The dragon breathed a bolt of lightning, catching Rolanna, Keldorn, Valygar and Nalia. Nalia fell to the ground, seriously injured, but the others moved to surround and attack the dragon.

The dragon beat its great wings, the massive draft of air sending Imoen, Jaheira, Minsc and Valygar tumbling backwards. Aerie was tending to Nalia. Abazigal spun about; only a quick duck by Mazzy prevented her from being severed as the massive jaws shut just above her. Abazigal whipped his body around again, to butt his head full on Sarevok, sending him sprawling to the floor. The dragon then turned to face Keldorn.

Rolanna had been carefully watching the dragon’s moves, and as he made his last turn counter-clockwise, she ran forward clockwise, her massive sword outstretched point first before her. When the dragon contacted the sword, his own momentum ensured it pierced deeply into his side, grazing his heart and nearly severing a great blood vessel. Blood poured from the wound as Rolanna withdrew the sword.

“No!” bellowed the dragon, collapsing to the ground. “It cannot be...the grand flames of my existence, snuffed out by this pathetic fool! But know this, your victory is flawed. Know this even as I die, fool! You have been used and misled. Witness the truth to which you have been so blind!”

By Abazigal’s magic everyone saw a scene playing out back at the monastery in Amkethran. Balthazar, attended by several monks, was meeting with someone familiar.

“So...” Balthazar was saying, “Melissan, you have returned to my monastery.”

“I have,” said Melissan. “Balthazar, I have need of your—”

“Enough. I know what happened at Saradush. I know about the Bhaalspawn.”

“It is unfortunate. But I can explain, my old friend...”

“No. You force me to tip my hand, now. It is time for you to die.”

“What? What are you doing?!”

“You are no Child of Bhaal, Melissan. Your part in this ends here...I shall see to that. My brethren...take her!”

The vision faded as Abazigal died. With the dragon’s death, Rolanna was once more drawn back to her pocket plane.

Preparation: The Five

“I greet you once again, godchild,” said the solar. “You near the final stage of your destiny. All will become most complicated very soon.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I only hope I will be able to hold onto what is good and righteous." Rolanna was anxious to destroy Balthazar and finish her "destiny." It had been a long campaign; she wished to have it end, no matter how, soon.

"We shall see. You have fought against brother and sister in recent days...fought and prevailed as they arrayed their forces against you. You have done well. The most powerful children of Bhaal gathered themselves together years ago. You know them as the Five. Together, they hoped their power would destroy all others of their kind. But what you do not know is why...what purpose your siblings have for their actions. You may suspect...but hear the truth from the lips of one you have murdered..."

The ghost of Yaga-Shura appeared before them.

"Wh...why am I called?!" demanded the shade. "Why is Yaga-Shura disturbed?!"

"You shall explain the truth of your actions, spirit, to the one that killed you."

"Hmph. If I was killed by that one, then I don't owe nobody nothing!"

"Regardless, you shall answer our questions about the Five."

"The Five, eh? Hmph. Yaga-Shura owes them, alright. Sure...I'll speak. I was approached when I was still at the temple, still being taught the powers of Bhaal by the old witch. The greatest of all the Bhaalspawn were joining forces, I was told. We would defeat all others before us! Yaga-Shura didn't trust the others. Figured sooner or later the Bhaalspawn would turn on each other. Figured I was stronger than the rest of them, maybe. But not all of them together. So I joined. Raised an army of men and slaughtered all the Bhaalspawn we could, waiting for enough of the essence to collect in the Abyss..."

"For Bhaal, the dead god and your father, to be resurrected as he had planned before his death."

"And we would be His right hands, all five of us. That's what we were promised. We would live as demigods, ruling Faerun with our power." The shade laughed, death having been insufficient to tame its passion. "It was worth taking a chance for, Yaga-Shura thinks!"

"So the Five sought to resurrect your father and become demigods. What does this mean to you, godchild?"

"It means that their plan is defeated." Rolanna was suddenly hopeful that she had almost succeeded. "Bhaal will remain where he is: dead!"

"Hah!" interrupted the shade. "You are a fool to think the Five are defeated, now. Of all of Bhaal's children, who do you think possessed the most of his essence? You, certainly...but we Five, as well. How many of the Five have you killed? Myself? Illasera? Probably Abazigal and Sendai, too? That is a lot of Bhaal's essence...and still one Bhaalspawn remaining."

"Balthazar," agreed Rolanna hesitantly.

"Yes...Balthazar. If anything, fool, you have stirred Bhaal in His slumber. He is closer, now, to awakening than ever before!" Yaga-Shura's shade disappeared.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"The last of the Five yet remains, godchild," said the solar, "and your father stirs. What will you do?"

"If I can kill Balthazar before he raises Bhaal, I'd prefer not to deal with my so-called 'father' at all."

"Then continue on your path, godchild. I shall see you soon enough." The solar disappeared as well.

Another area of the pocket plane was now available for exploration. When Rolanna and the others entered, a single figure stood waiting. He appeared to be a man, but his features were inhumanly regular and beautiful.

"Greetings, offspring of my old foe." The man bowed. "It's time we spoke, you and I. But first...let's make sure we're not bothered by any of your so-called friends. This is a private matter." He gestured; Rolanna's companions were transported outside the room, the entrance of which was now blocked by an energy barrier.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the man.

"No. Not a clue," Rolanna answered honestly. The man was obviously extremely powerful, and she carefully contemplated her chances if it came to a fight.

"Tsk. You'd think Bhaal would have spread his seed out a little more intelligently. No matter. I am Cyric. The reigning God of murder...not to mention of strife, lies and illusion." Cyric bowed again before continuing.

"Most recently I've recovered from a little bout of madness...not that that's important to you...only to find the seedlings of the former holder of my office everywhere, like weeds. There's only a bare few of the spawn left, now, of course. Like you. I'm not convinced you've the temperament or desire for the office of murder...but one can never be too sure. You can imagine my concern, hm?"

"How do I know you're Cyric?" Rolanna, given her past history, was understandably suspicious. "You sure don't look like a god."

"As opposed to what? Some grisly avatar like the Slayer? A cloud of smoke? A massive face in the sky with a booming voice? I am only here to talk, to gauge your threat to me...if any."

"If I was a threat to you, why wouldn't you just kill me?"

"Ah, if only things were so easy as that. But if I get involved in the whole Bhaalspawn mess, then my own opponents amongst the gods would intervene. Mystra... or Kelemvor, perhaps. And it seems that Ao, the Overfather, has an interest in this as well...which is very odd. He wishes this little climactic end for the Bhaalspawn to play itself out without interference from the rest of us. And so I, the great Cyric, am restricted to watching and observing. And yet if there is anyone who should feel threatened by a child of the former Lord of Murder, it is *me*. There is just no justice anymore. I've been watching your progress for a while. Very impressive. I've formed a few conclusions, but let's hear it from the horse's mouth. How much should I fear you?"

"I'm not going to answer that." The god of murder and lies would hardly credit what she said as the truth. "No matter what I say, you'll make up your own mind."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

"I see. I would have expected you to say as much, Rolanna." He theatrically sighed. "Who could have expected that this level of the Abyss, this 'throne of Bhaal' would give me such problems? Hmm. If only I could have destroyed it, to begin with."

"Why didn't you just take it over, then, when you became Lord of Murder?"

"I didn't need it. I didn't want it. I have my own plane in Pandemonium, thank you very much...much better than anywhere in the Abyss. But obviously I should have paid more attention to this dismal place. But it's no matter. Can't undo what's already been done...and if you try, well, that leads to all sorts of different problems. And I'd rather not open *that* bag of worms once again. As for you...I doubt you will seek my realm of influence. If you even get that far, that is. I have little desire to see yet another godling who might be a possible opponent...if you even have any power worth noting. I think you need to be tested. That *is* what you created these little rooms for, isn't it? To test yourself? Mystra and Ao couldn't fault me for aiding you towards that end, now, could they? Perhaps we will meet again. For now, let us see how you do against *my* favored. I suggest you prepare yourself."

Cyric disappeared, at the same moment Rolanna's companions reappeared in the room. No new opponents appeared, however. Rolanna warned the others attack was imminent, meanwhile trying to keep the entire room under observation for intruders.

"Die! For the Black Sun!" yelled a masked assassin as he sprang from the shadows, driving his blade into Valygar's back. Four more assassins stepped forward to attack as well, one aiming for Sarevok's back. With a yell, Rolanna pushed him out of the way, taking the blade on her own chest. The strike was not solid, skittering off her breastplate, leaving only a scratch.

After each assassin made his attack, he disappeared from view, magically cloaked. Rolanna yelled out to the others to form groups, facing outwards, guarding the weaker members within. Valygar was the only one seriously injured by the initial attack, still laying on the ground. Rolanna found herself with Minsc, Sarevok and Anomen, guarding Valygar's prone form. Keldorn, Mazzy, Jaheira and Aerie formed another group, Nalia and Imoen in the middle.

The assassins were forced to make frontal attacks. Despite their ability to hide after every attack, they were at a disadvantage in such a stand-up battle, and were killed without further major injuries. After Valygar was cured of the poison in his system he was good to go as well.

Sarevok came to Rolanna after the battle. There was something he wanted to say.

"I...have been considering your words. I have changed my outlook, and I think perhaps it may be a good thing. I feel I must thank you." Rolanna's action in the recent battle to save him was only a minor consideration. It had been Rolanna's reactions to her companions, and theirs to her, which had the major effect.

The passion play of Rolanna's origins, which had involved him as a child, had brought back memories of that time. Memories that he had avoided, not wishing to remember how weak and helpless he had been. He had been forced to acknowledge that at that young age he had really wished for everything Rolanna came to have. Rolanna's

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

life was much better than anything he had ever known, her path was the one he wished to follow.

Rolanna looked into his eyes, smiling slightly. "It was your choice, Sarevok, not mine."

"We shall see if my new view on life is something that will prove lasting. But...I cannot see a reason that it will not remain so. There is much in my former life that I must...atone for, I think. Somehow, I think it will be a good goal to strive for...don't you?"

Rolanna turned away without saying anything, realizing Sarevok was still hesitant in his decision and wished no flowery words from her. Perhaps as long as he was alive he would be unsteady in his new purpose, but Rolanna was glad for him. She felt an important victory had been achieved, certainly not worth the sacrifice of the thousands of innocents that had occurred along the way, but significant nonetheless.

The entire party had stopped, watching the exchange in wonderment. Imoen, given her heritage, had also realized Sarevok would not want any special attention by the others. She determined to do something to prevent that.

"Imoen!" yelled out Keldorn, grabbing her wrist. "What...are you pawing at me yet again? Do you think I do not notice? You are attempting to pickpocket me, aren't you?"

"Well, no...I just..." Imoen stammered out.

"Just what? Out with it, girl. I won't have a party member stealing from me."

"No, no, that's not it! I...I was just...I was just trying to find out if you're as muscular under your armor as you look."

"Eh? What's this?"

"Oh, I know that you're married and all that, Keldorn...but do you have *any* idea how good you look? I...I can't help myself, I just want to touch you all the time!"

"Imoen! I...I have a daughter that is the same age as you!"

"I don't know what it is, Keldorn...maybe it's the Bhaal essence in me. I just want to run my fingers through your hair and nibble on your ears! Oh, Keldorn, you drive me so wild!"

"By Torm, no! This is terrible! I...I had no idea I had this effect on you..."

"Oh, get over yourself already, Keldorn! Sheesh." Imoen giggled. "Here's your ring back. I won't take it again, I promise." The others laughed at the look on Keldorn's face.

Rolanna left the pocket plane, returning to where she had faced Abazigal. She hoped to find more information on the five, and their plans, but came up with nothing. As she was exiting Abazigal's former complex, leaving through the double doors, a figure was there to greet her.

"Greetings, old friend," said the old man. "Fancy meeting you, here."

"Elminster?" Rolanna grinned in delight.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Oh-ho! So you do know who I am, now? I must admit, you’ve changed more than a little since the last time we met, before you were straddling the world with your power... so to speak.”

“‘Straddling the world’? It hardly feels that way.”

“No need to be bashful. There’s only a handful of folks who would be willing to take you on, at this point. Not even I would dare...and I’ve had considerable time to practice. Have you any idea of the havoc the Bhaalspawn have caused up and down the Coast? The havoc you’ve caused personally? No, I don’t suppose you have. Not that it’s entirely your fault. We Harpers have been working tirelessly for weeks now to prevent the panic from reaching a boiling point. Not a simple task. As I understand it, though, your quest is nearly at an end, correct?”

“Why? What do you know about it?”

“I have to leave again, soon, so I can’t help you much. But I can help you a little, whether you like it or not. It’s important that this all ends, soon, but that doesn’t mean I won’t lift a finger over it.”

“So how can you help me, then?”

“Balthazar is known to me. His monastery is sealed up tight with powerful magic... where he gets it from, I don’t know. But you’re going to have to get inside, obviously, or he’ll ambush you eventually. I know it may not be pleasant to contemplate, but the rogue Saemon Havarian holds the key to entering the monastery. He is once again with the Amkethran smugglers, at the moment. As I understand it, Havarian has been into the monastery several times up until now. He may be able to help you once again, if you’re willing to look for his aid. There may be another way in, but you’ll have to find it on your own. Now I must go. From this point on, attaining your destiny is completely your own affair. I wish you well.” Elminster bowed deeply to her, before vanishing.

Rolanna shook her head, bemused that even the most powerful of Faerun’s inhabitants were now paying her such homage. Saemon Havarian, however, was not someone she wished to meet again, even if he were to acknowledge her greatness. There must be another way.

Rolanna considered her last thought for a moment. Desiring the worship of Saemon Havarian? If the Bhaal-taint couldn’t get at her through her rages, perhaps it was trying her ego.

Balthazar

Rolanna entered the inn in Amkethran. She had a question for the owner, asking Zakee Rafeha if he knew of a hidden way to enter the monastery.

“Ordinarily I would say no, my friend,” he replied. “But it comes to mind that I have heard this question asked numerous times before, and recently...so I am thinking that perhaps there is someone who can help you, after all. A pair of adventurers from Calimshan came to Amkethran months ago. They seem a quiet pair, and properly married, so I asked no question of them. They have been asking about the fortress, as

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

well. Perhaps they could help you. I speak of Faheed and Majira...they live in a home here in the village, if you wish to seek them out.”

Rolanna did, in fact, wish to seek them out. In such a small town they were easily found. Faheed graciously ushered them inside when Rolanna knocked on their door.

“Greetings to you, my Lady,” said Faheed, bowing. Everyone seemed to be bowing to her recently. “Is there something that you need?”

“I need a key that I’m told you have.”

“Oh? And what would make you think that I might have such a key?”

“Zakee Rafeya told me, actually.”

“Ah. I do have that key, yes. But I’m afraid I can’t just give it to you. My wife and I purchased that key from the smugglers for a very specific reason. We wish to kill Balthazar. He has endangered this whole village, and we can stand by and watch no longer. It will be difficult, but my wife and I are former adventurers...we have some power, ourselves.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it doesn’t matter. If you take this key, then we have failed. If you work for Balthazar, then we are undone. I cannot allow you to leave, obviously.”

“But I’m looking to kill Balthazar myself.” Rolanna hoped that with the death of the last of the Five, their plan to recreate Bhaal would be ended forever.

“You...are? Should I believe you?” Faheed considered Rolanna and her companions for several breaths. “Yes, somehow I do. You have far more power than I...if that is your true goal, then you have a far better chance than I.”

“I don’t want to kill him unless I have to. But I will probably have to.”

“Then take the key. Use it to enter the monastery through the graveyard cavern. We wish you the best of success.” Majira, who had not said a word, nodded vigorously in agreement as Faheed handed over the key.

As they walked to the cave, Anomen, unable to resist leaving the subject alone, commented to Sarevok.

“You have changed, Sarevok. Your new outlook is apparent even to me...only I wonder if this is not some sort of act to cater to the hopes of our leader.”

“It is no act, cleric.” Sarevok glared at him. “It is also none of your business.”

“On the contrary, Rolanna's safety is my duty, and I wonder at your motives.”

“My motives may not be as blindingly apparent as your own, fool, but they are also not as superficial.”

“Well, do astound me with your sheer depth, then, Sarevok. What is it you hope to gain by traveling with Rolanna?”

“Redemption.” Sarevok looked away, perhaps for once fearing the scorn his words would bring.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“Redemption? You must be joking.”

“Redemption.” Sarevok repeated, again glaring. “Among other things. Now begone...were it not that Rolanna calls you a friend, I would cut you down where you stand for your impudence.”

The party had not made an extensive search of the cave containing the town's undead when last they had been there. Now they did. A crypt high up on the wall to the rear had a door that opened to the key. Inside was no cave, but a passage continuing underground. When they followed it, they found themselves at the foot of some steps. The shallow steps led upwards directly into the chamber where Balthazar received guests. Balthazar was present, as were several of his monks.

