Oghma’s Faithful

by Alexis Álvarez & ChatGPT

**Chapter 17: Wheloon**

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**Abstract:** In 1374 DR in the city of Wheloon, the Oghmanytes—Eldrin Thistlebrook, Sebenzi Wesibindi, Banshee Mondflüstern, and Artemis— were recruited as investigators, and in this role, uncovered a conspiracy involving the infiltration of the Temple of Mystra by Sharran cultists. Initially summoned to investigate the temple’s sudden silence, the party methodically unraveled a plot tied to planar corruption, clerical impersonation, and the trafficking of humanoids through portals connected to the Plane of Shadow.

With assistance from local allies—including Ilmatari priest Drawud Kroth, Purple Dragon Knight Cyrus, and the displaced Mystran cleric Tunaster Dranik—the adventurers conducted a surgical strike against the impostors within the temple. Their success secured critical evidence of wider corruption, prompting a coordinated investigation into the cult’s citywide network and suspected ties to the Wheloon guard.

In the aftermath of the operation, the team prepared for a reconnaissance mission into the Vast Swamp, believed to be the cult’s true staging ground. Drawing on magical scrying, recovered documents, and divine insight, they planned to use teleportation to locate the site directly. A follow-up assault team—including paladins and a druidic guide—was assembled to arrive upon confirmation. Though the cult’s ultimate aims remained obscured, the heroes stood ready to press deeper into the mystery, determined to bring the Sharrans’ shadowed designs to light.

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Eleint 4, 1374 DR (Year of Lightning Storms) – Late Afternoon

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long golden shadows over the rolling plains of Cormyr. A brisk breeze carried the scent of early autumn, rustling the trees that lined the dirt road leading toward Wheloon. The town’s distinctive green slate rooftops and high stone walls came into view beyond a bend in the road.

The wagon trundled forward, its wooden wheels creaking softly as it followed the well-worn path. The two whisper gnomes rode their wolfhounds alongside, the animals keeping a steady pace with the cart. At this hour, the road was quiet, save for the occasional farmer or merchant headed back toward the countryside.

As the party neared the town’s entrance, a robed figure stepped out from the shadows of a nearby oak tree. His garb marked him as a Mystran—a deep blue robe embroidered with silver stars—though his hood remained drawn up. The man raised a hand in greeting, his voice low and urgent.

“You must be the Oghmanites we were told to expect.” He glanced around, as if wary of prying eyes. “I am Tunaster Dranik, an acolyte of the Wheloon temple. We cannot speak freely here—follow me, quickly.”

He gestured toward a narrow side path that veered off the main road, leading toward a copse of trees just outside the town walls.

Banshee approached the man as the other three remained alert, their hands on their ranged weapons should they be needed. “Yes, Clergyman, what is it?”

A map of a town

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

The robed man tensed at Banshee’s directness, but he quickly composed himself. “My name is Tunaster Dranik, a priest of Mystra,” he said in a low voice. “I visited the temple a few days ago, expecting to find my brothers and sisters in faith. Instead, I found strangers—priests I did not recognize, and acolytes who refused to speak to me. I was turned away at the door.”

He cast a wary glance toward the town gate. “I fear something is terribly wrong within those walls. I need help to uncover the truth. Will you aid me?”

Tunaster’s expression remained tense as he looked between the gathered Oghmanites. “Will you aid me?” he repeated, his voice laced with urgency.

Banshee nodded to the others to approach and relayed the information to them.

Sebenzi and Artemis kept poker-faced stances as Eldrin replied, “Tell us more. No reasonable decision of this magnitude can be made with just this fragment of hearsay.”

Tunaster exhaled, his gaze flickering with both relief and frustration.

“I arrived in Wheloon four days ago, expecting to visit the temple of my goddess,” he said. “But when I approached, something felt… off. The priests at the door were not the ones I knew. They wore Mystran robes, but their faces were unfamiliar. They spoke in polite yet firm tones, refusing to let me enter, claiming the temple was closed to outsiders while its high priestess, Shan Thar, conducted ‘important rituals.’”

“Shan *Thar*?” Eldrin checked his log for the name he’d never heard. “That’s not our point of contact, but do go on.”

He shook his head. “I know every Mystran temple in Cormyr. There was no ‘Shan Thar’ among our priesthood. Suspicious, I remained in town and observed from a distance. No known clergy have entered or left since. None of my Sending spells have been answered by those I know. I tried again to gain entry, only to be turned away more forcefully. The temple is under new control, and I fear its rightful priests are either imprisoned or worse.”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice further.

“I cannot breach it alone. But Oghma’s church has resources, knowledge, and investigative minds. Will you help me uncover what has befallen the temple of Mystra?”

“By the gods we serve,” Sebenzi now proclaimed.

Artemis finished her spiritual sister’s thought, “We have come to aid you.”

Eldrin clarified, “You are the person whose congregation we’ve come to search for. Your temple suspects the infiltrators you’ve described, and rather than risking the mission to one of their internal teams who might already be compromised, they’ve entrusted the task to the disciples of the God of Knowledge.”

“Truth shall set us all free,” Banshee repeated something Artemis usually said.

“… and knowledge shall keep us there,” Artemis finished another thought.

“Now then, Tunaster, let us steal ourselves from this place that we might talk freely. You know best what level of discretion we need. A tavern? A public square? A friend’s house? Perhaps the woods, miles from here?” Eldrin prompted the Mystran Clergyman.

Tunaster’s posture eased slightly at their words, though his eyes still held the weight of deep concern.

“A secluded place is best,” he agreed. “I have taken a room at the Wyvern Watch Inn. It is public enough that we will not draw undue suspicion, yet private enough for us to speak freely. If any prying ears listen there, I will know.”

He gestured toward the town proper. “Come. We should not linger here.”

With that, he turned toward the road leading into Wheloon, his steps brisk but measured, ensuring the Oghmanites could follow without drawing unnecessary attention.

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Now at the Wyvern Watch Inn, they took the flight of stairs to the Clergyman’s room, and continued discussing the small talk they’d deliberately concocted in case of any scrying. Eldrin and Sebenzi cast *detect magic* and *detect evil*, and entered the man’s room after the others.

They sat for another minute, studying one another as the conversation dwelled on the pastries of Wheloon. The cleric of Oghma and her archivist comrade scanned the room for *arcane eye* spells, and any auras indicative of a *clairaudience* or *clairvoyance* spell. After the minute was up, they nodded at one another, then confirmed, “If there are any Divinations afoot, they are far more powerful than our eyes can discern.”

“I trust our eyes,” the other one said.

“Let us begin,” Artemis facilitated the conversation. “Eldrin has a writ that he is at liberty to show you, but not to give you, as we need to retain it.”

Eldrin produced the writ, and held it that Tunaster might read the mandate confirming their mission here.

Artemis continued, “You are among friends, not only because Mystra and Oghma have been in league since time immemorial, but because we have pledged to aid your cause as if it were Oghma’s own. If the Mistress of the Weave is suffering a congregational coup, or something the like, we are here to preserve her rightful status as the keeper of all that binds our magical world.”

The priest was duly touched, and held back a tear of hope as his voice stiffened before he cleared his throat, and began briefing the heroes on all he knew about the case so far….

Tunaster took a steadying breath, his eyes scanning the writ before nodding in solemn acknowledgment. He folded his hands atop the modest writing desk in the room and leaned forward, his voice low and firm.

“As I said before, I came to Wheloon expecting a place of worship, but I found something else entirely. The temple stands, yet it feels… hollow. The clergy within do not recognize me, and they act as though I am the intruder in my own faith’s house.”

His brow furrowed.

“I lingered in town, watching from the shadows, listening to whispers. The townsfolk know something is wrong. They speak of changes in the temple’s leadership, but no one saw any ceremony, no public announcement. The faithful who once attended daily prayers have been turned away without explanation. Some mutter of strange lights at night, unnatural glows spilling from the temple’s highest windows. Those who dare question too loudly seem to lose interest just as quickly—like their concerns have simply… faded.”

He hesitated, his fingers tightening around his holy symbol.

“I have tried twice to gain entry, and both times I was refused. The second time, a woman confronted me—a priestess I have never seen before, wearing the robes of our order. She called herself Shan Thar and told me the temple was closed for ‘private rituals.’ When I demanded an explanation, her demeanor changed. She told me, very simply, to *leave*. And for a moment, I felt as if her voice alone carried power—some force I could not explain pressing against my mind. I resisted, but I know what I felt. That was no Mystran priestess.”

He exhaled sharply.

“I fled before I could be arrested or worse. I have no doubt that if I had pressed further, I would not have been allowed to leave at all.”

Tunaster’s eyes searched each of the Oghmanites in turn. “The temple of Mystra has been stolen, twisted into something else. But by whom? And for what purpose? That is what we must uncover.”

Banshee kept an eye out through the window, peeking through the blinds to ensure that no one lingered there for very long.

Eldrin and Sebenzi scribbled notes in their respective case journals. “Clergyman, would you happen to have a map of the temple? Or could you draw one for us?” Eldrin asked.

“Yes, the more information we have on the layout, the more we’ll be able to see if anything is out of place,” Sebenzi qualified the request.

Artemis added, “If someone’s coming in and out of a room that you label as a closet, for example, we know something’s afoul in that room.”

“I doubt it’ll be that obvious,” Banshee said.

“It’s already Sunset,” Eldrin made note. “We’ll need to prepare a fresh batch of spells tomorrow—not sure if you know, Clergyman, our spellcasters prep at dawn—so tonight, I propose we spend a bit of time undertaking reconnaissance.”

Tunaster listened, saying, “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll steer clear of any stealth near the temple. They see me with you, and your cover is blown.”

“Absolutely,” Sebenzi said. “We have traveling civilian clothes for this type of operation. We split up into two couples—usually Banshee and Eldrin go one way and Artemis and I walk hand-in-hand, staking out different parts of the perimeter of the temple. Is it a walled structure or just a free-standing building on the street?”

Tunaster took a quill and parchment, sketching out the temple’s layout as he remembered it. “The Temple of Mystra in Wheloon is a free-standing structure along a main street, with its western entrance facing the road. There are large double doors serving as the main entrance, flanked by statues of Mystra’s previous incarnations.”

He pointed to the sketch. “Once inside, you’ll find a grand entry hall leading to a worship chamber beyond. There are side passages leading to various rooms—offices, living quarters, and storage spaces. The entire structure is self-contained, meaning no external walls separate it from the town proper.”

Eldrin studied the drawing. “That means anyone entering or leaving is easily visible from the street—useful for spotting unusual activity.”

Sebenzi tapped a section of the sketch. “Are there windows we might use to peer inside without entering?”

Tunaster frowned. “There are a few, but most are high up—designed to let in light without allowing easy viewing from the outside. The main exception is the western facade, where some stained-glass windows sit lower.”

Banshee nodded. “Sounds like those are our best bet for reconnaissance tonight. We’ll keep our distance, act like ordinary travelers, and see what we can learn from afar.”

Eldrin added, “We’ll also want to watch for any unusual visitors or patrols. If this temple is compromised, we can assume they’ll be alert for trouble.”

Artemis folded her arms. “Agreed. We head out separately in pairs, observe quietly, and regroup to compare notes. We move out once we’re prepared.”

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Having done their monitoring tours, the four Oghmanites returned to Tunaster’s room at the Wyvern Watch Inn, stepping inside one by one. Eldrin closed the door behind them, ensuring the latch caught securely. Sebenzi set her satchel down, pulling out her case journal to record their findings.

Banshee crossed her arms. “We took our time circling the temple. Nothing immediately suspicious, but we did note a few things.”

Artemis nodded. “The temple has regular foot traffic—nothing unusual about people coming and going. But the ones leaving looked... uneasy. Like they’d seen something they didn’t expect or weren’t comfortable with.”

“Some of them were muttering under their breath,” Eldrin added. “Not full prayers. More like they were reassuring themselves. A few looked over their shoulders more often than normal.”

Sebenzi tapped her quill against her chin. “We didn’t see anyone outright fleeing, but there was definitely tension in the air. And there was an odd moment when a priest—genuine Mystra vestments—exchanged a look with a couple of city guards. They weren’t on duty, just standing nearby, but something passed between them.”

Banshee leaned against the wall. “Didn’t seem like a casual glance. It was brief, but deliberate.”

Eldrin glanced toward Tunaster. “Does this temple normally have close ties with the city guard? We know temples maintain relationships with local authorities, but this wasn’t the standard ‘priest and protector’ dynamic.”

Tunaster exhaled slowly. “No… Mystra’s clergy rely more on their own defenses and arcane wards than mundane city patrols. It’s not unheard of to cooperate with the guard, but what you’re describing sounds off. Especially if they’re making silent exchanges instead of speaking openly.”

Sebenzi turned to Artemis. “Tell him about the figures at the side entrance.”

Artemis nodded. “Two figures—hooded, but not in robes of Mystra. They stood near a side door, exchanging words in hushed tones. They weren’t beggars, traders, or ordinary folk looking for guidance. One of them had the stance of a fighter, hand resting near his hip as if accustomed to carrying a weapon.”

Banshee smirked. “I caught a glimpse under his cloak. He was armed. Short sword, maybe a dagger too.”

Eldrin frowned. “Armed men lingering at a temple entrance, tense clergy leaving, city guards exchanging glances… this is adding up to something unpleasant.”

Tunaster rubbed his forehead. “I feared as much. If outsiders are being allowed in armed, and if the local guard is somehow involved or at least aware, then whatever’s happening inside that temple has extended beyond its walls.”

Sebenzi sighed, closing her case journal. “That means the corruption isn’t just internal. There’s a wider net at play.”

Artemis met Tunaster’s gaze. “This isn’t just your temple’s problem anymore. If what we suspect is true, Wheloon itself may already be compromised.”

Gathering his thoughts, Eldrin spoke, “We must assume that every clergyperson except you, Tunaster, is compromised, perhaps possessed. The situation demands that we equip ourselves with some better scrolls and potions in the morning. For now, why don’t we take a 10-hour sleep schedule with each of us taking a 2-hour watch?”

They agreed, with the schedule putting Artemis, Banshee, Eldrin, Sebenzi, and Tunaster on watch in that order, from 9pm to 7am.

The night passed without incident, save for the occasional sound of wind outside the inn’s thick walls. The group, taking turns through the night, remained alert, but nothing untoward came of their watches. Each shift was uneventful, and as the early hours drew near, the weariness of travel and vigilance began to settle in.

At 7 a.m., the small group stirred from their respective beds, the soft clink of armor and the quiet murmurs of readiness marking the start of a new day. The first rays of sunlight peeked through the window, casting a pale golden light across the room.

The group gathered their things and descended the stairs to the inn’s main dining area, where the warm scent of a hearty breakfast awaited. The smells of ostrich eggs, rabbit sausage, fresh pita, and spiced cardamum tea filled the air, an inviting start to what promised to be a busy day.

They took their seats at a large wooden table, the clatter of plates and mugs filling the silence as they ate. It was a chance to discuss what they had seen yesterday and what their next steps might be.

Eldrin took a bite of his food, then turned to the group. “We’ll need to be properly equipped for what’s ahead. This is no longer just an investigation—it’s a confrontation. We’ll need scrolls of protection, dispelling, and perhaps a few for extra healing.”

