

I can't program and am not a British Maiden.

This has been edited via Grammarly by myself, Justlovereadin' and...

Chapter 8: A Circus Gone Wild

You have slept in a bed for eight hours in a safe place. Health and mana points have been restored. All spells written in your spellbook have been memorized.

Being the most used to this method of waking up, Harry hopped to his feet silently, gesturing to Khalid, who had opened his eyes, to be silent, pointing at the man's wife. By this point, they both knew that Jaheira was not exactly a fan of morning people, and thus was not a fan of the ability Harry and his band had of going from asleep to fully aware and cognizant within seconds. *At least*, Harry thought, in some amusement *when there isn't danger about*.

Khalid slid out of bed, standing up along with Minsc. Imoen didn't yet rise with them, frowning slightly as she remembered how much of her health had gone poof the night before thanks to her Obliviate spell. She'd been at full health before using it, then had gone well into the red after one use. *While I'm fully healed up now, that would have taken what, two Medium Healing Spells from Jaheira? I wonder, is it the fact that I'm trying to manipulate his mind or the fact I have to control every aspect of the spell to make it work just right that makes the Obliviate spell so health-intensive?*

She shook her head ruefully, as she pushed out of the bed. *Cock, we didn't spend enough time in the tutorial did we? Oh, I know we couldn't have spent more time there, Harry was going wonky already. But we should have experimented a lot more with the Blood Magic spells. I've still got a much wider variety than Harry, and we just don't know enough about why the cost for some spells is higher than others. I wish I knew Legilimency, for example. It would be interesting to see it in comparison to the Obliviate Spell. Or have Harry try to cast Obliviate himself, see if the impact is lessened by his higher Willpower stat or not.*

Standing up now, Imoen set those thoughts to one side. *Meh, there's a reason I was a Huff instead of a Raven. I'd have probably gone spare myself if we stayed in the tutorial for much longer. Regardless, the use of the Obliviate spell is just too expensive at this point. And we don't even know yet if it will work in the long run. Still, at least that we can see right now.*

Now on her feet, Imoen followed Khalid out of the room, although Imoen had to wait a moment to follow him Minsc had slept next to his Witch once more in a chair by her bed, his sword bared and resting on his thighs. But he too had woken up with the suddenness of the Advanced Adventuring System, and now shifted his blade's position when she asked him to

So large was the claymore Imoen actually had trouble getting around it between the two beds. "You know you don't need to protect Dynaheir so much here, Minsc?" She

whispered, pouting internally. Seeing Minsc's devotion was nice but also kind of annoying given his lack of response to her earlier flirtations. *I thought it was just because he was dense and also too concentrated on getting Dynaheir free. But if it's going to be like this with him when she's around, I have to wonder if I'm going to get anywhere with him regardless. Huh, I wonder how Dynaheir will react if she sees me flirt with him?*

"Minsc knows this with his head. His heart is another story," Minsc answered, his voice as near to a whisper as he could get. Which meant it was still loud enough to cause the sleepers to all mutter and groan in their sleep, which in turn cause Minsc to duck his head in embarrassment.

"Well, just so long as you don't wake them up, okay?" Imoen whispered. "Jaheira said Dynaheir needs rest more than anything else."

Nodding his head, Minsc very carefully said nothing, simply moving his sword to let Imoen pass by him easier.

Outside, Harry had stopped the first servant he had seen, asking if the inn served breakfast. He did so before fully reading the information his Greater Observation skill showed him of the woman which, if he had, might have stopped him from talking to the middle-aged woman at all.

Name: Sabrina

Class: Barmaid

Sabrina is practically a walking stereotype of a barmaid. Although middle-aged, her sexual appetite is undiminished. She has a strong preference for young men, and green is her favorite color, she might like to be in the saddle so to speak, in any encounter.

Sabrina smiled, leaning forward just enough to give Harry a glimpse down her shirt. "Sure we do lovey, though we don't have that many choices, just soup stew, bread, and maybe a sausage or two, and we don't have enough girls around this morning to bring it up to your room for you. Still, What's your pleasure? Personally, I like a big sausage in the morning myself. I bet I could whip something up for you personally."

"Gah," Harry almost whimpered, shaking his head and very carefully looking Sabrina in the eye rather than letting his eyes wander. Despite his time with the Elder Dryad, Harry had yet to get used to women who were as forward as this. Moreover, Harry had realized he had a type, and despite his seeming skill in attracting them, large-breasts middle-aged women were not it. He rallied quickly, and, seeing the amused Imoen, watching from the doorway beside him, decided to use her as a shield.

"Sausage is okay, but I think bread and stew would be better for all of us. What do you think, love?" He asked, stepping to one side and behind Imoen, putting her between himself and the older woman.

“Meh, I’d prefer sausage too, lover,” Imoen quipped, going along with things even as her eyes gleamed in amusement. “Still, more is always better, so I’ll go with the stew and bread.”

Pouting, Sabrina backed off, curtsying and saying she would tell the kitchen to prepare some food, she moved around them along the corridor.

Behind her, Imoen snickered at Harry’s expense until he whispered harshly, “How would you like being hit on by an overweight middle-aged man, huh?”

At that, Imoen’s snickers ceased instantly, but Khalid, who had been watching all this with some amusement, started to chuckle at both of the youngsters' expense. As they turned to him, he simply smiled at them beatifically. “I d, do hope that your refusal of h, h, her advances doesn’t cost u, us our breakfast. Perhaps y, y, you should have taken one for the p, p, party, Harry?”

Rolling his eyes at that, Harry led them down to the main room of the inn.

There, to their surprise, they found Garrick already up and sitting at the bar, talking happily with two men and a woman there. He saw them coming and waved them over. “It’s a glorious morning, isn’t it, my friends? I’ve already got a job. The innkeeper is willing to let me stay and play for my upkeep and keep any tips I make. This way, I’ll make a bit of gold, then I think I’ll travel south into Amn. It’s supposed to be a well-ordered, peaceful country.” The bard’s face grew pained for a moment before he shook his head with a rueful laugh. “I thank you for letting me travel with you my friends, but really, I don’t think adventuring was for me.”

Khalid’s eyes widened, noticing the surface friendliness, without any mention of the history Garrick had with them. That was very strange, especially since Garrick wasn’t mentioning how he had died and been resurrected, even lightly. Knowing what Imoen had done the night before, Harry took this response to mean that Imoen’s use of Obliviate had been largely effective. This was also shown by his observation skill and the relationship portion of the display above Garrick.

Name: Garrick

Class: Bard, level 5

Relationship: 200/500 Trust, 100/500 Respect

Garrick’s memory of your time together on the road has been largely modified by Imoen’s use of the otherworldly spell, Obliviate. He now remembers you only vaguely, if somewhat fondly, and has no idea about what you all ran into beyond several gnoll attacks which pushed you all to your utmost. He is friendly toward you, but that is all.

“That’s nice to hear. I can only hope that you have better luck in traveling further south than we have up to this point,” Harry said with a smile.

Garrick laughed at that, shook Harry's hand, bowed over Imoen's and then turned aside, continuing his discussion with the trio behind the bar.

"Hmmm, h, h, he seems to have gotten over his a, a, anxiety somewhat quickly," Khalid intoned. "I, I was worried about that, a, a, as was Jaheira. B, b, but how..."

"Good beer, a farewell party with Imoen, and a new job. Well, a lot of beer, I assume." Harry said with a smile before gesturing around them casually, indicating this wasn't the place to talk about it. Khalid nodded slightly at that and fell silent. He was a Harper, after all, and understood how to keep secrets.

The three of them fell silent for a time until Sabrina emerged from the kitchen bringing over their food. She tried once more to flirt with Harry, giving him another glimpse down her blouse, letting her hand brush Harry's but again, Harry didn't react, turning away from Sabrina to talk to Imoen without seeming to notice. She left with a faint pout on her head, but somehow Harry knew that if they stayed here, that wouldn't be the last time he had to deal with Sabrina the middle-aged barmaid.

The three spoke for a time about what they might run into when they started to look into the mine's problems, then as the trio finished, Harry turned their attention to supplies and what they could find here in Nashkel. Throughout the discussion, Khalid asked no questions about Garrick, although Harry could see his eyes flicking over to the bard occasionally. But here, Khalid had some information to share. "A, apparently the Issue with the r, r, roads to the north is such t, t, that a circus bazaar has yet to be able t, t, to move on. We might b, b, be able to find several items and deals t, t, there that we cannot find in town. B, b, but before that, we need to talk to the Mayor."

Harry nodded and gestured them all to gather up the remaining food to take up to the others. "In that case, let's check in with Dynaheir and then split up to gather some supplies. I'll go with you and Jaheira to talk to the Mayor." As he began to stand up Harry lowered his voice, whispering, "And while we do so, I'll tell you about what Imoen did to Garrick."

Harry knew that trying to keep that a secret from the two Harpers would probably be impossible in the long run and extremely counterproductive. The two of them already knew about Harry and Imoen's Blood Magic after all, and that Imoen was extremely adept at figuring out new spells. *I just hope that the two of them have a good enough impression of Imoen and Me that they don't react badly to the idea of such spells.*

Nodding agreement, Khalid stood up quickly, following Harry up the stairs with Imoen trailing behind them.

They all stopped outside the room as the sounds of shouting reached them. "Minsc warns you, wizard! If you come close to fair Dynaheir, Minsc will slice your vile head from your shoulders, then use it as a ball in a game of Kickvusk!"

Harry quickly pushed the door open, moving into the room and setting down the food before holding his hands out, pushing Minsc backward and glaring at Edwin. In so doing, he joined Jaheira, who was already standing between the trio, glaring at Edwin. Imoen and Khalid quickly did the same, pushing Edwin and Minsc into two different corners of the room, putting several beds between the wizard and the ranger. "What the hell is going on in here? I thought we had all agreed to get along for now. If I can't leave you three alone for a single morning, how in the world can I trust you to watch one another's back in a fight?" Harry asked, glaring at both of them.

Scowling slightly, Dynaheir answered quicker than Edwin could. "I agreed to work with the Red Wizard under some duress, but I will work with him during our quest. However, I certainly did not agree to go along with his experiments!"

"Experiments?" Harry looked over at Edwin in question, his lips thinning dangerously. "What exactly did you do?"

"Bah, I merely implied that a blood sample would perhaps help my investigations into the precognitive abilities the Wychalarn have access to. A study of the blood often gives great insight into the magical nature of such," Edwin replied.

Harry shook his head. "No. that is most decidedly beyond the agreement I brokered between the two of you. If you are willing to push past the agreement already made this easily then I believe our time together is at an end. I have no interest in aiding you further in your investigations." Harry's eyes hardened, and he glared at the Red Wizard of Thay. *And don't even think of trying to take mine or Imoen's blood!* Harry didn't think that the wizard would discover anything in such a manner but wasn't willing to take the chance.

Later, Imoen would tell Harry this was a very good move. Where they came from, blood-based magic was extremely powerful, if very finicky and often seen as dark. "And I doubt that's any different here. Besides, Edwin's too damn bright for his own good, let alone ours, Harry. Best to keep our secrets as long as we can until we're in a position to force him to keep them to himself."

That was later. However, right now Harry became somewhat amused as he saw a pop-up suddenly appear in front of him.

"Very well, I will agree with that. I am... concerned about the future and my interactions with my fellow Red Wizards. But I should not allow those concerns to... hinder our arrangements in the now." Edwin replied. He didn't apologize, but everyone realized that hoping for such from the haughty wizard was probably too much to ask for.

"Right." Harry chuckled dryly, then turned back to the others, looking specifically at Dynaheir. "Will that do?"

“I will not order Minsc to join me in assaulting the Red Wizard, but I will still be watching him closely.” With that, Dynaheir seemed to calm down from her previously battle-ready stance, shaking her head. “So, what are we doing?”

Harry gestured them all to eat, noticing as he did that Dynaheir’s Hunger status had disappeared from her status. Similarly, malnourishment had shifted in color, indicating that it too was going away after only a few days of good meals, much faster than Harry had expected it to. He wondered why that was until he decided it probably had something to do with her being part shaman, a master of natural energies, which allowed Dynaheir to unconsciously heal herself to a certain extent. *Or that could just be utter bunk, and it could be something to do with the whole Adventurer thing making all of us tougher and faster to recover from long-term injuries than is normal.*

“So, can I ask what spells you have memorized, Dynaheir? I’m wondering if we should wait another night before we head into the mines. I want us to be as ready as possible for what might be another dungeon. I’ve already got a good idea of what Edwin brings to a battle.”

Dynaheir nodded. “I too had that thought. I have four Magic Missile spells, two Burning Hands, two Fireball and two Stinking Cloud spells.”

While Minsc, Khalid and even Edwin both groaned at the mention of that spell, Harry, while also having bad memories about what that spell had been like in the bathhouse the night before, was surprised at the number of spells. Then he saw a new pop-up appear above Dynaheir’s head, new information about what kind of spell user Dynaheir appeared in reaction to his interest.

Note: Dynaheir is an Invoker, a mage who specializes in manipulating raw elemental and spiritual energies.

Advantages: May cast one additional spell per level.

Disadvantages: May not learn or cast any spells of the Divination or Conjunction schools.

Before he could say anything, Jaheira spoke up, her husband nodding along to her words. “Wait a moment! You are saying a little under half your spells are based on fire spells?” When Dynaheir nodded, Jaheira slapped a hand to her face, shaking her head before looking at both magic users firmly. “That is incredibly dangerous. Have neither of you fought in a mine before?”

“What do you mean?” Dynaheir asked.

“In mines there are mysterious, unseen gasses which can explode in the presence of fire. There is a reason why miners always have small canaries with them. The birds will die or warble a warning or some such, I am uncertain which, in the presence of the gasses. The only way to get rid of them is to ignite them in a controlled fashion. Which combat spells are

certainly not," Jaheira answered firmly. "Even a spell like burning hands would be enough to ignite the gasses and possibly kill us all."

Edwin scowled angrily, looking away. That meant several of his own spells, mainly his favorite, the Fireball, would not only be useless, but dangerous to his own survival. *Curses!*

"I did not know that, and apologize for it. Would Magic Missile set off these gases?"

"No. Lightning however might if there is enough gas in the air, though not as easily as an unprotected fire."

"Damn," Harry muttered. *Without the Fireball spell we've really lost any ability to rapidly clear a crowd. Still, I doubt there would be a time such would be needed in a mine.* "Well, this does give us an excuse to wait another day before heading into the mines. That way we can be certain that Dynaheir is fully over her ordeal with the Gnolls."

"I believe that taking it easy today would be a good idea, but I am not going to let my weakness hold us back from our quest for an entire day," Dynaheir answered firmly, before admitting, "Though I would like to speak to the local priest and have a large breakfast before doing anything else today."

With some misgivings about having both mages crippled in terms of their spellwork, Harry looked over at Minsc instead of answering. "Minsc, we'll talk to the servants about getting you some more food, but you might have to go down to the main hall."

"Minsc thanks you friend Harry! Indeed, all the food you brought up would be just enough to feed the mighty Minsc, whose appetite is as large as his body, which would leave nothing for the Fair Dynaheir or the perfidious wizard of Thay. But Minsc must ask, did you see any seeds for Boo? A young Miniature Giant Space Hamster must have corn and sunflower seeds to grow up big and strong."

Boo squeaked in his ear, and Minsc nodded seriously. "Boo also reminds Minsc that we should look into buying food-type supplies as well for the journey into the mines. One cannot be too careful, after all. Boo is so smart, to see beyond the moment!"

