

This has been edited by me, *Justlovereadin'*, *Michael*, *Morde24*, and several others over time. I have also evolved my use of styles, fonts and colors overtime.

Bhaalson Remodel Chapter 1: Magic Goes Blort, or, Idle Hands Do The Devil's Work

There were only so many times a person could stare at a ceiling without going utterly barmy, Harry reflected, and he felt that he had finally reached that point. *Having gotten my own room is nice, but I wish they'd let me in my old cupboard now. At least the spiders in there were always weaving different webs and other such things for me to look at.*

The Dursleys had given him Dudley's second room, though honestly the reasons for it escaped Harry. On the one hand they told Harry it was because they felt he was getting too large for his cupboard. On the other hand, he knew, because he'd overheard them, say it was because they were afraid of what other magicals might do if they discovered they were mistreating him.

But if they were really trying to convince people they treated me good, then why the heck do they think they could get away with locking me in here!? I mean, come on, they even installed a cat flap! Harry groused, looking over at the item, before his lips quirked into a wry smile. On the other hand, watching Fatso cut away at the door and then add that lock was actually kind of funny. All that flesh wobbling and the way his face turned so purple with the effort. Puce I think that color's called?

Sighing Harry shook his head and went back to contemplate the rest of the room. *Merlin, Morgana and Maeve but I am BORED!!!!*

When he had been forced to return to the Dursleys after his first year at Hogwarts, Harry had gone through a period where he had blamed himself for what had happened to Quirell when he was possessed by Voldemort and had subsequently been turned to ash by Harry's touch thanks to the magical protections of his mother. But eventually his reading of comics that Dudley had tossed into this room, his second room, had helped him get over it.

Thinking about it, Harry did not really want to be a Batman, bloody amazing belt and super martial arts aside, who always tried to take in Joker despite whatever murder he'd just committed. Quirell had been trying to kill him, and Harry was no hero, willing to take that and just try to capture him in return whatever it cost him. No, while Harry

regretted it, he wasn't going to beat himself up over having finished Quirell off. He was only sad that Voldemort, his real arch-nemesis hadn't been killed either.

That probably was not a very health way to think of it, but alone and, for the most part, locked within this room for more than a month now, it was the best Harry could do. He had reread every comic in here several times, then gone on to read the old tabletop game books from when Dudley had gone through a phase of thinking the little models were cool. Warhammer was bizarre to put it mildly, though Dudley had always liked the Space marines and Orcs. *Heh, for obvious reasons on that last one, why paint him green and let him grow a bit more he'd make perfect gobber.*

On the other hand, Magic the Gathering was actually kind of funny to read after his time in the magical world. *Although, how Dudley had been able to even have a Gathering book for a day without his parents going crazy is still a mystery.* Finding his mind going down the same old rutted road, Harry threw his Transfiguration textbook to the side, scowling angrily. Harry had gotten so bored he'd read all his textbooks again, back to front, and while educational, it was not something anyone but a Ravenclaw or Hermione could call fun.

"Right, that's it Hedwig, time for desperate measures!" he said to his friend, who perched nearby. She precked back at him, before going back to ruffling her feathers. The snowy owl could get out of the one window the room had easily enough, but Harry couldn't fit out of it himself thanks to a few bars barring his path while letting enough room for Hedwig to pass. That had actually been a concession Harry had convinced Vernon of. After all, Hedwig was a gift from Hagrid, and the half-giant might become angry enough to come back to discuss things with them if they didn't let Hedwig out to hunt for enough food to live on.

Of course, the bars they had left were enough to keep Harry inside. *I don't know what's worse, my only being able to leave this blasted room for chores, or none of my friends trying to contact me.* "Are you certain you can't get a message to them Hedwig? Ron and Hermione I mean. Although, you'd think that Hermione would try muggle mail after a month of us not hearing from one another. What if somethings wrong?"

"PREK," Hedwig precked back at him, her tone emphatic before she twisted and looked away.

Harry had always been able to tell what Hedwig was trying to communicate at moments like this, and that didn't fail him now. He reached forward, running a finger through her feathers. "I know girl, you can't find them, but it's just weird you know I wish I could figure out if the problem is on their end, or on ours with the wards Headmaster

Dumbledore said was supposed to protect me from being found by Voldemort or his followers.”

Harry had questioned Dumbledore on that point, having asked about the possibility of living at Hogwarts year round, or even moving in with one of his friends. He hadn't broached the subject with them, but he'd hoped that one of them might take him in, if he was willing to pay rent or something similar. But the headmaster had told him it was impossible. He had to go back to the Dursleys for his own safety. *Although I note the old man with the questionable taste in clothing didn't say anything about my sanity or level of living.*

Hedwig nipped at his fingers, making her opinion about the matter plain, then flicking her nose towards the piles of junk in the far corner. Perhaps, her movements implied, Harry could find something in there to alleviate his life-threatening level of boredom.

“Well, it's a possibility I suppose.” With that bit of encouragement, Harry began to work his way through the mounds of junk. The books and graphic novels had, by comparison been relatively well-treated, placed in neat piles by the door. But the rest of the refuse of years of Dudley breaking toys and being given new ones had been pushed to one side of the room to let room for Harry's own books, not his wand or anything magic-looking, all of that remained in his confiscated trunk, and a tiny cot and blanket pressed into the far wall.

Now with his owl's gentle remonstrance, Harry looked at that pile of junk not as actual junk, but as a target to alleviate his boredom. With that in mind, he began to sort through it, creating numerous smaller piles. Most of what he found was broken and useless, board games missing their pieces, dolls missing limbs, Legos of all shapes and sizes all mixed into a giant pile in the far back, figures that had broken off heads or some other body part, stuffed animals without much stuffing, a bike of all things missing a tire and chain. *Why in the world did Vernon and Petunia try to give Dudley a bike!? He's more likely to try and eat it than ride it!*

But the best, or most surprising find was a nearly brand new computer. “What the... why do the Dursleys have one of those?” Harry didn't know much about computers, but he knew they could be used to play games and other things, maybe even write. He'd never interact with one before this, the computer he'd gone to school to before Hogwarts had restricted access to its four computers, and they had been more to browse through the library than anything else.

He also found a few computer game discs and looked at the cover avidly. "Baldur's Gate?" reading the description Harry became excited. This sounded like a lot of fun. "Now if I could get the computer to work..."

He found and hooked up the power cord, then, after some exploration, found the way to connect the small, bulky monitor to the equally clunky looking computer. The computer had a large dent in the side, and the cord barely fit into its little socket, but putting his ear to the side Harry could make out a faint hum, so he supposed that meant the thing was getting power. "Now let's see..."

Pressing the power button, Harry listened intently but the hum didn't get any louder and there didn't seem to be any noises or anything else to say the computer was on. "Bugger."

Harry thought about taking the thing apart to look inside, but he discarded that thought quickly. *After all, how the heck would I know what was broken and what not? I could spot anything loose, but that's not the same thing as knowing where it would then go. I'd be playing it by ear, and while I guess I'm good at that, what if I make it worse?*

Then he remembered the first time he and Hermione had met on the Hogwarts and the spell she had used to repair his glasses. "Oculus Reparo, wasn't it? If that's the spell to repair glasses, then maybe if I do the same movements, if I can remember them, and remove the first word, it'll work on anything?"

I know we aren't really allowed to fo spells over the summer, but I think that's just because of the Statute of Secrets. So if I do it here, with no witnesses... Harry shook his head then. "Ah, but wait, I'm missing a very important item here, my bloody wand!"

With something to concentrate on now, Harry was feeling a lot more energetic than he had been. He did try to take the computer apart to look inside, using a piece of another toy as a makeshift screwdriver. But as he had thought, he couldn't actually figure out what all he was looking at once inside the thing. Still, at least the reason the monitor wasn't working was obvious, the screen had been cracked, presumably by Dudley in his temper tantrum, just like the damage to the actual computer.

The next day, while Petunia was spying out her window on a neighbor who was apparently talking to the milkman too long (Harry had no idea what Petunia was imagining and most desperately did not want to) he snuck back into the house from the garden where he had been pulling weeds and stole the key to the cupboard, and then took his wand from his trunk. Instead of putting it in his pants or in his room, though, he carefully

replaced it with a twig from the garden of similar size and then hid his wand behind the sink in the bathroom.

That night, when he was allowed to wash up after a full day out in the garden and making dinner for the Dursleys, he snuck it into his dirty clothing. As Harry feared, Vernon had, indeed checked on both the cupboard and his room when he came back, but didn't find anything amiss. *I'm going to have to watch out for that.*

With his wand in hand however, Harry was hopeful that soon he'd have something to wile away the boredom with. That night, when the noises of the Dursleys snoring reverberated in its chorus throughout the house, Harry started to experiment. Waving the wand over the monitor, figuring that was the least complicated part, Harry intoned, "Reparo!"

Nothing happened, no flash of magic no nothing. Still keeping his voice low Harry tried another few moves with the wand, racking his brain to try and remember the movements he'd seen Hermione use. Still nothing happened, and he began to get a little angry, his hope for something, anything to do in his imprisonment after having his hope rise plummeting. Concentrating on the monitor, on the crack and what the monitor should look like he began to try to sort of thrust with his magic, forcing it out of the wand as he tried to almost impress the image into the reality. "Reparo!" he intoned, hissing the word almost.

This time it worked, and the monitor began to flash almost as he watched, the long crack healing itself in an instant. "Yes!" Harry pumped his arm in the air, whisper-shouting the word. Then, looking around fearfully he waited a few minutes to make certain he'd not been heard. Then he stared first at the monitor, then his wand in sudden, wild surmise. "There is no way that was the right movement Hedwig, but the spell still worked. If it's not the movement, then how much magic is based upon the movement, the word, or the image!?"

Quickly he turned away and wrote those thoughts down, pausing only briefly. "Huh, this kind of makes me feel like Hermione after a particularly juicy piece of knowledge. Well whatever, it might be she's got a point about, gah, studying more." He paused at that thought, remembering what little he'd been told about his mother by his teachers, and frowned. "That... Mum was a good student. Maybe I really should try better. After all, there's no way the Dursleys would be able to compare my tests to Dudley's and punish me for proving better than them now."

With a newfound conviction, Harry turned back to the task at hand, gesturing again at the open side of the computer and this time trying at first to not use the verbal

spell. It didn't take, but he could feel something at the same time, like his magic was trying, but couldn't quite work without the spoken word. "Huh, so, is this something I can practice with, get better at?"

With that in mind Harry moved over to the broken junk pile and took out a few of the more intact pieces, and began to practice. Eventually he did make a silent Raparo spell work on a Dudley's Action Man action figure.

Once he was certain he had the spell working well enough, Harry turned back to the computer. Here though his magic's ability to repair the damage was impeded by Harry's not knowing exactly what it should look like. The spell repaired some things, a crack in one of the odd circuit things, made one other broken little red thing match another in size, and so forth. But when Harry tried again to turn the computer on, it still didn't work: there was obviously something still wrong with it.

"Still that's okay Hedwig," Harry said to his avian friend. "Since even that failure's told me something. It's the image that matters with a spell like this. The word is harder to do away with than the wand movement, but you can do it!" Writing that down too, he smiled. "Well, computer or not, I've got something else to concentrate on now."

From there, Harry practiced for about an hour, trying to use a few spells he had taken from his books. The ones he was most familiar with, *Immobolous* and *Stupefy*, a spell he'd taken to practicing every day at Hogwarts after his meeting with Quirell started to work after about another hour of study. This was big, this was so big it wasn't even funny! *If Hermione and I are still friends after this summer and she learns about all I've found out she's going to flip!*

However in his excitement Harry had forgotten one thing: the fact students weren't supposed to be doing magic over the summer. It was a somewhat ridiculous rule, but it was in place, and, despite Harry figuring that no one would care if he did magic while alone in a locked room at night, he was being monitored all the same.

As Harry was ready to close his notebook for the day and turn in, there came a rapping noise on the window. Quickly racing over so as to not let any of the Dursleys hear, Harry found an unfamiliar owl waiting outside on the windowsill. Hedwig too locked over, and as Harry opened the window quietly, she precked irritably at the other owl, her large eyes locked on the other owl as if it had offended her.

The owl, a large tawny owl, looked away after a second and shifted uncomfortably, but stayed put enough for Harry to remove the note on it. "Um, as you can see, if I am

supposed to reply Hedwig will take the message. Erm, thanks, I suppose. Am I supposed to pay..."

That was as far as Harry got before Hedwig precked harshly and flared her wings. The other owl instantly took off, not a second before Hedwig flew forward to land on the windowsill herself, her claws outstretched.

Chuckling at his friend's territorial nature, Harry looked down at the large, gold and black envelope, marked with the name, and the phrase Department of Magical Law Enforcement. *Hmmm, wonder what this is about?*

Opening it, Harry read the contents, his brows furrowing in anger. *'Dear Sir, we have detected the use of magic at your location. As this location is not in the magical world you are being issued a citation. Be warned that continued illegal use of magic will result in your wand being snapped and time in Azkaban. Wishing you a good day Mafilda Marchbanks, director Misuse of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.'*

Harry slowly put the missive down, then bit his lip until it nearly bled as he stopped himself from cursing with the reminder that he was in enemy territory so to speak, and that there was no way he would let Vernon find him using his wand on him. After a few minutes of simply getting control of himself, Harry moved over to the window and looked past Hedwig, scowling. *Am I being watched somehow?*

But after a few minutes, Harry pulled back, looking around. *Fine, so I'm not being watched by a person, but a magical method of being watched.* At that point, Harry remembered the letters to him from last year. *Ughhh I should have remembered that. So magic can tell someone, both at Hogwarts and in this DMLE. Think I remember Hagrid mentioning them, and the Ministry, called them all useless I think...*

For a moment the worry about being observed was all he could think of, but then a thought occurred to him. *But, wait, if even the teachers at Hogwarts know I was living under stairs, they must have some idea about what my life is like, and the headmaster forced me back here. And it's obvious the DMLE doesn't care about my life, just so long as I don't use magic. A dark smirk came to his eyes at that idea, and he tossed the missive into the pile of junk along the far wall. "Well in that case, I think I'm going to start my teenage rebellion a few years early. And if I can't get away entirely, that computer, and the games I could play, become even more important. Still how to go about fixing it, if I can't use magic here?"*

That took him a few days to think a solution to, by the end of which Harry Potter was ready to go absolutely spare for boredom. His days were spent doing chores, then

being bunged up back into his room with nothing new to do now that he couldn't practice magic and had no new books or comics to see.

Finally however, he thought up a solution of sorts. After a morning of weeding and other garden work, he approached Petunia while she was watching some kind of TV show about women in London. "Aunt Petunia, um, can I speak to you for a second?" She glared up at him but since it was a commercial at the moment he hurried on. "It um, well, it occurred to me that, um, in the interest of keeping my sort from coming around, or sending mail to me, like they did last year, I should, um, go downtown and look for my kind's equivalent of a mail box."

Petunia sneered. "Hah! Speaking of mail, I note after saying you had made friends this past year at that freak school of yours that none of your so-called friends have deigned to try and contact you. What's the matter Potter," she made his last name a curse, "Your freakish friends not so friendly?"

"I, I think you might be right about that Aunt Petunia, but that doesn't mean my own concerns about mail coming in by owl is wrong. Surely you don't want the neighbors to notice that kind of thing?" He asked. Giving Petunia a minor win like that was best way with her. She would smile and go away happy with that victory. In many ways she was the easiest of the three Dursleys to deal with. Dudley would push and torment making fun of Harry at the drop of a hat while the older fat walrus would never listen he'd just smack Harry upside the head.

"Ugh, fine!" Petunia groused. "You won't need to be driven anywhere would you? You'd have to pay for the gasoline used if so, prices are outrageous these days I swear!"

Harry bit back a retort at that along the lines of *Well if you didn't waste so much on toys Dudders broke within a week maybe you'd not have to worry about that kind of thing.* Instead he just shook his head. "No ma'am, I can make my way down well enough, I just wanted your permission to leave, and money for the bus, that should be cheaper than the gas right?" *And for you to not wonder where I am.*

The idea of using this excuse to get on the Dursleys good side had crossed his mind at one point, but he had rejected it. When it came to Harry, the Dursleys didn't have a good side.

"Fine, but I'll expect you to do all your chores for the day, and get back here in time to start dinner! I won't have you shirking your chores, not when we're good enough to put a roof over your head," Petunia said, pointing out the backdoor. "Now get back to work!"

It was another few days of mindless, mind-numbing drudgery before Harry had finished enough work in the garden and the rest of the house to get an afternoon off. He walked down the street then took a public bus into London, where he walked around for a time until he found the Leaky Cauldron, the eyes of the people around him skirting over it automatically. Entering quickly he moved through the thankfully busy bar to the back alley, a hat pulled down to hide his scar.

With the knowledge that he was being watched, Harry figured that he couldn't just entirely escape the Dursleys as he would like, nor could he keep using his magic there. He didn't think they'd snap his wand like Hopkirk or whatever the name had been warned, but he also wasn't willing to risk it. So the idea of repairing the computer and using the games within as an escape was really the only thing that interested him. This visit to Diagon Alley was to discover two things: one, if kids could get away with using magic in the magical world, and books, as many books on magical theory and repair charms as he could find.

With his hat on, Harry thankfully was able to move through the alley without being mobbed like he had that first time, thankfully. He first went to Gringotts, getting some gold from the goblins, near to the same amount he remembered having used to buy his books before school with Hagrid. From there, he went to the book store, but Harry found it wasn't very helpful on repair charm.

In the bookstore Harry nearly had a heart attack, leaping back out of the way of a tall, dumpy-looking redhead, whose face reminded him far too much of the trio of Weasley boys, Ron, Fred and George. "Oh, sorry youngster, I say, that cap! Are you a muggle-born!?" the man said, sounding almost effusive now. "I don't suppose you'd be able to explain what ekeltricity is, would you?"

"Erm, yes sir, I am, and sorry, no, we don't start learning about electricity for another year." Harry said, making certain quickly that the hat he had taken from the Dursleys was in place. "Um, I'm just looking for, um books on magical theory, and well, maybe repair? Er, one of my accidental magic moments broke me mum's favorite vases."

"Ah, well I'm afraid that is something the teacher who introduced the magical world should have seen too. Still, I suppose that it must have been a busy day for her or him. Unless, oh dear, you didn't get Professor Snape did you?" Mr. Weasley asked solicitously.

"Erm, I got short, kind of bouncy elderly guy with a face like, um well like those goblins really." Harry said, now truly out of his depth and just coming up with stuff on the

fly, finding it far easier than it should have been really. “He only was there for a few minutes though, then me parents had to go to work, and he left.”

The man nodded. “Ah yes, these days they give muggleborns a single day near the end of August together, to meet and greet and walk the Alley together. I would wager he had a number of other muggleborns to get to. Pity, with your question about magical theory books you’d be a shoe in for Ravenclaw. Still, I can help you find the books at least. My names Mr. Weasley, I’ve got three boys going to Hogwarts already, and a young girl, the only one in the family, going this year. She’ll be your classmate then.”

“That sounds great, I’m an only kid meself,” Harry said, emphasizing a bit of what he’d heard Vernon call lower-caste accent. Lying about having parents was kind of painful, but this was still a way forward to get what he wanted here, and he’d do it. “I’m Connor, Connor Rooney. Pleased ta meetcha.”

Mr. Weasley shook his head with a grin then showed him where the books on magical theory was, then warned him jokingly, “Now, I don’t suppose you have a wand yet?” When Harry nee Connor shook his head, Mr. Weasley nodded. “Well good, once you get one, don’t try to experiment. The Obliviators will be no kinder to your family than they would be otherwise, remember that.” Mr. Weasley jolted like he’d just been kicked, and pulled out a watch, a miniature clock complete with a cuckoo poking out. “Good lord, is that the time, well, I have to go now Connor, have a good day and all that. Hope you and my Ginny get along if you’re not in Ravenclaw but end up in Gryffindor.”

With that he rushed out the bookstore, leaving Harry behind, breathing a sigh of relief. He bought his books, then exited, and then headed to an ice cream shop he’d seen before. As he sat there, Harry patted himself on the back for the close shave he’d had with Mr. Weasley, as well as thanking Ron for not having described him well enough to the man to make him recognize him.

But after he got over that, and the taste of cherry chocolate and pistachio ice cream, Harry frowned. *The books are okay, they might help me eventually, but not right away, and not to help repair that computer. Hmm... what to do?*

As he looked around the alley he saw a few kids walk by, older students from Hogwarts that might have been able to recognize him, and he ducked down pulling his cap down over his eyes. But he was still watching the quartet as they used magic to carry a large series of boxes and bags behind them. *Huh, then is it just the younger years who can’t use magic? We’re told it’s the Statute, but then my using magic alone, in my room and where no one could see me, should have passed muster. It didn’t, all it cared about*

was... was that I was in a nonmagical location maybe? If so, I bet I could get away with using spells here!

Then the only thing left to think about is how to get the computer here, and then how to repair it... hey, what's that over there? Harry frowned as he saw several people going down another small alleyway that he hadn't noticed before. Finishing his ice cream, he hurried in that direction, looking down the new alleyway before looking up at the sign. *Knockturn? I, I thought that there was only the one...* Harry nearly smacked his forehead, and would have if not for remembering the hat blocking his scar from being seen. *Damn it, how stupid was I to think that!?* *How big is the magical world anyway?*

Still... He looked down at the alley, comparing its small, very dirty and dank looking appearance to Diagon, and then backed away. *Not going there, not yet. That place looks like those dank alleyways shown in those murder mysteries Vernon likes to make fun of. Best to not go there unless I have to, and with some preparation if I do.*

Unfortunately for Harry, it turned out that he did have to. The books Mr. Weasley had pointed him to were kind of interesting, but they didn't really help Harry figure out how to either use magic without being spotted back in the land of the Fat meanies and their horse-like companion, or how to repair the computer. So Harry once more went back to the Alley.

Petunia didn't care. His work on the garden was done, and the local wives had begun to make appreciative coos about it, which was all she cared about. He had told her that he he'd been forced to make an appointment at the bank, which could handle the issue of mail directed to him, which she bought hook line and sinker, though why the heck a bank would deal with mail Harry didn't know. It was another bit of bull-shite but it worked.

Now with a new destination in mind, Harry dressed as rattily as he figured he could get away with in public, more Dudley castoffs and a hat made even dirtier than it had been before, the better to blend in with the rest of this new alleyway. *Although, given cleaning charms why the heck is Knockturn so dirty? Personal preference, like Ron maybe?*

Harry made his way down this seedy-by-preference alleyway keeping to the main street, looking from side to side for another bookstore or a knickknack store, anything that might be able to give him some idea as to how to either do magic without being traced or repair his computer, preferably both. That, and just generally finding out more about the wizarding world away from Hogwarts. *And getting me away from the Durlseys, that's a major bonus right there,* Harry reflected almost cheerfully despite the dangerous environs

around him. Considering that it was bright daylight and only around two in the afternoon he figured that no one was going to try to abduct a kdi who looked like he fit right in here.

Unfortunately, once more, Harry was proven wrong. He had gone about a block down the alleyway when he was grabbed from one side and dragged between buildings to his left side. "Mm, what do we have here dearie, some nice young tender meat for old Mab, hAAAK!"

Harry might not have his wand, but he had a homemade cosh made of several dozen pebbles in a large sock. It now whirled around in his hand in a desperate attack, cracking the old crone-like being who had attempted to accost him in the face and she stumbled back. Another smack to the side of the head sent her reeling and a third laid her out.

Gasping in air, Harry quickly looked around, but other than some wry smirks and grins in his direction from a few truly dirty-looking wizards, the action hadn't seemingly drawn any negative attention his way. *Okay, so, rule number one when dealing with an enemy, when you put 'em down, put 'em down good and hard! Bloody hell, I'm learning all sorts of stuff these days.*

Feeling a bit full of himself despite his still pounding heart, Harry looked down the street and spotted a store sign that said Borgin and Burkes books and antiquities, which might be just the thing he was looking for. He entered quickly, not noticing that his hat had been shifted just a bit during the tussle.

Inside the shop was incredibly filled with a disorganized clutter of various odd looking furniture, knickknacks, and rows of old looking, dark-leather embossed books lining both walls. The shelves in the aisles were overflowing, but despite that, Harry couldn't spot a single duplicate item anywhere. At the far end of the store was a long table laid out with further odd looking magical devices, including a large glowing globe, a hand that looked carved from obsidian, and several long staffs made of various types of material.

There was an old man with wide shoulders and a grim twist to his mouth standing there. "What's a brat like you doing in here?" He barked, glaring at Harry, his eyes narrowing as he took in Harry's appearance. "Or did you just come in here before your father or mother arrived? Ya don't look like any pureblood I've ever seen..."

"That mighta be because you haven't been overseas often," Harry improvised once more, trying to sound like he had heard Blaise Zabini speak. "I'ma from Italy, and my

parents decided I should go to Hogwarts.” Putting his newfound gift of gab to good use, he moved further into the store, looking around conspiratorially.

As he did so however, he didn’t notice the man’s eyes flying wide as he noticed Harry’s scar. A nearly gleeful look came into the man’s eyes, but he banished it as Harry looked back at him.

“I’m looking for ways to enchant muggle items,” Harry whispered, then placed a large bag of gold on the table in front of the man. “I’m willing to pay.”

“Ahh, well then, we have a lot of things that could be enchanted muggle items, though of course that’s illegal here in Britain,” the old man said, one hand moving down below the table. Then he seemed to pause, considering. “How much are you willing to pay brat?”

“Up to a hundred galleons,” Harry replied promptly. It wasn’t as if the money was worth much to him, he had a pile taller than he was of the things, and a hundred was all he’d been able to stuff into what the goblins had called ‘a slightly expanded pouch’ but which he just thought of as a limited bag of holding. “And I’m more interested in doing the enchantment myself.”

“Hah, well if you have a house warded against the trace that’s all to the good then, and for a hundred galleons, I figure I can do ya something proper.” The man said, changing his tone somewhat.

The reasons for this was not what Harry thought. *Damn it, this might well be the Potter brat, but if so, I can’t just kill him here, no matter how much money that might gain me from Malfoy and others like him. Not with the Aurors already investigating me thanks to that bit of fencing I’ve been doing this past year. No, best to be subtle about this. Still, who would have thought, Dumbledore’s golden Boy Who Lived would be interested in enchanting muggle objects. And that interest makes him all the easier to trap.*

“Now, if the object you’re interested in has electricity running through it...” He waited until Harry nodded, looking a little surprised that Borgin had said the word correctly. “Well, that will mess the flow of magic through the object up. But you **can** brute force it, and maybe power it through magic instead of that muggle junk. Wait right there. I’ll be back in a moment.”

As the man left, Harry saw his reflection in the crystal and hissed, pulling his hat down over his scar again. *Crud, I hope he didn’t notice it!* With that seen to, Harry started to look at some of the books set on a small stand nearby.

A moment later, Borgin came back with two items. One was a square that looked something like black quartz, which seemed to drink in the light. The other was a simple white strip of paper with a lot of writing on it that looked Asian.

He handed both to Harry. The first one was a magical item that created lightning on command, which could be anything. The other was a talisman which would shield whatever it was placed on from other electrical things around it. "Now be sure you use 'em right. The first has to be part of the muggle thing, the other has to be tacked on the interior, and they can't be on the same surface either. Got it?"

Harry nodded, looking and feeling rather suspicious, but that turned around when Borgin put his hand out and said firmly, that'll be a hundred galleons each, boy. If you don't have the money I'll give you one, not the other. These are expensive items, and it'll be a wrench to get rid of them."

Scowling Harry retorted, "And if they don't work, if the item I'm trying to enchant, what then? Will you give me my money back if I return them?"

Borgin bit back a snort, but haggled back with the boy, eventually letting him talk him down to eighty galleons for one and seventy galleons for the other, with a money back agreement of only half that, plus five galleons for an Advanced Defense using the Dark Arts book. The boy left, feeling he had gotten what he wanted, without ever realizing that Borgin had been playing him too.

"Hah, if the boy can get either of those to work he'll be dead in seconds. Either the Soul Trap and Apparator will see to that, together they'll kill him and erase the evidence. And just as good, both of them come from the Malfoy collection. I'll have to Oblivate my mind of the sale, but after that, and after I get rid of any evidence around the place, I won't ever even be a suspect!" Borgin chortled, turning to enter the back of his shop. This called for a celebration.

OOOOOO

Heading home Harry immediately found himself accosted by his aunt. "There you are boy, where've you been all this time, and why in the world are you dressed like that!? You look like a hobo, I knew you freaks were worthless if that kind of clothing is normal! gah, go around the back, I won't have you treading dirt into my clean house. The instant you are clean, get started on dinner, Dudders and Vernon are going to be home any minute, and if their meals late you'll answer for it."

Harry hissed in pain as his aunt's hand found the back of his head, but nodded docilely leaving his dirty hat and work clothes outside the door. Knowing however that Petunia would be the least of his worries if their meal was late he cleaned himself quickly and raced into the kitchen to start a meal of fried chicken and chips. Petunia huffed at that, but subsided when he prepared a simply chicken salad for her. "You've been leaving off your chores early twice now boy, I trust that you'll be able to not need to do that again?"

Wincing slightly Harry thought about how to get out of this and said, "Well, I've done pretty much everything I need to Aunt Petunia except order next years books. If I can't get that done in a week they'll assume I haven't gotten the list yet and start sending letters until I do. I've ordered them, but I need to go back there with my old ones to exchange them in. I didn't know that I needed to do that."

Petunia scowled, seeming about to say something, but subsided as Harry turned back to preparing the meal. Within minutes it was done, and Harry was allowed to go back to his room without earning another smack, although the smell of the food he'd just made wafting after him was torture in itself. Yet Vernon and Dudley had both come in as he finished, and he knew if he even tried to take some of Vernon's favorite meal from him the fat walrus would smack him a good one.

Still, I've figured out the spells, and I've got an item that will work to power the computer, that seems a good days work. I've even been able to come up with a way to return in a few days to try my new repair spells in an area where they won't be able to detect me. At least, that's what I think the trace means.

For the next few days Harry did as good a job as possible on his various tasks to butter up his aunt, hoping to get a full day off in order to head to Diagon. After watching the older students and all the other people using magic in Diagon Alley, he knew he could get away with using magic there. This meant he could hopefully both practice magical theory to figure out some answers to a few of the questions that he had been wrestling with ever since the Reparo incident, and repair the computer.

It worked too. His aunt was so happy with the work he did done on the back yard, and cleaning the house, that she allowed him to "go exchange his freakish books for more freakish nonsense."

With that lie in place, and with Petunia once more watching her soaps, Harry was able to put the bulky computer into his backpack, with some difficulty, and lug it to the bus. Carrying it into the Leaky Cauldron was equally hard, but once there, he was able to

pay for a room for a day with relative ease. It appeared as if Tom was more than used to people of all ages needing rooms for what-have-you.

Harry stayed there the rest of the day, trying out various spells. He was able to make the Stupefy work without any wand movements, but couldn't quite get it to work without verbalization. The Immobilous spell worked without even the verbalization after several dozen tries. For some reason though Harry couldn't get any transfiguration spell to work without both wand movements and verbalization. And the first spell he'd read from the advanced Dark Arts book he'd bought from Borgin, Bombarda, didn't work at all. Harry was obviously making a fundamental mistake somehow.

Harry scowled at that, then winced. "Um, heh, I suppose using a spell that sounds like you're throwing around a bomb inside isn't the best way to go about things anyway. Should've thought of that before I tried, if I'm honest."

Feeling a little guilty about the fact that if the spell had worked he would have blown a hole in Tom's wall, Harry moved on to less destructive spell work for a time, getting the Wingardium Leviosa to work without wand movements or visualization, and the Reparo spell too. Then he got to work on the computer.

With the books on how computers worked open, Harry tried to use the visual aid of the book to try to fix each little part inside the computer that he could with a repair spells. It worked for a few bits, but Harry quickly realized that some computers must differ internally from one another.

Deciding he had done as much as he could on his own, Harry pulled out the two items he had gotten from Borgin. He figured out where the power should go once it came into the computer, and slowly removed that part, the converter it was called, and placed the small black square with the runic array on it there. Hooking the wiring up to it was difficult, and Harry eventually had to just use tape to latch it together. It looks very flimflam when he stared at it, and he sighed. *This is never going to work, is it? Heck, I don't even know if that will let me order the box thing to start powering up!*

Still, Harry wanted to try at least. With a sigh, he redid the side of the computer then put it back in his backpack. Harry hadn't been able to bring both the computer and its keyboard or screen along, so he would have to return to the Dursleys to see if it worked.

I am so not looking forward to carrying this home! But wait, that featherlight charm, couldn't that work? A slightly more advanced version of the levitation spell that

had, somewhat inadvertently, led to him becoming friends with Hermione this spell was designed to make things lighter. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

With a sigh, he pulled out his wand again, and practiced the featherlight charm several times on the various pieces of furniture in the room, before using it on his backpack. When he picked it up this time, he nearly fell over backwards, because it was so light. "Wicked!"

He was about to go back to practicing more spells, when there was a knock on the door. He frowned, then asked "yes, who's there?"

"Ah, Harry," said the voice of Albus Dumbledore. "Might I come in?"

Cursing inwardly, Harry replied in the affirmative, and tries to muster up a smile for the headmaster, but knew it probably looked somewhat guilty at best. Given his suspicions about the headmaster and the teachers, he wasn't certain how he felt about him now. After all, without the headmaster and the other teachers, especially Hagrid, he would never have discovered magic.

Yet at the same time it was the headmaster who had forced him to go back to the Dursleys again this past summer. And not only him but possibly all of the teachers must have known about how bad his home life was given where the Hogwarts acceptance letter had gone and Hagrid's chasing after the Dursleys when they tried to run away with Harry. And the headmaster showing up now was also definitely a mark against him in Harry's opinion.

"Might I ask what you are doing here, Harry?" Albus said with his twinkling eyes as he moved to sit on the bed only to frown, as he gently pushed it lightly to the side with a few fingers. "Ah, other than experimenting with your magic, I suppose?"

"That's pretty much all I'm doing headmaster," Harry said, rubbing at his hair and looking away. He didn't want to tell the headmaster about the computer. After all, Borgin had said enchanting 'Muggle' items was illegal. "I just needed to get away from my relatives for a bit. I had a bit of an accidental magic moment, and then I got this letter from a woman named Hopkins or something like that. I wanted to figure out what was going on with that too."

"While I would be the last person to dissuade you from experimentation, there is a time and place for it, That time and place being at school," Albus replied, his own wand in his hand and gently touching the items of the room that Harry had used the Featherlight charm on. "As for the missive from Young Hopkirk, leave that to me. She is rather too

fanatical about her work at times. I'm certain that a going-on second year student having a bout of accidental magic will be excused, so long as it is not repeated."

He turned back to Harry, at a that, smiling as Harry looks down at his feet. "But you my boy, needs to return to your family's house."

"Relatives Sir," Harry said firmly, though he was still looking down at his feet. "They're not my family. "There my relatives, there's a distinction there."

"Nonetheless, you are safer there than you are here. While Tom is a most excellent cook and a very decent innkeeper, he could in no way protect you from those who are your enemies because of who your parents were, who you are and who they once served." Albus said with a sad shake of his head.

"You mean Voldemort still has followers out there somewhere? How is that possible, I would've thought they'd all be in that prison!?" Harry exclaimed blinking and now looking up at Dumbledore, before looking away, his face a bright red now trying to keep in his laughter. Albus was wearing a vivid red and blue cloak marked by yellow and bright green stars and smiley faces for some reason. *How did I miss that!?*

"Alas that is not the case. For many, the wheels of justice turn but slowly. For others, I am afraid that the phrase 'money talks' is true in our society even as it is in the non-magical society." Albus sighed sadly. And in many ways, those who escaped justice are among the most dangerous of Voldemort's followers. I'm afraid I can't allow you to stay here Harry."

He reached out to take Harry's shoulder, squeezing gently. "Further, as I said even after I speak to Mafilda about removing the deficit against your name, you will have to be very careful about not performing any magic in your relative's house. Our government is practically obsessed with the Statute of Secrecy, there is no allowance even for those muggle-born whose family understands and is interested in magic. Whereas with you that most certainly is not the case. The damage Vernon or Petunia could do if they tried to share the secret of magic is considerable, or would appear such to the government."

"And I have to return there?" Harry asked duly, looking down once more. "I, professor you know..."

"Regardless, it is the safest place for you. Your mother's protections are strongest there. And neither I nor the other teachers can always be around to defend you." He gently shook Harry, causing Harry to look up at him, and for once, the old man's eyes were not twinkling, the dark brown of his eyes adding to the impact of his words. "Now, I don't

want to hear about you coming to the alley again... not until the week leading up to the school year all right?" he ended with a wink.

Smiling and nodding as if he had accepted that carrot, if that was really what it was, Harry hurried over to his book bag, lifting it up over onto his shoulders, and then picking up the books. He looked over at the headmaster then but he simply chuckled. "I daresay you could give your friend Ms. Granger a run for her money with that number of books, Harry."

Wincing at the mention of his friends, Harry debated questioning the headmaster about them, but decided against it. It was obvious that the headmaster at this point didn't really care about Harry's happiness, just his safety. And even that was kind of debatable given some of the things that the Dursleys had done to them over the years. They never really went out of their way to beat him except for Dudley, but Petunia had taken an iron skillet to his head at one point when he had messed up dinner. And Vernon had beaten him with a whip when Harry had brought home a better grade than Dudley during their first year in school.

No, best to keep silent. If the Dursleys or my own boredom doesn't kill me before school starts I'll figure out what's going on then.

OOOOOOO

Needless to say, Petunia was not pleased with Harry when Dumbledore returned him home, and his ability to leave home ended instantly. Harry found that kind of funny when he thought about it. His relatives hated him and couldn't have waited to see the back of Harry when he went to Hogwarts. But now that Dumbledore had come by with it like this, they were doing all they could to keep him on the property: out of sight, most certainly out of mind sure, but still there, and doing a lot of chores for them.

"I suppose the slave labor is kind of tempting then," Harry reflected as he stared up at the ceiling again. "Oh look, there's a spider over there. Please little guy, make something interesting for me to look at!"

Harry paused. "I just spoke aloud to a spider and hoped it would understand me. I am going barmy. Unless..." he frowned. "I was able to talk to that snake..." A few

moments later Harry had determined that either the spiders were not very talkative, or he just didn't have the knack, and he went back to being bored.

Three weeks had passed and Harry tried, he really **did** try to not perform any magic in the house. He tried to make some entertainment of his own, using the broken toys and the comic books. But there was only so many times Harry could play make-believe on his own at his age, and being locked back up in here whenever he wasn't doing chores was just, just horrible!

And despite the amount of exercise he had gotten out while in the garden, the lack of proper food was also beginning to get to him too after several months back in the Dursleys. When Hedwig had gone hunting two nights before and brought back a squirrel rather than a rat, that squirrel had looked mighty tasty to Harry.

"Alright that's it," he muttered, getting out of bed as he heard downstairs the Dursleys wining and dining someone. Vernon was playing host to someone from America or something that his company was trying to do business with, although whoever decided that Vernon was the one to play host, should have their heads examined in Harry's opinion. He doubted Vernon would be able to find America on a map, let alone talk to an American about anything without insulting him, his country, or something else. *On the other hand it could be worse; the guy could be from France. Vernon could possibly single-handedly start another war if that was the case.*

Still, Harry knew that trying to sneak out at this point would be a very bad idea, and doing magic would be even worse. So he decided to do something else with his time, something that could hopefully really serve as a real escape from the prison that had become his life.

Pulling out the parts of the computer from where he had hidden them, hooking them up together again. He had repaired the keyboard just the other day and put the talisman on the back of it, figuring that the keyboard was both part of the computer system and far enough way to not interfere with the Lightning Boc. The monitor had always worked since he'd first tried to fix it, and he thought that that Lightning Box would serve as a power source. "The only question is, will the magical government figure out that I'm doing magic if I turn this on?"

He paused for a moment, his hand hovering over the power key then he said, "You know what, I don't care at this point! I need something to do. I can feel my brain dying!"

He was about to press the button when a voice from behind him shouted "Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts!"

Harry whirled around a. He saw the speaker was a small creature of some kind that barely came up to his knee, with wide floppy ears, huge eyes, and a gangly body, wearing what looked like some kind of toga or something made from a tea cozy.

As the noise from below stilled for a moment, then came back even louder, Harry quickly held up a finger to his lips, saying "Please be quiet!"

The little creature nodded, his ears flopping as he did. Then he repeated himself in a near whisper. "Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts!"

Harry held up his hand then moved over to the bed and away from the computer just in case, staring at the little creature. "Okay," he said slowly. "Now that we're all using our inside voice, can you tell me who you are, and no offense, but what you are?"

"Oh, the great Harry Potter Sir wants to know Dobby's name!" The little creature moaned, looking like he was going to cry in joy for a moment. "Dobby knew that Harry Potter sir was a great wizard!"

"Um, so your name's Dobby?" Harry asked, hoping to get the little creature back on task. The hero worship was really off-putting. Harry had never been happy with the Boy-Who-Lived shite, so the little guy's fawning was well beyond what he ever wanted to see.

"Dobby is indeed called Dobby, Mr. Harry Potter Sir," the little being said, pointing at himself. "Dobby is being a house elf. The great Mister Harry Potter Sir has never heard of us before?"

"I can't say I have. Although, my knowledge of the magical world is kind of limited." Harry replied with a scowl before he shook his head. "What are house elves, and what do you do? And why are you here?"

"House elves be servants Mr. Harry Potter Sir. We be serving wizards in return for magic. Our magics be different than yours, wheeze must be bonded to use it and must mostly be using it for other people. It is how wes have always been." Dobby explained.

"And are you here on a mission from your master?" Harry asked, asking what he thought was the next logical question given what Dobby had just said. The reaction he got told him this was not the case.

“Oh no sir,” Dobby said, now shaking his head so wildly his ears actually hit him in the face, though he didn’t seem to notice. “No sir! If master knew Dobby was being here,” Dobby shuddered. “Oh he would be punishing Dobby so hard! Dobby is a bad elf!”

He went over to a wall and looked as if he was about to bang his head on it, but Harry leaped out of the bed, and quickly put his hand between Dobby’s head in the wall. “Dobby!” He hissed “Don’t do that! You’ll hurt yourself, and then you’ll get me hurt too.”

Dobby froze at that, looking up at him in shock as Harry whispered. “The people here don’t actually like me all that much, and they’ve got important guests over. If you get me in trouble, I don’t know what they’ll do to me.”

That seemed to get through to Dobby, and he backed away rapidly from wall. “Dobby is sorry Mr. Harry Potter Sir. But Mr. Harry Potter Sir must not return to Hogwarts!”

A certain manic gleam entered his eye, which Harry noticed, and quickly spoke up to stop Dobby from doing whatever he was thinking of doing.

“I was thinking about not returning anyway Dobby,” he soothed quickly, moving back over to sit on his bed. “I’ve recently discovered that the teachers and the headmaster there don’t really seem to have my best interests at heart. I mean look at this,” he said, gesturing down towards the cat flap, “that’s where they push my food in here. And look at the Windows too. The headmaster at least knows about that stuff, yet here I am still.”

Dobby did so, and saw the bars. That and the cat flap was certainly odd, even to him. “That not normal on muggle houses then?”

“No Dobby, no it isn’t,” Harry said with a sigh. “And I can’t escape either. When I tried, the headmaster found me and returned me here. Apparently I’m safe here, but safe in this case is still trapped. It’s probably better than Hogwarts,” he went on hurriedly, not wanting Dobby to overreact and think he wanted to return to Hogwarts given how Dobby had looked a second ago. “But I’d still like to escape somehow.”

“Oh, Dobby knows all about wanting to escape,” the little creature said disconsolately. “Oh yes he does, Harry Potter sir.”

The two of them looked at one another, having an odd moment of camaraderie. It didn’t last for long, but it was there for a moment before Dobby asked suspiciously, “So Master Harry Potter Sir will not return to Hogwarts?”

"I'll try my best not to," Harry said with a nod then an idea occurred to him. *He got here with magic, and a owl hasn't shown up, so maybe house elf magic can't be detected by the government?* He gestured over to the computer, moving over to sit down in front of it. "Although, I really would like to escape from here, even if only in my own mind. Do you know what this is?"

"No, Harry Potter Sir," Dobby replied, moving over to stare at the thing, poking it with a finger. "It looks like a strange window, connected to a box. And this other odd box thing with all these letters on it. It be looking like a typeewriter, Dobby has seen one before."

"That's pretty much what it is Dobby, but it all works together. It will put up pictures and stuff on this window, which we call a screen. It will allow me to play various games and other stuff, and I'll be a lot happier to stay here. Unfortunately, my cousin broke it, and I haven't gotten it to work just yet." he said pushing the power button. There was a loud humming noise from the back of the computer, but nothing else happened. "I've tried to fix it, but..."

"OH, Dobby can help with that!" With that in the elf clicked his fingers. Instantly there was several strange sounds from inside the computer of things being rearranged, somewhat violently if the sounds were any indication, and Harry winced. But thankfully the noises stopped quickly. For a moment, Harry was worried that those sounds would carry downstairs to, but the sounds of talking and eating didn't dissipate again, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

With that worry taken care of Harry asked, "Dobby, what did you just do?"

"Dobby simply repaired it Mr. Harry Potter Sir. This muggle thing will work now." Dobby replied authoritatively. "Dobby has used his magic on many 'muggle' things for the mistress at home, including what mistress calls her 'little friend'."

He looked aghast, clapping his hands over his mouth but Harry didn't question that, simply looking at him in astonishment. "That's amazing Dobby! You don't have to know what it looks like, or how it worked or, or anything like that to repair it? I looked up repair spells and they didn't work like that!" He exclaimed quietly

Breathing a sigh of relief, Dobby paused thinking and clicked his long fingers. "House elves magic be different, be much more about intent and wishing. We wishing to be helpful, our magic does the rest. Now, be there anything else Dobby can do to make you want to stay here rather than Hogwarts?"

That's interesting, even more things I don't know, Harry thought, while he nodded at Dobby. "All right Dobby with that, I won't try to return to Hogwarts, but I would like to write out a message to my friends there, tell them I'm not going, and why. The problem is I don't know if it will actually work if I send Hedwig. She hasn't been able to find them lately," Harry said even as he moves towards the small broken piece of chair he used as a desk.

Because his back was turned, he didn't see Dobby's look suddenly turning shifty. Hedwig did, and turned her head to a ninety degree angle, her eyes narrowing and her claws creaking ominously on her perch. Dobby flinched at that then held up a hand. "Dobby thinks it will get through now."

He frowned at that, but shrugged his curiosity about that off, anticipation and eagerness going through him to finally have something to do! He quickly wrote out a message, then tied it to Hedwig and said, "Take this to Hermione, girl."

Harry and Dobby watched Hedwig, who glared at Dobby for another second, turned and moved towards the window huffily. Hopping to the windowsill she slid between the bars and then out into the dark of night beyond.

As Hedwig flew out of sight, Harry smiled over at Dobby and held out his hand. "Well thank you for your help Dobby, and your warning. I don't care what your master says, you're a good house elf!"

Dobby's big eyes watered at that, and he shook Harry's hand with both of his up and down wildly. "Mr. Harry Potter Sir wants to shake Dobby's hand! Mr. Harry Potter Sir cares! Mr. Harry Potter Sir really is a great wizard! Dobby hopes that Mr. Harry Potter games will go all right, and that you won't be returning to Hogwarts. It bes much too dangerous!" Wiping away his tears, Dobby stood back. "But now Dobby must go! Remember Mr. Harry Potter Sir, Mr. Harry Potter Sir must not return to Hogwarts!"

With that, the house elves disappeared, and Harry blinked in surprise. "That was even neater than the teleportation spell the headmaster used." He then looked over to the computer and back again to where the house elf had been standing. "And they're supposed to be just our servants? The magical world is weird."

Putting that aside, Harry moved over to the computer and with baited breath pressed the power button again. To his delight, whatever Dobby had done seemed to have finally repaired the computer enough for the power to flow, even with all the modifications that Harry had put in in his own efforts to make it work. He watched as the startup screen appeared, and then loaded into windows smoothly. The noise was kind of

worrisome, a deep sort of thrum in the background, and there were lights appearing out of the side of the computer, but Harry could ignore those. He was just too happy that it was finally working after literally a month working on this on and off.

What Harry didn't know was something that most magicals learned early on in their lives: Mixing magic didn't work very well, and never as intended unless you really, really planned it out very well. Right now, in Harry's computer there were the remnants of dozens of repair spells from Harry, the cursed Soul-Trap, and the Apparator that he had used in his attempts to power the computer, muggle technology, and Dobby's helpful house elf magic.

There was, in fact, more magic in that small box, then in many a store in Diagon alley. A lot more. Worse was the fact that, as any of the Weasleys who had anything to do with their father's obsession could tell you, electrical things and magic couldn't mix very well. To top it like a cherry on a cake of utter confusion, house elf magic was a lot more about wish fulfillment than Dobby had explained. Harry had told Dobby that he wanted to use these games to escape, and that wish began to interact very... oddly with the Soul Trap and all the rest of the magic.

With the computer working, Harry was finally able to open the CD-ROM, and found that the disc inside was disc one of Baldur's Gate. He saw also that the icon for the game was showing up on the Windows screen. "Ah, so that's what Dudley was playing when he had his temper tantrum this! I suppose that makes some sense." When that game had come out, Harry had heard a lot of kids who had played it at school complain about how hard it was.

But Harry was not Dudley, and had always been interested in this game, although again how Dudley of all people had gotten his hands on a game with magic in it with how anti-magic his parents were was anyone's guess. "I bet he got it from one of his friends, on the sly. No way would they buy it for him. Just like he did with those Dungeons & Dragons books."

As soon as he was satisfied that the computer had stopped starting up, Harry clicked on the icon, watching the introduction video avidly for a moment, snickering slightly at the overreaction of the voice actor to the guy who was hurled off the roof by the unknown giant. After that, he was able to choose a new game after which came the skull with the glowing eyes that was the sign of the loading screen.

It seemed to go on for a long time, but Harry was willing to wait. *Although, that humming is getting kind of loud...and is it just me, or is that light getting kind of brighter?* Then there was an odd sound, almost organic, a "BLORT!" that took Harry aback. Before

he could do more than think it was odd, however, the skull loading screen vanished in a blast of white light so bright Harry was blinded. The he blinked his eyes rapidly, muttering “Bloody hell! Now I know why those warnings says you should play games like this in a well-lit area!”

Blinking his eyes open, he saw a vast skull and cross bones, hurtling towards ending through him. He tried to dodge, fighting himself on his feet somehow, when he had initially been sitting on the side of his bed, looking into the video screen. How he got to be standing up he didn’t know, you see is that either. That was the last thought he had before the skull and cross bones flew through him, and everything sort of disappeared for a second, before being replaced by a gray, world all around him.

At first that was all he could see, then then two doors appeared. They were utterly identical, with the same skull in the circle with glowing eyes motif as the loading screen. “**Choose your character!**” shouted a voice from on high.

Harry blinked, staring at the doors then around him. “Where the heck am I?” He looked down at himself, and scowled. “And where the bloody hell did my clothes go!?”

The voice from before boomed out “**Choose your character!**” to that, and Harry scowled.

“Look, I don’t know what this is, but if this is Dobby’s master or some other magical taking the mickey, well done, bravo and all that, you’ve had your fun, now let me out you wanker!” Harry shouted waving his arms wildly. This amounted to nothing, but another shout from the voice repeating the words from before. Scowling, Harry started to calm down and think.

“okay, so...no one’s replying, and honestly speaking I can’t see Dobby being a party to playing a trick or something like that on me. But, choose your character, and all that noise the computer was making... I am in the game? Magic and muggle tech, well I was warned that magic and muggle tech sometimes had really odd effects. Don’t think this was anywhere near what I was warned about though. And... I, I’m literally stuck in the game, can’t feel like I’m connected to my body or anything, which means I probably can’t get out. That means...”

Harry sighed. “That means I’ve got no choice but to play through the game, great.” He smiled wryly. “On the other hand, I did want to use the game to escape, although this is a lot more literal than I expected.”

At that a small square, the exterior of which was made of yellow light appeared in front of him. Inside were the words, “Congratulations, using logic and the power of your mighty mind, you have thought things through and figured out what’s happening to you! +1 point to intelligence, +1 point to Wisdom.”

The words also rang out, this time in a tinier sort of voice rather than the deeper, more theatrical voice, and oddly enough, Harry could suddenly feel his thoughts moving faster, his panic, which he had been still thinking despite his bravado, fading. He smirked then shaking his head. “Okay that, was kind of cool, although, I can earn points even now, that means that it’s a game within a game sort of thing...I can earn points in the game by playing the game itself... no wait, that isn’t the best way to put it...”

Harry closed his eyes, thinking things through once more to try to understand what he had been thinking. “I mean, that my life is one game, and Baldur’s Gate another, or perhaps a game within the game.”

This won him another “Congratulations, through a leap of logic you have spotted an oddity in the world around you and have begun to understand your new, unique circumstances! +1 to Wisdom.”

“...I’m not certain I like that, though why only wisdom instead of intelligence and wisdom this time?” Once more Harry thought about that, and what the two terms could mean. “Maybe, maybe intelligence is basic intelligence, how smart someone is. Then Wisdom could be something like experience, or actual knowledge gained of the world around you.”

“Congratulations, through thinking things through, you have understood more about your new, unique circumstances: +1 to Intelligence.”

“Interesting.” Harry laughed. Then thought it through even more. “Hmm... if it is really a game, could there be a, a user manual. Or a Stats screen?” Looking around, he saw nothing, then he thought those words hard, saying them aloud at the same time, shifting the wording as he did. Nothing happened in terms of a user manual, but he was able to see his stats, although this wasn’t as helpful as he’d hoped.

Status Screen:

Name: Harry Potter

Gender: Male(?)

Race: Human(?)

Wisdom: () + 2

Intelligence: () + 2

Bloodline Skills:

***** , ***** , ***** ,*****

Background notes:

Trapped within a game, Harry Potter, the so-called Boy Who Lived, is now facing a life spent in a very strange land due to a mixup of magical proportions. Will he prevail, or will he find out that game over is forever?

Staring at it, Harry sighed. “Right that was singularly unhelpful, which I’d guess is the point. Although perhaps it is supposed to force me to figure things out as I go?” As he spoke that idea aloud, another status change square appeared, awarding him another point to intelligence for figuring out how to access his Status screen. “Works.”

After a few more minutes of trying to get more information to appear on his status screen or for some kind of manual to appear, Harry was flummoxed on that score and turned to the doors once more. As he did they enlarged in turn rapidly, first one then the other. Neither were marked by anything signifying what they might be though. Harry hesitantly reached out a hand toward the door on his right first.

“You have chosen to play a female character!”

“Wait, what!?” Harry shouted, then screamed as his body slowly shifted. His muscles creaked and groaned, and he bit off a scream, grinding his teeth and clenching his hands as the pain wound its way through his body, shifting and changing. When it was over, he scowled, looking down at her body for a moment, ignoring everything around him, even the voice shouting something in the background.

Harry’s body had morphed around him, becoming shorter he felt, though given he didn’t have anything around him to compare himself to that was only a feeling. His hair had become longer and changed color to red, which was interesting, and Harry rather liked the color, which he supposed came from his mother. His hands were thinner, looking like those of a girl for certain, not that he needed the hands to tell him he’d changed gender. First, he’d felt his little soldier disappearing, (and ooh boy was he not going to forget that pain anytime soon) but he was now looking down at his, or rather ‘her’ chest at present.

Given Harry was only 12 going on thirteen, he didn’t have much in the way of a chest to speak of, but Harry could feel himself blushing as he stared down at the tiny breasts there. They weren’t more than a barest curve to his chest, but even so, they were the first pair he’d ever seen, and that was enough to cause him some embarrassment.

Harry hesitantly brought his hands up to his chest, and felt at the tiny breasts shivering a little and quickly pulling his hands away. “Eep, um, okay those are, um... that was, yeah let’s not do that again.” Harry paused then, and hesitantly looked below his breasts for the first time since the change had occurred, and shivered, seeing the tiny slit there where his little soldier should be.

At only twelve, and having missed a full year of regular schooling, Harry hadn’t had anything like a biology class yet, nor any kind of discussion on the birds and bees from anyone, although later he would come to be very thankful for that, given the adults in his life before this. For now however, his knowledge of girls was very simple: one, they were girls because they had breasts and couldn’t pee standing up, two, they liked to travel in packs, three, they preferred long hair, and four, they were pretty. That was pretty much it. Oh, and an ancillary note: they could be bossy, but actually telling them they were was a very bad idea and led to lectures.

Harry also knew one other thing at this point: he was a guy! This change was not one he was happy with, and he refused to go along with it. With that thought, and after calming down, he became aware of what was going on around him in this strange between place again for the first time since the change to his body had hit. “Okay, please, oh please tell me there’s a way to undo this bullocks!”

As he looked up, Harry saw hovering in front of him above head height were several of the announcement boxes, all piled on one another. "That is something to be aware of in the future, I'll need to be aware of the fact they pile on one another like that. I don't want to click through them and miss an important message, if such a thing happens anyway."

Reaching forward, Harry deleted the topmost message, which read, "Ouchie! You have grinned (rather grimaced) and bore through pain the likes of which would set most people to screaming. Does this make you brave, or just too stubborn for your own good? Only time will tell: + 4 to Constitution, +4 to Willpower."

"Nice, or well, not really because that was ruddy awful, and I could do without the sarcasm. But I'll take the points. And it tells me another stat I'll need to be aware of too." As he thought that, Harry could feel his body somehow toughening up, his muscles growing. "Wicked!"

The next box wasn't as helpful, in fact, it was downright insulting. "Oops! You have chosen randomly and very poorly: -1 to Luck."

"Oh, screw you! How was I supposed to know that door would do that! There was no way to choose between them! Ruddy game," Harry grouched, tapping out of that box too. "Still, that's another Stat I know about anyway."

Thankfully, the next box was good news, sort of. "Know Thyself! Even when dealing with a true moment of gender confusion that should have caused at worst an existential crisis you kept a mental image of yourself as a boy. Knowing yourself so well can only be good in the long run: +2 to Willpower."

"I am seriously uncertain how to take that. I mean, yes it's helpful, but I could have done without the moment of gender confusion in the first place," Harry grouched.

The next box was the one he had been hoping, nay, praying to see, and Harry paused, staring at it, taking in the details. This box was different than the stat boxes, which were lined in yellow light with nothing but the words inside. Instead, this box was lined with a blinking red light, and backed by something that looked like a wooden background, onto which the words "**You have chosen to play a Female Character, is this correct?**" Was emblazoned on top, while below were two buttons looking as if they stuck out of the wood, with the word '**No**' in red, and the word '**yes**' in green.

"Oh, Merlin, Morgana and Maeve thank you!" Harry muttered, and then very carefully reached for the no button. The door he had previously opened closed abruptly.

Instantly the pain was of the transformation was back, but Harry bore through it, grimacing and growling to himself, eager to get the stat points and regain his real body.

After removing the stat screen that told him he had been awarded with two more points to willpower and constitution. This once more told Harry something else about the game: there would be limited rewards for going through the same thing twice. Setting that thought to one side for now for more important things, Harry resolutely turned to the other door and opened it.

Another red-lined box appeared in front of him, with the words **“You have chosen to play a Male Character, is this correct?”** This was unaccompanied by further pain, which was a blessing. Harry instantly hit the green button, and watched in something approaching excitement as the gray background of the universe around him changed, shifting into a wooden lined hallway, the way forward blocked by several glass doors, on which were words, though Harry couldn’t make out more than the words on the first at present.

Those words read **“Choose your Character’s race!”**

As soon as Harry touched that door the hallway disappeared to be replaced by several doorways cone more all around him. Each doorway had a different image on it of a different race. These included, Human, Elf, half-elf, Half-orc, gnome, and dwarf.

“Wait, so I can choose my race, okay, that is interesting this is getting better and better,” Harry mused, grinning. The images here were pretty self-explanatory too, in Harry’s opinion, and Harry ignored them to read the information on the races.

Humans were, generally speaking, the best jacks of all trades, able to do any job or class, although their lives were of course not the longest. Elves specialized in dexterity, telling Harry another stat, archery of course, and magic, with half elves being somewhere between that and humans in that they could wear heavier armor and be stronger physically. They tended to also have a bonus to charisma another stat label, but not as much as Elves. But both elf and half-elf could not have much constitution as a human.

Harry didn’t even read the descriptions of Half-orcs after seeing the image, skimming to the bottom to see the stat bonuses and limitations. He wasn’t vain or anything like that, but he certainly would prefer to not have green skin and tusks. He also knew just enough about most fantasy games to understand orcs were one of the perennial bad guy races. A part of Harry wanted to champion them for that reason but the looks, and the minus to dexterity and wisdom he saw was enough for him to give that a miss.

Gnome and dwarf he disqualified for somewhat of a similar reason. "I might be short, but that doesn't mean I like being short darn it. No thank you. Although that stat bonus to constitution the dwarves have is neat, and the massive bonus to working with metal. But no. And the bonus to alchemy and potions for gnomes sounds uninteresting too, plus the minus to charisma."

Harry's interest in potions had died after a year of dealing with Snape and his hatred for all things Potter. *I still have to wonder why, if the Headmaster was right and my father saved his life, he hated me so much?*

That left humans, elf and half-elf to choose from and eventually after thinking it through, Harry chose human. The adverse impact to constitution was something he didn't want to deal with, as well as the inability to wear heavy armor for some reason. "I wonder what that's about."

Harry also remembered that most of this game was set in a human realm, so figured he could blend in better with those around him if the game was that realistic. Considering what was going on all around him, Harry wasn't certain what the actual game would be like after he was finished with this character creation section, but wasn't willing to act as if everything would be like a game, just in case. He could all too easily remember the 'game over is forever' line.

This won him yet another bonus point to Wisdom, which Harry chuckled at before making his choice. No change occurred to his body just yet, which again he was pleased about, but he found himself clothed now in a simple cloth shirt and leather pants. That threw him for a moment but Harry then smacked his forehead. "Right, Middle ages, only cloth and leather, no jeans... what are jeans made of anyway? But I suppose leather at least is hard wearing, and it isn't tight or anything."

As he was saying that aloud, the glass door disappeared from in front of him and Harry found his feet moving on their own towards the next one. *That had better be just a part of the character creation bit, I don't want my body moving on my own for me in the future.* He thought with a slight grimace before the next glass door rapidly expanded.

"Choose your appearance!" This time there were more doors, each of them with detailed images and various choices underneath in a series of blocks. The topmost image was that of a Human body from the waist up, the one below that a face, each of them set next to a series of choices, one of which, under the face, was hair color. "Huh."

Harry moved around the room, noting that he could change his body type: thin, fat, strong, tall, short that sort of thing, with the choice of which door to look at. All of

them looked like a Seventh year or so, a few looked older than that, but not by much. “Huh, so I won’t be starting at my own age, or level or whatever, are they equivalent? Whatever the case, that’s a little weird, although thinking back about it, I guess the game is supposed to be set after the main character’s come of age or something similar. It will sure be weird being that did all of a sudden though.”

The idea also excited him, as did the concept of being in a new, better body. Harry knew his own scrawny frame wasn’t exactly handsome or well built, whatever Wood said about it being the ideal build for a seeker. Being skinny was something to be proud of. Being malnourished and both short and skinny because of it was not.

With that in mind, and the fact this game was set in a fantasy swords and magic sort of realm, Harry chose the image that looked the most like the typical warrior image, something like Conan the Barbarian: big, six feet four inches, with wide, muscled shoulders and a six pack that put even Oliver Woods (they all showered together after practice and the captain was the only person Harry had ever seen with a six pack) to shame, with wide, powerful arms.

Once he chose that door, the face below the body image and the choices set beside it allowed him to change a few things in his appearance, bearded, long hair, short hair, that kind of thing. He noticed that even the short hair looked messy, and tried at several doors to change that, only to fail. And his scar stayed the same in each image too.

That Harry had mixed feelings about, much like the scar itself. For a long while it had been a sign of his freakishness, of how his parents had died in a car crash. Then it had become something to be sort of proud of a sign of his mother’s love, the sign that something she had done had saved him from the killing curse, leaving him with only that mark to bear. Then it had become a sign of the Boy Who Lived nonsense, just another thing that set him apart from those around him, that made Harry famous for something he hadn’t had a part in really.

Still, on mature reflection, (which won him another bonus intelligence point) Harry decided he was fine with the scar remaining. “I honestly don’t know what I’d be like without it, after all.” Harry also decided to keep his eye and hair color, although he did make his hair long and shaggy though. “I figure I can always come back and change that with a razor or something, and I remember all the images about warriors, knights and barbarians back in the Middle Ages showed that most of them had long hair anyway. The beard though... no, that thing just looks weird.”

Once he was satisfied with his image, Harry touched the green button which once more indicated yes, in this case yes the combined image was acceptable, grimacing his

teeth. As he had expected, His body once more shifted and changed and grew, expanding and morphing to match the image he had chosen. This won him more bonus points to Constitution and Willpower, but Harry shook his head groggily as it finished. "Bloody hell, I hope I don't have to get used to that feeling, that is not fun!"

As his feet started moving forward once more against his will, Harry looked down his body, flexing and smiling. "Damn me, but this is cool! Just look at these arms! I bet I could bench press a rugby player now!" As he walked though Harry felt a little chapped in the trouser area, and frowned, reaching down to rearrange himself only to blink. "What the heck, that grew too! Bloody hell, I hope I don't have to ride a broom, I had enough trouble sometimes with that already."

"Congratulations? You have discovered a negative (?) impact of shifting your body to that of an 18 year-old man. Remember, learning about yourself is sometimes just as important as learning about other people. +1 to Intelligence."

"Okay, now I know this game's taking the mickey!" Harry grouched, still shifting somewhat uncomfortably, rearranging himself with one hand, pressing his rod to lay within the pant leg to one side, while dismissing the stat bonus box with the other.

By this time Harry's feet had Harryd him to the next glass door and again it disappeared as he did. "**Choose your character's class!**" Again as the door disappeared, it was replaced by a series of others, eleven in all, although one of them was blacked out. Each bore both an image of a simple stick figure on the top holding different items, and words below it describing the various classes.

The images were ultra-simple in comparison to the ones Harry had been dealing with up to now, but the words made up for it in a way, describing each class in turn well enough for Harry to understand the pluses and minuses to each and Harry carefully read through each in turn starting with the image of a stick figure holding what was obviously a wizard's staff.

MAGE:

The mage strives to be a master of magical energies, shaping them and casting them as spells. To do so, he devotes much of his time to magical research. A mage must rely on knowledge and wit to survive. Mages are rarely seen adventuring without a retinue of fighters and men-at-arms. Because there are different types (or schools) of magic, there are different types of mages. The generalist mage studies all types of magic and learns a wide variety of spells. This makes him well suited to the demands of adventuring.

Special Abilities: Spell Casting.

Restrictions: cannot wear armor, can only wield daggers, staffs, darts, and slings.

Specialization classes: Specialist Mage, Wild Mage.

These specializations can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.

“Okay, that is so much bull-shite! Restrictions, why the heck can’t a mage wear armor!? I mean, I could see a mage starting off as a weak sort of guy or woman, and not having any physical abilities because of how much time they would have to spend learning spells, but not being able to get around that?” Harry groused, shaking his head.

Thinking about it, he tried to click on the underlined word there, and got a bland **“Restrictions are limitations most classifications come with. For every positive there must be a negative.”**

Scowling, Harry backed away from that door. *While I may be able to get around that restriction somehow if this game becomes more like a real life but with stats and stuff, I can’t bet on that being the case. No, best to look at all of them, then figure out the best one to take for the long term. Besides, I have to wonder about whether or not the spells I know from my own life will really translate into the game.*

With that in mind, Harry, ignoring the fact he’d just gained another intelligence point, turned away from that door to the black one, experimentally reaching for it. His arm bounded off the door as if he had just smacked it into a stone wall, and the voice of the game intoned, **“Because of your past decisions in this character creation process, you are no longer eligible to start as a Sorcerer. You can learn this class as a secondary classification later through your actions or quests.”**

“Huh. Okay, doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about that. Next.” The next turned out to be marked by a stick figure holding a bow and with a smaller stick figure with for legs and a large fanged head beside it.

Ranger:

The ranger is a hunter and a woodsman. He is skilled with weapons and is knowledgeable in tracking and woodcraft. The ranger often protects and guides lost travelers and honest peasant-folk. A ranger needs to be strong and wise in the ways of nature to live a full life.

Special Abilities: Weapon Specialization, Racial Enemy, Stealth, charm person/mammal

Restrictions: Human, Elf or Half-Elf only

Specialization Classes: Archer, Ranger, Beast Master

These specializations can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.

This class had no restrictions in armor type and Harry really liked the idea of weapon specialization and charm person/mammal, which like the rest was rather self-explanatory. The specialization classes though sounded kind of lame in his opinion, and far too restricted to being useful in nature. *Sure most of the game might happen on the road, but what if the Ranger gets a negative bonus or something in cities?* “Still, it’s a possibility. I’m definitely not going to make a choice without examining all of these classifications closely.”

That earned him another set of bonus points to intelligence and wisdom. “Making an informed decision! Your desire to know all you can before making a choice that will change you for the rest of your life shows you are learning! +2 to Intelligence and + 2 Wisdom.”

“I don’t know if that was praise or snark really, but I’ll take it.” Harry muttered, going on to the next door.

Fighter:

The fighter is a champion, swordsman, soldier, and brawler. He lives or dies by his knowledge of weapons and tactics. Fighters can be found at the front of any battle, contesting toe-to-toe with monsters and villains. A good fighter needs to be strong and healthy if he hopes to survive.

Special Abilities: Advanced Weapon Specialization

Restrictions: None

Specialization classes: Kensai, Wizard Slayer, Berserker.

These classifications can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.

“Ooh okay, I really like the idea of Advanced Weapon specialization...” With that idea, Harry clicked on those words, and thankfully a smaller box popped up with more information. He learned that there was a limit to how many ‘skill slots’ most classifications could put into their skill with various weapons types. Rangers, for example, could only put three slots down, then add one more to any single weapon. Mages could only use one skill slot per the limited number of weapons they could use in the first place. How that would equate to his ‘life as a game’ thing, Harry didn’t know, but once more, he didn’t like the idea of restrictions.

“Definitely an option, especially that Wizard Slayer specialization if there are a lot of powerful mages in the game. Kensai sounds Oriental, nothing against that, I just have no idea what it could mean.” When Harry clicked on ‘specialization classes’ and thereafter the actual names however, he didn’t see any more information. With that Harry moved to the next door.

Paladin:

A paladin is a warrior bold and pure, the exemplar of everything good and true. Like the fighter, the paladin is a man of combat. However, the paladin lives for the ideals of righteousness: justice, honesty, piety and chivalry. He strives to be a living example of these virtues so that others might learn from him as well as gain by his actions.

Special Abilities: Weapon Specialization, Lay Hands, Turn Undead, +1 point to Willpower with every level after Level 4,

Automatically learns Protection from Evil, Detect Evil with every other level

Restrictions: Human only

Specialization classes: Cavalier, Undead Hunter, Inquisitor

“EEEE!!!!” Harry squealed, which was very odd coming from his now barrel-like chest, as every dream of being a hero and knight he had ever had going through his head as he read this job’s description. He almost chose it at once, especially once he saw the Detect and Protection of Evil, which were self-explanatory, as well as the Lay hands, which was obviously some kind of healing spell. But he stopped and looked at the ‘human only’ statement, and the last Specialization class. “Inquisitor? Yeah, that sounds a little... bad. And human only too, does that mean there’s racism in the game?”

This line of thinking won him an intelligence point again for, “Thinking long term: You have identified a small clue and made a logical leap to try and figure out more about the world around you. While you don’t know the answer, that doesn’t mean thinking about the question was a bad move.”

“Huh, that was helpful. Yet even so, there are undead in this game, so Paladin is definitely a choice. Still, next.” On the next door Harry read out:

BARBARIAN:

A barbarian can be an excellent warrior. While not as disciplined or as skilled as a normal fighter, the barbarian can willingly throw himself into a berserker rage, becoming a tougher and stronger opponent.

Special Abilities: Fast movement, berserker rage, high hit points.

Restrictions: Cannot wear full plate, plate mail. Can't specialize past normal specialization.

“Nope!” Harry chuckled. “I can see myself becoming many things, but a Berserker raging all over, nope. And I’ve always felt not getting hit was better than being able to take a lot of damage. Next please.”

This statement won him another intelligence point for “Spotting the obvious” And Harry growled, now knowing the game was somehow being snarky on purpose. Despite that, he moved onto the sixth door.

PRIESTS:

The cleric is a generic priest (of any mythos) who tends to the spiritual needs of a community. He is both protector and healer. He is not purely defensive, however. When evil threatens, the cleric is well suited to seek it out on its own ground and destroy it.

Special Abilities: Turn Undead, Spell Casting

Restrictions: Cannot use bladed or piercing weapons.

Specialization classes: Specialization classes for this classification will be dependent on which god you choose to serve. This change is instant, and will have far reaching effects, choose wisely!

“Again, no.” Harry muttered, shaking his head and moving on. “I like the idea of spellcasting, but unable to use bladed or piercing weapons is just weird, and I don’t like the idea of needing to choose a god to serve instantly. That sounds way too much like it could have long term ramifications.”

Yet again that bit of forward thinking won him a “Spotting the obvious: + 1 to intelligence” stat bonus, which Harry just laughed at this time before going on.

DRUID:

The druid serves the cause of nature and neutrality; the wilderness is his community. He uses his special powers to protect it and to preserve balance in the world.

Special Abilities: Shape Change, Spell Casting

Restrictions: Human or Half-Elf only. Can wear leather armor and bucklers only. Can only wield clubs, darts, spears, daggers, slings, and staffs.

Specialization classes: Totemic Druid, Avenger, Shapeshifter

“For the third time, no. Shapeshifter sounds interesting, like Animagi almost, but the restrictions in gear is a bit much. And I think most of the rest sounds too restrictive in what kind of actions I could take, if my actions can be restricted by class anyway.” Bing came another intelligence point for ‘Thinking long term’, and Harry came to the eighth door.

Monk:

Monks are warriors who pursue perfection through contemplation as well as action. They are versatile fighters, especially skilled in combat without weapons or armor.

Though monks cannot cast spells, they have a unique magic of their own based around the energy of their bodies. This ki allows them to perform amazing feats. The monk's best known feat is their ability to stun an opponent with an unarmed blow.

Special Abilities: Martial arts, magic resistance, fast movement, lay on hands, thief abilities (stealth and detect traps).

Restrictions: Cannot wear armor, cannot use two-handed weapons. Cannot raise relations past friendship.

Reading this class, Harry felt as if he was missing something. It just sounded, beyond the no armor or two-handed weapons thing, too good to be true. There had to be a downside to it, something that wasn't being shown. No chance was it as good as it looked.

After a moment staring at the restrictions, Harry thought he had it, "Monks are, what's the word, um, ascetic I think? They can't drink, party or anything like that, at least from what I've heard about. They're a holy order, like priests. Huh, I wonder why it doesn't mention that and instead says that bit about raising relationships past friends. Oh, maybe they can't marry then? Weird, and not exactly an issue, at least I hope not. But still, I just can't see myself as a monk."

On the next door, Harry read:

THIEF:

To accomplish his goals, for good or ill, the thief is a skilled pilferer. Cunning, nimbleness and stealth are his hallmarks. Whether he turns his talent against innocent passers-by and wealthy merchants or oppressors and monsters is a choice for the thief to make. There are seven thief abilities in Baldur's Gate II.

Special Abilities: Open locks, find traps, pick pockets, move silently, hide in shadows, detect illusions and set traps.

Restrictions: cannot wear any armor other than leather or studded leather; cannot use any shield except for bucklers; can only wield clubs, daggers, darts,

Specialization classes: Assassin, Bounty Hunter, Swashbuckler.

Here again Harry ran up against the same problems he had initially with the mage class, that of where 'life' ended and 'game' began and the, to his mind, bizarre restrictions. *After all, anyone can learn how to find traps, open locks etc, I'd assume they'd need a lot of dexterity to do it, but I'd bet they could still try it. Detect illusions and hide in shadow though is probably class-specific. But Restrictions again make no sense, I mean, only wielding clubs? Come on! The Swashbuckler specialty sounds interesting though.*

Yet it was the lack of armor that really killed this class for Harry. As much of a proponent of not getting hit as he was, he still would prefer to be able to wear heavy armor if the situation called for it. "After all, what would be the point of this new powerful body of mine if I couldn't?"

At last Harry came to the last door. But here again, he was somewhat disappointed.

BARD:

The bard is also a rogue, but he is very different from the thief. His strength is his pleasant and charming personality. With it and his wits he makes his way through the world. A bard is a talented musician and a walking storehouse of gossip, tall tales and lore. He learns a little bit about everything that crosses his path; he is a jack-of-all-trades but master of none. While many bards are scoundrels, their stories and songs are welcome almost everywhere.

Special Abilities: Pick Pockets, Bard Songs, Spell Casting, High Lore ability.

Restrictions: Human and Half-Elf only cannot use a shield or armor heavier than chain mail.

Specialization classes: Blade, Jester

“Okay, weaponized witticism sounds fun, and I could totally see Lavender or the Twins picking this, but I don’t fancy singing all that much, and I hate gossip. And once again, the restrictions are ruddy awful. Nope. That leaves me with the Paladin, Ranger and Fighter builds.” Harry blinked as, at those words, the doors of the classes he had eliminated disappeared, allowing him to more easily compare the builds. “That’s handy.”

Examining the trio of base builds side by side, Harry decided rather reluctantly to remove the Ranger build from consideration. While he liked a lot of what that build offered, he just couldn’t see the specialization classes as that much of a leg up from the original, not without more information which he couldn’t access. He even chose the Ranger build to see if that would let him access more information, before backing out once more. *Plus, Rangers seem to be more about fighting at range, and if I have to fight in a building or up close suddenly I could run into trouble.*

At this point, Harry was racking his brains for everything he could remember about what other kids had said about this game, and not having much luck. He could remember that you formed parties, but that occasionally you had to fight alone, although how you formed parties and what that meant, beyond the obvious, was something he couldn’t quite bring to mind. So he was thinking long term and also about going it alone if he had to.

After a moment, that made him decide in favor of the Paladin build. The Fighter was interesting, and he wished he could find out more about the Kensai and Wizard Slayer upgrades. The advanced weapon specialization skill was nothing to sneeze at either. But Harry figured he had a fifty/fifty chance of possibly overcoming that kind of thing. And the Lay on hands skill, plus all the anti-undead skills were just too good to pass up. The only thing that would make him back off of it was if he had to choose a specific god to serve

right away, and if the background story showed paladins were also racists Like Malfoy and his lot.

When he clicked on it, Harry learned that he didn't have to worry about the first problem at least as the voice Harry had begun to think of as the voice of the game within the game, boomed out a bit of backstory like it had earlier for the Ranger build. **“You have spent your years at Candlekeep training your mind, body and soul to battle evil wherever you find it in the land. Your skills and general abilities are such you should be ready to sit your vigil, yet there is no chantry or temple within the walls of Candlekeep to any god who has a paladin order. And, given the fact you would have to find a rare tome that the Keep, the greatest library in the world, does not already possess to get back in, you have put off the choice of which Chivalric god to pledge to. This puts you in the odd position of having many of the Paladin’s low level skills, but none of the specialized God-given abilities all Paladins possess.”**

From there, Harry could choose several starting skill slots in various weapons-craft. This was a list of weapons comprised of various pictures, like two handed swords, halberd, short swords and others, including sword and shield, and crossbow. Beside each was a series of four boxes, then a 'specialized zone' besides two-handed sword, shield and sword, and war-hammers.

Harry frowned, thinking about how exactly this would work out in the future. *Will it be a boost to speed and strength when I use a weapon I'm better with, will certain weapons have restrictions not just of class or strength, but affinity with that weapon type?*

BING! “A Well-thought moment of Introspection: Thinking deeply about the meaning of your own abilities and how it could affect your future has shown you are growing in knowledge: +2 to wisdom.” The stat box stated.

This time the status change had an immediate effect Harry could feel. Somehow he now knew that his guess was correct: certain weapons would have skill restrictions, mostly the hammers and greatswords which paladins were famous for wielding. Furthermore, after a certain skill level Harry could learn and use special attacks. “Bloody Wicked that is!” Harry crowed thrusting a well-muscled arm into the air.

With that in mind, Harry looked closely at the weapons paladins could use. Building on his previous ideas about wanting to be as strategic in his thinking as possible, Harry figured that wielding a single handed weapon would be best, and he was pleased to see that there were no weapons restrictions here.

Weapon and shield style also gave a lot of bonuses against damage both ranged and close combat, although Harry had to wonder once more about how that would work out. *Maybe my body will move on it's own, or, or I'll see the attacks coming faster or something? This whole skill thing is bothering me.*

BING! "A Well-though moment of Introspection times two: While you might find skills bothersome, you are still thinking them through and how they might play out in the future, showing great foresight: +2 to wisdom." The stat box stated.

Again the effect was immediate, and Harry realized he was sort of correct, but not quite. When wielding a sword and shield, his off hand, the shield, would move automatically to block any blow up to the level of his skill that Harry didn't consciously see coming as well as long range attacks. On the attack, Harry's strikes would be stronger, faster, but no more skilled per se. That would come with practice and the skill slots spent on that particular weapon.

With that in mind, and Harry not wanting to have to try to find a specific weapon Harry put three of the six skill points he had into Weapon and Shield, then one in warhammer, then two in longsword, figuring that it would be the weapon most prominent in the game.

As soon as he was done, that door disappeared, to be replaced by the old corridor again. Once more Harry found his feet moving for him, and he scowled. *If that is how it will feel when my shield moves I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing.*

When Harry reached the next glass door, it shifted, only this time it became a screen composed of two parts as the Baldur's Gate game voice boomed out "**Roll your stats.**"

One side was a giant die with seven sides of all things, each side showing both a number and a different color. Above that were four asterisks, implying Harry would have four more to spend wherever he wanted, beyond being able to re-roll his basic stats. On the other side was the status screen fro before, but it showed more information than before, a **lot** more, and Harry read it avidly from top to bottom.

Name: Harry Potter.

Gender: Male

Race: Human

Class: Paladin level 5

Strength: (6)

Willpower: (14) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (23)

Constitution: (9) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (2) + 7

Charisma: (10) +4

Intelligence: (10) +9

Luck: (16) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer's mind, Parselmouth, *****, *****

Background notes:

Trapped within a game, Harry Potter, the so-called Boy Who Lived, is now facing a life spent in a very strange land due to a mixup of magical proportions. Will he prevail, or will he find out that game over is forever?

Most of the points he had waiting to be added to his basic stats Harry remembered receiving as he created his new body/character/life (he as uncertain what to call it, and how permanent everything he was feeling was so it could be any or all of those), but the Luck and Charisma additions were new. "And the underline there makes me think that it'll stay there when I'm past this screen too, and what's with the plus and or minus thing? Also, my base wisdom was that low!? Ouch, just ouch."

Frowning, Harry first out his hand on the numbers in question but got nothing. Then he moved down to the Bloodline Skills, which he had already been interested in. *I suppose the skills I can't see are things I'll need to learn about myself as I go rather than already know.*

“Gamer’s Mind: You are trapped in a game, but not panicking or screaming for someone to save you, this level of mental control is part of a Gamer’s mind, which will never allow you to panic. Immune to fear effects, but not mind control or other mental ailments and assaults,” Harry read aloud, frowning. “I guess it is kind of weird that I’m not panicking more than I am and am taking all this in stride.” He shrugged. “Well, I suppose that I can’t do anything about it for now.”

After that, Harry turned to the next, which was Parselmouth. “Parselmouth, the ability to speak to snakes. Can be useful when facing poisonous snakes, and can rather make you popular with the girls too’. Wait, what? How can talking to snakes make me popular with girls?”

Staring at that message for a bit, it was a few seconds before Harry could let that weird note go, turning his attention to Potter Luck. “Potter Luck, is it lucky or unlucky? Regardless, thanks to your family’s blood, whenever chance is involved you can bet it will either go better or far worse than you can imagine. Also brings along a permanent charisma bonus, because Potter’s have always been popular, if you know what I mean.’ Okay, again, not certain where that came from, but I guess given my year in Hogwarts I can see where it’s coming from. Except for that Charisma bonus, but I won’t question it.”

With those questions answered, Harry turned his attention to the actual stats, reading each description in turn.

Luck turned out to be more important than he expected, though thankfully not so much in battle. Harry had heard kids curse a lot about saving throws and suchlike, but this didn’t seem to be the case here. “I guess there is a limit to how game-like combat can be if your, well, being the actual player instead of just playing the game from the outside.”

Wisdom, Intelligence, Constitution, Strength, Dexterity also showed no surprises. Wisdom and Intelligence combined to be his basic mental acumen, his ability to retain, use and analyze knowledge. The other three were his physical stats, which combined showed how strong, tough and quick he was as well as his physical endurance. “Oy, I knew I was weak for me age before, but come on, I’ve got these massive muscles now!”

Apparently that hadn’t carried over just yet, and Harry fought to keep an unmanly pout off his face. These stats, Harry realized, had to be his stats from before he was caught in this game. Just as an experiment, which earned him another intelligence point, Harry tried to use the four stat points he had to add to his largest stat, that of Dexterity and he could feel himself move a bit faster, and stronger. “Hmm... I wonder... I have to think that physical skills can only be taken to a certain degree, after all there is a physical limit to how strong or fast someone can be.”

That line of thought earned him yet another point in wisdom, and this prompted Harry to look at the last few stats. “Durability, the physical durability of your body minus your armor. Note, as a squishy human, there is marked limit to how durable you can become. That’s why god created armor.’ Funny, really funny wisearse. Still, again nothing I can do about that beyond reroll I guess, and I’m way more concerned about my strength stat. Paladin or no, there’s a limit to what I can do with such a small strength stat.”

The description of Charisma was surprising. It wasn’t just about how good he looked, charisma effected how others reacted to him, how good he could haggle, how more likely he was to be able to talk other people to his point, how he was able to gather attention or not as he chose. It also mentioned something about being attractive to the other sex ‘or whichever team you batted for’, which Harry barely understood enough of to blush over.

Willpower was simply immensely interesting and even without the bonus to constitution Harry would have felt the pain he’d gone through was worth it for this. Harry would have thought willpower tied into the mental aspects already covered by Intelligence and Wisdom, but it didn’t. This stat directly defined how protected a person’s mind was to domination, intimidation, demonic and undead auras, as well as direct magical mental assaults of all sorts. “Wicked...”

With his curiosity satisfied, Harry instantly removed the extra stat points from Dexterity, and put his hand over the large die, rerolling his stat. Instantly however, he cursed the flippant way he did so as his body changed and shifted inside. “GAHH!!”

This wasn’t as painful as it had been earlier, but it still brought back to Harry the fact this was serious. A moment later as he felt the difference in his body and looked at his new stats wonderingly. Harry quickly noticed the base starting stats was composed of a hundred points, but now how they were distributed had shifted, his body transforming as a result. *I have to assume that’s because of my new character’s age and the fact I’m starting at level five. Regardless, the additional stats don’t seem to matter to the hundred I reroll with.*

Strength: (16)

Willpower: (10) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (7) + 7

Charisma: (12) +4

Intelligence: (1) +10

Luck: (16) +/- 4

“Okay, wow, okay, this, this is real... wow.” Harry muttered, staring from his body up to the screen in front of him, feeling the differences in both the way his body reacted, how solid it felt, and how he had to force himself to concentrate more on what he was trying to do now than he had before.

“*BING*” A new screen popped into being to one side. “Master of the Obvious: for spotting something so obvious it really, **really** should have occurred to you before this, you have earned one intelligence point. Pretty soon you’ll be as about as intelligent as a teenager should be instead of a cloistered toddler. +1 to intelligence.”

“OY, just oy!!” Harry groused before shaking his head and ignoring the stat change. Still, it was obvious given how hard he was having to concentrate that this reroll just wouldn’t do. *“I might want to be a Paladin, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be able to think as well as I was before. And that luck stat is just wrong.* With that he hit the die again and it rerolled, while his body shifted to match his new stats.

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (10) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (9) + 7

Charisma: (10) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4

With that third reroll Harry was satisfied. With the additional points he'd earned, that was a damn good build. Harry thought about it, then put in two of the extra stat point into luck, the other two into Charisma, figuring that being able to make deals and such would be a good thing in the future. With that, his stats were complete, and he hit the large green 'is this okay' button at the bottom of the screen.

Instantly the screen and the corridor disappeared, to be replaced by the skull with glowing eyes set in the circle once more. **"Welcome to Baldur's Gate, try not to die!"**

"Oh, now even the BG voice is a snarky arse!?" Harry shouted, before darkness took him.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Harry had been creating his character, back in what could be euphemistically be called the real world, things had suddenly and quite abruptly gone awry for one elderly gentleman in a certain Scottish castle.

Albus Dumbledore had been doing paperwork. This in itself was nothing unusual. He was head of the Wizengamot, Chief Warlock of the ICW, and of course Headmaster of Hogwarts. All three jobs created paperwork like nobody's business, even for magicals. Yet he had long since created a spell to help him with this, sifting through paperwork. The important information that he had to take note of would glow and anything unimportant would sort itself out. After that another spell to write his name or what have you and the work flowed quickly and efficiently.

Best charm spell I ever developed, he thought to himself cheerfully as he finished in a day what would take most people at least four or five.

This was the secret to why he could hold as many jobs as he did. Mind you, Albus often wondered if he actually did the job as well as someone else would have. After his long, rather storied career, questioning himself like that was part and parcel of the individual that was Albus Dumbledore. But he always came back to the same point: If he wasn't the one doing it, who knows what his successor would do with this amount of power? Given how many pureblood people have been able to buy their way out of jail here in the UK, this was no small consideration, nor was it ego per se.

Albus could not control who would get either job here in Britain if he stepped down, and so he simply didn't. Stepping away from the Chief Warlock position was a possibility, and one he was thinking of hard these days, but even there he had misgivings on a few of the people who might succeed him.

However, what was about to occur took his mind off of all three of those jobs with a suddenness that would have caused any non-magical person who looked as old as Albus did to have a heart attack.

There was a loud popping trailing whistle from one side of the headmaster's quarters, and Albus looked up with shock as several knickknacks among the bookshelves to one side of the door imploded. He noticed Fawkes leaping away from his perch with a squawk but ignored his familiar for now, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

First to go was the Monitor Stone that he had connected to the Blood Wards around the Dursleys. The simple device simply shattered, the granite of it breaking like so much glass. The next thing that occurred was something tied directly to Harry, Albus having taken the opportunity to do so when Harry was unconscious at the end of the year. This was a much more complex device, consisting of two compass-like devices set into small 360 degree mantles to either side of one another. Currently tied into two large arrows on the two towers furthest away from one another, they would twist this way and that to point in the direction Harry was now. Instead of twirling to point where Harry was now thought, the needles began to melt in place.

"What in the world!?" Albus shouted, leaping out of his chair and over his desk in a display of agility that would've caused many a gasp from his students. He quickly moved towards the two knickknacks, whipping out his wand, and casting several spells over them. Then his face paled, and he realized that this wasn't the two devices finally deciding they were incompatible as he had long worried about.

With that he turned and thrust out his hand to a bird to one side. "Fawkes, come! We need to go and discover what has happened to young Harry!"

A second later in a flash of Phoenix fire, the two of them had appeared in the backyard of the Dursleys. Striding forward, he opened the door into the house, and moved forwards, his wand flashing out instantly. All three of the Dursleys, who had been watching TV, and had turned as he entered, froze. He then magically lifted Petunia into

the air, and gestured with his wand, bringing her forward towards him over the sofa.
“Where is Harry!?”

“G, Gh, he, he’s up in his room, if he’s not there I don’t know where he could be, or how he got, out the freak!” the horse-faced woman spluttered, trying to regain some measure of control.

“Take me to him right this moment!” he ordered, releasing the woman to thump to the ground, then made some sparks appear in front of her when she didn’t move, cursing and moaning about magical freaks. Warily she led the way up the stairs, looking as if she was afraid he would turn her to ash in an instant.

Albus’ eyes widened as he saw the cat flap on the door, and the amount of locks on it too, the thought honestly occurred to him. *I knew they would be strict with them, and I suspected they would be neglectful, but this level of caging him, that is beyond what I had thought he would face. I knew I should’ve used Legilimency on him when we met in the Inn!*

“Out of the way,” he said, pushing Petunia to one side. A single unlocking spell shattered all of the locks on the door, causing them to fall to the floor of the corridor. He pushed the door open rapidly, and looked inside scowling as he felt the miasma of magics within, all of which centered around a part of the bed, and an odd square thing set before a small kind of typewriter and what looked like a TV screen. “What has happened here!?”

OOOOOOO

The black around Harry soon faded as BG voice came back, its words drilling into his head. **“Nestled atop the cliffs that rise like a wall from the Sword Coast, Candlekeep is the largest and most comprehensive repository of knowledge in all Faerun. It is also a fortress of considerable might, one that has always held itself aloof from the goings on of the nations of the Sword Coast around it, and beyond. Life within is regimented, the monastic Order Of Keepers believing the preservation of the knowledge within is their greatest calling. To enter is nigh impossible unless one has access to tomes that those within have not seen yet. All save you and others like you, taken in while young by one of the Keepers as they go about Faerun.**

The man who took you in as a babe in arms was named Gorion. For the last twenty years you have remained here, under his care and those of the Keepers who look after other foundlings like you, training, learning, preparing for adulthood, with Gorion your father figure, his tales of his wanderings a delight every night, with each one

different, each one amazing. That time is soon to end however, as the moment to choose to become a Keeper or leave Candlekeep is coming on your 19th birthday.

Yet though that choice should be yours, Gorion has hinted it is not so, and the two of you will soon leave on an adventure. You are prepared for it, having spent almost as much time training in weapons-craft as you have in honing your mind and soul to battle evil as a Paladin, although you have yet to sit your holy vigil on either Helm or Tyr, the gods of Justice and Righteousness. But despite those preparations and indeed Gorion's own well known magical and physical prowess, you have detected something almost like fear a time or two in his voice. Something has spooked your father, and you feel the walls of Candlekeep no longer protecting you, but rather enclosing you within, for good or ill you cannot say."

At the same time those words were going through his head, so too were some images, one after another appearing faster and faster. It wasn't as if it was an entire life flashing before his eyes. That would've taken far too long. No, this was as if Harry was seeing a few highlights, things they could possibly be on a test or something afterwards.

A moment later, the darkness was ended, as someone shook Harry awake. "Wake up Hadrian! Wake up! You have slept over long today."

Harry blinked up, and saw an elderly gentleman standing over him. He had the build of a man who looked as if he knew his way around a fight, wide shoulders, with a few scars here and there on his lower face and pieces of the neck that Harry could see, but also a pair of glasses perched on his face and an intelligent look to him, a staff waiting against the wall nearby. Above his head blinked a bright green notice box, reading "Name: Gorion. Status: family figure. Level: 28 mage, level 24 bard."

Connecting this man with his new characters background story, Harry blinked, rubbing at his eyes as he thought of a simple line to reply to this man as he got his bearings. "I'm sorry Gorion, for some reason, my sleeping schedule has been all off-kilter these days."

"Bad dreams then? Well I suppose it's to be expected Gorion said with a sigh patting Harry on the shoulder. "Yes, dreams like that are to be expected. Still, we'll talk about them some other time, perhaps once we're on the road. You know now with spring fully upon us my plan going forward is to leave soon. I fear that Candlekeep is no longer as safe for you, or for me."

"Yes you've mentioned that plan before," Harry said, remembering the introduction as he smiled slightly at the odd amount of care Gorion's voice contained.

Swinging his legs to one side he stretched, staring at his forearms, chest and legs now. While creating this character he hadn't really been able to turn his head very well except when looking at the 'screens' or whatever they were. Because of that he hadn't been able to look down at himself, so the muscles on his stomach and legs especially were entirely new to him. "Have you set a date when you want to leave?"

"Looking forward to finding a temple then?" Gorion said cocking an eyebrow at Harry.

Harry paused, thinking about it. He hadn't been able to discover anything about the gods a Paladin could swear to during the character creation phase, and he didn't have any idea which would suit him best. Or even what criterion to use. It was the *Lay on Hands*, the idea of being his own, albeit limited, healer which had grabbed his attention. That and all the other undead buffs.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I think, I think that the God I should swear my sword to will, it will sort of come to me on the road you know," he said lamely. It was the best he could think of at the time.

This actually seems to be the proper thing to say though Gorion nodded. "Good thinking. It's never wise to force that kind of devotion. If you are truly called to the ways of a Paladin, a God will reach out for you and somehow guide your steps to one of his churches. If not, you could always fall back on being just another fighter. Although I am afraid it's a little too late for you to become a mage."

Gorion laughed at that, causing Harry to laugh. Gorion's laugh was somewhat infectious, deep and warm. And Harry honestly really liked the way Gorion was talking to him. *Is that because of the family relationship, or just because I'm an 18-year-old now rather than a 12-year-old? Whichever, it's nice not to be treated as a child so much as a young man.*

At that point, Harry noticed that an orange box had suddenly appeared to one side, containing a message. "Optional quest: Before you can continue on the path of a Paladin, you need to decide what God to swear to. And here you stand, in Candlekeep, the world's greatest library. Will you take this opportunity to research possible deities, or be a lazy ass! Rewards, 300 experience points,+1 to willpower."

Okay, so that means there are quests, that's kind of awesome! So I can level up, change my stats maybe change my skill slots, and people here have designations determining their relationship to me, going by Gorion's anyway. That I'll have to research.

Standing up, Harry surreptitiously swiped a finger through the box where the accept button was, and the box disappeared.

“You’ve missed breakfast But you have just enough time to wash up, and shade for member, honestly a Paladin forgetting to shave his face, and with that long hair of yours!” Gorion said, smiling at Harry, and it was only now that Harry realized that besides having massive muscles and everything else, he was also tall now! He was able to look Gorion in the eye, and actually had to look down at him by a few inches. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

At his words, Harry blinked, ruffling one of his large hands through his hair. “You have a point there,” he said ruefully. *Maybe I didn’t think the long hair thing all the way through it it’s going to keep getting in my eyes like that.*

“Of course I have a point. I always have a point don’t you know?” Harry laughed at that, but Gorion went on quickly. “As I was saying, you have enough time to bathe and shave, before you have to meet the arms master for training. Although honestly at this point, I doubt the man has much to teach you.”

“There’s always something more to learn,” Harry said quickly, glancing to the side as another orange square appeared showing another Quest popped up. “Tutorial Quest: Although you have trained for much of your life, there is indeed always more to learn. Practice with the keeper of the gates, the master of arms of Candlekeep, to earn some experience points.”

This will quest didn’t have the ‘optional’ label, and there was no way for Harry to refuse. That was interesting. *So, some quests are mandatory.*

“Sound thinking,” Gorion said with a nod. “Oh, and Imoen was looking for you earlier. Something about you skirting your duties in the kitchen last night?”

Harry laughed, while inside he was panicking. *Um, unless, was that the little girl I saw a few times in those images after the introduction?* “Please, it was Imoen’s turn to help the cooks cleanup,” he said, wildly prevaricating. Since Harry actually liked to cook- considering most of the time it made the Dursleys leave him alone- he figured that would carry over. Cleaning up after the Dursleys though was a chore, and he figured his character might try to get out of that kind of thing.

“True,” Gorion said with a nod. “Imoen is much more interested in learning magical cantrips hers, and practicing with Mme. Barca rather than doing her chores. Although I remember a time when you were just as likely to shirk your chores as well.”

Harry shrugged that, not knowing the answer to that one, and Gorion laughed. “Well at any rate, come find me when you’re ready to begin our preparations to leave. We’ll need to buy supplies at that point, and make certain that our weapons are up to snuff. This is a dangerous time on the Sword Coast after all.”

And if that isn’t a segue into a major quest later on I don’t know what is, Harry thought to himself as he bade Gorion goodbye for the moment, and turned to look around him. He found himself in a small alcove-like room, with nothing but a slim dresser to one side consisting of only two drawers, on top of which was a few knickknacks, a knife, and a few coins. Harry picked up each thing in turn, seeing an information bar appear in midair over each.

The first told him that the coins were the local monetary denomination, and that he had five gold coins to his name. The dagger read simply as “small bronze dagger, fit to cut your meals or shave with, but you wouldn’t want to try anything more dangerous with it. Durability, two of twenty.” The other knickknacks were a small file, a wooden comb, and a bracelet. Each of these also had a durability rating, which was important to note.

He picked up the bracelet quizzically, looking at the information screen. “Common copper bracelet. Can be sold for money, or given as a gift. Girls like shiny things after all.”

Blinking Harry set it down again, shaking his head. Then he frowned in thought, looking around himself and wondering where he should go to bathe. Then a thought occurred to him. “Map?” he said aloud. At first nothing happened, then when Harry resignedly exited the room a small screen like object appeared in one corner of his eyes, showing a tiny image of the room he had just been in, and the corridor he now was standing in.

“Excellent he muttered to himself, “although obviously I’ll need to update it myself. That wasn’t entirely the case.” As Harry turned, he could look down the hallway in either direction and the map updated as he did.

Harry also saw little information screens in front of each doorway as he looked at them in turn. Looking at each one in turn caused them enlarge to the point where he could read them, adding the information therein to the map. In this manner he found out that he was in the lower dormitories, with each room on this floor being an alcove room like his own. At the far end however, was another information tag that said Communal Bath. Nodding happily, Harry moved in that direction.

Opening the door at the far end, Harry found themselves looking into a simple room with several basins set along the far wall, and flowing water coming in from another

area that gently steamed. Above that was a window leading outside with small bars on it, and Harry could hear the crackle of a fire, indicating the water wasn't naturally warm.

Regardless of that, Harry moved over to a silver bright standing mirror, to look at himself thoughtfully. This was indeed the build he'd made, but actually being in this body was going to take a lot of getting used to. He held up one of his hands, which was at least twice the size of the hand he was normally used here and clenched it, then punched out experimentally. He did this a few times, then squatted down, then stood back up. Then remembering a few exercises he had seen Oliver force Fred and George to do, he dropped to the floor of the bath area and performed 20 quick push-ups before hopping to his feet, not even winded.

Wicked! He thought to himself, posing in the mirror. A noise behind him caused him to turn quickly, coming out of his pose look at the doorway, but thankfully it had just been the sound of the wind. Sheepishly, Harry moved over to the heated water, and filled in the nearby bucket, moving over to one of the numerous body-sized basins, filling it with water quickly.

With that done, Harry stripped out of his shirt, taking a moment to look at his muscles again, poking at the six pack he had. *That's cool! But I wonder, can... if I have this body definition now, this I mean I can use it?* Thinking about that, he nodded. *That makes a lot of sense.*

At that he paused, looking around, and then shrugged. *I suppose the easy time of getting bonus points to intelligence or wisdom is gone then. Well whatever, it gave me enough of a leg up already. Although the fact I had 2 for wisdom back in my original body is just wrong.*

With that, he began to strip off his pants, leather like he had been wearing during the creation process, only to blink and look down at himself. "...I mean, I knew that I was larger down there than I had been before, but what's with all the hair? Do guys really grow that down there too? Weird." He experimentally reached down and played with the hair there, and then measured his large hand against his penis, blinking. "Meh, I guess it's proportionate to the rest of me now."

Shaking off the thought as unimportant, Harry lifted a leg, then settled into the bath for a moment, sinking in quickly and dunking his head. Pulling back out, he moved his hands up his face, wiping away the water then into his hair, only to pause as he felt something on his face. He quickly patted it, wiping away the water, and then blinked. "Seriously? I do have to shave! I thought Gorion wasn't being serious about that, or does that mean I can change my appearance? That makes sense I suppose, but how am I

supposed to shave?" Harry remembered the dagger back in his room, and sighed. He hadn't brought it with him and for a moment, he debated getting out and going to get it.

Just then though, the door to the bath house opened, and a young woman entered. She was possibly around the age of a seventh year just like Harry's new body, with long blonde hair down to her shoulders in bouncy curls something like a Hufflepuff girl he'd seen once, though the color was closer to Lavender's.

She also had a large chest, which for some reason Harry's eyes gravitated towards before he could pull them away, and she was dressed in a kind of bar maid outfit or something similar. *Oh right, Middle Ages, not a lot of variety in dress at this point for most people.*

The girl looked at him, and smirked. As she did, Harry noticed an information box above her head. "Name: Cassandra, Occupation: a barmaid at the end of Candlekeep. Status towards you: very friendly." Harry wondered about why it said occupation instead of class, but that wasn't the oddest thing. That honor belonged to her status bar, which was pink.

"Oh sorry," Cassandra said with something in her tone, that made Harry start blushing for some reason. "I didn't know you were in here Harry. Do you need any... help?" she asked, saying the word in such a way that Harry's blush became even redder and it sent a tingle down Harry's spine, although he didn't know why.

He coughed, looking away, and said "I, well yes," he said, his voice thankfully not coming out in squeak as he had feared. "I seem to have left my razor in my room."

The girl's lips twitched, and she nodded. "I'll get it for you. But then all want something from you?"

"And what would that be?" Harry asked warily, still looking away.

She shook her head with a laugh. "Just because your training to be a paladin doesn't mean you are one yet, you don't have to look away from me like that you know. Even Paladins can at least look at girls."

"Yes, well, you're a little distracting," Harry said, which was the truth, although he honestly didn't know why. *I'm looking at her like I've seen...*

Blinking, Harry would have slapped himself in the forehead if he was alone as he realized. *Oh my God, I'm older now, I am looking at her like some of the older guys look at*

Angelina! Angelina, it was wildly believed, was the hottest of the three Flying Foxes and though only a third year, she had quite a lot of the older boys pining after her. Not that she gave any of them the time of day, being far more interested in flying than anything else.

Harry understood that she was pretty, and understood what pretty was. But before this, that had simply been an abstract sort of understanding. He liked to look at Angelina like someone would like to look at a painting. But looking at Cassandra now, that was causing him all sorts of new and unusual feelings. And below in the water, Harry's penis was beginning to stir for some reason. *What the heck!?*

"That was nice," Cassandra enthused. "Heartfelt, and unplanned. Talk like that will get you everywhere! I'll be right back. But I'll still want something in return."

Two information boxes, one a status box and the other a quest box, appeared to the side as Cassandra left. Throbbing red like the information box over Cassandra it read, "Congratulations, you have earned +1 to your relationship with Cassandra the barmaid! Continue to build up your relationship point if you want to pursue more than friendship with Cassandra."

"Wait, this game will give me points and status updates about my relationships with people around me?! Oh that is so wicked! If I ever get out of here, I have to think of a way to bring that with me! It'd make people so much easier to understand!" Harry enthused.

As Harry clicked out of that one, he read the next, which was another optional quest but this one just confused him. "The birds and the bees: Due to your **appalling** lack of knowledge before becoming the gamer, you should probably look into more things than you previously thought you should here in Candlekeep. Discover what boys and girls do together. Reward: +1000 experience, +1 to charisma, +1 to wisdom. Regular relationships with the opposite sex, (you are interested in girls aren't you?) become available. Penalties for not accepting include -3 to charisma, -4 to wisdom. You will no longer be able to form a regular relationship with a girl."

"What, what's more than friendship with a girl?" Harry mused aloud, one hand moving up to touch his scar on his forehead thoughtfully. Still, this was an obvious choice, and he clicked accept.

The door opened at that point, and Cassandra returned. She boldly strode across the bathing room towards Harry, who quickly covered himself as best he could. *What the*

heck!? The girls on the Quidditch team never bathed with the guys! And why is she looking at me as if she wants to eat me?!

A status screen popped up to one side, but Harry ignored it as Cassandra had reached him now and stood over the basin, staring down into it, and smiling beguilingly down at him. "Here's your razor," she said, handing him the knife while leaning over him unnecessarily. Harry blinked but couldn't look away fast enough to not see down her blouse, to the large ripe...

Below his hand, Harry found his penis slowly stiffening, and he looked away quickly. "Thank you Cassandra, but I need to get shaving," He said, quickly coming up with an excuse to get Cassandra out of there. "I have a meeting with the Master At arms soon."

Cassandra laughed. "That's a pity. I could have given you a whole new definition for the word 'education', Harry." She then shrugged. "Anyway, what I want your help with, is to deliver some wood to the inn. Winthrop threw out his back this morning, and he can't move the poor man. We'll need some for the cooking fires."

"Done," Harry said with a nod, as another optional quest screen appeared then disappeared as he accepted it. *Okay, so I can also accept verbally if someone is actually giving me the quest rather than the world around me. That's good to know.*

Then with a final look at Harry from head to toe, Cassandra smiled. "I'll see you when you drop it off then." With that she turned, swaying her hips in such a way that Harry could only stare like someone hypnotized by a cobra.

"That was, that was weird!" He looked down at himself, removing his hands to stare at his penis, and scowled. "And so were you! What the heck, you're not supposed to get all stiff like that. ...Are you?"

There was another ding and Harry finally looked up to see that his interaction with Cassandra had accumulated three more status change boxes. The first one was once more the same sort of throbbing red color as the first one about Cassandra. Congratulations, you have earned +1 to your relationship with Cassandra. She is now interested. A step beyond teasing, this relationship entails that the girl with this designation might be interested in you in more than a flirtatious manner, though physical or emotional is unknown at this time.

"That is... okay, I guess?" Harry said with a frown, before turning to the other two status box changes. Thick as a Brick! Because of your appalling lack of knowledge of inter-

people relationships, you have lost wisdom points. -2 to wisdom. The next one read the same thing, with only -1 to wisdom.

“Ouch, alright fine! I will go research this birds and bees nonsense first,” Harry groused, then looked down at the razor in his hand. “...But how exactly am I supposed to do this again?”

Harry’s first attempt at shaving himself did not go very well, but once he was finished nicking himself, Harry learned three things. One, his health bar would appear if he was injured, two, there was actual pain in this game, and three, shaving was damn difficult.

He stared at the little screen that it popped up, thinking about the implications of it. The screen said “you have cut yourself shaving. Perhaps next time, you should think about this thing called on mirror. -1 to health.” The red health bar had appeared like one of the other games boxes above his right arm, hovering there rather unobtrusively in comparison to the other boxes. Since Harry still wasn’t certain if other people could see them or would notice him interacting with them this was a good idea. The bar showed 99 out of 100, however as he was watching, it began to slowly fill itself.

That was a good thing to now, although he doubted it would carry over to actual injuries rather than self-inflicted ones like this. *No way am I lucky. Although, it could just be the fact it’s only nicks and scratches...* With that in mind, Harry turned to the wall, his fist flashing out.

“Crunch! You have hit the wall of castle keep, why did you do that again? -4 to health.”

“Three, really?” Harry groused, wincing and rubbing his wrist and knuckles. “Okay, so pain is real in this game, that’s as an important thing to know in the future.”

Thinking hard, Harry wondered what he should do first then decided that the impact to his wisdom was too great to ignore after talking to Cassandra so went with the plan he’d made after she had left: he went in search of the library. Since this place was called the greatest library in the world, he figured that would be easy. And it was thankfully.

Harry found the library began on the level directly above where he was his room had been. However, finding a series of books to help him about birds and bees, whatever they had to do with girls, was a little more difficult. He couldn’t just out right ask for help. Considering the snark he had been getting from the pop-ups about this topic, he figured this was the sort of thing that a person who was his physical body’s age would probably already know, and he didn’t want to bring more attention to himself than necessary. So he just wandered the halls of the library, which put the library of Hogwarts to shame.

It was **huge!** The interior of this library was at least as long as a Quidditch stadium, the main room maybe as tall as the seating for one and it also sprawled throughout the keep, spreading into wings, small alcoves and little nooks and crannies, all of them lined with books. Wherever there could be were stacks in between the walls varying in size, all of them rising straight up to the ceiling. The books all looked well cared for, put away correctly, their linings almost glowing with good health despite the fact most of them looked older than Harry could possibly guess.

Hermine would love this place! He thought to himself with amusement, coming out of one small alcove he'd found almost upon entering the library. *When I'm done with this whole birds and the bees nonsense, I might have to look into just reading for a time here. After all, this is tutorial portion of this game. Until I'm ready to actually leave the keep, will time even matter?* At that thought Harry paused, then clicked his fingers. It looked as if the time of easy intelligence or wisdom bonuses was indeed over and with a sigh, he moved deeper into the library.

However, just because he wasn't earning more intelligence or wisdom points didn't mean he wasn't learning things. Because as he went, he saw other people within the library and he immediately noticed something different about their stats in comparison to the one he had seen over Gorion and Cassandra's. Gorion's had been a bright green, Cassandra's that odd red pulsing color. The people he was seeing around him had yellow notifications, and when he clicked on them, he saw. "Keeper Tassin. No relationship possible."

He heard them talking, quietly going about their business in the library, so he figured that these people were technically speaking real, it was just that they couldn't have an impact on him or his life/game. Harry wondered if he should experiment with it. He walked up to one of them and said "Excuse me, but could you point me in the direction of books about the gods?" *After all Harry reasoned, I'm supposed to be researching them to aren't I?*

The man looked at him for a moment from under his cowl, then shook his head wryly. "Nigh on sixteen years you've been here and you still don't know where all the books are? No wonder Gorion is thinking of taking you away. You would never make a good Keeper. The books about God's are on the 13th shell, all of it, up on the fourth floor, right wing. If you're looking for specifics, I'm certain you can work that out on your own."

Harry nodded, and backed away, looking around for any status screens from the conversation and found one directly behind the man. *I wonder if I can set where those things appear.* He moved to that screen, touching it with his hand and moving it to hang up higher in the air, and then moved over to another Keep, asking the same question. When he did, the same status screen popped up in the new position behind the older one. *Good! I'm learning.*

He asked that man the same question, and got something of the same response, but just enough of a difference to make it seem as if this person was in point of fact an individual rather than a cut out cuddy cutting board character. He walked away from the both, then enlarged the screen, reading it slowly. “You have talked to a Neutral civilian: These characters can have little to no direct impact on your game or your life. They are their own people, and should be treated as such. Just because they’re not important to you, does not mean they’re not important to one another. Be wary of how you treat them, and always follow the Golden rule, which as a paladin you should already know.”

Harry chuckled at that then said it aloud. “Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.” *I wonder if that would have changed if I had chosen another type of class.* With that bit of his interest allayed at the moment, Harry closed both of those windows, then began to move through the library, always keeping in mind the number of the area where the gods could be found. *I wonder if they have children’s books.*

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“Well, what do you think?” Albus asked, looking over at the other two old men who were standing across from him in Harry’s bedroom. For the moment he ignored the former student who one of them had brought along. Since the young woman’s hair was shifting in a riot of colors as she moved around the room examining things, this was not as easy as it sounded.

The old man who had brought this former student had a wildly moving magical eye, and a stump for a leg. He had been poking and prodding at literally everything in the room with his companion, his body tense and wary. He, like the girl, wore red robes, though the young woman’s was freshly pressed and marked with a yellow shoulder pad. The old man’s robes were drab, aged, dirty and patched.

He was the one who spoke up first glaring up at Dumbledore. “Well, besides the various evidence of if not outright abuse, then certain neglect, I can’t see any kind of sign of foul play here.” He waited for Albus to respond to that as the young woman looked in their direction, her whole face flashing red in fury for a moment.

But Albus said nothing, and after a moment the man with the wild eye sighed and went on. “There’s a lot of magical miasma in the air, so much so I can barely see through it at all, but like I said, no sign of foul play or foreign magics that I can detect. What happened here was either item related, a long term enchantment, or...”

“Or...” the old other old man supplied, scratching at his chin thoughtfully as he stared down at the computer that had been by the bed. He had recognized it for a computer but had not spoken up yet, and was interested in hearing his comrade’s opinion before he did.

“Or house-elf related. Their magic is a bugger to spot at the best of times, and whoever used it here took pains to not leave any traces. With that, and the rest of the magic that occurred here, it’s a wonder I’m able to get any hint at all.”

The second old man nodded thoughtfully. “That dovetails with what I have discovered. I am detecting a lot of magic around this computer here, so much so that I’m wondering if Harry somehow discovered an enchanted computer that someone else had created as part of a trap or some-such. I really have no idea how magic would react to a computer, a device made to, in some small fashion, think for itself. At least that is how I understand such things. I do not know enough about them.”

“Whatever it is, it ran on magic, not electricity,” the girl said speaking up for the first time. All three of the others looked at her in surprise, and she shrugged. “Look, I know I’m knew to this whole magical detection business, that’s the reason why I’m with old Mad-Eye there,” she said jerking a thumb towards the old man with the magical eye and the obvious label. “But I know a bit about Muggle technology. That computer should be connected to the wall over there,” she went on, pointing to a wall socket. “It isn’t, and I’d say that means it was running on magic right? And it’s off now.”

“That could well be true yes,” the as yet-introduced third man said with a nod. “I’m getting a lot of gobbledygook here honestly, Albus, Alastor.” He confessed. “There was so many various magics and work on this computer it’s a wonder that anything happened at all. But something did and I’d wager that what happened here was completely accidental, or simply well beyond what anyone could anticipate. There are just too many odd signatures all mixed up together for it to be anything but an accident. A horrible confused accident. Which alas will make it all the harder to figure out what did, in fact, happen.”

“Indeed, Algernon. I had not detected the house elf magic, but I was able to pull out Harry’s signature some Norse too, something well beyond what Harry would be able to perform. I believe you are correct, Harry found a magically enchanted computer and being young and ignorant, attempted to repair and use it. Something happened, and he was teleported elsewhere.” Albus said musingly. “The question then is how to find him and bring him back.

While the young girl mumbled something about the three of them being the A-team for some reason, Algernon shook his head. “There was another signal there, but as an Unspeakable, I’m afraid I can’t share the nature of it with either of you.”

Albus winced at that, knowing the number of magical vows all the Unspeakables operated under. A secret part of the magical government, the Unspeakables operated in shadows and obscurity, their job being to keep certain dangerous magics under wraps, to destroy old magics which were too dark or powerful to allow to continue to exist and making certain that other secrets, some magical, some not, never saw the light of day. Albus had worked with Alergnon Croaker on many jobs before, and now however there were levels of secrecy to his job. "Is this something you need to investigate, or destroy as soon as possible?"

"Destroy," Croaker replied coldly. "Every example of this kind of magic is supposed to be found and destroyed by my department. I've dealt with only one before this in my lifetime but any Unspeakable is Oath bound to destroy it." His teeth bared slightly. "I can put that off for a time, use the fact it is part of an ongoing missing persons investigation, but I will need to first try to trace Harry's steps so we can find out where he found this computer. If there was one, there could be others."

"Agreed. We need to trace Harry's movements, question those three creatures downstairs," Mad Eye said authoritatively. "And find out how a house elf is involved in this."

"So that's it, we just take the computer and question the locals, nothing else? What are we doing to find where Harry was sent?" the young woman asked looking angry.

"Why do you care Tonks?" Alastor asked. "I've told you, investigations like this demand some objectivity. We won't find anything if we go harrying off."

The girl with the odd colorful eye blinked, then seems to shrink in on herself. "He, he's my cousin," she muttered. "My Grand-mum Dorea married his grandfather." Inside the young woman

"Regardless, I need to take custody of that computer now. I'll have it down in my office, you can both come and examine it there, but I need to take command of it at once, my oaths demand it." Croaker said commandingly. "And I'm sorry to say this Albus, but I need to be more concerned about where that specific bit of magic came from than where Harry is now. You two and young Miss Tonks will have to handle that side of the investigation without me."

Tsking, Mad-eye nodded as did Albus. "I'd rather be involved on that end of things to meself, but finding Potter alive takes priority."

"Indeed. I will endeavor to trace the magic of the house elf, perhaps one of the house elves at Hogwarts could help me with that. Alastor, would you and Miss Tonks question the Dursleys for us. I believe Petunia in particular would be of help in this. I understand she spends most of her time at home." Albus said, pulling out a small vial. It looked like glass, or quartz, and he held it over the computer.

Algernon tensed, but Albus simply waved him off, muttering an incantation and waving his wand in his other hand. There was a faint ping, and the air around the computer slowly changed color to a light coppery color, flowing into the vial. The color seemed to calm Croaker down, though why Tonks couldn't figure out, watching this avidly.

"There, that gives me enough of a sample. I believe we should meet in Algernon's office tonight to discuss our findings. Until then."

With that Albus disappeared, apparating out in the neatest, smoothest apparition Tonks had seen this side of a house elf. *Damn me we do tend to take them for granted, don't we? House elves are a lot more powerful and versatile than we ever give them credit for.*

Algernon hefted the computer up one piece over the other, stuffing them into a large mokeskin pouch before nodding over at Alastor. "Until then Moody, oh, and you might want to check in with me in a few hours. If I find where this computer came from, well, I doubt you'd want to miss the fireworks."

Mad-eye cackled at that, and led Tonks out the door. She however paused, staring around the room, her face guilty, before she shook it off and followed her mentor out the door.

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Harry spent the rest of that day in the library, trying to discover more about birds and bees for some reason that eluded him until he actually did so. Luckily for Harry, the greatest library in the known world did indeed, have the some books designed to aid in teaching children. Despite his new body and looks, Harry was after all, mentally speaking still something of a 12-year-old. A mature 12-year-old in many ways, but also one that didn't really get out much or had anything in the way of adult role models.

Harry finally found some books that were on the topic that he had been told to research in no uncertain terms. It was labeled *Girls, Boys, the Differences Between Them, and Why They Matter*. It came with cutouts, and that was enough to cause Harry some nightmares that night when he retreated to his room, his eyes wide and unseeing, only the skill Gamer's Mind keeping him from going completely barmy. Or Harry thought of them as nightmares. He woke up with his penis hard, memories of the girl Cassandra in his head and his head so aflame Gorion asked if he was feeling sick.

As Harry had speculated would occur, his next morning started the same exact way, sort of. Gorion came and waking him up with a head on his shoulder, and mentioned the same thing as he had the day before. The wording was different however thanks to Harry's flaming face, and

that was enough to tell Harry that even if he was stuck in a kind of time loop during this tutorial phase, the people within it were still people, not caricatures. Harry had to respect that.

That morning, Harry practiced shaving himself again rather than simply getting into the bath, this time using a small mirror and then headed back to the library, his face as grim as someone heading to the gallows. He still had that hit to his wisdom he had to get over, no matter how embarrassing. The wisdom stat was just too damn important to his overall mental abilities to ignore.

Over the course of the next three loop days as Harry thought of them, Harry figured out exactly what the birds and the bees had to do with girls and boys, what all the mechanics were and everything else he could learn from that book. The cutouts still gave him issues each night, and Harry was honestly mortified in a lot of ways by them.

But that didn't stop his body from reacting. Whenever he saw a pretty girl, and there were several here in Candlekeep, his body would react. His eyes would stray where they shouldn't, and his mind would start to wonder and his body reacted. Controlling that reaction took several more loop days, but eventually, Harry learned enough to at least get back some of the wisdom points he had lost during that brief interaction with Cassandra. He had gone from that book to others about courtship and other things, even reading a romance from cover to cover, but most of it just didn't make much sense to him.

From there he'd spent a few days trying different ways to greet Cassandra, ranging from smiling at her and joking around, being embarrassed (he'd done this one several times, albeit unintentionally...) and twice going even further. Feeling very daring, indeed feeling very cocky overall thanks to his new body, he had invited her to join him in the bath, and gotten his first kiss for his troubles.

After Cassandra had reluctantly left after that, Harry saw the notification that he had completed the quest.

You have discovered what every little boy entering his manhood should learn, if more from books than from people as is normal. +1000 experience, +3 to your wisdom.

Bonus! You have gone beyond reading, both flirting with girls and trying to control yourself around them. Due to your ability to control your wandering eyes, You get +1 to willpower.

Due to flirting successfully with the Barmaid, you get +1 to charisma. Don't get cocky about that last one though, there are reasons why barmaids are known as easy after all.

Harry groused to himself that the game really was a snarky SOB, but put that to one side for now. The bonus to willpower was nice after all and he guessed the charisma was also nice.

“But besides kissing, and I suppose other stuff, being nice, I’m not arguing that they would be, what’s the point about relationships in this game?”

Looking around the castle figuratively, Harry frowned in thought wondering what else he should do. “So long as I’m stuck here in this tutorial I should try my best to better myself in as many ways as possible. It doesn’t seem as if I’ll be forced to leave anytime soon after all, best to use that loophole in the game right?”

With that in mind, Harry asked the nearest Keeper for a paper and ink, having gotten used to the lack of pens and pencils easily thanks to his time at Hogwarts. Indeed, besides his ongoing body issues – Harry would swear a certain part of him had a mind of its own – and his still needing to get used to being unable to slip into the background, Harry had rather gotten used to his time here in this new world. Part of that of course was his Gamer’s Mind skill. But part of it was the fact the people here were nice and Gorion was just great. He and Harry had every meal together and spent that time talking and laughing, with Gorion telling Harry of his adventures and Harry of the books he had read that day or what else he had been up to, bar his flirting and that kind of thing of course.

The only two things he actually hadn’t gotten used to was his hair, and the food. Harry had cut his hair in the mirror at one point, but it had grown back the next loop day, which irritated him. Harry figured he would have to wait until he was out of this tutorial to make any permanent change to himself. But the food was just poor, there was no other way to put it. The bread was decent, if very plain, butter was butter, but there weren’t nearly as much variety or spices, not even as much salt, as Harry was used to at Hogwarts. Even compared to the food he got from the Dursleys it was kind of poor in taste, though it made up for that with amount.

With his paper and quill Harry made a list of things he wanted to research, things he had to know, and things he wanted to do. *Hermione was right, making a list makes things a lot easier to manage. I still don’t think you need to make time on a daily schedule to visit the privy though, I’ll still side with Ron on that one,* Harry thought, with some amusement as he looked down at the list he had compiled.

1. Figure out more about the game, its controls and everything else about it I can. Experiment and see how people react to the Game bits.
2. Figure out the connection between magic from my own world and this one.
3. Continue to build up my knowledge of the world of Tyriel.
4. Research the gods I am supposed to swear to, and figure out what that might mean.
5. Create a war chest or something? I don’t think the gold I have will be enough. Build up some weapons too.
6. Built up my skills and stats if at all possible, including my general level.

Looking at his list, Harry was well-satisfied. He even thought that he had gotten the priority right. The game, its controls and the abilities it gave him seemed like they could be very important in the long run. He had already learned that people like Gorion had some of the abilities his Gamer ability gave to him, but not to the degree. Gorion talked about spell levels, learned abilities and levels, but didn't seem to know about the ability to upgrade his stats consciously, and Harry wasn't certain that Gorion's talk about levels were the same thing as his own. He also didn't have the item box, something Harry had discovered the same loop day he'd found the first book on sex. Gorion wasn't able to see the screens Harry could either, but Harry wasn't certain that meant he couldn't consciously interact with things pertaining to his own levels and skills.

However, Harry had also learned things about his ability to read people's information. If the person was too high a level in comparison to his own Harry wouldn't get any information from him, instead the information screen would just be blank save for the name and sometimes the class. There were four people like that in Candlekeep, all four of them senior Keepers, two of them the leader of the keep and his second-in-command. And Harry could see a lot of information about those who had less levels than he did, save for the citizens, who didn't seem to have much in the way of information.

Putting the note in his Item Box, Harry stood up and heading deeper into the library, smirking suddenly. *Huh, that could be an interesting experiment too, see if something I put in my Item box remains in there when a loop day restarts.*

With that the first time on his list in mind, Harry wandered in the library, using trying to figure out books that would help him in the long run. He found several, which fell into two categories. One was lore-based, books that taught him about the world in general, history and stuff like that, taking care of number three on his list. Through this he learned a lot about the geography of the world, the Sword Coast, Candlekeep's neighbors, a general overview of the history of the area and the gods in general. He even learned about the Time of Troubles and how it began, and the fact it had ended while his new body must have been a toddler.

Those were interesting, but Harry actually had to physically read through, which made them very different from the other types of books he found and time consuming. Harry spent half the day with them, the other half doing other research or small tutorial quests. Those quests stopped giving him any experience quickly, but they helped in other ways.

One way he spent this time was to train with the Master of Arms, and here he learned possibly the most important things he ever learned during this loop time. First, combat was very hard, and second, it wasn't anything he had thought it would be like.

“So Gorion says he thinks I’ve got naught more to teach you lad,” The Master of Arms, a man named Jondalar said, tossing a staff over to Harry. “Well, let’s see about that aye. Have at you!”

Harry caught the staff and fumbled with it for a second but was still able to get the staff between him and his attacker. He took a step back then was forced to defend himself again and again. His arms didn’t move on their own, as his legs had during the character creation process, but Harry was somehow able to see how Jondalar was attacking, and could then block him more easily. This was a major aid, but there didn’t seem to be anything game-related for a time, and Harry took two hard hits with the staff, causing im to grunt in pain. No stranger to pain in his old life, these hits still hurt like blazes.

Then Jondalar stepped back, signaling the end of the bout. “Hah, well your base reflexes and strength are good enough, now let’s switch to sword and shield and see what happens aye?”

Harry followed the man over to a weapon’s rack and took both a shield and a sword down, hefting effortlessly, something that still, after more than a month in this world, still surprised him. Both were practice weapons with low durability and high weight, but he could still use them easily. He turned and blocked the next attack Jondalar launched at him, even as he read off a status box above the fight.

“You have equipped a shield and weapon Combo. Since you have skill points in this ability, you will see a buff to your defense and overall speed while you have a shield and weapon equipped.” Behind that was another one. “You have equipped a sword. Since you have skill points spent on this weapon, you will see a buff to your offensive abilities while wielding it. Find magical weapons or armor to add more to your speed and striking power.”

To Harry, it seemed as if Jondalar was now moving in slow motion, and he almost negligently blocked the man’s next blow. He dodged backwards from a slash that snaked in over his shield, then somehow knew he should bash forward with the shield. This caught Jondalar in the chest, forcing him backward with a grunt of displaced air. Harry’s sword then flashed out before the other man could recovered and smashed into the older man’s chest sending him sprawling. He rolled on the ground and came back in, but it was obvious to Harry now that the skill slots were hugely important, helping him by giving him instincts he wouldn’t otherwise have as well as adding to his base strength and speed when

Then he discovered something else as he raised the blade and went on the attack once more. A red mark of some kind appeared in his vision and Harry instinctively aimed for it, where it lay on the side of

A small screen popped up then “Follow the bouncing red dot! Thanks to your two skill points with a sword when engaged in combat and using a sword you can see an aiming point and aim for it. Hitting that point will allow you to land a critical hit. Warning, your chance to hit is based on your dexterity, familiarity with your weapon, luck and of course your enemy. Remember, the enemy always gets a vote too!”

Harry attempted to hit that point but found his sword blocked. Moving his shield instinctively Harry stepped back and blocked Jondalar’s riposte, and the two continued. Harry would then come back to train like this every third loop day. He didn’t gain any experience for it beyond the first day, but the training with his new body and abilities was invaluable.

But even with what he learned from Jondalar and the other two mini-quests that taught him about combat if he had to categorize it, that information took third place to Harry’s personal investigations and what Harry found out via the second type of book: Information Books. When Harry picked the first one of these he found up, a bright green box appeared in his line of vision over it.

He dropped the book in surprise not having seen that occur before, catching it right before could it hit the ground. *Seeker reflexes, gotta like them!* Holding the book up again, he looked at the title, reading it aloud. “Relationships and you: forming parties, forming romantic entanglements, friendships, and how they impact your abilities.”

“You have found an information book!” The information slot said. “To read, simply press accept. A certain amount of time will pass, and the information will now be available to you simply inputting itself into your brain. Note, there are six information books in all in this tutorial section. Can you find them all? Bonus 400 experience points.”

Harry grinned at that, and hit accept. The book burst into flame and Harry stared around in horror, anticipating literally everyone else in the keep attacking him for destroying one of their precious books. But nothing happened, and he breathed a sigh of relief. *Huh, I guess those kids of books only appear for me then?*

Setting that to one side, Harry closed his eyes, and suddenly he just knew things. He knew about the levels of relationships, as well as the types. And how they tied into his intelligence and wisdom. Relationships directly impacted how people interacted with you. If you were friends with a merchant for example they would give you better deals. If you were friends with another adventurer like Gorion, you could invite them to form parties. The higher the friendship level, the better you worked together, up to and including creating group tactics, team attacks, even magically aided attacks.

All of that was interesting, but what surprised Harry the most was that forming relationships with women could also give permanent benefits or penalties. Some of them were kind of self-explanatory. The book told Harry that he would earn a slight bonus to charisma and wisdom the first time he formed a relationship with a woman. If he formed a purely physical relationship, which was what Cassandra had been hinting at, he would get a bonus point to Constitution.

But the book hinted at more: hidden abilities, skills, and bonuses to his basic stats than that if you had a relationship with another adventurer. It also warned about negative effects if such a thing occurred and the relationship failed for whatever reason. That was good, that could be really good. Harry was very pleased with his new knowledge, and what it meant in the long term.

“So I should look for friendships at the very least, and even romantic stuff can give me bonuses both in the long and short term. Weird, but certainly helpful. Still, I’m not happy about the moral side of things there. Although, I suppose if we both go into the relationship knowing that we aren’t interested in more it would be fine, right?” Harry mused, shaking his head as he tried and succeeded in stopping his body from reacting at the memory of her kiss or the view down her dress she’d given him.

It had to be said that Harry dismissed the idea of taking a loop-day to create a relationship with someone else, like one of the young Chanters who served the keep or the visiting mage Phylidia, who he had met on a small side-quest. There were a few chanters who were the light pink of ‘interested in you’ and Phylidia reached that point once when he took her side quest, although Harry had no idea what he’d done to get that reaction.

After all, he could enter the relationship, get the stat bonuses, and then the next day not be committed to anything since he was the only one who remembered anything after a loop day ended. But that would be wrong, toying with someone’s feelings like that, even if they would never remember it.

The next three books were not nearly as helpful. They went over information he had already figured out for himself during the current character creation process; what restrictions were, weapon combos, and suchlike, the Item box, and more along those lines, although they did mention that Harry was the only person who could see most of the information he did. The next one he found though was very helpful indeed. It gave him the information to be able to change some of what the game called the ‘interaction grid’. This meant how he saw the map, what information was shown, how to control where the information boxes showed up by type, how to create a journal that he could access mentally, how to create what was called a quick slot, which was extremely helpful for his day to day movement about Candlekeep.

The last however was even more helpful. It was labeled "*Magic in the world of Faerun.*"

When Harry gleefully clicked on it, the book burst into flame, causing him to once more look around quickly. AN instant later he stopped worrying about death by lynch mob, because now Harry knew how magic worked in this world.

Mages started in something like the same way as wizards did back in his own world. They would learn spells that other people had created, writing them down in spell books and memorizing their words using words, gesture and a wand or staff to create the effect. Magic in this world were also much more versatile as it was for only the best wizards back home, allowing some wizards to create their own spells or small cantrips to create changes to the local environment. The one area though where Harry's world was better than this one was in transfiguration and conjuration. Here both of those were incredibly difficult magical schools to learn and power intensive to boot. Back home, that was certainly not the case.

Eventually as they grew in power and skill, the only really limitation was how many spells per day they could wield, gestures and words falling by the wayside followed then by foci. But that limitation was a hard line dependent on level, and they always, **always** had to write them down in their book. They could eventually disdained a foci, though many staffs or other items existed that could help a wizard with spellcasting in various ways. A wizard could even learn how to create his own staff and add magic to it as he wished, including spells set to automatically activate under certain conditions.

All spells had a duration time, whereas powerful enchantments did not. Enchantments were the work of extremely powerful mages working alone or in groups. They could imbued into items to create long term effects such as adding to a weapon's hitting power or durability, or imbued into an area to create a bubble of influence or some such.

It was very interesting, but none of it told Harry the one thing he wants to know above all else at this point. How the spells from his own world carried over into this one. But it did tell him to things he needed to know to start: a mage needed a focus to start, and apparently needed to write down the spells.

"All right," he said to himself, "it's time for some more experimentation."

With that, Harry observed the people around him, seeing which of the keepers were mages, and how they treated their staffs. Eventually, he found one, an elderly woman of Phylidia's acquaintance who was very forgetful about where she placed her staff. Once he spotted her leaving it in one of the alcoves, he snatched it up and hid it in his room until after the evening meal, which was a time he knew the dorms were largely empty and no one was looking for him.

Staff in hand, Harry returned to his own room, and began to go through the gestures of one of the few spells that he had memorized beyond all others: Reparo. Using his body's strength, he bent a coin out of shape, nearly in half in fact, then pointed the staff at it, and intoned "Reparo!"

There was a moment of nothing, and then a flare of yellow light from the staff. Harry felt drained and in pain for some reason, but the coin was once more pristine.

A instant later as he was still contemplating this latest development, a massive notification square appeared in front of him. "Congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch! Because of your unique otherworldly status as a wizard where you came from, you have discovered the ability to use the spells from your own world in this one. Don't get cocky though, because with each spell cast, your lifepoints will takes a hit! New status added, Mage of the Blood."

Harry frowned once more wondering about the level of lip the game occasionally gave him, but decided to leave it to be for the moment. He opened his status board, and looked at it closely, clicking on the new addition noticing that the two that had been blocked out were still there. This was an entirely new ability blood-based ability. Harry clicked on it and saw the information within.

Mage of the Blood: Due to special circumstances you have discovered you can use the spells of your original world here in the game. However, this comes at a cost to not only your mana, but your very life.