“Ah, Rolanna,” greeted Balthazar, “your presence here shows me how foolish I have been in gathering my army of mercenaries. I truly regret my wasted efforts at the expense of Amkethran's citizens.”

“I know your secret, Balthazar,” accused Rolanna. “You were working with Abazigal and Sendai!”

“I suppose it may have appeared as such, though in truth I have plotted their destruction ever since Melissan recruited me into the Five.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you are one of the Five? A Bhaalspawn?”

“Melissan recognized the taint of Bhaal within me, just as she recognized it in Sendai, Abazigal and the others. Just as she recognized it in you. She lured me with promises of power and glory, but I followed her for a different reason. Only by joining the Five could I discover who the others were—and plot their demise.”

“So you used me to betray the other Bhaalspawn for your own goals.”

“I wish I could take the credit for this brilliant ruse, Rolanna. But it seems I was not the only member of the Five who plotted the downfall of the others. Melissan is the puppet master pulling your strings in this staged production. I have merely tried to stay out of your path for as long as possible, anxious to see if you would prevail.”

“Why would Melissan have gathered the Five only to plot their destruction?”

“It matters not, Rolanna. In the end both Melissan and I have what we want: the other members of the Five are dead, though she and I remain at odds.”

“And now I suppose you plan to kill me so you can resurrect Bhaal all by yourself?”

“Oh no, Rolanna. I have no such designs. Bhaal's taint is an evil blight upon the world. I have no intention of bringing the Lord of Murder back into existence. My plan is much more altruistic. I have vowed to exterminate all of Bhaal's children, forever wiping the Realms clean of his tainted existence. You have merely helped me in my goal.”

“But you are a Child of Bhaal as well—what happens to you?” Rolanna could accept he was one of the five, but found it hard to credit he actually didn't wish Bhaal's return.

“Once I am certain I am the last, once I know there are no others, I will perform a ritual suicide. Bhaal's evil will die with me. But first, I must end your evil existence.”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“But I am not evil! I am a force of good and justice!” Rolanna couldn't believe it. He was claiming to work only for the good of all, but was willing to destroy anything that blocked his way. She was sure she wasn't so single-minded.

“People sing the praises of your name, Rolanna. You strive to walk the path of virtue. But your intentions are meaningless compared to the consequences of your existence.” Balthazar pointed his finger at her.

“How many bodies have you left in your wake? Hundreds? Thousands? Saradush is a smoking waste...how many other cities and towns have you brought destruction raining down upon?”

“And how many corpses have you left behind, Balthazar?” A weak retort, but the best Rolanna could come up with. There was, after all, some truth to his accusations.

“I am much the same, Rolanna. Our mere presence brings death...it is inevitable. It is our destiny. We are not to blame, we are slaves to our father's tainted blood. And as your power grows, Rolanna, so shall the ruin sown in your passing. Kingdoms will fall, and the rivers of Faerun will run with blood.”

“You condemn me based on my possible future? That is not justice.” Rolanna had been promised that she was not bound by destiny, was instead its shaper. In any case, after all that had happened, she was determined to handle the entire mess Bhaal had left behind on her own terms. This discussion could have but one end.

“Further conversation is pointless, Rolanna,” said Balthazar, unknowingly agreeing. “I have a task which I must complete. Your death is a necessity, Bhaalspawn.”

Balthazar, although wearing only a robe and carrying no weapons, was potently armed. He sprang forward, faster than anyone Rolanna had ever seen. Both his arms gripped one of hers. He twisted to bring his back into her chest, and continuing the motion, tossed her against the fall wall. She hit with a thud, nearly dropping her sword.

When she got up, one of the monks faced her.

“I'll wipe your filthy lineage right out of the Realms,” screamed the man. Rolanna dodged around him, running to where Balthazar was pummeling Keldorn with a series of short blows, dropping him down the steps. Rolanna yelled to the others to ignore the monks, and concentrate on Balthazar.

Balthazar was unfazed at being surrounded. He picked up Mazzy, using her to block a blow, which Sarevok stopped just in time. He then threw her into Nalia, interrupting a spell.

Imoen cast a spell on Rolanna. She could feel her own movements pick up speed. Not as fast as Balthazar, but maybe fast enough. Balthazar turned to her as she returned to the fight, but had to glance aside to deal with simultaneous attacks from Anomen and Sarevok. Rolanna cut at him with short, chopping strokes of her great blade. No individual blow did much damage, but she was able to drive him back, not giving him time to do more than defend.

Imoen's spells had also speeded up the actions of the others, and now Sarevok, Valygar and Anomen had joined Rolanna. It was now too much for Balthazar to avoid all

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

of their attacks. He took a disabling cut to his right knee. He sank down, supporting himself on his good knee. He could not avoid the weapons slicing from all sides, and almost simultaneously took severe wounds to his head, chest, and left arm. He collapsed, dying. Rolanna felt the familiar tug, returning to her pocket plane.

Preparation: Deathstalker’s Betrayal

For a final time, the solar was waiting for Rolanna. She spoke.

“The greatest of the Bhaalspawn, the Five, have been destroyed, godchild. Nearly all of Bhaal’s essence has been returned to the source...your journey is nearly complete.”

“So Bhaal is being resurrected, is that what you’re telling me?” Rolanna wondered if all of her adventuring had been for naught, that she would still have to face a reborn Bhaal. Even with her power, a fight with a god could have only one outcome.

“The dead god, Bhaal, has not been resurrected. You must understand what awaits you at the end of your journey, godchild...and for this, the one you know as Melissan will explain for herself.”

Melissan appeared. Rolanna’s jaw dropped in disbelief, since she had thought Balthazar had killed Melissan. This Melissan was dressed in leather armor, prepared for war.

“I am here.” Melissan was also very annoyed. “Speak quickly.”

“You are here at my sufferance, spirit,” said the solar. “You will answer our questions.”

“I am no dead thing. You have called a piece of a living goddess to you...however you have done it. Should I become aware of what you have done, you will pay dearly.”

“You are no goddess yet, mortal. The prophecy has not come to fruition.”

“It will soon enough. Everything has happened as I wished it...and this will be no different. All of Bhaal’s essence will be mine!”

“Then explain yourself. If you are correct, it shall make no difference in the end.”

“True enough! So be it. My name is Amelyssan the Blackhearted, High Matriarch and greatest Deathstalker of my Lord Murder’s Bhaalist temple. T’was I who led all the chants in His holy name! T’was I who harbored his avatar when the Lord of Murder was cast down to walk amongst us in the Time of Troubles. To his greatest priestess did he come for succor!”

Another creature appeared. It resembled the slayer, but was taller, more strongly thewed, more menacing. The creature spoke.

“To my most trusted Deathstalker did I entrust the secrets of my resurrection.” Rolanna realized it represented Bhaal, the dead god.

Melissan nodded in agreement. “One of His priesthood needed to have access to the essence that would be collected from the Bhaalspawn...one of His priesthood would have to perform the necessary rites to give the dead Lord of Murder back that essence. And so

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

great Lord Bhaal entrusted that duty to me. After His death, I alone retained access to His essence. And my power grew as each one of His mortal children died, their divinity returning to the source.”

“And so you have betrayed me,” roared the creature, “Amelyssan the Blackhearted. The time draws nigh and yet you perform no rites.”

“That is correct. Remain dust, my foolish god.” The Bhaal-creature disappeared. Melissan continued speaking.

“It was I who created the Five...loosed the god-spawn at each other’s throats all the while promising those fools that they would serve at Bhaal’s right hand. Well they can... in Limbo, for all I care. It was I who masqueraded as the protector of Bhaalspawn, herding the ones that the Five could not find to their doom. I led the last Bhaalspawns to Saradush and had them slaughtered!”

“But you couldn’t have known that I would be there,” noted Rolanna in bewilderment.

“No, that’s true. I knew that Illasera would perish against your might...but I did not expect you to show up quite so soon. Still, you proved a fortunate arrival. Getting rid of one of the Five without it looking like my doing was one thing...but with you already in Saradush, I could turn you on Yaga-Shura as well. After I let him into Saradush to kill the other Bhaalspawn, of course. And then you turned on the rest of those paranoid fools while I distracted them. The Five were the last thing I had to deal with before I could become the Lady of Murder, myself...and you’ve dealt with them nicely.”

“It’s not over while I’m still alive!”

“I have most of the essence of Bhaal under my control, fool. I am nearly a goddess... I control the entire Abyssal realm that was once Bhaal’s, all of the Throne of Blood. Do you dare come and face me there? Or shall I have to hunt you down like the sorry dog that you are?”

“I will never let you get away with this!” Rolanna felt the godly fury rising within her. “Someone has to stop you!”

“Then why wait?! Let’s see how the prophecy ends right here and now!”

“As you wish!” Rolanna drew her blade.

“Enough!” stormed the solar. “A battle here will solve nothing.” The solar gestured, and Melissan vanished. “Your course is set, god-child. Your pocket plane...when you are ready, you will need to end its existence. Then you will be within the Throne of Blood... and Melissan will be at hand. She is not yet done taking the essence of Bhaal’s children. I suggest that you move quickly, god-child. The final act of the prophecy awaits.”

The solar vanished as well. Rolanna calmed, taking deep breaths. She would face Melissan soon. But first, another energy barrier had dropped, opening the way to the last unexplored area in her little domain. Another test, one she decided to essay before the end.

Anomen came up to Rolanna, embraced her. He then took a step back, where he could more easily look into her eyes.

Throne of Bhaal: The ‘Good’ Side

“My love, I must talk to you. I sense we are nearing...well, in truth I do not know. But your destiny fast approaches. I feel an ending is near, a time of great consequence—for you, and for us. Much has happened recently, and I suspect we all know your destiny may transcend any mortal state. Rolanna, you are everything to me...but I fear you may be forced to leave me behind.”

“I...I hope we may stay together forever, Anomen.” Rolanna’s eyes filled with unshed tears. “But I cannot deny my destiny.”

“I...I want you to know that I will not stand in the way of your destiny, my love. Our love is the most important thing in my world—more important than my family, my honor. Even my childhood dreams to join the Order seems insignificant beside my feelings for you. But there are things stronger than love—even our love. We have both changed, and greater changes are still ahead I fear. Perhaps...perhaps fate will not grant us a happy ending.”

“You speak as if you already know something about my fate.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Ah, Rolanna...I am but a fool, struggling against the wisdom of the ages. What do I know? My words are nothing—they can only cause you distress at a time when you need to be most focused. Let us...let us speak of this no more, my lady. I had no wish to upset you. Simply know...simply know that I will support you in whatever is to come.”

Rolanna turned away, a single tear trickling down her cheek. She harshly rubbed it away, then led the others to the final test.

In the room they entered was a single creature, the Bhaal-creature that had appeared to confront Melissan. Rolanna knew this was the Ravager, a form taken sometimes by Bhaal. The knowledge had floated up by itself, from that part of her which recognized and longed to be part of the dead god confronting her. The Ravager spoke.

“I am what lies within you. I am the ultimate expression of your power, godling. I am the last of the barricades you have erected between yourself and destiny. Defeat me and this plane is no more...there will only be the Throne of Bhaal. But you will not defeat me. For I am the Ravager.”

Rolanna drew her sword, calmly waiting. With a great cry, the Ravager attacked, tearing at her with its clawed hands. Rolanna parried with her weapon, catching the creature with the blade on several counterstrokes. However, her weapon barely cut the Ravager’s skin, such was its supernatural power.

So began a long conflict, Rolanna against the Ravager. The others backed away, giving them room, recognizing that Rolanna needed to win this symbolic combat on her own. All but Anomen, who several times during the combat cast healing or protective spells on his love. There was no conflict Rolanna would ever face again alone, if he had any say in the matter.

Rolanna continued to make small wounds in the Ravager, gradually bleeding its vitality, meanwhile dodging or parrying its wild attacks. After what seemed like a short eternity she noticed it was slowing down. After that it just required perseverance, continually cutting it, until it collapsed, defeated.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Rolanna realized she was different. The hate and murder within were totally under her control. She still found the feelings distasteful, but there was no longer the slightest chance they would be able to dominate. With Melissan's betrayal, Rolanna had been the only one left containing enough of his essence who could possibly raise the dead god Bhaal. After her defeat of the Ravager, Bhaal was finally destroyed forever. His divine power still remained to be claimed, however.

Rolanna nodded to her companions, ready to lead them to the final confrontation in her quest. She felt a tap on her shoulder. Glancing to the side, there was Minsc.

"Eh, you know," he started hesitantly, "with all that has been going on, Boo and I are having some trouble keeping our feet on the ground."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Well, with all this talk of gods, where will Minsc and Boo fit in. Swords have little effect on the heavens."

"Minsc, nothing can withstand the might of your righteous fury."

"Nothing that *stands* can withstand it, but floaty specters of evil gods incarnate may as well be made of the hot air they spew."

"It's all about belief, Minsc. Do you believe you can kick their tails?"

"Well, I *believe* that I can stick a thumb in the eye of evil no matter what head it is moored to. Perhaps that is enough. We shall have to see."

Rolanna smiled, and slapped him on the back. It was time.

Apotheosis?

Rolanna willed her pocket plane to cease to exist. Instantly, the party found themselves standing in a portion of the Abyss. The first thing that struck Rolanna was how suddenly alien it felt. A chill wind swept across an empty void, screaming in her ears that she was not welcome here. Several strange, towering structures were present, suspended in the void by an unknown power. All her immortal senses told her that the powerful essence of her dead father was close and that this place was, indeed, the Throne of Bhaal.

Standing before a pillar of light was Melissan. She had grown, or they had shrunk, since her form was now the size of a hill giant in comparison to the party.

"Welcome, Rolanna...I see you have finally found your way to the Throne of Bhaal. You should know, however, that you're far, far too late. This part of the Abyss was once your father's and might have been partly yours...but it's mine, now. Along with all the essence of a god, this place is mine to rule as I wish."

"I will stop you, Melissan." Rolanna squared her shoulders, taking a deep breath. "Any way I can."

"I am disappointed in you, Rolanna. So much bluster, so much force. How you have managed to blunder your way through the realms and not perished sooner, I have no idea.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

But it doesn't matter, in the long run. You've served me well enough...and now it is time for your essence to be added back to my power."

Melissan attacked, calling demons of the abyss, and foul death shades, to her side. Rolanna confronted her head on. Mazzy and Sarevok aided her, while Keldorn, Minsc, Valygar and Anomen held off the demons and shades. Aerie, Jaheira, Nalia and Imoen held a little back, adding their magic or martial might where it seemed most needed.

Melissan, protected by the vitality stolen from Bhaal, was impervious to spells. The same was not true of more normal weapons, however. Nor was she particularly skilled in melee, although she was much stronger than anyone there, even Rolanna.

At first all the wounds Melissan received quickly closed. However, shortly Rolanna noticed Melissan's wounds were not healing as fast, in fact were accumulating as Rolanna and her friends added more and more. Rolanna thought she might actually be winning when Melissan called out in rage.

"I should not be wasting time on you. I still have to absorb the Bhaalspawn essences...and there is more than enough power in this plane to keep you busy. If you are wise, you will flee. Once I am done with the essences I will not hesitate to gather your own, as well."

Melissan vanished. Thinking she might merely have become invisible, Rolanna slashed with her blade at the spot where she had been standing, but cut only air. Then she noticed Melissan was now standing in the pillar of light that dominated the center of the Throne of Bhaal.

Jaheira hurried up to Rolanna. She gasped out that she, Nalia and Imoen had been studying the structure of the throne. She believed Melissan was still mortal, and could only hold a fraction of Bhaal's essence at a time. She was now bathing in more of the essence to regain her power. There were three nodes spaced about the central pillar. If they could destroy them, Jaheira thought they would cut Melissan off from the Bhaal-essence.

Rolanna agreed to the plan. She ran, leading the others to the nearest node. They found it guarded by an elemental prince of air and several lesser elementals. The guards indicated Jaheira had been right about the importance of the node. After defeating the elementals, Rolanna destroyed the node with one blow of her sword. The party was instantly teleported back to before the pillar, where Melissan awaited them.

"Enough," she cried out. "I have gathered enough essence to deal with you...I will wait no longer to end your pathetic life. Prepare to join your siblings, Rolanna."

Again she summoned minions, the fight recommencing. The fight continued until the portion of god-essence in Melissan was worn down.

"No!" she cried in frustration. "Too strong! Damn you! I must take more essence...I must have more power!"

Melissan disappeared back into the pillar of light to regain her strength. Rolanna again took this chance to destroy another node, guarded by another elemental prince.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Again Melissan reappeared. The fight resumed. Rolanna and her companions were tired, but they persevered, again driving Melissan back into the pillar of light.

Rolanna led the others on to the final node. This was the most strongly guarded, by a dozen demons. However, the party defeated them all, destroying the last node. Again, they reappeared in front of the central pillar.

“So you are stronger than even I imagined,” conceded Melissan. “So be it, Rolanna. Your destiny versus mine...let’s finish this now, once and for all. To the victor go the spoils.” Melissan would have no further chance to draw more of the dead god’s power into herself unless she defeated Rolanna.