Sebenzi chewed thoughtfully. “And potions of invisibility, perhaps. If we need to scout the interior more closely, having some options to remain unseen could be useful.”

Banshee nodded as she sipped her tea. “Agreed. Potions of healing too, just in case things go south.”

“Let’s keep the preparations simple and focused,” Artemis added. “We’ve already drawn too much attention, so let’s not make a show of our readiness. Quiet, effective gear.”

Tunaster, who had sat quietly in thought throughout the meal, cleared his throat. “I have… personal resources to call upon, though not many. Still, I’ll contribute what I can to the cause.” He paused, looking directly at the party. “But I cannot, in good faith, accompany you inside the temple. They know me here, and any involvement will put you at risk.”

Eldrin nodded somberly. “We understand. You’ve done more than enough already, Tunaster.” He looked to the others. “Let’s finish breakfast and head out. The day’s going to be long.”

Once their meal was complete, the group left the inn and made their way toward the nearest potion and scroll shop. The streets of Wheloon were waking up, the bustle of vendors setting up shop and people beginning their daily routines filling the air. The shop was just a few blocks away, a modest building with a sign hanging out front: **Vellin’s Arcane Emporium**.

The glass display windows were filled with jars of shimmering liquids, glowing crystals, and various trinkets of arcane nature. Inside, the air smelled faintly of incense and herbs, the shelves lined with shelves of scrolls, potions, and oddments of magical nature.

Vellin, a stocky human with a long gray beard and spectacles perched on his nose, looked up from behind the counter as the group entered. “Ah, travelers,” he said with a smile. “How may I assist you this fine morning?”

Eldrin stepped forward. “We’re looking for a few specific items—scrolls of protection from evil, dispel magic, and possibly some healing potions. We’ll need something discreet but effective.”

Vellin nodded, adjusting his spectacles. “Ah, yes, I’ve got a few scrolls of protection in stock. As for dispel magic… It’s a bit rarer, but I have a few. Healing potions, of course, I carry those. I assume you’re preparing for something… rather serious?”

“Serious is an understatement,” Banshee replied with a half-smile. “We’re investigating a temple. We expect danger.”

Vellin’s face grew more serious. “I see. Well, I’ll fetch what I have. It won’t take long.” He disappeared into the back of the shop, and the group spent the next few minutes perusing the shelves while they waited.

When he returned, Vellin had several scrolls in hand, along with a small collection of vials. He laid them on the counter before them. “Here’s what I have. Three scrolls of *Protection from Evil*, one scroll of *Dispel Magic*, and I’ve got five potions of *Cure Light Wounds*, two potions of *Cure Moderate Wounds*, and two potions of *Invisibility*. All of it for a fair price, of course.”

“Seriously? That’s all you have on hand?” Eldrin was stunned. “In a shop this size? In a city *this big*? Alright, thank you, we’ll have to go elsewhere.” And with this, they went to a proper scroll and potion shop indicative of a city this populated and affluent.

They made their way to the shop of a spellscale that Artemis knew from her days in the Academy: Millionmax. The dragon-descended spellcaster was a scribe and a scholar, specializing in transmutations and enchantments. “Artemis! What a surprise! What brings you to Wheloon?” asked the spellscale.

The two caught up on their respective exploits over the last few years as Eldrin perused the much vaster selection of scrolls and potions. He looked over his current inventory, and stocked up on some of the spells that none of them could cast.

**Scrolls:**

* Eyes of the Avoral (2) L1
* Vision of Heaven L1
* Black Karma Curse L2
* Lastai’s Caress L2
* Iron Silence L2
* Footsteps of the Divine (Boccob 3) L3

**Potions:**

* Cure Light Wounds (5)
* Cure Moderate Wounds (3)
* Undetectable Alignment (4)

“OK, we’re straight now,” said the favored soul. “So each of us quaffs a potion of *undetectable alignment* before we go in, right?”

Sebenzi nodded, “That’s the idea, and I’ll cast *detect magic* at the onset. The rest of our spells we cast as needed.”

Eldrin followed up, “I can cast *detect magic* later on, after yours expires, if needed. We’re stocked up, though,” he took an inventory of what all he had now.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Scrolls and Potions** | **Qty.** | **Level** | **CLev** | **Notes** | |  | **Value** |
| Scroll of Detect Poison | 2 | 0 | 1 |  |  |  | 24 |
| Scroll of Message | 2 | 0 | 1 |  |  |  | 24 |
| Scroll of Remove Paralysis | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Wand of *Teleport* | 1 | 5 | 9 | 4 charges | |  | 2700 |
| Scroll of Comprehend Languages | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Detect Undead | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Eyes of the Avoral | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Black Karma Curse | 1 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 200 |
| Scroll of Iron Silence | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Scroll of Vision of Heaven | 1 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 25 |
| Scroll of Undetectable Alignment | 4 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 100 |
| Scroll of Footsteps of the Divine | 3 | 3 | 6 |  | |  | 1350 |
| Scroll of Lastai’s Caress | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Scroll of Divine Favor | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Endure Elements | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Dispel Magic | 2 | 3 | 5 |  |  |  | 750 |
| Scroll of Remove Curse | 2 | 3 | 5 |  |  |  | 750 |
| Scroll of Stone Shape | 2 | 3 | 7 |  |  |  | 1050 |
| Scroll of Lesser Restoration | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Scroll of Shield of Faith | 2 | 1 | 5 |  |  |  | 250 |
| Scroll of Summon Monster I | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 50 |
| Scroll of Barkskin | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Scroll of Flame Blade | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Scroll of Flaming Sphere | 2 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 400 |
| Potion of Cure Light Wounds | 5 | 1 | 1 |  |  |  | 250 |
| Potion of Cure Moderate Wounds | 3 | 2 | 4 |  |  |  | 1200 |

“Much obliged, Millionmax,” Artemis hugged the spellscale. “We may be back before you close up shop; on verrà.”

Millionmax’s reptilian eyes gleamed, and he gave a courteous nod. “Best of luck to you all,” he called out as they headed out and off to the Temple of Mystra.

The party left Millionmax’s shop well-equipped, their bags now heavier with a broader array of scrolls and potions. The bustling streets of Wheloon were still alive with activity as the morning progressed, but the group moved with a focused purpose, aware that time was of the essence.

The sun hung high in the sky now, casting a warm golden light on the stone streets. The towering spires of the Temple of Mystra loomed in the distance, its silhouette drawing nearer with each step.

Eldrin adjusted his pack, ensuring the scrolls and potions were securely stored. “We’ll drink the *Undetectable Alignment* potions just before we enter the temple,” he murmured, checking the contents of his spellbook once more. “After that, I’ll cast *Detect Magic* and keep an eye out for anything unusual.”

“Right,” Sebenzi confirmed. “I’ll stay in the front for this, and cast *Detect Magic* first. If we sense any arcane interference or other oddities, we can adjust our approach accordingly.”

The temple’s looming, sanctified presence felt almost oppressive, but they kept their resolve. As they approached the entrance, they noticed the guard stationed at the door, a stern-looking cleric wearing a simple but elegant robe. He gave them a quick nod as they reached the threshold.

“The temple is open,” he said with a warm yet guarded smile, as if he recognized them as familiar faces but didn’t entirely trust their purpose.

“Thank you. We’re tourists from Secomber,” Artemis proclaimed

Sebenzi added, “I’m originally from Chult, but I came with this party from Secomber.” Dressed in plainclothes now, the cleric of Oghma asked, “May I offer a tithe before we pray?”

The guard’s expression softened at their friendly approach, but there was still a wariness behind his eyes. He stepped aside and gestured toward the inner sanctum.

“Thank you,” he said with a polite nod. “The temple welcomes all, but if you wish to make a donation, we can certainly accommodate that. There’s a donation box at the far side of the hall.”

Artemis nodded and smiled politely, offering a brief, friendly glance to Sebenzi. “We’ll do that before we pray, then,” she replied, as the group continued their walk deeper into the temple.

The atmosphere inside was tranquil, with soft sunlight streaming through stained glass windows that cast colorful reflections across the marble floors. The hum of whispered prayers and quiet footsteps filled the air as acolytes moved about, their robes swishing as they tended to their duties.

Sebenzi seemed to relax slightly, his posture a little less guarded as he approached the donation box. He rummaged in his pack and pulled out a modest sum of coins, placing them into the box before stepping aside.

“I’ve been here before,” Sebenzi muttered quietly to the others. “I’ll be fine with the atmosphere, but let’s keep our eyes open for anything unusual.”

Artemis acknowledged his concern with a subtle nod. “We’ll stay vigilant.”

The group passed the donation box and proceeded toward a quieter section of the temple, where the walls were adorned with more intricate tapestries, each telling a different story of Mystra’s influence on the world. The air was filled with the scent of incense, and the rhythmic sound of prayer candles flickering softly added to the sacred atmosphere.

Eldrin, his gaze constantly shifting, was the first to speak, his voice a soft whisper. “Let’s proceed with caution. We don’t know who might be watching.” He scanned the temple, ever-alert for any signs of magical interference.

Sebenzi, ever the perceptive one, tilted his head. “I agree. If any of the clergy here are compromised, we need to remain undetected until we can identify them. But we won’t know until we get closer to the heart of the temple.”

The group continued through the temple, moving with a deliberate yet unobtrusive pace, watching for any signs of arcane or divine manipulation. Eldrin’s hand subtly brushed against the edge of his spellbook, preparing to cast *Detect Magic* at a moment’s notice.

As they approached the central prayer hall, the quiet whispers of the temple’s denizens filled the air. The sound seemed to grow louder as they neared the main area—prayers, incantations, the hum of the Weave itself, all blending into an unsettling chorus.

Eldrin glanced at Sebenzi. “You ready to scan for magic?”

Sebenzi nodded. “Ready.”

The group moved toward the heart of the temple, each step closer to the truth of the mysteries hidden within.

Sebenzi cast *detect magic* as Eldrin cast *message*, joining himself telepathically to the three others in his midst.

“Alright, everyone, we’ve established discreet comms, and Sebenzi is *detecting magic* so everything she sees we’ll all know it within seconds,” Eldrin announced telepathically as the congregants and clergy saw to their respective priorities.

The quiet hum of the temple seemed to swell around them as the magic began to pulse subtly through the air. Sebenzi’s eyes flickered briefly with arcane energy as she scanned the room. The soft glow of her detection spell illuminated a few subtle but potent sources—faint traces of residual magic embedded in the walls, perhaps from centuries of prayers, but nothing overtly threatening... yet.

Eldrin’s voice, transmitted directly into their minds, echoed with calm precision. “Let’s stay alert. If anything feels off, let us know immediately.”

Banshee’s eyes scanned the room as she took in the temple’s interior with a critical eye. She wasn’t one to miss anything, and even without actively searching for magical auras, her instincts were finely honed for finding something out of place.

The clerics moved about, attending to their duties, with no immediate sign of discomfort or suspicion. The temple was as serene as it always was, but beneath that calm exterior, there was something undeniably... off.

After a few moments, Sebenzi spoke quietly, her voice still telepathic but tinged with concern. “There’s something near the altar... faint, but it feels... wrong.”

Eldrin nodded, frowning as he focused his attention on the area she’d mentioned. He didn’t need to say anything further; the others had already picked up on the tension.

“Noted,” Artemis responded, her tone cool and methodical. “Let’s move closer, but keep our movements subtle.”

Sebenzi, feeling the pulse of the magic around her, continued to observe it. The subtle auras were still lingering near the altar, and they felt almost *too* quiet, too controlled for something that was supposed to be a divine sanctum.

“On approach, I’ll begin to look for signs of enchantment or transmutation,” Eldrin sent to the group, stepping with careful ease toward the front of the hall. “Keep your eyes peeled for anyone who’s watching us.”

The group moved through the temple with quiet precision, drawing closer to the altar area. It was a vast and imposing structure, carved from a single block of pristine marble, with golden accents reflecting the light of the few candles that burned in its presence.

Eldrin raised his hand subtly as they neared, signaling the group to stop. He reached into his robes and drew forth a scroll, his fingers carefully unfurling it as he prepared to read a *Comprehend Languages* spell if needed. If there were any inscriptions or divine symbols that seemed out of place, he would catch them immediately.

Sebenzi’s eyes narrowed as the faint magical aura continued to shift near the altar. It was difficult to pinpoint, like a shadow just outside her sight, but there was no denying that something was *there*. Something was *waiting*.

They studied the mannerisms of both clergy and congregants, and tried to emulate the behaviors of someone actually getting something spiritual out of the seemingly random movements that the were undertaking. The two gnomes ventured away from Artemis and Sebenzi, so that they wouldn’t be identified as a single group of four.

Banshee cast *eyes of the avoral [expired in 60 minutes]*, hoping to spot something deliberately hidden near the altar, and elsewhere in her line of sight.

*Banshee’s Spot ranks are now 12 + 8 = 20, meaning you roll 1d20 and add 20 to resolve her Spot checks. What does she see?*

The altar had some candles and incense placed on it, and the area around it seemed pristinely maintained.

However, she did spot a subtle flicker of movement near one of the side alcoves to the right of the altar. A figure—dressed in simple robes like many of the other congregants—moved quickly to the shadows, as if trying to avoid being noticed. This caught her attention, as it was a bit too deliberate to be a casual movement.

Banshee continued to observe the figure closely, her eyes narrowing as she kept track of his movements. The man in the robes seemed intent on staying out of sight, shifting through the shadows near the alcove. Every time he thought he was hidden, he glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if unsure whether he’d been spotted.

She could tell that he wasn’t simply trying to pray or be part of the service—there was something off about the way he moved. His movements were too deliberate, almost as if he was hiding something or attempting to avoid detection. Banshee focused on him, trying to determine his next move, knowing that the rest of the party would be on alert if things started to escalate.

She related this information to the others telepathically as she played nonchalant and watched a swirl of colorful stars floating overhead, the manifestation of one of the priests’ spells. “Ooooh!” others marveled, and she repeated their oooohs just to stay within the script… and all the while, she kept half an eye on the suspicious man.

Banshee sent the information to the others through their telepathic link, careful to keep her outward demeanor casual, her gaze fixed on the floating swirl of colorful stars that danced above the congregation. She mimicked the awe of the others, her voice a breathless “Ooooh!” as she nodded along, feigning deep wonder. The celestial display was beautiful, certainly, but it was nothing compared to the feeling that prickled at the back of her mind—something was off about that man.

As the stars shimmered overhead, she subtly shifted her focus back to him. He was still there, still acting strangely—hovering near the alcove, his attention darting between the altar and the crowd. His body language suggested discomfort, like someone trying to maintain the illusion of normalcy while hiding something. She could feel the tension rising.

Banshee and the others wondered if the man was part of the farse, or if he was being pressured by the culprits somehow. She tried to read distress on his face, but it was ambiguous, and thus, she continued to oooh and aaah at the sights as she overheard one of the priests mention something about *Mystra’s Sacred Trust*, and asked, “What’s that?”

As the priest’s words echoed in the air, Banshee glanced up, her curiosity piqued. Mystra’s Sacred Trust? She hadn’t heard that term before. A fleeting glance at the others confirmed they were just as puzzled.