Restrictions: you can no longer dual-class as a mage. Spells from your old world can only be used a limited number of time per day, the number of times to be determined by your level. The number of different spells you can retain per day is also dependent on your level.

"Wicked!" However, Harry knew that this was of limited utility. After all, he didn't know that many spells, and he doubted anyone in this world would be very affected by, say a tickling charm. Although the immobilization spell was one that he definitely could see being of use, just like the Stupefy spell.

Harry didn't need to write the spells into a spell book, but there was a certain definite limit to how many use per day. Like with his quick slots, Harry basically hung the spells to one side of his mind and then could use them a certain amount of times before they disappeared from his mind. At this point he could use a spell three times but could only retain two different spells in his head.

And like the warning had told them, they definitely hit his health. The stupefy spell, which Harry wasn't as familiar with, took thirty health points away. The Reparo spell only five. Still the

implications were so huge that Harry felt the impact to his health was worth it. It wasn't something he was going to want to overuse though.

After several weeks of loop-days, Harry finally decided he was done with the library. He could stay there forever of course, reading different books, but he had memorized the geography of the region, a lot of the history, and read through several small time skill books, such as how to set a fire, how to hunt, and set up a tent, things that would no doubt be useful once he was satisfied and moved beyond the tutorial phase.

He had even studied up on the gods which had paladin orders, Ilmater, Tyr, Torm, Helm and Lathander. None of them leaped out as being someone he would swear to serve however. Torm was possibly the closest to his ideal. However Lathander also interested him as did Ilmater. Tyr seemed to be too distant and unemotional a deity for him, and Helm, well unthinking obedience wasn't something Harry ever wanted to be associated with. Harry had also learned that as a paladin he couldn't learn how to lock picks. He also couldn't learn how to intimidate, it was apparently beneath a paladin which was kind of odd to Harry, but he wasn't going to complain given he had experimented with Lay on Hands, and it worked even without Harry swearing himself to a specific deity.

With a newfound desire to see if he could up his level or stats, Harry took to moving around the keep even more than he already had been, taking a series of small quests, both from Gorion and from others. ,

It was an intriguing time, though none of the quests he found added to his stats. All of them did give him experience, but not enough to level up. And Harry discovered that every quest only gave him experience the first time he did it.

That didn't stop Harry from continually finding Phyldia's book for her, because she kept on giving him a jewel for it, which was there the next day, unlike any money earned. That rather bothered Harry, but he supposed his money pouch was a part of this world, whereas his item box was it's own separate, and very small, dimension.

He ended up with eighty jewels separated into eight slots in his item box, having just spent those days to do that and actually get to know the older woman who became rather interested in him. He was even able to raise their relationship level to flirtatious, earning a +1 to his charisma, although only the first time alas.

At the other end of the relationship spectrum was, oddly enough, the odd woman named Imoen. She was a short girl, maybe only five feet two if that, with long brown hair to her shoulders, clean but not well cared for beyond that, a winsome smile and ready wit, at home in

either leathers or the cloak everyone in the Keep habitually wore day to day. Her class was a thief, and she loved it.

But the reason why she was at the opposite end of the relationship spectrum from Phylidia was Harry couldn't impact their relationship at all. The only time he could find her even for a few minutes was if he decided to forgo shaving and headed out to get some food in the morning from the inn instead of waiting for the refectory to serve lunch. There she was running out on her own errand, and, after only a few minutes of back and forth banter, she would rush off.

He learned from this that she was a bit of a thief in truth not just in class: she enjoyed picking locks, setting traps, and pickpocketing for fun. There was never anything malicious about what she did, it was simply a way to challenge herself. She liked pranks, dirty jokes, and was insanely jealous of Harry leaving the keep. She wanted to go, but had been refused permission thanks to her own step-mother, Mme. Barca, a senior Keeper, saying she wasn't ready for it yet despite being only a year younger than Harry in his new body. After two weeks of trying to interact with her longer or even find her after that, Harry gave up, deciding this had to be part of the game somehow.

Eventually, Harry got to the point where he felt he had plumbed the depths of Candlekeep the tutorial. It was time to move on and see what else the world had to offer. However, something was about to occur that would change that opinion.

OOOOOO

Tonks was angry though she would be hard pressed to decide whether or not she was more furious at herself or the world around her. The talk she had just stomped away from with her mother had not helped matters. "Well, if Harry wasn't going to approach you, then perhaps, you should have tried to approach him' my ass! I was a Hufflepuff, he was a Gryffindor, I was a seventh year, he was a little firstie, how the heck was I supposed to meet him outside of mealtimes, and crossing tables at mealtimes was practically forbidden! Stupid house rivalries, stupid Snape, jumping down everyone's throats, stupid teachers with their bloody mixed messages," Tonks snarled as she stomped down the street from her parent's house.

The fact of the matter was, Tonks was feeling guilty about the fact that she had never approached Harry, despite the fact that they were family. She really wasn't happy about that, but seventh year at Hogwarts was just so dang busy! She had her prefect duties, she had her training to get up to snuff before joining the Auror corps, and she had her regular classes. She just didn't have any free time, that was why she had never gotten back together with anyone after she and Charlie mostly broke up the year before.

At the same time, that was all an excuse. She hadn't wanted to approach Harry, she hadn't really known how to relate to. Walking up to him and saying "Hi, my name is Tonks, never ask about my first name, did you know that I used to change your diapers" would probably not have worked, given how shy and insular the kid had seemed to be at the time. And to be blunt, she hadn't really thought much about him at all other than that first day when she saw him at the welcoming feast. Call it the insular mindset of a teenager, but she hadn't.

Now the kid was gone, and there seemed to be little to know way to find him. "Not that I'm involved with the search much, if at all. Muggle expert my tight, taut arse!" she grouched as she found an empty alleyway. Making certain there was no one around, she then apparated into her apartment off Diagon Alley. "If I'm such an expert why don't they bloody actually ask me anything!?"

Tonks knew she really didn't have anything to add to the A-team for the elderly, they had the knowledge, the power and the resources, all she had was imagination and some more knowledge about computers, which they seemed to think wasn't enough. Not that they're having much like either.

The Unspeakable Croaker had somehow found out where Harry had found the computer and had gone on the warpath in that direction. Borgin, despite having obliterated himself of the sale, was now in jail, and Malfoy was also in jail being questioned since Borgin hadn't made himself forget who had sold him the item Croaker was so concerned about.

Minister Fudge had tried to stop the investigation, tried to get Malfoy freed. But Croaker was an Unspeakable, and their laws were older than the Ministry. Fudge could dismiss one of them for cause, but only if the other Unspeakables agreed. And getting in the way of their investigations was a worth a very quick ticket to a Veritaserum interrogation. After having this explained to him in very small words, Fudge had, very reluctantly and yet oh so satisfyingly (Tonks and Moody had both been there when Albus and Algernon had laid down the law) been forced to back off.

Mad Eye was now helping on that end, having already figured out Harry's movements prior to disappearing. But while they'd figured out what Harry had done, they hadn't figured out where he might have gone, and there was nothing hinting at that.

The headmaster's attempts to find the house elf involved had proven fruitless. He was now trying to work out what could have happened if the Soul Trap didn't activate appropriately thanks to all the other magic in action, and the muggle computer itself. He wasn't having much luck, and worse, he had to prepare for the inevitable fallout when school began and Harry didn't show up. Even Mad Eye was kind of worried about the fallout from that, but they had Malfoy and

anyone else they could smear with it ready to take the fallout. Yet that wasn't getting them any closer to finding Harry.

It all came back to the computer, Tonks groused. Something about it, the thing's programming or the house elf's magic has somehow sent Harry somewhere. With Croaker unable to tell anyone about the Soul Trap thanks to his Oaths, the idea Harry had been teleported somewhere was the most viable occurrence anyone could think of. But only Tonks was thinking that maybe the computer itself held the kid to finding him. But the others were blinded by their own gray hairs, and wouldn't listen to her.

Stalking around her apartment Tonks worked herself into a frothing anger at that, then abruptly turned and stalked out of her house, making her way to the ministry building. There she made her way to Croaker's office. There she didn't find the man himself, he was with Moody right now going over the plunder of the Malfoy manor raid.

This, to her mind, was part of the problem. Only Albus was really trying to find Harry any longer. The other two had let their interests in getting rid of more Dark objects and wizards out of circulation blind them to the fact Harry might be out there somewhere, needing rescue. *If this doesn't work, no harm done, if it does, the worst that can happen would be that I join Harry wherever he is.*

Determinedly, Tonks moved over to the computer sitting down in front of it. Reaching forward she turned it on. Beyond the noise and the weird light nothing seemed off to her. The operating system powered up, and nothing more happened. With a shrug and a muttered "Bloody hell, don't know what everyone was afraid of," she began to use the mouse to look around. She discovered there wasn't much on the computer, only the regular Windows stuff, and a few games. *Could the games have been affected magically but not the rest?*

With nothing more to go on since her first thought of just powering up the computer and something happening hadn't worked, she examined the games critically. "Now if I were Harry Potter, which game would I want to play?"

After a moment she clicked on the Baldur's Gate icon, and finally something happened. The screen flashed white, the computer went blort, and Tonks disappeared.

"Warning, this is only a single player game, you cannot play it at the same time! Fitting you into a contextual template, please wait."

"Whut?" Tonks muttered, staring around at absolute blackness. "Whut the bloody hell is going on here?"

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This time when Gorion mentioned going to bathe he shook his head. "I think I'll go exercise the Master of Arms first. No reason to bathe and then go sweat again is there?" Harry knew from experience that training with the man would lead into the series of quests which would let him and Gorion prepare to leave the Keep that afternoon. He had never completed those quests yet, but he was ready to move on now.

"Spoken like a true boy, whatever your height," Gorion said with a laugh, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

Harry smiled back, having come to greatly enjoy his time with Gorion. The two of them would meet in the morning like this then later have lunch together. Harry could then choose to spend the evening in the library, reading side-by-side with Gorion asking Gorion questions about his adventures out in the world. In this manner, and thanks to the amount of time Harry had spent here in the tutorial, Gorion had become what the game had called him, the closest thing to a father figure or at least a male role model that Harry had. It wasn't very close admittedly, but it was the best Harry had ever had.

"I'll tell him to expect you then," Gorion said with a smile, "and I hope that you will be ready to leave this afternoon. I'd like us to leave if we can today."

Nodding at that, Harry got up and exited the room, avoiding the Cassandra encounter for the first time in several days. Of course, this way also took him outside in the keep's training ground at the same time that Imoen was exiting the inn. He smiled and waved at her when something odd happened.

Everything sort of shimmered for a second, like the world had paused or, or maybe skipped like a record hitting a scratch. Harry stared around him but no one else seemed to have noticed and he frowned, wondering if it had been his imagination. And then Imoen stumbled, and would have fallen if Harry hadn't caught her. "Imoen, are you okay?"

"Ergh, take me back home Daddy, that twirl and hurl's livin' up to it's name..." Imoen groaned. "What the bloody bugging shite was that all about? and why does me chest feel so much smaller?" she looked up at Harry's face and blinked. "And who're you supposed ta be scruffy?"

This caused Harry to stare at Imoen in shock, almost dropping her, his shock growing deeper as her hair started to change into a light pink color. "What the heck..."

End Chapter

So there you have it. the character creation aspect sort of blindsided me by how long it took, but I think in general I am happy about how this all worked out. I think the beginning, the reasoning behind how the computer worked the way it did, could be better - Borgin's part in it seems too pat- but still, I think it worked out very well. And I'm happy with how the rest of the chapter worked out, although I wanted to put in some more at the end. But y'know, time constraints. Anyway, hope you all enjoyed it too, and as always tell me your thoughts.

Chapter 2: Crazy girls and a New Journey

Harry could only gape in shock at the person in front of him currently wearing the form of Imoen. But from that simple statement the person within that body was certainly not Harry's supposed best friend in this game. Not that, thanks to the way the tutorial world seemed to force them to stay apart did that make any big difference to him. No, it was the other aspect of this that was astonishing. After all, no one here would ever use the term tilt-a-whirl, or even know what it meant, and 'bloody hell' was a pure British idiom. For a moment, the shock of this caused Harry to simply stare at whoever this was, unable to respond.

For her part, Tonks was still dealing with internal issues. Her body just felt **wrong** in a way that Tonks had never felt before. And since she was a fully trained Metamorph, that was saying something. But the changes were not ones that she had ever felt before, both mental and physical. It was as if something was missing, or something out of reach. Her balance was all wrong, yet right at the same time, her body feeling right, but Tonks not feeling at home in it. *But that was it really, she thought, it's as if my body has instincts, and my head has instincts, and they're fighting.*

Finding herself in the arms of a tall, somewhat handsome stranger, with somewhat long black hair and a face with high cheekbones and smile lines around his mouth, was another issue. Most of the time, Tonks wouldn't have any issues with such an arrangement, she was a flirt and she enjoyed relationships. Tonks even knew she had a bit of a type which this guy met pretty well: tall, well-muscled, and with a sense of humor, thank you Charlie Weasley.

But at the moment, there were other things intruding. First were the guy's emerald eyes, which were a little disconcerting. Second was the gaped mouth look of

astonishment he was wearing, and the fact that he was also wearing what looks like medieval clothing. Robes she could've ignored; those were the normal wizardly thing. But leggings, pantaloons, and a leather jerkin under a chest plate of armor? Not so normal.

"What did you just say?" the man asked while Tonks was trying to get her mental feet under her.

Somewhat surprised that the big guy spoke English, Imoen pushed away from him only to stumble, her instincts and her body still telling her two very different things.

Harry put his arm around her, studying her and looking intently into the girl's face. "What did you just say?" he asked again.

"Back off scruffy," Imoen grumbled, smacking him on the chest with an arm, then wincing at the impact to his metal chest plate. Despite that though she continued. "I'm not some damsel in distress waiting around for Prince Ccharming ta sweep me off me feet."

"I've been called many things, but Prince Ccharming has never been one of them," Harry said dryly. "Now are you going to answer my question or not, Imoen? Or do you have another name I should call you?"

"Imoen? Who's that?" Tonks grumbled, trying to step away again and finding her balance this time. "Mey name's Tonks., Wwhatever that thing sent me, that hasn't changed."

"Well, Tonks," Harry said with a small grin, pointing down at her body. "I'd say either you hit your head, or something went wrong somewhere else, because you are wearing the body of Imoen, a young woman who I know pretty well."

Imoen looked down at herself, and Harry watched as her eyes widened. She frantically patted her chest, then closed her eyes and concentrated, as if she was constipated. Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing, and Imoen glared up at him reaching for her waist only to pause in shock as she realized not only was her body different, but she was wearing different clothing and she couldn't change her body back!

"Where's my wand?!" The now pink haired girl shouted, actually getting into a fighting stance.

Harry backed away, holding his hands up. "Now hold on, I have no idea where your wand is, I..."

To say that Imoen was a bit headstrong was an understatement. To say that Tonks was a bit headstrong was also an understatement. So whether it was physical or mental,

both of them were very prone to quick reactions. That was why Imoen punched out hard for Harry's face before he could finish speaking. Tonks had been trained somewhat in unarmed combat, mainly by her father who was a pugilist in his spare time, and for exercise purposes as well by her partner Moody, who firmly believed in training both the body and the mind. It was a classic right hook, and it should have laid out the big bloke in front of her, smacking into his jaw with punishing force.

Instead, he dodged back at the last second, and Tonks was so unused to her new body that she overextended. This let the man grab at her wrist and push her further off balance, before trying to back away. Her next punch though took him in the chest, but he just took it on her mail, twisted, and then grabbed at her arm again. He wasn't very skilled, but he was fast, and before she could get away, he pulled her into a bear hug around the waist, lifting her off the ground, holding her there. She tried to headbutt him, but he lifted her too high into the air and she couldn't contort her neck at enough of an angle to do it. She tried to lift her knees, but they weren't quite up to where they could do any real damage.

This left her basically flailing in his arms, kicking at his shins causing no damage as far as she could tell, although she saw yellow and green flashes appear to one side of her line of sight. It joined a lot of other things there, in both yellow, green and orange, which she hadn't noticed appearing before this. Now she continued to ignore them, like they had been the little flashing lights that you got when you looked into the sun or squinted too hard. A saner individual might have wondered about them since they had stayed there for so long after she had recovered herself sufficiently to throw a punch. But Tonks was not most individuals.

Other individuals might've also noticed that they were in the middle of what looked like a giant library and comported themselves thus. This might even have stopped them from throwing a punch in the first place. Again, Tonks was not such an individual. She kicked and screeched, shouting, "Let me go you big oaf! Where's my wand?! I'll hex you into next week!"

"You're, oww, you're making a scene," Harry grunted, as he lost a point of health. Her kicks to his shins weren't doing much damage individually, but she was kicking him so often that ten kicks piled up soon, equaling to -1 to his health bar. Yet even so Harry simply kept up his bear hug.

She tried to wiggle out of it,. But Imoen simply wasn't strong enough to get away from him now that Harry had her in his grip and she'd had been too disoriented earlier to use her own agility, which Harry thought was a bit higher than his own, to dodge him.

Realizing other people were around them, Tonks raised her voice. "Help! Rape! Get him off me!"

This did not broker the response that it should have. More than one of the robe-wearing individuals she now noticed all around them turned to her glaring and even shushing her, raising their fingers to their mouths to indicate that she should be quiet. Others simply laughed, shaking their heads. One of them even said "if you two are going to roughhouse, kindly take her outside, Harry."

The name Harry pulled Tonks up short, and she stared at the man who had spoken, before looking down at the man who was holding her in the air. "Harry? You can't be Harry!"

Narrowing his eyes up at her, Harry shook his head, and tossed Imoen over one shoulder. Before some smartly saluting the man who had spoken. "Yes, sir., Ttaking her outside right now , sir."

That won another round of chuckles from a few of the watchers, but even more censorious shushing from the majority. And before Tonks could try to say anything further, the large man holding her, who might have the name Harry in what had to be a coincidence, was carrying her out of this's library portion and into a hallway beyond.

"I might not look like old Harry but that's who I am miss, whereas you look like Imoen, who is supposed to be my best friend in this world. So why don't we stop trying to fight one another, and go somewhere where we can talk without being overheard?" Harry asked, then added a plaintive, "Please?" as Imoen somehow kicked a little higher than she had before.

Realizing she couldn't get out of the guy's grip and that she might have once more put her foot in it, Tonks scowled, but nodded her head. "Fine, just put me down, will you."

"You promise not to try and thump me one?" The man asked, looking up at her face from a few inches below her own.

"Fine, I pPromise," Tonks grumbled.

The man gently set her on her feet, and even held her shoulders until she found her balance, before backing away quickly. The two of them stared at one another for a moment, then the man gestured down the corridor. "Come on, my room's this way."

"Already inviting a lady back to your room? Don't you think we should exchange names first?" Tonks quipped, using humor to cover a new sense of unease.

But that unease vanished instantly as the man in front of her blushed, looking away quickly and actually backing away another step. "Ack, n-N, none of that, I, I mean your good-looking and all but no, I..."

"Enough," Imoen said with a laugh. "Good grief, you'd think that you'd never talked to girls before?"

"Well considering I've only been able to have conversations with girls, outside of one particular girl back home, since I arrived here, and before that I thought of girls as just guys with odd bodies, I think I'm doing pretty well," Harry retorted.

"I'll be the judge of that, and everything else you just said was so weird that I am honestly even more confused now than I was ten minutes ago," Tonks said, shaking her head. "Still, show me your room, sure. And while we're walking, you can tell me if there is any other person named Harry here, Harry Potter."

The man in front of her actually smirked at that, shaking his head as he regained some of his earlier poise. "I think we are going to have a very long discussion then."

The rest of the walk was thankfully silent if not quick. Tonks took the time to get used to her body further, and tried to transform it into her old form, but found she couldn't. She found she could change her hair color, but it wasn't automatic, and she couldn't change the rest of her body on at all. That was worrisome, very worrisome. In particular one area, that was now grabbing most of her attention. *Why the heck can't I grow me baps?! They're so tiny now! Cocky Nora I look like a boy! That's just wrong.*

Setting that to the side by figuring it was some kind of magic in the area that stopped her own body's internal magic from operating, she looked back at the man leading her down the corridor, glaring at him almost. She had no idea where she was, no idea where her wand was, and this guy was talking to her so familiarly at first, and then manhandling her like that. What was up with that!?

But Tonks was a trained Auror. She eventually set that anger aside and took in where they were as they walked up a flight of stairs, then along another long corridor. They looked to be in some kind of giant castle, larger by far than any she had ever visited with her father on their excursions into the non-magical world and larger even than Hogwarts. It was also built far more of stone inside than wood and had an all-around more solid and somewhat unwelcome feel. This place was meant to be a fortress first, and a library second/. Creature comforts mattered not at all.

Eventually, they entered a small room which Tonks saw held a single bed, and a small dresser with a small mirror on top of it. She quickly pushed around the big guy, grabbing at the mirror, and holding it up to her face. She looked at herself quizzically, and then finally nodded slowly. *I don't look all that bad*, she thought, a little thinner in the face, and that scar over one eye is interesting. It looked like it had been done by a claw or something. *There must be a story behind that.* And she had her pink hair as she had

thought. *I could do worse, I suppose. But why the hell am I stuck in this form? Now to get some answers about this place.*

She turned to the man across from her and crossed her arms angrily, staring at him. "All right, talk. What did you do to me? Why am I stuck like this? Where's Harry Potter!?"

Harry held up his hand, feeling a little intimidated now that he was sitting down and Imoen was almost looming over him. "Hold on! I don't know any of those answers except for the last one, okay. I didn't do anything to you, and I've no idea what you even mean by 'stuck like this'? How did you even arrived here, what's the last thing you remember?"

At that Tonks' eyes narrowed, but she backed away, thinking hard. Then it all came back to her. "The computer!" She shouted. She looked at the guy in front of her, then waved her hand. "You wouldn't understand what that is, never mind. Oh my God, I was teleported here wasn't I, and what was that weird voice saying, template? Molding me into a contextual template?"

"I know what context is," Harry said slowly, "and I know what a template is, it's the thing they used to create designs or something like that in metal right?"

"Um, maybe," she muttered, "but I have no idea what it means when you put those two words together either." She paused again, thinking hard, trying to remember what happened in that place of utter nothingness before everything went all fluid, all her senses rebelling at once. "It said it was a single player game, what the hell does that mean?"

"There I think I can help you," Harry said with a sigh, holding up his hand. "But first, perhaps we should introduce ourselves?"

"Fine whatever," Tonks muttered, still trying to piece together her shattered memories, and coming up with a lot of black nothingness. Those words hadn't even been spoken aloud, not really. It was more as if they had been seared into her brain, because at the time, there had been literally nothing around her. *Weird*. She shook her head. "Anyway, why don't you go first, scruffy?"

"Fine, if only to stop you from calling me scruffy. You would not believe how often I've nicked myself shaving," the man said shaking his head and causing her to laugh.

"I don't know, I might, I was at a boarding school for most of my teenage years after all, and more than a few kids developed scruffy faces before they learned the shaving spell."

Now fully convinced that this wasn't some odd game thing and that this person in front of him really was someone else Harry nodded again. It's like her soul has somehow been transported into Imoen's body, or something like that anyway. Setting the how of it aside as unimportant, Harry held out a hand. "Well, my name is Harry Potter, how do you do?"

"Okay I said it before, but you cannot be Harry Potter," Tonks said glaring at the man now and tapping a toe down on the floor as if she was debating whether or not to kick him. "Harry Potter was a little over twelve years old before whatever occurred to him occurred. I'll fully believe that I'm in the same world he's in, but he's only been gone for a week and a half. There is no way that Harry Potter grew up what, five years six years, in that amount of time! Not even the best Ttime Turner could explain that kind of difference in time."

"What's a Ttime Turner?" Harry asked, blinking at the apparent non-sequitur.

"Never mind, and explain," Tonks growled, glaring at the man.

Now becoming angry himself, Harry crossed his large arms in a move that he knew was intimidating, and even flexed them a little, something he rather enjoyed doing on occasion now that he had muscles to speak of. "I'm not going to tell you anything until you tell me your name! This isn't some kind of interrogation, this is an information exchange, and one that you need a lot more than I do, miss! Or didn't you notice all the status windows over there?" He finished, gesturing to one side.

What? Tonks blinked, then actually looked directly at the several small squares of different sizes that had showed up in the corner of her eye. Now no matter how she turned her head, they were still there, in the upper left corner, not blocking her vision in any way, but simply hanging there in space. "What the heck?"

"Those are status screen. You did mention that a voice told you this was a game, remember?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes.

Imoen's scowled but nodded. "All right fine, so what do I do with them."

Harry was still glaring at her though with his arms crossed. "Your name, and why you're searching for me." He reported firmly.

Imoen scowled back and entered into a staring contest with the man for a few seconds, but finally decided to answer. "Fine, my name's Tonks, no first name unless you want me to hex your bits off. I'm a magical policewoman, what're called Aurors, and I was searching for Harry Potter. No one knew what happened to him, and now I'm staring at a guy who says he's Harry Potter, but is at least five, maybe six years older than Harry should be. So you'll understand that I'm a bit stressed!"

"I thought police people worked in teams," Harry said slowly, trying to remember the few crime dramas he'd seen glimpses of while staying with the Dursleys. Of course, they had never let him watch with them, but they were so deaf they had to turn the TV up a lot, so he always heard them under the stairs in his little cupboard.

Imoen faltered slightly, moving back and looking away. "Yeah well, I wasn't exactly happy with how the investigation was going. My partner had simply decided that getting the person who sent you away behind bars was more important and using him to roll up others of a similar mind. The Unspeakables didn't have anything, or if they did, they sure weren't sharing it with me. So I snuck in and, kind of... investigated the computer we found in Harry's room."

Harry frowned further. "This sounds as if it's more personal than it should be. I mean, why would anyone care about me. That whole Boy Who Lived nonsense?"

Staring at him, Imoen frowned as well. "Okay, everything coming out of your mouth basically tells me you know Harry Potter, but you still can't be him, you're too old! So why don't you just tell me where the real Harry Potter is, and then I'll answer your questions."

"I *am* the real Harry Potter," Harry said glowering at her. "It's not my fault that time moves oddly here. You want proof of that, just wait till tomorrow. Were in what's called the tutorial, and time doesn't pass it all during this stage. Every day just loops back."

"... If you're telling the truth, that is bloody fuckin' scary," Tonks replied slowly, her eyes widening. "Looping time like that in such a wide area, as this castle, that, would be practically impossible."

"Yet, it's been happening," Harry said. "And I'm still giving you more information than you're giving me."

Tonks looked away, still not believing this guy was Harry Potter, but not knowing anything about the real Harry Potter to question him on. Yet the talk about time not passing around them did give her pause, and she turned back to look at Harry closely, before sighing. "All right, a part of it, just a small part is because Harry is the Boy Who Lived. I don't think you'd find any girl in Britain who wouldn't care about that bit, thanks to all those ruddy books. But the bigger part of it...the bigger part of it is that he's my cousin."

Harry blanched, his arms dropping from where they been crossed as she he stared at her. "I, what, I, you, you're my cousin!? Wh, since when do I have living relatives beyond the Dursleys?!"

Crap either he really is Harry, or he's a damn fine actor. "...OOkay, there are a lot of different reasons for that. I am related to Harry Potter yes, but it's not so much cousin, as cousin once or twice removed. My grandmother married your grandfather. But as for why you never knew, well, there's was the whole Serious Black thing. My grandmother was a Black, as was my mother, until she ran away from an arranged marriage to marry a muggleborn."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "The Blacks are a so-called pureblood family like the Malfoys then?"

"Oh please," Tonks said waving her hand. "Those Johnny come-lately Frenchies? The Blacks've been in Britain since forever! But the family was blacker than black you know. And one of the daughters running away from an arranged marriage to another pureblood family caused lot of issues, so she was disowned. But she was still technically speaking a Black, and like I said there was the whole Sirius Black issue there that kept Mum from trying to find out what happened to you. Not that she would have been able to, mind you, no one but Dumbledore knew where you were."

"Sirius black issue? Are you saying that like it's a name, or a seriousSirius issue with the Black family?" Harry asked slowly trying to work it out for himself.

"Good one!" Tonks said with a smirk, giving him a thumbs up, before going on sSeriously. "What, no one's ever told you? I mean how your parents were found?"

"No one's ever told me anything about that night," Harry grumbled, his hands moving to unlatch his armor and setting it aside before he leaned back against the wall behind his bed and stared at her. "No one. Not even the teachers have ever told me what occurred that night. All I know is that Voldemort came after me that night, to kill me and my parents because they had defied him or something. Hell, I couldn't even get the teachers to tell me anything about my parents at all."

"Ah," Tonks said wincing. "Okay, long story short, Sirius Black was for most of his life thought of as a white sheep of the Black family, a do-gooder funny man who liked pranks and was sorted into Gryffindor rather than Slytherin, as all the Blacks before him had been, even my mother, who eventually married a Muggleborn. He was best friends with James Potter, your father. The two of them were inseparable, two pillars of a group called the Marauders. Master pranksters, they were a big deal back then. And then, well, your father married your mother, obviously, during the war against Voldemort. Then you came along, and not long after Sirius Black turns around, and... and betrays your family's location to the enemy."

"So my father was targeted because his old friend turned back to his family?" Harry asked. "Okay, that makes some sense. What happened to him though?"

"One of their other friends, Peter Pettigrew, found him, and shouted out a challenge in a crowded street. Sirius Black responded, killed the guy as well as twelve Muggles with an exploding curse. He was captured at the scene by a group of Aurors and Obliviators. According to them, he even admitted to the crime." Tonks sighed. "And before that, he was my favorite cousin, always over at my house, always you know palling around with me, when I was a baby and then a toddler. My family was known to be good friends with him and that put us under even more suspicion, even if my mother had disowned the Black name."

Harry nodded slowly taking this all in. As Tonks continued explaining how Sirius had been sent to the magical prison called Azkaban, to be tormented for the rest of his life by creatures called Dementors there. But then a thought occurred to him, and he looked at her, pulling his knees up to his chest and suddenly looking a lot smaller than he had before. "But, you're... you if you were a toddler back then, you're only what, five or six years older than me? Doesn't that mean you, you were at Hogwarts last year?"

"For my last year yeah," Tonks said, before she realized where this was going as Harry finished pulled his knees up, almost hiding his face between them and his arms which he pillowed on top of them. The sight of this massive, well-muscled and all around tough looking guy looking so small and almost afraid should have been comical, but it wasn't as Tonks could see the hurt and distrust in Harry's face. Shit! Tonks, you just put your foot in it big time!

"Why didn't..." Harry began behind his arms. "I suppose, you, you didn't..."

"I didn't approach you that's right," Tonks said, taking the bull by the horns so to speak. "You wouldn't know, but seventh years are incredibly busy with our NEWT examinations, trying to figure out our apprenticeships, taking extra classes to look better for our chosen professions going forward. It's immensely busy, and besides that, I was a Hufflepuff, not a Gryffindor. I couldn't walk up to a little Gryffindor firstie, not without causing waves and making a lot of people wonder."

Tonks stared at Harry for a moment, then sighed and sat down beside him, reaching forward to touch his arm. He flinched, and Tonks frowned, feeling her hair go manky and brown as she took in how he responded to even that light touch. He wasn't even looking at her now, simply trying to move away, and curl up further.

For Harry this was a bit of a nightmare made real. He had magical relatives, at least one of whom had been in a position to approach him. But she hadn't. She either hadn't cared enough, or just didn't think he was worth the bother. That hurt, that got right past his newfound maturity and his Gamer's Mind ability to stay calm and hit him right in the heart, causing him to regress to being the young boy who had been locked

away in a cupboard with no one but spiders for company, always wondering if he really was a freak and deserved to be locked away.

Kid thinks I rejected him, but damn it that was the reason why I never approached him. Desperate to salvage something from this, and now fully realizing that yes, this guy was Harry Potter, and he really was around 13 rather than his apparent physical age, Tonks began to talk rapidly. "But that's all a lie. The real reason I didn't approach you, is I was afraid."

That caused Harry's head to shoot upwards. And he turned to stare at her, and she nodded. "I told ya I grew up on stories about the Boy Who Lived. All girls in Britain did, even if my mom did a better job of stopping most of the hero worship that went with it in me. But we knew, or thought we did, that you had been, you know, looked after by Dumbledore or someone he personally chose. And I personally thought you would be far too leery of me because of my connection to Sirius, regardless of our family connection. It wouldn't've been the first time someone didn't want to be associated with me because of that. One of my boyfriends, his family kept on trying to get him to break up with me for a while because of that connection. They thought I was destined to go Dark myself even without a Dark Lord around to rally behind. Drove him to dragons, apparently. And also unfortunately away from me, more's the pity. So I was afraid you would reject me, I was worried how much that would hurt. And honestly, you didn't seem to need any new friends or family. First you had that Ron guy and became an honorary Weasley, and then there was that bushy haired girl who shattered all the academic records, what's her name?"

"Hermione," Harry said, slowly letting his arms fall and his leg stick out again. But he was still looking at her very warily. "And looks can be deceiving. I..." He looked away, wiping at his face, though he hadn't thankfully cried, Imoen wasn't sure she would've been able to handle that. "I would've given anything" he said, his voice almost vibrating with emotion. "I would've given anything to have more family than my relatives."

"Yeah," Tonks said slowly. "That's, I got that impression when I walked into the Dursley's house looking with my partner after Dumbledore called him in. I wasn't even supposed to be there, but Dumbledore and Mad-Eye were old friends, and he wanted an Auror's perspective. But of course when I made suggestions, none of them listen to me thanks to my age. Seriously! It was getting really irritating, being ignored because of my age." Tonks finished, throwing her arms up in frustration.

"That's a tune I've run into a few times too," Harry said, now lowering his legs entirely and leaning back against the wall to look at her. "So what did you do?"

"Well," Tonks said, smirking impishly., "I decided to let loose my inner Gryffindor. The hat said I could go into one of any three of the houses you know,

Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. I chose Hufflepuff, because a few of my friends had already been sorted there, which obviously was the deciding factor, since it showed so much loyalty. What about you?" she asked, going off on a tangent.

Harry winced. "Slytherin and Gryffindor. It said I was ambitious, and had a certain amount of cunning too. But I'd already met up with..."

"The junior Malfoy. Yyou mentioned him, yeah," Tonks said with a nod. "I can understand why you wouldn't want to be around him. Anyway, I let loose my inner Gryffindor and snuck into the Department of Mysteries., Tthat's a sort of branch of the Ministry that deals with unusual magics, mostly by storing them away and keeping them from the general public. I found the computer and powered it on. I then found the last program you'd used, clicked on it, and then was in this kind of nothingness area with a voice ringing in my head talking about a game and contextual template."

"And no one else is going to come after us?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Tonks said with a shrug. "Wizards aren't exactly up on technology if you know what I mean. The unspeakable, Croaker, he knew what the computer was, but not anything else. They were trying to decipher all of the magics on it at the time, and they'd already found two of the things that you or someone else did to that computer." She let that sink in for a moment before asking, "Now, why don't you tell me what happened, okay?"

"Okay," Harry said with a nod.

To Tonks' eyes he still looked really leery of her, and hurt, but there was nothing she could do about that now. Except maybe mention how she'd seen him as a baby. *But that wouldn't really help matters here would it?*

From there Harry went on to describe how he had rebuilt the trashed computer, why he'd done so, and everything else that had occurred because of or during the project. After hearing the disgust directed towards Dumbledore by his cousin, and oh boy was that going take some getting used to, he described how Dumbledore had returned him to the Dursleys when Harry had pretty much escaped to the Leaky Cauldron. He also mentioned how the man had known that he was essentially abused there, if not physically very often then emotionally and mentally all the time. He then went on to describe how he had found some help in a few of the more disreputable places using a disguise.

Tonks winced. "And that's where you went wrong kiddo. Those kinds of stores, they're not just, you know, lowbrow., Tthey're Dark as Dark can be, peddling to the worst our society has to offer. I know that guy, Boardman, he has been investigated more times than I can think of off-hand, although no one has been ever been able to make anything stick."

"Yeah, well maybe I would've known that if I knew anything more about the whole magical world! Seriously, there needs to be like a class or something, an introduction to the wizarding world." Harry paused, then thumped one hand into his other palm, his tone mocking. "Oh wait, there is. Only I was never given it because I'm the Boy Who Lived! Obviously, I should know everything." With that he rolled his eyes and banged his head hard enough against the wall hard enough to cost him a health point.

At that Tonks laughed weakly, shaking her head. "Yeah, I can fully understand your worries there, although don't blame me for that, I suppose everyone just thought, you know, that Dumbledore would've told you. And now that I say it aloud, I realize how pathetic that was."

"Yeah..." Harry drawled.

The two of them fell silent for a few minutes, just staring at one another before Imoen shook her head. "Right, okay, so now we know the back story here, or rather we know the back story of how we both got here., Yyou said something about this being the game? How does that even work?"

"You tell me," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders. "House elf magic, Dark soul absorbing magic, Dark lightning magic, my own magics, all of that mixed up in a jumble and here we are. How it works, that I'll leave to someone who actually understands magic, rather than someone who's just learned about it."

"Ouch Harry, I see you've learned the joys of sarcasm," Tonks muttered, frowning as Harry tossed the hot potato back to her. She continued frowning for a few minutes thinking hard then shook her head, going on in an almost cheerful tone. "Nope, it's beyond me too. But you said it's like a game, tell me about that."

"Well first of all, this world being based off the game Baldur's Gate is the reason I look like this," Harry said, poking himself in the chest with a thumb. "I'm the main player of this game, the single player you mentioned earlier. But the player doesn't start out at age 14, so I was aged up to fit. I got this whole series of screens allowing me to customize myself, it was actually kind of cool. It wouldn't do anything to my hair for some reason, but everything else I was able to customize. Well except for my scar," he finished, motioning towards it. "It stayed regardless of whatever form I tried on for size. Which I've still got mixed feelings about that even now, frankly. I mean, in a way it's a reminder that my parents cared for me, but on the other hand, it's a reminder of why I was set apart from other people. But it's there and I can't do anything about it. Beyond that, well I suppose we should just talk through your stats. Can you access your stats screen?"

When Tonks looked at him blankly, he rolled his eyes. "Right, say something like status screen, or think it."

When the girl did so, nothing happened, and Harry frowned. They tried to figure out other ways for Tonks to access her stats, but nothing worked. Shaking his head, Harry put that down as a lost cause for now. "I had to find these information books before I could access some of my information. I'd wager it's the same for you. For now, let's move on to announcements." Gesturing to one side Harry asked, "Can you see all those? I can."

"Yeah, but what are they?" Tonks asked, staring at them herself.

"Those are bulletins marks, status changes, announcements from the game and so forth."

"So is the game kind of omniscient or something?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so anyway, it's not so much watching over us, as simply watching. It will however sound very snarky occasionally, so I don't know." At Imoen's look, he explained some of the messages he got, and then walked her through enlarging the ones in front of her.

"Welcome to your new life. Please wait while your mind and new body get to know one another. You may experience dizziness, moments of delirium, tasting like the color pink, and smelling yellow." This line was contained in a black message box.

"...Whhut?" Tonks muttered, shaking her head.

"Yeah... let's just put this to one side and go to the next one." Harry said with a shrug. "I get the impression that whatever you did, the computer or whatever wasn't ready for it and is scrambling."

The next line was a little more understandable and tied into the scant knowledge Tonks had before this and was again in a black message box as well as being one of the longest single messages Harry had seen yet. "Due to unforeseen circumstances, your soul has been transmuted into the body of a currently existing individual, a template, in this new world, which was intended to only have 1 Gamer. This is an unusual and dangerous maneuver, done only by the truly insane. While your previous skills might have some bearing on this new life, figuring out which will and which won't will not be easy. Any blood-based abilities have been disabled. Any magic known will not carry over. Knowledge may, but remember this new life is just that, a new life."

"That explains some of what happened to you, I think." Harry mused.

"Okay," she said after a moment, "Yyeah, this game's got a snarky ass sense of humor."

"I think it's also a bit," Harry paused clicking his fingers as he blanked. "What's the word when something has two minds?"

"Schizophrenic? That's not a good thing to hear, kiddo," Tonks said, having now gotten used to the fact that this large beefy semi-handsome looking guy was young Harry Potter and eager to establish a big sister roll over him. She knew it wasn't going to be easy, especially given how they had started and how she basically admitted that he she didn't want to be rejected by him during their time in Hogwarts, but she was confident she could do it.

"Not like that. One of them is just a highly robotic voice. The one I think controls the, well the world in general, makes the sun come up, the weather, makes certain that you know arrows fly in the correct form or whatever and also introduced me to this world in the first place. And then there's the second voice, which tells us that we have interacted with the world around us in a significant way, how that has affected us and why. That second voice is snarky as all get out. Still, I can't deny that it is funny," Harry replied ruefully.

"So talk me through more of this game thing kiddo."

At Imoen's requestquestion Harry explained the various stats and such like, along with the few set rules he had learned so far. This helped earn Imoen a few more wisdom points. To both their surprise, this allowed her access to her stat sheet, though Harry couldn't interact with it. Imoen couldn't either though that didn't stop her from reading what they could see aloud.

Name: Imoen

Gender: Female

Race: Human

Class: Thief level 4

The stats were blanked out as they had been for Harry, but for Tonks/Imoen they were utterly blank, completely gray, nothing visible. Below that though the rest of the stat sheet's organization resembled Harry's.

Bloodline Skills:

Metamorph (currently disabled - your stats do not match the needed level to use this bloodline skill), *****, *****, Clumsy (permanently disabled, yes it was always a body issue, lucky you), *****

Background notes:

While at one point Imoen the thief might have been a happy- go- lucky thief with more curiosity than sense, that person's mind and soul has been replaced by that of the Tonks, a happy- go- lucky, plucky girl young Policewoman in training who liked to poke her nose into other people's business far more often than was good for her. So no change there, really. It will be interesting how she interacts with the Gamer from this point on, as that interaction and his response to her will be the cornerstone of her future going forward in this new life.

For a moment, all Tonks could do was grumble about her Metamorph ability being disabled by her lack of stats, which she took to mean strength or intelligence in this case, shaking her head this way and that. "All my training, all of my knowledge, and my most unique freaking feature, and it's just gone! What the heck is up with that, huh!?"

"That's not really true..." Harry said slowly. He wasn't certain he trusted Tonks enough to tell her about this. *But then again why would she betray me? We're both stuck in this game, although I don't know if stuck is the right word for my own predicament. I've actually enjoyed myself most of the time here, and I chose to be here after all. I put the computer together, I wanted to escape from the Dursleys, and I did that.*

With that in mind, Harry straightened his shoulders and smiled at Imoen/Tonks. *I think I'll just address her as Imoen from now on, much less annoying.* "I figured out a way to bring the spells of our original world to here, which could be a major help going forward. I think you'll like it. So long as you don't mind being taught a power that is described as you 'cheating like a bitch'."

Imoen laughed. "You have no idea how many people have called me a bitch before this Harry, and for far better reasons in a few cases. And besides, if you ain't cheating, you ain't trying. Lay it on me, kiddo." A moment later Imoen/Tonks was staring at the same message Harry had discovered when he had figured out he could still do some of the spells from his own world.

"Congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch! Because of your unique otherworldly status as a wizard where you came from, you have discovered the ability to use the spells from your own world in this one. Don't get cocky though, because with each spell cast, your health points will take a hit! New Bloodline skill added, Mage of the Blood."

"Okay, that's cool, means that I won't be totally dependent on my unarmed skills, which aren't all that much to begin with. But why do you think we can't interact with my stats, and can you think of any way to raise them? How big a deal is that anyway?" Tonks asked, frowning as she took in the details of the new technique, which apparently, she wouldn't be able to see from this point on unless she found the right skill book.

Harry frowned, scratching at the back of his head as he stared at the same notice thoughtfully. "I don't know. What I see when I look at you is Imoen, my relationship status with you and vice-versa is semi-friendly, but on the low side for that scale. And when you had your stat sheet out, I couldn't see the rest of your stats either. It might just be a side effect of the fact that this is a one player game you now, and the computer, whatever magic has shifted within it, still can't figure out a way to put in the second player so it doesn't really know how to treat you. Or perhaps that's the way other people here always see their stat sheets. I know they can level up, but they can't control where their attribute or skill points are spent, so it isn't that big a leap to think they can't see their own stats at all."

"Beyond that..." Harry paused then breathed in slowly before going on. "The first thing you need to know, is that today is going to repeat, like I mentioned earlier. At 12 o'clock tonight, the day just sort of ends. Oh and we don't have dreams here., Like, I go to sleep, and then I'm awake instantly a second later fully rested with this message about having slept in my bed and doing so renewing my magical points and health. Or at least a second later to me, but the night has passed. And before this, I was the only person that remembered everything that happened." At that, he looked at her closely.

She blinked, backing away rapidly at that. "Are you serious!? I know you said that time was repeating, but no one else remembers the day before?"

"That's right," Harry said with a sigh. "Although it hasn't had much of an impact on me, not much of one anyway, not physically. I've just been using the time to figure out people around here, and how the game works and everything else."

"Yeah, but you put in all that effort for a day to make friends, and then they forget you the next day?" Tonks asked solicitously. "That's gotta suck."

"Actually, that's kind of helped too, I suppose. Erm, I'm not the best at talking to other people, and um, seeing how they react, and then just trying again in a different way, it um, it's kind of helped me a bit," Harry said looking away.

Sensing a teasing opportunity, Tonks leaned in, but winced as he tried to shy away. Scowling at herself she pulled back but that didn't stop her from saying "Oh, do tell?" Then she blinked. "Wait, you mentioned relationship status earlier, have you been taking advantage of this whole repeating a day thing to get in some lady's knickers?"

"Gah, no!" Harry flushed, backing away rapidly. "That's not even an option, I mean it wouldn't, I wouldn't do it even if it was but, I know...that is..."

"Harry, calm down," Tonks said, frowning at herself again. *Dammit, this boy really is still young, forget what his body looks like Tonks, remember inside he's still a youngster.* "It's okay Harry, I was just making a joke. I didn't think you were going to do

something like that. But it ties into why I was so worried about the game making the act in a certain manner. Have you heard about the Three Unforgivables?"

When Harry shook his head, she went on grimly. "One of them is a spell that completely takes over a person's mind. It's As one of the darker spells out there, because it suppresses an individual's willpower to such a degree that they can't fight back. Strong-willed minds can fight it off, but if you're weak willed, it simply takes control, and forces you to obey the caster. And back home there is another spell called the Obliviate spell, and it's one of the ones that is most abused when it comes to dealing with muggles."

Harry nodded, his face showing he was both understanding, and horrified at the same time and she smiled. "Taking advantage of a woman to that extent, and note," she said, poking Harry's forehead with a finger, "I said to that extent, in a physical sense, would be just as bad, because she wouldn't remember it the next day. But, mind you, using a day like this to get to know a girl, that's fine. Just don't take it past the kissing stage, 'kay?"

At that Harry blushed again, which again looked very odd on his more mature face, but he nodded, and Tonks went on thoughtfully. "Do you think... that is, does relationship status impact the information you can see from other people?"

"No," Harry said with a shake of his head. "My relationship status with Gorion is at the 'family' level, and all that tells me is his class and level, level 28 Mage and level 24 Bard."

"Wait, you didn't mention that before." Tonks interjected.

"Yes I did. I said you were a thief."

"Oh, huh that's my class then, missed that. Okay, so that would make me able to, what, sneak around, lock pick, that kind of thing?"

"Only one way to find out," Harry said, gesturing out the door. "It should be interesting to see if you can figure it out yourself and what it tells you."

Tonks held up her hand, making a calm down gesture. "Hold on there. We're not done talking here just yet. In fact, let's put that off until tomorrow. It will be a good first test if I can remember all this," she said grimly. "And if I can't, we'll need a secret word or something you can tell me, something that will make me believe you when you say we're repeating a day, and I can't remember things."

"Really, a single word will do that?" Harry said dryly, grimacing at the idea. He had slowly begun to get weirded out by the whole forgetting things thing, and the idea that someone from his own world could be affected by it was disturbing to him even beyond it

affecting people like Gorion, who he had become close to in his time in this 'tutorial'.

"Heh, yep. Mad Eye, my partner, he's the most bloody-amazingly paranoid bastard you could ever hope to meet. He's come up with all these different pass phrases and secret words to show if someone's been magically influenced. Erm, let me try to remember." Tonks frowned, tapping her chin in thought. "Think the word was 'sasaras' or something, Now give me some more background about what's happening here." Tonks nearly ordered.

"So long as you keep telling me about yourself," Harry said firmly. "I want this to be a two-way conversation, not just me telling you everything."

Kid has major trust issues, Tonks thought, still tapping her chin but she nodded. "Sure kid, what do you want to know?"

"Well first, I suppose I should ask why you wanted to be an Auror and what it really means. It is the first I've heard of such a profession, although I knew about the ministry and sort of figured they had to have their own Scotland Yard or whatever." Harry asked, still feeling this new Imoen, Tonks or whatever, out.

"Oh Merlin, don't get me started kid! Scotland Yard? Scotland Yard is a professional, practically apolitical group, who're supposed to serve the peace and also have a decent budget. I thought that the Aurors were the same way. But when I joined up, you would not believe the shit I had to go through. Not just because I was related to the infamous Blacks, but because I was a Metamorph, at least at first."

From there she went into an hour-long rant that told Harry a lot more about her personality than he had learned previously. He learned she liked pranks, and liked manipulating her ability to shape shift, a power that he had never heard of before, to get back at people who angered her. That she had a hair-trigger temper, something he had already feared was the case, was also proven. But he learned it burnt out just as quickly, and that she wasn't the kind to go around thumping people even when angry, something he had feared. She got along well with her parents, who apparently had supported her being an Auror even though they knew that she was cruising for a bruising but hated the first name her mother had given her."

At that point, Harry interjected, "In that case, isn't this a bit of a new start for you?"

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked.

"Well, the body you're wearing is named Imoen, and that's the name I still see above you. So whatever your name previously was, you're kind of leaving it behind, aren't you?" Harry said reasonably.

Tonks blinked, then grinned, and reached forward hugging Harry tightly not reacting to his sudden twitch when she did so. "Oh that's awesome, Harry! I hadn't even thought about it. Fantastic." Harry flushed a little, feeling Tonks's curvy body pressing into his, but Tonks pulled him away quickly, winking at him, then hopped off the bed. "I... am... Imoen!" She shouted thrusting her arm into the air. "No more Nymphadora or the jokes that come from it for me!"

"Really!" Harry began to laugh, shaking his head. "That's your name!? What the heck was your mother thinking?!"

"Oh, that's it!" Tonks growled, and grabbed the pillow, smacking Harry over the side of the head and causing him to fall back on his side on the bed. "That's enough of that out of you!"

While he hadn't ever dealt with something like this from a girl, the boys in Gryffindor had got into more than one pillow fight, magical and non. There could be only one response to this. Growling, Harry rolled onto the floor, pulling his blankets loose from the bed and hurling it over Tonks' head. With her thus entangled he then grabbed off the pillow and smacked her with it as she tried to get free from the blanket.

She in turn retaliated, grabbing at the pillow through the blanket and somehow pulling him off balance and back onto the bed, where, to his surprise, she leaped upon him, tickling him uproariously. *Hah, so there's some hope for you yet, Harry.*

What followed was the first friendly wrestling match Harry had ever had, and it was kind of cathartic for the both of them. The now newly renamed Tonks's fear and concern about being stuck in this 'game' had disappeared, although she was still very leery about what would happen at 12 o'clock. Harry, for his part, had forgotten that part entirely and was just relieved that despite her being a relative, Tonks seemed a decent sort, and very fun to be around. In fact, again she reminded him of Alicia Spinnet, who was essentially everyone's big sister, except Fred Weasley. Whatever was going on between them he didn't know, and frankly didn't want to know.

As they lay half on and half off the bed gasping for air, Tonks turned to Harry. "Truce?"

"Truce," Harry said with a nod.

"Bloody good, because you're heavy. Gerrof, ya big lug!" She said, trying to push him off and ignoring the rather suggestive way the two of them were laying. Whatever

possible attraction Imoen might have had for Harry's new body had died a fiery death when he had shown his true age earlier. That and the guilt at having not approached Harry while they were in Hogwarts.

Harry lifted himself off easily, then picked Imoen up as easily as he had before in the library, before setting her on the bed by the head, whereupon he sat on the other end. They looked at one another for a moment, before Imoen visibly became serious again. "So, tell me about this game. You said something about non-player characters when you look at me, does that mean everyone acts like robots or something?"

"No," Harry said shaking his head. "I think they have a set routine sort of, but they are human. And that's something you need to learn right away," he said seriously, pointing at her. "You have to treat the people here as if they were regular people. They each have their own lives; they all have their own abilities and minds and everything. Don't mistreatmiss treat them, don't assume that they're just, you know, part of the scenery or something. Wherever we are, despite the whole Gamer issue, which seems to be just a more advanced version of what other people around usme can do, the world itself is very real. You can be hurt, you can hurt other people, and everyone here is alive."

"Okay..." Imoen said after a few minutes thought, scratching at her hair thoughtfully. "That's incredible. I wonder then if we're not somewhere else, rather than in the game. But then there **is** the Gamer aspect. Does that kind of thing extend to other people?"

"It does and it doesn't at the same time. There are two types of people here I've found. There are Adventurer types, like Gorion and a few of the others here, I'll introduce you to him tomorrow. That is," Harry seemed to falter, "If you can." He rallied quickly shaking his head and going on. "Anyway, Adventurers can come in a few basic classes, thief, mage, wizard, cleric, bard, warrior, ranger. That kind of thing."

"What class are you?" Imoen asked, cocking her head thoughtfully to look at them. *Warrior? Figures a kid his age would want to be something he had never been before. If I was his age and I could have the physique of some kind wonder woman or something like that, you better believe I'd have jumped at the opportunity.*

Harry blushed and looked away, poking his fingers together sheepishly as he mumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry I couldn't quite hear that," Imoen said, leaning forward and cupping her ear with one hand expectantly. "What was that?"

Growling irritably, Harry answered in a louder tone, still looking away. "I'm a paladin, all right!"

Imoen laughed. "Kid, you are in Gryffindor and you're a young boy. I'm not going to make fun of you for being normal and wanting to be a knight in shining armor. Although," she teased, reaching out to poke the set of armor that Harry had set aside earlier. "This doesn't actually look all that shiny."

"It's the best armor I could find here in Candlekeep. I doubt it is the best we'll find elsewhere, but it was the only one I could find in this tutorial segment," Harry retorted. "Now it's your turn," he went on turning back to Imoen.

She rolled her eyes but flung her hands out to either side. "I'm an open book kiddo," she quipped, leaning back and stretching, cracking her neck and back before leaning back against the wall again.

Harry frowned, thinking about what he'd already learned, and what he wanted to ask this cousin of his, who may or may not become the first such family member that he ever really wanted to acknowledge as such. That still hurt, and he knew it would for a while: that she hadn't approached him, and that her family hadn't tried to take him in. But he would set those kind of serious matters to one side for now. "Tell me more about this Metamorph ability of yours. Can it be learned? What's it like? I once read grew my hair back overnight, when Petunia gave me a haircut I didn't like. Is that the same kind of thing? Or is that just how you start?"

Imoen smiled at him, and then began to explain, interrupted by numerous questions from Harry. As she finished, he frowned, thinking., "So, I mean do you have a regular body then?"

"Not really, no. At least I didn't before this," she said gesturing to her new body. "I can't seem to do anything but change my hair color, and even that is now taking an effort of will whereas before it would've simply changed with my moods if I wasn't careful. Kind of the exact opposite of what I was used to, really. But in terms of my body, I can't remember what form I was born in, or even tell you how I'd look if I hadn't changed myself. I mean I could change my height, so I did. I kept it at a height I was comfortable with. During puberty I had decided my chest was a little too small, so I changed that too occasionally." Imoen now pouted, patting her chest and then actually pushing them up slightly. "Dammit! I really miss that aspect, this is what, barely size A? I look like a boy, blast it."

With that in mind, and without even noticing as Harry began to blush and stutter, Imoen actually reached down to her crotch and patted it there before nodding. "Okay, good. It wouldn't be the first time I'd accidentally changed into a guy and not noticed."

"How could you not notice that?!" Asked Harry in a somewhat strangled tone.

"Let's just say that fire whiskey isn't the strongest magical drink out there, and I was very young and foolish to believe it was," Imoen replied with a wicked grin at Harry's embarrassment. "Luckily, in my inebriated state I decided to mess with the guy who was trying to get me drunk, in a way he wouldn't find out about unless he..."

"Okay, enough thank you," Harry grumbled shaking his head. *Okay, so she's a mix between a cousin I might like getting to know, and an offbeat uncle who is a bit of a pervert and you never want to acknowledge in public.*

Imoen smirked at him and leaned forward excitedly. "All right, my turn." She thought about it for a moment, then said, "That relationship status thing, what does that do?"

Harry flushed a little, reminded of his adventures in that area. "Well it, it doesn't do much, it's kind of boring if I'm honest."

"Right, pull the other one kid, it's got bells on," Imoen said, leaning back again and crossing her arms, actually giving Harry a glare that was pure Prof McGonagall.

"Um, wow, that's kind of scary," he said, shaking his head as he looked away.

"I might not be able to go the full body change to get give you even more of an impact, but she was my professor for years after all, and the best prank I ever did was to shape shift into people and do things that they had would have hated to do or be seen doing. Now talk,." sShe ordered.

"I don't know much about it, I haven't been able to well raise the stats of anyone permanently remember. But Gorion, he's family now. But that doesn't actually give me anything, in terms of stats boosts or whatever."

"But..." Imoen said, leaning forward.

Harry shuddered and took the plunge. "But there is this bar girl here, her name's Cassandra, and um... if I raise our relationship status from 'interested' to 'very interested', she tells me about getting me a discount on beer, and um, something about lessons thatbut I never quitegot understood."

Rolling her eyes at that, Imoen shook herhis head. "That's it? That's the only relationship thing you can do?"

"Well... I can get this other woman, she's one of the younger Watchers here, to teach me something, but it's not actually usable for my class."

"So what's the point of the relationship header?"

"I don't know, all the game tutorial says when I look into it is that relationships can give boosts and stats later in the game. So I can't figure out what they are now. Honestly speaking, I was pretty much done with the tutorial at this point. I've raised my stats as much as I could, I've done all of the preparation I can, I've even done a few quests in order to build up a nest egg," Harry intoned, counting off on his fingers.

"What do you mean?" Imoen asked, cocking her head to one side.

"Now we come to one of the greatest things about this game. The item box!" Holding out his hand, Harry was suddenly holding a sword, then just as suddenly was holding a bow. Both of them looked a little crude but were very simple but effective weapons. Then he was holding five small gems, uncut, and almost identical to one another. In fact, they seemed almost exactly identical as Imoen looked at them.

Then he pushed his hand back into a small pouch, which he should never have been able to do, Imoen reflected, noting the size of the pouch. "Okay," she said slowly, taking that into account with the disappearing, reappearing weapons. "That's all kinds of awesome. And is that something only you can do?"

"I don't know, though Gorion couldn't, and seemed very impressed the one time I told him about it. Try it," he suddenly said, holding out the short sword.

She took it, and actually held it very well, frowning as she did as a status screen outlined in red in front of her. "You have equipped a short sword. Since you have a skill point spent on this weapon, you will see a buff to your offensive abilities while wielding it. Find magical weapons or armor to add more to your speed and striking power."

"You get that kind of thing the first time you equip a weapon of a particular type," Harry said with a nod, once more showing her how to dismiss status screen. "Now try to make it go into your item box, basically will it to go away almost." He watched as Imoen was able to do it, and grinned. "Awesome, right?"

"That, that beats out any mokeskin bag, or even any expanded trunk I've ever seen! It comes when I think about it, I mean, holy heck!" she said, holding the short sword out again then making it disappear, then again. "Is there a limit to what we can hold?"

"Sort of," Harry said with a nod. "There are a limited number of items I can carry, though a lot of them can be stacked, like gems and arrows. Beyond that, the only limit is weight. I'm actually pretty strong, so I can hold up to 400 pounds. But as long as I don't go over that, it doesn't affect me at all. If I take more, I get a warning about being 'encumbered' and I can't move as well." He grinned. "I actually put my bed into my item box, which could hold it, but then I couldn't move very well, I felt almost like a beached whale. Not certain how it would effect combat though."

"That's insane! Do you know how awesome that would be for a soldier? Or hell, anyone, to be able to carry that much weight without feeling it?"

"I know," Harry said with a nod. "The only problem now though is that we have no idea what your strength stat is."

"Yeah, that's gonna be a little irritating," Imoen thought angrily. "Do you have any idea how we can figure out what my stats are?"

"Well, you could try wielding a club or another blunt weapon. The damage you did to a dummy could tell us in a roundabout way what your strength is."

Imoen grimaced, then Harry pointed at her. "However, I think I've told you enough about the game for this round. My turn."

Pouting, Imoen made her sword disappear, and looked at him. "Okay, shoot."

"What were your favorite classes, what are your favorite spells, and do you think you can help me expand my own spell repertoire?"

"Well my favorite class was easily Transfiguration, kiddo., being a Metamorph myself I found it kind of easy, although I also loved the Charms professor, Flitwick. The little guy, did you know he's a dueling master? I asked him to teach me a few tricks, and I learned more from him in a bare month of on-again off-again training than I did in the first two months of solid every day eight-hour training with the rest of the Auror trainees."

"As for my favorite spells," Imoen hopped up, moving into the center of the room. "Well, let's see if they translate."

She held out a hand, as if she was about to summon up her sword, then flicked her hand forward, moving her hand in a flick then a twitch to the other side, shouting out a spell. "Lacero!" From her hand there appeared a wide long whip of fire which flashed through the air in front of her. She moved it this way and that as her health bar appeared to both their eyes along with a notice message. This spell took 10 of her health points, which was a worrisome amount considering she only had 100 to start with.

"It's a fire spell," she said, whipping around her hand, then down and around to either side. "Really useful to cow people, and in close combat, not very draining to keep going either back in our own world. Not good against magical shields, but it can be used to redirect spells too." As she spoke another status appeared in front of her.

"Would- be dominatrix. You have discovered a hidden weapons skill dealing with whips and non-solid weaponry. This will allow you to do more damage with whips or other similar weapons. Beware though, using this technique too often in public will give

you a reputation, mostly bad. -2 to charisma. Can be changed to plus five dealing with certain situations or people who like that kind of thing."

Grumbling, Imoen removed that message, trying not to notice Harry's snickering as she moved on to read the previous message bar. "A new blood mage spell! You have discovered a new spell that you power with your own blood. Be warned, such spells are dangerous, and can bring you more attention than you might think they are worth."

"I wonder if I can learn it now," Harry said staring at her.

"I'll teach you what're supposed to be the wand movements, like I just showed you they do translate into hand movements pretty well," Imoen said, flicking her hand around and down then up, whipping the flame whip around. Then she made it disappear, and instantly got one of her hit points back. "Hhuh, well, that's nice at least. Although, if that spell took out 10, I'm a little concerned about what my other spells might take out of me." *And I don't think I'm going to teach Harry any of my more powerful spells, not yet.*

"Well don't hold out on me," Harry said eagerly, leaning forward eagerly. "What kind of other spells you have?"

"Why'd you chose the Paladin template if you're that interested in spell work?" Imoen asked, honestly quizzical. "Was it just the whole wanting to be a knight thing?"

"I chose the Paladin template because I was worried I might have to go solo occasionally., Aand yes, I've always wanted to be a knight in shining armor. But until I decide what God I will pledge myself to, I can only use lay on hands once a day, although I can use turn undead three times. But once I choose a God, those numbers will go up a bit. At least I think so. Now come on! Remember what you said before: if you're not cheating, you're not trying."

Imoen nodded and went through what were called the 'Auror's Quartet', the four spells they used the majority of the time. This was a high-powered trick tripping hex, the spell Stupefy which Harry already knew. The third was an incarceration spell which sounded a lot like the immobilization spell that Hermione had used on Neville, only it was area of affect and actually trussed up the enemy rather than simply immobilizing him. It was also difficult to dispel once it was on you even if you could point your wand at yourself. The fourth was a cutting spell, called Reducto, the power of which could be varied to create different effects, and which could cut through almost any substance but which could be blocked, dodged or even shielded against. "Beyond that, there's about six other combat spells that I know of which I could teach ya that're most useful in combat. I mean, any spells can be useful depending on how you use them, but these're made for combat."

"Like Bombarda?" Harry asked.

"Yeah that's one of them, although we don't usually use that one in combat, since if it hits, it can be lethal at even a low powered level. There's a few others though I can teach you."

"And I think we need to learn them now, so we know about the cost to our health. What's your health bar like by the way?"

"150," Harry said. "I think that the main combat types, Paladin, Ranger, Fighter, Berserker, get added health with every level, and I'm level five, so hundred and fifty."

"Damn," Imoen muttered "Why do I think I got gipped by being a thief?"

"Don't look down on it so much, paladins can't dual class, thieves can. If you reach level twelve in your thief class, you can start building up a secondary specialty." Harry frowned then. "Though don't ask me about what that'll do to your thief skills or your ability to wear armor or other restrictions."

"Well that's interesting, I suppose, but that's for later. What can I do right now is the question?" Imoen mused.

"Let's go find out," Harry said hopping to his feet as elsewhere the bell for dinner went off. *Huh, we've been talking for that long?* "Besides, I should show you around after dinner, get you used to this place, and find your room."

The two of them left Harry's room then walked down the corridor towards the stairs that would lead them downward, and then down again towards the refractory. Those within Candlekeep could either eat inside the main keep, which was always closed to outsiders who had not paid the toll in order to get within, or at the one inn, between the keep and the outer walls. But most of the Watchers didn't bother with going there, unless they were feeling hungry for something specific. As they went, Harry suddenly winced as he remembered something. "You're about to run into the downside of being in this game."

"What?" Imoen asked, suddenly wary.

"The food."

"You mean how Middle Ages it's going to be? I got used to that kind of thing at Hogwarts, I suppose." Imoen replied. "'You'd think they'd have learned how to cook muggle dishes, but no, it's all about pandering to the purebloods, ugh. I remember being almost to the point where I'd kill for a burger."

"No," Harry said shaking his head. "I meant, well you'll find out."

As they were walking through the halls of the keep though something else came up. With night now upon them the halls were lit by torches set in sconces along its length. But as they passed between them a message appeared in front of her. "You have entered a shadow, would you like to activate Hide in Shadows?"

"Hide in Shadows?" Imoen asked, looking over at Harry.

"Some kind of thief skill., I'd think a very sneaky one by the name," he supplied.

Nodding, Tonks clicked the yes button, actually pushing her hand out into midair to do it. Harry had a second to reflect that it would probably take her a while to learn not to do that, when she disappeared for a brief second. Then she was back, several feet away and scowling at another message. "Technique failed, huh?. Well, it didn't take any of my health so I suppose it's a decent enough substitute for a Disillusion spell. Still feel I got gipped on this whole thief thing though."

Moments later, Imoen was glaring at him across the table before turning that glare on her food. "Tasteless slop!" She growled, "Come on, why the heck is it so bland? And it looked pretty good, too." *Okay, leaving the N-name behind was cool, being around Harry could be fun, but darn it, this is starting to look a lot more like work than I would have liked.*⁴

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "I mean I've seen the cooks at work, I know exactly what the kind of foods we're getting should taste like, but when I actually eat it, there's no taste."

"There goes my theory of us being transported to some other real-world then, maybe," Imoen grouched. "A computer wouldn't be able to handle taste obviously, but if we had been transferred to somewhere else, then we would have that sensation along with everything else." *Although why the heck would I have the sense of touch if I don't get the sense of taste?*

Harry shrugged at that, then gestured down to the food. "Keep eating though. You'll need your stamina. If you don't eat, your stamina takes a hit and then your strength, dexterity and even agility will soon follow. Unfortunately, stamina doesn't actually appear in our status bars like health or magical power does, it's more like levels or something rather than a bar you can watch drain."

"That is kind of weird, being able to see how our magic is drained like that," Imoen replied frowning a little. "But then again, considering that our original world's magics come across as these blood spells, I suppose we don't have room to talk."

"Maybe," Harry said, before pausing and smiling up at a man who came across the room towards them. "Gorion."

Imoen turned and took in the man at a glance. *Nice build, decently wide shoulders, the air of an erudite, but the body of a very tough guy. Damn, he reminds me of my dad almost.* And the silver in his hair did nothing to take away from his appearance, rather it added a certain dignity, speaking of experience.

Gorion nodded back, sitting down across from the two youngsters, smirking at the two of them. "I take it you two have kissed and made up then from your little spat last night?" he added lightly.

Harry blanched, while Imoen guffawed. "You might say that." This was odd she thought, meeting Gorion for the first time since according to what Harry had said, this guy had been part of his life since he entered this weird world. It was somewhat made worse because of the fact that despite being stuck in a tutorial, when a single day repeated, he'd become close with Harry. That speaks both of his character, and of Harry's need for someone like this in his life too, Imoen thought grimly.

"Well that's good to know. , Bbut next time, try to keep your roughhousing out of the main library. The Master Librarian nearly talked my ear off about how you two were disrespecting the library this afternoon," Gorion said teasingly.

"Sorry about that," Harry said with a shrug. "Imoen here decided to take it upon herself to thwack me one when I told her that she would have to get Madame Barca's permission to come with us, **again**, as if it was my fault. Then I dragged her off so we could talk about it."

Imoen glared at Harry, smacking him on the shoulder while Gorion chuckled ruefully. "Yes well, Madame Barca is rather set in her ways," he said delicately. "Still, you've learned quite a lot of from her over the years, so I don't want to hear any disrespect from either of you, is that understood?" He asked, not changing his voice from his mild tone. But one salt-spotted eyebrow rose, as he stared at them, and both of them nodded with Imoen a tad behind Harry. "Good. And remember Harry, we'll want to be leaving tomorrow."

"Where do you think we'll be going first?" Harry asked, but something in his tone made Imoen look at him curiously.

"I don't know, the Friendly Arm Inn, obviously. But from there, we could go south or north, depending. I've heard rumors from a few of the guests, those rich ones who pay their way in. But Tthere seems to be some kind of iron issue occurring from the mines around Nashkel that could cause large-scale conflict between Baldur's Gate and Amn, maybe even worse. With that in mind, we might wish to take a boat from Baldur's boulders Gates, head overseas quickly. While Candlekeep will be sacrosanct in

any war, travelers certainly would not be. And especially someone as young as you. You would be a prime target for conscription my lad."

"Yes, I don't think I'd like to be part of an army," Harry said with a sigh.

"Your inability to take orders rather than instruction would be against you," Gorion said commiseratingly, his eyes twinkling. He then stood up, patting Harry's hand where it lay on the table and then Imoen's. "I'll leave you two to it. You wouldn't want your last meal together be ruined by the presence of an old man after all."

The moment the man was gone, Imoen turned to Harry, one eyebrow raised, and Harry shrugged. "Like I said, I was pretty much done with the tutorial portion. This is part of it. If I had met Gorion as I had intended to after leaving you behind this afternoon, he and I would already have finished our preparations and left. That is sort of the same speech he gives me every evening. And tomorrow, tomorrow will start the same way this one did, and I'll be going through things all over again."

Racking her brains to remember what she knew about role-playing games, which she had played the tabletop versions of numerous times, Imoen said thoughtfully "This iron ore issue is probably going to be a main plot line then. But why the rush?"

Harry winced then filled her in on what the game had told him about during the introduction and why he and Gorion were leaving.

"Yep," Imoen's said with a nod. "That definitely sounds like a main plot point." Then her eyes narrowed. "Well, if you think you're leaving me behind Harry Potter, you can think again. I didn't sneak into the Department of Mysteries and then get myself stuck in this game to be left behind when you go out to adventuring!"

Harry flushed at that, unused to people other than Gorion caring about him. Well other than Gorion and Hermione and Ron he supposed, but he hadn't thought about either of them since coming to this new world, and they certainly weren't around now. "Thanks," he muttered, looking away before slowly shaking his head as he turned back to her, his face grim. "But you might not have a choice. Remember what we were talking about?"

"Which part, the part where everyone here would forget everything that's happened today at the stroke of twelve, or the idea that maybe my own actions will be hindered by the game?" Imoen groused.

"Either or," Harry said sadly, shrugging his shoulders.

"We'll cross those bridges when we come to them. Unless we have to build them. In that case, we'll build those bridges and then cross them. Okay? I'm not letting you go alone. Set that in stone, Harry."

Another warm flush of pleasure ran through Harry at that, and he smiled. Perhaps, just perhaps the word relative really didn't mean enemy any longer. And as he thought that, the relationship status above Imoen's head changed from semi-friendly to that of friendly.

The two of them sat there as the candles in the dining room were changed about them, talking quietly to one another, exchanging stories. During this time, Harry had learned that Imoen had dated Charlie Weasley, and that he had broken up with her to head to Bulgaria for the dragons, that and to get away from his mother. Through Imoen, Harry learned more about the woman who had sent him a Weasley sweater that first Christmas, and of how she wasn't actually all that nice once you got to know her. "Oh, she's a right damn good cook, a fantastic mother for little kiddies I suppose, but that's just it. She doesn't want the kids to grow up. That's why both Bill and Charlie moved away. Awesome character Bill, I was just a little firstie meself when he was in his seventh year. He was head boy and everything, and just about the coolest guy you could ever meet. Charlie was in his third year of course and looked to be almost as cool as his big brother when he grew up, but he was all about care of magical animals, whereas Bill was runes and spell craft. Of course, both of 'em were mad for Quidditch."

"That sounds fun. You know I was..."

"The youngest Seeker in a century, yeah. That was pretty awesome, and you were darned good too. I saw lots of Charlie's games and afterward too. Gryffindor hadn't won a single a game since he left you know."

They were so busy simply getting to know one another that serious discussions had been set by the wayside. This continued until they were interrupted by a stern voice. Calling out for Imoen's name. "Ah, there you are, Imoen."

Wincing a little, Harry whispered, "That's Madame Barca, your guardian I suppose., Like Gorion's mine, although I don't know what kind of relationship you have."

She was a stern-faced elderly woman who immediately put Imoen in mind of McGonagall, though her clothing was very different. It was almost skintight but not quite., Black, with a black robe and cloak combination. The hood was pushed back at the moment, letting her face and eyes be seen, behind a small pair of wire glasses, glinting in the light of the candles that were everywhere in this room. Her face slightly softened as she saw Imoen talking to Harry, but she still shook her head sternly. "If you think I'm

going to let you miss a full day and evening of classes just because your friend is going to leave soon, you have another thing coming. Now get up, we have work to do."

"Huh, but I," Imoen began, only to yelp as the woman's hand flashed out faster than Imoen could dodge, grabbing him and pulling her out of her chair. "Get a move on! If you can't dodge that, it's obvious you need to work on your hand eye coordination more."

"Ouch," Harry muttered, watching the two of them go. He hadn't interacted much with Madame Barca in his time in the tutorials, and that bit of interaction told him he didn't really want to.

But now on his own, he sat for a moment, frowning as he looked out into the darkness of the night beyond one of the windows of the dining hall, scowling. He was almost tempted to go to bed early to see what would happen. *But would that force Imoen to go to bed too? Or would it just leave her high and dry until twelve o'clock came around?"*

Sighing Harry frowned thinking about what he could do with his time, and then shrugged, and headed off to the library. With nothing else to do, he could at least read more about the background of this world in history. He had already read a lot about that, but there was always more to learn. This actually helped greatly, since Harry got so into the history book he was reading about one of the Elvish and Draugr wars that he didn't notice time passing, until his door opened slowly. He looked up and watched as Imoen slunk in, closing it silently behind her. "Harry?"

Setting his book aside Harry beamed a smile at her, happy to see her. "Were you able to get away from Madame Barca then?"

"She kept me up until about 30 minutes ago, then sent me to bed, but I decided I'd rather come and see you. She said it was pushing the 12th candle, which I assume means 12 o'clock?" Imoen asked, moving over to lay out on his bed groaning. "Bloody freaking taskmistress, gah, makes me long for days of Moody's training, and that's just wrong."

"They use candle lengths to tell time here, yes," Harry said with a nod. They have clocks, that one big one in the library anyway, but no watches or anything of that nature. Although I don't know why, I read that these other races, gnomes and dwarves, are very good at that kind of thing. Maybe they just haven't been able to spread them very far or something?"

"I doubt it's that. There's a big difference between being able to tell time and being able to build a watch. It's all about miniaturizing things I think. And making them really, you know fit together, properly," Imoen said thoughtfully. "At least, that's what I can remember."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her and she shrugged. "I once smashed open my dad's watch to see how it worked, if the inside of it matched those of magical watches. Boy was I surprised. Twice over,," she finished ruefully. "He spanked my rear for that one, only time he ever did that kind of thing, too. Turns out the watch was really expensive, unfortunately."

Harry chuckled at that, but it was a little forced. "Really, my uncles never really did that kind of thing with me, although when I was younger, he did beat me for getting better grades than in my cousin. I got the message quickly enough after that, though. And of course, my aunt punished me if the meals weren't to her liking or not ready on time."

Imoen winced. "Um, you want to tell me more about them?"

"Why bother until I know you won't forget in the morning?" Harry asked wanly, shaking his head. "It's, that's not the kind of thing I'd, I'd want to go over more than once."

Imoen winced at that, but nodded. "How much time do you think we have left?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea., Nnot long, I don't think."

"So tell me more about this Gamer thing then. Let's not get into anything personal now, tell me more about how the game works. In fact, I have a specific question." Imoen said with her own forced cheer. "This is supposed to be a role-playing game, and all those have a lot of combat to them, so tell me how combat works."

Harry nodded, and slowly began to tell her about what he had learned so far about how combat worked, how the skill slots worked with the weapons. He showed her the weapons he had in her his item box and Imoen took them one after another putting them in her own, saying as an aside that "Doing that will help me figure out how much I can carry." The truth was, that she could carry up to 65 pounds., Aan okay amount, for a girl so slight looking, but not a candle to what she should have been able to do. "With my morphing powers, I could create muscle, and harden in my bones, and be able to lift like a weightlifter."

She was in the process of handing the weapons back to him after trying out each one in turn, figuring out which she preferred and which she couldn't even lift, when it happened.

One moment the two of them were looking at one another as Harry held out his hand for a war hammer and the next Harry found himself left in his bed with the sheets up to his neck again, and the words 'you have slept in your bed, health and mana points are fully restored and all spells in a wizard or mage's spell book have been refilled.'

Imoen was nowhere to be found as Harry looked around wildly, almost startling Gorion as he had just opened the door. "Easy there, lad. Did you have a bad dream again?"

"I..." Harry paused, then nodded his head slowly. He had tried to talk to Gorion about the Gamer aspects, and while Gorion knew about levels and such, he hadn't seemed to understand at all what Harry meant about redoing the same day. At one point he just ignored it when Harry brought it up directly and that made Harry forget all about telling him more. "Yes, I did. There was something chasing me, some kind of presence maybe?" He said, prevaricating quickly. This was something he had gotten used to early on here, and it served him well again as did his Charisma points.

"You have passed a charisma spot check," said a little status bar to one side. "Your tale has been believed. Use this power wisely."

Harry rolled his eyes at that, but did so quickly as he turned away to grab up a shirt that Gorion wasn't aware of them.

"Yes, I'm afraid that kind of fits. Don't worry about it Harry," Gorion said slowly, looking at the younger man thoughtfully. "Many people have these semi-precognitive dreams, and given what I've been telling you of late about our leaving, it's no wonder that you have bad dreams. Do you think you will be able to leave today? Oh, and Imoen said that she is a little angry at you, for leaving her with the dishes last night."

Harry chuckled wanly at that. "I suppose I should go and apologize then, although to be fair, she's never around when it's our time to actually work in the kitchen before meals."

"Truly, and would you want her there? I remember the time she tried to make that Sea bass dish, and she couldn't quite get the heat on the Sea bass correct all the way through, one portion was raw the other nearly charred black. And she somehow set water on fire somehow."

Again Harry let loose a chuckle and a nod, trying to indicate that he knew what Gorion was talking about, although of course he didn't, not having heard that story before. "Still, I'll go in search for her before I report for my lessons this afternoon."

"You have time, but only slightly. I would hurry if that is your plan," Gorion said with a nod. "And if you do decide that you're ready to leave, come find me in the courtyard by the inn. I'll be there talking to master Belasco about our supplies."

Harry nodded back, and the two men separated outside his room. Harry waited and until Gorion was out of sight, then looking at his map, try to figure out where Imoen's room was. Once he knew that, he turned and raced through the halls in such a way that if

he had seen any Watchers in this area at this point of day it would've caused many a shout of anger. As it was though no one witnessed his mad flight, or his desperate, fearful and yet hopeful expression.

He hadn't even covered half the distance but as he turned a corner, he ran solidly into another body. Harry fell backwards, with the other person on top of him, slamming his back and head onto the rock of the corridor below. He had a moment to see a message box. 'Ouch. You have run into someone pell-mell, and been dumped on your ass. -2 to health.'

Rolling his eyes, he clicked that screen off, then looked down at whoever had run into them. "Oh good grief, I'm sorry but..." he looked, and stopped, staring at Imoen as she pushed herself off his chest, having somehow taken the larger and far heavier Harry off his feet in her own mad rush. "Uh, Imoen? Are you..."

"I'm in here," she said grinning up at him, and hugging him tightly, before hopping to her feet, pulling the larger Harry to his, almost stumbling in her efforts until Harry stood up on his own. "I'm here, and I remember everything we talked about yesterday. So it looks as if, even if I'm not the player, I can remember things done in this tutorial thing from one day to the next."

"Awesome," Harry said with a sigh, smiling gleefully.

"Yeah awesome, but look, I just snuck out of reading lessons of all things with Madame Barca, and I need to get back there before she looks for me. Hopefully I can get out of them from now on, though I don't think much about Imoen, living in this huge library and still needing reading lessons. "How do you spend your day?"

Harry recited what he normally did, but then added, "But at this point, I'm not getting anything out of it. I've stopped getting experience points from sparring, or even doing any of the quests. All I can do is get materials, which is good I suppose, I've got a lot of those jewels, more than enough for a war chest or whatever, and a lot of weapons two, but still I don't get a lot out of staying within this tutorial area any longer."

"Is there anything you haven't tried?"

Harry frowned thinking. "I haven't tried to get out of the castle, I don't think it's honestly possible. I haven't actually entered the Inn, because I think that will make the main quest activate since Gorion has pointed me in that direction a few times as where we'll need to pick up supplies.

"Then let's stay away from that for now. You might be used to this game world, but I sure as hell ain't. So how about this. It's obvious I've got stuff I need to do, tell me

about the quests you think I could do instead of you, and maybe we'll see if I can get some experience from them."

"What does Madame Barca have you doing?"

"She has me practicing lock picking, scouting, hide in shadows, which is just awesome from the few times I've been able to do it. Setting and disarming traps and reading, a lot of reading."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Harry said slowly.

"Well it wouldn't to you, now would it?" Imoen grouched. "Like I said, hopefully I can get out of those lessons. Ugh, I had enough of those kind of lessons from Magic of History and Defense of the Dark Arts."

"No listen," Harry said quickly. "The more you know about the world around you, the greater your wisdom points. The more you understand, the greater your intelligence. Both of those are really important, they impact your ability to protect yourself from mind magics, and a few other things like barter and stuff like that."

"Barter?"

"It's a small skill that activates when you try to buy or sell something. It did to me once when I tried to sell off one of the gems I was getting from mistress Phyldia since I didn't know how much they were worth," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders. "I think everyone has that kind of thing."

"Okay but that's a normal skill to have then," she held up her hand as Harry made to speak. "I mean it is something that I doubt would be in the regular game. I've played RPGs before this and most of them don't go into that kind of minute detail, like barter level two or something."

"So you're saying I should look around for other skills to add? Skills that wouldn't necessarily be important in normal RPGs but which would help us going forward?"

"I think so yeah," Imoen said with a nod. "I mean, have you actually tried cooking on your own?"

"No, I mean the food so awful here, why would I try? And whenever I go into the kitchen, I just help everyone else there, I don't cook on my own."

"Do it Harry," Imoen said firmly. "I think there's more to this game thing, and more to skills than you've figured out just yet."

"Okay, but in return, I want you to train me up in those spells of yours."

"You've got a deal, Harry," Imoen said with a nod, shaking his hand. "We'll meet up for a late lunch, and we'll spend the rest of the day together going over stuff like that and figuring out what I can and can't do. We should also go over combat, maybe even spar together," she went on her Auror side coming out as she began to pace along the corridor, five paces to one side of Harry, five the other. "I'll need to figure out how different it is, I know you're used to it but I'm not. Furthermore, perhaps my own skill set will help you learn more than just fighting the same opponent every day, to say nothing of me needing to start thinking like a thief in a fight rather than a witch. With the hit my health points take with our blood spells they can't be my first recourse."

That made a lot of sense to Harry, and he nodded. "Just remember, follow the little red dot when you want to attack, although even finding out if you see the red dot or not should be interesting."

It turned out that while she did see the red dot Harry did in hand to hand combat, Imoen had none of the skills that Harry had in swords or anything else beyond the short sword, and even in that she only had a basic understanding, or one point used on the skill. She did seem to have a natural dexterity that was nearly equal to his own, and her agility was astonishing. This last point led to their greatest surprise since Imoen's soul had been transposed into Imoen's body.

"What the heck!?" Imoen said as she flipped and rolled away from a blow from Harry. Harry immediately backed up, looking at her quizzically and then up at the status screen that both of them could see.

"Fight like a Jackrabbit. Due to your inherent agility, you can fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, +10 to Evasion, plus 5 to Strength."

Is that an active or passive skill" Imoen said, staring at the message avidly, completely delighted.

"Passive, active?" Harry repeated blankly.

With a sigh, Imoen talked about what that meant, explaining in an RPG terms. A passive skill was something that added to your basic stats, like Harry's 'Potter Luck' which was always acting in the background passively. An active skill was something he could activate, sometimes using it over a set amount of time, like Harry's Turn Undead paladin skill. Imoen's skill was quickly proven to be a mix of the two types. She couldn't activate it, but it started up on its own when in combat, and stayed active for a set amount of time.

"That's incredible!" Harry said excitedly. "I wonder if I can learn something like that?"

"Maybe, or maybe it's a specialty skill Imoen developed before I came along. I doubt you'd get the same thing." Imoen cautioned. "Besides, given your ability to use armor, you wouldn't need to dodge as much as I do, since I'll only be wearing leather or light chain mail." She scowled. "If Miss Noodle Arm's body could even handle that. She should've really eaten more Wheaties you know?"

After they were washing up, wiping away the sweat from their faces, Imoen asked, "So, how did cooking go?"

"Oddly enough, pretty good. I was able to make the bread taste like well regular bread should, so I don't know, it's kind of interesting. It turns out that cooking is just another skill here. I can use my previous knowledge of it to help me raise my basic skill pretty quickly I think." Harry replied. "I'd never even thought about trying to cook something for myself, everything had been so bland and uninteresting that I didn't think we could do anything about it. It even becomes a new skill, Master Chef, but it's not like my combat skills, it's more like an ability, one that needs to be worked at and raised."

"Excellent!" Imoen said with a nod. "I was able to do those quests you told me about, finding Mistress Phlydia's book, that kind of thing, and get some experience out of it. Not a lot, 250, does that match with what you got?"

"It does. I think that is sort of the norm for quests like that, two hundred or thereabouts for small time stuff, a thousand for more involved quests, with anything above that being extreme but not impossible, Harry said, tossing the rag he had been using to clear his face away. Fighting Imoen was tougher than fighting arms master, not because of any lack of skill in the arms master's skill, but because Imoen was faster, and far more active than the older man. "Now, let's test out that mage of the blood stuff. And by the way, did you get that restriction, that you can no longer dual class as a mage?"

"Mage yes, but I wonder if that means I can't dual class as a wizard," Imoen replied. "But you're right, it's time for your instructions in wizard-type warfare." Honestly given her original ability and experience, Imoen/Imoen had thought she'd be able to beat Harry with relative ease, but she had been surprised by his skill and fighting ability. Let's find a deserted spot and start testing stuff."

By the end of the day, Harry had added a few more spells to his own 'spell book', and had walked Imoen through basically hanging the spells to one side of her mind, and then casting them with a single gesture, rather than going through all the ridiculous hand movements that she had been using the evening before. She had a vast repertoire of spells however, both specific to combat and others that weren't meant for that but could still be used as such.

Yet at the same time, they found out that the cost was worse for some reason. The Stupefy spell for her took ten health, whereas it took twenty from Harry. They supposed that that was a class thing too, although why the difference was so high, Harry didn't know. "I'd bet it could be because Imoen was once being trained as a mage," Harry said slowly. "She had the training for a bit, but then she decided being a thief was more fun than being a wizard so changed her base class. I think Madame Barca convinced her of something too, since she's a dual class thief/mage herself."

"Jeez, it feels weird to hear things like that about the body I'm now inhabiting when I don't remember it. Well, whatever the case on why it costs you more to cast 'em, you've done great Harry," Imoen said. "You were able to add those three spells to your repertoire faster than I expected if I'm honest. Those are seventh level spells, and you are only going into your second year. Now admittedly, you've got this new, adult body to play with but still, your ability to use spells like that tells me how good a student you are."

"And your teaching ability," Harry said ruefully. You definitely blow Professor Quirell out of the water in a single day compared to what he could teach us in a year. And that's without the whole attempting to kill me thing."

Imoen blinked. "...the what? You mean those rumors about you and him having some kind of epic duel and him dying were real!? You dog, you didn't mention that last night in your stories!" She quipped, smacking her fist lightly on his shoulder. He flinched slightly, and she frowned. Harry definitely did not take joshing around physically like that very well. He wasn't used to it, but Imoen was determined to get him used to that, and physical affection from a family member, very quickly. "You'll have to tell me about it over dinner. For now, do you think you found enough other things to concentrate on that you can put up with me wanting to spend a few days maybe even a few weeks in this tutorial thing?"

Harry winced. "Um, I suppose if we can continue training at night, that would be fine. But I didn't really find anything else to add to my skills. I can't raise my combat skills further without actual experience to level up my base level and there aren't any more quests here. Cooking is... okay and is a great thing to experiment with. But it won't keep my attention for days on end."

"What about relationships," Imoen said, waggling her eyebrows outrageously. "That barmaid of yours, or Mistress Phlydia."

Harry blushed, looking away. "I've tried to, well, you I told you that I..."

"Yeah, you told me that you raised their relationship status with you to 'interested in you' a time or two, and then stopped. Can you raise it further, is there anything you'll

get out of it? You said you got a plus one to your charisma, what does charisma do beyond the obvious?"

Harry explained how charisma helped you convince people you were telling the truth, general handsomeness which impacted how people dealt with you in a lot of social situations, and how it directly impacted the barter ability and she nodded slowly. "Okay, so charisma actually will matter when we're out and about. What is your charisma at this point?"

"Fifteen." Harry replied.

"Is that high or low?"

"I don't know," Harry said shrugging his shoulders, looking uncomfortable. "But are we really talking about me doing this? I mean didn't you say..."

"Harry, I said that manipulating offense so you could sleep with a girl and she wouldn't remember it the next day is wrong," Imoen interjected. "But I didn't say anything about you using this day just to get close to the girls, did I? There's a difference between being manipulative, and simply making up for lost time. You're 18, you've known at least this bar girl for years now, right? Your character has I mean."

Harry nodded hesitantly.

"In that case, you're just making up for lost time like I said. As long as you don't let it go too far. Simply talk to the girl and when it comes to kissing tell her or Mistress Phlydia," if you go that route she said teasingly winking at Harry, who blushed rosily under her gaze. She knew that Harry actually found Phlydia more attractive than the bar girl. *Not that I can see it, that bar girl has a spanking pair of knockers.* Imoen thought, somewhat jealously as she looked down at her barely A-cup chest. *On the other hand, maybe Harry just has a thing for brainy girls? Or older women? It will be fun to find out which.* "Whoever it is, just tell them that you're in it for fun, that you don't want to go too far. I bet they'll be very thankful for that, considering that I don't think this world has any kind of contraceptive spell or condoms."

"What are condoms? I've never heard the name before. I know what a contraception spell would be anyway. The name is sort of descriptive." Harry said, blushing yet quizzical.

"A condom is this rubber balloon thing that muggles put over the chap's wedding tackle in order to catch his ... emissions," Imoen said, grinning as Harry became more flushed with every word. "Am I embarrassing you enough now? I could go on. I hear they've started to experiment with giving 'em flavors somehow."

"What is this a contest or something?" Harry groused.

"I'm an older female family member Harry," Imoen said, watching as Harry twitched at the word family but going on smoothly. "It's part of my job description to embarrass you. Just be thankful I'm not doing it in front of anyone else."

"Oh yes I'm so thankful for that," Harry grumbled. He looked away for a moment, then back to Imoen, his face still flushed at the idea of what they were talking about and yet also thoughtful. "But you really think that there'd be an upshot to me doing this?"

"I think so Harry," she said with a nod. Then she sighed and looked around them gesturing around at the world. "Look, your ability to cook things that can actually taste to our senses, that tells me something else is going on here. That computer didn't transport you into a world created, it transported you to another world entirely. One where there is a layer of Game System or whatever, or else Gorion and Madame Barca wouldn't know anything about that kind of thing, which they do. That means we might be here for a lot longer than I had thought."

"You mean like the rest of our lives?" Harry asked. He was actually kind of pleased about that. It wasn't as if he had much of a life back home anyway, and beyond Hermione and Ron, who hadn't been talking to him that summer anyway, making him wonder about their friendship, he doubted anyone would miss him. And he certainly wouldn't miss being back there with his relatives, wondering why Dumbledore wanted him there, and was so interested in his alive, but not well. And this world, well it called out to the explorer in him. It was so much bigger so much wider than the world he had begun to know in the magical world.

"Yeah," Imoen said with a sigh. She could tell that Harry was kind of happy about that, but she was quite ambivalent about it. She had friends back home, a family that loved her, that would no doubt miss her. Which is everything that Harry doesn't have back there, at least according to him. Though she does wonder why his two friends cut off contact with him.

"So like I said, I think that adding to our ability to live here, to your ability to interact with other people, that's a good thing in the long run. And besides that, this whole relationship thing, it's got to mean more than we've discovered so far. Even taking into account your little bump in charisma for getting the barmaid interested in you." She laughed then, shaking her head. "Didn't the game itself tell you something about that?"

"No, it told me not to get a swelled head because Cassandra's only a barmaid, though I still don't know what that means, or what rumor says about them." At Harry's words Imoen had to bite her lip to keep from laughing, but she was just successful enough

to let Harry continue. "Alright, I suppose we can try this." Then he smirked at her. "So long as you agree to be my guinea pig in terms of my cooking skills anyway."

"Deal," Imoen said, holding out a hand to them. They shock, and then began to create what would be at their schedule for the rest of the time in the tutorial.

OOOOOOO

Hermione frowned, staring up in the sky before sighing and heading back inside disconsolately. Her mother saw her coming and raised an eyebrow. "Another day without a message from your friends, Hermione?" she asked solicitously.

The younger brunette nodded, staring at her mother, who shared her own wild, wavy hair, although hers were a light blonde color, whereas Hermione had gotten her hair color from her father. "Yes mum. I could almost think that Ronald at least has simply forgotten, that would be in keeping with his general personality," she huffed, before going on almost plaintively. "But Harry? He and I promised to contact one another as often as we could this summer, and not only has he not tried to initiate any contact, he hasn't followed up on any of the messages I sent to him! Not even my questions about his homework."

Chuckling a little at how affronted her daughter sounded at that last point, Dr. Granger leaned back and scratched at the tip of her nose for a moment, a habitual sign that she was thinking. "Ronald was the one who contacted you those first few weeks I believe?"

"Right, and then he slowly started to stop. It got to the point where I stopped sending him messages at all either. But I've kept trying to send messages to Harry, and he hasn't been responding at all!" Hermione scowled actually stamping her foot in frustration. "I hate this! I don't like being cut off at all from the rest of the wizarding world, and especially my friends. Especially Harry, I, I'm worried," she paused, looking a little guilty even as she said that.

This wasn't the first time Hermione had broken off talking about Harry, and her mother, whose first name was Emma, had decided she'd had enough. "Hermione," she said firmly, "there's something about Harry that you're not telling me. This isn't 'a daddy get your dental drill' thing either, it's something entirely different. Some secret and I don't mean that drivel about how he's the Boy Who Lived, I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't care one way or the other about that after meeting him and finding he's so unlike what the books say." The gentle teasing tone caused her daughter to flush, but she didn't let up. "So, talk."

"It's just well... okay those stories are part of it," Hermione grumbled. "I don't think he's seen any royalties from them, and more generally speaking, he, well, while his

robes were good, he didn't wear anything else that looked like they fit. They looked like very nasty hand-me-downs, kind of like uncle Frederick's that daddy tried to wear that one time."

Wincing at the idea of a young boy wearing such obese clothing, her mother made a humming noise, indicating Hermione should go on.

"There's the way he kind of flinched away when I tried to hug him, I, I don't know what to make of that. And I **know** he's smarter than he lets on!" Hermione finally shouted, as if she'd been keeping that in for a while. "He's always one of the first to pick up spells, and he can even describe them to other people easily. But his writing is so horrible! And I know I've caught him at least a few times trying to, to dumb down what he's doing in terms of his essays."

"And then there's the attention he sometimes gets. A lot of the times he seems to just want to hide. I don't know what it all means, but it's very worrisome. And he doesn't ever talk about his home life, ever. I've told them about you and daddy, I've heard a lot about Ronald's family, his brothers, his parents, I've even heard about some of our other friend's family's occasionally. But Harry's never told us anything other than the names of his relatives, and that they don't like magic. That's why I was so interested in keeping contact with them this summer, I thought he might appreciate having someone to talk to." Hermione finished, frowning in worry.

"I see," Dr. Granger said thoughtfully. So, possible neglect at the very least, certainly apathy and disdain. "And you keep on going to the alley to use one of the owls from the Owl Post there, correct? Have you tried any other means of contacting them? Such as looking him up in the phone book?"

Hermione blinked, then shook her head. "I don't think that would work. He told me that there's some kind of protection on his house to keep people from finding it."

"Yes, but you've also told me that magicals lack a certain logic? So perhaps if you use entirely non-magical means, you might have better luck."

With a smile appearing on her face at that bit of forward thinking, Hermione nodded and was about to race off to find the yellow book, when there was a flutter of wings to one side. Emma turned as her daughter did and gasped in delight and wonder. "My word! That is the most beautiful bird I've ever seen."

The snowy owl now perched on the windowsill preened a little as if she understood what Emma had said, looking at her in favor, before turning her attention towards Hermione. Her eyes almost narrowed, before she stuck out in a foot holding a message.

Hermione hesitantly reached for it, nodding at Hedwig. "Thank you, Hedwig, um, we have some bacon for you somewhere, just let me read this first." Moments later she was shaking her head, nibbling her bottom lip worriedly. "Oh Harry, what have you gotten yourself into now?"

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Harry got up, and talked to Gorion for a while, then gestured to his face, "I'll need to go and shave and shower though before I meet with the Master of Arms." Like Harry had known this would let him start the interaction with Cassandra in the baths.

As before he flirted with her to the best of his slowly growing ability in that area from within the basin. He once more got to the part where she said she would see him when Harry dropped some chopped wood off at the inn, but this time instead of agreeing, Harry caught her hand, slowly working his thumb along the back of her hand before slowly raising it to his lips kissing it gently, "So what if I said I wanted a bit more than just a discount on beer?"

Cassandra giggled, shaking her head. "Heh, what kind of girl do you think I am, Harry?" She waited a heartbeat to see if Harry would say anything and when he didn't, she went on still teasingly. "Besides do you think your vows would take it if I responded in kind?" She asked, licking her lips and looking Harry up and down again.

"I, *gulp* I'm not talking about anything like that. Just, maybe having a picnic between ourselves, or, or simply walking around the castle together?" Harry asked, his newfound ease with flirting disappearing now that he had to talk about more important things than simple physical attraction.

but to his surprise, Cassandra actually blushed at that, looking completely nonplussed at the idea of actual romance rather than just a roll in the hay. "Just for fun, right? I, I mean..."

Blinking, Harry slowly nodded, and feeling a bit bolder, went on. "You know I, Gorion and I are going on a journey soon. So, whatever happens, it can't be anything serious."

"Good," Cassandra said firmly. "I'm not interested in anything serious either Harry. Maybe if you were going to become a Watcher yourself, or Master at Arms to the keep that'd be different, but you're not. You're an adventurer, I've seen your type come and go, and I'm not going to pine after you or anything like that. But... if you stop by the inn's backyard as I asked and cut us some wood for the rest of the week, well, we'll have to see."

Harry nodded and released her hand. Cassandra smirked at him before leaning down over the basin and kissing him on the cheek right next to his mouth. "I'll see you then Harry," she said, her voice turning throaty somehow, before she turned and swished out of the room.

As she did so she moved her hips in such a way that it mesmerized Harry, swishing from one side to another. The effect was so great he had to ask Imoen later, "how do women do that?"

"Do what?" Imoen asked, as she grimaced at the taste of the soup Harry had made. "It wasn't very good, very bland frankly, and what chicken taste she was getting was most distinctly burned.

Looking at her face Harry grumbled, and shook his head. Back to the drawing board on that. And I meant how do you girls swish your hips? It's like, almost like, well hypnotic almost."

"It's a secret magic every girl has, if I tried to explain it to you, I'd have to kill you afterwards," Imoen replied with a grin.

Harry laughed. "Well we wouldn't want that would we?"

Over the next few days, the two of them spent the lunch and most of the afternoon getting to know one another. This was a very slow, stilted process since even though he was helping the pink-haired girl, Harry was still hurt by her admission that as Tonks she hadn't approached him despite knowing they were related. He was also a private individual, and so didn't share much of anything about his life back in their old dimension with Imoen.

For her part, Imoen recognized that, setting aside her Tonks name entirely, and decided not to push, instead simply observing Harry and willing to listen to whatever he was willing to tell her. She saw how occasionally he went from confident and acting his body's age at times to not in others. It was as if Harry in many ways didn't know what he was, an 18-year-old trained warrior, or a twelve-year-old who had seen too much in the way of hardship and pain in his young life. Regardless, those moments of confusion were slowly fading away, indeed they were doing so a hell of a lot faster than they should in Imoen's opinion. She could almost see Harry setting aside what remained of his childhood as the days passed by.

Emotionally though there were still signs of his inner youth. Girls in particular seemed to be confusing to him. It was evident he had discovered how to treat each of the girls who showed interest in him, but he didn't know why they wanted to be treated that way. So besides pushing him to figure out this relationship stuff, Imoen took it upon herself to tell him a bit about girls: the types of girls he would meet, how to spot a high

maintenance girl, a girl who was only out for herself, and the types of relationships that he could form, as well as how to spot if he was becoming emotionally attached to a girl or vice-versa and if that was a bad thing.

This took several days, but when she was running out of things to teach Ranma about girls in general, Imoen and Harry received a surprise in the form of a stat boost for each of them. Harry's read "Now was that so hard? Thanks to the hard work of your cousin Imoen/Tonks, you have discovered a bit about how women think and that all women are not created equal as well as what to look for and what to watch out for. +1 to Wisdom."

At the same time, Imoen's read "Congratulations, through perseverance and putting into words things you, as a woman, have always instinctually known, you have forced information through the minds of a 12-turned-18-year-old boy, a feat worthy of the god. +1 to Intelligence."

It wasn't the first stat bonus Imoen had seen. She'd gotten a few such message by reading the information books and going to classes with Barca. Although helpful the stats hadn't amounted to much, several to Wisdom, two to Constitution, and one to Dexterity. And that had been at the start. After the first few days she hadn't seen any, and Imoen was very pleased to see this one now. It gave her hope that in the future she could find more, if not during the tutorial, then out in the real world.

Dismissing the message, she turned to Harry and found him staring at his own message. "What's wrong Harry?"

"I, you, you weren't doing this just to tease me? You..." Harry trailed off staring at Tonks then the message.

Moving around Harry to read over his shoulder, Imoen smirked, then put her arms around Harry's shoulders. "Well, for one thing, yeah teasing you is fun, but I did really also want to help you. As for that message, course I consider you family ya big lug. I'm just sorry my own fears made me not reach out to you when I could have. But now that we're here, I'm going to do my bloody damn best by you Harry."

Hesitantly Harry reached up and put his arms around Tonks's in turn. Above her, the relationship turned from friendly, to friends. Imoen noticed this and smiled. It would take a bit, but they'd become family in the end, she was sure of it.

Beyond helping Harry further acclimatize to his enhanced age and girls, Imoen also got to grips with her thieving. She learned how to hide in the shadows, set traps, find traps and pick pocket which was just fun. More than once Harry found himself light a few coins or gems, with her walking away whistling jauntily. The two personalities of Imoen and Imoen had merged a little too well in his opinion. Still, she was a delight to be around,

and having someone else around who remembered what happened the day before, was utterly fantastic.

This helps offset the hurt that Harry felt when he started to flirt more purposefully with Cassandra and ran into her not remembering what happened the day before once more. It took seven iterations of flirting with the free-spirited barmaid before Harry could stop making a fool of himself on their little dates, either by coming on a little too strong, or by turning into a stuttering mess when it got to the point where she was more interested than then amused by his flirtations. For the first few times, she had simply been manipulating him in a way, or at least not making or not taking him very seriously, and Harry had paid for it, in the form of gems and gold and even some embarrassment.

That however served to spur Harry on further and he continued to try to raise their relationship status. Eventually it paid off, and one day Imoen looked up from where she had been sitting in what had become their normal evening meeting place, a small out of the way tree in the inner environs of the castle near its orchards but not part of them. She smiled, but her smile segued into a bit of a smirk, as she leaned back and crossed her arms under her all-too-petite chest, crossing her legs and leaning back against the tree as she stared at Harry. "I take it your date went well?"

"Kissing is great," Harry replied, his eyes wide and unseeing.

"Yeah it is, if you do it well. I take it Cassandra can?" Imoen asked, trying not to laugh. But when Harry simply replied by another kissing is great line as he stumbled forward, tripping over a tree root, she lost it, and began to laugh loudly, shaking her head. When she recovered, she asked teasingly, "And did this lead you to a new skill?"

Harry blinked, then opening his status screen for a moment, perusing it quickly. "I don't think so, I mean, why would kissing... Then he frowned as he read a new skill added in among his others. "Perception?"

He clicked on it, and read the description allowed. "Through your due diligence in interaction with those of the female persuasion, you have unlocked an advanced skill, Perception! This skill will allow you to read your fellow men to a large degree, the degree of which you can do so will be prevalent upon your skill with this particular talent. It can allow you to tell if someone is lying, someone is interested in you, what that could mean, or if your actions please or displease an individual... Needless to say, this skill can be used in many different areas of life."

"Wow," he mused before reading on. "'Ties into your combat ability, crowd watching skill and ascertain.' I understand the first two, but not the last one."

Smirking now in victory, she had been right that there was a reason for Harry to pursue relationships even in this tutorial, Imoen smiled at him. "My young padawan, you

have much to learn. Crowd watching, that's sort of an interesting ability that a lot of policemen have. It helps you to spot people who are a danger to themselves or those around them, and who might break in violence at any moment. You can spot thieves, rogues, at their jobs. Maybe even someone who is using hide in shadows eventually and of course if you're looking for a specific person it becomes much easier. As for the last one, I'd wager that has something to do with spotting whether or not gems are real or something like that."

"Bloody Brilliant! I can see how all of those would be useful. But why the heck was it tied into a relationship and my, my learning how to kiss?"

Because relationships are easier than any of the rest of that stuff in many ways and reading body language is a big part of perception," Imoen said with a nod. "It makes sense."

"Yeah maybe to you. Not to me," Harry groused.

Imoen smiled, pulling Harry down to sit next to her, and putting an arm over his broad shoulders. "Now come on, was it all that... hard?"

"Yes!" Harry groused not acknowledging the joke she's made out of that last word. "I still have no idea why she responded better to my saying that I found her eyes prettier than her hair, or why she responded better to me when I bent over to cut the logs rather than faced her as I did it flexing my arms. I thought that you know showing off my chest would be a good idea but no."

"Well some girls like a tight arse just like many a man, who knows, its awful hard to spot that kind of thing. As for the eye and hair, that's simpler. Hair is easy to see and comment on, but eyes are different, they're harder to remember, and of course, they are called the windows to the soul for a reason." Imoen elaborated.

"But, but when I just tried to comment about how she was probably a good person on underneath her beauty, she seems to think I was lying," Harry said, looking a little distraught at the idea.

"That was probably down to your wording Harry. And the timing. And the individual," Imoen added after second. "Cassandra isn't looking for you to fall in love with her, she isn't looking to have a permanent relationship, heck the bargirl told you that herself. So, Cassandra might have been scared off a little. She might indeed have thought you were taking the mickey, making fun of her you know?" Imoen waved her hand airily. "The point is, all women are different, you can't woo them all of them in the same manner, and you can't trot out any of those old hoary lines about inner beauty or some such unless it's at the appropriate time, and she's the one that brings up whether or not you'd like her for her body, or her personality."

"Why in the heck isn't there a book on this kind of thing?" Harry grumbled. "And do you really think it's worth the effort here? In the tutorial phase I mean. I'm a little leery about trying to get further with Cassandra at this point." He added, now sounding worried. "We're really brushing up on that part where it begins to get less about making up for lost time, and more about manipulation."

"Then stop," Imoen said simply. "You can switch to flirting with Mistress Phlydia if it's starting to bother you with Cassandra. As for there not being a book about this kind of thing, that's what society is supposed to teach you, Harry. You're supposed to learn from your, well from **me**," she said smacking her chest while she skirted around the use of the word family or the even more incendiary word relative. "There are a lot of unwritten rules about interacting with girls and girls interacting with boys, and most of them have to do with how society perceives that kind of thing. For example, the Muggles back home are much more liberal about how long a couple can date than the wizarding society is. You can get away with dressing differently, you can get away with dating for a lot longer. Yet at the same time, the idea of a girl asking a boy out would be seen as kind of odd in the muggle world. Whereas in the wizarding world, you could get away with that. Our clothing is far more conservative, but there's a lot more equality between the sexes in the wizarding world."

"And here?" Harry asked pointedly, gesturing around them.

"Medieval times Harry," Imoen said thoughtfully. "That means only the middle class really have dates as we would understand the term, although they would probably call it courtship regardless of the class. I would assume that nobles and royalty all can have arranged relationships, which is pure crap in my opinion. You know my why my mother had to run away to marry my father. The lower class, girls like your Cassandra.

She paused as Harry seemed to bristle, and she held up a hand hurriedly. "I'm not saying she's a hick or that there's anything wrong with that, I'm just saying she's a peasant, someone who wasn't born into wealth, or into any kind of high society that's all. Girls like her, well, their experiences and prospects can vary wildly. And those prospects will have to color how you act towards them and vice-versa, because for that class of girl, her prospects are never that good. It's either housewife, bar girl, or an adventurer I suppose, unless they know enough to go into a trade. And adventurers are an entirely different breed."

"That's true enough," Harry said with a nod. "I wonder," he mused, pulling up the perception dialogue again and staring at it. "I wonder if this would be able to tell me more about my enemies and friends, I mean I'd really like to know more about Gorion's stats, but I'm not able to see any of that stuff even if he is family."

Imoen wondered if Harry knew what that he wore a bright grin every time he mentioned the word family. *I wonder how long it'll be before he trusts me like that.* For now, she simply smiled to herself, patting him on the knee. "Well, there's only one way to find out isn't there? See how you can raise your perception. That announcement box mentioned several aspects of perception that you can test, can't you?"

"Yeah," Harry said suddenly enthusiastic. "That does sound a great idea!"

Over the next few days, Harry concentrated on that aspect of his Gamer ability, although he did step away from flirting further with Cassandra. He switched to hanging out with Phlydia, and to his very well-hidden pleasure, he was not able to raise their relationship level nearly as quickly as doing so with Cassandra had been.

Phlydia was an older, somewhat scatter-brained elven woman in her mid-twenties, who loved learning things, books and gems in that order. She was a fit, svelte woman, somewhat like Imoen was with a tan and a small but a very perky chest, and long legs put on display by a dress that had a long slit to either side, letting them be shown whenever she moved. She had short black hair, and eyes, and a faintly whimsical, smiling sort of face.

And unlike Cassandra she simply wasn't all that interested in jumping into a relationship whereas Cassandra was after a certain point very interested in a physical relationship. Phlydia also was able to teach him more about gems when he started to ask her questions about the gem she gave him as her reward for the quest to find her glasses.

This led directly into perception again, letting him raise it somewhat. The perception skill was raised in percentages as Harry used it, which made it a very different type of skill from most he had encountered. His cooking skill was something similar, but it grew in large clumps, whereas the perception skill was very slow to raise.

While this was going on, Imoen also was raising her stats as much as she could, which unfortunately wasn't very much. There just weren't very many quests in the tutorial that directly impacted the stats, and those that gave experience stopped giving experience quickly as you redid them. This left her to practice her thief abilities, which much like Harry's perception skill and cooking skills, only gained in percentages, and again for limited returns after she redid the same things.

This wasn't exactly a smooth process. Three times she was nearly attacked by Watchers for having tried to sneak into areas that she shouldn't be. Twice, she tried to pick pocket, only to be attacked by the individual whose pocket she was trying to pick, with everyone else around them piling in on his side of things. It was only because of Imoen's past habits and some very quick talking on her part that got her out of it. And of course, she also had to fight to get that kind of time free from her lessons with Madame

Barca, who looked down on her pick-pocketing skills and her general irreverent attitude, concentrating their lessons now on hiding in shadows and trap detection and creation. Or rather, those were the only lessons she gave Imoen that she actually listened to.

She did however find that Imoen had a skill slot spent on short bows. The skill with ranged weapons allowed her to hold it right and pull the string back and fire faster with each skill slot. And like in combat, there was a little bouncing ball of light, which she had to aim for. If she didn't hit that spot, then she missed entirely, or her arrow bounced off the armor of the target, though hitting it could mean a lot of different things.

But soon enough even that didn't excite Imoen's interest. In about half the time it took Harry to do the same thing, Imoen got to the point where she wasn't learning anything new in this tutorial phase. After one rather boring day, she found Harry at their meeting spot before her. This was something that had only rarely happened, considering the time he spent with Phlydia or with Gorion.

The instant he she came into sight, he looked at her. and stood up, his body almost trembling as he said abruptly. "All right, I'm done. I know you think you might have more to learn here, but I don't, and this is getting ridiculous. We have to move on. I have to move on. This whole everyone else forgetting thing is getting to me again, and I am not learning anything new."

"This doesn't have anything to do with the fact that your actually becoming enamored with Phlydia does it?" Imoen teased, while inside she was still a little leery about moving on. A part of her, a small, all too naive part had hoped that the two of them would be rescued by this point, that the question of moving on would never come up. But it had, and she knew she would have to deal with it. Imoen was also very concerned about how real the game, or rather this new life of theirs, would become once they left this tutorial phase.

Still, she couldn't argue with the fact that neither of them were learning anything new any longer. She couldn't raise her basic thieving skills anymore, without raising her actual level any longer, not without taking a lot of lumps. And the last time she had tried something, Madame Barca had actually let her stew in the little cell that Candlekeep kept for malcontents for the rest of the day. That had not been fun, especially since Harry had been forbidden to come and see her, and had actually listened to it too. *Seriously, I've seen him act out occasionally, why couldn't he have acted out there?*

"No!" Harry said, flushing a little at Imoen's question. He did find Phlydia a little, okay, a lot fascinating. Her more erudite and more experienced air, experienced in a very different way than Cassandra, it was hard to describe, really interested him. But he had been telling the truth when he said that he was once again edging into manipulation territory with the way he could acted around her in just the right way to get the best

reaction. But it was also the case that he was no longer be able to add anything to his perception skill or cooking skills.

"Okay," Imoen said with a sigh. "I suppose we can move on. The question is how."

"That's easy at least," Harry said with a chuckle. "I go and meet Gorion outside the end, then head into the inn like he said to pick up the supplies from the innkeeper. I come back out, I meet him, and we go." Despite his flirting with Cassandra, Harry had been careful not to enter the inn, fearing it would start the process of ending the tutorial before they were ready.

"That's fine for you, but what about me?" Imoen growled, poking the larger Harry in the chest. "Remember what I said about you leaving me behind Potter."

"Sneak out?" Harry shrugged. "Don't tell me you haven't been looking around for places to get out of Candlekeep."

"Yeah, but remember, I get caught, and told if I go out I'm not coming back." Through this the two of them had learned that it was even more difficult than they had supposed to enter the famous library. It was such a depository of knowledge that it could demand an outrageous price to enter it: a million gold coins or a single book that could not already be found within. This had heretofore been one of those things that everyone knew and thus didn't need to talk about.

"Why should that matter? I don't think that we're going to be coming back." Harry said with a shrug.

"Point," Imoen said with a nod. "Okay, tomorrow we'll leave then. While your meeting with Gorion and going on your way, I'll be looking around for a place to escape. I'll catch up with you outside somewhere."

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"What do you mean you've misplaced my partner?" Moody growled in anger, his wand pressing into Croaker's chest.

"Did you know she intended to sneak down here?" Croaker asked, not backing down.

"Of course not, but that sounds like her. Little lass was worried about the target of our investigation changing. Now tell me why she was able to sneak down here at all. You lot might not be the most vigilant, but you do have some security here. No chance someone from another department could have just waltzed down here, even a fully trained Metamorph."

We let her in," Croaker admitted. "We wanted to see what she could do, since there isn't a single muggleborns in the department. OH, we know what computers are, but we have very little idea about how they work, let alone the concept of programming."

Another Unspeakable spoke up from near the computer they had removed from Potter's house, shaking his head, his face unseen in his hood. "We had hoped she knew more about it, but we hadn't anticipated she would just reactivate the thing! Honestly, what are they teaching Aurors these days? Never trust anything unless you can see where it keeps its brain."

"Hah, own up my friend. We hadn't thought that it was possible at all for her to activate the computer like that given the magic dampeners we have all around here." Croaker said.

He was interrupted then as Moody poked him with his wand again. "So, how do we get her back huh? And Potter too. There's only so much longer we can keep a lid on that, hells, I know Dumbledore's been forced to sit on Potter's muggleborn friend already, the one Potter sent his owl to. Bright lass, and feisty too. It'll take spells to keep her silent before too long."

"There had been a time when it would have been Albus there," Croaker said, one eyebrow rising in surprise.

"Yeah, well, let's just say his idea of constant vigilance and mine have started to differ of late," Croaker grouched. "Don't talk as if you're all that happy with him either, leaving Potter out in the cold like that, with no way to contact him or even for Potter to protect himself. Dumbledore's bought into his own hype about second chances too much."

"Hmm... well we know at least thanks to young Ms. Granger, and you can't have her Moody, my department saw her first, that Harry had some role in his own disappearance. I could wish he had mentioned the name of the house elf who helped him repair his computer, but whatever the case, we have been able to figure out what happened there: the house elf and Potter's magic warred almost with the intent of the soul trap. So whoever powered up the computer was not absorbed, but rather, sent somewhere." Croaker began, gesturing over to the computer.

"Where?" Moody asked, finally letting his wand fall. Not that it was any great consolation, Croaker knew the man had another wand somewhere on him, and a few magical items which were strong enough to work even here. There was a reason Moody had survived two Dark Lords after all.

"Do you know anything about the pocket dimension theory?" the other Unspeakable asked. When Moody shook his head he sighed theatrically. "In that case just take it as a given that they have gone very far away indeed. And we can't get them back. We can't reverse the spell. It was more than one spell obviously and it was the muddle of spells rather than a single unified effort that sent him away. We would have to find a way to somehow discover their location in another manner before we can even try to. It would be like trying to find a single fish in the sea!"

Moody growled, then sent a series of ostensibly nonlethal spells at the man, a light spell followed by a tickling charm aimed at his feet, then a featherlight charm followed by the summoning charm. As he began to bounce the man off the walls and ignore his shouts of outrage and pain, Moody addressed Croaker. "Then you best get to building a bloody fishing pole, hadn't you?"

Rolling his eyes Croaker began to talk his old friend down from his semi-murderous anger, as well as trying to explain the difficulty of that task. "Besides, I think we might have something more important to worry about. That little diary we found on the Malfoy estate. That, that is a dangerous little item Moody, for all its unassuming appearance. Indeed, it might indicate that perhaps Voldemort's minions are not all we have to fear."

For a moment, even with the number of missing people having risen by one, Croaker and his associates had far more on their minds. If that state of affairs would continue however, especially once Harry Potter didn't show up for school, was anyone's guess.

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the next day, Harry did not meet with Cassandra. He did not go off to find Phlydia. He met up with the arms master and defeated him in record time, before going directly to find master Gorion, where he was talking with Candlekeep's blacksmith, a large man with massive arms who was the second hairiest man Harry had ever seen. The two of them were going over a parchment together, but Gorion looked up as Harry approached. "Ah Harry, have you said your farewells?"

"I have Gorion," Harry said with a smile. "I'm ready to go."

"Excellent. In that case, you can go pick up our supplies from the inn." Pulling out one of the sheets of paper that he and the keep's blacksmith were going over, Gorion held it out to Harry. "I'll be here still quibbling over the price of this armor that I wanted to purchase for you from our resident Smith here."

Harry chuckled at that in bowed his head and waste towards the blacksmith who waved him off. "Away lad. Your father and I have serious haggling to do. I like you and

the lad Gorion, but I won't be letting you convince you me to let this armor go for less than my full price. Iron is becoming more and more scarce throughout the Sword Coast."

Harry walked away, nodding quietly to himself. *Yep, Imoen was right, that iron shortage thing is definitely going to show up later on I'm certain.* With a smile on his face as he now began to imagine what adventures awaited him beyond the walls of Candlekeep, Harry made his way towards the inn.

He smiled and waved at Cassandra but didn't stop to talk to her as she exited the rookery to one side with the back basket of eggs, entering the in quickly. Given all the times that he had flirted, and even kissed her seeing her now was a little off-putting. *Thank God were leaving the tutorial!*

He was wondering idly as he crossed the threshold what God he should actually be thanking that for, because he still hadn't made a decision between the God of justice, or the God of lights, when a voice she'd never heard before shouted for him. "Hoy, you there! You with the big shoulders and the black hair."

Harry turned, frowning as he saw someone he hadn't seen before. Considering he hadn't ever been in the inn, that shouldn't have come as a surprise, but he thought he had seen all of the people who worked in the inn outside occasionally. And I didn't know that the inn actually had any guests. I thought that married couple staying on the keep's fifth floor were the only real outsiders here at this time. Harry tended to stay away from them, considering that they didn't give him any experience, and their bickering was a little much in his opinion.

"Yes," he asked pleasantly. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"Nah ya don't but I know you," the other man said with a smirk. "You'd be Gorion's ward, right? The boy he picked up when ya were a babe?"

"I am Harry said frowning now. "Do you know my father? If you do, why aren't you talking to him, he's out by the gate."

"Because my business ain't with him, it's with you. Sorry boyo, but someone's paid for your death. And I need to collect that bounty," the man said, stepping forward and pulling out a long dagger thrusting for Harry's chest.

Harry stepped back, twisting to one side as he entered the combat mode, his base level and dexterity allowing him to both see the attack coming, and dodged one side. While he didn't have any unarmed combat skill as perceived by the game, he was still big, strong, and fast. The other man was faster, coming in and slicing at Harry's arm and chest with his second blow, but Harry was able to dodge enough that the cuts were

superficial, and he struck back hard, his fist taking the other man in the throat, and almost dumping him onto his rear.

He stumbled against a table but regained his footing. However, by the time he did, Harry had his sword and shield out from his item box, causing the man's eyes to widen. "What the..." But Harry didn't let him recover from his surprise, moving forward with two quick steps and thrusting out hard with his long sword.

The man blocked it, but and then dodged to one side around another table into a bit of shadow, where he activated Hide in Shadows.

Harry lost track of his attacker instantly and backed away quickly heading into the lights cast by the inn's windows while a man at the far back of the inn looked up from where he had been kneading his back with one hand at the clamor of weaponry. Before Harry could reach the safety of the lighted portions however, his shield arm twisted almost entirely around him to block a blow that would've taken them in his kidneys. *Thank you, automatic blocking technique!* Harry thought to himself as he whipped around in the same direction, bringing his sword around in a flashing arc that caught the surprised thief by surprise, forcing him to raise his blade to block it.

But the short sword was batted to one side, by Harry's hard sideways blow which opened up the man's side. He squawked in pain and fear now, and tried to back away, throwing a dagger at Harry's face with the speed of a snake. But again Harry's shield rose, blocking the blow from landing and when the man tried to kick a chair into Harry's way, Harry ducked around it. A second later he took the other man's desperate sword stab on his shield, thrusting hard with his own sword. It was so automatic that Harry didn't even think of what he was doing, until his sword had punctured straight through the other man's chest.

Then he gasped, staring at the man he had just killed as the light slowly went out of his eyes, blood flowing out of his mouth. "Dammit, supposed to be... easy... wasn't told..."

Then the man died, and Harry let go of his sword, which clattered to the floor along with the man as he fell forward. Harry just stared down at him as the blood began to pull on the wooden floor, stepping back so as to not let the blood touches boots, as he just stared in shock, astonished and horrified beyond what even his Gamer's Mind ability could deal with.

The innkeeper had pushed himself to his feet by this time and groaning about his bad back moved around the bar, staring in shock. "Harry, what, what happened?" He took in the wide unseeing eyes on the young man, and hobbled over, putting a hand on his

shoulder, his voice becoming slightly less panicked and far more understanding as he repeated his question. "Harry what happened?"

"I don't know, he just attacked me!" Harry said. "He, he asked if I was Gorion's ward, and then said his business was with me, and someone, someone put a bounty on my head!" Harry said, trying to keep cool. He knew this was all part of the reason why he and Gorion were being forced to leave candle keep, and it was most certainly a sign that it was time to leave. But even with that and his Gamer's Mind trying to keep him from becoming too shocked, and even with the notices that had appeared after combat, he couldn't pull up his eyes away from the dead man. From the man Harry had just killed. *This is the second person I've killed in my life, dammit, I knew that killing would probably be a part of adventuring, but so soon!?*

"If he came at you with steel lad then you had no choice but to put him down with steel," the innkeeper said with a sigh. "I should've been leerier of him anyway. He tried to get into the keep with some fool book, and then paid for a week ahead of time, and from then on paid each day as it came. I should've been much leery her about him, gotten a few of the Watchers to boot him out the main gates. That's on me lad."

Grimacing at his pained back, the innkeeper knelt down, to one side, careful not to let the bloodstain his robe, as he reached for the man's pouch, frowning as he found nothing but coins. He also found a handwritten note on a piece of parchment and held it out towards Harry grimly.

Harry read it through quickly. It was a basic message that said that this man had been a member of a group, which had been sent to candle keep, to watch for a man of fair to large height with a lightning scar on his forehead who answered to the name Harry, or Gorion's ward. That proof of his death would pay for 5000 gold pieces. Harry knew enough about this world now to know that that wasn't exactly a fortune, but it would certainly set up someone for a good long while.

"Should I be insulted or just fearful do you think?" Harry asked staring at the note.

"I'd say both, lad," the innkeeper said with a smile, grateful that Harry was slowly getting out of his funk. Then he stared down at the body and shook his head. "Still, it's clear that Gorion is taking you out of here not a moment too soon. I've no idea what's all behind this, certainly can't be anything you've personally done. I've known you since you were but a babe and despite the odd brawl and sticking up for Imoen when she did wrong, you've not done nothing too terrible."

Harry chuckled, and nodded. "I think that Gorion means to tell me more about something, maybe my origins maybe?" That was about as much as he could remember,

that the story was more about Harry's past than anything else, or rather his parentage. Or this body's parentage anyway, not mine.

"Well, I've got the supplies you and Gorion wanted. They're over by the end of the bar. Best you take them, meet up with Gorion and get out of here. I'll tell the Watchers what happened here and get the master at arms to help me bury the body." He held up the thief's jingling coin purse. "And this will pay for it nicely. Looks as if he had enough money to pay for another few weeks, cheapskate didn't even want to pay ahead of time for days he wouldn't use, I suppose."

Harry nodded at that and left the man to his mutterings about his bad back as he moved to pick up some of the debris of the fight. Once that was done, Harry moved over to the bar, picked up the large bag there, and had it disappear into his item box, transferring much of the stuff from it into the box before tossing the bag over one shoulder and heading toward the door.

Outside the inn, Harry was debating between going to find Imoen or heading straight for Gorion, when he saw Gorion moving towards them from the entrance way. That solved that problem and Harry moved in his direction holding up the bag. "I, I have the supplies Gorion."

"And a blooded sword Harry," Gorion said stopping a few feet away staring at his ward and gesturing down to the sword. "What happened?"

Harry looked at his sword, not having realized he had still been holding it before kneeling down and wiping it off on the grass beneath them. Once that was done, he then made his sword disappear into his item box, along with his shield. "I, I was attacked Gorion," Harry said slowly, gesturing back towards the inn.

He explained what happened and watched as his adoptive father's face became even more grave and stern. "I see. In that case, I think we need to leave, now."

Harry nodded, and as they moved towards the entrance way asked, "what is all this about?"

Gorion frowned then answered slowly. "I don't know the whole story. But someone has been killing orphans all across the Sword Coast. I'm fearful as to the real cause behind it all, and I am very leery about jumping to conclusions. But there is something off about it. It isn't just someone trying to murder orphans, it's far too widespread for it to be a single person. And they seem to be going for people, well, individuals like you Harry, who exhibit unusual talents. Or did you honestly think that every young man who aspires to be a paladin can become as good and as strong as you are? You might only be level five Paladin, but your physical abilities set you apart."

Harry scowled irritably. There had been a time before this game began that Harry had thought he would be happy with just being a normal person, just disappearing into the background. That time was well in the past though, and he nodded. "Understood. Then what are we doing? Are we just going to be running away from whoever is after me, or will we try to hunt him down in turn?" His tone indicated which one he would prefer, although he also didn't look like he relished the thought.

"We'll hunt them down Harry, eventually," Gorion said, as they finally stepped out of candle keep through the wide tall outer walls and between the massive gates. "As I said, this conspiracy of murder is far too widespread for it to be any one person. There might be one overarching legal leader but finding him will be very difficult."

The two of them turned as they were hailed by one of the guards. This was an armed and armored Watcher, holding a large Pike in one hand, with the butt resting on the ground. He looked at them, nodding formally to Gorion. Master Gorion, we will be a sad to see you go, as well as you Harry. But you must know the rules. Once you leave, you cannot come back home here to candle keep without paying the price: One book that cannot be found within, or 1 million gold."

"When I was younger it was 100,000 gold," Gorion said crossly, shaking his head before he smiled at the man. "But that's inflation for you I suppose. He held out his hand to the guard, who took it with his offhand, gripping the forearm firmly. "I know the rules my friend, and frankly I think more than a few of the Watchers within will be grateful to see the backs of myself and my young ward here. He's never made any bones about not wanting to join the Order after all."

"Much like Imoen," Harry said, cutting in more so to say something and take his mind off what had just happened then that he knew that for a fact. Although given Imoen's personality, that was kind of a no-brainer.

The guard's face instantly became a little pained. "Yes, Imoen. And you're not going to be around any longer to be the main thought of her pranks. All of a sudden this doesn't sound all that good for those of us who are staying behind."

"I'm sure she won't burn the entire keep down," Harry said, then paused. "At least I hope not." *Although if she does set a fire to try and draw attention away from her escape, that could possibly happen? Best not to mention that.*

Gorion lightly swatted Harry on the shoulder. "Don't scare the poor man. Now come on, I want to get to the Friendly Arm Inn in two days."

"At your age?" the gatekeeper said with a guffaw. "Good luck with that. Still, farewell friend Gorion, and you too young Harry." Then his face firmed, and he moved behind them resolutely putting himself in the way of their turning around as within,

someone started to slam the main doors shut, barring their way backwards. The message was clear. Candle Keep was no longer their home and was now closed to them.

Harry found himself sort of sad about that. He didn't know how long he'd stayed there, probably about half a year or so, maybe longer, learning as much as he could and getting used to this new world and his gamer powers, as well as how they interacted with everyone else's abilities here. But, in a large way, this place wasn't like Hogwarts. Hogwarts had become a home away from home for a time, until the issue with Quirrell occurred, which sort of tainted the castle in his eyes. With candle keep he knew he could not make a home of the keep thanks to the tutorial and knew now that it was time to move on.

The two of them traveled along the path leading to candle keep from the main road along the Sword Coast for the rest of that day, but the sky began to turn black with storm clouds long before they would have stopped for the evening. Grimacing Gorion said that they would have to make camp soon and led the way off the path into the woods to search for a likely spot. They found one on top of a slight hill in the woods where two trees met at an angle, creating a decent enough little bower to hide their smoke from their campfires.

Even as they had walked Gorion had been instructing Harry on woodcraft and other skills needed on the trail, which Harry lapped up because the instant he did, they started to become actual skills, much like Harry's perception skill, adding to his repertoire. If that had been the case for Gorion he made no sign of it, simply instructing Harry as the day wound on with a small smile on his face.

Now they put some of those skills to use, creating a fire pit, lining it with stone, and's creating a small fire within before covering it with leaves, to further block out the smoke. Yet even with a small light from their fire, the night was closing in very dramatically, and Harry shivered staring out into it. Something about it was forbidding almost. It reminded him almost of the Forbidden Forest that time with Hagrid, the unicorns and how they had been attacked by Voldemort's shade. *If someone riding a horse walks up to us and goes the stars are bright tonight, I'm going to lose it.*

Gorion moved to stand beside him, staring out into the darkness himself. "Well, I suppose we shouldn't have thought that everything would be sunny and nice as we left home, now should we?"

Harry shrugged. "True enough, but is this kind of weather normal?"

"On the sword coast?" the older man barked a laugh. "I see that Watcher Trodan's teachings have gone in one ear and out the other. Oh yes, the storms that give this coast

it's fell reputation among sailors don't just hit the coast itself lad. Indeed, you'd have to travel for weeks inland to get away from them. And this is the season for traveling too."

"Great," Harry drawled. "So I should get used to the whole getting wet thing on a daily basis then?"

"You won't shrink in it like salt Harry, have no fear. The only real danger that comes with the rain normally are the selkies that can be found on the shores, and those shores are far from here," the man said with a laugh. "Now come, I'm hungry. And since you're the younger of us, it's your turn to cook first."

"How does that make any sense, shouldn't I, as the younger, watch you cook over the fire first to learn how it goes?"

"Perhaps if I had spent any time in candle keep in the kitchens, unlike you. Now go on. Enough prevaricating." Gorion ordered. "I'm hungry."

As soon as Harry began his cooking skill began to activate, and it helped him perform decently enough over the open fire, good enough to create a good solid stew from their packs. The two of them ate in companionable silence with Harry asking about the roads and the map of the area as Gorion knew it, as well as any specific plans Gorion was willing to make at this point.

Gorion however shook his head. "Other than heading to the Friendly Arm Inn in order to meet up with a few friends of mine, I'm not willing to make any set plans."

"Friends?"

Gorion hesitated, then sighed. "You have never asked what I did as an adventurer and I thank you for respecting my privacy, which I had reasons for, good reasons. In fact, would it shock you to know that I was part of the Harpers?"

Harry leaned back staring at his father thoughtfully. The Harpers he had learned through his reading were a group dedicated to the balance, to what were known as the true neutral gods. They acted out against the dark gods most often, but they also acted against the light gods occasionally, when those gods got too big for their britches essentially. They were a secret society known of the world over ironically enough, and any harpers and bards of the road could be one of them.

Generally speaking they were a force for good, despite their whole harping on about true neutrality, so Harry had no problem seeing his father taking that role. "I would say it wouldn't surprise me much," he said with a shrug. "You don't seem the spying type, but I have to imagine that the Harpers have a militant arm or something similar, don't they?"

"Actually, I was both spy and active participant as we would put it," Gorion replied with a shrug. "And my friends are much the same, although they are still active occasionally for the Harpers. I sent messages to them requesting their aid and I hope to meet them at the Friendly Arm Inn. Or if not there, then further south. I know they will be sent in to investigate this iron shortage issue. There is no possible way it can be as simple as it appears at first blush."

Harry was about to ask him what he meant by that, when there was a thunderous crash of thunder from outside. Soon after this was answered by a piercing ghoulish howl.

Instantly Harry was on his feet, his sword in one hand, his shield on the other. Gorion however moved around him, pushing him back with one hand. "Armor lad, get your armor on." Gorion had never taken his off but hadn't stopped Harry from doing so. "And let this be a lesson Harry," Gorion said as Harry fumbled with his armor, which he had not put back into his item box, rather setting it to one side to go over for rust spots. Never take your armor off when you're in the field no matter how rusty it gets, not even when you're behind the walls of an inn."

"What do you think is out there?" Harry asked, as he pulled on his armor and moved to stand beside Gorion staring out from underneath the branches of their camp into the darkness of the forest.

"Hopefully just wolves, but that howl sounded a little too human," Gorion said slowly. He narrowed his eyes, and began to enchant a spell, then lashed out into the darkness ahead of them with a flash charm, brighter and more powerful than any Harry had seen back in his old world. That charm lit up the forest, and elicited howls of pain and agony from the group that had slowly begun to encircle them.