Looking at the tiny hamster, Dynaheir sighed, murmuring words under her breath, so lightly that only Khalid and Jaheira could hear them, causing both half-elves to hold back snorts of amusement. "I could have asked for any of Rashemani warriors doing their Dajeema. Why did my visions have to show me Minsc, the one who had the most obvious brain trauma? Why couldn't I have gotten a normal berserker who only talks to trees and passing zephyrs, instead of one who insists his hamster talks to him?"

"I have no need for more food than that which you already brought up to us. I highly doubt it will be up to the standards of my own rich palette, though. But I wish to buy a few potions for myself and then see what other wares can be found in the town. I will return here when I am done. Unless that is, you wish me to come with you to the Mayor's mansion and add

my powerful intellect to that conversation?" Edwin asked, his tone going from mildly annoyed to questioning.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. Myself, Jaheira and Khalid will be meeting with him, but we'll cover more ground faster if we split up. Khalid says there's a bazaar here. Let's meet up here and then head over as a group. Imoen, you go with Edwin." He held a hand up to stop the protest he could see forming on Edwin's face. "I know you can handle yourself, Edwin, but if that assassin last night had friends, they might've seen you enter the inn with me. And a dagger in the back will give any wizard a bad day."

Lips quirking in annoyance, Edwin nodded. *And Imoen is by far the least objectionable of my current companions, even if this will stop me from searching for any Thayan contacts that might be within the town.* "True. If such a thing occurs, do you wish us to try to take him alive? Questioning such creatures might gain us some kind of actionable intelligence."

Harry shook his head. "If you can. Try, but don't endanger yourself or Imoen."

"Bah as if I would ever endanger myself for something that didn't directly benefit me," Edwin grumbled, waving that off.

"Remember that you will have to settle up with the innkeeper before leaving," Jaheira warned. The half-elven woman had remained silent earlier, which was no doubt something of a trial for her, yet Jaheira was more than smart enough to know that Harry would be much better at keeping the peace between the two magic users than her. "Why don't you do so now, while the rest of us get a bath this morning. Bathing like that also helps our bodies heal, and..." she smiled grimly at her husband. "I am certain that my husband and Edwin would also like an uninterrupted, if swift, bath."

Harry nodded affably at that, as Imoen agreed very firmly with the older half-elven woman, and they soon exited the room with one final look at the two magic users.

Downstairs, Harry found the innkeeper, one of the people that Garrick had been talking to, waiting for him. His arms were crossed over his chest as he glared at Harry the moment he stepped off the stairs. The glare seemed to lessen with every step Harry unarmed and coming his way rather than leaving the inn without paying for the damages that had been caused the night before.

"I trust you've had a carpenter by to estimate the damages?" Harry asked.

Several floorboards had been damaged in the fight the night before, blood spilled, and the wooden walls damaged. Mainly, it had to be said, from the throwing axes of Nimbul as they ricocheted off Harry's shield. He found it funny the victim was being forced to pay for the damages in this case, but he understood why: he had known there were assassins after him and hadn't warned the proprietor. In turn, the innkeeper hadn't told the guard that Harry had brought still more trouble into their town.

Still, Harry felt that he was being extorted in some fashion and tried to haggle with the man, which was a mistake. Not because it didn't work or the innkeeper was anything but polite during their haggling but because as Harry was doing so, a newcomer arrived, coming in from outside the inn.

He was a youngish looking man, thin to the point of almost looking ill-fed or perhaps gangly to the point of silliness. His face was somewhat slack, his eyes perpetually wide, like the face of someone who had taken some brain damage in the past. But he was also glowing the orange of a possible enemy, which caught Harry by surprise when he appeared on his map, which Harry was trying to force himself into keeping an eye on whatever else was going on, just in case.

The name on the map was Noober, which caused Harry's brows to furrow. There was something off about that name.

There was something off about the man as his eyes seemed to light up at the sight of Harry. He moved quickly towards them, his mouth already open to shout a question. "You, you're new here, aren't you! What are you doing here?"

Harry blinked, then looked back at the innkeeper, who seemed to groan internally. "That is Noober. Don't bother trying to answer his questions. He'll just..."

"That's a big sword. I've seen them before. My friend Dilly, he's got a big sword, well I say friend, but I suppose that since he tried to chop me in half, we're not exactly friends. You're not going to try to chop me in half, are you?"

Harry blinked again, now completely befuddled, as he began, "Um, well, no, I..."

"That armor looks a little dented. Are you an adventurer? What do you do? Have you killed any monsters yet?"

Getting himself under control after this verbal assault, Harry glanced up above Noober's head and saw the information that his Greater Observation skill was giving him about the young man.

Name: Noober

Class: Annoyance

Lowest of the low, a Noober is a creature that the gods have sent to test the patience of those around them, especially those who own anything shiny or pointy. One of a multitude, they exist across the realms of Faerun. Nothing good can come from interacting with them. No attempt at answering their questions will ever get through to them. Every Noober is in love with his own voice to the extent that they are perhaps the most annoying creatures in existence.

Suggestion: Kill it. Kill it with fire!

Grumbling, Harry turned back to the innkeeper, as the Noober continued to chatter in his ear, wondering idly if smacking the annoyance around would cause the locals to sic the guard on him. Judging by the pained glances of the innkeeper, he wasn't certain. Still, Harry had a full year of dealing with the Hogwarts rumor mill and the chattering of his fellow Gryffindors to fall back on. *If Neville and Dean's snoring didn't drive me insane, this won't either.*

As he thought that, he noticed a new pop-up window.

Seriously. There's no downside. This is the one time you could get away with killing a civilian and not get in trouble for it.

Repeated Suggestion: If fire is unavailable, any means will do.

The words of the Noober annoyed certainly but did not infuriate. At least at first. The line "I once held a dagger too, does that make me an adventurer, I bet I could join you, maybe become a thief? Thieves always have the most fun. For the loot!" annoyed him immensely. As did the continual pop-ups.

Seriously kill him, kill him with fire. Or anything, dammit, the man is basically asking for it.

Finally, Harry had finished haggling, and after handing over the money he owed the innkeeper for the effrontery of being attacked on his premises, he jerked a thumb towards Noober, who was still there vibrating with questions and shouting them out so loudly that Sabrina and the other servants had quickly vacated the main room, leaving the innkeeper and Harry to endure the annoyance on their own. "Would anyone really care if I took his head and used it like a training dummy for a bit? Or took a mallet to him?"

"I'd prefer you didn't attack him on my premises, but other than that?" The innkeeper chuckled dryly. "I think that no one will bother if you decide to... remonstrate with Noober harshly."

Harry nodded, then glanced up as the noise of footsteps was heard. He blinked, seeing Jaheira and the others coming down towards him. "That was perhaps the fastest bath on record."

"They don't have any hot water prepared in the morning, so we were forced to use cold," Jaheira explained promptly, glaring at the innkeeper. "I would say that is worth at least fifteen gold from whatever you paid him for the damages to his bathhouse."

Thinking quickly, Harry plucked fifteen gold from the one hundred and eighty that he had handed over for the repairs.

"I think she's right. And I think that a two gold Noober tax makes a lot of sense." Harry then quickly grabbed two more before the astonished innkeeper could close his hand around the pouch. "For not doing anything to him on your premises, I mean."

The innkeeper scowled but didn't argue the point. That much gold certainly was enough to repair the damages after all, especially when added to the amount of money Imoen had spent the night before, along with Khalid at the bar.

"That's a real pretty gal!" Noober exclaimed, looking up towards Jaheira as Harry began to lead the way towards the door. Noober got out of his way, bouncing up and down next to him. "Your ears are really pointy! Are you an elf? Are you a half-elf? My parents always say that half-elves are..."

Khalid reacted swiftly at this point, his hand flying up to place a hand on Noober's mouth, stopping whatever words were going to come out of his mouth.

"Whatever is going to come out of your mouth," Khalid began before pulling his hand back and quickly wiping it on his pants. "You licked my hand!"

"That always works! You know you could just ask and answer my questions, you don't have to be such a meanie, are you a meanie all the time, or just to people who ask questions? Are you a half-elf too? You don't look nearly as pretty as her. Are you going to start throwing rocks at me? That's what everyone does eventually."

Noober then turned his attention back on Harry. "What about you? Are you gonna throw stones at me?" He waited the time it took for Harry to take a step, then asked, "What about now?" Again. "What about now? Those colors look stupid on you, by the way. How about now?"

The comment on colors was added as an aside to Edwin, whose eyes flared wide in fury and whose hands started to move as he prepared a spell. He could ignore the yammering of the plebians easily whatever they were saying. Noober's words to Harry and the others had mattered not at all to Edwin, simply background noise from an uninteresting fool, one of hundreds all around them. But no mere civilian fool was going to get away with impugning his fashion sense.

His hands were grabbed by Imoen. "Much as I would like you to make him a greasy smear on the ground, I don't think we want any witnesses to the murder," Imoen whispered.

Edwin clenched his jaw while Noober's questions came like an unending torrent, with the question, "What about now? Are you going to throw stones at me now?"

This continued until they were outside, with Noober following them. There, Edwin once more prepared his spell, but before he could finish it, Imoen quickly moved behind Noober, smacking him upside the head with the hilt of her dagger.

Imoen has used Backstab with a blunt object. The blow thus used can incapacitate an opponent.

Noober is unconscious.

I suppose that's almost as good as being dead. Not really, though.

"And why is that so different from what I would have done to the creature," Edwin growled.

"He's still alive this way," Imoen answered blandly.

Harry simply smiled slightly, stood there for a moment, breathing in deeply. "Ahh, silence. I had almost forgotten what it was like."

The silence was interrupted by a ding, and Harry glanced up.

Uncanny! You did not respond with violence to incessant, asinine, deliberately annoying questioning of the Noober, and in point of fact, didn't lose your temper at all. This is a true testament to your desire to become a paladin, or perhaps just your mental fortitude.

Regardless, this test has borne fruit, +1 to Willpower.

The party members stared at this message as it appeared in front of them, and Imoen nearly burst out laughing, while Khalid simply sighed and gestured Harry and Jaheira to join him. "C, c, come on, I k, k, know where the mayor lives."

Edwin huffed in annoyance, but his eyes had tracked Harry's, and he wondered what the young man had looked at just then. *Perhaps yet another sign of the odd abilities that he and Imoen share? Regardless, the irritant is dealt with.* "Indeed, let us be off girl. Also realize that if that creature awakens and comes after me while Imoen and I are shopping, I will not be nearly so kind to it as she was."

Harry nodded in agreement. "That sounds perfectly acceptable. Heck, if he bothers any of us again, you can deal with him in any manner short of murder."

This caused Edwin to smirk a little as he turned away, with Imoen walking beside him.

But the moment that the trio was within that area between the mayor's house for the rest of the town, both Khalid and Jaheira turned sharply to Harry. "What did you do to Garrick? Or rather what did Imoen do to him?" Jaheira asked quickly, having been informed of this morning by her husband.

"She used a Blood Magic spell that modifies the person's memories. I don't know it, Imoen came up with herself apparently," Harry said, semi-honestly. Here, honesty was still the best policy. "That, coupled with a lot of drink and her Charm, completely lowered his defenses. Imoen modified his memories afterward so Garrick has no memory of much of our adventures and certainly no memory of our secrets, yours or ours."

Jaheira frowned. "Is it permanent?"

“As far as we know. It could probably be removed via magical means, but only if someone noticed the modified memories somehow. And it really took it out of Imoen,” he hastened to add. “She was near the red in terms of health when she came up afterwards.”

“N, n, nonetheless, that is a s, s, scary kind of magic Harry,” Khalid shook his head, looking sick at the very idea of anyone using magic on his mind. He’d had enough of that kind of magic, thank you.

Harry nodded firmly. “I agree. And it's not one we want to use often. But at the time, it was simply the best solution we could think of to keep Garrick from mentioning everything he knew about us.” He told the couple about how Garrick had been planning to make a song out of their abilities, a paladin who could use magic and everything else. At that, both Harpers hissed, shaking their heads as one.

Then they looked at one another, and after a few seconds of silent communication, Jaheira spoke. “We will want your and Imoen's words that you will never use that spell on us. And further that she will not teach it to anyone else. That kind of memory modification can be horribly abused. Indeed, that kind of mental magic is far more dangerous than any kind of physical spell.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that one, I think,” Harry chuckled, but he nodded. “I promise, on...” he paused, thinking. “I promise on my own soul and on my personal honor, I will never use that kind of spell on either of you, nor will I ask Imoen to use upon you. Will that do? You’ll have to ask her for her own oath later. All I ask is that you all are alone when you do it.”

You have given your oath of Honor to the two Harpers, Jaheira and Khalid.

As a Paladin, this is something that the Gods take very seriously, and if broken, you will no longer be able to call yourself a paladin. Instead, you will be a Fallen Paladin and will be forced to swear to one of the Dark Gods.

Your oaths as a paladin have weight. Do not make them lightly, regardless of the god you eventually choose to follow.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Jaheira nodded firmly. “That will be more than enough. Thank you.” She leaned forward, resting a hand on Harry's shoulder. “You didn't have to give that oath right away, but it means much that you were willing to do so.”

This was backed up in the pop-up message that Harry saw an instant later, and for once, when dealing with Jaheira, there was a distinct lack of snark.

You have won 100 trust and fifty respect points with Jaheira. You have won a hundred friendship points with Khalid.

Both Harpers appreciate your openness on this point, as well as your willingness to immediately swear an oath to back up your words.

The Mayor's house was set to the east of the main road through Nashkel, behind the church, separated by the small semi-open woodland the three of them had stopped in. This area allowed the Mayor's house to be within the outer defenses of the town, but also giving him some vestige of privacy. Harry noted that its more distant position also meant that if the outer wall, an outer wall that was not a very defensible position, fell, the Mayor's house would be one of the first to fall. It was simply too isolated from the rest of the village.

He pointed that out to Jaheira and Khalid, and the woman snorted. "No doubt the site was chosen to allow the man to keep his secrets rather than with any thought to defense. After all, in the course of normal events, a town of this size would not find itself bothered by outright attacks, and the guards would be enough to keep any skirmishes from coming close to the Mayor's house. You will be certain they have standing orders to defend the Mayor's house before anything else."

"I can understand an arrogant leader giving such orders, but secrets? Why wouldn't he want to be at the center of his town, the better to lord it over the peasants."

With a snort of humor, Jaheira turned away, leaving it to Khalid to answer Harry's question. "I, it is rumored that Denard h, h, has a mistress. A, a, and his wife too has m, m, many lovers."

"Ugh. Note to self, if small talk is required before getting down to business, don't mention family in any way." Harry shook his head at that, not understanding the idea of marrying someone and exchanging vows with them if you didn't intend to be faithful. "Still, I hope he has some information for us."

When they knocked on the front door of the two-story mansion, the butler who opened it to them nearly turned them away, sneering down a long aquiline nose at them. Jaheira, of course, took this poorly. "You will take our message to your master little man and let him make the decision to see us! Or I will take my staff to that long nose you seem overly fond of! Is this the welcome you people give to Adventurers looking to help your problems?"

The butler's sneer flickered away, and for a moment, he looked as if he was going to shout an alarm, but Jaheira's glare stopped that impulse cold, and he bowed obsequiously. "And might I inquire as to the nature of that message?"

"Tell him that we are here on account of a song. He will know what that means."

The butler hastened away, and Harry looked at the half-elven couple in some amusement. "As a Harper code that leaves much to be desired."

"It isn't a code, simply a way to tell people in positions of power that we are Harpers, or Adventurers looking into problems that affect the balance of the world," Jaheira answered.

The Mayor in question was a swarthy fellow of medium height, who looked as if he had spent a lot of time in the sun. In contrast to that, though large, his hands were flabby, and he looked as if he was about four stone more than he should be. He was also sweating despite the room he was sitting in being quite chill, and he seemed to want to concentrate on Khalid and Harry, excluding Jaheira.