Banshee’s voice, barely more than a whisper, carried over to the others through the telepathic link. *“Did any of you catch that? Mystra’s Sacred Trust?”* she asked, feigning casual interest as she allowed herself to be swept up in the spectacle of the ritual. Her gaze then flicked back to the suspicious man, still trying to gauge his reaction, wondering if he had any connection to this “Sacred Trust.”

The term had sent a ripple of curiosity through her, and she casually murmured to the group telepathically, *“He just mentioned something about ‘Mystra’s Sacred Trust.’ That’s what’s been going on in the temple lately... Sounds like something from a weird book by some priest named Starweaver Fembrys.”*

The name *Starweaver Fembrys* struck a chord with Eldrin. *“Starweaver Fembrys... wasn’t he the so-called priest who wrote that incoherent book on the stars and the Shadow Weave?”* he mused quietly to the group, piecing together fragments of past research. *“I recall hearing about that. A supposed ‘sacred trust’ tied to the stars, but it was full of half-baked ideas. That book was written by a false priest, a cleric of Shar, who twisted Mystra’s teachings.”*

Banshee, still keeping her face neutral and following the crowd’s lead, continued, *“So it’s all part of a strange ritual they’re following. Could be a distraction, or they might be trying to bind something... dangerous.”*

The priest continued speaking to the congregation, focusing now on the arcane symbols carved into the stone floor. The worshippers around them seemed enraptured, as if the entire ritual was meant to unlock some deep mystery of magic’s origin. The idea that it could be based on a false priest’s teachings wasn’t lost on Banshee. She kept her eyes sharp, watching for any sign of deviation from the expected behavior.

*“It’s all about the stars, but what exactly are they hiding in these rites?”* Banshee wondered, her gaze shifting back to the man who had caught her eye earlier. Was he part of this charade? Or was he just caught up in the strange beliefs surrounding this so-called *Sacred Trust*?

With another glance at the others, she waited for them to gather the full picture.

“Don’t get caught up in the charade,” Sebenzi telepathically warned her friends, her wisdom and intuition allowing her to see past the mesmerizing lightshow overhead.

“What’s up with the shifty guy over there by the alcove?” Banshee asked in the privacy of their thought channel.

Then the lead orator raised his voice, making eye contact with the heroes, and with just about everyone else as well, “Do you deserve Mystra’s Sacred Trust? The mysteries of Mystra are not for the faint of heart nor the idle wanderer. It is a privilege—no, a divine calling—to delve into the Starry Gnosis, to feel the very essence of the Weave flowing through your soul. Only those truly devoted to the pursuit of enlightenment may walk this sacred path, a journey that binds you to the Lady of Mysteries herself. If you believe you are worthy, come forth. Let us begin the steps that will mark you as chosen in Her eyes.”

Artemis engaged in some interpretive dance, highly inspired by the movements of those around her, and the rhythmic words of the orator. She made her way over to the sketchy human and said, “You look like this is new to you. You alright, brother?”

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Skill** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** |
| **Artemis, Diplomacy** | 1 | **Cha (+3)** | 0 | 4 |

*Please roll 1d20, add the Total (4) to the roll, and determine the IC outcome without showing me the numbers.*

The human flinched at Artemis’s approach, his eyes darting toward the priests before returning to her. His lips tightened, and he swallowed hard. “I—uh—yes, sister,” he stammered, voice barely above a whisper. “It’s just… a lot to take in.” His fingers twitched at his sides, as if suppressing the urge to fidget.

He hesitated, then leaned in slightly, speaking just loud enough for Artemis to hear over the murmuring crowd. “They say you see the *real* Mystra when you take the Pledge. That she whispers secrets of the Weave to you.” He glanced at the sermon’s leader. “But… some who take the Pledge don’t come back.”

His face paled as if he had already said too much. “I—shouldn’t talk here.” He turned slightly, shifting his weight as if preparing to slip away.

“Where are you off to, brother?” Artemis asked. “Was it something I said?”

The man hesitated mid-step, glancing at Artemis with a flicker of uncertainty. His voice dropped even lower, barely audible over the sermon. “No, it’s just… I don’t belong here.” His eyes darted toward the priests again. “I came looking for someone, but I don’t think I’ll find them.” His fingers clenched and unclenched at his sides. “Look, if you’re serious about this, be careful. The Pledge… it’s not what they say it is.” He exhaled sharply, then took another cautious step toward the exit, watching Artemis carefully to see if she would stop him.

She smiled, joyfully mimicked the hullabaloo that the woman next to her emitted, then hugged the shifty man, whispering, “I am aware of the disturbing nature of what’s happening. I’m an operative, also looking for others here, and need you to help me infiltrate this enclave, and maybe find your FRIEEEEENDSSS!” she blurted out the last word after releasing him from her hug so it would look like they were talking real friendly-like.

She then said in the same volume that he had used to be heard only by her, “I have fellow agents with me. Please help. We may need a diversion, depending on what transpires. If I wink at you with my left eye, can you divert everyone’s attention away from me, maybe towards the exit over there?” she pointed to the double doors to the west.

The man stiffened in Artemis’s embrace, caught off guard, but quickly masked his reaction with an awkward chuckle to keep up appearances. His lips barely moved as he murmured back, “I— I don’t know what you think I can do, but… fine. If it means getting out of here with my skin intact.”

His eyes flickered toward the western exit, then back to her. “Left eye, got it. I’ll think of something.” He swallowed hard, then straightened up, forcing a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“FRIENDS, YES! Praise be to Mystra, may the Weave guide us all!” he said a little too loudly, throwing his hands up in exaggerated enthusiasm before shuffling back a few steps, trying to blend into the crowd again.

Eldrin had taken this time to study the temple. The architecture was plainly Mystran, with the twelve caryatid columns depicting the goddess and several of her avatars and faithful mortal subjects, and the myriad engravings on every wall. However, the archivist noted several additions to the furniture, including an altar and supporting infrastructure that were at best cheap, faux-Mystran knockoffs.

Aside from the double doors to the west leading into the courtyard, there was another set of closed double doors to their east. The northern wall had 2 doors while along the southern wall there were 3.

Banshee had been studying the mannerisms of the Starweaver dude, for whom she had no affinity, and Sebenzi had been concentrating on studying the petitioners and others who were perhaps being swindled of their time and coin. She danced as they did, her observation as a participant helping her to blend in as just another lost soul looking for some deity to cast a light of importance on them; that was really what she saw in most of these people.

Eldrin’s keen eyes traced the architectural inconsistencies, cataloging each faux addition. The caryatid columns bore the expected elegance of Mystran craftsmanship, but the altar? A poor imitation. The engravings on the walls, though abundant, seemed incongruent in certain places—like someone had hastily added embellishments to mask prior iconography. His mind turned over the implications.

Banshee’s scrutiny of the Starweaver revealed his well-practiced cadence, the way his gaze swept the room not with the benevolence of a shepherd but the calculation of a merchant assessing his flock. His gestures were grand but mechanical, like a man playing a role rather than one infused with divine inspiration.

Meanwhile, Sebenzi’s observations reaffirmed her suspicions. The congregation was not a unified body of believers; it was a patchwork of lost and hopeful souls, all seeking something—meaning, purpose, perhaps just a respite from hardship. She could see it in their eyes, in the way they clung to the Starweaver’s words with the desperate hunger of those wanting to believe, rather than those who already did.

The sermon continued, wrapping itself in flowery mysticism, but the undercurrent of artifice was becoming harder to ignore.

Artemis led her newfound friend by the hand towards the others, saying, “This is my friend. No names yet in case any of us are in on this evil, yes?”

The man understood, and nodded.

The heroes all talked telepathically, getting a common understanding that this man was now their ally, and would cause a diversion upon Artemis’s prompt. They were glad to have him there, and Sebenzi said as much over the loud chanting that served as the backdrop for the Starweaver’s even louder cadence.

Sebenzi gave the man a reassuring nod, her voice carrying warmth despite the orchestrated fervor of the congregation around them. “Glad to have you with us, brother,” she said, playing into the role of an eager devotee while her mind remained sharp, parsing through the situation.

Banshee, ever watchful, eyed the Starweaver as he spoke, his words swelling like a tide meant to drown logic in blind faith. He spoke of Mystra’s Sacred Trust as though it were an exclusive prize rather than an open path. The petitioners around them swayed in agreement, lost in the spectacle, and she wondered how many were already too deep to be saved.

Eldrin, still standing slightly apart, murmured in their telepathic link, *We need to know what’s beyond those doors. The falsehoods in this temple don’t end with its decor.*

Artemis squeezed her new ally’s hand lightly, signaling her silent agreement. When the time came, his distraction would need to be well-timed, and they would have to move quickly.

“I’ll go to the restroom, then go dark and scout around,” Banshee telepathed as she walked up to a young acolyte, “Brother, where is the privy?”

“Just there,” he pointed to the door to their immediate north [T8].

“Thank you,” she said as she went to the door, opened it, entered, quaffed her potion of invisibility while standing behind the ajar door, then slipping out—now *invisible*—and closed the door, making it seem like she was still inside. Then she made her way southeast to the double doors that no doubt led further into the temple, and waited for someone to open those doors so she could slip through. “I’m in position at the eastern doors.”

“Oghma be with you,” Sebenzi blessed the urban ranger as she simultaneously sang in unison with the choir of three girls near Fembrys.

Banshee remained perfectly still, her breath even, her steps silent as she pressed herself near the double doors leading east. The chanting and swirling lights provided ample cover, allowing her to blend into the ambiance of movement and shadow.

*I’ll need to time this perfectly,* she thought, watching for any sign of someone approaching the doors.

Meanwhile, Sebenzi’s melodic voice wove seamlessly into the chorus, her measured tones lending an air of sincerity to the performance. She remained outwardly devoted, inwardly sharpening her senses for the moment things shifted.

Artemis and Eldrin remained engaged, keeping an eye on the Starweaver while their newfound ally subtly positioned himself for the diversion. The energy in the room was thick with expectation, but whether it was the anticipation of divine revelation or something far more sinister remained to be seen.

They were methodical, with no need to rush, and did their best to make their unnamed ally comfortable in their infiltration. Eldrin studied Fembrys’s mannerisms, identifying him as the dispassionate charlatan that he was. He hoped someone from the room to the east would open those doors and enter, leaving Banshee the opportunity to slip past before the doors closed.

The sermon continued, Starweaver Fembrys’s voice rising and falling in rhythmic waves, but Eldrin could see the hollowness in it. The passion was feigned, the words carefully chosen to sound profound while remaining frustratingly vague. His posture, his movements—too measured, too rehearsed. This was not a man channeling divine wisdom but a man controlling a narrative.

Banshee remained poised near the double doors, her body motionless, her ears sharp. She didn’t have to wait long. From within, faint footsteps approached, growing louder as someone inside made their way to the threshold. A second later, the doors parted just enough for a young, robed acolyte to step through, carrying a small tray of ritual implements.

Like a ghost, Banshee slipped through the narrowing gap before the heavy doors swung shut again behind her.

*I’m in,* she whispered through their telepathic link, already scanning her new surroundings.

A map of a building

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

The whisper gnome was in the Inner Temple now. Slabs of obsidian lined the floors, walls, and high ceiling. Two caryatid columns—both depicting Mystra—each held a blazing torch westwardly, as if welcoming incomers. This cast Mystra-shaped shadows on the eastern half of the room, where two newer statues had recently been wheeled onto platforms ensconced within alcoves.

A single, closed door led further east.



She relayed all of this information to the others as Fembrys ceased this part of the session, and began a dialogue with today’s petitioners. “Now, sons and daughters of Mystra, do you hereby swear your oath to follow Mystra’s Sacred Trust?”

“I do,” each of the three youths said after the other.

Banshee crouched low, her invisible form moving with practiced silence as she took in the chamber. The obsidian floor absorbed much of the light from the torches, making the space feel darker than it should. The new statues in the alcoves stood out—their presence was deliberate, recent. Not just artistic additions, but something… calculated.

*Two statues just added to the room. Doesn’t fit with the rest. Might not be just for show,* she warned the others telepathically.

Meanwhile, in the Middle Temple, Fembrys nodded solemnly at the petitioners’ pledges, his expression one of deep satisfaction. “Then come forth, dear children. The first step is surrender—let Mystra’s embrace take you, and fear not the unknown.” He gestured for them to follow him toward the eastern doors—toward the very chamber where Banshee now lurked.

*They’re heading your way,* Eldrin sent to her. *Be ready.* A mental nod went from Banshee back to her fellow gnome.

Banshee thought it wise to cast her other prepared spell for the day: *detect secret doors.* She could now see the finer details and flaws in the masonry, but saw no concealed thresholds at the moment.

On the other side of the room, the three Oghmanytes and their ally of the moment pretended to revel in the oh-so-delightful ritual as the three petitioners pledged their trust and surrender.

Eldrin also knew that fitting in was important, so he mimicked the chanting as best as he could, ha-le-lu-ya, or something like it.

La-la-pa-loo-za!” Artemis didn’t quite get it right, but she was enjoying the festivities, even if she was aware that they were hollow and likely intended to kidnap as many unwitting petitioners as possible. “Woohoo!” she raised her hands up in the air.

Banshee’s magically enhanced vision confirmed what her instincts had already suspected—no hidden doors, at least not in this immediate chamber. That didn’t mean there weren’t more secrets ahead. She positioned herself carefully near the eastern door, ensuring that when it opened, she could slip through unnoticed.

Meanwhile, Fembrys gave a slow, approving nod at the petitioners’ pledges, then extended his arms dramatically. “The journey begins with trust, with faith. You must leave behind the doubts that cloud your path and embrace the Weave in all its mystery.” His tone was measured, coaxing. He stepped toward the eastern doors and raised a hand.

As Fembrys signaled the transition, two robed acolytes moved to open the double doors leading to the Inner Temple—Banshee’s cue.

Telepathically, she relayed, *Doors opening. Moving in.*

Back in the Middle Temple, Sebenzi kept a measured rhythm with the ceremony, watching how the other petitioners reacted. Eldrin’s chant-mimicry was functional, if uninspired. Artemis’s enthusiasm, however, was *a lot*.

The young woman next to Artemis gave her a sidelong look and muttered, “You’re really into this, huh?”

Artemis beamed. “Mystra’s light shines in us all, doesn’t it?”

The woman blinked, then nodded slowly, unsure whether she had just witnessed a truly pious moment or an incredibly enthusiastic tourist.

“To be honest,” Artemis huffed at the woman, “I’m actually always like this. It’s not really the atmosphere; I just have my own things going on. Artemis. What’s *your* name?”

The young woman hesitated, clearly caught off guard by Artemis’s blunt honesty. Then, she gave a small chuckle. “Fair enough. I’m Maera.”

She glanced toward Fembrys as he ushered the petitioners forward, but her attention lingered on Artemis. “You’re new here, huh? What brought you to Mystra’s Sacred Trust?” Her tone was casual, but there was a trace of curiosity—maybe even skepticism—lurking beneath it.

Meanwhile, Banshee had successfully slipped into the Inner Temple just as the double doors opened. She now stood in the shadows, taking in the chamber as Fembrys and the acolytes led the three petitioners forward. The ceremony was progressing. But to what end?

Telepathically, she reported: *I’m in. Watching their next move. Eastern door’s still shut. No sign of guards yet.*

Banshee stood by the single eastbound door waiting for someone to open it.