As it lit up the night for a moment the forest was as visible as if by day, and Harry took a moment to stare at their enemies. Some of them were wolves, about ten or so, spread out all around, their eyes showing the blank nature of a charmed beast, which Harry had read about in his books. There were two shapes well behind the wolves to Harry's right, wearing robes and staves, which Harry knew meant that those two were mages. But mixed in with the wolves were four other figures, hunchbacked, with long arms trailing on the ground like a gorilla almost, but without any fur, a loincloth being the only thing of clothing they wore, and a mouth full of fangs.

And behind even the mages was another form, a large monstrous form taller than even Harry. It was even broader in the shoulders and wore matte black armor that covered everything from head to toe, making it impossible for Harry to see anything of the man within.

He was chanting something even as Gorion's blast of light went off and gestured forward with one hand, sending some kind of power forward, though it didn't come with a shouted spell, so Harry didn't know what it was. Gorion intercepted it with a harsh command, a magic bolt lashing out from his finger to catch the incoming spell and dissipated. But that attention cost the two of them, because it took Gorion's attention away from the two spell casters. They launched fireballs at Harry and his foster father, which exploded directly in front of them.

Harry screamed in pain, as he was hurled backwards off of his feet from the explosion, and rolled down the hillside, to fetch up against a tree. Instantly a message box appeared in front of him. "Warning, you have taken damage. Unknown enemy caster has used fireball to impact you for -25 health. Warning, you have cracked a rib, -20 to health. -2 two dexterity agility and strength so long as this wound continues."

Gasping in pain, Harry pushed himself to his feet groggily, and was not surprised that he had lost his longsword. Pulling out another longsword from his item box was easy enough, as was using his single healing potion. It had been among the supplies the innkeeper had given them and had been the first one Harry had seen, though he had seen pictures of them in books before this. Downing it, he was grateful to see that it quickly went to work need knitting his rib back together, although it didn't do much for his overall health points. Adding only 15 back, leaving him still at half health.

I'll just have to be extra careful then, he thought grimly, as he started back up the hill. Two of the things Harry now recognized as ghouls however had followed him quickly downwards, causing Harry to stop. He concentrated, and thrust forward with one hand, then clutched it into a fist shouting "Turn undead."

One of the ghouls was caught by the spell and collapsed into dust. The other however kept coming, only pausing for a second. Harry then charged forward, his sword lashing out. Even as he did so, he worried about what was happening up top where flames fireballs and now lightning could be seen as Gorion dueled the others. *Please be alright Gorion!*

OOOOOO

it had taken Imoen about three hours to figure out a way to escape Madame Barka's presence. The woman seemed to know that she had wanted to follow Harry and was determined to make sure that she stayed behind. However, eventually Imoen gave her the slip, and then attempted to get outside, and did so by the most expedient matter: she simply ran pell-mell through the front gate.

The gate guard paused as he saw the pink-haired girl racing by him, then shouted after her "You know you won't be able to get back in, right Imoen?"

"Sod that," Imoen shouted over her shoulder. "I'm going with Harry!"

The gatekeeper stared after her, then chuckled shaking his head. And if anyone even Watcher Barka is surprised by this, I think they'll have to have their heads examined." With a sigh he nodded at the viewer slot sliding to one side of the large gate. As Imoen raced on she heard the resounding clang of the door closing behind her ritually. When she was out of sight it would open again, but the gates of candle keep, both the castle and the library keep itself, were now closed to her.

Imoen raced on halting when her stamina began to appear in her view. Resting for a bit, then moving on. Unlike the other two however she didn't have any supplies, having been unable to gather them as Gorion had before heading out. She had a lot of food on her, stuck in her item box, which she had discovered could keep food at the precise heat that it was when it entered the box. But she didn't have any bedrolls or anything of that nature. *Still, it won't be the first time I've roughed it out of doors.*

Racing along, Imoen was almost within sight of Harry's back when the sky began to cloud over, and the two of them skirted into the woods. There she lost them for a bit. Whatever else could be said about Imoen, she had been a city girl, and Imoen had never been beyond candle keep's outer walls. Because of this she rapidly became lost out here in the woods.

However, when the fight began, the fireballs and noise from it acted like a beacon, and she raced through the woods, up the small hill only to stop and stare as Harry, was blown off the side of the hill and was sent tumbling down. Growling angrily, she pulled out her shorts bow, and notched an arrow to it, then activated Hides in Shadows. In the dark of night and with the rain coming down around her, the technique was easy to activate, with little chance of failure.

So covered, Imoen moved around, heading up the hill in a roundabout way, towards where Gorion and Harry were, her eyes searching for enemies, as they had been taught in Auror's school: when coming to the aid of pinned down fellows you didn't join them, you took the enemy out first, and if you could sneak up on them all the better. Luckily, or unluckily depending on your point of view, Imoen found the enemy quickly in the form of a snarling group of wolves. Three of them, and then something else beyond, something that stank, the stench of it making her eyes nearly weep. *Right, stinky gets it first.* With that in mind, she pulled back her arrow, and let fly.

Through the days spent in the tutorial area Imoen and Harry had been able to discover that she had a skill slot spent on the short bow. They had even tested it, and found that it, like close quarter combat, had a small moving target. For ranged attacks it took the form of a large, circular target. According to the message box they had initially seen when she tried it, at higher levels the target marker would change, so that the archer

could wound, maim, or try for a critical hit. Of course, any damage dealt also was affected by the armor, both natural and worn, of the target. Luckily, Imoen had always been a very damn good shot with spells, and, thanks to the skill slot, hadn't needed to go through a long learning period on how to use a bow.

The arrow thwapped into the stinky fellow's head, but didn't do much damage, simply embedding itself there. And worst, Imoen had forgotten that attacking like that pushed her out of Hides in Shadows and this gained the creature's attention. The creature she had attacked and the three nearest wolves turned to her and raced forward. But the speed of the creature, which Imoen now knew was some kind of undead, was astonishing, and it crossed the distance between them far faster than Imoen had thought it could.

"Bugger me! Stupefy!" she shouted, thrusting one hand forward. The spell, a wide circle of reddish energy flashing through the night too fast to ruin her night vision thankfully, spread out like a cone away from her and hit her targets. But to her surprise the creature seemed to simply shake it off and keep coming. The two wolves to either side skidded to a halt, collapsing where they had stood, as the wide reddish beam hit them. This left one wolf racing toward her with the undead creature.

She quickly dropped her short bow, and whipped out her short sword, getting it up into the thing's face and using it to block the creature's attempts to bite at her, but there her special ability 'Fight like a Jackrabbit' activated, and allowed her to dodge its claws. a quick cutting spell took the thing's leg off at the hip,, it's undead constitution no match for magic, although the minus ten points to Imoen's health was worrying. It fell and Imoen backed away only to face the leaping wolf. She barely got her sword up in time and the wolf struck, taking her to the ground. Her sword was thankfully between them, and the wolf's own weight caused the sword to cut into it. the wolf yelped and leaped away, and Imoen rolled clear. Before the wolf could recover, Imoen had sent another cutting spell at it, cutting the wolf's head clear off.

"Bloody hell, thank goodness it wasn't a werewolf." She grumbled, standing up straight and then moving over to the two stupefied wolves, finishing them off with short thrusts down with her short sword into the thing's back, right at the base of the neck severing their spine. Then, she turned to the undead creature, which was now trying to crawl towards her, using its arms as legs with far too much ease for her liking. "Damn me..." Imoen backed away rapidly, then lashed out with a fire spell, the magical equivalent of a flame thrower, thought an instant later, as the creature screamed and died, the hit to her hit points caused her to go lightheaded.

"Warning, continued use of Blood Mage spells will take its toll on you. -50 to health." A message box intoned warningly, the box flashing red and black.

That, with the spells she'd already used, left Imoen at well below half health, and even though her body was still hale and uninjured, Imoen could feel it, a nasty throb behind her eyes a certain wooziness and weakness of the body. That last aspect cleared quickly, but not the throbbing, which increased in turn. Still, thanks to her Auror training and generally scrappy attitude, Imoen/Imoen was used to pain, and bore through her first batch of enemies dealt with, Imoen turned away and raced on up the hill towards where the conflagration was happening.

OOOOOOO

Harry grimaced as he blocked the blow from the ghoul, then smashed his shield into its face when it tried to bite him, but his eyes were for the small red dot that he was following, and in a second, his longsword flashed out, embedding itself in the creature's forehead, slicing into its brain box, and sending it collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Gasping in relief, Harry turned and made certain the four wolves that had followed the ghoul down and attacked him during his battle with the ghoul were all dead. Thankfully they were, but not before one of them had taken a bite out of one of Harry's legs when he had slipped lightly in the mud. Ignoring that wound for now though, Harry made his way slowly up the hill, still dealing with a lot of pain from being thrown down the hill by the initial fireball on top of the bite. as he moved up the hill several more wolves charged towards him, and Harry debated with himself whether or not to conserve his magic and deal with them slowly, or get back to Gorion and help him against the real threat. Really, there's no choice there.

He moved to the side, so that both wolves were coming at him from the front rather than from too wide a difference in angle and then cast the Stupefy spell once more, gasping as the ten hit points were drained from him. In his wounded state, that dropped him down to below half health, and he grimaced, unwilling to give into the pain. Still the spell worked, knocking both wolves out. He finished them both, then stood for a moment, gasping in air, shaking his head. *Dammit! Those spells really do take it out of me.*

Shaking his head though, Harry moved upwards as fast as he could in his debilitated state, then stopped as a loud ringing noise appeared, and a large than average message box appeared in front of him lined in gold. "A possible party member has appeared in your area of control; do you wish to add Imoen to your party?"

Wondering about how that had occurred and why it had occurred now, Harry could only gape in astonishment for a brief second before shouting out "yes!" and smacking his hand lightly on the green button, forgetting in his haste that he could've just used his eye movements to do just that or that he wouldn't actually feel anything under his hand, nearly overbalancing himself in his haste and from the wound in his leg.

An instant later he knew precisely where Imoen was, the girl appearing on his small map as a bright green dot and moved around the hill towards her. As he did so, he quickly began to read off a series of little notices.

"Now that Imoen is in your party, you can access her item box. You can access her skills and stats. You can access her character sheet. Warning, you cannot make changes to Imoen's character sheet. You can only view it. When Imoen levels up, you will be able to distribute her skill and stat points as you see fit. Always keep in mind the character of the individual however."

Putting that to one side for more important matters, Harry went on to the next declaration. This one was even more important. "As a member of your party, you have limited control over the actions of Imoen the thief, you can also create team techniques, dual attacks. Passive abilities one party member has will be shared throughout the party for a limited time, as will active skills or auras. Your active aura, 'Turn Undead' has been activated on Imoen. Imoen's passive ability, 'Fight like a Jackrabbit' has been activated on you the player. You will be more difficult to hit from now on until the end of combat or until Imoen's stamina is decreased."

"Why couldn't we have practiced with this shit before?!" Imoen shouted through the tumult of the rain as she came upon Harry, gratefully leaping up and over a decomposing ghoul, who had been about to take a bite out of her before she had even known it was there. Harry's Turn Undead ability suddenly radiating out from her had saved her life, and she breathed a sigh of relief even as she took in Harry's bedraggled, wounded appearance. *Not, mind you, that I'm any better. Shit, this combat is far too fucking real for my liking, best get the idea that this is a game whatever the stats and shit say out of my head.*

this oddly enough won her a "Master of the Obvious: for spotting something so obvious it really, **really** should have occurred to you before this, you have earned one intelligence point. Perhaps one day you can aspire to be smart enough to operate complex equipment, like doorknobs, on your own. +1 to intelligence." which she grumbled at and waved off easily.

Harry didn't even notice the message box appearing in front of her, already turning away and gesturing to the top of the hill. "I don't know, and I don't care. Come on! Gorion's still up there, and..."

There was a flashing blast of thunder, and a scream, which came from a throat neither of them knew, and a body was sent tumbling through the air and down towards them forcing them to dodge backwards. It was one of the attackers from before, one of the two mages. "Um, are you sure he needs our help?" Imoen asked somewhat shakily. Even though she had been a trainee Auror this was the first real, to the death type fight

she'd ever been in, and she was kind of astonished Harry was handling it as well as he was. I wish I had the Gamer mind thing that he does, she groused, even as she turned and raced up after him.

"There has to be one more mage and this armored giant up there," Harry said, thinking quickly. "Let's move around to the side. See if we can spot them, then when I charge in, you take them from behind."

Imoen nodded and reactivated her Hide in Shadows skill. As she did, another image popped up in front of Harry. "Because of her trust in you, Imoen has obeyed your commands, and when she acts in concert with the rest of the party, will receive a +4 to damage and +6 defense. Because of your friendship your relationship with Imoen, your relationship with Imoen has raised to 'family'. The odds of activating dual attacks, combo and other team-based attacks has increased."

Staring in shock at that, Harry held back a whoop with difficulty. That family line meant a lot to him on an emotional level, but the rest of it was just fantastic. Imoen didn't honestly have a lot of strength, something that Imoen had complained about a lot of times as she was getting used to her new persona. But this, this could be a game changer for her. Just like her agility boost to him could be, especially in his wounded state.

Setting such thoughts aside for now, Harry crested the hill and came upon a site of destruction. There were four ghoul bodies burning to a crisp and there, the ghouls within the fire twitching this way and that. No wolf corpses could be seen, but there was the body of a giant bear which hadn't been there before. Six gnolls, large creatures with the body of men and hyenas mixed had also showed up from somewhere but were also dead. Indeed, their bodies were liberally scattered around the area save for two who had obviously been killed by Gorion's sword, a longsword like Harry's but with a better blade to it, which now lay shattered on the ground of the battlefield, almost sinking into the mud. *Jesus! Gorion is one tough old son of a bitch.*

But it was obvious that Gorion was flagging now. He was still under the attack of two more gnolls and the armored giant, who was simply cackling at him, smacking his spells aside as he marched towards his prey. Despite the fact that Gorion too was armored, still held a dagger and had a magical shield all around him Harry knew how that contest would have to end. There was something about that man, something almost unstoppable. Added to that was the fact that Harry couldn't perceive his level, even with his perception ability, which had allowed him to perceive the levels of a few of the Watchers within candle keep who were not friendly towards him. The others he could see the levels of, to level 12 gnolls, and a level 10 mage.

keeping to the shadows just beyond the sizzling fires here and there from the magical combat, Harry then broke out into the light, making his way towards the mage in plain sight as he whispered, "Take the mage."

The mage turned to Harry and he lashed out with magic bullets, which Harry used his shield to lock, grimacing. The small magic bolts were barely the size of a few fingers, the number of them matching the level of the mage. They hit like tiny sledgehammers, nearly tossing Harry to his rear, and his health bar dropped further when one bolt got through to sizzle into his shoulder.

Imoen grimaced as she moved around the fight, as one of the gnoll warriors too turned towards Harry. But Harry had told her to take the mage and judging by the fact that he was now chanting another spell while staring at Harry she had no issue with that order. *I just hope that Harry can handle that hyena guy, darn it, I know I should have spent more time on the books.*

To her surprise Harry didn't remain on the defense. Instead he charged forward, engaging the gnoll in a contest of whirling blades, dodging this way and that to keep the gnoll between himself and the mage. This both kept the gnoll from using its large billhook to good effect and kept both of their attention on him, as Imoen circled around them.

An instant later Imoen was in position right behind the mage. She came out of her hide in shadows technique and stabbed him just as he was about to launch another spell, taking him straight in the back and kidneys.

"Imoen has used backstab. Imoen has benefited from being part of your party and in the trust inherent in your relationship level, family. Instant kill!" practically shouted the message box that appeared in front of both Imoen and Harry.

The message was instantly proven correct as the mage gasped, and died, blood streaming from his side and mouth as Imoen pulled the sword back. She now leaped forward, nearly losing her footing on the muddy, wet ground as the gnoll warrior Harry had been facing turned to move to one side so it could take them both in but this let Harry push forward, nearly taking the creature in the chest with his blade. By the time the beast set its feet against Harry's renewed offensive, Imoen was gone.

He tried frantically to search around for her, but couldn't do that and keep Harry at arm's length. He paid for this lack of attention a second later as Harry's sword once more found the red dot, and the creature's arm flew off, cut through at the wrist. The hyena-like gnoll had just a moment to open its maw to scream before Imoen's short sword found him in the back of the neck. Her sword though shattered, and she gawked down at it. "What the..."

"Weapons have a durability rating remember, no time to worry about it now," Harry shouted, pulling out a short sword from his own item box and tossing it to her. She caught it deftly, and they twisted around, racing towards where Gorion was facing the giant as best their wounds would allow.

Just as they did though, Gorion's final protective shield went down, and instant later, the armored giant sword found him, stabbing through Gorion's chest. The massive blade lifted Gorion off of his feet. "You were good Gorion, very, very good. But your instincts for combat seem to have degraded. You should never have let me close to you, whatever you thought of your shield. Don't worry though, your ward will soon be joining you."

Harry and Imoen were close enough to hear those words, and close enough to shout in shock at what they were seeing, but they weren't close enough to hear what Gorion whispered in return, perhaps because it wasn't even in response to what the man had shouted, or rather monologued. Instead, it might have been a spell, because in the next instant, Gorion had spat out in the man's face, and instead of the spit simply hitting, it sizzled like acid, burning into the man's armored face. The acid somehow ate into the armor almost instantly and the man screamed in agony, wiping at his full helmet which only served to spread it, and Gorion stumbled back, the sword still embedded in him, one hand holding it there, as he spat again and again at the man, hitting his face several more times with the acid spell.

Shrieking in pain and fury, the man bellowed out "Damn you old man, you have only delayed the inevitable!" With that, he released his massive sword and fell back. Even as Harry and Imoen raced forward to join the fight he pulled out some kind of scroll from his pouch that he had been carrying to one side of his waist and crushed it within his grip. The next instant, he was gone, leaving behind his sword still embedded in Gorion's stomach and chest.

Harry shouted in fury and grief and raced forward, grabbing at Gorion even as he cursed the fact that he had already used his one healing potion as he tried to save his mentor's life.

"D, don't bother Harry," Gorion said. "I, I know a mortal wound when I, gah, feel it. And neither of you, *hack* are healers. Sorry. Sorry, Harry. Would have been with you, would have *cough* helped you. But this road, *hack*, seems you'll have to walk it without me. Loved you like a son, Harry. Rem, *hack* remember that. And remember, whatever you are family, whatever your, your patronage, you... you are... it is the... choices...you... make... that define...you." And with that, Gorion, former Harper, former adventurer, adopted father of Harry, died in his son's arms.

To one side, Imoen could only grab at Harry's shoulder from behind as Harry began to weep quietly, shaking his head from side to side. "I, I know he really shouldn't have gotten as close as he did to me. I know it, it shouldn't matter as much," he said not looking back at her as he sobbed through his tears. "But he really was a father figure to me."

"I know luv," Imoen said, sliding to her knees in the mud and wet earth underneath them putting her wet arms around Harry's equally wet armored chest hugging him to her and laying her head on his back. "I know."

How long they sat like that, with Harry simply staring at Gorion's body in his arms weeping, neither of them knew. But eventually Imoen slowly extricated herself from Harry standing up again and laying her hands on his shoulders. "Come on Harry. We'll bury him together. He wouldn't want you to just. just keep holding him like that. We need to move on."

Harry nodded, turning his eyes upwards and around to see that now that the rain had let up, some of the fires from the fight were growing burning merrily. "We'll need to make certain those fires don't get out of hand; we don't want a forest fire to start even if there aren't any people around it could spread back to candle keep. Plus the lights of the fires will let us bury Gorion. And after that," Harry said, picking up his sword as he gently laid Gorion's body to rest on the ground, returning it to his item box. After that, we're going to go to this Friendly Arm Inn, meet these friends of his Gorion told me about. And then I am going to make ass hole who did this to him and hunt him down like a dog."

End Chapter

I realize I didn't go into the game mechanics as much in this chapter, but I am still feeling my way in this story, which is fun, but also will mean the way I describe the world or write out some types of scenes will change. I also wanted to show Harry and Tonks interacting without getting bogged down too much in that or the whole showing the stats thing. Going forward, I will show how the Gamer differs from the Adventurer type norm, and of course, introduce our favorite snarky elf and her emascul, er I mean her happily henpecked, husband LOL. Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this.

This has been beta-read by [Udodelig Urningin](#). It's his first time folks, and you know my issues with spotting small mistakes LOL.

Bhaalson Chapter 3: Gaming with Friends

Putting out the fires around them took the two of them some time, and by the time they were finished, the sky was noticeably lighter than it had been, dawn breaking over the forest. After they were done with that, though, Harry looked between Imoen and Gorion's body before deciding that the buildup of messages in his upper-right line of sight was getting annoying. Anything to put off dealing with Gorion's death again for a time was a good thing in his mind.

"We need to talk about all the pop-ups that we saw during the fight that we didn't have time to reply to." He said aloud. Harry had played around with his character screen back during the tutorial phase and figured out how to only let the most important message screens through to him in combat, while putting the others in a queue to look at later, but this was the first time that system had been put through its paces in real combat. He thought it had worked very well, with only the messages that had direct impact on the battle showing up at the time, such as in Imoen's ability to Backstab, her getting into range to join his party and the fact that having the two of them in a party had given her and Harry some added bonuses or, on the other side of the ledger, notices about the injuries they had taken. But his queue was seriously full up now, and it was going to bother him a lot until he cleared it off.

"Let's look at the combat data first," Imoen said. Harry looked at her, and she shrugged. "Harry, no matter how much training you might've had, this is only your first fight. I think the both of us needs to get a better handle on how this gaming stuff works in combat."

"Second actually. Some idiot tried to assassinate me back in Candlekeep, in the inn outside the keep," Harry said, but he didn't argue with Imoen's point, pulling up all of the information that had popped up during the combat. Important message boxes were outlined in gold, while combat boxes came in red, but they also included little triangles of red colored in each corner.

And they had organized themselves thanks to his earlier fiddling, which Harry reflected was very helpful. *Should really have gotten more than one wisdom point for that, really.* The first few red boxes that popped up was information about ghouls.

"Information on the monster, Ghoul, has been added to your lexicon. The lexicon will house all the information on every monster or creature that your party runs into, filling in the information beyond the name of the beast that the lexicon will already have within. This information will include things like weaknesses, strengths, and disposition. To use the lexicon, say the name, and then the name of the beast in question."

“Lexicon,” Harry muttered, then blinked as the image of a ghost-like book filled his vision turning around to look at Imoen when he heard her gasp. “Wait can you see it too?”

“Yep. But...” Imoen reached forward, waving her hand in the air looking for all the world like she was trying to swat a fly. “But I can’t interact with it, darn it.”

“Maybe you will if you are the one to call for it. For now though...” With that, Harry reach forward, and tapped the near-see through book. “Ghoul.”

At his touch the book expanded by about four times so that both Harry and Imoen could see the writing within. At the same time, an image of one of the undead creatures Harry had killed in hand to hand combat appeared to one side. Harry couldn’t interact with the image, but the information to one side was pretty useful even without that. The information read:

Ghouls are undead creatures that, according to folklore, are said to be created after the death of a man or woman who engaged in cannibalism, but really just about any unburied body can turn into one given time and enough ambient magic in the area around the corpse. Ghouls can paralyze those enemies they attack with their claws or fangs, any touch on open skin is enough to let their touch begin its work. They are the weaker, more common versions of Ghasts, and can be easily distinguished by their green skin as opposed to the brown skin of the latter.

Strengths: they are undead, so if you don’t kill the brain or cut off limbs they won’t notice anything else you do to them. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed. Strength varies from individual to individual but is generally higher than most normal non-adventuring humans. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

Attitude towards adventurers: unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. But Ghouls, like Ghasts, also want to eat your brains, but they aren’t picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

Weaknesses: Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

“See Harry, this is what I’m talking about!” Imoen said throwing her arms up in irritation. Then she put them behind her head as she stared at the message with Harry, reading through the information about ghouls again. “This stuff would’ve been hugely

helpful to know. Those things had been darn tough to kill in hand to hand after all. And what the heck is the difference between Ghoul and Ghast?"

That question was answered in second later, as Harry intoned that name. Instead of just getting the name though, he saw another message box disappearing from his que, and, a second later, the information on this monster appearing in front of him.

Ghasts are the more dangerous versions of ghouls for many reasons. Made from the bodies of stronger humans or other species, they can exhibit both self-control and a certain low cunning that Ghouls cannot. Further, they are stronger, faster, and able to command Ghouls at times. Their claws and fangs are capable of not only paralyzing opponents like their lesser kin but also of inflicting disease, which has a cumulative effect on anyone thus touched. When more than one is encountered, they can be quite dangerous to low-level parties, and are best fought with ranged weapons and spells.

Strengths: They are obviously undead, so if you don't kill the brain or lop of limbs, they won't notice. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed and strength, all of which is higher than most level three Adventurers. Paralyzing effects and disease come from their touch. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

Attitude towards adventurers: unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. Ghasts, like their lesser cousins the Ghouls, also want to eat your brains, but they aren't picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

Weaknesses: Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

Harry blanched, as he read about the disease that this more evolved version of ghouls contained in their claws. "Bloody hell... Um, I'd guess that was the ghoul that my Turn Undead aura turned to dust. The Luck stat, it's not just for show." He quipped but it fell flat.

"We need to figure out a way to read this information in combat, because that could've killed us right there Harry if you were unlucky enough to try to fight that thing in hand-to-hand. And me too, geez." Imoen shook her head, her bubblegum pink hair rustling.

“From what Gorion once told me, death isn’t actually so eternal here most of the time. That is, if my body is still intact, you could use a resurrection spell or scroll on me to bring me back.” Harry replied, trying to be helpful.

From the look in Imoen’s face, that attempt failed just like his earlier quip, and Harry tugged at the neckline of his undershirt for a moment looking away from her glower and twitching fingers even as he felt a little warm inside. He was still getting used to the fact that Imoen really did care for him, but moments like this really brought it home to him, and he smiled as he realized that even without Gorion, he still had a friend, a family member, on this journey of his despite how they had both gotten here.

The next few messages were about experience points awarded for each of the enemies they had killed. The ghouls had given them 175 experience points, the one ghast a whopping 650. The wolves only gave 65, but surprisingly that was equal to the Gnoll Veterans that they had killed on their charge to help Gorion. The wolves and Gnoll Veterans also had their own lexicon pages, but Harry didn’t bother opening them now. The mage they had killed didn’t but gave the two friends a nice 800 experience.

“I have to say, it is kind of morbid to get experience points from killing things.” Imoen murmured shaking her head as they continued to read the messages. “But on the other hand... meh, they started it.”

Going through the XP message boxes brought them to the first character specific message they had seen. It was lined with pink and gold, the pink in it matching Imoen’s hair color exactly. And it was just as important as it looked.

“Congratulations you have leveled up! Imoen is now a level Five Thief. Steal, trap, pickpocket, and stab your way to if not fame then fortune. After all, everyone wants to die happy and rich, don’t they?”

Imoen’s chance of successfully using Backstab, Hide in Shadows, Detect Traps, and Unlock locked items or traps has risen by 2.5%. Specific experience can further aid these skills. You have been assigned stats points, of which you will receive four per level. You have been assigned a skill point of which you will receive one per level. As Imoen is now companion to the Gamer, the Gamer can help you distribute these points rather than have them be assigned based upon the action that leveled you up. Use them wisely and remember to always not over specialize too much. No one wants to play with a glass cannon after all.”

Ignoring Harry’s querulous query of ‘what’s a glass cannon’ Imoen whooped, throwing a fist in the air. “Awesome! I was so afraid that once I leveled up I’d have to deal

with my stat points and skill points being distributed randomly! Remember about my Metamorph ability from being Imoen being disabled due to Imoen's lack of stats? It's almost depressing how less physical she was than my own body. Distribute them Harry distribute them now please?!" She pleaded, reaching over and actually shaking Harry.

"All right, all right, hold your horses, I want to see why I didn't level up." With that, Harry opened his profile. There he saw that he was kind of close to leveling up. His 'experience points earned' green ink was almost half full along the long bar that indicated how much experience points he needed to gain the next level.

In reading the number corresponding to the bar there, Harry nodded slowly, realizing that since he was Level Five already, and each level was about half again as much is the level before he still had more than two thousand XP or so to level up whereas Imoen had barely begun to fill in her bar to get to Level Six.

With Imoen vibrating in eagerness to add to her stats, Harry deliberately took a bit of time to open the next few screens. Teasing her like this was fun, and there was a lot of things he wanted to learn about how his Gamer ability impacted combat, especially how different it was in comparison to how it was normally for people in this world. Of course he'd probably have to wait to answer those specific questions if he ever could, but at least there were a few things he could figure out right now. This included looking to see what he could find about what it meant to be in a party, and how that impacted combat. All these messages were in gold, lined with black.

"Congratulations, you have worked together with your party member to kill your enemies. Note, when part of a party, experience points are distributed evenly, with additional reputation points going to the killer of any particularly strong monster or a doer of some other kind of great deed. An example of this would be killing a particularly high level monster, human or other sentient being.

Notice: Reputation Points can be colored by the nature of the action taken. If you, say, walk into a house and kill all the people within, that too gains reputation, the negative kind. If you invade a bandit hideout and wipe them out while freeing their captives, that gains you positive reputation points. Fall into the negative numbers, and you will find people you interact with treating you like the village leper, only without the charm. Gain reputation, and people might treat you better than they normally would their fellow man.

Notice: At this moment your reputation is: zero. You are unknown to everyone but your closest acquaintances, even people back in Candlekeep do not think of you overmuch, positively or negatively.

Furthermore, combat builds trust. There is no such bond as the bond between men, or women, who face battle together. Your trust with your companions will go up slowly but surely in combat situations in which you and they perform well.

Notice: Your relationship level with Imoen is **Family**. Imoen will receive a +4 to damage and +6 to defense while part of your party. The odds of activating dual attacks, combo and other team-based attacks is increased with every relationship level, and certain skills and abilities can be shared between party members.

Notice: the active ability Backstab, normally a thief only ability, has been added to both your combat abilities. It will be added as an active buff under the right circumstances i.e., when you can actually do so. Congratulations, you can now stab people in the back. Aren't you special?"

Ignoring the sarcasm from his Gamer ability, if it could even be called his, Harry was face broke into a smile, the first one that had shown on his face since Gorion had died. "That is awesome!"

"You better believe it Harry! This body of mine doesn't have enough strength or skill with any weapon to really do much damage with any weapon but a whip at this point, and even then I'd only be good for stinging. Backstab though, makes me actually useful in hand to hand combat without my needing to rely on my blood mage spells," Imoen said with a grin. "And I bet it will help you too when we can get around to using it."

Nodding at that, Harry moved on, 'clicking' on the information which would describe what a party was meant to be.

"Congratulations, you have formed a party with Imoen! Parties are groups of individuals who have decided through friendship, Fellow feeling, or a shared goal to work together. Party members can share experience, distribute loot evenly between them, create dual attacks, combo attacks, and during combat will share both active and constant buffs. For example, you have learned the thief style Backstab. This is a thief only combat ability normally. You cannot learn thief only out of combat abilities such as detect traps.

Further, Imoen cannot in turn learn Turn Undead. This is a paladin skill based upon the religious learnings that you have gone through up to this point. But the aura of Turn Undead will spread out from her as well as you, the Gamer, when you activate the skill yourself. However, once you learn Power Strike, which is an active skill that warriors, paladins and other close combat types can learn, as a party member, Imoen will be able to learn it in turn. Further, Imoen's inactive combat buff 'Fight Like a Jack Rabbit', can carry over to you, so long as you are well enough to use it or not encumbered.

“That was sort of informative,” Imoen mused. “Although I get the impression that a lot of this is because of your Gamer ability Harry. The whole sharing thing I mean.”

“Are you going to argue with it?” Harry asked, sounding a bit more like himself now, as he got into the mystery and continued to learn about his Gamer ability. “Personally, I’m more interested in combos and dual attacks.”

It turned out that dual attacks were simple enough. All that meant was that two or more party members attacked the same target, adding to their chances of getting through its guard and/or its armor.

Combos were a little trickier. These kinds of attacks built on one another, creating a greater effect than any single attack of a similar level of skill would have in the first place.

“For example, if you have two mages in the party, and one uses a fireball spell, and the other a slick oil spell, well, you can just imagine what would happen. Goodness, gracious great rolling plains of fire’,” Harry read aloud, then looked over at Imoen, whose grin had become positively manic as she went into her happy place for a moment.

“I am **so** going to be a wizard when I get the chance to dual class!” She shouted suddenly, thrusting her fist into the air again.

Harry shrugged at that. “I’m looking forward to being able to heal and getting more Turn Undead spells under my belt. Face it, without that, we would have been in a very bad way to last night against those ghouls.”

“Reread that stuff again Harry about sharing skills,” Imoen said becoming serious again. After Harry did so, she nodded slowly. “All right, it is a game changer, no pun intended. But this working as a party thing, it’ll force us to think about tactics instead of just going all in and charging. I wonder though, since we’re in a party like this, does that mean that you’re the party leader? That you could actually give me orders in battle even if I don’t agree with them?”

Harry blanched, then asked hesitantly, “Wait, did you feel compelled to follow my orders when we were working together during the battle?”

Cocking her head, Imoen tried to think about what she had felt during that fight, beyond the adrenaline the fear and the exultation of combat anyway. “I think I felt a little tug, maybe? But I had agreed and went along with your plan because it made sense.”

Harry thought about it too, and murmured, "trust goes both ways." Imoen looked at him and he shrugged his shoulders looking a little embarrassed. "Trust is part of a relationship, whatever that relationship might be. I think that if you didn't trust me, you might have been able to fight off that effect, and maybe go your own way, but because you didn't, we worked together. But if you didn't trust me, even if I trusted you, we wouldn't be able to work together, and the buffs wouldn't cross over."

"That makes sense," Imoen said with a nod. "Now, what are those two other large messages, the ones in gold and red."

Seeing as gold was the color for important messages, Harry had left them for nearly last besides quest messages, which he knew were shown by orange boxes. He now clicked on them, his eyes widening.

"Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked a new inactive skill: **Leadership**. You are the leader of your party, and as such, your charisma will be enhanced. People who join your party will defer to you however subtly. Further, you will see a willingness to follow your lead based upon how much trust your actions or words have garnered with them.

Your Leadership level is 0. While you lead your party, that party is not only too small to matter, but your ability to lead them is mostly untried."

Reading this aloud, Harry became very worried. "That, that sounds like I'm trying to, I don't know, control them through a mild confusion spell or something. I don't like that idea one bit."

"No Harry it doesn't." Imoen said quickly before Harry could worry himself into a tizzy. "Some people just have a certain charisma, which can convince other people to follow them. It's nothing to do with spells and it's nothing they force upon other people to do. It is just that some people lead and other people follow. I know I'm a follower, with a tad bit of hero worship thrown in," she added bluntly, thinking about how she had felt about Dumbledore for so long. "I'd hate trying to lead, and I'm more than happy to follow someone else."

When she put that into words, she could see Harry calming down, and had to hide a grin. Whatever his Gamer ability thought, Harry's ability to be a leader had nothing to do with him forming a party, he had already been a leader before this. She had seen how people deferred to him back in Candlekeep. Even the Seekers had deferred to them at times, coming to him with questions about this or that book that they knew Harry had read. That was nothing to when he was in the kitchen. The Seekers and workers assigned

there followed his orders there as if they were gospel. Even when he interacted with guests or the other servants Imoen could see it.

That was a very small sample set admittedly, but she also remembered stories about how he had gotten people to follow him back in their own world and how she'd followed him in this fight. It wasn't every 12-year old who could convince his friends to follow him into the unknown like he had in trying to get past the locked door on the third floor. She hadn't even tried to take over from him, in spite of the fact that she had more combat training than he did.

After recovering slightly from his moment of concern, Harry kept reading. "Leadership is based upon your overall experience, charisma, and the trust you build within your party. The more time you put into building trust or gaining reputation the more you get out of it. Eventually leadership can allow you to have several status buffs when dealing with other people in terms of commerce, combat, espionage, dealing with local governmental authorities, and even becoming an authority."

"I wonder what that means, 'by becoming an authority'?"

"Maybe becoming a noble?" Imoen replied scratching at her cheek thoughtfully. "That would be kind of cool I'll admit."

"Maybe, or maybe since I'm a Paladin, it means that my leadership skill will help me to gain recognition or high office?" Harry said with a shrug. "I'm not certain how I feel about that honestly."

"Well, leave it for now. That message is right, since it's just the two of us, I doubt leadership is going to matter much in the short term. What's the next one say?"

"Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked the inactive skill: **Tactics**. A tactician is someone who sees opportunities or dangers in the most mundane of settings, can plan ahead and can turn events to his advantage. Where one person would see a hill, a tactician would see a high place to put his archers so that they can command the battlefield. Where a normal person might see a tree, a tactician could see a lookout position, a trap ready to be made, or a shadow for his thief to hide in.

Your tactics level is level 1. You are able to command your fellows and put them in a position to do damage, but the use of terrain, and the idea of planning ahead for combat still eludes you. You will gain only 25% chance to succeed to any command given to a party member. Make decisions, command your party in battle, and lead them to victory,

and your tactical ability will level up, opening further features and buffs for you and your party."

"Now that's interesting," Harry said scratching at his own lightning scar, which Imoen had recognized as something he did when he was thinking hard. "They are both inactive skills, but leadership doesn't say anything about me being able to level it up, whereas tactics is something I can level up through my actions in future fights. That's interesting. It implies that maybe my choices and decisions in the future will impact my leadership level, rather than simply my actions in battle."

"I'll admit that the idea of tactics and gaining the ability to see that kind of thing is great Harry, although again I don't see leadership as all that important right this second. But can we get the leveling up now?!" Talks growled.

"I want to read the journal entries first," Harry said mildly, but acquiesced when Imoen made little grasping moves with her hands towards his throat. "All right, all right! Let me just see if I can open your status screen." He looked at her, then pushed out of finger towards her, stabbing something right above her head, where he saw her name as he intoned status screen.

Name: Imoen

Gender: Female

Race: Human

Class: Thief level 5

Strength: (4)

Willpower: (4) +4

Dexterity: (19)

Constitution: (5)

Durability: (4)

Wisdom: (10)

Charisma: (6)

Intelligence: (21)

Luck: (11)

Bloodline Skills:

Metamorph (currently disabled - your stats do not match the needed level to use this bloodline skill), *****, *****, Clumsy (permanently disabled, yes it was always a body issue, lucky you), *****

To their surprise, the big of background information on Imoen had changed too.

Background notes:

Now fully integrated into the world of the Forgotten Realms, Imoen (the Auror in training formerly known as Tonks) has joined the Gamer in his quest to find his, and therefore her, place in the world beyond the walls of Candlekeep. A thief of some varied skill, a combative personality well used to hitting above her weight level, and an innovative thinker who likes to party as much as stabby, she is the best horrible friend anyone could ask for, the kind you love to hang out with even if it gets you in trouble with everyone else.

In the upper-right corner of the screen, Harry could see the little + that was the sign of Imoen being able to level up, which he clicked on. The same screen appeared, but now there was a new message between Imoen's class and her stats, while the (+) had disappeared from where it had been.

"You have Leveled up. You have four Stats and one skill point to disperse. Please assign Stat points now. You will then be taken to the skills page." Beside that message were four red dots, and there was a (+) sign next to each stat line.

When Tonks attempted to try to shift her status points though, she found out that she couldn't. when she tried to interact with the open page, her hand passed right through. It looked as if even as a companion to the Gamer, she couldn't use all the abilities of the Gamer. "Oh, come on!"

“I think we just figured out a part where the Gamer ability is different from everyone else’s ability to level up in this world,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I’d wager that while experience is the same, only the Gamer can freely manipulate his stat points. Whereas you, since you used agility and the thinking skills, I bet that your stat points would’ve automatically gone into the typical thief stuff, dexterity, intelligence, and luck, maybe. Certainly your stats look like that’s what’s happened so far.”

“But since you’re the Gamer, and I’m your party member, you can distribute them for me, while I can watch, but still can’t do it myself!” Imoen grumped. “I can’t say I’m exactly happy about that, but since I have no interest in leaving you on your own, Harry, I can go along with it for now.”

She winked at him, her anger instantly dissipating, and Harry smiled back, Gorion’s death firmly pushed to the back of his mind as the two of them read these messages. Imoen was not so foolish as to believe he was fully over it even with that weird Gamer’s Mind bloodline skill, but she would be there for him when he broke down at night, when the nightmares would come. For now, forcing him to learn more about his abilities, and what they could do with them, was the most important thing.

In the next moment however, Harry’s face went back to the blank expression it had been, as both he and Imoen read the journal entry. It read like the more officious overarching world messages.

Chapter 1:

Dawn has broken on the day after your life has been changed forever. Ambushed the evening before, you were forced to fight for your life only to see Gorion cut down before your eyes, even his powerful magic unable to stop the onslaught. It was his wish that you flee, but that does not remove the feeling of rage or bitter regret that now overwhelms you. The armored fiend had said he would kill you too, and even seemed to imply he was after you from the start, just like the murderer who tried to kill you back in Candlekeep. If only Gorion had given you some clue as to why someone could be after you, but now he is gone, and you are lost. Candlekeep is near, but you will find no quarter there. The readers pay for their serenity with rather draconian entry rules, and without Gorion's influence, their doors will remain closed.

“Chapter 1,” Harry mused, grinding his teeth a little at the reminder of Gorion’s death but otherwise not reacting. “I wonder how many chapters there are, and if they have something to do with the game, or if we are going to be able to affect them in some way.”

“I honestly don’t think we’ll ever be able to figure that one out until we actually start doing it Harry, so why don’t we just go on to the next bits,” Imoen replied softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. That next bit happened to be another journal entry, but this one was in the quest log portion of the journal.

“A main quest has been added to your journal: **Vengeance or Justice!** With Gorion’s death, your purpose becomes clear. You have decided to set out and find his killer as well as the reasons for his death. What did that strange armored giant mean when it said it would come for you? Was your death the end goal of this strange man’s machinations, or simply a means to an end, and if so why? This journey will teach you both about yourself and about your place in the world, but one thing is clear at the outset, you must search for your answers.

And when you have those answers, you Harry, will have to decide what to do with it. Will you seek out vengeance, brutally murdering your way through the Sword Coast to get your answers? Or will you serve justice, searching for your answers yes, but also aiding the people you meet, solving the problems plaguing the various people around you, and becoming a true paladin one who can be an inspiration to all? Only time, and your choices along the way, can tell.”

“As if I’d ever let you just search for vengeance and murder everyone that gets in your way, Harry,” Imoen said, rolling her eyes. “That was possibly the least informative quest thing I’ve ever seen, honestly.”

“I think that’s probably because we’ve already set out on the first steps of that path,” Harry mused, once more scratching at his lightning bolt scar as he stared at the journal entry hovering between them, with Imoen leaning against his side companionably. He had stiffened when she first leaned against him like this back in his room in Candlekeep, but he had since gotten used to these little cuddle type touches from her and took them as a sign that the two of them were close friends, something like the way everyone was on the Quidditch team occasionally. “Shall we go on to the next one?”

When Imoen nodded, Harry clicked on the other two quest logs. The first one had the heading of ‘Iron Intake Issue,’ and Imoen groaned. “Oh god alliteration, really? Please don’t let that be a trend! That kind of thinking get as old as puns, and that quickly.” Ignoring her, Harry looked at the information underneath the header.

“Gorion had evinced a high interest in what had been going on with the iron coming up from the south, and the fact that poor iron quality might cause a war between Amn and the city-state of Baldur’s Gate. Perhaps his interest, and the interest of the Harpers, of which he was a retired member - if anyone can be said to truly retire from such an

organization - could be tied into the attack on the two of you by the armored giant. Although why he would be after you would become a separate mystery in that event, it is still a place to start if you so desire. And after all, didn't Gorion say that you might meet new allies on the road in searching for the reason behind this problem?"

"That seems self-explanatory too Harry," Imoen said with a nod. "I'd wager that if we decide not to look into these friends of Gorion's they won't be willing to help us in turn. Did he tell you anything about them by the way?"

Harry told Imoen about what Gorion had said about his two friends, which hadn't been much, but he did agree with Imoen that was very easy to see that they would have to look into this issue to get on the Harpers good side. And after all he's finished, the Harpers are a kind of secret spy right? If anyone can figure out stuff about this giant that killed Gorion it'll be them."

With a nod, Harry and on to the next side quest, which read 'Pray for Your Future'. For a moment Harry and Imoen just looked at it, then both of them as one raised a hand and slapped it to their faces, groaning aloud. "Really, cocking really!?" Harry muttered shaking his head. "Bad jokes, now?"

"Well, we've seen before that your Gamer side seems to have a sense of humor, when it isn't in full on Voice of the World mode anyway." Imoen said with a shake of his head. "The Gamer ability is going to help you a **lot** Harry, so I suppose we need to take it's very dubious sense of humor in stride."

With another groaned, Harry began to read the sub quest information.

"Now that you are out and about in the real world, the time has come to choose the deity to which you will swear your service to. Will it be Helm, the Vigilant? Will it be Lathander, the Morning Lord? Will you serve Illmater, the God of Martyrs? Will it be Tyr, God of justice and righteous war? The decision will be yours but be warned, this choice will have major long-term ramifications, not only for you and your abilities, but how you are perceived by your party and the public at large. Furthermore, once you have made a decision, you will **never** be able to take it back. Unless you fall from grace, thereby losing all of your paladin abilities... and giving yourself a whole new slew of problems."

Since that also was self-explanatory, despite their shared irritation at the joke in the quest's title, Harry moved on quickly to the two minor quests below that. These read 'loot the bodies for clues', and 'making certain the dead don't rise again'."

After exchanging a glance with Imoen, Harry quickly looks clicked on the first one, reading it aloud. "It's a long shot, but perhaps one of the armored giant's followers might have had some paperwork, or other kind of clue that could point you in the direction you need to go from here. Loot the bodies for profit and information', plus 300 XP."

The next read:

"in this world, unburied corpses can become a danger to anyone, rising as undead ranging from skeletons, to ghouls, all the way to skeleton lords and Lichs depending on the level of the deceased, the anger and emotions they died with, and any surrounding magic in the area around them or on their persons. Make certain that your former enemies do not return for an encore in any way you can devise."

"Well, neither quest is worth a lot of experience, but I suppose that we do need to get on with it. And..." Harry said, looking over to where Gorion's body still rested, waiting for its own burial if they could do it. "I suppose we need to do something with Gorion's body as well."

Imoen wordlessly moved over to the nearest body, the wizard they had teamed earlier, leaving Harry to move over to Gorion on his own. After kneeling beside his father figure's body for a long few minutes, Harry sighed and then reluctantly started to rifle through Gorion's pockets. He found forty gold coins in a small money pouch, three broken daggers, their blades shattered like the sword Imoen had lost last night, and two mana potions, the information of which he read about quickly.

"Small Mana potion. This potion is meant to refill a little bit of a mage's mana. Mana, as well as the spells a wizard or mage has in their spellbook, determines what spells a mage is able to perform per day. Each spell comes with a mana cost, visible to the mage or to the party leader if they have enough trust between them. If a mage cannot meet the cost of a specific spell, the spell cannot be performed, hence the need for potions like this."

I wonder if I could use this potion to get out of having my health to power our 'Blood magic' spells, Harry mused, before moving on with his search.

In Gorion's other pocket he found two notes in parchment covered in a wax tube. One of them was a note, a letter of introduction that Harry was to use should anything happen to Gorion and he met any of his 'friends of the trail', which Harry knew to mean fellow Harpers and perhaps others. The second was a note that went a long way to telling Harry how Gorion had found out so much about the Iron Issue despite never leaving Candlekeep. "Imoen, come take a look at this."

Imoen turned from where she had been looting the corpse of the mage, hurrying over at the interest she heard in Harry's voice. "What is it?"

Harry held up the parchment he found, then opened it, so that they could both read it together.

"My friend Gorion,

Please forgive the abruptness of this letter and the manner of its arrival, but time is short. What we have long feared will soon come to pass, though not in the manner foretold, and certainly not in the proper time frame. As we both know, forecasting these events has proved increasingly difficult, leaving little option other than a leap of faith, in many ways.

Despite my desire to remain neutral in this matter, I could not, in good conscience, let events proceed without some measure of warning. The other side will move very soon, and I urge thee to leave Candlekeep as soon as this message reaches you with your young charge. You know they will come for you both, you for the threat you are now, and him for who he is. The open road may seem equally threatening, but a moving target is much harder to hit, regardless of how sparse the cover. A fighting chance is all that you can reasonably ask for at this point.

Should anything go awry, do not hesitate to seek aid from travelers along the way. I do not need to remind thee that it is a dangerous land, even without our current concerns, and a party is stronger than an individual in all respects. Should additional assistance be required, I understand that Jaheira and Khalid have responded to your overtures already and can be found at the Friendly Arm Inn. They know little of what has passed between us, what we were working on and what you were guarding, but they are ever thy friends, and will no doubt help however they can.

Luck be with us all, as I am very afraid we will all need it. I sense the Time of Troubles is not done with this world just yet.

Signed, a man who is truly getting too old for this,

E

"Well, that was... bloody freakin' cryptic. Honestly, this guy sounds as if he's talking about prophecies but doesn't want to give anything away to anyone who could read this," Imoen grumbled. "It sounds like a big fat conspiracy though."

“A big fat conspiracy that has something to do with me. The armored giant really was after both Gorion and me. For different reasons but... this is making me feel far too much like the whole ruddy Boy Who Lived Nonsense.” Harry said, scowling.

Imoen had nothing to say to that. After a few minutes talking about what this meant, and who this ‘E’ could be, she went back to looting the bodies of the dead elsewhere, leaving Harry to keep searching Gorion’s bodies.

The next thing he found was hidden in a small, very well-crafted pouch under one shoulder, invisible to anyone seeing Gorion in his jerkin and even hidden to the touch until Harry had put his hands underneath the shirt. Pulling the item out, Harry held it up to the light, staring at the tiny, exquisitely crafted harp. It was about as big as two fingers, and every little detail on it was perfectly etched out, with numerous little etched designs on the wood. It even had real strings between the two arms of the harp, although they were all broken now.

After that, Harry found a necklace around Gorion’s neck. It was a simple, thin silver chain with a small square locket. Inside it was a tiny painting of a young Harry and Gorion. Gorion looked younger of course, his hair a solid brown rather than a mix between brown and white, but other than that he looked the same, smiling jovially towards the painter. Harry’s own painting looked like an odd mix of his new body, the one he’d created for himself and his old body, the one Harry Potter had been born with. He was taller and broader than Harry remembered being back in his old life, but the lightning bolt scar and the messed up hair and the thin face was the same, as were his eyes.

For several minutes Harry just stared at it, ignoring the few popup screens he saw to one side, his Leader ability telling him what Imoen had finished her own search and with it they had finished looting the dead. Instead he was working on the question of if he should take this keepsake with him or let it here with Gorion.

After a few minutes pondering that question, Harry decided to leave the necklace behind with Gorion. He already felt wrong on taking everything else the man had been carrying with him. *Let Gorion take this with him at least. I won’t take it from him.*

Once he was done with Gorion’s body, Harry moved over to join Imoen, and between the two of them performed the grisly work of piling the bodies of the gnolls, the human attackers, and even the heads of the undead ghouls, up in one place and setting them on fire. It was either that or the even grislier task of chopping heads off and removing them from their bodies, and neither Imoen nor Harry was up to that.

With that done and noticing that the experience they had gotten from those two tasks still wasn't enough to level him up, Harry turned his attention onto distributing Imoen's level up stats.

When they opened up her status screen, Imoen interrupted. "Wait, can I see yours?" She blanched a second after that left her mouth, but thankfully the joke flew straight over Harry's head, and she breathed a sigh of relief as all he did was open up his own stat page.

Name: Harry Potter.

Gender: Male

Race: Human

Class: Paladin level 5

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (8) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer's mind, Parselmouth, *****, *****

Background notes:

Having now stepped out into the wider world beyond the tutorial, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived of one world, has discovered he might be the equivalent or something worse in this one. His father figure taken from him through violence, Harry and his cousin Imoen (the pink-haired troublemaker formerly known as Tonks) must search for answers as to why he seems to have been marked out as Fate's Bitch. Is it just luck, or is there something deeper, something...sinister at play? Regardless, Harry will have to face it as it comes.

The two of them compared them side to side, and Imoen whistled. "Is it, is it normal for a level five thief to be that far behind a level five paladin? You have fifty-two more points than I do, minus the four we haven't distributed yet." After working through the tutorial and Imoen's life up to that point, Imoen/Tonks had eighty-eight stat points, with four to be added. Harry had a hundred and forty.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so, Gorion mentioned that I had quite high stats for my level several times," He laughed shaking his head. "Not that I was all that high obviously, Gorion's stats were much higher than mine all around, although they were also a little more eclectic than you would think when he told me about them. He had points in everything well into the thirties, and his wisdom and intelligence were in the sixties. Now come on, tell me where you want your points to go."

That was easy for Imoen. She put two into Strength, which had the immediate effect of adding a further ten pounds to the weight that she could carry, which had been a measly thirty pounds. She put one in Intelligence, which was already her strongest stat, but which would become important if she was able to reach level twelve and could then choose a second class. The last point went into Constitution, which again was horrendously low for her.

"All right, now that I can hold more, I want some more arrows, a second short bow," Imoen muttered, looking through the pile of stuff that she had taken from the dead bodies. "And another sword and a staff."

"What about your skill point?"

Imoen blinked then whirled like a cat, moving back to Harry quickly. "Right, yeah, show me my skill sheet." She paused in thought, then added, "And yours too."

Once more, Harry pulled up both of their sheets to compare them side by side, noticing almost immediately that the skill sheet didn't show the Blood Mage stuff.

Harry Potter Skill List:

Weapons Skills:

Weapon and Shield ***

Longsword **

Warhammer *

Life Skills:

Master Chef: You are a master of cooking and can make even the simplest meal a treat.
Chance to cook something other people will find amazing, 42% chance rate.

Loremaster: Thanks to your growing up in Candlekeep and your desire to learn, you have begun to learn how to identify items. Chance to identify unknown objects, 22% chance rate. (Note, this percentage can go up through use)

Natural Charisma: Despite what Harry might think sometimes, he does have a natural ability to draw others to him: Chance to have people react positively to you, 17% (Note, this percentage can go up or down through personal choices)

Class Specific Skills:

Turn Undead: Percentage chance to turn undead into ash, 25%. Can be used five times per day.

All other class specific skills are locked until the Gamer has chosen a god to follow.

Miscellaneous:

Leadership: 0

Tactics: 1

Besides that, was Imoen's skill sheet:

Imoen Skill Sheet:

Weapon Skills:

Short Sword *

crossbow *

Staff *

Short bow *

Life Skills:

Friendly: You are friendly by nature and can bring out the talkative side in everyone around you: ability to learn something new via discussion 50% chance rate to learn important information.

Flirty Little Lass: You are flirty and able to grab the attention of men anytime you choose, and even sometimes make them do what you want them to do, 42% chance to confuse men, for various effects.

Reading Your Opponent: You are a master of body language and can often spot when people try to lie. Plus 20% chance to spot a person's true feelings or goals when talking to them.

Class Specific skills:

Pickpocket: 62 percent chance to successfully (get away with it 52%)

Hide in Shadows: chance to successfully hide before you go all stabby, 65%, depending on your environment

Detect traps: 23% chance to spot a trap before you or your allies get caught in it.

Set Traps: 14% chance to create something that could make your life easier.

Pick Locks: For the LOOT!! Chance to unlock those pretty chests, 29%

Unlike Harry's skill sheet, Imoen's didn't have a place for miscellaneous skills, yet. Harry figured she might be able to learn something later. And when she tried to get Harry to add a second skill point to the short bow skill, it didn't work. "It looks like thieves can't have more than one skill to any weapons proficiency," Harry said with a shrug. "Any other choice?"

Imoen growled but told him to put it to sling. It was clear to Imoen that she could never fight someone up front just now, and she already had skill points in dagger and

short sword, which filled in the short rang needs of Backstab. All her other skills would need to be shifted to keeping her out of the reach of their enemies.

Once Imoen was satisfied, Harry nodded over towards where Gorion still lay. "We've put it off as long as we can," he said with a sigh. "Come on, it will go faster if we both work on it."

Because the ground was so rocky where they had fought, Harry and Imoen were unable to dig a grave, and as battered as they still were, their health points not having grown back much, they didn't want to use their Blood Magic spells. Instead they had to create a cairn, placing rocks over Gorion's body. Once finished, they stood staring at Gorion's final resting place, with Imoen placing her hand on Harry's shoulders, but leaving him to his thoughts. She had only been in the game for a short time in comparison to Harry, and she had not been nearly as close to Gorion as Harry had become, but she knew how she would feel if her father had died back in their old lives.

There moment of introspection was interrupted by a loud female voice shouting to the right of them. "Ho there, young ones."

The two of them turned, with Imoen's hands dropping to her sword, and Harry's flashing to his own with a speed that made Imoen blink. *FUCK*, Harry thought, *how the heck did they sneak up on me like that?* He glanced up to the area map and he realized with a start he actually hadn't used it the night before. *I'm going to have to get better at that kind of thing if I want to survive in this world.*

But neither of them pulled weapons out just yet, as they stared at the two people who were making their way up the hill towards them, stopping as they stared at the pile of burning bodies, before moving well around it, and continuing on towards Harry and Imoen.

From here the two from Candlekeep could see that both of them were wearing leather leggings and cloaks, their hoods pulled over their heads at the moment. One was holding a bow in his hands, and a shield on his back, it's top just barely visible over his shoulders. The other was holding a staff, with what looked like a cudgel at his belt and a slingshot as well. It was only as the two of them came closer that the second figure's figure was able to be seen, marking her out as a woman.

When they reached the two by the grave, who had yet to answer them, simply watching them come, the woman barked, "Well, what has happened here?! A fire fit to burn the woodlands, sparked by a large pile of bodies both undead and human. Most

unusual and dangerous. And two young people who look barely old enough to be away from the farm. What has happened here?"

Her accent was somewhat unique, Imoen thought. It almost sounded Eastern European perhaps, like the accent she'd once heard from an Auror from Russia. *Doesn't change the fact she sounds a bit of a rhymes with punt though.*

Harry growled taking a step forward angrily. "You come upon us in front of a cairn for the fallen and all you do is bark commands? Why the hell should we answer any question you put to us?"

The woman paused, looking down at the cairn as if only now recognizing what it was, before sighing. "I... Apologize. My husband and I have been traveling for many weeks now, and we were waylaid by several wolf packs last night just as we were going to make camp, then five ghouls after we tried to put some distance between us and the bodies of the wolves. When we saw the fire, we had feared what we would find here."

"It's been a long night for all of us," Imoen said shaking her head. "But if you don't mind, both Harry and I would like to see who we're talking too."

"That, that's a v-very acceptable req, q, quest," said the man speaking up for the first time. "And you must ad, d, admit my dear, that, that, they did a very good job moving the bod, d, bodies of the dead away from anything tha, a, that could've caught fire." Unstringing his his bow and slinging it over his back, the man pulled back his hood and pushed back his cloak.

The face revealed when the man pulled back his hood was that of a brown-haired and brown-eyed half-elf. Half-elves had more pointed ears than humans and were slimmer of build than humans tended to be, with a slightly more pointed face than humans, especially around the chin. Their eyes were also a bit larger and more luminous than a humans' would be. The man wore full plate armor under his cloak of better quality than what Harry was wearing if only in its construction, and his suit was complete with arm and leg guards which Harry didn't have. The quiver at his side was also half-empty, and as Harry looked at the quiver, he got a notice from his gamer abilities.

"Fire arrow. This special type of arrow will do fire damage due to a spell placed on its tip. Useful for dealing with the undead, trolls, houses and other flammable objects."

Of course, Harry also got some information when he looked at the man. In the air above him, the man's name glowed with the blue of an adventurer, and when Harry looked at it, more information popped up.

Name: Khalid

Gender: Male

Race: Half-Elf

Classification: Level 32 Warrior

Relationship Status, Strangers: 200/1000 Trust, 200/1000 Respect. You've only just met, and while Khalid is not going to hold that against you, he certainly isn't going to trust you either.

That was all the information Harry's Gamer gift could give him from a complete stranger, as the relationship bar said.

He also had a face made to worry. The man's face was long, the expression one Harry felt fit the word lugubrious, with frown lines and smile lines around his mouth, drooping eyes, and a twitch to his features to match his stutter.

All this made Imoen chuckle shaking her head. "You've got the look of a worrywart to you, but you need a long beard to tangle your fingers in when you mutter to finish the image," she quipped.

That caused the woman to bark out a laugh as her husband chuckled shaking his head at the odd comment. "Half-elves very are very rarely able to grow facial hair child, it is after all, something elves cannot do." Her husband looked at her, and the woman seemed to frown within the cloak before pulling her hood back.

Name: Jaheira

Gender: Female

Race: Half-elf

Classification: Level 33 Druid.

Relationship status, Suspicious: 0/10,000 Trust, 0/10,000 Respect. Gifted with a more suspicious - some would say bitchy- attitude than her husband, Jaheira is not only unwilling to trust you, but is actually openly suspicious of you. Don't take it personally, she's that way with everyone.

Unlike her husband, Jaheira wore only chain mail, which matched her druid class from what Harry remembered, although it Harry was now much leerier of the staff in her hand than he had been a moment before. From his readings Harry knew that Druids could do quite a lot of damage with staves and could place spells on them to command nature around them. And much like a wizard with his staff, a druid's staff would allow the druid to cast the spells within without the need for verbalization.

Like her husband Jaheira was a half-elf. This meant she a thin rather than curvy body, which made Imoen think happy thoughts as Jaheira looked only to be a B-cup maybe, which was below what Imoen herself had at this moment. *Although if I ever get the chance, the first thing I'm going to morph is my chest!* Back in her old life, Imoen normally went around with a high C, low D-cup at best. And for some reason she missed it a lot in this world.

But even Imoen had to admit that Jaheira's face was gorgeous. It was a thin, slightly more pointed face than a human's, with high cheekbones showing her Elven heritage, her skin without pock mark or freckle, her mouth showing no lines around it like Khalid's. She had a dirty blond hair done up into a series of tight braid along the top while being loose at the back and sides, with tiny cloth wraps around small bits of it, here and there, her hair framing her long, pointed ears. She had light green eyes, almost turquoise actually, under well-cared for eyebrows, and a face devoid of other cosmetics. She had simple banded earrings one to an ear and two tiny scars barely noticeable on her cheek.

"The two of you are married then. Might I ask your names?" Harry asked, looking between the two half-elves. *After all, I can't exactly say that I've already been able to see them.* That was one other thing that he had learned during his time in the tutorial. Other people did not see even a little bit of what he could when he looked at items or people.

"We, we are indeed, and my nam, m, name is Khalid, and thi, i, this is Jaheira. I am sorry for your loss, bu, u but pray, can we have your names as we, e, ell?" Khalid asked.

Harry nodded slowly, looking between the two of them. "Gorion mentioned the two of you," he said abruptly. "I'm Harry, his ward. But we were supposed to meet at the Friendly Arms Inn."

"Indeed, we were. But plans changed," Jaheira said shaking her head, and then pausing as she stared between Harry and the cairn before sighing. "But I believe that your own plans changed even more than ours, and that you ran into trouble far sooner than even Gorion had suspected. Is that not the case?"

Harry nodded silently, gesturing down to the pile of stone that he and Imoen had placed over Gorion's body. "I'm very afraid it is. We were waylaid last night by a large group of warriors, a few mages, several ghouls, at least one ghast and their leader, a giant armored behemoth. He was at least a foot and a half taller than me, and broader in the shoulders too."

Harry and Imoen then related the tale of the fight during the night, talking about how Imoen had snuck out of the Candlekeep for friendship's sake, causing Khalid to nod at her approvingly, and Jaheira to roll her eyes but say nothing. Indeed, neither of them said much. Khalid simply stared down at the grave of their friend crossing his arms in front of him and sighing. Jaheira went to her knees beside it, putting her hand out on top of it, as she began to mutter underneath her breath while Harry and Imoen told the tale.

She built up her power slowly, until it was a light green glow around her fingers, and suddenly, she pulled her hand away, releasing what looked like a small seed from her palm at the same time. It gripped onto the stone of the cairn and began to grow as a message appeared in Harry's vision.

"Jaheira has used Honored Oak. A Druid only spell, this spell creates a sapling over the resting place of a fallen friend to watch over him in repose. While not very powerful, the sapling will create an area around the grave that will repulse anyone with negative feelings towards the grave itself or the person within. It is a high honor to have the sapling placed upon a grave, one few druids would extend to non-druids."

"Thank you" Harry said, leaning forward to gently touch the tree, bowing his head formally towards Jaheira. "With the undead we saw last night, and with the ambient magic of this forest, I had feared..."

Jaheira's eyebrow rose in surprise, then she smiled. It was a smile touched by grief, but it was real, nonetheless. "Gorion was a good teacher I see." Then she became serious looking between the two youngsters. "But that is all well and good, and we have so far allowed you to prove your bona fides by your story. But Gorion would surely have had something upon his person to prove both who you are, and your connection with him to us when we met. May we see it?"

"So long as you show us yours," Harry replied, causing Imoen to bite her lip to keep from giggling.

Khalid and Jaheira both noticed her reaction and Khalid laughed, understanding where she was coming from, while Jaheira rolled her eyes. "I see that someone here still

needs to be doing a little bit of growing up, do they not?" She said shaking her head before looking at Harry, nodding her head slightly as a message appeared in his vision.

"Congratulations. Your forthright manner along with the respect you showed her, has gained you +10 respect with Jaheira. Keep going and like a mighty woodsman, you might be able to chop that tree down and actually become friends with her... In about 1000 years. Give or take."

Now it was Harry's turn to bite his lip to keep from laughing, since he had already determined that Jaheira would be a very tough nut to crack respect-wise. Still, he watched without saying anything as she reached into her person, and pulled out from somewhere, Harry tried not to think of where after all she was a married woman, a small golden harp. It was perfect, and as she ran a light nail over the strings it let loose a low dosage tone, from within could be heard her name. "Jaheira..."

Khalid also brought out a similar harp, although the way he did was more prosaic: simply reaching into a small pouch at his belt. But when he played his finger along the strings, it too sang his name. "Khalid..."

When they finished, another message appeared in front of Harry's vision. *This is getting old, he thought, is it going to be like this every time I meet new people, or is it just because these two can be my new companions like Imoen? Despite that, he read the message quickly, trying to keep his eyes from giving anything away. I need to figure out how to maybe shift these messages to mental only or something, like a voice inside my... yeah, no, never mind. Bad idea.*

Jaheira and Khalid have shown you their bona fides. They are Harpers, a society dedicated to keeping the balance upon this world from the shadows. It is a secretive order and like any such they do have enemies, large and small. Joining your rising star to them can be good or bad. Choose wisely.

For a moment, Harry wished that he could speak to Imoen without these two listening in, but really, there was no choice. He and Imoen were alone in this world and the Harpers, for all that they probably had their own long-term goals, could help him achieve his goals. Thus, before Harry could even really think about it any consequences to the act, he had reached into his pouch, and pulled out the small harp he had taken from Gorion's body, holding it out towards Khalid.

Khalid took it holding it up to the light and sighing as he saw the broken strings. "It will not sing again, a Harper has passed on," he whispered, before putting it into the same pouch as he had already put his own back.

Jaheira nodded slowly, looking down at the grave. "That proves indeed, the the person within this is our old friend, but we had already known that. And now we know that you had naught to do with his death, else you would not have been able to pick up the enchanted harp. But your own relationship to him is still in the air."

Nodding Harry pulled out the letter of introduction that Gorion had had prepared just in case something happened to him. "There is another way I could prove myself I suppose," he said with a sigh gesturing down to the grave. "He had a locket of the two of us, a painting from years ago. But.."

Jaheira shook her head, taking the message and reading it quickly before handing it over to Khalid. "Leaving it there might with Gorion seem sentimental to some extent," she said shaking her head "but it was well done as well. Regardless of what you think occurs in the afterlife, taking such things into the grave with you can let one rest more easily."

Congratulations? You have lost -10 respect for sentimentality with Jaheira, but gained +50 to Trust. It's going to be a bit of a give-and-take with this woman, isn't it? Your Relationship status has changed to Strangers. She no longer thinks the worst of you.
Hooray.

Congratulations! You have won five hundred respect with Khalid. Your relationship with Khalid has risen to Semi-Friendly. While he still isn't certain about you, he is willing to at least be friendly towards you.

As another notice appeared, saying that "Harry had now tied his star to the Harpers, whether or not this was a good idea will become clear in time." Imoen spoke up.

"So, you two are the more experienced adventurers," she said, looking between the two half-elves. "The plan for us was to head onto the Friendly Arm Inn, so is that still a good plan, or do you have anything to add?"

The two Harpers exchanged a glance then shrugged, and Jaheira gestured over their shoulders, already pulling her hood back up over her head, and grabbing up her druid staff from where she had laid it by the cairn. "Other than a suggestion that we get a move on, we have no issue with your current destination, no. Anymore we can talk on the way. Only a fool would stay where the enemy knows where they are, especially one of such proven deadliness. Gorion was one of our strongest, and if he could be overcome, I do not want to meet the individual who did it without quite far more of an argument to hand."

“Yes, but I have to tell you,” Harry said, grabbing up his own cloak and pulling it on since it did look like it was going to rain again, “that finding the person who killed Gorion is going to be one of my primary goals. I’m all for doing good, I wouldn’t be a paladin in training if I wasn’t, but I want his killer brought to justice.”

“And,” Imoen spoke up again, grabbing up her own cloak and hurrying after the other three “from the way he was speaking, the guy was after Harry here as well, so going after him in turn is just common sense.”

“What, what do y, y, you mean?” Khalid said, turning towards them even as he walked on next to his wife. Their strides were the kind of loping strides that could eat up miles, and Harry and Imoen quickly fell into step with them.

Wincing, Harry decided to just go with it, although he wasn’t certain that he liked the idea of these two near strangers knowing that he was somehow important to the dark armored strangers plans. Sure enough, a second later after he explained it, another message appeared.

For showing trust in near complete strangers you have lost -10 respect from Jaheira, but also won +20 trust from both Khalid and Jaheira.

Harry surreptitiously blinked that message away and fought the urge to reach up and rub at his lightning bolt scar in sheer confusion. *How the heck does that work? Women!*

Harry knew that respect and trust could directly feed into relationship changes from one level to another, although he wasn’t certain what would happen if these two went from near strangers to other levels. Imoen was on the low side for family, but still family, which was a bright status bar which range from light yellow, where she was now, to bright green. Khalid and Jaheira, whatever their official relationship level said, were wary acquaintances at best, and Harry wondered idly how that would work in terms of the party tactics and such. But since they hadn’t been offered a place in his party just yet from the Gamer system or whatever, he supposed that he had to build up the trust before that became an issue.

“That is most strange to my ears, but you have my gratitude for sharing such upfront, even if it was better for you not to do so” Jaheira said honestly, shaking her head. “However, you are correct in that searching for an enemy like that is only right and proper when he has marked you out so. But it cannot be our priority. The Harpers sent us here to look into the iron shortage issue, and we must do that before taking on any personal quests, although the two goals might be intertwined. Do not worry young ones,” she said,

her tone becoming that of a stern task mistress almost as she looked at the two of them as they walked along. “Khalid and I will do what we can to guide your steps for now.”

Harry growled, shaking his head and stopping, moving into Jaheira’s personal space, causing Khalid to stop too pressing his hand against Harry’s chest for a moment. “Now hold on a minute! Yes, we might be young, but we are not stupid or unlearned, nor are we as Harpers such as yourself. Yes we will investigate the iron shortage, but if you’re with us, it’s a partnership of equals to a dictatorship with you and your husband telling us what we’re going to do, where to go or whatever. We will discuss what we do together and make a decision together. If you don’t like that, then I’m sorry, friends of my father or not, we will continue on to the Friendly Arm Inn and we can say goodbye to one another there.”

Two messages instantly appeared in front of Harry’s face once more, causing his lips to thin ever so slightly. Luckily that looked appropriate for the moment as well.

Standing up for yourself has gained you +50 respect with Jaheira, +25 trust with Jaheira.

Standing up to his wife has cost you -10 to trust, -50 to respect with Khalid.

Weird, Harry thought, not for the first time.

“I, I cannot say that I like that,” Khalid said shaking his head. “Surely the path of wisdom is to listen to your elders.”

“Oh,” Jaheira said with a laugh. “And if **we** had done that, would we have even been married, my husband? They are right. This is the start of their journey, their lives away from the nest. They must make their own choices. But you are agreed with us, that the iron shortage must be looked into?”

A quests screen popped up, although Harry would’ve thought had he had already agreed to this. Still, he supposed he had to say it formally, and he nodded, holding out his hands. “Yes, Imoen and I will help you search for what is causing the iron shortage.”

“In that case, oh illustrious leader,” Jaheira said with a faint smile even as she shook Harry’s hand “where do **you** think we should go from the Friendly Arm Inn?”

Imoen laughed shaking her head. “Nashkel of course. Whatever is happening, it starts in the mines, that’s obvious.”

“Although we shouldn’t do it openly,” Harry said shaking his head. “That giant from last night could warn people to look be on the lookout for us, so maybe disguises will be necessary once we reach there. We could pose as mercenaries looking for jobs maybe. And we need to know how far this iron shortage has spread, as well as **how** it has spread.”

“Spot check failed!” A message said in Harry’s line of vision. “Your charisma roll has failed. You have not convinced your audience of your point of view. Get to know them better before trying to convince them that you are right about something like this, young whippersnapper!

“I agree with going to the Friendly Arm Inn and south, but we need to check in along the way at various places to gain some more information about what is going on in the sword Coast. This area is a hotbed of many different political and ideological groups, we need to know the lay of the land before we can figure out where to go from there,” Jaheira said authoritatively. “Perhaps even hunt down some bandits here and there, bandits are, oddly enough, sometimes the best sources for information in their chosen hunting grounds.”

Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, and once more Harry wished that he could talk to Imoen about the messages he was seen. Luckily at least some of them had appeared in her view too, something he would later learn later that night when they had a chance to talk alone. But for now, they simply communicated with their faces and eyes before Harry turned back to the two half-elves.

“I don’t see a problem with that honestly,” Harry said with a shrug. “We need the experience anyway. I just feel as if we will need to hide our identities eventually when we get to Nashkel.”

This response earned more respect points from both of them, although Harry noted that it was a very small increment for Jaheira, and that he had a loooooong way to go before any change in their relationship status happened there. But despite that, he nearly had to grin a manically as he saw the next message popping up, and he heard Imoen gasp to one side although neither of the half-elves responded as Harry finally saw a message he had been hoping for.

Jaheira and Khalid have been added to your party. Warning, party skills and abilities are effected by the trust and relationship status between the party members. Due to their low relationship status with you, party skills are disabled for the half-elves Jaheira and Khalid. However, certain bits of information about that your two new party members are now available and you can see their positions on your map as green (allied) dots on your map.

Whistling quietly, Harry quickly began to ask Jaheira and Khalid about the road to the Friendly Arm Inn, as well as how the two of them and Gorion had communicated, while he indicated with one hand that Imoen should fall behind them. She looked at him quizzically for a moment, before he surreptitiously gestured as if he was punching a button with a finger, then towards the two of them again with a flick of his other fingers.

Realizing what Harry wanted, Imoen fell behind the other two, and then clicked over their heads, where she too could now see their names. When she did, she got a bit more of a status screen than Harry had been able to before although still not much, some background on both of them along with their ability with various weapons appeared, and she read through it, whistling silently. It turned out that though he had been using a bow when they first showed up, Khalid also was very skilled with sword, having two skill points spent there, whereas Jaheira was equally skilled with the sling and staff and club, but also had a point in scimitars. She could even see some of the spells that Jaheira could command, including several healing spells. That was amazing, and she had to grin over their heads at Harry winking at him appreciatively, which caused him to smile back at her.

The four of them continued on throughout the rest of the morning and into the mid-afternoon while the clouds continued to threaten rain but not actually open up on them. Jaheira led the way directing them through the woods a ways away from the actual path leading out from Candlekeep to the main road but paralleling it for the most part in a way that neither Harry nor Imoen had the skills to do without getting lost in the dense woodlands. As a Druid of course Jaheira had both a feeling for the woods and the experience. When Imoen asked, she actually proved to be willing to impart some information about the woodlands as they passed through, her normal caustic and standoffish character giving way to a somewhat kinder, more instructor-like attitude.

Going off the beaten path like this, it was almost inevitable they would run into trouble but even running into trouble taught Harry more about his Gamer ability, and how it differed from what everyone else in this world seemed to be able to do. He paused as they crested a small hill, frowning as he looked around while a message appeared in his vision, it's outline red and throbbing.

Warning, you have entered an enemy zone. An enemy zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range. These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.

The others looked at him quizzically, while Imoen, who had been a step behind him also paused just as she reached him. She looked at him, nodding slightly to indicate that

she had seen the same message, and Harry crouched, looking ahead of them, as if he had spotted something through the woods.

“What is it, child?” Jaheira asked.

Harry was beginning to get tired of that child stuff from her. Even though it was technically true that he was a child, it smacked too much of the way Dumbledore addressed him back in his old life for him to want to take it now. He looked at her irritably but decided not to bring it up just yet. Instead, he pointed out and down into the woods, ahead of them. “I thought I saw something moved out there, something white between the trees,” he prevaricated quickly.

“Spot check failed, Khalid and Jaheira still do not trust you enough to take your word for such things and view your inexperience in a negative light.”

“If there was something there child, I would have seen it, or at worst sensed it through the feel of the forest,” Jaheira said shaking her head.

“I, I too would have seen it, we are after all half-elves, we, e, e, have better eyesight,” Khalid said, smiling companionably at Harry, and reaching out to smack him on the shoulder. “You are just, just a little twitchy after your first battle last night. It happens to a, a, all of us, even paladins are not immune to such things.”

With that the two half-elves took the lead and headed down the incline of the hill. Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, then without a word, Imoen took a single step back into a shadow, and activated Hide in Shadows, while Harry pulled out his longsword and moved down the slope ready for trouble.

And just as he had seen, trouble did find them. One moment all was pristine and clear in the forest, then Harry spotted three red dots on his map, which he was keeping an eye on now almost religiously. Before he could shout a warning though, three arrows suddenly zipped out of the forest to the left of them towards Khalid, who gasped, but somehow was able to get his shield off his back their way, in a move that Harry recognized as a skill from the Weapon and Shield skill, much like his own. Another arrow zipped towards Jaheira, but she ducked underneath it, and quickly began to intone a spell.

Jaheira has used Barkskin. Barkskin is a spell that covers the user’s body in a bark-like armor, adding +6 to her durability.

Watching this, Harry couldn’t stop himself even if he knew it was kind of childish. *But then again, despite what my body looks like, at least a part of me is still a 13-year-old*

right? I'm allowed to be childish a bit right? With that thought bolstering him, he asked snidely, "Do you believe me now?" as he raced unerringly towards where the three arrows had come from, knowing that Imoen would probably be following him in the shadows.

Running around a massive tree, he discovered the attackers, sixteen red dots on his map, were groups of undead skeletons. There were six archers and ten melee specialists and, all of whom held a large glaive's in their hands and moved towards Harry as he came towards them.

As he looked at them, information about them popped up from his Lexicon. Reading through it, Harry breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that changed the way the Gamer skill seemed to have changed how it acted once he and Imoen had found out about the lexicon, as any conscious attempt to change how information appeared had not worked up to this point. Now apparently reacting to his desires the instant he met a new type of monster, the lexicon page would splash up a small summary.

Skeletons. Simple undead constructs of bone and sinew these are the lowest of the low in terms of undead, but they can be dangerous in numbers. Unlike most undead, they are nearly immune to fire-based spells on top of their high endurance against dark type spells. But they are still weak against holy magic and are very weak against blunt damage. Swing that hammer paladin, swing!

Seeing no reason not to follow the suggestion of his Gamer skill, Harry instantly dropped his sword back into his item box and grabbed out the warhammer he had taken from Candlekeep as he had his sword. He also shouted aloud "Imoen, wait for it, then target one of the archers!" Then without pause he slammed one hand into his chest as he shouted, "Turn Undead!"

Harry has activated the aura skill, Turn Undead. Chance to turn any undead into ash, 25%

Then he raced forward, bringing the aura Turn Undead created with him. One of the melee attackers immediately collapsed, failing it's saving throw, and he engaged the other two closest as Khalid raced to join him, shouting out "good, g, good lad!"

Between attacks, Harry was able to watch Khalid in action. Unlike Harry, he didn't seem to have a secondary melee weapon to switch to, but that was fine by the half-elf. He wielded his sword and shield like extensions of his body, using minute shifts of stance and shield to ward off attacks that Harry had to just block full on with his weapon. His sword lashed out in precise, flashing attacks, stabbing, cutting, hacking at the undead, hitting the portion of their anatomy or armor he was aiming at practically every time.

While Harry knew that the enemy wasn't one to demand a high level of skill, Khalid still looked impressive to his own, relatively inexperienced eyes. And he and Jaheira worked together like a well-oiled machine. Once Khalid had joined Harry at the front, Jaheira had remained staunchly behind him, using her staff to aim a series of spells into the melee at their enemies, never once hitting Khalid or Harry and always protecting Khalid from an enemy he didn't see, or entangling the foe he currently faced to let Khalid dispatch the Undead Skeleton more easily.

Between each spell she would use a sling in her other hand, hurling three or four sling balls forward before using magic once more. She did decent damage and aim, but her spells were the druid's best offense.

Their ability to communicate and work together without words was extremely impressive, although Harry was quick to realize it did exclude him. That would be something they would need to work on, he thought, as his warhammer smashed into the head of an Undead Skeleton, crushing it to powder, while two more moved to engage him.

Just then, Imoen appeared, an arrow taking another Undead Skeleton in the back of the neck, right into its spine. It didn't go down, but as the message about Imoen having successfully performed a Backstab (with a bow, no less) Harry instantly leaped to the side, moving with that Undead Skeleton when it turned in the direction of Imoen's attack. As it did, Harry's hammer licked out above its shield, smashing into its shoulder and neck.

"You have performed a dual attack and a flank attack! Damage increased by X 2."

The Skeleton, whose health bar had been in the yellow before this fell to the ground dead as Harry's attack chopped half of its health bar away in a single blow. *Okay, dual attacks might have seemed obvious, but they can be devastating if done properly, and with a bit of tactics.*

For her part, Imoen had taken the opportunity to disappear back into shadows, then came out elsewhere a second later, stabbing at one of her original targets, the four Skeleton Archers standing back of the fight and firing arrows into it. Her attack did crippling damage this time, upending the Archer onto its side. Jaheira took the opportunity to change targets too, and two quick sling stones smashed into the injured archer, taking one of its arms off and again dumping the Undead Archer to the ground.

Harry's Turn Undead aura cut out, but he instantly recast it, thumping his chest with the same hand, which was wielding his warhammer, shouting out "Turn Undead!"

This close the renewed aura caught all the remaining Undead Skeletons in its area of effect, and four of them this time failed their saving rolls, falling into dust. This left six of them, plus the two as yet uninjured Skeleton Archers.

It also made all of the melee combatants turn to him. Harry though didn't have a problem with this. "Jaheira, use one more Entrapping Vines, then switch targets to the archers. Khalid, pull back around and engage them too."

"Who are... I was joking about you being our inestimable leader, child!" Jaheira grumped, but since she had just dodged an arrow that could have taken her in the eye and Khalid's shield had more than a dozen shafts stuck in it, to say nothing of Harry's, she agreed with this shift of tactics. She obeyed, casting out another spell to cause vines to grow below the feet of the six remaining Undead Skeletons, making it so they could not move, although this time she also caught Harry in it. That too was alright though since he was trapped within hammer range of one of his enemies, with the others unable to come to their fellow's aid.

Within minutes the three of them had the two remaining Archers fell swiftly. Then the three of them turned and, with Khalid getting out his longbow, started to pelt the captured undead from a distance. Harry took a few hits on his shield, and one hit to his armored chest before they were done, but all in all, even Jaheira had to admit that the tactic had worked out well enough. "Against these weak enemies at any rate," she added with a shake of her head. "Do not let it go to your head, Harry. Although, I must say you did a good job spotting these Skeletons before myself or Khalid did."

"In, indeed, you, you also performed adequately when combat began. A bit head, he-he-headstrong, perhaps, and, and your movements seemed un, uncoordinated. Bu, but such things can b, be changed with experience." Khalid added.

"Congratulations, you have gained forty respect points with Jaheira, seventy points with Khalid. Keep on chopping, woodcutter, you'll get there eventually... maybe. Your relationship level with Khalid and Jaheira remain unchanged, a big fat neutral."

"Indeed, you were quite skilled for two so young. But I note that you are moving somewhat stiffly. Were you injured in that battle?" Jaheira asked, showing a more caring side than she had since erecting the Honored Oak.

"Um, no, not really, a few scratches. I did break a rib last night, but I took a healing potion for it." Harry replied, shaking his head. "Imoen also took a few wounds last night. Heal her first."

Imoen grumbled at that but since her health bar hadn't regenerated, said nothing. It seemed as if a slower HP regeneration time was yet another 'perk' of being a thief.

"Hah, and in that you show your lack of experience, Harry. Healing potions are well and good, but if you have broken a rib, say, unless the broken portion of the bone has remained where it should, the healing will not be able to repair the damage. You might not know anything was wrong intellectually, but our bodies are often far more intelligent than we thinking, sentient beings like to think." So saying, Jaheira moved towards her as another message about earning trust appeared in front of Harry.

He was just wondering why he'd earned trust rather than respect points there when Jaheira began to talk, her hands glowing with blue light as she held them in front of Imoen's face. "Still, it is well that you had me heal Imoen before your own wounds, Harry. While I do not have much time for romantic drivel, seeing to your lover's physical wellbeing is a different story."

"What!?" Imoen yelled, while Harry simply gawked at the female half-elf. "Harry and I aren't like that!"

"Oh? I thought you must be, your leaving your life in Candlekeep behind for him and all." Jaheira replied, sounding both amused at their reactions and nonplussed at being wrong.

"As for leaving my life in Candlekeep behind, that was a much easier choice than you might think. As for Harry no. Not only don't I see him that way, we're practically family really, but I'm so not his type."

"Hmm, and what is his type?" Jaheira asked, amused to see Harry turn away and move off towards her husband rather than wait around for her to heal him in turn. To see the self-possessed, confident young man be so embarrassed was somewhat amusing.

"Elf girls and bookish types with a penchant for svelte bodies," Imoen replied with a laugh. "You should have seen how smitten he was with this one Seeker who had returned home recently. I had to practically coach him so he wouldn't trip over his own tongue talking to her."

Shaking his head with a low laugh, Khalid patted Harry on the shoulder commiseratingly. "You'll get u, used to it my lad, girls on the m, march can be as bad as goss, gossiping housewives."

Harry smiled back wanly. "Well, so long as your wife has enough attention to lend us her woodcraft occasionally and your eyesight they can talk as long as they want."

"Flattery will not work on me child," Jaheira called out, and Harry could almost feel her rolling her eyes behind him.

"Hahaha, w, well, it worked on me," Khalid said with a chuckle. "Still, we should get a move on if we want to reach the Friendly Arm Inn by tomorrow night."

OOOOOOO

Back in Hermione land, there was much gnashing of possibly overlarge teeth and raging. "What the heck is going on with Harry!?! First that message, now Headmaster Dumbledore, the headmaster himself, basically told me to mind my own business and forget about him for a time and I can't even, ooh, I just know that boy's gotten himself into trouble somehow!" The bushy-haired Gryffindor snarled, pacing around her room, one hand clenched around the message Hedwig had delivered to her from the Headmaster, which he had sent back to her in reply to one she had sent him one the other day.

Hedwig didn't reply though, too busy gobbling bacon at the moment which let Hermione continue to rant. After more than two months of getting by on rats and mice, Hedwig had her priorities now that she was living with Hermione full time. The fact Hermione had her working every day, was another factor behind her hunger.

"All this talk about experimenting on a computer, using magic to fix such a complicated piece of technology, ugh what was that boy thinking!?! But of course, he probably isn't thinking, he never does, ugh Gryffindors, why am I in that house again? And why, if, if he's... why can't even the Headmaster give me any information!?"

Deciding the bushy-haired one had vented her spleen enough, Hedwig looked up from her meal at last, precking harshly at her, and adding a glare for good measure.

This caused Hermione's angry monologue to skid to a halt, and she looked between the owl and the message in her hands, sighing as her anger, always caused more by worry for Harry rather than anger at him, dissipated. She reached out a tender hand, stroking the back of Hedwig's head and down into her plumage. "Forgive me Hedwig,

but, well, I had so hoped that whatever had happened to Harry would be a momentary thing, and it doesn't look like that is at all right. To have you refuse to return to him, that can only mean he's out of your reach somehow, but even then there was hope. Now, with the Headmaster shutting me out, I just don't know what to do."

Hedwig precked again, this time in tones of deep sorrow, nipping at Hermione's fingers as she looked down at the remains of her meal. That had been the first thing Hermione had wanted to do after she read Harry's letter to her: she had written out on a message the words 'don't do anything rash' in as large lettering as she could fit on the note. But Hedwig had refused to take it. She couldn't find her human any longer. She could, somehow, tell he was alive, but she couldn't find him, which infuriated and scared the Snowy Owl in turns.

"Alright... enough ranting Hermione, let's do what you do best: organize and analyze. Go back to the beginning and work your way on from there." The young girl moved over to sit down on her bed, nibbling at her fingernails. "Subject one, Harry's activities. Point one, Harry did try to reach me numerous times, but something was blocking him. I might have only his word for it, but given the, the tone of his letter to me, weeks ago, I can only accept that as truth."

She looked up askance as Hedwig's claws flexed, making her perch, which Hermione had bought the day before for her on a family outing, to groan alarmingly. But the bird didn't communicate anything further, simply glaring straight ahead as her claws continued to flex.

Right, not going to go there, Hermione decided. "Point two, because of that lack of contact, which wasn't only with me, but Ronald, he became a little... manic, in his attempts to try and find some way to escape, physically or mentally from the Dursleys. Not that, with what I've deduced about them, I can't understand that. He then, and this I find hard to believe, made his way to Diagon Alley somehow in search of help to repair a computer. This despite knowing magic and technology often mix in unusual ways."

"Point three, this mission was helped along by a House-elf, a species of which I most certainly need to find a book about. This house elf warned him about going to Hogwarts, that there was some threat there. And Harry, for reasons he didn't go into detail about decided that was a good idea and promised not to return. That is... also odd, but perhaps a separate factor." Hermione continued, counting off points.

Point four, since then, you, Hedwig, can't find him. This means he is either behind massively powerful wards, wards which aren't friendly to him, or at the very least not to familiars. Very much not a good thing."

Hedwig precked, and rolled her head around, as if to say 'no duh' in such a way that even someone with the understanding of a teaspoon would be able to understand what she was implying. Hermione though simply nodded and continued to count off points on her fingers.

"Point five. My attempt to find anything about Harry in the muggle world has not done very well, although I was able to find the Dursleys. And thank goodness Harry once mentioned his aunt and uncle's names. But as far as the nonmagical world is concerned, Harry Potter might as well not exist, which is horribly confusing since I know Harry went to Elementary school, he told me so himself."

"Subject two, point one, my attempts to ask the headmaster for information, even after sharing the message with him and those two old... gentlemen with him did not in gain me any further information." At this point, Hermione began to speed up, becoming more incensed.

"Point two, judging by their age, clothing and manner, all three were important individuals in the Magical community but have no understanding of nonmagical technology. We can thus assume that they have no understanding of magic and its interactions with technology. In other words, the so-called experts are not, in fact, experts, and are whistling in the dark."

"Point three: my continued demands for answers from the headmaster have gone from being brushed aside, to being threatened to remain quiet, and now to simply being ignored beside a 'we are aware of the problem thank you' reply **irritates** me, especially since he just reused the response he gave me the second time!"

"Point four, without recourse to the headmaster, many of my contacts in the magical world, my head of house, Madame Pomphrey and Madame Pince become suspect as they are all his employees. Which leaves me with my fellow children to interact with, and there... I am afraid my own personality is against me, as I only had one other friend. Ronald... well I doubt he would know anything unless, did you bring him a message too girl?" Hermione asked, slowing down..

Hedwig righted her head then shook it once in a clear negative.

"Right then. So no trying to get Ronald to help, just as well really. I think... I think that concludes my points. Bugger." Hermione ignored Hedwig's look of surprise at her relatively minor curse, thinking hard. "But if the magical world can't be trusted, then I have to fall back on my nonmagical resources. That means that I have only one way to get more information: by going to the source."

Convincing her parents to come with her to the Dursleys was actually relatively easy. The two of them had been worried about Harry ever since Hermione had shared her suppositions with them, and three days of inactivity on that point had bothered them almost as much as Hermione, although they too were much more incensed on how little paperwork there was about Harry Potter at all. Hermione's mother, Emma, couldn't join them, being on duty at the practice today, but Hermione and her father took his car out that very afternoon.

"Oh my word, it's like entering a cookie cutter world," Dan mumbled, as they slowly drove through the area around the Dursley's home. "Little Whinging is it, do you suppose the local homeowners association gives points for making their houses so alike to one another? Bloody freaky this is."

Hermione giggled a little at the irony in that statement, having heard from Harry that his relatives had often called him a freak. At first she had thought that was because of his magic, and while horrible, was somewhat understandable. Later on, she realized it had nothing to do with magic, and everything to do with Harry.

Soon enough they were pulling up outside of the Dursleys house on Privet drive, and the Grangers got out, with Dan in the lead as they headed to the door. Ringing the doorbell, they were soon answered by a horse-faced woman who looked at them askance, sending a near surreptitious sneer at Hermione's hair. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"I believe I am speaking to a Petunia Dursley?" Dan stated. "If I am, my daughter here has a few questions about a Harry Potter? Is he still staying here?"

"Who?" Petunia scowled. "No, no, there's no Harry Potter here, you've got the right name, but I don't know anything about a Harry Potter. Perhaps you're looking for another Petunia Dursley too."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, staring at the woman. "Perhaps his appearance will jog your memory, Mrs. He's my age, thin, wears glasses, has a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He's always wearing large hand-me-downs."

At those words there was a rustling to one side, causing Dan to turn in that direction just enough to see the top of another woman's head peeking out over the hedge separating another house from the Dursley's. But Petunia looked blank, blank and now getting angry. "I've just told you I never heard that name before, and that description sounds far too much like a dirty street urchin to me. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to making dinner. It's, for some reason I seem to be out of practice on it."

With that she banged the door in their faces, leaving the Grangers to stare at it in some confusion.

“That woman was, I think she was Obliviated of everything involving Harry Dad,” Hermione said with a frown. “It’s a spell designed to remove memories, which ones is controlled by the person casting the spell. That probably means this was a dead end. Darn it.”

“I don’t know lovey, but maybe the next door neighbor who reacted to that name knows something.” That caused the woman behind the hedge to twitch and move off, but a few minutes later, Dan was banging on the front door. “Ma’am, we know you’re in there, we’re just asking questions about Harry Potter, there’s no law against that, or against you talking to us.”

“Please, I just want to know what happened to my friend,” Hermione begged the closed door.

For a moment it looked as if the woman inside was going to just keep ignoring them. But finally, the latch on the door opened, and a female hand gestured them in.

Inside they found cats. Lots and lots of cats. Hermione liked cats just as much as the next girl, but even she felt that any number of them above three was just silly. This house had -yes, she counted them - at least fourteen on this floor alone. That went well beyond silly into the surreal. Still, the woman, who looked like the sort of crazy-cat lady you might picture in a storybook, hopefully had some answers for her and she could put up with the woman’s mild insanity for now. “You’re looking for Harry Potter? And where did you meet him, and don’t lie girl.”

“Hogwarts Ma’am. I’m a witch, a muggleborn,” Hermione replied promptly. “And I’m Harry’s friend, we’ve been friends since last Halloween. We’re also in the same house. But please, tell me what’s happened to him? He hasn’t responded to any message I’ve sent him, and I’m worried.” Hermione didn’t mention Hedwig being with her now. Hedwig was Harry’s, and this woman was a near stranger. “But who are you miss?”

“Arabella Figg, I’m a squib that Albus had looking after Harry.” Ms. Figg didn’t notice how both Grangers stiffened at that as she went on. “Good then. We’ll there’s not much to tell, not that Petunia’d be able to tell you anything. She’s been obliviated of anything to do with Harry, all the Dursleys have, even Marge. Still, I can tell you what happened, or as much as I was able to tell from out here.”

After about ten minutes of explanation, Hermione was both incensed and even more worried than before. As she and her father got back in their car, she was making plans. *If Harry hasn't been returned from wherever he went, it's obvious that I was right this afternoon: the headmaster and his so-called experts aren't going about this the right way. But I still need a **lot** more information, and if the Headmaster isn't willing to talk to me about this, then I need to solve it on my own. And if it turns out that there's no way to get to him, well, I'll just have to figure one out. A bit of the scientific method and knowing Harry's starting point may serve where regular magical means have not.*

To do that, she needed two things: one, to know everything about what Harry had done she could, and two, everything the headmaster and his experts had figured out by this point. The second would be very, very hard. *But perhaps I can put the magical world's fifth estate to good use for once. Get Dumbledore to share as much as we can force him to about his own research into it, maybe the others two.* As for the first thing she needed, there it looked as if she was going to have to reach out to the Weasleys again, but not Ronald this time. No, she needed older, more devious minds for this.

Her parents though were more worried about the threat Harry's message mentioned, as well as the fact that Dumbledore might well have known about how Harry was being treated at home. Hermione's attempts to explain that Hogwarts was perfectly safe somehow had her spilling the beans about the Halloween troll, about Ron being a bully at first, and of course the dragon and the end of year adventure. How her parents forced that out of her she didn't know, but her parents were now determined to try and find her some alternate schooling.

While they did that, Hermione, who had decided that if they couldn't find Harry she would be perfectly fine with the idea of changing schools, moved on with her own plans. Two days later, Hermione looked up as Fred and George Weasley, with Ronald in tow alas, entered the Leaky Cauldron. She waved at them, and they came over, sitting at her table.

"So, Hermione..." One twin, possibly Fred, George or Gred or Forge, began.

"What kind of mischief..."

"Are you talking about?"

"Your message intrigued..."

"But did not explain much. I hope that..."

“It’s not something so plebian as replacing a stolen library book.” The second redhead finished.

“Aye, and why’d ya go to these two rather than me, eh? Aren’t we supposed to be friends?” Ronald said angrily.

Sighing, Hermione began to explain. It instantly turned out that the Weasleys had no more an idea about Harry missing than she had, and all three of their faces were grim as she finished explaining all she knew about what had been going on. “Ugh, I don’t know what this computy thing is, but mixing magic with muggle stuff, that’s dangerous, especially for something you say is kind of designed to think for itself,” Gred said, setting aside the twin-speak in his seriousness.

“Agreed. Our Dad always says, never trust anything that talks if you don’t know where it keeps it’s brain.” Forge continued. “But... what do you want us to do about it Hermione? If Dumbledore’s already on the case then...”

Here Hermione knew she had to tread carefully. She had begun to see the headmaster in a new light thanks to some pointed questions from her parents and Ms. Figg’s revelation that he knew about Harry’s home life, but the Weasleys didn’t have that. “Um, as intelligent and learned as Dumbledore is, he’s not very... muggle world savvy. I think if I can look at the computer, maybe even the type of game Harry was going to play, I might be able to help his inquiries in a way he doesn’t know to think about.”

Ronald grumbled at the idea of a computy thing being able to play games, muttering “Can’t be near as good as Wizard’s chess, can it? But did Harry show any interest in that, no. Still, yeah, that could help, maybe, if he was shrunk and is playing in the game or somethin’.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see what that’s got to do with us?” Gred asked, rolling his eyes at Ronald’s reaction.

“Well,” Hermione paused then blurted out, “How would you like to help me break into the Dursleys house? I need more information on what happened, and that’s the only place to get it.”

Instantly both twins showed her evil, eager smirks. “Tell us more...” they crooned as one.

OOOOOOO

Several days after Hermione had managed some mischief with the twin terrors, Dumbledore reached a decision. "I have to go to Egypt," he said aloud to the emptiness of his office.

Over the past week Albus, working with a now-reluctant Croaker, had discovered that Tonks had been transported to wherever she was in spirit, but not physically. Thanks to her having activated the muggle contraption within the Department of Mysteries, he and the Unspeakables had been able to get a far better read on what had occurred. Because of that, they knew her physical form and her spiritual-self had been separated, but not destroyed as was the original intent of the Soul Trap. Somehow the rest of the magic on the muggle contraption, especially the house elf magic, had offset the destructive aspect, but not the portion of the runes on that item that separated the soul from the body. And with that knowledge, they now knew exactly what had occurred to young Harry as well.

This did not pair well with the pocket dimension theory, but it was now clear that whatever had happened, Harry Potter did not arrive wherever he was in his own body. Rather, he would arrive as a soul, and then interact with the world at large as a soul. Albus at first had the rather quixotic thought that perhaps in this manner he would be reborn, a soul searching for a body. But he was uncertain about how such a thing would occur.

Regardless, with the odds of finding Harry in his new pocket dimension the next best thing to impossible, Albus had decided to leave that task with the Unspeakables as two questions rose to primacy in his mind: what about the soul fragment that Riddle had accidentally infused with the young baby's? And how did this effect the prophecy?

Albus had already discovered that the original Riddle fragment, the one that had taken over Quirrell last year, was still alive, so that ruled out the first, positive, outcome. Now, over the work of several days, Albus worked out that the shard in Harry's soul was also probably transported with him to wherever he was now. That wasn't good, but it also meant that the prophecy was still active. Yet, if neither were here, did that fragment still constitute a viable anchor for the original Riddle?

To that, Albus could not divine an answer on his own, and it was with a heavy heart that he decided he would need to devote some time to researching Horcruxes, and pocket dimensions. Luckily, both magical phenomena had been first developed by the

Egyptians. And the magical portion of the Library of Alexandria was still out there, in small portions throughout the country. While Albus wasn't looking forward to going to Egypt and needing to deal with the goblins there, who practically ruled the magical side of things in that country, he knew it had to be done.

I may even have to step down as headmaster if it comes to it. Finding out about how those two phenomena interact is that important. If Riddle, the original fragment, is now truly unkillable because his anchor is so hidden from us... Albus shivered at the thought, grateful now that Croaker and Moody were on the lookout for other anchors. That just leaves me to find out if the one in Harry is still viable... and if it is... if it is and Harry ever returns, I might have to go back to my original plan of sacrificing him for the greater good.

There was no way to separate a soul fragment from a soul like this. It had never been done before, but Albus had studied the scar extensively after Harry had ousted Riddle at the end of last year. The two could not be separated, the only way to kill one was to kill the other. *I had hoped the Soul Trap might have done that, taking the fragment of Riddle as payment, but that was not to be. And if that did not work, then it calls into question everything but the Killing Curse, which would more likely kill both souls. But, but to stop Riddle from rising once more, Harry's life would be a small price to pay.*

Albus' musings were interrupted by Minerva slamming the door to his office open, having used the assistant headmaster's override password to get by the gargoyle. "Albus, have you seen this?!" she nearly shouted, slamming a copy of that day's Daily Prophet down on his desk.

On it, Albus read the headline, "**Boy Who Lived missing! Dumbledore and the Ministry Clueless! Is this connected to the recent arrest of Lucius Malfoy? The public demands answers!**"

Shaking his head and removing his glasses to rub at his nose, Albus sighed. "One wonders how Rita fits all that into a single headline. Regardless, I had feared this would come out soon enough."

"What are you going to do Albus? That article, it mentions you by name, and then casts aspersions on where Mr. Potter was left for so long among muggles who abused him. Rita's going to rile up the mob, and you know that the Ministry will be gleeful to throw you to the wolves."

"I rather think you are mixing metaphors my dear, but your meaning is still quite clear. Nonetheless, I believe that the truth can be used without much harm done. I was

hoping to wait to tell you my dear, but I fear that I must step down as headmaster.” Minerva gasped, but Albus went on unhurriedly. “While the chances of getting Harry back intact decrease with every day that goes by, there is still a chance and I must be free to pursue it into the new year.” *And to hunt down Riddle’s other Horcruxes too.* “For now, I think I will schedule a press conference for this coming Wednesday.”

So busy was Albus dealing with the public fallout, that he never realized that Ms. Granger had not only stopped sending her daily requests for information. She had instead sent a letter stating her intent to transfer.

OOOOOOO

It took Harry and the others five days travel to reach the area around the Friendly Arms Inn patrolled by the Arm’s live-in mercenaries. During that time, the four of them had slowly melded into an actual party, as Harry’s Gamer ability put it, at least in some ways. They had yet to run into enough combat to give them the experience needed to work together, and after failing the first time Harry was reluctant to try again to convince Jaheira or Khalid about the necessity of training together.

Khalid was more than willing to train with Harry one on one, and Jaheira was willing to discuss her Druid powers, and talk about their experiences with either of the youngsters, which she still called them much to Harry’s displeasure, made worse by the fact that he thought that his displeasure was part of the reason why she did it. But when it came to be talking about group tactics and working together in a fight, neither of the more experienced adventurers were willing to discuss it, outside of the minimum.

But on the more noncombat side of the ledger, things were looking very good, all four of them figuring out what they could do in terms of their roles in the party. On the march, Imoen was scout, with Jaheira acting as rear scout, and Harry and Khalid in the center, able to react to anything they saw while Jaheira would use her Druid powers to feel out the life force as she called it of the forest as they traveled through. This also put Imoen, who had a map ability like Harry’s, at the front, with his one at the center of their formation.

This had allowed them to get the drop on several groups of wolves and other beasts and had kept them from running into anything unprepared. Khalid and Jaheira put

it down to Imoen becoming better at moving through the forest silently and Jaheira's own Druid abilities, but it wasn't.

Although, moving through the forest alone was an experience to Harry and Imoen. They both came from a society that had conquered the world around them to a great degree. Even the magicals didn't live as they would have thousands of years ago for example, instead living in the cities or near the farmsteads of non-magicals, with little of the raw, original nature of the area near them.

But this forest, it was like what Europe might've been before the Dark Ages. Before the times of the Romans maybe. An endless forest as far as the eye could see, thick, unyielding, a forest moreover that most certainly had **not** gotten used to humans and other sentient creatures in its midst, whatever the humans and others themselves had done to create their homes and roads. Even the Forbidden Forest paled in comparison to this forest and looking at the map of the Sword Coast Harry knew it actually was quite small in comparison to ones found deeper inland.

When they brought it up, the two half-elves were amused. "Ah, I had forgotten what it was like to be so innocent. But you come from Candlekeep, and I suppose have never truly been far from that mighty bastion of all that is written and moldy." Jaheira did not mind book-learning, but she disdained those who thought learning was more important than using what you learned in the real world.

"The forest was here before you were born, before even I was born or Khalid for that matter," Jaheira added teasingly looking over at her husband, who mimed looking affronted quite easily with his normally sour, depressed expression. "It will be here far after we are all dead and gone. The forest has a memory not as we would understand the term, but it still understands. It still knows, and it knows that we are ephemeral, that we are foreign. We will leave, our marks on the world will fade, and it will still be here."

Around the camp, their jobs settled down just as easily. Jaheira would create the camp, where again, Imoen and Harry would learn something about life on the road. In this case they learned more about how to hide such things from casual observation than either had known was possible, merging the camp into the forest. It was excellent training, since Harry hadn't figured out a way to link his map to a warning system of some kind. He could tell enemies were on his map, but that was a conscious thing. The map itself wouldn't warn him of it.

While they went about that, Khalid would head off to hunt for their meals. He was, despite being a warrior who professed to prefer sword and close combat, much better than even Imoen with the bow, which was only to be expected admittedly, although it got Imoen's back up something fierce.

After the camp was set up, Harry would cook, which was something of a surprise to the two older adventurers their first night camping together.

Flashback:

"What are you doing young one? Harry," Jaheira corrected herself as Harry looked at her with a light glare from where he had just pushed Khalid away from the fire that her husband had just created. "I was about to start cooking us a warm meal, but if you do not wish for one, pray tell me rather than be rude about it."

"That's not cooking, that was simply burning with a bare modicum of style," Harry retorted. He pulled out from his ever-handly item box several different spice bottles that he had bought back in Candlekeep, taken little by little and added into bottles every day back in the tutorial. Given how much of each spice he had, and the amount those spices went for, Harry knew his bottles of spice were actually more expensive than the jewels he had 'farmed' during his tutorial. But he'd only sell them a bit at a time, considering that unlike those gems, the spices were also useful.

He then pulled out a few ingredients, and several pans which he'd had the Candlekeep's blacksmith make for him out of bronze, with no iron in it. It cost him several jewels he had gathered over the time in the tutorial, but again, to Harry that was a very cheap price. He actually had every single pan or other tool he might need to cook in his item box.

Jaheira blinked at it all, a small smile flickered across her face as she once more about her head. "I see Gorion was very proactive when it came to prepare you for the road. I should've expected it, I suppose. Although I have to wonder how high your Chef rank is given how much time that can take."

"We'll have to see, won't we?" Harry replied, even as he twitched, since even with his previous knowledge of cooking, Jaheira was right: it had taken him a lot of time to become good at cooking in this world. Primarily because there were no appliances but even so, the fact was he had abused the tutorial in a lot of ways to prepare for this journey.

He and Imoen had talked about that, their stats, and their pasts, and exactly how much to share now and into the future. The tutorial, the whole time starting over thing would remain a secret along with where they came from as long as they could keep it. But even the lie Imoen had come up with to explain some of their abilities such as Blood Magic, would be an easier lie to swallow than the idea of time simply skipping like that to anyone who understood even the simplest concepts of magic. Which, as a Druid, Jaheira certainly would.

“Still,” she went on, staring as Harry continued around the campfire, “it is most interesting that you and Imoen are both able to use your item box so easily.”

“Gorion mentioned that,” Harry replied mildly, as he set the spices he would need for the deer that Khalid had brought in. He had spotted signs of a herd earlier that day. “Something about your item boxes not being so organized?”

“And thus of limited utility,” Jaheira said with a nod. “Very few adventurers are born with the ability that you and young Imoen seem to have been born with. Neither my husband nor I have such a skill, hence our packs. But an item box such as yours is only limited by the physical weight you can carry, and never will you seem to be encumbered. It is almost enough to make one jealous.”

“Enou, u, enough about that,” Khalid said, as he watched Imoen begin to prepare the meat, grimacing as she did so. “I think youn, n, young Harry has time before Imoen is done with her chor, r, chore. Come Harry, I would like to test yo, o, your skills.”

Harry nodded, and not three minutes later was staring up at the stop sky as his Gamer ability intoned “you have been disarmed and floored by Khalid in this spar. You have lost. Remember that the path to wisdom is fraught with peril, and bruises in equal measure. It is how you deal with the bruises that matter the most.

“How did you do that?” he asked slowly, as he pushed himself to his feet. “I thought I had you there.”

“Your stan, n stance was wrong,” Khalid explained calmly. “Your sword was o, o on target, and I will admit t, t, to some surprise at that. But your entire move, mo, movement needs work. It’s almost as if you trained just your ar, ar, arm work rather than see, se, seeing how your swordplay pl, pl, plays into and is built upon the foundation o, o, of your body’s movements.”

Harry grunted irritably at that, and Khalid chuckled. "Do, o, don't worry, that is a mistake that many young adventurers ma, ma, make. They don't realize it, because su, su, such lear, learning doesn't show up in your sk, sk, skills."

Harry nodded rueful agreement that, then glanced at Khalid's blade. "Before we go again, can I see your sword? It doesn't look like a typical blade, not in length or girth." Harry actually knew it wasn't a normal sword because when he looked at it, he got a popup of "Unidentified sword, you cannot identify this blade without your party member's permission." He saw much the same when he looked directly at Jaheira's druid staff.

"Of course Harry," Khalid said with a smile I was wondering if you would notice.

To one side, Imoen snickered shaking her head. "Did you just agree to show Harry your... "

Khalid nodded slowly not getting the joke for a few seconds before his wife groaned. "Honestly child, do you have any maturity whatsoever?"

"There's maturity, and then there's not actually knowing what humor is. Those are two very different things," Imoen shot back, and the two women started to needle one another mercilessly.

To one side Harry looked up from where he had been inspecting Khalid's Bastard Sword (+1 to attack +4 to defense) and gave it back to the man as they moved softly away from the two women, heading back to the fire.

End Flashback

From the start, the relationship of the two women was very odd to say the least. Harry often wondered if this was how it was for women all the time, since it somewhat resembled how Hermione would get along with lavender and Parvati, friends one moment laughing at something or other and then the butt of jokes and needling them back the next. Although laughter was in far less supply on Jaheira's part. The cool blonde-half-elf replied with half-smiles and eye-rolls most of the time, but she did have a wicked sense of humor.

For their part, the two men got along well enough. Khalid, for all his stutter, was a decent trainer, and Harry created several low-key combat abilities he never even knew

about: Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement. According to the Gamer's information about them, these skills would eventually re-merge with his already existing skills. But until he mastered them, they would remain separate. None brought a combat bonus with them; indeed, they impacted his overall defense negatively at his current level, but in creating them Harry had activated a quest which would give him two more skill points to add to his abilities, which was major. Imoen had said she had seen much the same thing when taking lessons from Jaheira about how to move silently through the woods.

On a personal level, Khalid had something of a sense of humor, which paired well with Harry given that his social awkwardness did rear its head occasionally even now. Neither took pleasure in needling or making fun of others and spent much of their time talking about the nations Khalid had seen, and the skills needed on the road. Harry learned Khalid loved riding, but had a fear of elephants, whereas Jaheira couldn't stand being around horses, and had issues with bears. "For some reason, the instant they see her they go wild and attack. No idea why."

In turn, Khalid learned about how many books Harry had read in Candlekeep, his desire to do good in the world which fueled his paladin training, and other such things. Nothing major on either side, just funny, amusing anecdotes as the two men got to know one another without the shouting and verbal sparring of the ladies.

At night, the four of them would retire to their tents, which Harry had instantly offered to carry in his item box, gaining a few more trust points with the married couple. To Harry and Imoen it was simple common decency to split the party up like that with the married couple having their own tent, and Harry and Imoen their own. It made for some awkward moments for the youngsters, but once Imoen put her foot down and told Harry to take care of his ablutions while she got undressed for bed and vice versa, they were fine.

But it would surprise them that the half-elf couple did not point of fact need a tent for 'marital activities' as Imoen had put it when they decided on that. The difference between half elves, and indeed elves, and humans went far deeper than looks, or even the body types each race was genetically predisposed to. Elves were practically immortal, at least as humans understand the term. They could live for thousands of years, and their mental and emotional psyches were built to think in those lengthy terms. As such, they

didn't build, create, propagate, or grow as fast – from their perspective- as humans, and that carried off over into their relations with one another.

While there was a tremendous amount of love and understanding since Khalid and Jaheira had been together for 200 years by this point, there was no sense of passion as humans would understand. Love yes, and the two always cuddled of a night, but there was no pressing need, be it emotionally or physically, to take it further than that so often. A few times a month was enough for more than that, and even that was more than many purely elven pairings would indulge in, in their own lands. That wasn't to say they weren't passionate. They simply directed those passions differently.

Instead two of them would talk, or read books, and other such activities. Of course, now that they were no longer alone, they talked about the two youngsters, more often than not speaking quietly about the oddities they had begun to notice even upon that first day with them.

"It is strange," Jaheira said the night before they broke out of the woodlands, as she pulled off her feet and began to massage her ankles and arch, sighing with a faint smile on her face as she did so. *Time for new boots, methinks.* "I tend to notice it more in Imoen than Harry if I am honest, but there are, I would say emotional and mental moments of, of disparity perhaps? The mental and emotional maturity that they show is not quite matching to their physical age?"

"I understand what you're say, say, saying," Khalid replied with a nod, still stuttering his words despite it being only the two of them. Most didn't realize this, but Khalid's stutter had nothing to do with shyness or anything of that nature, rather it was lasting damage from a spell that had gone wrong in spectacular fashion when he was nearby. "Im, Im, Imoen comes off as more mat, mat, mature than her years suggest. Sub, sub, subtle ways, how s, s, she holds herself, the way Imoen m, m, moves her body, even how she looks a, a, at Harry. She is sup, su, supposed to be the younger of the two, but how she ac, acts towards him, you would not know it."

"Exactly, and that despite his taking the leadership position between the two of them. Whereas Harry shows an almost childlike immaturity at times, especially when it comes to missing Imoen's more ribald jokes. But that is a minor mystery in comparison to the large one that I believe we have both noticed in Harry," Jaheira replied.

“In, in, indeed,” Khalid said with a slow nod, staring through the closed flap of their tent towards the other tent, where his half-elf hearing could make out the noise of conversation, punctuated by a laugh from Imoen. He smiled hearing it. Imoen was certainly the life of the party in terms of her personality and getting the others to talk. Harry seemed to almost have something of a brooding personality at times, which was perfectly understandable given Gorion’s recent demise, but Imoen refused to let him remain that way for very long before she would cajole him or Jaheira or Khalid, both of whom were more silent individuals, into speaking.

Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to his wife, smiling as she slowly started to undress, taking in her form as an artist would a magnificent painting. A stir of baser desire also flashed across his mind, but he quashed it, knowing now was not the time for such. *Perhaps if we stay a few nights in the Friendly Arm Inn.*

“But it is h, h, his various abilities that surprise me. He is when it is a, a, all said and done on, on, only a Level 5 Paladin. Yes, he sh, should be looking for the deity he wi, wishes to pledge himself too. Yet, h, h, his various strengths and abilities physically are fa, far higher than they, sh, sh, should be. His knowledge of co, co, combat isn’t, but his str, str, strength, his dexterity, both are much h, h, higher than they should be.”

He looked at his wife her confirmation that she had seen the same thing, and she nodded firmly. “The same is for Imoen if on a smaller scale from what I have seen when I have sparred with her. I have noticed her dexterity and agility are far higher than her level would suggest, even without her amusingly named passive skill of ‘Fight Like a Jackrabbit’. I would say from their stats and skills they are at least in the nine to eleven level range, perhaps a bit less?”

“Ex, ex, exactly! it makes me wonder how they ha, ha, have been trained before this. After all, Gorion is n, n, not one to concentrate so m, mu, much on one area.”

“Gorion concentrate on only the physical side of things?” Jaheira scoffed at the very idea, and the two of them exchanged a brief chuckle before lapsing into companionable silence as they thought about their old friend. Though human, Gorion had been one of their closer companions for more than thirty years before he had retired to Candlekeep, and both of them had many fond memories of him, from when he was a young man straight to when he had become an experienced and dangerous Adventurer.

“It makes me wonder how they have been able to build up their physical abilities to such an extent,” Jaheira said breaking the silence by reiterating the question they had been wondering about before. Of course both half-elves knew of ways to build up strength and dexterity, but such means were of limited return after a short period of time.

“So either Imoen and Harry has discovered new ways that the two of us don’t know about to heighten their physical abilities, or something else is going on. And it makes one wonder furiously to think about their parentage in particular,” Jaheira mused, to which her husband simply nodded, sharing a dark glance with her.

After a moment she went on, putting both their thoughts into words as was her wont. “And then of course there is their item boxes, and a few other minor things I notice about the two of them. Mysteries that are adding up to something. I am not doubting that they are good youths you understand my husband, it is just odd, that is all.”

Khalid nodded. “A m, my, mystery to be ce, ce, certain. Yet perhaps one they wi, wi, will enlighten us upon as we continue to get to k, k, know one another.”

Jaheira nodded, and the two of them turned in for the night, curling up against one another under their shared blankets.

The next night, they finally came out of the woodlands into the more settled area around the Friendly Arm Inn.

The change between forest and settled area was quite abrupt. One moment they were moving through trees whose ages could be best told in millennia and then they were among scrub brush and scattered fields, an actual road, or rather two roads, for the first time since their journey had begun. One was running parallel to their route to one side just a bit further away than bowshot, showing the two youngsters that Jaheira had led them perfectly through the woods.

Visible in the distance further ahead of them to the east, there was a main road, its stone cobbles rattling with the loud noise of several carts moving along it. Harry and Imoen also saw the blue dots of several dozen people scattered across the fields and onto that road at the furthest reaches of their map.

To one side of that road in the distance, beyond the range of their maps, they could see a large stone building surrounded by four smaller buildings, each of them set within 20 yards or so of of the stone outer wall of the large mansion within. None of the

outer buildings were made of stone, instead being made of thatch and wood, but they too had smaller hedge walls around them. Around this center they saw numerous guards along with farmers and travelers traveling along the road.

None of the farmers closer to them even looked at them askance coming overland and they moved to join up with the road that would have led from Candlekeep to here, before it intersected the wider road. This was the road to the south and north, the South Beregost Road.

To Harry and Imoen's surprise, Khalid and Jaheira pulled up their hoods as they moved forward, making themselves look as nondescript as they could. The cloaks hid their armor, but left Jaheira's Druid staff and Khalid's bow and quiver to be seen. They looked almost like villagers, or perhaps hunters rather than Adventurers now.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked quickly, looking around them.

"It is better to get the lay of the land before announcing your presence, child, much like you said we might need to later on, so we do here," Jaheira said shaking her head. "We have friends at the Friendly Arm Inn, and yet it is civilization, an important crossroads, which allows for the presence of enemies at the same time."

Harry and Jaheira shrugged, before pulling up their own hoods way. "We do kind of stand-out don't we," Harry said gesturing towards Imoen's hair and his own lightning bolt scar.

"In a word yes," Jaheira said dryly, shaking her head as she stared at his hair. "Honestly, what were you thinking child, pink?"

"I like pink!" Imoen shot back shaking her head. "It doesn't seem to bother my hide in shadows ability at all, so while I can't exactly blend into a crowd, I can hide myself just fine."

"Those are two very different things and blending in is often even more advantageous in non-combat settings," Jaheira remonstrated, and the two of them were off again while Harry and Khalid shook their heads.

Moments later they had reached the crossroad. They were about to turn to make their way a bit north to head to the inn, but they were halted by two other fellows, coming down the main road.

The two were an odd pair to be sure. One was a halfling man, dressed in decent chain armor, wielding a long dagger and a small shield, with several long, thin scars marking his face. The one who addressed them was a tall human man with wavy hair down to just below his ears whose face looked as if it had been marked by someone wanting to make him look like a demented jester without the white makeup. He had a series of eight dots on his forehead right above his eyes, cry lines under his eyes, and then what looked like thin smile lines moved from his mouth in either direction.

“Ah, two young people travelling these roads alone. You must either be most puissant, or idiotic to do so. I wonder which it is. Still, the answer to such a question must be found by asking the person in question. Ho my Good fellows,” the human man shouted in a louder voice, as if his earlier words hadn’t been audible. “From where do you come? And have you news of the road?”

Harry looked at the two people who had moved into their way, taking in their appearance slowly while his Gamer ability gave him what information.

Name: Xzar

Gender: Male

Class: level 14 Necromancer.

Relationship Status: unfriendly, -500/1000 respect, -1000/1000 trust (yes there are negative numbers). This individual does not like you, or indeed many other people. It’s nothing personal, Xzar simply has a very twisted view of the world and the people within it beyond himself.

The information gained from the other fellow was much the same, although he was a 24 dual level Fighter and thief, with a level 24 in Thief and 16 in Fighter. His relationship was also Toxic.

Nothing you do or say will change the opinion of this fellow that you, like nearly every individual in the world not named Mortarion, is better dead than alive. Don’t let your children grow up to by gleeful psycho killers, boys and girls.

For a moment, Harry thought that Jaheira or Khalid would speak up, but the two of them had suddenly fallen behind Harry and Imoen. Indeed, they were so far away by now

they weren't even in speaking distance, leaving the two of them to talk to these two fellows as if the two half-elves had never been part of the same party.

Harry blinked at that but took it in stride as much as he could, moving forward himself and nodding. *I don't like their relationship status, but I am not going to start something here unless they do the same.* "I'm afraid that we don't actually have much information from the south. We came from Candlekeep way."

"Indeed, and how is the ancient repository of what other people seem to think it's important? Still drear, boring, and self-important, full of people nearly as dry and flammable as their books?" asked the mage, chuckling at his own humor. "Honestly, how does that place still exist despite the fact that it has the most ridiculous method of gathering knowledge that I have ever heard of."

"Somewhat, but I'll agree it was rather boring and dry there? As for why we are traveling I could say that we are on a search to find ourselves, Harry said with a shrug. "I am a paladin, and I need to figure out what denomination to follow. Candlekeep didn't have any churches or sects there for me to study at. My friend Imoen has come with me for the adventure of the road."

"Ick, a paladin, guh, I hate good-doing lickspittles like that. What say we kill him, and then have some fun with the girl. I'll wager I'll be much more fun than the boy who'd rather spend the night praying than plowing girl," the assassin quipped, leering at Imoen.

She huffed, but didn't look away, crossing her arms under her chest and cocking her hips at the halfling. "Don't get any ideas Short and Stabby. I like my man a good deal taller than you," she said, while also indicating something else entirely by pulling two fingers away from one another in a parallel, stopping, after a glance at the dwarf, with her fingers barely two inches away.

"I'll have you know, that I am most disproportionate to my size my dear, and I like stabbing things. Don't make fun of my pastimes less you find yourself it's recipient." Mortarion retorted with a cackle, causing Imoen to roll her eyes.

"Pray then keep it and your daggers in your pants. I don't want to see you using either of them."

"If we could get back on track," Xzar said coldly to her and his companion before trying to smile naturally at Harry, the expression more of a rictus on his face than anything

else. "You wouldn't have happened to hear aught about the activities of any bandits in the area would you?"

Harry and Imoen both shook their heads, and the man sighed. "Ah, so you are both deaf and dumb. Excellent, those are both things I look for in companions. For, there is strength in numbers. If you have not pressing business to the north of here, could we interest you in joining with us. The two of you may see young at first glance, yet experience is the best teacher, and we have need for meat shields. that is companions, on this journey."

"To that I would ask you the same question you put to us," Harry said with a smile as he fought to keep from either rolling his eyes or killing this psycho where he stood. "Why are you journeying?"

The two unknowns exchanged a glance, and Xzar went on a little more slowly. "We have business in the South. The issue of the iron shortage has been noticed in the great city to the north, and the two of us, among others less intelligent and more expendable to be sure, have been sent South. Yet it seems to me, that it will take someone of my vast, overpowering intellect to discover what is going on."

Mortarion seemed to dispute that, snorting and spitting to one side while Imoen rolled her eyes at the man's ego.

"But whatever is causing it, we must take part of it, err, take it apart. The iron shortage issue is causing far too many problems in far too many quarters, there are lines that have been crossed, which we cannot allow. If it was directed, controlled and allowed to bear only certain fruit, perhaps there could be some purpose to it, yet at the moment, that is most decidedly not the case." Xzar went on.

"You're saying that you're not going to try to solve the issue?"

"Oh," Xzar said with a wave of his hand. "Perhaps, perhaps if that serves our purposes, and if there is not a certain amount of profit to be made."

"Profit?" Harry asked incredulously. "From the iron shortage, with war threatening over the horizon?"

“You sound astonished at the notion, ah, but you are a paladin-in-training. I apologize, I’ll speak slower so you someone of your limited intellect and naïve world view can understand.”

“I understand it,” Harry said hurriedly. “I’m just wondering how exactly you would be able to take over something that has obviously been going on for some time and has already built up to this level. Just the two of you?”

“I, then you’re much wiser than I expected a paladin to be. Yes, I understand your concerns. But never fear, my friend Mortarion and I are quite capable. Quite... capable,” he repeated, his lips twisting into a sneer, as magical energies began to accumulate around each hand.

Harry slowly nodded at that, and the halfling suddenly barked out “Well, what about it. Are you willing to join us? We cannot promise that you would be able to find a temple to pray to along the way, though why’d you want to do that when there’s killing and wenching to do, but you might find experience, answers, and perhaps, in a bit to knowledge about the world.”

A pop-up window once again appeared in Harry’s vision.

You have been offered the chance to join forces with the most unlikely and somewhat confusing pair of Xzar and Mortimer. Warning, while the idea the idea of additional party members is always good, adding new partners is always a chancy business. Especially with obviously crazy people. Yet crazy money spends as well as sane:

If you chose to add these two to your party, the quest ‘Xzar and Mortarion’ will become active. Rewards include 3000 XP, greater relations with Xzar (not Mortarion, he’s just crazy that way) and their mysterious backers.

Harry idly wondered who these two represented. It was evident that Mortarion at least had been speaking not only of themselves but of a larger group. *And it might be just an impression, but the way they speak, it’s more like they are affronted at the very idea of the iron shortage happening without their being a part of it than worry about the fact that it is happening at all.* Harry didn’t know what to make of that. He also could tell they were both a very long way from sane, and in fact were possibly just plain crazy. *I don’t think anything good can come from being around these two for an extended period of time.*

Still, Harry decided to be diplomatic for now. "I'm sorry, but I have to decline. For one thing, I wouldn't want to hold you up, as we do have business at the Friendly Arm Inn, that could take us several days to complete. For another, I truly do wish to first find a god to follow, before deciding upon my path afterwards. But, the iron shortage issue does interest me and perhaps down the road, when my journey takes me South, we can work together then."

"You speak like a burgher and yet you speak with a certain amount of decorum to your betters," conceded Xzar overriding the halfling's response, which was unprintable. "Still, our offer is not one made more than twice young ones. Be aware of that the next time we meet."

"And if that happy day at comes, we will see you then. Good day." Harry replied.

With that, the odd pair passed Harry and Imoen, with Mortarion sneering at them both, drawing a thumb across his neck as he passed them. As they passed where Khalid and Jaheira were ostensibly reading the side and speaking quietly to a farmer while helping him with his cart which had busted an axle very conveniently they both slowed down slightly, so slightly Harry didn't notice but Imoen, a master of body language, did.

Harry was still confused about the two Harper's odd actions. They waited until the two crazies were out of sight before moving over to Imoen and Harry, who asked the two of them, "What was all that about?"

"It was better that you handle speaking to those two, child," Jaheira said with a shake of her head. "Do you know what they were?"

"You mean beyond insane?" Harry asked, frowning as he cocked his head at her. "A mage and a thief, I think, why?"

"I was not asking for their Adventurer class," she said dryly shaking her head. "I was asking about their affiliation."

While Harry was still looking confused, Imoen was looking at the two Harpers, crossing her arms. "Do you want to set share something with the class?"

"We co, could smell those two, a m, m, mile away," Khalid said, his voice quite a bit colder than either of the two humans had ever heard before. "Do you kn, kn, know about the Xhentarim?"

Harry slowly nodded, turning to look down the road towards where Xzar and Mortimer had been going. "They're a group like the Harpers, only directly opposed to you, they serve their own ends or evil I believe.

"Correct," Jaheira said coldly. "They are the sworn enemies of the Harpers, and we have had run-ins with various members of that group before. Those two were unknown to us, but the signs and the feeling is there for those who have the ability to see. That, and yes, they were both obviously insane," Jaheira added dryly.

"Why were you so friendly to them?" she asked abruptly almost glaring at Harry as she crossed her arms and stared angrily at him.

Harry shrugged. "I could tell they were kind of crazy too you know," he said, scratching at his lightning bolt scar, even as he looked at the blonde half-elf in amusement. "And while I didn't know they worked for the group you spoke of I could tell they were part of a larger organization. I therefore didn't see any reason to be anything but friendly. It was a false friendliness, but I doubt they care, and besides, it serves no one for us to have to dodge assassins from another quarter or have another group of spies starting our path that we will already have the deal with.

Jaheira called down somewhat at that, nodding her head slowly. "I had hoped it was something like that and not you trying to keep your options open for more spurious reasons," she confessed.

As Jaheira spoke, a message appeared in Harry's vision denoting that he had won 300 Trust and 80 Respect from Jaheira and the by-now normal double that amount with her husband. That meant he was more than halfway to becoming an actual friend or whatever the next level up from traveling companions/acquaintances was with Khalid (the Trust aspect being full now), and still way less than that with Jaheira.

"You speak wisdom for one so young," Jaheira went on, of course not seeing the message Harry had. "Pray keep it up."

Harry chuckled rather wanly at that, reminded of his secret, about how old he was back in his original body, whatever his new body might tell anyone. To one side, Imoen giggled wildly into her hand thinking about the same thing, actually having to put her hand over her mouth for a moment.

Blinking at the odd response to her statement, Jaheira shook her head, and gestured the three of them to move along. "Come, the Friendly Arm Inn beckons."

The four of party members moved to join the small queue looking to enter the inn via a small side road connecting it to the main road heading north and south. There was an even dozen men and women in line there with packs or carts waiting there. Still, the guards inside moved through it quickly, with the biggest wait occurring with the one cart directly ahead of them. By the time it was their turn the previous fellows had moved off, leaving the entrance deserted on the other end as well as behind them.

"Number of rooms needed and the duration of your stay," said a guard with a clipboard, looking up at them. "No names needed, just the number of rooms an' the duration," he intoned by rote, sounding extremely bored.

Above his head, Harry read, "Friendly Arm Guard, level 14. A neutral non-Adventurer (any relationship beyond simple acquaintance is impossible) who is assigned to the thankless task of saying hello to people like you." That told him nothing about how tough an opponent the guy might be, since Guard, certainly hadn't been an Adventurer class. *Still, it's not like I'm going to try and start trouble here.*

"Four of us, probably one, maybe two nights at most," Jaheira said crisply, "and two rooms. Or one if you do not have two."

"We have room, although they're not the least expensive," the guard said shrugging his shoulders. "Nor the most expensive. We've got a lot of people here tonight, and a caravan going in either direction came in last night, and the one going south has yet to leave, wanting to add more people to it. Safety in numbers you understand."

Harry nodded at that, hearing the same phrase that Xzar had used moments ago.

"In case you haven't been here before," the man said, his voice shifting back into the dull rote response tone that he had been using earlier. "The rules of the Friendly Arm Inn are as follows: No cheating at dice, if you are caught, we not only will evict you, we will remove one of your hands. No armed fighting outside the training pits. You draw steel we draw blood. You can practice and spar in the training pit if you must, but your blunted weapons will be inspected. You keep your room clean. There is to be no use of magic whatsoever within the room's confines other than memorizing spells. Rowdiness is allowed in the tap room, so long as steel is not drawn but not the courtyard or the upper levels."

“Payment is to be prompt, produced upon entrance into the inn proper at the the innkeeper’s desk. Any attempt to get out of that or finagle, and we will toss you out. The prices are what they are, there is no haggling allowed, but if you conduct business with anyone else, that’s up to them. We have a temple here to the Gnomish god Garl Glittergold, and the normal rules of such a temple apply on top of the rules we’ve already mentioned. If you cannot abide by these rules, seek rooms elsewhere.” The guard finished with a sneer, the face of a man who knew his Inn was the only one for miles in any direction.

Harry nodded, and replied for the group that they were all fine with that, when Jaheira looked at him questioningly at as if asking if he and Imoen could pay their own way.

“Is there someone on staff who would be interested in buying some jewels?” Harry asked instead of replying to her query.

The man nodded and gave the name of one of the workers inside the inn who handled such transactions but warned him that he would have to pay for his night before being allowed into the barroom proper where the was working. “You can pay for your second night after your first, but you have to pay to enter,” the guard intoned as if it was a religious law rather than simply a rule of the inn.

Harry nodded, and the four of them were finally allowed through the main portcullis into the courtyard of the large manor that had been converted into the Friendly Arm Inn.

The manor itself was about four stories taller than the outer wall which itself was three stories, a large building that was several times larger than the inn back at the entrance to Candlekeep, although it would have been dwarfed by the actual keep. Like Candlekeep, the manor was entirely built of stone and tiles, with the manor built up on stone pillars, allowing the ground floor to be used as a paddock. for horses. There were two small farms inside the outer wall visible from the entrance, one with several cows, the other with a good number of stumpy trees. From the portcullis they could see places where the courtyard was dotted by tents, put up next to carts.

As they moved into the courtyard Harry was taking it all in, but while he noticed the guards, he didn’t notice how tense they were. Imoen did. She might have only been an Auror trainee, but she had learned the one, universal rule of guards and police

everywhere: guarding like this was the most boring occupation of all time. It took minds perfectly capable of staring at the same stretch of woodland for hours on end without dying up and going home. At night, the guards should be the next best thing to bored.

Instead, all the guards were tense, wary. They kept their eyes peeled to the world beyond the walls, and moved in groups of three, with the majority of them on the guardhouse's roof above the portcullis. None seemed to be looking away from the outside, and she frowned, shaking her head and wondering why they were tense, but kept silent about it for now, moving after the others as they made their way through the darkened courtyard to the side of the manor where there was a staircase leading up to the inn's main room.

As they came around the corner, Imoen and the others saw a smaller building set to one side. It had two wings spreading out straight from either side of a central dome, with the roofs of the wings being curved too. Along the front of the church was a row of roses, the red of them visible in the light of two braziers set to either side of the doorway and from within could be heard small chime. In front of the church were several dozen more tents and people could be seen sitting around small fires here and there.

However, Imoen and Harry ignored all that for what their area maps were telling them. At the top of the stairs were the silhouettes of two people, one of them leaning over the side of the railing, looking as if he was about to puke, with the other one standing beside him, shaking his head. It looked as if someone had simply drunk too much and was paying for it while his friend looked on, but there were a few bits that didn't quite fit. First, these two were Adventurers, their levels, a Fighter level 14 and a Mage Level 9, by the names of Skitter and Tarnesh respectively.