Name: Denard

Occupation: Local Nobleman

The Mayor of Nashkel, Denard, has been such for at least fifteen years, placed there to oversee the town not through any foolish election by the locals, but by the Council of Six to see to their interests in this, a backwater for all its importance to the rest of the Sword Coast. He is competent at his job and somewhat intelligent, yet it is obvious that the hard times the town has been plagued by have also impacted him.

You note that he does not seem to want to look in Jaheira's direction. This could be because he is somewhat attracted to strong, forthright women or is terrified of them. Given the rumors passed on and how much he is sweating, it is most likely he is afraid of her, with good reason in this case.

"Thank goodness someone is willing to look into this problem and one with the backing of the Harpers to boot! You have no idea how much that puts me at ease," Denard began, addressing Khalid as soon as introductions were over. "We've tried to hire several groups of adventurers before. Two local boys who had taken up Adventuring took our money and then walked off, not even bothering to go to the mines at all. The third, a party of four Adventurers, hasn't arrived yet despite sending word they had accepted our contract. And the second..." he gulped, shaking his head. "The second arrived but two weeks past, and, and just disappeared into the mines. But they were only three people, and you say you are...?"

"Seven," Harry answered, as leader of the party. "Two Mages, one Druid, three frontline fighters, and a Thief. We're a well-rounded group, I feel."

"I can see that." The Mayor paused then, looking down at his desk before gulping down a brandy that sat there before going on. "But realize because of those other rogues taking our money, I can't pay you as well as you should deserve for looking into this. I, I can promise to pay five hundred for each of your members, but that is all."

Harry could somehow sense the man was lying, his Greater Observation skill telling him so even though it didn't use the pop-up windows to do it. Instantly, Harry decided to use that

information and pressed hard. This man didn't impress him at all, and that seemed a paltry amount compared to the mass of trouble the Iron Intake Issue was causing the Sword Coast and Amn.

"That will be fine for a down payment. However, afterward, I would want your word in writing to be willing to pay what I believe is an acceptable rate for the job. We just don't know enough about the manner of this job for me to tell you a set price, though. I would say it would be less than three thousand gold each, but I could be wrong."

"Th, that's outrageous!"

"How much did you pay the other groups? The one that disappeared into the mine to never return? Or the ones that simply walked away?" Harry answered tartly. "You're going to pay us more because the job has already proven to be dangerous enough to kill Adventurers, not less because you already paid those who died. That might seem harsh, but it's also true. Unless you can give us enough information to let us prepare?"

The Mayor dithered for a moment but realized that this would be the best deal he and Nashkel were going to get. As Harry had learned last night from the tavern-goers, without the mine the town was doomed. It had literally no other industry, and even the mine was mostly worked by slaves. What little farms there were around the town certainly couldn't actually feed it without supplies sent to it from further south in Amn. If Nashkel couldn't produce iron to pay for it and to send north into the Sword Coast, the town would eventually be completely abandoned. And if that happened, Denard would no doubt be held responsible for the disaster, whatever the real source of trouble.

He did try to give Harry enough information to offset some of the price, but he really couldn't tell them much of anything. The mine's first level was still being worked, but somehow the ore brought out was tainted. There weren't enough slaves any longer to work the mines as they should be, and while slaves were continually arriving in drips and drabs from Amn, the losses were piling up. So much so that the mine foreman, the man who really ran the mine and led the few dozen real miners, had pulled his own people back into smaller five-man teams, none of whom were allowed to venture down to the second level except when accompanied by slaves and guards. The mine did have a group of ten guards, but whatever was happening made it a point to not attack them.

This was enough information to give Harry an update on the Iron Intake Issue, and he agreed to mark off their price by two hundred. But beyond that, Harry held out that the amount they would be paid should be determined after, and would be anywhere between a thousand, eight hundred to two thousand, nine hundred gold each. He also didn't budge from the need to have that agreement in writing before leaving the manor house.

Yet, a thought occurred to Harry. "I am not willing to go lower than that, but I am willing to add some more work that will help the town. Last night, we were attacked by assassins in the

inn. On them, they had a message that seemed to indicate they worked with some local bandits. So if you can give us information about them, we'll take care of them for you as well."

At that, the Mayor agreed to Harry's terms and sent a servant for the priest. Meanwhile, he pulled out several maps of the surrounding area, where he began to point out where the guards thought the bandits could be hiding. He didn't know anything about informers within the town, but Harry thought that was enough and soon Nalin arrived to witness the creation of the contract.

As a Helm priest, he could sit in on matters of law and contracts, and his word was final. He would also keep one of the three copies of the agreement, enchanted by Helm's power, so that it could not be changed. In that way, the agreement would be known to both parties and kept. It was still far too vague for Harry's taste, and he knew that the Mayor would probably try to pay them the minimum amount. But he couldn't do anything about that, and soon the priest left with his copy of the contract. At that point, Denard asked if Harry or his companions had any further questions.

Up to this point, Jaheira had remained silent for the second time that day, and for much the same reason: she had seen that Harry would see to this issue as well as she would have. That, and she too had noticed the way the man had been trying to not look in her direction.

But now, seeing that Harry was about to end the discussion, Jaheira leaned forward, her gaze sharp and hard as she looked at the Mayor. "And what can you tell me about the rising tensions because of this issue. Have there been any more moves by Amn?"

The Mayor gulped, twitching backward in his chair and not looking Jaheira in the eye, proving to Harry that he really was intimidated by her, which was somewhat funny, frankly. *Oh, not that Jaheira can't be intimidating, but the idea of being scared of her just because she's a strong-willed woman seems off.*

"I, um, I," the man fumbled for his words, then looked down at his desk, grabbed up a few pieces of parchment, holding them up triumphantly. "Troops are moving up from deeper within Amn." As he read off, he seemed able to block out Jaheira's demanding gaze. "They're doing so slowly. After a recent disaster on their borders with the Elven nation of Suldanessellar, Amn is in no great rush to embroil itself in another military campaign."

Denard looked up now, glancing at Khalid and Harry. "But there are growing voices that whisper that it could be a key to even greater power among the Denard families. But the families are not happy. They are always slow to war, of course, given how much war disrupts trade. However, since trade is already being interrupted..." He shrugged his shoulders, and everyone nodded.

"How much time do we have before that force arrives?" Jaheira asked quickly.

"I don't know," Denard mumbled, turning his eyes away. "I don't even know the size of the force that is on the move. I know it started at two companies in size, but then I heard that it was growing and slowing down as it did. And there are the Cloud Peak mountains to consider, which will no doubt slow them. So your guess is as mine."

"Where did it start?" Harry asked, bringing a mental map of the Sword Coast and the surrounding territory to mind. *The problem is, while I know about size, I still haven't any idea how size equates to time, and those maps I studied in Candlekeep weren't the most detailed either.*

"Athkatla, of course. As big as Amn is, a lot of its strength is concentrated there," the Mayor shrugged.

Harry frowned, looking at the man thoughtfully. "You're being awfully open about telling us these things about Amn, which is nominally in charge of this town."

"Nominally," Denard snorted. "Very much so. On its borders, Amn rules very lightly, except in times of actual war."

Harry nodded at that, then looked over at Jaheira and Khalid, who both nodded in agreement with the Mayor's words, and Harry turned back to the Mayor. "I think we've got all the information you can give us. Unless you have anything else to add?"

The Mayor shook his head, sighing faintly as having shared his information during this discussion had shown him how little he truly understood about the problem facing his town. But what could he do? To find out more, Denard would have had to order the town's guards to enter the mine itself, and the town didn't have enough men on hand to do that and guard the town and the mine entrance. Keeping the first level of the mine free of whatever was going on, for the most part, was all he and Emerson could do.

With a sigh, Harry led the others out of the building, scowling and shaking his head. "Well, that was almost entirely pointless. We have no better idea of what we might face in the mines now than we did when we arrived."

"Not so," Jaheira answered promptly, shaking her head. "We know that war is far closer than even we had assumed given what that messenger between the Friendly Arm Inn and Beregost had said. Amn is still reacting instead of acting and did not have any forces in the area."

Harry frowned, but then he understood. "So whoever is causing this Iron Intake Issue isn't directly connected to the power structure of Amn. Or else they would have been poised to take advantage of it more quickly. Right?"

"Exactly. Further, your point about the assassins was well thought out and tells us that bandits are also an issue around here. That is important information, as it might well give us another... line of inquiry, shall we say. After all, whoever is behind this communicated through

this Tranzig fellow to the assassins that have dogged our steps. It perforce stands to reason that he will also be in communication with the bandits. If no doubt through other means and mediums." Jaheira paused then, noticing Harry had an odd little smile on his face. "What?"

Harry looked over at Khalid, who was also smiling slightly, and the woman's husband replied for both men. "Y, y, you said our steps, my love, rather than y, y, your steps, as in Harry and Imoen. B, b, back at the Friendly Arm Inn, y, y, you would have h, h, had trouble saying that. I w, w, would say this is a good sign at how f, f, friendly we have become."

Jaheira huffed, looking away slightly, but she was also flushing somewhat, and Harry's smile widened before gesturing the two half-elves to follow him as they walked back to the main town. As they did, Harry idly noted that Imoen was still expanding his map as she and Edwin moved through the town. But then he frowned, pausing in place as he noticed two orange dots near Imoen's position on his map. The two names above were two he knew, and he didn't like seeing them now.

He looked over at Khalid. "I think we might have a problem."

"What, another one?" Jaheira grumbled, looking at Harry askance.

"Oh yes, and this one is because Imoen and I decided to travel with you two Harpers..."

Scene break

As Harry and the married half-elf couple talked with the Mayor, Imoen and Edwin had gone to a few local stores. Imoen had bought all of the food and other items that Harry and the rest would need when they left town, along with something else she thought Harry might want to purchase. She and Edwin would have to carry that for a bit, but the Item Space Imoen had access to was more than enough to do so. And with items like this, using the item box to carry them wasn't so unusual as it would've been with weapons or other items you had to get out quickly.

Edwin had bought a few healing potions for himself from Nalin and had asked about some protection from spell scrolls. Coming out of the church, he looked over to where Imoen had been haggling with one of the food sellers. "Woman!" he shouted, holding out his hand towards Imoen. "Do you have any further funds on you?"

"I just used all of the money and stuff I had on me to pay for the food supplies," Imoen said tartly. *God, this guy might be hot looking, but he is such a dick sometimes.* "If you want to buy something, you'll have to get Harry to agree to help. He's got most of our money on him, plus he and Minsc are carrying all the items we're looking to trade."

That wasn't actually true. As part of the same party, Imoen had access to all of the party's funds, held in common between them, something that had surprised her and Harry when they had realized it back at the Friendly Arm Inn. But Harry hadn't exchanged the emeralds for cash yet, let alone given Imoen anything other than the amount to buy food when

they split up. And whatever else, she couldn't access Harry's Item Box without him being right there.

Edwin huffed in annoyance but turned back to enter the temple for a moment before coming back out. As Edwin joined her, Imoen looked around, then frowned suddenly, twisting to one side and stepping behind one of the temple's ornamental pillars. Edwin blinked, turning to look in the same direction she had just been staring, and by the time he looked back towards her, Imoen had activated Hide-in-Shadows.

Noticing his companion disappear, Edwin too took a step behind the corner of the temple as two people passed by, entering the church. One was a halfling dressed in chain armor, with a large dagger at his waist and a shield on his back. His most striking feature was the three scars down his face and the sneer he wore, which was, Edwin thought, quite a magnificent example of the breed. The other was a mage in long flowing robes and with a staff in hand, with wavy hair and a face that looked as if he had just escaped from the circus considering the amount of makeup scattered haphazardly across it.

As they walked into the church, the mage muttered to the halfling, "I hate temples! You can practically feel the idiotic goody, goodness coming off of the walls."

"I still say we should just kill the priest and get it over with. You know that he's going to sense the blood on our hands, and that'll do it for the both of us."

"Now, now, we don't know that. And we don't want to turn the entire town against us, which killing the priest surely would, even if we could do so without any witnesses. And do keep in mind, my fine friend, we're not here to cause mayhem, but get to the bottom of some that is already occurring."

Moving towards where Imoen had disappeared, Edwin drawled out, "I take it that those are known to you? They seemed an interesting duo, it must be said. There are perhaps others looking into the Iron Intake Issue?"

"More like competitors in the same business," Imoen replied.

"What do you mean competitors?" Edwin asked, one eyebrow-raising in suspicion, but then his expression shifted into a faint smile. "Or was all this talk about solving the Iron Intake Issue a farce, and you mean to actually take whatever organization is causing it over for yourselves? That would be most delicious irony, ha an iron pun, would it not? Certainly, a good way to add a delicious flavor to Harry's vengeance."

Rolling her eyes, Imoen didn't turn to look at Edwin, instead keeping watch on the church entrance. "No, nothing like that."

"Then what?" When Edwin received no reply, he scowled, shaking his head angrily. "I detest being left in the dark, girl. Keeping personal secrets is one thing, but by the way you are

skulking about like a mouse, it is obvious to one of my intelligence that this has some bearing on our current objective. If those two are going to turn out to be enemies, I certainly deserve to know why.”

“They represent the Zhentarim. Is that enough for you?” Imoen said, now turning to look over one shoulder at Edwin.

Underneath his hood, Edwin scowled, reaching up to pull at his short, neat goatee. “I see. And a moment ago you said that they were competitors. You and Harry were ostensibly in Candlekeep until recently and are still quite young. Which means the other two. The half-elf couple. They are Harpers, are they not? Sanctimonious fools, the lot of them!”

“Personally, I don't know enough about the Harper philosophy to form an opinion of the organization. But regardless, you're stuck with Khalid and Jaheira for now, unless you want to leave and go your own way?” Imoen retorted.

Edwin scowled angrily. But he was simply too intrigued by the abilities that he felt Imoen and Harry might possess. That, and he was still concerned about enemies within the Red Wizards who might target him if he returned to Thay too quickly or was seen in Baldur's Gate again. “Very well. But I demand the right to leave at any point if the Harper's holier-than-thou attitude starts to spread to the rest of you.”

“Honestly, I haven't seen much of that attitude from either of them. A sense of right and wrong? Sure. A desire to do good? Sure. Jaheira's certainly opinionated. But when you use that phrase, I always think that it means holding your righteousness above the heads of other people and being arrogant about it. I haven't seen that from them yet.” *Although I'll admit Jaheira's attitude does annoy me sometimes.*

“Perhaps not.” Edwin conceded with a shrug. “You give it time. I'm certain it will come out at some point.”

Imoen shrugged that before hissing out, “Quiet, they're coming out.”

To her annoyance, instead of heading back the way they had come, the Zhentarim pair came down the streets towards where she and Edwin were hiding.

Imoen quickly backed away, then leaped up and over the metal fence around the church's graveyard. Rolling on the ground, Imoen knelt behind one of the gravestones there, hissing out, “hide somehow!” before she activated Hide-in-Shadows.

“How plebeian,” Edwin drawled. At which point he pulled out his spellbook and a scroll that he had just bought from the priest, holding them up one after another, as if comparing them.

When the odd pair came level with Edwin, the mage glared at him, and Edwin glared right back, waving the scroll and annoyance. "A rip-off, I tell you! I have half a mind to incinerate that priest."

"Aim for the feet. It makes the process all the more painful. Although you should first silence the bastard, so no one can hear his screams." The halfling answered with a chuckle.

Edwin blinked at that, then nodded his head in acknowledgment of this good advice, and the two Zhentarim members went their way.

He waited for a few moments until they were further down the street, turning to the west and heading down the road to the first tavern that Harry and his friends had passed by, where Imoen and Edwin had recently been to buy food and other supplies. Then he looked over the fence to the gravestone Imoen had been hiding behind as she stood up, her Hide-in-Shadows skill fading. "The two of them have no idea who I am. So why would I need to hide?"