Melissan unleashed a powerful spell upon the party, a wave of force which emanated from her, forcing the party away, tumbling them separately to the far sides of the throne.

When Rolanna picked herself up, it was to face clouds of boiling blackness. She couldn’t see any of her companions, or Melissan. She began searching. Before long she ran into a demon, one of Melissan’s servants. Although she had been fighting so long her sword seemed to have tripled in weight, she slew it.

After it was dead, Rolanna noticed the blackness was beginning to dissipate. Sounds were no longer muffled, and she could hear Mazzy yelling not far away. She ran that direction, to find Mazzy and Imoen fighting Melissan. Rolanna’s companions were on either side of Melissan, one leaning in to strike her when Melissan turned to face the other.

With a cry, Rolanna joined the combat. Soon after, Anomen appeared, adding his might. Minsc ran forward, in full berserker mode. Then Nalia showed up, summoning creatures to hold off Melissan’s minions who were also beginning to arrive. Valygar approached, drawing his bow to send arrow after arrow into Melissan. Sarevok staggered into view, his armor rent in several places, but still able to swing his sword. Finally, Jaheira led Aerie and Keldorn forward. Rolanna later learned Keldorn was the only one sorely hurt when the party was scattered. He had stumbled into a group of three demons, had in fact died. But Aerie came upon him soon afterward, resurrecting him and healing his hurts.

Tired and drained as they were, Rolanna and her companions were still a match for Melissan. Slowly, Melissan’s wounds began to heal increasingly slowly. Finally, it got to a point where Rolanna believed a few more good blows would finish Melissan.

Suddenly, the solar appeared in the midst of their battle.

“Enough, Amelyssan,” commanded the solar. “The gods have decreed: this contest is over.”

“No!” Melissan practically spat in frustration. “I am a god! This is not over until I say it is!”

“You are no god, priestess of Bhaal. You play with stolen energies that make you immortal, that give you great power...but that does not make you a god.”

“No! The Bhaalspawn has *not* won! I refuse to believe it!” Melissan attempted to cast a spell; nothing happened. “I would die, first!”

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“But you cannot die, so long as the essences are within you,” agreed the solar. “Even now, however, they struggle to flee from your weakened frame. You are defeated, and destiny belongs to the victor.”

“N-no...” said Melissan, more weakly. “I...I will kill you all!” The last came out as a whisper.

“You will do nothing, Amelyssan, but accept your fate.” The solar looked at Rolanna, ignoring Melissan, who had collapsed, unmoving.

“The time that was mentioned has come, godchild. There is a choice before you... you have prevailed against all that have assailed you, and now you must decide your fate.”

The solar nodded towards Imoen.

“One other spawn of the dead god remains here...the sibling who fought at your side. Her portion of the essence is not large, but she must make a choice”

“You mean me, don't you?” said Imoen. “You're talking about the part of me that's...the taint. The powers I've developed.”

“Do you intend to keep that essence, godchild? Or will you surrender it to your elder sibling?”

“If I could have gotten rid of it voluntarily, I would have done it a long time ago.” Imoen shuddered, turning to Rolanna. “Take it...I don't want it. I never wanted it.”

“As you wish, Imoen, so it is done,” said the solar. A slight mistiness seemed to lift from Imoen, then formed about Rolanna like a cloak, before vanishing inside her. “The only decision that remains, then, belongs to your sibling.”

“The vast majority of the soul essences of the children of Bhaal, Lord of Murder, now belong to you and you alone,” said the solar to Rolanna. “You must now decide what to do with this power...be wise, the choice is irrevocable.”

“Why? What's going to happen to me?” asked Rolanna.

“There are consequences with all decisions. This one, however, is unique in its scope. I will attempt to explain it as best I can.”

“First, you may choose to surrender that portion of the essence which remains with you. It shall be given to Amelyssan...and her soul, with all the essence it contains, shall be destroyed. You may think this brutal, but Amelyssan has welded the essence to her own soul, foolishly, and there is no other way. The price of ambition is always high.”

“Surrendering the essence will allow the gods to remove its evil taint and hide it well within the halls of Mount Celestial, forever preventing it from soiling further souls. You, Bhaalspawn, would be made a mortal...free to continue your life with a destiny of your own choosing. The manipulations of gods will no longer be your concern and your soul will be untainted.”

“And my other choice?” said Rolanna.

“Once Amelyssan's soul is destroyed and the essence released you may accept it into yourself, if you want it, and the Throne of Bhaal will be yours to command.” The solar

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

bowed to Rolanna. "You have fought against the taint of your father with great vigilance. It is most impressive...impressive enough that I would be willing to remain by your side. The power you may claim will bring new enemies, and the attentions of evil gods such as Cyric, who usurped your sire's godly role by the edict of Ao the Overfather. I will fight by your side and help you achieve whatever destiny awaits in the planes. Your future is unknown even to the gods, although it will certainly be a great one."

"The choice is difficult, but these are your two options, Bhaalspawn. This is where your destiny is realized, and your future begins."

Rolanna looked at her friends, anxious to know their thoughts.

"I would caution you if I could, Rolanna," said Mazzy. "Great power comes with its own temptations and its own trials...have you not been through enough? I think you would be happier in the end living your own life. But I would not think to speak for you, my friend. If you succumbed to temptation and became an evil power, however, it would sadden me to think I had fought so long to support such an ending."

"I urge you not to accept the taint," agreed Sarevok. "There is too much folly in such power, as you yourself have taught me. Do not make the mistake...refuse it and live the life you wish." Rolanna shook her head slightly, amazed he had changed so much he would advise anyone to pass by such power.

"Hm." Nalia pulled at her lower lip. "You would be powerful, Rolanna, but what would you use the power for? What will it use *you* for? I might accept the power of an evil god if I thought I could help people...but I won't fool myself. I would be tempted by the taint just like anyone else. But you know more about yourself than I do."

"So...it's finally come down to this, has it?" said Imoen. "After all we've been through, right from Candlekeep and Baldur's Gate, through Irenicus and Bodhi and their plans... I wonder what Gorion would say now? Me...I...I'll miss you, if you go. You're more than a sister to me...I owe you everything. But who wouldn't want to see the planes? Who wouldn't want to see this through to the proper end?"

"It seems my promise to Gorion is at last at an end." Jaheira smiled; Rolanna thought to see more than a little motherly pride in the smile. "It will be...difficult to watch you move on to a higher state of being, if that is where you choose to go. But you hardly need my guidance any longer. I only pray you make the decision that is right for you, Rolanna. Even Gorion would ask you to do no less."

"What a terrible thing to decide!" Aerie was the most upset of Rolanna's companions, clearly distraught by the choice before her. "You...you've fought for so long to get to this point...but if you choose to keep all this power, there will be nothing more than more fighting... I...I couldn't do it. I wouldn't want to. What a frightening thing to become. But...you've never taken the easy path, have you, Rolanna?"

"You wish to face the taint of Bhaal forever? It will eat away at you., if you do not embrace it willingly." As always, Valygar distrusted magical power. "Make your own destiny would be my advice...do not rest in your sire's shadow."

"No! Say it is not so!" boomed out Minsc. "We will no longer fight evil together? Boo will miss you, Rolanna. Forever shall we hang our heads in sadness in remembrance

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

of our great butt-kicking friend. Boo and I will say we knew the hero Rolanna. And people will of course not believe us. And maybe, they will look at us more strangely than they do now. Or maybe not." Minsc had missed the point, focusing on the lesser result of the end of the quest, the sundering of the party. Or perhaps, in his own non-subtle way, he had enunciated the most important item here.

"To become a power that would walk the planes at will," mused Keldorn. "I cannot imagine facing such a choice myself, Rolanna, and I do not envy you the task. Were the choice my own, however...I would not leave behind my beloved Maria and both my children forever. I could not endure it. And the thought of dealing with the evil taint as you do...no, it would not be for me."

Finally, it was time to hear from her last companion, Anomen.

"What I have always feared is now coming to pass. Your birthright catches up with you, my lady, and I may lose you forever as a result. Do you...know what you will do?"

"I don't want to lose you, Anomen. I love you," said Rolanna.

"I adore you with all my heart, Rolanna. But I would be remiss not to encourage you to take up this challenge...who could refuse such an offer? There is nothing that I could give you that would match such an experience, my love. I am a poor substitute for adventure...there has been more than once that I've wondered how you put up with me. If you decide to stay a mortal, then I will endeavor to provide you with everything you desire, with everything that I am capable of with whatever time we have together. And should you decide to leave, then I will let you go. It may be painful, but I will be overjoyed to know my love has achieved such greatness...and I will remember you always."

"The time has come to make your choice, Bhaalspawn," said the solar. "What is your wish?"

Rolanna stole a last glance at Anomen. She considered the power being offered to her. She imagined thousands worshipping her, calling out to the goddess Rolanna. Absurd. She called out to the solar in a loud voice.

"I do not want the essence of Bhaal. Do what you will with it...I want to remain mortal." She couldn't resist glancing at her companions. Anomen wore a look of stunned surprise, a dawning hope just beginning to overtake it. The others looked nearly as shocked. Really, after all the time they had spent together, she would have thought they would know her better than that.

"Then you shall begin life anew, mortal," said the solar, "without the taint of your sire upon your soul...and the essence of Bhaal shall forever be hidden. You have done well, and freedom shall be your reward." Good, thought Rolanna, let the Bhaal-power be taken away, where it could tempt some celestial to abandon its duty.

The others gathered around her, to congratulate her.

"So the fate of our sire has finally come to its conclusion," said Sarevok, "and the tale has ended perhaps as it should. I look forward to future travels...with you, if you allow."

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

“So you’re going to stay a mortal? Wow!” Imoen excitedly hugged her. “After all that, we’re going to end up on the road again. Must feel good, though, to have your own future ahead of you again, though, no? It’ll be the first time we’ll be able to pick our path since we left Candlekeep! I can’t wait!”

“You will remain, my love?” Tears of joy coursed down Anomen’s cheeks. “Nothing...nothing could make me happier! You will be free of your dark taint, and both of us will be free to live our future together! Oh, joyous day!”

“Your decision has been made, godchild.” The solar bowed to her, again. “Now the act must be carried out...prepare yourself!”

In the moment before the solar acted, to imprison the Bhaal power, and send the party back to the world of Faerun, Rolanna had a few moments to consider herself.

She felt...lessened. Although she had constantly fought against it, the Bhaal-power had been like a heated stove, stoking her internal power. She had come to rely on it, and felt unbalanced without it. She wondered how much of herself, of her actions, had been driven by her Bhaal-taint, and what she would be like now.

Then she looked at her friends. She realized her love for them was as strong as ever. She considered Anomen in particular; she felt no change in the loving, sexual excitement that gripped her whenever she looked his way. She smiled, basking in the warmth of the emotion. Nothing of any real importance had, after all, been stripped from her.

Epilogue

Aerie: Aerie continued adventuring after leaving Rolanna's company, although she only continued to serve as Minsc's witch for a short period. Driven in her travels to oppose slavery in any form, her compassion grew tainted by revenge; revenge for what had been taken when she was in chains. She might have lost herself entirely had she not stumbled across a group of Avariel winged elves enslaved in Cormyr. They compelled her to come to Faenya-Dail, the home she was originally stolen from, and she learned much while there. Most importantly, she learned she was no longer one of them, and stopped pining for wings she wouldn't use anyway. Aerie eventually became a high priestess in Understone, a gnomish village her mentor Quayle had sometimes spoken of. He had been her true family, and it was among his people that she finally found peace.

Nalia: Nalia grew quite powerful after her association with Rolanna. Initially she traveled, learning magical lore and making influential friends, but after a year she returned to Amn and her family home of de'Arnise Hold. She found it in the control of none other than Isaea Roenal, but she was no longer the wayward child that he expected, and single-handedly brought him to justice for his indiscretions. She declared herself the inheritor of her father's ducal title, becoming a beloved ruler, respected archmage, and eventually earning a seat on the Amnish Council of Six itself. She would become a prominent figure in Amn for many years, constantly fighting for the good of the common folk and making many frustrated enemies among the nobility and Cowled Wizards both.

Keldorn: Keldorn Firecam thought his travels with Rolanna marked the end of his active career, both as an adventurer and in service to the Order. He retired to Athkatla, hoping to live in as much peace as an old warrior can expect, but the call to serve came

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

one last time. It was years later, and Amn was besieged by giants. In his 60th winter, Keldorn and five knights held a strategic pass until the main Amnish force could arrive. He won the day, but his wounds were severe and the old paladin fell on the battlefield. As his knights watched, the hand of Torm descended upon the scene, and when it departed, Keldorn was gone. From that day, visions of the True God were accompanied by the stalwart ghostly form of Keldorn at his right hand.

Valygar: Valygar continued adventuring for several years after the Bhaalspawn saga, traveling among the wilds and becoming a common sight near Waterdeep. In time he would retire to Athkatla, content to assume a contemplative life on his family estate, but admirers among the nobility would not let him rest. He was pressured into assuming the title of Chief Inspector, a responsibility he didn't want, but corruption within the city soon gained his ire. Surprising even himself, Valygar became an effective leader, and it was this term in office that truly restored the Corthala family name. Valygar eventually married and his only son, the pride of his life, took the lessons of the father to heart. He would go on to lead the Cowled Wizards, becoming its greatest agent of reform.

Mazzy: The perils that Mazzy Fentan faced at the side of Rolanna did nothing to dissuade her thirst for adventure. In fact, it was not long after the events in Tethyr that she formed the Fentan Knights, a stalwart band of heroes that spawned tales across the Realms. They battled trolls to save endangered towns, turned back tides of orcs to preserve ancient forests, and faced a rogue dragon in its own lair just to make the world a better place. Their legend was larger than life, especially so for Mazzy, and it was said on occasion that if valor were inches, she'd be twenty feet tall. For all her risks, Mazzy eventually passed peacefully at a ripe old age, knowing she could take pride in everything she had done.

Minsc: With the saga of the Bhaalspawn closed, Minsc fulfilled a long promised oath. He returned to Rashemen, accompanied by Aerie acting as his witch, hoping to regale the Icedragon Berserker Lodge with the tales of his deeds, and earn a place within its hallowed halls. His words were not needed. Every tavern in Faerun had a bard singing of the valiant ranger, and he was welcomed as a hero. Eventually he formed his own adventuring company, the Justice Fist, striking fear in the hearts and faces of evil until, in his advancing age, he again set out across the Realms...and disappeared. And what of Boo? Well, what is Minsc without Boo? The two would never be separated, and some say they are together still, up amongst the stars where hamsters are giants and men become legends.

Jaheira: The events of the Bhaalspawn saga affected Jaheira deeply. It was her duty to protect the greater balance of things, but in the years to come she found an increased portion of that fight occurring within her own mind. Witness to great change while in Rolanna's company, she had become acutely aware of how fleeting life was, and how the loss of those she held dear ate away at her thoughts. In time she would be known as a tireless champion of balance, one that sometimes acted in concert with the Harpers and sometimes did not. Always, however, she remained distant and guarded, never staying long in any one place. Jaheira would cross the Realms thrice over, but she never did return to Tethyr or the Sword Coast.

Throne of Bhaal: The 'Good' Side

Sarevok: In the years following his resurrection by Rolanna, Sarevok never settled in any one place for long. In Berdusk he is said to have routed an army of invading orcs, displaying such fearsome power and rage that terrified locals weren't sure whom to fear more. In Westgate he arrived as conqueror, brutally enforcing his will only to mysteriously vanish months later. He acted like a man that did not know himself, and all the stories agreed that Sarevok was a tortured soul, balancing between life and death, never to achieve either. Eventually he disappeared, said to have assaulted the Abyss itself, or even taken his own life. In truth, he journeyed to Kara-Tur to bury his one true love, the warrior Tamoko. He never returned, though the stories endure.

Imoen: And what of Imoen, the eternal child? She had long stood in the shadow of Rolanna, but she was her own person, and would find her fate where she pleased. She journeyed with Anomen and Rolanna for a time, but found they had all changed, and eventually struck out on her own. She returned to Candlekeep, her formidable skill in magic granting a greater appreciation for its tomes. It was smaller than she remembered, however, and she did not stay long. Later she was seen in such vaunted company as Khelben "Blackstaff" and Elminster, by all accounts encouraging them to not be such stick-in-the-muds. Her influence grew over time, and she may have founded a thieves' guild that now operates all the way to Neverwinter. When asked of this she always answered with a smile of purest innocence. "Heya," she would say, "it's just me, Imoen."