But, although only Harry realized it, Tarnesh wasn't drunk. If he was, that information should have been shown in a status bar under his name. Harry had seen such things before back in Candlekeep. Drunkenness, confusion, even poison (someone hadn't cooked a fish properly), all of them showed up in a special status bar on the short information shown by looking at a person's name. Here there wasn't any of that.

But Khalid and Jaheira didn't seem to notice anything, and the four of them made their way up the stairs. However, as Harry move up the steps into the light of a torch set at the corner of the manor, the man who had been calmly standing beside his friend looked at him straightened abruptly, smirking suddenly. "Ho friends, what brings you to the Friendly Arm Inn this night?"

Jaheira opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, the man attacked, a sword appearing almost as if from an item box in his hand as he lunged forward. The attack was so sudden, that Jaheira barely got her staff up in time to block it and could do nothing but stumble back down the stairs. "Nature's fury, what..."

At the same time the man puking at the railing came alive, twisting around to face them. As he did he finished the words of a spell he had already started triumphantly thrusting out his hands towards Harry and his companions, who were all now pulling out weapons roused by the sudden attack on Jaheira. "Magical Thrust!"

The group of four found themselves blown off of the staircase, all four of them landing in a tumble on the ground below, with Jaheira rolling with the impact, and Khalid tumbling, but pushing himself to his feet and pulling out his sword and shield quickly as the shock of the sudden assault left him. Imoen too rolled coming to her feet and then in a smooth move even Harry hadn't seen her do she stepped to the dark of one side

Harry didn't take the fall nearly as well as the other three, but he had already pulled out his sword, and retained it in his hand. He didn't bother summoning his shield just yet, instead concentrating on what his map was telling him for a brief second, seeing several blue icons showing other people had suddenly turned red. None of them were among the guards, but two of them were among the stable hands, and four others were among the people who had been lounging around a few of the tents behind them.

Two of those strung arrows to their bows and fired in the next instant. The attack would have struck an unsuspecting Khalid in the back if not for Harry shouting "Duck!" With that he took the man in a tackle and hurled them both to the ground. The arrows whizzed by overhead, causing Khalid to stare at them, then at Harry as he wondered how the boy had seen them coming, but not questioning it just then.

"We're surrounded!" Harry shouted, "Imoen, take out that mage! Jaheira, tangling vines on that group of enemies over there, Khalid guard our back." With that and ignoring Jaheira's shout of irritation at his ordering them about, Harry leaped up and charged forward towards the first opponent that had tried to to attack Skitter, believing it more likely that he was of a higher level than the others, since it seemed as if everyone else was following his lead.

The man was fast, far faster than Harry had thought, his sword flashing forward, but Harry had been training with Khalid who was an even higher level Fighter, and he

blocked the blow, much to his enemy's surprise. Skitter was caught with his sword arm overextended, and Harry tried to take him in the side, thrusting hard for the man's side. But Skitter somehow got his shield around and in the way of Harry's blade, sending it to one side. Then they were trading blows, and Harry was slowly pushed back.

Growling, Jaheira realized that Harry's call had been correct as she stared at the four men racing forward towards them from the tents. Smashing her staff into the ground she activated one of the spells set within it, and vines grew at the point of impact, flashing towards the four attackers, all of whom would, had Harry time to notice, be showing up in his view as Bandits, one of the many types of non-Adventurer combatants out there. She caught three of them, and with a shout Khalid moved past her to engage the first man sword to sword for a brief instance before his skill overcame the attacker, slicing deeply into his side.

That left the two archers and one other, a man who revealed himself to also be a mage, though like with the others Harry hadn't seen it, not having looked directly at them since the battle began. Now both that mage and the one up on the balcony intend the same spell. Magic Missiles, a low level but quick casting spell flashed from their hands, tiny bolts of pure magical energy that hit like tiny hammers. The number of them varied based on the level of the caster, starting at three and adding an extra missile per two levels. Four flashed from the man on the ground, and 12 from the man above them.

One man had targeted Harry's back, the other as Khalid engaged his fellow. Harry twisted, around just enough to take most of the missiles sent his way on his shield, only one of them getting through to slam into his thigh with punishing force, although his shield cracked in places, and Harry's Gamer ability warned "Warning, your shield's durability has fallen to 2/100. It can barely stop a breeze now let alone a blow."

Between one second and the next, Harry had tossed the shield at Skitter, forcing the other warrior to back away. Then he was holding another tower shield pulling it from his Item Box. For a moment Skitter just gaped, as did the mage above them. "You can't do that! Even an Item Box doesn't work like that."

"Well, I just did," Harry quipped, charging forward, smashing his sword into Skitter's then going shield to shield and pushing the other man back. As he did so another message showed up, visible only to him.

You have attempted Shield Bash! Warning, Shield Bash is a Warrior skill that must be learned prior to use. Your attempt has failed but has opened up the ability to learn the move in the future.

However, while the two original attackers were being at least put on the backfoot by the two from Candlekeep, behind them Khalid, with his sword stuck in his opponent's chest, wasn't able to twist his body around to bring his shield up in time to stop the Magic Missiles coming his way. The blows from the Magic Missiles caught him off balance and smashed him off of feet once more.

He landed at Jaheira's feet groaning, while her spell tangled vines hadn't done nearly as much as Harry had hoped to slow the advance of the for coming up at them from behind. She too gave a cry as an arrow found her in the shoulder, causing her to drop her Druid staff even as she healed herself with her free hand, grabbing at her waist and the cudgel there.

Harry cursed, then looked on up with a smile as Tarnesh, the mage above them, screamed as Imoen suddenly appeared in the darkness beneath the stairway, stabbing up between two of the slats and into his foot. He stumbled to his knees, holding his ruined foot, and whimpering.

But unfortunately for them all he had enough presence of mine to toss himself back onto the balcony, away from Imoen. And the balcony, unlike the steps, was solid wood, without any slits to stab through. Grimacing, Imoen dropped down to the ground, disappearing into shadows again. *Huh, I think I'm getting the hang of this whole hit and run thing the Thief class has going for it.*

At the same time she had dropped to the floor, Harry had twisted around. "Jaheira, catch!" tossing his shield to Jaheira, who quickly used it to defend herself, even as she strained somewhat to lift it. Jaheira block the few blows from her opponents with Harry's shield, as she fumbled at her belt for her club, and the first attacker to reach them through her tangling vines fell screaming as her husband stabbed up at them, regaining his feet but slowly until Jaheira turned her healing on him.

But that moment of largess cost Harry. Before he could pull out his last spare shield, Skitter's blade caught his, and though Harry's sword turned his enemy's blade, the sword shattered, and he cursed, before wheeling away from that opponent, hurling the remains of his ruined sword into the man's face, as another message appeared.

Your weapon has been destroyed, -10 to attack. Your weapons destruction has injured your hand, laceration damage to palm and the back of your wrist.

Despite that pain, Harry reached into his item box and pulled out his Warhammer, bringing it around in a powerful two-handed blow into the side of Skitter, who had flinched back from the hilt to the face. He let loose a scream as his ribs cracked and was hurled to the side.

With the one mage nursing a badly wounded foot, Harry saw that Jaheira quickly moved to engage the others. Khalid had blocked two more arrows and another magic missile spell, but this had allowed the last two bandits around him to attack Jaheira, who had taken another arrow to the side. Her armor had blocked the arrow, but barely.

Another spell lashed out, a confusion spell that swept over them all. This caused both Khalid and Jaheira to lower their defenses for a second, while Harry dropped his hammer to land in the dirt at his feet. If they had time, their Willpower would come into play to throw the spell off, but the last two attackers who had charged forward were free of Jaheira's tangling vines and advancing. One of them even activated his own Hide in Shadows as he came.

But then Harry was on the last one visible smashing into one him bodily, taking the bandit to the ground. Once down, Harry slammed a punch into his face that nearly splattered his brains all over the place a show of strength that took Jaheira aback for a moment as she threw off the last bit of confusion.

Then the man who had disappeared earlier into shadows came out from behind Harry, and his sword was out and flashing before she could even shout a warning.

But Imoen was suddenly there, coming out of her own Hides in Shadows technique, grabbing at the man's wrist with one hand, as her sword flashed up. The man parried it with a dagger but was not prepared for a red glow that suddenly appeared around Imoen's hand, causing him to slump, while Jaheira blinked wondering what she had just seen. The next instant, that man died, as Khalid's blade found him, stabbing him hard the side.

This left Jaheira to take out the mage and the two archers. Fully recovered from her Confusion she did so in no uncertain terms. With a roar she started her own chant, and the spell lashed out not into her opponent but up into the nighttime sky.

Jaheira has used Call Lightning. This bolt of lightning flashes down in a vertical stroke at any of the priest or druid's enemies. The first enemy struck by the lightning will be the enemy targeted, but after that the lightning will spread out to any nearby enemy, creating a small, but localized lightning storm. No Allies will be harmed by this show of Nature's Fury.

The message appeared to Harry and Imoen's eyes before a lightning strike flashed down, electrifying the low level mage and his two archer allies. All three of them screamed and died, writhing on the ground while at last the guards on the walls noticed something was going on.

About damn time! Harry grumbled, hearing the shouts in the distance over a strange humming noise in the background. It was with some trepidation that Harry turned in the direction of the noise to see Tarnesh standing once more on his ruined foot on the balcony above them.

In their rush to finish the other attackers, Harry and his party had neglected to finish off the first two, especially Tarnesh, the mage that Imoen had stabbed earlier. Skitter had healed himself somewhat with a potion and taken position again on the steps guarding his companion. The mage was the worse threat though, having had time to chant another powerful spell. "Fireball!" he shouted, thrusting his hand down towards them. A ball of flame twice as large as a basketball flashed out towards them.

Tarnesh has used Fireball. The Quintessential magical spell, this favorite of all wand-wavers everywhere creates a large fireball that detonates upon impact with the ground, expanding into an explosive cloud that burns everything in its path, while also blowing those of shorter stature or weight off their feet. The damage, duration and power of the spell, like most spells, is directly connected to the level of the mage.

But even as the spell flashed towards them, Imoen and Harry were already moving. Imoen was closer to Khalid at the moment, and took him at a run, taking him off his feet and placing her own body over his. At the same time Harry grabbed Jaheira, pulling her around, and taking possession of his shield again holding in between the two of them and the incoming spell.

Of course, the two half-elves didn't know this, and for a moment, Jaheira wondered if Harry had lost his mind. A regular shield would be no match for a fireball spell, and she wondered if all of three of them were about to die. Injured multiple times

since the battle began and having not had time to heal herself back up to full health, Jaheira knew she and Khalid at least lacked the health to survive a fireball from a high level mage, which Tarnesh must be given the number of Magic Missiles he had conjured earlier.

But then twin bright glows enveloped Harry and Imoen just as the explosion hit, and Jaheira gasped as the fire of the fireball spell and the slight impetus that it would've given them washed over and away from the two of them, leaving Harry and Jaheira, and Khalid and Imoen not only not burning, but not even injured.

The blue faded quickly, and Harry rushed forward, hoping to get to the stairwell and up towards the mage.

However, Tarnesh recovered from his own surprise quickly, and lashed out once more with the old mage stand by. Once more Magic Missiles flew, targeting Harry. Harry grunted as his shield once again shattered under the impacts, followed quickly by three of them slamming into his chest, and his health bar decreasing deep into the red and Skitter, moved forward to finish him off, his blade raised high over his hand in a two handed grip, his face a rictus of agony from his ribs,.

But then, Khalid was back in the fight, pulling up his bow and arrow and loosing it into the throat of Skitter. He fell with a bloodcurdling scream, losing his sword to grasp at his neck and Harry leaped over his body, bringing around his hammer in a two-handed swing. The mage's head splattered everywhere, gore flying back into Harry's face and upper body, as his body collapsed to the side.

Harry breathed heavily, staring around him, as guards from the wall and main entrance to the courtyard **finally** rushed towards them. Thankfully several bystanders had seen the whole thing from the shadows and started shouting out what had been happening to the guards as they rushed forward. That meant none of the guards in turn turned red for enemy on his map as they moved forward.

One moved through the carnage quickly, nodding gruffly to Harry and the others as he apologized for what had happened. "This shit's not supposed to happen in the Friendly Arm Inn," he said, as Harry stared down at the body of the man he'd just killed, the fifth such man he'd killed so far.

To his credit, Harry was a little worried about that aspect despite his Gamer's Mind keeping him from falling into a funk about it. Looking up he simply nodded to the guard,

gesturing around them. "I take it, that means we can search their bodies for clues as to the why of this attack?"

"Yeah, because me and Harry here've never been away from Candlekeep before, and I doubt this could have been a crime of passion towards my companions," Imoen quipped as she knelt, cleaning her short sword on the nearest dead body. Luckily the magic of the fireball spell was what sustained it's flames, and the fires it had begun quickly pattered out.

"Indeed not," Jaheira muttered, while Imoen moved to help her sit Khalid up from where he had fallen onto his side after shooting the arrow that had taken out Skitter. Like Imoen, he was a little battered around the edges, especially his head, Imoen not having had time to be gentle when she tackled him to the ground. And alas, Jaheira knew Khalid often was effected more by Confusion spells since the miscast spell that had given him his stutter.

While the two ladies were seeing to their wounded companion, Harry dealt with the guards, who started to clean up the bodies after Harry searched them. He didn't find much of interest until he got back to Skitter's body, finding on him a message that explained this attack.

BOUNTY NOTICE: Be it known to all those of evil intent, that a bounty has been placed upon the head of Harry, the foster child of Gorion. Last seen in the area of Candlekeep, this person is to be killed in quick order. He can be identified by the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He might be in company of a pink haired girl of short stature but still human descent. Those returning with proof of the deed shall receive no less than 200 coins of gold for his head. A further hundred shall be yours for the confirmed death of the girl, but none for her alone. As always, any that reveal these plans to the forces of law shall join the target in their fate.

As Harry read that message, a quest bar appeared in his view.

"Someone Out There Hates You: It looks as if the armored giant is no longer willing to get his own hands dirty and has gifted you with a bounty. This might turn the hands of all those evil or criminal in this land against you, until, that is, they realize taking you might be costing them more than gold. Kill forty assassins and you might make the rest of the underworld think twice about tangling with you. Just don't let innocents get

caught in the crossfire. This is a mandatory quest that can be achieved over time for a reward of 2000 XP and Reputation +1."

You have Survived an Assassination attack: XP reward of 500 plus the XP for each attacker: Tarnesh, 800 experience, Skitter, 400, Bandit X 6 at 70 experience each, Bandit Mage X1 at a hundred.

An instant later, these two messages were superseded by another one that Harry had been hoping to see for a while now. "Congratulations, you have leveled up. Harry is now a level 6 Paladin." It was all Harry could do to not thrust a hand in the air and shout in triumph.

Despite his jubilation however, Harry knew he couldn't deal with that just yet. He had to deal with the locals, while Jaheira was too busy fussing, and there was no other term for it, over Khalid and Imoen, who looked a little sheepish but happy at the reaction from the standoffish Druid. It didn't stop her from going "Aw, you really do care."

For which she earned a smack upside the head and a "Oh, grow up child!" From the other woman.

Rolling his eyes, Harry put the bounty notice he'd read into his item box and continued to loot, waiting for the others instead of entering the inn now. *My party members folks, warts and all.* As he thought that, he realized he wouldn't have it any other way.

He didn't notice Jaheira's speculative glance going between him and Imoen. *What in the world was that, that magical shield? No Paladin or Thief should be able to do that. So what was that? And the red glow Imoen showed earlier. Hmm... I think tonight Khalid and I must have a talk with these two. There is far more going on here than meets the eye.*

End Chapter

Ain't named Rowling or Forgotten Realms, although that last name would be kickass.

Chapter 4: You Meet All Sorts on the Road

About five minutes after talking to the guards, another local came out, this time a gnome adventurer. He took one look at the guards around Harry and his party and their dead attackers, his eyes lighting on Khalid and Jaheira for a brief second longer than would have been normal. "Alright you idiots, I don't pay you to stand around like chickens with their heads in the trough after an attack's happened. I'll get a few of the stable hands to take care of the bodies, get back on watch.."

Harry turned to the man, seeing the information pop up above his head, as he noticed that he read as an adventurer, but was the blue of noncombatant while the guards moved off with alacrity. And even more oddly, the information read like the information he had gotten about the guards rather than Xzar or Khalid, although thankfully he wasn't the orange of a possible enemy, and such it gave Harry more information than he'd had from Skitter and his companion.

Bentley Mirrorshade, level 22 Warrior.

The owner of the Friendly Arm Inn, once a powerful adventurer, now a powerful innkeeper and landowner. He might have let his body go to seed a bit, but don't let that fool you, this gnome could still probably give any low ranking adventurer a run for his money.

Harry could well believe it. The gnome seems to have a very tough looking body, just barely going to fat, but his level was more than ten levels below Jaheira and Khalid's. *But on the other hand Harry thought, those two aren't nearly as tough for their levels as I would've expected. Nor were those mages. What's up with that?*

The whole idea of levels, and whether or not he and Imoen were normal or unusual was something they would have to figure out in the future. *It could be perhaps because of their Elvish heritage. They're just not as tough physically as they should otherwise be while all their other abilities are at the correct level?*

When the last guard was out of earshot, Bentley turned to Jaheira and Khalid, thumping his stomach in amusement. "You two! It's been how many years we've since I've seen you, and you're still trailing trouble after you. Of course given your profession perhaps I shouldn't be surprised."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. Perhaps trouble is just there waiting for us when we arrive," Jaheira said, holding out (and down) her hand to the gnomish man. "It is good to see you old friend."

“And I you,” he said with a booming laugh, clasping first her hand and then Khalid’s in friendship. “How are you both doing? Did you ever find a cure for that...”

“W, we are w, well enough,” Khalid said shaking his head subtly as he interrupted Bentley’s question. “Well en, n, enough. Although I will say, I did no, no, not anticipate being att, tt, attacked like this in your inn my friend. Have you beg, g, begun to lose your touch in finding fight, fi, fighting men?”

Some dig was involved in that that Harry couldn’t follow, but which caused the man to cough exasperatedly, shaking his head. “Will you never let me live that down?”

That half-elf warrior shook his head with a laugh. “No. It, it’s too good.”

Jaheira frowned, shaking her head, the loose tufts of blonde hair to either side to move slightly, although much of it was matted with blood from the fight, it had been that close. “Again with that old joke. If you’re going to make jokes at Mirrorshade’s expense Khalid, the least you can do is let your wife in on the story behind them.”

“He promised he would never tell anyone else that story, so don’t blame him,” Bentley replied with swiftly, almost glaring at Khalid who just nodded his head. “So, who are your new companions? And how long are you staying for? And,” he went on in a lower tone. “What was this attack about. Do you require any help?”

The last was asked very hesitantly, and it was obvious to Harry and the others the man had no love of the idea of getting involved in what he obviously considered Harper troubles. Still the fact he was offering at all said something good about him.

Harry stood forward, holding out his hand. “My name is Harry sir, and that is Imoen over there. We are new adventurers out seeking the world away from Candlekeep, where I was a ward of Gorion.” He had instantly made a decision to not tell the man about why they had been attacked, instead saying that this seemed to be something because of his connection to Gorion. As he said that, a new notice appeared in his line of vision just above Bentley’s head.

“Spot check passed. Your charisma has allowed your thinly veiled lie to be believed by Bentley, just don’t get used to it.”

“That makes sense,” Gorion said with a nod. “Gorion made even more enemies than you two did after all, and not all of them came from Harper business either. He was

much more active around the Sword Coast than the two of you were before his retirement to Candlekeep.”

“Indeed,” Jaheira said, going with the lie that Harry had come up with quickly shooting him an approving look before turning back to Bentley. “And the fact that we might be looking into another trouble around here also adds to that.”

“The Iron Intake Issue shortage,” the man said nodding slowly. “I can’t tell you much about it, I’ve not been away from the Friendly Arm Inn for more than twenty years as you all well know. What I can tell you though is that it is a **big** issue, it’s having an impact both economically and politically.”

There was a loud *Bing*, as his Gamer system conjured another notice in front of Harry.

The main quest, ‘Iron Intake Issue’, has been updated. You have realized the scope of the problem.

The iron shortage problem is much larger than you feared, and the importance of finding the reasons behind it have grown. Search for more clues and you might discover more about the final goal of the individuals behind the problem.

“But we already knew that,” Harry muttered to himself, shaking his head.

“I do, don’t believe we need that m, m, much in the way of aid old f, f, friend, although if you would l, l, let us stay for free...” Khalid trailed off leadingly.

“Of course, of course! Do you honestly think I’d let you pay after being attacked in my inn? You can stay for three days in the best rooms of that we have available. That’s a suite on the fourth floor, a small foyer and two small bedrooms. I’ll even throw in telling my wife to use her identify skill for you on any items you have for free. I’m not happy that you were attacked within my inn’s walls, to put it mildly,” Bentley said, a fierce scowl appearing on his face. “Will that do?”

“That will do nicely yes,” Harry said eagerly with a nod. “Thank you.”

“Might I ask that we also get free baths?” Imoen asked shaking her head as she looked down at her blood soaked leggings and blood splattered leather armor, which was really little more than a leather jerkin which offered a bare level of protection. “I’m feeling kind of dirty right now, and not the good kind.”

The gnome let out a laugh that was rather too loud to come from such a short fellow, shaking his head. "The Friendly Arm Inn offers warm baths for free, and hot meals for a penny a meal. It's part of why we were called the Friendly Arm Inn after all. Now come on, let's get you started on those baths."

The four weary warriors entered the inn and found themselves in the main barroom instantly, where Bentley shouted at a young boy, who ran on ahead of them up the stairs with alacrity. The barroom was a high-ceilinged area, the main hall of the former baronial home the inn had been in ages past. The interior was lit by numerous lanterns here and there along with a few chandeliers with dozens of large candles each. About a dozen tables were scattered around the area filled to capacity, and two bars, one of at the far end, one on another wall, both of them also filled. Indeed, there were so many people that Harry could barely make out any of their names with his Gamer skill, and on the map the room was a giant sea of blue dots.

The whole area the area was just damn crowded, the noise of dozens of conversations bombarding their senses loudly from the get go. *Hmm...I don't know if I'd be able to pick out a single orange dot among the blue like this, that's something I to remember.*

It was so crowded and so noisy their entrance went unremarked, even the blood splattering them all was ignored as Bentley led the way around the outskirts of the hall and then to a series of stairs at the back. There he left them heading around the bar set to one side of the stairs where he disappeared underneath the bar for a second, coming back with a series of keys. He handed them to the four adventurers, telling them, "Room 403, take the stairs all the way up, then turn right, can't miss it."

Thanking him profusely, the blood-spattered group made their way up the inn, remaining quiet as they did. In the room, true to Bentley's word, there were two tubs in each room already teeming with water. Imoen instantly went towards one, saying, "Girls over here, boys over there. And afterwards, I think we should all head downstairs and listen into the conversations going on. Bars like this, they're going to have a lot of rumors, and if you listen to a lot of them, eventually you can put enough rumors together to get some truth. That way we can figure out if there's anything new to learn about the iron shortage that the innkeeper doesn't already know."

“I think that’s a good idea,” Harry said with a nod. “But while you all are doing that; I’ll take this ring I found on that mage’s body over to be identified and ask about other temples in the area since you two don’t know about any.”

Khalid nodded, smiling. “I can a, a, ask more questions from the innkeeper w, w, while we’re downstairs, in, in, information that can give us some idea of the s, s, scale of the iron ore t, t, trouble, how long it’s been going on, ho, ho, how far it has spread and such. Ben, ben, Bentley will also be able to point us to an, an, anyone who might have more in, in, information for us.”

For her part Jaheira looked around at the others and scowled a little internally. She had wanted to ask the two youngsters about their odd abilities and that spell they’d both used to defend the four of them from the fireball earlier, but evidentially, that wasn’t going to happen.

“I will talk to the proprietor,” she said warningly to Khalid as she pulled her armor over her head, dropping it to one side. She was amused to see that Harry had turned away from herself and Imoen as they began to under their armor, which in her case was a chain mail. *It wasn’t as if they didn’t have anything on underneath after all.* “You and the innkeeper would probably simply start to exchange stories and lose yourself in that and the wine rather than keeping on task.”

“You wo, wo, wound me,” Khalid said, although he did look a little guilty to Imoen’s eyes, as if the idea of losing himself to the wine wasn’t one he could argue against very well.

Later on, Imoen, out of her armor - such as it was - and into some leggings and a jerkin, smiled happily as she grabbed up a stein of ale from the bar, and began to move through the crowd, saying “excuse me,” “sorry about that miss”, and “hey love, ‘ware behind.”

As she did, she kept her ears open, looking around thoughtfully despite acting as if she was just wondering the crowd looking for a free seat. She spotted Harry instantly, moving through the crowd, looking uncomfortable as he made a beeline to the door. *Funny that I didn’t notice that when we were in Hogwarts. He **really** doesn’t do well with crowds does he?*

He moved through the crowd too, but unlike Imoen who moved through it like a fish through water, he parted the waves like a ship, his larger frame able to just move

people out of the way. Yet as he did so, he bowed his head and acted self-conscious, trying to make himself small at the same time he was pushing through the crowd.

Shaking her head at that, Imoen moved through the crowd herself, heading towards the table that had just lost one of its members. "Hey all," she said plopping into the empty chair. "You mind if I take up this chair for just the time it takes me to finish this drink?"

The other table goes, two dwarves, a human, and a gnomish woman mostly shrugged their shoulders, although the human man leaned across, smirking at Imoen. "That depends, how long does it take you to finish? Because my friend was sitting there moment ago."

She shrugged. Then she downed half of her stein in one long gulp before slamming it down the table. Imoen had learned early on in this world that she could drink like a fish, which was good since she'd been able to do that in her last life too. "I don't know you tell me," she said cheekily.

The two dwarves smacked the table in approval, and the man scowled leaning back, conceding the point.

After that, Imoen introduced herself in as bubbly a manner as she could manage, which given her old life as Tonks was a hell of a lot, slapping on an actual question at the end. "So I'm Imoen, a would be adventurer out from Candlekeep with a friend, although we seem to have chosen a bad time to explore the world. What kind of dangers are out there for someone like me?"

"A lot," the human man said, and Imoen looked up above his head for just a brief second, seeing that he was an Adventurer, a level nine Thief, which was interesting. The other two were farmers, who simply shrugged ignorance as the man went on. "Business is down all around. The sub-humans, the orcs, goblins, kobolds, and knolls are all making trouble throughout the Sword Coast, there had been a few reports of dire spiders and other monster type issues. Especially bandits along the road. Beyond that, well, if you want more info, ya might want to pay in return darlin'." The look in his eyes as he gazed at Imoen told her precisely what kind of payment he wanted.

"Don't speak to me about spiders!" shouted a voice nearby, obviously having overheard that comment through the background noise of the bar. "My home, my precious home!"

“Wow,” Imoen said, looking down at her drink. “And here I thought I needed this.”

With that, she stood up, and quickly moved over to the woman who had been sobbing, patting her back, and pouring her own drink into the woman’s. “There there, have a bit more drink, sorry I can’t offer more, unless you’re actually having issues?”

“Define having issues dearie,” the woman, whose name read as Landrin, a civilian said, drinking her drink eagerly, whining aloud, “My home, my lovely home...”

Seeing the woman was in no mood just yet to talk, Imoen moved on from there grinning at all around her and flirting it up, pulling drinks out of men’s hands and drinking half of them before pressing them back with a wink and sometimes a kiss on a cheek or a pat on the rear and moving on, her hips twitching this way and that. Yet whenever anyone got to fresh, she smacked away their hands with a laugh, gaining nods of approval from the barmaids working the crowd. You would’ve thought that a person with pink hair wouldn’t be able to fit into a crowd like this, but Imoen did it with an ease of long practice, her normal outgoing effervescent nature playing well here. But while she seemed to just be having fun, Imoen was listening all the time to the conversations all around her.

The first bit of information she heard that could deal with the ‘Iron Intake Issue’ (a name she still loathed, it didn’t even make sense!) which she overheard a few merchants saying that caravans were a new thing, but also didn’t seem to be working. “How the hell are they managing to bring together enough of brigands to truly stop a caravan!” shouted one man to another.

The gnome who had been shouted at growled back to the human doing the shouting, his own tone angry. “I don’t know, if I did do you think I’d still be sitting here waiting for my guilds okay to turn around back to Baldur’s Gate? But they are. The guards are charging more and more as they lose men and material.” He spat angrily to one side. Hah, it isn’t as if the iron is actually any good by the time it arrives in Baldur’s Gate anyway!”

They looked around as Imoen bumped into them, muttering an excuse me, before moving on, circling around that conversation slowly as she listened while the conversation had quickly turned back to the brigands. The iron shortage was indeed only half a problem. The rest of the rumors were about lots of bandits and undead and rest, having been on the rise in the area too. There was good money for adventurers on guard detail, and not

many places safe from one type of danger or the other. The dangers from these bands of sub-sentients was way more, even for a place as untamed as the Sword Coast.

The Main Quest Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have found new information.

For some reason, the iron issue is occurring at the same time that there has been a rise of bandit activity, both from human and nonhumans. How could these two troubles be related? How could they not be, given the timing? This information adds to your information pool and counts towards solving this quest.

How many clues can you discover in the Friendly Arm Inn, the meeting place of North, South, east and West?

There is a bonus available for finding them all!

“It’s tainted I tell you tainted at the source!” said another man, interjecting himself into the conversation.

He wasn’t the first one who mentioned something like that. More than one of the other drinkers said something similar about how they’d seen iron tools crack. A few had seen swords do the same, and more than half a table of hunters in from the woods said that even their steel arrowheads and daggers had started to show signs of failing. This eventually added up to another update.

The Main Quest Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have found new information.

Something wrong with the iron itself? How can that be? You have heard numerous rumors about there being a problem not only with the shipment of iron, but with the quality of the iron when it arrives. Added to the fact that you have seen perfectly good-looking weapons break, this gives you new information that will count towards this quest.

There was even talk of some kind of a fortress being run by the knolls down South. But Imoen only heard one rumor about that, and it didn’t activate the quest log as the rest of the rumors had.

Thank God this quest stuff carries over though, Imoen thought, still smiling cheerfully as she turned away from one man, giving him a kiss on the cheek for the drink he’d offered her, but nothing more as she moved on leaving him with with a smile but nothing more. She paused mid-step though as she heard another *Bing*.

Flirty Little Lass: Imoen has used her body and wiles gain information that will serve the party in the future. +1 to Imoen's Charisma. Add another two points to your charisma and the chance to confuse men will go up by ten percent.

"Bonus," whispered to herself, then carrying on even more eagerly, though she kept from doing anything more than a wink and a kiss.

It quickly turned out that the Sword Coast was a source of raw goods for both Amn and Baldur's Gate. Indeed, you could say that without the Sword Coast's resources, Baldur's Gate would not be the massive city-state that it was. Wood for the city itself and for its massive fleet, healing herbs, several types of exotic spices - the Sword Coast was famous for its spices - and all sorts of ore from precious metals to nickel and iron. All of it was able to be found here. But without iron, even other mining operations were slowing down.

"Indeed, there used to be a mining operation to the north west, a major one that should have been the start of a outposts town at the very least," said one middle-aged man, shaking his head to a comment someone else had made about the iron issue only impacting adventurers, not noticing Imoen moving in close enough to overhear them halfway through. "But they couldn't get mining equipment that could last at all in the past few months. If that kind of thing spreads, Baldur's Gate won't last, it's power is built on trade after all."

"I know the mine ya were talking about I think,. They were forced to abandon it about a month back. It's a damn shame too, all of those attacks emptied the place out quickly, and I think that someone else has moved in," said another man at the bar, leaning over Imoen to do it causing her to shift from her chair.

B-Bing. Imoen almost cheered aloud as she saw another two updates after that conversation before frowning slightly as she read them. The first was fine, but the second was downright annoying.

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue quest has been updated, you have found information.

You know now that the iron problem is effecting the whole economy of the region. All other mining operations have stopped, as far as the locals know. That could mean a disaster in the future for Baldur's Gate.

Imoen has discovered a conversation that might lead to a quest. Unfortunately only the party leader can find and accept quests.

Still look at the bright side Imoen old girl, if you see a notice like that, you know where to direct Harry after he comes back from the temple, Imoen thought, keeping her spirits up. This was made easier a second later as her charisma went up another point do to her flirting. Only one more. Although I wonder if I could use 'Flirty Little Lass' in combat?

At the same time Imoen was working the crowd, the two Harpers had also gone to work. They had begun to speak quietly to Bentley and a few of the better dressed individuals. Imoen slowly drifted over, looking at them quizzically, and Jaheira whispered introductions into her ear which Imoen promptly forgot. Who cared if this or that individual was a magnate, whatever that meant, or a merchant prince, heck what did that even mean?

And yet, as she listened, she started to understand more. 'Who has to gain' was the main thrust of this discussion.

"Not the current power structure in Baldur's Gate, or Amn. It's true that our two nations, if Baldur's Gate could even be called such are in a constant struggle, but it is an economic struggle, not a military one," said the magnate, some guy from across the ocean, here on his way back to Baldur's gate.

"Baldur's Gate could call up whole armies of mercenaries with its treasures, and the city itself is near to impregnable. It's mighty navy would make hash of any other nations maritime trade if they were so foolish as to go to war with it," opined one man, smiling thinly at his fellows.

"Ah, but in contrast, Amn is very definitely its own superpower, with a massive military force, so wouldn't need to pour out it's life's blood for a short term solution." Said an Amnian, who despite his words was looking quite defensive, and also relieved that neither Jaheira or Khalid had a Baldur's Gate accent, like most around the table. He went on in a more conciliatory tone. "But... they are a land-based force. Baldur's Gate could hurt Amn severely with its navy and fighting along the Sword Coast would be horrible for both."

“We are all agreed to that,” Jaheira said sharply. “You’re just basically listing reasons why whoever is stirring up trouble can’t be from one place or the other. But surely it **must** be someone in one of those areas yes? Who then?”

There were some looks between them, and the Gate natives spoke up. “...A noble perhaps, disillusionment yet with deep pockets, who wants to see himself rise and others fall. It would be an age old story, if written in different ink.”

“That metaphor didn’t work for me, sorry,” Imoen said with a shake of her head. “Could you explain that to this poor country girl?”

“He meant that a noble that nobles always scheme against one another, rising and falling, and if someone had, say in the last two generations taken in a major setback acting out in this manner might appeal to them. I think it’s a bit of a reach myself,” Jaheira said shaking her head even as she instructed the younger girl. “No, this must be the signs of something else, a criminal organization?”

“Than most definitely does not come from Amn,” the man from Amn said. “In my own business dealings I have had conflicts and issues with the Shadow Thieves, and they stomp all holy hell out of any other group that attempts to act illegally in their own territories. The Shadow Thieves well understand the limitations of a criminal enterprise.”

“Which means that it is still likely to come from Baldur’s Gate,” Jaheira said, with Khalid nodding agreement as he filled up his wine glass and that of the two men to either side of him before passing it on. It was obvious both more experienced adventurers agreed with the point the Amnian had raised.

“And I still say no!” Said one of the city-states natives, his fellows joining in hotly. “You’re just trying to paint it like it’s our fault!”

“How dare you?” Said Amnian native scowling angrily. “I’m simply stating facts.”

“And your facts just happened to insult us, calling into question our city and its honor?”

At that point, Imoen realized she wouldn’t hear anything more from this group until they calmed down some more. Rather than wait for that slipped away, leaving Khalid and Jaheira to play peacemakers for a time, moving through the bar area once more. She noticed though that Jaheira seemed to be doing much of the talking, and

Khalid more than his share of drinking. And did she notice him glancing at a few of the barmaids too?

Shaking that thought off, Imoen turned her mind to the annoyingly named quest they were all on. *Weird that they are both convinced this problem originates in or the other's territory, and not really smart. After all the Sword Coast is huge!*

Imoen had seen a map back in Candlekeep and estimated it to be at least the length of, say a trip from one side of Italy to the other side of France, although it had nowhere near the width of those nations. *But that's only because of the ocean to the west, and the massive entirely unexplored forest to the west. Who knew what was out there? Heck, who knows what could be hidden in the Sword Coast itself? Like whoever took over that mine I heard about earlier that could lead to a new quest once I get Harry back in here. *Ding**

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

Though your opinions might not be shared by others, with all the eyes facing towards Baldur's Gate or Amn, it leaves the rest of the Sword Coast open. While this doesn't exactly cut down on where you are searching, it is certainly a step towards doing so. It remains to be seen if you're correct of course, but hey, baby steps.

Imoen paused, slipping into a shadow not using the thief technique just moving behind a pillar of wood for a moment, glaring up at the message before flicking it away with her finger. *Okay, I'm beginning to see Harry's point. The weird sense of humor of this Gamer ability of his is disturbing at times.*

Still, thinking about it Imoen had to admit that the game was right. And yet, she still felt the locals were wrong. She didn't think it was anyone who had **anything** to do with the existing power structures. Too many pies were getting upset by this move for that to really ring true to her. *Follow the money, always follow the money, or whoever benefits, that's what my instructors, and all those cop shows I watched, say. Always look to who benefits, She thought to herself, frowning. I can't find a money trail, not yet, but Nashkel is the key, where the Iron Intake Issue is coming from. Whatever else is occurring, it's roots are there. *Ding**

"Oh God dammit!" Imoen shouted. This got her some odd looks from around her, and she winced, quickly making up a story. "Stubbed my toe sorry."

Everyone else went back to what they were doing and allowed Imoen to read the message that it just appeared her line of sight. *'For showing insight and actual forward thinking, something unheard of among most Adventurers, you have heard +1 to Intelligence. Congratulations.'* Ruddy Gamer system. She glared down at her toe for a moment, then sighed and moved on.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Imoen was making all of these quest boxes appear, Harry was in the Temple of Wisdom dedicated to Garl Glittergold, the chief of the gnomish pantheon of gods. Luckily, he had also inputted a command into his interface meant that those messages appeared high and to the right of his line of sight as little square bars in different colors after the fight with Gorion's attackers. So he could ignore them to concentrate on his discussion with the priestess of the temple.

She was of the same age as her husband, and just as friendly-looking, but whereas he had dressed in almost somber, sturdy work clothes, she was dressed in a robe, which was made up of tiny patches of colors, all the colors of a rainbow. It matched the decor of the interior of the temple, which was lined with shiny bits of marble in various colors all around, spiral patterns, whirls of colored glass that was quite pretty in a gaudy sort of way.

At least, Harry thought I hope most of them are glass. Surely not every temple could afford to showed that kind of wealth right? On the other hand, they are kind of dedicated to a God of gems, lapidaries and protection, so maybe people are afraid of stealing from them.

Underneath her somewhat amazing robe, Gwyneth was short, what some would've called dumpy, but Harry felt was more matronly than anything else. She was the first gnome lady he'd ever seen, but she certainly seemed typical of the type that was talked about in the few fictional stories he had read.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat?" she asked, turning away from what she had been doing, which seemed to have been examining a series of potions in front of her, frowning heavily, the frown disappearing into a wry quirk of the lips as she looked at Harry.

“I was at wondering if you could tell me about where to find temples to for the Gods of Light,” Harry repeated.

She blinked, somewhat looking surprised. “That’s what I thought you said. Most of the time when they ask for directions like that it’s to the temple of a specific god, and even that is rare. Can I ask why?”

“I’m a Paladin, but I grew up in Candlekeep so while I have a lot of the training, I have yet to devote myself to any specific God,” Harry supplied by rote.

“Oh,” the woman said nodding her head rapidly I see. “Yes, paladins do sometimes crop up like that, although, I have to warn you that even if you find a God to worship, your acceptance into the Order of the Radiant Heart is not quite the same thing. I can tell you a bit about temples around here but I’m afraid there aren’t many of them in the Sword Coast.” The matron went on after describing the Order of the Radiant Heart, which was the Order of paladins, active throughout the world. “The Radiant Heart as an organization is somewhat separate from all three churches, although they do answer to them as a whole. You can still be a paladin and not be part of the Order, but it is much harder without that structure.”

As she spoke a quest box appeared. It flashed above Gwyneth’s head at full size since it was something Harry had done himself rather than coming from Imoen.

A new quest has appeared, **Radiant Heart or Radiant Loner**. Congratulations!

The Order of the Radiant Heart is the only game in town if you are a paladin, an order made up by paladins devoted to not one, not two, but all three of the gods of light to make use of Paladins at all. You can be a paladin and not be a member but becoming a member of the Order of the Radiant Heart will open many doors for you in the future. Or it might close them. Who knows? It will be up to you to make that decision.

Despite the tone of the message though, Harry was kind of uninterested in joining any Order just yet. He would need to think about that in the future perhaps, but right now, he just wanted to figure out a way to gain access to the skills that had drawn him to choose to become a paladin in the first place. “How did I not know about them before this?” he asked Gwyneth.

“The Order is actually a relatively new thing in terms of world history. They’ve only been around since the Time of Troubles, and they haven’t actually appeared in many books,” she teased, to which Harry simply nodded conceding her point.

“At any rate, there is a temple on the outskirts of Beregost, the next settlement you’ll find if you’re going south. It’s a decent sized town, although it’s fallen on hard times thanks to bandit raids in the past year or so. The temple is dedicated to Lathander, but that is the only temple between here and the mining town of Nashkel.”

“...Although,” she said, perking up slightly. “There are roving paladins who could give you some information about their patron deities if you ask. A young one who was a member of the Order came through on a quest a few days ago heading east. I rather liked him. And I know another paladin took up station in Beregost right before these recent troubles began.”

She smiled at Harry faintly, as he nodded thanking her for the information. “Now that I’ve answered your question though, could you perhaps answer one of mine?”

Harry blinked at that but nodded politely. “If I can, certainly.”

“Why do I, when I look at you a young soul in a nearly adult body?” He blinked, and she laughed, gesturing around them. “I am a priestess of the Garl Glittergold, who along with protection and gems, is a god of trickery. So we who have devoted ourselves to Glittergold sometimes see truths where others see merely reality. And souls are not nearly as simple as you might think.”

“...I never actually consider them simple in the first place,” Harry said slowly. “You could say that well I’m a traveler of sorts,” he went on, knowing instantly that trying to lie to this woman would not only not work but would be counterproductive. “In another place, I, well I made a mistake, and found myself in this new body here.”

When she nodded with a smile, making a little go on gesture he obeyed. “Rather than try and fail to get home, I decided to make the most of my new life here. My life back home wasn’t... well it wasn’t what I wanted it to be. A lot of things were out of my control, and I didn’t want to be what they perceived me as, or like how other people demanded I become,” Harry said thinking of the Wizarding World’s scary amount of interest in him the vagaries of the public over the year he’d been in Hogwarts, and the Dursley’s and how they had tried to starve magic out of him this summer and before.

“Good for you,” Gwyneth said cheerfully, reaching out to thump him on the arm.

“You’re not going to ask more questions about that?” Harry asked, both relieved and confused.

The older gnome woman laughed gaily. “Nom no. You answered my questions, whatever other secrets you are trying to keep hidden are yours. Trying to discern secrets like that have never been my main calling, seeing the truth as I can occasionally is enough. Still I will ask you, why did you want to be a paladin in this life? That is a very hard life you’ve said yourself, one of constant warfare, quests and doing battle with darkness. Both dark things, and dark individuals at times. You will see the best and the worst humanity and the other races have to offer as a Paladin to a far greater extent than you would in any other job.”

Harry, once more struck by the realization that trying to lie about this would not be a good idea, answered honestly, looking away sheepishly. “Well, I didn’t really think about that kind of long term thing. I’ve always wanted to fight the good fight obviously but well I suppose... isn’t every little boy’s dream to become a knight? And of course, the healing aspect of becoming a Paladin was a major draw.”

“Well that’s one reason to become a paladin,” Gwyneth said with a jolly laugh, slapping her stomach lightly as she leaned back in her chair. At the same time, a green stat notice appeared in his line of vision.

You have passed the test of the priestess Gwyneth, answering her questions truthfully, and showing that you are of a good heart. +1 to wisdom, plus a special item bonus.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, and she asked, “Although I do have some advice for you if you’re willing to listen?” When Harry nodded, Gwyneth smiled. “First, remember that no matter how harsh this life may be, that you remember to have fun and make it a life worth living.”

“With my friend Imoen along, that at least isn’t a big issue,” Harry said dryly shaking his head as yet another little square glowing rectangle appeared indicating an incoming message of some kind.

“In that case, I wouldn’t recommend Helm to you. He is far too serious and very judgmental. Either Tyr, or Torm would probably work best for you.”

From there, the woman went into a basic overview of what she thought the two other Gods of Light were like, causing Harry to chuckle as Tyr was described as “not only the God of martyrs, but the God of whiners and whingers. Really, Torm would be much more fun at a party,” she said with a laugh. “Here, take this book.”

She held out a book, the title of which read, ‘An Adventurer’s Guide to the Gods of Light and Darkness.’ “It will no doubt help you a lot as you go on, though I still maintain that mere book learning is no substitute for experience. Still, I think I’ve talked your ear off enough. The point is, knowing yourself is not a simple journey, but a never tapped changing tapestry of experiences and choices, and making certain you devote yourself to the right guide is a step best taken after a lot of thought. Just make certain when you look in a mirror, you like the person is looking back at you. That is the most important thing.”

The side quest (large) Pray for your Future has been updated.

Listening to Gwyneth Mirrorshade has given you more information that will help you move forward in your quest to become a real paladin, little boy. Congratulations. +2000 experience.

Harry smiled at that, knowing 2000 was actually a nice chunk of the experience needed to go on to the next level. Although the fact that it gave me so much experience points for just asking the right questions and getting answers instead of actually fighting or killing someone, sort of showed how much people’s lives were worth here. That was a little disturbing, but thanks to his Gamer’s Mind it didn’t bother him as much as it should.

As Harry looked into the first few pages of the book, Gwyneth asked, “Was there anything else, the old priestess asked. “Because at this point, considering I just handed you a book, which cost me some money to buy in the first place, well, we priests tend to demand a monetary room recompense.”

Harry fumbled in his pouch for a moment, bringing out several gold coins as well as the ring he had found on the corpse of the wizard. “Um yes, could you identify this for me?” Harry knew his intelligence was high enough that he could use the identify skill himself, but he had never seen how someone went about using the skill before and apparently he had to, since his first attempt to identify the ring hadn’t worked, nothing changing nor did any message box appear.

The woman nodded, and held up the ring to her eyes, spinning it thoughtfully, then looking at it through a series of refractions of light from above. Then she nodded. “This is

a ring of wizardry; it adds to the number of spells that a wizard can memorize per day below the spell level three.”

You have learned identify:

This is a skill based on your own knowledge, along with your intelligence and wisdom stats combined then divided by half. You will have better luck identifying simple items, rather than more difficult ones, but as you learn about the world, and your knowledge base and stats, so too will your ability with this skill and what information you can glean with it about unknown items.

“Thank you,” Harry said, paying the hundred gold crowns for the identify spell, and then 50 more for her advice despite Bentley having said he would get access to that skill of his wife’s for free..

A hundred and fifty gold coins was chump change for what Harry had learned today, even if it would normally have cut into his and Imoen’s budget given how short a time they’d been on the road. But Harry had a bit of a trick there: the jewels he had collected during the tutorial phase back in Candlekeep. Harry had a total of five hundred forty seven lynx eye gems which he could sell to make some quick cash. Each alone wasn’t worth much, but given the sheer number of them he had, Harry knew they could make him a lot of money, so long as he was careful how and when to sell them.

“Thank you young one. Bentley might have told me to help you with identify for free, but well, my church does need to pay its own upkeep. A sense of independence is necessary in a marriage like ours,” she said chuckling. “I hope that your quests go as well as they can in this imperfect world of ours, and remember what I said, always remember to know yourself.”

Harry nodded, and turned exiting the temple. Outside he paused in a patch of shadow to go over the message boxes that had built up in his peripheral vision from Imoen, shaking his head as he noted she had upgraded her ‘Flirty Little Lass’ Life Skill. He also saw the Quest notices, and smiled at how much progress she’d made, although learning she couldn’t take, quests for them was something of a mixed bag.

On the one hand, she can’t sign us up for something silly or promise that we’ll go out of our way. Having lived with her for more than half a year by this point Harry had a very good grasp of Imoen/Tonks’s personality. On the other hand, it would hurry things along at times. Still, not a big deal right now.

Entering the inn he found Imoen still working the crowd. She spotted him almost as fast as he had spotted her, waving her hand. "There's my buddy now!" She said expansively, waving a tankard of ale around and gesturing Harry over to join her. She had found her way back to the woman who had yelled about spiders, thinking it might be another quest, and had been proven right a moment ago. "This young laaaady here," she said slurring her words slightly and very deliberately. "hasss an issue with some spiders down in Beregost."

Harry nodded agreeably, having seen a notice to that effect a moment ago. "What's your name miss and what kind of trouble are we talking about?" A few minutes of conversation later, a new quest message box appeared in a blue color, although the Gamer's continued use of alliteration made Imoen conk her head against the table.

"You have agreed to the quest (minor) Spider Splatter:

The weaver Landrin has a rather ironic problem in the form of an infestation of spiders in her house. Get Rid of these overgrown insects and you will be rewarded.

Reward: two hundred gold, plus an extra fifty for every spider killed.

However Harry saw something Imoen didn't, a little odd button like addition to the bottom of the message box which read 'haggle possible'.

Thinking quickly, Harry slowly nodded. "Well miss, my party is going that way, and I can certainly say we'd be up to the job. The reward also sounds good, but I was wondering if, once we clear out the house, could we have use of it while we are in Beregost? Obviously you're comfortable enough here, but our business might have us staying in the town or to the south of it for some time, so having a house of our own would be very nice. I can promise we'll clean up after ourselves," he said with a wink.

The old woman smiled at him and Harry saw two more messages appear.

Charisma Check Passed. You have convinced an elderly woman that you can be trusted to look after her home for her, what are you, a teenager?

The second read:

Your first attempts to haggle was, successful though you aimed low. That could be a good thing, but perhaps next time, you can figure out how to really use that Potter Luck enhanced Charisma of yours?

From there Imoen led Harry around to several other people she'd met. The next conversation was with a dwarf woman who had decided to make an early night of it, retreating to her room after having met Imoen earlier. She led Harry up, and to her room, where they were let in without much preamble.

"You want us to what?" Harry asked a moment later, frowning.

"Return a girdle," the dwarf woman said, growling. "Are you an idiot, or just hard of hearing?" said. She was the first dwarf woman that Harry had met, and she was exactly how you would envision a dwarf woman, stout, with muscles and a large chest, although she didn't look nearly as stout (read as fat) as most rumors made them out to be.

"That's what I thought you said. Um, how exactly did you lose this girdle?" Harry asked, wondering what 'girdle' meant here, and hoped it only meant a belt of some kind rather than anything else it could be.

"I was waylaid by an ogre who has some kind of fixation on girdles. He forced me to choose between my girdle and my life, and well, the decision was quite obvious. But I still I would like it back. I will pay 100 gold coins for its return," the dwarf, Unshey, replied.

Harry nodded slowly reading the notice as it popped up thinking, then slowly nodded as he once more attempted to haggle. "150, plus I think, and the cost of any healing spells we might need after."

Another Charisma check failed here, and Unshey refused, but still offered them the quest, so Harry decided to take this with a grain of salt and move on. At the same time however, she was staring at Harry's forehead.

Having gotten out of the habit of expecting that kind of thing in his new life where the scar on his forehead was just one scar among several his new body had rather than a symbol of his status as the Boy-With-Hyphens, Harry finally got fed up with it and asked, "excuse me, but is something wrong?"

"Hmm, no, not, not wrong exactly," Unshey said, frowning. "It's just, I have to wonder why you carved out what looks like a rune of protection on your forehead."

"What?" Harry asked, blinking while Imoen's face radiated confusion.

“You didn’t know? That scar on your forehead matches a rune of protection, one that is connected to Clangeddin Silverbeard, one he, it has been written, actually received from Lord Ao the Over-God. I’ve seen it on temples occasionally devoted to the god of battle, and at times on the armor of some of his priests.”

Clangeddin Silverbeard was not the head of the dwarven pantheon, but he was a Lawful Good deity whose portfolio was war, honor, and blacksmithing. That was almost all Harry knew about him, though he had heard that he was called on more by war leaders and those seeking wisdom in war than for courage or anything else.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Harry said, frowning.

Unshey shrugged. “It could be a coincidence, who knows, stranger things have happened. It just caught me by surprise is all.”

You have discovered a Side Quest (unknown) Fate Marked or Just Marked?
Congratulations.

The dwarf Unshey is positive that the scar on your forehead, which once marked you as the Boy-Who-Lived, is a rune of protection from a dwarven god on this plane. This is, needless to say, extremely unusual, and something you will no doubt need to follow up on... somehow... in the future. But perhaps knowing what it is, and figuring out what happened that night when your parents gave their lives for you, would be an important down the line.

Unknown reward for completion.

The unknown was interesting, Harry reflected, but he also realized that this was one quest that would almost undoubtedly go unresolved. He glanced sideways and Imoen shook her head, indicating she had no idea either and Harry believed her. Imoen had told Harry all she could remember about the Potters, who she’d met when she was a toddler. Still, for now there was nothing they could do about it, and when he spoke, he had moved back to the quest Unshey was offering.

“Well, that’s interesting, but I think we’re done here. Be aware though that we won’t be going out of our way to return your lost girdle to you after we reclaim it from this ogre. We have business down in Nashkel. We might be able to send it back this way with a caravan from Bereghost. If we do, you can leave our payment with Bentley.” Harry said, to which Unshey agreed.

They called Bentley up to witness it, and then Harry and Imoen left Unshey in her room with her books. They spoke about the odd new quest for a time, coming to no conclusions before they made it back into the main bar room.

Imoen and Harry went on from there to collect two minor quests that they could perform on the way down to Beregost, although they would have to return to the Friendly Arm Inn to collect their rewards in most cases. Imoen had also found bounties: money that would be paid for specific criminals or proof of the death of various criminal types: bandits, ogres, and hobgoblins. Hair for the bandits, ears for the ogres, and fingers for the hobgoblins.

That made Harry a little queasy to think of but given the trouble those bands were making in the area, Harry couldn't say he didn't see the logic behind offering money for their extermination. He was more interested in the other quests and the use of haggling, which didn't seem to be a set skill, but rather a bonus that connected to his charisma stat.

Still, the use of Landrin's house while we're in Beregost seems to have been the best reward so far. If we are going to stay there to search around for any clues about the iron shortage or if I want going to check in at the temple of Lathander having a house to stay in will just make everything more pleasant.

The most important quest Imoen found though revolved around the mine to the northeast. Engaging the middle-aged trader who had spoken about it before, Harry let Imoen do the talking for a time.

The man gave them a bit more background about the mine, and when they had been forced to close. "Aye, bandits have been seen in the area, a mix of hobgoblins and human bandits. A ranger came in here a few days back, asking about that mine too. The problem is, it's so far out into the wilds that it's deucedly hard to get to, now that the miners aren't keeping the road clear. But the lands worth a lot of money, even so. They'd just found a vein of silver to hear a few ex-miners tell it any road. If that's the truth or just boasts I don't know, but I'll tell you this: if that's the case, and you can stake your own claim on the mines, silver or no, it would make you money hand over fist given the troubles with the mines down south near Nashkel. Or if you so wanted, you could clear it out, and inform the Baldur's Gate Council you had. They'd pay you your weight in gold for that alone."

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue, has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

You have learned that other mines in the area have suffered hugely due to the iron shortage, many of them being turned into dens for demi-humans. This then adds to the general upheaval going around the sword coast. But this also means that the reach of those behind the Iron shortage grows over time. Perhaps you can then hurt them in turn by taking out these side operations?

You have discovered all the information to the Main Quest Iron Intake Issue available in your current vicinity. To discover more you must travel to Nashkel, one of the main sources of this problem.

Rewards: + 1000 experience to all Party members, + 1 to the wisdom of all party members. Warning: these kind of bonuses will only cross over to those party members at relationship **Friend** or higher.

Harry barely had time to purse his lips in surprise, having realized that this plus his earlier quest had allowed him to cover a full fourth of the way to his next level up, before another message box appeared.

A Side Quest (Large) Has been found. This quest is one you do not have to accept or act on. The rewards will vary depending on the difficulty (size) of the quest.

Mine, Mine: The mines in Nashkel are not the only mines currently running into hard times. You have heard tell of a mine to the northwest that has become home to demi-humans and bandits. Defeat the current 'owners' and take over the mines, and you will be rewarded, or can take the land for itself if you are strong enough.

Rewards: 80,000 or more gold, ownership of a silver mine and long term income of 2,000 gold for every week you are within the Sword Coast territory.

As soon as it was polite, Harry and Imoen pulled away, looking at one another in some shock. "Damn."

"Damn!" Imoen replied, nodding her head eagerly. "I think we know what we're going to be doing after we clear up the Iron Intake Issue."

"Maybe," Harry prevaricated. "Remember this is the real world Imoen, time and other people can effect what we do."

Spotting the Obvious: For stating the truly, utterly, easily seen by a child obvious, you have won + 1 Intelligence.

Harry and Imoen gave one another deadpan stares, shaking their heads. "Snarky arse Gamer skill," Imoen muttered.

Lips twitching in a grimace Harry was about to reply when he heard a name he had heard before when he was back in Candlekeep reading about strange monsters. The book he had been reading at the time didn't have enough information apparently to activate the bestiary Harry that he had been able to access since exiting the tutorial, but the name of the anima now caught his attention.

He moved over in that direction, pulling out a chair across from a fat, if quite tall human farmer. He looked well into his cups, his hands shaking, his eyes bloodshot. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear what you were just saying," Harry began. "Could you say it again. My companions and I might be able to help"

The man looked up blearily, then burped, sending a waft of smelly air into Harry's face causing him to recoil slightly. "My farm, my farms completely overcrowded with those, those damn ankheg! Killed most of my cattle they did, moved in before I could even try to stop him. Not that I could damn ankheg are as tough as they are ornery."

"And are you offering a bounty for them?" Harry asked slowly, hoping not to spook the man.

"Nah lad," the man said, picking up his bottle face twisting into a parody of a sly smile. "Sold the land I did, moment they showed up. Got a pretty penny for it too, and then hightailed it here, before the buyer understood what they were buying." He cackled at that, draining the glass. "Going to just drink my days sit my life away right here thank you kindly."

Charisma Check Passed. The Drunkard across from you likes the cut of your furrow and is willing to tell you something actually important for your lending him an ear.

"Although, come to think of it," he said setting his cup down after the charisma check past. "I think that the blacksmith down in Beregost is offering some money for ankheg hides. Apparently you can use their hides to make a good suit of armor. Light enough to be leather, but strong enough to stop steel."

"Interesting," Harry said with a nod as another side quest, medium turned up in his line of sight and he stood up, pushing the stein of beer Imoen had pushed into his hands across to the other man. "I'll have to look that up. Thank you for the information."

“That was a good find,” she said. “That armor sounds dead useful. Especially if it’s so light, since that might mean I could use it.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Harry said the grin. “I read about those creatures in a book back in Candlekeep, and how their hide could be turned into armor like that. I figure we’ll have to sell to a few for any one set of armor, but that’s still very good.”

“well, unless you think there’s another quest like that around, we’re all done here,” Imoen said stretching. “I didn’t find any more people offering quests when I was working the crowd, so I think it’s time to head up to Jaheira and Khalid. They went up about an hour ago, although it’d be fairer to say Jaheira was dragging Khalid away from the wine than anything else.”

Harry nodded agreement and the two of them moved over to the stairs. As they ascended however, Harry Imoen leaned in, grasping Harry’s arm and whispering in his ear. “By the way, I think the two lovers are going to ambush us. I’ve noticed both of them giving us some odd looks over the past few days, and Jaheira certainly noticed our use of the Shield Spell during the battle even if Khalid didn’t. They’re going to have questions about that at the very least.”

Harry frowned, scratching at his neck thoughtfully. “Okay, thanks for the heads up.”

They finished the ascending the staircase to the fourth floor, in silence then Imoen asked “Come on, the least you could do is tell me if you’ve got a plan. How are we going to play this?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the one that’s supposed to be the senior one here after all,” Harry quipped.

She just gave him a deadpan stare, then said simply “Leadership, tactics and the Gamer ability? Do these words ring a bell?”

Know yourself, Harry thought to himself, know yourself as another message box appeared in his line of sight. Judging by her start, Imoen saw it too. It read:

Warning: a major decision in how you and the Harper Couple will interact has been activated.

Jaheira, the suspicious one of the duo, has noticed yours and Imoen's odd abilities and is planning to question you about them. How will you explain your odd strengths and abilities to them? And what will the long term consequences be?

If you are found to be lying what will the effect be? You honestly trust two people you've only known for a few weeks? Can you see yourself traveling with them for longer than it takes you to find Gorion's killer? If not, can you trust them to not share what they learn from you? Choose your course wisely!

But despite that, it was Gwyneth's earlier words that stuck in Harry's head, and which made him reply as he did. "I'm not good at lying, despite what I was able to do earlier with the innkeeper I'm not very comfortable with prevarication. That being said there are some things that I don't think we need to be sharing, ever."

Imoen looked at him quizzically and he elaborated. "The tutorial for example, that experience going to stay between the two of us. And the idea of coming from another world and taking over these bodies too. Maybe eventually we can both say that you know we were merged into them like you and the original Imoen were, but nothing about my whole character creation thing or the tutorial. The power over the world implied by it is too damn scary."

To that Imoen could only nod in agreement.

"On the other hand, I think we can play it pretty straight with a lot of my Gamer abilities. We won't call it the Gamer though, that's lame. The Advanced Adventurer Skill perhaps?"

"Hmm, that might work," Imoen said with a nod. "I don't think it's how I would play it, I don't know if I would tell them anything, I mean yes we're kind of friendly with them, but our relationship status has hasn't changed much, and Jaheira's an extremely trying woman."

Harry shrugged. He felt much the same occasionally, but sometimes, Jaheira was actually quite nice. When she was teaching them woodcraft and other stuff like that, Harry had seen the person within her prickly exterior coming out.

"Regardless, that's how we'll play it," he said definitively. "We'll talk the about the Gamer ability or rather the Advanced Adventurer and abilities, all of them that we can, because I think in so doing, we'll be able to get a lot more out of them eventually."

Remember they are a lot more experienced and knowledgeable about the world than we are. They could be a major help.”

As Imoen had warned, Jaheira quickly ambushed them, smiling thinly at them as she stood up from where she had been sitting at the main room’s small table. “Excellent, there you are. Perhaps now can finally get some straight answers out of you. You showed abilities and skills that no Level Five thief or Level Six paladin should have. “What are you? How were you able to protect us from the fireball? What are you hiding?”

Harry growled, furious suddenly. Questions like this reminded him all too easily about how the kids at Hogwarts had demanded to know everything about him, or how he’d lost Gryffindor the points he and Ron had after helping Charlie pick up Hagrid’s dragon. It had gotten worse at the end of the year, and Harry had hated it. “Jaheira, shut up!”

The woman backed away quickly, scowling angrily at his tone. “This isn’t the first time you have treated us Imoen and I like like we’re second-class citizens just because we’re young. Stop it. We might be young even for humans let alone half-elves, but we are adventurers too, and this is our adventure just as much as it is yours if not more. You acknowledged us as such didn’t you? And we agreed from the outset of this arrangement between us, that we would be equals.”

He deflated a little, shaking his head. “I understand where your questions are coming from, and I will answer them, but not like this, not like some one-sided interrogation!”

Jaheira frowned, then nodded looking almost sheepish as she backed away, moving back to the table and sighing as she saw even her husband’s eyes on her in condemnation. “I’m sorry. I realize that came off more harshly than I intended. But you have to understand, those shields of yours, we have seen others use such of course, but they were mages. You two are obviously not mages. How were you able to re-create them, what kind of skills are they based off of? That could be huge in the future. And before that, there were other clues as to the two of you hiding something. Your strength and physical abilities are too high, and there have been flashes of, of some kind of secret between the two of you. Things that have grated on my nerves the more I noticed them.”

“It h, hints at something, something th, a, that Gorion told us at one point,” Khalid added, looking at the two youngsters sadly. “Something, th, th, that could be dan, dangerous. Very dangerous. M, my wife’s concerns, ar, are not just about the secret y, you are keeping, b, but the dan, danger it rep, represents.”

“What?” Harry asked, looking at him askance, and Khalid frowned, looking away. He twisted his gaze to Jaheira as Imoen sat next to the woman. She looked between the two youngsters, then back at Harry, her face still apologetic for earlier but she didn’t look away from his gaze. “Okay.... If we are going to keep travelling, I do want to come clean. But in return, you need to tell me what you mean by that, and you might need to help us understand what we are able to do. And you have to promise that, whatever else, you will keep what we tell you to yourselves. Not even your fellow Harpers can be told.”

One eyebrow rising in eloquent query, Jaheira stared back at Harry for a moment, then nodded sharply, while, to his surprise, Harry didn’t see any Charisma check or anything similar. It was evident that whatever else, this decision was based on more than his stats. “Very well. We will tell you why we are worried, and we will help you discover the, the limitations of this power you are so subtly hinting at. And as to keeping your secret, I give you my word I will do so unless you prove to be a threat to the stability of the world that we Harpers are sworn to protect.”

Imoen scowled but Harry nodded. “That’s fair. First, I have to explain a single skill I’ve had since I hit puberty. It’s called the Advanced Adventurer skill.”

Harry briefly explained how his Gamer system worked, and the control, experience and stats. There, Imoen broke in explaining her own stats, saying that she had eighty-eight points spread out through her various physical and mental abilities, discounting the point’s she’d won during that night.

“That is h, higher than, it, it should b, b, be,” Khalid said thoughtfully staring at the two of them. “F, far more for yo, you, your levels.”

“And it sounds as if, correct me if I’m wrong, but you said ‘to use’ when you mentioned that you had leveled up recently. But when you level up young man, your stats are automatically integrated into your abilities by how you leveled up?” Jaheira asked.

“Thanks to my Advanced Adventurer ability, I can put those stat points where we want them to go for both of us,” Harry said with a shrug. “Imoen leveled up after the fight

against the attackers that night with Gorion, and I distributed her points the way she wanted me to one to constitution and intelligence, and two to strength.”

“I felt the results right away too, I was able to carry about ten, maybe twelve pounds more because of that,” Imoen said with a nod.

Khalid and Jaheira stared at them in shock, and Khalid asked hesitantly, “You, your sta, st, stat points Harry, h, how many do, do you have?”

Harry shrugged and instead of answering, pulled up his stat sheet itself, hitting the level up button and then being directed to the physical stat sheet which he read aloud, leaving out his skills and background notes as well as his gender and name, considering them unnecessary to this discussion:

“Class: Paladin level 5

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (8) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4”

“And I have four stat points to distribute,” he finished.

Khalid seemed in a bit of shock. “Th, that is at least tw, tw, twice as high as it should be.”

“And much more balanced than a paladin’s normally would be. The ability to put your stats where you want them, that is a game changer,” Jaheira muttered, more interested in that aspect than the actual numbers.

Harry coughed, hiding a laugh at how his words her words referenced the actual name of his abilities, nodding his head. “I gathered that much from talking to Imoen once she joined my party as it were and was able to activate it.

Eyes narrowing in thought, Jaheira stated, “And by that I have to assume that despite traveling with you, we have not joined your party. What does that entail?”

“No, I’m afraid you haven’t. As to what it entails, how much of my abilities carry over to you is based on our mutual trust and respect, our relationships between one another.”

Jaheira winced at that, knowing it was a comment on her personality just as much as anything else. But she refused to be brow beaten to change that personality, shaking her head.

“Wh, what about skills?” Khalid asked.

There there wasn’t much of a difference at least in terms of combat related skills.

“Th, this explains much. S, skill points w, work much the same for you a, as they would for anyone else, b, b, but you have missed out ce, certain things that you sh, sh, should’ve learned. This ability of yours does not give you e, e, experience, but ra, ra, rather abilities that you must then ho, ho, hone.” Khalid said looking at Harry thoughtfully.

Harry nodded, understanding his point. “Yes, I actually got a minor quest to incorporate what you were teaching me about footwork and body control when you started to spar with me. I’m nearly finished and looking forward to the combat bonus I’ll get.”

“Hmm... a, and if you learn a new ski, skill, say kn, knife throwing, you, you would be able to th, throw the knife, but would, wouldn’t have the knowledge of i, i, it’s weight, wha, what happens after it lea, leaves the hand. Int, interesting, but not w, world shattering.”

“But with that said, what can be shared between you two, and what is your relationship level?” Jaheira asked, moving on quickly. It was indeed obvious that whatever else, Harry’s physical abilities were close to what they should be whatever this Advanced Adventurer system did for him. But the way he and Imoen worked together in a fight hinted at more.

“We can share certain abilities, both those that need to be activated and which can occur automatically. I gained the ability to backstab for example from Imoen, among other skills, and if I activate Turn Undead, the aura can also start to flow out from her.

“Harry can also use my Blood Mage skills,” Imoen explained, the two of them agreeing she should take the credit for that. The name made the two half-elves eyes widen, and they stayed that way as she explained that their spells used life force rather than mana.

“That explains where those shields came from,” Jaheira said, shaking her head. “Do you need any more healing to deal with that?” Both youngsters shook their heads, and she asked, “Does this adventurer System have anything to do with your Item box?”

“Oh yeah, that and it also has a map, which can update me where enemies are.” Harry said with a nod. “Both Imoen and I can access our item boxes at will, and can create what are called quick slots, which we can fill with weapons and maybe other things eventually. It makes for easy access to whatever we’re carrying.”

“Je, je, jealousy is rising fr, fr, from deep within me,” Khalid muttered, his lips twitching to showing he was joking. Mostly.

The questioning went on from there for several hours, moving from whether or not Gorion knew, to how they had pushed their stats so high, although there, both Imoen and Harry tried to ask questions about the older adventurer’s levels, getting nothing in return except a flinch from Jaheira and a sigh from Khalid that said whatever it was, was very serious.

The idea of getting some stat bonuses like Harry and Imoen did was intensely fascinating, an idea they had not come upon before and one they were interested to see the reality of in the future. Further, getting such during conversations, and getting clues like Harry and Imoen described for quests, was just as interesting. But it always came back to the fact that neither of them was at the ‘Friends’ relationship level.

Yet the questioning did tell Harry just how unique his AA (Advanced Adventurer) Skill was in the amount of control it gave him. Jaheira was impressed with the item box, Khalid with his states, but Harry was interested in the level up system they described, which was highly limited.

First, half-elves only got two stat points per level, with a quarter point added to dexterity or Wisdom randomly with every level. This had made those stats very lopsided, made worse by the fact they couldn't control where those stats were spent. Instead, as Jaheira had said earlier, where the stat points went was determined by what you had done to level up. If you were in a fight, you could get strength, dexterity or durability. If you did it while completing a quest, it varied wildly. So their stats, which they did not share, looking guilty but adamant about it, were all over the place. For example, Jaheira's strength was almost as low as Imoen's but her dexterity and willpower were in the high thirties.

"That explains so much," Harry said aloud as she said that.

"Oh~?" Jaheira drawled, crossing her arms and mock-glaring at him. "And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Er, I meant your skill with the sling of course," Harry quickly replied, quickly, smiling innocently. "What did you think I meant?"

Charisma Check failed. Jaheira has not believed your obvious attempt to cover your ass. Luckily, Jaheira knows herself far too well to care what other people think about her personality.

"I'm certain it was," Jaheira replied with an eyeroll.

The quest function was different as well, and the identify function, and the idea of Charisma being directly linked to whether or not you could bargain or have a lie be believed was also fascinating. Imoen shared their quest journal, her and Harry taking turns reading aloud all the points they had found, and both Jaheira and Khalid were impressed with the skill and with the way Imoen had been able to find all that information.

Eventually the married couple's fascination with Harry's AA skill began to wane, and Harry could finally turn the discussion – for that was what it had become thankfully –

back to what Khalid had hinted at the very beginning, which Harry very much feared would be this world's version of the Boy-Who-Lived nonsense.

"Now you tell us, Harry said turning to Jaheira, since she had settled into the role of talking for both herself and Khalid as the discussion continued. "What did you two think we were. Why do you think we have these powers? What did Gorion hint at that Khalid mentioned earlier.

The married couple exchanged a glance, and for a moment, it looked as if Khalid was going to suggest they not say anything, but for all that she was up confrontational and prickly as all get out, Jaheira was honest to a fault. Or at least as honest as a Harper could be. When she gave her word, she meant it.

"He's right," Imoen said with a nod. You both think there's something unusual about Harry, and come to think about it, I can kind of see it too. I mean come on, orphan boy, raised on his own in a sheltered keep, then the instant he gets let out into the world, he gets ambushed by some mad armored giant? Doesn't take big brains to see that there's something going on there."

As Harry growled at her in mock anger, Jaheira spoke in her abrupt, to the point manner. "You are both correct. What do you know about the Time of Troubles?"

Imoen frowned, not getting it, and Harry began to think then remembered. "The Time of Troubles ended about nineteen, twenty years ago? It was called that because a few evil gods attempted to steal Ao the Over-God's power, only to fail. When the attempted theft was discovered, they didn't step forward, and the Over God decided to punish all the Gods by throwing all of the gods but Helm out of heaven, right? Forced them to walk among humans. ...Something like four gods died in think. Including all three of the gods who were actually behind the attempted theft and the goddess of magic I think. There is no one book that covers all of what happened during that age though, so I think that could be wrong.

"Actually, that is essentially correct Jaheira said with a nod. She looked over at Khalid, before going on slowly. "...But it is wrong to say that the Time of Troubles ended twenty years ago it in fact ended near to eighteen years ago. And there have been persistent rumors over the past few years that one of the gods who died, the God of Murder, Bhaal, had anticipated his death and had created... call them vessels which would contain portions of his power. Eventually those part parts would come together, and he

would be reborn. But as they are buried in the individual, until then they give those individuals powers beyond the norm.

“Okaaay, what are you talking about when you say vessel?” Harry asked frowning. Between him and Jaheira Imoen gasped, scowling and running a hand down her face in exasperation as if she understood where the store was going.

“T, t, tell me H, Harry,” Khalid said, patting the young man’s hand. “D, do you r, remember anything about your father? About l, l, life before Gorion found y, y you?”

“Yes,” Harry said instantly, nodding his head I remember my mother, she had red hair, and a bright smile, she’s where I get my eyes and hair. But why are you asking?”

“The way th, th, that the Bhaal created his ves, vessels was by spawning them,” Khalid said, hesitating before spitting it out quickly. “He did so by im, impregnating women of all r, r, races except possibly dragons by ap, ap, appearing in their minds, and th, th, then simply well doing the dead,” He said finishing lamely while Jaheira rolled her eyes, knowing he was annoyed to speak so in front of her and Imoen.

“Are you telling me, that this murder God basically intends to survive by sticking his soul into women he sexed up!?” Imoen asked. She might have gotten there sooner than Harry, but she didn’t like the conclusion she’d reached for that. “How does that even work!”

At the same time that Imoen was asking that question, Harry’s eyes strayed to a new message, it’s importance denoted by the solid gold outline. On it read the message:

Your Bloodline Skills has been updated. You know now you are a Bhaalspawn. Increased Stat growth in comparison to normal Adventurers.

So this is why me... and Imoen too, get so many stat points per level, when normal Adventurers don’t grow nearly as fast. Still, not exactly important, although it might point out why that guy had targeted me. Not that I care.

Main Quest Vengeance or Justice Has been updated. You know why you were targeted now.

You are a son of the god of murder, and either the armored giant - or his possible employer - could also be one, aiming to kill you for this bloody competition. Does this

change anything? How can it? How can it not, knowing that your father figure was killed by or on the orders of your half-brother?

Half-brother my arse. He's no brother of mine, and Bhaal's no father. This, all of this is like the Boy Who Lived. That might describe what I am because of fate, but it doesn't describe who I am, because that is my decision now, and always will be.

As Harry finished dismissing those two messages, Jaheira was speaking.

“These soul fragments will be driven to fight one another, and when one kills another, the portion of god-soul within the one who has died will transfer itself into the winner. There have been four documented cases of such events occurring that the Harpers know about, and there are probably **far** more that we don't. We have no way of knowing how many offspring the God of Murder left behind after all, or how violent such a confrontation and later joining will be,” Jaheira said before going on more slowly, her expression compassionate as she looked at Harry. “And the majority of the women he impregnated were worshipers of his.”

Coming back to the present, Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously at that. “Mine wasn't,” he said firmly.

“Can you really be so sure?” Jaheira challenged.

“My mother was no murder man-whore worshiper!” Harry shouted, getting upset despite his Gamer's Mind – which he hadn't mentioned to the married couple – interfering in his becoming so. Any such comment directed to his mother annoyed him, since his few memories of her had, during his younger years, been his sole source of love amidst the neglect and contempt of the Dursleys.

Jaheira blinked, while Khalid and Imoen both burst out into laughter. “Where did that come from?” Imoen shouted amidst her peals of laughter.

“What?! It's appropriate, after all we're talking about this guy having hundreds, thousands of children after all, all with different women. What would you call him?”

“A lucky bastard?” Imoen quipped with a laugh. “I mean if he hadn't died, think of all the money he'd have to spend to make the women keep their mouths shut.”

“A G, god?” Khalid asked quizzically.

Jaheira just rolled her eyes once more, staring at them all. "You're all mad," she intoned, before pointing at Harry. "But you were saying?"

Harry smiled, and it was this not the smile of someone who was being questioned about something that he shouldn't remember. No, that expression was of a little boy, despite his age, remembering a sweet memory. "I remember her. For a long time, it was all I could remember. Before Gorion found me. My best memories. A redheaded woman, she cared for me a lot, picked me up, hugged me, played with me sometimes, and then gave her life against the bandits to protect me."

He sighed, deflating a little realizing that even with that, he couldn't explain how he knew that his mother wasn't a murder hobo believer. After all, those are the memories of a baby, and Gorion had taken him in when he was but a toddler. So how could he later learn about his parents as he did when he was just Harry Potter instead of Harry Potter, possible murder-man-whore's son.

But, he realized that maybe that didn't matter. "I can't prove or disprove the fact that she wasn't worshiper of the murder God. But I can tell you that she loved me. And I think she love me for me, died to protect me. I'm sorry, but that's just how I feel."

"And!" Imoen said triumphantly "we just meant a dwarf named Unshey who said something about your scar. She said it was a rune of protection connected to one of their gods."

Unlike Harry, Imoen had known Lily Potter for a few years when she was a toddler. She had really liked the lady, and she wasn't about to let them say anything about her. James, she would've defended too of course, he was easily her favorite non-blood related uncle, who you know didn't turn into a a murderous assassin. But like Harry she could tell that this was the way the game was set up, that the body that Harry inhabited was indeed the body of a Bhaalspawn.

Jaheira stared at Harry, then nodded slowly. "I believe you. The way you speak of her, it's obvious that you do retain those memories, and now that I think about it, the idea of that scar on your forehead being a ward of protection makes some sense."

"Good," Harry said with a nod before sighing. "But I can't argue against the idea of my father being this Bhaal. So, so does this change anything? Harry asked staring between Khalid and Jaheira.

“No it does not,” she said briskly shaking her head. “Would I prefer not to travel with someone who is almost undoubtedly going to attract trouble like dung attract flies, certainly. But I’m a Harper, and it is our job to look out for trouble. So perhaps trouble coming to us instead of the other way around will save time.”

“I feel so loved right now really,” Harry said dryly. “But what I meant was, do you think that this means you will will trust us more?”

The married couple exchanged glances and then Jaheira nodded firmly. “Yes. You didn’t have to be so open about your Advanced Adventurer abilities as you call it, and the skills it gives you are quite obviously real. Real and truly amazing. But, trust is not something that can be formed just like that. While I trust you more and even respect you a bit for how you comported yourself during this conversation, that doesn’t mean I’m willing to cross the line into honest friendship. That’s takes longer to build.”

Harry nodded. “I can live with that,” he said, reading off a notice box that had just appeared.

Congratulations! Due to your honest, forthright, and above all, pragmatic, manner you have earned respect and trust with Jaheira and Khalid, not turned them aside or convinced them you should be locked up in a loony bin.

You have gained 5,000 Trust and 5,400 Respect with Jaheira. You are at 5225/10,000 Trust, and 5530/10,000 Respect with Jaheira. Jaheira now views you as a Travelling Companion.

Not a real relationship change, this title implies that she trusts you to have her back in battle and to travel with her, while also respecting your sense of honor, yet at the same time still not being a true friend.

Note: Though Traveling Companions do not receive the benefits of fully integrating into the party, they will gain the advantage of certain combat abilities relating to tactics. Your Leadership will also be effected by how you treat your Travelling Companions as well as your party member(s).

You have gained 400 trust, 250 Respect with Khalid. You have 680/1000 Trust and 550/1000 Respect with Khalid.

While not as impressed by your attitude, Khalid is even closer to calling you friend due to his more trusting, friendly nature, and also will now see you as a Travelling Companion.

So long as your cause remains just and moves along the same lines as their own quest as Harpers, these two will remain with you and Imoen, even if they aren't yet truly part of your party.

Holy freaking hell, that's awesome! There might be a light at the end of the tunnel that is getting Jaheira to be a friend after all! Harry thought, but wisely kept to himself.

"Well, you'd have to, won't you?" Jaheira said with a laugh, and the others all laughed too. Imoen shook her head, chuckling to herself internally at how the two powerful wills of Harry and Jaheira had clashed during this conversation before she shrugged saying, "Well, in that case, I'm knackered. And I suppose we have an early day tomorrow."

"In, indeed, I w, w, want to see this map o, o, of yours, and what you called an enemy z, zone in action," Khalid said briskly. "To b, bed everyone, an, and we will s, see you tomorrow."

The next morning Imoen had thought she would wake up with a migraine, but upon blinking away the now normal 'you have rested and recuperated' message she blinked, her eyes going wide as her headache was not there. "Okay, I just learned a new thing about your AA skill Harry, I realized that this gamer thing was messing with our sleep before this, but getting rid of my hangover, now **that** is amazing."

In the bed across from her own, Harry rolled over his eyes showing he too had gone from asleep to wide awake with no intervening steps.

Whatever Harry said, shrugging his shoulders that and flipping his legs out all out of the bed. He stood up, stretching and cracking his back and shoulders, shaking his head. "You're right the AA is great for sleeping, but it just feels still unnatural."

"Hah, at least you had months on end to get used to it. I only started to see that aspect after we formed our party," Imoen replied.

Outside, Harry found Khalid and Jaheira waiting for them. Jaheira was sipping at a mug of tea of some kind, while Khalid was sipping at a stag and of ale, the woman looking slightly worse the wear for their late night while the man was showing red eyes and keeping to the shadows. *Huh, I suppose he decided to go for what I've heard called 'the hair of the dog solution'.*

Harry nodded to them both and sat down asking if they either of them had ordered breakfast. Khalid answered in the affirmative and stated that they were also already packed. "You and Imoen look fully rested and awake, despite all the wine, is that another gift from your Advanced Adventurer skill?" Jaheira asked, sipping at her tea delicately. Whatever it was was waking her up quickly, her eyes clearing as Harry watched.

Harry nodded. "When we lay down we are out in an eyeblink. We don't even dream either, we lay down close her eyes, and then are awake eight hours later."

"That c, c, could be dangerous," Khalid stuttered. "If it forces you t, t, to sleep for a s, s, set amount of time you are v, v, vulnerable if there are enemies about."

"No idea," Harry said with a shrug. "It's happened every day on the trail, but we've never slept near where enemies were, so I have no clue how it would react."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing myself and Khalid are not part of your Adventurers' Party just yet. How are we for arrows," she asked, changing the subject abruptly looking over at Khalid. "I would like to pick up some sling stones if we can. I've not been able to find many worthy of the use on the road, and my iron balls are all used up."

"I'm sorry," Imoen said brightly as she came out of the room, grinning evilly. "Did Jaheira just say that she had iron balls? And used them all up?"

"Child, it is far too early for your sense of humor right now," Jaheira growled, shaking her head. "And you and Harry don't have to rub in the fact that you are not feeling the effects of our late night drinking and talking please."

Harry nodded though, interrupting the banter. "Actually, Jaheira's got a point. How are we for provisions? And after this, I think we can dispense with a lot of our actual baggage, that should speed us up right? If you all put your bags in my item box?"

"We need bread," Khalid answered promptly, also cutting through the ladies back and forth. It was amusing to see the two women go at one another sometimes, but it could also just be a waste of time. "W, w, we might also want to lo, lo, look around for some new weapons."

Harry instantly nodded agreement to that. "My second sword broke during that fight, and I don't think any of us wants to be caught out in the wilds without working weapons. Speaking of, Can I see your longsword +1 Khalid?" he asked.

Khalid obliged by pulling the sword out of its scabbard, which was hanging by his chair, and Harry looked at it.

Khalid's Bastard sword +1 +4 to Defense when wielded by Khalid. Durability: 25/100

Khalid's favored weapon, this has seen service in his hand for three times your own lifetime. It was an early present by his superiors in the harpers and has been with Khalid through thick and thin.

Now that he was holding it and had the identify skill, Harry could make out the wear and tear on it, whistling a little. "Khalid, I think you might want to pick up another longsword too. This says that it's durability is twenty-five out of hundred. I've no idea if that will equal directly to the amount of hits it can take or whatever, but since it says that, it's obviously gone down."

"So, so, sound thinking, but c, c, can you make out tha, tha, that kind of thing on regular sw, sw, swords?" Khalid asked.

Blinking, Harry looked down at handed back Khalid sword, and Imoen wordlessly handed her own over. He looked at it and the Warhammer he'd used last night after his longsword had broken, but they read simply as short sword and warhammer. "Doesn't look like it, no. I think that the durability issue only comes up with either enhanced items. The others will just last as long as they will and that's that."

"That's also makes some sense," Jaheira said frowning. "After all, a Bastard sword +1 like Khalid cow costs about as much as two thousand five hundred gold to three thousand in a large city when trade is flowing. A regular weapon only costs twenty five, possibly as much as seventy depending on the type of sword it is."

Harry nodded. "The only other time I've seen durability like that was on my razor back in Candlekeep, and it was a gift from Gorion." He frowned, looking into his inventory for a moment turning away his fingers flicking around the empty air to everyone else's eyes. "I don't see it. Darn it, of all the things to forget." He raised a hand to his chin and scratched it. "Razors," he said definitively "add them to our shopping list."

Jaheira raised an eyebrow. 'You don't think you're going to grow a beard? Most human men seem to think of it as some kind of rite of passage. I've never understood that myself.'

"N, nor I," Khalid said with a chuckle of his own. As a half-elf, growing a beard would have been incredibly difficult for Khalid, even if he had been so inclined.

Imoen laughed. "Well I for one approved. I don't think a scraggly Harry would be quite as good-looking," she said ruffling Harry's hair affectionately.

Shaking her head at their antics Jaheira stood up. "In any event, we should head down and see what what supplies we can find. But you need to watch out for that Harry. We saw you doing something when you were looking through your item box. You must keep it a secret that you get so much honest utility out of that skill."

Frowning, Harry nodded. "I suppose I shouldn't get into the habit of showing you and Khalid then, even now that you know the secret."

"Exactly. We want to benefit from that skill, but we do not want others to know about it." Jaheira suddenly scrunched her brows in an honestly cute expression of confusion. "Is your item box or these quick slots you mentioned the reason why you are able to change weapons so quickly?"

"Quick slots," Harry replied, standing upright. Between one blink and the next he was suddenly holding Imoen's short sword and his own shield, and then again a shield and Warhammer. Then, a little slower a staff and a crossbow. He looked down at the crossbow thoughtfully and then at Khalid. "Why can druids like Jaheira use slings but not crossbows or bows?"

"Cr, crossbow and bows ar, are weapons m, meant to kill. That is, an, an, anathema to the teachings of the druids," Khalid said instantly. "A sling, is a weapon to, de, de, defend the flock."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That sounds like an amazing bit of justification for something that just exists, without any greet real reasoning behind it. And dare I ask about why druids can wield scimitars?"

“Because nature, like the gods themselves, are prone to whimsy,” Jaheira replied dryly, looking at her husband with amusement plain on her face. “Now if you are ready to move Khalid, I think we should be going.”

Harry and the others headed downstairs, finding the innkeeper and one of his bartenders still up already up. Bentley waved at them, looking at Jaheira and Khalid quizzically, and asking “If they needed anything.”

“Nothing but access to your stores old friend. We will of course pay,” Jaheira added, seeing his hesitance.

Bentley breathed a sigh of relief. “Good to know you aren’t going to prevail upon my hospitality to that extent my friends,” he said with a laugh. “Now come with me, and we will see what we can see.”

He led the way to the back of the main hall of the inn, where there was a locked door behind the bar there, leading them in and lighting the torches within. “Now, what do you want?”

“What do you have?” Jaheira answered quickly.

Harry was about to say that they had more than enough resources to buy anything. But remembering the haggling skill, he decided not to shoot himself in the foot. He didn’t want Bentley to gouge them after all. Instead he turned and looked at each item on the walls in turn seeing the notices everyone else could see and the ones only he could see thanks to his Gamer ability. Moving over to one side, he pulled out from a pile of slings and leather armor to find a sling made of some kind of gray material, it’s large sling sack well-made and slightly larger than normal.

Sling +2 Durability 100/100

This sling is made of elephant hide, made to be tougher and stronger. Though giving no additional bonus to range or aim this sling can add more damage to your slingshots.

+2 to damage

Jaheira stepped forward and taking it from his hand, examining it carefully as Harry subtly nodded to her. “Khalid, how much money do we have?”

“Only around a thousand and fifty gold,” Khalid replied, examining a few longswords with a mournful expression.

“Add our three thousand to that,” Harry said gesturing to himself and Imoen and speaking about the money they’d made during the tutorial and small quests over and over.

Keeping their money separate like this was something again that would change once he earned the trust of these two: they would then combine their money into one purse for the party. But until then, their funds were still separate.

Harry found another find, a small Buckler which had a name Buckley’s Buckler. As Jaheira pulled it out, he placed his head on the shield of the same time as her, and instantly got a bit more information about it.

Buckley’s Buckler: 10/100 durability

A rectangle of mammoth hide forms this small shield. No amount of cleansing can dispel the pong of decay from this poorly tanned device, yet somehow the malodorous shield fortifies its wielder.

This shield gives +1 to Constitution but has at least two unknown negatives.

Despite the plus to constitution, Harry shook his head, gesturing to her to back away. She frowned at him, but he whispered is not worth it, “it’s only got 10 out of 100 durability, and some odd negatives I can’t make out.”

Her eyes widened, and then a small smile appeared on her face. “That AA skill of yours. That is truly going to be very helpful into the future.”

Harry grinned, and moved deeper, moving over to Khalid, who gestured at a few weapons, asking loudly for Harry to test the heft of them for his build. Most of them were simple swords, and Harry bought three of them, having them disappear into his weapons space. He also bought himself a helmet for himself and Imoen. Imoen also got an upgrade to her leather jerkin, a studded leather jerkin. His own chain mail he replaced with a chest plate and he bought.

However, he was able to find a single buckler that had a hundred durability. This, the smallest kind of shield only really protected the forearm, but it would do for Jaheira or

even Imoen the thief, in close combat. He handed it over to Imoen first, who put it on her arm, then equipped her sort sword, moving through a few forms.

Imoen has started to learn the importance of Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement. These combat skills will now be treated separately from her weapons skills.

-15% chance to hit in Close combat. -15% chance to dodge. -15% chance to block.

Once mastered these skills will rejoin Imoen's combat skills to give combat bonuses to Agility, Dexterity and Strength.

Harry blinked at the familiar message, the same one he'd gotten when he learned the same thing, and smiled inwardly appreciative that even Imoen, who could only put a single skill slot into any one weapon, could still become a little bit better with that weapon than otherwise. In fact, the combat bonus for her would probably be more noticeable than the one for him because of that.

Harry left Khalid and Imoen to it for a second, moving over to Jaheira who was examining a few sets of chain armor, and staves near the doorway. Her own staff had come through the fight last night relatively unscathed, but the same could not be said for her armor, which had been torn. "Are any of these any different?" she asked quietly as he walked up.

Harry glanced at them, shuddering slightly as the air from the open door brought the flower and grass scent of Jaheira's hair to him for just a second. *Gah, none of that, she's married, it doesn't matter if she smells of fresh grass and has elf ears. God, I need to find a girlfriend. Curse this eighteen year old body and it's urges!*

Shaking those thoughts off, Harry took in the items she was examining. But his Gamer ability didn't tell him anything different about any of them and he shook his head. "I don't think so. I wanted to ask you though if you felt that the innkeeper would give us a good price on jewels?"

"That will depend on the jewel, and how many you are selling. He won't actually be the final buyer after all, anything you sell him will have to be sold began to someone else," Jaheira replied promptly. "There's no jeweler working in the Friendly Arms Inn."

"in other words, he isn't the correct one to sold jewels too, right?" Harry asked cutting to the quick.

Jaheira rolled her eyes and nodded. "That's correct, child."

Harry twitched, at that. Being called child or lad always reminded him too much of Dumbledore's 'my boy' and sounded way too condescending. "Okay, I've had enough. I'll make you a deal Jaheira, you don't call me child, and I won't call you Grandmother. Deal?"

She reared back, but Harry gave her his best innocent look, which due to his eighteen-year-old body wasn't actually all that good in comparison to what it might have been in his original form. "After all, half-elves live forever, and you're obviously much more mature than your physical form would indicate, right?"

No woman likes to be called grandmother unless they really were one, and even then only by their actual family owners. Thus it was no surprise when, after a Willpower Check Passed, Jaheira simply nodded, "I believe we have an accord."

Harry nodded back, but his eyes had been caught by something, a notice hovering behind several others among the shields that she had been studying.

Harry instantly began to push toward it, moving aside the items between him and the notice that had gotten his attention, and removing the notices themselves. Until he finally revealed what he had been looking for.

Tower shield +1 Durability 100/100

An extremely well made a shield, further enchanted for strength, although the weight of the tower shield is something that most adventurers would be unwilling to work with.

Harry hefted it, sliding it onto his arm, then pulled out his sword, and moving through some motions, nodding. "I'll take it," he said, sliding his sword back into its sheath and turning to look at the innkeeper.

the innkeeper grimaced. "I didn't expect you to find that," he said honestly. "It's easily the best thing I've got in my inventory. I'll sell it, but not for a penny less than three thousand gold."

Harry frowned, then said, "I'll pay two thousand in gold, and the rest in gems."

"Depends on what kind of gems boy," he said, shaking his head.

“Don’t call me boy.” With that, Harry pulled out a large pouch of jewels and handed them over. Inside were the lynx eye gems that he had collected during the tutorial, seventy of them, Harry having quickly transferred twenty-nine of them out of the bag and into another gem bag in his item box.

The innkeeper pulled them out, staring at one than the other, his eyes widening. “These are all fine quality gems, and they’re all cut already. Aye, you have yourself a deal, boy,” he said, spitting into his palm and holding out his hand.

Harry growled at that, and Jaheira chuckled behind him, shaking her head before hefting up a chain mail armor. Khalid’s armor had not been replaced, nor Harry’s though they had taken a lot of hits in the fight the evening before. But the armor for them both was too expensive and not better than what they were wearing by enough to interest them.

The four of them soon left the inn, with both Jaheira and Imoen armored with new chain mail, although Imoen could barely use it.

From the inn they moved down onto the road going south for a time until they broke off. They weren’t going to use the road the entire way, instead, the four of them had decided last night to see if they could find any bandits, not just for the bounties that Imoen had found first, but also because they needed see if these bandits were actually working together with the individuals behind the iron shortage, or if they were simply a symptom, not connected to the actual issue.

It was slow going for a time, both because of the distance, and because they were going overland, paralleling the road instead of on it. Harry had agreed with them in the inn that it was necessary, and still agreed with them now. Because this way they would get a chance to see his Advanced Adventurer ability in action in a smaller, less dangerous setting.

The first opportunity for this came four days after they had left the inn behind. Harry was walking along in the center of the party as usual, when he blinked, staring up into the side as his map updated showing a single red dot to one side. He frowned, then whistled in a way that Jaheira and Khalid had taught him and Imoen early on in their trek out from Candlekeep.

The others quickly closed in on him, Jaheira coming out of the wood lands as if she had been summoned there, causing Harry to shake his head. “Is that Druid thing or half-

elf thing?" he asked jokingly, gesturing to her and then around at the woodlands. "How quickly you move and everything."

"Elves are at home in the forest, yet, I was not born in one. I was born in a city and came to my powers later. Much later."

"Oh really how much later?" Imoen teased, before Harry slapped her upside the head very light.

She had done this a time or two to him back when they were in Candlekeep, and though it'd taken them a while to get used to it, gentle head slaps like that were not a sign of anger or hate, rather they were assigned of comradery. "No, bad Imoen."

"Why d, d, did you call u, u us back, Harry?" Khalid asked, cutting through the banter.

"My map is telling me that there is an enemy of some kind out there," Harry reported seriously, pointing in the correct direction. "Right at the edge of my map range."

"Hmm...I've been seeing spore and pawprints of wolves...How large is your map range?" Jaheira asked, musing aloud.

"It doesn't have any indicators like that, although that could be possibly be upgraded in the future. I'd say maybe about an hour's worth of walking in the forest, thirty minutes on the road. They are definitely out of my sight, that's about all I can tell you for certain."

"Which means we m, m, might well be wi, wi, within the range of a wolf's nose. And where th, th, there is one, there will be a pack," Khalid said, scratching at his nose thoughtfully.

"Khalid is right, but this could do for a first test of your abilities. Does your map ability tell you anything else?" Jaheira asked

Harry shook his head. "No, only that there's an enemy out there."

"Then let us see what we can see. We'll move in that direction until that first dot is well into your map range, then send the pink haired one here out to scout. You believe that I am good at appearing, and it is true when we are here in the forest, but against

enemies, Hide in Shadows works far better than the dual than the Druid skill of Forest Melding. Even a wolf's nose will be defeated by that skill." Jaheira said.

Harry nodded, looking over at Imoen. "Are you up for this?"

She just grinned at him, not even bothering to answer as she turned and started to head off in the direction Harry had indicated. Harry quickly caught up with her, and the other two as well, all of them now pulling out weapons just in case. After all, despite the map it would hardly be good for them to let their guard down. About an hour and a half later Harry stopped, as more and more red dots appeared ten in number. He looked around at the others and said, "There's ten of them now."

"Is there any indication that there might be more beyond your site?" Jaheira asked.

Harry frowned, staring at his map, then shaking his head. "I don't think so. But to be certain, I'd have to try to come at the pack from another angle."

"Let u, u, us do that," Khalid said, clapping his hand on Harry shoulder. "Imoen ca, ca, can go forward now, and Jaheira w, w, will stay here, to mark our regr, re, regroup point."

Harry nodded, and the two of them moved off as Imoen left heading on straight towards the wolves, causing Jaheira to sigh. Leaning back against tree, her fingers slid down it's bark as she communed with it, savoring a few moments to herself, melding into the forest.

She opened her eyes from her meditation as she felt Khalid's presence through the forest, and Harry's a second later. Khalid she was used to feeling, his presence a firm, familiar presence to her expanded senses. The fact that she could already sense Harry's as well, was somewhat surprising, mitigated by the fact that a few minutes later she felt Imoen coming towards them too.

Harry nodded to the others. "It's just the ten of them, no other enemies in sight."

"Excellent Harry!" Imoen said, coming out from behind him and Khalid spooking both men, causing Khalid to actually let out a squeak. "And it is just wolves, well, wolves and one Ogre. The ogres cooking some kind of meat over a fire, and the wolves are laying about it like lapdogs."

Jaheira rolled her eyes, but did not look surprised, the forest having warned her of the thief's presence a second before she had revealed herself. When she had compared Imoen's skill to her own forest melding, she had not told them that she could see through it here in the forest. "Let's get to it then."

The four of them moved forward, and sure enough, Imoen was correct. It was a wolf pack, led by a large ogre, who seemed to have tamed the wild wolves to a certain extent.

"Do you think that's the girdle where stealer we're supposed to be on the lookout for?" Imoen whispered.

"Maybe," Harry said with a nod. "In which case, this is doubly good. I think we can try a bit of what I've called a flanking attack here..."

Moments later, he and Khalid were gone, moving wide around the campfire, until they were to the side of it. As they settled down, Harry stared at the ogre, and a new bestiary page appeared in front of him.

An ogre is a large, brutish creature that can be found in many places around the world, or perhaps all of them save the bottom of the ocean. Ogres have just enough intelligence to be able to work with others and are more than strong enough to cow wolves or even other animals into serving them, acting like a pack alpha. They aren't as smart as orcs or humans, and their culture, such as it is, is even more devoted to the rule of the strong than the orcs.

Attitude toward Adventurers: It depends on the time of day and if they are hungry, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup, but Ogres are lazy and prefer easy meals.

Weaknesses: Ogres are animalistic in many ways, and their defense against mind magic, or indeed being scared at all, is low, so long as other ogres are not around.

Once they were, Khalid let loose a very lifelike owl hoot, signaling Jaheira they were in position.

At that signal, Imoen and Jaheira let fly. Imoen's arrow hit its mark, and to her eyes one of the wolves lost about half of its health bar. Jaheira's sling stone also hit, but not the target she had been aiming at, rather another wolf directly behind that one.

The wolves yelped and howled, and the ogre stumbled to his feet, grabbing up his club and moving in their direction. But halfway to them, Harry and Khalid attacked from the side. As they did, both Imoen and Harry saw the message they had been hoping to see.

You have performed a dual attack and a flank attack! Damage increased by X 2 for all participating party members.

A longbow's larger arrow slamming into a wolf with punishing force, sinking deep into its body and killing it instantly. Jaheira's next sling stone hit another wolf in the head, cracking his skull open as Harry's slower crossbow arrived, killing the wolf that Imoen had wounded.

Then Jaheira was casting. Before the wolves and ogre could react to the fact that they were being attacked from the side, Entangling Vines burst upon the wolves which had charged towards her and Imoen's position. Khalid and Harry then raced forward from their own flanking position, moving around the entangled wolves to engage the ogre.

The ogre seems confused for a moment then roared out, 'You'll pay for hurting my pets! I'll have your lives and girdles for this!'

Harry blinked, and shook his head. "Well, that confirms this is the girdle obsessed ogre. Good to know."

Then the ogre was on him, and Harry raised his tower shield, letting the ogre's club hammer into its face head on. This was a mistake, as Harry learned when the blow nearly lifted him off of his feet, causing him to stumble backward. He still kept the shield up between them, but his arm throbbed from the effort.

Khalid nipped in, slashing at the ogre's back but the ogre turned, fantastically quick for something so large, it's club flashing out in a thrust that should've caught Khalid in the chest. Yet Khalid dance aside, his longsword flicking, cutting not at the ogre's main body out but at his knuckles. It was evident to Harry instantly that he was trying to wreck the ogre's grip on his club. But it failed, the attack not cutting deep enough into the ogre's toughened hide.

Thanks to the bestiary page Harry knew what its weaknesses were though, so instead of going for the main body, he went for one of its knees, slicing into it from behind just as the ogre turned again, to face him. When the thing tried to bring it's club around

again, Harry got into its swing with his shield, carrying the club to the side, and attacking the same knee.

Critical hit! Your strike has crippled the ogre!

Harry saw the message and instantly backed away as the club was swung again, ducking underneath it and rolling, despite his encumbering tower shield. He was then up and out of the ogre's range, and the ogre was falling back, his one leg now unable to bear his weight.

Khalid followed suit, nodding approvingly at Harry. "S, s, sound thinking," he said as Harry idly noted that he had won a bit more respect from Khalid. Harry nodded, then looked over as Jaheira and Imoen came out of the Woodlands around them into the fire of the ogres campsite. The wolves weren't dead yet, but they were still heavily entangled and could be dealt with in a moment.

The two of them instantly joined Khalid and Harry in firing at the ogre, killing him within a few seconds from outside his own weapon range. One lesson Harry had never been needed to be told was that in a fight, there was no such thing as fair play. That left the entangled wolves, and Jaheira turned to Imoen. "Your Blood Mage spells, do you think you can show us one?"

"Hmm, I suppose I could," Imoen replied, then slowly an evil smile appeared on her face. "Hey, are the vines that spell conjures up flammable?"

"They are, but given how close we are to the forest, I don't think we want to risk of fire spell," Jaheira cautioned.

"Well then there's always my old standby," Imoen said, then thrust out one hand towards the pile of the entangled wolves. "Bombarda!"

"Imoen has cast Bombarda. This Area of Effect spell costs -20 to health," Harry read aloud, even as the explosion hit. All four of the remaining wolves were blown apart, and Imoen's lips quirked into a less evil smile as she looked over at Jaheira. "Well?"

She exchanged a glance with Khalid. "The explosion aspect of that spell is much more concentrated than a Fireball, but not so much as one of the higher end spells, like Explosion itself. We would have to see it's effect against armored targets to tell you which is truly more dangerous to its immediate targets."

“Quite go, go, good though. I think a, a, anyone who sees your levels and b, b, believes that a co, co, correct indicator of how dangerous you are go, g, going to be sadly disappointed.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harry said shaking his head. “Remember, that armored giant that killed Gorion actually got away. So he at least knows we were more dangerous than our levels would indicate, although he might not have seen us actually use our Blood Mage spells.”

“True, yet setting those spells aside, I have to admit that your tactical skills are impressive. I would not have thought about flanking on such a simple target, but I did notice the extra damage that you were doing,” Jaheira said gesturing around them.

Harry grinned at that nodding and noticing that the respect between him and Jaheira had again gone up.

“And now we loot the bodies,” Imoen said mock cheerfully. “Wolf pelts go for what forty gold each?”

True, and with you and Harry here, well we would be fools not to make use of your incredible item box abilities, although thanks to your demonstration we are down four possible pelts,” Jaheira mockingly reproved to which Imoen stuck out her tongue. “Come child,” she said to Imoen in response to the younger woman’s expression, a smirk appearing on her own face. “I can show you how to skin a wolf.”

Harry frowned at that and moved over. When Jaheira looked at him quizzically, he shrugged. “I don’t know how to skin a wolf either and I want to see if this Advanced Adventurer system of mine can do anything to make it any easier.”

“If so, I will cheerfully call it the most magnificent gift of all time. However, I am most doubtful that will be the case.”

“You never know,” Harry said with a chuckle, kneeling down next to the wolf across from the two women. Khalid also wandered over, stopping his journey towards the dead ogre, Harry simply touched the head of the wolf, running his hands through the fur. After all, beyond the wolves that attacked him that first night out with Gorion, this was the first time he’d seen one.

A moment later, the image of the animal in front of him was superimposed by a wire outline showing its fur as if it was already pulled off and laid out on top of the animal. Harry blinked, then looked over at Jaheira. "You're going to hate me."

Jaheira and Khalid's eyes narrowed, and Harry very deliberately pulled with the hand that had been touching the wolf. An instant later, there was a tiny flare of blue light and the wolf was both skinned, and the wolf meat cut into different haunches.

For a moment his fellows were silent, staring at Harry, then Imoen growled. "Why, if could do something like this, did you make Khalid and me prepare that one deer he shot on our way to the Friendly Arm Inn?"

"Because I didn't know this was a possibility!" Harry said quickly holding up his hands quickly. *Although I do wonder why I was able to do it now when I couldn't when we were dealing with the dead bodies of the attacks back where Gorion and I were ambushed. Maybe it only works on certain animals and creatures? Or could it be tied into my identify skill?*

Jaheira's eyes narrowed, staring from him down to the skinned wolf, while Khalid shook his head. "Can I just say, th, tha, that is very much like ch, ch, cheating?"

"Humph, regardless, this means we will let the wolves and ogres to you then."

Harry rolled his eyes but nodded and moved around. Imoen did o wondering if, now that Harry had shown her this, if it was possible she could do the same thing. It turned out she could, and with a whoop, she moved from one wolf to another, adding them to first her own item box, then shifting it over to Harry. With the wolves taken care of, Harry moved over to examine the corpse of the ogre that they killed.

On his person, Harry found three different belts, only one of which was labeled 'simple belt' and was therefore left on the body. When he looked at the second it came up as Mysterious Girdle followed by a query asking if Harry wanted to identify it. The other belt read as:

'The Elf's Bane:

An infamous highwayman in his day, Pandar of Scardale made quite a name for himself vexing the elves of Cormanthor forest. To their annoyance he continually used the wood

to escape the law; and with the aid of this girdle, the elves' arrows as well. Unfortunately for Pander, pit-traps and starvation proved a slower, but effective, substitution.

Armor Bonus: +3 VS Piercing, +3 Vs Missile

Harry nodded. "I believe that is the girdle that the surly dwarven woman wanted I think, right?" Imoen nodded, and Harry put it into his pouch. With that done, he turned his attention to the Mysterious Girdle, hitting the identify button with his eyes. The Mysterious Girdle label disappeared in a little bit of blue color, replaced by:

Mysteriously Magically Enhanced Girdle:

Although you tried to identify this Girdle, you have not come across an item like this before. It seems to have a few layers of enchantments on it, a few bonuses to mages for one, like the robes of the Seekers in Candlekeep.

You can also tell it is cursed: not in a malicious or harmful way but rather in a deliberately comedic manner, somewhat like the Tickling Charm of Imoen's. Wearing this girdle is bound to make people laugh, and that wearer moan, not in agony, only in embarrassment. Why that is, you cannot tell.

Harry read that aloud, looking around at the others. "Any guesses?" None of them said anything, simply shrugging her shoulders in ignorance, and Harry shrugged too. "Well, I'm certainly not going to try to put it on and see what happens so unless someone else is volunteering?"

In th, tha, that case I suggest we move on. T, th, the dead bodies will no doubt bring predators. A s, s, shame really, this area is quite a nice c, c, campsite. That ogre cho, ch, chose quite well."

Jaheira nodded agreement, and Harry and Imoen, not having any real experience with how quickly the smell of dead bodies could carry through the woods, simply shrugged their shoulders.

As they were walking away however, a thought occurred to Khalid. "You ne, ne, never said how much experience wolves and that ogre were." While most Adventurers say the experience they got from completing quests or fighting other adventurers they didn't see them from fighting demi-humans or animals like this.

Harry blinked, then nodded. "Sorry, I forgot afterwards. He looked at the messages which had gathered up in the corner of his eye, enlarging and getting rid of them one after another with eye flicks. "Each wolf was 25 experience, and the ogre was 125. Not enough really to matter for any of us, which is a pity."

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he opened up his status page, calculating for a bit, then looked at Imoen's. "Okay, something else has carried over. The experience wasn't split before us or went only to the person who got the kill. We each get 25 and 125 experience regardless of who got the kill, so long as it was one of us rather than Jaheira and Khalid."

The married couple grumbled good naturedly about that but didn't care overmuch about it. Not until they could join Harry's party fully.

About two days later they came upon something else that Harry had told them about. He read the reading aloud now for the benefit of the others. Warning, you have entered an enemy zone. An enemy zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range. These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which."

Finishing reading Harry looked around at the others, then explaining a bit more of what he knew. "This is like those first skeletons we fought as a team. "The respawn area will keep on respawning a certain number of enemies."

"I, I, is there anything else about it th, th, that you can tell us?" Khalid asked, frowning and scratching at his chin. "What ty, ty, type of enemies, h, how long betw, be, between respawns? I, is th, th, there a reward for clearing it o, o, out?"

"There wasn't a reward for killing all those skeletons before, and I can't remember the experience they gave us, so I have no idea if it's worth it or not," Harry said with a shrug. "It's probably more of the same though, skeletons or other low-level enemies. If we see a high level enemy, we can always retreat. "

"It is good to know that despite this gigantic cheat function that you have somehow been rewarded with through fate and the lechery of a dead god that you have not become arrogant," Jaheira said caustically.

Harry looked at her, shaking his head. "That was kind of impressive actually. Should I be flattered you put that much effort into insulting me?"

"Don't min, mind m, my wife," Khalid said with a chuckle. "She gets into these mo, mo, moods occasionally."

"Oh, like once a month or so?" Imoen said shrewdly. "So Elven women get that too huh?"

"Yes," Jaheira said irritably "yes we do. And Bentley alas had run out of the necessary herbs to counter my pains. Now, can we please find these enemies? I wish to kill something, and if I can't find something else to vent upon, the two men in this party might enough alternative."

Khalid blinked, then nodded rapidly, and led the way, grabbing Harry and pulling him along. "Do you have any chocolate in your item space?" he hissed, actually not stuttering for a brief second.

"No, sorry" Harry said with a shake of his head. Harry had tried to find chocolate at one point, but after getting used to the almost medieval tech level that this world had, he had realized quickly that it was either completely unknown, insanely expensive and hard to ship. Khalid was actually only the third person to have ever mentioned it to him. "I have a lot of different spices and other things; I even have some yeast from the Friendly Arm. I could try to make some kind of sweet cake for her over the fire tonight. Would that help?"

"It might, yes."

You have earned +50 respect and +100 trust from Khalid. Good grief, apparently that time of the month is worse if you're already a bitch.

Harry blinked, looking away from Khalid to read that and Khalid looked at him quizzically. "Did your Ad, ad, Advanced Adventurer j, just give you som, so, some information?"

"No," Harry said hastily, "Nothing like that, ju, just an errant thought." *Is it trying to get me killed? Or does it just really not like her for some reason?* For his part, Harry really didn't have a problem with Jaheira except for when she was being insanely bossy. Now mind you, that was about forty-nine percent of the time. The other fifty-one percent

she was actually kind of nice, and her sense of humor was an odd mix between Prof. McGonigal, and Hermione's with a lot more sarcasm thrown in. Heck, even her bossiness sort of reminded him of his best friend at home, so he could take it far easier than Imoen could, right up until she started to really talk down to them. **That**, he hated.

The enemy zone turned out to consist of kobolds, giving Harry a new page in his beastie Harry.

Kobold:

small kangaroo like creatures, who are weaker than even goblins, Kobolds are only a threat to extremely low-level parties, or in groups of hundreds. Unfortunately, most of the time they do come in groups of hundreds, so fighting them can in fact be quite dangerous.

Favored weapons include short bows and swords. Watch out for poison. Their shamans can also be a little difficult.

"There are about thirty of the little creatures," Imoen reported, returning after getting close enough to see the enemy under her Hide in Shadows skill.

Harry looked over at Jaheira. "How many times can you cast tangling vines?"

"Four times per day," she replied promptly. Since she wasn't part of his 'party' Harry had no access to her spells as he would if Imoen had such spells. But after a little under three weeks, she trusted Harry enough to know her spell repertoire, although she didn't trust him enough to ask him for input on what spells she should use. "I also have two spells of Cure Poison, and four Cure Minor Wounds, two spells of Summon Animal, two spells of Hold Animal, and two spells of Cure Serious Wounds memorized for the day."

Harry nodded, then had Imoen described the area around the 30 kobolds. "So the enemy zone's respawn point is probably that cave behind them..." Harry said musing thoughtfully. "And how large is that rocky zone?"

"Um... about fifty yards maybe." Imoen guessed, closing her eyes as she pictured the camp. The tunnel Harry had mentioned led into a small hill in the landscape, in front of which was an open area abutting a rocky segment of the forest, where large chunks of granite stuck out of the ground, scattering the few small trees that were attempting to take

root there. At the same time, the forest grew up over the hill very slightly, but there was enough of a clear zone that anyone above the cave could see in every direction.

“We’ll circle around them up I think, let my map work out there whether or not there are any others around in the forest on the other side of the hill before we attack. But I think that Rocky area that you noticed to their east might be the best bet,” Harry said.

“Why so?” Jaheira asked, cocking her head quizzically.

“The rocks would break up any charge. We could leave you and Imoen there behind us and create a killing ground in front of them.” He looked at Khalid. “I know you prefer to use a medium shield, but with the main threat from kobolds being from their arrows, do you think you can switch to our extra tower shield?”

Khalid nodded wordlessly, and Harry pulled out the item in question, handing it over.

They did circle around the kobolds, finding no other enemies in the area bar a cougar that Jaheira sent off in an opposite direction with her druid powers. She couldn’t have dominated it entirely, not without actually using an animal friend spell, but as a Druid she did have a certain way with animals regardless. “A, and, it wasn’t a b, b, bear,” Khalid teased. “Jaheira, h, has issues with those, a, as you’ve noticed.”

Jaheira huffed but didn’t deign to reply to that, and Harry led her and Khalid around the camp and to the rocky area, leaving Imoen behind to use her thief skills to flank the enemy. But as they moved into it, they were immediately spotted by the enemy, as Harry had figured. Jaheira instantly started to cast, and Khalid and Harry stood in front of her, their shields up to protect her from any missiles that might interrupt the spell.

The spell went off, catching the kobolds as they charged forward in its vines. The little creatures didn’t seem to have any kind of immunity against the spell, and more than half of them were caught instantly, with several more bounding forward into the rocky area only to be unable to move quickly through the rocks. That left eight archers free in the distance, but Harry and the others instantly started to fire at them with their long range weapons

Soon the trio had killed the six of the kobolds still free on the other side of the vines. Then Imoen appeared in among the archers, and Jaheira hid behind Khalid and

Harry lobbing her slingshots into the kobolds who had gotten into the rocky area. At the same time, Khalid and Harry moved forward to engage them in melee combat, Harry simply changing his weapons out, and Khalid dropping his longbow on the ground behind him.

As their numbers whittled down, more kobolds appeared from out of the cave, proving that it had indeed been the enemy zone. Harry scowled, as most of those moved through the tangling vines towards them. Kobold Commando came the announcement as he Harry looked at them, opening bestiary at the same time.

Kobold commandos, the more more trained better armed version kobolds. Still not very tough, except of course in numbers.

Twenty of these kobold commandos appeared to attack them, but Jaheira simply cast tangling vines again, catching many of them. The only real danger to in the fight occurred a second later as another kobold came out of the spawn point and cast a spell of his own toward them before Harry could even glimpse it's label. Several Magic Missiles flew from it towards Harry, who took them on his shield, each hit taking a bit from his shield's durability.

Before the Kobold Shaman thing could even get off the spell, Harry shouted, "Target the mage!" But it dodged around nimbly and was able to cast another spell towards Jaheira. A Cone of Silence struck, and Harry saw a status symbol appear above her information to one side.

'Silenced'. Jaheira has been silenced, she will no longer be able to intone spells.

"Damn! Khalid, with me, Jaheira fall back. Imoen, fall back into the woods and circle around." Harry shouted.

A second later, Imoen yelped as the Shaman sent a prismatic spray of colors into the woods around her. The spell didn't do much damage, when it hit her, only taking her health down by three points. But, it did reveal her, and many of the kobold commandos turned on her. "Crap!"

Harry and Khalid charged forward, braving the area plagued by the tangling vines, racing through ignoring the still tangled kobolds within to engage the kobold commandos before they could swarm over Imoen.

She was still forced to shout out "Protego!" As they circled her, their swords flashing. The defensive spell encased her in a shield, and their swords smashed into it ineffectively. Then Harry was on them, his longsword, slicing two kobolds in half with a single blow, ignoring the critical hit announcement he'd just seen as he smashed another one bodily to the ground, trampling it under him. The next second he was in among the kobold commandos around Imoen, hacking this way and that, scattering the little creatures.

He felt a few sword blows go home on his back and shield, but he ignored them, trusting to his shield and chest plate which protected and to his own high health points. A second later, Khalid was there, slicing into the side of the troublesome spell user, ending its life quickly.

Harry then looked around the battlefield, noticing instantly that all of the kobold's marks via his map had turned yellow on his map screen. This was shown a moment later in real life as the few free of Tangling Vines fled away from them into the woods. Even those still entangled panicked, no longer trying to fight towards them, rather tossing their weapons down and running in place, tearing at the vines in a frantic effort to run.

"Finish them or not,?" he asked Khalid, glancing over to where Imoen was breathing a sigh of relief and releasing her Protego spell.

"What kind of exp, ex, experience points have they g, gi, given us?" Khalid asked, showing a bloodthirsty side of him Harry hadn't seen before.

Harry frowned at that, realizing that indeed, adventurers didn't seem to see the other races as real unless they could communicate. He looked through his built up messages, and replied, "Not much, seven experience points for the normal kobolds, 35 for the commandos. And... huh, only 65 for the shaman."

"Th, then don't bother." Khalid said, as Jaheira came out from the woods behind him, having circled back and around the fight as Harry had ordered, though she would never have admitted to having so followed his 'suggestions' like that.

"So," Harry said thoughtfully looking around them. "What have we learned?"

"Kobolds don't make for good experience points. Not worth the hit points it took to take them out," Imoen grumbled. "At least not to me with my damn thief type's crappy health level."

Harry chuckled, ruffling her hair affectionately, to which she pushed him hard enough to nearly topple them over, growling at him. "Just you wait, just you wait until I can dual class, then I'll show you."

Nodding, Harry turned his attention to something else which had bothered him from the moment the fight started. "Are they all like that? All of the demi-human races I mean, so mindless and aggressive?"

"Not all, no. Kobolds yes most of them are. Goblins yes, orcs and ogres and ogrillions. Half orcs are no, no, not. Orcs can be different too, although their morality is very different from most of the sentient races. They sometimes make excellent mercenary groups. Their society is built upon the idea of survival of the fittest, and rule of the strong. They loathe book learning outside of mage craft, and even their shamans are not held in high regard, merely fear. Fear is enough for them, though."

"Does it bother you?" Jaheira asked, after Khalid finished speaking to which Harry nodded, looking uncomfortable. She smiled at that, touching Harry's shoulder gently as Khalid smiled. "You're not the first to worry about the morality of offensive actions such as this," she said gesturing to the dead kobolds around them. "If we could coexist with them, many adventurers would be willing to give it a chance. But the kobolds and the other sub-human races have to be willing to meet us halfway, and in the main that they are not willing to do so. I am not going to tell you to not let it bother you, but do not let it stop you from protecting yourself against them. The only effectiveness a bleeding heart can do is by bleeding himself yes?"

Harry chuckled at that, nodding his head. Message received ma'am.

She twitched at that, then laughed, shaking her head.

Congratulations, your beliefs and morals have effected your relationship status with those around you positively.

You have learned +20 respect +20 trust with Jaheira.

+10 trust, +10 respect from Khalid.

You have earned +100 respect relationship points with Imoen. Your relationship status with Imoen remains 'Family' but remember there are varying degrees of closeness to that term.

All right, Harry thought. On the one hand that's nice to know, but on the other hand I'm not thinking like this for the damn points!

"S, s, still, it was somewhat in, in, interesting" Khalid said looking around. "But y, y, you are saying if we sta, st, stay here for a certain amount of t, t, time, that we would find these kobolds somehow re, re, respawned?"

"That's what my Advanced Adventurers system is implying," Harry replied with a nod.

"I have heard of something that might explain this phenomenon," Jaheira said thoughtfully. "Chaotic mana. Magic from the earth itself has come to the surface here, and Ao decided to put it to use, creating these nodes to continually challenge adventurers, give them a leg up as it were before they can take on tougher of opponents."

"Well, with this as a clue to go with those skeletons, I believe I can emphatically state state that any enemy zone will only contain low level enemies. They could be useful if we were willing to take the time to sit here for months and kill them, but I would feel it incredibly bad about doing so, and it would be a horrible use of our time."

"Agreed Harry," Khalid, Jaheira and Imoen all said as one.

Harry went on. "I vote that in the future, while we need to be aware of these enemy zones, we don't actually need to go out of our way to search for them unless they are connected to an actual job that were already on. Agreed?"

All three of the others again replied in the affirmative before the group split up, Imoen and Harry using his AA skill to easily search the bodies.

They pulled out arrows of fire arrows, adding around thirty two of them to Harry's item box, each of the kobold commandos having had at least two of them on their person, which Khalid was happy to see. But beyond that there were only a few bits of gold and others things, and Imoen scowled. "Damn, even when it comes to loot, enemy zones didn't seem to be worth it."

“D, did you see an e, en, enemy zone or anything of that n, na, nature that night with Gorion?” Khalid asked, frowning as he brought up the topic.

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “And it was obvious that those adventurers wouldn’t respawn either. I think Jaheira’s right, enemy zones are only to give low level experience. We have to use other means to level up like everyone else.”

In contrast to his AA skill’s ability to notice enemy zones, the map was an ability that the two experienced adventurers were coming quickly to see as being worth Harry’s weight in gold. This was proven the evening next, when they were setting up camp. The map was clear, but as they were turning in for the night, Harry’s eyes widened as he saw message he never had before.

Warning, there are enemies about. Do you still wish to attempt to go to sleep?

Harry instantly sat up, the action dispelling the message.

From where she had been about to lay down. Imoen looked at him, quizzically. They had seen before this that she had to wait at least a second to go to sleep before Harry to take advantage of the benefits of Harry’s Gamer skill. “What is it?”

“Um, the Gamer Skill just warned me that there are enemies about.”

Pushing out of the tent he found Jaheira on watch, with Khalid next to her, asleep in a blanket beside the fire instead of in the tent.

The sight was kind of touching, but they both woke up instantly as the two youngsters came out of their tent. “What is it?” Jaheira asked frowning and coming to her feet, her eyes scanning the woods around them.

Harry explained to them what had happened, then asked, “You’re the expert on woodcraft, is there any anyway you could tell which direction these enemies might be in?”

“Yes,” Jaheira said instantly, turning slightly and pointing. “That way. It’s the way to the road, about...” she frowned thinking remembering where they had last seen it and triangulating their position and their speed of movement through the forest with all the expert knowledge of a Druid and experienced adventurer. “About, I want to say ten minutes sprinting in clear day. At night, more than two hours, possibly as much as three depending on the density of the forest.”

Harry whistled, shaking his head. "They have to be just outside of my map range then." They had estimated it by separating into groups, and Harry's map was a 360° field of around an hour's quick jog during the day in the woods.

Harry looked over at Imoen who nodded. "Let's go," she said, "I don't think we want to try to rest here just yet, do you?"

Khalid and Jaheira both scoffed at that one, readying their weapons wordlessly.

It was full dark now and pushing through the forest like this was hard going, especially for Harry and Imoen who did not have the night vision their Elvish side gave the half-elves. But each of them took the youngsters by the hand, Jaheira taking Imoen by the wrist, and Harry being led by a hand on his shoulder by Khalid, through the pitch darkness of the forest.

Not for the second or even fifth time as they moved Harry was struck by the wild nature of the forest. It wasn't so impenetrable, so **alien**, during the day with Jaheira and her druid craft. You could almost forget how ancient the forest was even here, this tiny splinter of the greater forest to the east. But now it came crashing back on him, making him almost nervous, twitching this way and that at odd sounds in the night. He saw Imoen was similarly affected, her green dot pulsing to yellow and back on his map, though she herself was nearly invisible to him through the forest.

When they started to see fires in the distance through the trees it was almost a relief. That relief did not last however, when they came close enough to stare through the darkness of the forest to what was causing that fire.

Because what was causing it, was a burning caravan. Several large carts were on fire, and bodies were strewn here and there, barely visible in the backdrop of the flames. Standing over them, Harry could now make out at least 12 bandits. They looked human-sized, but that was about all he could tell from this distance.

Thinking quickly, Harry pulled out his crossbow, and used its aiming function to heighten his eyes. That allowed him to see the marker over the bandits, actually getting a bestiary page for them as he did.

Bandits:

Human-shaped trash which plague the land wherever you go, they are one of the non-adventurer combat types that humanlike beings can become. Do not let their apparent humanity fool you. Bandits can be as inhuman to their victims as any orc or kobold. A kobold would kill you quickly for what you're wearing, a bandit would rape you, then sell your dead corpse for gold.

Harry whispered "bandits," to the others, who all nodded grimly, Imoen having already assumed it was something of that nature. He looked at Khalid and Jaheira. "Can you both describe the area to me?"

Khalid quickly did so, having come to trust Harry's tactical sense, even if he didn't quite have a grasp of the true utility of that skill yet.

While her husband did so Jaheira stayed silent, moving to one side and crouching down next to Imoen where she had left her a second ago. "We're obviously going to attack them, just so you know," she whispered sarcastically. "So much for the idea of picking our battles thanks to Harry's mapping ability."

But there was a hard edge to her voice where there was normally just a regular prickly edge, and Imoen nodded grimly. She too could make out the bodies lying on the ground out there, and as a former Auror, she was even more determined not to let these scum walk away than the others. She quickly pulled out her short bow, then scowled realizing that in the dark, she would only be aiming at silhouettes. Even with the bow in hand she couldn't make out the regular red dot, although she too could see the labels above the bandits now.

Jaheira chuckled as Imoen whispered that aloud. "Nice to know that there are some things that even Harry's overpowered Advanced Adventurer skill won't help. I however can see them perfectly," she finished, fitting a sling stone into her sling but not twirling it just yet.

We can tell their numbers, but we can't tell anything about their strengths, armor or anything like that, Harry thought, scowling. Ironically, without the fires Khalid and Jaheira would have been able to make out how the bandits were armed and suchlike, but the fires defeated their night vision. They could make out features occasionally, and thanks to their Elven heritage again could hear the course voices of humans and could occasionally make out flashes of leather armor but they couldn't make out more than that.

Still, that was enough for Harry. "Here's what we're going to do," he said gesturing the others to huddle up. "I think it's time that Imoen and I start using the Blood Mage spells in earnest. We'll split up again, come at them from two sides, one from here the forest side, the other from down the road a ways. The ones coming from the forest will grab their attention, then we'll flank them."

"Like we did against the ogre, sound thinking," Jaheira said with a nod. "Although you are getting a little too enamored of this whole split and attack from two angles concept. Against an enemy that can think and react, it might not work."

"But th, th, these aren't thinking or r, r, reacting people right now," Khalid said shaking his head. "Y, y, you saw them drinking just a, a, as well as I did love."

"True, I just wished our omnipresent authority figure here to be aware of the danger of falling into having a favorite tactic, when others might work just as well."

"If you cast Tangling Vines, straight where that mean fire is, is it far enough away for you to do so without fear of causing of forest fire?"

"I would have no fear on that score anyway, given the rain last night," Jaheira said tartly. "I'll warn you though that bandits are far less likely to be caught. Unlike skeletons and kobolds they will react like that group we fought at the friendly arm Inn."

"I'm not," Harry said grimly. "Trust me, I know this'll be tough."

With a limited plan in place, the group moved in quickly, getting to their prepared positions. When they did, Imoen came out of Hide in Shadows, and tossed the first spell and only spell she would be using in this fight, straight into the center of the largest fire. "Bombarda!"

Imoen has used Bombarda, the explosion-like Blood Mage spell. -30 to Health.

A bare second after Harry and Imoen saw that note the fire exploded in all directions, catching the attention of every bandit there. Three of them were hurled aside, one of them dying having been too close to the fire blasted sideways so much by the explosion he was slammed into a burning cart, snapping his neck. The others were merely singed, having been moving around the caravan's carts. Now they tried to race towards

Imoen as she disappeared again into Hide in Shadows, the skill coming back into play easily thanks to how dark it was beyond the fires.

This put them out in the open, and Jaheira struck next, conjuring up Tangling Vines. Instantly as the spell head it began to catch fire from the fires in the carts and the scattered bits of burning debris.

A few of the bandits were caught, but what the spell did most was slow them down and force the bandits to split their attention. “Fuck, are we dealing with two spell-users!?” shouted one of them, turning to the woods and barking out commands to two more, only to have them ignored.

All of this activity had three bandits who hadn’t been drinking and who were still free of the Tangling Vines. They instantly moved toward Imoen’s last position, shouting out to one another. “Keep close!”

“Be ready to dodge when the thief shows up again!”

“Right, it’s gotta be a thief, did you see how the bastard disappeared like that!”

Harry then burst out of the woods, running hard for ten paces, and before they could turn towards him, he was in among them. His sword’s tip drove into the back of one.

Harry has used backstab! Critical hit!

A second later his tower shield slammed into the center of the other man, and the ubiquitous ‘you have attempted to shield bash, shield bashes an advanced warrior skill, you do not know shield bash’ appeared in his vision, before he blinked it away. Still, the blow had, if not knocked the man backwards, at least staggered him slightly, allowing Harry to twist around, crippling the next one with a blow to the side of the knee.

By that point, the other man had brought his own sword up, and stabbed forward hard, trying to catch Harry in his side.

The blow hit unfortunately riding up the side of his armor, the point of the short sword slicing into his leather undershirt and into his side aiming for his armpit.

“Guhhh,” Harry groaned in pain, but he had already been backing away from the blow before it landed, and only the tip caught him, entering into his side a bit further

down rather than up into the upper armpit. He turned, blood dripping down his side. as the sword was quickly pulled back out of his wound. Now the bandit came in again, and Harry had to defend himself quickly, pushing past the pain.

Elsewhere, the remaining eight bandits who had found themselves in the quickly expanding fire zone of the clinging vines were not having fun. Two of them had been caught by the spell, and a third faltered as he tried to get to his feet. The rest were able to break free, until one of them was caught right at the edge. As those men started to scream in suddenly sober fear of the fire crawling over the vines reached them, Imoen attacked from one side, and Khalid and Jaheira came out of the wood from the other.

You have attempted a flanking maneuver. flanking maneuver has succeeded! X2 to damage for all participants.

With the damage multiplied, two of the remaining bandits were down by sling stone and arrows before Khalid was in among the others, his sword flashing out. He landed a crippling attack of his own, cutting a leg out from under one bandit, while Harry was still dueling with the one remaining bandit who hadn't been drunk. That dual ended, as the man's sword smashed into Harry's shield, and Harry used a trick Khalid had taught him which his Gamer skill hadn't told him about. His sword came up in an arc not to hit the man, but to catch the man's wrist before he could pull his sword back.

The man's sword and hand went flying, and as he stumbled back with a scream, Harry thrust forward ending his life, without further preamble. He ran towards the others and grinned as through the pain of his wound as another flank attack announcement appeared, making for a total of X4 times damage.

Now attacked from three sides, with two of those sides containing long range fighter who were willing to shoot then move backwards, the the bandits were never able to coordinate and died to a man in the next few minutes. Ironically, the ones who survived the longest were the ones who were still within the fiery area of the tangling vines spell. It turned out that the fires didn't spread as fast as they had wanted thanks to the rain that afternoon. Only one of them had died thanks to the fire crawling up the vines before Harry and the others had finished off the bandits who had gotten out of the area effected by the spell. The last two bandits were shot down from a distance, and finally, the sound of battle receded, leaving only the sound of the fires crackling to drown out the night noises of the forest.

When the last bandit fell, Jaheira instantly moved towards Harry, shaking her head as she began to move her hands and fingers in an intricate pattern. “A well thought plan I believe, but next time perhaps you could not get yourself injured in the doing?”

Jaheira Has used Cure Minor Wounds, +10 to the target's health.

Harry was the most injured among them. One of the bandits had gotten off a shot towards Jaheira, but her buckler had interposed itself to catch the arrow on its face despite being so small thanks to her own ability in weapon and shield techniques. Khalid had taken a light grazing to one thigh and another to his side, but his armor had turned both, despite the fact that his shield had been held out of position by another bandit before that bandit had fallen to an arrow from Imoen.

Sighing faintly as the wound in his armpit closed up Harry nodded. “Agreed, I turned around too much to deal with the second one of them, I need to remember to keep my eye on the fight as a whole. Regardless, I think we should move away from here for a bit.”

“We’ll want to at the very least take their scalps now,” Khalid said professionally. “It’ll be easier because of your ability so shouldn’t take long.”

Harry shrugged, and moved over to one of the bandits, the man’s hair coming away in his grip a second later as he looted the body. “By the way did you see that one message when I began my attack?” Harry said looking over at Imoen

“Yes I did, Imoen,” said with a laugh. “It’s proven, you can use backstab.”

“So, n, n, not only can you loot a bandit of h, h, his hair by simply touching them, but you c, c, can also share different techniques, at l, l, least some of them anyway. That is ch, ch, cheating, that is,” Khalid said with a chuckle shaking his head.

As he moved from one body to another, Harry asked, “How close to Beregost do you think we are?” More to keep his mind on other things other than what he was doing than an actual desire to know.

Turning away from Imoen who had just been healed by another one of her spells Jaheira thought for a moment, looking around and pursing her lips thoughtfully, her eyes lighting on a banded rock set a few feet down the road, recognizing it as a feature she had seen before. “I believe we are about four more days away. If we go overland any rate. If

we go by the road rather than paralleling it, that cuts it down to two days, since this area of the forest isn't nearly as dense as the area we've been moving through."

Looking up from the task which should have been grisly but thankfully wasn't thanks to his ability, he looked at Khalid and Jaheira. "I think we're done with checking out all of my abilities. Unless you two have anything else you want to test?"

The two more experienced adventurers nodded, and Harry went on, not noticing how Imoen smiled as he once more took charge, showing his leadership ability. *And his Leadership skill, she thought with a wry smile. This marks the third plan he's made that worked darn well. I wonder if his leadership have gone up, or his tactics?*

Later that night she would ask him about that, but Harry would reply with a shake of his head. Tactics was upgraded via combat and solely via combat. Leadership was something else entirely. But his Tactics skill hadn't updated at all either, despite him coming up with good plans for them all. Harry figured this was because Imoen was his only other party member. Khalid and Jaheira were merely traveling with them.

Now Harry went on, pointing down the road to the north. "In that case, I vote we backtrack a little bit, find an area of the roads to camp out on or near to, then come back here tomorrow morning to see what we can salvage from these carts. Then we push on, and I don't know about you, but I think we should push on hard, not stopping so long as were on the road. That's possible right?"

"It is, with your mapping ability to warn of enemy threats," Jaheira said nodding approvingly.

Congratulations. You have earned +10 respect with Jaheira. Sometimes good decisions are their own rewards.