"No one likes a smartass, Edwin." Grumbling in annoyance at how the mage had shown her up, Imoen hopped up over the fence, gesturing down the street after Xzar and Montaron. "Come on, I want to see who they meet with."

Edwin shrugged his shoulders, pulled up his hood still further to hide his features somewhat, and drawled out, "I beg to differ. My intelligence and good looks speak for themselves. Still, lead the way, oh illustrious thief."

Her scowled deepening, Imoen wondered if it was really worth the effort to keep Edwin around if they had to deal with his condescending and snarky attitude, but still led the way after the two Zhentarim agents, moving at an angle to their own path down the main street.

It was slow going though because there just weren't as many places to hide here in the center of Nashkel. Fearing that the two Zhentarim agents would think he was following them, Edwin too ducked to the side occasionally, grumbling in annoyance at the necessity. Imoen was also grumbling but had more reason: since if Edwin had been someone they could trust, she could've just used one of her spells to hide them both from sight as they moved around.

As it was, twice Imoen had to activate Hide-in-Shadows to keep from being seen, but again, without many shadows, the technique didn't work nearly as well as she would have hoped. She didn't know if it was habit, or if they really thought someone was after them, but both Xzar and Montaron had a habit of occasionally glancing over their shoulders at random intervals. It made it very troublesome to remain hidden.

Despite that, the two of them kept Xzar and Montaron in sight as they moved through Nashkel. They bypassed the tavern heading towards the entrance that Harry and his party had entered by from the Southwest. On the way there, they met with the lieutenant Oublek in the middle of the road.

Alas, when they did, Imoen and Edwin weren't close enough to hear what was being said. Or so Edwin assumed. When Imoen hissed in anger, he looked at her quizzically.

"I'm good at reading lips." Imoen scowled. "It appears as if Oublek is one of their spies here in town, and has been feeding the Zhentarim information for years, before he was even assigned here. He's trying to get off being blamed for their organization's being blindsided by the Iron Intake Issue. Oublek says he's passed on information via the normal couriers and it isn't his fault if they didn't get through. He's even offered to show them his own records, although I would think that keeping records of passing information on to a foreign organization, especially a group like that, would be a bad idea." the pink-haired girl's voice trailed off in some confusion.

"There are enchantments you can do to keep certain information secret. Blood locking items or books to only be read by certain individuals is somewhat simple if you can set up the proper ritual area. You could go to an enchanter in any major city and have them do it for a thousand gold." Edwin replied promptly.

Imoen nodded in interest at that, comparing it to some of the blood-based magic she'd heard rumors about back in her old world. Here though? Edwin had said commonplace, whereas where Imoen and Harry had come from, most blood magic was looked at as being very Dark except in the use of certain wards and, she had once heard, the creation of wand cores. Because of that, even knowledge of blood-based magic was rare.

The two of them continued to watch the conversation, Imoen using a mental mnemonic to memorize whatever the three men said to one another. It seemed as if Montaron wanted to kill the corrupt guard lieutenant, while Xzar wanted to make certain the Zhentarim got their money's worth. "We did, after all, supply you with a certain item, which was meant to cause blood and death. If nothing has happened there, then that is another mark against you, and your time on this plane will end swiftly. And most comedically if I am asked to do the deed."

Eventually, with Xzar in the lead, the two men turned around and came back towards the central area of the town, leaving Oublek looking very frightened indeed. Again, Imoen was forced to hide, and Edwin, deciding that meeting them the second time wasn't a good idea, backed away, quickly moved to the side and around the house, putting two walls between himself and, Xzar and Montaron.

Joining up again, Imoen and Edwin watched as the two of them moved down the streets and entered the Belching Dragon Tavern.

The two of them made no effort to enter the tavern themselves. Instead, activating Hide-in-Shadows, Imoen moved to a small window set in one of the walls of the inn, peering inside. She watched as the two of them approached the innkeeper, who had been working at something at the bar, keeping an eye on the two other people in the room, including a drunk who was laid out flat on a table.

The halfling stopped by him, checking his throat with a finger for a moment, then said something that even Imoen's ability with lip-reading couldn't make out. Whatever it was, the innkeeper looked appalled, while Xzar simply laughed but shook his head. A moment later, he was moving over to a young barmaid working on cleaning a row of mugs. Gesturing her over to the drunkard, he dropped a gold coin in her hand, and within seconds, the barmaid had moved over, shaking the sleeper awake, and exited, looking fearfully over her shoulder.

The innkeeper said something, and this time Imoen could make out what he said. He was asking whether that had been a good idea. Scaring people like that would surely stick in their memory.

Xzar replied, "More gold will solve that problem, or perhaps a visit from my bloodthirsty acquaintance over there. We have no need of witnesses to our talks, pawnbroker. We require your services. We need information about two half-elves that might be in the area and about the movements of the lieutenant. One source is always suspect after all."

Montaron cackled this time and then joined the conversation, but Imoen was unable to read his lips. Whatever he said seemed to make the innkeeper pale further than he already had, but he nodded obsequiously and gestured the two of them around the bar and into the back room.

For a moment, Imoen thought about entering the inn now, with hide in shadows still activated. But decided against it. Even if she could use Blood Magic without leaving witnesses, she wasn't certain she could take both of those men out without any backup and putting herself in danger for further information on what they were up to seemed foolish.

She moved away from the window, deactivated Hide-in-Shadows, and met up with Edwin, waving her hand and then gesturing back the way they'd come. He however simply shook his head, indicating he was going to move around the back of the tavern, and Imoen shrugged but let Edwin go his own way.

The two of them met up moments later on the main street. Edwin huffed, pulling back his hood and once more allowing the world around to gaze in awe at his good looks as he sneered good-naturedly at Imoen. "Well, did you learn anything of use on this rather annoying escapade?"

"They're here to look into the Iron Ore Issue, and they seem to know Jaheira and Khalid are around. They are angry with Oublek, but Xzar apparently wants to make certain of his guilt before killing him since Xzar considers him an investment of sorts. They provided him with something, but they didn't go into detail on what," Imoen said, counting points off on her fingers. "So yeah, I think this was time well spent."

Scene break

When they met up with Harry and the other and explained what it happened, Harry fully agreed with Imoen, though he was concerned about the risks that Imoen had run in doing so. "There were only the two of you, and from what I remember, both of those people are extremely high level. Level eighteen, I think."

"You can see other people's levels then?" Dynaheir asked before Edwin could, causing him to sniff somewhat an annoyance, but he too looked at Harry in interest. "Normally, Adventurers who have the Observation Skill can only see people's levels if they are weaker than the one trying to see it."

"Gorion taught me the Observation Skill and had me practice on the watchers and everyone else in Candlekeep," Harry lied with a shrug. "I was honestly surprised that more people couldn't do the same when I started adventuring."

Charisma check passed!

Edwin and Dynaheir are convinced what you said is the truth and are rather annoyed that they have never heard of the Observation Skill being taught in a similar manner. How long this lie will hold up is in question though, as both magic-users are convinced there is more to you than meets the eye already.

"So, what should we do now? I'm all for ambushing them myself right now." Jaheira suggested, a scowl on her face as she touched the scar on her chin as if remembering a past battle.

"J, J, Jaheira! We cannot simply a, a, attack them. Even if w, w, we know they are Zhentarim t, t, that would be wrong. W, w, we are not yet in direct conflict with them after all," Khalid retorted. "We a, a, also do not have any e, e, evidence to prove t, t, they are Zhentarim b, b, beyond our word."

Edwin rolled his eyes, looking over at Imoen with a 'see, I told you so' kind of look, although he had been somewhat more mollified by Jaheira's more bloodthirsty and aggressively practical solution to the current issue.

But Harry agreed with Khalid, pointing out, "While we are willing to take your word that they are working for that group, and they certainly seem the sort, if we start a fight with them in the middle of the town, the Guards are going to come in on their side of things." He frowned, thinking, then shrugged. "We might think about ambushing them before we head to the mine. Until then, you're certain that they were going to rest at the Belching Dragon Tavern?"

"The halfling demanded something from the innkeeper. Beyond that, I can't say," Imoen answered pedantically.

“Close enough, I guess,” Harry nodded. “In that case, let's head to the bazaar. We'll get our shopping done and then head out to the mine. If we see a spot where we might think about ambushing them, we'll do so.”

Jaheira smiled slightly, while Edwin just nodded his head since this was good sense, and Harry noted he just earned twenty respect from both of them. Jaheira's bloodthirsty attitude somewhat surprised him, but Harry supposed that she was the sort to take the negative relationship between the Harpers and Zhentarim more seriously than Khalid. For his part, Khalid frowned but then nodded. He didn't like the idea of attacking someone from ambush at all, but Khalid had to admit that doing so against these two was probably justified.

About forty minutes out of town to the northeast, they came upon the area designated for the circus. There were several small tents inside the entrance, one medium-sized tent, and one massive big top set directly in the center of an open area. As they walked towards the entrance, marked by a large sign hanging between two poles, they saw pamphlets plastered to several trees leading into town the showing the various acts and what was on offer at the bazaar.

“This Minsc must see! A great exploding ogre! Minsc wonders how this is possible!”

Dynaheir shook her head, although she looked interested enough when she noted that someone was ‘offering fine jewelry and glittering delights for sale by mistress Minerva’. “Hmm, now that looks much more promising than an exploding ogre.”

In contrast, Jaheira was shaking her head. “This all looks a little too overdone to be real. I would recommend, if you are going to be buying any jewelry, you have Imoen look at it first, Dynaheir. As a thief, she should be able to appraise whether or not something is real.”

“Harry and I both can identify items to a high degree,” Imoen nodded, having had some training in identifying whether a jewel or piece of jewelry was real with Mistress Barca back during the Tutorial.

“In that case, why don't you go with Minsc and Dynaheir, Imoen. Jaheira, Edwin, Khalid and I will search around for other things to buy.”

Everyone nodded their agreement, and after paying the entrance fee, entered the circus. As they did, Harry noticed absently that there were some guards around the edge of the area, and one or two moving around the area. Like the Amn Soldiers, all of them were Guards, not Adventurers. Only they were not nearly as well-outfitted as either of the other groups. These men were armed with short swords, leather jerkins, and one or two short bows.

Outside of the main area to one side of the Big Top, the group came upon the first act. There weren't many other people around, a few dozen kids and their parents, but even from here, Harry could hear the noise of people moving around in the big tent stamping their feet as

they watched whatever show was the main event here. Harry asked about it and heard that it was a lion and tiger act, which caused Jaheira to scowl in annoyance at the idea of such powerful beasts being used as creatures of fun.

Then she sighed. "Still, I would say that this circus is a godsend to the people of Nashkel, to keep the minds of most of the populace off the issues with the mines."

Yet only Minsc was interested in seeing the acts in the big tent and only if, "The tigers are fighting one another in a battle for the ages!"

They really didn't have a choice with the first act, it being situated directly in front of the smaller tents where they wanted to actually go. These were the tents that sold magical items, bought and sold weapons and armor. Each specialty had its own tents, with further signs pointing around the big tent to the right, pointing out where the jewelry 'store' was.

In front of this tent was a small halfling man, dressed in grandiose and very garish clothing, thrusting his hands up in the air, as he held a staff in one hand. "Yes, yes, come one, come all! Witness at the start of your journey through the wonders of the Circus of the Laughing Gods, the power of the Great Gazib and the Exploding Oopah!"

Harry frowned, staring at the ogre, as his Greater Observation activated.

Name: Oopah

Race: Ogre

Oopah is a seemingly normal ogre bar a strange choker around his neck. Beyond that, he seems typical for the semi-intelligent race, but he is also a very unhappy ogre, evinced by his jaw clenched, and the way his arms tremble all the way up to his massive shoulders. He is also afraid, the twitching of his fingers and the white in his eyes is a dead giveaway. One could almost think he doesn't want to be exploded...

Now scowling, Harry leaned over to whisper into Khalid's ear as the crowd shouted and cheered. "Khalid, that ogre..."

That was as far as he got before the act commenced. To the roar of approval from the crowd, the man turned to the ogre shouted out "Now, perform your trick!"

"N...no! N...!" The next second, the ogre exploded. There was a scream, and a drawing back of the crowd, a dozen kids for the most part, with one or two parents present. All boys, Harry noted. I guess, boys do take more pleasure in gory fun than girls. The next second, the ogre reformed, to wild applause from the crowd.

"Now, would anyone like to see the full show again, or..."

“No! No more!” The ogre turned quickly and grabbed the staff out of the surprised man's hand, pushing him to the ground with his other hand.

There were some screams, and a shout of “is this part of the show?” And another incredulous voice of “He's escaping, the ogre is going to kill us all!”

The man who had previously been holding the staff turned, staring into the crowd as he crawled backward rapidly. “Help me! Someone help me. He's gone crazy!”

At those words, the crowd began to melt away, racing in every direction. Harry, though, noted that they didn't turn the yellow of panicked. Instead, they simply walked away on his map, and neither ogre nor man was the red of an enemy yet. Rather they had turned orange. This, coupled with what he had seen with his Greater Observation, caused him to ask, “How exactly did you get the ogre to agree to be exploded?”

“What does that have to...” Gazib started to shriek before the ogre's deep baritone interrupted him.

“He never did! Gazib trick me. Oopah supposed be strong man in act. Ogre be strong, thought it good. Gain money, travel, be fun. Ogres not happy in cities, but this way, see many things! But no! Put collar on me! Make Oopah explode instead! Put back together, again, again! Not fun, painful!”

“Regardless, we can't exactly let you take the law into your own hands,” Dynaheir began.

Harry, Imoen and Edwin all turned to Dynaheir, while Jaheira and Khalid remained silent. “Why not? It's what Adventurers do all the time. Besides, is there actually any law out here that isn't based on the law of the strong?” Imoen asked.

“If he has abused you so, I'm not going to help him. But I'm not going to let you kill him either. Not with all those children around,” Harry decided quickly. “Leave him for the guards. You have your freedom. That's enough for now.”

Charisma check passed!

Somewhat intimidated by your glare and the number of Adventurers with you, the ogre Oopah has decided to abide by your words.

The ogre growled, then snapped the staff in his hand like it was a twig, which indeed in his giant hands it seemed. He then very, very carefully took the top of the staff, between his two hands. That staff's top was a small crystal ball, which after several grunts of effort, Oopah crushed between his hands.

There was a flash of magical energy, and Edwin shook his head with a sigh. "What a waste, an enchanted item like his collar and the connection to the wand is somewhat difficult to do. It might well have come in handy."

"Slavery is something that never 'comes in handy'," Jaheira growled.

While the two of them started to snipe at one another, the ogre glared down at Gazib, who had just shakily gotten to his feet. "Should squish. But not want to die again. We not meet again little man, or this ogre not be so nice." With that, Oopah pushed the man back down to the ground, leaving him there in the dust as he reached up to his neck and tore off the collar, tearing it into pieces as he went. Then eating the pieces. He was an ogre, after all.

The remaining crowd parted before him as they began to chatter amongst themselves, debating whether or not that had been the right thing to do, whether or that they felt sorry for the ogre, or he should have been put down.

Jaheira and Khalid exchanged a glance, and Khalid nodded. "I, I, I will go find the circus g, guards. T, t, they'll have an officer among them, and they can help s, s, sort this out. I doubt they'll be very happy about the idea t, t, that that ogre was basically enslaved t, t, to explode again and again w, w, without his c, c, consent."

"Makes me wonder how he was kept silent for so long," Harry mused.

"I doubt it his been all that long, but perhaps a silence spell when he noticed one of the guards or other circus performers around?" Jaheira shrugged. "Regardless, you handled that quite well, justice in its best form."