Meanwhile, the others emulated the behaviors of the convinced, and Artemis continued the dialogue with Maera. “Oh, I’m not sure I’m feeling this vibe, but those three look pretty into it,” she pointed at the petitioners. “Ooh, look! They’re proceeding into wherever you go to get the Trust! Do you know where that is?” she asked Maera.

Eldrin and Sebenzi were now talking to the man who had agreed to cause a distraction, and both had identified themselves as investigators into the matter that was concerning him. “It is wise—as our friend—suggested, to not use names for now,” Sebenzi spoke for all of them, “but know that our cause is just, and our resolve is strong. You may want to start making your way westward towards the entrance. Our sister will wink at you when we need everyone looking in that direction.”

“Right,” the man waltzed and meandered from place to place, much like others were dervishing to the rhythm of the chanting, and gravitated towards another visitor who had not ventured very far into the temple.

Banshee kept her back to the wall, waiting near the eastbound door. No one had approached it yet, but she remained patient. *No movement here yet,* she relayed to the others.

In the Middle Temple, Maera followed Artemis’s gesture toward the petitioners, her expression darkening. “They go below,” she said in a low voice. “Through there.” She tilted her head toward the eastern double doors. “Not sure what happens next. No one comes back the same.”

Eldrin and Sebenzi kept their exchange with the allied informant brief. The man gave a short nod before continuing his dance-like shuffle, slowly inching toward the western exit.

Meanwhile, Fembrys placed a hand on the shoulder of the first petitioner. “Come, child. The Weave calls to you.”

The double doors to the east opened.

Banshee saw a robed figure stepping through.

Banshee pressed herself against the wall, holding her breath as a robed figure entered from the eastern doors. The figure was a young acolyte, carrying a small tray with an empty silver goblet. He stepped into the obsidian-lined chamber and, without hesitation, turned toward the Middle Temple, heading straight for Fembrys.

The whisper gnome took her chance, slipping through the open door before it closed behind her.

On the other side, she found herself in a short hallway leading further east. The passage was dimly lit, with another door at the far end. To her left, a narrow staircase spiraled downward into darkness. She telepathed to the others, “I’m in. Stairs leading down. Hallway ahead.”

“Right on, sister!” Artemis congratulated her on the progress. “Another hurdle, but be cautious.”

“I’m invisible,” Banshee reminded her friend, “that’s just part of my caution.”

Back in the Middle Temple, Maera’s words lingered in Artemis’s mind. No one comes back the same. The ritual was reaching its final stage. Fembrys gestured toward the eastern doors where Banshee had just disappeared, leading the petitioners forward. The moment of decision was fast approaching.

The three Oghmanytes continued their pleasantries with Maera and the others, and waited to see how this ritual would unfold, and what kind of success they would have in getting some of these newcomers to sign up to be petitioners on the next go-around.

This wide landing was flanked by two more dark statues, both apparently carved of coallike stone, roughly depicting a female human. Soft white light spilled from the north and south stairwells. She took the southern one further down, where a flickering, starry light clung to the statue of a woman in the center of an ample chamber. The rubble of broken statuary, burned scriptures, and smashed holly vessels was piled about the central statue and elsewhere throughout the chamber. Five doors allowed egress into the area, in addition to the twin staircases.

The invisible ranger heard movement on the other side of the door to her immediate south, and moved westwards towards a single door that she hoped would be unlocked.

The door creaked softly as Banshee tested the handle—it was unlocked. She slipped inside, closing it just enough to ensure no wandering acolyte would notice it ajar. She was now in a wide hallway with six caryatid columns depicting some of the lesser known Mystran heroes and heroines.

She went to the next door to her west and found it to be locked, reporting all of this to her friends above. “Based on how many steps I’ve taken westward since I got down here, I’d say I’m standing about 15’ below you all.”

“You’ve made it quite far. Don’t get stuck somewhere, even if you’re invisible,” Sebenzi was Banshee’s voice of reason.

A map of a building

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

“There are a few other doors I haven’t tried, and I have a feeling someone’s on the other side of one of them, so I’m going to just listen for a bit,” Banshee clarified as she returned to the room with five doors. With one door tried, and another sounding like a man or woman was on the other side, the urban ranger tried the northward door.

She found it unlocked, and closed it behind her, beholding a library with about a half-dozen bookshelves, which were stuffed with tomes and scrolls, though as she perused, she could see no discernible order by which they might have been organized. They were piled in heaps, and as many lay on the floor as were on shelves.

This would never be a sight in an Oghmanyte temple, and Banshee suspected the same was the case for a Mystran one. “Guys.” She described the panorama of “parchment debris”, adding, “It’s painful to see what they’ve done to all these scrolls and tomes.”

She heard laughter—a deep, masculine chuckle—in the door to her south, confirming that it was at least one humanoid in there. Another voice—a woman—spoke at a steady pace, but Banshee could not make out the words through the wall.

Meanwhile, in the Middle Temple, Fembrys pressed a hand to each petitioner’s forehead in turn, muttering solemn words that were barely audible over the ambient chanting. One by one, the initiates were led toward the eastern doors.

Sebenzi continued his friendly exchange with the unnamed ally, all the while keeping track of the clergy and petitioners. Artemis, ever the embodiment of chaos and charm, leaned in to Maera. “So what happens next? Do they come back out later, or is this more of a one-way trip?”

Maera hesitated, her lips parting slightly before pressing into a thin line. “You really are new, huh?” She let out a quiet laugh, but her expression carried unease. “They’ll be back. Different, but back.”

“Ooh, I wanna see!” Artemis announced as she discretely cast *detect thoughts [expired in 6 minutes]*. She focused first on Maera’s thoughts, then on Fembrys’s, all the while telling her friends via *message* spell what she was gleaning on the thoughts in her midst. Eldrin and the others remained vigilant, as Artemis went closer to the eastern door to keep Fembrys within her spell’s area of effect.

Detecting only the magic that was creating the lightshow above everyone’s heads, Sebenzi wondered what manner of magic he would use on the petitioners.

Maera’s surface thoughts flickered with hesitation and unease. *Why is she so interested? Is she actually just curious, or…?* There was a flash of guilt, quickly buried. *I should tell Fembrys, but if she’s just another lost soul, he’ll say I worry too much.*

Then, from Fembrys, Artemis picked up something colder, more methodical. *Soon. The Trust must be kept. These ones will serve.* A moment of calculation. *Three new faithful. Not ideal, but sufficient.* His thoughts carried a vague but clear undercurrent—something about the ritual was a means to an end, not an act of devotion.

Meanwhile, Banshee rifled through the nearest desk, scanning the open ledger for useful information. Names, dates, donations—none of it particularly damning, but then she turned a page and found something more promising. A list of names, some crossed out, some underlined. The heading read:

*“Processed for Initiation – Final Departure Pending.”*

She telepathed to the others. *Got something. Looks like a list of people who came in but… didn’t leave?*

At the same time, Sebenzi continued his observations. The lightshow’s magic was entirely superficial, but that didn’t mean the true enchantments weren’t at play elsewhere. He murmured to Eldrin, “He’s priming them for something. Not sure if it’s enchantment magic or something subtler, but those kids won’t be the same when they come back.”

Eldrin and Sebenzi—the lead strategists—discussed the fork in the proverbial road at hand. They could maintain the element of surprise, and continue to spy, or they could wait until Fembrys took the petitioners into the next room, then signal their ally to have everyone turn westward, then open the doors and slip through, confronting Fembrys. They gauged their options, now cognizant of Maera’s complicity with Fembrys.

“Banshee, Fembrys is about to go eastward,” Artemis said. “You may want to come back upstairs in case conflict ensues.”

“I can hang by the single door at the top of the stairs, and pop out if and when I hear your voices confronting the priest,” Banshee agreed as she opened the door just an inch, looked out to ensure that no one was in the hallway, then exited the scroll room, closed the door and invisibly made her way back upstairs, hanging back by the door she’d taken to get to the staircase.

Eldrin and Sebenzi nodded in silent agreement. Surprise was their greatest advantage—if they struck too soon, they might not uncover the full extent of the scheme, but if they waited too long, the petitioners could be lost to whatever fate awaited them behind those eastern doors.

Sebenzi spoke softly, just enough for his allies to hear through their telepathic link. *Let him lead them in. Once he closes the door, we move. If we catch him alone with them, we might force him to talk.*

Eldrin adjusted his posture, still feigning devotion but ready to act at a moment’s notice. Artemis, still scanning thoughts, focused again on Fembrys as he turned to usher the young petitioners forward. *He’s confident,* she reported. *No suspicion yet.*

At that moment, Banshee settled into position at the top of the stairs, keeping her ears trained on the echoing movements below. She could hear distant footsteps—someone moving about in the lower chambers—but no immediate alarm. *In position. If you start talking, I’ll be there in seconds.*

Fembrys motioned to the petitioners. “Come, children of Mystra,” he intoned. “The next step awaits.” He placed a hand on the nearest youth’s shoulder and guided them toward the eastern door.

All the heroes needed now was the right moment. They gravitated towards the doors as Fembrys casually opened them and led the three unsuspecting victims inside. “We wait until the doors are closed so Fembrys is well inside by the time we go in,” Sebenzi telepathed the contingency.

Eldrin added: “I will cast *silence* once we get in there, so if Fembrys shouts, none of the people in this room will hear.”

“With luck,” Artemis said, “we’ll slip by unseen, and disable the priest for questioning.” Artemis then hugged Maera and said, “I think I’m going to go sit on that bench for a moment. I got myself too giddy and now I’m dizzy.” And with this, she half-danced over to the bench by the double doors as their ally occasionally looked eastward towards her to see if she was winking.

Almost there.

Fembrys guided the petitioners inside, his voice still rich with the honeyed tones of a practiced deceiver. As he stepped across the threshold, the doors began to swing shut behind him. Maera watched with mild disinterest, more concerned with the other congregants still engaged in quiet conversation or reflective prayer.

No alarm. No hesitation.

The moment was nearly perfect.

Then, a subtle hitch in the air—Maera’s gaze flicked to Artemis for the briefest second, as if something about her movements nagged at her subconscious. She didn’t move to intervene, but her thoughts, still faintly within Artemis’s reach, churned with the quiet suspicion of someone accustomed to deceit. *What’s she up to?*

The doors were closing.

The heroes had to move *now.*

Artemis could tell that Maera was going to be a complication. “I’m going to have to stay out here, guys. Maera’s eyeballing me hard.”

“Noted,” Sebenzi thought over to her. “Banshee, are you in place?”

“Good to go,” the urban ranger replied.

Artemis waited for a moment when Maera was turned away and the allied male was not, and at that moment she winked at him.

The man began to shout, “Hey! That’s *my* satchel!” He pointed to another man’s satchel, and the other man was duly shocked.

The other man said, “By Mystra, man, this is *my* satchel.”

“It’s *mine*!” insisted the heroes’ ally as two acolytes wandered over and everyone’s gaze turned eastward, including Maera’s and Artemis’s. Artemis actually got up to lead Maera’s gaze away from the double doors, and towards the disagreement about the satchel.

Eldrin cast *silence* from his daily whisper gnome spell repertoire. The effect—centered on him—allowed Sebenzi to open the double doors completely silently, and into the Inner Temple they went.

“Now, Banshee!” Sebenzi sent the mental ping over as she closed the door.

Fembrys turned to see the two intruders, asking, “What on Faerûn are you-” the rest of the question was muffled by the sphere of silence around Eldrin as he approached, pointing his crossbow at him.

Standing outside the sphere of *silence*, Sebenzi cast *hold person [expired in 6 rounds; Will DC 17 to negate effect]* upon Fembrys as Banshee opened the door and entered, still invisible.

Fembrys’s eyes widened in outrage as the two intruders entered, but before he could finish his question, the air around him thickened with unnatural stillness—Eldrin’s silence blanketed the room, snuffing out sound like a smothering cloak. He barely had time to register this before Sebenzi’s spell seized his mind in an iron grip.

For an agonizing heartbeat, the priest struggled internally against the magical paralysis. His lips curled in defiance, his body trembling as he fought to break free. Then, with a final twitch of resistance, his muscles locked into place, his face frozen in mid-snarl.

The petitioners gasped, their wide-eyed expressions shifting between confusion and terror.

Eldrin wasted no time. He stepped northward, bringing the edge of the silence field with him, allowing Sebenzi’s voice to reach the would-be initiates.

“We’re here to save you from these impostors,” the cleric reiterated what she’d already said. “You’ve been duped—this was no sacred initiation. You were about to be kidnapped.” [Please stop reiterating what I’m posting IC.]

The three young acolytes hesitated, exchanging uncertain glances. One—a freckled woman with a streak of silver in her dark hair—looked at Fembrys with dawning horror. “That’s… that’s not possible. He—he’s a priest of Mystra, isn’t he?”

The petitioner’s words were lost within the silence spell, though Sebenzi—who stood outside the sphere—could tell that the freckled woman was distressed. “We may have resistance among the followers. Banshee, restrain the priest.”

Banshee, still invisible, got her rope and shackles and began to tie the priest’s hands behind his back as Eldrin used his rope to bind the man’s ankles such that they were only a foot apart. He would not be able to run away that way.

Artemis monitored Maera’s reactions from outside as the commotion continued. The favored soul wandered over to the satchel dispute, and kept Maera’s attention focused eastward.

Sebenzi stepped into the sphere of silence and gagged Fembrys’s, stuffing a sock into his mouth for symbolic value, and to muffle any screams he might want to emit.

Once the magically held dude was all tied up, Eldrin dispelled his *silence* sphere and Sebenzi continued her parley with the petitioners. “Sisters, brother, look me in the eye. If I am lying, may Mystra herself strike me down in her temple. These are not Mystrans.”

Eldrin reached into his haversack, which functioned as a traveling library. “She speaks the truth. We are undertaking an investigation, and I can pledge that the concept of Mystra’s Sacred Trust is entirely a fabrication that doesn’t even appear in print until 1369. Look,” he fumbled through his well-organized books, and found the recent hoax-dispelling publication, *Bet You Didn’t Know This Was Baloney*, turning to the index, then to the page indicated for Mystra’s Sacred Trust. “Look, look.”

“We haven’t much time,” the invisible ranger said. “I’m Banshee, by the way. I’m with them. You’ll probably see me in a few minutes when my spell expires, but we need to get you to safety.”

The other two petitioners were more receptive to the rescue attempt, and the male among them said, “I… I *knew* something was off.”

“You *suspected*, dear,” his partner said.

“Well, yes,” he corrected himself. “What should we do now? We expected to be cleansed downstairs.”

Banshee reported, “I was just down there, and I didn’t see any cleansing going on, or anything used to cleanse, as I understand the word.”

“In a way, we have the upper hand,” Eldrin said. “If our immediate goal is to get the innocent to safety, then we only need to deal with three acolytes and their maces out there. Once that has been achieved, however, we don’t know what our odds are if we press further into the temple.”

“It’s pretty empty,” Banshee noted. “But there are at least two people down there, and I’m assuming at least one of them is above Fembrys in whatever hierarchy they’re beholden to.”

“Artemis,” Sebenzi sent the message telepathically. “Are you ready to block the front entrance so no impostor escapes?”

“On it,” Artemis confirmed. “Pretty much there now.”

Eldrin cast *protection from evil [expired in 60 minutes]*.