Harry blinked, nodding at her, but not commenting on the relationship change as he had decided early on to keep most of that aspect a secret. It looks as if the longer we interact, the easier it is to gain her respect and trust. Trust was slower building than respect, but Harry could live with that. He was just grateful to see the change, since he figured that Khalid wouldn't want to join his 'party' via his AA skill without Jaheira.

A few minutes later, Harry led the way north along the road. Khalid and Jaheira soon spotted a small out of the way culvert where they could create a campfire and hide themselves away. After a full day's worth of travel, and a fight at the end all of them

elected to go to sleep, trusting Harry's ability to notice enemies were about for the first time.

Early the next day, Harry woke the others with a good breakfast, already prepared, and Khalid shook his head when he saw Harry had made them some fresh bread somehow, using a flat rock and his special utensils. "S, s spoiling us a, a, are you?" He asked, chuckling a little. He did however notice that both Imoen and Harry looked far more rested than they should have after only five hours sleep. *Another benefit to his AA skill?*

Harry shrugged, then gestured down the road. "I figure that a light meal like this is probably the best thing, when we're about to deal with what was left over last night. No meats for certain." He paused, then went on in a somewhat lighter tone. "And that thing Bentley called Traveler's Bread is a travesty."

The others all nodded grim agreement to both Harry's statements. But despite his moment of levity, conversation petered out slowly, none of them looking forward to this duty.

Soon they were on their way to the battlefield of the night before. Thankfully a few of the bandits bodies had been dragged off by wild animals, and the fires had died out dramatically, which made searching the caravan simpler.

"I d, d, don't suppose you have a spell t, t, that could make digging holes eas, ea, easier?" Khalid asked looking over at Imoen.

Imoen frowned, then nodded slowly. "Well I could use Bombarda, although I don't know how often I would have to in order to dig even one grave. And with the number of dead guards, merchants and bandits..."

"We won't be burying Imoen the bandits," said Jaheira's sharply. "We will pile them up and burn them like the scum they are. That is what everyone does with the scum."

Harry nodded, grateful for the hatred towards bandits she and Khalid were both showing, if much more subtly for Khalid. It was much better than the seeming apathy they had all felt after the battle against the kobolds. It made having killed the bandits seem somehow more righteous than the fight with Khalid.

Once their bodies had been searched, the bandits were piled up into a large heap, whereupon all of the remaining alcohol was poured over their bodies, and Imoen set them up on fire with an *Incendio* at Jaheira's request. The druid still wanted to see more Blood Mage spells in action to get an idea of their abilities.

Later, while Harry and Khalid were busy digging the graves, and Jaheira frowned, looking at the items they had found. "Several letters to loved ones, most of them romantic in nature," she reported sadly, though she also looked relieved something her next words explained. "No fathers or sons among them. I always find that kind the worst to bear, sons especially. No parent should outlive their child."

Harry nodded understanding, then looked at the ring Imoen had just dropped in front of him as Harry was hip deep in one of the graves. Hitting yes to the routine identify question, he blinked as he actually got a full response instead of the partial one he'd been expecting.

Prince's ring, armor level +1.

This ring despite its overbearing name, is actually quite ubiquitous across the land of Faerun. It is able to heighten the armor level of the wearer. Similar rings can be found in numerous places, although a few have other powers.

Armor level +1.

"Now that's an interesting find," he said, before telling the others of what it was. He looked between Jaheira and Imoen, considering, then tossed the ring to Imoen. "There you go. With your inability to wear better armor, that kind of thing is best suited for you, I think."

Jaheira and Khalid both nodded, while Harry idly noted he had again won some trust with both ladies. Imoen put the ring on her hand, admiring it for a moment, then laughed. "That's great and all, but I hope that when you finally get a girlfriend, you don't give them gifts like that! Rule number one for all girls: we like jewelry and any gift of such should be somehow special."

Even Jaheira nodded at that one, a faint smile on her face as she winked at Khalid, who rolled his eyes at some old joke between them.

“So, all in favor of racing on to Beregost the instant we’re done here?” Harry asked, shaking his head at the married couple’s antics.

Khalid and Imoen instantly raised their hands, but Jaheira shook her head, gesturing over towards the bodies. “I certainly agree with that, but before we bury these four fellows, there’s something we must see.”

Harry frowned, as his identify skill went off as he looked at one of the bodies. “That’s very weird,” He said aloud

‘What?’ Imoen asked.

“Well, most of these bodies I don’t get anything via my observation ability, they are just, you know, corpses. “But this one, he’s dead, but I can still see an actual name over him.”

“He co, co, could be important in some fash, fashi, fashion, or perhaps linked to a q, q, quest. See if there i, i, is anything upon his per, per, person that could identify him,” Khalid said.

Given what adventurers sometimes did for quests that made some sense, and Harry nodded, moving over to the body. Unlike with the bandits, or the wolves, or the kobolds though, Harry had to physically search this man, and he wondered idly why that was, but shook it off as unimportant for now. He eventually found a series of letters, to and from the man, whose name was ‘Entar Silvershield Junior’, and held them up to the others. “Will that be enough you think?”

“I imagine so yes,” Jaheira nodded. Harry nodded back and the group went back to burying the bodies.

“Is there anything we need to say over them?” Harry asked about two hours later. The sun was high in the sky at this point, so he estimated it was a little past noon. They needed to get going if they were going to put any real distance under their feet today, but they still could make time for this.

“There would be, if any of us were priests. But a druid is not a priest, rather a servant of nature Harry, although some of our skills may overlap. As it is, all we can do is make markers for the grave and carry what remains of their goods and personal effects to Beregost. That is all.” Jaheira reached out and took Harry’s shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“Yet it speaks well of you Harry that you worry not only about the state of their bodies but the states of their souls. Not even most Paladins would be so concerned.”

You have won +100 respect with Jaheira. It would appear she does have a soul and approves of the fact you have one too.

Shaking his head to get rid of the message, Harry nodded to Jaheira, wondering again if the Gamer skill was trying to get him killed or just really didn't like her. Soon they all began to make up little markers and writing down descriptions of the individuals. Slain by bandits was the epitaph for all of them, slain by bandits and were avenged on this day.

It worked too, although they wouldn't know it until they passed by this way again. None of these men or women would rise as restless dead. That was a victory in and of itself.

However, burying the bodies had taken so long, and exhausted Imoen so much – her constitution was very low at five - that Harry decided both that she needed more stamina points the next time she leveled up, and that they could take a day's rest. They marched down the road about ten miles before the sun started to go down, finding a nice campsite to use that night soon after.

The feeling around the campfire was sober, all of them lost in their own thoughts, as they eat the extremely good food which Harry had created for them: a kind of minestrone soup, to go with the bread from this morning. And with the food, it was Khalid who broke the silence.

“I m, m, must say Harry, of all of your o, oth, other skills, I think that the most important and use, us, useful one so far is your ab, ab, ability to cook,” Khalid said with a chuckle, patting his stomach happily.

“I'm trying to work out if I should be insulted or flattered by that,” Harry said with a laugh.

“You co, co, could be both,” the other warrior replied with a chuckle.

After that, the air around the campfire turned a little more convivial, but there was no real chatter as they started to make preparations to head to bed. Even with Harry's map, it was decided that with bandits in the area, they would have to post to guard. Harry volunteered to take first watch, followed by Imoen, then Jaheira and Khalid.

The others were just about to head into their tents when Harry called out, 'Hold on someone just entered my map range.'

"Someone?" Jaheira asked. "Not an enemy?"

"Blue neutral, that means he's a civilian."

"That's odd, but... a lone civilian?"

"Yes," Harry said with a nod, his eyes widening as he saw how fast the blue dot was approaching them. "And he's going like blazes!"

The two half-elves came out of their tents at that, and Imoen followed from her and Harry's. They stood, watching to the north as the man came towards them, rushing so fast he was leaving a dust wake behind him visible even in the failing light.

He was moving so fast Harry whistled. "Is that some kind of spell?"

"An enchant, t, enchantment," Khalid said nodding. "They are called b, b, boots of quickness or something like that. Ex, ex, extremely expensive, they go f, f, for around two thousand g, g, gold, for a pair t, t, that has been used and is o, o on its last legs. The en, en, enchantment doesn't wear out of course, b, b, but the boots themselves do."

By the time Khalid finished his explanation the man was close enough for Harry to identify.

A messenger.

A civilian who is tasked with rushing messages to and for, this individual is worth far more trouble than he's worth to attack as every barely sentient individual knows. when he dies, where he dies becomes known to the authorities who sent him out. Since those authorities tend to be powerful, this often does not end well for the individuals involved.

"Interesting use of magic," Imoen murmured, staring at the same message.

"Make way, make way!" the messenger shouted as he came on them. "Must dash to Beregost I must! Governor Kelddath must be told of the extra troops being sent his way. Beregost is to be garrisoned in case of Amnian attack. Though Amn has denied such intent. Of course they would deny it the snakes. Make way for the messenger!" the man shouted, all in one breath before he was past them.

“W, w, well,” Khalid said thoughtfully, “That was in, in, interesting. So h, he, he’s not only serving as messenger but Cryer a, a, as well.”

“Baldur’s Gate must want everyone to know that there sending troops south. As if we needed another reminder,” Harry said, having ignored Khalid’s pronouncement to stare at the announcement from his AA skill. “The Iron Intake Issue just got another little bit of information. Rising tensions. Nothing new there either.”

Jaheira nodded. “The iron ore itself is not the goal, the tensions between the two parties seem to either be the goal, or a side effect. Could someone be trying to use this to start a war?”

No one answered her question, and with that sober thought, all four of them fell silent before Harry told the others to get some sleep. They would be pushing on to Beregost without pause starting tomorrow.

OOOOOO

“And this is where the school intersects the local wizards quarter. It also has a point of intersection with Paris to the east down the main street. I have been told you have parents out there waiting for you. They will be coming through that entrance over there,” the older, blonde said pointing to a gateway to the south. “The parents of prospective students are given a tour of our government building before they are allowed onto the campus itself.”

The older girl was gorgeous, Hermione had been able to acknowledge that within a minute of meeting her. She had long, amazingly lustrous platinum blonde hair down to the middle of her back, let loose at present, long legs, and even curves which, at fourteen, were just becoming clear to see. Her face was clear of blemish, angular, with just a bare hint of baby fat on high cheekbones, a small pert nose, deep blue eyes, a petite mouth marked by the tiniest hint of pink lipstick. She had also been relatively welcoming and kind to Hermione after being introduced to her in the Headmistress’s office.

“I, I’m of two minds about this,” Hermione said, almost frowning as she looked around. “It’s a lovely campus, and I have greatly enjoyed the tour, but a giant school, with

so much free land, smack dab in one of the biggest, busiest cities in the world? It smacks of hubris. A single series of alleys is one thing, but this? Especially... well, I don't know what you have heard about muggle technology but it's advancing very quickly, and it might, eventually..."

"You're not the only one to worry about such things," the tall blonde young woman said from next to her. "Many non-magical born who come to our school worry about that kind of thing these days. I believe that is why the headmistress has started to push for our moving to another location. We are simply waiting for the new buildings to be built up. I understand there was also supposed to be some kind of large tournament or some such the year the new campus is supposed to be finished. But I believe it has been canceled recently, your old school, Hogwarts, pulled out of it."

Hermione shrugged ignorance of that, looking from the older student towards the gate, then back around the school. "I have to thank you for showing me around, I realized that it was part of your duties as an upperclassman, but I presume you also have other things you could be doing."

"That is true I do," the French girl said without any attempt at prevarication. "However, it has not been nearly as onerous as you might think. Your questions were direct, intelligent, and your French has improved as we've been speaking. You are quite quick with languages. I wizz I wazz" she, finished in English, her accent coming through very clearly. "I cannot get zome of zhe sound juzt right."

Hermione almost shuddered as that accent washed over her, shaking her head. Something about that accent did **weird** things to her. "I, ahem, I rather think the boys in the world would prefer you to keep that accent honestly, Fleur." she said with a quick, forced laugh.

Fleur, for that was the girl's name, laughed too. "I do not think I need an a'cent," she said switching to English for that last word before going on in French again" to attract the boys. It is alas all too easy for me. So easy I attract them even when I do not want to."

Following her gaze Hermione saw her glaring to where a few upperclassmen, students older than Fleur, had been practicing dueling a moment ago under a few trees set to one side of the main thoroughfare that lead between the front yard of the school. Hermione stared at the two older students as they glared back. But not at her as she at

first thought Hermione suddenly realized, but Fleur. A second later they noticed Fleur and Hermione staring back at them, they looked away.

“And I thought it was me,” Hermione said to herself.

Fleur blinked, looking down at her. “I’m sorry, what?”

Hermione didn’t reply directly, looking away. “Attracting boys to you. Is that why many of the girls here seem to want to glare at you half the time?”

One well-manicured eyebrow rising in surprise Fleur nodded, raising her estimate of Hermione’s intelligence another notch. “You noticed that?”

“At first, I thought it was me, and I would have to deal with non-magical bias again like in Hogwarts. But I just realized that it was actually you they were glaring at.”

Fleur nodded. “I have heard that there is this issue of the blood in England. We have it too, but Madame Maxime has put a stop to much of it in the school, all that she can find anyway. If you insult another student through racist language, you either face him or her in the dueling ring, or if the offended are in their first or second year such as you, they face Madame Maxime herself. She is not quick,” Fleur said judiciously, “and her magical strength is only a little above par, but she is very dangerous nonetheless.”

After meeting school’s headmistress, Hermione could well believe it. She was easily the largest woman Hermione had ever met or even seen. Indeed Hermione could state she was as large as Hagrid and had idly wondered if she was so large for the same reason too: having a giant for a parent.

But that didn’t mean she was willing to let Madame Maxime do Hermione’s fighting for her. “I wouldn’t want Madame Maxime to be put out on my behalf, I’ll do my own dirty work thank you. My father’s taught me how to punch, and my friend Harry, well he told me to stand up for myself more a time or two,” she said, suddenly looking a lot smaller than she normally did as she thought of her missing friend.

After they became friends Harry had always told her to be herself, and to stand up for herself more than once when he saw Draco or some other students trying to make fun of her. He’d even told Ron more than once to stop taking advantage of Hermione to do his homework! That, and the whole saving her from a troll thing, was why she knew he had been a friend to treasure.

Fleur decided she didn't like that depressed, sad look on the little girl. *She has such spirit it would be a travesty to have such be beaten down.* "Who is this Harry you speak of, was he a boyfriend that you had to leave behind?" she asked, adding a deliberate note of humor into her voice.

"Oh, no," Hermione said with a laugh. She frowned thinking. "I... I suppose it could've gone that way eventually, but..." she looked around, then gestured Fleur to walk with her towards the gate to the school, and out into the streets beyond where she would meet her parents. "Have you heard about the disappearance of the Boy Who Lived?"

"Of course. I have mentioned my papa is the Advisor for Judicial Affairs, have I not? As such he is in touch with what you call Aurors in England and knows all about it..." Fleur slowly stopped speaking, looking at Hermione with even more interest than before. "You knew him, I take it?"

"Yes, he was my best friend. Frankly looking back on it, I think he was my only real friend. My other so-called friend stopped actually contacting me, when I started to refuse to help him to do his summer schoolwork." When Fleur's eyebrow rose once more in query Hermione shrugged. "I don't think he was using me for it entirely, but I definitely think that our friendship was started because we were both friends with Harry. If he wants to reach out and keep our friendship going, he has to do some of the work, and I don't mean just his schoolwork," she said ferociously to herself, muttering about idiot redheads.

This caused Fleur to laugh. The girl indeed had spirit and intelligence too. She approved. Then she thought of something. "I've been meaning to ask, why are you only taking part-time classes. While we certainly offer them, most of the time those we do offer them to our people who have to work for a living as well. Surely your family is not so badly off?"

"Oh, no!", Hermione said with a laugh. "My parents are actually quite well-to-do. There both dentists you see."

Flares Fleur's eyes widened at that. "Those are the non-magical to work with teeth, yes? You truly must introduce me to them. I would love to get my teeth looked at by such experts."

And here's hoping her father has some of this one's defenses against my Aura. Fleur's mother was a Veela, which made Fleur a Veela too, and she had hit puberty last

year, which had caused a lot of upheaval in her social life. This morning she had accidentally released it entirely when a most bothersome boy had decided to accost her, when she was actually running late to meet young Hermione in Madame Maxime's office. She had still had her Aura at full strength when she entered the room, and Hermione had reacted by blushing, flushing, and looking away until she got it under control with a speed that had impressed Fleur.

"Yes they specialize in teeth whitening, realignment, and other things of that nature," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. "And yet they still don't want me to try and find a potion that could shrink my teeth."

"You will grow into them," Fleur said firmly. "That kind of talk is ridiculous. You have such pretty hair, and your face is already losing its baby fat. You will grow into your teeth, and the boys, they will be all over you."

"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment I suppose," Hermione said with a laugh.

"But you did not answer my earlier question," Fleur asked, prodding Hermione delicately.

Hermione shrugged. "While magic is amazing, I have... let us call it a **goal** for my future. It sounds so much better than obsession after all she thought, with wry self-awareness. "And to reach that goal, I need to have a foot in both worlds."

"Interesting," Fleur murmured. "What are you learning then on the other side? I know of some of what they teach there, mathematics, astrology certainly, we have long acknowledged the muggles are well ahead of wizard-kind there, and history."

"All of that and programming, some engineering, advanced string theory when I get to it, and other things." In particular, Hermione was interested in programming, because she was almost certain that the magic had somehow reacted to the computer's program, and that had influenced whatever had happened to Harry. Once she could figure out where, or rather how it was done, she could figure out how to bring him back.

The headmaster and the others don't want to share their thoughts on the matter, and the Unspeakables don't let anyone in to see the computer again? Fine, I don't need them, I can find my own solution! The petite, extremely frizzy haired genius thought to herself, not noticing how her eyes began to light up like a madman as she thought,

rubbing her hands together gleefully as she imagined all of the learning she had to do for this.

Fleur did notice and took a step back, scratching at her ear thoughtfully as she stared at the younger girl. *Why do I think that with this girl around, school is going to cease being boring quite quickly?*

OOOOOOO

Of course, there were some students who would prefer boring. Back in Hogwarts, a disconsolate Ginny was sitting with Luna, her only friend from before Hogwarts, as she waxed eloquently on the fact that she had finally gotten to Hogwarts, only for Harry Potter to not be there. "I mean what the heck! I thought the headmaster was supposed to be watching out for him. And then this disappearance happens, and he steps down as headmaster, and all the rest of it and the Boy-Who-Lived isn't around anymore" she growled ferociously, poking her lunch with her fork.

She had initially pulled Luna over to sit with her because the other girl looked a little lonely to Ginny, but also because Luna was good Ron-repellant at mealtimes. She had gotten into Gryffindor of course, just like the rest of her family, but there was no rule that said you had to stand at your own tables. Besides, they'd already gotten their course schedules, and the rest of the students were only waiting for the headmistress to make an announcement at this point before the first day of school could begin.

Luna smiled that special smile of hers that showed her brain was somewhere else, a look that would've gotten Luna teased by anyone else, except for Fred, George, and the rest of the Weasley's bar her dumb bunny of a brother Ron. Ginny had thought at first that teasing Luna was Ron's way of showing that he liked her, but since he'd taken to calling her Loony, that a gone out the window.

"Harry Potter will return due time, when the time is right for him to do so. And not before. But he will be changed by the experiences I think," Luna said.

As Ginny was blinking at her friend in confusion, wondering what she meant, Ron was busy worrying about another missing student. "Darn it, I can't believe that Hermione went through with her plan to transfer to Beauxbatons. Is that even allowed?"

"I don't know, I've never heard of such transfers, but if she didn't want to continue her education here after last year and all that's occurred this summer it was probably her best choice." Percy said from where he was trying not to notice his brother's horrible table manners. "I think we should just be glad her parents didn't try to pull her out of the Magical World entirely.

"Huh? Why? If she weren't in school at least she'd still be in England you know?" Ron asked around a mouthful of bacon.

"I believe that once you enter the Magical World, you must complete your magical education in one of the schools. There are no tutors for muggleborn. If they do not finish their education, the individual's magic would be burned out of them, all of their memories of the magical world erased along with those of the parents. The Statute of Secrecy must be maintained after all."

"God I hope that didn't happen," Ron said, his earlier irritation with Hermione disappearing instantly. She might've gone to the frogs, but even that was better than being without magic.

"I'm still getting used to the fact that Dumbledore is not around," Fred muttered. "What do you think McGonagall is going to be like in charge?"

"I think brother dear we're about to find out," his twin replied.

Everyone at the table looked up towards where Prof. McGonagall stood up and was waving her hand in the air, intoning a spell none of the students could hear over the chatter they were generating. Silence slammed down throughout the hall, and she stood there for a moment holding the spell like that, before canceling.

"Thank you for your attention," she said a second later, her tone firm and no-nonsense. "Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, Albus Dumbledore stepped down as headmaster prior to the school year beginning. However, I have been acting as his deputy for a very long time, so you should not be concerned about the quality of education here going down. Indeed, I believe that with a bit more discipline and adherence to the rules of this school, it will go up."

She ignored the groans from the two Weasley twins with ease, gesturing to one side, as a large parchment floated up off the table. She hit it with another spell, and it duplicated into fours, before floating out to each table. “Copies of this, the new guideline for students, has already been posted in your common rooms. There are new rules on there that I urge you all to look over closely. Ignorance of the rules is no defense.”

She glared at a few students in Ravenclaw, then twitched her glare to a silently fuming Snape then to a few of his Slytherins. “These sheets will tell you the system that **every** teacher will follow regarding punishments in terms of points and detentions, all the way to expulsion. They also will show you the rules, showing what will be regarded as bullying, the penalties for the usage of racial slurs, and what is and what is not allowed as personal property on Hogwarts ground.”

Albus might've thought that the statues, ghosts and portraits were enough to keep his thumb on the lives of the students. I don't, McGonagall thought as more than one of the Slytherin students shouted a protest as they saw the forbidden words on the list.

The Weasley twins too were shouting angrily at some of them, knowing that a few of those rules have been targeted towards them and their pranks. The Ravenclaws were also protesting, although not about that. Instead they were shouting out about the new rules for taking books out of the library. All of them thought they should be allowed to take any book as long as they wanted so long as it was returned in pristine condition. But hoarding like that would no longer be allowed. The other three houses needed equal access to those books.

Deciding this had gone long enough, Minerva decided to end things here. “These are rules ladies and gentlemen, not subjects for debate!” she boomed in the thunderous voice, a voice trained in hundreds of classrooms. This instantly silencing the room except for Draco, who began his normal shout of when my father before pausing as he remembered that his father was in jail, most likely for the rest of his life.

His face paled, and he sat down, but he was still glaring at McGonagall angrily. Draco had hoped to return to a bit of normality after his life had been turned upside down this past summer. But that was not going to happen.

He wasn't the only one glaring at her, but Minerva was fine with that. These rules were meant to make this school a better place, a safer place, a place with more equality and more emphasis on education. *I will never be as famous, or as well-liked as Albus. But*

that is fine, I will make my own mark on this school, in discipline and safety, she thought, smiling thinly as she felt Snape staring at her. And that might mean more changes in the future, and not just to the rules of the student.

OOOOOOO

“Amelia!” Shouted Prof. McGonagall’s voice through the fireplace.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, jumped, slamming her leg into the underside of her desk both surprised by the sudden call and thrown off balance by the tone of the older woman’s voice. She had not heard that tone in the old woman’s voice since war against Voldemort ended and it shocked her out of the dull blah mindset she had fallen into after a routine day of paperwork.

“What is it Minerva?” she asked, looking over at the slightly older woman.

“I have an unregistered Animagus who was hiding among my students, for years apparently,” Minerva said scowling angrily. But Amelia could tell he wasn’t directed towards her, rather it was directed toward Minerva herself, something her next words proved. “All these years, all these years that rat lived! I should’ve realized!

“Rat?” Amelia asked, cutting through the other woman’s self-flagellation.

“The Weasley’s pet rat, Scabbers. I just conducted a survey of the school’s pets, a routine set of tests on them you know, disease, intelligence, familiar check. none of the Spells worked on the rat and it seemed to panic in its cage the instant I started to cast spells on it. Thank goodness I had all the pets in cages when I went over them. I instantly stunned it, and then used the Humanum Revellio on it, which gave me a positive return.” Minerva reported crisply. “I would rather undo its animal form with more wands than my own and Filius’s here, so if you could...”

“Of course! I’ll get a team together and be there instantly.” Amelia stood up purposefully. “In fact, I’ll come myself.” This looked way more interesting than paperwork after all.

And so the stones kept tumbling down in the avalanche of change that had begun with Harry Potter's disappearance.

OOOOOO

Beregost was a small town, surrounded by an outer hedge wall, with brambles and thorns growing through it that looked almost like barbed wire to Imoen's eyes, with more than two dozen houses and larger buildings within. Some of these included inns, many of which had signs telling you how to get to them before you even reached the town from the north.

At the entrance way cut into the outer hedge wall there was a squad of six Flaming Fist guards. Harry examined them as they came up, and though he didn't have as good an idea of armor as he should have, he thought they looked smart and organized. The notification over their heads also agreed with them.

Flaming Fist Guard.

Another type of humanoid, or specifically human in this case, type of warrior who is not an adventurer. While not able to stand up against an Adventurer one-on-one, Flaming Fists come in packs like wolves.

Organized, well-equipped, and sometimes even well led, these are the soldiers of Baldur's Gate, its principal army, police force, and investigation team all in one.

Leading them was a woman, whose title read,

'Valerie, level ten adventurer'.

An Adventurer who joined the Flaming Fist Valerie is known to be somewhat fast with her sword and much faster with her mind, an organizer and decent field commander all in one, despite some... question about her time out of uniform.

Status: Wary Interest. While she is leery of you as a stranger coming to her town, she is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, and maybe become interested you in another way...

That relationship status threw Harry for a moment, but he still noted that she was wearing the same armor as the Flaming Fist guards, and she stood among their number, which Harry felt was something he had to note for the future. It looked as if the mercenary groups could also have adventurers among them, which, if he ever had to fight one, was something he'd have to be aware of.

"Name and reason for your visit to Bereghost?" the woman asked.

Jaheira, Khalid and Imoen all looked to Harry to speak for them, which caused him to groan a little, before he stood forward smiling at the woman politely. "Harry, and his party, Imoen, Jaheira, and Khalid. Might I ask why you're checking visitors? Is it just the recent troubles, or something specific?"

"Just the recent troubles, no one can be too careful after all," the woman said, actually sending him a smile, her eyes flicking up and down Harry's body.

Valerie's Relationship has changed from wary Interest to Interest. Charisma for the win, boy!

Harry blinked at that, noting that Valerie's name over her head had changed to the pulsing pink that Cassandra and Phylidia's had. But then, as Imoen elbowed him in the side, smirking he replied. "Well Miss..."

"Miss?" Valerie interrupted, laughing. "I don't think so, or are you trying to make me feel old?"

"Not at all," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I was just trying to be polite. After all your what b,,"

At that point he was interrupted by Imoen putting her hand over his mouth, while Khalid laughed behind her. "I have to stop you there Harry! Just say she's beautiful and young and leave it at that. Don't play guessing games."

After Harry nodded Imoen released him, holding out her hand to the woman who took it, a smirk on her face after watching the two interact. "My name's Imoen" she said.

"Charmed, and I wasn't going to take offense unless he guessed in the high thirties or something," she said chuckling as she led the way through the hedge wall. "I'll need you to sign your names to the book here. You're all adventurers correct?"

“That’s right, why?” Harry asked.

“We’ve got several bounties you might be interested in, and there’s a paladin looking around for help to hunch down a band of ogres. I also have to ask you what the conditions were like on the road from wherever you came from,” Valerie rattled off as she crossed to a small desk set out in the open next to the inner wall of the hedge.

“We came from the Friendly Arm Inn, and the conditions of the road itself was nice, the conditions not so much.” From there Harry began to relate what they had run into with the help of the others occasionally.

Valerie frowned, listening to the description of the bandits that they had taken out. The ogre wasn’t of much interest to her, oh she’d heard about him, some strange ogre with a girdle fetish, but he was well out of her jurisdiction.

The bandits though, she grinned savagely hearing of their demise, her joy only slightly tainted by the fact that they had taken one final group of victims. “Hard luck on that caravan, and harder luck for some of the guards. I know one of them was some kind of highborn from the gate, an heir to one of their noble houses. And I know at least two of those boys came from here in Beregost. Stupid idiots, who thought that just because they could pick up a spear meant they could fight.”

“This world is often times cruel to the foolish,” Jaheira said with a sigh.

“You said you had some of their belongings?”

“We’ve got their chain mail, notes, messages, some jewelry and a cloak a or two,” Harry said pulling out the items from his item box. Jaheira rolled her eyes, and Harry paused, as he lost -10 trust with Jaheira. And -5 trust with Khalid suddenly. *Right, the item box, most people can’t use it like I can.*

quick thinking quickly, he then accidentally pulled out several other things, while looking for the final bits and pieces.

That did not regain the trust he had just lost with the married couple but earned him a few points of respect from both half-elves, and Valerie stopped looking as amazed, putting down that first time pulling out what he had been looking for as luck.

“Still, wiping out those bandits was good work.

Finding their camp like that after you killed would have been even better, but I suppose we can't be too picky."

Having 'finally' found the bunch of scalps from the bandits Harry dropped them onto Valerie's desk. She looked at them, counting each of them off, then went back to looking through the effects Harry and the others had brought back before nodding. "The scalps seem in order, and the rest I can send on to the proper families. stop by later at our garrison and I'll give you the money then. Or..." she said as if a sudden thought had occurred to her. "We could meet up at one of the inns. The Red Sheath? Maybe have a drink and talk then."

Harry slowly nodded, flushing slightly as he went through all the extra meanings of that statement and the way she'd said it. "I'd like that."

"Excellent, I'll be off doing the rounds for..." she looked up at the sun. "Another three hours I think." Harry nodded, and turned back to his companions

They entered the town proper after that, with Imoen and Khalid and even Jaheira teasing Harry about how he had gone from accidentally insulting, to flirting with the guard officer, and now had something of a date to look forward to. "It's just drinks," he protested feebly. "And it's not important regardless. We should be looking around for jobs we can do while waiting."

"Actually Harry, you're forgetting one of them already, that house with the spiders. Landrin's job for us, remember?"

"Good point," Harry said with a nod to Imoen's comment. "Let's see if we can find it."

A few streets later, they found a house with a notice stuck to the outer gate. "'Caution spiders: enter at own risk'. So these are not going to be run-of-the-mill spiders," Harry quipped.

"Actually they probably are," Jaheira said with a shrug. "Certain spiders after all can grow to the size of a man."

Harry simply blinked at that, then shook his head slightly. Fine, we won't touch that one. Do you think we'll need a torch or something in there?" He asked, looking at

the windows. They seemed blocked up by something, though Harry couldn't tell what it was.

"Quite probably, and don't expect Tangling Vines to be as useful here as it is out in nature. That spell works much better when there is some plant life to work with."

Harry nodded, but pulled out his tower shield and sword, as a helmet he had taken from one of the bandits in the last fight. It was a simple bucket-shaped helmet with a bit of metal moving down from the rim above the eyes to cover his nose which left much of his face and neck unprotected.

Looking at that helmet and comparing it to his own helmet with its armored mouth and nose piece and longer sides to protect his neck, Khalid shook his head. "W, w, we'll need to be getting you some better, t, t, better armor lad."

"Good point Khalid, and we'll want to find someone here that we can sell jewels too. Uncut jewels, like the bag I sold as part of the payment for my shield."

"And you still haven't told us where you got all those?"

"I'll tell you after we clear out the spiders," Harry said nodding. He would have to come up with the story for that that was the kind of thing he couldn't put down to his AA system after all.

"I don't know why you're so concerned about that Harry, it's not like Frederick is ever going to leave Candlekeep. And that gem duplication product of his was actually just a byproduct of his real experiments," Imoen cut in, smirking.

"Gem duplication?" Jaheira asked quickly, frowning as she thought through all the implications of such a thing.

"Frederick is this Seeker we know, who likes to experiment. He figured out this way of basically re-creating the process through which gems are made. But that was a byproduct for his real experiments.,"

"Let me guess, he was trying to turn lead into gold," Jaheira said with a sigh. "Such nonsense. Alchemists, ugh."

Harry chuckled, but nodded. "Something like that I think. When I started to do odd jobs for him, I didn't actually understand what he was saying. Anyway, Imoen here

discovered that the copies were just as good as the original, and were exact copies, so were even worth more as a set. We kept on doing small jobs, and he kept on paying us for them in gems, thinking he was skimping us. I've got over four hundred of the things still."

By that point they had reached the doorway to Landrin's house and Harry opened it, quickly entering, his shield up and pushed forward to protect as much of his body as it could, ankle to chest. Harry figured that any threat from spiders would come at ground level.

But they were not attacked right away, and Jaheira rolled her eyes. "I see that at least in this, you have not had any training. Spiders are ambush animals; they will not simply wait by the doorway and charge forward. They will wait until we are within, and then they will come at us from every direction."

"You are a little bundle of joy sometimes Jaheira," Harry muttered, looking at her thoughtfully, causing Khalid to let loose a crack of laughter and her to scowl. But he went on more seriously. "I don't suppose you have a seeing in the dark spell that you could use on Imoen and I? It's dark as blazes in here, and I'd rather not have one of us have to hold a torch instead of a weapon or shield."

"And here is an, an, another thing we can te, te, teach you," Khalid said with a laugh, as Jaheira stopped glaring to pull off her buckler, handing it to Harry to put in his items space for her with just a bit more force than was needed.

As he did so, Harry noticed that he had also somehow won twenty respect points.

You have earned +20 Respect points for Jaheira. Huh? It looks like Jaheira might have a sense of humor. Don't let on you can tell though, she might have to kill you.

While Harry read that and again wondered why the AA skill didn't seem to like Jaheira, the half-elf herself pulled out from her bag, her physical bag rather than her item box, some flint and tinder. Looking around she then picking up a hunk of wood from a box next to the door, dowsing it with a little bit of cooking oil, to get the fire going.

She then held the torch in her shield hand, while still holding her slingshot in the other.

Imoen looked at her, then around the interior of the house from the protection of the doorway before shaking her head. “No way could I get an arrow shot off in these close confines. I hope you don’t mind if I borrow that buckler of yours.”

“Not at all child, although I do not think you had a spot in sword and shield.”

“Only the one,” Imoen said grimly. “But, any help is, you know, helpful.” She then equipped her short sword, before activating her skill Hide in Shadows.

Harry ignored the normal heads up communication on that score as he entered the doorway, with Khalid behind him for a moment before Harry had him spread out and back to Harry’s shield side. They fell into a diamond formation, with Harry in the front, Khalid to one side, with Imoen to the other side of him and Jaheira in the far back closest to the door, which slowly closed behind them, leaving them in torchlight alone. Imoen was not there to the other’s senses, but Harry could still see her on his map.

What he couldn’t see were any enemies. That wasn’t good. It meant that creatures with an ambush specialty could avoid his map’s detection, something which he told the others as it occurred to him. They all noticed then that the interior of the house was as dark as Harry had feared. The windows, such as they were, had been covered up by inches thick webs, blocking out the light. But from the light of the torch, he could make out a fireplace set to one side, a few chairs, one quite nicely padded, a doorway leading into what was probably a kitchen, judging by what he could see through the doorway, and a set of stairs leading upwards.

They moved forward, and he asked in a whisper, “Is there any way to spot them before they attack? My map is not helping here.”

“No,” Jaheira said, her own eyes sweeping the interior, looking very deliberately away from the torch in her hand. Then she spotted the fireplace and pulled back her hand hurling the torch forward with surprising accuracy.

The torch landed in the fireplace, where, as she had thought, some very dry wood started to catch fire as well, which gave them a little more firelight first set few seconds and as she did, the spiders attacked.

One of them appeared in front of Jaheira, leaping forward and bearing her to the earth with a startled cry. But she had been tense since entering the house expecting

something similar and had her staff up between herself and the biting mandibles of the spider.

Another spider appeared in front of and leaped onto Harry, his bestiary opening to it's new page at the same time.

Huge Spiders

These large, dangerous ambush predators hail from all around Faerun. Their hides are as tough as a rhino's, their bites sometimes carry poison, and their limbs are strong enough to knock a grown man off his feet. They are immune to web, hold animal, but not Tangle or other similar spells. Their bodies take slashing attacks better than thrust type, and worse are blunt object strikes which can do internal damage.

Attitude towards adventurers: antipathy. If you don't enter their territory they won't bother you. If you do, then you are fare game, just like everything else they can catch and eat

Weaknesses: Contrary to popular belief, spider web doesn't burn. Water can drown them, but concussive type magic works best. They also don't like operating in light.

But he lifted his shield, getting it between the two of them and taking the things wait on it, slicing quickly with his sword. The side of the spider seemed to absorb much of his blow, but still it started to bleed, chattering in as much pain as anger now, it's mandibles flailing and it's legs trying to scabble around the shield to Harry.

Khalid faced two of the beasts, and wavered moving one way than the other, blocking and then dodging. Then Imoen appeared out from behind her own Hide in Shadows, beside one of the beasts, thrusting sideways, slamming her hand on to the hilt of her sword to push her short sword deeper into the creature. It squealed, convulsing but its tough hide was unable to stop a thrust like that and Imoen's sword burst through her his abdomen unlike Harry's slash,, which had been blunted by the naturally bristly skin of the spider.

Khalid has used shield bash.

Shield Bash successful, Huge Spider is stunned.

Harry saw this message as Khalid attacked the other one, smashing it backwards with his shield. The Stun actually caused it to collapse to the ground, its legs flailing out from beneath it. This opened up its head and body to a stab from his sword, and Khalid killed it a second later with a stab right between the eyes.

That spider was the first to actually die, followed next by Imoen's, but the one which had attacked Harry had retreated. At the same time, Harry could hear the skittering of more as suddenly a rash of tiny red dots appeared in the corner of his map in the direction of the stairwell. Lots of them.

Seeing that and also having taken in the rest of the downstairs, Harry made a choice. *Tower shield don't fail me now!* "Khalid, Imoen help Jaheira, then clear out the kitchen, I'll guard the stair!" He shouted, as he himself moved towards the doorway and the stairwell leading up.

He got halfway up before several dozen more spiders, smaller ones began to skitter into view down the stairs, crawling over the stairs and one another to get to one another.

Small Spiders.

While still much larger than the common house spider these younglings are actually much smaller than the average giant spider. Like all spiders, they are immune to Web but can be affected by other immobilizing spells such as Entangle. Beyond their unusual size, their poison attack is more potent than the larger variety of spiders, but their hit points are less than a fourth of the huge spiders they later become, making them ever so much more squishable.

One of them died instantly as Harry smashed it with the bottom of his shield, indeed squishing nicely despite Harry not having the Shield Bash skill. He then sliced his sword sideways, catching another spider across its eyes, causing it to back away, one of its eight eyes busted open.

But the spiders coming behind those two were not stopped by Harry's first victim. They crawled over them then started climbing up his tower shield, and around him, trying to swarm him under, but unable to: thankfully they couldn't push themselves through the banister to one side, and Harry's shield protected him from one side of the stairwell to the other.

Harry stabbed over his shield and down, killing one spider, then another, but the weight of them started to tell on his footing and he fought for balance on the steps. "Gah, I hate giant spiders!"

Behind him, Imoen and Khalid finished off the one spider that Harry had wounded, before moving to Jaheira's aid, who had been holding off the spider that had taken her to the ground with her staff, the middle of the staff latched between the mandibles of the spider, as she twisted this way and that trying to shift its weight off her.

Luckily, the larger spider's feet didn't seem to be strong enough to punch through her chain mail, although she looked more than a little battered around the edges as they finally got to her, Khalid thrusting down into the back of the spider before grabbing the spider by the back of the head and pulling it off his wife tossing it aside.

Jaheira rolled then, push to her feet, and angrily slammed her staff into the ground. "Bark Skin!" She shouted, gesturing towards Harry.

Jaheira has cast bark skin on you. This spell gives the target's skin all the durability of the bark of a mighty oak.

Durability +8 For the duration of the spell. Harry is now immune to poison.

It was a good thing she had done that, because Harry had been unable to keep the spiders from trying to swarm over his shield, and three of them had already bitten him. He had started to see the world in green, accompanied by the blasé notice of:

You are now poisoned. -1 to health every minute until healed.

But once Jaheira's spell hit, Harry could feel the bites no longer being able to sink home. *Okay, I think I have a new favorite druid spell,* he thought, crushing one of the spiders to him with a bear hug, then grabbing up his sword and pushing two of the ones still on his shield away.

He still held the bottom of the stair though he'd been pushed backwards several steps, and the spiders still couldn't move around him. Thanks to his tower shield, and now's Jaheira spell, Harry was able to withstand it. Jaheira cast two healing spells, and a cure poison spell in swift succession, her fingers flying as she intoned the spells while Imoen and Khalid dealt with two more huge spiders in the doorway leading into the kitchen.

“Clear the kitchen before you come and help,” Harry repeated. “The last thing we need is to be attacked from behind.”

Grabbing up a chunk of now burning wood from the fireplace, Imoen and Jaheira and Khalid entered the kitchen quickly, looking around. Jaheira stayed there to tear out the spiderwebs and then moved resolutely to the windows, tearing down the spiderwebs there as Khalid and Imoen went to Harry’s aid. They took up position behind him and to the side of the stairwell stabbing up. Unlike the spiders, their swords could get through the banisters.

She was called back to heal Harry one more time before the flow of spiders finally began to peter out. “That was reckless, stupid, vainglorious...” Jaheira said, before breathing in deeply. “And quite effective, much as I don’t like admitting it. She shook her head. “You have a head for tactics I have to admit. It that lot of spiders able to spread out, we would’ve had a much harder time.”

True, although I think from now on you were going to get into a fight, I am going to ask you to use that spell on as many of us as possible,” Harry said in reply, looking up the stairs. “So, do we finish down here first, or...”

“Finish down here first,” the others intoned, and Harry nodded approval. He stayed at the stairwell just in case more spiders were going to suddenly decide to throw themselves down into the murder alley that he had created there, but none appeared.

After that despite Harry’s concerns the fight on the second story was much easier than the first. They only ran into two large spiders there, larger than the others called sword spiders. Their legs were tipped with sword-like ends that were troublesome to deal with, causing several wounds to Harry and Khalid as they leaped out of their own Hide in Shadows. But without their fellows around they died faster, though the last one did knock Harry off his feet when his sword shattered on contact with one of its legs.

Groaning in more annoyance than pain, Harry held out his hands and was pulled to his feet by Khalid and Jaheira. “Well,” he said cheerfully I suppose that will teach me to...”

“Always make certain that an enemy is downed and dead Harry,” Jaheira said sternly, although her lips were twitching as she did.

For the next hour or so, the group went around the house, always in teams of two, just in case. They found several of the Small Spiders in areas whereby all rights they

should never have been able to hide given their own size. However, they didn't find any further dangers. The house was small and had been quite organized and clean at one point..

"It makes me wonder how the spiders got in," Harry mused.

"Spiders like that can creep in occasionally, although, I don't know how they were able to multiply without her calling in the guards." Jaheira said with a nod.

"M, m, maybe the guards just don't c, c, care about anything within the to, to, town so long as they're protecting it fr, fr, from external threats," Khalid asked shrugging her shoulders.

Imoen laughed shaking her head. "Nope, it was all a land grab scheme."

"A what," Khalid and Jaheira asked, while Harry simply furrowed his brows, confusion plain on his face.

"It was a land grab scheme. The woman who gave us this job gave me a bit more background before you came back Harry. Her next-door neighbor planted them here, she wanted to basically buy out the house cheap. But the Flaming Fists discovered her part in the scheme and though they were unwilling to put forth the effort to clean out the spiders once the infestation had gained so much members, they arrested her the day before Landrin met us," Imoen reported.

"That is kind of disturbing to be frank," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I mean come on; those spiders could eventually have spread out from the house right?"

"Yes they could have," Jaheira said simply. "I imagine that the next-door neighbor is going to be answering some very pointed questions by the town's counsel about this."

"Regardless," Harry said with a shrug "I think we have a base of operations for our time in Beregost."

"Indeed. If we stay here for any length of time this place will serve," Jaheira approved. She looked around, smiling slightly at the sight of the interior of the main room now sans spiderwebs. "It's certainly nice enough, almost homey, and once we get rid of all the spiderwebs, it'll actually be quite clean and then wash down the interior it will be very nice indeed. But, I'll warn you that Beregost isn't near enough to Nashkel to serve as a base of operations for our investigation there."

“True, but it’s a big town, I think we should stay here for of maybe three days, look around, do some odd jobs while also investigating anything about the bandits, sub-humans and the Iron Intake Issue.”

“Two days max,” Jaheira said firmly. “We must go on to Nashkel as soon as possible.”

“Khalid, Imoen? Your thoughts?” Harry asked, rather than trying to persuade Jaheira on her own.

Khalid thought about it, then shrugged. “I thi, th, think we don’t have enough in, in, information about what is go, g, going on here. Valerie to, to, told us, or rather she told y, y, you,” the older man said teasingly, “that there were a few dangers ar, ar, around the town, b, b, but are they connected to o, o, our real purpose? We don’t kn, kn, know yet.”

Harry nodded, understanding his point. Imoen shrugged. “I’d prefer to stay here a few days, but I have to admit that they’re right Harry. With that messenger guys message, I don’t think we can afford to really wait.”

“Exactly. The tension between Amn and Baldur’s Gate must end before anything else,” Jaheira said.

Harry winced. “Okay, I’d forgotten about though political tensions, sorry.”

Jaheira simply nodded magnanimous in her victory, deliberately biting her tongue to call him boy or youth or some such. Harry had proven himself to her over the past few days, and so she would not denigrate him like that. Not unless he screwed up royally, which simply forgetting the political aspects of the Iron Intake Issue was not.

“So one day? Or a day and a half?”

Something like that unless we find clues to a local individual who is connected to the Iron Intake Issue,” Jaheira said, sighing. “And oh my, that alliteration is getting irritating.”

“You’re telling me.” Harry grumbled. “My AA skill’s sense of humor can wear on anyone, but you all don’t have to put up with a 24 seven. Did you know what it said that one night we camped out right after taking care of the kobolds?”

He waited, then went on in a louder tone, making his voice deliberately jolly, like someone trying to come off as friendly but with a snowballs chance in hell of actually being believed. “You have slept for eight hours. And you haven’t been attacked either, wow, that Luck stat really does work for you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jaheira said dryly “That would be quite annoying. And now I am quite correct grateful that I do not have such a system. With my temperament, that would drive me up the wall.”

“We would say drive you batty,” Imoen said with a laugh. “But then again, we grew up in a keep.

“Bats are quite nice creatures, why would you say something like that? They eat mosquitoes and other allies, and are actually quite intelligent for their size,” Jaheira said her brows furrowing as she looked at the two of them. “I quite like them.”

Harry and Imoen blinked staring at her, then looked at one another and shrugged “Must be a druid thing,” they said as one, causing Khalid to laugh and Jaheira to roll her eyes.

Soon the cleanup was done, and after getting their beds ready, the group of them left the building, checking the time of day by staring up at the sun, which was just starting to set. “I think we should look around for short-term quests, stuff we can do in a day or so, and then head over to that tavern that Valerie mentioned.”

“Anxious for your date?” Jaheira teased, getting the words in before Imoen could, causing the younger girl to pout.

Harry shrugged, looked away sheepishly. “Well, she is good looking, and um, seemed interested in me so we’ll see where it goes.”

Unfortunately, while there were quests around the town, **none** could be accomplished without going out of their way. There was a ‘Blast Barbarous Bandits’ quest, which was being offered by the Governor of the town. There were several quests to hunt down this or that sub sentient band to return lost items. There was a missing person, a wife asking them to keep an eye out for her husband when they left the town heading south. There was indeed the Ankheg quest being offered by the local blacksmith, but they didn’t have any Ankheg hide yet.

And finally, there was indeed a paladin in the town, but he was not at all what Harry had expected. First of all, they found him in the Jovial juggler, a tavern which was popular among the younger set of the town, which was apt, since Bjornin was young, almost as young as Harry, and seemed even younger, with a baby face and innocent, if down on his luck, expression.

Harry took one look at the guy labeled 'Bjornin, Paladin of Tyr level 7, and bit his lip to stop himself from asking if he really was a paladin. Instead, he slid onto a stool next to him and asked, "Paladin Bjornin? Officer Valerie said you had a quest to offer a party of adventurers."

Bjornin twitched, nodding his head as he took in Harry, who was at least a foot taller than him, then his companions. "Um, yes, I, I do have a job for you. Um, I, I was ambushed by a group of ogres. They are attempting to fortify a chasm near Fisherman's Lake. It's an important source of food in these times of trouble. I, I attempted it myself but as much as I am a paladin, my skills have never laid in warcraft really."

"You don't say?" Jaheira muttered under her breath, obviously not impressed.

"Is this quest time sensitive?" Harry asked, ignoring her words and Imoen's snicker.

"No, um, no. There aren't very many of them, just the four, and they moved into the area just the day before last. I attempted to oust them the same day, but as I said my strength lies in my faith and piety rather than my sword arm. I was able to injure two slightly and take the arm off one, suit, but I was forced to flee back to town when my blade broke. I shan't try that again, believe you me."

"In that case, we have an existing quest that is taking us south. But as soon as we are done that quest we will return to Beregost and deal with these ogres for you," Harry decided.

Bjornin thanked them, and after asking a few questions about Tyr, Imoen provided Harry an excuse to leave quickly before Bjornin could start proselytizing. After that with night now fallen, Harry led the trio to the Red Sheath, where they were going to meet Valerie for the reward of six hundred gold for the twelve bandit scalps. As they were walking, Harry frowned noticing something for the first time.

"What is it?" Imoen asked, looking over at them quizzically having notices frown.

“I just realized, that my mapping ability doesn’t look into houses and suchlike,” Harry said.

“Ac, ac, actually, that and the fact that it wa, wa, wasn’t able to see the spiders as t, t, they were using h, h, Hide in Shadows m, m, makes me feel better a, a about it. If it could d, d, do those two things, it would ju, ju, just be too powerful an ab, ab, ability to be believed could be si, si simply randomly given to you. E, e, even if you are a s, s, son of the Murder Manwhore,” Khalid said with a chuckle, using Harry’s term for the former God.

“Hey! That might be my father you’re talking about,” Harry said, causing Jaheira Imoen and Khalid to all stare at him in shock, before he went on smirking “even if he is a manwhore.”

They laughed, and Harry opened the door, pausing as his map updated instantly. He moved forward, frowning instantly as he saw where everyone’s markers were. There were fourteen people within the Red Sheath, it was hard to tell given some of the dots were overlapping in the main bar room.

But That wasn’t why he was frowning or had slowed down his steps. This was caused by the fact that most of them were the blue of noncombatants. One of them was even pulsing blue, and he supposed that might mean Valerie. But one of them was orange, and that orange signified a dwarf named Kharlat, Warrior level 3, who had been lounging against the wall in the outer area of the inn, a small welcome area cut off from the rest which had two fireplaces, unlit at the moment, and lots of coat racks. He supposed it was for wintertime. People could warm themselves up out here, leave behind the codes, and any snow they tramped in.

But the man, a dwarf, had been waiting there, and he looked up, his eyes bright as he sought spotted Harry. But Harry knew the orange meant a possible enemy, and so was ready when the man said, “No offense, but you shouldn’t have ever pissed off whoever you did piss off. But, money is money, and I’s mean to earn mine.”

With that, the man moved forward, stepping in close and moving for a stab with a short sword. Harry however simply dodged aside, his previously empty hand now holding a sword which came around in an arc to slice into the side of the man’s face. This greatly decreased the man’s hit points and burst an eyeball as well as tearing across his nose even as he pulled away. Kharlat staggered sideways and then Jaheira’s sling stone put out his

other eye right before Harry's sword swept back, cutting his throat. Before he could even start screaming really the dwarf had fallen dead at their feet.

"Let that be a lesson folks," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "Even a warrior's hit points aren't enough to make you invincible. And one on four odds are freaking horrible. The moron."

The brief sounds of battle had been audible inside the Sheath, and Valerie and two others stepped out. The other two were workers of some kind, large powerfully looking man, but unarmed, whereas Valerie had a sword, holding it like the Warrior she was. However, she frowned seeing Harry, and then the gnome. "Kharlat! He's a cut purse and a drunk, but I didn't think he would be stupid enough to ply his trade with you all."

Harry shook his head. "I believe he intended to make the jump up to bounty hunting. It seems I have made an enemy somewhere out there," said, searching the body and pulling out the bounty notice he had expected to find there, reading it aloud before handing over to Valerie. Everything was the same as the last one but the price being offered. "It's gone up to, it was only two hundred and fifty gold before, now it's three hundred and fifty."

Harry also noticed that dealing with him so quickly had given him two hundred and seventy experience points. *Not as much as the first assassins they dealt with back in the Friendly Arm Inn, but then again this one was acting alone.*

Valerie grinned, her eyes racking up and down Harry's body, and Harry saw a message.

Valerie's interest in you has increased, Valerie's relationship status is now Extremely Interested. She doesn't want to jump your bones, but she wouldn't say no to your jumping hers either either.

Harry shook his head slowly internally at that, almost but not quite worried about where this was going now.

"Mmm, that's interesting, I like a man who makes powerful criminal enemies~," she said almost cooing the words, linking her arm with his. "Let me buy you a drink, and you can tell me all about it."

“Do you kn, kn, know what the wine sel, se, selection is like here?” Khalid asked, moving into the main hall with the two of them, his face lighting up eagerly.

“We’ve got quite a large selection I think,” Valerie said. “Although I’m more of a mead drinker myself.”

Khalid sighed theatrically at that. “H, h, humans, you wouldn’t kn, kn, know a good drink if you sw, sw, swam in it.”

“Harsh,” Harry muttered, turning his head as he heard Jaheira huff irritably.

Imoen was also looking at Khalid, then back to Jaheira. “So it wasn’t just at the Friendly Arm Inn?”

Jaheira shrugged, looking a little defensive. “He started to drink to help with the pain initially from the spell blast he took that caused his stutter. His recovery from the physical impact was at the time quite painful, but since, he does seem to have started to take too much interest in drink for my tastes.”

“Well, I’ll stay sober with you if you want,” Imoen said with a chuckle. “I’m not much of a drinker myself, whatever ya might have thought seeing me in action back at the Friendly Arm Inn.”

“No you just like flirting,” Jaheira teased back, and the two women followed Khalid, intent on keeping him out of trouble.

Once his friends had moved off, Valerie took Harry’s arm in both of hers, snuggling up next to him, pushing her chest into his side. Since she was no longer wearing armor, this was very noticeable. She then started to pull him, unresisting, to a nearby booth, where a magically chilled pitcher of mead and two steins already waited for them.

She pushed Harry into one side of the booth, then sat down next to him, wordlessly urging Harry to pour. After they’d both taken a drink she asked, “So are you going to tell me how you one that bounty?”

“I’d really rather not,” Harry replied shaking his head. “Sorry, it’s nothing personal but I think it might be dangerous for you?”

“Ooh, looking out for little old me big boy? Well, don’t worry, I won’t push. I think we can find something a lot more interesting to do with our time...”

A second later, their lips were locked in a kiss, and Harry found Valerie moving into his lap, slowly undulating against him. For a moment Harry just kissed back, then he began to see the messages he'd seen when with Cassandra.

You have activated advanced Perception at 67%.

This ability will allow you to read the body language, intent, and even desires of the individual you are romantically involved with. This will be shown by both a bit of an overall description, and then a wire outline.

Valerie enjoys being in the lead but might also enjoy the student passing the master. She is only mildly turned on and is into you for the moment due to your good looks and the air of mystery and power about you despite your relative low level. She has no wish to be involved further than a one night stand but might not even let it get that far if you start boring her.

After that, Valerie's body was outlined to Harry's eyes by an outline made of different colors, which faded into Harry's mind, giving him more 'impressions' than anything else, guiding his actions subtly. Her mouth was green, and as Harry slowly deepened the kiss, he started to feel how to kiss her, how she liked her tongue teased, how she liked her thigh touched, but not her rear. In this manner, Valerie slowly lost control of their make-out session to Harry first becoming flustered, then aroused before pulling back, her expression shifting from aroused to confused.

Harry let her, smirking slightly as she slowly moved off his lap to sit next to him. "Ahem, well, that was a nice start I suppose, but I think I need another drink now. Before that though, tell me what you think of our town?"

Later, Imoen was staring at a very happy, yet somewhat bemused Harry as the four of them returned to Landrin's house for the night. He had gotten several kisses make out sessions though she had seemed off-balance after the first kiss, as if not actually enjoying how well Harry could read her. It was something to keep in mind in the future. He had also gotten a promise for more from Valerie if he helped her kill off more bandit groups around Beregost.

"Why does it feel a little wrong that she put it like that?" Harry asked looking around at the other three as they sat down in the main sitting area of the house

Khalid was no help, his face was a little red from his wine intake, and Jaheira had propped him up in one chair. She was currently using his lap as a footrest, occasionally kicking him lightly in the side as she was doing it. It seemed as if it was a regular thing for him to get a little drunk, and for her to abuse him because of it, but Harry wasn't going to get involved one way or the other.

"Not so much," Jaheira said shaking her head. "It was obvious that Valerie liked the look of you, she only added on that bit of incentive at the end to make you come back to see her. Or she likes young men who are willing to get their hands dirty. Were you looking for something permanent?" Jaheira asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry thought about it, thought about Valerie, then thought about what he knew about relationships and what he liked about them. "I think I'm looking for something more permanent, but not from her. Hmm, that sound callous."

"Do not worry about it," Imoen said with a laugh. "She's what I think my mentor called a cougar."

Harry's eyes widened and much of his guilt about having not lived up to Valerie's expectations for the evening disappeared. But Jaheira needed more of an explanation, which Imoen, giggling gave. "It means an older woman who is into younger men."

"Ahh, yes, I have met such women before, although the age difference here isn't that large," she mused before shrugging and getting to her feet. "Still it is time for bed all." They had replaced the reed thrushes before heading out for the evening, and their cleaning up had been very thorough, so they were able to sleep the night away with only the faint scent of the spider repellent Jaheira had made invading her and Khalid's dreams.

The next day, Jaheira looked at the morose, bleary-eyed Khalid, and the cheerful Harry. He had also drunk enough last night to gain a hangover, but that didn't seem to be in evidence now. "Another advantage of your AA skill?"

"Yep," Imoen replied for Harry. "I ran into it back in the Friendly Arm Inn. I think if we can get to sleep, any status change will go away."

"Heh, now that is most definitely an incentive to become a full, trusted member of your party Harry. Certainly it would help my husband, especially if he insists on continuing the self-destructive behavior of last night. Getting drunk in public, honestly."

Her husband turned her head to mock glare at the woman, and she only pulled back the tea she had just made specially for him. "I'm sorry, what do we say?"

"I, I'm s, sorry," he whimpered, and I p, pr, promise not to drink t, to excess again."

"If only I could believe you'd actually keep that promise," Jaheira said with a laugh, handing over the herbal remedy for hangovers quickly. "I'd rather you promise not to eye up busty human barmaids, but I know that too to be an impossibility." *And rather harmless besides, since he would never jeopardize our relationship by going further.*

It was a known pattern among elves and half-elves who travelled among humans: they became entranced by humans as humans were by elves, attracted to their liveliness, their energy and enthusiasm, and, it had to be said, their bodies. Elves, both men and women, tended to athletic and lithe forms, and half-elves too. Broad chests, powerful muscles, and large breasts, these were almost unknown among elves (although Jaheira had heard that Drow broke that mold). Jaheira knew Khalid had a wondering eye, but also knew he would never act on it.

In all honesty, she had a bigger problem with his addiction to wine, something he had begun to deal with the pain of the interrupted spell which had given him his stuttering problem. *But even there he has it under control. He never drinks to excess unless we are in a safe place, and other than that he won't even drink while we are on the road. I will take that trade off every time.*

A few minutes later after it kicked in Khalid once more apologized for his attitude before adding, "But my d, d, dear, it isn't as if you are with, with, without fault either. I do se, se, seem to recall a time where we were for, fo, forced to spy upon a gladiatorial arena w, wh, which was being used to launder fu, fun, funds for a Zhentarim operation. You were quite t, t, taken with..."

Jaheira scowled, looking away. "That was one time," she said primly. "And indeed only a one day thing. Besides which, it was the gladiator's face rather than his body or what he had below the neck that attracted my attention, like you and barmaids."

Khalid chuckled, knowing he'd scored a point, and the two half-elves smiled at one another, shaking heads in unison.

"Is this a married thing?" Harry asked looking over at Imoen.

“I think it’s a married half-elf thing,” Imoen replied shaking her head.

“Anyway...” Harry said clapping his hands together to get everyone’s attention. “I think we have enough money now, with the money we’ve picked up along the way, and from the bounty on the bandits Valerie gave me, to check out the local blacksmith’s wares. Especially if he’s willing to pay good money for my lynx eye gems.”

Valerie’s words on the quality of the Smith quickly proved to be spot on as the quartet entered the smithy. It was large, larger than the Inn in Candlekeep actually, with seven different blacksmiths at work at any one time. One of them was on a small dais in the back, and read to Harry’s eyes as

Taerom Fuiruim Civilian.

Taerom is one of the most skilled and renowned blacksmiths in Amn or Baldur’s Gate, if not all of Faerun. Why he is acting as the chief blacksmith of a town like Beregost is no doubt a mystery. Regardless, he knows his craft, and what it is worth. Down to the last gold piece, alas.

Beware: Hagglng is not advisable with Taerom or anyone who works for him.

He was working on something as they arrived, a gauntlet of some kind from the look of it, forcing them to work with one of the blacksmith’s clerks instead of him himself. Harry looked through the weapons and armors the man was trying to sell them in thought. A few items instantly stood out, including one that was an interesting number.

Beruel’s Retort.

Throwing axe +1. This series of throwing axes were designed by a dwarven blacksmith who always wanted a retort hand and one which could follow the person he was...discussing things with if they should flee from his argument. This weapon is enchanted to deal extra damage.

Sold in packs of 5.

Throwing Axe +1, 50% critical hit if the user has two skill points in Axes.

Hmm, I really like having a long range weapon I don’t have to sacrifice my shield for, so it’s either something like this, which I honestly hadn’t considered before this, or the one-handed sling that Jaheira used. Pity I don’t have a skill point in axes. And that second

enchantment is impressive too. I think I might just by them to speculate, it's not like they are much money, only seventy five gold.

"First I want a pack of those," he said pointing at them. "After that, I suppose we should get the essentials out of the way. We need more arrows and arrowheads as well as at least one pack of crossbow bolts. And two each short and longsword. That should at least get us to Nashkel."

"Heh, aye they'll do that, and you'll be doing us a favor taking that crud off our hands. Not even the Master knows what's wrong with the iron, it heats the same, it reacts the same when struck, but it still cracks when tested. We've not been able to get in any good iron for more than a month. Lucky for us we're just as good working with wood and leather than iron, and we'd put away a good bit of iron too."

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

Even one of the greatest blacksmiths in the area can't tell you what has happened to the iron coming out of Nashkel. That points to something either magical or alchemical being done to the iron. The question then is, where is whatever this is coming from, and how is it getting into the iron?

+400 experience for the party members.

Be on the lookout for other single clues out there that will help you discover the source of the Iron Intake Issue!

Harry looked over the rest of what the smith was offering, quickly found a Short Bow +1 and a Medium Shield +1. A Small Shield +1 was reluctantly added to the pile, even though it's durability was down to 30 out of 100, while the others were still at 100 out of 100.

Harry asked about it, and was told that, "We got that sword in lieu of a payment at one point. If you want, you can perform some maintenance on it for you, but it will be an extra two hundred gold.

Harry winced, shaking his head. "Hell no. It's way too expensive as it is. Are you willing to take gems?" *If not we are not going to have gold for everything already.* Having gone through much of the cash they'd made in the tutorial to buy Harry's shield and pay half of the cost of Jaheira's sling back in the Friendly Arm Inn, Harry and Imoen had

around one thousand, five hundred gold, most of which came from the bounty on the bandits they had killed and selling off all the items they had found on the bandits and guards yesterday. Khalid and Jaheira had a further one thousand gold from their share of the bounties and items.

“It depends on the quality,” the clerk began, before Harry pulled out a pouch from his side. He had remembered Jaheira’s injunction about not showing off his item box’s utility and had prepared for this beforehand.

He poured out several of the gems he had earned back in Candlekeep, and the man put them up one after another, examining them with disinterest at first, then excitedly. “They’re all the same,” he muttered in some shock, pulling away his jeweler’s monocle. “And they’re all of good quality. I think I need to speak to my boss about this if you’re... um... how much are you going to sell?”

Harry was about to reply but paused as Imoen said, “Harry, look at these!”

He turned and looked to where Jaheira and Imoen were looking over several items set aside from the regular stuff on sale.

There were four of them, and they were listed as master crafted works of Taerom himself. One, was shadow armor a highly modified version of the best armor a thief could have, which was apparently used almost exclusively by the Shadowmasters of the Shadow Thieves in Amn. The next was a poisoned dagger the size of a small sword, which had a +2 to its base damage and a poison that would be automatically used on the victim every time it hit. After that was the Army scythe, a light crossbow with a speed spell on it to make it fire at three times the normal speed along with a +1 to damage.

The fourth item wasn’t enchanted at all but was still expensive as heck at nine thousand gold. Though given the iron shortage and the craftsmanship that was obvious in it Harry couldn’t argue with the idea of a full suit of plate armor being expensive.

All of them were expensive as hell, and Harry rapidly tallied everything together, then said very firmly, “No.”

Imoen looked at him and Jaheira raised an eyebrow. Harry gestured them close and whispered, “We don’t have enough money. Even if I sold all my gems at once we wouldn’t have enough to buy the items we’ve already picked out and even one of these.”

“Th, th, that’s a pity, la, la, lad. Your armor is not going to last v, v, very much longer. Y, y, you need an up, u, upgrade.” Khalid said.

“I’d like one, but we can’t afford it,” Harry said.

Making it look as if she was hugging him commiseratingly, Imoen whispered directly into his ear to ask “Would we if you unloaded your spices? The amount of that salt, pepper, and the rest would surely add to our tally. And Khalid’s right, even if we can’t get the rest, you need an armor upgrade, mister close range combatant.”

“I’ve already added them in to my calculations, and I’m not selling them here,” Harry said with an eyeroll. “Apparently, spices like that are the purview of a local merchant who has a monopoly on them. so I’d have to pay a major fine, which would half the amount of money I could get for them.”

Looking around at at the two half-elves, Harry raised his voice. “Regardless, I’m not about to spend all of our money on something just for me. It’s better to spread out the money for all of us, have all of us be better prepared than only one of us.” That was why he had pitched in to buy Khalid and Jaheira armor after theirs had been near to ruined in the ambush back in the Friendly Arm Inn.

Khalid smiled, and Jaheira nodded approval, although Harry noticed that he had lost twenty respect with her for the decision, and gained fifty trust, while gaining ten in each for Khalid. He could almost understand her reasoning behind that one considering he’d shown in the fight against the bandits that yes, he needed better armor and should be looking out for himself more. But his thoughts on that score stopped a second later, because another message box appeared on top of those.

+1 Level to leadership. Twice now you decisions regarding equipment that serve the good of the party, rather than yourself, proving that you have their best interests at heart and know that the many is stronger than the one. Your Leadership ability has leveled up!

Charisma +2, Willpower, +4. Your observation skills will now see more than the the average adventurer.

Now, that’s interesting, Harry thought to himself, not noticing that both Khalid and Jaheira were looking at him closely. Breaking out of it he saw their stares and asked, “What?”

Jaheira moved over and whispered, "Now that we know what to look for, both of us were able to see you staring off into the distance there, Harry. What happened?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll tell you later, it's more a long term thing than a short term one. And thanks, I'll try to work on that."

The half-elven woman nodded, still looking at him in interest for a moment before he turned back to the clerk. "Now, where were we?"

Eventually, Harry was able to buy the items they'd already picked out. He was able however to get a refurbishment of the small shield +1 for free, though he parted with the better part of a third of his remaining jewels to do it. Apparently Taerom was going to use them to create a kind of armor for a nobleman so was quite happy to see so many jewels cut similarly.

"Thank you for this, Harry," said Jaheira, shaking her head in some amusement as she put on the small shield +1 on her arm. "We're so used to having to deal with the bare minimum on assignment in this area that having some good gear is an immense relief."

Harry shrugged, and tapped his side where he had been stabbed during the fight with the bandits. "Let's call it even for all the healing spells you've used on me," he said, winking at her and causing Jaheira to laugh dryly, shaking her head.

As they exited the blacksmith's property, a man was walking by on the street in front of the shop. He took one look at their clothing, and then turned, purposefully moving towards them as he raised his voice in a near shout. "Gentlemen ladies, are you adventurers, and if so, might I inquire as to whether or not you are available for a small job?"

Behind Harry, Imoen murmured, "Oh my, now that is a pretty, **pretty** face."

"Far too pretty to be of much use," Jaheira replied. The two of them looked at one another than laughed.

Harry shook his head, looking over at Khalid. "Why is it if as if I feel as if my gender was just insulted?"

"F, f, female solidarity will give you that feeling quite a lot, H, h, Harry," Khalid said with a chuckle before turning back to the other man who had just strode up to them, so he didn't have to shout again. Evidently having been happy enough to get their attention

first. Harry looked at him, taking his body in before looking up at the message he saw above them.

He was at least a foot shorter than Harry, maybe standing 5 feet nine, 5 feet 10 with a thin, but still well-built body, a short sword at his hip, and some kind of instrument on his back. He wore leggings, and leather armor, although that wasn't exactly important, considering Harry had just left a blacksmith shop where he learned how expensive better armor was. A simple longbow also was tied to his back unstrung at the moment, and Harry supposed that he carried his arrows in his item box, although whether or not those were the only things in there and that they were thus useful, he didn't know.

His face was indeed rather pretty: high, sculpted cheekbones, a wide smile, that almost but didn't quite cross the line into vacuous, deep blue eyes, and magnificent blonde hair, obviously well cared for pulled back from his forehead into a ponytail. *If I was a petty person, I might hate this fellow on first sight he's that pretty*, Harry thought to himself. *Sort of what a good-natured Draco, if such a thing is actually possible at all, could look like.*

What was more interesting to Harry than his physical appearance though was the information he got from his newly advanced observation skill.

Garrick, level IV Bard.

A wandering Bard, Garrick has trained his wits, and his melodies rather than his body, hence his low level. Whether or not that equates to actually being useless in a fight, is unknown.

His strength, endurance, durability and perhaps willpower are all suspect, but Garrick's dexterity is something to be reckoned with.

That bit about his stats being impacted by his past choices, that's a very telling bit of information, Harry thought, fighting the urge to look at his companions and then activate the journal pages about them to see if he could discern more about their stats in turn. The mystery of why they were so much less capable in most ways they should be given their level was eating at him, but he refused to invade their privacy like that.

And he's our age Harry thought, turning his attention back to the pretty boy, *or should I say mine and Imoen's ages anyway.* Still, the fact that he had walked up to Harry and the others like this, meant he was either in trouble, and Harry is saving people thing

wasn't going to let him pass, or this could be interesting. "What do you need?" he asked instead.

"My name is Garrick, and I am currently in the employ of a famous singer, whose name is Silk. She was here on request of the Governor, but she was supposed to move on. However, she is being threatened by a local merchant whose threats have scared away her other guards. They are threatening to kill her unless Lady Silk stay and perform for them in a private setting. She is offering to pay any adventurers I find to aid her against this menace."

"By private setting I presume you mean something more will be required of her performance than merely song and dance?" Jaheira asked dryly.

"You have the right of it great lady," Garrick said with a bow that was as graceful as it was overdone towards her.

Jaheira's eyebrow rose in amusement, and Khalid coughed, staring at the man with unfriendly eyes for a moment. Harry chuckled, amused at the interaction, while Imoen mock-swooned, amusement plain on her own face.

"Still," Harry said aloud, "perhaps we should at least meet with the Silk. If she is in danger of being forced to what I think you are suggesting, I can't in good conscience leave a lady in such straits."

"Nor would I expect you to," Jaheira said, as the others all nodded. The decision was the right one instantly apparently, not just because Harry wouldn't have made any other decision of course, but because it won him one hundred relationship points with Imoen, and twenty trust and respect points with both Khalid and Jaheira. That put Khalid within a hundred in each of leveling up into friendship status, which was very interesting. Harry still had no idea whether or not the man would be willing to take part in the party system without his wife, who Harry was still less than two-thirds of the way to making the shift from travelling companion to friend.

"Lead the way Garrick," Harry said, once more putting the notes from his AA skill to one side in his mind.

Garrick coughed, and asked plaintively, "Um, might I have your names, adventurers?"

“Oh, right, I’m Harry, that’s Imoen, Jaheira and Khalid,” Harry replied.

Garrick nodded, and started to lead the way, making conversation with Imoen starting with her bubblegum pink hair. “It’s an amazing color, how do you keep it that bright a shade? I know a lot of bards and actresses who would love to be able to stand out like that.”

Imoen kept his attention on her for a time until they reached a small side street, where Garrick broke off, moving to the front of the group again. “There she is,” he said pointing ahead of them.

In the shadow of one of the buildings, a lady stood leaning against the side of the building. She was dressed in a cloak that covered her from shoulder down to ankle, but Harry could catch a glimpse of a good dress underneath, along with some jewelry around her neck, and some bangles on her wrists. She wore a kind of circlet or something in her hair to keep it out of her face, and the rest of her hair was slicked back and down.

She certainly looks the part of a decently wealthy actress, and singer. Her eyes however told him something different, and Harry’s newly upgraded of observed also warned him, as did his map, which showed her as a orange dot instead of the neutral blue of noncombatants.

Level 12 Mage, Silk.

Silk might look as if she is a fluttering nothing, but she has magic at her fingertips, and magic is the great equalizer. Beware, for you can also detect that she is wearing magical items.

As a Mage her stats are skewed to intelligence, wisdom and willpower above all, though like many mages, she might be able to offset this weakness in strength by summoning some muscle to help her.

Harry frowned, took a step backward from Garrick, to tap the nearest party member on their shoulder. This turned out to be Imoen, who had been looking down at Garrick’s butt with some approval on her face. She blinked and looked up at him, and Harry rolled his eyes but remained serious. “She’s more than she appears. If this woman needs help, we might be in for more of a fight than I thought.”

Imoen's eyes narrowed, but by that point, Garrick had hailed Silk, who was moving towards them so they both shut up and watched her come. "These are the adventurers I found to help us Lady Silk," Garrick said with a smile, and a deep bow, looking at Silk with calf eyes, and Harry blinked as another notice appeared in front of him, Garrick's name suddenly being lined with a light pink color.

Garrick is infatuated. While not as bad as being Charmed, this status disability will impact his willpower and his ability to make logical decisions in the presence of his light-a-love.

For once, my AA skill's snark is actually helpful, Harry mused, now more than a bit worried about what they might be walking into here. He gently nudged Imoen backwards bumping her into Jaheira and Khalid, and all three of them soon spread out, staying away from Silk but doing so in such a way that it almost looked natural.

"Thank you for your help adventurers," Silk said, her tone, low, almost velvety or smoky, a voice made to grab a man's attention. Both Harry and Khalid felt it, and Khalid had to shake his head and look away. Harry saw another message from his AA skill about his having passed a Willpower Check as Silk continued to speak, staring at Garrick, then the others, coming back to stare at Harry with deep, almost luminous black eyes.

"I know not what I did to draw this unwelcome interest from the man, but the chief gem merchant in this town has been after me since I arrived. I ordered a bird necklace from the man, and when it was finished, I had intended to pay him, but instead of allowing me to simply pay for it and leave, he raised the price, and then indicated he would be more than willing to lower it back down for a, a private session."

Silk shivered, a frightened look appearing on her face. "When I refused to such a deal, I found myself accosted by his toughs every time I turned around, up to and including harassment at the inn I am staying at. He frightened away the two guards I arrived with in this manner. But because he is a wealthy merchant, the Flaming Fist guards refused to believe my story, so I am forced to look elsewhere for help."

"Not even Lieutenant Valerie believed you?" Harry asked sharply.

The woman frowned a little bit at Harry, perhaps for his knowing the name of the Flaming Fist officer, though Harry wasn't certain, but nodded her head. "She and I, well, women sometimes develop irrational hatred's for one another upon meeting, and I'm rather afraid that our first meeting was when I was on stage singing. So Valerie and I do not get along to put it mildly."

Harry frowned at that; he didn't think that Valerie would be that irrational. *But who knows, Pansy and Hermione certainly formed a cordial hatred the instant they met one another, so it could be possible.* "Okay, I understand your problem miss. So do you want us to guard you as you leave the town, or..."

"Not at all no, I would not wish to take you out of your way like that," Silk said, a faint scowl on her face as she gestured down the street behind her. "The man has reached out to me for a meeting, here at this time. That's why I was so thankful to see you and your fellows Mister..."

"Harry," Harry supplied. "And you agreed to meet with them?"

"The alternative was to have them stop taking my no for an answer **entirely**. I felt that even if Garrick would be was unable to find adventurers that could help me, I could at least talk my way out of anything dangerous for a time in public like this." She looked over at Garrick, bestowing a wan smile on him, and Harry could almost see the other young man's mind go on a holiday as he flushed. "And I had told Garrick that if couldn't find adventurers, to at least find a few witnesses."

Garrick nodded, indicating that had been the case, and Harry scowled internally, idly noticing that Khalid and Imoen seemed to have bought Silk's story while Jaheira looked skeptical. For his part, while her story seemed plausible, there was something about the woman that was setting his hackles on end, above and beyond her being a mage and a possible enemy. He just couldn't figure out what.

Still, he nodded, and told Silk, "Well we're at your service then." He smiled suddenly. "We can talk about our payment afterwards, although I'll warn you, we are in the need of some funds right now."

Silk nodded agreement to that, since it made sense not to make any such plans before they understood what was needed. As Harry and Silk finished talking, six men appeared at the far end of the small alleyway, moving towards them. One of them was very obviously a well to do merchant, a little overweight, and very, very well dressed. He reminded Harry of some of the lords and ladies back in, Candlekeep who had paid their way into the keep rather than found a book to use as their entrance fee.

The other five were obviously bodyguards of some kind, leather armor, small shields, and short swords. And like Silk, in the map to Harry's senses, unlike the rest of the people who Harry's map had found in the town, they were orange. Each of them was

reading to his senses as 'private guards not much on their own, but be wary of them in groups', but unlike the Flaming Fists, they each had their own names. Weird, but not something Harry wanted to think about right now.

At that moment, Silk pointed at the men coming towards them dramatically. "You see! This was supposed to be a meeting between myself and the merchant himself alone or with one companion, and he comes with five, all armed for trouble? He obviously intends to strong arm me despite our being in public! Do your duty adventurers!

"What do you mean?" Harry frowned, while his companions all readied their weapons, even Jaheira, although very reluctantly in her case.

"Attack!" Silk she shouted, pointing at the merchant and his guards. "Is that so hard to understand?"

"You want to attack us before we even hear what they have to say? Hell no," Harry said shaking his head. "I'm not going to do it."

As he spoke, Harry barely noticed the notice going up in his vision of the fact that he had made a choice, and Silk growled, as the merchant came up to them.

"Lady Silk," he said, smiling disarmingly. "I thought that this business was supposed to be between the two of us. Why have you brought adventurers with you? Surely you don't feel threatened by me and my men. Even here in Beregost when one goes to deliver as many gems as you purchased from me one should have protection."

"That's interesting," Harry said, stepping back away from Silk and now looking at the two of them with a frown on his face. "Because she told us she had paid you for some work you had done, and you upped the price and refused to turn it over without a more personal payment than money.. But the way you're talking, it sounds as if you're here to give her some of your wares?"

Behind him, he could feel Imoen and the half-elves both stepping back as well, moving into a formation Khalid to his right, and Jaheira and Imoen directly behind him. With the enemies this close, both women had shifted from their long range weapons to a short sword for Imoen and her staff for Jaheira and were watching the possible conflict closely.

The merchant huffed. "Good sir, I am a prosperous and wealthy merchant, why ever would I jeopardize by standing in the community by importuning someone like Silk! Besides, my wife would skin me alive! No, I had given lady Silk a piece of jewelry that she had commissioned, but she had only paid me half of the agreed upon price but then mentioned she would pay for more, and for some cut gems too, at this time here."

Silk scowled at Harry, pointing at the man dramatically. "He's lying, obviously."

"Someone's lying," Harry said with a nod. "I'm just not certain which of you is the one doing it. Regardless, I'm not about to start a fight here in a town, until I have all the information."

While the merchant just nodded his head, evidently understanding and approving of Harry's caution, Silk scowled angrily, her beautiful face now nowhere near as beautiful. She waved her hand slightly and a series of messages cascaded through Harry's mental eye. "Are you sure you won't change your mind," Silk whispered, smiling at him, her tone shifting into a sensual caress. "For me?"

Willpower Check Passed. You have a strong will and have thrown off Silk's attempt to use the spell Charm on you.

Imoen has been confused.

At the same time, Harry could see new status symbols appearing under Garrick, Khalid's, and three of the five guard's names. They all had been Charmed and would thus obey any order given to them by Silk for a set amount of time.

"I don't think so," Harry said taking a step backwards. "This is not my problem," he said as he reached out and thumped Imoen on the back of the head, causing her confusion to falter, and her to step back into Jaheira. Khalid was still looking at Silk with love in his eyes though, and Harry scowled angrily remembering the fact that Khalid had a negative to such mental spells. "Release my companions from your spell Silk, or else!"

Jaheira to was looking at her husband worriedly, whispering something Elven. But that was all the attention Harry could spare for his party as Silk growled angrily, stepping back. "Fine! I should've known better than to trust Garrick to find right sort of adventurers for this! But if I have to do this myself, I will."

"Boys!" she said suddenly to the merchants guards. "Get them."

The four charmed guards instantly turned on the merchant and one guard who hadn't been enchanted. The remaining guard put himself, his sword hacking out before they could attack, tying up one of them instantly. "Snap out of it ya bastards!"

Another moved to help their fellow against him, while two of the others came for Harry. But Harry leaped forward, moving quicker than the two to charmed men had been prepared for, going shield to shield with one man, and pushing him into his fellow off balance. *I'm getting a real hang of this shield combat thing, even if I can't use Shield Bash just yet.* At the same time Harry's sword flashed, and took the man in the side, cutting through his leather armor and deep into his chest, before pulling back out, sending him falling to the ground gasping in shock. "Don't kill them, just wound them severely enough to knock them out of the Charm spell!"

To one side, Jaheira had engaged her husband, an utterly ferocious scowl on her face as she used her druid's staff to smack away his blows. Luckily the Charmed spell removed the individual's higher brain functions, and he was just attacking her in the same pattern over and over.

Imoen had already disappeared under Hide in Shadows, but she now reappeared next to the non-enchanted guard, successfully backstabbing one of his opponents, and then engaging the other beside the last remaining guard. The stabbed fellow fell groaning and holding the injury to his side, the horrible nature of the wound knocking him out of the charmed spell. But Garrick, who had been edging forward to confront the merchant before this, now took up her attention, the two of them exchanging blows back and forth. It looked as if Garrick was extremely fast and accurate, if not very strong, but then again, neither

That part of the fight looked even, but Harry cursed as he realized that Imoen hadn't realized how dangerous Silk was. Before he could finish the last guard facing him Silk had already conjured up a shield around herself and was now gesticulating and intoning rapidly in a magical incantation. "Summon Monster: Golems!" she shouted.

Two long strips of red and black that looked almost like wounds torn into the air appeared for a moment, and from within two large humanoid looking creatures. They were large, taller than Harry, wider in the body, with formless faces and chests, oversized fists and two gleaming red eyes. And as they did, the bestiary page about them appeared, with a bit more information than before thanks to Harry's observation ability having gone up with his Leadership skill.

Flesh Golems, level 4

Golems are tough, durable creations of magic that enchanters and sorcerers often use as labor or guards. Depending on the variety, they can range from just dangerous, to insanely deadly. Flesh golems are the lowest class of Golem, but do not let that fool you.

Immune to Backstab. Immune to Poison. Immune to Pure Magical Attacks. Immune to electricity. Immune to Cold.

Enhanced durability: +25% Extra Armor against blunt damage, +50% resistance Against Slashing, +25 Damage Against Long Range Weaponry

These golems don't seem as well made as most of the breed though, perhaps you can have some success aiming for the same weak points you would find on a human body.

And remember to Stab, not Slash!

"Get out of here!" Harry shouted at the merchant, smacking the guard he'd been facing off balance and racing around him towards the mage, getting in close. But with Khalid tying up Jaheira, and Garrick and Imoen dueling to the other side, that left Harry alone to face Silk and her two summoned guards. She didn't seem to be conjuring anything new though, and in fact looked to be gasping, swaying in her feet.

Summoning the golems must've taken out of her on top of that shield. No wonder Jaheira thought that my and Imoen's shield was strange though, her shield looks really different in comparison to ours. Whereas their shield was an almost solid construct of blue energy, the sphere around Silk was a coruscating wave of different colors,

The next second Harry winced as a blow landed on his shield, so strong his arm throbbed, and Harry stumbled backwards, all his momentum halted. He also noticed that his tower shield +1 had just lost about ten points of durability from that one blow. In turn the golem he'd stabbed had lost five.

In reply he flashed forward, stabbing into the side of the other golems as it tried to come at him from the side. But the golem kept moving, wrenching his sword out of his grip. A second later, his ability to switch from one weapon to another came into play once more, and he twisted around the next blow of the golem, using his shield to carry the blow to one side, and then bringing his backup warhammer down in an overhead strike, slamming it into the thing's forehead. He could see that the blow had made the thing lose

about 15 health, with twenty five left, and he shook his head. *Damn, just like fighting an adventurer, you can't kill them with a single good strike.*

The next second, the second golem's blow slammed into him, and this time Harry wasn't able to superimpose his shield in time, the shield out of position having carried the blow of the first golem to the side. He grunted in pain as he saw a message pop up informing him he'd lost 14 points of health, followed by a second.

You have broken a rib. Movement is impaired, speed is impaired. Agility is impaired.

If not healed by a spell, this wound will continue to have an impact on your body.

Rolling along the ground, Harry came to his knees, flinging his hammer around in a wide arc. The blow slammed into one of the golem's knee causing it's knee to collapse under it for just a moment. Then Harry was past it his hammer disappearing as he stabbed forward with another sword, slamming his full power behind the thrust. It staggered back, losing another fifteen health points, but it grabbed his outstretched arm with both arms, and before Harry could set his feet he found himself hauled off them and hurled into the wooden side of the building to one side.

So hard was the throw Harry's back broke through the wood and he continued to crash to the floor until he slid to a stop, his body, in particular his back, throbbing with pain so much he didn't need the message about his having lost another twenty five health to know he was hurting.

But then the two golems made a mistake. They followed him into the house, away from any witnesses. Still kneeling on the ground Harry looked up at them and allowed an almost vicious smile to appear on his face. "Incendio!" The fire spell lashed out in a line of fire to slam into the head and chest of the least wounded Golem. Then Harry changed his target, flashing the fire towards the second golem, who almost panicked despite being a construct, backing away rapidly. A second spell, Imoen's Lacero spell lashed out, pulling both golems off their feet, and they rolled on the ground, desperately trying to put out the fire despite still not letting out a sound.

Ignoring the twin hits to his health points even as he started to feel a pounding headache at the back of his skull, Harry trooped forward, and brought his hammer down hard on the back of the Golem's skulls one after another. With the least damaged golem before this it took three heavy blows to the head, with Harry actually having to dodge around it as it rolled around on fire. But eventually the two golems were dead, and he

trooped out the hole in the wall, grateful that no one had been home to see or be run over by the battle.

At the same time Harry was dealing with the two Golems, Imoen and the guard were fighting the last two guards on their feet, the one Harry had bypassed having joined their part of the fight, and Garrick. Garrick wasn't a bad swordsman despite his lack of strength, and he was actually faster and more dexterous than Imoen. Imoen's agility allowed her to dodge his blows, but she hadn't been able to land a blow in return or back away to slip into Hide in Shadows again.

Then the notice that Harry had used his Blood Magic popped up, and Imoen suddenly felt very stupid. *Right, I'm not just a sexy thief darn it, I'm a sexy thieving Blood Mage. Got to remember I'm not a muggle, ugh, whoever would have thought I'd ever have to think about that?* When next they clashed, Imoen dodged to the side rather than trying to take Garrick's blow on her shield, her shield disappearing into her item box as she threw out a punch.

As the blow landed onto Garrick's chin, she whispered, "Stupefy!" willing the spell to come out via her punch. She'd been experimenting with this on and off back in Candlekeep, and it paid off now. There was only a brief flash of red before Garrick collapsed, and she shouted. "Hell yeah, glass jaw for the win!" Before leaping behind one of the two remaining guards, bringing the flat of her sword down on the man's head. The last guard turned and nearly stabbed her for her troubles, but the other man slammed the flat of his blade into the side of the man's head, sending him crashing to the ground to join his fellows.

But of course, that left Jaheira and Khalid. Jaheira had kept her husband busy but had been slowly pushed back. Only the mindlessness of his attacks, and his desire to engage Harry in defense of Silk, had kept her from being overwhelmed. Yet Jaheira had eventually been knocked to her knees, and was now straining upwards, her staff held sideways above her head pressing back against Khalid's sword.

"Behind you my love!" Silk shouted, desperate now and directing her voice towards Khalid, who was the last of her Charmed victims still on his feet. Khalid turned, but too late, and Harry, who had snuck up behind him, got his arms up under Khalid's armpits, locking them in behind his head. He then twisted this way and that, shouting into his ear. "Snap out of it man!" Khalid didn't and continued to struggle, but despite his much higher level, the half-elf lacked the strength to break out of Harry's arms.

Now without even Khalid to protect her and with her shield losing strength quickly, the sorceress decided it was time for the better part of valor. She turned, her icon on Harry's map turning yellow as she raced away.

"I think not," Jaheira shouted, quickly flashing her fingers through a series of moves, then thrusting out her hand, sending out Tangling Vines.

"That spell must be one of your favorites," Imoen said, also glaring as the retreating sorceress was grabbed by the spell.

"Indeed, it is most efficacious. "Now it only depends on whether or not her shield lasts longer, or my spell. And if it doesn't, I can always cost another which she most certainly cannot," Jaheira said smiling evilly at the sorceress, who was looking down at the tangling vines which had burst up through her shield from below. Her shield after all was only a fourth level magic shield, which didn't do anything against spells which didn't cause direct damage.

Harry wondered idly if her shield would stop a stunner, before he looked down at Khalid in his arms, who was shaking his head blearily. "W, wh, what happened?" Khalid asked, looking up at Harry and then over at his wife.

"You were charmed and deeply too," Harry said shaking his head. You really need to work on getting some more immunity to those kinds of mental attacks my friend."

While she was not looking happy, Jaheira shook her head. "It's not his fault." She narrowed her eyes, looking at Harry speculatively. "In fact, I'm impressed that you were able to throw that spell off."

"My willpower is strong," Harry said pompously, before leaning in, whispering. "Besides, you saw my stats back in the Friendly Arm Inn."

"True," Jaheira said with a nod, a frown appearing once more on her face as she turned back to Khalid, saying something to him before moving to heal the wounded guards they had been forced to fight a moment ago.

Behind her Harry paused, seeing that answer had made her respect for him go up, and he frowned in confusion. *Maybe just the memory of that discussion was enough? How much I showed them all that I trusted them yet also was smart enough to withhold*

information? Or maybe she just likes the fact that I can't be charmed. Weird, but whatever.

Shaking that off he looked at the merchant, his one conscious and uninjured guard, and the unconscious Garrick. "What do we do with him?" he asked, gesturing down to Garrick.

Garrick however was already stirring, shaking his head. "ooh, did som'ne throw a flagon at me head agin, oooh...." He looked up, frowning as he took in the surroundings, first in confusion then in moral outrage. "What, that, that witch! She she ensorcelled me!"

"The proper term is charmed," Jaheira said with an eyeroll, removing her hands and wiping at a sweat-streaked forehead. Keeping her husband from overcoming her defenses had taken a lot, and she'd been forced to use every healing spell in her repertoire to save the lives of the formerly Charmed guards and heal Harry's ribs. He'd broken a second rib in the impact with the wall.

Seeing this the merchant breathed a sigh of relief as his last guard, the one Harry had stabbed in the side, began to breath more easily. None of the downed bodyguards were going to get up anytime soon though. But they were alive, and so was he, that was the most important thing. "Thank you Adventurers, if not for you, we would all probably be dead right now. Is there anything I can do to pay you back for this?"

"Actually," Harry said with a smile. "I have quite a few gems I need to sell, and..."

"Say no more, my lad!" the merchant said with a laugh, shaking his head. "All buy them at the same price I'd give to a fellow member of the Merchants' Guild! You can't get better than that in this town."

"Would I if I went somewhere else?" Harry asked seriously.

Flush off of his recent brush with death, the merchant answered easily. "If you went south, you might get some promissory notes that are worth more in Nashkel, but you'd have to go much further south, into Amn, to find someone who was willing to pay you in cash. A promissory note from Nashkel would only be good to cash in up in the Gate – possibly, I'd bet no money on that - or there in Nashkel. We wouldn't take them here, not with the way the wind is blowing."

Harry nodded slowly at that, thinking hard, looking around at the others for their opinion. Jaheira of course had one, saying that he should wait for the promissory note. "We might need the money to fuel our... quest down there," she said, hinting at their true mission.

Khalid said that having something in hand now was actually a better idea disagreeing with his wife for the first time Harry had ever heard. Imoen said that it depended on where they be going to shop. "That blacksmith guy, I think we'd have to go really way a far field to find anything like his goods, and the merchant here just said they wouldn't take the promissory notes here. So cash to spend back here would be the best idea."

Harry nodded, thinking about it then said "I think I'll take the cash now. After all, cash will spend just as well down in Nashkel as promissory notes, and I doubt we'll need that much money to grease our quest's wheels when we arrive." With that he turned, pulling off the heavy burlap bag on his back, reaching inside in as obvious a manner as possible as he used his item box to pull out 3 bags worth of jewels. He handed over a bag and this is the gym I'll be selling in large quantity, two-hundred and ninety seven gems." This left him with thirty gems remaining, but he figured that selling them would be useful to push him over the edge in any future trade.

The jet merchant looked through them, his eyes gleaming with interest. "This is amazing! Are they all like..." The merchant cut himself off, looking at each of forty randomly selected gems from the three bags. After examining them each under a jeweler's glass, he began to laugh. "Lad, I think we're both going to make one another quite a bit of money today! I know exactly who to sell these to, a merchant that's going south with the next caravan that'll be bypassing Nashkel, and the two jewelry makers in this town. Why, if I do it up right, I can sell to both, without either of them knowing I'm doing it, so they won't try to undercut me. I can give you four thousand, five hundred gold for it."

Seeing that he could haggle, Harry did so for a time, and ended up bouncing the total to four thousand eight hundred, which would be enough carry them halfway to the full plate armor Harry had his eye on. It would have to wait until they came back this way though. "We have a deal. Two of us will go with you and your wounded men for now, then we can make the deal at your shop. If you could send your guard to find some of the Flaming Fists?"

The merchant nodded, and Imoen and Harry left with him, while Jaheira and Khalid stayed guard over Silk. Harry had seen the look in the married couple's eyes and thought the two of them had some words they both needed to speak to one another after this incident.

When the two dimensional travelers came back, the married couple were looking much more sanguine. Officer Valerie was there too, questioning Garrick closely as he sat on the ground tied up. Silk was nowhere to be seen.

"Why is Garrick tied up?"

"Silk had one more Charm spell on one of her bracelets, and it hit him. He attacked us and we were forced to subdue him again," Jaheira said, almost looking proud and for a moment Harry couldn't figure out why before he saw her glance at Khalid. He then realized Khalid must have been able to resist it. "So, oh illustrious authority figure, what will you do with your money?"

"Set it aside. We're not in desperate need of more supplies at this point, but we do have several more things at the Thunderhammer Smithy once we have enough of a war chest. That shadow armor and the poison dagger and the crossbow are just too good not to try to buy eventually, to say nothing of the full plate armor."

"You know," Imoen said in a low tone, looking at the other three, while Garrick was being questioned most strenuously by Valerie. "I could try to lift one of them. The Dagger at least."

"Can you name one time that ever worked for you Imoen?" Harry asked with a laugh. "I remember your mentor despairing of teaching you how to pick pocket, let alone attempt to steal something out of a glass case in a busy room."

"It wouldn't be busy at night," Imoen protested, although not very hard. It was true her actual pickpocketing skills were not very good in comparison to her general sneakiness.

"Smithy's are always busy my dear," Jaheira said dryly. "Especially ones as large as that. They'll have commissioned work to work on at night, which can go on throughout the evening and well into the darkness with a team of blacksmiths taking turns. Besides which, I'm still of the opinion that we shouldn't stay here over long."

Harry sighed, shaking his head. "And here I was looking forward to cooking us a proper lunch today and maybe even a dinner..."

"L, I, let is not be hasty dear," Khalid said quickly. "Aft, af, after all, there might be more clues to the Iron Intake Issue around here."

"I am somewhat hungry," Jaheira said slowly, staring at Harry, her eyes narrowed. "But do not think that I will always fall for this this blatant bribery."

Harry nodded agreeably and led the way back to Landrin's house. The meal he cooked up was magnificent, Seabass grilled with tomato, olives and basil, fresh bread bought in the town, and slices of cheese and a local meat that he had found in the town, cured and seasoned by Harry.

During the discussion, Harry told the married couple about the he'd used on the golem, and then asked the two Harpers more about bards, singers, Harpers and traveling the road in general. The two of them dominated the discussion, with Jaheira of course doing most of the talking, while Imoen was looking at the two older adventurers thoughtfully taking it all in.

However, despite Harry's teasing and Imoen's desire to stay here for the night, one meal was enough, and they had honestly not found anything more to do in this town that could be done without going out of their way. A few quests that were so minor that they would be able to see them along the way perhaps, but nothing to stay here for. Not with more than half a day they could use to get a head start on the trip to Nashkel.

"Are you sure you won't miss Valerie?" Imoen teased.

"No I won't," Harry said repressively, sending her a scowl while Khalid chuckled and Jaheira shook her head in exasperation. From the glimpses of the two she had gotten the evening before it was clear to her that Valerie had been doing most of the work in seducing Harry, rather than him showing much interest in her. *And she did ignore him earlier when she was questioning Garrick. That says much of the depth of her interest in Harry.*

So, soon after eating the four of them left Beregost, heading south. However, the day had one more twist to offer them.

As they were leaving, they were costed by a shout of, "Hello friends!"

As one they all turned and stared at Garrick, who had been waiting by the side of the road. Apparently for them, given how his face had lit up as he spotted them.

“What can we do for you this time Garrick?” Harry asked warily.

“No further damsels that aren’t exactly in distress that we’ll then have to flight I trust?” Jaheira added.

“No no,” Garrick said with a wan laugh. “None of that.” His laugh sort of trailed off after a few seconds. “Although it is sort of because of that that I am here. You see, I’m afraid that Lieutenant Valerie was not very, well, very sympathetic.”

Really Harry mused looking at him with a wry smirk. “I would’ve thought you’d be right up her alley, frankly.”

“I’m sorry what?” Garrick asked, looking confused.

“Nothing,” Harry said while the others laughed. “Nothing at all. What were you were saying?”

“Well yes, you see I’m well, a I’m a Bard, and to play in any town you have to get a permit, of course, and I did,” the young man added hastily but, “Lieutenant Valerie decided that with my association with Silk, that I am accountable for some of the damages. So either I stay and work to pay for the damages to the house that was damaged during the fight as well as enough money to help the families of the guards pay for more healing spells than Miss Jaheira used on them, or I leave immediately. And as you well know, it isn’t exactly good for a single sure on the road. I was, um, hoping that I could come with you,” He finished lamely.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Garrick had done okay in the fight against Imoen it was true, and he remembered that bards were actually supposed to be able to use a few mage spells. *He could actually be useful without Charm clouding his senses.*

He looked at the others. Jaheira looked neutral, which probably meant she disapproved. Khalid simply nodded, indicating without words that he understood the youngster’s plight and sympathized. He also smiled at Garrick, perhaps feeling some fellow-feeling towards him for enduring Silk’s Charm spell together. Imoen simply grinned, giving Harry a thumbs-up, while surreptitiously looking at Garrick from head to toe.

That did not make Harry want him anymore in the party than he already did, but eventually, he sighed, and nodded. "Oh very well, if you want to come with us, come with us. But we will only take you on at on a trial basis until Nashkel. After that, if we've discovered were not compatible as a party, we can part ways amicably understood?"

Garrick nodded eagerly. "Thank you for this, friends!"

You have earned +200 Respect, +200 Trust with Garrick. You have 290/500 Trust, 310/500 Respect with Garrick. Garrick is now a Travelling Companion. Good grief, but that happened quickly didn't it?

Harry groaned, internally shaking his head. A guy he just met was closer to becoming a friend than Jaheira. And yet at the same time, Harry realized that he approved more of the way Jaheira was all prickly to Garrick's way over-the-top openness. *He's like a strange mix between the Weasley twins, a used car salesman and Seamus with how he seems to be a little off-balance around the girls.*

With Garrick added to their party, the group moved on with Harry questioning Garrick closely about his equipment and spells. Learning that the man had skills in a longbow, Harry pulled out the fire arrows that they had taken from the kobolds days ago before pausing, looking over at Khalid. "Do you think he can join us in training at sword-fighting Khalid?" he asked the more experienced adventurer. "He's apparently pretty decent, but there's always room for improvement."

Khalid nodded firmly. "Of c, c, course. I'd l, l, like to get a handle o, o, on his skills. Indeed, I thi, th, think he needs to show u, u, us his skill w, w, with the bow before you hand hi, hi, him those fire arrows Harry," he said gesturing down to the quiver of fire arrows in his hand. Harry nodded, and slipped them back into his items space.

Garrick didn't seem to notice anything unusual about that, for which Harry was thankful, since Jaheira was glaring at him now for trying to give away that secret again. He shrugged at her, gesturing to Garrick as if to say, 'he didn't notice'. She sighed and nodded, understanding the point, but not liking the fact that Harry still hadn't gotten used to trying to hide that ability, which to her mind was more useful in many ways than his map ability.

As they continued walking, Garrick pulled out his balalaika, strumming the the strings. "I don't suppose anyone would like a tune to while away the leagues?"

“Heck yes,” Imoen said with a laugh. “Give us some happy tunes, that’ll make this trip less boring.”

“In, in, indeed,” Khalid said with a chuckle. “Music will m, m, make the miles go f, f, faster.”

Harry shook his head, moving ahead of the others, the better to use his map ability, something he’d gotten into the habit of doing over the past few days. Jaheira joined him after a single song from Garrick, a love song it had been, about a young Swain wooing his love, which apparently was not to Jaheira’s taste.

Behind them, the man moved into a bawdy drinking song, and Jaheira sighed. Harry heard this and after hearing the first refrain of the song, he asked, “How long will it take us to get to Nashkel?”

“I think we should take the road at this point. After all, shouldn’t we learn what dangers are on the road as well?” Jaheira said mock-brightly.

“I agree,” Harry said. The two of them looked at one another, an unspoken thought being shared between them. *Anything to get this journey over with as fast as possible!*

OOOOOOO

Determination deep within them, Jaheira and Harry drove the band hard that first day and then the next, keeping to the road all the while. No longer were they trying to stay out of sight. Rather, they were going for speed. But they could not go faster than Garrick’s songs, and the man could play as well on the march as standing still.

And yet as they took to the road, the two musical critics outside of his music didn’t really have any issue with Garrick as a companion, much to Harry’s annoyance. He had the skills of a Bard, and his skills with his voice and instrument were decent enough, it was just that his choice of the balalaika was not to Harry’s and Jaheira’s taste.

Jaheira was able to escape into the woods for the first two nights, which apparently was enough to give Khalid the idea that his wife didn’t like the music. After two

nights of the emptied tent Khalid finally asked Garrick and Imoen to tone it down. “Af, af, after all, if there are enemies about, your music will carry further than the sight of the campfire through these woodlands.”

And it was woodlands here once more. Oh, the road itself was decent, Imoen even said something about it almost looking like a Roman road after they had left Beregost, although that didn’t mean much to Harry who hadn’t studied much history in his old world, something he regretted since coming to this new world. But the forest was literally two feet away from the edge of the road with new growth, and beyond that deep forest. Despite having seen numerous cycles of civilizations try to tame it, the Sword Coast was still very wild, and with much more reluctance than many areas to give over its wild ways.

Beyond that, Garrick was decently intelligent, happy to help around the camp, and generally as nice as he first appeared, making Harry take back at least the used car salesman aspect of his first impression of the other young man. He and Imoen got along quite well, talking about this or that story, this or that song, types of drinks, and other such things. Luckily, Garrick stopped trying to flirt with Imoen within two days. After hours of being teased mercilessly and made so red as to resemble a tomato, Garrick had finally understood that when it came to flirting he was a novice, and Imoen was at least a journeyman if not a master.

“Or should that be mistress...” Harry said aloud later that night, cocking an eyebrow at Imoen later that night.

Imoen laughed, shaking her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Your flirting. You do know I get notices when you activate Flirty Little Lass right? So whenever you decided to use your wiles on poor Garrick I knew about it. Not exactly fun, let me tell you.”

“My wiles?” Imoen said with a laugh. “God Harry, you do talk some rubbish sometimes don’t you? No one uses that word aloud like that.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “All right then, what would you call it?”

“Just flirting, or maybe using what my mom gave me,” Imoen replied with another little laugh. She flopped down on Harry’s bedroll next to him pulling him into a friendly hug. “Why?” she teased, whispering into his ear as Harry once more saw a notice that Imoen had activated her skill Flirty Little Lass. “Do you want some pointers?”

Harry dug his elbow into her side very lightly pushing her away then got his other hand up between them, and tickled her unmercifully, causing her to shriek and leap away. That was his new defense when Imoen got a little too into teasing him, the girl was ticklish as heck.

She escaped quickly, flopping back onto her own bedroll, turning to look at him with something like awe in her face. "Still, I have to admit to being jealous. Do you have any idea how many men and women would kill to be able to see real progress like that in terms of their relationships and everything else you described to be back in Candlekeep?" She shook her head. "You are one lucky little boy!"

"I'm not so little any longer," Harry retorted with an eyeroll.

"I wouldn't know. I'd have to ask that barmaid back in Candlekeep for that one wouldn't I? Or maybe Phylidia?"

Shaking his head, Harry determinately looked away, ignoring his blush in order to try and change the direction of the discussion. "Speaking of flirting, are you actually interested in Garrick? I mean you have flirted with him occasionally, and he's actually traveling with us so you could have an actual relationship unlike me and Valerie. So, I'd much rather you tell me out right if I will have to move out into the woods rather than me coming back to the tent one night to find the two of you snogging."

Imoen burst out into laughter, rolling her around and slapping the ground next to her. "Garrick and me? God no. I flirt back with him 'cause it's fun to watch his attempts at coming off as suave and confident shatter like so much glass. He thinks he's handsome and all that, but he really isn't experienced with girls., certainly not as much as he tries to portray himself as. And he's more than a little leery about me now, knowing that I have more experience than him.

She chuckled grimly, remembering a past relationship gone sour. "Although, he isn't exactly alone. Lots of men prefer to have more experience and knowledge than the woman in the relationship."

"Why?" Harry asked blinking in honest confusion, which Imoen found rather endearing. "I mean if the girl knows what she likes and doesn't, then isn't that a good thing?"

“You’d think so, but mainly it has to do with the male ego. A lot of men, especially in this day and age, don’t want to, shall we say, tread territory that was tread by others.”

“Then why are whores so popular? I mean we saw an entire quarter devoted to them back in Beregost.”

Imoen winced. They had, and had steered clear of it, although several of the courtesans had called out to Khalid and Harry. Which was undoubtedly the first time Harry had ever seen the darker side of his own gender’s need for sex. “I thought we were talking about relationships. Men go to whores if they want relationship sex,” she said bluntly. They don’t take a relationship the guy doesn’t need to take their emotions or even their pleasure into account. They just take cash, and that makes it perfect for a lot of men.”

“Ugh. No thank you. I’d like to think I have better control than that. And what’s sex without at least affection, if not love?” Harry said, scowling and shaking his head. He had created views on such things in his time during the tutorial, else he would have been able to go quite a bit farther than he had with the barmaid in Candlekeep.

“Good,” Imoen said with a laugh, patting his thigh companionably. “If you liked that kind of thing, I’d probably have to smack you for it upside the head a few times. Although,” she teased if you want to go to say a courtesan at one point, to learn what you’ll be doing once the lights go out, that I could understand. It could even be called a rite of passage in this era.”

Harry winced, then surreptitiously looked around, breathing a sigh of relief as there was no quest statement appearing. “Oh thank goodness. Don’t do that to me girl!”

When she realized what had caused his sudden fear Imoen laughed again, and Harry growled at her pouncing and tickling her mercilessly, to the sound of shrieks of laughter.

Outside Garrick and Khalid and Jaheira all looked at one another. “Sounds like they’re having fun,” Garrick said, sounding a little wistful and a lot jealous.

Jaheira shrugged her shoulders. “Siblings often rough house like that, I understand.”

“Siblings?”

“Not my story to tell Garrick,” Jaheira said lightly, patting him like a child on the head. She rather liked the fact that she could call him child without any repercussions, her so-called agreement with Harry grated sometimes. *Even if he has shown an astonishing level of maturity and intelligence at times.* She looked back at the tent, rolling her eyes as she heard the faint sound of Imoen shouting about having gotten the upper hand. *Most of the time, at any rate.*

Early the next day, Harry was once more in front of the party, when he paused, frowning. Looking ahead of them it was a blue dot. But there were no red dots around, so he continued walking, until he could reasonably have been able to see the owner of the blue dot ahead of them. “Khalid, can I have your half-elf eyes up here for a moment?”

Khalid moved ahead of the others, where the three of them had been talking about what it was like down in the south, and if Khalid or Jaheira had ever spent time in Amn. Harry had taken part in the conversation at first, but when it became clear that they hadn’t spent much time in Nashkel or around the border between Amn and the Sword Coast, he had moved ahead of the others to use his map ability.

“What is it I, I, lad?” Khalid asked, looking ahead of them been blinking. “I, is tha, tha, that a young boy?”

“Indeed it is,” Harry said talking quietly so Garrick wouldn’t overhear. “I spotted him on my map, or I spotted the blue dot on my map, about ten minutes ago.”

“What is a b, b, boy doing out here?”

Harry shrugged. “Searching for something from the way he’s been moving around.”

The others joined them, and all of the others expressed some surprises well as they moved forward down the road towards the boy. He didn’t look up from what he was doing, searching around the bushes near to the road, scowling irritably.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but isn’t there a bandit problem around here?” Jaheira said tartly as soon as they were within hailing distance “What are you doing out of the alone, child?”

The boy, whose label read ‘Sam, farmer boy’ jumped, putting the bush between himself and them, looking like a frightened rabbit ready to run. “Nothin’! Nothin’ that

needs done to deal with adventurers anyways. You just be about your business; I'll be about mine."

"you didn't answer her question," Harry said, smiling kindly of the young man. "And what are you looking for anyway?"

Staring from him to Jaheira and then back, he seemed to relax a little as he looked at Harry.

Charisma check passed. The young boy, Sam, thinks he can trust you, despite disdaining Adventurers normally.

"Just looking for a Bluebonnet, Mary Lou wanted one," Sam said.

Garrick began to chuckle and moved forward, looking through the bushes, shaking his head. "I can tell you for certain that you won't find it among them, bluebonnets grow underground trees not bought bushes."

"What's a Bluebonnet?" Harry asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"A very pretty flower, cheap, but extremely hard to find," Garrick replied in a similar manner. "It's the kind of thing that farm girls send out there young boys to find, to show how seriously they are taking their courtship."

Jaheira sniffed obviously having overheard them thanks to her half-elf ears. "He's putting his life on the line for something so, so silly?"

Harry shrugged. "That's the aspect that I'm interested in too." He raised his voice, and asked "But aren't you worried about the bandits or other dangers Sam?"

Sam laughed. "Nah, I can run faster than them, besides, they wouldn't be interested in me, I don't carry iron."

That caught their attention, and Harry quickly signaled Garrick to move forward with him. "How about this: you explain what you mean by that, and Garrick and I will help you find this Bluebonnet thing."

"What does it look like?" he asked looking at Jaheira.

"I note you're not asking me to help," the druid replied with a smirk.

“He does find you scary,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“I am scary,” Jaheira said dryly. “To fools and idiots, and a boy who is willing to be out here with the current troubles is most decidedly an idiot.”

It turned out that Sam had actually seen the bandits in the area and had spied on them occasionally. According to Sam, he’d seen them let two large caravans which had been carrying food to the mining town of Nashkel go. But they had attacked an equally large caravan that was carrying iron.

“One with lots of guards and everything!” Sam exclaimed nodding his head sagely. “They attack anyone carrying iron, but let other people go. I’ve seen it dozens of times.”

At that point, Harry was able to find the Bluebonnet quickly thanks to his observation skill and the description given him by Jaheira and he and Garrick returned to the others with Sam.

“Thanks Mister,” Sam said taking the Bluebonnet from him, and holding it critically. “Don’t see what’s so interesting ‘bout a flower, but then again I ain’t a girl.”

“No you ain’t” Harry said with a laugh, clapping Sam on his shoulder light. And isn’t that a good thing.”

“Too right!” The youngster said then looked at Harry speculatively. “You been asking a lot of questions about them bandits Mister.”

“I’m an adventure, and it our job to deal with that kind of thing,” Harry replied glibly, with Garrick nodding alongside him.

“I suppose,” the youngster said with a nod then looked at Harry again. “Ya helped me right quick, So I’ll tell you something for free. One time, when I was watching, the bandits, they attacked a large caravan and I’m tellin’ you, t’were the biggest I ever did see. The guards were good too, adventurers such as yourself one and all, and they couldn’t overcome ‘em. They figured that out right quick, but then, as they were fight them, other bandits snuck in. I saw ‘em from the woods. Three bandits, all of them sneaking in like, like thieves. But instead of stealing anything or trying to get behind the guards, they snuck into the wagons, carrying someat. And when they came back out, they weren’t carrying it.”

He frowned at that, and nodded, pulling out twenty gold coins and showing them to Sam in his palm. "Tell me everything you can about the attack, from beginning to end."

Later that day he and Garrick told the others about what Harry had learned. Which had been enough to give Harry another clue worthy of updating the Iron Intake Issue.

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue, has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

'Something wrong with the iron?'

You know now for certain that something is happening even to the iron that has been successfully mined and shipped. This speaks of both organization and communication to know when it's being shipped and the ability to get people into place to do something about it. This problem is much larger and much more convoluted than you anticipated, and it's reach is growing.

Experience Bonus, +500 to all party members.

"The bandits attacked the camp right before they were able to set up defenses and were carrying some kind of substance in green vials. Sam didn't see more than that, but they put the vials into the carts carrying the iron. Then all of them retreated. The bandits took severe losses and the caravan went on its way with no one apparently the wiser. But I very much doubt that iron arrived without issue."

"Alchemy, some foul concoction that rots the iron from within in some fashion," Jaheira said with a scowl. "And for bandits to throw away their lives on a feint like that, it speaks of fear and power. A lot of both. This is becoming more complicated every time we learn more."

Garrick looked at them all with interest, then grinned. "Well now, I know I've chosen an interesting group to join if you all are willing to look into the problem with the iron. Perhaps I will stay with you after we reach Nashkel, hmm?"

However, the group was soon to find another source of trouble appearing before them. Early the next day, Jaheira came back as the others were cleaning up after breakfast, smiling thinly. "I believe that we are within a day and a half at most of the outskirts of Nashkel. However," she said gesturing up to the sky "it's going to start raining soon. I'm afraid we will not be having a pleasant time of it once that occurs."

“In other words cloaks on over your armor everybody,” Harry said with a wan laugh. “I don’t think any of us wants to deal with rust or anything of that nature, do we?”

True to Jaheira’s prediction, the rain started to come down to bear hour and a half after they started to move, making visibility difficult at any more than a few hundred yards in every direction. However, that didn’t stop Harry’s map ability, for which they were all very grateful by this point, even Garrick despite not knowing about it.

It was because of his map ability that Harry spotted trouble up ahead. “I’m starting to see red for dots folks,” he said, glaring ahead of him, hoping his voice would carry over the sound of the rain to the two half-elves behind him.

“How many?” Imoen shouted over the rain. The other two also moved closer with Garrick trailing at the back of the party.

“I don’t know, they’re moving around so much and overlapping too. More than twelve for certain, maybe as many as twenty or twenty-five.”

“That many?” Jaheira muttered, “Operating a bare day from Nashkel?”

“Are you sure we’re actually that close?” Harry asked, looking towards her while waving his hand in the air for Garrick to come closer.

Jaheira scowled, trying to picture in her mind what the area had looked like the last time she was here, and finding she couldn’t quite make the claim that she did in fact know where they were. “No,” she said after a moment, shaking her head. “We could still be as many as two days out going our normal speed.”

Garrick frowned, as he came close hearing that. “What’s going on?” he shouted, unable to use the map and not having the two half-elves hearing he had not heard Harry’s shout.

“I think there might be trouble up ahead,” Jaheira shouted, so loud that it all of them could hear her. Like his item box, Harry’s map ability was so good, they should probably try to keep it a secret for as long as possible. Even from Garrick, who had proven to be a decent sort after a very rocky start.

Imoen grumbled, then looked over to Khalid who was the closest of the two half-elves to her. “Do you have any idea what rain like this will do to my ability to Hide in Shadows?”

“So long as you d, d, don’t step into any puddles you sh, sh, should be fine,” Khalid shouted back.

The thief nodded and was about to move off when Harry grabbed her shoulder. “Hold on, they’re not here for us,” He said staring not at her, but at her his map, which he had enlarged, something he had learned to do since his leadership level had gone up.

“There is a blue dot in there, breaking out this way towards us. And one less red dot too.”

“Could they have been the same somehow?” Imoen asked.

But Harry quickly shook his head. “No, the blue dot intersected the red one as it was fleeing the rest and killed it. I can’t wait until my observe skill is able to give me more information from my map than this,” he muttered, to which Imoen simply nodded rueful agreement.

“What do you think we should do?” Jaheira asked, coming close enough now for Harry to make her out through the rain. The cloak she wore was matted to her body which could possibly have been sexy for both her and Imoen, if not for the fact that they both wore armor underneath, and, despite some of the comic books that Harry had seen in Dudley’s collection, for the most part armor on a woman, if it was actually any good, was not sexy. *All those comic books lied to me*, he thought idly with a chuckle to himself as he took in the two women, although calling them women at this point was being very gentle and generous. Bedraggled rats were more apt a description.

Harry however didn’t say so aloud, nor did he allow himself to think such thoughts that for very long, instead turning his attention back to his map, speaking low enough that Garrick could still not hear. The blue dot is coming this way, but the Reds are going to cut him off unless we do something, fast.”

“We don’t even know what we’re dealing with,” Jaheira protested, a but it was a very limp protest. Given how he was describing matters ahead of them, she thought this would be pointless but trying and failing would be better than not trying at all to save a life.

“We can’t try anything fancy and get there in time,” Harry said gesturing up into the rain and ahead of them to indicate the chase going on, not realizing how he took control now that there was combat in the offering. “Not without knowing what we’re

dealing with, or anything about the terrain. But I don't want to send Imoen forward. At the pace they're going, they'll be within hearing range of you two I think..."

He was stopped by Khalid holding up his hand. "I he, he, hear it, some kind of yipping n, n, noise over the rain. A, a, and bellowing. Lots o, o, of bellowing."

Harry nodded, then made a quick, very dirty plan. "All right, Jaheira cast Treebark on me and Khalid. Garrick, you cast resist Fear just in case, I'll call up Turn Undead if we are facing undead. Beyond that..." he scowled. The rain would make Garrick's balalaika near to useless, and without it, he couldn't use most of his spells. "Stick to arrows for now, don't get in close unless you have to. You too Imoen, and Jaheira. Only Khalid and I have the armor to really stay in close against these numbers." He smiled wanly. "Well, unless we're facing kobolds or goblins anyway."

With Garrick still protesting that he didn't really understand what was going on Harry raced forward as fast as his feet could carry him, his shield up and ready, but most of his attention was on both his foot work and his map, watching until finally, he too began to hear the sound of yipping dogs of some kind.

The road flowed onto a large clearing that went from east to west following a river about three yards wide but possibly as much as two feet deep. There was a burnt out house to one side, the river was close to flooding its banks, but Harry could still see the bottom of it, right before he realized what they were up against.

On the far bank was all large band of about twenty dog men, which Harry recognized as gnolls. Their bestiary appeared in Harry's vision for a brief blink, giving him some useful information but not enough to somehow turn this on its head.

Gnoll:

Gnolls are large chaotic evil creatures that closely resemble humanoid hyenas. They are found throughout the world. They have the strength of larger-than-average humans, but the constitution of hyenas, able to run men and horse down in short burst or continue to move with little food and drink for long periods of time. They are slow of limb, but use halberds and large numbers to overcome this, and there are those among them who have trained themselves to a greater degree.

Attitude toward Adventurers: While their leaders can be reasoned with and even make deals to help control their people's natural aggression, the normal gnoll believes

that most other people in the world would serve best by being either far away from gnoll territory – wherever a gnoll is – or dead.

Weaknesses: Like ogres they can be seen as more animalistic than truly thinking once a battle has begun. Fire can frighten them as it would a true hyena, and high pitched or just loud sounds can cause them to freeze. Once broken, it will take hours for a gnoll to regain control of himself. Their legs and knees in particular are vulnerable.

In among them, racing into the river was a human man, a large near-naked unarmed human man with what looked like a tattoo or large bruise on his face, a bald head dripping with the rain. He was covered with slowly bleeding wounds and was obviously in dire straits. He was also pulsing on Harry's map now that he was close, and his observations skill told him who the man was.

Minsc, level 5 Ranger.

From the eastern steppes of Rasheman, the Ranger Minsc is a might warrior who, despite having a way with animals, also specializes in combat to a tremendous degree. He is monstrously strong, decently quick, and has incredible constitution, but has rather low wisdom, willpower and intelligence to pay for it.

Minsc is in a Berserk state and will barely be able to tell friend from foe. Though, he won't feel his wounds either, not unless he loses a limb or is on death's door.

The word Berserker was pulsing in red letters. Harry hadn't heard of that status change before, but he could tell what it meant thanks to his higher ability with observation.

At first the gnolls and the man didn't notice his arrival, or that of his friends as they came down the road behind him, and Harry knew he couldn't let this chance go. "Spread out!" Harry shouted, use the advantage of the river to to keep them at range. Jaheira, see if you can Summon Animals over on the other side of the river, break up their numbers. Garrick, Imoen, target a single gnoll each, kill him then move on. Jaheira, after you use that spell as often as you can, concentrate on picking off wounded and supporting Khalid and me. Khalid, let me get stuck in first, then guard my back and that big guy!"

With that, Harry had given his last order and he raced forward, crashing into the water and shouting “Big guy! Catch!” at the top of his lungs as he pulled out one of his spare swords, tossing it through the air aiming above the man’s head.

His throw went lower than Harry had hoped, but the man had seen the sword flashing through the rain, which was now slowly starting to peter out. He reached up with both hands, and caught it, by its handlebars, before grabbing it in one hand, and slaying the first gnoll that came at him.

The gnolls were armed with pikes, and the nearest to their victim thrust forward at the man just a second too late. Minsc bellowed something in some foreign language, smashing the haft of a halberd to one side, then lashing out with a lightning quick strike that cut that gnoll in twain.

Harry watched that for a brief second then he was dashing forward and guarding the man’s back from a halberd strike that would have torn him into his side.

He had almost forgotten to reequip a weapon, but then, his trusty backup warhammer was back into his hand, and he twirled it, smashing it not into the gnoll that had attacked the man, but into the gnoll’s weapon, smashing it into pieces. The gnoll fell back, then died as the man took him in the throat with a sword thrust, roaring in fury.

A second later seven more Gnolls were on them, striking with their blades and shafts. Harry blocked dodged and smashed, slamming his warhammer into anything that offered a target, kneecaps, faces, chests, arms weapons, even the halberd heads occasionally. His tower shield moved wildly, and Harry was grateful that he had followed Khalid’s advice and put his skill slot point from leveling up back in of the Friendly Arm Inn into sword and shield. That gave him the Max skill he could in it as a paladin, but the automatic nature of that defense was serving him well now.

Elsewhere, Imoen had hissed angrily, roaring, “How am I supposed to backstab ever supposed to stay on this side of the river, stupid Harry!”

“Shut up and fire as he told you too!” Jaheira shouted, turning words into action. Her fingers moved in a wild dance as she shouted out, “Summon Animal!”

Jaheira has used the druid spell Summon Animal. This spell summons an animal from the nearest forest, the size and number of animals summoned being effected by the level of the summoner.

A second later an animal, in this case a tiger, appeared. For a second it stood blinking. Normally this was where Jaheira would have to take a second to mentally befriend (or dominate, it varied) the animal. But since the animal appeared in among a group of gnolls attempting to enter the river downstream from Harry and the unknown, it came under immediate attack, and responded appropriately.

Two of them fell to its fangs and claws before it was harmed, and then it was really going to town as the gnolls tried to fall back, using their long halberds to their advantage. Another spell, another animal, this time a wolf, joined in. Then Jaheira turned her attention to her sling. Her sling stones flew rapidly, the half-elf barely bothering to aim. She was looking to disrupt the attack on the other side of the river, not score outright kills.

At her side Imoen and Garrick started to fire their bows, Imoen's Short Bow +1 now proving it's worth, each shot going home. But the gnolls, for all their animal features, wore chest plates like Harry's or at the least chain mail, and her shots weren't the instant kills they should have been. Garrick's composite long bow – which he'd had before he had joined them - proved a little better in that area, but his own shots sometimes missed their targets due to the tumult of battle.

Khalid had reached the two beleaguered warriors on the other side of the stream by this point and shouted a warcry in Elven. The gnolls that had surrounded the two warriors turned, but before they could, his sword took one of them in the back. If he'd had Backstab like Harry or Imoen, that attack would've killed that gnoll instantly. As it was, the gnoll screamed in pain, and stumbled forward, wrenching himself off of Khalid's weapon while two more swung their halberds at him.

He raised his shield, taking both blows on the plus shield mediums shield +1 that he had been given by Harry back in Beregost. His sword then flicked out, not up or straight, but down, stabbing one gnoll in the foot through the water, causing him to yowl in pain, and back away, allowing Khalid to push up with his shield. Using his skill Shield Bash he smashed the other gnoll's weapon out of his way. Two swift strikes with his sword, and both of them fell, gurgling their life's blood away, their throats cut neatly.

Then he was standing with Harry back to back, trying to protect the Berserker at the same time.

The spell on Harry had faded, and he had taken three hits by this point from the halberds of the gnolls despite everything his shield and sword ability could do, and his

chest plate was torn through in two places. Even his helmet had been sliced into from one side, the blow leaving a long gash on his chin and jaw. That had probably protected them from a killing blow.

But even so, they were in dire straits. Despite the arrows raining in from the other side of the river, there were more and more gnolls piling into the three warriors. Harry fell back a step slamming a halberd to one side with his warhammer and then circling around another gnoll, his tower shield, a battering ram to slam one gnoll into a second, using them to guard himself from several more. He was able to turn and glance to the side, noticing the total battle.

Counting quickly he saw about twenty two gnolls still alive and in fighting shape, with ten dead and at least seven wounded. But the Berserker was flagging, and as Harry looked around, he saw Garrick run out of arrows and Khalid take a blow to the side that got through his Barkskin. The two summoned animals were both dead as well, and more of the gnolls were moving to surround the three warriors in the stream. Five of them were even moving across the stream to attack the archers.

“Imoen or Garrick, cast a spell that’ll push them away from us to the south! Jaheira, Tangling Vines or something to the west” Harry shouted.

Garrick hesitated but Imoen did not, shouting out, “DUCK! Expeliarmus!” With her spell’s effect somewhat shaped by her visualization the flash of energy blasted out, picking up the gnolls on that side of the battle and hurling them sideways into their fellows messing up the gnolls attacking Harry and the other two warriors. The other side had been badly depleted by Jaheira’s summons and were slow to move forward.

This let Harry take the next step in his plan to regroup. Standing upright from where he’d crouched, he shouted, “Protego!” while flinging both arms wide. The shimmering blue wall of magical energy appeared, spreading out from in front of him to cover all three of the somewhat scattered warriors with a shield from all three directions, backing away into the middle of the stream.

Gasping, Harry shook his head, feeling his health points deplete at about twice the rate they should have for that spell. Still it was working, shown by the gnolls in front of them bashing away at the shield ineffectively.

“H, ho, how long can you ke, ke, keep this up?” Khalid asked, stabbing his blade into the ground of the river for a moment, shaking out one leg and wincing. He’d taken

another shot from the butt end of a halberd there before Imoen's spells had done their work.

"I don't know I've never tested to destruction. Especially not with someone inside, trying to hack his way out," Harry said, looking exasperated as he saw that Minsc, in his berserk state, was trying to do just that. *I thought he was running away before this, but it's like with a sword in his hand he's stopped being able to think of anything but killing the enemy.*

"J, j, just be thankful that he doesn't think that you meant to attack him with this Khalid said, examining the naked man and from this close finally was able to the whole package. Because this guy was huge. So large, that Harry felt that he might be as tall as Hagrid back in his old life, although he wasn't quite as broad across the shoulders. *And then there's the tattoos, the lack of all hair and, oh yes, the murderous fury with which he's battering against my shield trying to get at the small company of gnolls attempting to kill us.*

Harry then felt one of Jaheira's healing spells hit him and nodded towards her gratefully from where she was moving toward them through the water. Strangely enough the gnolls weren't doing much on their end except trying to break through the shield, so the other two were still safe on the far bank. "So you're saying he won't be able to think of running away?" Harry asked.

"No, he, he, he'll only see the e, en, enemy. We can probably wa, wa, wait i out, I think the ber, be, berserk state only lasts for an hour."

Just then a crack appeared in the shield, and Harry winced. "Well I can keep casting shield, but I doubt I'll be able to fight afterward, even with Jaheira's spells keeping me alive. And even worse, they have reinforcements incoming."

More Gnolls were appearing at on the edge of Harry's map, and he shook his head. "We can't stay here, we either need to finish these Gnolls and then retreat or knock that guy out and retreat."

Khalid winced. Att, att, attacking him would n, n, not be a good idea. Kno, kn, knocking a Berserker out, that's j, j, just not happening. And I do, do, don't see this number of gno, gno, gnolls retreating."

“Then we’ll have to kill them all,” Harry said. “Do you think he can put on armor? I’ve got us a few spare leather armors and leggings at least.” He stopped as Khalid shook his head again.

At that moment Imoen and Garrick reached them then, with Imoen glaring at him. “That was the most idiotic thing I’ve ever seen, just, just charging forward like that.” But then her eyes strayed to the man, she whistled. “He’s a big one,” she said admiringly.

“Well if I hadn’t been the most idiotic thing you’d ever seen, he’d be a dead big thing, and it isn’t like I didn’t plan as much as I could, there’s just something not be said for facing more than six times your own numbers, you know,” Harry replied dryly.

Jaheira finally pushed her way through the water behind Garrick and Imoen, staring upwards as the shield started to collapse. “This rain is nearly gone,” she reported. “That means we can try the same old trick of lighting my Tangling Vines spell on fire. I’m afraid I’m out of Barkskin and call animal spells, however. I am also down to three Cure Minor Wounds and one Cure Serious Wounds.” She looked at the large, almost naked man with pity in her eyes. “And none of my spells could break him out of his Berserk stats.

“Um, well if the rain lets up I can start using my songs, but I’ve only got two Agannazar’s Scorcher Spells. Oh, and one Armor spell, but I can’t use it on someone else, only myself. My Songs though, they might make a difference. I have ones that can heighten speed and healing too. Um... well I suppose now would be a bad time to ask right,” Garrick mumbled the last to himself, before nodding resolutely, casting fearful glances towards the company of gnolls trying to shatter Harry’s shield. “Right.”

Harry waited a moment expecting to hear Imoen say something, but you didn’t say anything, causing Harry to turn his head just slightly to stare at her. To his chagrin, she was staring at the naked man too, but instead of Jaheira’s pity. Instead she had a weird grin on her face. “MMM, all those muscles yum, Imoen likey. It’s like Charlie and Hagrid had a love child!”

“Imoen how is it that you can both freak me out and put the most disturbing image in my head when we are more than likely about to face the toughest fight we’ve faced yet?” Harry said, with a scowl. Jaheira could you smack her upside the head for me?”

“Gladly,” the druids said, smacking her so hard upside the head of that Harry actually noticed that she lost two hit points.

“OW, bitch what was that for?!”

“You can ogle the poor man after the fight is over child, concentrate now please,” Jaheira said tartly.

Meanwhile, the reinforcement for the gnolls had arrived. This meant that all of the earlier losses they had sustained had been made good. There were at least forty gnolls now, spread out, some of them actually forming into a strange looking line of soldiers, their halberd’s all pointed forward as they waited to charge forward towards the beleaguered adventurers in the river.

And as Harry watched, 10 more red dots appeared at the outskirts of his range, moving towards them. “This just keeps getting better and better,” he muttered, shaking his head thinking quickly. *Tactics don’t fail me now.*

“Jaheira, stay to the middle of the river, the gnolls don’t seem able to move through the water as well as we do. Stay out of their range of those halberd’s entirely, if you have to retreat to the other side of the riverbank, do it. They don’t have any long-range shooters, and I don’t see any spellcasters among them either. Cast that Tangling Vine spell of yours to our right, that should help guard the big guy’s flank. Garrick, you stay back and start lobbing fire arrows into the mass of that is caught by the Tangling Vines.”

“When you have set the Tangling Vines on fire, move on and cast again on the other side of the line. Try to keep them from surrounding us, but if the choice is between catching us and not catching a lot of them, do it.”

Jaheira nodded, but she was glancing up at the sky which had cleared up by this point. “I don’t know if that attack is going to work, it’s a little too wet.”

“Against these numbers I will take whatever I can get,” Harry said sternly. He turned to Imoen. “Imoen, you and I will cast our Blood Mage spells right into that mass of more organized troops that just showed up. They’re the center of the line, and if we break them, the Berserker, Khalid and I can charge forward, grab their attention and pull it back down on us.”

Becoming serious instantly, Imoen nodded. “What spell?”

“How destructive can you make a Bombarda spell?”

“Pretty damn instructive Harry,” Imoen muttered.

That had been one of Jaheira’s suggestions after they had fought the wolves and the ogre. She knew that some Sorcerers could overpower spells, and given their innate understanding of magic, the Blood Mage spells Harry and Imoen could use were close to that school of magic. Indeed, it was what Harry had done a moment ago to his shield spell.

“Imoen, once we finish casting, use Hide in Shadows. Try to flank any of the Gnoll Elites that you can see with long range fire. Do not get close unless you have to.”

Among the Gnolls now attacking Harry’s shield, were the ten slightly pulsing red dots Harry had seen Earlier. They were reading to his AA skill senses as:

Gnoll Elites. The second level of the common Gnoll Warrior.

With more HP, greater speed and dexterity, these gnolls have proven themselves above the common Warrior stock. They might still have some of the same weaknesses as their fellows, but they are simply tougher all around. They might use the same halberds, but their plate mail tends to be of better quality, and they are far more experienced and trained.

Before Harry could read further Imoen interrupted his thinking with a shout. “Shit, the shields breaking!”

Harry nodded, and moved to face it seeing those same Elites directing groups of gnolls to hit separate parts of the shield in a rhythm.

Fine, ready Harry said to Imoen, with the others behind him. On either side of the Berserker. Thankfully he hadn’t started attacking them, instead he had stopped attacking the shield, and now stood, breath heaving. Harry frowned for a moment then decided not to change to one of his other spare swords, the warhammer seemed to be working just as well, and Harry was unwilling to mess with the something that was working.

Instead he summoned a second sword from his item box and held it out to the Berserker, fearing the one he’d given him earlier would break soon given how hard the man was on it. The Berserker grabbed it up, and held both swords one in each huge hand, making them look like short swords almost, and Harry wondered if he actually had any skill in dual wielding.

He had to put that thought aside though as the shield came down. As it did, he and Imoen cast as one. "Bombarda!" An instant later they both groaned, and Harry's head started to pound. Harry noticed both of them were in the orange on their health bar now, with him close to the red, and Imoen right at the top of the orange.

The spells flashed forward into the mass of the gnolls in the center of the enemies, as they had begun to charge forward. The spells struck, and it was as if kegs of dynamite had gone off in the center of the gnolls. Body parts and gnolls flew everywhere, the front line and most of the second just disintegrating in front of the adventurers as fourteen gnolls instantly disappeared from Harry's map, with four of the warriors being so badly hurt they panicked, turning to run away.

At the same time, Jaheira had been casting Tangling Vines on one aspect of the line. She caught four Gnolls spell, then twisted around, and cast again on the other side of the line, catching only two this time. None of the caught gnolls panicked though the entire group of the doglike sub-sentients had recoiled from the dual spells, letting her catch just a two more.