You have won +40 trust with Jaheira.

As a Druid, she holds a very firm opinion on the concept of freedom, even for nominally mindless beasts like ogres. And so much more, although that's more because she's Jaheira rather than having anything to do with her being a Druid. As such, she approves of your stance on both letting the ogre go and of not letting him kill Gazib in cold blood.

After Khalid returned and the guards took their statements, the guards dragged Gazib off to see the Ringmaster. At that point, the band broke up into the pre-established groups. Imoen went with Dynaheir and Minsc towards the jeweler's tent following the signs. Harry and the others moved into the first of three tents here in the main area. This was the tent that sold magical items.

There they came upon an astonishing sight. The tent was set up like a shop, with several collapsible tables here and there showing wears, along with two shelves that looked similarly collapsible, stuffed with small items and books.

Such wouldn't have been so surprising. What was surprising was the fact that near the doorway was a man dressed in flowing wizards robes of gold and green, pointing his staff at a woman at the far end of the circular tent. She was a white-haired woman, somewhat elderly but not overly so, who Harry's Greater Observation skills identified as a mage, but the man drew his attention so much that Harry didn't read the rest of her description, instead switching to read his. "You and all your foul get will die, Witch! Die for your crimes and seductions of good honest men!"

Name: Zordral

Class: Mage level 6

Despite being quite a showy dresser, Zordral isn't all of that noble or rich, and his robes are noticeably fraying around the edges. Worse, you can also see one of his cheeks twitching spasmodically and his hands shaking either with fury or some kind of mental twitch. This, coupled with the fires in his eyes, and the fact that he seems poised to commit murder, tells you that perhaps Zordral is not the sanest of individuals.

"What is going on here!?" Harry boomed, speaking up quickly on the heels of the man's diatribe, striding forward to put himself between the man and woman. "As far as I can see, this is just a woman going about her trade. If you have a problem with witches or women who use magic, that's your issue.

"Witches! You don't understand! They are all evil! Leading us all to damnation and sorrow! They use their magic, their feminine wiles, their seductive hips and busts break the minds of lesser men, turning them to evil!"

Harry blinked, then just shook his head, looking over at Jaheira, the only woman there from his party. "Would you like to respond to this?"

"I rather think this man's madness speaks for himself. Misanthropes do often go off the deep end," Jaheira quipped, lips quirked wryly. "Especially if they have been spurned in the past by one of the women they so scorn."

Harry nodded and, faster than the man could move, grabbed at his staff. This turned out to be a mistake. The spell that the man had been ready to cast on the woman instead launched at Harry. "If you stand with the witch, you will burn with her!" Purple bursts of magic flashed from Zordral's staff into Harry's chest plate, hurling Harry off his feet.

As Harry stumbled away from the Magic Missiles' impact on his chest plate he noticed the heavy hits to his health, quickly pushing back to his feet Harry wondered idly, if craziness in this world was common, or if it was just him attracting the crazies.

Instantly his fellows went on the attack, Khalid racing forward sword in hand while Jaheira readied her sling and Edwin a spell. But before Khalid could get within range of his blade, the man cast a spell, and suddenly, there were several of him around.

Enemy mage has cast **Mirror Image**. This level 2 spell has a fast casting time and allows the wizard to create a number of illusory duplicates of himself, the number equaling the mage's level. The illusions disappear when a characters hits an illusion, but will otherwise remain, copying the mage's moves.

It worked, distracting everyone else's to the Illusionary Images while the mage prepared another spell. The fact that the images parroted this movement made it all the more effective. The next second, another spell lanced out from one of the mirrored images. The spell flashed up and into the air of the tent rather than at Harry or one of his companions. The spell quickly burst in a yellow and brown blast of color.

Enemy mage has cast **Horror**, a level 2 spell that causes all within the area of effect to flee in mindless fear. This spell's effect lasts for two minutes.

Edwin had been preparing his own spell but was instantly struck by this mental attack and began to flee, his dot turning yellow. He didn't race directly out of the tent but rather directly away from the man, running into a corner. Khalid was also overcome and began doing much the same thing, while Jaheira paused for a second, taking several steps back before shaking her head and seemingly throwing the spell's effect off.

Thanks to his high willpower, Harry was able to push through the Horror spell just like he had been able to ignore the Charm spell of the Elder Dryad. He raced towards the mage, longsword in hand, his shield in front of him, and the next second, a new spell that he hadn't seen before slammed into his shield.

Enemy mage has used Melf's Acid Arrow. Utilizing this spell, the magic-user creates a magical arrow that speeds to its target unerringly and does acid damage. The acid can continue to cause damage the armor or skin of the individual struck for a set amount of time.

Your shield has taken damage and will continue to take durability damage until the acid is cleared away. Since your Tower Shield is a +3 item, this is minimized to a quarter-point durability every minute.

Unfortunately for Zordral, he hadn't backed away, believing that his acid arrow would blast through Harry's shield. He was still gaping when Harry reached sword range and attacked with an overhand blow.

The mage blocked it, but the blow cut straight through his staff. This redirected the blow to miss by a hair's length, as the man backed away, trying another spell. But before he could finish, Harry ran him through, the sword bursting through his chest and out his back.

The light of life in the man's eyes faded, and Harry scowled angrily as he stood back. "Honestly, what the hell is it with crazy people and thinking they can overcome all the odds and continue their craziness!?"

Jaheira quickly moved towards him, reaching down, grabbing up some sand from the ground of the tent and tossing it onto his shield then still more, using it to wipe away at the acid very carefully so that it didn't touch her own skin. With that done, she moved and began a spell of healing on Harry. Harry hadn't taken much damage from the initial Magic Missile attack thanks to his chest plate taking most of the magical pulses, which set him right, bringing him up almost to full health.

"I thank you for the aid you have given me, travelers!" Bertha said, shaking her head in some confusion. "I honestly do not understand what that man's problem with me was. I had performed a magic show earlier today and he was among the audience. Zordral was shouting something foul at the time, I believe, and was escorted out of the tent, only to come to my own tent just now in an attempt to accost me. Thankfully," her lips quirked, "he wished to rant and rave at me first, or else your timely arrival would've been too late."

"The mad do tend to want to share their madness with a captive audience," Jaheira said, hurrying over to her husband as she gestured Harry to help Edwin.

Edwin, however, had already thrown off the effects of the Horror spell. And slowly, Khalid was doing the same thing, hampered by his negative status effect, Curse of the Dread One.

He looked at the dead mage, then shook his head, sighing. "A great pity. He was a most excellent dresser. And I suppose due to your being a paladin and therefore foolish, you have not asked for any remuneration for this random good deed we were forced to do?"

Harry shrugged, looking over at the woman. "Would you give us a discount on your wares?" He asked, cocking an eyebrow. "We did just save your life after all."

"I will do better than that. I have four items in my shop. Bertha moved over to a closed chest that had been behind her, pulling out two necklaces and a ring. She set them down, then pulled out several scrolls, which Harry identified with a glance as protection scrolls from acid, cold, fire, electricity, and for some reason, petrification. "You have a choice. I can give you a discount on any one of these four items, but I won't tell you the price of each," Bertha said with a laugh. "Nor will I tell you their properties. Or, I can give you any two of my scrolls. Given the ease with which you dispatched that madman, I believe that is more than fair."

Harry smiled, first because the ring was one he had already seen, a Topsider's Crutch. It allowed people to see in that dark, almost as if they had infrared vision. As for the others, his Greater Observation skill told him enough about them to help him decide what to purchase.

Unidentified Golden Necklace: This amulet is built with finger-thick golden chains, each link about a pinky in length. A single red stone is set into a golden ornament that looks almost like a star, but not quite. Indeed, it looks almost like the thing is moving or was crafted to look as if it was anyway. It is highly magical, although the magic seems offensive in nature.

Unidentified Golden Pendant: This necklace is seemingly made of several ropes, which pass twice alongside one another on the sides before flowing into two small beads, merging together at the back of the neck into one rope. At the front of the necklace are several rectangular beads on either side of a central pendant, which looks like two arrows set one on top of the other made of gold. The magic within this item isn't as great as the other piece of jewelry, and what there is, is defensive in nature. Thinking about it, the one on the far left looked like the best item, but not for Harry's party. The spell on it was an offensive one, and whatever it might be, Harry's party already had two wizards. No, what they needed was more defensive strength. *Especially for Imoen.* As their primary scout, Harry was always concerned about her ability to defend herself. *But something else with a protective spell added to the Gauntlets of Protection will give her an armor benefit equal to wearing plate mail.*

"This one," Harry pointed at the one with the protective spell on it.

Bertha was an experienced merchant and did not allow her eyes to widen, nor did she curse in annoyance. She simply nodded and said that the price would be 2,362 gold.

Harry nodded, then his hands moved to the ring. "And this one. I'll pay full price for it." With that, the majority of our party will see in the mines as easily as Jaheira and Khalid. Indeed,

"That will be another 1125 gold," Bertha replied again, smiling faintly. "Do you wish me to identify them?"

"No need," Harry chuckled, holding it up. "This is the Topsiders Crutch. I've seen one example of it just the night before. And this is a protector style amulet. I've seen pictures of these in books in Candlekeep. These amulets give Armor Protection plus one."

Bertha laughed ruefully. "I took you for a simple rube, a young Adventurer who didn't know anything much beyond swinging a sword. More fool me, I suppose.

"More fool you for putting such a small price on your own life," Jaheira muttered, shaking her head and glancing at the other two items. "And how much will this other one go for?"

"The One Gift Lost will be three thousand gold," Bertha answered promptly, almost glaring at Jaheira. "And while I do indeed prize my life tightly, so too do my fellows. The Ringmaster would have paid for my resurrection. You saved me from having to pay him back once my body was found, nothing more."

“She’s right, Jaheira. I realize as a Druid, you dislike seeing life equated to gold, but this isn’t the time to make a snit about it,” Harry said soothingly, gesturing Jaheira to be quiet. Her eyes widened, and her lips thinned, but she went along with it, and Harry noticed that he had, oddly, won some more respect from her.

You have won +10 Respect from Jaheira.

It seems as if the wench knows that her opinions drive her mouth forwards when she should keep them to herself at times. She actually approves of being stopped at those points, even by someone other than her husband, who is rarely up to the task. Once more, it must be said: women are weird.

Harry paid with gold, and the majority of the emeralds that the party had taken from the gnoll fortress. Then, with their items in hand, Harry led the way out of the tent. The band went to the next tent over, where Harry sold the extra short swords +1 they had gathered and the last two of the emeralds he had kept for the party. Edwin and Dynaheir retained the money Harry had given them as part of their haul from the battle against the gnolls, mainly in the form of an emerald each, and Garrick had been given one as well, though Harry had no idea what Imoen had told him about it to explain his presence.

With that done, Harry used his map to lead the group to the northeast, through the circus, occasionally stopping to ask about spices that he smelled at some of the food stalls, amusing Edwin. “I am still getting used to the fact that a man is the one who cooks for this party. And yet the proof is in the meal, and you cook better than any cook I have tried since leaving Thay.” Edwin wasn’t one to give out praise normally. But eating meals like Harry could make on the road was worth some praise, in his opinion.

“I, isn’t he?” Khalid said, breathing out the words. “H, h, Harry’s fish meals are to d, d, die for, and you would n, n, not believe how good the pastry h, h, he made us the n, n, night we spent in t, t, the Elder Dryad’s grove w, w, was.”

Soon though, the two half-elves frowned. “I am hearing the sounds of shouting, and it is not all coming from Minsc. I can make out Dynaheir as well.”

Shrugging in confusion, Harry led the way down the trail. Soon the source of the commotion became apparent. Imoen stood between Dynaheir and a dwarf, who was standing next to what looked like a stone statue of a woman, while Minsc menaced several very frightened circus guards with his sword.

That is a very good stone statue Harry reflected. The statue in question was posed with one hammer raised in her hand, her shields thrust forward as if to shield her body from a blow. She wore plate armor but no helmet, her hair was flying all around her head as if the sculptor had caught the woman in the middle of some wild movement. The statue’s mouth was also

wide open in a shout. All in all, she looked like some sculptor's masterpiece. *It's really caught the idea of a warrior woman to a T.*

But why that was causing such an argument Harry didn't know and he rushed forward quickly joined Imoen in holding Dynaheir back as the two half-elves got between Minsc and the hapless circus guards. Edwin, of course, did no such thing, simply watching events with some amusement. As he rushed forward, Harry put his fingers to his mouth and whistled loudly.

By the time he was standing beside Imoen, everyone had turned to him and he scowled at them angrily. "What exactly is going on here Dynaheir?"

"This most vile of dwarfs this ignominious hole-crawler, this.."

"Save me the histrionics," Harry interjected loudly. "Although I do appreciate your command of invective. But I really don't want us to cause a riot here by Minsc's slaughter of these guards, so please get to the point."

Dynaheir snorted, pointing that the dwarf and then the statue. "He was trying to sell it."

"Yesss?" Harry drawled. "This is a carnival and I would imagine that a circus doesn't have that much weight capacity to lug around statues."

"Aye, that's the honest truth!" The dwarf replied. "I was asked to unload it, ain't nothing wrong with me selling it! As I've been trying to say to this lovely lady and her, um, her mighty companion."

"It is not an it!" Dynaheir shouted. "It is a her!"

"What are you talking about?" Harry look to the statue again, looking at what his Greater Observation skills. His Greater Observation skills simply told them that it was a statue. *What the...*

Statue of Unknown Artistry

This statue is made to resemble a warrior woman without a helmet and with long hair. The statute is so good you can even make out individuals molars in her mouth and the strain of her muscles. Or the laces of her boots. Indeed, it almost looks too-lifelike...

She's been petrified hasn't she?" Jaheira guess, moving around the statue thoughtfully. "I've seen such things before."

Khalid nodded too, while Edwin looked on in interest now.

"Is that true?" Harry turned, addressing the question to the dwarf.

Name: Zeke

Class: Civilian

This dwarf is a young one for his race – note the small beard and the lack of jewels or armor – and seems somewhat innocent, or as innocent as any skill looking to offload something whose providence he has no idea about could be. But due to his age and inability to talk himself out of his current trouble, you can conclude he isn't very highly ranked in the odd organization of the circus. He is almost certainly following someone else's orders in getting rid of the statue.

"How am I supposed to know?" the dwarf scoffed. "All I know is we found the statue like this on the road within the remains of a burnt out caravan. We thought it might have survived the fire, some masterpiece that was being transported elsewhere. If it be a woman petrified, I had naught to do with it."

Staring at the man, Harry could tell that he wasn't lying and nodded. "In that case, his selling her makes sense. Stand down Minsc." Minsc scowled, but sheathed his sword, and Harry gestured the guards away. "There's not going to be any violence here. Don't worry. Now, do any of you have any idea how to un-petrify her?"

They all shook their heads bar Khalid and Jaheira and Khalid supplied. "T, t, the priest in town should p, p probably have a release from Petrification s, s, spell."

"Imoen, you're the fastest, why don't you head off to the priest and tell him we need one of those scrolls. Tell him we found someone who has been petrified and mean to free her. If he wants money for it, don't bother haggling."

Those are expensive Edwin warned. "Doing so out of the goodness of your heart is foolish, unless you wish to demand some payment from her for being freed?" He looked at the statue admiringly. "I'll admit I have some thought as to how she could repay us."

Harry slapped his forehead, while Jaheira scowled, Imoen rolled her eyes and Dynaheir looked pained. "None of that," Harry said, shaking his head. "No, I rather think Imoen will be able to get the priest to release the spell scroll easily enough. As for after she is freed, we will have to see. It might be good to add another Warrior to our party after all."