*Sebenzi gained +2 to AC vs. evil creatures’ attacks, and to saves vs. Fear.*

Sebenzi cast *longstrider*.

*Sebenzi gained +10’ of movement per round.*

The *hold* spell expired, and Fembrys began to blurt obscenities as Banshee took him by the back of his cloak, preventing him from fleeing with his ankles bound. “Fugh! Di!” were the only syllables that came out of his sock-gagged mouth, and he displayed his truer colors as a vicious, malicious evildoer.

“See? What say you, sister?” Eldrin posed to the freckled woman after their earnest attempt to show forthright, transparent, and honorable virtues in their words and actions. “Do you still believe that this man is anything but a charlatan?”

The freckled woman trembled, her eyes darting between the struggling, muffled Fembrys and the open pages of *Bet You Didn’t Know This Was Baloney*. The cold, factual evidence juxtaposed against the reality of the priest’s undignified rage cracked something in her certainty. Her lips parted as if to protest, but no words came. Instead, she swallowed hard and lowered her gaze.

“…No,” she whispered, then more firmly, “No. I—I don’t.” She turned to the other two petitioners, seeking some reassurance in their expressions. The man nodded hesitantly, while his partner—still shaken—gripped her hands tightly together.

“Then we must go,” Sebenzi urged, stepping towards the door. “You are innocent in this, and we mean to keep you that way. Artemis is securing the entrance—none of these impostors will be escaping justice.”

Eldrin flipped the book closed and returned it to his haversack. “The three acolytes outside are an obstacle, but if we move quickly, we may be able to subdue them before they sound an alarm.”

Fembrys thrashed against his bonds, his muffled obscenities barely intelligible, his face red with exertion. Banshee adjusted her grip on his cloak, keeping him firmly restrained.

“I can try to talk them down,” the male petitioner offered. “If they don’t know what’s happening in here, they might just listen.”

Sebenzi nodded. “It’s worth attempting first. But if they refuse to stand down…” She patted the hilt of her mace.

Banshee, still invisible, quietly reported, “Someone’s moving in the hallway beyond. Slow, deliberate steps. They’re heading this way.”

Eldrin exhaled sharply, adjusting his grip on his crossbow. “Then we move now. The moment they open the door, we control the situation.”

The heroes positioned themselves strategically—Eldrin and Sebenzi flanking the door, Banshee keeping Fembrys restrained behind the nearest alcove, and the petitioners huddled near the wall. The tension thickened as the footsteps approached.

Then, a hand touched the door handle.

“Artemis, who’s coming in here?” asked Eldrin.

“Two acolytes,” she answered.

“Even better,” Eldrin said. “We deal with these guys and have only one acolyte left out there, plus Maera and anyone else loyal to the impostor,” he motioned to Fembrys behind the alcove.

With her quarterstaff now in both hands, Sebenzi waited for those entering to do so before moving to close and stand by the doors.

Eldrin pointed his crossbow at the acolytes, and motioned for the three petitioners to move in. “You’ve been found out, young men. You will surrender now, or I guarantee that our force will be lethal.”

Banshee stepped out of the alcove with the bound and gagged priest.

Sebenzi added, “Don’t be stupid. This is the day you decide the fate of the rest of your lives.”

The two acolytes froze as they stepped into the room, their expressions shifting from confusion to fear as they took in the scene before them. Eldrin’s crossbow trained on them, the bound and gagged Fembrys struggling in Banshee’s grip, and Sebenzi’s firm stance by the doors—it was an undeniable display of control.

One of the acolytes—a wiry, dark-haired youth—glanced at his companion, who had the softer features of someone not accustomed to violence. The latter swallowed hard, his hands twitching near the hilt of his mace, but he hesitated.

The softer-looking acolyte visibly wavered, his grip loosening on the mace at his belt. “This isn’t right,” he murmured, eyes darting toward Fembrys, then to the three petitioners who had begun edging toward him. “They… they said it was Mystra’s will…”

“It’s not,” the male petitioner interjected, stepping forward with surprising conviction. “They were going to *kill* us.”

The dark-haired acolyte clenched his jaw. “You don’t know that—”

“I do,” Banshee interrupted, her voice cutting through the tension like a knife. “I *was* down there. You think I didn’t hear what your superiors were planning? Whatever lie they fed you about some divine ‘cleansing,’ it’s a cover for murder.”

The wiry acolyte’s face darkened, his internal conflict evident. He wasn’t letting go just yet. “If we let you go,” he asked warily, “what happens to us?”

“That depends,” Sebenzi replied. “Surrender, and we take you into the authorities as misguided pawns who were lied to—*not* the masterminds behind this deception. Resist, and you’ll be treated as willing participants in this farce.”

The softer acolyte exhaled, then—slowly—lifted his hands. His mace dropped to the floor with a dull clatter. “I’m not dying for this.”

His companion remained rigid, his fingers curling into fists. A moment passed. Then another.

Banshee tensed. “Well?”

The dark-haired acolyte looked at Fembrys one last time, eyes flickering with something close to regret. Finally, he, too, let out a sharp breath and released his weapon.

Sebenzi relaxed ever so slightly, nudging their surrendered weapons aside. “Smart choice.”

Eldrin didn’t lower his crossbow just yet. “That’s one more problem dealt with. Now, we need to clear the front hall before reinforcements arrive.”

Artemis’s voice came through their telepathic link. “I can delay Maera and the last acolyte, but we should act fast. I think she’s starting to realize something’s wrong.”

Sebenzi nodded. “Then we move now.” She turned to the petitioners and acolytes. “Stay behind us, do exactly as we say, and you’ll make it out of here alive.”

Banshee grabbed Fembrys by the cloak again and gave him a tug forward. “And you—if you *even* think about making this difficult, I’ll make sure your gag is the least of your problems.”

The bound priest glared, muffled curses escaping from behind the sock.

Eldrin added, “Know that we have an operative who can read thoughts. If you,” he turned to the man who’d hesitated to surrender, “have any reservations about your surrender, we will know it. Alright, people,” he then turned to his friends and the former petitioners, finally lowering his crossbow as he moved toward the door. “We’ll need to block all the doors in that chamber. I’m trusting you lads to put those maces to use in a righteous manner. Take the northern doors. We’re also aware that the authorities have been infiltrated by the impostors, and the legitimate authorities are currently dealing with that snag, so there will be no outside reinforcements coming your way even if Maera and the others sound an alarm. Let’s roll.”

“*My* satchel!”

“No! *Mine*!” they were still going at it.

Coordinating their movements telepathically, they positioned themselves so as to block the main causeways leading out of the main chamber. Artemis nonchalantly put herself in front of the westbound double doors.

Sebenzi and the freckled petitioner remained guarding the eastern doors as Banshee moved with Fembrys and the two petitioners without freckles towards the southern edge of the room.

Eldrin led the two acolytes northwestward, and stopped as he made eye contact with Maera. The two acolytes drew their maces and went to the northern part of the room, each standing in front of a closed door.

By then Eldrin had already begun speaking, “Maera, we know you are in league with this nefarious charlatan. We know you’re disappearing your so-called converts, never to be heard from again. Effective earlier today, your network of spies and lobbyists to the City Guard has been dissolved, and we are here to offer the terms of your surrender.”

The conversation about the satchel stopped, and the ally apologized to the unsuspecting satchel owner, “I’m sorry; it was in everyone’s best interests and safety.”

“Ah…” the other man understood now.

Artemis asked the others, “We need everyone to stand where they are for the moment.” She could read the minds of everyone present, and could—by now—tell that Maera was the only other accomplice in the room. “Maera, I can tell from our brief conversation that Fembry’s has kept you from some of the secrets... from some of what happens on the lower level.”

“I…” Maera didn’t finish.

“They don’t let you down there, do they?” Sebenzi asked Maera as Banshee’s *invisibility* spell expired.

“Drop your mace as an act of good faith, and we will testify in your favor,” Banshee offered the ultimatum. “Don’t think about it too much. We haven’t fired a single shot, and my trigger finger’s getting blue.”

Artemis murmured to her ally, “You did awesome, brother, and have helped to save at least three lives today. I must ask one more thing of you. Go to the Temple of Oghma; they have not been compromised as the City Guard has. Tell them Agent Artemis sent you, and try to muster as many of the faithful as you can. We’ll need to ferry these “cultprits” there,” she merged cult and culprit into a single term, being the divinely inspired wordsmith that she was.

Meanwhile Maera studied Fembrys, whose expression was that of someone who’d abandoned hope of salvaging this situation, though he was still intent on escaping, and Artemis relayed these thoughts to the others.

“Maera, it’s over,” Eldrin said. “Your fellow acolytes now see the truth before them, and their current actions will receive ample consideration when these events are discussed at the Hall of Justice. You must now decide *your* destiny.”

“Either way,” Sebenzi swore, “This farce ends today.”

Maera’s grip on her mace tightened, her knuckles whitening as she stood frozen in the wake of Eldrin’s words. Her eyes darted to Fembrys, searching for some kind of unspoken reassurance, but all she found was the defeated glare of a man who knew the noose was already around his neck.

She exhaled sharply, her breathing uneven, her mind torn between the conditioning that had led her here and the grim reality now staring her in the face. Artemis’s words echoed in her head—*They don’t let you down there, do they?*—and the way Fembrys avoided her gaze only deepened the pit in her stomach.

For years, she had justified the secrecy. Justified the whispers. But if *she* wasn’t worthy of knowing the truth, then what had she been fighting for?

She let out a slow breath and, at last, released her grip. The mace slipped from her fingers, landing on the marble floor with a dull clatter.

Sebenzi gave a short nod. “Good choice.”

Banshee kept her crossbow steady. “Now step away from it. Slowly.”

Maera complied, lifting her hands to show she meant no harm. “I—I just wanted to serve the goddess,” she murmured, voice thick with doubt. “I thought I was helping people.”

“Perhaps today, this moment, you are serving Mystra,” Artemis stated. “And as for deserving to know the Ultimate Truth, only Mystra can fully know the Truth of the Weave, and only Oghma can fully know the Truth of the Truth; any mortal seeking that knowledge in a ritual like this is likely to wash up emptyhanded.”

Eldrin’s gaze didn’t waver. “Help them now.” He gestured toward the room. “Tell the truth when this is over. That’s the only way you make things right.”

The two acolytes who had surrendered before watched her closely, their own uncertainty mirrored in her posture.

Artemis turned to the ally she had tasked with reaching Oghma’s temple. “Go. Now.”

The man nodded, casting one last glance at the others before slipping out.

With Maera disarmed and her spirit shaken, the last piece of resistance in the room had crumbled.

Fembrys, still bound, let out an incoherent growl through the gag, his eyes burning with frustration.

Eldrin barely spared him a glance. “Your turn to walk, priest.”

Banshee stepped up beside him, prodding him forward. “Hope you enjoyed being in charge. It’s all downhill from here.”

Sebenzi, eyes still on Maera, sighed. “Let’s go.”

Artemis lingered for a moment, scanning the room with her thoughts to ensure no unseen resistance remained. Satisfied, she followed.

The false temple of Mystra was no longer theirs to control.

Now, the real battle for justice would begin.

Eldrin picked up Maera’s mace, and handed it back to her, “This is a gesture of good faith. Should your will prove to be heroic today,” he spoke to the other two acolytes as well now, “know that the courts view such actions as redemptive. In light of the fact that you—too—were duped, I will personally fund your defense and counsel, and will do what I can to reinstate your statuses to those of righteous citizens. This I pledge before my allies and all present.”

Artemis then asked the innocent bystanders who had simply been invited to come today, “Good people of Wheloon, I must ask for a few volunteers to watch over the priest alongside the acolytes. Magical forces can sometimes intervene when the evil are not being watched, and while reinforcements are on their way, we would be grateful for your aid.”

“Oh, I’m definitely standing guard over this dude,” a hefty half-orc said, having been cajoled into attending by Fembrys himself. “Said he’d free me of my burdens...” he almost started to cry. “Move, fool, and I’ll add another burden to my soul with yours.”

A person with arms crossed

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

“Easy, brother,” Banshee cautioned him. “I feel you; I really do, but he’s good and restrained for now.”

“If anyone else could help,” Artemis reiterated. “You have our gratitude.”

Banshee turned to the two male acolytes, “What are your names, lads? I’m trusting you with your former boss. Don’t disappoint me.”

Sebenzi thanked the petitioners and acolytes for their rightful conduct, and added, “You do honor to your families. I, too, pledge to testify in your favor, and like Eldrin, I trust there’s justice in this city’s courts.” She then cast *clairvoyance* on this room, able to visually monitor everything that transpired here while they ventured forth.

“Sssssmart!” Eldrin praised the Chultean cleric for her wits.

Maera’s hands trembled slightly as she accepted the mace from Eldrin. His words had reached her, and though doubt still clouded her mind, a spark of resolve flickered in her eyes. She glanced at the other two acolytes, who exchanged uncertain looks but nodded.

The younger of the two, a human with short, curly black hair, straightened his back. “My name is Rell.”

The other, a half-elf with sun-kissed skin and a slight build, spoke next. “Soren.”

Banshee gave them a measured look before nodding. “Rell. Soren. You both get one shot at doing the right thing. Make it count.”

The hefty half-orc cracked his knuckles and leaned over Fembrys, who recoiled instinctively. “Oh, we’ll be watching him alright.” His gaze darkened. “I ain’t falling for another charlatan’s tricks.”

A few more petitioners—those less shaken by the revelation—stepped forward, steeling themselves for guard duty. Artemis gave them all an approving nod. “Keep him bound. Don’t give him even a second of opportunity. If he tries to cast anything, gag him tighter or knock him cold. Reinforcements will be here soon.”

Sebenzi finished her spell, the unseen eye of her *clairvoyance* settling into place. With a final glance over the room, she exhaled. “Let’s move.”

Banshee took point, her movements swift and precise as she led the party forward. Her sharp eyes darted between doorways and corners, wary of anything lurking in the false temple’s depths.

Artemis followed at a measured pace, her longbow at the ready, the string taut beneath her fingers. She kept her mind open, sensing for thoughts ahead.

Sebenzi and Eldrin moved together, their weapons trained forward, their steps careful but confident. Eldrin’s hand crossbow gleamed in the dim light, and Sebenzi’s grip on her longbow was steady, her expression unreadable.

The weight of the confrontation behind them faded as the ominous silence of the temple’s lower level stretched before them.

There were at least two people downstairs, and the heroes were about to find out exactly what secrets Fembrys and his ilk had been hiding.

They continued down the stairs. Banshee reached the landing once again, and having taken the southern staircase to the lower level, she now pointed her magical shortbow northward and took that flight of stairs down towards the room where she’d seen all the parchments and other writings.

She waited for Artemis to reach the landing and get back into her line of sight as she listened to make sure no one was around the corner before stepping off the last step and onto the lower level.

Sebenzi cast *omen of peril*, as she and Eldrin caught up with Artemis, who waved to Banshee to confirm that all was well.

“Great danger,” she reported. “We must be prepared, and dispense with any dialogue or parley. The next person we see here, we must consider them foes.”

Artemis cast *crown of clarity* on Eldrin, then on Sebenzi, then on herself.

*Artemis, Eldrin, and Sebenzi gained +8 on their next Listen OR Spot check, which I will declare.*

They then joined Banshee, reaching the lower level.