At the same time, the large man named Minsc (although Harry couldn't tell anyone that just yet) had charged forward, and Khalid and Harry charged, on his heels. By the time the gnolls had recovered, the three warriors were in their faces, and Harry's hammer flashed out, smashing into a dazed gnoll in the head, pulping it, then around into the side of another one. Imoen moved with them, ignoring Harry's earlier orders to start using Hide in Shadows instantly, conjuring up a Lacerator instead, and lashing out in either direction to protect their backs

Imoen has used fire whip. -10 to health.

Imoen's Would-be Dominatrix skill has activated. This will add half again as much damage to any attack with her whip.

Other than noting he had forgotten to look at Imoen's learned skills the last time they had compared stats, Harry ignored the message and any others he saw about flank attacks, critical hits or damage taken, dodging this way and that as the gnolls finally started to recover, their halberd's flashing forward. Only one of the higher-level gnolls had died in the initial bombardment spells, and the remaining nine started barking orders in their strange doglike tongue, reorganizing the warriors around.

Khalid was the first one to meet one of the Elites face-to-face, and nearly paid for with his life. The halberd of the enemy warrior shifted its aim slightly as another two gnolls attacked his shield, keeping it in position while the halberd of the Elite dove straight over his shield, right towards his chest.

But, Khalid was the only one who wore full plate mail, and he twisted aside just enough for the halberd to score a glancing blow along it, creating a large dent but not penetrating. He then twisted around, bringing his shield up into the gnoll's center, and activated Shield Bash. The successfully executed skill blow smashed the gnoll off its feet, where the Berserker stopped on its head with a foot, crushing it with a show of power that took several of the surrounding gnolls aback.

He even roared out a battle cry, the first actual words that Harry had heard Minsc say. "Butt kicking for goodness!"

With that he hurled his second sword into the face of another gnoll, then chopped that gnoll down when he tried to block the thrown sword with his halberd.

Guess that answers my question about dual wielding, Harry thought as he twisted around behind the big guy, using his tower shield to block one, then two, then a third blow, thanking all the heavens that he had the foresight to buy the Tower Shield +1 back in the Friendly Arm Inn. It's durability was slowly degrading in this fight, occasionally after a particularly strong swing, but like in the earlier portion of the melee, the tower shield and his Sword and Shield skill was proving its weight in gold.

Elsewhere, Garrick had fired his fire arrows that Harry had handed him into the mass of Tangling Vines, which had lit on fire fitfully here and there. Thankfully however, the regular Gnolls were susceptible to panic at a fire, just as any wild animal would be. So while not a lot of them had actually been set on fire, most of those trapped had begun to panic, no longer taking part in the battle.

This left only about around seventeen Gnolls facing Harry and his fellows in close combat along with eight Elites. But that was more than enough.

Khalid gasped as a halberd took him low in the leg, smashing into his greave, the greave stopping the halberd from cutting his leg off. The blow still broke bone though sending into the ground. Jaheira instantly cut off the spell that she had been about to perform, another Tangling Vines, spell, and centering her eyes on him began to cast a Cure Minor Wounds.

But even as she did, Jaheira despaired, knowing she wouldn't be fast enough to protect Khalid from the downward flashing blades of the gnolls surrounding him. He hacked at one of their feet, causing him to yet painfully and back away, but the other two, both Elites swung their halberd's down aiming for his chest and head.

Harry desperately cast a Reducto spell, catching both of them in one blast, sending their bodies falling backwards, their weapons and upper bodies both cut in twain, then, his head seriously frowning and a warning about his health appearing in his vision, he twisted around, barely getting his shield up to block a blow it would've taken his head off. Another blow came into his side and he couldn't move his hammer fast enough to take it on its shaft. The blow crunched into his side armor, denting it badly and breaking at least a rib or two. "God damn it, what is with my ribs being everyone's favorite freaking target!?"

Another blow came in over the top of his tower shield, as it was engaged with the first attacker, one of the Elites having aimed his weapon at just the right time. The blow smashed into Harry's helmet, and he saw stars, stumbling backwards.

The Berserker too was taking a hammering. Since the shield came down he had been hit at least three, maybe four times, and Harry knew that his health had begun to fall precipitously. Or at least he supposed that was the case since his name was now flaring red and black over his head.

Imoen had been forced to back away into the stream herself, having killed five gnolls with her fire whip, before nearly losing an arm to another Elite. She was now bleeding profusely into the water, her arm useless, cursing the fact that she couldn't use her other arm at all well with any weapon. Jaheira however turned to her, healing her quickly, then turned back towards Harry, as Khalid pushed himself to his feet, healing him in turn. Khalid was still badly wounded, but his bones were broken anymore at least.

"I'm down to one healing spells, now!"

"Garrick!" Harry roared. "Now's the time for those spells of yours!"

"OH, great gods of Light~~, bless us with good he~alth~~~!!" Garrick belted out, strumming his balalaika to a deliberate short tune. A wave of green energy splashed out from him, impacting Imoen, Jaheira and the others as he pointed the head of his instrument at them one after another.

Garrick has used Song of Regeneration.

A spell calling on the god of bards and travelers, this spell creates a healing aura among those targeted, healing one hit point every few seconds. Both the amount regenerated per person and the speed can be modified as the user gains levels.

+1 to health every three seconds.

Even as Harry and the others started to feel their health slowly regenerate, Harry felt another blow land on the back of his helmet, but he had felt it coming and ducked forward. Instead of smashing into the back of his helmet with enough force to possibly crack skull underneath, it simply smashed the helmet off his head, and Harry turned, bringing his hammer into the side of the gnoll Elite that had been about to kill him. The gnoll groaned in pain as its ribs gave way, but grabbed Harry's outstretched arm, before an arrow from Imoen slammed into the back of his head, Flank Attack doing its work.

Shaking his head, Harry took in the total battle in a brief lull before shouting, "Garrick, those Scorcher spells, use them on the right then switch to swords and get to the berserker. Imoen go with him but keep an eye on Jaheira we'll need our healer still. I've got Khalid!"

"Right!" Garrick started to intone the spells and an instant later the spells flashed out one after another, bright tongues of flame much like that of a flamethrower only far narrower in diameter. Three more gnolls screamed and started to flee as the spell lit up the four gnolls still trapped on that side of the battlefield. Unable to escape they started to burn, their screams causing many of the other gnolls to start acting more wildly, angry and fearful at the noises of agony coming from their fellows.

With that done, Garrick put his balalaika on his back, the spell keeping the strings moving as he charged forward, pulling out his short sword as he went. Imoen went with him, disappearing into Hide in Shadows. Two gnolls turned to him, and Garrick engaged them, ducking under one blow from a halberd, and then twisting around another, using his shield to push it out of position to stab with his short sword.

His short sword was dodged just enough to avoid the tip, however, that had pushed that gnoll out of position to defend the back of his fellow. Imoen appeared there, stabbing viciously, then turning, and cutting at the first gnoll's leg. He couldn't defend himself, and it hit, then Garrick was there, stabbing up into his face.

Minsc howled in triumph as he killed another gnoll, then turned, gasping as a halberd blade stabbed into his chest. He had dodged just enough that it hadn't gone completely through him, but it still stabbed deep, and at last his vitality started to fade. Yet even as his feet faltered under him, the mighty Ranger still grabbed the shaft, and stabbed forward, taking the gnoll Elite at the other end, stabbing through his mouth into his brain.

Then he began to collapse, but Jaheira was already casting another healing spell on him, as Imoen and Garrick tried to close in, protecting his down body. Harry and Khalid fought through two more warriors to meet up with them, and the four of them became a shield around the downed warriors body.

All of them were battered and bleeding. Even Garrick had taken a hit and was wincing, favoring one leg. Harry's side and head were aflame in pain, Jaheira not having another medium healing spell able to heal his broken ribs. Indeed, she was out of spells now and was down to lobbing sling stones. Facing them were still seven gnoll warriors and five Elites.

It was as if both sides knew that this was the last last gasp, because even as Minsc slowly pushed himself to his feet, the battle reached a brand new crescendo, the Elites pushing the remaining warriors, who were looking very nervous, into the fight with roars and growls. Halberds flashed forward, swords sliced, and the sound of battle rose again, with the Elite's constant roar a backdrop behind everything.

A second later after Harry had downed another warrior with a blow to its kneecap, a halberd sliced in over his shield. Harry flinched back, which protected the top of his head from being sliced off, but the ragged tip of the halberd still sliced across his forehead, and suddenly, Harry's world disappeared into red as his blood flowed down his face into his eyes.

He backed away as he a message appeared in front of his eyes.

Head wound! Wow, does that bleed or what? You are blinded.

Harry desperately tried to defend himself, but unable to see, seemed to mean that his shields automatic shield block didn't work either.

Another blow came in, luckily turning on his now-ragged chest plate before Khalid, Garrick and Imoen could pull him away. Soon Garrick's slow healing spell did it's work, and

Harry wiped away the blood, his shield instantly flashing up to block a blow that would have caught Khalid in the side.

In a moment of vicious irony just as Harry was back in the fight thanks to his spell, Garrick went down a second later, gasping as a halberd's shaft, its head cut off a second ago, slammed into his chest just above his groin, actually hurling him backwards to land in a small bundle of agony.

Another warrior tried to bring down his halberd blade on the downed bard. But Minsc was back up on his feet and charged, slamming into the thing bodily shouting, "For my witch, for goodness!"

He had lost his weapon, in the skull of his last victim, but he bore this creature down, a blow to the face actually pulping the thing like one of Harry's hammer blows. He then wrenched the halberd out of the gnoll's dead grip twirling around to slam the end of the shaft into one warrior, then cutting into a second.

"Thank you for your help good friends!" the Ranger shouted. Harry realized with a start that the earlier wound had apparently been harsh enough to knock him out of his berserk state.

Next it was Khalid who cried out in pain, a halberd cutting into his shoulder from one of the elites. But this opened the Elite up to a wild blow from Harry which shattered the side of his head.

The last Elite might have gotten him in turn, but then Jaheira was there her staff lashing out with all the force of a tree falling. The blow lifted the Elite and hurled him to splash down into the river.

That broke the last gnoll warriors, and they turned to flee, but Jaheira and Imoen weren't having any of that. As they turned and ran the two of them took them under fire. The last gnoll fell with one of Imoen's arrows in the back and its skull smashed by one of Jaheira's sling stones.

It was just as well they'd broken though, Harry realized dimly as his hammer dropped with a splash into the water from his nerveless grip. All of them but Jaheira, who had stayed behind the rest of them and whose spells were the only reason they were all still alive, had been battered near to near collapse by this point. For a moment, all was still, as Harry stared around them, exhaustion clear on his face, so tired he couldn't even

lean down to try and find his hammer now that the adrenaline was starting to leave him. He unequipped his shield, stowing it in his item box, and fell to his knees in the water, gasping. He found the hammer then, and made it disappear too, before he plunged his head into the water and gasped in relief as the water flowed over his head.

Next to him, the big guy stayed taunt and ready for a moment, staring all around him, then being to smile down at Harry and around at the others. The might Ranger Minsc thanks you for your help stranger, but I think,” he began to sway on his feet as his eyes started to close. “It is time for all those good and righteous to rest.”

Like a mighty oak, he fell backwards, splashing into the river soaking Harry and the nearby Garrick and Harry chuckled wanly, lifting a tired hand to wipe away the water from his face. “Well, that’s one way to make an exit.”

Standing up and grabbing the big guys shoulder, Harry began to pull him back to the riverbed, met halfway by Khalid, who, with his one remaining working arm – the other shoulder having been broken along with the shoulder plate of his armor - helped Harry get Minsc up onto the bank. “All those in favor of making camp right here say aye,” Harry muttered, shaking his head.

All of the others nodded tired agreement, taking stock slowly. Garrick was the worst off, though not by much. He’d lost his sword on the other side of the river or it had simply shattered no one was sure which. He was still in quite a lot of pain and not answering any questions yet, and unfortunately his falling into the river had halted Garrick’s regeneration spell. Khalid had a broken shoulder and was limping despite his thigh bone having been healed from his earlier wound. And both Imoen and Harry, while looking better than the others for the most part, were in the red in health thanks to their Blood Mage spells.

Imoen was worse off despite Harry having several broken ribs making every move agony, because he had much more health than Imoen. She was now shivering in place, her skin clammy to the touch as Jaheira put her arms around the younger woman and slowly led her after the others, starting to drag her as Imoen’s adrenaline left her.

All of her spells were spent, her mana horribly depleted but of all of them, only Jaheira was physically fine. Once she got Imoen ashore she began to bustle around creating a fire, while Khalid and Harry moved the big guy over to it, slowly laying him down the ground, before moving to do the same with Imoen. Harry bundled her into her

sleeping bag, then piled his own on top, figuring that being warm would help, before cursing himself for a fool.

“And why for are you doing that?” Jaheira said instantly interrupting him.

“Back in the Friendly Arm Inn, I could’ve bought some healing spell potions I mean.”

“Yes, you could have,” she said, but unlike Harry’s tone, hers was not at all condemning. “Yet did it occur to you at the time?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. In fact, the fact that the priest is had healing spells hadn’t even registered until several days later when he found the empty vial of the minor healing potion he’d found in Candlekeep.

“Exactly. Hindsight is always more destructive than helpful at times like this Harry, and, while healing spells might help Imoen, so too will rest and food. Did we do everything right here? Perhaps not, although I would contend we did the best we could. Could we have done everything right for ourselves and still saved Minsc, again no. We won, we succeeded in defending him, and we slaughtered a band of gnolls many times our number, a feat that is an extremely impressive considering that we didn’t have any time to prepare. Learn from this later, when you are not feeling guilty about all of us being hurt during an adventure we chose to go on. Do not beat yourself up over it,” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” Harry said, smirking.

She glared at him. “Let us put the phrase ma’am under the same heading as ‘Grandmother’ shall we? Other without wise I will start calling you impertinent youngling.”

“Was that the best you could come up with?” Harry asked, smiling at her as Khalid chuckled from where he was now helping Garrick along.

“I’m tired, so you’ll forgive me from not giving you my best material,” Jaheira said tartly.

Khalid chuckled once more, slumping down next to her. “W, w, we probably should m, m, move away from the battlefield. T, t, this ma, many bodies will no d, d, doubt draw animals.”

Jaheira shook her head, gesturing down to Imoen and Minsc. We can't move them. The big one, he is barely clinging to life.

"He said his name was Minsc," Harry supplied.

"Minsc then is barely clinging to life, and it is only because of the added durability that the berserk state gave him that he is still alive at all. And Imoen, her spell usage sucked out all of her vitality. Until I am able to cast a few healing spells on her, I refuse to move her." Jaheira said firmly, almost glaring at her husband.

"B, b, but," Khalid said calmly, only quailing slightly under her gaze. "th, tha, that doesn't change the facts th, th, that this b, b, battle will attract both an, an, animals, and other demi-hu, hu, humans. None of us a, a, are in a fit st, st, stage to fight back."

Harry made an executive decision and stood up from beside Imoen. "How much do you think that Minsc weighs?"

Frowning at the apparent non-sequitur, Khalid shrugged. "Thr, thr, three hundred pounds t, t, two hundred p, p, pounds something like th, th, that. W, w, why?"

Harry nodded slowly, then said "I think, well I have to wonder if I'll be able to put them in my item box."

The now aware – if barely - Garrick, Khalid and Jaheira all stared at him and he shrugged. "I don't think I'd be able to do it if they were conscious, able to fight the effects, but like this? It's possible. And Khalid's got a point Jaheira, none of us are in a fit state to fight besides yourself. I'm not saying you couldn't guard us, but then you wouldn't be able to get any sleep, and we'll need your healing spells tomorrow."

Khalid nodded, glancing at his own health bar which adventurers could see, pretty much like Harry, although they couldn't see the status bars of anyone else. "I f, fu, fully agree wit, wi, with that."

"...Very well," Jaheira said. "Let us get some food into them both, soup and broth I believe, they'll be able to keep it down, while I dress the big fellow's wounds."

Minsc, Harry replied again.

Jaheira shrugged. "Big guy is more descriptive."

Khalid chuckled at that, and Harry pulled out more bandages and wraps, something he had thought of buying back in the Friendly Arm Inn, and then again in Beregost. He gave them to Jaheira and as she went to work on that, started to make some soup and sandwiches for those who could chew at present.

About an hour and a half later, Jaheira finally agreed to move, and Harry doused the fire with a helmet full of water from the stream, then moved first to Minsc, reaching down and activating his item box at the same time as he was touching. There was a moment of wrenching disjointedness, where Harry instinctively knew if he had tried this on someone conscious, the individual could have fought him. But Minsc was not conscious, and Harry was able to see his body disappear into his item box, shown in front of his eyes by a small doll-like picture.

He then moved over to Imoen, where he touched her forehead, gently stroking her hair back for a second, before doing the same thing. The added weight of the two of them made a warning pop-up.

Warning, your item box is at full capacity. Anymore, and you will become encumbered.

Meanwhile Garrick, who despite limping and holding his crotch occasionally, was in decent shape, had moved back over the river and looted the bodies, cutting off ears as he went. The bounty for Gnolls was for 75 each, which meant this fight could add quite a bit to their stores. But soon enough, they were on their way.

With Jaheira in the lead, they retraced their steps up the road to the north, where she had spotted a decent sized camping area near the road, which they had gone past earlier that day when it was raining. There, Jaheira, Khalid and Harry began to move around the place, creating a campsite for them, while Garrick watched the wounded after Harry had pulled them out of his weapons space.

Neither of them looked any worse for wear thankfully, still unconscious, still shivering in Imoen's case. Jaheira and Harry once more fed them some, broth and a very light soup, before packing them back into the bed rolls Harry having donated his to Minsc for the night and laying them out by the fire Khalid and Garrick had lit a second ago.

"Go to sleep," he ordered Jaheira. "Your spells are easily the most important thing to getting these two back on their feet. Garrick, you're on first watch, wake me in two hours. You and I are going to switch off throughout the night."

“Am I going to get that explanation about you and Imoen suddenly able to use spells at some point?” Garrick asked sarcastically. “We’re supposed to be traveling companions, you can keep secrets from traveling companions.”

“You don’t keep secrets from friends,” Harry replied coolly, in no mood to be diplomatic. “You can certainly keep them from traveling companions especially were only known for a few days.”

The man winced at that but went on doggedly. “I’d still like that explanation.”

Harry shrugged, looking over at Jaheira who hesitated, then nodded, and then Khalid, who just nodded. “I’ll give it to you I suppose, in the morning. Can you wait that long?”

Garrick rolled his eyes and the conversation slowly came to a close and soon everyone was either sitting down and trying to stay away, or very deliberately going to sleep.

When his eyes snapped open the next day, the first thing Harry did was sigh in relief.

You have rested for four hours

Due to not resting on a bed and not for a full night, your normal Paladin health regeneration has been reduced to a quarter.

Even so, that had given him twenty more health points than he had had yesterday, and he felt better for it. He slowly pushed his way up from where he had been sleeping, moving around and beginning to prepare breakfast.

Leaving her own tent to the smell of food, Jaheira frowned looking around at the rest of the party. She had rested for a full eight hours in order to regain all her spells, and by nature’s provenance they had not been been attacked during the night. So she had her spells and her mana was back up as much as it could be. She scowled irritably internally. *There was a time where that number of gnolls would’ve been but a minor challenge to Khalid and me. Blast that curse!*

Regardless, she looked to Harry. “Which of them should I start with?”

“Imoen,” Harry said quickly. I’ll watch her health bar. Get her up into the yellow I think, and then switch to Minsc, then Garrick, Khalid, and finally me.”

“Why not start with him?”

“Is in danger of dying?”

“No,” Jaheira replied with a shake of her head. “I dressed his wounds, so he won’t bleed out, but he won’t wake up either without healing spells.”

“Then we stay here another day,” Harry said simply. “I want the rest of us able to fight, just in case another band of gnolls comes after him. They seem to be really determined to kill him didn’t they?”

The others all chuckled agreement, then Garrick said firmly while she’s doing that, I’d rather like that explanation please.

Imoen was sitting up, within a few minutes, and Khalid, Garrick, and Harry’s wounds had been healed for the most part. They still weren’t at 100% but going into a fight now didn’t seem as suicidal as it would have been before Jaheira saw to them. Garrick even started to slowly strum his balalaika, conjuring up the bardic regeneration aura around him, which filled the others with vitality and added strength.

He had taken Harry’s explanation about their Blood Mage skills with aplomb, but Harry had not shared with him his Advanced Adventurer skill, only his item box skill and the Blood mage skill which Imoen had taught him somehow. That seemed to the lesser very much the lesser of two evils.

They stayed there the rest of the day, simply resting, talking quietly and sleeping, all save Harry, whose Gamer ability did not allow him to nap. He made up for it though when Khalid and Imoen stood watch, Jaheira needing another full night’s sleep.

The next day, after using all of her Cure Minor Wounds spells on the others, Jaheira used her two Cure Serious wounds on the big guy, and Harry watched as the bandages were peeled off Minsc, to show fully healed skin, leaving behind tiny scars in some cases, like the one massive hit he’d taken late in the fight, which had forced Jaheira to use her last Cure Serious Wound spell on it.

That seemed to be enough, and slowly Minsc’s eyes began to open. He grumbled, one hand moving to his face as he said something about “That is the last time Minsc we’ll

ever drink so much mead before bedtime. Milk only, for strong bones the better for hunting for evil to kick." Then he blinked, staring up at them, before looking around frantically, his large hands slapping his still bare chest and sides. "Boo! Boo where are you?"

There was a squeak, and from out underneath the big guy, a tiny hamster appeared, rapidly climbing up his side, to rest on his chest. Imoen instantly cooed, "Oh it's so cute!"

Harry however had him very much more important observation. "Where was that hamster hiding?"

"Did you not see him before?" Minsc asked. "He was taking part in the fight just as Minsc was. Truly, for all his tiny size, Boo is a might warrior."

Harry blinked, trying to go over the fight, but then he frowned. "There was that one gnoll that I thought had a drop on you," he said slowly, staring at the small creature.

Giant Space Hamster?

The Ranger Minsc believes that this is a fine example of the species known as Miniature Giant Space Hamster, although whether or not that is the case, you cannot tell. Regardless, this furry companion never leaves Minsc's side, and at times might be seen as the more intelligent of the pair.

Special ability: Plus 100% to Minsc's morale, grants immunity to mental attacks.

Harry raised his eyebrow at that, as Minsc replied "Of course! He goes for the eyes! No enemy protects his eyes well enough against the mighty jaws and claws of a miniature Giant Space Hamster warrior!"

While Khalid and Garrick just blinked, Imoen laughed. "All those muscles, and he's a little wonky too. Excellent!"

"If by wonky you mean insane, then perhaps" Jaheira replied dryly. She moved over to examine Minsc's head from behind, sighing as she found a few old scars indicative of head trauma. "Ah, that explains much."

"Can I touch it?" Imoen asked looking at the little critter and ignoring Miss Grumpy Pants.

“You may pet him and feed him, but do not attempt to lift him away from Minsc. Only I can lift the mighty Miniature Giant Space Hamster that is Boo.”

“Mental trauma is not so easily healed alas,” Jaheira said with a sigh.

Harry shrugged and whispered so only the two half-elves could pick up on it. “Beyond the hamster, he seems to track pretty well. We’ll let him have his little foibles for now.”

“I have to thank you friends,” the man looked said looking around at them all. “Without your help, even mighty Berserker Ranger Minsc would have been overcome.”

Harry nodded thinking internally that Minsc seemed to like his lengthy names. “We’re adventurers, were supposed to help one another. Although I will say that fight was a little too close for comfort.” He then introduced himself and his friends.

Minsc boomed laughter. “And yet those are the best ones! Where you win much glory and renown, with tales to tell in the drinking halls back home in Rasheman.

“I don’t have a drinking hall,” Harry replied dryly. “And I don’t think I want to start drinking.”

Minsc gasped. “A warrior that does not trick! That just means that you have not tried Rasheman mead!”

“If w, w, we could get b, b, back on topic,” Khalid said ignoring the faint smile that had appeared on his wife’s face at Harry’s professing to not enjoy drinking. “C, c, can I ask, why exactly were y, you, running around nearly n, na, naked?”

“Not, that that’s entirely a bad thing,” Imoen said, ogling the man as he sat up against a log.

Minsc frowned, looking at her. “Minsc feels somewhat violated yet does not understand why. Nor do I understand why Boo is telling me good for you.”

Harry laughed but gestured Minsc to speak up. “Tell us your story Minsc.”

The story of why one so large and strong as Minsc is in such dire straits? It is a terrible tale.” He sighed, then took a bowl of hearty meat-based soup from Harry, sipping at it before going on. “Minsc was on his Dejemma, to become a full-blooded warrior. One must go on a walkabout around the world, accompanied by a witch, whose own Dejemma

is to find some problem in the world and to solve it. We had come to this area, fearing the rise of some evil power.”

He then slammed his hands to the ground before covering his face, seemingly overcome by guilt and remembered pain. “But the gnolls, they came upon Minsc when he was resting his eyes for but a moment! And then... oh woe is Minsc! For they stole her away. They stole his witch, the Lady Dynaheir.”

“And all of your clothing and weapons?” Harry said.

Minsc nodded., His large hands clenching and unclenching. “Where they were taking us I know not, but while they simply knocked my witch, the Lady Dynaheir unconscious and kept her so, they made sport of Minsc.”

“But ha, the last joke was on them!” he said with a booming laugh, slamming his fists together, creating a sound almost like crushing skulls. “For they did not count on the Berserker strength that Minsc could call upon at need. When Minsc saw his chance, he called his Berserker fury, killed his guards, and escaped. Alas, beyond the simplest of commands, to himself Minsc is unable to think while in such a state, and so could only run.

“Well, let’s solve that issue right now,” Harry said, pulling out a spare pair of leggings and then a shirt.

Taking the clothing from Harry, Minsc stood up and moved off into the woods. “Minsc thanks you for while he is strong enough to deal with the elements, young Boo sometimes has trouble with the cold and would rather like to have more places to burrow.”

From next to him Harry heard “yummy muscles” from Imoen, as she stared after him, causing him to shudder. Not that Harry couldn’t see her point. The guy was all muscle, making Harry wonder if he should put some more stat points into strength, and he was taller than Harry too.

After the big guy was dressed and sitting down again, Harry asked, “Do you know where this Dynaheir might have been taken?”

Minsc blinked looking up at him his eyes wide in hope. “Does that mean you will help Minsc even more? Does that mean you will help him find his witch?!”

“Yes,” Harry said with a nod. “Of course we’ll help. Saving a damsel in distress is after all, something all Adventurers should do.” *And if the gnolls are strong enough to operate so close to civilization in such numbers, it’s best we nip them in the bud now.*

Jaheira groaned, and Harry saw several messages one after another. He had gained trust with her, but lost respect again, which Harry supposed he could put that down to the fact that he was so quick to offer his help and was willing to set aside their main goal of solving the iron intake issue for this one.

Imoen though gained points, as did Garrick. Minsc instantly slipped from it’s previous, stance, which Harry hadn’t had time to read but had been combat ally, into full friend, while another message popped up about Khalid also sliding into friend.

Through your decision to help him rescue his kidnapped witch charge, you have Gained 500 respect and 500 trust with Minsc. You have 500/500 Respect, 500/500 Trust with Minsc.

Minsc is now your friend, for better or worse.

With your decision to save a damsel, you have earned +200 Respect, +200 Trust with Garrick. You have 510/500 Trust, 390/500 Respect with Garrick.

While you have enough trust with Garrick, Garrick doesn’t quite respect you enough to make the leap from Travelling Companion/Acquaintance to Friend.

To save a person in need from durance vile has cut Khalid to the core. You have gained 500 trust, 500 Respect with Khalid. You have 1180/1000 Trust and 1050/1000 Respect with Khalid.

Khalid is now your friend. You have to wonder how Jaheira will react to this...

Another message instantly popped up afterwards and Khalid jerked in surprise, staring at something none of the others could see.

Khalid has become your friend and is eligible for full party integration. Would you like to add Khalid to your party?

Minsc has become your friend and is eligible for full party integration. Would you like to add Minsc to your party?

Harry's eyes widened as did Imoen's, breaking her out of her momentary stupor, but Harry was unable to concentrate on that. Because he found himself lifted up into the air by the larger man and nearly squeezed in half, Minsc apparently not having noticed or cared about the message appearing in front of his eye. "Yes! Harry, Minsc and boo! We will be butts kicking to retrieve our witch!"

"Gah, not if you break my ribs we won't damn it I just got those healed!"

End Chapter

This has been edited by Udodelig Urningin.

Chapter 5: Evil Smurfs, New Acquaintances and Morons

Jaheira scowled at Minsc, who, in the true nature of any male in the face of a furious older female, gave the half-elven woman his best innocent smile. It didn't work and her scowl didn't go away as she pulled her hands away from Harry's abdomen the blue light of a healing spell slowly disappearing from her hands. "I just healed Harry's ribs and you go and break them in your exuberance Minsc? Tell me, are all Rashemani so careless with their strength, or is it another sign of the head wound you have so obviously sustained recently?"

She broke off as she looked at her husband, narrowing her eyes at him seeing his eyes were not on any of them, rather they seemed to be concentrating on something only he could see. But before she could speak, Minsc did so. "Minsc apologizes for wounding Harry, he should have realized that Harry would still be recovering from the mighty battle that we fought yesterday."

He stopped as Boo squeaked in his ear, nodding to the hamster before he went on. "On another matter, Minsc is seeing something. He often sees many things, especially when he has partaken of his people's best mead, or the shaman's special tabac roots. But

Boo is saying that he is seeing it as well, and as a young giant miniature space hamster, Minsc has never allowed Boo to partake of such. No matter how much Boo has pouted at him.”

As the others snickered or just stared at that, Minsc went on unperturbed. “There is an odd message box in front of Minsc, the type that he has seen when leveling up or taking on a quest in the past. But this time it is saying that Harry is offering to bring Minsc into his party, but Minsc already thought that he and Harry were a party. Did we not already agree to find Minsc’s Witch? Boo is saying this is the case, and yet there is no message for Boo either.”

“...I th, th, thought that your advanced ad, ad, adventurer skil, sk, skill couldn’t affect us,” Khalid began, frowning and rubbing at his forehead as he as he to stare at the message in front of him. “But be, be, because I apparently now see y, y, you as a friend, I a, am, seeing a me, mess, message must like Minsc’s. I can, ca, cannot complain about see, see, seeing you as a friend, y, y, you have been a tr, tru, true companion sin, si, since we met, a, an, and you decision to help Minsc find t, t, this stolen Witch of his s, s, speaks well of you be, beyon, beyond that. Yet, y, y, your AA Skill is g, g, going to affect me as w, w, well now because of t, th, that?”

“We said so back in the Friendly Arm Inn, didn’t we?” Imoen said pointing at herself. “That because he was able to add me into his party because of our relationship his AA skills sort of reached out into me.”

“Well yes, y, y, you said that, but s, s, seeing is one thing, be, b, believing another,” Khalid replied.

“I take it you now believe,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Let us say,” the half elf male began with a laugh “th, th, that seeing th, th, this in front of m, m, my face is a most poi, poi, pointed re, re, reason. But why am I see, s, seeing this now?” Khalid asked, frowning.

“Well, that has to do with relationship statuses. Imoen was labeled as family by my AA Skill before she and I became party members. But when we met the two of you, we became aware of how relationships statuses impacted becoming real party members,” Harry said slowly.

“Explain,” Jaheira said, her voice brooking no argument.

Looking over at Imoen, Harry received a nod in reply and then turned back to Jaheira and Khalid. He briefly explained how he had been seeing various notices about how the two of them felt towards this or that activity or action he had committed during their time together. This led up to Khalid becoming an actual friend, rather than Semi-Friendly, or a Traveling Companion.

To one side, Garrick listened to this looking more and more confused and annoyed as Harry spoke. For his part Minsc simply leaned back and listened intently, although whether or not that was to Harry and his explanation or the squeaking of Boo in his ear was anyone's guess.

"And let me guess, I am at the point where I am a Traveling Companion correct?" Jaheira asked.

She was not well pleased to hear that Harry and Imoen had been keeping something this large from them, but she could well understand why they had done so. *It all sounds so fantastical! Being able to see how people around you react to your actions opinions? To your comments and everything else? That goes well beyond any ability or skill I've ever heard.*

Her eyes suddenly narrowed, and she was about to ask a very sharp question about whether or not Harry had been manipulated when she came to her senses. Harry was not a manipulator. Harry was about as straight as an arrow and while he obviously had some wisdom to keep secrets, he was not manipulative at all. *Confrontational, sometimes acerbic, and very opinionated he might be, but Harry is no intriguer to try and control us in such a manner.*

She was still very leery, more about the impact his power could have than about Harry's personality, but she could understand why he kept that from them. "Tell me, with this revelation what points did you lose with me?" she asked suddenly, interested to see both what Harry would say, and how such a revelation had impacted their 'relationship status'.

"As you're still at the Traveling Companion level, the points I can earn with you are broken into two categories, Respect and Trust. "Whereas with them," he went on, pointing to Minsc and Imoen. "The points are just friendship points. There aren't obvious levels of friendship, it's based on a scale system shown by a yellow to green, based on

how how close a family member or Friend is. Imoen and I are right in the middle of family, and Minsc and Khalid are both on the low side for friendship.”

“Understandable. But the points I mentioned?”

Harry winced. “Um... before I read that out, I want you to be aware I don’t choose how these notices read off or anything, I don’t have any control over that. Whatever fragment of the murder-hobo that is in me is a snarky bit of soul I have to say.”

Jaheira nodded and gestured him to continue and he read them aloud still looking at Jaheira.

For being so tactless as to dare to keep parts of your AA skill a secret from her, you have lost -200 to trust, but gained +40 to respect with the Harper Jaheira. Evidently being secretive is actually a good thing up to a point with her, yet the lack of trust you’ve shown has for some reason actually hurt that stone heart of hers. She’ll probably get over it though... eventually.

When he finished reading that message off, the half-elven woman merely nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, that largely dovetails with my thoughts and feelings towards this revelation, though putting into a point format is odd to say the least. So, this Advanced Adventurer Skill is at least accurate in what it reads from us.”

Again Jaheira had the urge to ask if Harry had ever tried to manipulate them using this system but again, she fought the urge back. If he had wanted to manipulate her, he would have told her something different just then, or figured out some way of playing them off with some kind of story to explain how Khalid was able to now become part of Harry’s party rather than the truth like this.

“And if ever I needed the proof that you do not control much of this advanced adventuring system of yours Harry, the snarky attitude of that statement put paid to it. You have not shown any sign of that kind of humor before this. Still, it is a magnificent tool, one whose implications are even larger than I had first thought.”

“I haven’t followed anything about whatever you’ve been talking about for the last fifteen minutes,” Garrick said looking a little annoyed now, that the food was gone. “Can someone please explain this all to me?”

“Minsc is also very confused moment, but then Boo is also telling him that this is all something wondrous. Still, Minsc would like an explanation of the strange words hovering in front of his eyes. If they are going to continue to stay there, that will soon become annoying when we are faced with battle,” the large bald man said.

Harry looked at the two lovers closely. “Um, before we get to that, one thing that the AA skill will do which we haven’t talked about, because it hasn’t come up before, is that it will give me more information about you than just your stats. Your abilities, your skill sets, will all be visible to me.”

“For instance if you look at my status screen,” Harry said, before stating aloud most of his Life Skills, an openness that caused again Minsc and Garrick to look at him in shock. People did not just share their stats and skills like that, not even with their closest friends!

Then Minsc simply laughed, slapping his large hands together and shouted, “Excellent, most excellent, to show such trust in a fellow warrior, such an honest and true act. Minsc has truly found the right individual to journey with to rescue his Witch! I am perfectly fine becoming a party member with you, Harry Potter!”

“You n, n, never said anything about b, being able to see that k, kind of thing before”, Khalid asked incredulously, and accusingly.

“No I didn’t,” Harry said with a shrug. “I realized that what I could already tell you and do with the AA system was too much as it was. Or can you look me in the eye and say that you would have believed such as that on top of everything else.”

“We would not have,” Jaheira replied instantly for Khalid again. “And you know it husband. Trust does not only go one way. That is why it is so hard to build.” At that Khalid could only nod, knowing his wife had a point.

“What the heck is going on!?” Garrick asked plaintively, staring after them before turning to look at Harry and Imoen. “First you and Imoen can use spells, now you Khalid and Minsc are sharing what could only be hallucinations yet all of you are treating it like it’s real?”

Khalid looked at his wife, and a silent communication went between them for a moment, a thing of raised eyebrows and frowns Harry could not follow. Then Khalid stood

up and the two half-elves excused themselves quickly heading out into the woods. “We will be back, but we need to talk about this and it’s implications.”

Behind them, Harry looked at Imoen, twitching his head to Minsc and Garrick, but she smirked back at him, patting Minsc on the arm as she winked at Harry. It looked as if the cat was out of the bag good or bad, and she didn’t care much one way or another. That made Harry rather annoyed with himself and how his AA skill acted sometimes. *And here I am getting better at not reacting to the messages as they pop up like that, and then this happens.* “Well, this is going to take some explaining Garrick. And I will ask both you and Garrick to give me your words you won’t share anything I am going to tell you with anyone else without my permission.”

Scowling Garrick gave his promised while Minsc simply nodded, patting his stomach. This sounds like a long tale, but in that case, could we at least take the time to eat? Not only does food and wine make a tale-telling better, but a mighty warrior such as Minsc has an equally mighty appetite,” he finished with a Booming laugh. “And Boo is a growing giant space hamster so has a most mighty appetite as well.”

“And what exactly does Boo eat? And for that matter, do you have any dietary requirements as a Rashemani? Or as a Ranger, does that mean you can’t eat cooked meat or something?” Harry joked.

Minsc laughed, slapping Harry on the shoulder. For all of Harry’s own strength, that slap was tremendously powerful, and Harry had to shift his shoulder slightly to get the sting of it out. Nonetheless, he moved over to the fire, and began to lay out a few pans. “Imoen, I don’t suppose you could rustle us up some fish from the stream? Or would you rather start this explanation?”

“Sure, but I also want to loot the bodies. You lot didn’t get to them all did you?”
Imoen

“No and I think Khalid and Garrick were more interested in any money or armor they could find,” Harry replied.

Out in the forest, Khalid and Jaheira stared at one another. “The moment we heard about this AA skill being able to reach out to Imoen we knew something like this was possible,” Jaheira began, then smirked. “If not in exactly the same fashion.”

“Agreed. B, b, but, I do not want to take this pl, pl, plunge without you, my dear,” Khalid replied.

“Bah,” Jaheira, waving a hand like she was swatting a fly. “While I might not completely trust Harry, he has proven to be a good sort,” she said, each word coming out as if winched out of her with great effort.

To say that Jaheira did not trust easily was putting it mildly, although Khalid knew why that was of course. They had both been betrayed several times as Harpers, not by other Harpers of course, but by contacts, local allies and so forth. On top of that Jaheira had been betrayed most cruelly several times before they had met. So he knew how hard it was for her to completely trust someone. Whereas Khalid came by his openness naturally, not so much because he was a friendly sort, although he was, but because he liked to see the best in people.

And so far, he had only seen the best from Harry. Heck, while he didn't agree with it, Khalid could even understand why a young adventurer like him was trying to stand up for himself more than was probably wise of him. And in this last fight, Harry had saved his life several times, as they fought to save another warrior and then at the end, had made a selfless decision to find and rescue a woman in need rather than to follow the voice of logic which should have dictated that they prioritize the Iron Intake Issue.

All of that had come together to make Khalid trust Harry more, both in his decision-making skills and in terms of his basic humanity. Even as a paladin that last wasn't something that could be assumed in this imperfect world of theirs.

“And what is holding you back my husband?” Jaheira asked, one eyebrow rising in query. “The fear that I will be left behind?”

“The fear th, th, that you will begin t, t, to feel ostracized,” Khalid said.

Jaheira rolled her eyes. “As if that is not a feeling I have ever dealt with before. Besides which, you have seen how they act, do you think that Harry or Imoen would really be willing to push me out of things? Just because I'm not a full party member doesn't mean anything in terms of traveling with them. It just means that I don't have access to this AA Skill, which is, frankly annoying. But Harry said it himself, it is based on trust and respect, and I have always been tougher in those areas than you.”

She frowned and took Khalid's hand in hers, squeezing. "But what is really bothering you? It certainly is not the idea that you will be seeing and taking advantage of something that I will not for a while. No, this is more personal."

Khalid looked away, frowning and crossing his arms. "The c, c, curse," he muttered, his stutter even more evident than normal. "He'll s, s, see the c, c, curse. If he's a, a, able to see ev, ev, everything else, including our stats an, and all, he'll see the n, n, negative as well as the p, p, positive. He'll want an ex, ex, explanation."

Jaheira winced but did not relinquish his grip on her hand. "We probably owe him that anyway. You've been wanting to give him one for certain no? After all, they both can tell our levels, and that neither of us are as tough or as skilled as we should be."

Khalid winced at that but nodded slowly. "Y, yes, but I w, w, wanted to do it on o, o, our terms."

Jaheira shrugged. "We rarely get what we want in this life. I say we see what happens, see what he can see when you become a full party member. And then, we can tell them whatever we wish afterwards."

The two of them looked at one another, and Khalid shrugged. "I sup, sup, suppose then we sh, sh, shall see what we shall s, s, see. Or rather H, H, Harry will."

Back in the camp, they found Harry had finished explaining things to Minsc and Garrick and had also prepared a hearty lunch for them all. The smell of it hit the two half-elves and Jaheira and Khalid both smiled. "Braised fish?" she asked as she moved over to look at them in the pan. "With wild onion and garlic no less."

Harry simply shrugged. "Well, I thought that good food would make this conversation go more smoothly. Minsc came up with the onion and garlic, and Imoen caught the fish for us."

Imoen's ability with unusual weapons like whips actually had carried over with her ability to fly fish for some reason. She had also found several dozen bottles of nasty grog on the gnolls which her thief skills had told her could be used to create a new kind of fire or grease trap. Traps had been something she'd trained on in the tutorial, but hadn't yet used out in the wider world.

“And watching him cook gave us something other than this fantastical story he’s been telling us to concentrate on. This, this AA skill...” Garrick said chuckle shaking his head. “I’m almost upset at how much of an advantage it gives you. I mean the ability to see your own stats, to control where your stat points go, where your skill points go? That is just huge!”

“Indeed!” Minsc said, thrusting a large fist into the air. The other hand was currently holding Boo, one thumb gently rubbing the top of his little head. “And yet, nothing we have learned has made Minsc change his mind. Harry most definitely is the best person we could choose to help us rescue Dynaheir!”

Harry held up a hand. “Minsc, this is a big decision and a bigger commitment between us. You joining my party means our affiliation is going to go on a lot longer than it will take us to find our Witch. This is a long-term commitment.”

Minsc nodded his head. “I fully understand, and it speaks well of you that you would wish me to make a decision like this knowing that. But Minsc is unconcerned. Minsc is a Ranger of Rasheman, and I can sense that there will be much evil butts to be kicked in the future with you! The only way that you would get rid of me is if my Witch, Dynaheir decides that we cannot travel with you for some reason that is beyond the ken of men and hamsters. And that will not happen until we rescue her.”

“Then I promise that we will rescue her whatever we have to do,” Harry said with a nod. “Or avenge her if it comes to that. I promise.”

At those words Minsc eyes blazed, and he reached across and held Harry’s forearm in a warrior’s clasp firmly. “Minsc will take that as an oath given between warriors. Let evil tremble at this!”

Your bellicose and hasty oath has earned you 200 relationship points with Minsc. Warning: as his basic friendship with you indicated, this is based on your helping him find Dynaheir. If you cannot do that, prepare to see a blowback of most heinous proportions. Even if you are able to avenge her.

Smiling at the two men, Khalid turned the conversation back to the elephant in the room, asking, “What ex, ex, exactly does this ent, en, entail? A, a, as party leader, how m, mu, much control of my actions wi, wi, will this give you?”

Harry looked to Imoen to answer that one, and she replied promptly, "Very little. Oh," she waved her hand airily. "I follow Harry's instructions in battle most the time as you've noticed, but I can go my own way just as easily. I would say, that the greatest thing it does is the ability to share skills. The most disturbing it does, is that it gives Harry control of your stats."

Both Garrick and Minsc must have just heard the same thing because their expressions did not change. Like every other adventurer, they knew that stats were given out the instant you leveled up, assigned via the activity that had leveled you up. It was why a Bard or warrior would have specialized stats that would help them in their various abilities, rather than a more balanced approach: a high level of charisma or wisdom for Garrick as a bard, and an equally high level of strength and endurance for Minsc. To hear that Harry would be able to control those for them, well that was big.

The talk continued for a few minutes with Imoen dominating it now, putting to rest any lingering fears Khalid had about the amount of control AA Skill afforded Harry of his actions and abilities. She emphasized the lack of that, and the amount of help being in the same party as Harry offered her in terms of combat. But what really sold both half-elves was the fact that Khalid would have access to his own Item Box as the two Bhaalspawn did.

"In that case," Jaheira said briskly, "I suggest you add Minsc into your party. Then read us out what you have learned about him in so doing. We will then make a final decision on whether or not we wish to fully join your party Harry."

Harry nodded, and Minsc pushed the yes button – which he had seen previously when he, as an Adventurer accepted quests - to accept Harry's offer to join his party as Harry did the same on his end. Almost instantly, both of them were inundated by messages and Imoen gasped as she too saw more than a few messages. The first Harry saw was the shortest and least helpful.

"Congratulations, you have added a third person to your party! You are one step closer to being able to fully utilize the Tactics skill!"

It didn't tell Harry anymore about the Tactics skill, or how many more people he needed to actually start using the Tactics skill. After that though, things got more interesting.

Congratulations, Harry has learned Cleave.

Cleave is a specialized Warrior skill that allows you to add three times the damage to any edged weapon attack. Warning: active skills come with cool down times. You can only use Cleave once every three minutes.

Imoen has learned Cleave! Warning: Imoen does not have enough Strength to use Cleave. The skill is now locked.

Imoen's 'Hide In Shadows' skill has gone up 23% thanks to Minsc's Ranger skills.

The next notice that Harry and Imoen both saw was:

"Congratulations, you have started to learn the Ranger skill: Woodcraft."

Woodcraft, a skill of rangers and Druids, which allows you to discern what animals are in the area, follow tracks, and find food in the wood lands other than the four-legged variety. This includes but is not limited to numerous verbs, which can be used for potions, or cooking.

Notice: your skill in cooking is high enough to use anything you find in the wood lands, just make sure to clean at first.

Minsc too saw a new message. He in turn had learned Backstab, as Harry had from Imoen. And his own Hide in Shadows, which had been 23% chance had gone up by 32%, half of Imoen's preexisting chance rate.

"I don't understand," Harry said after reading the messages aloud, looking over at Minsc. "I saw you use that attack, Cleave, during the fight. But you're a Ranger, not a Warrior. How do you have a Warrior skill, and how can it be a high level one like that?"

"Indeed," Minsc said with a bellowing laugh, as he in looked at what backstab would do for him. The idea of dealing that much damage to the butts of evil was most amazing to think of. The fact that according to Boo, Boo had also learned the same skill was equally interesting. *His ability to go for the eyes is even greater now!* "But while the warriors of other nations might learn Cleave as an advanced skill, my people, whatever their adventuring title, can learn it from the instant they start training! That is what sets a Rashemani barbarian apart from a common Adventurer."

He frowned then, pouting a little. "But, there are rights and practices that you must observe before you can first use Cleave as a true barbarian of Rasheman! Hmm... we will have to put that off until after we rescue Dynaheir! But I do look forward to training you in the ways of the barbarian Ranger! Why, one day you may even be able to attract your own familiar! It could even be another miniature giant space hamster, although perhaps that is aiming too high."

Jaheira looked somewhat dyspeptic at that thought, while Harry's smile went a little wooden. At the same time in another dimension, Hedwig's eyes snapped open on her perch in Hermione's room, and she let loose a low, very dangerous sounding "preck..."

"And because it's a learned skill, not a hereditary one, it carries over," Imoen exclaimed, hugging Minsc around the shoulders. "Damn that's awesome! Think about what you can do with backstab and with Cleave, that's a certain kill shot right there on anything human-sized! And maybe even anything bigger if you add in the Flank Attack attribute."

Minsc smiled and nodded at that, while Garrick was scowling, willing himself to trust Harry more, muttering under his breath. "Come on, come on! He helped you so much with Silk, and now we're going to rescue another potentially fair maiden? A real one this time. If that doesn't show he's got a good heart what does? Come on just a hundred more points! Come on, you want the relationship level to get better, right!?!"

It was actually ten respect and ninety trust, but given his current frustrations, it was understandable, perhaps, that Garrick didn't make that distinction.

Jaheira looked at him askance and Harry swiftly moved away from him on the log they were sharing. The two of them looked at one another and exchanged a smile, before turning back to the others. "Well, I think we're ready to go on to look at Minsc's stats correct?"

Everyone nodded, even Minsc leaning forward eagerly. Of course he knew his own stats. Any adventurer could see their own status screen to that extent. But he was interested to see what his new friends thought of them.

Name: Minsc

Gender: Male

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Ranger

Strength: (28/93)

Willpower: (6) +15

Dexterity: (15)

Constitution: (12)

Durability: (13)

Wisdom: (4)

Charisma: (5)

Intelligence: (6)

Luck: (5)

Harry whistled, staring at Minsc's Strength. "Remind me to never get into an arms wrestling contest with you big guy."

Minsc boomed out a laugh again, and Harry realized, somewhat belatedly, that doing so was his normal way of laughing. "Indeed, few even in the warrior log houses of my homeland would dare to try and match my strength in such a contest."

"Just the way I like 'em," Imoen murmured, pushing a little closer towards Minsc. "Brawny and dumb."

"Minsc feels he's been insulted and yet complemented at the same time. He is also feeling a little uncomfortable, despite the fact that Boo is telling him to just go with the flow. But we are not in a river, so I do not understand what he means," Minsc murmured, his face showing his confusion as Imoen moved to lean against him.

Khalid reached out and gently but firmly took Imoen's shoulder and pulled her away from the confused Ranger. "E, e, enough of that for now m, m, my dear. Continue Ha, ha, Harry," He said, his voice somewhat tense as he knew that now the stats had been read out, they would go on to the next segment of Minsc's status screen.

Life Skills:

Beast Familiar: With Boo as his ranger companion, Minsc is immune to mind-control type attacks. They may gain a foothold, but will not remain in place long.

Class Specific Skills:

Woodcraft level 5: Minsc is as at home in any Woodland or jungle as an animal who has lived there all his life. He is able to track, hunt, and 'Hide In Shadows' in any natural environment despite his tremendous size.

“You see, Boo? Even Harry’s amazing Advanced Adventuring Skill knows that you are mighty despite your miniature status. I will have no more talk about your being too small. The lady giant miniature space hamsters will know you for your greatness regardless of your size.”

As he heard that, there was a moment of utter disconnect in Harry’s mind for a moment, and then Imoen was laughing, causing a chain reaction among the others. Even Minsc joined in, although he stated that he didn’t know why everyone was laughing. “Still, laughter is good for the soul!”

Harry nodded at that. He liked Minsc and was looking forward to traveling with him. *It will certainly never be dull. It’s like getting a larger, more random version of Imoen in my life! One with a less ribald sense of humor and more jokes that I can actually follow without having to think about them.*

Pushing herself up right, Jaheira coughed, looking as if she wanted to make it seem as if the last few minutes of total laughter had not in fact occurred. Without much success it must be said, but she was the first to fully regain control of herself, and she coughed into her one hand, then smoothed out her hair, playing with the beads in her hair for a moment. “*Ahem*, yes, well, I believe that you were speaking Harry? Is there anything more you can tell us?”

“Well he’s got a bloodline skill here, Berserker. ‘At a mental command or in reaction to certain events, Minsc becomes enraged for two hours,’” Harry read off. “While enraged gains a massive bonus to his strength and becomes completely immune to charm, confusion, fear, feeble mind, hold, level drain, maize, stun and sleep. He also gains fifteen heath points temporarily, which disappear at the end of the Berserk rage.

This can possibly knock Minsc unconscious if he is wounded enough, though he cannot die from this backlash.”

Hearing this Minsc blinked in wide-eyed surprise. “Minsc knew that he was stronger and faster in his berserk state, but to be so immune to so many spells! Truly, the spirit of the Rashemani Ice Dragon berserker lodge is a powerful gift!”

Imoen asked, “Okay so what is his favorite weapons?”

“As if you need to ask Harry that! Any weapon that is in my hands becomes my favorite weapon, for it helps me to buttkick the forces of evil!” Minsc began, before going on more hesitantly, if such a word could ever be used to describe him. “But I do prefer the large Claymore, the bow and arrow, and halberds.”

“That’s right,” Harry said with a nod. “He’s got two skill slots in Two Handed sword, two in Longbow, one in halberd and one in mace.”

“And other than the halberds that we took from the enemy, we don’t have any of those weapons in our inventory do we?” Jaheira asked frowning. “Going directly after this Dynaheir woman is looking to be less and less of a good idea. I mean no offense Minsc,” she said holding her hand up as the large man seemed to swell at that. “But we need to talk about this further after we are done exploring what Harry’s AA Skill can do for his party members.”

For a moment everyone fell silent, thinking about what they learned then Khalid asked a question. “We A, A, Adventurers, wh, when we accepts quests we g, g, get quest notifications. D, d, does your AA Skills tell you an, an, anything more than the re, re, regular version?”

“You tell me,” Harry said with a shrug. “I’ll read it out for you, as well as the journal entry.”

You have accepted the Side Quest (medium), Where’s the Witch?

While Jaheira, Imoen and Khalid all groaned at that, Minsc nodded his head sagely, “Mmm, that is a good name, most descriptive of our current plight.” He then looked confused as Harry slapped his face with one hand. “Was there a mosquito friend Harry? I hate that.”

“Um, yeah, let’s go with that,” Harry said while attempting to glare a smirking Imoen into silence, but having little luck as the others were also fighting back laughs at his expense. After a few seconds of fulminating impotent glaring, Harry went on.

The warrior Minsc has come before you with a plea to help him rescue his Witch, Dynaheir who he was traveling with on the equivalent of their dual rites of passage. Minsc cannot become a true warrior of his warrior lodge without returning home with Dynaheir.

Dynaheir moreover is searching out some great evil that Witches of her school are apparently sent out to find as part of their own rite of passage, although what that evil meant to be, you do not know.

Harry looked at Minsc quizzically at that, and he shrugged his shoulders. “the wily Dynaheir has not said much of that, only that she felt compelled to come here to the Sword Coast, to investigate Nashkel in particular. She told me she had glimpses of great evils, both large and small.”

“Personal evils like murder or such I suppose,” Imoen said before going on with an overdone eyeroll. “And large like, oh I don’t know, the Iron Intake Issue! It seems everything is coming back to it.”

“Not just the Iron Intake Issue,” Harry said shaking his head. “But the people who have put that scheme into motion.”

Jaheira and Khalid nodded at that in approval. After all, foiling one scheme which no doubt had lined the pockets of the individuals behind was one thing. It was entirely another to bring those people to justice.”

“Truly! For when a plot is foiled villains will always find a way to skitter away and hide once more in their dens, like the mice they truly are when the mighty forces of justice come for them!” Minsc bellowed. Like booming a laugh, bellowing seemed to be Minsc’s normal means of communication.

Harry grinned at the other man, nodding his head. Despite his age and the experience of travelling however long they had been since they left the tutorial behind, there was still a bit of of the little boy in him who longed to be the kind of Paladin who went around righting wrongs and saving people. And it looked as if Minsc was onboard for following that ideal.

Khalid however was frowning. "An, an, and that is all?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Oh, we can figure out other things along the way, there are a few clues here, little dots to indicate that we can learn things that will help us in this quest, like what Imoen did back in the Friendly Arm Inn, although this is the first time I've ever seen the initials places for those hints marked out like this. But that's all my AA skill can tell me."

He frowned thinking, then looked over at Minsc. "Minsc, you're the only one who can tell us anymore. You say you were attacked by Gnolls. Could you tell which direction they were going with when you were there captive? And were there any other creatures with them?"

In response the bald-headed barbarian Ranger frowned, thinking deeply as Boo climbed up him to perch on his shoulder. "They were moving south, for a time. They were not following any roads of course. As much as I loathe the creatures, Gnolls are as at home in the forest as any Ranger could be, even one so well trained as I. There were many of them, but I cannot say how many there were, or where the numbers of gnolls who followed Minsc came from. As for other creatures of villainy with them, I cannot remember any."

He broke off as Boo squeaked and squeaked some more before nodding. "But Boo says that he spotted other creatures, small ones coming and going, delivering food to the Gnolls and then retreating. They were tiny little creatures, so small that Minsc might have missed them, but with blue skin."

"Xvarts," Jaheira and Khalid both said as one.

"Bless you," Imoen said, and Jaheira and rolled her eyes.

Khalid explained. "N, n, no, that wasn't a sneeze, that's their race is c, c, called, xvarts. They are small gob, go, goblin-like creatures, smarter than most though in t, t, that they are able to work to, to, together more ef, ef, effectively. They also with blue s, sk, skin and rounded ears rather than p, p, pointed."

"And they are intelligent enough to get along with other sub-humans, like gnolls, orcs and so forth. It sounds as if the gnolls have been able to subjugate them, but I'm afraid that doesn't help us find this Dynaheir woman," Jaheira said with a sigh.

But it did update my quest Harry said with a nod, before going on to explain what he was seeing.

The (medium) side quest 'Where's the Witch' has been updated. You have discovered new information.

"You have learned from the barbarian Ranger Minsc that there were other creatures working with the gnolls even if they were not involved in actually taking Minsc or his companion captive. They in fact were supplying the gnolls with food and drink as they were traveling. That implies that there is a camp of them between where Minsc was attacked, and where the gnolls are making their hideout. Perhaps finding it will give you more of a clue as to the final destination of Dynaheir and her captors."

Minsc's eyes widened. "Truly, your Advance Adventuring Skill is a gift from the great god Ao! That would never have occurred to Minsc!"

Harry nodded truthfully. "It is, but while that was very helpful, I don't think we'll be able to add more to it right now." He looked at Khalid, then Jaheira before asking hesitantly, "So, did you to make a decision? I don't want to pressure you or anything, but you were able to hear what I found out about Minsc."

Khalid looked as if he was going to be back away again, but Jaheira reached over and took his hand, squeezing once. That seemed to give him more courage and he nodded. "I'm fully w, w, willing to call you a friend, an, an, and if that means I c, c, can be part of your adventuring p, p, party, and ta, ta, take advantage of what that m, me, means, it is worth it. I'd simply a, a, ask that you do not j, j, judge me or Jaheira by w, wh, what you find out."

"You know I could just add you in and not look if it matters so much to you," Harry said with a shrug. "I would promise not to and that would be that." He smirked. "What kind of paladin would I be if I broke that kind of promise after all."

"No," Jaheira said and Khalid echoed her. "It wo, wo, would fester be, be, between us, the fact th, th, that you were willing to trust us, that y, y, you were willing to ex, ex, extend the hand of friendship, b, b, but we were not w, w, willing to meet you h, ha, halfway."

"While it is not my place to say anything at this point as I cannot in good conscience yet call you friend, I believe that knowledge is power, being able to see that

information will be important for both of you. And perhaps, a second eye on a certain issue may help myself and Khalid.” Jaheira said.

Harry looked at them both, locking eyes with one then the other, until they both nodded, then breathed in deeply, and slowly exhaled it, before raising a finger. “Okay. Let’s do this.” A second later, the congratulations message popped up.

“You now have more people in your adventuring party. You will be able to use Tactics!”

Your Tactics skill is now level 2, experience level 100/3000 to next level. Tactics levels up passively during combat and you will not receive notices about gaining experience until you level up.

You are able to command your fellows and put them in a position to do damage, creating Formations. Creating the correct Formation for any given battle will give you combat bonuses. These bonuses will not carry over to allied combatants, but they can be used to create the Formation in question.

You understand a bare minimum of how to use terrain to your advantage, and the idea of planning ahead for a specific combat is something you have now learned is a good idea, although strategic planning is still well beyond you. You will gain 50% chance in succeeding to give an order to a party member.

Make decisions, command your party in battle, and lead them to victory, and your tactical ability will level up, opening further features and buffs for you and your party!”

After that was a few more messages the like Harry and Imoen had seen before, about Khalid learning Cleave and Backstab. And unlike Imoen, Khalid had enough strength to use Cleave.

In return, Harry was able to learn Shield Bash, although he also received a notice that the side quest (small) which he would’ve have to complete to learn it had been failed. Since that didn’t come with a onus, Harry ignored it to gain shield bash, reading it off for Minsc’s benefit since he, unlike Imoen, had the strength to use it.

You have learned Shield Bash. This is a high level warrior skill which can be learned at later levels.

Using your shield you can bash your enemy off balance, backward or even entirely off his feet depending on the combat environment at the time.

Warning: as an activated skill, Shield Bash has a cooldown time. You can only use Shield Bash once every ninety seconds.

Beyond that, there were a few level activated skill notices that Harry and the others lacked the requirements to use. They were just straight up determined by levels, but once Harry and his party members reached those levels they would be able to use them. Bar Imoen at least, unless she raised her durability and strength levels a lot more than they were now.

Harry read all that off, then looked at Khalid for permission to turn his attention to Khalid's stats. He nodded, and Harry continued.

Name: Khalid

Gender: Male

Race: Half-Elf

Classification: Level 32 Warrior (-26)

Strength: (62) - 48

Willpower: (18) -15

Dexterity: (104) - 80

Constitution: (88) -68

Durability: (22)

Wisdom: (32)

Charisma: (19) -15

Intelligence: (16)

Luck: (7)

Listening to this, Garrick looked pained. "On the one hand, that really does tell you how far we have to go, but on the other, minus forty-eight to strength? Minus eighty to dexterity, minus sixty-eight to Constitution!? What in the world did you run into Khalid?"

“Is not what he ran into child, but what **we** ran into,” Jaheira barked, coming to her husband’s aid instantly, almost growling like an animal at Garrick who flinched back.

Harry actually smiled at that, picturing Jaheira as a mama bear trying to defend her young was kind of funny. But the next part he knew was going to get serious right bloody quickly. “Your favorite weapon is longsword, you’ve got three skill slots and that, four in sword and shield, three in Longbow, one in crossbow. And now we get on to the bloodline and life skills,” Harry said slowly. He stared at each title, then began with the bright side.

Half Elven. Due to his half Elven heritage, Khalid is at home in the forest and able to see in the dark. His hearing is also acute, though not to the level of a full elf. He is also long-lived, being 376 years old.

This came as no surprise to any of them, after all elves and even half-elves were common in this world.

Hunter, level 5: Thanks to his wife being a Druid and due to his own childhood growing up in the forest, Khalid is more than capable of hunting for his food, and though not the best at finding a trail, will gain +4 to any critical hit and chance to hit with bows on any food animal.

That also made sense given Khalid routinely added venison or some pork to their dishes on the road. From there though the AA Skill went on into more unknowns.

Indomitable: Due to special training, the warrior Khalid has a +5 to all defensive abilities, which includes the Sword and Shield passive skill, the durability of his body and armor, and the activated Skill Shield Bash.

This skill is unavailable due to lack of strength and endurance.

Fortitude: a high level warrior skill, this active skill allows warriors to ‘tank’ as it were, taking damage for indeterminate amount of times.

This skill is currently disabled due to lack of strength and endurance.

There Harry paused, staring at what was revealed to him before looking over at the married couple. “Are you sure you want me to go on, because all that’s left are the two negatives. We can get by with only seeing the symptoms caused rather than the reason behind them.”

The two half-elves exchanged glances, and then Jaheira nodded firmly. Harry idly wondered if she could honestly nod, or do much of anything else, any other way at this point. "Go on. And I will explain afterwards. "After all, it was my fault that we became afflicted."

"No it was n, n, not!" Khalid said snappily. "I agreed with you th, that, we needed to att, attack **his** island. It w, w, was what we were sup, sup, supposed to do as H, h, Harpers after all."

"And yet, the Harpers have not been able to help us get rid of that curse, while at the same time still demanding that we continue our work. No, I am at fault for what occurred to us."

Harry cut them off quickly. "Let's not play the blame game okay. I'm gathering that this is something that happened far in the past right? That means, that it is in the past! You can't solve it by continually beating it to death."

Both half-elves nodded, looking somewhat abashed, and Harry looked at Khalid again who nodded to allow him to continue.

Status disorders:

(Note, disorders are permanent or near to permanent changes to an individuals' stats and abilities. Unlike Status ailments, they cannot be cured easily or at all.)

Spell damage: Sometime in the past, Khalid was near a spell gone wrong, which has permanently damaged his mind and thus his ability to speak. This impacts his willpower and makes him more susceptible to mental attacks, and Charisma, due to the stutter it has given him.

"Which we'd already known about," Harry said with a nod. "This one though is where it gets interesting. Do you, that is we could ask Garrick and Minsc if they'd be willing to leave?"

Garrick nodded quickly, and actually stood up along with Minsc. "If you do not wish to share it with Minsc, Minsc understands. He thinks there is no shame in past wrongs, only in not addressing those which did the wrongs in the first place. But he can understand that the embarrassment of being a victim of such, none better given what happened to his Witch on his watch!"

Jaheira and Khalid again exchanged looks, then shook their heads. No, they can stay. This is our secret misery, but it really should not be. No matter how much we argue whose fault it is, we both know that it was the creature who did this to us who is truly to blame, and thus any shame is on him.”

“Well spoken,” Harry said with a nod, fully understanding that kind of thinking. After all, there had been a time where he blamed himself for what happened to his parents, when in reality, it was no one’s fault but Voldemort’s for attacking him. With that in mind he read off the next disorder.

Curse of the Dread One:

In his past, Khalid was subjected to a curse by a powerful magician. This curse halves his level and the top three of his stats. This curse is as strong as the creature who cast it and cannot be removed by any normal priest or priestess.

Having finished reading this off, Harry shook his head. “I didn’t even know a curse like that was even possible. I’ve heard of creatures being able to drain your level, but a curse to do the same thing... and so much too...”

The two of them exchanged another glance, Jaheira began to speak. “As all but Minsc and Garrick knows, myself and my husband are Harpers. We have been around the world several times, then practically every civilized country in the world and faced numerous enemies. But one we faced, in the straights of Amn, he was terrible in every definition. We were part of a group of Harpers sent to discover the head of a slaving ring. More importantly we were to learn what was going on with the slaves. They were not appearing in any of the normal places, so we knew this individual, who was only called the Dread One was using them for his or her own fell purposes instead of selling them on.”

“Grrr... slavery is the most dastardly of villainy! To take a man’s freedom so, to to chain him like a beast of burden! It makes Minsc want to bring the boot of righteousness to all involved!” Minsc growled. “Even Boo, slower to anger than Minsc as he is, becomes angry at the very idea.”

“Indeed. But at any rate, we discovered where the slaves were sent: a small out-of-the-way island near the southern border of Amn. The Harpers were able to clandestinely convince the local government to add in several companies of Amnian infantry to help us. The Dread One had been making an enemy of himself in several

different ways apparently, above and beyond slavery which isn't illegal in Amn. But when we actually attacked him in his place of power, it all went wrong."

Jaheira shivered, and that seeing this strong, proud and confident woman looked frightened, drove home to Harry the seriousness of what had occurred. "The troopers were picked off by spells and traps before we even got within his base, an old fort on a large hill. We discovered quickly upon entering and freeing a number of slaves that he was sacrificing the blood of his slaves to somehow transform dryads, he had captured into... into something else. We also discovered that the Dread One was a vampire and was working with a coven of others. One of whom was nearly as powerful as he was. We had apparently just missed that one. If we had not, neither Khalid nor myself would be here now."

"We had not come prepared for such a foe. But we had the numbers of the soldiers on her side, and one of our party was a Vampire Hunter of some good repute. He took over leading us, and we fought our way into the main hold. But the Dread One was prepared, and he used spells on us all cursing each and every one of us who passed the threshold of that room. And then he simply started killing, laughing all the while."

"N, none of o, o, our weapons did a, a, anything," Khalid said, gesturing to his sword. "I g, g, got in c, c, close, and I d, d, don't think he even n, n, noticed my attack. I, I, it was like we were less th, th, than nothing to him. M, m, mere in, in, inconveniences! That w, w, we had f, f, forced him to b, b, break some k, k, kind of contract with s, s, some other individual, who he called The Exile," Jaheira said with a nod.

"After he tore apart the first few soldiers and after his immunity to our weapons became apparent, we could do nothing but retreat. Of all of us who went to that dread isle, only four of us survived, Khalid, myself and two Amnian troopers, their minds broken by the experience," Jaheira said after a long silence. "Yet our survival was not the end of it. We were still cursed, as we had been since the moment the battle began, and we have not been able to get rid of it. We have gone to every temple we were able to find: of light god's, neutral gods and those evil gods known to accept deals from non-followers and follow through with them like Shar. None were able to discover how to lift the curse. It's vampiric in nature, that is all anyone was able to tell us."

"...Well," Harry said staring above their faces "Now I can tell you that it isn't impossible. Because I just got a quest update."

You have found the side quest (large) Free Your Companion of His Curse.

Your party member - and his wife - are suffering under the curse of the Dread One, an ancient vampire. Yet how could even a vampire mage thousands of years old create a curse the gods could not get rid of? Surely something can be done if you can find the right god to ask for aid. Discover hints about the nature of the curse, and free them from its grasp.

+7000 experience when accomplished.

Jaheira smiled, and Khalid grinned wildly. Harry idly noticed that Jaheira had gained several more points in trust and respect toward him at that moment, pushing her even closer to becoming his true friend like Khalid.

With your promise to help them overcome the curse afflicting them, you have gained +500 friendship points with Khalid.

You have also gained +2000 to respect and Trust points with Jaheira. Perhaps this mountain isn't so insurmountable after all, merely extremely difficult.

He was happy about that, but even happier for the words she said. "That gives us hope Harry. That actually gives us more hope than either of us have had in a very long time. Thank you! Now we know at least that there is some kind of cure there."

"And I will help you search for it," Harry said with a nod. "That's the least I can do for a friend...and a Traveling Companion who has already agreed to help me look into bringing my father's killer to justice."

"Minsc agrees wholeheartedly for the removal of this painful curse and finding this Dread One and introducing Minsc's boots to his posterior! But what is this talk about dead fathers? Is this another enemy who needs to meet Minsc's mighty blade!?"

"Pretty much," Harry said with a nod. He explained how he and Imoen had come to leave Candlekeep and what had occurred directly after that. Minsc and Garrick both exclaimed outrage at the idea of having been attacked like that out of the blue and Minsc went on to say that he would gleefully "help Harry find this large giant fellow, and cut him down to size after we rescue fair Dynaheir."

"Which brings us back to something I need to say right now," Jaheira said. "Setting all these new revelations aside, we cannot simply go after Dynaheir right now, Minsc."

Evidently despite now being so much closer to being Harry's friend was not going to stop Jaheira from giving her opinion and Harry actually found himself thankful for the fact. That, and the fact that he had not seen any kind of deference in even Imoen. It was one thing to be able to track how their relationship, whatever it was, was changing over time. It was an entirely different thing to have his AA Skill somehow gave him control thoughts and actions."

Minsc seemed to swell up at Jaheira's words once more, but she went on calmly. "Going after Dynaheir right away is folly! We were hammered in that fight, Khalid and Imoen and Garrick are all out of arrows, our armor has been battered to near uselessness. I mean look at Harry's!" She said, reaching behind the log she was sitting on to pull it up to see to let everyone see it.

It had several large tears in its side, and the undercoating of chain mail which protected his legs had also been bent and battered.

"Khalid's is no better," she said primly setting aside. "If not for taking a halberd from one of the gnolls we wouldn't even have a weapon for you and Minsc, let alone a longbow, a shield, armor or even a helmet."

"Yeah..." Harry said slowly. "My helmet... forgot about that." His helmet had been torn apart and then dumped in the river during the fight.

"Furthermore, I have already used up all of my healing spells today!"

"But if we don't go after the gnolls right away, won't the trail get cold? And every day we wait, is a day that is putting Dynaheir's life in danger. We have no idea why the gnolls took her, why they wanted to take both her and Minsc alive at all. That can't be good, whatever the reason," Harry said.

"I am not arguing that we need to go after them, or that this Dynaheir life is worth the risk. I am saying that we are in no position to do so!" Jaheira said angrily.

"We can heal ourselves by waiting a day," Harry argued back, waving Minsc quiet. He knew that Jaheira would not respond well to fiery rhetoric, only calm logic. "In fact, we probably should, in order to figure out where to go if we can't pick up a trail."

"That is an impossibility," Minsc said bluntly calming down since Harry was not agreeing with Jaheira. "Minsc knows that he himself left a trail behind. My berserk state

is not exactly the most subtle of things in moving through the woodlands. We can find and follow that trail if nothing else.”

“All right, but we should still rest at least we are agreed on that,” Jaheira said. “But that does not help solve the issue of supplies! The only ones of us who have suits of armor are myself and Garrick, and neither of us are front line combatants. My chain mail can protect me true, but Garrick is wearing studded leather armor, not exactly frontline material.”

“Actually,” Imoen said speaking up for the first time in a while. She wasn’t exactly all that comfortable with big, serious reveals and such like. “I think I can help with some of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of my blood mage spells allows me to repair items. It was the first one I figured out in fact, since I accidentally destroyed a vase back in Candlekeep.”

“In that case we have a plan,” Harry said firmly, staring at Jaheira. “We’ll rest here another day, let Jaheira use her spells while Imoen, you and I try to use our Blood Mage spells are our damage.” He held up a hand, still looking at Jaheira. “We can’t always go into every battle as prepared as we would like you of all people should know that and your objections have never been about whether we should do this, just about whether or not we are ready to. But ready or not, I think we need to do this. Don’t you?”

After a Jaheira broke their stare off and then quirked a smile at him, nodding. “Far be it from this particular lady to say that another lady does not need rescuing,” she quipped. “Very well. Over my strenuous objections, I will agree that if we can rest here another night, we should be in a decent position to at least follow Minsc’s trail. I have no idea whether or not that means we will be able to rescue Dynaheir though.”

“Excellent!” Minsc she said with a shout, getting to his feet. “In that case, I will go and find the trail now, and will also hunt for red meat to add to our next meal. These fishes were magnificent Harry, but I would like to see what you can do with venison, or pork.”

Harry chuckled that, and Khalid stood up to. I’ll go with you. Despite wh, wha, what my wife said, I st, st, still have a few arrows I, le, left. So if y, y, you see a d, d, dear, I

c, c, can bring them d, d, down easily en, en, enough. Although even th, th, that would be easier if your m, m, map could help us.”

“Sorry,” Harry said with a shrug. “That’s a little much for my map. Predators it’ll show them yes, but not herbivores.”

“While they’re gone,” Jaheira said looking over at Imoen. “Let us see what you’re repair spell can do. And how much it takes out of you as well. That will of course be considerations as well.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere that same day, a Conjuror and his followers were under attack. “Begone, you irritating little creatures!” A blast of Magic Missiles came from the tip of the red-cloaked Conjuror’s staff, slaughtering several of the creatures, none of whom had the health to stop more than two of the missiles, which he launched forward in a batch of seven.

At the same time, one of the Conjuror’s companions, although he would never use that word, hirelings would be the term he would use, went down gurgling with a sword slid up under his chain mail. Two more started to break, their courage failing them.

Seeing this, the Conjuror shouted, “Do not think for one moment that you will survive betraying me and the Red Conjurors of Thay! We will hunt you down and use your skin to make spell books!”

As he spoke, the Conjuror’s hands had never stopped moving, and when he finished haranguing his followers, his hands flashed, and he was suddenly enveloped in a skin-tight force field just in time to stop the swords of three of the little xuart creatures from impacting him and possibly even wounding his person. Their blades bounced off, and he sneered at them from under his hood. “As I suspected, you imbecilic creatures do not seem to understand what magic is, let alone the mighty spell Immunity to Normal Weapons. Regardless, you have attempted to wound my person, and that cannot be borne!”

Another wave of one hand this time, and a far shorter gesture sent a blast of searing fire out from one hand as the Conjuror used Agannazar’s Scorcher. This spell seared through all three of his attackers, as he quickly turned in place, catching each of them with the tongue of flame in turn burning the top of their bodies to ash.

However there were more than two dozen of the little creatures, and they had gotten far too close for the Conjurers liking. "Damn that woodsman. 'I can spot a track or a trap at a league's distant' the moron said, but look at the situation now. I am surrounded by incompetence and Neanderthals! It is well enough he was the first to die else I would have made his death a lingering one," The Conjuror muttered, even as he pulled out a scroll.

The next second, he sent out a concussive blast of force from his body, the spell, Concussive Blast, sending the attackers nearby skittering backwards. It didn't do any damage, but it gained him a few more moments of uninterrupted time. During that moment, his last two followers died, although they took five more of the xvarts with them, and wounded several more.

He supposed that meant they were worth more than the worthless Ranger who had led them right into this ambush. Nonetheless, it left him alone against more than ten of the tiny creatures, and he knew that his immunity to normal weapons spell would not last long. *Calmly, calmly, a man of your intellect cannot be overcome by such as this so long as you use your intelligence to good effect.*

With that in mind, the Conjuror began a spell, creating another shield around himself of blue fire. This spell covered his person then was swiftly absorbed within it, and 'immunity of fire' rang in his head the words briefly appearing before him as they did in response to his cast spell.

Then, his hands began to twitch and flash again as the xvarts fought amongst themselves for the loot on his flunkies bodies or attacked him. They honestly seemed to believe he had run out of attack spells, and that it was only a matter of time before his defensive spells failed.

"You poor deluded little creatures, do you think you will be getting out of here alive?! Allow me to educate you on the reality of your position in relation to one such as I!" The Conjuror growled, then gestured forward with both hands down almost at his own feet. "Fireball!"

The fireball hit and combusted, spreading instantly all around him and catching every living xuart in the area roasting them alive within seconds. A few of them were at the outskirts of the explosion and were able to run away a few steps before collapsing, the pain of immolation being too much for their minds to comprehend, their bodies shutting

down. And soon they too were turned into greasy stains on the forest floor, while around them, the fires on the trees started to gutter and slowly go out.

Sighing, the Conjuror walked around slowly, looking to see if any of the hangers-on that he had brought with him had anything material that he could use. He found their food, which obviously he'd been forcing one of them to carry rather than himself. After all, he was a superior Conjuror, why would he carry something of that sort? But much of it had also burned with the rest, save for a few items held in the buffoon's Item Box, released upon his death. *So, I have food enough for one for several days, and wine too. Good. Foraging is not among my many and myriad abilities.*

Standing up from one corpse and showing no concern about the body or the charred flesh smell, the Conjuror taking stock of himself and the area around him. "Deep in the woods, with much of my magical spells expended except for three magic missiles spells, and one rainbow spell," he murmured. "Not a good position to be, it must be admitted. Nonetheless, I will forge on. Perhaps I can find another group of imbecilic simians to do my bidding soon enough. Certainly that last group was not exactly hard to find."

With a course decided upon, there remained the problem of the moment: he had little spells left for the day, and his shield spell would be going out in another ten minutes by the clock. "Yes, ten minutes," he mused after pulling a small, extremely expensive looking watch from a pocket. "As in everything else, my sense of time is excellent. And as such, the choice of what to do with the rest of today is, alas, made for me."

With that, the Conjuror moved forward, looking around him as he left the battlefield behind. With eyes untrained for the forest, it took him a while to spot what he wanted, but after several hours of mindless wandering he finally spotted a tree, with many branches he felt he could climb, and with an area two stories or so up that could, in a pinch, hold an individual hidden among the boughs for a time.

It was incredibly demeaning for the Conjurers to have to climb up tree like some ape, but the red-wearing Conjuror was a practical man to a certain extent.

Once in the tree, he gasped for a few moments, shaking his head. "Perhaps, hah, I need must, hah, do some upper body exercises, hah, at some point. While a true Conjuror should never be forced to defend himself with mere physical skill, it does pay one to be in good shape. And women do tend to like men who are back in better shape after all as

well. It would not do for one like myself to need to pay for the company of the opposite sex after all.”

With that thought, he took out his Conjurer book, and began to reread his spells, thinking hard about what spells he would need, committing many once more to memory as every Conjurer had to on a daily basis once they used their spells, and then going over new ones. Once that was done, he pulled out his wineskin and took a deep draught, before chewing on some of the food, and leaning back in a philosophical mood.

“Things could be worse, but so long as I can get a good night’s sleep, I believe I can carry on as I wish tomorrow. But I must get some sleep. Even a Conjurer as puissant as I in the magical arts must admit to the need for rest.” With that he closed his eyes, and despite the sun still being high in the sky, settled in to try and get some sleep.

OOOOOOO

The next day, the group headed southwest, with Minsc and Jaheira working together to try and find a trail. At first this was relatively easy. As Jaheira was quick to point out while they moved through the brush following the trail Minsc had created in his mad escape. “You barreled through the woods like a mad beast,” she remarked, shaking her head. “Your berserker abilities seems to be an incredible combat skill, but not one to use for overlong in the woods.”

“Minsc will take that as a compliment for his wild escape will now work to lead us to his Witch!” The barbarian Ranger exclaimed.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Harry said from his own place in the column. Jaheira and Minsc were ahead, with Khalid and Imoen behind and Garrick and Harry in the middle. Occasionally Harry would stop as his newfound woodcraft ability activated, and he saw wild onions, or other such legumes. When that occurred, he would go off the beaten path for a moment to grab them, before returning quickly.

“That’s a dangerous word to use Harry, thinking,” Imoen said, with a faint shudder. “Still lay it on us.”

“We know that none of the gnolls who had come after Minsc survived the attack,” Harry said indicating his head with one finger as if any of them had been able to run, he would have seen them doing it. “But, what if there were some of these xvarts with them only they gave up the chase? They might be waiting for the gnolls to return, which can easily lead into their attempting to ambush for us.”

“Which means following Minsc’s trail would in fact be the worst thing we could possibly do,” Jaheira said slowly, scowling. *That should have occurred to me and Khalid. And we cannot blame that on our curse! Even beyond that, we, no, I have lost my edge.*

“I’ve been thinking much the same thing,” Imoen said with a nod. “However, I anticipated that your map skill would be able to spot them if they tried to ambush us.”

“I would’ve thought the same thing up until we dealt with those spiders Beregost and saw how they were able to ambush us,” Harry said, to which Jaheira nodded as did the others who had been part of that battle. “I think we need to get off this trail, parallel it rather than follow it, and I think those of us who can use Hide in Shadows, or in your case Jaheira Forest Melding, should. That way regardless of anything else, they might come in overconfident at least.”

While he had worded it as a suggestion, everyone else took this suggestion as a command and Imoen instantly activated her Hide in Shadows ability, with Minsc following a second later. Harry could still tell where they both were though thanks to his map

“Ah, another thought occurs to me,” Jaheira said, coming out of her own Forest Melding, causing Harry to start. She had disappeared from his map the moment she was out of his line of sight and stayed that way when hidden under her druid skill. She smirked at him but said nothing about that, instead looking around at the others. “With us out of sight, and in possible enemy territory, we need to have a signal that will not give our location away. An animal noise perhaps.”

“How ab, ab, about owl noises?” Khalid asked. “W, w, we have used such be, b, before.”

“A specific owl noise would be better. Two precks and then a hoot?” Harry asked.

“Owls do not ‘preck’ Harry,” Jaheira said.

“Snowy Owls ‘preck’,” Harry said with a tone of certainty in it. “Trust me on that.”

Minsc nodded agreement, and after one look at Harry Jaheira simply nodded, and the group began to move forward once more.

With Minsc and Jaheira both in the lead hidden under their respective skills, the group continued on through the woods now rather than down the incredibly beaten and slashed path that Minsc had created in his mad escape. As they walked, Harry engaged Garrick in conversation, trying to get a better handle on his Bard ability, how they differed from his sorcerer spells, and where they were the same.

He already had an idea of the efficacy of the bard class spells. His Song of Regeneration was incredibly useful and had helped both during the battle and this morning to help build up their hit points. Indeed, without it, Imoen would not have been able to use her Repaire spell as often as she had been forced to in order to fix up their armor. Imoen had not been pleased to learn that the Repaire spell was of limited utility in this world, and the hit to her health was a full fifteen health points per use.

Not, Harry thought to himself morbidly *that our armor is really in that get a shape despite that*. Khalid's full plate mail had taken several nasty hits and Harry's had a large rent in the side of it. Much of that damage had been repaired, unless actual material was missing. So Harry's armor still had a few rents in it, and there had been no saving his helmet. The metal of the helmet had just been completely torn away and had then been lost in the river.

However, they had been able to recoup their losses in arrows by going over the battlefield as they passed through it. Harry had also made a point of collecting an ear off each of the gnolls they had slain. That would mean a pretty profit once they reached Nashkel, even if they didn't add any more to their count, which they would be.

They had even learned something new about his shield that morning when Imoen had tried to repair it in turn. Because it's durability was down to ten out of twenty and Harry had hoped that Imoen and his Repaire spell would be able to bring that durability back up. But they had gotten instead a warning, saying that +1 weapons and shields could not be repaired except by the blacksmith who cast the spells in the first place or a by an equally skilled smith who could remove the spells and then re-lay them into the metal.

Needless to say, Harry was a little annoyed by that. His Tower Shield +1 had served him extremely well up to this point. But given the battering it'd taken in the last

battle against the gnolls, who knew how well it would handle a battle against who knew how many more gnolls?

Regardless, Imoen was certain that she could have repaired a regular shield, as she had done to Harry's chest plate, Khalid's own shield, and his full plate. It was just that her magic was incompatible with the magic already on the tower shield which made it so much better than the norm.

But his conversation with Garrick went much better that afternoon. The other young man was willing to take Harry's advice on spells and had told Harry in turn he could use up to level four spells, though he didn't have many. He had replaced his two emergency backup spells, Shocking Grasp, with Melf's Acid Arrow and would memorize the new spell later that day. That gave him four spells that could be used offensively: Acid Arrow, Agannazar's Scorchers, Prismatic Spray and Grease. The last he could cast twice, the others once each.

On top of that he had his bardic songs, which, like spells he could only use a set number of times, had changed too: he had replaced two spells that had a chance of letting him charm any enemy listening with two more Songs of Regeneration. This gave him one Song of Haste, one Song of Courage and three Songs of Regeneration.

But Harry's conversation with Garrick broke off abruptly as he spotted a red dot at the outskirts of his map, and he whistled lightly in the manner to call the others back.

Minsc and Jaheira soon returned as Imoen and Khalid bunched up from behind. When she arrived, Jaheira dropped her cloaking skill first, one dark blond eyebrow rising in question as the Ranger and Thief followed her example. "Yes, oh omnipresent authority figure? What have you discovered?"

Harry rolled his eyes at her gentle ribbing, before pointing forward. "My map just detected an enemy out there, I wanted to warn you."

Jaheira frowned, staring around her into the Woodlands, then nodded brusquely. "I suggest that you two and Imoen and Khalid change position in the column. That'll put three of us forward that the enemy can't see.

"Let's do a bit better than that." Harry said with a nod. "Imoen can join the two of you forward as a group, while myself Khalid and Garrick move forward on our own. If that is a xuart and there are others around in ambush, they'll wait until we're in position and

you can ambush them in turn. If they aren't, you'll be able to tell what they're doing before we get within sight of the creature."

"Sound planning," Jaheira said with a nod gesturing Imoen and Minsc forward. *Hmm, is this Harry's Tactics in action, or is this simply his own tactical brain. Regardless, I should be interesting to see what he can do when battle is joined. And it just occurs to me that I am rather the odd woman out here, being unable to see the other two or be seen in turn by them or Harry. Still, needs must and all that.*

The three of them once more faded into the woodwork as Minsc's voice carried back to Harry through the forest. "Minsc does not believe in all of this sneaking and skullduggery, we are not hunting for the pot after all but hunting the evil that lurks within every forest! It must be excised with the swords of justice!"

He's a little over-the-top, but I can't help but like the guy, Harry thought to himself with a chuckle as he took up position between Garrick and Khalid. The three of them continued forward, this time shifting their line of advance past the red marks on the right, skirting them just out of sight.

As they did Harry saw the red dot joined by three more, then a further four. A few minutes later as he directed Khalid and Garrick he watched on his map as those four dots started to move. They were not moving towards them, but rather across the Adventurer's own route.

Several minutes passed as Harry continued to watch the dots move, then he held up a hand, and signaled Garrick and Khalid to quiet as they moved forward. He even pulled his cloak tighter around himself and put his sword away in his Item Box. It was the party's last spare longsword since both of the ones Minsc had used in the fight had shattered, but with the addition of Cleave to his combat skills, Harry had shifted back to it, despite the fact that it was that he had begun to like his Warhammer simply because it didn't break. *I still have more skill with my sword anyway.*

Then the xvarts turned outwards from their previous course through the woods. It soon became apparent that the xvarts, who were on patrol perhaps, would be coming into sight soon.

Harry looked around, trying to use both his Woodcraft and his Tactics ability to figure out where to hide. He eventually saw a dip in the ground to one side full of small bushes. He moved towards them. He gestured down into the tiny area, and when

Garrick balked, Harry grabbed his shoulder and said in his ear, "it's a patrol, if we hide, the others might be able to follow it back to wherever they're coming from."

Having heard the whisper thanks to his half-elven hearing, Khalid nodded, and the three of them crawled under the bushes, hiding there, their cloaks over them and their heads and faces hidden among the bushes. And it was not a moment too soon because a bare few minutes later, the xvarts came into view.

When they did, it was all Harry could do to not laugh aloud. They were short creatures, thin of body and only coming up to his waist, wearing oddly decent looking clothing and holding short swords in one hand. They moved quickly, their heads swiveling this way and that as they moved. But what was the oddest thing about them? They were indeed, as the more experienced adventurers said, blue. Not only were they blue, but it was a glean, almost crayon colored light blue, with big, round ears sticking up from their heads. They also had mouths full of sharp, almost eel-like teeth, and seemed to chatter to one another in low tones constantly as they moved.

Smurfs. Evil...smurfs, Harry thought, staring at the sub-humans and trying not to shake his head and give his position away. *Good grief.*

Xvart:

Small, blue skinned creatures, which may have come from a universe where blue skin is the newest and greatest thing ever or be Ao's idea of a giant joke, much like the rest of creation only a bit more pointed in this case. Small. Squishy. Somewhat intelligent as they can actually organize their own farms and communities, unlike goblins, who rely on following other creatures who can think for them. Only dangerous in numbers.

Attitude toward Adventurers: Cautious Aggression. If an Adventurer shows himself strong enough to frighten them they will retreat without any hesitation. But if not, they will attack.

Weaknesses: All of them. Seriously, xvarts and goblins aren't smart, aren't strong or durable or particularly quick. Except in large numbers they aren't dangerous to anything but low level Adventurers. As a group though they tend not to care about losses unless it's clear they have lost the battle.

The next few moments were very tense as the group of eight xvarts passed by them. It wasn't tense as in Harry thought that the little creatures were an actual credible

threat against the three of them. No, it was tense because he could not stop his mind from replaying the few Smurfs episodes he had seen as a child spying on the TV from his cupboard under the stairs and twitching because of it and his traitorous imagination wondering if Dudley would have liked a show starring these beasts better than the originals.

Despite his mind going down such odd roads, Harry noticed the xvarts seemed to be looking around themselves with some seriousness and also knew the lay of the land quite well if the way they moved through the forest was any indication. But they didn't spot the three hiding adventurers in the bushes, and the patrol passed them by without an incident.

Harry waited, watching until they were out of sight on his map, then slowly pushed himself out of the bush.

Imoen appeared then, so quickly and silently that it nearly startled him backwards despite having seen her dot close in. "Imoen! Don't do that," he hissed in a loud whisper.

She laughed, shaking her head. "That was great thinking Harry," she said with a smile, pulling him to his feet and then reaching down into the bushes to help Garrick and Khalid. "Although, you might want to have a nice long bath with some aloe leaves later on, and wash your clothing too."

"Why?" Harry asked, suddenly wary.

"Because when Minsc spotted you Jaheira nearly burst out laughing," she replied with a chuckle. "She had to hide herself behind a tree for a moment because she come came out of her Merge with Forest technique. Apparently, you all decided to hide in the bush that is known as this area's equivalent of poison oak I think."

"Oh... drat," Harry said mildly despite his growing concern, shaking his head. He could already feel the desire to scratch at something rising within him, and that was pure idiocy. He hadn't had any actual skin showing, not even his face had touched the bush.

"You r, r, realize, that telling us t, t, that was actually going to make it w, w, worse didn't you?" Khalid asked dryly, his own hand straying towards the small of his back for some reason.

"Yep." Imoen simply smiled brightly at them all.

Harry rolled his eyes at that. "Thanks Imoen, really. As if I didn't already have enough mental issues with us running into a race of evil Smurfs."

"I know right!?" Imoen replied, laughing before she pointed down south towards where the xvarts had disappeared from Harry's map. "Jaheira and Minsc are trailing them, but Jaheira felt that you all would need at least one person who can Hide in Shadows just in case."

The four of them continued southwards, trailing after the patrol hoping that they were heading home rather than simply continuing its rounds.

Soon enough that turned out to be the case. About a bare hour later they came out of the forest into a slightly more open area. It was open simply because the land had slowly started to change, becoming rockier, less rich, leading up into a series of large, stony hills.

As they did, Minsc and Jaheira made their own presence is known. "An excellent plan Harry!" Jaheira said with a smile, unvarnished approval in her eyes, enough that Harry found himself smiling back for a second. "I believe that we have found their base of operations, indeed, we have found an entire xuart village."

Harry looked at her quizzically, and she gestured to one of the small mountains rising to one side. "There's a trail there leading up into some kind of hidden valley or largish grotto up in the hills. They have guards up there obviously, so we did not follow them in, considering that my hide in merging forest technique was bound to fail the instant I left forest, and sending a Lone Ranger into such, would be the height of idiocy. But Minsc followed them until an elbow in the trail and saw a palisade and some huts beyond."

"Indeed I did," Minsc said, his voice for once not booming. "There were many of the little creatures as well. Four were on watch on the palisade, and others moving beyond so many they could have threatened even Minsc accompanied by his mighty companion Boo."

Harry frowned thinking. "Do you think the rest of us can get close enough for us to look up this trail of yours without being spotted?"

"They don't seem to have any watchers out watching the approaches or up in the hills above their village, although as I said they have guards up the ravine," Jaheira said

with a shrug. "Still, I believe we could get to the elbow where I turned around before at least. Follow me."

The group continued on, and the ravine was just as Jaheira had said. It was a wide pathway about the width of a large cart leading up into the hills before taking a sharp right. There they were able to hide out of sight of the xvarts on watch, letting Harry's map do its work, as well as his AA skill as a whole, because as he reached the elbow an irritating notice went up in front of him, Imoen, Khalid and Minsc.

Warning, you have entered an Enemy Zone. An Enemy Zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range.

These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.

"What is this?" Minsc asked, looking over at the others.

Harry briefly explained what an Enemy Zone was, and how they had run into two such before. "It means that even after we clear out the enemies here, they may, may respawn somehow."

Blinking Minsc looked down at Boo on his shoulder contemplatively. "Hmm... how do xvarts and others spawn naturally anyway? Minsc has never heard tell of a female xuart or goblin."

"They capture females of any other species: elves, half-elves towards gnomes humans, even female orcs, if they can. And then they breed them. Their young gestate in a matter of a few months rather than nine as it would be for other races. The women so captured die in childbirth, their bodies unable to sustain them," Jaheira said, her tone making ice look warm in comparison. I have seen the aftermath of such. To say the minds of the women are broken is to grossly misuse the term. They are simply destroyed, mentally and physically, they never recover."

"Kobolds are r, r, rather more live and let l, l, live, they have females o, o, of their own, and lay e, e, eggs. But xvarts, goblins, M, m, mind Flayers, and a few o, o, other species do n, n, not," Khalid said, his voice hard.

Listening to this, Harry winced. "W, well, regardless the village being an Enemy Zone means that there will no doubt be more enemies than we might think otherwise.

And since I'm seeing at least 25 enemies up there, maybe more. I can tell that number pretty well though, because the red dots are spread from around..." he counted off thinking about distances on his map and assaying a guess. "Maybe fifty feet around the corner here? Minsc?"

Minsc nodded seriously. "For one such as Harry or I, it would take us fifty paces to reach the palisade where the tiny creature's guards are." He looked down as Boo squeaked and he added hastily, "Boo is not disparaging for their size Boo and you know it. He is making fun of them for their evilness and silliness. One would have thought anyone would know they should post guards at this elbow where we are now, not just at the entrance to their village."

Harry nodded firmly. "In that case, I think we need to estimate at least twice again those numbers. Remember, my map can't look inside buildings."

"No because that would be too broken," Imoen quipped, elbowing him in the ribs lightly.

Harry chuckled, and put an arm around Imoen's shoulders, squeezing her gently but his voice was serious as he went on. "We have to assume that each of those huts could be used as a spawn point. That means the xvarts will get reinforcements even faster than those kobolds we fought before." He scowled, thinking and looking at the trail leading up to the xvert village. "I don't suppose you had time to scout around the foot of these hills did you?"

None of the others answered, and he nodded. "All right, let's see if we can do something about that. Either retrace our steps to go around on to the other side of the hills, or follow them on this side."

"You're looking for another way up I take it?" Jaheira asked.

Harry nodded and the group of them moved on cautiously, they were in enemy territory after all. And now that they were out of the forest, Jaheira fell back with the others, leaving the Ranger Minsc and the Thief Imoen to scout around them.

In the end, they were able to find a small defile, a dry streambed, leading up into the hills. Although to call them hills was a bit of a misnomer. They were more like jagged teeth of stone thrust out of the land their sides stony and unscalable for most of their length. Even the streambed was tough going, but Minsc proved to be highly capable

climber, and with Jaheira's tangling vines conjured up to actually give them some rope, albeit short-lived, they were able to make progress.

Eventually, they reached a slightly flatter area hidden among the rocks and crags of the hill. There the riverbed broke in two, one portion enlarging and going downhill through the heavier rocks, and another fork leading towards the village on an almost flat line. They were about to take it when Harry spotted something unusual: a dot blinking blue and yellow on the edge of his awareness to the north.

"That's interesting, there's a traveler out there," Harry said pointing in the correct direction.

"A lone traveler, this close to a xuart town? That seems bizarre to me. He must be an adventurer," Jaheira said with a nod.

"That makes sense since his dot is blinking red and blue as if he could be friend or foe," Harry nodded his head, looking around at the others. "Do you think it would be worth it to try to recruit him? After all, if he's in this area, he might be after the gnolls or the xvarts for his own reasons."

"I still say that name for that species is like a sneeze," Imoen muttered, before nodding her head. "I say let's do it."

Jaheira shook her head, as did Khalid. "A chance meeting like this might not be chance, and even if it is, that does not mean that the person you meet will be a welcome acquaintance."

Garrick nodded toward Imoen indicating he agreed with her, and Minsc shrugged. "The mighty Ranger will go with whatever Harry decides, he has proven to be most quick with thinking ahead, like the war leaders in Rasheman. Even Boo thinks highly of your plans, though believes that your cloths will need to be cleaned most thoroughly of the oils from the scratchy bush."

"All right, Garrick, Khalid, Jaheira with me. Imoen, Minsc, can you scout along the other riverbed? I want to know if it goes where we want it to, and if the end of it is guarded if so."

“From what I know of xvarts which is quite a bit, they are somewhat lazy. They might know of it, but be convinced that no one would be able to get up here. After all, it took us several hours of hard effort to do so,” Jaheira said.

Harry shrugged, but repeated his request. “Better safe than sorry after all.”

Jaheira simply nodded at that, and the group separated into two groups once more. Garrick, Jaheira and Khalid followed Harry down the other side of the series of hills, which was a lot easier than the side they’d gone up. That sort of annoyed the two young men as they commented on it, but then they came to what once must have been a waterfall, a sheer rock face leading down that they had to carefully scale down. Still, even that was easier than the dry riverbed they’d climbed up.

When they reached the forest floor again, Harry looked around at the others, making a point of catching Garrick’s eye. “Remember everyone, not a word about my advanced adventurer skill, or anything else I can do that’s above the norm. If we have to we’ll explain about my map, but nothing else.”

“Agreed,” Jaheira and Khalid said as one, with Khalid not even stuttering for once.

Garrick frowned, shaking his head though. “I don’t understand what’s so important about keeping your AA Skill a secret. I mean I understand it’s a big deal, but surely sharing that information with other people, especially if we might be recruiting to them to fight alongside us would be a good idea. And this fellow’s an Adventurer, surely he’ll be trustworthy.”

“Not unless we know we can trust them,” Harry said sternly.

“Indeed,” Jaheira said. “In fact, why don’t you remain as silent as possible? That way, you won’t have to perjure yourself, and, you won’t have opportunity to share the secret.”

At that Garrick simply nodded, and Harry wondered about the bard. For a class that was supposed to be pretty much a loner, able to become a jack of all trades, Garrick was very much a follower, willing, perhaps even eager to follow orders. It was weird, just as weird as his attempts to come off as more experienced with girls at times, which Imoen had thankfully broken him of.

With that out of the way, Harry led the group forward. Soon enough the man was in sight, of the two half-elves. Khalid let loose a loud bird call, and as the figure, who wore a red cloak with a hood, turned, Harry waved his hands towards the man. The man looked around him sharply, then nodded towards them, and moved in the same direction.

As he came closer, Harry saw that besides his gaudy red cloak, he wore a necklace made of large squares of gold and embedded with jewels, and what looked like some kind of ringlets on his fingers. In one hand he held an elaborately carved staff. *So a sorcerer or mage then. One without the sense to wear something that might let them be less than a freaking target in the forest, but he's a magic user so I'll take what I can get.*

"Greetings," the man said, not removing his hood. "I take it from the fact that you are using common animal calls rather than shouting that you are intelligent enough to know that there are sub-humans about? Were you attacked by those irritating xvar't as well?"

Harry nodded, making no sign of what the advanced adventurer skill was telling him about the man in front of him. It was enough though that Harry decided not to open the journal entry about the man just yet.

Name: Edwin Odesseiron.

Race: Human

Gender: Male

Class: Conjurer level 7.

Relationship status: cautious wariness. 0/4000 Respect, 0/4000 Trust.

Edwin doesn't like you, trust you, or in any way respect you. But don't worry, that doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he wants to kill you or anything, that just means you are not named Edwin. Seriously, this guy might not be as blindly stab happy as others you have met, but he makes up for that in a riotously out of control ego.

Beware extending any trust to him before building up respect. In fact, respect, or even fear if you can manage it, would probably be the best way to go with this fellow.

"We are, although were not actually here for them. Were on a quest to rid the area of gnolls," Harry said, not mentioning anything about their specific quest, something

both half-elves picked up on instantly while Garrick frowned in some confusion. “They are apparently allied with the xvarts, or more likely of have simply convinced them to go along with things rather than be wiped out.”

“Indeed such is the way of most societies when one is intelligent enough to see the levers of power,” the wizard replied, before turning aside lightly and murmuring as if to himself “The annoying over-involved muscle seems to believe that I care overmuch about the xvarts in the area, and yet he did say something interesting didn’t he? One wonders if he actually knew.”

With that he turned Harry and the others. “A quick question, you mentioned something about gnolls? Have you had dealings with the dog faced folk? You see, I am searching for them myself.”

“So are we, hence our interest in the xvarts. We don’t know where their base camp is, that’s why we’re thinking of destroying the xvart village, because we believe that they will have that information.”

“If they are working together, that is indeed a credible idea,” the wizard replied, as if Edwin was loath to give compliments of any sort to other people. Given the brief introduction to his character that Harry’s summary had given him, that was probably spot on, Harry reflected.

“In that case I will lend my magical strength to your cause for the moment,” Edwin began. “They might have the information I seek as well about a prisoner that the gnolls took near the road leading north from Nashkel.”

Harry nodded slowly, frowning as he wondered whether or not this was coincidence, or if this wizard was seeking Dynaheir as they were, and if so, why. *Hah, Imoen would say there’s no such thing as coincidences, and I think I’m beginning to agree with her.* Still, adding a wizard’s power to their group was too good to pass up, so he nodded. “All right, you can join us for now. Come on, we’ll lead you back to the rest of our band.”

Edwin blinked, looking at the four of them. “It is not just the four of you?”

“No, we still have two more, who we left to scout out the village. We’ve already found a back entrance up to the valley they are hiding in.” With that, he led the way back

to the hill then up the dry riverbed, causing Edwin to narrow his eyes. He was able to keep up with them, though he was gasping doing it.

Soon they were at the top, and Edwin scowled at him. "And was there a reason why you forced me to take such a road?"

"Attacking from the front is stupidity," Harry said bluntly. "We wanted to see if we could find a way into the valley where the xvart villages without having to fight our way up the same entrance they used."

The man scowled, but his actual irritation seemed to have lessened. "That makes some sense I suppose," he said, in a tone that implied that he was astonished that such was the case.

Harry simply nodded showing no umbrage to Edwin's attitude. He was used to even more condescension than this thanks to Professor Snape back in his old life, and more than one of the Seekers in Candlekeep hadn't liked him or Imoen either.

About thirty minutes after their own arrival back at the intersection of the different dry streams, Imoen and Minsc came back, coming out of their Hide in Shadows techniques to look at Edwin quizzically. "Another stray Harry?" Imoen asked with a grin on her face. "Heh, and another guy too. Man, with Khalid and Jaheira paired off, it's like I'm travelling with my own little harem."

The wizard pushed his hood back to glare at her. He had a somewhat aristocratic face, cold and haughty, the kind of face that Draco always used to try to assume, but never quite could. It was somewhat spoiled by the fact that besides the well cared for goatee and beard, he also had a nose ring connecting one side of his nose to his ear on that same side of his face. He had long hair, as a lot of men apparently did in this day and age, falling to his shoulders, kept out of deep set black eyes by a simple metal circlet. "I am no stray girl," he said harshly.

He paused, his lips twitching into a small smile over his goatee as he he looked at her and then the three other human men around him. "Nor am I mere pleasure slave. And even if I was, judging by your present company, I would have to question your tastes even if you are looking to upgrade to such a fine specimen of manhood as I, as well as whether or not you were free of disease."

When Imoen winced and held up a hand to indicate a touch, Minsc growled angrily, interrupting the repartee. "Grrr...I know who you are. You have some nerve, appearing before me like this when you and yours have dogged our steps for so long. You pose a threat to fair Dynaheir, one that would be my pleasure to buttkick!"

"As if a mere Neanderthal like you could ever even touch me," the wizard said, even as his free hand moved to the small of his back and began to gesture as he prepared to conjure up a spell.

"Enough," Jaheira and Harry said as one, before looking at one another.

"Jinx!" Harry said quickly, before leaping forward, causing Jaheira to roll her eyes. "What is this about? Minsc, you say you know this man, and he was after you and Dynaheir? Is this true wizard?"

"It is, and if you are working with him and his Witch, then I am afraid that we are at an impasse," the wizard replied grimly.

Imoen's hand suddenly grabbed his wrist from behind, and he jumped, trying to get free even letting his staff fall to the ground, but she pulled his arm up and around, twisting it. Her short sword appeared in her other hand, pressing up into his chin. "I like Minsc she said conversationally. "I'm not certain I like you yet, so let's keep a civil conversation going, m'kay?"

"It was he who threatened me first," The wizard said haughtily, as if he hadn't been about to start sending out spells like they were going out of style.

"I'll note you didn't deny Minsc's charge. Why were you searching for them?" Harry said crossing his arms. Wanting to add a wizard's power to their party was all well and good, but certainly not if it came at the cost of Minsc and his trust.

"Why does it matter what he wanted with her, he was after Dynaheir! He is as much of an enemy as the gnolls," Minsc argued.

But Harry shook his head. "Let's have the wizard speak for himself."

The wizard shrugged, and seems to calculate whether or not he could get away with a lie. But Imoen had shifted her grip so that her thumb was resting on the veins on his wrist. "And don't try to lie to me pretty boy, I'll know."

The wizard huffed. "You are a most contentious wench aren't you?"

"Yep," Imoen said cheerfully. "And you've only just begun to know me too. Now answer Harry's question."

Edwin rolled his eyes at that, but he had already calculated the odds against him before Imoen had taken him captive like this and found them wanting. *Given the range at the moment I doubt I could get more than one spell off, if that. And considering that they have a Bard of their own, that might mean that my shield against normal weapons will not be enough.*

"Very well, I will inform you of my mission. I am Edwin Odeseiron, a Red Wizard of Thay."

At that Jaheira and Khalid both scowled, while Harry just nodded, having thought that might be the case. Garrick and Imoen both looked confused, and Harry explained, using knowledge he'd picked up back in the Candlekeep library. "Thay's a nation to the north of Baldur's Gate I think. It's a magocracy and the Red Wizards act as almost a noble class there. The Red Wizards are somewhat notorious for seeking out unusual magics as well... and..."

"And Thay has been at war with my homeland of Rasheman numerous times! They take my countrymen as slaves for their games and fell magics, but have never been able to make much headway against the lodges of Rasheman thanks to our fighting prowess!" Minsc said proudly.

Looking over at the two Harpers Harry cocked an eyebrow in silent query. Both more experienced Adventurers nodded, indicating that was indeed the case and Harry turned back to their possible prisoner. "Okay, so we know why there's bad blood between you. But is that why you were after Minsc and Dynaheir? That seems a little too... well stupid, coming out to the Sword Coast just to hunt two Rashemani on their Dijeemma, or whatever the Witchly equivalent is."

"It is not." Edwin scowled, then went on more slowly, obviously choosing his words carefully. "I was... shall we say at loggerheads with some of the more senior members of my Order. I was... informed... I should pursue my studies out in the wider world. Then, when I was leaving Thay, I was...given a choice of aid on my journey that I could not ignore."

“Out in the wider world in the sense you are exiled?” Harry asked shrewdly. “Or out and about for a set amount of time to allow tempers to cool?”

Edwin grimaced. “The head Neanderthal seem to be more intelligent than most of the breed,” he muttered to himself, eliciting a laugh from Imoen behind him.

She released his arm, but the wizard knew she was still behind him with a drawn blade, and the Bard had also begun to ready a spell, if the militant way he was holding his balalaika was any indication. “Atrocious choice of instrument,” he muttered staring at it for a moment before looking around at the others.

“Oddly enough that is the first thing you said since we arrived here that I agree with,” Jaheira said with a scowl.

“Yeh, I’m right here you know,” Garrick said holding his weapon to his chest. “You guys just don’t understand good music.”

“Yes we do, you just haven’t shown a us any” Harry said with a laugh, before turning back to Edwin. “And what was this mission you were assigned?” He asked, shifting the conversation along considering his last question answered by Edwin’s grimace.

“...The power of precognition is one that the Red Wizards have long sought to understand, along with many other wizard societies the world over. In our case however we live right next to a country home to hundreds, perhaps thousands of trained precogs who can use their powers very effectively. That power has helped the Rasheman barbarians destroy every army or even large company sent into their nation. There are many among us who would wish to capture a Rasheman Witch, but they are extremely hard to capture even on their own, let alone with their barbaric bodyguards. Yet it is felt that an... intensive study... of them could give us the clue as to how they are able to use their precognition so effectively.”

“How effective is it, really?” Harry asked looking over at Minsc, who was gripping the shaft of his halberd so hard that Harry could hear the wood begin to creak. “And if you break that Minsc, I’ve only got two more.”

Minsc growled, but nodded, releasing one hand from the shaft of the halberd to thump his chest, hard. So hard Harry actually noticed that he lost a hit point. “The warriors of Rasheman are famed for protecting their Witches, and the witches themselves are renowned for being able to spot trouble in the world. Many times on the steps of the

barbarian world, they have spotted trouble arising, be it some local trouble, sub-humans looking to conquer or the Thayan wizards,” he went on glaring at the Red Wizard. “I have heard of even plagues being stopped by the potions of the Witch whose mind was filled with portents of such! Even Boo stands in awe of their ability to find trouble. And his little nose is drawn to evil like a magnet to a lodestone.”

Edwin’s face twitched, as he stared at the Giants Miniature Space Hamster that had just crawled out of the large barbarian’s armor. “The bald one speaks to a rodent, and you give his words credence still?”

“Minsc and Boo seem to be a set package,” Harry said with a shrug. “And admittedly, some of what Boo has to say has made some sense.”

He looked at Edwin thoughtfully. “A quick question, is your mission to bring Dynaheir back in chains or to discover the means with which she can see the future, if that is what they really do, since it sounds kind of different to me.”

“Hmmpf, bringing the Witch back was implied, but never outright stated. In fact, given my... troubles at home, I would much rather come to understand their precognition on my own and then present that to my fellow Red Wizards,” Edwin said, honestly for once. “If I brought her home, I would gain a somewhat well-place patron. If I bring back the information, I will have no need of such and will not have to suffer his control or inevitable round of back-stabbings and betrayals.”

“So... if you could come up with the information another way you would take it? Say, by a wizard doing a Witch a favor, like helping a band of adventurers rescue her? In return for a honest question-and-answer session, for about ten questions?”

Harry knew that convincing the two magic users to put aside their differences would be a lot more difficult than that, but he hoped that his charisma would at least make the idea seem attractive. And who knew, with Harry and the others standing over them both with big clubs to make certain they played nice, maybe they could talk without trying to launch spells at one another.

Charisma Check passed!

Edwin has been convinced there’s a possibility logical discourse can give him what he wants rather than brute force. Astonishingly. Now you just have to convince the other half of this equation of the same thing...

The Red Wizard scowled, stroking his beard. "A study of her body and brain would be a more potent way of dealing with things, but your idea does have some merit. Practicality has its place after all. I would not have any pleasure in taking her apart thus after all."

Minsc growled, and Harry grabbed the other man's arm. "So, will you join us in rescuing Dynaheir, and ending the gnoll threat? In return, we will demand that she answer your question, as concisely and as honestly as possible."

"Hmm, and after several days of being a captive of the gnolls, the Rashemani Witch is bound to be in a receptive frame of mind," Edwin muttered to himself, nodding. "And it isn't as if they would succeed without my magical prowess to aid them and their foolhardy plans. Very well," he said in a louder tone, "I will agree to this."

"Good," Harry replied, releasing Minsc's arm. Minsc did not look happy, and Harry noticed that he had lost a few relationship points of the man, whereas he had gained quite a few with Edwin. Evidently, logic and discussion was a way to go with Edwin, or was it just the practicality as he mentioned? Regardless, they had a wizard among them now.

"In that case," Harry went on briskly, looking over at Imoen and Minsc. "What did you to find?"

With a final scowl sent Edwin's way, Minsc knelt down. With his finger he began to draw a map on the gravel of the trail of the dried riverbed, marking out the xuart village.

"The village has three large huts, almost as large as a log house back in Rasheman. It has a palisade blocking the main trail leading into it and a barricade here. There are trees and bushes growing throughout up to the barricades, although there does not seem to be any threats in the valley. The river comes out, or perhaps starts, here," he said pointing to a place on the west, of his makeshift step.

"And they do not seem to know or care about it for some reason. It is not guarded, and we were able to make our way up to the edge of the cleared area around the barricade," Imoen interjected.

"You've both used the word word barricade, instead of wall. Why?" Harry asked intently staring down at the map.

“Because it isn’t a wall Harry,” Imoen said with a shrug. “It’s just two wooden barricades set in an open area between the small group of trees and the village, about as high as a xuart.”

“And their numbers?” Harry asked.

“And are we dealing with just xvarts?” Jaheira cut in. “Did you see any other monsters?”

“We are not dealing with just xvarts,” Minsc said shaking his head.

“There are four gnolls among them, all of them Elites, like the tougher variety we face the other day,” Imoen supplied nodding. “And there’re about 35 maybe 40 xvarts around the village at all times, unless more are hiding in the hut,” Imoen went on earnestly.

“Alright, here’s what we’re going to do,” Harry said, scowling as he looked down at the map. “Jaheira had a point about how our supplies were looking before we decided to accept this quest. Even with Edwin added to our party, our armor is not very good and we don’t have any healing potions. On top of that we pushed forward so hard after breaking camp, that we haven’t rested since then. It’s nearly pushing evening now; I think that the best plan would be to attack the dawn, there is a reason why that’s a popular move after all, and I think, that what we need to do is to conserve our numbers, and any kind of direct combat.”

Harry paused there, scratching at his chin and noticing absently that he needed to find another razor somewhere. His last one, which he had bought at the Friendly Arm Inn, had not lasted more than a day after leaving Beregost, and he could feel some stubble starting to grow. “Edwin, what spells do you have?”

Edwin huffed irritably. “That is a rather rude question to ask someone who has simply joined your band for convenience’s sake, but very well. As it is in the interest of planning a better attack I will tell you of my might. I can use two Fireballs a day. I have two spells of defense, one summoning spell, and three Magic Missile spells. For close in fighting I have two Agannazar’s Scorcher.”

Harry nodded, whistling appreciatively as did Imoen who muttered, “I am so going to dual class the instant I get a chance, I swear!”

Of course they had their Blood Magic spells, but Harry was in no way going to use them in front of Edwin, who huffed in snarky amusement at Imoen's mutters. Not until the man proved himself trustworthy, and frankly Harry didn't see that happening anytime soon given his attitude and the group he was a part of.

Turning his attention back to planning out their attack, Harry asked, "Good, so we can hopefully do most of our killing at range. Minsc, how close could you get with your Hide in Shadows skill?" Close enough to say get here, and offer some long range protection for Imoen?" Harry said gesturing to the edge of the small wooded area.

"Minsc can and will do so! But why are you thinking of sending Imoen in on her own? Neither Minsc nor Boo can approve of that."

"Traps," Harry said bluntly before looking over at Imoen. "Imoen, how good are you at trap laying again?"

Imoen shrugged and twitched her eyes, opening her Status Sheet page as Harry surreptitiously did the same, enlarging that thief skill for a moment. Since it, like Hiding in Shadows, was a percentage rather than level based skill, it was slightly tougher to get a handle on and it was not a skill that Imoen had practiced since leaving the Tutorial, or even that much during it.

"You can lay traps while under Hide in Shadows can't you?" Harry asked looking over at Imoen, since that information wasn't available on her Status Sheet. "I think I remember you being tested on that."

"Yeah I can do that, so long as we have the materials," Imoen replied promptly, already getting an idea of what Harry wanted her to do.

After examining it, Harry nodded. "We have the materials for at least a half-dozen traps, if we add in the grog you found on the gnolls we fought the other day. So, here's what we do..."

OOOOOOO

The night was deep and dark when Imoen began her trek up the dry riverbed and into the valley, where she activated her Thief skill, Hide in Shadows covering her like a cloak. Minsc came with her, but they split off with Minsc moving into a position by a tree, as he pulled out Khalid's longbow, laying an arrow along the string. He didn't pull it taut just yet, but his eyes were scanning the area, and he nodded at Imoen, seeing her as a bare outline as she moved forward, marveling at that as he began to realize the party's ability to see one another like this was very important. It made activities like this far easier.

Imoen moved forward, waiting on the edge of the lit area from the torches that were being held in the hands of the two xvarts on guard to either side of the single barricade, a bit of wall that barely came up to the height of the xvarts themselves. The interior of the village was somewhat decently lit too, but even there there were shadows.

"Let's see how good you are at sneaking around Imoen over old girl," she muttered, before pulling back into shadow. Once there, she breathed in deeply, and then used a spell she hadn't used since comparing it's effect to Hide In shadows, obscuring herself with magic on top of her Thief skill, grimacing at the hit to her health points. If she was spotted, those health points would come back to haunt her. *But then again, I don't intend to be spotted, and shouldn't with two techniques now covering me.*

With Hide in Shadows and her Disillusion spell around her, she wound her way forward, through the two low barricades and into the village, where she waited in the shadows, looking around. At night, the place was nowhere near as bustling as it had been before the sun fell. There were only seven xvarts awake, scattered throughout the area, and a single Gnoll Elite, sitting by the main firepit in the center of the village. The rest were presumably inside the large huts, their doors set toward the firepit. But the Elite wasn't awake enough to be looking around, and none of the other xvarts were nearby.

With that in mind, she moved to each hut's entrance and began to lay down traps. This was something, like Harry's ability to instantly search a body for money, which she had played around with only a few times in the tutorial. As she began, Imoen saw a glowing set of diagrams in front of her, showing her how to lay the trap. As she constructed the trap the bits she set correctly would change, showing the outline of the bits she had placed correctly in green, or incorrectly in orange for a brief second. The trick was to spot the color before it disappeared, or else you wouldn't know you had done so until you were finished with that particular trap. *I suppose the percentage of the skill*

effects how long I see the colors maybe? Or maybe the percentage comes in as people start to move across it, and the percentage shows how much chance they have to be caught?

Regardless, the traps she could create were simple, traps that would trip anyone trying to come over them. But unlike the equivalent back in Imoen's old life as Tonks, these traps would snare anyone who tripped them for a determined amount of time until the traps themselves were broken, rather than breaking or being seen after a single person went over them. Unless someone with a detect traps ability came along, they would remain hidden until the string broke.

From hut to hut she went, laying down traps in front of their doors. When she was done, she moved back into the shadows again, thinking hard as she renewed her spell, grimacing at the hit to her health points. *Damn, I need more health. That'd be endurance right? Have to remember to tell Harry to up that as often as I can.*

Regardless, Imoen knew she still had enough items to create four more traps: fire traps, traps that she had never actually made before during the tutorial but were based about the rotgut they had found on the bodies of the gnolls they had killed. *Well, nothing ventured nothing gained. We've got more than enough rotgut to let me do this, and to prepare the rest too. And remember what Harry said old girl, no need to light the rotgut up in the trap itself, just set it so it spreads around.*

Imoen carefully began work on those, her fingers moving silently as she set the traps, mostly tripwires now tied to the flasks of rotgut, around. Since she didn't have to set anything to light the rotgut on fire, the difficulty of the trap went down tremendously.

Eventually, she was finished, and moved out of the small village. There she slowly un-stoppered two more flasks of rotgut, pouring them onto the barricades. She couldn't do much there because of the two xvarts on watch, but she was able to at least douse the bottom of the short wooden walls which would hopefully be enough.

A second later, she was off once more, meeting back up with Minsc without any issue. Moving back through the small copse of trees, they found Harry and the others waiting in the entrance to the dry riverbed, which was a large lip in the edge of the valley where the soil of the valley ended and the bedrock of the hill began.

There Harry was resting one arm on the lip, watching the village through the forest as best he could. He jumped most agreeably when Imoen and Minsc came out of their

disparate Hide in Shadows abilities, although he didn't look as surprised as his jump indicated. *He must be acting for Edwin. I suppose I can understand that, that guys not exactly trustworthy is he?*

"Gah, don't do that you two!" Harry huffed, grabbing at his heart for a moment in a bit of over the top acting that had Imoen rolling her eyes as Harry asked. "Were you able to lay your traps?"

"All done," Imoen replied with a nod. "I laid as many traps as I could without giving the game away. There are only about seven of them despite that, but six of my traps were set up directly in front of the doorways to the three huts. Three simple trip traps, then after them three makeshift grease traps. Then one trap near to the main fire-pit, a half circle caltrop trap using the bit of iron we had from the swords Minsc wrecked."

Harry smirked evilly. "Great job Imoen. Now, Khalid, do you and Minsc believe that you could take out the guards?"

"We could take out the guards for certain," Minsc said authoritatively, pointing them out. "But we could not take out the guards that are actually on watch on the main entrance. They are sure to hear any commotion in the village and raise the alarm, even if we silence those creatures still awake within."

"All right, let's do this." With that, Harry raised himself up out of the ravine, then turned back and helped Garrick up, although Jaheira looked at him with one eyebrow raised in irritation and he backed away, holding up his hands placatingly. Edwin grumbled as he climbed up, but still did so with some alacrity and took his hand without complaint, with Khalid climbing up out of the riverbed with ease despite his full plate mail.

They were almost at the edge of the area when Minsc paused, exchanging a glance with Khalid, who frowned, fingering the bow he was borrowing from Imoen, the worst shot of the four who used bows, her short bow feeling odd, almost wrong in his hands. Still, there was some bleed-over between one bow type to the next, and he knew he could use it well enough. He, Garrick and Khalid aimed for the two guards, and at Harry's nod loosed.

Unfortunately Khalid was too used to a longbow, and his shot fell short, impacting not the head of the xuart he'd aimed at, but its lower chest. It was still a kill shot, but not one that would kill right away. Garrick's shot too, missed the mark, hitting the same xuart in the shoulder. Minsc's shot was good, slamming into the head of his target. But the

damage was done, and the mortally wounded xuart instantly started screaming out it's agony.

In the center of the xuart village the Gnoll Elite raised it's muzzle howling out a call to arms, and the few other xuarts, five still moving around the village and the two on watch o the main entrance began to move towards the screaming guard at the back of the village. The Gnoll Elite then began to bellow commands to them, as others slowly started to leave the huts, groggy from sleep at first but waking up quickly.

But Edwin, Jaheira and Garrick were already casting spells. Garrick played his balalaika, the notes of his Song of Regeneration carrying to all his allies as the other two summoned up their animals. Jaheira did somewhat better than Edwin at this, summoning up three wolves, dire wolves, larger and tougher than the normal breed, which she sent forward, after only a moment's communion with them in order to dominate their minds. Edwin in turn summoned up a simple tree creature, but also sent it lumbering forward.

"Wait," Harry said. "That thing's too slow to go on the attack, keep it close as close in detection detail instead." He idly wondered where the wording of that had come from, but he understood what he had meant to say all the same, so ignored it.

Edwin raised an eyebrow, then nodded. 'A most intelligent plan, to keep your best assets so guarded.'

"More like my most vulnerable asset at the moment," Harry said with a dry chuckle, to which the man looked mildly affronted, but didn't reply further.

Instead, he did as Harry with had told him to, the tree creature taking position in front of him, muttering. "Hummf, regardless, this will put me in good position to turn on these adventurers if I so desire and they are weakened enough for such to make sense in the long run."

Hearing that Jaheira scowled but said nothing for now, merely keeping an eye on the annoying mage.

For his part Harry moved forward, to place himself in one of the gaps left by the two barricades. He took the center most, with Khalid to his left and Minsc to his right. Once they were in position, with Imoen having reclaimed her bow, he began to rap out orders. "Garrick, Imoen, Jaheira, targets of opportunity. Edwin, hold for now. Jaheira, keep your beasts with us here away from the fires and with us here."

As he watched, the xvarts had begun to run around, several dozen of them coming out of the various huts, but tripping the traps that Imoen had placed. From nearby, Harry heard a whoop of glee, and then a muttered "Bugger" as Imoen found herself out of her Hide in Shadows.

"It's all right for now," Harry said. "Stay behind us, use your short bow for now. We don't need you to use Backstab."

"All right, but remember we don't have many arrows, only fifteen per person," Imoen warned. They'd only been able to recover about forty six arrows from the battle against the gnolls. Garrick and Imoen had both been very profligate with them during the battle.

"It will have to do," Harry said, grimly setting himself, and waiting as the xvarts began to form up. Harry waited, until they became aware of where the arrows slicing into them from outside of the barricades were coming from. Then, they all turned and as one roared forward, howling their war cries. Harry waited, then waited some more, then finally as the first xvert was about to reach them shouted. "A fireball right in the middle of their town if you please Edwin."

Edwin smirked, and for once did not reply in a snarky manner, instead simply letting his magic do the talking, waving his staff this way and that as his voice rose in an incantation.

As the first of the xvarts slammed into them, Harry dipped his shield and took their charge easily, hacking the first to down with quick strikes, frowning as he realized how easy it was to do so. Nearby, he heard Minsc bellowing, thrusting his own halberd forward. Khalid waited another moment before lashing out, his bastard sword flicking in and out like a snake's tongue.

Edwin's spell soon finished the fireball streaked over their heads, aimed at the farthest reach that the wizard could aim for, where it exploded. And instead of simply blasting outwards, which would've been dangerous enough, considering the number of xvarts that had come out of their tents, it hit the modified grease traps Imoen had set. These now shattered, the contents of the grog having been spread all around by the xvarts already.

As such the fire spread, and more than one xvert fell screaming after the fireball had dissipated, staring down at the clothing and their feet as they caught on fire. Screams

began and more of them began to die while still more boiled out of the huts. Harry slashed down, killing one xvirt, then watching as several dozen were plagued by fear running away, the gnoll elite having died to the initial fireball blast.

Then more of the Gnoll Elites came out from two of the huts. One of them swept it's halberd down, cutting through the traps that Imoen had left there and began to bellow orders in its yipping voice.

The xvarts who then came out of the huts started to become more organized. Instead of rushing forward to engage the enemies they could see they held back building up their numbers, until there were about fifty dots crowding the center and east of Harry's map. Even the fires were slowly starting to be stamped out as the sun started to rise enough over the hill to give them more light to see by.

Seeing their numbers, Edwin needed no urging to conjure another fireball. But one of the xvarts, it's dot indistinguishable from the others, reacted. It raised a staff, and the fireball spell that Edwin had just cast disappeared, bouncing off a spell of some kind.

Xvirt Shaman has used Dispel:

Dispel is an active defensive spell that can cancel or negate a single enemy spell. It is usually used to break through an enemy's magical defenses, but can be used to attack slow-moving offensive magic and is very quick to cast.

Weaknesses: can only be used on spells up to level 5.

"What!?" Edwin growled. "Y, you dare, to pit your pitiful might against mine! Delusions of grandeur need to have limits!"

"Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?" Jaheira said from beside him.

"What does that mean woman!?" Edwin growled as he turned from the battle to send her a glare.

"There should be a limit to someone's sophistry," Jaheira replied, not taking her eyes off the battle but allowing her lips to twist into a sneer that would have done Edwin justice.

“Fallback,” Harry shouted, his voice cutting through the rising sound of the xvirt horde, the battle and the incipient argument behind him. “Jaheira, send in the dire wolves, everyone, use long-range attacks for now.”

Minsc obeyed instantly, as did Khalid after a few seconds needed to disengage. The wolf Jaheira had assigned to his position had to help him, tearing at two of the xvarts who were trying to keep him in place, their hands grasping at his shield even as he slew them.

As they retreated, the xvirt shaman cast another spell. A thing of like a cloud of biting wasps came from its tiny, gnarled hands, the buzzing noises.

Xvirt shaman has cast Insect Plague:

This spell calls into being, a hoard of flying insects which will attack all enemies of the caster. Those hit lose a point of damage every 2 seconds regardless of their Armor.

Spellcasting within the swarm is impossible. Invisibility is no protection. Due to the suffocating nature of the writhing insect swarm, each victim must pass a Willpower check or run away in fear.

Perhaps a fire spell could ward off the insects? Or a shield of water or Earth defend against them. But other than that, this spell is a great weapon to use against magic users.

Jaheira cursed as she saw it. “Send your tree monster forward,” she ordered Edwin. He continued to glare at her, but she was unrelenting. “That spell is called Biting Insect plague I have seen it before used on a mage to deadly effect. Unless you want to not be able to shape another spell in this fight, we need to intercept it with something large enough to take the bees interest.

Realizing the older half-elf woman had a point, as much as he looked loathed admitting it, Edwin nodded, and gestured the ent forward.

It strode forward to take Harry’s place in the middle of the largest barrier, as the others regrouped behind it. As they did, Harry and the others continued to rain down death on the xvarts as they came, using the conjured animals to create a barricade that they could not pass just yet. But it was only a matter of time, and Harry knew it.

So instead of being pushed out of position, Harry shouted more orders, which were somehow heard by Khalid and Minsc and Imoen at the very least over the tumbled

of the screams and shouts of their enemies. “Jaheira, can you recast your summoning spells when your wolves die?”

“I have one more Summoning Spell yes,” Jaheira said with a nod.

Harry nodded, and then quickly outlined what he wanted to do. “We’re not going to try to reform a line where the conjured creatures are right now. We’re going to let them out from past the barricades...”

“What!?” Edwin interrupted, gaping at him. “But that is the most natural defensive line. And if we light them on fire as we wanted to originally...”

“It splits our front line into three and gives them the initiative even if Jaheira is able to keep her animals under control with fire that close on their flanks. No, we’ll pull back and create a sort of concave curve,” Harry said outlining it in the air with a finger. “With the open end facing towards the village. Edwin, Jaheira, you’ll be the center, straight behind the central opening. Jaheira, Imoen, you’ll target that spell user.”

She frowned, but nodded, flinging her sling around. “Edwin, your job is to kill those four Gnolls, magic missiles only if you please. Garrick, another Song of Regeneration, then join Edwin with your bow. Once out of arrows you can join the line.”

Garrick nodded, and Khalid ordered Minsc and Khalid to the other side of the concave line. With his tower shield Harry was much better at standing his ground than either of the other close-range warriors, especially Minsc who didn’t have a shield. He had a tremendous range advantage against the short xvarts though thanks to his halberd, and with Khalid in close to defend any who got under his reach, the two of them would make a potent force on that side.

When the last of the creatures summoned died, Jaheira was already muttering the enchantments to some and more, and this time, they came in the form of a Panther, and a small wolf.

The small wolf moved with Khalid and Minsc to the other side of the barricade, and Harry and the panther took the other side of the now vaguely concave line. Garrick joined Harry with bow in hand at first after having sung his second Song of Regeneration Spell, shooting his last two arrows before pulling out his short sword. This finished the concave line Harry had wanted as the xvarts finally pushed past the barricade, their own flanks protected by the solid stone of the hill all around the valley.

The barricades weren't tall enough to stop Imoen and Jaheira from launching their long-range attacks over it, and the spellcaster died in seconds, and arrow impacting his shoulder just as it was about to finish a spell as a slingstone took it in the face. It squawked in pain, falling on it's read, and the spell fizzled, backlashing instantly, covering the creature in stinging bus just as it had intended to cover the party.

Two more xvarts on either side of it died by the stinging of the bugs so summoned. The gnoll elites kept on shouting for the xvarts to rush forward but by that point, magic missiles were already impacting the head and shoulders of the them, and the rest of the xvarts had pushed past the barricade into the bag that the concave circle of the adventurers had created.

Instantly Harry saw several messages pop up in front of him, their outer edge lined in gold to signify their importance.

You have created a tactical formation, Concave Line.

While vulnerable to a more organized enemy, this formation, when correctly placed, can create an area wherein the enemies are unable to bring their numbers to bear.

+2 to every defensive skill or ability of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

+2 to armor type of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

The second one read:

You have created a Tactic: Killing Zone.

With the enemies being attacked from three sides, the enemy is unable to organize themselves properly to use their numbers against you. With that, the enemy will become trapped unable to disengage, becoming more and more disorganized.

All damage by party members will be doubled.

All damage dealt by allied combatants will be raised 25%.

The enemy will have a 50% greater chance of their morale failing.

The xvarts charged forward through the three breaks in their barricades, only to be attacked from the sides, as well as from ahead of them. This, as the AA skill had indicated, seemed to confuse them. They all slowed down, bunched up, looking confused as their numbers began to dwindle under the rain of arrows and stone from Imoen, Jaheira and Edwin now that the spellcaster was down.

Edwin without command added his own long-range attacks after a few seconds. An Agannazar's Scorcher spell racing out to impact each of the two barricades, lighting them on fire and adding still more chaos to the xvarts advance. The fact they lit up in the center of the mass of xvarts meant the embers of the fire spread throughout them and so did the panic it caused.

Then the first few xvarts were on them, and Harry had no more time to look at the rest of the battle, smashing down the first xvart that reached him with a hammer blow, having switched out from his longsword. The decision had been an easy one, considering he wanted to be able to use Cleave later on just in case, and the xvarts weren't exactly a worthy opponent of that kind of thing.

He blinked however as his first victim didn't just die from the hammer blow to the head, it almost exploded upon the impact. *Damn, that extra damage isn't just for show! Wow, I'm going to have to continue to try out new tactics in the future.*

The concave line, with the fire of the barricade within their horde causing chaos and fear, instantly began to tell. The xvarts still had enough numbers to swarm them if they could have concentrated them on any one portion of the line. But now a few xvarts were turning from the red of enemies to the yellow of panicked foes on Harry's map, something he noticed even as he continued to kill.

The battle continued on from there for only a few minutes and then, the xvarts broke completely. It was as quick as that. One moment, only about a dozen of their dots on his map were yellow, then the next, there were only a few somehow braver xvarts still in the red. All the rest were now trying to escape, fear taking them like an odd kind of madness.

"Close!" Harry roared out instantly, somehow knowing without understanding how what he had to do. The enemy had broken, now to finish them.

A few moments later, it was all over. The xvarts had shattered, fleeing back into their village, but the adventurers were on their heels. All of them, even Imoen and Jaheira

had switched out their long-range weapons for a sword and club respectively. Even Edwin got into it, using his wizards staff, slaughtering the xvarts now that they had broken.

As he slew the last xuart which had tried to escape down the passage, Harry looked around him in a daze almost as the sounds of battle faded to nothing. He soon saw the others were a bit in a daze too, or at least Imoen and Garrick were, the closest to them at the moment. The others, more experienced adventurers were simply grimly satisfied, exchanging nods.

Even Edwin looked happy for the first time since they met him, his habitual sneering face now settled into more of a smirk as he had when he bantered with Imoen, a light of satisfaction glimmering in his eyes. "That was an...acceptably run battle," he said nodding towards Harry. "Your tactic at the end there, letting them out into a killing zone like that, that was most excellently done."

Harry just nodded, staring down at his hammer, which was caked with blood and gore. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to blink as he hadn't realized that Jaheira had come up behind him. Glancing over he noticed that Khalid had moved over to Garrick and Imoen. "He's right Harry," the half-elf woman said, squeezing his shoulder gently. "This was well done."