Anomen: Rolanna, abandoning her place in the Order of the Radiant Heart, journeyed with Anomen far away, seeking to know her new self. However, they did not stop opposing evil, or righting injustices. Eventually, tales of their continued adventuring spread until they were known as heroes almost everywhere they went. So prolific were their careers that the proposed date of their wedding kept getting moved back, either due to impending crisis or some lucrative adventure that one or the other would insist on investigating. Finally a date approached that both Rolanna and her beloved were determined to keep, and the much heralded event drew heroes and dignitaries from across Faerun. The couple had touched the lives of many, and those people arrived in droves to watch Elminster himself unite the two in one of the grandest ceremonies the city of Baldur's Gate had ever seen. Anomen and Rolanna retired from public life shortly thereafter, although, if tales be true, their adventures never truly ended.

Appendices

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Appendix: Aerie Romance

One path through the romance possible between Aerie and the main player.

* * *

Aerie: “My wings have been clipped...oh, I wish you could understand how it feels to be bound to the ground, chained and weighted like a miserable prisoner of earth...”

Player: “What was it like to fly, Aerie?”

Aerie: “Oh...it-it’s so hard to describe. It’s the ultimate freedom, to soar above the clouds and become part of the wind, itself. I remember I used to be so happy. The clouds are a special place up there, Player...it’s like a land of billowing white beauty that you can almost walk upon.”

* * *

Aerie: “Have you...have you ever heard of my people? The Avariel?”

Player: “The winged elves? Very little. I thought they were all gone.”

Aerie: “Most of us were, according to what I remember my mother telling me. Killed by the dragons before the First Flowering. But some of us still survive in isolated places. My own people live high in the mountains to the far south, in a place called Faenya-Dail, separated from contact with others. It is...was...a grand and majestic place. My memory is dim, but whenever the thought of it crosses my mind, my eyes still blur with tears.”

Player: “Tell me more about your people, Aerie.”

Aerie: “Our...our homes were open places of marble pillars and vistas from which you could watch the entire mountain range below. There was no place you could not spread your wings... We cherished the wind and the rains...we breathed in life, Player, and lived in peace with each other. There were distinct societies among us, as I remember. There were...great aerial warriors who defended us, possessing glass weapons that radiated in the sunlight... And my own class pursued art and knowledge, building the great buildings and filling them with glorious wonders. It...it was.....I am sorry, Player, I can speak of it no longer. I think of my lost home and I am reminded of my poor uncle Quayle. It...it simply wrenches my heart...”

* * *

Aerie: “I...everyone here seems too unhappy and severe...I am so unused to living this way. In the circus, we always were cheerful. Or, at least, Uncle Quayle was determined to be. He used to say that a frown would never get anything useful done. I think everyone could use some cheering up... what about you, Player?”

Player: “Whatever. Just don’t go turning anyone into a chicken or anything foolish like that.”

Aerie: “(giggle!) A chicken? Now, that would be a neat trick! I’ll have to work on that, you silly man! Ha ha ha!”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Aerie: "I...I have been looking at the scars...on my back. The stumps that were...that were once my wings. They do not...they do not make me truly homely, do they? Am I...am I ugly to you?"

Player: "It would take far more than a couple of scars to hide all the other beauty you possess, Aerie."

Aerie: "R-really? You are...very kind to say so, Player. I...I suppose I am too proud, that I miss my white wings so. When I was first enslaved, I was kept in a small cage and put on display. I had no room to stand, much less stretch my wings. I...I tried to warn my captor, I pleaded to him.....but my wings withered and became bloody and diseased. Until, finally, he was forced to...to...saw them off. It was...it was so painful and horrid! I've felt like a great part of me has been missing ever since. I am incomplete. I...do not feel beautiful, Player. Not anymore."

Player: "You placed too much of yourself in your wings, Aerie. You have to look at the rest of yourself and find beauty in that, too."

Aerie: "It is...very hard for me. But I shall try to think as you say...and I thank you for your kind words."

Alternate if Viconia is in competition for the main player's affection.

Viconia: "Must you act so pathetically within the earshot of others? What is it that you expect him to say? That he thinks your scars add character? Are you truly so witless?"

Aerie: "I... I was talking to him, not to you! You've made your feelings on everything apparent enough!"

Viconia: "Oh, did I hurt your feelings? Have I scarred our precious butterfly even worse, now?"

Aerie: "Go away, Viconia. M-maybe it is silly of me to ask you about my scars, Player. I... I just respect your opinion."

Alternate if Jaheira is in competition for the main player's affection.

Jaheira: "Have some backbone, girl. Do not wilt like a flower and expect him to pick you up. Have some respect for yourself."

Aerie: "I was j-just asking for his opinion... is that so bad, Jaheira?"

Jaheira: "I suggest you forget your scars, child. Life has treated you harshly, but it will be harsher, still, if you cannot get over your loss."

Aerie: "I... I don't know. Maybe it was silly of me to ask you, Player. I just... respect your opinion. I have no idea what I look like... to men."

* * *

Aerie: "Have I told you of how I was captured and enslaved, initially?"

Player: "No, you haven't."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: "It was...my fault, really. I was away from Faenya-Dail, flying just for the glory of it. I...spotted a large group of armed men assaulting some humans on the ground below. They were slavers, although I didn't know that at the time. When I saw a human child crying and desperately trying to run away from them, my heart clenched with concern. I was distraught. My mother had always warned me to be wary of outsiders...but I did not heed her warnings this time. I flew down to aid the child, swooping to carry him away. The child was surprised and frightened, and his struggles slowed me...enough so that a slaver struck me with an arrow. I plummeted to the ground and was knocked unconscious. When I awoke...I was in my cage. I was the prize of the slavers...to be sold to the highest bidder. They were pleased to sell me to the circus for a great amount of gold.... I...I suppose...I suppose I was glad to learn that the child escaped, after all. He ran away after my fall. Hopefully, he survived...."

Player: "What else could you have done? It's not your fault it turned out as it did, Aerie."

Aerie: "It is, though...it was foolish of me to disregard my teachings. And I have paid for it dearly. I was bereft of my home...and then my wings, Player. I...I am glad that Quayle yet lives. And...and I have found you, Player. Perhaps the gods have begun to forgive my foolish pride."

* * *

Aerie: "I miss my Uncle Quayle. I miss his presence dearly."

Player: "It's obvious that you're very close to him."

Aerie: "Quayle befriended me when I was caged. H-he would...bring me things. To eat...or to make me more comfortable. And he would teach me, sometimes. He hated the owner for keeping me caged. And...and when they had to cut off my wings, he took me in. He taught me all he knew, and gave me my faith in Baervan Wildwanderer. I was happy...of a sort...while I was with him. I owe him so much."

Player: "Baervan Wildwanderer? That is a gnomish god, isn't it?"

Aerie: "Yes. After I lost my wings, I could not bear to turn to my winged goddess, Aerdrie Faenya. I was filled with utter loss. It was Quayle who consoled me and renewed my faith. Baervan is called the Masked Leaf...he is the gnomish god of nature. I...I know it is strange for an elf to pay him homage, but that is the way it is. I was always entranced by Quayle's tales of Baervan's escapades with his racoon companion, Chiktikka Fastpaws. They were filled with humor and kindness, and indicative of Baervan's gentle nature. Baervan brought me my faith back...he gave me peace when I needed it most. And I shall always pay him homage in my heart. Is that so strange, Player?"

Player: "Perhaps a little."

Aerie: "Ha, you are probably correct. I am a flightless elf lost in a strange land and am plenty strange, myself. What I would not give, sometimes, to forget what I have known. I shall think of my dear friend, then, and sing a quiet song to honor both he and Baervan while we travel."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Aerie: “Have you traveled much? I have been over much of Amn and Tethyr with the circus...although it was not always the most pleasant way to voyage.”

Player: “I have been traveling since I left Candlekeep many, many months ago.”

Aerie: “I have not been that far north...the circus mainly made its way around Amn and further south. I’ve been to Eshpurta and Murann, among other places...but people are all the same. They gawked at me when I was caged...pointed and were cruel. Once I was out of my cage, the people were no kinder...if it were not for Quayle, I could not have stood it. I...I think I am glad, finally, to be traveling away from the staring and jeering crowds. I am away from prying eyes, voyaging freely...on the ground, at least. And...and I am glad to be traveling with you, Player. You have saved my life and...made me feel very welcome.”

Player: “I am glad you are here, Aerie. You’ve proven your worth more than once.”

Aerie: “You...you are making me blush, Player. Th-thank you.”

Alternate if Viconia is in competition for the main player’s affection.

Viconia: “I will tell you what would make this journey more pleasant. Not having to listen to the constant whimpering of a wounded dove.”

Aerie: “I was just trying to talk to someone about traveling. Why must you be so cruel?”

Viconia: “You think you are the only one who has met harshness in this world? Be glad that having your wings ripped from your back is the extent of your misery, fool!”

Aerie: “You are no martyr, Viconia, you don’t fool me! And... and I am not interested in *your* travels, I was asking Player about his!”

Alternate if Jaheira is in competition for the main player’s affection.

Jaheira: “None of our travels have been overly pleasant, child. If your view is that we are on some carefree outing, you are desperately in need of correction.”

Aerie: “I never said that was what I thought! And even if I did, I... I don’t think I would need correction from such a bitter, nagging woman as you!”

Jaheira: “Bitter and nagging, am I? Better that than a wide-eyed doe with no sense to realize the universe does not revolve around her. Experience will bring perspective, I imagine.”

Aerie: “Yes, well I don’t need the benefit of *your* experience, Jaheira. I was asking Player about his. I...I just wanted to talk about his travels, is all.”

* * *

Aerie: “AHHH! HELP ME! HELP ME, PLEEEAAASE!”

Player: “What is it, Aerie? By the gods...you’re drenched with sweat! What’s wrong?!”

Aerie: “I... (gasp)...I was having a dream. A most dreadful nightmare! Please...please sit with me for but a short while...I am shaken to my very core...”

Player: “Certainly. What was the dream about?”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “(shudder) I...I was back in the circus, after my owner had decided that my wings had become too diseased. I had been laying in my cage, sweating and delirious for days.....his men came and pulled me out, and my wings burned so! I could barely cry out, I was so weak! And...and they began to saw off my wings...hacking at them with rusted knives! (shudder) I screamed and screamed! They...hacked off...my wings and then used...torches to seal my wounds. Oh, Player...! (sob!) Oh, Player, I...I...!”

Player: “Shh...calm yourself. I understand.”

Aerie: “It...it felt like I was there again! I can...I can still feel my wings being torn from my back.... I...I’m sorry, Player. It was so long ago, I should not still be so torn. I...I must resign myself to my fate. Come...let us continue on with your journey....”

* * *

Aerie: “I have been thinking...I shall never fly again, never taste the freedom of my wings, I am sure of it. I...I don’t know if I can face this wretched existence on the ground...!”

Player: “Life down here isn’t so wretched, Aerie.”

Aerie: “But it *is*! It is, Player! How could you understand, when you haven’t flown in the clouds? To feel weightless and free! Oh, how I miss it!”

Player: “Well, your wings are gone, now, aren’t they? You’re going to have to find the strength to face up to it!”

Aerie: “Find the strength?! Find the strength?! How can you be so cruel as to cast that at me?! I...I am a member of a proud race...my wings were everything to me! I can never go back to Faenya-dail! I could not face them without my wings! Here I am, stuck like an insect crawling on the dirt.... And you tell me to simply be strong?! W-well...what am I supposed to be strong for?! I...I hate this existence...”

Alternate if Viconia is in competition for the main player’s affection.

Viconia: “Well, perhaps you will leap off the nearest cliff, then, and spare the rest of us the wretchedness of your company. Some of us have better things to do than listen to your bellyaches.”

Aerie: “Oh, yes, I know! I’ve seen you sizing him up like...like he is some piece of steak! You think the rest of us don’t know?”

Viconia: “Why should I care? Do you deny your own intentions? The ‘wounded bird’ you play, floundering, crying to attract Player’s attention. It is pathetic.”

Aerie: “That...that has *nothing* to do with it! What...what’s pathetic is that you actually think anyone would be interested in a cold, heartless, evil woman like you!”

Viconia: “If Player shows you the slightest attention it is out of pity for a poor little dove. The same cannot be said for any male’s interest in *me*.”

Aerie: “I don’t care! I don’t care! Player, I can’t stand this! I can’t stand *her*, and I especially can’t stand being stuck on the ground like some worm, oh Baervan, help me!”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Alternate if Jaheira is in competition for the main player's affection.

Jaheira: "Oh, come now, child. I have been listening to your simpering for quite some time, and it begins to grate on the nerves. You are in this group to help, as I recall...so pull yourself together!"

Aerie: "I am *not* your child! I'm older than you are, more than likely! And...and the only thing my 'simpering' does is distract you from those little looks you are always giving him!"

Jaheira: "I...I do no such thing! You are mad, girl! Obviously a life of adventuring is too much for you."

Aerie: "If...if a life of adventure will turn me into an annoying, heartless woman ready to abandon her dead husband's memory so soon after his death, then...then maybe you're right!"

Jaheira: "You cross a line, Aerie. You do not know enough about love to question my love for Khalid. Mention his name again and you shall regret it."

Aerie: "I don't care! I don't care! Player, I can't stand this! I can't stand *her*, and I especially can't stand being stuck on the ground like some worm, oh Baervan, help me!"

* * *

Aerie: "I...I am sorry for the way I yelled at you. I sometimes feel...as if I have been weighted down by many stones...but I should not have reacted so to your words."

Player: "It's alright, Aerie...but you are going to have to accept your fate and find a way to deal with it."

Aerie: "I...I suppose you are correct. But how can I? Tell me how I can ever accept this, Player?"

Player: "You've got to find another reason to live, Aerie...something else to hold onto."

Aerie: "I just wish I knew what that was. It was once so easy...why have the gods punished me so? I shall try, Player...I will try to be strong. I just...don't know if I can."

* * *

Aerie: "Why must we always be fighting? All I see is bloodshed and battle...and it drains me. Do you...do you not yearn for a life of peace and contemplation?"

Player: "Sometimes battle is required, Aerie...it is not something that I have a choice about."

Aerie: "None of us has ever had a choice, I suppose. But I see no good that comes out of fighting and constant struggle."

Player: "I suppose you are right, Aerie. It is pointless, I sometimes think."

Aerie: "And yet it continues on and on. I...I don't know how much more of this I can take. I feel so empty inside...."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Aerie: "I...need you to tell me what the worth of a life on the ground is. Is there anything to compare to the freedom of living in the clouds?"

Player: "There are many things that are wonderful, but I don't know if they are better than your former life."

Aerie: "No...they can't be. Everything of beauty can be seen from the sky. And there are so many places you cannot go if all you can do is walk."

Player: "It's the way life is. But I'll be here to show you the better parts."

Aerie: "Are there better parts, Player? How would I recognize them if I discovered them? I...I just don't know if I can wait for them to come along. Just...just ignore me, Player. I must seem very pitiful and wretched to moan so all the time. You must despise me."

* * *

Before resting for the night.

Aerie: "W-we're stopping? (sob!) Oh...I...I just feel like collapsing here and dying. I just...don't think I can go on. Perhaps it is better and more fitting if I just...just die. Like a bird whose wings are broken, I am useless, Player...utterly useless. (sob!)"

Aerie: "I've....I've had enough of this life! (sob!) P-perhaps it would be better if I...just went back to the circus..."

Player: "Pull yourself together, Aerie! You haven't even tried to face this!"

Aerie: "But I have, Player, I have! I...I just don't have the strength! I'm so useless...."

Player: "You're not useless, Aerie! And you do have the strength! You just have to reach down and find it!"

Aerie: "(sob!) I...I can't!"

Player: "Yes you can! You have a choice, Aerie: either be strong and live or lay down and die! That's your choice! Do you *want* to die?"

Aerie: "N-no...no, I don't want to die. Maybe...maybe I will think on what you have said. Let...let me just sleep...for now."

Alternate if Viconia is in competition for the main player's affection.

Viconia: "Indeed you are. I have little idea why he even keeps you about."

Aerie: "Shut up, drow! Shut up! As if anyone would listen to... to the opinions of some poisonous serpent! Spend your venom elsewhere, Viconia! He won't listen to you!"

Viconia: "What if he will? Perhaps my charms appeal more than yours. You might amuse for a few moments, but Player deserves someone of vigor like me."

Aerie: "Nobody deserves you, just like nobody deserves some horrid disease! You're like some affliction that should be cut off from the rest of the body!"

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Viconia: "Like your wings? Oh, don't glare little girl. You have nothing to offer Player, no matter how desperate you play. You cannot compete."

Aerie: "There...there is more to love and affection than frequent trips to the bedroom, Viconia! I'm sure Player wouldn't care for someone who has spent most of her life on her back!"

Viconia: "Perhaps we should ask him. What of it, Player? You don't actually see anything in this cripple, do you? Put her in her place, as it should be."

Player: "I like Aerie. I'm not going to put her in her place, and neither will you."

Viconia: "So be it. Crawl like some orphaned puppy; spend your time with the cripple if it pleases you. I do not know how I missed this weakness within you earlier."

Aerie: "Oh, Player...this...this is so embarrassing! I...I didn't mean for it all to come out like this! Nothing ever seems to go right!"