Artemis then cast *conviction [expired in 60 minutes]* on all four of them, starting with Sebenzi, then Banshee, Eldrin, and herself.

*All PCs gained +2 to all Saving Throws.*

“That’s where the parchments are ‘stored’,” she air quoted the last term as she waved her hand northward. “And that’s where the voices were coming from,” she pointed south as a woman’s voice rang again from within that room, laughing.

Banshee nodded, her grip tightening on her magical shortbow. The faint sound of laughter from beyond the corner only reinforced the urgency in her step.

“We move in swiftly,” she whispered, voice steady but sharp with the anticipation of danger. She led the group, not bothering to conceal her movements anymore; every second spent trying to be silent could cost them a moment they didn’t have.

Artemis, the glowing aura of clarity still shimmering around her, stayed close to the others, bow now fully nocked and ready. Her eyes scanned ahead, the increased awareness from her spell giving her a heightened sense of the surrounding danger.

The group descended into the darkness of the lower level. With every step, the air felt heavier, charged with an ominous presence that echoed off the stone walls. The woman’s voice sounded again, closer this time—more menacing, laced with a madness that only deepened the unease hanging over the party.

“Stay sharp,” Artemis murmured, her mind already working through possible contingencies.

Sebenzi felt the familiar weight of her faith bolster her resolve as the conviction took hold. Her body moved with precision, eyes alert, ready for anything.

Eldrin followed, his hand-crossbow raised, each motion deliberate. He spoke, but his voice was quieter now, a low murmur. “No more negotiations. We see their faces now, and we deal with them accordingly.”

The lower level stretched out before them, the faint flickering light from distant sconces illuminating only parts of the long hall. The room ahead held the potential to be a central hub for whatever dark dealings had been taking place beneath the surface.

Banshee’s sharp eyes scanned the room ahead, seeking any sign of movement, any shadows that might betray the position of their adversaries.

Sebenzi—able to see well into the room above—confirmed that Fembrys was staying put.

Not yet using their Listen and Spot boosts, the heroes approached the southern door. They could now barely make out the man’s and woman’s words. “So the petitioner asks, ‘Will it hurt?’ and I’m like, ‘You won’t feel a thing.’”

The woman cackled, “Woo! Well, you weren’t technically lying.”

They both laughed.

Artemis read the thoughts of the two people in the other room, and whispered, “One of them is named Shan Thar. He’s the leader. The woman is his bodyguard.”

Eldrin suppressed his anger at the jesting over the murder of their victims, “Now,” he said.

Banshee opened the door. The two gnomes, half as tall as Artemis and Sebenzi, entered first with their bow and crossbow trained on the robed man sitting at a table playing a card game with his armored bodyguard, by the looks of it. “Reach for your weapon, and it’ll be the last thing you do,” Banshee threatened the woman who’d thought to do so.

Artemis and Sebenzi pointed their bows at the bodyguard woman. “We are reading your minds,” Artemis stated. “We’ve apprehended your lackeys, and they’re being processed now. Fight, try to run, or surrender now. These are your only options, and the first two end up with you horizontal for the rest of history.”

The air in the room felt tense, almost suffocating with the weight of the decision hanging over their adversaries. The robed man, Shan Thar, and his bodyguard, the woman who seemed ready to draw her weapon, had no illusions about what would happen next.

The sudden shift from the loud laughter to the sharp, direct commands left a stark contrast in the air. The two gnomes, weapons trained, entered with lethal precision. They were followed by Artemis and Sebenzi, each bow pulled taut, faces set in grim determination.

The woman’s hand twitched, but she froze as Banshee’s words hit their mark. The man, Shan Thar, seemed unbothered by the threat, his poker face showing no sign of surprise. His bodyguard, however, was far less composed.

The woman’s gaze shifted from Artemis to the weapon at her side. Shan Thar, on the other hand, seemed to be calculating his next move with a calm that could either be a sign of confidence or the first step in a trap.

Eldrin’s grip tightened on his hand crossbow, his voice betraying none of the anger that simmered beneath the surface. “Time’s ticking,” he said, each word cutting through the silence like a blade. “Make your choice.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed as she considered the threat, her hand still hovering near the weapon at her side, clearly weighing her options. Shan Thar, calm and composed, tilted his head slightly, his gaze shifting between the poised gnomes and the others. His lips curved into a thin, almost imperceptible smile as if he were enjoying the moment in some twisted fashion.

His voice, when it came, was smooth, almost condescending. “You’ve made your point,” he said, clearly not intimidated, though the tension in his posture suggested he wasn’t entirely careless. “But you should know, you’re not the only ones with cards to play.”

The woman’s hand hovered a moment longer before she lowered it, a reluctant surrender to the situation.

Artemis, her mind racing through the possibilities, kept her bow trained on the woman, her expression unreadable. “Last chance,” she warned, her voice cold. “We won’t hesitate.”

Sebenzi’s sharp eyes never left the pair, her bowstring taut, her mind already calculating the next step in case they chose to defy them.

The room held its breath.

Artemis murmured, “*Someone’s* going down.”

The lawful archivist proclaimed, “Shan Thar, based on your actions and response, I hereby identify you as an entity hostile to this investigation. Your admission of guilt relinquishes your rights as a citizen. Should the court see fit to *resurrect* you to stand trial, so be their choice.”

And with this, arrows and bolts flew into the robed, unarmored man’s chest.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ranged Weapon** | **Dmg.** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Rng.** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Sebenzi, Longbow +1 | 1d8 | 1 | 1 | x3 | 100’ | 3.0 | +4 | 4 | 8 |
| Eldrin, MW Light Crossbow | 1d6 | 0 | 1 | 19-20, x2 | 120’ | 4.0 | +7 | 16 | 23 |
| Banshee, Composite Shortbow +1 | 1d4+1 | 0 | 1 | x3 | 70’ | 1.0 | +10 | 13 | 26 |
| Banshee, Shortbow, Rapid Shot | 1d4+1 | 0 | 1 | x3 | 70’ | 1.0 | +10 | 13 | 23 |
| Artemis, Longbow +1 | 1d8 | 1 | 1 | x3 | 100’ | 3.0 | +6 | 18 | 24 |

*Shan Thar AC = 19. Miss, hit, hit, hit, hit. Dmg to Shan Thar: (6 + 1) + (4 + 1) + (3 + 1) + (8 + 1) = 7 + 5 + 4 + 9 = 25.*

*Shan Thar has 23 hps total, and has been reduced to -2. He is unconscious and bleeding, and will die in 8 rounds if not stabilized.*

They all reloaded their bows and crossbow. “How about you?” Eldrin asked.

“Feeling lucky?” Sebenzi added.

“It’ll take us more than one volley to bring you down for sure,” Artemis gauged, “which will make your last moments that much more painful.”

Banshee walked over to the woman, ready to be struck by surprise, and ordering her, “Relinquish your weapons… now.”

The room was thick with the tension of the moment. Shan Thar, the man who had tried to stay calm in the face of certain death, crumpled under the onslaught of arrows and bolts. His body jerked with each strike, and the mocking calm that had once settled in his features shattered as blood pooled beneath him.

The woman’s eyes flicked from Shan Thar to the party, the weight of her options pressing in on her like a vice. Her hand twitched once more, but she didn’t make a move to draw her weapon.

As Banshee closed in, the bodyguard’s stance remained defensive, though the first signs of doubt crept into her expression. She had been calculating her next move, but with Shan Thar on the floor, dying, the equation was rapidly changing.

“You’re out of time,” Banshee’s voice was firm as she stood over the bodyguard, the tension palpable. “Weapons. Now.”

The woman’s lips curled into a snarl, but she slowly stepped back, her hand lifting from her weapon, and a soft, almost regretful sigh escaped her. “You’re not getting away with this,” she muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

“We’re not getting away or going away,” Eldrin assured her.

“We’re here to stay,” Artemis finished poetically, smiling. “And Mystra will again have her day.”

Sebenzi, Artemis, and Eldrin stood at the ready, waiting for any sign of aggression, prepared to react should the woman decide to make a move. Banshee kept her gaze sharp, focused on disarming the woman.

“Hush now, and consider salvaging what remains of your life by acting in accordance with honor,” Sebenzi kept her bow on the woman as Banshee bound the bodyguard’s wrists behind her back and Eldrin did the ankles as they had with Fembrys.

Sebenzi then cast *cure minor wounds* on Shan Thar, stopping the bleeding, and stabilizing his critical condition. He remained unconscious and disabled, and they then tied him up as well.

“Reinforcements should arrive soon,” Sebenzi guessed, still not seeing any in the room where her *clairvoyance* was active.

Eldrin then said, “I have enough scrolls to deal with Shan Thar if he somehow regains consciousness. Take this thug and have the others watch her as well.”

Sebenzi, Artemis, and Banshee led the woman out of the room. Artemis turned to her as they headed up the flight of stairs and asked, “What’s your name, warrior?”

The woman glared at Sebenzi but did not respond immediately. Her arms bound tightly, her wrists and ankles secure, she was led by Banshee up the stairs. Her defiance was still there, but now it was tempered by the cold reality of her situation. She had no choice but to comply, and the silence between them stretched long as they moved. Her gaze flickered to Artemis, then to the others as they approached the top of the stairs. For a moment, there was hesitation in her eyes. She didn’t answer right away, perhaps assessing her odds or considering whether there was any advantage to be had in silence. But then, with a resigned sigh, she spoke, her voice low but clear. “I’m Kira,” she said, her eyes narrowing as she added, “but I doubt you’ll care to hear more once you learn the truth.”

Eldrin, standing behind the group with a watchful eye, spoke with authority, his voice cold. “Your allegiance has already been revealed in part, Kira. We know you’re not who you claim to be. You’re part of something much darker, aren’t you?”

She didn’t flinch, though her lips twisted into something resembling a smirk. “What would you do with that knowledge? You think you’re the first to chase shadows? You may not even realize the extent of the game you’re now part of.”

The group ascended into the more secure confines of the upper level, where they could prepare for reinforcements. Sebenzi, as she looked to the others, considered the woman’s words carefully.

“Well,” she said, glancing at Artemis and Banshee, “the truth is something we’ll uncover, one way or another.”

Eldrin, though mostly focused on the bindings and securing Shan Thar, added, “Once our reinforcements arrive, we’ll have the means to dig deeper. I hope your resistance holds up when we turn the screws, Kira.”

As they reached the top of the stairs, Sebenzi turned her attention back to the others. “I’ll send for the petitioners and the half-orc. They can help get Shan Thar up the stairs,” she said as she made her way toward the doorway.

The atmosphere in the room was tense, the echoes of the struggle still ringing in their ears. As Banshee and Sebenzi set Kira in a chair, binding her securely, Artemis and Eldrin stepped into position, ready to turn the conversation into something more useful. The only sounds were the occasional creak of the building and the soft shuffle of footsteps as the petitioners and half-orc began to arrive to assist in moving Shan Thar.

Sebenzi eyed Kira carefully as she spoke first, her voice calm but stern. “Now, Kira, I’ve already shown you some mercy by stabilizing Shan Thar. But don’t mistake that for kindness. You’re going to answer our questions, whether you like it or not.”

Kira met her gaze defiantly but said nothing for a long moment. Finally, she broke the silence, her tone flat but sharp. “You think you can intimidate me with your ‘mercy’? You have no *idea* what you’re dealing with.”

Artemis leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “Perhaps. But you’ve clearly underestimated us. We’re well aware that you’re no mere mercenary or rogue. You and Shan Thar, and the rest of your group, are involved in something much darker. The questions we ask now will help you decide how much pain you endure before we put an end to this charade.”

Kira’s eyes flickered, but she held her tongue, clearly contemplating her response. After a long pause, she finally spoke, her voice quieter but no less venomous. “You really don’t know, do you? We’re not just here for coin. This is bigger than all of you. The truth will swallow you whole, and your little game will end before you even understand why.”

Sebenzi pieced together the woman’s words in reference to her studies of evil deities. She stepped forward, her gaze hardening. “You’re part of the Sharran cult, aren’t you?”

At the mention of the name, Kira’s lips twitched, betraying a flicker of recognition, but she quickly masked it. Her silence spoke volumes.

Eldrin moved closer, his tone a shade colder. “We’re not interested in your cryptic riddles, Kira. You’re going to tell us everything. The Sharran cult’s activities, their plan, the true nature of what they’re trying to achieve. This is your chance to make it easier on yourself.”

Kira sneered. “You think you’re the first to try and hunt us down? The First Darkness has many eyes and ears. You’re playing at something you don’t understand, and the longer you pursue it, the more you’ll lose.”

Artemis, losing patience, cast a quick glance at Sebenzi. “The more you resist, the worse it gets for you. We can keep playing this game, or you can help us stop the next move.”

Sebenzi’s gaze flickered to Banshee, who stood ready to maintain control over the prisoner. Sebenzi then returned her attention to Kira. “You’re clearly well-trained, but everyone breaks eventually. The question is: how long do you want to prolong this?”

Kira let out a low, almost sadistic laugh. “I’m not the one who’ll be breaking. You’ll see. The next step is already in motion. It’s too late for you.”

Sebenzi stepped back slightly, a silent signal to Artemis. “We’ve got no time to waste. The reinforcements are on their way, and we need to know what’s coming next. If you don’t talk, we’ll have to get more creative.”

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed from the entrance, signaling that help was on the way. The Oghman reinforcements, including the half-orc and petitioners, had arrived.

As the half-orc moved to help carry Shan Thar up the stairs, Sebenzi leaned in once more, locking eyes with Kira. “You can hold onto your secrets if you wish. But I suggest you think carefully about your next words. Your life, and what little of it remains, is entirely in your hands now.”

Kira’s defiance remained, but the air in the room had shifted. She was cornered, and she knew it. The stakes were higher now than ever before, and whatever game she’d been playing, it was clear she wasn’t going to win this time.

Artemis blankly stated, “I say we kill her.”

Eldrin and Banshee laughed through their nostrils as Sebenzi assured Kira, “She’s kidding.”

“No, I really wanna just...” she strangled the air in front of Kira’s neck, making a crack sound with her tongue across he roof of her mouth. “It’s like Shar’s influence is...” she feigned gasping and being possessed, continuing the act, “... must kill innocent people…”

Others in her midst laughed at the comical favored soul of Oghma before she said. “Alright, I *am* just kidding… for now.”

The footsteps of the actual reinforcements from the Temple of Oghma arrived shortly thereafter, with a silver-haired halfling leading the congregation of heroes whose might equaled that of the protagonists. “I am Loremaster Ghazni,” he announced himself. “Who is leading this investigation?”



Eldrin raised his hand, reaching innocuously into his vest pocket as he produced the writ handed to him. “Loreseeker Eldrin Thistlebrook, and my colleagues.”

“Priestess Sebenzi, at your service.”

“Artemis of Oghma.”

“Banshee. Glad you made it,” the urban ranger counted the half-dozen Oghmanytes, including a locksmith with an impressive keyset and toolkit at his belt.

The locksmith took off his hat, and announced himself, “Name’s Fidget. I know this temple a little, and can point out the secret room below. I was there during construction. I was also told there’s at least one locked door to pick. I’m your man for that.”