"Then why do I feel numb rather than any sense of accomplishment?" Harry asked, his voice almost flat as the Gamer's Mind tried to keep him from going into shock now that the battle was over. "This... that was butchery, not a battle."

"It speaks well of you Harry that you refused to lose yourself in the slaughter," she said, using the same sort of words as she had after the fight against the kobolds. "But do not let your kindness get in the way of realizing that this was a job well done."

"I know it was, and I know I would do it again, even if it wasn't necessary for our quest after what you told us about how these creatures breed. But..." he shrugged. "Don't ever expect me to ever enjoy it."

"Why would I ever want you to?" She asked, seeming to be honestly confused, and Harry smiled at that. The two of them exchanged a nod, and Harry noticed that he had one another two-hundred respect and trust points with her. *Quite prickly and standoffish on the outside, but almost soft and gooey on the inside of that's Jaheira* he thought, although he understood that if he ever even attempt to say that aloud, she would probably brain him.

As Harry regained his mental equilibrium however and the last of the adrenaline left body, Harry's mind once more was able to take in what his senses were telling him. And that was dominated by the smell of the battlefield, and he nearly gagged as the stench of the dead, burned and none reached him, along with other, equally earthy smells.

Khalid came over then, holding out a scarf. "H, h, here Harry, my wife h, h, has a bottle of perfume she uses b, b, but if you don't li, li, like the smell of lavender, this is a mu, mu, much better idea."

"Is that what you wear?" Harry asked looking over at Jaheira, more for something to concentrate on rather than the smell as he slowly tied the scarf around his nose and mouth.

Jaheira nodded, cocking her head quizzically, the beads in her hair clacking together very gently. "You've noticed?"

"Only once," Harry said with a shrug, trying not to bring attention to the brief moment where he saw Jaheira as a half-elven woman rather than a married woman full-stop. "Imoen commented on it too though."

"You actually have perfume?" Imoen said, looking at Jaheira almost hungrily. "Do you think I..."

"Yes child, you can borrow some, but only some. I don't have all that much until we reach a city like Baldur's Gate."

"Still," Harry said his voice mildly muffled now through the scarf. "We need to get going. I don't think any of us wants to stay here very long do we?"

"Indeed not," Minsc said, while the others all shook their heads emphatically, even Edwin. "The smell is getting even to one with such a strong stomach as mine, and young Boo is most distressed by it. As a giant space hamster you know he has a far greater sense of smell than any of us."

Harry nodded, thinking as he looked at the three huts. They hadn't burned very much, but if they wanted to find any information about the Gnolls, it was obviously going to be somewhere within them. With that in mind, and wanting to get out of here quickly, Harry began to give out more orders. "Alright. Garrick, Imoen and I will search one hut,"

he said, picking one out randomly and pointing at it. None of them, after all, had anything to say one was more important than any of the others.

“Jaheira, Khalid, Edwin you take the other,” he said pointing randomly at another. “Minsc, would you mind going around and cutting off ears? Each xuart ear is worth five gold as a bounty, and we killed what, 75 of them, more? That will help refill our supplies after this quest is done.”

Everyone else nodded, and the group split off, though Harry was wondering at his own ruthlessness now that he was past his moment of introspection. *Still, I suppose they are already dead. What happens from now on doesn't really matter to them.*

Inside the huts, however they did not find an empty hut as Harry had expected.

The hut was circular, its edges lined with a few scraps of hide or pale leather, or at least what looked like pale leather at first. At one end was a large table set to the side of a throne-like chair, with cheap, primitive plates scattered around the table. On the floor were countless simply bedrolls.

More importantly in front of the three adventurers were ten xvarts larger and stronger looking than their fellows with actual muscle showing on their wiry little bodies, and chain mail to go along with their short swords. They still didn't have shields though, for which Harry was very thankful.

And in their center, was a dark blue-skinned, or blue-furred rather, gnoll. He stood a head taller than most, his eyes showing both intelligence and malevolence in their red gleam, and his shoulders were broader as well, his plate mail showing shoulders with heavy spikes coming out of them. In one hand he held a large two-handed sword, the sword looking like a longsword in his hand.

As Harry caught sight of them, two bestiary pages appeared briefly in front of his eyes, though he only read the first page rather than both pages devoted to the background of the beasts. The rest wouldn't exactly be helpful at this point.

Xuart Elites

The equivalent of a chieftain's bodyguard these xvarts are the strongest within the xuart's community. However, if the chieftain is beaten in battle by a representative of another

sub-sentient species, or even occasionally an adventurer of the Orcish persuasion, they will instantly shift their allegiance to the stronger individual.

The same basic resistances of xvarts apply here too. But be prepared because these creatures are a little stronger and a little faster than their fellows. Still not very dangerous to most adventurer groups except in large numbers, and they never come in such except as part of a Horde.

The next page read about the Flind, which turned out to be a subspecies of gnoll called Flind.

Flind.

These creatures are the true elite of the gnoll race whatever the title of the Gnoll Elites. Stronger, tougher, with a clear genetic advantage over even elites, these creatures were bred from birth as warriors, and then were thrown into battle after battle, coming through either victorious or at the very least alive, which, if you haven't noticed up to this point, is much the same thing.

The Flind is the equivalent of a gnoll adventurer, in that they can use some warrior skills. This one seems able to use Cleave and two other skills you haven't seen before, one team support and one direct assault.

Even as Harry banished the two bestiary pages from his eyes the Flind roared, and the xvart elites charged forward.

“Of course there had to be a catch somewhere after such an easy fight!” Harry shouted. He barely got his shield up in time to block a sword blow from the Flind, and it threw him onto the back foot before he set himself, battering the Flind's large blade to one side with his shield and then hammering out with his hammer. But the gnoll did something that Harry hadn't seen in no be able to do, instant parrying the hammer blow to the side with his blade grunting with effort.

Harry wasn't surprised for long, but it was long enough for Flindf to fling his sword back in an arc, swinging down at his shoulder. Now was Harry's turn to grunt as his short sword and shield technique moving his body for him to bring up his tower shield +1 above his head. The blow smashed down into his shield, pushing him to his knees.

“Back out! Imoen, cast a Bombarda then out with Garrick, let’s see if we can spread them out outside,” Harr growled, whipping his hammer out to tie and take the flind in it’s legs. It leaped backwards, but Harry then shifted his attack, using his still outstretched hammer to target a wide angle Stupefy that hit just as Imoen’s Bombarda flew from her own out flung hand.

Harry’s spell caught the flind and five of the elites, but the Flind threw off the spell and rolled to the side, evading on instinct Imoen’s spell which imploded among his followers. By the time he righted himself, Harry had retreated out the door of the hut, and the Flind howled in fury, gesturing his troops out to follow the adventurers.

Instantly one of them died to a longbow shot from MInsc, and then he was charging forward to engage them, as Harry continued to fall back. “Butt-kicking for goodness!” the barbarian bellowed.

There was no time to try to coordinate, the xvarts and the Flind were too close to Harry for that, and he was desperately parrying and dodging as they came out of the hut on his heels. He only shouted “Try to take them from behind!” But it was enough.

Two of them died to backstab from Garrick and Imoen as she appeared from Hide in Shadows, and the Flind was forced to dodge backwards from a blow from Minsc as he roared in. The Flind blocked Minsc’s halberd, his sword’s catching the end of the halberd and pressing it up and out. It then danced around Minsc and let loose a bellow, before glowing red.

Flind has used Shoulder Charge.

Shoulder charge is an easy to understand attack, basically being a charge with your shoulder, fast and powerful, but in a straight line. Dodging it isn’t easy if you are entangled with the individual doing it, but tripping the individual using the technique is easy.

This technique can be evolved into a greater skill at higher levels.

The charge slammed into Minsc’s side hurling him off his feet and away, then the flind was turning on Garrick, activating another technique, its hand and sword glowing. Harry was engaged with two of the elites at the time, but a quick pointblank Stupefy took them down and didn’t cost him much in health, and he charged forward using his own technique, Shield Bash.

The blow caught the flind as it brought its sword down, causing the flind's technique to stop working. Its sword still crashed down with punishing force though, shattering Garrick's own short sword and throwing the other young man back onto his rear. The flind though recovered and rolled away from Harry's follow on blow from his hammer, breathing deeply and letting out a thunderous howl.

Flind has used Support Howl.

All those allied with the flind will receive a combat bonus to both offense and defense. Support Howl can be countered by Silence or Dispel, and does not effect magical attacks, only physical ones.

Imoen tried a quick Backstab but was intercepted by two more elites. She growled, then was forced to back away as the two elites began to move faster than she could handle. "Lacero!" she shouted, and her offhand filled with her fire whip, and her Would-be Dominatrix combat bonus activated, allowing her to dance around them until Garrick was up again, having scooted back on his rear until grabbing up a short sword from a dead xart.

Since Edwin was still in the other tent, Harry followed Imoen's example, lashing out now with a cutting spell. "Defindo!" The flind dodged again, the blaze of magic passing it by to one side but cutting the two unconscious elites in half where they lay.

The flind growled, its sword lunging out towards Minsc. But Minsc was able to block it, getting the haft of his halberd up between them before the flind could get much energy behind its swing. A bellow and the stronger Ranger twisted, letting the blade of the flind carry down into the ground where Minsc captured the sword with the end of his halberd against the ground. Yet the flind quickly punched him away.

Then Harry was on the flind, having finished off the two elites fighting Imoen. The flind turned but too slow now and had also prepared himself for a hammer strike, raising its sword. Instead Harry switched out from his sword his hammer to his sword, lashing out with an overhand blow shouting to activate the skill he had learned from Minsc. "Cleave!"

The shout apparently worked to activate the skill, and his blow shattered the creature's sword before flashing down into its chest hurling it backwards with a massive wound running from shoulder to waist.

You have used Cleave, an advanced Warrior Skill.

With any slashing attack a successful hit will deal three times normal cutting damage.

The gnoll was still alive though, saved by the amount of impetus the attack lost smashing through the flind's claymore. It instantly reached forward to grab Harry still outstretched arm, pulling a surprised Harry forward as it brought the ruined hilt of its sword, which still had more than a foot of blade, down towards his head. But that blow was blocked by Minsc, who intercepted it with its his own halberd. Then Garrick was there, stabbing into the thing's face as he leaped up with his own short sword. "Just die already!"

The thing finally died at that, Garrick's desperate stab, punching his blade deep into its skull. The flind then fell back nearly pulling Harry after him before he wrenched his arm out of it's death grip.

"About, hah, darn, hah, time!" Garrick gasped, wincing a bit. "What the heck!? That was harder than the fight against the rest of the xvarts."

From the other tent, Jaheira and Khalid came out, carrying a wounded Edwin between them, his skull looking as if it'd taken a hit. Behind them, four more elites came out. But without a Flind among them, and outnumbered, that group of elites didn't last very long.

As the last one felt to his hammer, Jaheira glared at Harry, who had the decency to look sheepish, looking down at his own feet. She adopted a schoolmarm sort of tone as she asked "And, what have we learned today?"

"Don't separate the party and send them into different buildings while in enemy territory, unless you know for a fact those buildings are empty," Harry intoned shaking his head. "I'm sorry everyone, I didn't anticipate they would have kept any forces back."

Although... I have to wonder if the reason they did is because of the whole Enemy Zone thing, and those huts being the respawn points. A final battle to eliminate their ability to respawn makes too much sense for me to ignore, Harry thought, hiding a frown. Damn it, what could that mean when we find the gnolls base, wherever it is.

“No reason you should have,” Garrick said frowning as he looked over the village which now more closely resembled a abattoir. “I mean isn’t it kind of weird that they did?”

“It is in, in, indeed, but, perhaps the Flind that you k, k, killed kept the others b, b, back, anticipating the lo, lo, loss of the rest of th, th, them and wanting to ambush us?” Khalid asked.

“Or maybe the Flind was unwilling to brave the fires? Gnolls are still beasts after all, no matter how strong they may seem,” Jaheira interjected.

Harry nodded, although he had a nasty suspicion that his own guess was closer to the real reason.

Edwin frowned, looking at them all and shaking his head. “Bah, close yet so far. While both your reasons were part of the Flind’s strategy, that strategy started much more simply. This was about control.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked mildly before anyone else could ask the question far more sharply than.”

“Allow me to educate you,” Edwin said with a laugh as dry and acerbic as his tone. “The gnolls, as most governments do, rule through fear and terror among these xvarts. The xvarts follow them because the gnolls are stronger, no doubt having proven so by killing the local chieftain. The blue skinned one, the flind, could control them to a certain extent, but only through his own person and those of the other gnolls. Because I killed the other gnolls as swiftly as I did, as you commanded,” he added, looking at Harry and bowing his head mockingly. “The Flind lost the ability to relay commands to the horde of xvarts. Which might have meant he would have been faced with an uprising if he came outside and faced the tribe.”

“Moreover, there was the fire to consider. The Flind decided to keep control of the elites he could in an environment without fire, after we had hopefully been lollod into a false sense of security and dealt with the rest of the xvarts who might have rebel. It was actually quite intelligent of the creature. A tactic we might have to be on the lookout for in the future.”

Harry nodded, not saying anything about his own thinking about the reasons for this last battle and looked at the other two huts. "In that case, let's clear out the last hut before splitting up again," Harry intoned seriously.

In the last hut they didn't find any gnolls or xvarts. Instead they found a large bear, chained to the ground, in the center the center of what looked like some kind of barn.

When it attempted to attack them, Jaheira and Edwin had killed it with sling stone and spell. When the bear died though, something more important occurred because as it did, Harry got a message from his advanced adventurers skill, which caused him to smile even as Minsc started, glancing up at a message of his own with a wide beaming grin.

Congratulations, you have successfully cleared the entirety of an Enemy Zone including the Zone Heart!

This is the center of organization and willpower among the enemies. Guarded by stronger opponents, clearing the Zone's Heart 'kills' the Enemy Zone for a set amount of time.

This zone will be clear for a full year before re-spawning begins. And it will be at a lower level even when it does.

Reward: +2000 XP to every party member.

It was the next message, which Harry, Imoen and Khalid also saw however that was the reason why Minsc was looking so pleased. Because the shared experience had leveled him up.

Harry quickly looked at his own status screen, and saw he was relatively close to leveling up too, another one thousand two hundred experience points and he would level up again, although it was only a bare nine hundred for Imoen. Khalid was a different matter entirely, since even though he couldn't actually be called a high level fighter he was still technically a level 32 Warrior.

"Minsc has leveled up!" Minsc shouted, throwing his arms into the air with both hands on his halberd, whooping in delight. "Let the enemies of goodness beware, for Minsc will be even stronger!"

He then looked over at Harry and was about to say something before Harry interrupted him quickly, looking over at Edwin. "Right! let's split up again and get out of here before the smell starts to get to us even with these scarfs Khalid and Jaheira loaned

us. Edwin, you and Imoen explore this hut. Minsc and I will take the other tent with that had the flind in it, we'll see if we can find anything that'll lead us to the gnolls and then he and I will start cutting off ears again.

"Garrick, Khalid, Jaheira you take the the one that Jaheira and her group were investigating before.

A quick walk later Harry was once more in the first hut he had entered drink behind Harry, before crying out irritably. "Why has Harry not yet leveled up Minsc!?"

"Remember were trying to keep my AA Skill a secret from Edwin, Minsc," Harry replied winking at the other man. "Just because we have, shall we say engaged his services, for the time being doesn't mean we actually trust him."

Minsc's eyes widened, but he nodded looking a little crestfallen. "Minsc had forgotten that and so had Boo. But Boo will remember from now on even if Minsc does not. But, does that mean you will try to keep it a secret from Dynaheir as well when we rescue her?"

Harry frowned. "I... I don't know Minsc. I'm sorry I can't tell you whether or not she and I will get along, or she'll want the two of you to leave or will prove as trustworthy as you. I'll make that decision when I come to it, but I will meet her and decide with an open mind. That's the best I can give you.

"That is more than enough," Minsc replied with a nod and a proud smile at having been told he was trustworthy. "Thank you Harry and now, can will you level up Minsc? Minsc is interested to see what you will do with his stat points."

Harry nodded, and opened his stat, frowning as he looked at it. As a regular, for a given value of regular, Adventurer, Minsc only got two Stat points per level, unlike the three that Harry and Imoen got as children of the murder-hobo. But that didn't change what Harry wanted to do with them.

"All right Minsc, I'm going to tell you flat out I'm not going to add any more to your strength or other physical stats. I think those are high enough for now. What you need is more wisdom, Willpower, Intelligence and Luck. I'll put one stat point into Willpower for the next four levels, and the other into either Wisdom or Intelligence, whichever you wish, okay? That way after a few levels you'll have built up a bit more of your own defense against mental attacks if something happens to Boo."

“The idea of anything happening to Boo is a horrifying one,” Minsc shouted, before going on in a quieter tone as Boo skittered from one of his shoulders to the other, chittering all the while. “Yet Boo is saying that your idea has some merit, since a smarter Ranger might have been able to see the gnoll’s ambush coming, before they attacked. Still, it is a pity that Minsc will not be any stronger just yet.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, having anticipated an argument, and nodded at Boo with far more earnestness than any human should have nodded at a small hamster, even if that hamster was believed to be a giant miniature space hamster. “Well, thank you Boo.”

“Boo says don’t mention it. He says that Harry has been straight with Minsc so far, and will continue to do so. Ha, even Boo acknowledges that the two of us can be a mighty force for goodness!” Minsc shouted.

Harry smiled, and opened up Minsc’s status page for only the second time since they had met, working through his stats for a few moments, before he put the two points that Minsc had earned by leveling up into Wisdom and Willpower. As a warrior neither of those stats were as important as strength or his other physical abilities, but Minsc already had all of those in abundance, whereas his mental abilities were dangerously low. Harry estimated he would use the points Minsc earned by leveling up at least three more times to bring those up to an acceptable level before adding more to his physical abilities.

Harry nodded to Minsc, then looked around a thought just occurring to him. “You know, a thought occurs: what if the xvarts have booby-trapped anything in here I mean they didn’t seem to booby-trapped the ground, but that’s because they were sleeping on it. What if they booby-trapped the table or the chair? Or those, those um, bits of decoration on the walls?”

“Boo believes that they did not, he also believes that the throne is a bit too much for any little creature like a xvart and should be smashed to be used for kindling on general principle,” Minsc replied dryly.

He hefted his halberd, and Harry shrugged. “Go ahead big guy, that should show if there’s any hidden panels or anything within it anyway.”

Minsc smiled widely, hefted his halberd up, and brought it crashing down. As his halberd’s head smashed into the chair, two things happened. One, of course was that the throne chair shattered it’s back sliced in two and the seat smashed. This did indeed reveal

that it had a fake bottom to it, the contents of which crashed open on the ground a second later.

And, much to Minsc's consternation, the halberd's head shattered as it crunched into the seat of the chair. He grimaced as some of the bits and pieces blue back into his face and upper body, not enough force to actually hurt, but certainly enough to sting. When the sound of the shattered chair faded, Minsc looked over at Harry, shrugging his shoulders. "I am sorry Harry, Minsc sometimes does not know his own strength."

Harry shook his head. "No, that's been happening a lot unfortunately. Hence the whole Iron Intake Issue." With that, Harry moved over to the table, examining its contents, but not finding anything of merit, he and Minsc moved to look through the contents of the hidden panel.

He found 485 gold, which he took, three gems, a fire agate, a lynx eye gem, like the ones he'd been stockpiling during the tutorial, and an emerald as large as his fist and already cut. Harry also found a map. It was a very crudely drawn map, but there was a marked trail on it, leading South, South West. "I think," he said with a smile picking that up and holding it in the air "that this is what we were looking for."

Outside, he found the others had already finished clearing out the village. They hadn't found much: one spell scroll in a secret hollow in the cave, which turned out to be some kind of meeting hall, empty of anything but an altar at the far end, another seventy gold scattered around, and lots and lots of short swords. Harry added two of them to his Item Box when Edwin wasn't looking, and Minsc picked up the halberd that the blue furred gnoll had been using.

Harry showed the others the map, looking at Khalid and Jaheira for their input.

The two of them looked at it thoughtfully, then Jaheira said, "I believe I remember a story, something we heard years ago, about a failed fortress or stronghold, three days out from Nashkel it was, straight west. Looking at this map it reminds me of that story." Khalid frowned, trying to think of the same story, but shook his head when he was unable to add anything and Jaheira went on. "I'm sorry but I can't tell you anymore. Although I do know that there is a place between here and there that we can rest safely."

"How do you know that?"

“I was told by fellow Druids that there is a dryad in this area,” she said pointing down at the map further south and west, shrugging her shoulders. I’ve never met this particular dryad, but Druids and dryad’s have a semiofficial alliance between them. If I ask, she will give us shelter for the night.”

“And since we’re in technically enemy territory, that’s a good idea,” Harry said with a nod. “Unless we think we can get rid of the smell and fortify the valley here?” He asked sardonically, looking around at everyone. They all shuddered at the very idea, even Edwin looking disgusted at the very idea.

At that Harry nodded firmly, then gestured everyone to move towards the valley’s main entrance. “In that case, let’s get out of here. Jaheira, do you think you can guide us to this place?”

“I think we need to follow the map for a time. Once we get close enough that the forest can tell me more, I will be able to guide our steps,” Jaheira replied with a shrug.

Leaving the valley behind, Imoen and Minsc took the lead, the group forming into a column once more with Edwin joining Garrick and Harry in the middle, and the two half-elves moving to the back of the column. They talked quietly to themselves, as the three men in the center simply continued on, talking about the fight that had just occurred, with Harry asking the other two their impressions of how it had gone and otherwise whiling away the time to let their legs do the work.

OOOOOOO

“I must thank you for coming with me Remus,” Albus said, looking over at a younger man who stood beside him as they exited the Belgium Wizarding Authority Foreign Ingress station, the name saying exactly what the building was: a place where tourists or other travelers came into the magical portion of the country from other magical countries. “This is a kind of mission that a man should not take on his own, no matter how strong he believes himself to be.”

“Trying to hunt down a spirit is going to be difficult even with the two of us Professor, but you’re welcome all the same,” Remus said with a shrug. “Yet given who

this particular spirit is, I couldn't help but agree when you asked me for help. And to be perfectly honest, it will be nice to be involved with a wizarding society again, even if it isn't that of the UK."

Albus Dumbledore sighed and nodded, reaching out to steady the younger man with a speed that belied his own age. The young man across from him, who did not at all young any longer, was obviously still suffering from the full moon, which was only two days behind them. Yet he was still proud, and after a second getting his feet back under him, he pulled gently away from Remus. "I'll be better as we move away from the full moon."

Albus nodded. "Still, allow an old man his foibles, and let us get some chocolate. Chocolate, cocoa, and I think a local biscuit." With that the pair continued down the street beside, while Albus looked at Remus with some pride, and quite a bit of regret.

Remus Lupin had been bitten as a child and turned into a werewolf, but Albus had worked hard to get him into Hogwarts, the first child so bitten to attend. There Remus had made friends, James Potter, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew, yet life had never been easy for the werewolf, who refused to give into his curse, fighting it every month for control of his mind and soul.

But after that fateful night when Riddle came for the Potters, Remus, who had slowly been ostracized by even his friends due to his status as a werewolf, had retreated from the Wizarding World entirely, doing what jobs he could in the human world to get by. Yet even so, he used what little money he was able to save and Albus's continued help, to continue his magical education beyond above and beyond what Hogwarts offered. That was laudable, as was the fact he'd earned a Mastery in Defense Against the Dark Arts. But it was very obvious to anyone who knew him that the toll his curse demanded was growing every year.

Still, that didn't mean that he was helpless, and for all of his aches and bills, Remus remained one of the best wizards trackers then that Albus had access to. Especially in forests. *And since Riddle has retreated into the Białowieża Forest, I will need that help immensely.*

The two wizards moved down the magical quarters of Belgium, talking pleasantly for a time then Remus stopped and stared at a newspaper. Albus turned, looking at him quizzically, but Remus ignored him, moving over to take the newspaper from its case,

absentmindedly handing over a few Knuts, as he stared at the moving picture on the front. Albus looked at it over his shoulder, and his own eyes widened in shock as he saw what was blasting out from the headlines: "Sirius Black exonerated! Gross miscarriage of justice! British ministry under attack from within as head of DMLE leads witch hunt for the truth!"

"I think," he said frowning thoughtfully "I need to contact our friends back in Britain. Let us find a hotel, and quickly.

Remus nodded, seeming in shock, and Albus gently took his elbow, guiding him through the city streets. Even as he too considered the ramifications of this, as well as how in the world it had even happened. How had Sirius not been guilty? And if he had not been guilty, then who had been? Who was the secret keeper that night? And why had Lily and James kept it from him?

Questions abound, he thought to himself but this far after the fact, I wonder if they really matter. After a few moments walking while still guiding his friend, he looked at Remus and shook his head. Now not for me, but for perhaps my young friend they will. I rather fear that our search for Riddle's spirit will need to wait for a time. Still, a return to England can be made to work for me as well. There were hints of where Riddle learned about horcruxes in the first place to follow up on after all.

OOOOOOO

At that moment in France a young girl was reading the same headlines albeit in French rather than Dutch like the two men, frowning thoughtfully. And yet despite their ages and the anger Hermione felt for Albus she came to the same conclusion as Aldous had. It didn't matter really. *Oh, perhaps in the future if my own research hits a dead end, then I'll reach out to the Sirius, if he proves trustworthy. This talk in the newspaper of him running after Peter Pettigrew certainly does not fill me with confidence.* "Regardless, she murmured, setting aside as she picked up one of her textbooks. "even if he does prove so, I still have a lot of groundwork on my own to do."

"ermione are you in 'ere?"

Hermione blinked, looking towards the door, then flushed as she realized that she had accidentally piled up all of her current textbooks in a pile in front of her, obscuring her entirely from the view of whoever was at the door to her small room here in the Granger's new townhouse in Paris.

"Um, yes Fleur," she said, and watched as a silver hair popped up over the books, looking down at her.

Fleur had become a true friend to the younger girl, and the Granger's house had become a place of refuge for Fleur in turn as she continued to deal with the fallout of her Veela powers at school. After exchanging a nod with Hedwig, the blonde girl looked down at her younger friend, quizzically cocking an eyebrow. "Is zis some sort of game, guess your 'eight in books?"

Hermione shrugged. "No, this is just a week's worth of light reading. I'm trying to determine how to organize my time going forward."

Flower blinked, stared between Hermione and the pile of books, then back again. "A week? zis will only last you a week?"

"The wizarding books will, the others, depending on what they are I might go through them a little less quickly. Programming is not as easy as I had hoped," she said in tones of gross understatement. "But I'm getting there," the very, very determined 14-year-old nearly growled, clenching a fist.

She would find what happened to her friend at the very least, and if he was still alive somewhere out there, she would find a way to either bring him back or contact him. Hermione Granger was a witch with a mission, and she refused to give up. *Hmm... on second thought, perhaps I should reach out to Sirius after all. He would, if he's really Harry's godfather, no doubt like to hear stories about him. And he might have resources that I could use, or perhaps some more information on what could possibly have happened. My own research is hitting more dead ends than finding facts these days.*

Hermione blinked then as she realized that Fleur had asked her a question about classes. Soon the two were engaged in a deep discussion on charms and where the line between a charm and a DADA spell was, and Hermione shelved her mission for now. There would be time enough to consider how to move it forward later.

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Harry and the others had traveled through the rest of the day before being forced to spend a very nervous night hiding in a small copse of trees that were slightly taller than the other trees of the forest around them. There they rested in the trees with the two half-elves on watch, neither of them needing as much sleep as the humans did. Yet none of them had gotten much sleep, even Harry and the rest of his party members. When he woke up that morning, the AA Skill told him he'd only gotten four hours of sleep, which was not enough for any spells or anything of that sort to have been memorized.

But as the sunlight of dawn hit him, waking him out of his AA skill fugue, Harry was unwilling to try to rest any longer. By his and Minsc's estimate, it had been three, maybe as many as five days since Dynaheir and Minsc had been captured. Even if the gnolls were treating her as well as a human would a prisoner, that was a long time to be anyone's captive. If they wanted to save her, they had to free Dynaheir soon, or else. The others woke up to the smell of him cooking breakfast down on the forest's ground, with Khalid helping out, setting out strips of venison in a pan to be turned into jerky.

Edwin was the most irritable of a morning, but a steaming pot of mulled mead helped him. After a few sips he nodded appreciatively at Harry although his mutter of "I suppose even Neanderthals can get something right even if they insist on waking up at ungodly hours," did not do him any favors in Harry's eyes.

"I am getting the vague sense of a dryad nearby," Jaheira said, frowning as she looked around standing beside her husband and Harry while the others continued to eat. "Odd, it's not nearly as wooded as I would have thought for dryads to grow, but it is nearby. I believe..." she paused, cocking her head closing her eyes as she felt out the forest around them with her senses. "I believe south from here."

"Then lead on," Harry said with a nod.

The group set off silently for a time, some of them chewing on their jerky, others sipping at flasks of mulled mead, but eager to move on, and find someplace where they could truly get some good rest, before pushing for the gnoll's stronghold via the map Harry and Minsc had found. Harry just hoped that Jaheira was right, that this dryad would be willing to put them up for a night. There was no way they were going to be able to rest this close to the enemy's stronghold if not. Indeed, when they joined him for breakfast

the two half-elves had reported that they had seen a patrol of 10 gnolls passing their hiding place by during the night.

Luckily, as they went on through the morning, Jaheira's certainty continued to grow. "Yes," she said more than once. "Yes, I can sense a dryad far more clearly now through the bones of the earth. Perhaps a little too clearly." Now she and the other scouts started to be able to point out easier routes through the forest and still be able to find the scent, or trail whichever she wanted to call it, of the dryad.

But then her progress was interrupted as Imoen and Minsc having been ranging ahead of the rest of the band at the far edge of Harry's own map skill, began to retrace their steps back to the rest of the company. The others soon caught up, and the two of them cut out their Hide in Shadows. "What's wrong?" Harry asked

"There is a single gnoll coming, a large one, larger than even the elites though not as big as the flind we fought. He's also gnashing his teeth and muttering to himself," Imoen said with a laugh. "It sounds kind of weird too."

"Okay, so why didn't you just kill him?" Harry asked, confused.

Both of the forward scouts shrugged. "Because it's a lone creature I suppose," Imoen replied. "No threat really."

Minsc simply shrugged his shoulders." It was Imoen who spotted him, the creature was not close to Minsc until she came back to warn him. Minsc was busy listening to other noises in the distance."

"Other noises?" Jaheira asked cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes, arguing voices of two men. Neither Minsc nor Boo could not make out there words, but they were coming from that direction," he said pointing south and east.

Jaheira's eyes narrowed. "That is the same direction I am feeling the presence of the dryad."

Ignoring that for now, Harry looked over at Edwin. "I don't suppose you have a translate spell, or you, Jaheira?" When they looked at him he shrugged. "A lone gnoll could probably give us some good information if we could take him captive."

“If we could get it to talk,” Edwin drawled. “Would a paladin like you be willing to use torture to get it to do so?”

“No, but none of the light gods say we can’t use misdirection or lying in order to trick our opponent into revealing something, do they?” Harry asked. *If they do, I might have to rethink this whole Paladin thing.*

“Indeed they do not denigrate such tactics, only the use of them in interpersonal relationships, although far too few young paladins realize they can think their way out of problems in such a manner,” Jaheira replied with a chuckle. “It is good to see that you have a wise head on those young shoulders.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Is that some new way to call me child or something? If so, I have other names I could call you in turn.”

The others all laughed even Edwin who didn’t understand the full joke there, but then Harry looked at her and Edwin in question. But both of them shook their head. “However, gnolls have been known at times to be able to speak common. If so, we can still interrogate this lone gnoll perhaps.”

“Let’s find out if it’s even possible then. Imoen, Minsc, Jaheira, cloak yourselves again, just in case this one gnoll isn’t actually alone. The rest of us will continue on and meet him face to face,” Harry decided. “The two arguing men, men being this far into the wilds, will have to wait until after.”

Harry’s guess about the gnoll possibly not being alone turned out to be the case. The gnoll in question was escorted by five xvarts, who followed him at a distance, almost acting leery of him. *If I didn’t know better, I would say that they’re not actually with him, rather they’re almost escorting him away from something behind them.*

The xvarts reacted instantly to the sight of the four adventurers through the woods, shouting and moving forward, moving around the gnoll to attack them. But the gnoll didn’t do anything, simply stopped in place, glaring at them.

Shrugging his shoulders, Harry hefted his hammer, still his favored weapon since they were still down to only one longsword, and Harry wanted to use foretain the Cleave attack for when it would be most useful. “Kill them?” he asked.

After the battle of five xvarts and four Adventurers in open battle came to its logical conclusion, Harry lifted up his hammer and rested it on one shoulder, looking quizzically at the gnoll, who had not done anything, simply watch the fight. As he did, he took the time to read off the bit of information his AA Skill was giving him about the creature.

Name: Ingot. Gnoll Veteran.

A step between Elite and Slasher, the Veterans are the equivalent of sergeants and sometimes champions in gnoll clans, respected but not as feared as flinds without their inherent natural abilities or the next level of training, the Slashers.

Given he has a name, Ingot is a very unusual gnoll, and should be treated with wariness despite his relatively low title. He also seems a little more intelligent than most gnolls, and is using a very odd looking halberd...

Now it spoke, glaring around at the humans as its voice came out in common. "You good fighterrrrs for weak pinklings. You going to Forrrrrrrress? Is good. You kill all gnolls there. All stupid!"

Ok, Harry thought, *this could be easier than I thought it would be.* "Did you have a falling out with them or something?" He asked, coming to what he felt was the logical conclusion.

Charisma Check passed! Even though he has just met you, Ingot has decided you are interesting enough to converse with. Just keep your questions concise and to the point or else he might lose interest.

"Falling out? Fell out of nothing!" The gnoll replied, the words mangled by his canine jaws but still discernible. I was kicked out! Me, Ingot, the greatest fighter of my clan, exiled! And only because wanted to each woman!"

"Oh really, what woman would that be?" Harry asked quickly.

"I think herrr name starrrrt with D. She speak weirrrrd, have strrrrange magics, dangerrrrous, but tasty looking. Ingot wants to eat, I go to eat, to roast alive, but otherrrrs say no! She must be kept, then sent on to allies." The gnoll snarled, this time for real rather than as a mangled word. "Allies not trrrrustworrrrthy. Allies only using gnolls.

Gnolls could crrrreate empire, but to busy sniffing the tail of the so-called of Masters! Fools, weak!”

Harry nodded slowly. “I see. So you wouldn’t care if we wiped out all of the gnolls there?”

“No! Kill weak, strong thrive. Is way of world,” Ingot said almost philosophically.

Edwin shuttered. “I find myself disturbed yet also intrigued in a vile sort of way. I actually agree with that statement.”

“And w, w, what exactly does that say a, a, about you?” Khalid replied.

Edwin sneered at him, but Harry ignored their byplay, looking at the gnoll in front of him as it continued to speak. “This one will gatherrrr followerrrs, followerrrs to be trrrrrue to gnoll path. Ingot not weak! Ingot will show them all, meet with Ludrrrrrug, kill him, take overrrr band, become chief of own new clan! Then will rrreturrrrn to Forrrrrress and claim for self afterrr you leave. If you not win thrrrrough, I will finish job, then me will finally eat woman!”

“And where is this fortress exactly?” Harry asked slowly, as if not really interested in that, and certainly not interested in the woman Ingot seemed obsessed with devouring. He also noticed idly that every time he answered a question he passed a Charisma Check, which kept the gnoll talking. That was good as they were about to get to the most important part.

South Southeast from herrrre, you come to edge of sworrred Coast, therrre be a larrrge crrrag just on the other side of a long brrrridge. Brrridge be about quarrtterr day trrrravel away. Therrre the forrrrrress be. Huge thing, made by humans long ago. It good place for gnolls, could be mighty empirrrre thing, centerrr of Empirrrre, whatevrrr it be called.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is capital,” Harry supplied.

“Yes that!” The gnoll replied nodding his doglike head. “It be that after I take overrrr, kill those who would follow old Masters. Kill old Masters and eat woman!”

Harry nodded again, then said in a louder tone, “I think that’s all we need from him. Minsc?”

Minsc appeared behind the creature, lashing out with his halberd in a downward thrust that slammed into the gnoll's shoulder from behind and cleaved straight through him down to his crotch. Harry idly noted that the giant warrior had used Cleave and had been able to activate Backstab, which was, as Imoen had predicted, a surefire kill shot on anything human -sized.

"Well that was interesting," Harry said brightly as the body of the gnoll fell nearly cut in two in front of him, blood spraying nearly to his feet.

The others came out from behind their own hide in shadows technique, nodding their heads. "That was ingenious Harry the way you led him on," Imoen said holding up a hand for a high five which Harry gave her. "Brilliant, bloody brilliant!"

Minsc blinked cocking his head to one side "how is what Harry did bloody? What Minsc did was most bloody, but it was talking about eating Dynaheir!"

"Yeah, I figured that your self-control would be fraying after hearing him talking about eating her Minsc," Harry replied with a chuckle. "But is it just me, or does that halberd look interesting."

It did indeed look odd as his AA Skill had told him. The halberd in question was large, larger than the one in Minsc's hand, with a massive head to it, about a quarter again the size of a normal one, and it's shaft was metal instead of wood. The head's edges also shown with a blue sheen, which instantly showed it to be magical in nature. Harry picked it up, whistling at the weight of the thing. He was strong, for his level he knew it, but even so, this thing was heavy to him.

Unknown Halberd: though it is obviously not a normal weapon, beyond it being magical you cannot tell anything about this weapon by simply picking it up. The magic seems to be benign but who can really tell?

You have picked up an unknown magical item. Would you like to use identify?

Harry instantly indicated yes with his eyes and Harry watched as the first message disappeared.

It was replaced with:

Heavy Halberd: The Chesley Crusher

This famous halberd was first used by an ensign in Waterdeep's fleet but has since been passed around for generations, but only to those strong enough to carry its considerable weight. The iron haft of this heavy polearm makes the weapon slow, but its sheer mass smashes skulls and shatters limbs with equal ease.

As implied by its name this halberd has an added weight to it, as well as a magical edge which gives its attack even more impetus and cutting force.

+6 to damage, piercing, cutting or blunt.

-50% to overall movement and speed of the individual wearing it unless the wearer has a minimum of 36 strength, with -10% added for every four strength less than that the wearer has.

"I think I've seen one of these before," Harry said slowly, his eyes flicking over to Edwin. Two of the Seekers back in Candlekeep had halberds like this. They're slow as molasses to use, but they have added cutting power. Minsc, you can have this, but I don't think you should use it unless you are about to enter your Berserker state."

Minsc nodded happily taking the weapon and stowing it in his Item Box.

"That was interesting, but do you really think a Neanderthal like him will be able to get that out of his Item Box in a timely manner in a battle?" Edwin snarked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Probably not, but we can all guard him until he's got the time, and once that's done and his strength has ratcheted high enough to use it without penalty, Minsc and that thing could be a nightmare for any opponent."

"Minsc is already a nightmare for any enemy of justice!" Minsc shouted, but then nodded his head. "Yet he can always be more of a nightmare and thanks Harry for the weapon."

"You killed him after all," Harry said with a shrug.

"After the most intriguing semi-interrogation disguised as a conversation," Edwin approved. "Now we know where the fortress is, and it is a bare three hours travel from here. Excellent. This is actually working out rather well, one wonders if there is another shoe to drop at some point?"

Harry shrugged at that, then looked over at Jaheira. "Could you continue to lead us to this dryad of yours milady?"

Jaheira smirked, nodded her head, and with Khalid behind aside her, led the way forward.

She soon led them to a hill, the same kind of hill that the xuart village had been hidden within, then around it's feet until they found a small path leading up. But unlike the path leading to the xuart village, this path was lined with grass and trees dotted it here and there, which they had to move through.

As they moved, Jaheira began to smile, whispering something to Khalid in Elvish which Harry couldn't understand. He simply nodded, bumping his shoulder against hers for a moment. A moment later Jaheira stopped and looked around her, breathing in deeply like someone taking a lung full of air after a long time spent holding her breath, before she smiled. The smile completely transformed her face from merely attractive to downright beautiful, something Harry noticed idly as he looked around wondering why she was smiling like that.

Imoen asked the same question bluntly, as she came up behind the other woman, draping herself across her shoulders. "What's the silly smile for?" she asked, smirking at the half elf woman.

She rolled her eyes. "Can you not feel it child? These trees, each of these trees are thousands of years old! They are filled with the power of earth, the power of life."

"They are indeed Druid," said a new, melodious voice from one side. All of them turned, to see a ghostly image slowly emerging from within one of the trees. "My grove has been here for ages, since long before Baldur and his fleets came, long before the men of the south pushed north."

The image was of a woman, a beautiful woman from what little could be told from the image itself, middle-aged perhaps, but the form was so wavy away from the face that her curves could barely be seen as a hint rather than reality. "Greetings Druid," went on with a bow. "I would ask your business here, but first I must beg a boon of you."

"Ask and we will grant it, Great Mother," Jaheira answered for them all, bowing. Harry asked her later about the title, and was told that Great Mother, was simply a title given to any elder dryad of a Dryad Grove.

“My Grove is threatened,” the dryad said. “Two human adventurers have come here, and are threatening to cut my tree down. “I have used my Charm, but they somehow are protected against it. I have attempted to persuade, to lead them from this folly. Yet while they hear my words, it only eggs them on to destroy my tree more!”

Edwin blinked. “They ignore a Druid’s charm, truly?” He frowned thinking as he stroked his goatee. “They must be either heavily guarded against mental enchantments, or, gripped in some religious fervor.”

Harry shrugged. “Whatever the reason, if they’re looking to knock down this central Oak, then I think we need to stop them.”

Edwin nodded. “Indeed,” before he continued on in a lower tone, “if only to make certain that we have a safe place to rest for the night, and to perhaps see if this dryad is willing to...exchange services. It has been a long while since my last visit to a courtesan.”

They came out into a gorgeous looking area, a small valley, somewhat like the xvar’s valley, although that was instantly where the any comparison ended. Here the trees dominated, many of them looking like they bore fruit occasionally. The grass underneath was deep, there was the sound of water nearby, and Harry could glimpse a stream or maybe a pond to on side through the trees. It was all in all an amazingly beautiful and peaceful place.

This feeling was ruined a moment later they started to hear noises, the sound of two voices arguing, and the sound of chopping in the distance. At that sound, Jaheira’s face closed down, and her fingers began to twitch on her staff in a most disturbingly violent manner. They were still somewhat out of sight thanks to the trees when they finally began to be able to make out the actual words being spoken.

“And I’m telling you, this is the wrong tree, it’s too obvious.”

“What’s obvious mean? Use real words, Caldo!”

I am using a real word Krumm. It means... it means... it’s obvious!”

“How can a word mean a word!”

“Whatever, let’s just chop them all down. Maybe there’s more than one treasure.”

“Ooh, tha’s good thinkin’ but that means will be here even longer. And with all those dog men in the area, that’s not a good idea.”

“Why do I think we’re about to walk into something incredibly stupid?” Harry muttered.

“B, be, beecause you have working ears?” Khalid asked shaking his head. “G, g, good grief, they sound lik, l, like they were dropped on, th, th, their heads as c, ch, children. Many times.”

The others forbore to comment as they finally came out of the denser woodlands into a small glade by the pond. In its center was a massive, truly monstrous tree, so big around that you could think that a person could make a three story house out of it, and a goodly sized one too. Between the tree and it were, two men, with one of them poking and prodding at the other, as he hefted an axe, obviously about to take a chop of the tree again.

Krumm and Caldo, Level 6 Fighters

Yes, these two come as a pair. That is because their basic intelligence is so small, that even combined, they barely register as a human being, let alone Adventurers. To say that they have all of their stat points in strength and dexterity is to put it mildly. Although one shouldn’t deny the luck of the fool, for is it not often the case that the most foolish seem to survive when the more intelligent are less-favored by that most fickle of ladies? nonexistent. These two morons are not intelligent enough to know what the idea of friendship is, let alone anything else.

Warning, continued attempts to talk to these two will negatively impact your own intelligence and those of your party and Allied companions.

I really hope that last bit was a joke, Harry thought to himself as they moved into the small glade

“What do you do here!” shouted Jaheira in a voice like rolling thunder, mixed the sound of an angry goddess with an, admittedly impromptu, professor McGonigal impression that made Harry and Imoen both back away from the woman. Even Edwin looked a little startled, while Minsc blinked, and stared at her. Khalid simply looked proud. “How dare you defile a dryad’s tree!”

The two men turned, and stared at her, their faces somewhat slack. One of them, Krumm said, "She's real pretty, you think she's real too? Or is she another wood woman?"

"I don't know," Caldo replied, his tone a near drawl that made Harry's brain itch. "She looks real enou'h to me, like she c'ld be one of them fancy elves though. Don't they have some kind of thing with trees?"

"What thing? "

Don't start that again!"

Jaheira continued striding forward's with the others spreading out behind her. Both men noticed this, and unconsciously moved apart, the second man picking up a Claymore while the first man hefted two axes in his hands. This did nothing to dissuade Jaheira. "I asked you a question! To hear up what do you do here?"

"Wha's it look like?" Krumm asked, gesturing back over his shoulder to the tree, which was slowly starting to heal itself rum his axes ministrations. "We're here for treasure."

"What?" Edwin asked disbelievingly. "What to do you in Neanderthals think you could find in a dryad's tree?" He then went on in his habitual mutter, "I thought that might have been some kind of odd echo through the trees, but to hear that is actually what they are doing? I know that most of humanity is moronic by its very nature, but this certainly takes the cake."

Caldo shrugged. "It's got a wood woman right? Why'd pixies or sprits create tha' she weren't guarding a treasure? That's logic that is said the second man with a nod. He looked at the adventurers closely. "You gots some big Fellers there, you reckon you could help us? The faster we chop it down, da faster we get out of here with da treasure before those dog men find us."

"Funny thing," Krumm grunted,, looking back over the tree. "They don't seem to come here, but getting out of here with the treasure, tha's almos' as important as the treasure."

"And what did the, the wood woman say of there being treasure here?" Jaheira asked, trying to rein in her temper with some difficulty. It was after all not something she

habitually had to do or even wished to do. But starting a fight here in the sacred Grove, was wrong in her opinion, so she would attempt to give diplomacy a chance.

Caldo grinned, his face splitting into an almost comical attempt to appear sly crossing his face. "Well she didn't say nothing 'bout it, in fact, she told us there ain't no treasure. But ya see, tha's just what she'd say if'n there be treasure right?"

"...Astonishing," Edwin said shaking his head. "I might have to write this episode down. It has been known for a long time that wisdom and intelligence can combine to aid one in throwing off Charm, and yet here we are, face to face with two examples at the other end of the spectrum who were able to do the same thing. Perhaps extreme idiocy can also be a defense to mental attacks? I imagine it would lead to a series of fascinating experiments."

"Boo is normally not a giant space hamster who hates on-site, but he is telling Minsc that these two are too dumb to live. That is a phrase that Minsc has never heard before, and yet if they are trying to chop down a dry it's tree, perhaps there is merit in the idea." Minsc began, scowling.

"Two stupid to live," Imoen quipped nodding.

"Ye're alls just jealous dat we figured it out first," said Krumm, before rolling his massive shoulders and flexing his equally massive arms. "But if'n youse guys keep on calling us names, we's gonna throw you out."

"Teach you a lesson we will," Caldo said, also flexing his arms. While not as on display as the second man, were equally large and powerful looking.

"All right, that's enough. The dryad of this tree is an ally, and as such, I will take it poorly if you continue to threat tree. Leave, and don't come back," Harry ordered. "There's seven of us and two of you, even someone as... oblivious as the two of you should be able to figure out what how this battle ends."

It turned out, that they couldn't. Or perhaps it was the word oblivious that threw them.

"Squish their heads Krumm!" Shouted Caldo, pointing his sword at them, and the second man roared towards them, both his axes raised. "The pixie treasure's ours!"

Afterwards Harry shook his head, as Imoen quipped, “Well what you know, idiocy really can be deadly.”

From the bark of the tree in front of them a woman slowly stepped out onto the green around the tree’s roots, smiling at them. “I thank you adventurers,” she said in a deep, melodious tone.

The woman’s beauty made her earlier magical sending seem as pale a reflection as the magic which had created it. She was full-bodied, with wide, extremely well crafted hips and a chest that defied reason in both size and perkiness above a waist that was thin and almost but not quite toned. Her skin was the color of a ripe peach. Her hair was a perfect blonde cascading down her back in a wave. Set into a perfect, heart-shaped face, the dryad’s eyes were a bright, gleaming acorn brown, warm with both thanks and invitation.

She was in point of fact, the most perfect example of the phrase MILF that Imoen had ever seen and she said so aloud following this with a mutter of “Cock, she makes even Narcissa look ugly in comparison!”

“Who?” Harry asked out of the corner of his mouth, unwilling to turn his eyes away from the woman in front of him. He also idly red out the information his AA skill was giving from the woman and that he had passed some willpower check, as he had when fighting Silk.

Dryad Elder

Dryads are tree spirits. For reasons unknown, all Dryads are female. They are often considered forest guardians, and work with druids occasionally to safeguard their trees and the forest around them. They are gentle creatures not made for direct combat, but Dryads, like their water dwelling cousins the Sirens emit a never ending low-key Charm, and can use a full- powered version of the spell with no cooldown, as well as a few other plant-specific spells.

They are however vulnerable to such mental attacks, and are at times taken prisoner to be the slaves of rich men. Dryads taken like this rarely last long, but so long as the original tree survives the dryad can be reborn.

The Dryad Elder has extended her influence beyond a single tree, though her life and existence are still tied to that tree. She has great powers in her grove for life and rejuvenation, but none for death, which is anathema to her people.

Imoen didn't reply to Harry's question as the dryad continued to speak in that deep, velvety tone. "Those two were causing me more pain than I have felt in many a century, and their improbable immunity to my charms was most vexing. They were the first I have ever met that completely ignored my attempt to charm them. It was as if they did not understand I was real at all."

"I suppose they had never heard of a dryad although that's rather incredible in and of itself. Perhaps they were too obsessed with money to care?" Imoen replied, while Harry was trying not to be spellbound by the woman's beauty. He had already noticed that Edwin, Garrick, and to a lesser extent even Minsc and Khalid were spellbound by her. But Harry wasn't willing to let her charm him and tried to ignore the tiny message popping up in front of his eyes telling him about the continual effort that decision was taking.

"How can I ever repay you?" the woman said, her tone and body language telling her listeners exactly how she wanted to repay them, or at least the men among them. She looked at Imoen and Jaheira, one eyebrow rising, and Imoen flashed her a thumbs up, and a bright grin, while Jaheira simply rolled her eyes, grabbing her husband's arm as he tried to move towards the dryad.

"This one is mine," she said firmly. "The others are... she paused, blinking in surprise as she saw Harry looking away and closing his eyes, breathing deeply. "Harry, you are not charmed?" Jaheira asked looking at him quizzically after smacking her husband upside the head.

"I, um, you're beyond beautiful lady dryad, but I prefer my mind to remain my own. And um, I'd really rather not lay with someone I've only just met, no matter their race."

"Pity," the woman said looking him up and down. "You look as if you have the most...potential of these men. But so be it. If you are strong-willed enough to overcome my beauty, than I will not try to force you to comply with my... desires." She giggled wickedly as Harry shuddered from head to toe at the lilt she gave that word before looking over at Jaheira, addressing the druid as was her wont. "But I may have the others for the night? I promise I'll give them back to you in as good a shape as they come to me."

By this point, Edwin Garrick and Minsc had reached her, but a sudden bite on his ear from Boo broke Minsc out of it, and he shook his head. The bald Ranger backed away quickly, staring at the woman. "Although you are a most magnificently beauty, and Minsc would like to tumble with you in the hay as he did with several of the village girls back home, he is on a quest to find his Witch taken from him by most foul villiany and until that quest is done, there'll be no time for fun fondling's.

Harry blinked, as did the reviving Khalid, and they stared at the other man in shock. "D, did you just s, s, say fun fondling's?"

"That is possibly the most descriptive, and yet hilarious way to put it I've ever heard. Well done," Harry said with a nod.

Minsc shrugged. "We Rasheman are known to be good with words as much as swords." As he spoke he was still moving away from the dryad, and now stood next to Imoen.

"Great Mother," Jaheira began again, "we did not save you just out of the goodness of our heart. We would have of course, such vile men as those two..."

"They needed killing," Harry said with a nod. "I just hope that we were able to do so before they passed on their stupidity to the next generation."

Jaheira chuckled at that, and even Khalid, who was still recovering somewhat from the impact of the Druids charm - and the slap upside the head - looked amused as the druid went on. "But we are on a quest to do something about the gnoll fortress to the west."

"I know of it," the dryad said, even as she reached out and tenderly stroked down Garrick's cheek, causing the boy to almost swoon. Edwin on the other hand was now whispering into her ear, causing her to blush for the first time. She looked at him, smiled, and let one arm wrap around his waist before turning her attention back to Jaheira and the others. "I will send you on your way with as many healing fruits as I can give you, and you may rest here both on your journey to and back from the fortress."

Harry nodded agreeably at that, and Jaheira asked "Great Mother, would you also be willing to charge my staff?"

She held it up and the Dryad's eyes focused on it, before she nodded her head firmly. "Set it against my ancient oak, and it will be charged and more by tomorrow." She smiled at the other woman. "Though I am sorry to say, but that is all the aid I can give you. If you are going to ask me to remove the curse on you and your husband, which I can sense now that I am looking for such, I could not do so."

Jaheira shrugged. "It had had not even occurred to me that you could Great Mother. We have gone to dozens, perhaps a little under a hundred clerics, priests, and paladins. None of them have been able to discover how to break the curse."

"What is its nature?" the dryad asked curiosity piqued at that.

"Vampiric my I, I, lady," Khalid said, taking part in the conversation for the first time. Jaheira looked at him sharply, and he looked embarrassed, shrugging his shoulders. She sighed, and seemed to forgive him, looping one arm through his before turning back to the dryad.

"Vampire," the dryad frowned then shook her head. "I'm sorry, there was something, something when I was young and newly formed when this land, what you call the Sword Coast was under the dominion of a vampire empire, and a religion arose to fight them. But I cannot remember more than that."

The side quest (large) Free Your Companion of His Curse has been updated. You have found information which could lead you to the quest's conclusion.

The Elder Dryad of Dryad Falls has given you some information about a religion built around facing a vampire threat. It follows that this religion, whatever it was, could perhaps hold the cure for the curse on your companion Khalid (and his wife). Trying to find out information about that religion should be your next step.

"...That could be enough of a clue," Harry said obliquely, twitching his eyes towards Jaheira, who's eyes widened as she realized what Harry was hinting at. She nodded firmly, thanking the dryad, who waved them away.

"The grove will guard you this night, bed down in it wherever you wish in safety and certainty of protection. The gnolls will never bother you here, nor will any other creature. Trust me, given the size of the gnoll patrols I have seen through my trees passing through nearby, you will need your rest to deal with them," she finished before

turning her attention on the two men around her, whispering into their ears as she led them around the tree to the opposite side.

“And if that wasn’t ominous I don’t know what is,” Harry quipped, moving away from the tree with Jaheira and Khalid.

Minsc and Imoen followed. “Come on Minsc, let’s see if we can find a place for us to bed down, then you can tell me more about Dynaheir. For all that we’ve been traveling for more a little under two days now, you actually haven’t told us much about her. Other than she is fair and a witch anyway.”

Harry chuckled moving in the same direction, looking over at Jaheira, cocking his head towards Imoen and the Ranger. “You two coming?”

Jaheira looked over at her husband. “I think not. We will see you in the morning, Harry.”

Shrugging his shoulders, left the married couple to what, judging from Khalid’s expression was going to be an argument, and followed after Minsc and Imoen. Story time before bedtime, with what was going to be their toughest battle yet on the morrow seemed like an excellent way to end a trying two days.

End Chapter

{Consistency point for my reviewers: Garrick knows about Blood Magic spells. I think I get that confused in a few places.}

Chapter 6: Dungeon Dogs

You have slept in the gnoll of the Elder Dryad. You have slept for eight hours. All spells have been memorized, and health points restored in relation to Class.

This was the message that as usual greeted Harry as he woke up for the day. What also greeted him, was the face of the dryad looking down at him. From only a few inches away in fact. He tried not to flinch, and simply nodded hurt his head at her. “Erm, good morning?”

“It is indeed morning, and you wake up quite quickly don’t you?” the dryad asked, cocking her head to one side.

“So do you,” Imoen interject from nearby, looking at her quizzically then over to her tree and the other side of it, where last night’s goings on had occurred. Imoen of course had also seen the same message as Harry, something that both Minsc and Khalid had seen as well. “Although I’ll note that our two other male companions aren’t waking up just yet. Tire them out did you?”

“Alas yes.” The dryad sighed, a wicked twinkle in her eyes. “I had hoped for more.”

“Really?” Imoen leaned forward, the wicked twinkle transferring to her own eyes now, accompanied by a smirk. “So Edwin’s boasts were just that?”

“Not entirely. His loquaciousness was only the first aspect of his lingual skills I put to the test, but when it came to the main event, neither he nor the other one quite measured up. Neither in stamina, nor in actual measurement.”

“Perhaps you need to make a sign,” Imoen said with a laugh. “You only get to play if you’re so tall?”

“If only the height of a male’s was commensurate to the...”

“There’s a man right here you know,” Harry muttered, pushing himself to his feet and shaking his head. “If you got two are going to have girl talk, couldn’t you at least wait until the guy in the area has left the area?”

“Why ever would we do that?” both the middle-aged seeming dryad and Imoen asked as one, then shared a laugh at his face.

“My vengeance will be swift and final,” Harry growled, before he moved past them.

He found Jaheira and Khalid already awake. Khalid was busily cooking something over a very small very well controlled fire, well away from any of the trees on the other side of the small lake that fed the dryad’s growth. Jaheira was sitting in the lotus position next to him, wringing water from her hair, as her eyes moved over to her armor and staff laid out in front of them.

They both nodded to Harry, who nodded back, before pushing Khalid away from the cooking fire. “I thought we agreed that I would handle the cooking?”

You hadn't woken up yet," Khalid said with a chuckle, "and it's not as if burning meat is so hard."

"Burning meat is fine, burning it with style, i.e. the ability to actually make it edible, is something else entirely," Harry retorted

This caused Jaheira to chuckle. "You're going to spoil us you know."

"Well you did call me your omni-present authority figure, and as the so-appointed leader of this group, I suppose it is my job to spoil you all whenever I can." The smell of the food soon roused the last three of their party. Minsc came out of the woods nearby, smiling grandly up at the sun for a moment before turning to his friends his loud voice Booming out. "It is a great day for buttkicking for goodness! Today, today we will rescue my Witch and put those vile ones who so trapped her into the ground! Truly Boo, it is a day on which the sun could not possibly shine enough!"

This was accompanied by a squeak from his shoulder, and the dryad, who had come up with Imoen stared at the little creature. "Ah, I saw this one last night did I not? He's quite cute" she murmured, reaching over with a finger. Minsc might have tried to defend his giant miniature space hamster companion, but the dryad was a little too quick.

One finger caressed down Boo's back, causing it to chitter in delight before the large Barbarian Ranger twitched aside muttering about how the pretty lady "should not spoil the mighty eye-seeking warrior that is Boo!"

"Foods up," Harry said, gathering everyone's attention. Two roasted fish had been filleted, with at least two slices for every person there and various greens made into a morning salad, heavy on the fruit donated from the druids. There was even a roasted potato, cut into thin slices, and cooked in a bit of vegetable oil with salt and pepper.

"Truly, your food is one of many reasons why Minsc knows that he and Boo have found true boon companions," the large man exulted, grabbing his chair and eating ravenously.

Edwin sneered at the fare for a moment, but the sneer went away as he ate, while Garrick kept silent, his eyes twitching towards the dryad then away, something in his face signifying that he wasn't certain what to think about last night. Which was fine enough for Harry's perspective given Harry wasn't certain he would know what to think of it either.

All Harry was certain was, he was glad to have dodged that particular issue. The Elder Dryad was attractive, immensely so despite appearing as a middle-aged woman, but she was not really Harry's type, and he was sort of afraid that he would not have measured up to her expectations either. The gleam in Imoen's eyes still promised trouble for Garrick at the very least if not both him and Edwin, and Harry wanted no part of that either, asking the dryad if she knew how long it would take them to get to the gnoll fortress.

"If you travel for a full morning as fast as humans are able to go, without truly tiring themselves out you will arrive at your destination. It will be a vast fortress, separated from this coastline by a single bridge," the dryad explained. "What guards the bridge, or what awaits you within, I cannot tell you. But know that my grove is open for you on your return trip."

"Even if we bring one more woman with us?" Jaheira asked quickly. Often times dryads were very fickle about how many people, not only the type of individual, they led into their groves. Another woman might especially cause issues.

"Child, I was old when that fortress was first built, I am well past such petty jealousies as consume those dryad's of younger trees," The matronly dryad laughed setting her large chest to bounce, a site that caused even the married Khalid to stare, while Harry closed his eyes, concentrating on his food.

Willpower check past. +100 reputation/Trust/Respect points for every woman around you. Even the Elder Dryad. Many women like men who will play hard to get.

When he looked up, Harry found the dryad's eyes on him, her tongue flicking out across her lips. "Besides, she doesn't seem to be involved with any of these men judging from what little you mentioned of her. So she would not be competition for the unattached men in your party. And I would dearly love a repeat performance... perhaps with a third actor on the stage?"

Harry twitched, but made no reply. There was really nothing safe he could say to that one.

Ding Common sense, it can even help you with that odd creature called the female of the species. Just not often.

+ 1 to Wisdom.

Soon enough the meal was finished, and after Edwin confirmed that his late night debauchery's had not stopped him from them rising his spells for the day, the dryad loaded them down with the promise provisions. The majority of these provisions consisted of more than one hundred tiny red berries, which Harry's gamer skill identified.

Healing berries +1 X 175

These healing berries were created by the mother dryad and are a sign of her favor to those she gives them to.

Consume them and you will receive +2 health for every berry consumed. Tastes like an odd mix of cherry and lychee.

Thinking about it, Harry had the berries divided, giving fifteen to Edwin, Jaheira, and Garrick, and then splitting up the others evenly to the rest including Imoen, who wasn't a frontline combatant. Jaheira looked at him quizzically at that, but before she could ask the question, Harry forestalled her. "I know Imoen isn't a frontline combatant, and I'm not going to ask her to be, but what she is, is one of our scouts, along with Minsc and you. But your ability can't be used in a fortress or settlement right?"

Jaheira nodded and Harry gestured to Minsc. "And even Minsc might lose his ability to Hide in Shadows once we're in the fortress. So Imoen might become our only scout. She'll be operating on her own, and I want her to be able to get out of trouble if she runs into it"

Bing You have taken a step on the road to understanding the difference between tactics and strategy.

While small as you do not yet have the ability to truly make strategic decisions/plans, these steps will add up eventually.

While Harry pondered on that message, Jaheira nodded, as that made sense. She was quite impressed by Harry's ability to think ahead when given the time, and his tactical skills were growing as she and her husband continued to travel with him. *I wonder, is that because of a natural affinity for leadership? Or simply a byproduct of his Leadership ability?*

Regardless, she was eager to see where their partnership with him went. Indeed, Harry had already proven to be a godsend, discovering what could eventually become a clue leading to Jaheira and Khalid regaining their true strength.

The elder dryad also gave them other fruits, all of which Harry's skill identified easily one after another, as they were handed to him in one large mass.

Gourd of power X 5.

Like the healing fruit, this adds +1 to strength for a given amount of time once consumed.

Banana of Dexterity X 2.

A rare viand only made by dryads, this fruit can give + 2 to Dexterity for a given amount of time once consumed

Grapes of Insight X 1.

A very rare viand made exclusively by Elder Dryads, this fruit can give +2 to Intelligence and Wisdom for a given amount of time once consumed

Warning, the effects of these fruits do not stack.

Harry had to think for a moment to wonder about what 'does not stack' meant. but he supposed that it meant you couldn't just eat several of each type and build up the stat like that. Still, Harry was pleased with their gifts, especially the two bananas of dexterity which he immediately handed over to Imoen. "Just in case we find any traps or locks we need breaking," he quipped. The power fruits he passed around to himself, Minsc, Khalid, Garrick and Imoen, one each.

Through all this, Edwin was staring at Harry, then over at Imoen thoughtfully, interested in their use of the Item Box. "Your Item Box is that well organized that you are able to get out what you wish at any one time? Fascinating, and well beyond what I would expect of normal chest-beating, weapon waving simians such as yourselves."

Harry shrugged his shoulders nodded his head, and said that it was one of his abilities, not going into any date detail. Still, that was enough, and Edwin kept on looking at them thoughtfully. Harry of course notice this and muttered to Imoen to, "Can you

tease him or something about last night to distract him. Edwin is far too smart for me to want him to be thinking about even just how we use our Item Boxes.”

“You got it boss,” Imoen said with a wink, and shifted around the group to do just that. Within minutes of her verbal assault, she had Edwin nearly biting his goatee in anger while Garrick stammered and blushed and looked away, continuing his unusual silence.

“That was well thought of if rather cruel,” Jaheira said as she moved to take the lead as they walked down the ravine to the plain below.

Harry shrugged, keeping his reply low. “Any port in a storm. Remember, we still aren’t certain how far we can trust Garrick, let alone Edwin. If for very different reasons.”

“One for his big mouth, one because of his affiliation,” Khalid cut in grimly from Harry’s other side. “You’re right about the reasoning lad, we won’t argue about that. With someone like Edwin, it’s always smart to be wary of a dagger in your back.”

Once they reached the plains, Jaheira and Minsc broke away from the group, heading out ahead of them with Imoen eventually moving to the tail end of the group. They moved through this area quickly, possibly a little faster than the dryad had estimated they would be able to. When they started to hear the sound of the distant shoreline around midday, they stopped to eat, after which the party continued on its way.

Eventually the party arrived in sight of their target and Harry whistled. It was indeed a massive fortress. Not as large as Candlekeep, Harry estimated it was about the fourth of the size, but this thing was built for war, not a built for purpose citadel of learning. Its walls were high rising out of sheer cliff faces, in a series of outward-facing walls and from where he stood, Harry could only see one road leading up to the entrance, one walled portion to the other. The top of the keep seemed square, its sides crenellated. But from this position, Harry couldn’t see if they were patrolled or not. There were also several dozen murder holes in the walls of the main keep segment, and what looked like a few side roads leading around the side of the massive rock that stood as the base of the fortress.

Garrick gulped. “Um, far be it from me to advocate caution, but that, um, that looks far too large for a group our size to take on.”

“Bah, the greater the challenge, the greater the glory! Right, boo?” Minsc argued, caressing the head of the giant miniature space hamster as it sat on his shoulder.

“Far be it from me to agree with someone who believes that singing for his meals is a proper trade, but I must admit that even my own puissant spellcraft has limits,” Edwin mused. “While my mission is paramount to my continued well-being, dying in it’s pursuit would not serve that well-being either.”

“We’re going to have to take it slow and carefully then,” Harry cut in. “I think through careful planning and guile we can do this, we just won’t be able to fight them all. Remember these are gnolls, they won’t be as organized or quick to rally against an attack as a trained unit of humans, elves or even orcs would. They lack the intelligence to do so.”

While Harry and the others were examining their target, Jaheira was staring up at the sky, scowling. “It’s going to start raining soon.”

“There’s not a cloud in the sky,” Imoen protested.

But to her surprise, Minsc backed Jaheira up, sniffing the air. “This is the coast little Imoen, and there is a reason why this coast is called the sword Coast. Storms are frequent, rise out of nowhere, to smash ships against the land. Of course, we are no ship, yet it will not be a pleasant time.”

“It won’t be that heavy,” Jaheira theorized, “but it is going to be quite a lot of rain.”

Despite that grim prediction, they were in position to stare down at the bridge leading to the fortress by the time the storm struck. The storm wasn’t heavy as Jaheira put it, but the rain was still coming down enough to obscure vision.

It was a thin bridge, made of wood, and there looked to be some rubble on the other side that might have been a guard post or gatehouse, but it had long since fallen apart. The bridge too looked rickety, but somewhat in better repair, a few bits having been replaced by new wood. It also had two large ogrillions guarding it on this end of the span.

“Is it normal for gnolls to be able to work with ogrillions and xvarts? ...Ugh, evil villainous Smurfs,” Imoen sighed, shaking her head. “My childhood will never be the same again.”

“I have no idea what you just said, and for my sanity I think I’m just going to ignore it,” Khalid drawled.

‘With Imoen that’s often the norm,’ Harry laughed. ‘But, she did have a point. ‘If we’re going to face ogrillons and other things in there as well, we should probably think about that now.’

‘Gnolls are able to work with other subhuman races, but most times they won’t bother. In the case of the Xvarts, they’ll probably be quite a few of those up there, they are a subservient race to Gnolls, orcs, and all types of ogre, orcs and giants. But gnolls won’t make large scale agreement with those races.’

‘Giants use Xvarts?’ Imoen interjected incredulously. ‘what the heck for?’

‘Yes, normally as portable snacks,’ Khalid chuckled darkly. ‘They and goblins both. And kobolds. When giants are around, the smallest of the subhuman races make themselves scarce if they have any sense.’

‘Focus please,’ Jaheira ordered, her tone somewhat wry. ‘And Khalid, my husband, once more, don’t encourage her.’

‘Going down that rabbit warren tends to make one lose one’s mind eventually,’ Harry agreed. ‘Still, you’re saying we won’t face many ogrillons if at all inside?’

‘Exactly. These two will probably have agreed to take on some guard duty work in return for weapons craft or food and other supplies. That will be the extent of it.’

‘Regardless,’ Edwin said, butting into the conversation with a scowl if we are supposed to, to retrieve the Witch within, then we needs must get past the over-evolved dirt mounds below.’

He’s right Harry said with a nod making no point that he, and the others indeed judging by their narrow eyed looks had noticed that he had switched the word ‘retrieve’ for something else. It was no secret to any of them why Edwin had agreed to join them and that was part of the reason why they didn’t trust him further than Imoen could throw him.

‘Minsc, Imoen do you think you can get into a position behind them without one of them spotting you?’ Harry asked, staring at the two ogrillons as he read off the information his bestiary was giving Harry of this new kind of monster.

Ogrillons.

The shorter, uglier version of Orges, or perhaps the larger, uglier version of orcs depending on who you talk to. They are smelly, stupid the majority of them anyway, prone to fits of violence, and all of them have immense strength even for their size. Not a communal species, they generally stay to themselves or to small groups of their fellows.

Being the son of an ogre and orc pairing isn't good for getting dates.

Attitude towards Adventurers: neutral/varies. Ogrillons can be civilized occasionally, to a certain extent, and some of them take up adventuring themselves, but they are in the tiny, tiny minority. The .0001 percentile in point of fact. The rest are more open to being bribed than most monsters. But they also .

Weaknesses: ogrillons have no added immunity to magic or element-type damage, but neither are they particularly susceptible to any.

Then he looked up at his map, and blinked confused for a moment. He hadn't noticed before but there were two odd things going on with it at the moment. One, it wasn't showing any red dots in the portion of the fortress that was within his range. That was very strange, but he supposed that the gnolls could be inside the castle and thus out of his range as he had seen before. But he also noticed that the two ogrillons were not glowing the red of enemies, rather the blue of neutrality.

"Minsc does not believe so," Minsc said. "I tested my stalking skills just a second ago, and alas, Minsc was still there when he looked down at his own mighty frame. A pity that, it always amuses Minsc to see little Boo hiding away on his person before he too disappears. There is so much of Minsc that Boos often becomes confused as to where he should hide."

"Too much information there big guy." Still thinking, Harry stared at the bridge. "What about you Imoen?"

"Yeah I can do it," a voice said in his ear, causing him to twitch.

He turned slightly to glare at the purple-haired girl so she could see him rolling his eyes. "Show off. Right, get behind them, and prepare to Backstab."

"Both of them at once?" Imoen asked, now looking a little worried.

"I'll leave the decision of which want to target up to you. But if the rest of you could wait here and prepare suitable long ranged gifts for them we'll be right back."

“Wait, what?” Jaheira blinked while the others also looked confused.

Harry ignored her and wondered idly what reaction that would give him in their trust and respect range before he saw the results.

You have lost -10 respect from Jaheira.

No woman likes to be ignored, even for a moment. Especially if they’re a bitch in the first place.

I see that this Advanced Adventurer Skill of mine still doesn’t like Jaheira all that much. I wonder why considering I don’t mind her all that much now since she’s calmed her baps down about being the more senior adventurers and all that ‘child’ stuff.

Putting those thoughts aside, Harry pulled his hood over his face further, and began to slouch, actually dragging one foot.

To the ogrillons he looked like a wandering, down on his luck lone adventurer now, which was precisely look he was going for. “What do we have here Hairtooth,” said one of the ogrillons to the other.

“I don’t know Gnarl,” said the other ogrillon. “Does it look tasty?”

“Maybe, although it also looks kind of stringy. Might not be worth the mastication.”

Wondering idly about how the heck ogrillons knew how to use a word like mastication, Harry continued his advance towards them, holding up his hands and looking about as helpless as he could possibly look. “Hello there,” he said, in the best elderly gentleman voice he could make which frankly wasn’t all that good. The game seems to agree judging by the message that quickly appeared in front of his face.

Warning: A thespian you aren’t!

When attempting to act out a role that you are not suited or trained for, you will lose +2 to charisma every thirty seconds for as long as you continue to try your hand at ‘acting’.

Harsh Harry thought to himself, but then he was in front of the two ogrillons, still holding his hands up in the air. “Greetings, do you have any food for a weary traveler?”

“Food to give haha, no,” the one called Hairtooth intoned, shaking his large, bald head, twisting his scrunched up, flattened face in a way that brought even more attention to his massive nostrils and wide, tooth-filled mouth. “Food to take from you maybe.”

“Food to make of you, maybe,” Gnarl agreed.

With that, he raised his club and Imoen promptly stabbed him in the back. She got both a critical hit and a backstab multiplying her damage, doing nearly enough to kill the ogrillon in a single blow, and the ogrillon she targeted squalled and shifted, falling back to its knees.

The other ogrillon turned roaring in anger and took a side and face full of arrow stone and magic missiles. By the time they hit and the ogrillons took the damage they dealt, Harry had one of his swords out. Leaping forward Harry pushed off the side of the ogrillon that was already kneeling, and then leaping sideways, stabbing his sword into the side of the neck of the one still standing despite the sling stones and arrows that had hit him.

That ogrillon fell dead, and Imoen finished off the one that was kneeling by sawing her sword along its throat.

“Heh, that worked,” Harry said with a smile.

“Despite your horrible acting,” Imoen said with a nod, but as the others headed towards them through the rain from the outcrop of rock where they’d been hiding, both of them fell silent, staring at the new message that had just appeared in their view from Harry’s AAS. It wasn’t talking about the experience. The experience had been nice, 300 per ogrillon, but this new message made that fade into insignificance in both their minds.

You are entering the Dungeon: **Gnoll Fortress.**

Within its depths alive the Rashemani witch Dynaheir in durance vile. To rescue her, you must cleanse this dungeon of the taint within.

Dungeons: Dungeons are unique combat zones where the rules of combat and Adventure are different than out in the Roaming World.

Your map ability will not work as previously impacted by the ‘fog of war’, which means that you must explore to open the map up.

Resting within a dungeon is fraught with danger as even if you keep someone on guard, you have a chance to be ambushed by the denizens of the dungeon. And even if you manage to sleep the night away, only half your available spells will have been memorized and you will not have recovered any Health Points.

Enemy respawn time is **heavily** magnified while in a dungeon, commensurate to how many Heart Stones are within the dungeon. Heart Stones are giant crystal stones that act like Zone Hearts within a dungeon. They will appear if a respawn point is cleared of its defenders.

Use of Tactics and Formations have their normal impact on a battle and can be created in a dungeon just as in the Roaming World. But each time you use a specific Formation the impact will lessen as your enemies learn. In contrast, new formations will have an enhanced impact. There is no impact to the effectiveness of Tactics.

In other words, get gud scrub!

Many dungeons come with a Dungeon Boss.

Dungeon clearing tasks:

Defeat the Dungeon Boss.

Note: defeating the Dungeon Boss may drop magical items and advanced loot.

Gnoll Heart stones x 2

Xvart Heart stones x 2

Destroy the Heart Stones within. Rewards may vary.

Rewards:

Heightened respect trust and friendship with Minsc. Warning the nature of this reward will be effected by choices made upon meeting the Rashemani Witch.

+14,000 experience. For every party member. Travelling Companions and other allies will receive only X 2 experience for each kill.

Dynaheir may join your party. Warning, the nature of that joining will be affected by previous decisions.

Behind the two dimensional travelers, Khalid, and Minsc also stared as the message appeared in front of them. The large barbarian Ranger's eye bulged at the sight and he made to open his mouth, but Khalid very adroitly stepped to the side, accidentally tripping Minsc with a subtly outstretched foot. "Sorry about that my friend," he said reaching down to help the far larger human up onto his feet. It looked comical given the disparity between the Ranger and half-elf's size, and Edwin snorted in amusement, before moving on with Garrick and Jaheira.

Jaheira looked at her husband with one sardonic eyebrow raised, but he nodded at her, and she simply rolled her eyes and continued on. While Khalid was dealing with Minsc's inability to keep anything whatsoever from showing on his face, Imoen and Harry were glancing at one another while cleaning their weapons to keep their mouths from being seen by their fellows. "Well there's a thing," Imoen whispered.

"What is a Dungeon Boss?" Harry whispered back, somewhat annoyed that the game didn't give him information on that first. *On the other hand, it normally only gives me information on my abilities or on what's right in front of me, so I suppose it makes sense.* Imoen was the only one of the two of them that had really gone into gaming before arriving in this world, so when something like this came up, Harry had to rely on her to give him some insight.

"Probably a Gnoll Chieftain on steroids in this case," She decided. "It won't be anything to world break-ish I suppose you could say, but it will be of definitely a tough battle." She then clicked her fingers, and idea coming to her. "What I'd wager, is a Dungeon Boss is something like a mid-level adventurer sort of thing. It'll probably have a lot of abilities, active and passive, lots of health, that kind of thing."

"So nothing we couldn't overcome with a lot of forethought and planning. Okay, that makes sense. But five of those respawn points? Dealing with them is going to be a bitch and a half."

"Truly," Imoen said with a sigh. "Mob hell, anyone?"

The phrase went right over Harry's head, and Imoen groaned wondering if she should ever take the time to sit him down and teach him some gamer terms, but decided against it as Harry sighed, staring up at the fortress, tracing their way up into it, frowning heavily. "Right." He breathed in deeply, thankful once more for the help the Gamer's

mind gave him in controlling his emotions at times like this. "Right okay, we can do this. We will do this."

He turned to the others, both his party members and his traveling companions. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Given what I can see up there, we shouldn't go straight to wherever we think they might be keeping their prisoners. This place is too big, the danger of us getting bogged down is way too high. We need to clear the fortress as we go, make certain we can't be surrounded and always make certain that we can retreat back down and out onto the path there."

"Retreat!?" Minsc commenced to bellow before Boo nipped him on the ear. He winced, then Boo chattered something and Minsc pouted. "Boo has reminded Minsc that at the moment, we are being sneaky thieves, and it is not the time yet for the bellowing of war cries and the lamentations of our enemies women. But still, we cannot retreat! Dynaheir is within, and I will not leave without my Witch!"

Harry didn't need the prompt that appeared in front of them just then to tell him this was a major decision and could have a major impact on their friendship, and he waved it away as he chose his words carefully. "That's not what I was saying Minsc but look up there. In that fortress, we could be surrounded. But if we retreat out onto this walkway, they'll have to come at us along a single avenue of advance. And gnolls don't make good archers or anything like that right?" He added looking over to the two more experienced ventures.

The married half elves shook their heads and Harry turned back to Minsc. "While **we** can. You and I can hold the front line, while Imoen and the others rest behind us lob their arrows and stones over our heads. We won't be retreating, we'll be taking a defensive position, letting them bleed themselves on us, before taking the attack back to them."

Edwin snorted, stroking his goatee. "A fine rationalization, and one that was most probably needed for this simian. But for myself, I can see the true meaning and agree with it. But do you expect to command my spells in battle as you are attempting to dictate our movements?"

Harry knew that meant he was asking what his own rules of engagement should be and Harry took a moment to think about the spells the other wizard had on hand. "Garrick and you should hold back your area of effect spells unless we're faced with more

than eight gnolls at a time,” he said at last. “Beyond that, so long as you don’t use an area of effects spell that could impact your allies, I’ll leave the choice of whether or not to use them up to you.”

He held up a finger when Garrick made to speak. The young Bard had been somewhat silent up to this point. Apparently whatever had happened last night with the dryad had impacted his normal insouciance. “Garrick, I want your songs on us in any battle when I call for them okay? And if you see any of those blue furred gnolls or see any of them trying to give out orders, those become priority targets. “We’ll be heavily outnumbered, we need to keep the momentum, and will need to keep them from getting organized.”

Edwin and Garrick both nodded at that, as it made sense. From there Harry quickly organized the group into two lines of three, ordering Minsc and Imoen across the bridge first. “See if your Hide in Shadows ability can work among the ruins of that gatehouse Minsc, and if so, keep pushing up the path with Imoen. If not, stay there until we’re across.”

Everyone agreed, considering how rickety the bridge looked the idea of sending two people across at a time was just good sense. Edwin did mutter about how Harry seemed to be getting used to giving out commands to him, but Harry ignored him. In contrast Jaheira and Khalid both approved of it, as did Garrick although not as much as the two half-elves.

“Garrick, I’d like you to keep an eye up on those murder holds for us please,” Harry asked. You and Khalid RR best shots, and I think until we get to that first landing up there, Harry said pointing to it vaguely that will be more in more danger of being attacked from there.

Both of those men nodded and agreed to wait for the others to cross first, with Harry going after the first two scouts, followed by Edwin and Jaheira together.

By the time Khalid and Garrick were across, Harry had gotten used to the changes in his map. The fog of war was indeed irritating, cutting down the radius of his map to what his party could see, but it was everyone in that part, not just himself. As she scouted ahead, Imoen had dispelled the fog of war as easily as Harry had when he moved across the bridge. He now knew that the walkway wound up along the sides of the cliff face. It met what looked like two natural trails around the right edge of the cliff, one on top of the

other before the trail broke off to the right. That was as far as Imoen had gone, as at both points, there were groups of enemies.

But given how they were keeping his various abilities a secret Harry allowed Imoen to make her report when she returned several minutes later, having no interest in sharing even his map skill with Edwin unless under dire circumstances. *Garrick's a possibility in the long term, if I decide he can keep his mouth shut about that kind of thing. Right now, it's doubtful.* For some reason, Harry had still not warmed up to the other young man.

"Okay Imoen I was able to get up onto that first landing, it's more basically a natural flat area in the side of a rock than anything else. There's a sort of semi-natural path leading off to one side. It looks natural at first, but it isn't really, not like that matters. Anyway, there are eight gnolls there sitting around a fire and looking right miserable with themselves at the moment. I pushed past them, and got in sight of the next landing, where there's another group of six gnolls. They aren't close though, I doubt they'd hear anything happening on the first landing, not in this rain. What's down that more natural trailed to left, I have no idea. I didn't follow it down."

Harry nodded slowly as if taking this in, idly noting that at least acting like this wasn't giving him a hit to his charisma, then asked, "If we take those six out, are there any other patrols or people nearby?"

"No idea Harry, I didn't see any. But..."

Jaheira and Khalid both nodded with the Warrior half-elf speaking. "Gn, gnolls m, m, might hate the rain and what it does to t, t, their sense of smell, but they will ha, ha, have patrols out."

"And it is for this reason that I had the perspicacity to practice my Silence spell," Edwin said with a nod. "If I am able to target them before they sound the alarm, we will be safe and able to take these pathetic creatures out piecemeal."

"That's kind of a tall order. Especially once I start using my own musically based spells," Garrick warned.

"...I don't think so," Jaheira cut in. She had been standing next to Minsc, having been conferring with the Ranger. "I believe this storm is going to get worse gentlemen, I apologize for my earlier optimism on that score. We are going to be going from a light

drizzle to practically swimming soon. No lightning or thunder thankfully, but quite a lot of rain.”

Harry nodded, shrugging his shoulders. “Honestly, that’ll probably help us given the reaction the gnolls are already having to the rain.”

“Yeah, but our sight’s going to be messed up too,” Imoen warned.

“Minsc, do you think this will help your ability to stay hidden?”

“The rain will help my ability to Hide in Shadows yes,” he said firmly. “Although Minsc is not as much of a fan of this sneaking and backstabbing.”

“Right now, you don’t have to like it, just do it,” Harry replied bluntly, causing, oddly enough, a message of his receiving +10 respect from Jaheira, regaining the ground he’d lost before. Khalid and Edwin too both seemed to approve, though Harry felt it was for very different reasons. “Besides, I rather think that the tale which will be told after this day will be better if we actually conquer this fortress, rather than fail to do so right?”

“Truly!” Minsc said with a low chuckle, having learned his lesson earlier about using his true barbarian voice as he thought of it.

“O, one more warning. W, we need to all remember what impact the rain will have on our b, b, bowstrings. It will make them slowly unusable if w, we aren’t careful.”

Harry nodded, but turned that discussion over to Khalid, who walked Imoen and Garrick through a quick way to string, restring and protect their bowstrings when not in use. When Khalid indicated he was done, Harry took over once more, beginning to give out orders. He and Khalid took the lead of the five remaining after Minsc and Imoen led the way up the steep side of the rock path. With the rain and his armor, it was somewhat harder going for the Ranger than for the leather clad Imoen, who hadn’t noted how steep the trail was in parts. But Minsc was still able to activate his Hide in Shadows ability, fading from sight but not from Harry’s map.

He waited until he could see that he she and Imoen were on the other side of the six Gnolls, before looking at Khalid, and holding up his sword. “Ready?”

Khalid nodded, and the two of them barreled up the last few steps – more wide flat cuts in the rock than actual steps - which had been obscuring them from the gnolls. Both of them were somewhat surprised how long it took the gnolls to respond to them

being there. Each of the gnolls were hunched under cloaks spread held over their heads in both hands, and only looked up as the sound of their approach reached them, their eyesight not being the best it at the best of times and now almost useless at anything beyond pike range.

They threw off their cloaks growling and snarling at one another and the troopers as they grabbed up their weapons. But by then, the two charging warriors were in among them. A second later Imoen and Minsc attacked from behind the gnolls.

Behind them, Garrick, Jaheira and Edwin followed. Edwin stayed back, watching for any sign of movement past the combat as he had been told to. Despite his earlier semi-whispered comments about Harry's parentage, and his daring to give such as Edwin orders, he didn't actually argue with those orders themselves. When he was clear that these dog-headed cretins had not sent o

Imoen backstabbed one of the gnolls, ignoring the sight of the information popping up on her eyes as her strike hit home, twisting around and racing up one of the slopes, where she activated her Hide in Shadows as soon as she could. There she waited, using her senses to extend Harry's map as much as anything else, watching the pass leading upwards closely.

the Gnolls really didn't stand much of a chance. Disorientated, with two of their number dead, and the berserker Minsc, Harry and Khalid in their midst, three more of them died before they could even raise their weapons. The others fell soon after, the last with an arrow from Garrick in his chest.

"Imoen," Harry called quietly, hoping his voice would carry. "Come back."

Two minutes later, as Harry and the others were disposing of the bodies by tossing them off the cliff side, making it seem as if the Gnolls had just wandered off, Imoen came racing back. "Patrol incoming. Slowly, and very miserably, but they are moving down this way."

"Get out of sight," Harry ordered everyone, and Minsc and Imoen promptly once more used Hide in Shadows, while the others retreated back down the way they came very slightly. A second later, two gnolls came down the pathway, muttering and snapping at one another standing close and dragging their feet, the very picture of annoyed.

The two hiding warriors attacked the two patrolmen the instant it became clear they had seen the fact that no one is on watch. Harry instantly ordered the others up and at them, when the two in hiding engaged, but by the time they did, Imoen and Minsc had already dealt with them both. Backstab was just that nasty a force multiplier.

“All right,” Harry said, grinning at how successful that had been. “Imoen, start laying some traps here on this ledge, and upwards. Nothing major just yet I think, small ones that will annoy and slow any response down. Don’t use your makeshift grease trap yet. Minsc, let’s go down the path that way. We don’t want to be cut off by anything coming up behind us.”

Minsc obeyed with alacrity, shouldering his large claymore blade in favor of his bow and arrow, as he did so. Edwin blinked at that, his eyes narrowing before quickly assuming a look of neutrality before Harry or the others notice. *Fascinating, one individual able to organize his item box is intriguing. Two in the same party is interesting, but not outside the realm of possibility given the fact that they espouse to be related. But a third, moreover one who has not been in their company over long, having the same skill with his Item Box? That is beyond strange. Especially considering the individual in question and the habitual Adventurer skills that berserkers are bestowed. Something is going on here...*

However, luck turned against the Adventurers a few moments after the others had set off after Minsc. He had made it around the roguh corner in the rock of the cliff, when his Hide in Shadows failed. Harry watched as six xvarts charged him, at the same time that an alarm of some kind was raised. He watched intently for a few seconds eyes scanning back along the route as shown by his map to make certain that the entire fortress hadn’t been roused, before shouting out “I think I hear something ahead, Minsc must’ve run into trouble,” and racing after the other man.

They came upon Minsc slowly being surrounded by the small blue furred creatures, his broadsword was out, and he was cleaving at them, killing one as the they watched, then decapitating two more. But six had become twelve, had become twenty four, all of them surrounding him pressing him backwards toward edge of the path.

One of them was able to get under his guard, cutting at his side and Harry saw the message:

Minsc has been dealt seven damage to health.

Then he barreled into the side of the massive blue furred sub-humans causing another message to appear in his eyesight.

You have attempted to use Shield Bash. Shield Bash is a high level Warrior skill. You do not have the commensurate level.

However despite that, he had been able to bowl over at least the xvart that he had aimed for, and he stomped down hard with 1 foot, crushing the little creatures rib cage as his sword flashed out. "Edwin, wait for it," he ordered, shouting to be heard over the tumult of the fight and the rain, which was now coming down heavily. Regardless, given how many of the xvarts there were in sight, Harry felt that the cave his map showed to one side – Harry couldn't see it through the rain - might be the entrance to one of the Heart Stones, a respawn point.

When seven more Xvarts came out to be marked by his map, that confirmed it in Harry's mind, and he began to shout further orders. "Jaheira, heal Minsc. Khalid, switch to swords and join me here. Garrick, song of Regeneration. Then arrows for a bit. Edwin, just no fireballs just yet."

By that point, Harry had killed three of the little creatures, and had reached Minsc's side.

"Minsc is sorry for the trouble. I stepped on a bit of gravel that moved under my foot oddly, only to discover it was a piece of bone. Then the Xvarts were on me," the larger man grunted as he brought his sword down, bisecting a Xvart lengthwise.

This caused his sword to stick in the ground for a second which opened him up for another Xvart to try to stab him in the side, but Harry danced around behind Minsc, daring the path's edge to put himself between Minsc's attacker and his side. His sword cut the creature down and he stumbled forward, pushing two more backwards to get some more breathing space..

By this point, some fifteen of the Xvarts had fallen, but they were now among even Edwin and Jaheira. Garrick had switched to his short after intoning his spell of courage, adding to their armor and strength, but still more of the little creatures were coming. And now Imoen was racing towards them shouting out "there's a patrol coming, eight gnolls, I think my traps can deal with a few, but not that many I was only able to put down three traps down before everything went to hell."

Thinking quickly, Harry decided they couldn't hold back any longer and he shouted, "Edwin, fireball and grease spell straight into the cave!"

Edwin instantly obeyed, followed a second later by Garrick. "About time you fool! Die you pathetic little creatures! Burn in the fires of my magics!" He waited a brief instant of Garrick's spell, a fog of grease, to appear and land among the xvarts, before his fireball lanced out, entering the cave.

While the fireball didn't spread back out of the cave and so didn't spread the fire into the xvarts that had already appeared out of the cave, it stopped anymore from coming, and Harry quickly shifted their priorities, shouting out, "Khalid, fall back to the other side of Edwin and Jaheira. Garrick you too. Imoen, switch to archery." All but Edwin had been using hand to hand weapons, but without further xvarts coming, enough had been put down by this point that they could break off and move behind Harry and Minsc.

"I think it's that I am now clear to use my own spells on the gnolls, then?" Edwin asked sardonically, as he moved in into the central position, having no qualms about putting Khalid and Jaheira between him and the gnolls. That was their purpose as meet shields after all.

"Yes!" Harry shouted, ducking under a blow from one xvert, which had actually leaped into the air over one of his fellows. He dodged it entirely, then as the xvert landed on all fours, nudged the creature, with his back, sending it off the cliff face, before slicing out into another. Two more struck at him, but his shield moved automatically blocking both, and Harry whooped in his mind, *let's hear it for sword and shield style!*

At that point the xvarts began to break, seeing their fellows being cut down so liberally and no more reinforcements. Harry watched as first two, then four, then all the remaining eight xvarts broke. "Garrick, Imoen, finish them off. Minsc, with me."

The two of them turned quickly, passing through their fellows and arrived on the other side of the fight as Khalid was being pressed back. The pikes of the gnolls were a much more serious threat than the short swords of the equally short Xvarts. He was already bleeding from a few cuts through his armor, but his shield was moving just as quickly as Harry's would have in his place to block the incoming pike thrusts and the gnolls were so large only three could really fight him at any one time, and even that was a

squeeze. Meanwhile, Jaheira, Garrick, and Imoen and Edwin rained down fire on the behind.

Now the two he'd named broke off, switching places with Harry and Minsc. They hunted down the eight xvarts before they could get too far down the trail, which continued past the cave.

Minsc and Harry charged on to either side of Khalid, taking position alongside him, getting in under a few of the Gnolls defenses before they could realize two more hand-to-hand combat and said appeared. Harry gutted his opponent quickly, ignoring the critical hit message that appeared on his in his eyesight, as Minsc nearly cut in half his own opponent at the waist using his Cleave skill. However, another gnoll slammed his pike's head into Minsc's side, causing him to grunt and's all back, blood flowing from his side.

Enemy gnoll has achieved a Critical Hit on Minsc. -25 to health.

That gnoll went down to an arrow in the head from Imoen, and two more were felled by the Magic Bullet spell and slingshots from Edwin and Jaheira.

The three gnolls in the back began to retreat, two of them actually turning the yellow of broken enemies racing away and Harry shouted "Edwin!" and pointed at them with his sword, dripping blood despite the rain.

This opened Harry up in turn to the last gnoll, but his short and shield style was high enough that his shields took the brunt of the thrust from the gnoll's halberd. It caused Harry to stumble backwards, and he twisted around the strike, which in turn allowed Harry to cut forward with his sword, cutting that warrior's arm off at the forearm. A second later, his sword flashed up again, cutting the gnoll's throat, by which time the last two had been felled as well.

Harry had not only been taking part in the fight, he had been watching his map, making certain that no further gnolls were attacking them, and he breathed a sigh of relief as that seemed to be the case. Not even any more Xvarts were coming out of the cavern behind them. He took the time though to turn and shout "Garrick, "anymore xvarts over there? And how far down the trail can you see?"

Garrick replied in the negative, then added "And not very far. This rain's insane! But I doubt the sound of the fight will have carried very far either."

“All right, regroup on me.” As the others did, Harry turned to Imoen, thinking hard. “Imoen head back to the first area we head, set up what traps you can, in particular those grease traps but make those on the trail leading here along the cliffside rather than up the trail or in the meeting point. Smaller traps elsewhere, little things, not big ones.”

“Multiple small traps? Got it,” Imoen replied with a nod, racing off, disappearing from sight not only through the rain but because of her Thief skill Hide in Shadows.

“Everyone else, I think we need to break out the healing berries. Conserve your spells,” Jaheira he added, when she made to heal Khalid with it one of them. “We can eat now, we can’t eat in battle.”

Rolling her eyes at that homily, Jaheira did so. All of them had taken a few nicks and bruises, nothing serious beyond Minsc’s wound, but even so, that kind of thing could pile up. But soon enough, even Minsc was back to a hundred percent.

Imoen did not return for a while, while the others waited for her patiently, or impatiently in Edwin’s case. The rain and the fact he’d been forced to defend himself with his staff physically a moment ago had not helped his normally irascible attitude at all. “Correct me if I’m wrong,” he drawled “but did you not say that momentum and movement would be most important?”

“I also said organization would be, and defending our back,” Harry retorted. “But if you wish to head into that cave without our scout and one of our archers with us, we can do so...”

Edwin huffed, but made no further comment. Instead, he began to go over how many spells he had left, a discussion that Garrick joined, until Edwin’s glare sent him away. Harry however listened to them both closely and was somewhat satisfied. Edwin had prepared very well last night and had emphasized his distance type spells over close range ones. The only issue was the number of Silence spells he had.

Soon Imoen returned, and Harry nodded at her. “You all right?”

She nodded back, shrugging her shoulders. “I might be getting run ragged, but I actually haven’t gotten hurt just yet,” she quipped.

“Good,” Harry said thinly, gesturing to the cave. “So, do you feel like sticking your head in there?”

“If I said no would you listen?”

Harry chuckled. “Unfortunately not. wish we had more thieves with us, you’re useful fellows to have around.”

“Oh thank you kind sir,” Imoen drawled, bowing with a flourish. Harry laughed, but looked at her seriously, and she shrugged. “Don’t worry about it Harry,” she said calmly, reaching up slightly to ruffle his hair. “I can handle it.”

Harry tugged on her arm, and mockingly got Imoen into a chokehold. While the others were all rolling their eyes, Harry whispering into her rear “And if you’re in there, and out of Edwin’s night, you’re free to use anything you need spell-wise.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” she whooped, as if Harry had been tickling her.

“Children, do I have to separate you?” Jaheira asked dryly.

Harry huffed, but released Imoen who moved to the entrance to the cavern, slipping inside without another word.

Inside, she instantly found herself facing around thirty xvarts, all of them set up in a loose semicircle around the entrance. There were a few among them who looked tougher and stronger, which she recognized as Xvarts elites, and two of those had far better looking swords, although her own Identify skill wasn’t nearly high enough for her to tell more about them. *Not even if I had them in my hand. I wonder if it’s wisdom that I need in order to activate my metamorphic powers or constitution?* she ruminated thoughtfully, counting heads, noting positions, and also seeing there was one of those large worm things in one corner. *I wonder why the xvarts like that thing. Meh, don’t matter much I suppose. Now time to get this party started!*

Smirking slightly, Tonks wiggled her fingers, one hand thrust out towards the large worm thing, and the other to the other end of the xvart line. “Reducto Bombarda!” She shouted, hurling out one spell then the other. She grimaced at the hit to her health points, but then turned, racing out of the cave like the bats of hell were after her as the surviving xvarts noticed she was there and screeched their war cries.

Outside, she found that Harry had set up the group of adventurers in the same sort of semi half-circle that they had used so well against the xvart Village, minus the natural obstacle. He also hadn’t had Jaheira summon up any more monsters to help them, but

against xvarts, that would probably have been superfluous anyway. Even with the numbers that were coming after them now. When she moved into a position between Garrick and Jaheira Imoen instantly felt the power up, getting a notification of:

You have joined the Formation, Concave Line.

+2 to every defensive skill or ability of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

+2 to armor type of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

At the same time, Harry and Khalid and strode forward. The two of them with their heavier armor held the front of the cavern, and the xvarts couldn't get past them without getting in one another's way, while the others simply rained hell from behind them.

In a far shorter amount of time than anyone but Harry and Imoen had thought possible, the tide of xvarts faded out, the last few of them panicking, running back inside the cavern. "How many did we miss?" Harry asked looking over at Imoen.

She chewed on some of the healing berries for a moment, healing from her use of the Blood Magic as she counted off on her fingers while looking at the pile of corpses that had piled up in front of the entrance to the cavern. "Erm... five or so?"

"Okay, Minsc, with me. Everyone else, rest up, see to your bowstrings and everything else, and be on the lookout for more trouble coming up from behind us."

"You don't want me to head that way" Imoen asked, pointing down the seemingly natural path. They could tell it twisted back up the hill and maybe even split into several different paths.

"Not yet," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I think that would just be borrowing trouble at this point. Minsc and I will finish off this group of xvarts, then we'll continue that way."

"I feel that I must protest once more," Edwin growled. "In a battle like this, momentum is everything. We have it now, what serves the purpose of finishing off these pathetic Xvarts."

Harry pointed ahead of them down the natural seeming path. Because we don't know if this is the only group said with a shrug of his shoulders. Check to see if I have mentioned dungeons.

"Because I think that this place must have some way of rousing itself once the alarm is given. And I refuse to let that happen with enemies behind us. We just saw an example of how dangerous that can be," he said, gesturing to the dead bodies of the gnolls, which been left where they were for the moment, his sword making a splashing down through the rain of the area.

Edwin snorted, but didn't say anything more, and Harry received notification.

Your ability to actually argue your point has one you some respect from Edwin. Is a blue moon out? + 10 to Edwin's Respect.

Snorting slightly at that, Harry and Minsc headed into the cave. They found four more Xvarts than they had expected, three others showing up on his maps as the yellow of broken enemies, hissing at one another in a pile in the corner with one of the other four standing over them growling angrily.

That worthy turned and with the three other Xvart Elite others attacked quickly.

But Harry and Minsc didn't let the group of cowardly Xvarts have enough time to rally themselves. Minsc instantly switched from his broadsword to his bow, an arrow flying out and piercing one of them straight through the chest and out its back, sticking it to the side of the cavern such was the power of the strike. Then he switched back and roared charging forward. "Buttkicking for goodness!"

Harry raced alongside him, not bothering with a wacry although he wondered idly if wacries could serve some actual purpose via his abilities. *Something to think about later* he thought, as he used his shield to knock aside one blow from one of the Xvart Elites, stabbing around his tower shield into the thing's face, then flinging himself around, slicing into another one with his shield's edge.

By that point, Minsc had hacked the last two Elites apart using his **Cleave** ability to slice both of them at once with one mighty blow. Stabbing the two more cowardly Xvarts was somewhat anticlimactic after that.

With that done, Harry turned his attention to the elephant in the cavern, the giant crystal set into the center of it. The thing had risen up as they had killed the xvert elites, and now it seemed to hover in the air, pulsing with purple and orange energy. He and Minsc looked at one another, and said as one “Heart Stone,” after which Harry read the description quickly.

Heart Stone.

Durability 100/100

A physical manifestation of a dungeon’s ability to respawn the creatures within a Dungeon, Heart Stones are destructible for a given value of the phrase. You can destroy them, but they will come back. However, they will not come back quickly, the timeframe being from several days to nearly a year and a half.

Destroying a Heart Stone resets the dungeon’s respawn cycle, minus the monsters tied directly to the Heart Stone. Each Heart Stone can both spawn its given creatures on its own, and is linked to a secondary respawn zone. It also counts towards clearing the dungeon. You must destroy every Heart Stone before the dungeon can be cleared.

At times for higher level monsters, destroying a dungeon core will give you immediate loot rather than having to wait to clear the Dungeon Boss.

Why a year and a half Harry thought, before switching out from his sword to his hammer, figuring it would be easier to destroy the thing rather than try to slice through it.

Warning: destruction of the heart stone will have consequences!

“And that’s not ominous at all,” Harry muttered, using both hands on his Warhammer. “Watch out Minsc, this might cause something to be summoned.”

“Of course friend!” Minsc bellowed cheerfully. Inside the cave, he no longer had any need to find his volume after all and was enjoying the experience after having had to be silent outside. “Do not worry, nothing will harm you as long as Minsc is here to guard your back.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Harry said with a laugh, then reared back and hammered the hammer’s head into the Heart Stone. It only took about fifteen durability points off though, and he scowled. “Right, spell time.”

Harry backed up and looked over at Minsc. "Remember we're keeping my spells a secret from Edwin, and possibly from Garrick and your witch. I realize it puts you in an awkward position, and if you don't want to actually see them in practice, you can turn away."

"I will not. Your Blood Magic spells are strange and unusual, but you and Imoen have proven to be true companions. I will keep your secrets, unless my Witch asks me whether or not you have magic. In that case, my oath to her means that I will not lie."

Harry nodded firmly. "That's good enough for me, my friend."

Minsc grinned at him, and crossed his powerful arms watching everything around them with keen eyes as Harry thrust out both hands, shouting out "Bombarda!" It took two spells for him to destroy the Heart Stone, but when it went, it exploded, sending shards of crystal everywhere. Luckily, Harry had anticipated that, and both of them had backed well away from the thing.

"Right," Harry said with a nod. "Long-distance destruction is the way to go for those things. If we had been standing right next to it..." At that point Harry interrupted himself as both of them saw the notification.

You have destroyed a Heart Stone. Enemy respawn time reset. Enemies have respawned, but will no longer respawn as quickly throughout the dungeon. Respawn time remaining: one hour.

"Shit!" Harry groaned, twisting around to the cavern caverns entrance. "Let's go!"

By the time they were outside, Imoen had returned quickly from back along their trail, while Garrick was retreating back the other way. "We've got problems!" Garrick shouted, the first to reach the rest of the group. "I got a horde of Xvarts coming our way, I don't know how many, but I heard them way before I saw them through this."

He had to shout to be heard over the sound of the rain, which had somehow started to come down even heavier. It was like a physical force now, almost knocking Harry off his feet for a moment after the warm and dry cavern.

Harry dredged up the memory of the bestiary page he'd seen for xvarts, remembering that they didn't have any kind of extra senses, which was a very darn good thing in his opinion.

“All right,” he said holding up a hand for Imoen. “And let me guess, we have gnolls coming from the other end?” She nodded, and Harry asked. “Imoen, do you have any traps that can slow down those Xvarts?”

“Grease traps,” replied promptly. “Part of their property is to make people slip and slide. On a short walkway like this, they’ll be even deadlier.”

Harry nodded, sharply. “Do it in front of the xvarts. Protect our rear.”

“The rest of us, let’s get into formation.” He paused for a moment thinking about the formation they were going to take then as the others clustered around, described it in the air with a finger. “I want us to form a ‘T’ shape. This pathway is wide enough for three of us to fight alongside one another, if we’re careful. Big guy, I know you don’t like it, but can you switch to a sword and shield?”

“I can my friend, but I’ll warn you, my abilities with such will not be as good. as with my mighty weapon!”

Edwin could not let that one go, and shook his head, snarkily remarking, “I rather doubt your ‘weapon’ is all that mighty. I have found that Rangers and Barbarians both lack in that regard.”

“We just want to create a sort of semi-shield wall,” Harry cut in before Minsc could reply, whatever that might have been. And when we hit them, I want you to let out of bellow, as loud and as frightful as you possibly can. We’re going to take them at the charge.”

“Thus putting more distance between us and the Xvarts. Sound thinking that,” Jaheira nodded. “You didn’t ask Imoen how many there were though, she added gesturing over her shoulder to where Imoen had disappeared out of most of their sight through the rain along the path leading further upwards through the rocks. Jaheira and Khalid could still see her thanks to their half elf heritage, but the others couldn’t.

“I didn’t because it doesn’t matter. We have to defeat them, then turned and deal with the Xvarts. But if there’s more than twelve, I’ll want you Jaheira, and you Edwin to switch from your long range weapons to spellfire. Now, let’s get into formation.”

Edwin rolled his eyes, wondering why Harry was talking about formations and such, but after the way his commands had allowed them to massacre a whole xvart

village, and now near to half those numbers again, he didn't argue. Instead he merely took his position at the back of the 'handle' of the T shaped formation. In his mind, it was the place of most defense, and therefore the perfect place for the most important person, I.E., him.

You have created the formation: **Hammer Time.**

As it's name implies, this is allegedly an offensive formation, used best when on the move to strike the enemy.

X 4 to melee speed before combat begins

X 2 damage after combat is joined.

Smiling Harry looked over at Khalid on his left, and Minsc on his right. Harry had done that deliberately, wanting to use his's sword and shield tactics to help Minsc out defensively. And he wanted his tower shield in the center. They both nodded firmly, and Harry thrust out his sword towards the incoming gnolls, who had begun to appear to shoe who did not have his map.

"Charge!" Harry shouted, just as the gnolls looked up, and realized there were enemies.

The front line of the Gnolls thrust forward with her pikes, but Harry and the others took them on their shields, even Minsc able to block that first thrust, pushing them away, getting in underneath the halberd shafts and then crashing bodily into the first two gnolls, pushing them back into a few of their fellows.

You have created the tactic: At the Run!

Moving quickly and with weight beyond your controlled charge, you can inflict morale and physical damage to a higher degree.

Party member attacks do X 1.5 damage. Does not transfer to Travelling companions.

All enemies will be more likely to break and flee as long as you continue pressing forward.

Behind them, Jaheira and the others began to fire into the horde.

There were ten gnolls Gnolls and two gnoll elites, but only six of the enemy could attack the front of the line at any one time. Three of them could thrust over or under the

arms of their fellows at the front, but that made for poor striking power and more often than not they just got in one another's way. The gnolls were not intelligent enough to realize that, and the first four went down in less than a minute, with Harry and the others step standing over their bodies and cutting forward.

One more was smashed entirely off the path by Harry, who caught him at just the right time to find the gnoll off-balance thrusting forward with the edge of his tower shield, cracking his knee and causing him to collapse over the side of the path. He fell screaming, his screams almost instantly disappearing in the sound of the rain.

Meanwhile, Edwin had begun to intone spells. None of them were area affect spells he didn't want to waste a good fireball in this downpour after all. But the back of the gnoll line was now taking hits, and three of them in the center, unable to retreat and unable to attack, began to panic.

The two of the Gnolls at the back of the group began to retreat, and Harry noticed this on his map instantly. "Edwin, Spell of silence!" Edwin broke off one spell, muttering under his breath. But obeying still made sense, and the efficacy of this charge that Harry had ordered had once more affirmed the fact that despite his youth, the young man did know what he was doing.

His spell struck, and the two fleeing Gnolls found themselves silenced, unable to speak, unable to use the special howl that would summon others to their aid. They still raced away from the battle, and Harry had to quickly ordered Garrick and Imoen forward. The fastest of the group on their feet, the two of them raced after the fleeing Gnolls, cutting them down from behind with their arrows before they could get too far. Imoen then nodded towards Garrick, gesturing over the side of the cliff. "Let's get the bodies over the edge. Don't want to give the game away after all"

Garrick nodded glumly, moving forward to help her with the first dead body, which she had just lightened with one of her Blood Magic spells, though he hadn't noticed which one. "You know, my minstrels songs ever mentioned anything like this."

"What 'this' are you talking about, the rain, the blood and guts, or the need to get rid of the bodies after the fight?"

"Yes," Garrick replied dryly, causing Imoen to laugh, her voice lost in the tumult of the rain coming down all around them.

Back with the others, Harry had reformed the rest of the party into a line of two abreast, with Harry and Minsc once more in the front, and Khalid having fallen back to join the others as they moved to deal with the xvarts. They found that many of the xvarts had been felled by the grease trap, with others simply piling into them.

Harry blinked and stopped Minsc and Khalid from moving forward, instead turning to Edwin gesturing to the mass of the xvarts. "I don't suppose you have a spell that would deal with these without using fire?"

"I do prefer fire," Edwin drawled. "It is the most powerful of the elements in my opinion. Still..." With another wave of his hands and a thrust forward Edwin conjured up a Cone of Cold, the only spell of that type he had, freezing many of the Xvarts where they were, and further hampering the others.

With that, Harry and Minsc switched to their long range weapons, and just pelted the group of Xvarts from afar, switching targets to any that broke and tried to run back along the passage. It was like shooting fish in a barrel thanks to the grease trap's continued effect and Edwin's initial spell. It took a while, and Imoen and Garrick were able to return and join the slaughter before they were finished.

"That grease trap works a treat," Harry said with a wan smile, not having enjoyed the one-sided massacre even if he knew it had to be done. "How many of those can you create?"

Imoen went over her inventory, her eyes flicking this way and that seen in the rain by any. "I don't have enough ropes or tripwires to use all the grog we have unfortunately. Five traps I think. I can possibly double down, make them larger though, cover more area and last longer I mean." With traps, there was a lot of room for changing things and going beyond the basic design.

Harry thought for a moment, then gestured forward. "Garrick, Minsc can I ask you to scout along here? Minsc take the lead, Garrick back him up just in case, stay out of sight of one another in the rain, that means you should be out of sight of anyone he runs into. But I want him to have some backup."

"While Minsc is more than strong enough to deal with any of these little creatures, he is grateful to know that help will be a tent. Besides, young Garrick is a Bard! And having one close is always important if you want your deeds spread near and far to further put the fear of a good buttkicking in the hearts of Evil!"

Chuckling at his large friend's attitude, Harry turned to the others. "As for the rest of us, I think we should get in out of the rain for a bit."

He and Khalid had taken a few hit in the melee, and now they began to use the health berries to recover their health, while Imoen moved around the cavern, searching for anything shiny basically. She handed over the short swords of the Xvarts elite, which Harry quickly identified.

Short sword plus one.

Somewhat crudely made, swords like these still contain a slight magical enhancement to them.

Harry promptly handed one of them back to Imoen who could use short short swords as well as she could a bow. None of the rest of what she found was at all interesting, a few gems, a few coins, and several dozen clay figurines which she left in place. They seemed worthless to her.

Regardless, the time out of the rain was nice for everyone except for Jaheira, who actually refused to come into the cavern, preferring to stay outside in the rain. "All the better to be closer to nature," she had told them all, which even Khalid had thought was rather silly. Harry simply asked her to with Garrick after he Minsc.

Once Imoen was finished looking around and making sure that place wasn't trapped, she too left the cavern, heading back the way they'd come to be on the lookout for further patrols.

"It boggles the mind that our eradication of that first group of Gnolls has not yet sounded the alarm among the rest of the fortress," Edwin opined as he watched Imoen once more brave wind and rain.

"I think it's the rain. Or the combination of the rain and the fact that they're not all that organized despite, as Jaheira said earlier, being one of the more organized of the beast races two points above zero after all isn't all that high,"

Edwin chuckled at that, but soon enough, they all moved back out into the rain. They found Jaheira and Garrick waiting for them, gesturing along the path to the left from their starting position. Before the bard could report, Jaheira spoke up peremptorily. "Imoen says she hasn't spotted any more patrols coming, but Minsc found a few dozen

more of those Xvarts moving around out there like a patrol. This path becomes a passage through a series of crags just after where the xvarts turned back, Minsc

With Jaheira in the lead now, the group moved after Minsc while Harry examined the map silently. Thanks to Minsc, it had updated itself just as much as if Imoen had been the one doing the scouting. He scratched his chin thoughtfully as he examined their position. Ahead of them, as Minsc had reported through the other two, the path split up. Indeed, it became a regular kind of warren, several different branches moving around larger rock formations. Still there seemed to still be one central path going forward, and none of the trails were all that long, so they could explore them with relative ease.

“How many more fireball or grease spells do you have?” he asked, looking over at Garrick and Edwin. Edwin replied that he had three, while Garrick replied he only had one grease spell left. He did however still have two Scorcher spells, but that was nothing to Edwin’s spell repertoire. “I also have Aganazzar’s Scorcher, Shocking hands, Acid Arrow, Fire Arrow, two more Silence spells and a few other surprises. But with this rain, alas, the efficacy of fire based magic will be badly eroded.”

Harry thought about it for a few minutes, then nodded slowly. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Jaheira, could you and Imoen head back to the first cross path? I want you to summon up a few animals. No traps, just animals, something to slow any patrol down. Once that’s done find us, we’ll have attacked that next xvart patrol already. I don’t want any spell work for a bit, not until we find the next respawn point.

Once more, they use the formation hammer time, thundering out of the rain into the startled xvart patrol, rushing out of the rain around them. And it worked even better against them than it had against the gnolls. The gnolls hadn’t broken, they’d simply been surprised and unable to fight back for a moment. The xvarts on the other hand shrieked in terror, several of them breaking instantly racing back down the passage, while others were so startled, they turned and fled down another portion of the causeway which would prove to be a dead end. This allowed Harry, Khalid and Minsc to cross the intervening distance, getting among the xvarts before they could regain their senses.

Once the patrol was dealt with, the runners having been shot down by Garrick and Edwin, Harry and Khalid went after the runners who had gone the other way. As they did, Harry blinked as two red dots appeared on the portion of the map near where Imoen and Jaheira were. He had noticed the appearance of three new green dots signifying the creatures Jaheira had summoned into being as the rest of the party attacked the xvart

patrol, but the red dots had come in from outside the mapped area. As Harry watched, the two dots fought the three animals, before Imoen attacked from behind and Jaheira from the front.

As the dots disappeared, there was a *ping* and a new message appeared in front of Harry's eyes.

Your party has found and killed a patrol.

Patrols are small groups of monsters which are set to move around the dungeon in set movements and at set times, or around certain areas of the dungeon.

Killing patrols can keep your party from being discovered, but not doing so quickly enough can cause the entire dungeon to become aware of your presence if there is one Dungeon Boss controlling the entire dungeon. If not, then only the monster class who made up the patrol will be aware of your presence.

Patrol sizes can be effected by the size of the dungeon, not the number of heart stones, although there is often a correlation between the two.

Xvart patrols killed: 1/?

Gnoll patrols killed: 1/?

Next gnoll patrol time: 15 minutes.

Harry quickly checked the respawn countdown and noticed they had forty minutes on it before the next respawn time. That was good. The patrol time was bad, but workable too.

The two women quickly rejoined the rest of the party, and Harry sent Imoen and Minsc ahead of them, but this time, the rest stayed within sight of them. Harry wanted to speed this up and get back to the main path up towards the keep on the heels of the patrol, at least. The group made their way forward, discovering that the passage split up among the rocks. A few dogs and other animals roamed here, but not many.

Two xvart patrols of six each were dealt with easily, bringing the total of those patrols they'd killed to three, but they didn't seem to have a set timer to them, so Harry figured they were more guard posts than patrols. They'd had to pause and send Imoen and Minsc to deal with another gnoll patrol in that time, which had been composed of

four this time rather than two. And they were still moving forward cautiously enough that the next patrol was due soon as well.

After that however, Imoen and Minsc found the entrance to another cavern set behind a group of fourteen xvarts milling around. Unlike gnolls they were active in the rain, doing something to a few long strips of some kind of meat that, in Imoen's words, "Smells like a weird mix of spunk and sick."

This pronouncement caused everyone, even Jaheira to just stare at her. Before anyone could ask the obvious question, Harry held up his hand. "Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Not going to go there people. Besides, we don't have much time left before the next respawn time, if my guess is right on that anyway. Same tactic as before people, we plow right into them. We clear them out, we gain the entrance to the cave and we murder the xvarts as they appear. Imoen, stay back and when we gain the entrance to the cavern, break off and head back down the passage to guard our back."

Edwin twitched at that, one eyebrow rising under his hood as he stared at the similarly hooded back of Harry's head. *Hmm, interesting. I wonder if he is truly so perspicacious to think he can work that out, or... hmm...*

For the third time, the shock of the adventurer's racing out of the rain caught the xvarts as they rushed forward silent until they were already upon the xvarts. But after that, as Harry had predicted the cavern spawned xvarts by the dozen. But by that point, as before Minsc and Harry had gained the front of the cavern, and the wave of Xvarts which should have drowned any opponent in sheer numbers was broken up, halted there in place, the majority of them unable to get around the front ranks.

Behind them, once again, Khalid led the others in a long range bombardment over Harry and Minsc's heads. Most of that fire wasn't aimed thanks to the narrow confines of the cavern entrance, but it didn't have to be.

The sheer numbers of the Xvarts pushed the two warriors back, but more of them were dying, and Harry shouted out spread out, form a semicircle, Garrick, Edwin, wait for it." As they did, Harry waited until he saw the notification that they had formed the formation 'half-circle' then he shouted "Minsc, Cleave!".

Minsc obeyed instantly, his sword disengaging from blocking a blow from one xvart and flashing around in a massive arc, which hewed the heads off of three xvarts, as he

shouted out “AH, hat trick! Most excellent, that will gain me much fame back in Rashemon when we return!”

But then Harry was grabbing his arm, and dragging him down and backwards, once more shouting out in a voice as loud as any Ranger, “now!”

From the bard and from the wizard came tongues of flame, which impacted the entrance, searing and setting on fire several dozen Xvarts, causing more than just those who had been set on fire to break, fleeing back into the cavern. “Bah, a hat trick you say, then what would you say about that, hmm? Magic rules, and the rest of you can only bemoan your impotence,” Edwin snarked.

“Minsc, Khalid, with me!” Harry ordered, hopping to his feet as he raced into the cavern. “We have to keep up the momentum. The rest of you wait here.”

Edwin blinked at that, cocking one perfectly manicured, if currently wet, eyebrow. “Does he truly believe that he will not need the aid of our spells and weapons?” *Well, if he does, then I suppose he is not nearly as intelligent as I had hoped he would prove after coming up with such of plans as before.*

Of course, Jaheira didn’t reply to that one, simply shrugging her shoulders and saying, “I have come to have faith in Harry’s abilities, and besides,” she said gesturing down the trail to where they could see Imoen racing back towards them, her Hide in Shadows technique being turned off as they she came into sight I believe he had other reasons in mind for keeping us out here...”

“Patrol of xvarts incoming, and I think behind them we’ve got another gnoll twosome.”

“Then they must have dealt with my creatures. Pity. Still, let us set up an ambush quickly,” Jaheira replied, taking command quickly. None of the others, even Edwin bothered to argue, though his sneer was visible under his cowl as he passed the druid by despite the rain.

Inside the cave, were six xvirt elite, and twenty-eight other Xvarts along with seven more who had rushed back inside. They would have been more than enough to deal with three Adventurers of low rank as Harry and his two companions were even if it would have been a pyrrhic victory. But Harry didn’t intend to fight them in a straight up

battle. Just like Imoen he had their Blood Magic spells. And he had a lot more health to use before becoming worried about its effect. "Bombarda! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!"

The first spell he tossed had hit four of the xuart elites who had been crowded around one another, exploding them in an impressive display of blood and viscera. The second two spells had knocked all of the remaining Xvarts off of their feet, stunning many of the normal Xvarts. The two remaining Xuart elites were able to push themselves to their feet just in time to meet Khalid, who cut them down with ease.

The others were killed before they could regain their feet, leaving the three warriors to look at the Heart Stone as it slowly rose out of the center of the cavern's floor. "The last time I destroyed one in the other cave," he said to Khalid, grateful for the moment to be able to speak to him openly without Edwin or Garrick around between munching on some health berries. "We instantly reset the respawn point for the entire tower. And we were jumped by those gnolls from behind."

"I see. And you are afraid that doing so now will summon more?"

"I know it will," Harry said with a shrug. My Advanced Adventurer System is guiding me in how to fight these dungeons, and..."

"So we a, a, are in a dungeon! I had t, t, thought we might be, b, b, but the fact that y, y, you were told we were in a d, d, dungeon, is amazing," Khalid explained.

"And you're not in surprised by the crystal?"

"No, I have b, b, been in enough dungeon dives to k, k, know what a Heart Stone looks like. Ho, ho, how many are there? Did you're a, a, advanced Adventurer sy, sy, system tell you that? That's always the question. T, t, that and the Dungeon Boss." Khalid shuddered. "Dun, d, dungeon bosses are always t, tr, tricky."

"There is a Dungeon Boss, and there are four remaining including this one. Two Xuart, two gnoll."

"T, t, the last time, it respawned eight gnolls," Khalid mused. "This time if w, w, we destroy it that may be d, d, doubled. As you destroy the heart stones, the immediate respawn you s, s, see will often be larger, but t, t, the respawn rate will always sl, sl, slower."

“It’s a trade-off then, an immediate negative balanced against a long-term positive,” Harry thought aloud. “And the monsters who come from the nearest respawn points will move directly to the position of the destroyed heart stone.”

“Exactly,” Khalid said with a nod, smiling internally that Harry was picking up tactics and long-term thinking very well. *His leadership talent obviously has massive benefits.*

“Hmm... okay then. I think we can work with that.”

The two of them kept talking for a time, having been unable to before this, with Khalid telling Harry in his halting manner of past dungeon battles he’d been involved in. Many of them had not succeeded due to lack of information and supplies, making the AAS a magnificent gift to him, though Khalid and Jaheira had stayed away from such dangers since the debacle with the vampire. He also warned Harry to keep up the idea of stopping word of their attacks from spreading. They could not afford the Dungeon Boss becoming aware of them, or else they would just be swamped with enemies.

They left the cave and informed the others of what they had found. Edwin blinked at the knowledge that Harry and Minsc had together destroyed a heart stone, smirking at the idea of them putting forth so much effort into something that he could do with a single spell. “And you wish me to destroy this new heart stone, while the rest of you prepare a trap for the respawned enemies. An excellent use of my talents I suppose.”

With Edwin cavern, inside, that left the rest to prepare, which they did, with Imoen leading them back down the trail a ways to where Harry wanted to set up their ambush. At the same time, Harry handed out more arrows to the archers, while Imoen put down the trap Harry had asked her to.

The position he had chosen for the ambush was a place where the passage split off into three directions excluding the one which led back to the manmade stairs up the side of the mound. Two of them lead to dead ends, which Imoen had explored. She and Minsc hid themselves down them now, covered in their Hide in Shadows technique. Harry, Khalid, Garrick, and Jaheira waited along the trail leading to the second heart stone.

They had barely finished when Harry received the notification:

A traveling companion or temporary ally of yours has destroyed a heart stone. Respawn rates have been reset. Note: Respawn rates are now up to 2 ½ hours.

Almost immediately on the heels of those words however, there came the barking cry of gnolls talking to one another, coming through the rain. And Harry's map updated itself with not eight, but fourteen red dots, all moving along the trail towards them.

"Get ready," Harry said, as Edwin exited the cavern from behind moving towards them.

When he came within sight, Harry nodded to him, and the mage sent him a supercilious sneer, wiggling his fingers. It only took me one scorcher spell to destroy it, truly, those of you who are so mere brute force so helpless without those of us who are able to call upon the greater mystery magic."

With an eye roll, Harry gestured Edwin into position.

The trap activated, as Harry watched, catching the gnolls one after another. "Jaheira, now."

Jaheira cast Tangling Vines, which instantly captured the rest of the patrol, and the other Adventurers around Harry began to attack from long range. The trapped gnolls were easy meat for a time, with three of their number falling quickly. However, the Gnolls were able to find their feet more easily than the xvarts, pushing themselves to their feet and charging on through the vines. Within a few minutes, the fighters had to switch back to hand-to-hand weapons.

At the front of the battle, Harry and Khalid were pushed back by the initial rush, five of them breaking out of the trap at the same time hurling themselves forward, using their momentum to push the three warriors back with their halberds. But one of them died almost a second later to Khalid's flashing blade, taking him in the throat and opening it, blood spurting to join the rain pelting down all around them.

Harry's tower shield took several hits, defending him from the enemy, and he was nearly smashed off his feet almost entirely by a lucky shot that took him in the shoulder knocking him off-balance. But he recovered enough and stabbed desperately as he was twirled in place from the force of the initial blow.

He caught his enemy on the leg, causing the gnoll to fall backwards, letting Harry regain his footing. The next second, an arrow and slingstone slammed into that gnoll's chest, sending him falling backwards.

The battle was fast and furious for a few minutes, and got worse when a patrol of not two, but six more gnolls appeared at the back of the battle charging forward. By that point the grease trap had been all used up, and this force hammered into the Tangling Vines. It stopped two of them, but the other four joined up with three more who had been able to get through the vines, which were now dissipating.

However even as it did, Harry was thinking about where these enemies had come from. *Another patrol, yes, but six? If each patrol is going to be larger than the last, we're missing a few.*

"Minsc, now!" Harry shouted to be heard over the sound of the fight and the ongoing rain. "Imoen, head back down the trail, we might have two more gnolls out there! Press forward, cleave on three," said in a lower tone to Khalid.

At the count of three, he Khalid and used the skill that Harry had gotten from Minsc when Minsc had joined his part. The enemy in front of Harry fell, cut in two, while Khalid simply fell to his knees with a low keening scream, his arms cut off at the wrist.

Behind the battle, Minsc had also charged forward cut his own enemy in half and cut the arm off the next one in line. Then with a roar he charged, bodily checking into the next group of Gnolls. They were still tangled them up and two of them fell back into more. The last few on their feet were able to get in a few hits on Khalid and Harry, but they were still caught between Minsc and the two warriors, unable to move to let the others get to their feet, while their legs and bodies stopped them from using their halberds.

At the same time Imoen moved around the battle once more pulling Hide in Shadows over herself. Racing back down the way they'd come Imoen quickly realized that Harry had been right. There were two gnolls waiting just out of sight, already turning as she raced forward. Imoen shot at them as she ran forward, but her aim was ruined by the rain and because she was moving at the time. If anything, her arrow whizzing past it made one of the monsters move faster. No help for it she thought, lashing out with a Stupefy.

The red beam of flashed through the rain, catching both gnolls in the back, tossing them forward. The next second, Imoen was on them. A simple stab into their necks and both died.

She crouched there, waiting for the cool down time on her Hide in Shadows to end before pulling it around herself once more, staring upwards the path leading further up to

the fortress. After a moment she breathed a sigh of relief, then, chewing on some more of the healing berries then used a Leviosa spell on the two dead bodies, tossing them off the side of the cliff before moving back to the others.

By that point the last of the gnolls fallen and the group had come together moving back to the second cave, even Jaheira wishful to get out of the rain. Joining them Imoen reported on what she found before quickly searching through the second cavern, while the others rested, pulling out some beef jerky or berries to eat, Edwin scowling all the while as he tore into some of the jerky. "I would be saying something along the lines of so far so good given how many of these creatures we have slain and two Heart Stones destroyed as well. And yet, we have yet to even reach the fortress itself."

"That might actually be a good sign," Harry said thoughtfully. At least we won't be facing more Xvarts, or possibly anything but gnolls for a while. They are tough, true, but not intelligent or numerous enough to cause us issues so far."

Harry idly identified six more short sword +1s that Imoen handed him, stuffing them into his Item Box. Those would fetch a nice price once they returned to civilization. They'd yet to find anything else worth their while.

That ended abruptly when Imoen pulled out two potions some kind, hurrying over to Harry as the chest which had previously been trapped and locked behind her, handing it over. The chest had looked as if the xvarts had been trying to break into it without breaking whatever was inside, but the lock on it had been easy for Imoen to pick.

Harry took them and his high intelligence and wisdom scores allowed him to identify them easily. "One is a Potion of Healing, he held it up, +12 health points. Minsc, I think that will go to you. You're the only one of us who doesn't routinely use a shield in close combat."

Minsc took it gratefully, putting it not in his item box but on his belt. That would be even faster to find after all.

"The second one is a potion of invisibility. I think I'll keep that one for now," Harry murmured, putting it into his item box.

After that, the group stayed silent for a time, simply sitting around the fire that the xvarts in the cavern had been using, resting for a time before Harry should stood up, and

gestured them all out. "Come on. We have a which to save after all. And we want to hit the next Heart Stone before the gnolls respawn."

"Yes! More but kicking for goodness. Right, Boo?" Minsc shouted, to which Boo squeaked some response as it climbed up to his shoulder once more.

"Minsc, has anyone told you about using an indoor voice? Jaheira asked.

"Minsc has heard the term before, but truly there are few buildings indeed which can encompass the magnificence that is Boo! Let alone this poor Ranger."

Garrick chuckled, then looked over at Harry. "My lyre's strings are not happy with the weather. You want me to start a Song now?"

"How many more do you have?"

"Four more," Garrick replied promptly.

Harry shook his head. "Best to wait on it. Now, let's get a move on."

When they reached the crossway, Harry had Imoen put down one large-scale grease trap that covered the entire area, as well as numerous other smaller ones. "Just in case," he supplied looking over at the others. With that done though, Minsc and Imoen once more took the lead, with Harry and Khalid behind them at a fair distance, nearly but not quite invisible to the two scouts thanks to the rain.

The two scouts soon reached a second crossway, where Minsc remained just below the leave of the junction, watching a group of eight gnolls sitting around a fire. They had a large tarp over them and the fire, held in place by X shaped pieces of wood at either edge of the rectangular-shaped tarp.

Imoen snuck past easily, moving down the walkway until it started to ascend once more in a series of wide steps leading upward. *This has to be the main way up to the fortress. The most well-guarded way. As Harry would say, nope.* With that in mind, she turned back, and turned to the north, moving around the 'front' of the fortress, noting where it rose up out of the stone about two stories above her, the walls adding another four stories at the least. *No way any of us could climb that, even if I transfigured a few ropes and 'found them' for us.*

She kept on exploring up and around, intent on seeing where else the trail went. Soon Imoen found another place where the trail split, one portion going down, the other, going up. At that point she decided that she'd seen enough. *Time to head back to the others.*

Soon she and Minsc were back with the others, reporting what they'd found. "I didn't go too far up the steps, but I think there could be another way around it, maybe a way to rappel down from one high. Regardless, we're still too far away from the fortress walls for anything up there to hear whatever happens at the intersection."

"In that case, second verse same as the first," Harry said with a chuckle. "You two get behind them, prepare to backstab or warn us of incoming patrols." His eyes briefly flicked up to glance at a timer that had begun to impede on his thoughts. *We should still have eight more minutes on the next patrol, and an hour and a half before the next full respawn, unless of course we destroyed more heart stones before that. I find it grossly unfair that they reset the response time whenever we do that!* "Beyond that, shock and awe, fast and dirty people."

The next battle was indeed quick and brutal. In a flash of inspiration that won her an intelligence point Imoen cut the two poles holding up the edges of the large tarp, one after the other, the tarp impeding the Gnolls while Harry and Khalid led the charge up onto the platform. Like Harry, Imoen had learned one of the first rules of combat: In combat, playing nice doesn't give you anything.

"Alas," Edwin muttered, as he ascended to the platform to, twirling his sling slightly. He hadn't needed to toss more than five stones before the fight was over. "If only there wasn't so much rain, we could truly play with fire. Underneath a tarp like that, they would've made perfect targets."

"They wouldn't be underneath the tent if it wasn't raining," Harry shrugged philosophically. "Now grab a leg Edwin, let's get these bodies off the trails."

Imoen and Minsc took the lead again, expanding Harry's map outward and around once more while the others waited where the pathway broke in two. Harry noted that the . Another, just as path to their right went down and around the edge of the stone foundation of the fortress, steeper than the one they'd been climbing up. In fact, Harry estimated it would probably debunk itself right at the top of the ocean level.

"Any idea what could be down there?"

Jaheira scowled as she stared down the path, and not just because they had to due to the angle of the passage leading down to the ocean, but also because the rain had once more picked up, and now it was buffeting them with heavy winds, so heavy they were having trouble taking headway up from the last standing. “Gnolls are not known for being a seafaring race, in fact, they rarely if ever willingly go on boats at all.”

“But there could be a few down there?” Harry asked. When Jaheira nodded, he sighed. Then his eyes flicked sideways a little to the timer to the next patrols, and once more Harry decided to split their party.. “All right, let’s head down there than.” He still had another hour before the next mass respawn though. “Imoen, Minsc, head back down until you’re right on top of the second landing and ambush the next patrol as they come down the steps. If I’m right, you should only have about another minute and a half to wait. Jaheira, if you could summon up some more creatures to help them?”

“You have been timing them then?” Jaheira asked quizzically.

Edwin too also looked amused at the prospect. “And what makes you think creatures such as these would be able to keep to a timing schedule?”

“I think being inside a dungeon like this makes events like that occur on a timetable,” Harry said slowly, working out how to put it in his mind without giving away his abilities. “And patrols aren’t respawn points, they’d be on a separate, a separate schedule as you put it.”

Edwin nodded slightly as that made sense, but behind his eyes, he was thinking things through. There had been a few times during the fighting, especially right before the battles began where Harry was just a little too confident as to what they’d face, a little too certain of what Imoen had reported.

You have earned +100 respect, -10 trust from Edwin. Something is going on in that wizards mind, something you might wish to be aware of going forward.

Thinking that a problem for the future Harry shrugged that notice away and led the depleted party down along the steep pathway. It twisted twice around the side of the rock jutting out from the ocean, until they arrived at the docks. There they found an actually decently covered area, with a heavy wooden roof over what looked like a fishing spot. Several dozen fishing poles with long lines were thrust into holders along the edge of a stone quay. Several hundred fish were drying out to one side, and others were stuck on poles over a large fire that was set in the center of the area.

There were also four Flinds. The stronger, more durable and tougher type of gnoll with their better senses turned as one as Harry came down the steps, then roared and charged out into the rain, their halberds, heavier and larger than those of the normal gnolls, flashing towards Harry and Khalid.

“Crap!” If it wasn’t for his tower shield that charge might well have smashed Harry off of the pathway into the ocean. As it was he teetered on the brink while Khalid was knocked backwards, his shield having taken two hits from the Flinds, as another one tried to go over his shield, the halberd’s head cracking into his armored chest.

Harry righted himself and brought his shield up in time to block the next thrust, while behind him, Jaheira and the others all released a volley. Garrick’s arrow hit one of the Flinds in the side of the head, taking out its ear but doing no real damage despite making it flinch. The sling stones however just bounced off their armor, not slowing the Flinds down at all. Worse, the Flinds were intelligent enough, that the one who had been fighting Harry twisted around and pushed Khalid to one side, getting in between Harry and Khalid and moving through them towards the others while the three remaining Flinds kept the two of them engaged.