Alternate if Jaheira is in competition for the main player's affection.

Jaheira: "If you continue to cry in such a fashion while we are attempting to help him on his quest, then you are indeed useless. For the last time: pull yourself together, girl!"

Aerie: "Shut up, Jaheira! You think he'll be somehow impressed because...because you're so mean? You do nothing but boss people around! No wonder that Khalid was the only man who would marry you!"

Jaheira: "I warned you before, girl! You know nothing of my Khalid and I will not tolerate your speaking of him!"

Aerie: "Or what?! I do know of your Khalid! They say...they say he was a weak man who you bossed around! Well, Player isn't like that! He isn't!"

Jaheira: "I never said he was! And I will not have a foolish girl disparage my dead husband regardless of what you think my intentions towards Player are!"

Aerie: "But it's you who are jealous, Jaheira! You're constantly picking on me, glaring at me! You want Player to yourself!"

Jaheira: "You are being foolish. This is obviously some attempt to gather Player's attentions. Player, I suggest you let the girl down easy before more harm is done."

Player: "I happen to like Aerie, Jaheira. I'll do no such thing."

Jaheira: "(sigh) Then it is up to you to help her, Player, if you have such feelings. I shall stay out of it...and away from you. Obviously our friendship upsets her."

Aerie: "Oh, Player...this...this is so embarrassing! I...I didn't mean for it all to come out like this! Nothing ever seems to go right!"

* * *

Aerie: "I...I have been thinking, and...y-you are right. I have been foolish. I may not have my wings, but I have everything else...especially my life, and people who care for me. I am such a silly woman. Whining and crying...I must seem so ridiculous and petty. No man will ever want me, I think...I feel so embarrassed."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "I'm glad you're better...but you're wrong, still. There are many reasons a man would want you...not least of which is your beauty."

Aerie: "Oh, now you're just flattering me, Player! None of that is true, really!"

Player: "Of course it's true. I say what I mean, Aerie."

Aerie: "Oh...I see. Well...thank you, Player. Um...do you...do you think I'm beautiful? I mean...do you feel all these things about me?"

Player: "Yes, I do. I care about you, Aerie."

Aerie: "And I care for you, Player. Th-thank you...for everything you have done...for me. I feel...much better."

* * *

If Haer'Dalis is also romancing Aerie.

Aerie: "I have something I need to ask you."

Player: "What is it, Aerie?"

Aerie: "I...I know this may seem an...odd question. But I need to know...how do you...feel about me?"

Player: "I care for you deeply, Aerie."

Aerie: "Oh, Player...I...th-thank you for saying so! My heart is fluttering so...oh, this is so terrible! Oh, that sounds all wrong! I...I do care for you very much, Player! I do! But I...I also care for Haer'Dalis! This is...so confusing...I must think about this..."

* * *

If Haer'Dalis is also romancing Aerie.

Aerie: "Haer'Dalis? Might I have a...a word with you?"

Haer'Dalis: "But of course, my mourning dove. Whatever your wish might be, this sparrow will endeavor to achieve it."

Aerie: "I...I just wanted you to know...I've noticed the amount of time you've spent with me..."

Haer'Dalis: "Aye, 'tis a pleasure and more than that besides to spend the hours with a lass of talent and refinement such as yourself."

Aerie: "Th-thank you...but I wanted you to know that I...that I have feelings. For Player. I...didn't want you to get the wrong idea..."

Haer'Dalis: "Ah... Well, I'll not lie to you, my mourning dove...I had my eye set upon your gentle heart. But 'tis always a grand thing when two friends join in love. This sparrow shall not come betwixt the two of you. Be merry, my swan...it's glow suits you well. And who knows? Perhaps I shall play at your wedding!"

Aerie: "Ha ha! Oh, you rascal! It...it's nothing like that! But...but thank you for your understanding..."

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Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: "I've...I've been thinking about some of the things you've told me. I...I wanted you to know that I've come to a decision."

Player: "And what decision is that?"

Aerie: "I am determined to...to face this life on the ground, Player. My wings are gone and that can never be changed. I must learn to appreciate the beauty that I can still see. And I...I hope that you will be here to teach me about it, Player. To show me how one can live on the ground and still...still be happy."

Player: "I'd like that, Aerie."

Aerie: "That makes me glad. I am beginning to wonder what I would have done if you had never come along, Player."

* * *

Aerie: "I have heard from some of the others, about your adventures in the lands of the Sword Coast north of here. It all sounds rather exciting!"

Player: "Exciting? That doesn't sound like you, Aerie."

Aerie: "Oh, I know it must sound strange to hear me say it...but if I'm going to face my life as it is, I want to experience everything that I can. I want to feel the thrill and fear of combat...to pit my magic against our foes. I want to be awed and terrified...to feel everything that my life has to offer me, good or bad. Does that sound strange, Player? Does that make me odd?"

Player: "No odder than the rest of us, Aerie."

Aerie: "Good...that makes me feel a little better. It is strange to be thrilled and yet shivering at the same time...I am free, and I am traveling...and I feel like I am flying."

* * *

Aerie: "Have you been to very many other places besides Amn?"

Player: "Just to Baldur's Gate and several other places along the Sword Coast up north...so far, at least."

Aerie: "I have never been that far north...nor have I traveled anywhere outside of the circus. I have been told about some of the other places in the world where one can go, however.... Calimshan is supposed to be a great place of sand and silks, merchants of all kinds...there are supposed to be strange and exotic dancers and great, spiraling towers. The Moonshae Islands are supposed to have magnificent mountains and waterfalls...along with beaches of blue sand and ancient forests that time has barely touched. And...and the jungles of Chult! Towering trees and vines, exotic spices and flowers that smell of the sultry heat...rainstorms that last for days. ... I...I want to go to these places, Player! I want to voyage there and see their beauty for myself...I want to stand there and feel it...touch it with my hands."

Player: "That sounds wonderful, Aerie...I wouldn't mind joining you someday."

Aerie: "I would like that, Player...although, of course we must pay attention to surviving, first. Likely, we will face death many times...but it is pleasant to dream, isn't it?"

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Aerie: "I've been wondering...do you have any advice for me for combat?"

Player: "You're doing fine, Aerie. Why do you ask?"

Aerie: "I know that you are determined to combat evil...and I wish to do so, as well. I don't want to be a burden...I want to be effective. I want to survive so that I can see the world. I shall try to improve my skills with magic, over and above what my uncle Quayle was able to teach me. I suppose...I suppose that is the best way I can aid you."

* * *

Aerie: "I...I know that it might be difficult to foresee what is to happen in the future...but do you have any plans? Once this is all over, I mean...."

Player: "I haven't given it much thought, actually."

Aerie: "Well...do you see yourself traveling? Or settling down? Do you...do you see yourself with me?"

Player: "I would prefer to be with you, Aerie...if the gods are willing."

Aerie: "That's...that's good. I would like to be with you, if the gods will it. Th-thank you, Player...I just...I just wanted to be sure that you felt the same for me."

* * *

Aerie: "My love...? I...I know that you are tired from the day's travels and that you wish to rest. I...wish to ask you something, before you retire to your blankets...."

Player: "Very well...what is it that you wish?"

Aerie: "Here...come with me away from the eyes of the others. We will not be very far from them. I simply wish privacy. Now that we are alone...let me speak for a moment. You have led me to a tremendous discovery, Player...I have found that I do not need wings to fly. I...do not have much experience with love, Player. With your urging, I have become eager to experience many things...and now I wish to experience this. I...I will show you my body, Player...and I hope it pleases you. Would you...would you stay with me this night, Player? Will you show me what true love consists of?"

Player: "How could I refuse such a sweet offer?"

Aerie: "C-come close to me, then, Player. Let me feel your hands on my skin...let us lay together so I may experience your love and become a woman at last..."

* * *

The next morning.

Aerie: "So...you are awake at last? I have been...watching you sleep for some time, now. It calms me, watching you...and it gave me time to think. You...have made a woman out of me, Player. I love you more deeply than I can say and can only thank you for what you have done for me. But...at the same time...I cannot help but think that things need to be slowed. I am so full of emotion...I want to experience too

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

much and am doing it all too quickly. I feel overbalanced, Player. Quayle would never approve of this, I think. My heart clenches at the thought, but we must stop ourselves from going down this path. I need to...to find out more about myself...before I can attach myself to another. I...hope you understand.”

Player: “No, Aerie! I love you!”

Aerie: “I... I know, Player. You have been very patient with me, and very kind. But I have not found my way in the world, yet... you know so much more than I do. I need to...find out more about myself, Plyaer...I need to become familiar with and experience everything...but slowly. And with you it will never be slow. I...I am willing to stay with you, now. Your quest is too important for me not to help you, even if... if it will be hard, with you so close. And then, after, I can leave. I...I do love you, Player, and I hope you understand. If you would find it too hard...if you want me to go now...I will understand.”

Player: “No...please stay, Aerie.”

Aerie: “Then let us continue. A new day awaits us.”

* * *

Throne of Bhaal material.

Aerie: “Imoen...you grew up in Candlekeep, too, did you not? Since you were very young?”

Imoen: “Yup. I was climbing the walls and driving the monks up them since I was a little girl. Why?”

Aerie: Well...you grew up with Player then, didn’t you?”

Imoen: “Sure did. We were both Gorion’s wards and it wasn’t like there were lots of us kids around, you know.”

Aerie: “I’ve a few questions about Player, then...if you wouldn’t mind me asking. They’re a bit...personal.”

Imoen: “Heck, I don’t mind. Um...Player might, though. You think he can hear us?”

Aerie: “Maybe. Let’s go talk about this somewhere more private, then. I’m just dying of curiosity....”

* * *

Aerie: “I...I know there is a lot on your mind right now. But may I...may I talk to you? About us?”

Player: “Us? I thought you needed to ‘find yourself’ before there could be any us.”

Aerie: “I...this has been a difficult time for me, Player. My life has changed so much since I met you. Since you rescued me from that circus. Sometimes I don’t even feel like I know myself anymore. You’ve...you’ve been so patient this whole time. So understanding. And now, because of you and your love, I’m not that frightened little girl anymore. But...but I’m still scared....”

Player: “You have nothing to be frightened of, Aerie. I’ll always be here to protect you.”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “I’m frightened of what’s to come, Player. So much has changed so fast. I love you, but what if...what if I suddenly lose you? What if some irresistible force tears us apart? That’s why I wanted to wait. Until things were more...stable.”

Player: “Sometimes you have to live for the moment, Aerie—before the moment is gone.”

Aerie: “I...I know you’re right, Player. I’m just so worried about losing you later on that I’m afraid to let myself love you now. It’s foolish, but I can’t help it. I want to let myself love you, Player. Please, just be patient with me a while longer.”

* * *

Before resting for the night.

Aerie: “I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier. About waiting...and how sometimes we can wait so long for something we want, we end up losing what we already have.”

Player: “You sound like you’ve reached a decision.”

Aerie: “I have, Player. I love you. I want to be with you. Now and forever...but I can’t control the forever. I can only control the now. May I...may I sleep with you tonight? If...if I haven’t already waited too long....”

Player: “I love you, Aerie—with all my heart and soul. I would have waited an eternity for you.”

Aerie: “I’m ready, Player. Ready to commit to you in body, heart and soul. Ready to give myself to you totally. I was afraid before, but not anymore. Whatever the future brings, I want us to make the most of the time we have together. Starting right now.”

Player: “I couldn’t have said it better myself, my love.”

Aerie: “Shh...the fire is burning low, and the others are asleep. Why don’t I snuggle in with you, Player? And when the morning comes, I promise I’ll still be here. I won’t push you away anymore, my love. And I swear I’ll never let you go.”

* * *

Volo’s description of the romance.

Few beings have ever been as powerful in both the priestly and wizardly forms of magic as the young girl from the circus. And though she lost her wings, Aerie found something even more valuable...the love of Player.

* * *

False visions created by wraith of vengeance at swamp temple.

Gorion Wraith: “What of the inevitable pain you must give to the one you love? The elven girl you name ‘Aerie.’”

Aerie: “Wh-what do you mean, inevitable pain? Player has brought me only great joy!”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Gorion Wraith: “You know nothing of what you speak. You belong with my failed ward, however, you who are a murderer as much as he.”

Mother of Aerie: “Aerie? Oh, my Aerie...is it really you?”

Aerie: “M-mother?! Oh, mother! What...how can it be you? Where are your wings?!”

Mother of Aerie: “Oh, my dear Aerie. Did you think I would not search for you, search for my own child?”

Aerie: “You...? I didn’t know, Mama, I...”

Mother of Aerie: “Of course I did, my poor child. I searched over the land for many, many months. In vain. In the end, human wizards took my wings and I was murdered.”

Aerie: “No! Mama, don’t say that! That didn’t happen! Wizards couldn’t have murdered you, no!”

Mother of Aerie: “They took my wings for their spells, but they did not murder me. You did, child. Your foolishness in saving the human was the knife to my heart. You murdered your mother.”

Aerie: “No! Noooo! (sob!) No, please, no! Make it stop, Player, make it *stop!*”

Player: “Stop it! She’s not responsible for what happened to you!”

Gorion Wraith: “I will not allow you to be the one who causes the prophecy to become true! I won’t allow it, Player! I will see you dead, first!”

* * *

After defeating wraith of vengeance.

Aerie: “I...I have to go! I have to see if my mother...(sob) It can’t be true, can it? I have to...I have to return to Faenya-Dail!”

Player: “Calm down, Aerie. That wraith was lying.”

Aerie: “You can’t be sure, Player! How did it even know those things? Oh mother! What have I done to you?”

Player: “Aerie, that creature was pure evil. It said those things to hurt you. That’s all.”

Aerie: “I...I have to go back home. I have to find out if that spirit was telling the truth!”

Player: “Don’t go. Whatever the past is, Aerie, it’s in the past.”

Aerie: “What...what are you talking about, Player?”

Player: “You weren’t responsible for your mother’s death, Aerie. No matter what that thing said.”

Aerie: “But I...I... (sigh) I know you’re right, Player. Maybe my mother really is dead...but I didn’t kill her. And returning home won’t bring her back. Besides, I left that part of my life behind a long, long time ago. My place is here now...with you, my love. Someday I plan to go back to Faenya-Dail. But not now. Not if it means

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

deserting you. I swore to stay with you, Player, and I will. I won't let a ghost from my past destroy everything we have built together."

Player: "I'm glad, Aerie. Are you okay?"

Aerie: "No...but I will be. Thank you, Player. Thank you for...well, everything. I couldn't have done this without you by my side. But I don't want the others to get impatient with 'poor little Aerie.' Don't worry about me—I'll be fine once we get moving."

* * *

Aerie: "I had a dream last night...a beautiful dream. But I wasn't sure if I should tell you about it."

Player: "Why not...was I in it? Was I...naughty?"

Aerie: "Player! You are so bad! (giggle). No, this wasn't a 'naughty' dream. This was about us. We were sitting together in our home. Not speaking, just sitting and thinking. And holding hands. We were both old...very old. Old, but happy."

Player: "Just the two of us, Aerie? Don't you see any children in our future?"

Aerie: "Maybe, maybe not. Who can say what the future holds for us? But it was a nice dream while it lasted."

Player: "Ah, my love. I always find your innocence so appealing."

Aerie: "My 'innocence'? I hardly think of myself as 'innocent' anymore, Player. Not after everything we've been through. Maybe once, a long time ago...but I've grown since then. I'm not a wide-eyed little girl anymore."

Player: "What was I thinking? You are truly the epitome of mature and matronly womanhood, Aerie."

Aerie: "(giggle) Oh, Player, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. It's just that everyone always still treats me as a little girl...and I'm one of the most powerful spellcasters in all of Faerun! Maybe the next time someone treats me like a child I'll turn them into a toad. That should get my point across. (grin) And as for you, my love...wait until this evening and I promise you'll see that I'm anything but 'innocent'!"

* * *

After stopping to rest for the night.

Aerie: "Player...I can't sleep. Every time I close my eyes I see the burning buildings of Saradush and the smoking bodies of all those Bhaalspawn lying in the streets! It's horrible!"

Player: "It was horrible, Aerie. An entire city ravaged because some of them shared my tainted blood."

Aerie: "I'm sorry, Player...I was so worried about my own reactions I forgot that it must have been even more upsetting to you. All those who shared your destiny, butchered like that..."

Player: "There's nothing we can do for them now, Aerie. Best to let the dead rest in peace."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “You don’t seem very upset about it, Player! Just because we didn’t know those people doesn’t make their deaths any less meaningful!”

Player: “With as many deaths as I’ve seen in my life I guess I’m just numb to it now. It’s how I cope.”

Aerie: “No, Player, don’t be like that. If you numb yourself to the pain and suffering, you’ll numb yourself to everything! Joy, happiness...even love. We have to accept the good and the bad, my love...but it’s better than feeling nothing at all.”

Player: “You’re right, Aerie. And as long as you’re with me, I know the good will outweigh the bad.”