The heroes summarized what they knew so far for the Loremaster and the other new arrivals. These Oghmanytes looked upon the Sharrans, and took in the situation. Loremaster Ghazni looked to one of his flock—a woman with wings on her boots—and nodded, saying, “Alert our liaison at the City Guard, and let her know about the compromise of their own staff.”

The Loremaster knew they would still be vulnerable if the corruption spanned all the way up to the top of the municipal hierarchy, and thus he looked at another of his loyal agents—a cloistered cleric in the regalia of his position—instructing him, “Rally the members of the Righteous Order,” by which he meant the leadership of all the temples in this district dedicated to the worship of Good-aligned deities. They were mostly on this block, along the main promenade, so it would not take long to sound the call to their cause, particularly with a fragmented City Guard dynamic. “Let them know that any Guard could be in league with the Sharrans. The Temple of Ilmater has a holding cell for spellcasters and other powerful folks. Ask them for the use of the space while we sort out the corruption within the secular ranks.”

“Aye, Loremaster,” the halfling bowed her head and flew on her boots’ wings out of the Temple of Mystra and towards the Temple of Ilmater.

“You have done well for the cause of order and goodwill,” the Loremaster commended the heroes.

Sebenzi spoke with the senior cleric, “Loremaster, we appreciate the recognition, but if there are any other agents of Shar downstairs, we must make haste.”

“Not to mention the fact that we didn’t search any of these rooms to the north and south,” Artemis added.

With the reinforcements in place and orders issued, the heroes and their allies moved swiftly to secure the temple.

Banshee and Sebenzi led a thorough search of both floors, assisted by the other Oghmanytes. Fidget proved invaluable, quickly picking locks and spotting potential traps before they became hazards. The locksmith grinned as he worked, whispering, *“Sharrans think they’re clever. But secret doors ain’t so secret if ya know where to look.”*

Each room was searched with efficiency. The northern chambers revealed little beyond personal quarters, some hastily abandoned. A few rooms bore signs of recent disturbance—open drawers, missing documents, and traces of footprints leading toward the stairs. Sebenzi made note of these clues, suspecting that some cultists had either escaped or relocated before their arrival.

The southern rooms proved more interesting. A locked chamber contained a small shrine dedicated to Mystra, long neglected but intact. Another door led to a hidden study filled with religious texts—some Oghmanite, others tainted by Sharran influence. Banshee leafed through them briefly before setting them aside for later review.

One of the junior Oghmanytes, a nervous-looking acolyte, hesitated before speaking. *“I—I’ve been below,”* he admitted. *“Only once. There’s a storeroom, then a narrow corridor that leads to a boat. I never saw what was beyond that.”*

His words confirmed what they suspected—this temple had been used as a front for something far darker.

Before long, the wing-booted messenger returned with three Ilmatari clerics and two Justiciars, clad in crimson-trimmed robes. With practiced efficiency, they took custody of the captured Sharrans. Kira and Shan Thar were gagged with iron-threaded bindings to prevent spellcasting, while lesser cultists were shackled for transport.

Artemis stepped forward, addressing the assembled petitioners. *“We appreciate your patience. This temple was not what it seemed, but justice is being served. You’re free to go, but remember—always question what you are told, and seek knowledge above blind faith.”*

The crowd murmured their gratitude and dispersed. Only the half-orc remained, lingering near Artemis.

*“You stayed,”* Artemis noted, crossing her arms.

The half-orc hesitated, then rumbled, *“Saw the way you lot handled yourselves. You’re... different. Not just soldiers or zealots.”*

*“We serve Oghma,”* she replied, *“not with blind obedience, but with understanding. You fight for something, don’t you?”*

He grunted. *“Used to. Not sure what now.”*

Artemis nodded. *“Then maybe it’s time you started asking the right questions.”*

The half-orc looked thoughtful, and for now, that was enough.

While the others worked, Eldrin disappeared into the parchment room. Stacks of scrolls, letters, and ledgers filled the shelves. He methodically sifted through them, pulling aside anything suspicious. Several documents stood out:

* **A roster of names**—likely cult members, or perhaps victims.
* **A ledger tracking supplies**—mentioning “vessels” sent downriver.
* **A coded missive**—signed only with a crescent moon, likely a higher-ranking Sharran.

Eldrin carefully organized these findings, marking key passages for later decryption. “What have you all been up to?” he asked the Sharrans as he stood alone in the room, hoping the documents would answer his question.

With the upper levels secured and the enemy contained, the team regrouped. Loremaster Ghazni nodded approvingly.

*“You’ve done well. But the true threat lies below.”*

Banshee adjusted her weapons. *“Then let’s not keep them waiting.”*

Before they ventured down, Sebenzi said to the three acolytes as they were being led away, “Brothers and sister, know that Eldrin’s pledge was true.” She then clarified for everyone who’d just arrived, “Eldrin has promised to pay for their legal fees, and he and I intend to document our testimony of their voluntary surrender and subsequent aid to this cause. Were it not for them, we might have failed today, and Mystra’s name would be further sullied by Shar’s murders.”

Maera nodded, “I thank you for your mercy.”

“It is Oghma’s will—and perhaps also Mystra’s—that we should be the instruments of mercy when the situation calls for it. We hope to be able to visit you all later today. Once we sort out the corruption amongst the City Guard, we will have a clearer picture of our next steps. Until then, the Church of Ilmater is as merciful as I am.” She looked at the Ilmatari to gauge their reactions, hoping their lot hadn’t been corrupted.

With Fidget leading the way, the heroes descended toward the unknown depths of the temple.

They descended into the lower level, starting first with the locked door in the hallway that led into the Hallway of Night. Entering, they took in the sights of a wide, utilitarian hall flanked by several doorways, with the northern wall boasting two double doors, suggesting large things went through them.

Two torches burned in iron sconces, one on the north wall and the other on the south. The far end of the room exhibited a great black circular disc of darkness bordered by deep purple stone.

“I don’t think I can help with that,” the locksmith shrugged, going to the northern doors, to try them, finding all four knobs locked. Trying the southern ones, he noted that none of them were locked. Opening them one at a time from west to east, he revealed for the others a torture chamber, a storage closet, and a guardroom.

The smell of rotting flesh from the torture chamber prompted them to close that door, and they took a moment to take an inventory of what was in the closet, where boxes, barrels, and shelves lined the floor and walls.

Artemis and Sebenzi studied the black disc, wondering about its nature and function.

Eldrin, already suspecting the disc’s nature, adjusted his glasses and gestured for Artemis and Sebenzi to step back slightly as he scrutinized it. He murmured a prayer to Oghma, calling upon his divine insight to unravel the mystery.

Sebenzi, relying on her own theological knowledge, examined the craftsmanship of the deep purple stone border. The symmetry and intentional placement suggested ritual significance.

*“A portal?”* Artemis asked, frowning.

*“Likely,”* Eldrin replied, his voice tinged with caution. *“But to where—and what manner of key it requires—is another matter.”*

As they debated, Fidget rummaged through the storage closet, pulling back a tarp to reveal an assortment of mundane supplies—ropes, nails, candles—but also some more curious finds:

* **A wooden crate bearing a crescent moon sigil**, its lid slightly ajar.
* **A set of five obsidian rings, each carved with arcane runes.**
* **A small coffer, locked with an intricate mechanism.**

Banshee narrowed her eyes at the crate. *“That’s the second time we’ve seen this mark today. Looks like Shar’s deeper layers are starting to show.”*

Sebenzi gestured toward the rings. *“Those are components for something ritualistic. They may interact with the portal—or be used to pass through safely.”*

Eldrin nodded, retrieving a notebook to quickly sketch the runes.

Meanwhile, Artemis, feeling the weight of unease thick in the air, turned to the guardroom. A long table, scattered playing cards, and half-finished meals suggested a hasty departure. But something gnawed at her instincts. She took a slow, deliberate step inside, eyes scanning for anything out of place.

Then she saw it.

A thin, violet shimmer lingering in the air—a residual trace of magic, dissipating like mist.

She gestured sharply. *“Someone teleported from here, recently.”*

Banshee’s grip on her weapons tightened. *“We need to move.”*

Eldrin exhaled slowly, adjusting his glasses. *“Agreed. But we need to be sure what we’re stepping into first.”* He glanced at the dark disc once more, his mind racing through possibilities.

Would the rings grant them passage? Was a sacrifice required? Was there another way through?

The questions lingered as they stood at the threshold of the unknown.

“Remember when we did that thing with the conjured sparrow?” Eldrin reminded Sebenzi.

“Oh, right,” the cleric said, casting *summon monster I* to conjure a sparrow, then casting *chain of eyes* on it as it perched on her finger, then sending it into the disc to see what it saw.

The tiny conjured sparrow flitted from Sebenzi’s finger, its beady black eyes reflecting the ominous glow of the purple-bordered disc. It hesitated for only a moment before diving forward, vanishing into the inky void.

Sebenzi’s eyes glazed over slightly as the magic of *chain of eyes* took effect, letting her perceive through the sparrow’s senses.

For a heartbeat, there was nothing. Pure blackness. An abyss that seemed to stretch on forever.

Then—a shift.

The sparrow emerged into a dimly lit stone chamber. Sebenzi’s vision adjusted, revealing a circular room lined with black marble. At the center stood a dais with a large obsidian altar, its surface slick with some viscous, dark fluid.

Dark-robed figures knelt before it—three in total—heads bowed in silent reverence. At the far end of the room, a spiral staircase wound downward, disappearing into deeper darkness.

One of the robed figures suddenly stirred, turning slightly, as though sensing something. A soft whisper, inaudible yet laced with power, rippled through the chamber.

The sparrow let out a tiny chirp—then disintegrated into shadowy motes.

Sebenzi gasped as the spell snapped, her vision returning to the temple hallway.

Artemis was the first to react. *“What did you see?”*

Sebenzi steadied herself. *“A ritual chamber. Three Sharrans at an altar. And a stairway leading further down.”*

Fidget muttered a curse under his breath. *“Figures they’d have another layer to this mess.”*

Eldrin adjusted his glasses, mind already assembling possibilities. *“They destroyed the sparrow? That means they noticed the intrusion. We need to assume they’re preparing for us.”*

Banshee cracked her knuckles. *“Good. Let them prepare. Won’t change how this ends.”*

The decision loomed before them—step through the portal now and face the cultists head-on, or attempt to find another way down?

Sebenzi cast *find traps [expired in 6 minutes]* as Eldrin cast *barkskin [expired in 60 minutes]*.

Artemis cast *shield of faith [expired in 6 minutes]*.

“Loremaster,” Eldrin urged Ghazni. “We should waste no more time.”

“Agreed,” the Loremaster proclaimed before he and his paladin-at-arms ventured in and through the portal.

“Come on,” Banshee then said as she and the others stepped through, leaving the locksmith alone to pick the locks along the northern wall.

Reaching their destination, Sebenzi now cast *sanctuary [expired in 6 rounds]*.

As the party emerged from the portal, the air grew colder. The chamber was dimly illuminated by violet braziers, their flickering glow casting jagged shadows across the walls. The scent of incense and aged parchment mixed with something more acrid—like burned hair.

Three figures in midnight robes stood at the far end of the room, each gripping a wicked-looking dagger. At the center of their ritual circle, a bound and gagged prisoner—a man in commoner’s garb—writhed against his restraints. One of the cultists, a woman with a shaven head and dark tattoos spiraling down her neck, held a chalice in one hand, dark liquid sloshing inside.

“Intruders,” she hissed. “You desecrate sacred ground.”

One of her companions, a taller figure with a silver mask obscuring their face, stepped forward, raising their dagger. “Shar’s will is absolute. You will not leave here alive.”

Banshee was already moving. “Yeah? Let’s test that theory.”

Round 1

Artemis, Banshee, and Eldrin attacked the nearest Sharran cultist as Sebenzi retained her sanctuary spell.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ranged Weapon** | **Dmg.** | **D+** | **TH+** | **Critical** | **Rng.** | **Wt.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Artemis, Longbow +1 | 1d8 | 1 | 1 | x3 | 100’ | 3.0 | +6 | 11 | 17 |
| Banshee, Composite Shortbow +1 | 1d4+1 | +0 | 1 | x3 | 70’ | 1.0 | +10 | 11 | 21 |
| Banshee, Shortbow, Rapid Shot | 1d4+1 | +0 | 1 | x3 | 70’ | 1.0 | +10 | 18 | 28 |
| Eldrin, MW Light Crossbow | 1d6 | 0 | 1 | 19-20, x2 | 120’ | 4.0 | +7 | 10 | 17 |

*Assuming Shan Thar’s AC, these shots miss, hit, hit, and miss.*

*Dmg: (2 + 1) + (4 + 1) = 3 + 5 = 8.*

Sebenzi proclaimed, “Your comrades are in custody, or dead. You will now join them in either condition.”

They were hoping that the Loremaster and the paladin of Oghma would help to turn the tables on the cultists before the latter could mobilize their offensives.

The wounded cultist stumbled back, clutching at the arrows embedded in his side, while his two comrades moved to cover him. Despite their situation, they held firm, their devotion to Shar giving them reckless resolve.

“You don’t belong here,” one of them hissed, hurling a small black bead onto the ground—a *smokestick*! Thick, choking smoke billowed out, rapidly obscuring the chamber.

The second cultist lunged at Artemis, attempting to exploit the cover of darkness.

*1d20 = 10 + 2 = 12 (Miss).*

The dagger scraped harmlessly against her armor.

The third cultist muttered a quick prayer to Shar, channeling dark energy into himself, casting *doom* on Eldrin.

*Eldrin Will save, DC 14, or take a –2 penalty on attack rolls, saving throws, and skill checks for 1 minute.*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Save vs.**  ***doom*** | **Rank** | **Ability & Mod.** | **Misc. Mods.** | **Total** | **Roll** | **Check** | **Notes** |
| **Eldrin, Will** | **5** | **Wis (+2)** | 2 | 9 | 11 | 20 | +2 vs. Enchantment & Illusions |

*Success. Effect negated.*

The battlefield was now a swirl of shifting shadows, smoke, and flickering violet light.

Round 2

Sebenzi cast *searing light*, targeting the unharmed cultist.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ranged Weapon** | **Dmg.** | **Atk** | **Roll** | **Check** |
| Ranged Touch Attack | 3d8 fire | +3 | 16 | 19 |

*Hit. Dmg: 16 fire.*

The searing light blasted through the swirling smoke, striking the last unwounded cultist squarely in the chest. He let out a strangled cry as the radiant fire consumed him, his body collapsing in a smoldering heap.

The paladin of Oghma, unshaken by the obscuring smoke, swung his greatsword in a wide arc. The blade bit deep into one of the wounded cultists, dropping him instantly. The remaining enemy barely had time to react before the Loremaster followed up with a precise, calculated strike, his blade finding the cultist’s throat.

A few ragged gasps later, the chamber fell silent once more. The only sound was the settling smoke and the faint, acrid scent of burnt flesh.

With the immediate danger passed, the party turned their attention to their surroundings.

The portal was clearly a failed experiment—the black, circular disc of darkness flickered erratically, its magic unstable. Looking closer, Eldrin recognized remnants of a *shadow walk* ritual woven into the stonework, but it seemed incomplete or corrupted. The destination was uncertain, likely collapsed or inaccessible.