"Now hold on," the dwarf began as Imoen raced off. "That's fine and dandy, but what about the circus? We transported that thing for four days, and it wasn't easy, let me tell you. I was told to get at least five-hundred gold for it, starting price. And that's only to pay off transportation."

Harry debated haggling on this point but then decided against it. There was no reason to do so. The dwarf was just doing his job. With that, Harry pulled out the prerequisite gold from his money pouch, dumping it into the man's hand. "There you go."

The dwarf took the pouch, then, after counting it in front of them, something that was extremely rude to do in the presence of the Adventurer, he raced off back into the rest of the circus area. This left only two guards, both of them wearing better armor than the circus guard, standing outside the jeweler's covered wagon and Harry's party alone around the statue.

Nearby, another attraction was being set up at the same time, some kind of boxing ring, but at this time of day, even the work on that had been left for the moment, as the circus workers concentrated on the areas people were busy congregating. The jeweler's shop was the only attraction here, and even it didn't seem to have any other customers at present.

Harry looked over at Dynaheir, gesturing with a twitch of his head toward the jeweler's wagon. "Were you able to discover anything of interest in the jewelers?"

"Jewelry," Dynaheir added blandly, twitching one hand and showing that she had replaced a few of the bangles on her wrist that she had lost when she had been captured. She had also gained two new earrings. "I might find an enchanter to add magic to these eventually once we have the funds. But for now, they are of high enough quality to keep around, even without magic. What have you all found?"

Harry held out the amulet of protection, tossing it to her as he explained it's properties. "You can use it for now, although I will request that you give it to Imoen when we get to the mines and I send her forward. As one of our scouts, Imoen needs the best armor we can get. Minsc, you're still wearing the chest plate plus one, right?"

Minsc nodded, tapping the item in question with a heavy hand. "Minsc is indeed, friend Harry. He must thank you once more for this magnificent gift! Too often when adventuring parties discover such things, the leader always keeps the best for himself."

Harry bared his teeth in a smirk, "Then they're piss poor leaders."

Even Edwin had nothing to say that score, although he did sneer at the idea of largess. But since he had also received an emerald from Harry upon being revived through his companion's efforts, he kept silent.

Harry was about to ask you if anyone had seen anything else in the bazaar that they thought was worth any more money when suddenly, someone stabbed him.

You have been backstabbed. Montaron has done seventy damage.

Your spleen has been punctured. While an amusing name for an internal body part, the spleen is still kind of important. Your status has changed to **Crippled**.

Harry gasped, going to his knees. The suddenness of the assault had taken everyone by surprise, not just Harry but Jaheira instantly began to intone a spell as Harry slapped himself, using the Lay on Hands spell, while shouts of consternation and shock abounded.

Jaheira's spell was interrupted as a fireball landed in among their group, and a shout of "Death to all Harpers and the goody-two-shoes who stand with them!"

While the guards at the jeweler's entrance died in that blast of fire, Edwin was blown off his feet by the explosion of the fireball, but he rolled with it, hastily twisting his robes this way and that to get the fires out of them as he quickly intoned a spell of magical resistance against fire, idly noting that all the covered wagons around them seemed to have been ensorcelled with the same spell.

It was as well he had, because, in the next second, a flame arrow struck him, nearly killing him instantly. The Protection From Fire made him nearly immune to it, so he only stumbled backwards thanks to the impetus of the spell.

Dynaheir hadn't been able to roll, but Minsc was able to interpose himself between the fireball and his Witch. With his armor and suddenly holding a shield from his quick slot, plus his greater weight, he was able to withstand the explosion, staring out between several small tents on their left. There stood Xzar, smirking as his ally disappeared back into Hide-in-Shadows while the mage's own invisibility potion died off under the impact of his own spellwork.

"Back to back!" Harry near tried to shout, but the pain from his backstabbed wound was impeding his ability to be heard. "Form a circle!"

Khalid gasped as the thief-warrior once more appeared from out behind Hide-in-Shadows, stabbing forward. But his full plate armor was such that, as he had already been turning, looking towards the sound of a slight noise, Montaron had made, the daggers skittered across his back rather than hitting an area uncovered by armor as it had with Harry.

He lashed out with his sword, but the halfling warrior-thief ducked one side, howling in laughter. "Ahaha, yes, yes, now for the stabby sort of fun!" With that, Montaron disappeared into Hide-in-Shadows once more, practically disappearing in front of Khalid's face, such was the ability of a thief at that high a level.

Seconds later, from the other direction came two twin bellows as two ogre berserkers rushed through the areas between the two tents on that side, holding their heavy clubs high. They just appeared there, and Harry realized that Xzar must have summoned them there to split his band's attention.

As he thought that, Jaheira completed a second healing spell, and Harry instantly felt better, pushing himself to his feet, then whirling around, bringing his shield up and over it just in case. His quick reaction time surprised the thief-warrior, smacking him just as he came out of

Hide-in-Shadows, hurling the halfling to one side. Whatever his high level, a halfling was still not exactly a weighty sort of person.

A quick step forward and a stab nearly caught the the halfling, but Harry was forced to retreat as another fireball spell was launched towards the group. He ducked down behind his tower shield, taking it on his shield, as he whispered out, *Protego!* His shield glowed for a second as the fires washed over it, while Harry grimaced at the hit to his health, which took away about half the health Jaheira had just given him. The wound in his back and spleen was still healed though. And a second later, Harry was up and barreling through, heading towards Xzar, shouting behind him “Khalid, Jaheira, guard my back. Minsc, Dynaheir and Edwin, take out the ogres!”

Understanding what he meant, Jaheira began whirling her sling, and waited for a target to appear. Khalid too had switched to a long-range weapon, as he moved away from the two charging Ogre Berserkers. In contrast Minsc charged in their direction at Harry's command, while Dynaheir and Edwin both launched out Magic Missiles at the twosome, halting their progress and sending them reeling backward in a moment of odd synchronicity that would have appalled both of them.

A moment later, Khalid launched his arrow not at the mage, but at the halfling warrior thief, as he went for Harry again from the back. Jaheira's stone followed instantly.

Both attacks struck true, and the halfling shrieked in anger, disappearing into Hide-in-Shadows once more. Then Harry was suddenly holding one of the throwing hammers he had bought from the blacksmith in Beregost. Harry hadn't used them before this, believing that he was better on the front lines, but now he did. He hurled one towards the mage, who shrieked and dodged one side, the hammer missing entirely. But Harry had already turned away and was attacking Montaron.

The halfling was good, far better than any thief should've been thanks to his dual-class, despite how much lower his Fighter level was than his thief. He parried and blocked Harry's longsword with his own short sword. Yet Harry kept Montaron's attention fixed on him while Jaheira and Khalid switched to firing on the mage, who was forced to pull back once more, invoking a Protection From Normal Weapons spell before renewing the attack.

Simultaneously Minsc hacked a leg out from under one of the ogre berserkers. This opened him up to a blow from the other ogre, whose head exploded in turn from a Magic Missile spell from Dynaheir a second later. His head ringing and his helmet dented, Minsc fell back onto the ground but rolled away from the one remaining ogre's wild blow at him, the creature still fighting even though it was missing its leg from the knee down. He then rolled forward and thrust his claymore like a short sword up and through the beast's chest.

Muscles straining, Harry tried to push the halfling off-balance only to find Montaron already backing away a single half-step himself. Harry almost lost his own balance in turn but

recovered, bringing up his tower shield in time to block the Shield Bash that the fighter thief lunged at him. *How the heck is he able to do a Shield Bash with that small shield!?*

Montaron has activated Shield Bash.

You have blocked Shield Bash. Your shield arm is numb, but your movement is unimpaired.

The second ogre berserker dealt with, Minsc pulled his sword out of the thing's face and turning roaring and racing towards the halfling engaged with his friend. At the same time, Edwin and Dynaheir turned their attention to Xzar.

Too late. Another fireball raced over Harry's head, crashing right at the feet of the two Harpers. Khalid and Jaheira were flung through the air, screaming and on fire, and they both rolled, their health badly damaged. While Jaheira wasn't a part of his party, Khalid was, and Harry could see his health was down to half of what it had been a moment ago. Edwin and Dynaheir were far enough away that they didn't take as much damage, but their clothing was still set on fire, and both had to stop, drop, and roll quickly.

Minsc had also been hit by the fireball, and he stumbled forward, just in time for Montaron to twist away from Harry and shout out, "Ya picked the wrong friends, you giant freak! Power Strike!"

Montaron has used Power Strike!

This is a high-level warrior skill that, like Cleave, is designed to multiply the damage done on a successful strike. More designed for those with short swords or spears instead of long swords and claymores, it does piercing damage to the opponent, three times the user's normal damage. Bleeding damage is guaranteed, and if the wielder is using a poisoned blade, that too will be automatically applied to the victim.

Desperately, Harry interposed his sword. The sword he had pulled from his quick slot was the mysterious long sword +1, which Harry had claimed from the gnoll fortress's loot. Given the nearly deadly nature of the ambush, Harry had instinctively decided it was time. The magical blade crashed into the short sword of their enemy, just in time to stop it from stabbing up underneath Minsc's breastplate.

The short sword in Montaron's hands shattered on the magical blade, all the power of the halfling's attack bounced back into the blade. An instant later, Harry shot out a point-blank stupefy spell. It was the fastest and least magically visible spell he had, and it sent the little man reeling backward, but to Harry's astonishment, it didn't knock him out.

You have used Stupefy. However, Montaron is a high-level dual-class fighter/thief. His willpower and constitution are high enough that he can overcome your spell. Unless you overpower it. Perhaps.

While startling, the spell still had an impact, sending Montaron reeling right into Minsc's overhand blow. And Minsc too had his own power attack. "Cleave!"

That blow crashed down onto Montaron's shoulder and down his chest. The short halfling stumbled back, his armor rent, and a deep gash across his chest, but once more, Harry saw the impact of fighting someone who was such a higher level than they were. Instead of being sliced in half like he should've been, the impact had simply cleaved Montaron's chain mail and made that gash on his chest, which wasn't all that deep.

Yet he was still reeling, and as Minsc took the fight to him, with a roar of, "Butt kicking for goodness! You will fall, vile little man! No more will you stab the backs of righteousness!" Harry had time to take a step back metaphorically and examine the battlefield.

Jaheira was back up, her hands already flickering in healing spells, while her husband was slowly getting to his feet, pulling his sword and shield out from his quick slots. Thanks to wearing armor, he hadn't been set on fire like his wife. However, the hits to his health from the initial explosion had seemingly been more damaging. The portions of his face Harry could see were burnt under his helmet, and he was moving much slower than normal.

More importantly, Harry realized that they could take advantage of the terrain, an idea that he had to put down to his Tactics level. "Spread out! Don't let the wizard catch us again with a single spell. Jaheira, Edwin, Dynaheir, concentrate on Xzar. Khalid, circle!"

Those as far as he could get, before another spell, Magic Missile, hammered into his side, the side that wasn't holding his shield. Alas even his Sword and Shield style had limits. Harry stumbled sideways, then quickly wrenched himself backward, blocking with his tower shield a blow from another short sword that the little creature had pulled out from somewhere, Montaron having danced around the far slower Minsc like he was standing still to try and put down the more battered Harry.

A second later, the halfling attempted to disappear into Hide-in-Shadows, but with Minsc and Harry on his left and to his front, the technique finally failed. Montaron could only take a single step away before the skill faded out and then had to dodge to one side as Minsc attacked, roaring in anger. He hadn't given himself over to his Berserker Skill just yet, but it was a close run thing. "Bah, enough with the sneaking and the hiding! Face me coward, and take the boot to the rear that is your comeuppance for your villainy!"

Xzar once more ducked out from around the canvas-covered car, whereupon he began another spell. Jaheira, having finished her own healing spells, joined the fight now, a sling nearly hitting Xzar in the face forcing him back once more while the two wizards got to their feet angrily, Edwin's curses both voluble and quite interesting. "Be damned to the deepest darkest of pits, foolish peasant and be gnawed by the most horrid of tentacular beasts. I will emasculate you and then feed your entrails to your..."

“Stop cursing and start casting!” Dynaheir barked, sending out Magic Missiles past Jaheira's head towards the halfling, the half-elf having shifted her own attack into another spell. They crashed in, but Montaron was able to defend himself with his buckler, catching four of the five missiles that she had sent his way. The last impacted his side but barely made him grunt in pain.

A moment later, his map updated, as four new red dots appeared. The conjured wolves raced towards through the area between two covered wagons where the wizard had previously been, howling as they came.

Quickly, Harry shouted out, “I'll take the wolves,” just as Jaheira's spell completed. Nature's Call crashed out, a thunderous bolt of lightning slamming into the halfling and doing real damage. Montaron stumbled back half of his face and body now seared from the lightning, the heat of the bolt having melted portions of his remaining chain mail painfully into his flesh. “Damn you wench, my sword will bathe in your blood yet!”

Jaheira has struck the enemy, Montaron, with Nature's Call. This spell has made fifteen points of damage and has **Electrocuted** Montaron. For the next two minutes, his movement speed and dexterity will be halved. All Skills based on these stats will have their effectiveness halved.

Seeing this notification, Harry turned his back on him to engage the wolves while he shouted out, “keep up the pressure, Minsc! Don't let him heal himself somehow!”

Turning his back on the halfling might've sounded quixotic since, up to this point, he had easily been the most dangerous enemy. But Montaron was now reeling himself, and in so doing, Harry blocked the ability of the wolves to get at his companions. Using his tower shield held sideways and crouching down, Harry basically formed a small wall in front of the wolves, which, astonishingly, allowed him to create a new tactic.

You have created a new Tactic: **Cork in the Bottle.**

A defensive tactic, this tactic is activated when a single member of the party puts himself in harm's way, guarding a strategic point so that no enemy may pass.

+60% to defense, -30% to the offense of the party member in question. +5% casting speed and long-range fire from your allies.

Note, the additions do **not** carry over to nonparty members.

Harry was also trusting Minsc to keep the halfling's attention on him, and for a time, this proved effective. Harry was able to kill one of the wolves, despite his damage not being much. They were just wolves, after all. Behind him, Jaheira quickly returned to healing the party, while the two wizards launched spells at where Xzar was. Thanks to her efforts, Minsc and Harry were back to nearly full health.

But then Minsc was knocked off balance by a Shield Bash. "Gonna knock you down and gut ya, you tall fuck!" Montaron howled, the halfling activating the skill just as he blocked a blow from Minsc's Claymore. The Claymore went flying out of Minsc's hands, and the halfling danced inward, stabbing upward with his sword just like he had been trying to Before.

Thankfully it wasn't a Power Strike, the cooldown time for that skill not having expired just yet. But even so, a sword to the guts driven by a level ten fighter – his fighter level would override his thief level when it came to dealing damage - was more than enough to put Minsc on the ground and forced Jaheira to quickly shift targets for her next healing spell.

Edwin's Magic Missiles caught the halfling in the side and face, tearing away more of his skin and flesh. And the next second, Dynaheir's acid arrow lashed out over the wolves' heads towards the other wizard. Her spell caught him mid-spell. "Why you saucy wench, wait till I get me staff aimed at you!" Xzar squawked in anger, but not much pain, as he started to redo his spell, the attack not having slowed him down at all.

However, the wizard and the halfling hadn't been communicating with one another. And, better, they hadn't been able to keep track of everyone. The spell concluded, and four Undead Warriors appeared, charging forward to try and attack Harry over the backs of the wolves. But then, Khalid was there behind the mage. And no matter his level, a Backstab was still going to ruin any mage's day.

Khalid has activated backstab! Khalid has achieved a Critical hit!