Aerie: “Yes, my love. We must draw strength from each other. Perhaps...perhaps if you wrap your arms around me I will be able to sleep tonight.... Ah, the comfort of your touch keeps the dark visions at bay. Sleep well, my love, until the morning.”

* * *

Aerie: “Please, my love, hang back here with me a while. Away from the others. I must ask you something...privately. What do you think of Quayle?”

Player: “Your Uncle? He seemed nice enough.”

Aerie: “No, I mean the name. What do you think of Quayle as a name? For a child. A boy.”

Player: “Is there something you’re trying to tell me, my love?”

Aerie: “I’m pregnant, Player! Isn’t it wonderful?”

Player: “Pregnant? I...I...I’m not sure what to say.”

Aerie: “I realize this is not the best timing, but there are still many months before our child will be born. And I...oh, Player (grin)...I can see by your face that you’re still a little overwhelmed by all this. Please...don’t tell the others. Not yet. This joyous news is for you and me alone right now. I’ll...I’ll give you some time to let this news settle in before we discuss our future plans. Hurry...let’s catch up with the others before they get suspicious.”

* * *

Aerie: “My love, have you had a chance to think about our little secret? My...condition?”

Player: “I have Aerie. There is much we need to discuss.”

Aerie: “This child will change our lives completely, my love. And the lives of those who would adventure with us on this quest you have undertaken.”

Player: “Aerie, I think we should find somewhere safe for you to stay until after the baby is born.”

Aerie: “This will not be so hard as you might imagine, Player. We may very well conclude our adventures long before my condition even becomes noticeable. And if not, I can still fight and cast spells while our child grows within me.”

Player: “What if you get injured? What will happen to the baby?”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “While the babe still dwells within me, it will draw its strength from me. The healing magics that restore my health will restore the health of the unborn child in my womb—even resurrecting it to life, if that should be necessary.”

Player: “And if the baby is born before our adventures are done? What then?”

Aerie: “If the child is born before we finish our adventures, I shall bundle it on my back—as is the custom of my people, the Avariel. This child is your offspring, Player...it shares the blood of Bhaal. At Saradush you saw what happened to your kin. There is nowhere I can go, no place I can hide that will keep our baby from being hunted and slaughtered. The safest place is here with us, where we can protect our child. I know this will be difficult, my love. But I have suffered through worse. When I lost my wings I found the strength to go on. Surely I have the strength for this.”

Player: “If you think you can do this, Aerie, I will support every step of the way.”

Aerie: “I...I know together we can do this, Player. As long as I have you by my side, helping me and watching over me, I’ll be okay. And so will our baby. But...please don’t mention this to the others. They’re finally starting to treat me with respect now. I don’t want everyone to suddenly start making a big fuss over ‘poor pregnant Aerie.’ ”

Player: “Eventually they’re going to figure it out. You can’t hide something like this.”

Aerie: “If I wear long, loose robes no one will notice until the last few weeks. And if neither of us draws any attention to it while the others are around no one will suspect anything. Please, Player...let’s keep this our special little secret.”

Player: “As you wish my love. Mum’s the word.”

Aerie: “Oh, Player...you and your jokes! I do love you so. But come, the others will wonder what we are up to if we tarry any longer.”

* * *

Aerie: “My love...dawn is approaching soon. May I ask you something?”

Player: “Of course, my dearest Aerie. You can ask me anything.”

Aerie: “This is the happiest time of my life, Player. We have shared trials and tribulations. We share the deepest love. And together we have created a new life. But I know our greatest challenges are still ahead. Your ultimate destiny—and the destiny of our child—is yet to come. I...I don’t know what awaits us, Player. But once again I fear I may lose you....”

Player: “Aerie...we will always be together. We are united as one.”

Aerie: “I know, my love. But still...could you do one thing for me? Could we celebrate our love in the traditions of my people?”

Player: “I have trouble picturing you in a bridal gown, Aerie.”

Aerie: “Oh, Player! (giggle) Such ceremonies are not the custom of my people! True, we Avariel have weddings—but they are usually grand and formal events reserved for nobility and political alliances cemented through marriage. Most of my kind prefer

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

a simpler marriage ceremony...the uniting of two hearts with a simple vow as the sun appears on the horizon, for example.”

Player: “Dawn is approaching, my love...shall we swear our love to each other now?”

Aerie: “Thank you, Player! I, Aerie, shall stand by your side in both peace and battle. I shall shoulder your burdens as you shoulder mine. I shall unite myself with you in body, mind and spirit. And I shall remain with you always, as your wife. This I swear by the light of the rising sun.”

Player: “And I, Player, shall stand by your side in both peace and battle. I shall shoulder your burdens as you shoulder mine. I shall unite myself with you in body, mind and spirit. And I shall remain with you always, as your husband. This I too swear by the light of the rising sun.”

Aerie: “You cannot imagine how happy this simple ceremony has made me, Player! I wish...I wish we could just lie here and savor this moment forever. But of course, I know we cannot. Even now the others are stirring, and we must rise and continue our quest—for your own sake, as well as that of our child. Come, my love...let us face the world as husband and wife.”

* * *

Aerie: “Please...my love. (groan) I must...I must stop for the night. I...I think it’s time! The baby is coming!”

Player: “Now? You’re going to have your baby now?”

Jan: “So...you finally got little Aerie pregnant. About time, if I do say so myself. You two were going at it like a pair of hormonally imbalanced bunnies. I was beginning to wonder if Player’s bow was out of arrows, if you get my drift. It’s like the time my cousin Hedgehog...”

Keldorn: “You...you are with child, Aerie? But...but you are not married! Unless we sanctify your union with Player this child will be a bast—”

Player: “Don’t even go there, Keldorn!”

Edwin: “Well, it would seem the leader of our little group has impregnated the impressionable circus child. (And here I thought she was merely getting chubby without the ring master’s whip to keep her in shape.)”

Viconia: “So the wingless one is pregnant? I thought she was merely becoming fat.”

Mazzy: “This is so exciting! Here, let me help. I have a little experience with child birth...though not much.”

Jaheira: “Ah, this time comes sooner than I expected... I have little experience with the gestation period of the Avariel. Do not give me that look, Player. Did you really think we were so blind we would not see Aerie’s swollen belly beneath her robes? Fortunately I have prepared some herbs to ease her pain during this coming ordeal.”

Aerie: “Augh...it hurts! Oh, my love...come quickly. Take my hand, please!”

Player: “Don’t worry, Aerie. I’m right here. Just...uh...just breathe!”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “I...oh! the pain! (gasp) (pant) I...I can do this, Player...as long as you’re with me.”

One birth later.

Aerie: “It’s a boy! Oh, what a beautiful son we have—look at him wiggle his toes!”

Jan: “You did well, Aerie. He’s a fine, healthy looking baby! Reminds me of the advice me own father gave me about raising kids. Jan, he said, whatever you do.... *Hey!* The little tyke just smiled at me!”

Korgan: “Huh—I thought ye flyin’ elves hatched yer young from eggs! Ach—‘tis too bad...I fancied an omelet this morning!”

Imoen: “Oh...he’s so precious. Hey, since Player and I are brother and sister, I guess this makes me an aunt!”

Aerie: “I...I have a name chosen already, Player. If you don’t mind. I want to call him Quayle.”

Player: “I would be proud to have my son named after your Uncle, Aerie.”

Aerie: “Hello, Quayle...can you say ‘mommy’? Oh, he is so cute. He looks just like you, Player. He looks just like a little human. Why don’t you hold him for a bit? You won’t break him.”

Valygar: “Player, you must be very proud. I was against having children of my own, given my family’s cursed bloodline...but if you’re willing to give it a try, maybe I should reconsider.”

Haer’Dalis: “Ah, Player...had you not kept young Aerie’s condition secret, I would have composed a sonnet to celebrate this great occasion!”

Minsc: “Congratulations, Player. Soon this tiny one will be planting his wee feet into the backside of evil, just like his daddy! We should give him a tiny sword to wave at the villains as we battle! Oh...Boo says that may not be such a good idea.”

Aerie: “He’s certainly a handsome lad, isn’t he? Just like his daddy. Can you say ‘daddy’ little Quayle? Can you say ‘mommy’? Oh, he looks hungry. You better give him back to me for a bit.”

Player: “Here he is...mommy. How are you feeling after all this?”

Aerie: “I’ll be fine, Player. I’ll just patch myself up with a few healing spells and I’ll be ready to go. Help strap little Quayle onto my back, and we can set off again and make the world a better place for our son.”

* * *

Offer of godhood made by solar.

Aerie: “Oh, I knew this was coming. I knew this would happen. I suspected what your success would mean. But to have to face it now.... Oh, Player, the very thought of being without you...of raising our child alone....”

Player: “I don’t want to be without you either, Aerie. I love you.”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “And I love you. Ooh, sometimes I love you so much it hurts. I lie awake at night and wonder what kind of future we could have or what will happen to our child. I don’t know...and neither do you. There was a time I didn’t know what love was...I thought that we needed to be apart until I realized that just because you were my first love didn’t make it any less real. You’ve done so much for me, I can’t even begin to explain. And now you’ve given me a child. But if you feel that you need to accept this power...and that I have to let you go...than I suppose I can do that. It will...hurt. Just the thought of it makes me want to scream. But I couldn’t have you hate me for holding you back from what you deserve. If I was in your position, I don’t know if I could do the same. A child, love, our future together...what are these mortal concerns next to the power and responsibilities of an immortal?”

Player: “If I had the power of Bhaal I could make sure you and our child were well looked after, Aerie. I could even restore your wings.”

Aerie: “You...could? Yes, I suppose you could do almost anything, couldn’t you? Except keep us together. Your love made it possible for me to find who I am. I have strength, Player...enough for both myself and our baby. You taught me that. I cannot tell you what your destiny is, Player. I can only tell you to do what you feel is right. I can accept what that means, my love...even if it means I must raise our child alone.”

After deciding to decline godhood.

Aerie: “You...you stayed, Player. Oh, my love! I’m so happy! We will have a life together...a good life. You, me and the baby! You won’t regret this, you won’t, I swear!”

* * *

Epilogue: Aerie and Player would prove inseparable, their adventuring careers becoming secondary to the raising of their son, and eventually a daughter as well. Their later years would hold one last great trek, however, as Aerie still suffered a sadness from her time enslaved and the loss of her wings. Together she and Player sought the Avariel of Faenya-Dail, the winged elves she was stolen from so long ago. They discovered not only her people, but loving parents that had spent years searching for their lost child. With no more mystery or confusion to cloud their lives, it was there, among the clouds, that Aerie and Player would finally be married. Their union, it is said, was blessed by visions of Aerdrie Faenya and Baervan Wildwanderer both.

Appendix: Jaheira Romance

One path through the romance possible between Jaheira and the main player.

* * *

Jaheira: “So, where to now, fearless leader?”

Player: “Perhaps an inn. I guess it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: It doesn't? I hope you'll come up with something better than that. I will not be put in a position where survival depends on the toss of a coin. Not everyone's coins land on edge, you know. I'm...I'm sorry, Player. I do not wish to cause undue strain in our party. I am merely a bit stressed, and no doubt you are as well.

Player: "Think nothing of it, Jaheira. It is understandable."

Jaheira: "Yes, but not acceptable. We are friends, and should act as such. I...I apologize."

* * *

Jaheira: "It has been some time since I have been this far south. I recall seeing Gorion here some years ago. He was a bit out of place away from his books but.... Hmm...seems I cannot help but speak of the dead lately. I did not wish to cause you any distress if I have."

Player: "I do not remember Gorion with sadness, despite his end."

Jaheira: "That is good. He would not have wished his memory to cause pain. I like to think the same is true of Khalid."

Player: "He was a fine man, despite his cautious nature. They both were."

Jaheira: "Yes, though they took risks when necessary. Khalid lived well, and would not allow me to do otherwise. Gorion was all for danger if it would prove fruitful."

Player: "Rules that are meant to be broken, and all that. To know when the boundaries should be pushed."

Jaheira: "True...true enough. You are wise to see as such. Well...enough of this for now. Talk such as this can get maudlin if indulged too often. I have a...a good feeling from this though."

* * *

Jaheira: "Eh, I think I still have a stitch in my leg from lying in that cold cell we were in. It is good to be up and moving."

Player: "I've a few pains from that incident myself, though I'm not as certain of the cause."

Jaheira: "I am not surprised. Irenicus seemed to have a special interest in you. I imagine he will not be the last, and I cannot blame him. I have an interest as well. As a Harper I mean. I wouldn't want you to think.... Um...let's just get moving."

* * *

After awakening from sleep because of Jaheira's nightmare.

Jaheira: "Mmmph...nnno...Nnn...no...No! Wh..wh...what? Nnn...no...No!"

Player: "Your dreams proving a bit ugly? Mine are like that sometimes as well."

Jaheira: "I suppose they would; you have lost people as well. How do you deal with...watching them in your mind over and over? I did not see Khalid's death, but I feel it."

Player: "You feel terrible, but you still feel. It should not consume you."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “‘Lest it consume your memories and you are left with just the sadness.’ From Alaundo? Gorion taught you from the same book I learned from. He was wise in this. Yes, well, we should be going. I am fine now. Thank you.”

* * *

Jaheira: “A copper for your thoughts. You are looking rather pensive today. Doubts about your current path perhaps?”

Player: “Perhaps, though I have little choice in changing where I am bound.”

Jaheira: “Is that your feeling? I was taught we all had choice, but then the great cycle likely did not count on divine interference. You must feel pressures that I do not.”

Player: “On occasion. There are a great many things pulling me to one side or another.”

Jaheira: “Ah, I understand. Most of us would tend towards equilibrium. It would require effort to pull in one direction or another. But you are pulled from the start, with balance being the difficult path. It is the same with nature when civilization intrudes.”

Player: “And what has been the solution there?”

Jaheira: “Solution?”

Player: “But there has to come a time when things must end, for better or worse.”

Jaheira: “Aye, but who knows when such an end will come. We work for balance in case the final count is taken today. Live each day as the last, just in case it is. ‘The present will pass by if you live in the past. Neither should you wait too long for the future to find you.’ Who said this? It was...Khalid. He did not dwell on things, and wished I would not either. I wonder what... Now look, foolish things in my head. Still, these talks always make me feel...better.”

* * *

More missed sleep.

Jaheira: “Mmmph... MmmPHH! Nnn...Khal....Nnnno...I...”

Player: “Jaheira, you were having another nightmare. It’s a wonder you get any sleep at all.”

Jaheira: “Khalid was in the distance, but he would not come closer, and I could not see the way to him. He walked with us, from a distance. He smiled that I was content. I guess...I guess I was.”

Player: “Well, to see you traveling with a group probably meant a lot to him. It meant you could carry on.”

Jaheira: “It...it was not a group. Just...it was just you and I...and I think you are right. Well...um...shall we be off. It is already late in the day. Plenty to do.”

* * *

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: "It is good to be back in Amn, even under these conditions. Still, I would have wished us even further south. I have not seen the land of Tethyr in quite some time."

Player: "Why would you want to go there?"

Jaheira: "It was my home, though it was a long time ago. I trained as a druid in the forest of Tethir. Before that...well, I am told it was a chaotic time. "

* * *

Jaheira: "Blast, our progress is not as it could be, I am sure. Ah, perhaps it is just me. I grow tired of these pursuits. My life was not always such."

Player: "And what did it used to be like? I cannot picture you other than as you are."

Jaheira: "Oh, I am certainly meant to be this way, but I once lived quite peacefully. Druids took me in very young, and you can only be calm when surrounded by balance. It was like that for a long time, but I always felt I should do more. Balance needed to be...encouraged. I wouldn't let it happen again."

Player: "You would not allow what to happen again?"

Jaheira: Oh, nothing. I'm just rambling on. Talking to a trusted friend helps ease the soul. I hope I do as much for you as well. I mean...for the good of the party."

* * *

Jaheira: "I...this may be a bad time or not, but you asked a question of me and I brushed it aside. I would speak of it now...if you still wish to hear."

Player: "I did not want to press if you wanted to remain silent."

Jaheira: "I did, but I...it is not important enough to keep aside. I would rather such things be talked of openly. I know much of you, but you know little of me. You asked what made me seek the Harpers or similar service. I was made aware of what had come before, and what still happened outside of the forests. I came to the druids after my family died during a king's fall. No, I am not royalty, and neither do I grieve. I do not feel their loss in that way. But I was angry that a life was taken from me, even though I still live. It had happened far from the grove, but I brought the conflict there in my manner. I decided that the balance needed help beyond the forest, or it would eventually fail there as well. Simple reasoning, I suppose. I...I don't know why I didn't wish this known. Maybe I thought such a history was unimportant by the standards of others such as...well...such as yourself."

Player: "Do not diminish your beginnings, you have taken control much more effectively than I have."

Jaheira: "I thank you for those words. I find myself drawing strength from you in our close quarters. It has been...a great help. I...I am sorry. We should continue on."