Near the portal, several human skulls rested in a ceremonial pattern—each carved with arcane sigils devoted to Shar. Many were cracked or charred, perhaps a byproduct of the portal’s malfunction. Sebenzi carefully examined them and confirmed they had been used as focus components, though it was unclear if they had been magically significant or merely symbolic sacrifices.

Among the wreckage of the cultists’ makeshift shrine, Artemis found a small, locked iron coffer. It bore no immediate traps, but the heavy weight suggested something valuable inside.

The room was otherwise barren—aside from the ominous aura left behind by the failed portal, a quiet sense of stillness had settled over it.

“Let’s bring this back across to the locksmith,” Eldrin urged as they wondered if there was anything else still stirring within.

Stepping back through the portal with his eyes closed so he wouldn’t be quite as disoriented when he got to the other side, the whisper gnome saw Fidget standing by the open doors to the north. “Empty of enemies, and ready to inspect,” the locksmith motioned northward to two joined rooms [T30 & T31].

A study was adjoined to a bedchamber, and as Eldrin stepped in and scanned *[expend Spot +2 bonus from crown of clarity spell]* the area, he noted a décor and personal artifacts that suggested that a woman had kept this area for work and leisure. The elegant rococo-style ottoman and other furnishings included an ornate, gold-cornered chest comprised mostly of iron and wood with the insignia of Mystra on its lid, though heavily defaced with knife blades or other sharp instruments.

“Anyway, if you can get that unlocked, I think the group is advancing through there,” Eldrin mentioned to Fidget.

“Sounds good. I’ll tinker away on this box over here and see if that chest proves to be a problem,” Fidget replied.

Eldrin returned through the portal, finding the party ready to continue. The paladin’s name was Cyrus of Neverwinter, and he wore a helmet of seeing invisibility as Loremaster Ghazni and Banshee now led the way through the only door in the room, one along the southeastern wall. It was unlocked, and the whisper gnome and halfling now led the others southward for what must have been 90’ or so, where the path turned sharply east, and led to another door 20’ further.

“Locked,” she cursed, waiting for Sebenzi. “Do you have a knock spell or should we get Fidget?”

“I do not have that spell prepared today, sorry,” the cleric announced.

Eldrin returned to where Fidget was. He’d gotten the chest open, and said, “Just personal artifacts here, nothing of real value to the case. As for what’s in the box,” he held up the chakram. “I think they call this a chakram.”

“Hm,” Eldrin said, stuffing it into one of the evidence bags that they’d all been handed. “I appreciate your skills, and I think they’re most needed at the frontline now.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, there’s a locked door barring our path forward,” Eldrin motioned for him to follow.

~\*~

Less than a minute later, the locksmith was having a peek at the mechanism, and didn’t take much longer to unlock it, cautiously opening the door just a crack.

They heard a male voice speaking as if in a dialogue, though there was no other voice replying. “Yeah, well, that’s what you get when you fuck with Shar.”

They looked at one another, and Banshee and the Loremaster inched forward with Eldrin and the others following behind. The paladin—armored from head to toe, was the last one to move, lest they have zero element of surprise as they came upon a man called Mhair (male Tethyrian human fighter 6, page 34 of this module).

They entered a dim, cold chamber echoing with the sound of rustling water. A subterranean channel flowed from the north wall, bordered by a stone walkway on the west and east. It flowed south through a low-ceilinged cave. A span of stone bridged the dark, flowing water. The east and west walls were lined with rusty, iron-barred cells, inside of which a human woman slept.

He was a burly, broad-shouldered human with a really nice masterwork suit of studded leather armor. His features told them he’d had a hard life, though he seemed sure of himself as he burted, “Hey, this... wait a... who in the Nine Hells is you all?” He’d left his sword on the catamaran 15’ to his south, and was otherwise armed only with a dagger.

Eldrin succinctly explained the situation, “All of the clergy of Shar, and its accomplices, have been arrested or neutralized. Only you remain. Some, such as Maera, have already agreed to testify against those culpable for this nefarious enterprise. Choose your fate by reaching for your dagger or raising both hands in surrender.”

Banshee had already stepped forward as they all had their ranged weapons trained on Mhair. “Give it up and live to tell the tale to your cellmates. Food is free there, and if there’s no evidence tying you to this, you’ll probably walk after a tenday.”

Mhair’s rough features twisted as he processed their words. His fingers twitched toward his dagger, but then he glanced toward the catamaran and the sword he had left behind. His jaw tightened. He wasn’t a fool.

Slowly, he raised his hands, palms open. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he muttered. “Didn’t think I’d see the day.” His voice carried a Tethyrian drawl, the weariness of a man who had made one too many bad bets.

Banshee let out a short breath, tension easing in her stance. “Smart choice.” She strode forward and kicked the dagger away, sending it clattering into the corner. The paladin stepped up to restrain Mhair, binding his wrists with practiced efficiency.

Meanwhile, Sebenzi approached the rusted cells, peering at the sleeping woman inside. Her breath was steady, though her clothes were filthy, and her thin frame suggested she had not eaten well in some time.

“Hold,” Sebenzi murmured, pressing a hand to the bars. “Let me see to her first.” The cleric muttered a quiet prayer to Oghma, letting divine insight guide her assessment of the woman’s condition.

Eldrin turned back to Mhair. “You’ll be answering questions about what you’ve seen here. If you cooperate, we might even let you testify rather than rot with the others.”

Mhair scoffed. “You’re telling me *Maera* flipped? Should’ve known she didn’t have the spine for this.” He let out a breath through his nose. “Fine. I’ll talk.”

Banshee smirked. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

The room was eerily quiet save for the trickling of the subterranean channel. The next step was to secure the prisoner, awaken the captive woman, and determine whether any remaining threats lurked beyond.

Mhair offered no resistance as Cyrus secured his wrists, the paladin murmuring a brief invocation to ensure truthfulness in the man’s coming statements.

Sebenzi carefully unlocked the cell door using a key from Mhair’s belt, stepping inside and kneeling beside the emaciated woman. “Easy, you’re safe now,” she whispered. The woman stirred, eyes fluttering open. For a moment, confusion and fear flickered in her gaze—until Sebenzi produced her holy symbol.

“Oghma...?” the woman croaked.

“You’re going to be alright,” the cleric reassured her. “Help has arrived.”

Eldrin, Banshee, and Ghazni moved systematically through the chamber and adjoining spaces, noting damaged altar pieces, corrupted tomes, and defaced religious artifacts. The disfigured Mystra iconography was particularly concerning—it would require both magical and theological assessment.

Banshee held up a splintered relic. “This should go in with the rest. Could be part of how they disrupted wards or holy ground.”

Loremaster Ghazni nodded, dictating notes aloud to a hovering quill enchanted to transcribe his words into a ledger. “All items shall be logged under Tribunal Case #3776 – ‘Mystran Temple Conspiracy.’ Provenance: Deep Crypt Cells beneath Ilmatari Grounds. Items secured for interfaith examination and adjudication.”

Cyrus and Fidget carefully sorted artifacts and magical items into linen-sealed evidence bags enchanted against tampering. Eldrin checked seals twice over before each item was handed off.

The investigation’s conclusion was decisive: the surviving cult members in this sanctum had been neutralized, and their plot laid bare. As agents of both the Temple of Oghma and the Ilmatari Order descended from above, the search widened. They began investigating guards allegedly on Shar’s payroll, clerics suspected of magical subversion, and temple personnel who had disappeared or turned a blind eye.

Aboveground, dusk had begun to fall over the Mystran Temple. The stone facades of Waterdeep’s tombs turned amber under the setting sun.

The Oghmanyte team emerged with grim faces but upright posture, carrying their evidence bags and escorting Mhair and the freed woman. Lorekeeper Xiomara stood by the entry arch, flanked by her aides.

“You have done what few others could,” she said solemnly. “The darkness beneath us festers no more.”

Ghazni gave a short, respectful bow. “May what was learned here illuminate more than just this case.”

A cheer rose among the assembled Ilmatari and Oghmanyte agents, clerics, and watchmen who had supported the operation. Even the normally reserved Banshee cracked a smile, lifting a hand in recognition before muttering, “Let’s hope the next layer’s not worse.”

The team knew this victory was but a chapter. The deeper rot of Shar’s conspiracy might stretch through courts, cells, and power-brokers. But for now, they had done their part. The sun had touched the stones once again.

~\*~

Eleint 5, 1374 DR – Morning

The next morning had been an uneventful one as they had prepared to venture back to the Temple of Mystra, where Tunaster Dranik had been reinstated. He was not the chief Clergyman, but without one present, he served in the interim capacity until the real clergy could be found, if they were still alive. Records were even now being magically scanned and organized so as to facilitate the investigation, but for the time being, the heroes were all now gathered around the table where Shan Thar and Kira had been playing cards the day before. Some sat; others stood. Tunaster and Ghazni—the lead clerics for their respective temples—discussed with the Ilmatari representative—Drawud Kroth—their next steps.

Cyrus—a paladin of Oghma and a Purple Dragon Knight—assisted the taskforce with tactical and strategic considerations for the arrest of known Sharrans throughout the city, though the evidence was pointing more and more towards an expedition into the Vast Swamp, seeing as the evidence they’d gathered so far pointed to the boats leaving with petitioners being headed there, where an active portal to the Shadow Plane was being used to ferry these poor people to some horrible fate.

“To what end?” someone asked.

“The documentation so far has been rather elusive,” Ghazni summarized.

“Who will go on this expedition?”

Several names were thrown out, and Eldrin suggested that he and his sisters in Oghma’s faith take on the charge of laying these renegades by the heels.

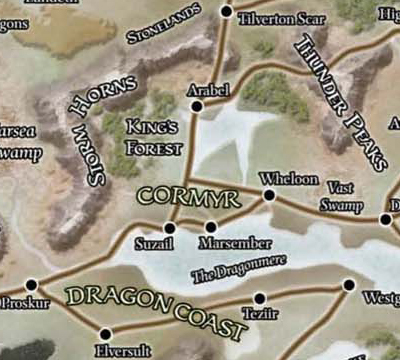
“Loreseeker Thistlebrook,” Ghazni had come to respect Eldrin in the last day, “Your service does you all honor.” He looked at Sebenzi, Banshee, and Artemis with deep gratitude, and continued, “I’m not sure that your specializations are suited for a sylvan trek through rugged terrain. It’s quite literally a run through the jungle: quicksand, bogs, foggy paths….”

“Aye,” Tunaster had moved to Wheloon from the east, and had taken that very route. “The Loremaster speaks the truth. An urban ranger such as Banshee can excel here in the bustling city, but the swamps require a different mindset. A druid perhaps.”

There was agreement, if not consensus, on the matter, until Sebenzi brought up an idea. “Fellow disciples of all that is holy,” she began, speaking to the intramural audience of Ilmataris, Mystrans, and Oghmanytes. “While it is true that we—even I, from Chult!—are a bit unsuited to the outdoorsy ruggedness that separates Wheloon from the intended destination, we live in a world of wonders. I direct this mostly at my fellow Oghmanytes, who worship knowledge itself in its embodiment in Oghma, but also to you, Tunaster, and the rest as well... with our combined investigative capacity—with every diviner now poring over the parchments, books, and scrolls recovered—we can pinpoint the location with some accuracy, in order to *teleport* there.”

Eldrin nodded, recalling the wand they’d found on the Isle of Dread. “It’s true: with this wand, I can take up to four people with me, so Banshee, Artemis, and Sebenzi, plus one more. However, as you all know, *teleport* is a fickle spell, and it can randomly place you in a completely different spot miles away.”

Tunaster shook his head, “I... I do appreciate your initiative, and what you’ve done here for my temple and its congregation, but getting there will only be part of the problem. Once you’ve teleported, having bypassed the arduous journey, the task before you will still require some brawn. You are all diviners in your respective specializations; even your ranger excels with her *detect* and *eyes of the avoral* spells. But we now know that we’re dealing with denizens of the Shadow Plane and their Sharran accomplices. I don’t doubt that you have a fair amount of martial training, but…”



The man’s voice trailed off due to politeness. “I take your point, Tunaster,” Artemis spoke up. “I think we all do. But Sebenzi may be proposing something else, if I know her well.”

Sebenzi nodded in thanks, continuing her thoughts, “We have enough charges to use *teleport* multiple times to get there. Its geo-positioning error is based on a percentage of the distance that the caster wishes to cross. In this case, the Vast Swamp begins about 20 miles east of here, and spans another 20 miles eastward. Thus, if it fails on the first attempt, we’d be teleported to a location that is a fraction of that distance from where we’re headed. Our second casting, therefore, even if it’s botched, should get us within a few miles of the place. Once there, we can use a *sending* spell to communicate with one of you, and perhaps identify landmarks that might help an expeditionary force to teleport there with better accuracy.”

Eldrin added: “Surely, we are not the only ones in the room with access to a wand of *teleportation*.”

Ghazni had begun to like the idea about half-way through Sebenzi’s explanation. He put down the leg he’d crossed over the other, placing both boots on the ground now. “So you—the diviners—would be the expeditionary force conducting the recon, while we would muster an assault team to come in as reinforcements when the site of the Sharrans’ operation is found?” he asked the statement.

“Maybe not so much reinforcements,” Banshee opted. “But allies better suited to the subsequent part of the mission.”

“Yes,” someone else agreed as others nodded.

Eldrin summarized: “In short: a party suited to the trek without our intel will be poorly prepared to find their way to the Sharrans, particularly if they’re taking boats, which leave no tracks to follow.”

“The boat rides seem to just be going upstream, so they’re picking a spot to start walking from,” Banshee pointed out, having read this in one of the parchments yesterday.

“The objective is to neutralize the Sharans, who are—we now know—quite wily and connected to the municipal powers here. Though that is being rooted out as we speak,” Cyrus reported on behalf of his knightly order, “the Kingdom of Cormyr takes this pending matter quite seriously and is prepared to support this mission with my sword, and others, if need be.”

“It will most certainly come to that,” Loremaster Ghazni forecast. “Sir Cyrus, how many are currently under your command, should this course of action be needed?”

“Three paladins and one knight are under my pledge, and can report here by Highsun if needed.”

Tunaster nodded. “You Oghmanytes really know how to party. Alright, I’m in. What do you need from the Temple of Mystra to facilitate this op?”

Drawud Kroth, Loreseeker Ghazni, and a few others looked at one another before Kroth spoke. “Ilmater’s teachings on this suggest that we procure at least one of our number for your proposed team of rugged outdoorsy types. There is a druid—Nevra the Forgetter—whose affinity for The One Who Endures is notable. She knows the Vast Swamps well, and can guide the second team once we know where they should be headed.”

“Do we have a plan?”

There was no more disagreement on the main matters.

“Agreed then,” Ghazni said. “Sebenzi, you will find provisions and equipment at the Temple of Oghma waiting for you and your team. We will recruit a second expeditionary force while you all get prepped to teleport.”

Tunaster added: “I will see what types of scrolls are left in the library. Maybe the evidence folks have found some *sending* scrolls by now. It would be good for you to have extras.”

“The new gear is appreciated. It’s been years since we had a significant upgrade,” Eldrin expressed his gratitude before they took their leave. “See you at Highsun?”

“Back here at Highsun, yes,” Ghazni nodded.

OOC: This concludes the chapter. Can you sum up the adventure so far into a half-page abstract?