The high-level mage gurgled, taking several steps forward, twisting around and launching what had to be some kind of emergency spell from a wand he was suddenly holding. The Magic Missiles barely had any distance to form before they crashed into Khalid, staggering him backward, but the damage was done. The mage was now badly injured and faced with Khalid moving forward again grimly, his own health now blinking orange in Harry's eyes as he peered past the four newly conjured undead.

Shrieking, the mage grabbed at one of his rings, twisting the top of it hard. "Monty! Retreat! The asinine forces of goody-goodness have won the day!"

With that, he disappeared with a massive clap of thunder, leaving Khalid to face the four undead who had turned to him at a last mental command from the wizard.

He smiled grimly, holding up his sword and shield while Harry finished off the last of the wolves, and turned his own attention on the halfling.

The halfling had backed away from Minsc thanks to Edwin's spell and was now looking near death and desperate. He turned, his short sword seeking Harry's back at the same time Harry had finished off the last of the wolves. "I'll at least have one of you to accompany me into the dark pits!"

He was just a little too slow. The blow still landed, slamming into Harry's shield as it moved to protect him automatically. And then Harry's sword caught him right in the side of the head, cutting through it into his brain.

Montaron fell, and Harry turned around, shouting out another spell as he slammed the hand holding his sword hilt to his chest. And this was one of his Paladin skills. "Turn Undead!" From Harry and the rest of his party, the holy power crashed out and the four undead soldiers that the mage had summoned into being collapsed, all of them struck by the aura of holy magic at once.

Harry looked around them for a moment, as shouts from the nearby circus began, and two of the circus guards raced towards them, faces grim under their half pot helmets. "Well, that was something."

He looked over at Dynaheir, shaking his head sardonically. "Heh, it looks as if you will have another day off despite your protestations to the contrary, and will be able to redo your spellbook too. I think all of us will need a rest after this."

The battle had been a seesaw there, and once more, having a healer in the party had proven the real turning point, Harry reflected as he looted Montaron's body, finding nothing but a small bag of gold coins. Without Jaheira healing them, Harry might well have died from the first stabbing, his life bleeding out slowly but surely. Minsc would also have died from that last stab from Montaron. Even with her healing spells, all of them were battered to a certain degree. Minsc and Jaheira were still the worst off from the various injuries and again that last moment stab, but thanks to the half-elf, they were not in any danger of dying.

Dynaheir was bruised and battered, that was all, Montaron having been kept from closing with any of the three magic users. Edwin too had been battered, and to a slightly greater degree than Dynaheir thanks to the amulet of protection Harry had given her right before the battle began due to the Fireballs and the Flame Arrow. But the Red Wizards was still in relatively good fighting shape. Khalid and Jaheira had also been badly hammered. Being at Ground Zero for not one but three fireballs in succession would do that to you, even if you healed yourselves with minor healing spells between. And Jaheira had not bothered healing herself, as she had her husband.

Thankfully, the guards did not try to attack immediately, seeing the ogres' bodies and the wolves lying on the ground along with the two jeweler's guards, dead from the first fireball. They instead asked for clarification on what had happened. When told that they had been seemingly by random bandits, with a grudge against one of their party members, the guards asked no further questions, especially when the jeweler, an elderly rail-thin bald man, came out of his tent telling them what had happened from his perspective. While he hadn't dared to poke his head out and watch the battle, he had heard everything.

Once they had heard all this, the guards moved over and began to remove the bodies, as Khalid moved around to where he had previously been standing, hoping to find his longbow +1. Harry didn't think he would though, the bow had after all been wood, subject to being at the center of the fireball spell.

Harry moved over to Jaheira, asking quietly, "How many spells do you have left?"

"I have the spells on my staff remaining to me, three Tangling Vines spells, and two Hold Person," Jaheira replied instantly. Gone were the days when she would have disdained Harry's input on her spells or argued with him midbattle on tactics. Harry had proven himself to her over and over by this point. "I replaced my Animal Summoning spells last night in preparation for us to go into the mines. Down there, such a spell would be of limited utility."

Harry nodded, then inquired, "What would it summon, do you think?"

"Rats, rats, cockroaches, perhaps mice. It would be different if it was an actual dungeon, but a mine that has become one?" Jaheira shrugged. "I honestly don't know, but I erred on the side of a spell which I know would be useful rather than one which might be a dud."

"Hmm... still, can I ask that you replace one of the Hold Person spells with a Summon Animals spell? We might need it. Beyond that, I'd like you to continue to concentrate on healing spells." Gesturing around, Harry shook his head with a scowl. "They saved us here, Jaheira. Thank you."

Smiling slightly at Harry's heartfelt thanks, Jaheira nodded agreeably, then her eyebrow rose in surprise as Harry gestured to the body of the dead halfling. "But for now, is there a way to make his permanent? I can't remember."

"Removing his head would be a start," Jaheira said with a nod, and then her smile turned crooked but somewhat approving as Harry moved over and did just that, not without a certain amount of squeamishness, but with an equal amount of grim determination. That had really been too close, and Harry preferred to not fight the same enemies twice. *We might have to fight Xzar again as it is, damn it.*

You have received +40 Respect from Jaheira, + 40 friendship points with Khalid.

For once, this isn't so mysterious! As Harpers, Jaheira and Khalid have long been used to the need to get their hands dirty, and they appreciate having a Zhentarim agent dealt with permanently. Your quick thinking in battle and your willingness to see to this necessary act yourself also impresses them.

Ignoring the message, Harry glanced over at Edwin, scowling faintly to himself, before wiping the expression on his face a second later. Harry was certain that he could get Dynaheir to agree to keep his secrets with Minsc's help and her own high sense of honor. But Edwin, no,

they needed something more there. *But I think it's time to talk about that with Jaheira and Imoen and Khalid at least. I am getting tired of not having access to my Blood Magic Spells in a fight. I don't want to use them as a crutch, but being able to use them openly would be nice.*

At that point, Harry looked at his map automatically and smiled as he saw the green dot of Imoen coming towards them from the main circus area. Glancing around as she came within sight, Harry noticed that the statue was still in one piece. It had been far enough away from the center of the fireball to avoid the concussive nature of the spell, although the stone had been scuffed, and there were a few cracks here and there, but looking at it, Harry breathed a sigh of relief at what his Greater Observation skill showed him.

Petrified statue: Durability 20/100.

This statue of a warrior woman has been badly damaged, but not to the extent it would crack straight through. So long as that is true, the individual within will not have come to any harm once the spell is removed.

Slowing down from her pell-mell run, Imoen looked around the battlefield as she arrived, holding up a scroll of some kind. "I got the Scroll, but what the hell, Harry! You send me off, and then have all the fun for yourselves?"

"I would hardly call it fun," Jaheira grumbled, shaking her head. "It was a well-timed, well-planned ambush. If not for Harry's remarkable durability, and my own ability to heal us, we would've been lost." Jaheira had seen how Harry had defended Minsc from being gutted, and then had kept the wolves from charging Jaheira and the two magic users.

Imoen quieted down quickly, taking in the blood still covering Harry's back and shoulders, and the blood that had drizzled down from the stab to Minsc's stomach and guts. "Yeah, I can see that."

"Let's just get this over with, and head back to the inn. I'm hungry, I wish to lay down, and I want to move on from this battle," Dynaheir grumbled. Neither of the magic users had covered themselves with glory here, being so caught up with ensuring their own safety they hadn't been able to try any of their larger scale spells, or indeed, any spell slower than the ubiquitous Magic Missile spell.

Nodding, Imoen handed the Scroll over to Dynaheir, who held it, opened it, and nodded firmly, before moving over to the statue. She intoned a few words in a language that Harry hadn't heard before and a new notification popped up, replacing the message telling Harry how much XP he and his party had received after killing Montaron. Harry would look at that message later. Right now, this one seemed more important.

Dynaheir has used a Scroll, Scroll of Stone to Flesh.

This Scroll will remove the Petrification placed on the statue that was previously a person, regardless as to the cause of his or her current state.

A moment later, the statue began to glow with White Magic, reminding Harry somewhat of his own holy based abilities.

So busy watching it was Harry, that he didn't notice Edwin looking at him thoughtfully, his eyes narrowed as he touched one of the chains going from his ear to his mouth. *I do wonder what that blue energy which covered Harry's shield was. Magic for certain, but magic from a Paladin? It wasn't a Holy spell for certain. Indeed it was something else entirely. Yes indeed, I do believe these two Candlekeep youths are keeping secrets. I am now more certain than ever that staying with them was the proper thing to do.*

The light began to spread down from the woman's forehead to her feet, and then, there was a crack, like stone shattering under a hammer, as the entire edifice of stone sloughed down, falling away from the woman. She stumbled forward, the edge of a shout escaping her lips as her hammer fell from her nerveless grip to the ground. Regaining her feet, she looked around in anger, then her eyes widened as she realized apparently what must have happened. "Wh, what, where is that bastard mage?! I..." She paused as she looked around, then down at her feet as something crunched under them, seeing the stone bits there. "I see. I was caught in his spell."

"That seems to have been the case," Harry said as he took in the woman. She was tall, almost as tall and broad in the shoulders as Harry, with long, honey-colored hair, tumbling in an uncared for cascade and reaching down below her shoulders. The woman had a gold amulet around her throat with a green stone of some kind set into the center of the stone, the gold coiling slightly like a snake, with the tail falling down towards her modest cleavage, most of which was hidden under a chest plate. Around her forehead, she wore a thin, multicolored bandana, something designed to keep her long hair out of her eyes and add some color, which went with whatever it was that women put over their eyes to add color. In this case, the woman had chosen light purple for some reason.

Her face was wide, her mouth and face seemingly made to smile and scowl in equal measure, with lively dark brown eyes below the purple marks. She also had a stern set to her jaw, which matched well with the warrior ethos she seemed to represent. She wore plate armor and had a hammer and a shield, none of which was magical going by what his greater observation told him. That wasn't all it told him now that the woman was free of the stone though.

Name: Branwen

Class: Priest of Tempus, Level 5

Summary. Branwen is a priest, one who looks to the Neutral war god, Tempus. He is a God of battle, extremely violent and random in his blessings.

While not as random, Branwen has a stern, combat based idea of right and wrong: the weak should be protected, but Tempus favors the strong. Branwen has muscles on muscles, seems to be the gregarious, forthright sort, who would sooner solve a problem with her hammer than talk it out. Yet as a priest of Tempus, she will acknowledge any debt owed, or oath given.

Relationship level: Due to apparently being part of her resurrection from a stony death, you have earned 1000 Trust and 1400 Respect points.

You have reach 1000/2000 Trust, 2400/4000 Respect. If fighting or travelling with you, Branwen will treat you as a Traveling Companion.

“I take it I have you have all of you to thank for rescuing me?”

Harry shrugged. “We paid for the spell that released you, but I’m afraid you were seemingly left behind by whatever mage petrified you. A circus came along, found you, and thought you were a statue, so they tried to sell you off. We didn’t want that to happen.”

Branwen blinked at that, then looked around. “And what about all this?” she gestured to the battlefield around them. “By the icy breath of Auril, there was surely a battle here.”

“That wasn’t anything to do with you, I’m sorry to say. Instead, it was something entirely unrelated.” Harry shook his head with a slight hint of amusement.

Edwin scoffed, shaking his head. “You would've made her debt to us all the greater if you had but remained silent and let Branwen come to her own conclusion of events, oaf!”

“Right up until the point she looked around and noticed we were in the middle of a circus,” Harry quipped with an eye-roll. “At that point, I rather doubt that attempting to convince Branwen that we had to fight our way to free her from her rocky prison would have withstood the evidence of her own eyes.”

Edwin looked around, then fell silent. That was as close to admitting that someone else was right as the prickly red wizard was going to get, and Branwen guffawed, shaking her head. “Truly, you are an eclectic band to have such as him among you. I can sense the arrogance of that one from here. Worse, he is a magic-user, and they are inherently weak of body and morals.”

While Dynaheir shook her head and didn’t rise to that dig, Edwin growled. “Bah, a wizard’s power is in his mind and will woman. With it, we can make even the greatest sword swingers fall at our feet.”

“Hah, the power of Tempus fills me, wizard! Your spells are nothing to the power of sinew and muscle!” So saying she looked over at Harry. “Despite the lack of glorious battle to free me, I still do acknowledge a debt exists. Although, I would like to work off that debt quickly, if I can. After that, unless our goal at the time is righteous and just, I will have to take my leave. I was ambushed and struck from behind by one who I had been traveling with, and I must seek him out and take my vengeance upon him.”

Before Harry could say anything, Dynaheir asked, “How are you feeling? What was the date when you were petrified?”

“Tired, somewhat sore, and hungry. But beyond that, I think that the stone actually protected me. Strange that.” Branwen chuckled, shaking her head. “As for the date...” she gave a date, which Harry, having studied the Faerun calendar, knew had been several months ago.

That made Branwen scowl, and then she said something that made Harry’s eyes widen. “May Tempus strike Tranzig’s soul upon the Stone of Ages! To think I was petrified that long.”

“Tranzig?” Harry asked quickly, noting absently that another clue thing had appeared. “Tranzig was the mage who petrified you?”

“Indeed, I would not forget his name. Why?”

“Then I think we can make common cause even after our current mission is done. Still, this isn’t the best place for such a conversation.” Harry gestured for Branwen to start walking with them, nodding to the circus guards as he led the way back into the main area and out towards the town. As they walked, he and the others explained their short-term goal of figuring out what was going on with the iron in Nashkel’s mine and how they were now planning to enter the mine tomorrow.

“Ah, so that battle you had before freeing me was a tough one then?”

“You might say that,” Harry drawled, shaking his head and nodding over to Jaheira. “If not for the healer we already had on hand, we might all have died.” *And let that be a lesson, Harry. You’re getting better at looking at the map, but that doesn’t mean shite when the enemy can be invisible! Imoen and Edwin must have been spotted, and those two planned out that ambush to a T.*

He explained the ambush but then fell silent as they left the circus behind, while Minsc and Dynaheir introduced themselves to Branwen. By the time Dynaheir had explained their connection to Branwen, who had never heard of Rashemen before, they had reached the town proper, and Imoen nudged Harry in the side. “There’s something in one of the shops we might want to buy, especially now that we’ve got Branwen the giantess here.”

Branwen boomed laughter at that, patting Imoen so hard on the shoulder that she almost sent the thief stumbling to her knees. "Do not worry little lass, all are equal in the side of the eyes of the Tempus, large or small it doesn't matter when the arrows fly and the swords clash."

"I doubt you'd agree with that if you were the one in the short side," Imoen replied tartly, to another booming laugh from Branwen.

She spied the tavern at that point, the sign just sticking out from one side of the street they had just exited onto the main fair thoroughfare from. "But Hark, I see tavern! And I have a powering thirst."

Harry nodded, gesturing them all on towards the tavern. Except for Imoen. "Let's go buy this item of yours. We have money from the sale of the short sword +1s we found in the gnoll dungeon, so hopefully we'll have enough to buy whatever it is."

He turned to Khalid, and then very ostentatiously handed him a pouch containing several hundred coins. "That should be enough for another night, another room, and meals before we leave in the morning."

Khalid nodded, although his eyes were questioning as he looked over at Branwen. "A, a, are you sure you n, n, need to keep your secrets f, f, from such?" he whispered, while Branwen was loudly about what kind of meals and ales she wished to taste now that she had her freedom once again.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "We don't know her very well yet, and while she seems a trusty sort, I'm in no greater rush to share our secrets now, than I was with you and Jaheira. If she cottons on to something unusual, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But Edwin is still the main issue, and Dynaheir too for that matter. I am uncertain how she'll react to my Blood Magic, given her shamanistic ties."