* * *

Jaheira: "We continue on our path and I cannot help but wonder if we walk in balance. I have a role to follow...."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "I assume you speak of your role as a Harper?"

Jaheira: "As Harper and as druid. They are complimentary, despite bards being thought the Harper standard-bearers. Both seek balance over all. I...I think I have done so. Sometimes the proper course is hard to see; what is best overall may seem barbaric at first. You will know this when... if you deal with Harpers in the future."

Player: "It sounds like you do not trust yourself. That is very unlike you."

Jaheira: "The goal is what matters, despite a questionable method. Balance in politics, balance in nature, balance in one's self; all take strong measures to maintain. I think...I think I am the one out of balance, not you. I think...well, I think many things. I...I need more time to consider this. I'm afraid you'll have to indulge my silence for a time longer. I...I apologize for interrupting you."

* * *

Jaheira: "I... I worry sometimes...."

Jaheira: "Player, do you worry of missing friends? Of those missing or...lost? Of course you do, I don't know what prompted me to ask."

Player: "I do not mind. Yes, I hope to spare them the pain of loss I have felt."

Jaheira: "I'm not sure why I brought it up. I just needed to know that...the living and dead are still in mind. They grow distant, but vengeance must still come. I am becoming used to the aftermath of death, but I will not forget what must be avenged. There must be closure. I must do this even as I...as we...move on."

Player: "I know this better than any other. Old wrongs will not be forgotten."

Jaheira: "That is good to know. Those passed beyond will be glad that we do not carry them as a burden, but that we do seek justice in their names. I...I don't brood all the time; I was just thinking of the past and what is to come. I'm trying to balance.... Well, enough whining for today. Let's move on."

Alternate if Viconia is in competition for the main player's affection.

Viconia: "You worry too often. And speak your mind more than the rest of us would like to hear. Mongrels should be silent and respectful to their betters."

Jaheira: "My words were for him, drow. You shall know I am addressing you if I spit in your direction."

Viconia: "Such fire! Did I step on your tail, perhaps? Or are you afraid precious Player will get wind of your true demeanor and stop paying you attention?"

Jaheira: "Player's and my own relationship is none of your concern, if you could even conceive of such a notion. I shall speak to him and you will be silent."

Alternate if Aerie is in competition for the main player's affection.

Aerie: "You worry away at things...sometimes so much I expect them to fall apart. Why he should be interested in your nagging I don't know."

Jaheira: "What has gotten into you, Aerie? I would not expect you to leap upon me so, for a simple statement."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Aerie: “But we all know what is coming, Jaheira. Nagging, picking, bossing. That’s...that’s what you’re best at, isn’t it? Oh, never mind.”

Jaheira: “Perhaps experience in the real world will serve to give you perspective. Not that I would wish to nag you away from your spite, excuse me.”

* * *

Jaheira: “I do wish these scars would heal. I’ve a life to continue and I do not need to be picking at old wounds.”

Player: “Nor I. There is little alternative to time, though.”

Jaheira: “Ah, I am not fooling anyone. The leftovers of hardships that I should not be dwelling on. You speak a lot of sense when you wish to, Player. I thank you.”

* * *

Jaheira: “This is a dangerous life we seem to lead, it does seem. I wonder if you always think it will be so?”

Player: “I don’t know. I can’t envision settling down.”

Jaheira: “Nor can I, but the inevitable must happen. Bones grow weary and battle becomes foolhardy. Oh, I would not wish it any time soon, but someday. Have you...given any thought to this?”

Player: “I can affect my immediate future, but there are other factors in the long term.”

Jaheira: “Yes, I suppose your heritage adds a complicating factor. You have a birthright, of a sort. I wonder what you intend to do with it when age grants you wisdom.”

Player: “In time I will come to terms with it. I intend to live a long, normal life.”

Jaheira: “A fine aspiration, if not the king’s choice. I know very few kings that live in peace. Equally few inspire true loyalty in followers, or their...companions.”

* * *

The party awakes from sleeping outside to find that the bandit Ertof Dand and four followers have infiltrated their camp. Ertof holds a dagger to Jaheira’s throat.

Ertof: “Pssst...pssst. Hey. Hey there. RISE AND SHINE! Oh, I hope I didn’t disturb ye. My, but yer a bunch of sound sleepers. Did’nay hear the approach of us wee little bandits and now look at the mess yer in.”

Jaheira: “Get your hands off me! So help me I’ll...”

Ertof: “Uh uh, stay right where ye are. Wipe the sleep from yer eyes and ye’ll see me little friend, a sharp little number right at this here lassie’s throat. I would’nay want to...*slip*.”

Player: “Alright, no one do anything rash. Let’s just talk this through.”

Ertof: “Yes, lets do just that. I’ll start. Ye’ll be handing over what valuables ye have—and we’ve heard ye have a lot—and then we’ll be going on our way. We get what we want and ye get...well, perhaps we just get what we want. That’s good enough for me.”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "Not good enough. Leave her be. I'll be your hostage."

Ertof: "Well, I see we've done and come to the self-sacrifice portion of our little stage play. I wonder what our little lassie has to say about such a proposition? Speak, girl."

Jaheira: "Don't make deals with this scum! He won't keep his Mmmph!"

Ertof: "I think I got the gist of it there, lassie. Well now, she does not seem to think much of yer plan. What say ye now, valiant one?"

Player: "I say take me instead of her. Look, I am not at the ready. I am standing here defenseless. Let's make this easy."

Ertof: "Yes, let's make this very easy indeed! Kracer, take the shot!"

The main player is seriously injured by a shot arrow.

Jaheira: "No! Blast you filthy bogslimes! Not again!"

Ertof: "Druids are so much fun when they curse. To the dance, me fellows!"

After defeat bandits.

Jaheira: "Are...are you alright?"

Player: "I was more worried about you. I'm a little sore, but I'll be alright."

Jaheira: "Good, I am so glad...you *idiot*! What were you thinking! You could have been killed! An arrow can pierce the heart or the eyes when you stand like a pincushion!"

Player: "I...I suppose. I didn't think about it at the time. I just wanted you safe."

Jaheira: "Don't you *ever* do something that stupid again, you hear me? Not in a thousand seasons! I lost...I lost...ahem...I lost Khalid...to a pointless death, I'm not going...to lose you too."

Player: "Jaheira? Jaheira, I..."

Jaheira: "Oh, shut up and let's get out of here. We'll...we'll talk later."

* * *

Jaheira: "So, what do you think of Amn so far? It is certainly not without its charms, or its hardships lately."

Player: "There does not seem to be a healthy balance between the two."

Jaheira: "Perhaps not. It has always been so, but there are many things of merit here. Perhaps not in the cities, but the forests are a great treasure."

Player: "I would agree, though a more relaxed tour through would help my outlook."

Jaheira: "Then I will show you when we have the time. I will take you through the deepest lands, and you will see the beauty that I know is there. That is, if you have not tired of my company yet."

Player: "Tire? I grow quite fond of your company. I would miss it were it gone."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “W...well. I would...I would miss your company too, Player. (Cough) Well, we should be moving on again. Enough of this idle musing.”

* * *

After kill Galvery, a self-important Harper.

Jaheira: “We have had many people seek our deaths so far. Some would have been friends had things been different. This weighs on my mind.”

Player: “As it does on mine. More so that you are in conflict with your own kind.”

Jaheira: “I do not know what to suggest. I...I would follow you, because I know you will ultimately do good, but they are my kin. I don’t know what to do.”

Player: “You can only do as you must, whatever that might be.”

Jaheira: “As all good advice, that was absolutely no help at all.”

* * *

Jaheira: “Again I must say how much I prefer the forest to artificial structures. Everything I see simply reinforces that to no end.”

Player: “There is order in the city, to a degree. It is not easy to see that in nature.”

Jaheira: “Ah, but only if you choose not to look. Nature falls into balance, whereas man must work for his. I just prefer the simpler...the simpler roles in nature.”

Player: “Your role is as harsh as you make it, though yours is difficult because of me.”

Jaheira: “No, I find comfort because of you. Others cannot see what I do, and it is their intolerance that makes it difficult.”

Player: “And what is it you see in me?”

Jaheira: “I see...I see a confidant. I see someone undeserving of the scorn of the ignorant. I see...I.... Now I am babbling like a brook. We should not dawdle like this.”

* * *

Jaheira: “I have been in a similar place as this before, though it was in the company of other Harpers. I will miss those times.”

Player: “There must be a way to reconcile this matter.”

Jaheira: “I doubt that it will be that easy. Galvarey was as close to a regional leader as the Harpers have. The events will be told from his favor, I am sure.”

Player: “Then there is no need to fret about it. We know the worst and can prepare.”

Jaheira: “Yes, I suppose there is some peace in this. There is little that could happen to make this worse. That ‘we’ will prepare is also pleasing to me. No better comfort could I ask, Player. I will continue to stand for you if you do the same for me. Together we can...togeth.... I’m sorry, I’m a bit out of sorts. Let’s continue this another time.”

* * *

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

After Reviane, another Harper, tracks Jaheira down, possibly leading to a fatal fight.

Jaheira: "Skies are a bit gray no matter where we go, aren't they? Or perhaps it's just my mood. Yes, that must be it. No wonder, I suppose. I cannot help but think of Reviane."

Player: "We did no wrong. How were we supposed to have reacted?"

Jaheira: "I don't know. I begin to wish we had been wrong. It would be so much simpler. I want to believe as they do, and I wish I didn't feel like I..."

Player: "How is it you feel, Jaheira? What is it you are saying?"

Jaheira: "I don't know. I want to stay with you, but we will need to avoid my former kin. I will have to tell you about them. What if you betray...what if you turn...I am sorry, Player, I didn't mean to suggest anything."

Player: "If you do not trust me then you should do me the courtesy of saying so."

Jaheira: "No! I just...this is so damn difficult to get straight. We should...we should speak of this later. Things will be said in anger.... Let's move on."

* * *

Jaheira: "This may be a bad time or not, but I think we should speak."

Player: "Very well."

Jaheira: "Yes, well, I wished to apologize for our argument before. I wanted...I wanted you to know why I cannot speak of the Harpers. There is much harm I could do."

Player: "This is not a question of harm; it is a question of trust."

Jaheira: "And I do trust you, but I do not trust myself. I am no traitor, of that I am sure, but what am I if I must hide from my brethren? What am I then? If I am in the right, why must I tell their secrets. If I am in the right, why must I hide? I do not have answers for these questions, and they worry me."

Player: "That you are worried shows you care about all those involved."

Jaheira: "Yes, but can I? There is no middle-ground. I am heading for an extreme of either end. With you at least the choice is mine. It is, isn't it?"

Player: "Who am I to judge? The least I can do is offer you the same as you offer me."

Jaheira: "I thank you for this. It helps. It does."

* * *

Premonition before appearance of Jaheira's old mentor Dermin.

Jaheira: "There is an ill wind in the air. Do you feel it? I feel a storm inside, in the distance."

Player: "Do you mean the actual weather, or is this prophecy of a sort?"

Jaheira: "I don't know what I meant. They say you shiver when someone walks over your grave. I feel as though something were marching back and forth across mine."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "A parable for change, isn't it? Not death but change."

Jaheira: "I don't know. Let's just get going, and it will pass. If you don't mind, Player, I would walk in step with you. I...just need someone near me."

* * *

After first meeting with Dermin.

Jaheira: "I...I am sorry, but I need a moment to collect myself."

Player: "No need to ask. We haven't had time to stop since your meeting with...well..."

Jaheira: "Player? I don't know what to.... I am *not* used to this! I am the one in control! I am...I..."

Player: "Jaheira, why did you leave the Harpers? I mean, I know 'why,' but why for me?"

Jaheira: "Selfish, selfish, selfish! People have died because of...what I want, what I see in...you. The Harpers have rightfully turned their backs! Rightfully! I...selfish..."

Player: "There is no shame in this. You did what you thought was right."

Jaheira: "Did I? What if I am wrong? What if my own stupid thoughts have colored what I see? What if you....What if it all goes wrong? What happens to what is lost? I can't risk any more! So much is gone."

Player: "We live and the world goes on. Hear my cliché and smile. Please? Don't make me say another."

Jaheira: "Mmph...don't...don't make me laugh, you.... Thanks, Player, but I don't want to talk anymore right now. Thanks."

* * *

Jaheira: "Blast, my armor could do with a cleaning."

Player: "You seem to have cheered up a bit. Feeling better?"

Jaheira: "Somewhat. I am far from my old self however. I thank you for putting up with me."

Player: "Think nothing of it. You have done more for me."

Jaheira: "Yes...yes, I suppose I have. How much did I do for you however, and how much was for me alone."

Player: "It's not important. Come now, you were almost happy for a moment there."

Jaheira: "I am fine. Let's just keep going."

* * *

Jaheira: "Your old injuries feeling alright? I thought I saw you wince a moment ago."

Player: "Hmm? No, nothing like that. Likely you just caught me looking your way."

Jaheira: "Oh. I...I see. I am flattered, I suppose."

Player: "I am sorry, was I out of line?"

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “Oh, no, not in the least, really. I am just...I have to deal with a few things.... I have to decide some things. I apologize for being in a foul mood. I wish I could say it would end soon, but I don’t know. It’s not you, though. It’s not...”

* * *

Jaheira: “So...could I...have a few moments of your time?”

Player: “Certainly. What is it you wish to know?”

Jaheira: “Thank you. I wished to speak of the future a bit. I know we have discussed this in brief before, but I need to...clarify a few things.”

Player: “Why? Has your recent loss affected how you see me?”

Jaheira: “No, no, not as such. I just wished to know how you fared on the path you have chosen. Granted I am right here to see, but I don’t know what you...think. Do you still find my company beneficial? Do you still think of our missing friends as often as you did? What of your fight to remain in balance?”

Player: “Jaheira, this is not a ‘chat.’ This is more a judicial inquiry.”

Jaheira: “I am sorry then. I did not mean to test you so. Perhaps this can wait for another time. Forget I said anything. What? Let’s just go.”

* * *

Jaheira: “I...I need to speak with you a moment.”

Player: “What is it, Jaheira?”

Jaheira: “I wished to apologize for my questions earlier. I was too forward. I needed to know you remain the same man that I began traveling with so long ago.”

Player: “I suppose it has been some time. Many things have changed. I have not.”

Jaheira: “There has been change all around. You may have been affected in ways you don’t know. That does not ease my mind. I must know what is truth or I cannot trust myself. My decisions have affected many and I do not wish to endanger anyone else.”

Player: “I do not hide anything from you, Jaheira. I have no reason to.”

Jaheira: “No? The Harper in your midst?”

Player: “You are not ‘the Harper in my midst,’ you are Jaheira by my side.”

Jaheira: “I...I don’t know what to say to that. I still have many concerns that must be addressed, but you seem so....I need to think on this some more. Let’s get moving.”

* * *

The main player loses control, becoming the slayer aspect of Bhaal.

Jaheira: “Are you well? I am growing very worried about you, you know. I should not like to lose you in this evil place.”

Player: “Jaheira, I would get back if I were you. I think it’s happening again!”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: "Player? Your lips move but there is no sound. Player? Player!"

Before returning to his normal form, the main player attacks Jaheira.

Jaheira: "You would have killed me, if I had let you. You would have left me to rot in this place."

Player: "I tried to warn you, but I couldn't speak. I am sorry. I should leave."

Jaheira: "No, you should not be alone during this. We will get through, I am sure. We just have to keep going, no matter what comes."

* * *

Jaheira: "How...how did that last battle make you feel? Did you enjoy it?"

Player: "No more than you, I am sure. I do what must be done. Is that wrong?"

Jaheira: "No, but what were your motivations? You can be violent like any other person, but there is more at stake with you. What were you thinking?"

Player: "I do not recall. How long before your questions mirror Galvarey's?"

Jaheira: "I...I am sorry! But I must know! I must know that you are more human than not! I must know that your...your poison blood has not taken your senses! I must know that the Child of Bhaal in front of me is as sincere as he seems, so I do not get myself.... I mean, get anyone else hurt...pursuing your company."

Player: "If my word and your eyes are not enough, ask yourself what could be?"

Jaheira: "So you are saying that if nothing could ever make things right, it is me that is wrong. I am...I am looking for excuses to avoid you...and what I feel. I do not recall myself being such a mess. It is time, I guess, to move or get off the pot. Chaos in their passage indeed; you have nothing on me, Player. Let's get to walking, I have yet more thinking to do."

* * *

Jaheira: "Is...is this an inconvenient time for us to speak?"

Player: "Speak your mind, Jaheira. I will make time."

Jaheira: "I am sorry if this seems odd, but I wanted to thank you. You did not have to follow me to the Harper Hold. In fact, I seem to recall telling you not to."

Player: "I did not trust that Dermin, and your letter did nothing to ease my mind."