Khalid nodded and the group broke up, with Imoen leading Harry to the store, where she and Edwin had been earlier that day. There, she had found a single gem, a Large Shield+1, it wasn't the same size as Harry's tower shield, but it had the same kind of spells on it. At two-thousand gold it was very expensive though. Still, Harry couldn't argue with the idea of buying it, and after a few bouts of serious haggling, where Harry leaned heavily on the shopkeeper's love for his town, the man agreed to take a promissory note built on the mayor's promise to pay Harry and his band more after the mine had been cleared.

They also bought a sling for Branwen, and stones for her and Jaheira. Harry bought another longbow for Khalid, whose own beloved weapon had died to one of the fireballs as Harry had feared. And arrows too. Still, the large shield plus one was by far the best find any of them had found that day, and Harry thanked Imoen profusely for it as they walked back to the inn.

"I know it's a good idea to always have more armor, but you're acting like it's a fantastic idea rather than just a good find," Imoen joked, twirling a bit of her bubblegum pink hair in her fingers cocking, her head as she looked at him.

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "Think about it. Tunnel fighting. What is there in tunnels?"

"...Not a lot of room to maneuver, you have to go in a single file or double file if you're lucky. And..." Imoen frowned, then nodded. "Not a lot of cover either."

"Right, and most of the time, you either have to advance in one direction or retreat." He frowned, thinking. "I'll put Branwen upfront with me, Khalid in the back with Minsc and the rest of you in the center, with you or Minsc pairing off and acting as scouts. Moreover, we might set up some ambushes using my map ability and your ability to hide. It could be interesting. But the main thing will be the fighting in the tunnels, and in that environment, shields will help a lot."

"Interesting, he says. Like the freaking Chinese curse 'interesting'," Imoen scowled, shaking her head shivering a little as her hand fell from her hair. "Have I mentioned I don't like being underground?" Harry looked at her worriedly, but she smiled at him whimsically. "No worries. It's not like I'm claustrophobic. I just don't like it."

They met up with the others in the inn's main room, finding that Branwen had basically bought one of everything on the menu and was in the process of eating her way through it. The others also had appetites, but only Minsc was eating anywhere near as much as the tall priestess.

Throughout the meal, Harry, Minsc, Imoen and Jaheira described their adventures up to this point and their motivations, although neither Harper admitted their affiliation to that group. Branwen exclaimed at certain points, asked questions here and there about the battle, and generally acted like the best audience for such stories, similar to Minsc in that manner. Branwen also had a rather booming sort of personality, Harry thought, loud, boisterous and forthright, just as his greater observation had warned him.

After their background journey from the Friendly Arm Inn to Nashkel was covered, Harry explained how he was apparently being targeted by someone due to his connection with his stepfather. At no point did he mention being a Bhaalspawn, thinking it too soon to introduce that topic. He mentioned the assassins and the note on them, saying, "That message was written by someone named Tranzig. So you could say we have a common enemy."

"Indeed, by the icy winds of my homeland! I agree that Tranzig is a villain who must be hunted down, both for justice and for your safety," Branwen shouted, slamming her hand down on the table in emphasis. "This deserves a toast I think."

“What can you tell us about Tranzig?” Harry asked quickly, though Minsc and Khalid both looked ready to agree with the woman for their own reasons.

“Hmm... not much. Tranzig was a very average man to look at him. He wore dark blue robes when I traveled with him and was most unassuming in manner.” Branwen scowled as she bit viciously on some of the meats she had ordered. “He seemed nice enough, well-educated, if with an accent. I thought him just a simple Adventurer leading a band of such south to Amn. I was heading in that way myself and signed up with them for the journey.”

She took a swig from her stein of ale, swallowing half of the stein down before going on. “Several days after we had left Beregost, they showed their true colors. They set up and ambushed a caravan heading north. Now, I am a follower of Tempus, and if twas just an ambush of an enemy group, that I would have approved of. Tempus is not fussy on the manner of battle. But to attack the innocent?”

She shook her head, spitting to one side and then draining the rest of the stein, shouting for more before looking back at Harry and the others. All of them were there bar Edwin, who was off in one corner nursing a bottle of wine and flirting with one of the younger barmaids. “Of course, I didn’t go along with it. I struck one of the rogues from behind, then rushed forwards to engage the others, but Tranzig cast a spell on me ere I could reach the battle. Curse his black hide to the depths of the ocean!”

“But you know what he looks like and sounds like?” Harry questioned, and when Branwen nodded, he went on, “and you met him in Beregost?” Branwen signaled an affirmative once more, and Harry smiled thinly. “In that case, I think we know where we’ll be going after we’re done in the mines. Before that, tell me more about yourself. Your fighting style and spells.”

Harry, Jaheira, Imoen and Khalid spent the rest of the afternoon and evening getting to know their newest party member, with Dynaheir soon retiring to her room with Minsc. Branwen was only around four years older than Harry was in this world and had been a priestess of Tempus for three years. She told him a bit about her religion and growing up, hinting that her decision to be a priest had not met with approval in her home of Seawolf.

The fact she held no animosity to her clan, along with the adventures she shared was enough for Harry to get a feel for Branwen’s personality beyond what his greater observation told him. She was also a hammer wielder who preferred to use offensive-style spells to supplement her martial abilities. Still, Branwen was willing to work with Harry and the rest of the party. However, she wasn't willing to follow Harry's suggestions completely on what spells to use, unlike Jaheira at this point. That was fine, so long as she listened to some requests.

When Harry presented the large shield plus one to the group, then talked about his plans for entering the dungeon, which had almost certainly replaced the mines at this point, Branwen and Khalid debated for a long while until Khalid handed the new shield over to

Branwen as Harry had hoped. "H, h, Harry's right," he said firmly. "H, h, having me at the back is a good idea, b, b, because I'm very good with my l, l longbow. Y, y, you said you're not as good with slings or any other ranged weapon."

"Indeed not," Branwen laughed, even as they discussed something which was a combat weakness. "Tempus demands that we who look to him for our power face our enemies head-on so that we can stare into their eyes as we send them to the next world."

She thanked Harry and Khalid equally for the large shield +1, and for the extra hammer Harry had also bought her, laughing out that "You can never have too many of them!" as she placed it in her Item Box. Like the others who were not part of Harry's party, she couldn't really interact with her Item Box all that well, but she had confessed to the fact that it was currently empty of everything but for the new hammer and gold, so that was all right. Her original hammer and shield were completely ordinary and nonmagical. Indeed, the hammer she had been using was one she'd had to buy when the shaft of her first one had shattered.

Eventually, the meal drew to a close, and Branwen joined Dynaheir and Minsc up in their new rooms. "So what do you think?" Harry asked, looking over at Jaheira. Khalid had kept up with Branwen's drinking throughout and now was in the boisterous stage of his drunkenness, much to Jaheira's well-trodden annoyance.

"I think that your, what do you call it, Potter luck? Certainly worked for us here," Jaheira answered dryly. "Having another healer to aid our efforts will be an amazing benefit to our combat abilities. And I think she meshes well with the group." The blonde half-elven woman glanced over at Edwin. "That one is still the weak link."

"In terms of trust and compatibility with the rest of us and in terms of attitude, yes," Harry sighed. "But once more, he's too good a magic-user for me to want to simply tell Edwin to go away. And frankly, he knows too much already. I'm almost certain that he's got an idea about Imoen and my abilities."

"Do you think you could do whatever you did to Garrick again?" Jaheira asked, looking over at Imoen.

Imoen paused for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe. But Edwin is a lot smarter than Garrick, and I doubt my feminine wiles will work on him to the extent it did with Garrick. And I don't have any idea what his having a higher Willpower or whatever, if he does, would do to my attempt. But we do have another solution if possible. Magical Oaths."

"Explain," Harry practically ordered.

Imoen explained about the magical oaths that she had 'read about' in Candlekeep: the idea of one magic user, say a priest, helping to bind someone to an oath.

“That's a thought,” Jaheira slowly nodded, although she had rarely heard of the same sort of thing, and it was rarer still to tie the words of two people together. Instead, something similar would occur when someone swore to follow a deity's commands, such as a paladin, priest or even an agent chosen specifically by a god for some equally specific task. “It would have to be very specific and cover everything we wish to keep secret. But it's an idea. Still, it is one that we would need to his consent to do, and at present, I don't see that.”

“So we keep going as we have,” Harry said with a shrug. “Trying to keep our abilities secret, from him, Dynaheir, and now Branwen as well. If it comes out, it comes out, but I'm in no hurry to have that conversation again.”

Jaheira chuckled at that. The three of them continued to talk throughout the evening, with Jaheira trying to control her husband's drinking habits as it came out once more. The idea that he no longer had to worry about hangovers had seemingly broken some measure of Khalid's self-control. Imoen just thought Khalid was hilarious when he was drunk, but she wasn't married to him. Nor was Harry, but he figured that trying to keep the peace between the married couple would help the whole party. So with Harry helping, Jaheira kept him to four bottles of wine after Branwen retired and easily poured him into bed.

The next morning the group was up early, and Harry was happy to see that the last sign of malnutrition had left Dynaheir's face after another day of good meals and sleep, despite her new bruises. Which had also healed over the night. The dull orange of malnutrition had disappeared from her status, leaving her hale and hearty. Similarly, Branwen's stiffness and sore muscles had also faded in the night, and she greeted the dawn with a loud prayer to Tempus. “Let this day's dawning see glorious battle, let my hammer be wetted with the blood of my enemies, and let Tempus decide the victor!”

Jaheira, looking like death warmed over, nearly attacked the other woman before her husband could intercede. She was really not a morning person, especially when woken up by loud noises. Especially after a night of trying to get her husband to take pity on his liver.

Despite that moment of inter-party homicide, they were soon out of the town and heading towards the mine. But before the group could get out of town, they were accosted once more by the Noober.

“Hey, there you are! The adventurers. That wasn't a nice thing you did to me! I asked you if you are going to throw stones at me. You didn't have to smack me upside the head. Wow, you got another girl in your party, although I don't think she's as pretty as the Shorty.”

Imoen's eyes flared in anger at that quip. Her height, along with her bust, was something Imoen dearly missed about being a Metamorph. On the other hand, Branwen simply chuckled wanly, staring at the youth in something approaching consternation. “Er, does this youth have something wrong with his head? And how is it he is continuing to speak without needing to stop for breath.”

Harry however didn't reply other than to slap a hand over his eyes. Instead he addressed Edwin. "Edwin, something nonlethal but painful please."

Edwin smirked. "And here I was thinking that you had forgotten your offer to me. I even have the right spell."

Between two seconds he had stepped forward. His hands flashed, and then, he touched the youth, and Harry saw the notification:

Edwin has used Grasping Shock on Noober.

This is a nonlethal spell, which incapacitates and electrocutes the individual so touched to a given degree.

Seriously, just kill it already. What is with all these nonlethal measures, huh?

After explaining about Noober to Branwen, the party left the still-twitching annoyance there and moved southward along Nashkel's main street, then broke off along a well-trodden and stamped down street that led out of Nashkel to the east. About an hour and a half's travel away from the town was the mine itself, the image of which Imoen whispered reminded Imoen of strip mines she'd seen in the news occasionally back in their own world."

Harry looked at her quizzically at that. "Is that a bad thing?"

"For the surrounding territory, yeah. But I doubt this world needs to worry about the local ecology or carbon dioxide or anything like that," Imoen chortled, shaking her head.

At the top of the ramp they were met by two more soldiers, but with the Mayor's letter of introduction, the twosome led them through the outer palisade and down into the mine itself. Inside it looked almost like a crater, but the walls were too uniform, the road leading down obviously a manmade thing. They wound down to the bottom segment of the spiral, which had an entrance leading deeper into the ground at a slightly steeper angle. To one side of this was a series of long log houses and a shack directly next to the mine's current entrance, outside of which stood a man, who was staring into the depths of the mine as if he was trying to pull information from the darkness within by will alone.

Harry nodded to the man, noticing absently that the man was marked by a blue dot on his map. There he saw the man's name, Emerson. The blue meant that the man was, if not an ally or fellow Adventurer, an innocent, much like the townspeople.

Before he could speak, the man did, gruff and annoyed. "What the hell? I thought we had guards at the entrance to keep the riffraff out. Unless you're looking to hire on as miners for a bit of quick cash. In which case, I could use the two strongmen. The rest of you look too damn scrawny to do a day's work."

“Excuse me!?” Dynaheir said angrily, while the other more volatile lady, Jaheira, simply shook her head with a wry smile. It was evident to her the man was coming to the end of his patience and temper, and as an expert on such, she would not hold it against him.

Edwin merely snorted and shook his head. “Obviously, you do not know quality over quantity. Nonetheless, and as much as it pains me to personally say this, we are on a mission of mercy, to figure out what is wrong with your mine, and solve it if we can.”

“He’s right,” Harry said. “We talked to the Mayor. We have his signature on the contract between us, here.”

With that, Harry handed the paper over, and the man read through it slowly, his lips moving every word. Finally, he nodded. “It looks like everything’s in order. I’ll warn you now: the deeper you go, the more dangerous it is. I don’t know what is down there, but either it’s got a thirst for blood or a thirst for killing, I can’t tell which.”

With a final shake of his hand, the man turned away, gesturing them towards the mine’s entrance with one hand. “That’s it over there. Get to it. Adventurers assemble, or whatever. And when your bodies are found, we might be willing to give you a nice burial. Don’t hold your breath, though.”

The group made their way to the front of the dungeon as Harry stared up at the information.

Nashkel Mines Dungeon, Level 2

Hidden within these mines is a portion of the conspiracy that has brought the Sword Coast to the brink of war. Enter, and find the secrets within.

These mines consist of four levels, each with their own dangers, and each larger than the last. The first level is mostly safe, but going beyond that will bring you into direct contact with the creatures within

Dungeon clearing tasks:

1. Defeat the Dungeon Boss.

Note: Defeating the Dungeon Boss may drop magical items and advanced loot, but certainly will drop a clue to the greater conspiracy attempting to bring Amn and Baldur’s Gate to war.

2. Destroy the Heart Stones (X4) within.

Although you still do not know what manner of creature has infested the mines, you can assume that they are not large creatures. Gnolls, ogrillions, and other such need not apply. You can also tell there is only one spawn point on the first floor, two on the second and third, and three on the fourth.

Rewards may vary for the destruction of the Heart stones.

Optional:

1. Discover whatever is being added to the iron to make it brittle!

This task will again tie into your greater mission. It will require examining your surroundings and bringing back samples of whatever you find within to the mayor of Nashkel, the foreman, and an alchemist.

2. Find and free any surviving miners trapped on the lower levels.

You learned that along with the slaves, a few free miners have disappeared from the mines. If they are still alive, it is your duty as a Paladin to free them.

3. Seal any other mine entrances you find. The creatures who have taken over the dungeon must have entered the mines from some other entrance, or perhaps more than one. Seal them all so that when you leave, the mines will be safe to work again.

Rewards:

+5,000 minimum experience for every party member. For every additional goal achieved, you will receive 1,400 experience. Travelling Companions and other allies will receive X 2 experience for each kill.

Harry looked around at his party members, who were also studying information. In particular, Khalid was reading it over very thoughtfully, then shifted his attention down to his foot, as if his bootlaces had come undone. He pulled out a small stone from within and tossed it aside, as Edwin passed, shaking his head in annoyance, before falling behind the others whispering to Harry from behind. "T, t, that was quite helpful. A, a, although, I do not t, t, think that it is going to make w, w, what we find within a, a, any easier to deal with."

"You and me both," Harry answered at a similar volume before hefting his tower shield and readying his sword, a regular longsword now, rather than the magical one he had used in the ambush the day before. He nodded to Branwen, who nodded back firmly, her own Warhammer resting on her shoulder, as she grinned at him. "Let's do this."

"For Tempus! Into the fires of battle, onto the anvil of war!" Branwen shouted as she and Harry led the group into the dungeon.

End Chapter