Jaheira: "The shame of Dermin's accusation colored my own sight. He is the one that has changed. You would have been a better guide.... You have proven master of your path, and as...as much as I wish to walk it with you there is much unfinished business that has been eating away at my will. Khalid's death, my need to move on, these Harpers that have forced my own treachery; and in the background is who and what you are: a spawn of murder and lies. But you have left behind the evil that your very nature is built upon. If you can do that, proving to be the caring person you are, then why do I fear? I...I value your company, Player. After all we have been through, I must know: do you value my company as well?"

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "Jaheira, your loss would be a tragedy. I need you here...with me."

Jaheira: "Those are nice words, Player, and I am not so fearful to hear them anymore. I am not so sure how to act upon them, but knowing you feel as I do is a start. I won't delay us any longer for now. We will speak again on this, in better spirits, I hope."

* * *

Jaheira: "Ah, the dawning of our day, though it is very rarely that we seem to match our sleep to the cycle of day or night."

Player: "We take our rest where we can. It is a necessity sometimes."

Jaheira: "Oh, I don't dispute that, and neither was I criticizing, but I wouldn't mind waking to the sunrise a little more often."

Player: "If it would make you happier then I will see what I can do."

Jaheira: "Do not trouble yourself over it. I was merely saying I enjoy it, not that we should order our lives around it. It is beautiful, but I know it is there. Besides, do I strike you as a person that would adjust well to such a strict timeline? Not before I suffered greatly."

Player: "Your wit would exact payment, I am sure."

Jaheira: "Perhaps, though I intend no malice. I would laugh at you as I laugh at myself, and...hopefully I will come to know you that well. Your words were pleasing; do not think otherwise. Eh, perhaps we should just get moving for now."

* * *

Jaheira: "It is about time we rested. I have seen enough waking hours, thank you very much."

Player: "I was not aware that morale was so low. What can I do to make you happy?"

Jaheira: "I do not want to be happy. I want to be angry and not feel bad about it."

Player: "If I knew what was wrong I could help."

Jaheira: "Stop being so damned reasonable. Get mad and say you won't stand for it. Act like you should!"

Player: "You are doing a fine job of tormenting yourself. Why ask me to help?"

Jaheira: "Because you are supposed to! Damn it! If you would have just acted like you were supposed to, like everyone said you would... None of this would have happened if you had accepted your evil heritage. I would not have sided with you. I would not have fought for you. I would not have..."

Player: "Jaheira? Making you wrong will not change anything."

Jaheira: "If I was wrong, at least the dead would have died for just reasons. So many...that are dead and we are the cause. How can all those people have been wrong?"

Player: "They simply were. You know in your heart that you are right in this."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “Bah! What does the heart know. It makes you do foolish things for no cause. It makes you forget the dead before you should. It makes you fall in.... It...makes you do things that wreak havoc on your mind. I’m a sorry, Player, you should not have to hear this. You have been good and true. I should be happy, but I am not. Even with all we have done to make things right, I am still troubled.”

Player: “I can’t wait forever. I do what I can, but it is difficult.”

Jaheira: “I know, and I need your company. I am just not comfortable with needing it. Let’s get some rest for now. I’ll try to straighten this out.”

* * *

After unmasking of Dermin as corrupt and his death in combat with the party.

Jaheira: “What? What is it you want?”

Player: “Well, you’re in a good mood. It’s about that fight with Dermin, isn’t it?”

Jaheira: “Very good, you’ve mastered the obvious. Now consult your navel about what to do next. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. It’s just...I am so mad and I don’t know how to get it out. It’s because...it’s because...I...I know why I am upset, but I just can’t seem to shake it. I am angry with that dungweasel Dermin for...for making me feel guilty for killing him! Isn’t that ridiculous? The bastard was putting people in danger for nothing, and I feel guilty for ending it!”

Player: “I don’t know what to say, Jaheira. What do you need me to say?”

Jaheira: “I need you to say...what? I don’t know either. I’m sorry, this is not fair to you at all. I will need a bit of space for now. Damn, why is this so hard? Remove the bad seeds and walk into the sunset; that’s how it’s supposed to go. Nice and clean.”

* * *

Jaheira: “You needn’t keep a distance between us. I am in less of a mood now.”

Player: “Are you? I did not want to risk setting you off once more.”

Jaheira: “I do not blame you. Such trouble I have been. Simple feelings made more difficult by the strangest things. I hope I have not harmed your view of me.”

Player: “It has been difficult but...but I would not trade your company for anyone’s.”

Jaheira: “You do not know how glad I am. I worried I had ruined what we.... You are my stability, you know? Perhaps it doesn’t always seem like it, but you are. Know that I care for you, even if I do not show it well. If this meant nothing it would have been easy to deal with. Small consolation, I know. “

Player: “Not so small. Does this mean you are comfortable with me?”

Jaheira: “I am trying. You have shown such caring so far. I have taken you for granted as someone that would always be here, even as I questioned our very friendship. I will not make such a mistake again. Of this I am sure. We should get moving. Walk with me, Player.”

* * *

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “I have...had a realization. I have been walking with my eyes downcast for so long I had forgotten the beauty of the land. After all we have seen, I had thought never to feel the warmth of nature again.”

Player: “You make me appreciate such things. I never appreciated a simple forest before you.”

Jaheira: “They are not simple forests, but ancient places in harmony for untold years. I have walked through many, but I had forgotten...how they stir my soul.”

Player: “It is the elf in you, and the druid. Culture and nature together in balance.”

Jaheira: “Yes, and if the balance can be struck there, it can happen where I am willing. It was my calling as a druid and as a Harper. I had forgotten...I forgot that balance does not mean conformity; equilibrium does not need to sacrifice variety. Dermin forgot that too. Difference does not have to be chaos.”

Player: “Heh, you are beautiful when you have epiphanies.”

Jaheira: “Oh, stop it. I am being serious here. No, no, don’t stop it. I have been far too serious and have worried about too much for too long. What is so wrong with this? Nothing! Player, I care for you. I have not always shown as such, and my words may seem harsh on occasion, but my feelings are true just the same.”

Player: “I knew. I had faith you would come around in time.”

Jaheira: “Perhaps this changes nothing, perhaps everything. I don’t care anymore. My heart cannot have nature within and be ashamed as well.”

Player: “I prefer you with a smile. I should have camped us in a forest or grove months ago.”

Jaheira: “What? We would have missed out on all the fun. Yes, I am joking. Let’s go, Player. I feel happy for the first time in a long time.”

* * *

Jaheira: “We have to be nearing our goal. It has been a long journey and we have been through so much. I hope this does not end up all being for naught.”

Player: “We will survive, and get some payback in the end. This has been quite the ordeal.”

Jaheira: “On this we agree. We will do what we can, but we must be sure to exact a payment from this Irenicus that will prove permanent. There can be no mercy for this creature. What he has done is unforgivable.”

Player: “And still some good has come out of all of this.”

Jaheira: “Remarkably, we wouldn’t be this close without him. We might have parted company once we left Baldur’s Gate and I would still...well, things would be different.”

Player: “I would bring back our fallen if I could, but I would not wish to lose you.”

Jaheira: “Do not waste time thinking of what would have been. It is fruitless and only results in tears. I would know. Let’s just get going.”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Jaheira: “Can I...I would...ahem. Hear my words while I have the nerve. Player, as we learn of our situation I want to say...that there is much to come, and I find I need your company more and more. You are a great comfort in this time.”

Player: “You know you can count on me being with you, Jaheira.”

Jaheira: “I know. We are great friends...and more. Your words ease my thoughts, and many is the time we have saved one another in battle. We have grown quite close.”

Player: “What are you getting at, Jaheira?”

Jaheira: “Stay with me tonight, Player. If...if you wish.”

Player: “Are you certain of this?”

Jaheira: “No, but I am less sure of many things these days. I worry less about it though. I will set aside my hesitation if you will.”

Player: “Jaheira, there is no other answer I could give.”

* * *

The next morning.

Jaheira: “Good morning. Shall we get ourselves ready for the road? We’ve much to do, so we should get an early start. “

Player: “Are you ready for travel? I don’t think you slept much.”

Jaheira: “Neither did you, so pipe down. Let’s get going.”

* * *

Throne of Bhaal material.

Jaheira: “It seems we are never allowed a moment of rest. Still, I am glad we have accomplished so much.”

Player: “I’m just happy to have weathered it all with you still at my side.”

Jaheira: “I am glad as well. I was worried that my desire to avenge the...the dead had...well...I just wanted the business of the past to be well and truly finished. That is important to me, Player. There must be closure to the past for us to...to move forward. If that is still your wish, I mean....”

Player: “Jaheira, I need you here. You keep me grounded.”

Jaheira: “I had hoped as much. You are very important to me, Player. I could not imagine us...I just wanted to say that I still feel for you, and that I hope we can get past all of this...together.”

* * *

Volo’s description of the romance.

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

As devoted to her lover Player as she is to nature and the balance, the half-elf Jaheira will long be remembered as one of the greatest Harpers who has ever served the cause.

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False visions created by wraith of vengeance at swamp temple.

Gorion Wraith: "What of the inevitable pain you must give to the one you love? My old comrade, Jaheira."

Jaheira: "It is my choice as much as his, Gorion...though I doubt that is truly who you are."

Gorion Wraith: "You know nothing of what you speak. You belong with my failed ward, however, you who are a murderer as much as he."

Khalid: "J-jaheira? Is...is that you?"

Jaheira: "Khalid? No...this cannot be...."

Khalid: "Why did you d-d-do it, my love? Why did you k-kill me? Why?"

Jaheira: "Khalid would not say such a thing! I did not kill him, I did not!"

Khalid: "You...you insisted so on f-f-following G-Gorion's ward...to h-help him. Did...d-d-did you love him even then, Jaheira? D-d-did you leave me for him?"

Jaheira: "No! No, my Khalid...do not think that! I loved you, but you were gone! Gone!"

Khalid: "I...I am n-n-not even c-c-cold in the ground! And you are w-with him! You n-n-never loved me, Jaheira! You never loved me and you wanted me to die!"

Jaheira: "No! This is not real. Khalid would know...he would know what I felt! (sob!) What I always felt! Player, make this stop!"

Player: "Don't you believe it, Jaheira! It isn't real!"

Gorion Wraith: "I will not allow you to be the one who causes the prophecy to become true! I won't allow it, Player! I will see you dead, first!"

* * *

After defeating wraith of vengeance.

Jaheira: "I really did not need that...that phantom and his accusations. How dare he! To defile the form of Gorion and Khalid with such...with such...."

Player: "As if the living do not suffer enough when loved ones fall."

Jaheira: "I have grieved in prayer and action for all that have fallen around me. I have fought to avenge each and every soul that has been taken in the fight for balance. I will not be accused of dishonoring their memory, of benefiting from the death of friends. I have punished myself enough for...."

Player: "Jaheira, you have done so much...."

Jaheira: "I mean...you made certain that Gorion and his vision were properly honored, even if you could not save...."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Player: "Jaheira!"

Jaheira: "I am sorry. I should stop. I will not poison your view of me by having you assume my regrets. That is not fair of me."

* * *

Jaheira: "I...I wanted to say.... Can you listen to me for a moment?"

Player: "No, I won't. I want to speak and have you listen to me."

Jaheira: "I...very well. Speak your mind."

Player: "No, I will speak my heart. Jaheira, I care deeply for you. I need to know if our relationship is the healthiest thing for you."

Jaheira: "Healthy for me? What do you mean?"

Player: "Is it too soon, Jaheira? That wraith of Khalid shook you up pretty bad, and I need to know if you think our relationship is a good thing, or if you feel guilty for having feelings for me. I need to know."

Jaheira: "Player, I...I.... Without a doubt in my mind, I say to you that I am not sorry for a moment we have been together. I have many regrets in my life, but you are not one of them."

Player: "Then please understand that nothing will change how I feel. I need you here."

Jaheira: "That means a lot to me, Player. You are foremost in my life now. Shadows cannot change that."

* * *

Jaheira: "Sleep did not come easy last night. I hope I am not alone in this."

Player: "I slept well enough, though I do have sympathy for those hurt because of my kind."

Jaheira: "I worry for you. You seem distant, when the carnage is so real, so near. I know you worry for others, but I hope you are not immune to the pain yourself. Player, do not lose yourself. You care about your fellow beings, about me. I do not know if the gods have such feelings...we are so small to them."

Player: "I don't know. Much good could be done for the grand scheme of things. Little things work themselves out."

Jaheira: "And what will be your role? Are you to be the avenging solar or marauding demon? Neither is a creature of balance. Neither is anchored in the world of mortals. Player, please, give thought to your actions. I do not want to lose you to this beast you carry within. Be careful."

* * *

Jaheira: "You know, we should return to the elven city one day...."

Player: "It was beautiful, I'll give it that. A pity it suffered like it did."

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

Jaheira: “Yes, but they will rebuild. Even the elves feel the impetus of time and act to better themselves. They are not slaves of destiny.”

Player: “Please don’t disguise your meaning, Jaheira. Voice your concern openly.”

Jaheira: “I did not intend to speak down to you. I just want you to remember what is worthwhile. Destiny seems intent to claim you, and I don’t know if that is for the best. Even if people distrust you now, at least it is *you* that they distrust. The creatures threatening us are beyond this earth. They are abstract, strange, and out of balance. Player, I know *you*, not your taint. I just want to protect what I have an interest in. Your life is tied to mine now.”

Player: “Jaheira, I am not leaving anytime soon. Please, trust in me.”

Jaheira: “I do. I just want to make sure you know it.”

* * *

Jaheira: “There are great changes to come, aren’t there? Of all possibilities, I worry most for your future.”

Player: “Why so, Jaheira? What concerns you?”

Jaheira: “We have fought much, and many children of Bhaal. They have sought conquest, to raise Bhaal, to become Bhaal, to destroy, to create, and now I wonder.... I wonder, Player, what will happen when this is over? If we prevail, that will undoubtedly free a great amount of the Bhaal taint. Will that be yours? I mean, the children were to raise Bhaal. They are pushed to conquest to grow in strength, and then that strength is returned to Bhaal when they die. What if he is not raised?”

Player: “Someone will have to assume the power. Perhaps me. Perhaps not.”

Jaheira: “That is my greatest fear. Such a person would become unreal, become godlike. They could not exist in a mortal shell. Nature would not allow it.... Such a person would leave this plane, called to duties elsewhere, beyond our thinking. Such a person might as well be dead to us...to me....”

Player: “No. No, Jaheira, please calm down. I will not leave you, dead or otherwise.”

Jaheira: “I want you to be with me for a very long time, and I have enough trouble just seeing you hurt in combat without...without destiny killing you outright.”

Player: “Enough sorrow, Jaheira. I’m here now, and I promise I’ll be here tomorrow.”

Jaheira: “Tomorrow...one day.... What of the rest? Please, think about the rest.”

* * *

Jaheira: “Well, it would appear that this...this is close to the end of our journey. I trust you, Player. Remember that.”

Player: “I’m glad someone does. Seems like the gods want to hold my hand through it.”

Jaheira: “I will too, if you like.”

Player: “Oh, aren’t you sweet. OK, beautiful, you and me. Here we go.”

Jaheira: “Yes...you and me....”

Aerie and Jaheira Romances

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Offer of godhood made by solar.

Jaheira: “So. It seems we have finally reached the end of your quest. What comes next...could change you forever, and dictate your...our...future.”

Player: “What do you want, Jaheira? What future do you see for us?”

Jaheira: “I have pondered that question at your every move. With all that has been learned, I don’t know where we would go next. I don’t know where we could go. I do know this: there is no place for me at your side if you accept the power. It would be...hard...to lose you, just as hard as it was to say good-bye to...to Khalid. Bastards...both of you, to do this to me. I knew this would...”

Player: “Jaheira.”

Jaheira: “(ahem) I knew this would happen, that I would lose you. Not that I could see this coming, of course. Seems the gods themselves conspire to...to.... This is ridiculous. This is not about me. This is about you. I won’t ask you to stay. I won’t make your choice for you. You worked for this, fought through so much....”

Player: “With you at my side.”

Jaheira: “If it is important, then go. I will not have you stay and regret it later. I will not be the great mistake that forever follows you. I have...too many of those to wish them on another. Go. Do what you must. I...I love you. (Jaheira kisses Player, and then turns away, resigned to the decision she feels to have already been made.)”

After deciding to decline godhood.

Jaheira: “Wh...what?”

Player: “All that power...the gods...that’s somewhere else. You are here...real, and I’m not leaving.”

Jaheira: “Oh my...I...what can I say?”

Player: “Just smile. That’s enough.”

* * *

Epilogue: The years following the Bhaalspawn saga were kind to Jaheira. They couldn’t be called peaceful, by any means, but her relationship with Player weathered it all. Theirs was an unshakable union, and while duty or adventure might separate them for even years at a time, they always returned to one another. Her friends would marvel at how secure in this Jaheira seemed to be, especially considering her initial reluctance, but she would chuckle when thinking back on those first cautious days. After all, she and Player had literally been to the hells and back, and when the gods themselves couldn’t separate the two, what were simple months and miles going to do? She lived long and well. Not always with Player, but never truly apart from him.