“Nature’s call!” Jaheira shouted, and a lightning bolt flashed, smashing that Flind from on high, causing it to stagger.

The next instant an arrow flew from Garrick, catching it on the side of the neck system causing it to cry out in pain. But it still swung its Halbert, smashing Garrick off his feet and back into Jaheira, both of them going down in a heap.

“As always, it is up to the mage to save the day!” Edwin snorted, and lashed out with a shocking grasp, which finished that Flind off, causing it to shudder and collapse spasming on the steps.

Khalid had dispatched one of the others, his sword taking it in the back of the knee, then his shield bashing its nose in, before blinding it with a cut on the forehead. Harry knew from experience that kind of thing was deadly in battle, and Khalid proved to the second later as he dodged a blow from the last Flind and stabbed the injured one straight through the chest. He overextended to do so however if only very slightly, and a Flind’s return blow nearly took his head off. But he ducked under it, and the halberd slammed into the side of the cliff face, causing a welter of sparks.

For his part, Harry repeatedly stabbed his own enemy, then used Cleave, cutting its leg off before kicking it off the side of the stairs into the ocean. A second after that he stabbed the last one in the back, and Jaheira sent a point blank slingstone right into its face, finishing it off.

“...Well, on the one hand I’m glad that we came down here now, when we were still in fighting shape rather than after we’ve cleared the fortress and think leaving will be smooth sailing,” Harry gasped, leaning on his blade its tip stuck in the rock beneath. “On the other hand, I really hope there aren’t many Flinds like that inside.” The speed and strength of the Flind was just on a whole other level from regular gnolls or even gnolls Elites.

“Agreed,” Jaheira said moving over to heal Khalid with one of her healing spells before Harry could stop her.

Harry himself simply popped in a few more healing berries, before looking at the patrol timer. Getting down here had cost them a few minutes, and the fight had cost them another few minutes. The patrol timer had reset without him noticing and was now reading fourteen minutes. *More than enough time to get inside the keep.* “Let’s get a move on, and meet up with Minsc and Imoen.”

The two of them met the somewhat more battered group at the place where the path diverged, where Imoen took one look at them and instantly asked, “What the heck happened to you?”

“Four Flinds in close combat before we could really realize what we were facing,” Harry replied dryly. “I do hope we didn’t make you wait long?”

His sister from another mum chuckled, pointing towards the doorway. “We dealt with the patrol, it was another small one this time, two gnolls, easy meet for me, Minsc and the animals Jaheira summoned. I then headed up the path further. It doesn’t lead anywhere helpful unfortunately, just a dead end at the bottom of one of those circle towers.” If Harry and I could use our spells more freely that wouldn’t be the case but as it is, that’s not happening.”

“Damn. That means we’ll need to come through the front. Not good.” Harry groused, then shook his head. “Well, whatever, we can’t change facts. So let’s get a move on troops.” *We still have forty-five minutes to the next respawn time, but even so I don’t want to take chances.*

Edwin scowled and muttered something about being called 'troop' under his breath, but the others simply fell in line, with Imoen once more going first. And it was a good thing she did, because as she ascended up the steps leading to the front of the keep she did find several traps. Simple ones they were just tripwires attached to heavy bear traps here and there and she took them apart quickly and waved them on.

In the same formation as before, the group headed up the stairs finding that the steps turned to the left at a platform, covered with still more traps. From there, while the others waited behind them, Imoen and Minsc moved further up the stairs. The two of them found themselves at the entrance to what had to be the parade ground of the keep. There was a massive fire pit to one side, centered in circular outcrop of the open area. A few makeshift tents were set up here and there toward the keep of the fortress. On the other side of where they had entered, another set of stairs lead downwards while behind the tents there was a door leading into the keep proper. To one side, there was another staircase heading up to the top of the keep, the stairs covered with rubble.

And everywhere there were gnolls. Thirty-two regular gnolls were scattered around the place, with eight gnoll elites among them, and two Flinds. The two Flinds were together near the doorway, apparently having an argument, if the way Imoen reported they were gesturing and snarling at one another was any indication. But the rest, mostly around the fireplace, or sitting in the tents.

And one of those tents is probably going to be a respawn point, Harry's thought, his heart sinking as Imoen finished her report. That was a lot of enemies, especially given the fact that he and Imoen couldn't use their Blood Magic in front of Edwin. I am seriously beginning to have second thoughts about talking him into joining forces. He's been a powerful addition not the crew, but his magic just isn't as versatile as that from our homeworld.

The others too were all exchanging worried glances, and Harry realized he had to get their mind off it quickly. He clapped his hands together hard, nodding his head. "Okay, it's not exactly what we were hoping to expect, but we still have a few positives here. We still have almost all of the supplies that we got from the mother dryad, which means those not in hand-to-hand combat can heal themselves if they need to. Jaheira, you still have nearly all of your healing spells, I'll rely on you to use them at your own discretion."

“Oh thank you oh omnipresent authority figure,” Jaheira said, but she was smiling as she said it understanding what Harry was trying to do. This kind of fight was going to be very tough, even if one of those tents didn’t turn out to be a Heart Stone.”

“Second, Imoen how many more grease traps to have?”

“Three more grease traps, fourteen different small wound type traps. However, there’s a lot of them right near the top of the staircase,” Imoen warned. “If I put down traps, they might spot me.” There was always a chance of a thief being spotted making traps, the percentage of chance effected both by the thief’s level and his or her skill with traps.

“Okay, let’s do something different. Instead of attacking again, we’re going to lure them into a field of traps. We’ll fall back to that platform just now, while you lay down the traps. Garrick and Imoen will then charge forward, and launch some arrows at the gnolls get them riled up and chasing you. Then act as if you know you’re coming on them all shocked at their numbers or something.”

“Gnolls are not big thinkers, they will not wonder about the enemies we have already dealt with, this is true,” Edwin murmured. “But I have to warn you, numbers like that can mean that we won’t be able to make all of them come down into our traps. We might eventually have to fight them out in the open up there, where their numbers will begin to tell quickly.”

Harry glanced over at Minsc. “If that happens, Minsc, you break out that halberd we took from that talkative gnoll, the the Chesley Crusher. And then go berserk.”

Minsc grinned, showing all of his teeth which somehow still flashed *ting* despite the rain. “Minsc believes this is a most excellent plan, as does Boo!”

“We also have my remaining summoning spells, these two and Edwin’s in a pinch,” Jaheira interjected, gesturing at the two dire wolves she had conjured to help Imoen and Minsc ambush the latest patrol. “I realize we have been husbanding Edwin’s more powerful creatures, but that kind fight is the perfect time to use them.”

Harry nodded at that, then glanced over at Imoen, moving over to pat her on the back as he asked “do you think you’re up for it? And, if you have to,” he whispered in a lower tone, unseen by any thanks to the rain “don’t hesitate to use your spells just in case. We can always deal with Edwin somehow later.”

As Imoen was working on the traps, the others readied themselves, once more using wax on their bowstring's, eating some jerky and so forth. For his part Harry replaced his sword with another one, in no mood to have it shatter mid battle, while also glancing occasionally at the timer for the next mass respawn. They still had time. *And we've got those traps down there, that should slow them up anyway.*

When Imoen came back signaling they were ready, the others got into position while she led Garrick up the steps, where they paused, choosing out a target among the three gnolls near the top of the staircase leading out into the open area of the keep. She then pulled back her arrow on her bow, looking over at Garrick. "On three. One, two, she turned back, her eye staring along the shaft of her arrow as she shouted "Three!"

One longbow and one short bow fired as one, slamming into their chosen target. The damage was enough to kill the gnoll, and he fell back with a cry. The other two turned, roared a warning audible even through the rain, and then marched down the steps towards the two.

Two more fell, as Garrick and Imoen backed away, wasting four arrows in the doing. They then raced back up and saw that the rest of the Gnolls were already moving towards them. "Two arrows then away for you Garrick," Imoen said, firing off her own bow. A short bow could fire faster than a Longboat even if it didn't have nearly as much stopping power, so she could fire perhaps twice as many arrows in the same time frame.

This was proven as she launched five arrows while Garrick only shot twice, but only one of her arrows hit with enough damage to actually make a gnoll pause. Of Garrick's arrows one of them went wide of its target, but the other slammed into the chest of a gnoll causing it to gasp out, falling to its knees dropping its halberd and claspng at the arrow with both hands. Imoen twitched her next shot to that one, and got a critical hit, sending an arrow through its head to finish it off before turning and grabbing Garrick's arm. "Away! There's too many of them!"

"Right, we have to run, we have to get out of here!" Garrick replied, his voice carrying far better than Imoen's thanks to his training as a Bard. Which probably also had something to do with how much he hammed it up, declaiming in terror-stricken tones, "I don't want to be meat for the stewpot! We need to get out, tell everyone about this place!"

Despite Imoen's impression of his acting though, the gnolls ate it up. With a mass howl the whole crowd of gnolls followed after them, the closest practically on their heels, while the others scrambled after them mindlessly, eager to be in on the kill.

The two of them moved quickly and expertly through the traps, and then past where the others were, as the traps behind them went off with the first of the Gnolls entering the area.

For a moment, most of the adventurers held their fire, unable to see up to the top of the short stairwell thanks to the rain. All Save Khalid and Jaheira, who could see thanks to their half-elf heritage. Three Gnolls fell to married couple's expert shooting, and Harry laughed, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Damn fine shooting."

"O, only fair, I'm afraid. The range isn't enough to really challenge me, even with the rain," Khalid replied modestly.

Soon as the gnolls forged through the traps, Harry and the others opened fire on them with Garrick and Minsc using their longbows, and Harry his crossbow. But the rain made it difficult, the little red aiming iris his AAS gave him amazingly difficult to even see let alone hit. Thankfully the gnolls were so mashed together any shot could hit something. And they were so helpless at range that the Tactic, Killing Zone activated, helping the Adventurers along in their slaughter.

When the first few gnolls reached them, Harry waved Khalid and Minsc away moved forward, stabbing a few of the Gnolls that came closest through the grease trap. He fell to his knees at one point, but still stabbed downwards into the gnoll that had been his target before pushing backwards, watching as more came on.

What followed was several minutes of easy battle for the adventurers, as more of the front line gnolls got caught in the traps, stuck in place their feet in some traps, or simply slipping in the grease trap. But their numbers began to do away with the traps, even the grease trap move losing its efficacy. It was obvious to Harry and everyone else that the gnolls' numbers had been multiplied several times over.

Then the Gnolls were on the front line of the adventurers, with Khalid and the Minsc switching to melee weapons, joining Harry. The others spread out in a firing line behind them as Harry directed. This allowed Harry to activate a new formation.

You have created a formation: The Line formation (small scale).

Though simple, a shield wall backed by long range combatants can give you some protection against simple foes who attack you from the front.

Defensive +1/5th of each frontline warrior's base damage.

Attack +1/2 of each long range combatant's base damage.

The sheer number of gnolls were still getting in one another's way as they came down the stairs, but when the first few of them smashed into Harry's mind, Harry realized he made a mistake. The added height from the steps allowed the back row of gnolls enough added height to be able to thrust over the shoulders of their fellows much easier, and Khalid nearly went down almost at once as he tried to duck under the blow of a gnoll in the first row. He took a blow to the side of the head, which rent his helmet but the helmet stopped the blow enough, that he survived it. He even was able to get in, and stab at the other one.

"Cleave, then in with them! Block their path, get underneath them, use their bodies to defend against the second row! Get up onto the stairs, don't let them push us back!" Harry shouted, instantly understanding he couldn't let the gnolls realize they had this tiny advantage.

Above them, the rain finally began to peter out, something all of them were glad to feel but the battle continued as Minsc and Khalid did what Harry had asked, all of them getting in underneath their opponent's guard, slicing the first row down before charging the rest, knocking the dead bodies out of the way to get in among the second group. They still kept their line, as Harry shouted more commands to that effect then added, "Edwin, Jaheira, Garrick spells free!"

Magic Missile after Magic Missile flashed forward, downing gnolls. Each of them could take two hits from the magic missiles before collapsing in bloody ruin, the magical bolts lashing unerringly into the target's head or chest. Edwin used that spell four times, killing eight gnolls while Jaheira called down lightning once, but then decided to conserve that spell for when the two Flinds. Neither of the blue furred Flinds had rushed down the stairwell to attack.

Instead Jaheira concentrated on healing the front using a single Minor Healing spell of her own, and then using one of spells on her staff.

Jaheira has cast: Stinging Flies

This spell creates a swarm of stinging flying bugs. While it stings and annoys, it does no really damage. Yet it can certainly distracting whatever enemies are caught in the radius of the spell.

Several of the gnolls being stung began panic, trying to get away, entangling their fellows. The killing went on, as Harry, Khalid and Minsc forged their way forward, and the gnolls kept on coming down. Harry lost track of how many other words, the enemies just a mass of red his map, pressing in on the small group of green dots.

Soon, Edwin stopped casting Magic Missile, having run out of the spell he'd memorized the day before. He switched to Acid Arrows and Fire Arrow spells. Equally deadly, these spells resembled arrows made of the named element and could do as much damage in a single hit as five magic missiles. They were honestly overkill against most gnolls, so he targeted the odd elite hidden amongst the lower ranking troops.

The front line of the gnolls began to all panic thanks to the damage they were taking and the stinging bugs, and Harry decided to shift tactics. "Back up! Jaheira, Tangling Vines. Everyone else, shift to long range weapons!"

The spell struck, capturing the entire upper portion of the stairs in its area of effect, and trapping fourteen regular gnolls and three elites. At first only a few were trapped but between that and the ones who had panicked, none of the gnolls could get to Harry and the others.

However, as the final gnolls near the top of the stairs fell back into the area above them, Harry chanced to glance at the time winced. *Four minutes remaining before the next respawn. I hope those traps we left behind us work.*

Harry however couldn't concentrate on that right now and he knew it. They couldn't allow the two Flinds to simply wait until they had sufficient numbers to swamp them again, between them and the patrols behind them they could overcome the adventurers, or just retreat into the fortress and warned the rest of the dungeon members. "Form up! Formation Hammer Time! Edwin, Garrick, fireball and grease spell towards the tents, then Jaheira and Edwin, concentrate on summoning spells when we get up there. The rest of us, take them at the run!"

"Yes!" Minsc roared, thrusting his massive Claymore into the sky that made Harry very glad the storm had passed because he was certainly the tallest that'll object and area at the moment. "Let us move on! For my Witch, for goodness!"

“You heard the man,” Harry said, placing Khalid in the center of the three of them, as the others formed a single line behind him. Harry put himself on the side which would be closest to the tents when they reached the parade ground.

The same message as before popped up although this time, Harry noticed that the efficacy of the Formation was barely worth it, adding only 1/10th to the damage they could deal. Just like the information announcement had warned, formations lost their impact in a dungeon over time. *Damn, even if no one we’ve faced with it has survived to bring word? I call that ruddy cheating.*

That didn’t stop him however from leading the charge up the steps. They had to keep the momentum, or else this whole dungeon would turn against them.

Two Gnolls were stationed near the top, and they barked out warnings before the three warriors slammed into the bodily, knocking their halberds to one side, and then pushing them out of the way, stabbing with their swords. The two gnolls fell, and the charge continued into the nearest clump of Gnolls, which had congregated around the fire.

As the ‘hammer’ twisted in that direction, Edwin and Garrick turned their own attention to the other side of the parade ground. They launched their spells towards the tents, and with the rain having stopped, the two spells went off without a hitch.

First the grease spell hit, spreading like a miasma around the area, covering every tent, the wet cobblestones and every gnoll within sixty feet of the impact point. Then the fireball struck, exploding all over the area, causing damage to several dozen gnolls and the two Flinds standing there, setting the grease on fire. Only one of the gnolls died, but most of the others were panicked, rolling on the wet cobblestone to put out the fires in their fur.

Then Edwin and Jaheira were both concentrating, summoning their creatures into being between them and the group of gnolls around the tents. That group multiplied as the magic users watched, but by that point, four dire wolves were attacking, along with two ogres as Harry and the others pushed into the rest of the group around the firepit. Several of them stumbled back and fell into the firepit, while Harry and the others cut still more down. “Finish them off,” Harry shouted. “Finish this group off. Imoen, Edwin, everyone, keep firing at the group around the tents!

Unfortunately, as Harry had known, the open area here was too large for the summons to cover. The gnolls around the tents led by the Flinds began to envelop around the line of summoned creatures, as well as sending several of them towards the magic users. At the same time, the group around the firepit recoiled, spreading out and away before coming back in, doing much the same thing as their fellows, attempting to envelop the head of the 'hammer'. Soon enough all of them were being pressed back hard.

In an effort to shield the two spellcasters, Garrick and Imoen moved ahead of Jaheira and Edwin, to face the gnolls that moved towards them after moving around the summoned creatures. but it quickly became apparent that neither of them were up to facing five times their number of gnolls in hand-to-hand combat. Even with Garrick's songs stirring their muscles, they just couldn't do enough damage in this kind of furious me. One on one they'd still win of course, maybe even two on one. Three or four on one, that just wasn't going to happen.

Jaheira and Edwin did their best to help the two, while Harry and the others desperately tried to finish off the enemies around the fire. But the Flinds had proven smarter than Harry had thought, and the enemies on that side had moved into two groups, moving around the already encircled summoned beasts. Those beasts were still blocking many, and had killed several, but the Flinds knew how to use their numbers anyway.

As Harry tried to think of what to do while dodging and blocking blows from his own immediate enemies, one of the Flinds reached the front of the battlefield. Imoen had barely a moment to pull her blade out of the side of a gnoll before she was smashed off her feet to the side, crying out in pain as her arm broke under the blow.

Critical hit! Imoen has taken 25 damage. Her arm is broken. This is a long-term wound that impairs Imoen, giving her the status, crippled.

Harry, ducking under a halberd blow, lashing as he did out with a kick that caught the gnoll in the side of the knee. It felt screaming and Harry was scrambling back towards the others shouting out over his shoulder "Minsc, berserker mode! Khalid with me."

Instantly Minsc dropped his claymore, not even bothering to put it back into his item box as he pulled out the halberd the Chesley Crusher, which was a + 6 for anyone with 36 or more strength, as Minsc would have once he entered his berserk state. Then he roared, a thunderous bellow that put Harry in mind of a lion in comparison to the

hyena bleating of the Gnolls all around them. “Face the might of Minsc and Boo, evil! **GRRRAAAAAA!!!!!!**”

Minsc has activated the Barbarian technique, Berserker!

Minsc has gained immunity to all mental attacks. Minsc has gained plus 40 to strength and constitution.

Minsc is now Enraged. He can no longer tell friend from foe, and only the ability fading or his death can knock him out of it.

The gnolls around Minsc recoiled and his halberd smashed theirs to pieces, his return blows cutting their bodies in two, blood and viscera literally exploding in every direction as he howled and roared and laughed maniacally. Thanks to his berserker strength the speed penalty of the Chesley Crusher didn't come into effect, and the extra damage it caused was frankly insane, setting aside Minsc's immense strength and berserk ability to ignore damage.

With that aspect of the fight under control, Harry shouted out further commands, ordering Garrick to grab Imoen and retreat back to the top of the stair, as he barreled between Jaheira and Edwin into the Flind that had broken Imoen's arm as it strode towards them. The Flind turned and took his charge with its halberd in defensive position and Harry ground to a halt, before he was pushed backwards off-balance.

The Flind then twirled it's halberd, coming down with an overhand blow that Harry couldn't dodge. His shield did its best, blocking the blow, but ten of it's durability went with it, and the Flind then kicked out at Harry, catching him in the chest.

That was a move no other gnoll had done before, and it completely surprised Harry, nearly putting him on his rear. He stumbled back again, only saved by Khalid stepping forward to block the Flind's next blow. Regaining his feet Harry brought his sword around in a massive attack, shouting out, “Cleave!” as he hacked at the Flind's side.

The attack did its work, and his sword found itself buried halfway through the Flind, doing more than enough damage to kill the creature. However Harry's blade was now caught, and he twisted away quickly, pulling out another sword. This one was the one unfortunately that he had been using all day. Still, two more Gnolls died before it shattered in his grip.

He grabbed out a third sword from his Item Box, grateful that he'd bought two back in the last town they'd been in. Despite that, this was his last sword, and Harry made a note to retrieve the one he'd left stuck in the flind's body. Regardless, Harry moved forward to help one of the ogres that Edwin had conjured into being, gesturing Khalid with him. Harry hoped that they could once more create a bulwark to protect their long rang fighters while Jaheira healed up Imoen's arm.

But three of the four dire wolves were down by this point, and more of the gnolls had worked around the far end of their line. There many of them had run into Minsc, who roared and shouted and screamed his defiance. He was like a rock now, slaughtering all enemies that got close.

Despite that, Harry and the remaining summoned monsters couldn't hold the line. The Gnolls were simply too numerous, pushing through and around them to attack Garrick, Imoen, Jaheira and Edwin. As the others pulled back for a moment, Jaheira laid out with her staff, blocking the blows of the halberds seeking her life.

Then Khalid was there, pulling back from the line, leaving Harry on his own along with one summoned wolf and one remaining ogre to form a triangle. Luckily the summoned creatures obeyed his command to form that triangle, but Harry took several hard blows in the next few minutes the fight so furious Harry could no longer concentrate on the larger battle.

Yet that was next to nothing to the fight going on around Khalid.

The half-elves tried his best, he really did. But he couldn't defend all four of the others even as they tried to retreat back down the step, forcing them to once more come at him only a few at a time. But the steps were so wide Khalid couldn't cover them all, and Garrick had to step forward to help. This led to their first casualty.

Garrick's short sword stabbed into one gnoll having ducked under the blow from his halberd, but another gnoll moved around it rapidly, it's halberd flashing out to his side. Garrick was able to get his medium shield up in time to block the blow, but it pushed him off balance, and then a third gnoll attacked on his other side. Garrick tried to block the blow, but his sword shattered, and Garrick fell back, about to shout for help before the gnoll whose attack his shield had block stepped forward again.

It's halberd head caught him in the side, his leather armor, not stopping the blow at all, and he fell back crying in agony. Another blow silenced that cry and caved in his chest.

Imoen killed one of the three gnolls attacking Garrick with a well-placed arrow, her arm having been healed by Jaheira, who took out the other one with an overhand blow from her staff which shattered his skull. And Khalid killed the next two, as they continued to fall back around the firepit.

But Garrick's spell had died with him, the bonuses to strength and dexterity leaving all of the Adventurers. Now all but Minsc were being pressed back hard, without any formation to help. Khalid fell with a cry, taking a blow to the shoulder, and another to the side. His armor turned the one on the side, leaving him with bruised ribs rather than a gash that would've ended his life, but his shoulder had cracked under the other blow, and his shield arm was now useless.

He felt fear rising from within him, but then Harry was there. The enemies had long since stopped spawning, and the last Flind had found its death against Harry's sword, although Harry had taken a hard knock to his leg killing him. With Edwin being pressed so hard further down the steps and no longer able to see him, Harry had taken a chance to use an Expeliarmus, knocking down the enemies around him. He'd left the last of the dire wolves – which had somehow survived to this point - and the still Berserk Minsc to finish them off, racing into the mass facing the rest of his party.

Critical hit, you have achieved backstab.

Critical hit you have achieved backstab.

The two messages flashed in front of Harry's eyes as he put down two more gnolls. This left only four, and Jaheira used one of her more powerful healing spells on her husband, healing his shield arm. Between the two of them and Imoen joining Jaheira and Edwin in long-range attacks the last four gnolls fell quickly.

Harry blinked through several of the messages that had appeared in his head as the battle had continued, until he came to the one that he was most concerned about.: The respawn time. It had passed and gone, but no enemies had appeared. Yet. "Edwin, stay away from Minsc for now, but destroy the Heart Stone. Everyone else, let's prepare to be attacked from below."

“What about Garrick?” Jaheira asked gesturing down to the young man’s body. She felt remorse at his death of course, and sadness. But there was literally nothing they could do for him now. *I could have resurrected him if I was able to access all the spells available to a Druid of my true level rather than at this, this emasculated mode of mine, but as it is that is impossible.*

Harry glanced Garrick, leaning down and closing his eyes. “We’ll deal with that after we deal with the enemies coming up at us from behind. Imoen?”

Without a word Imoen raced down the stairs, disappearing into her Hide in Shadows spell. Harry watched his map for a moment simply leaning his head back, staring up at the sky as if he was exhausted, which all of them were by this point. That fight had been far too fast and far too furious for anyone’s liking.

What was to Harry’s liking however was the fact that Imoen had passed the place where they’d found the gnolls hiding under a tarp from the rain and was now pushing to the north then down towards where the Flind had been. None of the Flinds were alive thankfully. It was evident they were not connected to the respawn time of the rest of the dungeon’s monsters.

The next second, as another message scrolled across his eyes about Edwin’s destroying the Heart Stone, Imoen turned back, moving down the stairwell to renew a few more small traps. They were out of parts for the grease trap after the last battle, which was unfortunate, although the grease itself might still be useful to Harry’s mind. And she eventually found a few gnolls – only four, coming up towards them. Imoen led them back, and the others, including Edwin who had rejoined them, pelted them from long range, all four falling quickly.

Once the fight was over Harry left the others, and moved up towards the parade ground, moving towards Minsc, who had finished hacking unconscious and knocked off their feet Gnolls to death. Harry downed several Healing Berries and then intoned, the tickling and cheering charms towards Minsc. The spell hit and Minsc began to guffaw, his eyes clearing. Harry held the spell on him until he dropped his weapon, then backed away out of hitting range and cancelled the charms.

Minsc groaned, holding his side which ached for many reasons at the moment, then his head, then his stomach then his head again. “Ooh, my head feels as if I decided

to take part in the headbutting contest once more only to run into Snarl and his metal forehead. What happened?"

"We won." Harry said bluntly looking around them. "Now come on." Harry then back towards the others with Minsc following, taking a last glance to the tent which had contained the heart stone.

He found the rest of his party surrounding Garrick's body, and knelt down, touching the man lightly. He then saw the notification,

You have found the body of the adventurer Garrick. Garrick is dead.

However, as his head is not been chopped off, or his heart pierced, or his brain damaged in any way beyond what already had been, a resurrection ritual or spell will enable him to come back to life. So long as his body remains in one piece.

Do you wish to add Garrick dead your item box?

Harry sighed, but then nodded his head slowly and reached out to the accept button which looked as if he'd just reached out a second hand to touch Garrick's chest. There was a brief flash of light, and the body disappeared.

You have accepted the quest: Revive Garrick.

Killed in the pursuit of a quest while in your company, Garrick the Bard is still able to be revived in the future. Take him to a temple or high level Druid or priest, and they will be able to see to the revivification.

Rewards: +200 Respect/Trust with Garrick.

Additional rewards vary.

Edwin's eyes widened. "You are able to add a dead body to your item box! Amazing," He stated making the deduction easily.

Harry grunted, but didn't reply, just turning and walking back up the steps, with Imoen skipping up the stairs ahead of them. As they walked, Harry examined each of them in turn. A little over half of the healing berries were gone by this point, Minsc having eaten almost all of his along with the health potion just now to get over the damage he'd taken under the control of his berserk fury. Harry had also eaten almost all of his, Imoen's nearly half of hers and Khalid a few.

Yet Jaheira still had four healing spells, two medium, two minor, plus a medium healing spell on her staff. Edwin had one scorcher spell, one Fireball and a Protection from Normal Weapons scroll – a truly precious thing Edwin hadn't mentioned before this - remaining. He also had a single summoning spell left, whereas Jaheira had two, one from her staff, and one from her own reserve. She also had three Barkskin spells she had yet to use.

Imoen and Harry also had their Blood Magic, which was unlimited even if they were still constrained in when to use it thanks to Edwin being there. That, and the hit to their health each spell took.

"I pushed down that little walkway there, find anything but another fire pit, and an old ballista pointing out to sea. Nothing else," Imoen reported as she moved back to the rest of the group.

"Then we need to figure out where to go from here. Through the regular entrance, or climbing over those rocks and trying to see if we can get in from the top?"

"Up top," everyone said. Harry nodded, grateful for their unified solidarity.

He, Imoen and Minsc led the way with the others following. They didn't find any more enemies on the roof of the keep thankfully, save for a few rabid dogs which they easily put down. The barking didn't even bring any attention from below, thankfully. But Harry knew that another patrol was due to head out another ten minutes, and then the jig would be properly up. The rest of the guard posts being empty they'd understand, or at least not be as concerned about. The massive group of gnolls and two Flinds missing from the parade ground? That, would spread the alarm far too quickly.

Still, we've got 2 ½ hours before the next respawn time too, and there really were fewer monsters this last time around. One more heart stone, and the Dungeon Boss. Then the dungeon will be 'cleared', Harry reflected.

On the roof of the keep the group split off into teams of two, until they found an entrance that would allow them back down to keep. The door was old and rotten and Minsc and Harry were able to pull the wood away, allowing them access.

Inside they found a spiral staircase heading down into the spiral until they came out into the top lore of the main keep. At the bottom, they found another doorway, which was locked. Imoen unlocked it after a few minutes, although she had to use her

unlocking spell to do it, her first attempt to use her Thief's ability having failed. But that spell didn't cause any splash or anything visible and with Imoen intoning the spell directly into the lock, Edwin didn't notice anything.

They came out of the staircase into a hallway which looked like a noble's formal receiving room. It was a long, wide room, with several fires set here and there through it. There were a few flinds scattered around the fires, cooking something over them, while a few two more slept on the ground wherever they wished. In the center of the room was a small dais that held a single large chair, it's back to them.

Worse the instant they entered, a strange force rose behind them, pushing all of them through the doorway. Then the door clanged shut behind them as a message appeared in Harry's view once more.

You have entered the domain of the Dungeon Boss, Gnoll Chieftain Nashaka! You cannot leave until the Dungeon Boss is slain.

That clanging noise drew the attention of every gnoll in the room and the Chieftain rose from its chair, as did the Flinds, standing up and turning in their direction quickly. Normally six Flinds would be enough to grab Harry's attention all on their own, but next to the chieftain they paled into insignificance.

The chieftain was massive, at least two feet taller than the other gnolls, although he was a bit stoop-shouldered so this wasn't immediately apparent. His shoulders were wide, wider than even an ogre's. It wore what looked like a full plate armor made for it's body, even its legs and a helmet, out of which its ears jutted to either side, its eyes dull orange burning from within the depths of the helmet. It's halberd gleamed with some kind of inner light over the edge, and it's claws also gleamed like metal in the light of the fires. It also had a Health Bar in gleaming Red above it, a wide, red bar superimposed over the world which none of the other enemies they'd faced thus far had.

"Well cock," Harry growled, before shouting out commands. "Edwin Fireball then Summoning spell! Jaheira, Tangling Vines at the door and then the same before switching to defensive spells. Imoen, Vanish, Minsc and Khalid, press forward with me." By this point Harry was very conscious of the first rule of battle in this world: protect your mages and long range fighters. Let them do the killing for you.

Yet even as Harry was shouting, the new Gnoll Chieftain was also shouting out orders, while several more gnolls, elites all of them appeared around him three to a side.

Warning, Dungeon Boss has used passive summons. Every two minutes the Dungeon Boss will act as a respawn point, creating a group of randomly chosen warriors to defend it.

(Note: Higher Level Dungeon Bosses can summon elite troops every time, and even choose which kind occasionally depending on the basic intelligence level of the species the Dungeon Boss Represents.)

Edwin's fireball slammed into the center of the hall, killing two of the suddenly summoned gnolls and setting three of them alight, but the other one joined the rush front with the rest of the seven Flinds that had already been in the room. At the same time, the Dungeon Boss slammed his halberd into the ground shouting out at a command in its own language. A blast of light came towards Harry and the others, some kind of magical spell releasing along the ground towards them.

Dungeon Boss Nathan has used arcing quake.

This attack goes around long the ground, causing people along the edge of it's attack radius to lose their feet, and in the direct line of attack to be electrocuted, causing one half the Intelligence points of the Dungeon Boss.

It is a Dungeon Boss special spell. Cooldown time: 7 Minutes

(Note: higher Level Dungeon Bosses can...)

That was as far as Harry could read before he had to concentrate on the incoming attack itself. In reply Harry slammed his shields down into the ground, hunkering down behind it as one hand pressed up against the inside of the tower shield, muttering out. "Protego!" just as the attack hit. He had timed it perfectly and even Jaheira and the others who knew about Harry's Blood Magic spells couldn't detect a difference between the blue-white light of the lightning aspect of Nathan's attack, and the Protego on the shield.

At the same time, Jaheira finished casting Barkskin on her husband. As the battle continued she moved on to cast it on Minsc, thinking he would need it the most, then Harry and Imoen.

At the same time Harry cancelled the spell and hurled himself up and forward the instant the attack dissipated, racing towards the nearest Flinds. Behind them, the Dungeon Boss seemed to be startled at the way it's attack had failed on his shield, but

now it marched towards him, and between one step and the next barreled forward like an out of control car.

Dungeon Boss has used Shoulder Charge.

Cooldown time: 2 Minutes.

Harry barely got his tower shield between them again thanks to his sword and shield technique coming into play, but he was smashed off of his feet and noticed the durability of his shield had taken one heck of a hammering, going down 40 points, leaving him with a little over half remaining. It had taken cumulative damage up to this point, the magic in it slowly eroding under constant low-level attacks.

He also lost his grip on his sword, but that was no matter, as Harry simply pulled out a second one from his dungeon space. It was the last extra sword he had, but that was all right, and he danced around the next blow, then the next, his own sword flicking out. But the Dungeon Boss twisted its his halberd, blocking the blows easily, the end of its shaft coming up, crashing into the bottom Harry's hastily interposed tower shield. The blow was strong enough to cause Harry to stagger back, while elsewhere in the room the rest of his friends were not having an easy time of it, something Harry could only take in at a glance.

Khalid had taken a slash to one forearm, which was bleeding slightly but not dangerously. Around it, his shield was also being battered into uselessness, while Minsc was being pushed backwards towards Edwin and Imoen. Edwin and Jaheira however were not engaged in hand to hand yet, and it was time to make certain that remained the case. "Summon monsters! Every summons spell you can!"

Without hesitation Edwin and Jaheira switched their spellcasting, and in the next moment, one ogre, and one Ent appeared there. In the next second two bears also appeared summoned up by one of the spells on Jaheira's druid staff. Massive Kodiak bears they roared with her fury, attacking the nearest people, who happened to be the gnolls, specifically a group of Flind.

They bore down three of them before the other gnoll could respond, their halberds hacking at the sides of the Bears, whose fur and fat actually worked as pretty decent armor against the slashing attacks from the Flinds favored. The bears, now thoroughly enraged, smashed the striking halberds to pieces, and barreled forward, their mighty jaws crunching, their paws crashing.

The Gnoll Chieftain however, brought Harry's attention back to him with a thump, as it leapt high, and slammed its feet down again on the ground causing an earthquake.

Dungeon Boss has used Stomp.

This is a mid-to-low level Warrior skill that is also available for monsters.

Stomp creates a tremor in the ground, commensurate to the level of the user's Strength.

All enemies around the user will need to either have a Dexterity of over 20 or make a saving throw or be knocked down.

Cooldown time: 3 minutes.

This was followed instantly by another few messages. Jaheira let loose a curse Harry would never have thought her capable of. The summoned creatures all staggered save the Ent. Edwin fell to his knees, and grabbed at something underneath his red cloak, his eyes wide in a suddenly frightened face. Of Harry's actual party members, Imoen and surprisingly Minsc had retained their feet, while Khalid and Harry did not.

Save roll Failed!

You have been knocked down.

And of course this meant that most of them took hits. Jaheira especially took several slashes before she could roll behind her husband's legs. Edwin didn't take much damage, but Khalid took a few hard knocks.

Harry too was now flat on the floor, rolling desperately as the Gnoll Chieftain slammed down its halberd. It was joined by several others, and only Imoen's appearing behind one and backstabbing him in the kidneys allowed Harry a moment to get to his feet. His tower shield interposed itself between Imoen and the next Flind, blocking his blow, as Harry pushed it out of the way, his sword flicking up into the Flind's chest.

By that point, Harry had noticed that he could tell the cool down times of the abilities that the Gnoll Chieftain was using, and knew he had three minutes before he could use that attack again, and even longer to use the other skill he'd shown.

He backed away, pulling out a throwing axes and hurling it at the Gnoll Chieftain. This was the first time he'd used that rather expensive weapon, but his skill with axes was enough to let him throw it with relative ease. The blow was accurate, catching the

Chieftain in the chest, and pairing off a good 10 hit points from the health bar that Harry could see above it, the weapon disappearing in a flash of magical light and fury. The chieftain in turn staggered back retreating behind two of its guards and this allowed Harry to not only pull out his sword again, and cut into two more of the Gnoll, but also shout out more commands.

He and Khalid swiftly met up, protecting Jaheira and Edwin as they retreated into the corner of the room, Imoen once more disappearing under her Hide In Shadows to allow Minsc to join them. Once there, the two spell users used the last of their Summon spells, the summoned creatures they had already called forth being dead on the floor chopped to bloody offal. A cougar, two regular wolves, and another ogre appeared, roaring their fury as they attacked the gnolls, letting Minsc and Harry gain some more health from a few Health berries.

But the summon time for the Chieftain's automatic random respawn had also hit zero, and this time, six Flinds appeared. They all charged forward in groups of two to join those already in the room, showing an ability to work together and a dangerous level of skill as they attacked the summoned creatures.

"Edwin, concentrate on the Chieftain, Silence I think, if you have that spell left, then hurt him as much as possible at range!"

Harry grunted, as his tower shield took a blow from one of the Flinds on its surface, the strength of it actually pushing Harry backwards. Luckily, these Flinds like the ones they already slain in the dungeon didn't seem to have the same abilities as the first one they had dealt with in the Xvart Village. That particular blue-furred gnoll attempted to stab forward again, but Harry rushed forward himself, pushing the enemy's halberd up and to the side, his sword stabbing forward. He caught the Flind in the chest, peeling off a large portion of its health, and then Khalid stabbed in from the side, ending its life.

But then, the Gnoll Chieftain was on them, pushing two of his Flinds to either side in order to smash Minsc to the side with a display of strength that made Harry gasp. He gasped again when the halberd flicked back to the other way, nearly decapitating him. A last instant duck saved Harry's life, but he was still smashed flat, his helmet crushed in the side and his head ringing. If not for the Barkskin spell on him, Harry knew that might have knocked him out entirely.

You have suffered a critical hit, minus 25 points to health.

You are not quite concussed, but your head is telling you that was a near run thing.

Total health: 75/120

The Gnoll Chieftain stood over him, and brought it is halberd down, but Harry rapidly interposed the tower shield, lunging up off of his feet as hard as he could, meeting the blow and pressing upwards. His sword flicked out underneath the Gnoll Chieftain's guard, stabbing twice, pairing off more health, and the Gnoll Chieftain backed away to bring its halberd into play again but Harry didn't relent, pressing forward hard.

As one of the timers he was keeping track of dinged down, Harry watched his opponent's legs, and when he saw them bunch in preparation for a jump, Harry jumped up off the ground too, an instant before the Gnoll Chieftain used stomp again. That caused some surprise in the Gnoll Chieftain's face, and Harry's sword point caught it on the side of its head, cutting across one of its eyes.

Critical hit, you have blinded the Gnoll Chieftain Nathan on the right side of his face.

Having made his own save against the Stomp, Khalid tried to take advantage of this, but he was quickly engaged by a few Flinds, both of the wolves Jaheira had summoned recently dead by this point. Indeed, he nearly found himself in trouble, a halberd blow taking him in the thigh.

At the same time, Harry also tried to follow up only to take a hit from the side, as he landed, a light one, but it made him stumble on his landing. A second later he Harry grunted, as the Gnoll Chieftain halberd shaft caught him in the chest hurling him backwards. His armor dented but held, yet Harry found himself unable to breathe for a moment, forced entirely on the defensive.

You have cracked a rib, breathing will be more difficult, -15 to health, -5 to health every 2 minutes this wound goes untreated.

Behind Harry, Edwin was concentrating on backing up his ogre, and did not look to the side to notice his friends were in trouble. Indeed, it was debatable he would have at all since he had ignored Harry's orders to concentrate what damage dealing long range spells he had left on the Dungeon Boss.

Minsc on the other hand did notice and he instantly decided what he had to do. He switched out from his heavy Claymore again to the Chesley Crusher, before bellowing out

his warcry as he once more called upon his berserk fury. "You will not stop me from rescuing fair Dynaheir when we are so close! GRAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!"

The Flind that he had been fighting had stepped forward, grinning maliciously and thrusting his halberd forward to take advantage of the time that Minsc had to take to switch weapons, but then found his weapon smashed to pieces by the heavier halberd. He wasn't surprised for long as Minsc snarled and cut him down with back swipe, before racing into the Flinds that were attacking Harry from the side.

Two of the three turned to engage him, and Harry thrust his sword up into the skull from under his jaw of the other one. Khalid and Jaheira instantly turned their attention to other things, as Harry shouted out "I need healing, then Jaheira, backup..."

Imoen appeared then, stabbing the Gnoll Chieftain in the back, or attempting to at least. But the Gnoll Chieftain had turned and took the blow in the side, before lashed out faster than Imoen could avoid, not with his halberd but with a kick. She was hurled through the air with by the force of the kick, her small, spare frame unable to even try to hold up against that as another message appeared in Harry's view.

Imoen has taken a Critical Hit. -35 to health.

Again, it was only Jaheira's earlier application of the Barkskin spell that kept her from taking at least a crippling injury. As it was Imoen rolled with the blow, letting it carry her away from the rest of the battle where she could once more use her Hide in Shadows.

At the same time, once more the timer for the Dungeon Boss's automatic respawn ended, and five gnoll elites and another Flind appeared.

This action had pulled Harry and Minsc away from protecting Edwin where he was standing on the right side of their defensive position. While Minsc was hacking and destroying at the front of the battle and Harry using the moment to let Jaheira heal his rib, a few of these new enemies took what they saw as the easy option charging the man in red. A few were felled by his spells but then the others were within striking range.

Edwin protected himself ably from the halberd's of his foes for a few seconds thanks to a spell called Protection from Normal Weapons scintillating in the air around him, making him practically immune to nonmagically-enhanced weapons. But it could only absorb so much damage, before it failed. It did so now, as the Gnoll Chieftain turned to dealing with Minsc, smashing the berserk Ranger aside.

This cleared the way for another two flinds to charge forward just as the spell around Edwin failed. Harry leaped forward, attempting to get in the creature's way, but he could only take one of the flinds out of the equation, hammering into his side and slowing him down, his sword stabbing. The metal of his sword broke, and Harry was flung aside for a second before he could rearm himself. The other Flind then stabbed forward, his halberd taking Edwin straight into the chest even as the man tried to intone another spell.

The Red Wizard stared down at the chunk of metal in his chest, and then gasping fell to his knees. "Curse you! I said, this wasn't...worth... dying for..."

He fell to the floor dead, but before the Flind attacking him could slice his head off, Harry leaped around the one fighting him, pulling his hammer from his weapons space and smashing the Flind's head in from the side, the force of the blow sending the body staggering even as it also crushed its skull.

He looked down at Edwin's body, seeing the notification that the man had died as it flashed up into his line of vision, before turning away and shouting out "Imoen! Spells free, Stupefy!"

The dual Stupefy washed over the entire room, knocking the weaker gnolls unconscious into the floor. This left the remaining Flinds still on their feet, pressing in hard around Khalid and Jaheira, the area around Harry devoid of conscious enemies for a moment. Jaheira was bleeding from numerous cuts, her chain mail not up to stopping the halberd ends, while Khalid had flung aside the ruined remains of his shield, and was now using his sword with both hands, showing a skill and dexterity that bespoke of his true level rather than the extremely limited level that he had been reduced to.

Harry charged forward shouting out "Imoen, deal with those three!" as he raced forward, the Stupefy spells having cleared the way to the Chieftain as he backed away in order to use the technique Arcing Quake. The Chieftain turned, trying to keep Harry in sight, but Harry quickly shifted from his hammer to his throwing hammer, and hurled a second one at the Chieftain.

The monster smacked it aside with its halberd, but its attempt to use the dangerous ability was halted in place, and Harry thrust out a hand shouting "Incendio!" a tongue of flame flashed out, something like Agganazzar's Scorcher, only a bit more targeted and draining 15 points from Harry's health.

The Gnoll Chieftain screamed as he fell backwards, while behind him, Imoen had dropped her sword, and intoned “Lacero!” From one hand a whip appeared, and she raced forward now dancing between the Flinds, while Jaheira knelt next to her husband’s form, intoning her second to last healing spell.

Even as it’s fur caught fire still the Gnoll Chieftain didn’t go down, or rather it did, but only to roll and put out the fire in its fur. It then raised its halberd and was able to block Harry’s first blow, from the hammer. The two of them strained against one another, and Harry smirked suddenly, the tower shield in his other hand disappearing as he thrust out that hand, shouting out “Expeliarmus!”

The magical blast slammed into the Gnoll Chieftain, and the Gnoll Chieftain found itself flung backwards where it rolled. Ignoring the fact that spell had put his health in the red Harry charged forward and his hammer came down on its head, once, twice.

It thrust up desperately with its halberd in just one hand, a short stabbing blow that took Harry in the chest, lifting him off the floor, penetrating his chest plate slightly and making Harry very grateful that he hadn’t tried to use a bombarding spell. If he had, that blow would’ve been enough to kill him, so low was his health.

But then he was hit by the last healing spell from Jaheira, and before the chieftain could pull back to strike again Harry brought his hammer down a third time. Finally the health bar above the Dungeon Boss disappeared, as did his brain and skull under the blow from a hammer.

Harry fell to his knees, as the Dungeon Boss’s body slowly started to scintillating with light as a new message appeared, its sides glinting gold as all important messages did.

You have slain the Dungeon Boss! You are one step closer to clearing the dungeon.

Remember, experience is cumulative, and you will only receive the experience for this dead when you clear the dungeon.

Hint: Remember to check his body for valuable loot. The nature of loot **does not** follow logic!

Dimly, Harry pulled out some more of the healing berries, looking over to where Minsc was raging and slashing at many of the downed gnolls all around him. The three

Flinds had been practically flayed by Imoen, and now Khalid was back on his feet, looking groggy, but still in one piece. He too was eating his last handful of the healing berries, chomping into them as fast as possible while Jaheira did the same with the few that she had been given.

“Khalid, Jaheira. You two have better hearing than we do, can you hear anything out past that door?” Harry asked, his voice sounding slurred to his own ears. Like the cavern entrances, doorways like that and the town for, doorways block Harry’s map.

When his health ticked up into the yellow, Harry stopped eating the berries, leaving him with six of them left, and he quickly looked at his friends and allies one after another. At the same time, Imoen used the calming charm and cheering charm on Minsc, as Harry had earlier to knock him out of his Berserk state.

Minsc was once more in a bad way, but Harry knew he had at least a few more health berries on him, so perhaps with Harry’s own mixed in, he’d be back into fighting trim, if not well off. *At this point I doubt that’s a possibility for any of us.* While Minsc was the worst off now, the others had all taken heavy hits, and none of them had the health points Harry and Minsc had.

Jaheira moved forward, and Harry looked at a few of the messages blinking in the corner of his line of sight. It looked as if they still had two hours before the next respawn time, but that the patrol time had come and gone at least once, maybe twice since the battle began. Still, I can’t hear any hue and cry, so maybe...

The half-elf Druid set herself against the doorframe, listening intently, then shook her head. “Nothing. I don’t detect anything out there.”

“In your opinion, will the rest of these gnolls know we’ve killed their chieftain?”

“No. If one of the heart stones had been here, then yes, they would have known. As it is, they will have no idea that he has fallen, unless there is some kind of set schedule wherein some stop by here in his private area. This hall is obviously for his use and those of his elite, so I think we’re safe enough,” Jaheira stated.

Khalid nodded in agreement with his wife, still looking a little under the weather. Like the rest, his health status was deep in the yellow, but unlike Harry, who had broken three new ribs in the chieftan’s last attack. “I b, b, believe, that the Chieftain would w, w,

want to the area to be separated f, f, from the rest of his tribe, all the better to l, l, lord it over them.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” On heavy feet Harry moved over to Edwin, nodding to Minsc who Imoen had put through the same treatment Harry had earlier to break him out of his berserk state. “How many more spells do you have?” Harry asked looking over at Jaheira.

“Only the one tangling vine I’m afraid,” she said slowly, gesturing to her staff which she had lifted from the floor from where she dropped it earlier in favor of her club before rushing over to the door. “I still have one Nature’s Wrath, one Buzzing Flies spell and one healing spell one here. We’ve gone through all the rest. I do hope that the mother dryad will be willing to recharge it for me once more.

So saying she strode over to Harry, laying the end of her staff on his shoulder very lightly as she intoned the spell, closing her eyes and concentrating on her connection to her staff, the better to control the flow of the healing magic. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he felt his body becoming less heavy, his broken ribs healing themselves under her direction. “Thank you,” he murmured.

She smiled at him, and Harry was struck not for the first time at how smiling like that transformed her normally severe expression. “You are welcome Harry.”

“Even if I nearly got you, your husband and all of us killed?” he asked quietly.

“Harry you lead us into a trapped is true, but it is a trap that would have captured any adventurer, save perhaps the most high level bands,” she replied softly, shaking her head. “True, if my husband and I could fight at our true levels, we would’ve been able to fight our way out, but as it is we did as well as could be expected. Only Edwin died against the Dungeon Boss, and he did not die forever either. Do not beat yourself up over this. Believing that they are at fault for everything that occurs around them is something only the young are so foolish as to do, and I do not want to go back to calling you young one or child.”

“I don’t want that either,” Harry said with a laugh, but also throwing off his momentary guilt about what had occurred like an ill-fitting cloak. It was true after all. No one could have known that they would be thrust forward and locked into the room the instant they were in the presence of the Dungeon Boss, and they hadn’t been able to tell they were all in the presence of a Dungeon Boss before the door had opened. Harry still

thought they could have done better, but he wasn't going to wallow in guilt at how it turned out.

With a sigh, Harry moved over to Edwin, reaching down and closing his eyes, before placing his hand on the mage's chest, seeing the same message he'd seen when Garrick died. A second later, the mage disappeared into his item box. Then Harry leaned back, sighing, closing his eyes and just resting for a brief moment, before pushing himself to his feet determinedly, looking over at the corpse of the chieftain. "Minsc, come here for a second."

With two dead bodies in his item box, Harry had barely a pound left before he would started to be to feel it, which meant anything on the gnoll chieftain would have to be carried by someone else. Harry walked Minsc through the easy way to strip the Chieftain, causing Minsc to chuckle in delight, shaking his head. "Your Advanced Adventurer System is most amusing and helpful! I look forward to seeing what happens when we clear this dungeon!"

"At this point, I want a vote people," Harry said shaking his head. "I know I'm not as experienced as a few of you, and this is a big decision. Do any of you think we should rest here before searching the rest of the keep? We could rest, let Jaheira use her spells on us before moving on, and we've got enough junk around to barricade the two entrances easily."

"No!" Minsc shouted, his good humor fading instantly, now looking almost angry enough to accidentally enter his berserk mode. "My Witch is still out there somewhere, I will not rest when she is so close when so many of the obstacles between us have been cast down by the might boots of righteousness! Right Boo!?"

"I vote we rest," Jaheira said with a sigh of weariness. "But I am uncertain that even in this area we would be able to do so. Like my husband, I have been on dungeon dives before. And resting even in closed rooms is asking to be attacked in the night."

"Ja, J, Jaheira is right," Khalid said with a nod. "Enemies can literally s, s, spawn right on top of you if y, y, your luck is bad enough."

"All right," Harry said rubbing at his face wearily. "But, Minsc, Khalid, both of you switch to bow and arrows. I'll hold the front line. Harry gestured to his tower shield, patting it happily as he intoned, "Repairo!"

The tower shield's durability was re-enhanced to one hundred and Harry cheerfully chomped down on the last of his healing berries, the spell having knocked him into the red once more. Being in the red in health was not fun and brought with it a headache, along with something Harry would call a bone ache which was debilitating in the extreme. Wordlessly Jaheira also handed over some of her berries to the others, leaving all of them in the yellow. They were not exactly capable of a full fight, but at least healthy enough to engage the enemy.

With Harry in the lead, and without even looking at the items on the Chieftain yet – none of them were weapons, and the plate armor was in horrible repair - they moved over to the door and flung it open, with Harry hopping out quickly looking to either direction. No one was around, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Imoen past him, not needing orders to understand what her role was once more.

Harry watched as she updated the map, whispering to the others, all of whom knew about his map ability. "All right, one way is a dead-end, a few rooms, all empty from what Imoen's seeing. I'd assume they're full of junk or something. The other way..."

He smiled wearily as Imoen past her them, heading in the other direction and waited while she did so, chuckling as she slapped Khalid on the rear as she went. "The other way... shit. She's found about 30 warriors in a long hall, tough to make out individual dots in that horde. But they're down on the first floor, were on the second floor here. Imoen exited out onto a, what do you call that thing, like a balcony except it goes all around? Is there a special word for that?"

"I think you are getting rather too tired whatever your Constitution," Jaheira said frowning thoughtfully as Harry. "There doesn't need to be a special word for that, but I think you and Imoen might wish to look into the mental effects of too many blood magic spells in quick succession even if you are healing yourself from the health points that they take."

"Yo, you seemed somewhat p, p, punch drunk after the l, last time you had to use multiple s, s, spells in a row," Khalid observed, clapping the younger man on the shoulder.

"Later," Harry waved off their worries. After this fight I'll cheerfully look into that while we're recovering." Harry thought about it for a moment, then looked down at his suddenly full hand, which was holding a Potion of Invisibility. "Do you know how long it

takes someone to notice you once you come out from under a Potion of Invisibility if you're casting a spell?"

"The instant the spell hits the potion fades," Jaheira replied promptly.

"Good." With that Harry thrust the potion out to her. "In that case, I think I've got a plan. It's not pretty, but who cares?"

The plan was ridiculously simple really. Jaheira imbibed in the potion downing the entire bottle. Much like medicine, potions like that had to be taken all at once to have the intended effect. Then she moved down the corridor, joining Imoen and whispering instructions to her as the other girl had been coming back, having gone all around the balcony.

From where they had entered the balcony moved in two directions, around the main hall below, one side ending quickly against the wall while the other direction led to the stairs leading down and around the other side of the rectangular hall. There were no enemies on this level any longer, the other doorways being blocked off by fallen rocks.

The others waited down the corridor from the enemy until Harry said "Okay, judging by the movement of the enemy Jaheira's just intoned the spell. Let's move!"

With that, they all raced downwards, as Imoen flung a bottle of the grog they'd taken from the gnolls they'd fought when they met Minsc down onto the massive group of gnolls below. Harry tossed his own bottle, followed in rapid succession by two more bottles from Khalid and Minsc. A third bottle flew from Jaheira before she switched to her sling.

With her spell being able to cover the entire room, many of the gnoll had been caught in the tangling vines. Those that weren't turned, trying to race up the staircase but Harry was already there, and he shouted out, "Now!"

At that cry Imoen came out of her Hide in Shadows next to Jaheira thrusting both hands down towards the group, shouting, "Incendio!" The spells caught, and spread among the trapped gnolls via of the tangling vines, and the cooking oil, spreading the fire all around the room quickly.

Then Minsc and Khalid began to fire into the mass from one side, while Imoen and Jaheira took the other. Harry protected the one stairwell up, slamming his tower shield

into the ground, his hammer flicking out only occasionally as enemies came to him. At the same time, he smiled thinly as he saw the now-familiar message:

You have used the tactic: Killing Zone.

Like dogs and other wild animals, gnolls had a massive fear of fire. Harry had of course noticed this before, going so far back as the fight at the stream. He knew without a doubt that this tactic would work, and he was proven correct. The majority of the gnolls below broke, and with each one that panicked, the process became quicker. Even when the heart stone within the room began to spawn more creatures, they too were caught up in the fear, and the fires spreading among them.

It was still long going and the hanging tangling vines spell had long since faded, and Imoen nearly collapsed after having to redo the fire spell as the fires below started be put out by the sheer mass of gnolls stamping and rolling around. But none of the gnolls got past Harry's tower shield, and the others killed and kept on killing, slings and arrows winnowing the horde below until the last fell.

By that point all of them were exhausted, and they watched with almost dead eyes as the heart stone slowly rose up out of the center of the hall. "I don't have enough health to want to use a spell to shatter it," Harry said slowly, pulling out his throwing hammers. "These will have to do."

It took all three throwing hammers Harry had left, the magical weapons disappearing after they were used unfortunately, before the heart stone shattered.

You have destroyed the last heart stone! Due to this being the last heart stone, no further enemies will respawn in the dungeon during your time within.

Any enemies already spawned will remain in their positions, filled with a sense of unease and unwilling to leave their current positions. You are one step closer to clearing the dungeon.

Harry sighed, then looked over to Imoen and Minsc. "You two, I trust that you both can search the rest of this place?"

That search actually didn't take all that long. Only one area of the keep beyond what they'd already seen had to be explored. There, a single room which looked like a

servants quarters had been set up as a jail. Within Dynaheir lay against the wall, her hands bound above her head, a hood over her face.

Minsc smashed the iron bars down with a single blow from his halberd, not having switched back to his claymore, and strode forward. He then lifted the woman up, looking over at the others. "This is my which Dynaheir, I cannot thank you enough, you truly have been warriors of goodness and the lights today! Your deeds will be sung in the holes of my homeland forever!"

Harry smiled faintly, then his smile widened noticeably as he saw the message that had just appeared, one of many, each of them surrounded by a gold outline.

You have cleared the Dungeon, Gnoll Fortress! Congratulations!

This dungeon is cleared. No new monsters will spawn here for at least four and a half years.

Laughing, Harry pushed them all to the side with an eye movement, then looked back at Minsc. "Come on, let's head up to the Dungeon Boss's room. We'll fort up there for the rest of the day. I don't know about you, but I think we've all earned some naptime."

Even Jaheira could not stop herself from joining the cheer this statement evoked.

End Chapter

Chapter 7: Journey through the Weird

With the rescued but unconscious Dynaheir in Minsc's arms, the adventurers retreated to the room in which they had fought the gnoll chieftain and his immediate bodyguard. It was easily the most defensible position within the keep, other than the jail cell area, and no one was going to be using that area for anything.

Minsc carried Dynaheir into the large room and laid her out, followed by Jaheira, who looked her over and began to bind up her ankles, wrists and fingers with simple wrappings. At the same time, Harry and Khalid worked, creating a barricade in front of the door leading out to the rest of the keep. Unfortunately, Harry's being encumbered by the weight of two dead bodies in his Item Box impacted his ability to carry things physically, forcing Harry to take Garrick's body out and lay it aside until they were finished.

Imoen had offered to help, but with her puny strength stat, she could barely lift one of the smaller pieces of rubble and annoyed, Imoen moved over to the other two, helping to gently straighten out Dynaheir's broken fingers for Jaheira's splints, an act Minsc's larger fingers were unsuited for. The fact Dynaheir didn't even move as they did so was not a good sign, Imoen reflected.

The defense set up to his satisfaction, Harry turned his attention to creating a fire from the embers of one of the ones that had been in this room previously, one that hadn't been used recently. The smell of the meat the gnolls had been eating was not appetizing, to say the least. Harry was silent as he worked, staring into the fire as it began to grow for a few seconds before shaking himself and reaching into his Item Box for more of their foodstuffs.

He hadn't yet begun to cook when twin growls of hunger swept across the room, causing Harry to grab for his sword, before realizing the sound had come from Imoen and Minsc. "Sorry about that," Imoen laughed somewhat sheepishly. "It's been a long while since breakfast, know what I mean? The fruits we got from the Elder Dryad don't fill you up at all."

"While the noise of Minsc's mighty stomach was somewhat off-putting to little Boo, Minsc will not apologize. He is a mighty warrior, and mighty warriors must have equally mighty appetites."

"You will have to wait for a moment before Harry feeds us another of his amazing meals," Jaheira commanded, crooking a finger towards Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow at her, not moving any closer, and she gestured down to Dynaheir. "Tell me what your gamer skills can about this woman's injuries."

At that, Harry's flicker of ire at Jaheira's peremptory command faded, and he stood up, moving over to the others as he looked down at

Name: Dynaheir

Gender: Female

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Mage.

Relationship Status: N/A *Locked*

Note: the background if this individual is locked. The woman in question is unconscious.

Eye-clicking through that message, Harry looked at the negative statuses affecting the woman. He whistled a little, shaking his head. "Okay, so malnutrition and being hungry aren't exactly the same thing as I thought. First, Dynaheir is suffering from multiple concussions. I didn't even think that multiple concussions were a thing. Because of that, she's taken minus nine to her willpower, intelligence and wisdom. Ouch."

"It isn't, not really. You can have a concussion, but it can be worsened by further blows to the head while you should be recovering," Jaheira said, playing with the beads in her hair in worry. "That kind of thing can have a permanent negative effect on her mental health. Do you..."

"I don't see anything about that. The message says that the impact of the concussion on Dynaheir's stats can be cured if treated properly over time." When Jaheira nodded, Harry went on, reading the description of the second status effect. "Malnourished is next. The message about that says that she is suffering from long term nutritional needs, taking away from her stats at a minus one per day Dynaheir has been inflicted with it. 'Only through a long term well-balanced diet can this status be cured'," Harry quoted, before going on quickly. "On the other hand, hunger is a short-term malady that can be cured quickly through eating, but until it is cured, Dynaheir gets several minuses to all her physical stats, minus four across the board. But they aren't semi-permanent like the ones from malnutrition."

Tsking, Jaheira nodded. "The precise impact to her mental faculties and everything else is nice to know, but you don't see anything more important, internal bleeding or similar?" *Not that we could do anything about it right now if there was such*, the druid thought in annoyance. She had not a single healing spell to her name at present, and beyond Harry's Lay on Hands, which he had used at the end of the battle against the Gnoll Chieftan, none of the others had any such facility.

"No, I don't see anything like that. The only other two negative status penalties are hobbled and fingerless. Hobbled, I'm assuming that has something to do with how swollen Dynaheir's ankles are. 'It gives the same status effect as being heavily encumbered, the individual so impaired cannot move on their own. this physical ailment is caused by damage to the legs, which hampers one's movement.' And the fingerless is equally self-explanatory if rather darrrrk!"

As Harry was about to finish speaking, his voice broke off into a yawn, one that forced open his jaw so wide it actually hurt for a second. He flushed in embarrassment, looking away from the others. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

Imoen and Minsc heartedly agreed with that, while Khalid simply nodded his head, and Jaheira chuckled. It was somewhat refreshing to see the youth, who normally seemed if not mature, then at least self-controlled, having a moment like that.

"And here I thought it was only straightforward women that would embarrass you?" Imoen teased.

Remembering that morning with the Druid, Harry scowled at her, before shaking his head. "Only forward in that manner, thank you."

"And you with all that experience with the barmaid back in Candlekeep," Imoen continued her verbal assault.

"Oh, did he leave a ladylove behind?" Jaheira inquired. While she normally wasn't interested in gossip, the teasing variety did interest her somewhat.

Imoen shook her head but was still directing a teasing smirk toward Harry, happy to jolly him out of what she had seen as the beginnings of a funk while he was working with the fire. "Not really. They Cassandra did spend a few months flirting with one another. I couldn't tell you the number of times that Harry came away from those meetings blushing and confused. Still, he eventually got the hang of it. And if you spend any time with the Dryad, I'm sure you'll get used to her too."

"Which she would take as a challenge," Jaheira chuckled, shaking her head. "Then again, perhaps Harry could rise to that challenge too,"

"Anyway, what can you do for Dynaheir?" Harry interjected, redirecting the conversation before the teasing assault could continue.

Jaheira sobered, staring down at their patient and Minsc kneeling beside her. "Dynaheir's being hobbled and having broken fingers and wrists are the easiest things for me to take care of. Minor healing spells will do nicely for those. Concussions are very tricky, however, as they impact the mind. The best thing to do is to let a person with a concussion rest. Healing spells can only do so much on the mind unless the one casting it

is a dedicated mind healer. The brain is simply too complex for even directed spellwork like healing spells to do much about.”

“As for the malnourishment...” Jaheira frowned, looking over at Minsc. “How long were you two captive, and how long were you on the run?”

“The gnolls kept mighty Minsc captive for a week or more, the first day is rather fuzzy to Minsc. But then he was able to break out through the use of his great berserker strength! But alas, when in the grips of such, time loses all meaning.” Minsc growled, tapping a finger against his belt buckle as he thought before Boo squeaked in his ear. “Boo is not so good with days, but he says that it felt as if we were traveling for quite some time, and then blue, and Minsc were on the run for at least another day and a half, perhaps two.”

That bit of information hadn’t come out before, and Harry wasn’t the only one to whistle in surprise at how long Minsc had been on the trail alone, possibly stuck in his berserk state as he tried to leave the gnolls behind. That spoke of the larger man’s endurance and his willpower too, whatever his stat in that area, minus Boo’s influence, might have implied.

Jaheira, however, kept her mind on the information. “Despite a hamster’s ability to tell one day from the next being somewhat dubious to me, I must take that into account, as well as the fact Dynaheir was no doubt healthy before being captured. Malnourishment shouldn’t set in that quickly unless one is without salt and water for that time. So a lot of water. And I doubt not that Dynaheir would refuse any meet, jerky or otherwise that the gnolls gave her for fear of who it might have been.”

Harry blanched at that. “Wait, they, they wouldn’t really...”

“they would,” Jaheira replied sharply. “To Gnolls, men are just as edible as any other beast.”

“Suddenly, any guilt I might have felt about wiping them out is gone. Before it can even appear in point of fact,” Harry snarled, looking angrier than any of his companions had seen him before this.

Jaheira simply nodded at that. “Truly, but as we cannot kill them twice, and I would halt any attempt to resurrect them to do so, let us deal further with Dynaheir. Soup, salt, in that order. Meat and vegetables after that.”

“Nutritional food, right,” Harry affirmed. “I can make up anything she wants, as much as she wants.”

“Control yourself,” Jaheira chuckled at Harry’s enthusiasm. *For all his strength and odd abilities, it is his skill as a cook he seems to take the most pride in. That speaks well of him, I suppose.* “Quantity isn’t what we want to present moment, nutritional quality is. Don’t just stuff her full of food,” she admonished, looking at Minsc, who had pulled out a large chunk of bread and was ready to stuff into Dynaheir’s mouth.

Wondering idly why he had just gained five trust points with Jaheira, Harry nodded and turned back to the fire. There he pulled out various foodstuffs as he prepared a meal for them all.

Nearby, Imoen lay down on the ground, watching Harry and everyone else with half-lidded eyes, exhaustion claiming the thief now that her adrenaline had worn off. *Stupid low endurance stat. Times like this, I really miss my original body.* After a few minutes, she was only kept awake by chewing on a bit of jerky that she had taken from their supplies.

Despite his own hunger, Minsc stayed where he was crouched down next to Dynaheir, making no move to leave her side. Indeed his body language and the fact his claymore was laid out nearby gave everyone else the impression that he would become violent should anyone even suggest he do so.

In contrast, Khalid moved away from the others slightly, standing next to a large chunk of debris leaning up against a pillar, at which point he began to pull off his armor one piece at a time wincing all the while as he laid each piece out. He was soon down to his undershirt, and Jerkins and the pain had not yet left him. Every part of Khalid ached, his collarbone most particularly.

With difficulty, Khalid looked down at it and was unsurprised to see a rather spectacular bruise developing there from where a blow had landed right at where the pauldron meant the chest plate. It had bent the metal there out of shape something fierce, and throughout the rest of the battle had continued to grind into the bone and sinew of his shoulder.

Yet that was not the worst of it for Khalid. No, what pained him was his pride when he thought about how well he and Jaheira had been doing since they had first encountered the gnolls. He and Jaheira had been traveling as messengers and low-level

adventurers for the Harpers ever since the Curse, and this was the first time they'd come up against a situation which really ground into his head how much they had lost after being hit by that mage's Curse. Yes, this place would've been tough for him and his wife before there curse, but it would've still been possible for just the two of them.

Now? Now it had taken Harry, his use of tactics, formations, and frankly showing that he and Imoen were well beyond what most adventurers of their levels were capable of to win the day. *And even then, it was ludicrously close. If not for the healing berries, the Gourds of Power and the rest of the fruit that Jaheira had convinced the Dryad to give them, we might well have lost anyway. Two dead, myself battered nearly into looking more like a black and blue mark than a half-elf, and the others well below a quarter of their health too.*

The only one of them that was still in combat shape was Jaheira, and that was because of Harry's tactics again. He had basically put her in the back of every battle they'd been in where he could, him, Edwin and Garrick. *The whole campaign was actually quite well done, but it shouldn't have had to be. It shouldn't have ever been that close! That blasted Curse! It's going to become a major issue going forward in young Harry's company, I feel.*

Sighing, Khali shook his head, muttering, "I need a drink." With that, he began to rummage through his Item Box, removing items one after another until Khalid finally came to what he wanted, one of the bottles of wine that he had bought back in the Friendly Arm Inn. Sitting down next to his armor, Khalid took a long pull of the wine, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

Looking up from where she had been binding Dynaheir's fingers and ankles, Jaheira noticed this causing her to scowl. Deal with that in a moment, she thought to herself, turning and sending a slight smile towards Harry as he stood behind her, handing down a bowl of soup. "Thank you, Harry."

"When will my Witch wake up, do you think?" Minsc asked. "It would do my warrior heart good to see her smile, even to hear her complain about Boo again."

"She doesn't like the little animal? That shows uncommon good taste." Jaheira's tone was biting, yet also teasing, Harry having confided in the others the bonuses that having Boo on him gave Minsc somehow. "As for when your Witch will wake up, Dynaheir has sustained several hard blows to the head. This wasn't one concussion were dealing

with, but a concussion, exacerbated further by several hard knocks to the head as I told Harry earlier. She will only wake up when her mind is capable of facing the world once more. All we can do until then is make certain her body is as healed and as fit as we can make it. Which is scant little now, alas.”

The blonde half-elf frowned for a moment, thinking hard as her fingers gently probed into the other woman’s hair, feeling along her scalp. “I don’t think they purposely set out to damage Dynaheir mentally, yet the overall effect... I think it was part of how they were trying to break her for further interrogation.”

Harry frowned at that, squatting on Dynaheir’s other side looking down at her thoughtfully as Jaheira started to feed the woman the soup one slow spoonful at a time, examining her in the light of the various torches and the fire behind Harry. In contrast to Minsc, who was mostly lightly tanned, Dynaheir was far darker in skin tone. Harry had heard the phrase dusky maiden, a time or two since arriving in this world, and she certainly fit the bill, her skin glimmering darkly in the light of the torches and fire. To Harry, she looked almost like someone had added twelve years or so to Angelina Johnson, then made her wear a number of gold accessories before wrapping her in the rags of a barbarian woman.

Indeed, Dynaheir’s clothing was more rags than whole at present, but those rags looked as if they should’ve been pretty expensive-looking, hardwearing certainly, but expensive, done in purple and light blue, with a necklace of some kind hidden underneath hanging right over her bodice. Her curves were impressive too, not as much as Cassandra, but certainly more than Imoen and a little more than even Jaheira, who was most decidedly the athletic archetype. She had wider hips, shorter legs, and dainty feet for some reason beyond her broken ankles, along with bracelets of some kind on her wrist.

“They didn’t kidnap her for food, didn’t kidnap her for what she was carrying, or they would have stripped her of those like they did you of everything, Minsc. I agree, Jaheira, and didn’t that one talkative gnoll mention something about Masters? I think they came after you and Dynaheir under orders of someone else.” Harry gestured down to the bangles on Dynaheir’s wrists. “Unless these have some kind of spell on them to keep them on Dynaheir’s body?”

“I believe they are not magical, or at least not in the manner of the big booms and the shooting of fire. Though they are precious to Dynaheir, and she never takes them off. Beyond that, Minsc cannot tell you.” Minsc rumbled in a deep, angry voice. “But you think

that someone targeted Minsc and Dynaheir? This villain will need to be the target of a good butt-kicking!”

To this, no one had anything to say, and silence fell as Jaheira continued to feed Dynaheir. After that, she turned to a meal that Harry had prepared for everyone else, strips of grilled deer, marinated in some kind of wine sauce that made it taste amazing to Jaheira, and she shook her head, staring at the young man from Candlekeep. “Truly, you will spoil us.”

“S, s, spoil away!” Khalid chortled, taking a bite from his own piece of meat and then swigging down another gulp of wine. “I think w, w, we deserve it.”

“That’s my opinion too,” Harry chuckled, although he was looking at the older man worriedly. This worry coalesced when he offered Minsc some wine, and the big man agreed readily, downing half of the pot volume of the bottle to Khalid’s anguished cry of ‘hold on there!’ “Um, since we are in a dungeon, I don’t think...”

Glaring at her husband, Jaheira hissed out something in a lilting flowing language that Harry had not heard before, but which he assumed was Elvish. Khalid glanced down at the wine and sighed before nodding, and setting aside, digging into the meal more as he stoppered the bottle and set it aside.

Harry had to make two more slices of deer meat for himself and for Minsc, and one more for the others. They also ate through all of their bread before all of them are satisfied. “We’re going to have to restock almost entirely when we get to Nashkel,” Harry scowled. “I still have a lot of my spices, but we’re down to the dregs in terms of jerky and everything else.”

Jaheira did not look worried by this. Nor did Imoen, being too busy laughing, while Jaheira was trying to stop Minsc from once more jamming the last bit of deer meat into Dynaheir’s mouth. “That is not the way to cure malnourishment, you oaf!”

By the time Harry was finished cleaning up after the meal and Jaheira had convinced Minsc not to simply feed his Witch until she burst, Imoen had found the wine, sampling it a bit herself as she tossed out her bedroll by the fire laying out to one side of Dynaheir and Minsc. Wordlessly Harry left the others around the fire pit, moving to the doorway and laying out his bedroll there before peeling off off his chain mail and setting it down to one side. Imoen noticed this even through the haze of drink, and she sighed,

before deciding to leave the half-elf couple and the two Rashemani to their own devices, moving after her cousin/brother, whatever.

After finally convincing Minsc she knew what was talking about in terms of what food to feed a malnourished woman, whatever his fellow barbarian rangers might think, Jaheira then had to persuade Minsc that no, he didn't need to stay up all night to watch his Witch and that it was perfectly acceptable for him to lay out next to her instead. "You may sleep sword in hand, Minsc, in fact, I encourage it. But your staying awake all night is not necessary."

"Hmm... Jaheira might not speak kindly, but Minsc supposes she has a point. Very well. But if aught should threaten Dynaheir now that Minsc and Boo has found her, they will face my sword and Boo's teeth!" Minsc whisper-roared, an odd linguistic feat.

Rolling her eyes, Jaheira took a step back, looking over to where her husband was sitting with his back against the same broken pillar where he had put his armor down on, staring down at his hands morosely. She winced at that, shaking her head internally. Jaheira knew what he was feeling, but she really didn't think Khalid had any reason to feel so bad. *After all, it was I who had decided they had to go after that possible slaving ring. It was I who led them into the maw of that sorcerer. If anyone should feel guilty or humiliated, it is me.*

But for all his quiet attitude normally, Khalid took a great deal more pride in his combat abilities than Jaheira, and this latest adventure seemed to have cut him to the quick. *Not that he is alone in that, if not for the same reason, she thought angrily, looking back towards Dynaheir. I should be able to raise the dead! I should be able to bring back our brethren, to call upon nature's judgment more often, to heal Dynaheir fully despite all the spells I have spent this day! And yet I can do none of those. We are but shadows of what we were.*

Jaheira's eyes flicked over to where Harry laid out, her mind going through the same mental processes that her husband's had. *And yet, despite doing what he can to protect us even now, methinks that Harry is taking this battle just as hard as we are if not for the same reasons.* She moved after him for a moment, then shook her head as a yawn burst forth. *No. If the youth is still feeling dismayed by how well he performs tomorrow, I will speak to him then with my husband at my side. Right now, perhaps sleep will do him more good than any words I might impart.* Jaheira was many things, but blind to her own fault was not one of them.

With that, she moved over to her husband, wrapping an arm around his shoulders as he did the same to her waist, leaning in for a moment of comfort as they began to talk quietly in Elvish before they joined the others in slumber.

Your party has slept for eight hours.

Note, due to sleeping on a hard floor and in a dungeon moreover, health points recovered through sleep have been halved. Spells level four and above have not been re-memorized by the party's spellcasters.

This time Harry didn't even remember falling asleep. He simply laid out on his bedroll, and then was blinking his eyes at the notification. *Huh, I wonder if that carries over to Jaheira since she isn't technically part of my party.*

He felt Imoen stirring nearby and could hear Minsc muttering something to Boo elsewhere. A moment later, Khalid grumbled out, "I d, do, don't think I will e, ev, ever get used to t, t, that." Jaheira first slept on, even as her husband left her side, groaning loosely and shaking his head with a chuckle.

He moved over to Harry, who had also stood up by this point, slapping the young human companionably on the shoulder. "We, w, well I just found out t, t, that Imoen was telling the t, t, truth about your ability t, t, taking away hangovers. Please do n, n, not use this power for e, e, evil. Being able to d, d, drink to excess a, a, and not feel it, that is t, t, too strong a force to allow f, f, free in the world."

Harry smiled wanly at that, having noticed that Khalid was drinking last night. Still, he felt that the man, or at least Jaheira, had a handle on it and wasn't about to stick his nose in there. "I'll try not to, I guess. Not that I can see all that many people joining my party in the future, so I doubt that is an issue, really."

Hearing her friend's dry, almost glum voice, Imoen groaned, glaring up at Harry from where she had sat up in her bedroll. "All right, Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry shrugged. "Everything? I lead us into a death trap. It was only luck that got us out of this, and our ability to take those last group of gnolls from above and create a killing ground. If we hadn't been able to do that, if that Gnoll Chieftain had been ready for us when we entered his throne room, if the Gnoll Chieftain had simply retreated and sent his summoned creatures after us or if the gnolls had been able to surround us with that last group, we would've all died. We weren't ready for this campaign."

Minsc guffawed, raising a fist to the ceiling. "Ah, but that did not happen! Instead, Harry, Minsc and their companions won through into a great battle worthy of a song! A warrior does not think about the past! Think of your mistakes, perhaps, learn from them, but always face forward! After all, how can you do the butt-kicking of evil without seeing where it is in front of you?"

"W, w, while I would not p, p, put it as our ebullient f, f, friend did, he is right H, H, Harry," Khalid said, using the hand he had used to slap Harry's shoulder to grip it now. "We h, ha, had no idea what w, w, we were getting into, a, a, and once we did, w, w, we were committed. And without y, y, you leading us, w, w, we would not ha, have won at a, a, all."

Harry shook his head stubbornly, trying to take the blame of the near-disaster on himself still. "That doesn't mean that I was right to lead us in here. We should never have come here as haphazardly as we did. I don't regret doing so, given we did rescue Dynaheir, but it was far too close. I think it's a lesson to me, a lesson I need to start making longer-term decisions with my head, not with my heart."

"Such is the way of wisdom, Harry, but do not let your head make all your decisions for you," Jaheira interjected, opening her eyes to glare around at the others, having been woken by Minsc's bellow. She sat up, creaking and groaning a little, but was up on her feet quickly enough, staring at Harry. "My husband spoke the truth. Without you and your abilities, your tactics and the bonuses they gave your companions and your allies such as me, we would've lost this small campaign. Do not doubt it."

She shook her head, sending the beads in her hair to clicking very gently. "Further, one cannot always choose one's battles. If we had not come here, Dynaheir would possibly have died by the time we could return here from Nashkel, or been taken by this Master that the gnolls were serving. Leadership, like any ability, takes time and experience. So long as you learn the proper lessons from it, you will better serve yourself and your followers. We did well here. Leave it at that."

Harry stared at her then over to Khalid, then nodded slowly. But before he could say anything, Imoen cut in, hopping to her feet as she pointed dramatically at Jaheira. That had been enough doom and gloom for one morning, thank you. "What's this, kind words from Jaheira!? The sky must be falling."

Jaheira glared at the girl while Khalid began to smirk, looking over at his wife. “You s, s, should take my w, w, wife’s words to heart, Harry. Did you know, J, Jaheira was almost a l, l, leader once as well? A D, D, Druid Grove that we had h, h, helped face a, call it an insurrection o, o, of its members a, a, attempted to vote her into office as h, h, High Druid. She would have n, n, none of it b, but...”

“We agreed to never speak of that!” Jaheira shouted, a flush suffusing her features.

As Imoen joined in on the teasing of the suddenly off-balance Jaheira, Harry shook his head, laughing quietly to himself and moving around them to the embers of last night’s fire, which had burned through the night, warming the room and keeping the shadows at bay. It did nothing about the smell, however, and Harry was suddenly looking forward to fresh air.

First, food. The group didn’t have much left, but Harry could give them something for breakfast, at least. *Although we’ll probably be subsisting on the Druids kindness once we get to the Grove. Oh, but wait, there’s the pond there too. Alright, that lets me use the rest of our meat now.*

With that in mind, Harry used the last of the jerky, softening it in a stew pot, before chopping it into pieces, making a hearty soup of it, much like what had been fed to Dynaheir the night before only chunkier. Jaheira came over and took some of the soup, straining out those chunks, before once more feeding some of it to Dynaheir. “Does Dynaheir still have the Hungry status, Harry?”

Harry looked over at the woman, then shook his head. “It’s disappearing, which is kind of interesting. The status name was in bright red, but now it’s in orange.”

“Excellent. Now let us see what we can do for the rest of Dynaheir’s wounds.” Handing the bowl over to Minsc with an admonishment to go slowly and to watch the woman’s throat to make sure that she was swallowing before pushing in the next spoonful of soup into her unresponsive mouth, Jaheira bent over the woman’s ankles, and then her hands. Three minor healing spells later, Dynaheir’s fingers were healed as were her ankles. But she still made no sign of waking up. “Which is possibly for the best. Again, minds are tricky things.”

“Yes, but it does leave us with a problem. Minsc, do you think you can carry her? For however long it takes us to get to Nashkel from here?”

“Friend Harry asks a silly question. Minsc can carry Dynaheir easily. His Witch is as light as a feather, as is a must for any witch!” Minsc shouted at the top of his lungs, moving his hands under Dynaheir and making to stand up to elucidate the point. This caused her rags to slip more, showing an indecent amount of cleavage and mocha-colored thigh.

Jaheira’s warning hiss caused Minsc to back away slightly while Boo bit at his ear, and she shook her head. “We will create some kind of backpack to put her in, that will have to do,” she muttered, shaking her head. “One that keeps her head upright and not moving. Just letting it flop around would not be good for Dynaheir’s mind.”

“Besides,” Imoen quipped, staring down at the other woman. “I rather doubt she is that light, not with curves like that, Minsc. Something you’d notice right away with her on your back.”

Jaheira rolled her eyes, then without looking, pointed a finger at her husband, who coughed and turned away quickly. Harry was already looking away but now clicked his fingers. “Imoen, repair her clothes!”

Imoen blinked, then facepalmed. “I’m a bloody idiot.”

A second later, the previously almost unclothed woman was now much more sedately clothes, and Harry had one more friendship or respect and trust points from everyone there. The note, however, bemused him somewhat.

Due to your forethought and kindness, you have won 50 friendship points with Minsc, Khalid and Imoen.

You have won 60 trust points with Jaheira, but not respect for some reason. Women are a highly unusual type of creature. This one more so than most.

You have lost 100 man points. Seriously, covering up that view, what is wrong with you?

“What’re man points?” he asked the room.

“T, t, this is the f, f, first I’ve heard of them?” Khalid answered, shaking his head quizzically and looking at the younger man. “Why?”

“I just won friendship and respect points with all of you and lost one hundred man points.”

“I am still of two opinions about you seeing such, but since you have never tried to manipulate your actions to gain more such, I will not belabor my misgivings. Beyond that, as long as you do not in point of fact change into something else at losing so many points, I believe that your advanced adventurer system is poking fun at you, as you say it occasionally does,” Jaheira observed before looking around them. “Now, I think we need to loot this area, and then move on.”

It amused Harry how easily Jaheira, who was undoubtedly a very upright, moral individual, talked about looting in this context. But she did have a point, so Harry moved over to the corpse of the Dungeon Boss. After the battle against the Gnoll Chieftain had finished, Harry had left most of the items he had seen on the corpse, being unwilling to add still more to his Item Box when he was already working under the heavily encumbered status change.

His caution on that was proven correct a moment later, as, after Harry dismissed a flashing notice about having become fully encumbered, Harry couldn't even turn around to address the other people in the room. “My Item Box is completely full, and I'm overweight on it,” he informed them all. “I um, I can't move.”

The more experienced adventurers quickly hurried over, Minsc shouting, “Then put one of our dead companions in my Item Box friend Harry. I, too, can access it much more easily now that I am a part of your party.”

“In, indeed, t, t, that is one of the best things t, to me about being in your p, p, party in the first p, pl, place,” Khalid joked.

Harry shook his head. “You'll be carrying Dynaheir. No way am I going to take away from your ability to care for your Witch, Minsc.”

Minsc paused at that while Boo squeaked in his ear, then nodded firmly. As Harry saw that his friendship points now had risen to the point they had been at before Harry convinced Edwin to join them. “Friend Harry is correct! My enthusiasm for helping got in the way of keeping my eyes on the prize as Boo puts it. But what would you have me do? For truly, I am stronger by far than friend Khalid.”

“T, t, truly,” Khalid murmured with a nod, glancing to the side at the large barbarian.

Harry snorted and motioned Minsc to keep coming towards them. “In that case, there are a few things in here I want to identify before handing off. In particular, there is an unidentified chest plate that I want to see if we can repair. After that, Khalid, we’ll see to your armor too.”

“I suppose I will heal you up afterward as well,” Jaheira scowled, making a note to once more shift her memorized spells to include more healing spells and fewer offensive spells. She hadn’t done so last night, being so exhausted, but if she kept traveling with Harry and Imoen, it would no doubt become necessary. That would leave her with few offensive spells at all, but that couldn’t be helped. “Your blood magic spells are insanely useful items, true aces in your hand which can change any battlefield. Yet their impact on your health is something we need to watch most carefully.”

Harry thought about it, then looked over at the others in his party. Besides Jaheira, he could see their health bars, and he shook his head with a sigh. “No. Pass out the others to Minsc, Khalid and Imoen. Even after repairing this thing, I should be fine.” Repair cost pretty much the same for anything, something that he had Imoen had tested in the tutorial, a -30 to health. With that, Harry estimated he would be at a little less than half health, which was fine.

Jaheira looked at him, then nodded once and moved over swiftly to her husband, who smiled in gratitude as many of his bruises and his battered shoulder were healed under her gentle touch.

You have earned + 5 Respect and Trust points with Jaheira.

Every little bit helps, maybe?

Minsc and Imoen murmured their thanks in turn as Harry turned his attention to the loot that they had taken. After that, he would come looking at all of the messages that had been accumulating in his message box. Harry had just been too mentally fatigued last night to go through them and had stuck them down into one of the corners of his vision until he could read each message in turn.

“Okay,” he announced after a moment. “This reads as a chest plate +1.” The item in question was the battered, torn armor that Harry had found on the Gnoll Chieftain’s body after the fight. The full message about it read:

Chest Plate +1

A simple, magically enhanced chest plate, this piece of armor gives the wearer plus one to his defensive stats. In particular, being a chest plate, it will help protect against critical hits or backstabbing better than the normal chest plate it appears physically.

You might want to do something to delouse it, though, given what was wearing it recently.

Warning: Durability 0/100. This piece of armor is too damaged to wear.

“It might have been what that boss monster was wearing, but there’s nothing here that a repair spell won’t put right. Well, that, and a delousing along with a bit of lavender-infused water will do wonders.”

He dropped the armor plate on the floor then held out a hand over it, already noticing how he was no longer encumbered. That was something to keep an eye on in the future for certain. *If that had happened mid-battle, it would’ve been disastrous.* “Repair!”

The chest plate twisted and squealed most disconcertingly, and both half-elves clapped their hands to their ears, grimacing in pain. But eventually, it was restored to its proper shape without any tears, and 20 out of 100 durability. Relaying that, Harry shrugged. “I think that’s the best we’re going to get. The effects of the repair spell depended on how damaged the repair being item being repaired already was. Still, Minsc, it should do well for you once we delouse it.”

“No! Friend Harry should take it.” Minsc objected instantly.

Harry chuckled. “I can’t take it just now without being encumbered, but you might end up keeping it anyway, Minsc. There are two other items in here that I have to Identify first, though.”

“Truly? Three items that need Identification is a great prize.” Jaheira observed.

“Not when you compare the cost of the feeding this dungeon to it,” Harry shot back grimly, causing Jaheira to wince before he looked at the next item. These were heavy leather bracers, which had two large crystals bedded into the outer surface of them.

“Bracers of armor +1 as well,” he explained aloud. “They don’t have to be repaired although their durability is only 16 out of 100. Could a blacksmith be able to repair them both more than my repair spell, do you think?”

“C, c, certainly, although I would w, w, wager their prices for such w, w, work have r, r, risen during this iron o, o, ore issue,” Khalid answered, shrugging. He was about to add that Harry should give those to Imoen, as her being a thief meant she couldn’t wear armor heavier than reinforced leather jerkin. However, Harry was already tossing them to her, causing Khalid to smile.

“It was either you or Jaheira, and you’re in more danger with your role as a scout, Imoen,” Harry explained.

Jaheira nodded firmly, sharing a smile with her husband, and Harry noticed idly that he had gotten another five points in respect and trust for her, and friendship with Khalid.

The next item was a potion of health but not a good one.

Impure Potion of Health +10.

Warning: impurities will cause negative reactions.

A health potion made by someone who didn’t quite get it right, this potion will heal you for ten health points. But it will also cause a minor status change.

It is unknown what kind of status change, but the choices include: vomiting, shitting, seeing pretty colors, believing you can fly and wishing to attempt to do so right away, losing all taste or smell for an indeterminate amount of time, and more.

In other words, drink at your own risk, and only if it is a matter of life and death.

Hearing Harry explain this, Jaheira winced. “Ah. Khalid and I have come across numerous examples of potions that have not been brewed correctly. My advice would be to either sell it to an unobservant merchant or use it only if your life is on the line. I know I will not be using it regardless of the circumstances.”

“T, the last such p, p, potion she was forced t, to use, turned Jaheira’s h, ha, hair a muddy b, b, brown color,” Khalid explained out of the corner of his mouth.

“Was that any better than the one that turned your skin bright orange?” Jaheira questioned tartly, causing Khalid to wince.

Ignoring their byplay for the moment, Harry looked around the room, then gestured for Imoen to scout around. “Let’s see if there are any hidden treasures to be had.”

Imoen nodded, closing her eyes as she activated the detect traps skill. When she opened her eyes, the world had shifted, the throne of the Dungeon boss glowing dark red now to her senses. Moving in that direction, Imoen munched on the Grapes of Insight to give her intelligence-based abilities an extra kick.

Even so, Imoen nearly failed to disarm the trap, her fingers moving this way and that, with little picks working at the lock as she tried to unlock the little alcove hidden under the throne without setting it off. Eventually, Imoen breathed in with delight as her attempts finally succeeded. “Madame Barca was right, I did need more practice on unlocking things,” she grumbled, before lifting the top of the throne clear of the hidden alcove, staring in delight at what was within.

Within was a pouch of gold, containing, she discovered after a moment, two thousand gold. The second item within was a set of ten emeralds. There was also a sword in there, and after making sure there wasn’t another booby-trap, Imoen stood back and gestured Harry to pick it up as she turned to ask the more experienced adventurers, “What are emeralds worth?”

“Those are extremely expensive. I wouldn’t be surprised if we could make 1,500 gold for each gem from any reputable buyer,” Jaheira exclaimed, looking stunned.

Harry barely heard them as he was busy looking at the longsword that had been hidden within the throne somehow. It was built much like Khalid’s, double-bladed, the blade forty-inches long. There was enough space for one hand on the hilt and a pommel that had a place for a stone, four steel tines leading from the bottom of the hilt, but which did not actually have a stone in there at the moment. The hilt was guarded by a crossguard that looked golden, intertwined with bronze of all things. The bronze for several things that almost looked like the runes or some odd ancient kind of Scripture.

Longsword +1, +?

At first glance, this is a simple longsword +1. But there are a few strange points to consider as you look at it. For one thing, it’s durability is extremely high for a weapon found in a dungeon, 90 out of 100. For another, it has a place for a gemstone to be set into the hilt, but no actual stone. It could be that this weapon is incomplete in its current

form, having lost some extra magical item that could give it even more magically enhanced strength.

Harry explained this to the others, and Khalid whistled as he moved over to stare at the sword. Harry handed it to the man, who put it through its paces, the sword flashing this way and that, as he moved through a series of cuts and thrusts, before raising it into the guard position, nodding cheerfully as he flipped the blade in his grip, holding it by its cross guard as he handed it back to Harry. "It's an e, e, excellently forged b, b, blade. The balance is in, in, incredible, well beyond most every day l, l, longswords you could find for fifteen gold p, p, pieces. But b, b, beyond that, and the w, w, whole +1, I can't tell y, y, you what other m, m, magics might be upon it if y, y, you found the right gemstone."

"Do you want to use it, Khalid?" Harry asked. Khalid was easily the best swordsman among them. Not only did he have four skill points in the longsword, but Khalid was also a past master of all the little skills that Harry was only slowly learning under his tutelage. It just made sense to Harry to give him the blade.

But Khalid shook his head, chuckling. "T, t, thank you for the offer H, H, Harry, but I am used to m, m, my own weapon. I w, w, would sooner ask e, e, either you or Imoen to k, k, keep on repairing my blade as y, y, you have for as long a, a, as we travel t, t, together."

With a nod, Harry took Khalid's blade of longsword +1, +4 to defense, and noticed with a wince that during the battle against the gnolls the sword's durability had taken a massive hit, pairing it down to 22 out of a hundred. Staring at it, Harry placed one palm on the side of the blade, the other hand on the crossguard as he intoned, "Repairo!"

This spell hit his health points again as his bar dropped a further fifteen points, putting him at the just above a fourth of his health of 120, and he gritted his teeth. But the sword was repaired once more to 100 out of 100, it's edge gleaming in the light of the fire that Harry had previously used for breakfast.

Handing the blade back to Khalid, Harry looked over at Minsc, smirking. "So you see, my big friend, you do end up with the Chest Plate +1. And I take the longsword."

Minsc boomed out a laugh, grabbing Khalid and Harry both in a bear hug. "Truly, you are a most magnanimous leader! And you Khalid, a man of rare wit and ability! We must spar at some point. Your abilities with a longsword are impressive even to one from the shores of Rasheman!"

“T, t, thank you, my large f, f, friend,” Khalid replied as Harry simply laughed aloud, throwing an arm around the larger man’s shoulders in turn. “B, b, but if y, y, you expect to spar w, w, with me at any point, I w, w, would like my ribs to r, r, remain in o, o, one piece.”

As Minsc released them, Harry frowned, thinking. “Given what you said about price hikes, I think I’m going to keep this weapon for special occasions as a reserve. For my main weapon, I’ll switch to my warhammer. That at least hasn’t broken on me yet.”

Placing the longsword in his item box, Harry looked over to Imoen, who was practically bouncing on her feet, her eyes gleaming as she looked at Harry. “The lootings done with, come on, let’s get over on with it! Give me those sweet stat points, baby!”

“All right, all right,” Harry laughed, looking around at the others. Even Jaheira, the only one there who wasn’t part of Harry’s party - he didn’t count Dynaheir as she was unconscious - looked interested.

Sifting through the messages, Harry got to the gold ones, the most important ones and began to read them out.

Congratulations!

Due to how many tactics and formations you have used and created to overcome your enemies, your **Tactics** skill has risen to level 3.

As a level 3 Tactician, you can choose **Specialties**.

These are passive additions to your more commonplace abilities or your own tactics and informational abilities. Choose two specialties from the choices below.

Greater Observation,

Unit Cohesion,

Favored Tactics

Mapmaker

Click on each passive ability to gain an insight into what each specialty does.

“O, only Tactics?” Khalid wondered after Harry explained this to them. “Th, there is n, n, not one for l, l, Leadership?”

“Well, there are still only three of you in my party,” Harry shrugged. “No offense Jaheira. I just don’t think I’ll get more leadership levels until the number of people in my actual party as the Advanced Adventurer System terms it.”

“None taken,” Jaheira waved one hand through the air. “I am what I am, scars and all.”

Harry glanced at her, the tiny scars on her face and neck as he wondered if she meant those, or more mental ones, before deciding that right now was not the time to ask. If there ever would be a time for a conversation so personal, anyway. “Anyway, I’m going to assume that tactics just go up like a normal level ability. Leadership is probably more directly connected to how many people I have in a party.”

With that, he read about each of the new skills he could learn, lips pursing in thought. “I’m going to want everyone’s opinions on these. I have my own thoughts, obviously, but I know I’m not the most experienced here.”

“Perhaps, but your lack of experience certainly didn’t hold you back in this campaign,” Jaheira ruefully shook her head. “However, if you want words of wisdom, we are here for you.”

After relaying the titles of the four choices, Harry went on. “Favored Tactics seems the most straightforward. It simply will give me a buff to a formation or tactics I routinely use. Greater observation simply changes my existing Observation ability to include being able to read the terrain, read maps better and...” Harry blinked okay, having gotten this far before speaking aloud to the others. “It also will allow me to see the level of some people who I normally wouldn’t be able to given my own, and the level of any dungeons or respawn points.”

“““That one,””” every voice there bar Minsc shouted, and he was only a second behind everyone else. Then he added, “Boo would also be most interested in what Unit Cohesion is. Cohesion is a word we have not heard before.”

Reading that off, Harry rubbed at his lightning bolt scar in thought. “I think that’s just for all-around tactics and formation fighting. With that, the party would all fight

together like we were trained to do so regardless of what formation we take. It's a +5% to Cohesion, but like the Favored Tactic, it's passive."

"And Mapmaker?" Jaheira asked intently.

"Enlarges the map and gives a bit more information on what I can see on it. But everyone's agreed that Greater Observation should be the first one I choose?"

Everyone did agree on that one, but after that, the discussion broke down, trying to choose between either Favored Tactic or Mapmaker. With the small nature of their band, the formations and tactics that Harry had already used were probably all they were going to be able to use the future. The most versatile one was probably the one the AAS called Hammer Time, and Khalid pushed for it strongly, while Jaheira remained silent, thinking.

Harry though had thought Unit Cohesion would be a good idea, but after Khalid and Minsc opined on it, realized that until there were more of them, they really didn't need Unit Cohesion all that much. And indeed, given the fluid nature of the battlefields adventurers normally faced, it might not be necessary at all.

Jaheira eventually broke into the discussion, asking Harry, "Harry, your map, when we were in the dungeon fighting our way through, did Imoen and Minsc not also spread the boundaries of it, pushing back what you all called the fog of war?"

Harry nodded, then his eyes widened as he realized what she was getting at. "Of course! If Mapmaker carries over, then coupled with my scouts," he nodded toward Imoen "ability to sneak around, it would mean they'd be able to notice a lot more things without endangering us all."

At that, Khalid instantly changed his tune, and Harry eventually agreed too. Knowledge was power. The more knowledge you could have of your enemies, the better you could plan.

Harry clicked on those choices and instantly noticed a better ability to understand the terrain around him. He could pick out places where thieves could hide more easily in the room, cover, half cover, what bits of rubble were flammable, things that could be used as stationary defensive points, both entrances into the building - which obviously he could already see - and how to bring them down. He shook his head to clear it, then went on.

“Imoen, you leveled up, yes. Your next level is well away. You’re not even a sixth of the way there, but that’s understandable. So, where do you want me to put your stat points?”

Imoen’s lips twisted into a moue as she had Harry pull up her full status sheet for a second. “Put the skill point in daggers when we get there. I am not going to be a front-line in your face fighter whatever happens, and I already have a point in short sword, so another secret stabby-type weapon might be a good idea. As for the skill points, put one point in dexterity, that’ll help with traps and long-range weapons. Two more in strength, I have to get that up. Then put the last one in charisma.”

Having been nodding along up to that point with Imoen’s choices, Harry paused, finger in midair from where he was about to allocate the last level up stat point. “Wait, why charisma?”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and, well, you remember how I was able to use my Flirty Little Lass ability? If I level up my charisma, I wager I might be able to use that in combat. We’re not always going to be fighting beasts after all,” Imoen replied. Imoen had decided to stop pining for her Metamorph ability. Once it came back to Imoen, she would be ecstatic, but until that point, Imoen had to concentrate on what she could do for the party right now.

Harry scratched at his lightning bolt scar again, then shrugged. “Your body your choice, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Harry, you would be astonished at how many men don’t get that,” Imoen replied, causing Jaheira to chuckle, and for the three men to look at one another in confusion.

Harry looked over at Minsc and informed him that he had gained quite a bit of experience points as well and that he was about a fifth of the way to his next level. Minsc nodded agreeably at that, and Harry turned to Khalid, saying, “Your experience gains are invisible to me though. All I can see is a message saying, ‘XP gain is impossible due to the Curse of the Dread One’.”

Khalid sighed, deflating slightly. “That d, d, doesn’t surprise me at all, Harry. N, n, neither my wife nor I h, h, have been able to level u, u, up, or indeed ch, ch, change our stats positively in a, n, any way beyond p, p, potions since we were c, c, cursed.”

“Ouch,” Harry said, shaking his head. “And here I was hoping that if you gained a level, I could assign you some points that would help offset what you all had lost.”

“That would take a great many status points,” Jaheira replied drolly. “Especially considering that we only get three per level, with one point going into dexterity due to our elven heritage. Whereas you and Imoen apparently get four. Something I’m still astonished by, just as much as I’m astonished by the whole ability to actually put them where you wish rather than having them being assigned either by race or by the action that caused you to level up in the first place.”

Harry shrugged at that. After all, there was really nothing he could say to that, although he did note Jaheira didn’t sound jealous, simply amused. Imoen, however, was quick to say, “Is it enough to make you think about wanting to become a Bhaalspawn yourself? I have to warn you, we do have these tendencies to think about killing everyone in our sleep to deal with. It’s enough to drive you mad, I tell you. Mad!”

Everyone there just looked at her until Boo finally squeaked in Minsc’s ear, and Minsc nodded sagely. “Minsc agrees, Boo. Imoen would be more likely to talk, tease or tickle someone to death than murder them in their sleep. Boo thinks that even if you weren’t lying, Bhaal would not find any purchase in your teasing and upbeat soul.”

“Point for Minsc!” Harry chortled, watching Imoen blush a little and look away as the other two agreed with him.

Shaking his head at her antics, Harry moved on to his own level up screen. “I leveled up too,” he said, smiling slightly. Harry had leveled up after the fight at the Friendly Arm Inn, whereupon he had put one point into strength, two into durability, and one in wisdom. Now, Harry decided to assign these new points to his weakest areas.

Luck got two points. After all, luck was important, no matter how wild and crazy it might be, and at least this way, he could offset the negative effect of Potter Luck when it bit him in the rear, as it no doubt would. Intelligence and dexterity both got one point as well, and Harry went on to put a skill point into Warhammer. “After all, my weapon and shield combo is already maxed out, as are my longsword skills.”

Before Khalid could say anything, Harry turned to them and wagged a finger. “And yes, I know that doesn’t mean there isn’t room for improvement, it’s just that such improvements won’t come automatically from leveling up. And this way, I can use my

Warhammer as my primary weapon for a bit without any loss in ability, saving that sword for special occasions, like I mentioned earlier.”

With that, he closed the level up screen, staring at his overall status screen as Imoen did the same. They then looked at their stats side by side, along with Khalid and Minsc.

Class: Thief level 6

Strength: (8)

Willpower: (4) +4

Dexterity: (20)

Constitution: (6)

Durability: (4)

Wisdom: (10)

Charisma: (7)

Intelligence: (22)

Luck: (11)

Class: Paladin level 7

Strength: (20)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (17)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (12)

Wisdom: (9) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (9) +11

Luck: (10) +/- 4

However, leveling up to Level 8 was far, far away, even worse than it was for Imoen. Harry had barely any experience showing on the experience bar to it, and the number at the end was so daunting that he didn't even bother looking, simply closing the screens and looking around at the others. "Now that all of the maintenance and looting is done, do you think we can get the fuck out of this fortress?"

"Here here!" Shouted every voice there.

The group made their way out of the fortress, although it was slow going because Khalid insisted they stop to harvest the dead gnoll's ears. Like bandit scalps, they could be exchanged at most towns for gold. And with all the supplies they had gone through, they would need all the gold they could get.

As they were heading across the bridge, Harry was going through his old journal entries, frowning. "Hmm... huh, it might be because of my Greater Observation skill, but the message about us beating the dungeon changed to calling it a Class Four dungeon."

Jaheira, Minsc and Khalid all stopped walking, turning to stare at him in surprise. "That is amazing!" Minsc bellowed. "A Class Four dungeon would normally need a band of twenty low-ranking adventurers to clear, or even a group of mid-rank adventurers!"

"Indeed. If I had known that before..." Jaheira wearily sighed, making a throwaway gesture with one hand. "Bah, what's done is done. But that, if we can tell such things ahead of time, that is going to be an incredibly useful tool."

"Then I guess we all made the right decision there, didn't we," Harry teased, causing her to laugh.

The trip back to the Elder Dryad's Grove was uneventful, something all of them were very happy for. Although none of them had any bruises or injuries that would slow them down, thanks to Jaheira's healing, they were all hurting. Harry and Khalid and Minsc were around the same in terms of overall health, Minsc having taken more injuries during

the battle but having ignored them due to his high level of endurance. Imoen had slightly more health than either of them in terms of her health bar, but actually less than the warrior types given her Thief nature. The only one who was really in fighting shape was Jaheira, and she was in no way a frontline combatant.

As they reached the Druids Grove, Harry was musing aloud on that, his musings ending with, "even though she swings a mean staff." Occasionally Jaheira had had to swing her staff defensively once or twice, and he had seen her put down gnolls and xvarts alike.

"And don't you forget it, young one." So saying, Jaheira halted on the pathway leading up to the Druids Grove, frowning at them all. "Realize before we go up there that Dryads are fickle at times. This one seems a bit more intelligent than most of the breed, thanks to her advanced age. However, remember that she did say that she hoped for a repeat performance," she began obliquely, "and that both of her... performers... are no longer with us. I have no idea how that is going to go over."

"Are you saying that Harry here might have to take one for the team?" Imoen laughed, her eyes lighting up with the amount of teasing material this could give her.

Harry groaned while Khalid joined Imoen in laughing at his expense. Minsc did not join them, not getting the joke really, and too busy carrying Dynaheir on his back. The man had kept up despite her weight throughout the day, a feat of strength that demanded respect.

True to Jaheira's prediction, the Dryad was somewhat annoyed when she took in the new composition of their party, becoming even more so when Jaheira explained to her how Edwin and Garrick had died and were currently being carried within Harry's Item Box. "Of course, you have sanctuary among my trees. But I feel I must protest, Druid. You take my toys away, and then return with them broken?"

"Still..." she changed her mood on a whim, moving towards Harry, one finger tracing the side of his face to draw and backup. "There is this one. Unless I misread things, and you and he are involved, my dear?" she asked, looking over at Imoen, one eyebrow raised in query.

Imoen laughed and raised both hands, waving them wildly in front of her. "No, no. Our connections familial, nothing like that."

“Excellent. Then you wouldn’t mind spending the night with me would you, handsome one?” the Elder Dryad’s voice was almost a purr as she turned back to Harry, sidling up to him so that her breasts gently pressed into Harry’s armored chest. Even through the armor and his undershirt, Harry could somehow feel the sensation, and he gulped, before tearing his eyes away.

Elder Dryad has attempted to use Charm.

You have resisted Charm.

Due to your willpower, you have resisted the Elder Dryad’s attempt to befuddle your mind and senses.

But do not think this makes her any less interested in you. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Women are weird like that.

“I, erm, that is I’m not certain that would be wholly appropriate. I do not know if my current energy level would, um, match your needs,” Harry replied, stumbling over his words as he tried to figure out a way to get out of this while the others looked on in amusement.

The Elder Dryad took a step back, cocked her head thoughtfully as she looked up at Harry. Like Imoen, the Dryad was a head shorter or more than Harry. “That is the second time you have thrown off my Charm. Impressive..” Her full lips, somehow the crimson of an autumn oak leaf, twisted into a sensual smirk. “That just means I will have to seduce you the old-fashioned way. And I do like a challenge...”

Throughout the rest of the night, which they spent in the grove from early evening on, Harry found that the Dryad never moved further away from him than a few feet, making her interest plain in him at every point as they made camp, talked about the battle they’d had against the gnolls, and what the fortress’s destruction might mean for the area around it. As that conversation wound down, Khalid returned with some fish from the lake, and Harry got to work on the meal, with the Dryad hovering close, pressing in, touching his hands, arms and shoulders, bare now that he had removed his armor for the day.

“And what are you doing with those berries in this tiny pan?” the Dryad inquired, licking her lips from tasting the sauce Harry had made to glaze the fish steaks with.

The pan in question was small, made of tin, something Gorion had purchased for the trip, along with many of the other cooking gear Harry carried. Inside, the berries, healing berries, ripe strawberries, and blueberries, swam in a strangely gloopy sauce.

“Um, that is sugar and basil-infused sauce. It’s supposed to add a bit more sweetness to the berries. Then I’ll put them in a pastry. I have enough flour and yeast left for one more party-sized pastry,” Harry explained, flushing to his ears as the Dryad’s large, slightly drooping breasts pushed into his side as she peered over his shoulder.

“Bah. Berries are nature’s sweets as it is.” Dryads didn’t need to eat since they got nutrients from their tree, truly being a part of the tree despite having their own physical form. That didn’t mean she wasn’t intrigued by it, however. “May I try one?”

“Um, sure, one more or less won’t matter much with the amount you gave us all.” Harry turned now, staring at the Dryad in the eye, his face and tone both earnest and thankful. “Thank you for this. We weren’t on our last legs, but we were close. Having a night here, with the number of healing berries you have already given us, that’s enough to make me certain we can make it to our next destination and resurrect our friends.”

The Dryad stared at him for a few minutes, then flushed and looked down, mumbling under her breath, “By the Oak, those eyes are just unfair.” She shook her head, sending her blonde hair swaying this way and that, while she looked back up at Harry. “Do not worry. I would have supplied you with the healing berries at the very least due to your having a druid in your party. The rest, well, having people be here briefly is rather fun for me as well.”

The way she said the word ‘fun’ made Harry shudder from head to toe, and she smiled before gesturing down to the berries. “Give me one.”

Eyebrows furrowing, Harry was confused for a moment before the Dryad opened her mouth, her tongue flicking out for a moment. Realizing now what she meant, Harry looked around for a fork but didn’t find one. With a blush, Harry reached down into the gooey mix picking out a blueberry.

He raised it to the Dryad’s still open mouth, but before he could just pop it in like he had done occasionally with Imoen when she was taste-testing things for him, she grabbed Harry’s hand and leaned forward. Harry’s eyes widened in shock, and he felt the earlier shudder return with reinforcements, going down his spine as his thumb and index

finger were engulfed in the Dryad's warm mouth. The berry between them was flicked away by her tongue, which then began to lick and swirl around berry and finger alike.

How long this went on, Harry didn't know. It was too much and over too soon, as she leaned away, gulping down the berry and smiling at the taste. "Mmmm, yes. I think I am looking forward to trying whatever you can cook, Harry."

As the evening wore on into the night and the party had what amounted to a minor feast of fish and pastry, Harry got better at flirting back at her, but he never took it to the next level, and the Dryad realized that the boy really wasn't all that attracted to her. Or if he was, he wasn't willing to act on it. Not once did Harry flirt with her unless the Dryad started it first, and never more than verbally.

Finally, as the others began to move away from the cookfire and bed down for the night, she asked bluntly, "Is it because you are a paladin that you attempt to rebuff my advances?"

"N, no," Harry said with a blush. "Or at least, not only that, miss."

"Why then? You are not attached. Indeed, the one girl here that you seem closest to seems to be urging us on. And not exactly subtly either," the Dryad added dryly, looking over to where Imoen was flashing the two of them a thumbs up as she folded out her bedroll under one of the willows lining the bank of the pond. This stopped when Jaheira gently reached over and rapped her on the back of the head. But Jaheira's own by-now amused look, and Khalid's look of equal amusement wasn't doing anything for Harry's sense of propriety.

"I'm just, I don't, well, I'm a..." Harry floundered, embarrassed. Guys were not supposed to admit to this! He didn't know much about guy interaction, certainly not when it came to interaction at the age of his current body, but he knew that for a fact, having heard the ribbing some of the seventh years gave one of their fellows on this topic.

"Ah, is that all?!" The Dryad laughed, shaking her head as a small but somehow calming and tender smile came to her face. "You would not be the first virgin I have laid with. And I am not looking for something long term, or anything of that nature, my young paladin. In fact, you could think of this as simply you're paying the toll of your time here if you wish."

“That doesn’t make it any easier. In fact, that makes it worse,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “This kind of thing should be, well, meaningful.”

“I think we are talking of two different definitions of the word meaningful,” the Dryad began, frowning a little, then she understood. “You wish to have some kind of emotional connection with your partner.”

Harry nodded, blushing brightly and looking away. “Is that so wrong?” he retorted gruffly.

“Not wrong, no, not for your species at any rate. For mine, the idea is highly unusual.” Deciding she’d had enough of this, the Dryad stood up abruptly, reaching down and grabbing at Harry’s hand, pulling him to his feet. She could feel her core dripping with desire, and it was high time that all of the evening’s flirtations come to fruition. “And you are in my grove and should play by my rules. And if you just did not like the idea of paying your time, consider this a learning experience. This way, when you find that partner of yours, you will know what to do. Far too few men truly do.”

With that, she stepped in close and kissed Harry. It was soft at first, simply pressing their lips together. Then, as her arms went around him, the Dryad began to feel Harry relax, and she began to deepen the kiss.

Harry got into it quickly. The same ability he had discovered while kissing Valerie came to the fore. This allowed Harry to read the Elder Dryad, kiss her just the way she wanted to be kissed, even as that changed for one second to another.

To her shock, the Dryad began to feel herself responding more as the kiss went on. *The boy is a natural! Oh, I must see how far that innate skill goes!* She pulled back slightly, smiling as she saw Harry’s half-lidded, almost stunned look. “Come,” she said simply. “Your friends can look after themselves for the rest of the night. You are mine until dawn.”

Staring at her, Harry could only nod his head weakly, following behind her as she led the way toward her tree and around to the other side.

OOOOOOO

You have rested for seven hours. Due to not resting in a bed...

Grumbling, Harry waved the normal morning message away. The next message however was less easy to ignore:

WOooHOOO! Congratulations!

You have lost your virginity to an Elder Dryad! Very few men alive can say they had the privilege of learning about the mysterious thing called 'sex' as you have. Your knowledge of the female body, what feels good to you and your partner both have risen to new heights. As such, your perception skill has split into two separate skills: Sexual Awareness and Perception.

Sexual Awareness: As you kiss, touch or otherwise interact with your partner, you will be able to notice subtle hints to show you what feels good for the woman or not. You will be able to fine her erogenous zones, and, more importantly, know what doesn't feel good or what makes her uncomfortable.

This skill is a percentage-based skill. You have a 82% chance to guess accurately what really gets your partner going.

Perception: A side-skill of Observation based around personal interaction, Perception allows you to understand a woman's individuals tastes. What is she interested in relationship-wise? What are her preferences sexually?

This skill is a percentage-based skill. You have a 35% chance to activate this skill and accurately understand your partner. Once you get to that point anyway. Getting there is another matter entirely.

And just think, you still don't know why Parselmouth will make you so popular with the ladies. (hint, hint)

PS: do not worry. Personal lifestyle abilities, such as anything to do with flirting, cooking, sex or even something as banal as sewing cannot be viewed by anyone but those they pertain to within the party.

Staring at this message was of two minds about it. On the one hand, he was still ambivalent about the morality of tracking relationships and, ahem, personal experiences like this. They seemed too important to treat like a game. But on the other hand, the dryad had said it herself: last night had been about pleasure. Heck she had even said would be a learning experience for him so in that case, seeing results like this was weird,

but kind of nice too. Although Harry did wonder why Perception was so low in comparison to his old Perception skill. *Maybe because I haven't actually been in a relationship, not really? I mean, I never went past the flirting stage back in Candlekeep, or kissing with Valerie, and the Elder Dryad agreed that it was just a one night stand.*

"My, that was most satisfying," a female voice murmured, and Harry looked down to see the Dryad laying out on top of him, her head against his chest, her bare breasts pressing into his stomach, oddly bringing to mind once more that this body wasn't Harry's original. As thin as he had been, Harry didn't have a six-pack like this body, certainly not enough of one to twitch under the Dryad's gentle touch. "You weren't nearly as good with your tongue as Edwin, nor as quick to get into things as Garrick was. But you had more self-control than either, and once we started, your enthusiasm and desire to experiment was fantastic. And your physical... abilities were well beyond their own as well."

The Dryad smiled winsomely, leaning up to kiss at the underside of Harry's jaw for a moment. "I don't suppose that I could convince you to stay here, Harry? I believe the two of us could have quite a bit of fun together for a few years."

"Erm, I'm sorry, but I have obligations elsewhere, to my party, and to our long-term goal." Harry felt himself really feeling sorry about that too. Last night had been amazing and very informative too. "Beyond that, my being here might bring danger down on you."

The woman looked at him in confusion, pushing herself off his chest with a sigh of reluctance, one that Harry found himself feeling as well. He tried desperately to keep his eyes from straining down to those large, full breasts, with their almost inhuman level of softness, but his eyes did slide that way once before he could control himself, something the Dryad noticed but did not comment on. "I am not without strength here in my own grove. "What kind of danger are you speaking of?"

"What do you know of the Time of Troubles?" Harry began. *After all, my being a Bhaalspawn isn't a big secret, and she certainly isn't going to be sharing it with anyone else.*

From there, Harry explained what he knew of his origins and the fact that his heritage was known to someone out there, and that it would bring trouble down on those near him. Scowling at that, the Dryad slowly nodded. Even here in her grove, she knew of the time when Gods walked among men, and the horrors that resulted, and she wanted

no part of danger on that scale. "In that case, I suppose you do have to leave. I would rather not bring down what will possibly amount to a personal war on my head. Your destiny is elsewhere, and no doubt fraught. But I have one final bit of advice for you, my young paladin."

The Elder Dryad leaned down and kissed Harry lingeringly almost enough to make Harry think that she wanted another romp. But then she pulled back, stood up, and then gestured down at her body. Harry watched in unashamed awe at that body, which he had gotten to know so well last night, as it suddenly became covered with leaves, clinging to her from the knee up to the neck. Those leaves rustled as she moved, somehow sticking together and to her skin, acting like clothing would. But Harry knew from experience that each leaf could be removed on its own.

"Don't so serious all the time," the Dryad went on as if the kiss hadn't even occurred. "This life can be sweet if you but allow it to be."

Still staring at her, Harry stood up and nodded, and she waved her hand airily at him. "Go. Your fellows are over where we left them last night. I expect some breakfast from you as well, Harry, as a final farewell."

When he joined the others, they were all already moving up and about, his three party members having gotten up that he had, going from sleep to awake instantly as the Advanced Adventurer System, or AAS allowed. Jaheira was still looking a little groggy, but she seemed to be waking up quickly, whereas Dynaheir was not, still unconscious. Minsc was feeding her some of the broth left from the soup that Harry had made back in the fortress, his movements almost exaggeratedly gentle as he fed her one spoonful at a time.

Imoen was the first to notice Harry's moving towards them, and she chuckled, waving at him. "Hail the conquering hero!"

Turning to look at Harry, Khalid began a slow clap, while Jaheira simply nodded in Harry's direction, taking note of his incredibly frazzled, bemused appearance.

Harry growled at Imoen, shouldering past her, nearly putting the smaller thief girl on her rear, but this just caused her to laugh all the louder. Pouting down at her, Harry plaintively begged, "Can we just go?"

Shaking her head at her husband and Imoen's continued amusement at Harry's attitude, Jaheira nodded towards the remains of the cooking fire. "Just as soon as we

have a meal. Then we must be on the trail soon and pushing ourselves hard. “We have only three days to get to the nearest temple if we wish to revive our comrades.”

“Wait, what?” Harry stuttered, blinking in confusion.

Imoen too was looking startled, her humor at Harry’s attitude falling away instantly.

“You didn’t know?” Khalid was surprised and looking at them in confusion.

Minsc, too, was looking incredulous. “Truly, even Minsc know that there is a limit to how long the soul of a person who has been slain will remain near, able to be contacted and brought back once more. Wait too long, and the soul will go on to its deserved afterlife. In my case, it would be Meilikki’s forest, where I would join the Eternal Guard, watching over the land and the spirits within forever. For Garrick as a Bard, perhaps he would wish to play in the halls of the gods?” He paused, then scowled. “And the red priest’s soul would go into the darkness, to be judged for his evil. For Garrick, at least, we should hurry.”

As ebullient as he is, Minsc is quite correct. The soul will depart this plain permanently within five days of the death of its body. The only exception to the rule would be if the body was petrified. In that case, the individual’s soul is trapped within the stone,” Jaheira explained.

“This is one of those things everyone knows, so it doesn’t have to be written down, isn’t it?” Imoen said with a sigh. “We really did miss out on things growing up in Candlekeep, didn’t we?”

Jaheira snorted. “Considering you wouldn’t have met that interesting jewel maker, or come upon your amazing amount of spices, I believe the negatives and benefits of your having grown up in Candlekeep even out in the end. And I would also wager that it is indeed written somewhere, just not the kind of books I can see either of you willingly reading.”

“Ask Garrick or Edwin if it does or not ‘even out’ when we revive them, and they learn we didn’t know at first there was a time limit,” Harry replied dryly. “Edwin’s answer to that question would probably not be printable. Regardless, we probably only have two and a half days to get to the nearest priest, which would be in Nashkel, right?” Khalid and Jaheira both nodded at that, having a good idea of most of the geography of the Sword

Coast. Even if they hadn't been active in the area, they had passed through it several times. "So let's get a move on. I'll whip us up a quick breakfast, but after that, we keep on without pause unless one of us collapses."

"In that case, I should use my healing spells upon you and the others rather than husband them less Dynaheir becomes more sickly. We might have to fight through any enemies in our path quickly," Jaheira scowled. "I dislike the necessity. Beyond that, I think we should plan out our route as well."

While Harry moved over to the fire to make some more sugared berries to go with a spinach salad with a vinaigrette dressing, Khalid and Imoen began to pack away the bedrolls and everything else. As he was working, Harry also watched as Jaheira began to draw a map of the area as she thought it looked like in the dirt.

"We are here. We actually passed south and west of Nashkel from where we had begun to get to the gnoll fortress. From here, we can make a straight run to Nashkel, although we will be technically within the boundary of Amn for most of the journey. The area here is called Fire Leaf Forest or something of that nature? Something oddly poetic and vainglorious for such a small, tiny, outpost of the mighty forests to the north and east of us." The half-elf shook her head. "I believe it's called that because some rich hunters from further south in Amn come out here to hunt occasionally. Regardless, a straight path through these woods will bring us to the western border of Nashkel. I'd estimate if we push on hard, unmindful of the trail we will leave behind, we could get there within a day and a half."

"Sounds good, but how well do you know the area around here?"

"Not very well, alas, beyond a sense of where we are. My husband and I have been in Amn several times. Indeed we have several friends, both Harpers and none, scattered across it. But unlike Gorion, we have never been active before this in the Sword Coast. We have passed through numerous times, and I know the general geography. But if you are asking for specifics, I can't help you."

"But, there's nothing major like the gnoll fortress between Nashkel and us?"

"Indeed not. That would be disastrous for the town if such a thing existed. Indeed, this fortress is much closer than should have been allowed if Amn had a significant military force nearby."

“Precisely my point,” Harry replied dryly. He was getting better at that sarcasm and dry wit.

About an hour later, after the dryads once more gifted them with several dozen healing berries and two more Gourds of Power, the party of adventurers moved off.

With speed of an essence, Jaheira was off like a gazelle, with her husband racing beside her through the land toward the forest’s edge, barely visible from here. Harry blinked at how quickly they could move, then shook his head as Imoen muttered something about a ‘Legolas,’ whatever that was, to herself, and raced after them. This left Minsc and Harry to look at one another. “I don’t think they assume we can move that quickly, my friend, but I believe it is time for us to run as well.”

“Indeed! If not for Edwin, then at least for Garrick! His songs might have made Boo’s teeth itch, and he was certainly not the bravest of companions, but he did not deserve to die in the quest to rescue fair Dynaheir,” Minsc agreed.

With that, the two warriors raced after their friends side-by-side, catching up with the others only because the two half-elves slowed down when they reached the forest.

They didn’t keep up the running pace all day, of course. They ran until Minsc and Imoen started to tire, then switched to a normal marching pace, as they ate some of the normal berries and fruits that the Dryad had given them. And of course, Harry had to endure Imoen and Khalid’s jokes at his expense with a red face and a put upon expression.

“Is it just me, or did the Elder Dryad have a very bountiful harvest to share?”

“M, m, my goodness, something put the d, d, dryad in a good mood, I wonder w, w, what it could have been?”

Despite their japes and Harry’s urge to run away from the embarrassment, In this way, they made good time until it started to rain. It was not pleasant, although it didn’t slow them down as much as Harry had feared. Everyone bar Dynaheir had hoods. Her cloak must have been lost somewhere along the way during her captivity.

But Imoen used another new Blood Magic spell, an engorging charm, on Minsc’s cloak. This made the large man’s cloak grow to nearly twice it’s original size, being able to cover both Jaheira and Minsc both from the rain. On the other hand, It hit her health

badly, -30 points, and forced Harry to use his Lay on Hands spell on Imoen before the girl could collapse.

As they continued on their way, Harry found himself between Jaheira and Imoen, holding Imoen's elbow until she got her feet under her. They stayed that way for some time until they came to a tiny stream where Jaheira paused, her elfin ears flicking slightly against the rain as she looked off into the woodlands south of the trail that they had been forging through the forest. "What in the world? Khalid, do you hear that?"

"T, t, the sound of a young voice s, s, shouting on the w, w, wind? I do. S, s, strange to hear it outside in t, t, this weather, so far removed f, f, f, from civilization. It c, c, could be a trap."

"Perhaps, but it behooves us to make sure that it isn't just in case," Jaheira replied, looking in the direction from which she could make out a distant shout.

None of the others could object to that, so the group moved through the woods, with Harry joining Jaheira in the lead, using his map ability to home in on a green dot as it appeared. Coming into view of the green dot, which was labeled 'Young Albert', they found a young boy of around thirteen standing at the edge of a large clearing, shouting out something the humans in their party had to strain to hear over the tumult of rain. "Rufie, come home! I know you can hear me!"

For a moment, Harry could only stare, cocking his head to one side, then he looked around at the others, shaking his head. "What is it with young boys in this day and age? Is someone sort of somehow removing their common sense? First, the kid who was out and about up north who made a habit of spying on bandit attacks, and now this one shouting in the middle of the wilds?"

"Young boys are not known for common sense in any event," Jaheira chuckled.

Imoen began to laugh, shaking her head and grabbing at Harry's ear to whisper, "Oh, and you were the model of common sense when you ran after Quirrell down that series of traps the teachers set up to protect the Philosopher's Stone?"

Harry had the grace to flush at that but replied gamely and in a louder voice as he shifted things around to make up a vague tale that somewhat resembled the adventure he, Hermione and Ron had when they tried to stop the Voldemort possessed Quirell from bringing his master back to life. Whispering might not be enough with two half-elves in

their group, after all. “That was different. I thought there was a danger to Candlekeep, that a thief was in our halls. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

“You were, but remember you were only eleven at the time. Don’t go throwing rocks when you live in a glass castle Harry,” Imoen replied, going with the change of story as if the two of them had talked about it ahead of time. She was quick on her feet like that, something Harry always appreciated.

“Good grief, a glass castle? Do you have any idea how expensive that would be?” Jaheira asked jokingly while Minsc added that he would love to see such a thing as it would be truly a sight to see.

“E, e, enough talking! The boy is in danger o, o, out here all alone. Let us s, s, see if we can do something a, a, about that,” Khalid interrupted with a put-upon sigh. Occasionally, he felt that this party tended to lose themselves in dialogue when they should concentrate more on their surroundings. The fact that he was craving a drink might’ve had something to do with his eagerness to move on.

“Sure,” Imoen said with a shrug, marching out of the woods towards the youngster before any of the others could respond. “Hey kiddo, what are you doing out here? Where’re your parents?”

The boy turned, looking at Imoen and the others behind her as they came out of the woods, showing no surprise or concern at their appearance out of the rain-soaked forest. Instead, he simply answered Imoen’s question, gesturing vaguely southward or at least the direction Harry assumed was southward, judging by the direction that they had been traveling. “My parents? They are over there somewhere. I will return to them eventually, as soon as I find my dog.”

Harry cocked his head, his eyes narrowing under his hood. Something about the youngster’s voice and cadence was throwing him off, despite the reassurance of his map telling him the boy was no threat, a true civilian just like the other boy they had met before finding Minsc. The tone just didn’t seem to match his outward appearance. And for some reason, that dichotomy set Harry on edge.

The others didn’t seem to notice, though, so despite being on a hair-trigger ready to summon his weapons out his Item Box, Harry moved forward to join Imoen as the others did the same.

Yet despite being faced with five adventurers up close and personal, the young boy still didn't seem at all startled or frightened. Indeed he smiled brightly. "Excellent. There are more of you. Could I ask for your help in finding my dog? He is a large black brute named Rufie. My name is Albert."

"We're just adventurers passing through, and you would ask us for help?" Harry asked before anyone else could say anything.

"Yes, I would. If you meant me harm, you would be attacking already, wouldn't you?" the boy answered, smiling as if the idea had never even been a possibility.

This disarmed Harry somewhat, and Imoen spoke up before he could continue his interrogation. "I suppose we can help you find them. Just tell us where you saw him last, and we'll get you and Rufie back to your parents." Imoen answered, thinking they could probably find a road by taking this kid to find his parents. Maybe even a map of the area.

"We were stopped by a small waterfall down that way. Rufie saw something in the forest and went hearing off before I could get out of the water," Albert answered, pointing south and east of their current position.

The adventurers all looked at one another, then sighed and began to move in that direction. Despite Jaheira looking as if she wanted to tan the boy's hide, none of them was the type to leave him alone. Although Harry was still getting a very uncomfortable feeling around the boy. And as they traveled, that feeling did not go away, causing Harry to be ready to activate his Item Box and bring out his weapons instantly.

They found the waterfall quickly, where Khalid began, and Minsc both picked up the trail of the dog despite the rain and Dynaheir still being carried on Minsc's back. They quickly moved on, with Khalid in the lead, and Jaheira taking up the rear position with Harry falling back too, watching the boy as he walked beside Imoen and Minsc. She looked at him quizzically, only now noticing how tense Harry was. "What is wrong?"

"Something about that young boy is niggling at my senses. I don't know, it's just something off. I think it's something to do with my Greater Observation, but because it isn't something to do with terrain or anything of that nature, it isn't as clear as it should be," Harry confessed.

After studying Harry's face for a moment and realizing he was serious, Jaheira nodded, then very surreptitiously loosened the top of her sling stone pouch while letting

the sling itself drop into her hand from where it had been tied loosely around her wrist. She made an odd animal noise for a moment, sounding like a cat almost, but even deeper in tone ending in a bark. This caused Khalid, several hundred yards ahead of them through the forest to twitch his head, looking back at her in confusion, but he didn't reply further, instead simply moving on. "If there is trouble, my husband and I will be ready."

"Signal calls, excellent idea," Harry nodded in approval. "Do you think you could teach the rest of us that call?"

Jaheira smiled at that, then nodded her head slightly. "In the future, perhaps."

Congratulations.

Due to realizing that having some signals to share with your group so you can communicate over distances might be a good idea, you have earned ten Respect points with Jaheira.

You're getting there little...

After that, the group ran into a group of undead skeletons around a small battlefield of some kind but easily dealt with them, moving on until the trail they were following entered a small cave. There they found the dog, who came out at Albert's shout of "Rufie, come out here, you big brute!"

The dog was big, for certain, and quite shaggy, looing more like a hunting dog than a boy's pet. It bounded through the rain towards the boy, yipping happily.

At that point, though, things went sideways quickly. The boy and the dog touched, hand to nose, and suddenly both of them started to change, their forms morphing into something else entirely. The dog became a giant beast of some kind, with wide, stooped shoulders, four arms and two human-like legs, with a mouth that had far too many teeth to be believed. The boy's transformation was less disturbing but just as profound, becoming an ogre of a rather large size, standing at least 3 feet taller than even Minsc.

Before their change had completed, Harry had begun to bark out orders, pulling Minsc and Khalid away from the two, having them spread out. There was a downed tree to one side, and he gestured Minsc and Jaheira to use it as a barricade, while he took one end, the sword he had taken from the throne room in the gnoll fortress in one hand, his tower shield on his other arm. Khalid took the other side of the same downed log.

So spread out, the group could not be targeted by any single magical attack Harry had yet seen, while the downed log was more than tall enough to serve as a makeshift barricade to protect against a charge from the beast. At the same time, Imoen disappeared under Hide-in-Shadows, her ability to do so enhanced by the rain coming down while Minsc, still carrying Dynahier on his back, couldn't. Indeed, he couldn't be involved in any close-quarters combat at all, hence why Harry had him pulled back with Jaheira to provide long-range cover fire.

As the transformation continued, the information Harry saw via his AAS ability changed too, the color of their dots on his map shifting from blue to the orange of possible enemies. Their races also changed, while their names did not.

Name: Albert

Race: Ogre mage.

Class: Level 15 Mage.

Attitude toward you: complete disdain. Like a child looking at an ant, he might decide to step on you or not. Your opinion on things hardly matters at all.

A planar traveler, Albert the Ogre Mage might be able to get lost in a tiny grove of trees, but he is a powerful mage, one not to be underestimated. As a Planar traveler, he has one more spell per level than an equivalent mage who was born on this plane. Expect summoning and teleportation spells.

A page has been added to your bestiary.

Name: Rufie

Race: Level 13 Pit Fiend

Attitude toward you: Depends. If hungry, you look like a tasty meal. Otherwise, something to hunt down and toy with at its leisure.

Rufie is a surprisingly docile member of its race, ostensibly raised by its master since it was young. Do not make the mistake of thinking that makes it any less dangerous. A Pit fiend can utterly demolish low-level or even many mid-level Adventurers.

A page has been added to your bestiary

Quickly using eye movements to open the bestiary page, Harry desperately hoped that the pages would give him some idea of the weakness of these two beings. Because just looking at 'Rufie', Harry knew this wasn't a battle they could win with strength alone.

Race: Ogre Mage.

An offshoot of the ogre race, Ogre Mages are far more intelligent than the other types of ogres out there, with all the abilities of a mage. And unlike ogres, Ogre Mages can serve any of the alignments they wish. Depending on where they come from, their spells can differ wildly from those available to mages of similar levels. The race specializes in invisibility spells and mental magics.

Do not make the mistake of thinking they cannot fight in-close, though. Ogre Mages are still mages and can wield scimitars, katanas or bastard swords as well as any adventurer.

Weaknesses: Ogre Mages do not have any racial weakness beyond a slight weakness to sunlight. They can be overcome eventually through a mix of brute force, keeping them from using magic, and long-range firepower.

The page on the Pit Fiend was much worse.

Race: Pit fiend.

Pit fiends are literal demons of the pit, denizens of Hell, where the Dark Gods dwell each in their own pocket plane. Most have the intelligence of dogs, if dogs were habitually vicious and ate the souls of their victims at the same time they ate their flesh. Others can live long enough to be as smart as any human, if without any hint of empathy or morality. Powerful, fast, and with tentacles where others might have whiskers, they are immune to +2 weapons or lower, regenerate 3HP/round, and can attack with claws as well as cast three spells per day.

Weaknesses: Holy magic, God-blessed weapons, and that is about it. Pit Fiends are nasty. They can often be tricked into traps, and their dexterity is abysmal, so holding spells like Tangling Vines can work on them. Beyond that, Silence and long-range weapons are your friends. If you have arrows or whatever of +3 anyway. But hey, once they are stuck, you can run away at least.

"wait for them to attack first!" Harry shouted, hoping this terrible duo would decide they were not worth the trouble but preparing for the worst. "Jaheira, ready tangling Vines,

then, if you have it, Silence or something else on the Pit Fiend, while everyone else concentrates on taking down the mage. But do not fire until they attack!”

Once the transformation completed, the ogre turned, but then paused, one hand still on the muzzle of the giant archer as it sat on its haunches beside him. He studied the adventurers, who waited tensely, spells and arrows ready.

After a heart-stoppingly tense moment, he nodded. “You show proper deference and wariness of me, you strange, pitiable creatures who have never been beyond this plane of your own. And I thank you for your help in finding my pet. Lost as I was, I could not make heads or tails of his trail. I am a sophisticated individual, after all, not like one of you dirt grubbers. Now, however, I can at last return. Farewell.”

With that, and with no other word spoken, the ogre mage and the pit fiend disappeared, a doorway opening up in front of them both, with each he stepped through closing it behind themselves.

“... What the hell was that?” Imoen shrieked as she came out from behind her Hide-in-Shadows, staring around at the others. “I mean, just what the heck!”

“Those were planar travelers. Travelers from other dimensions who come here occasionally. They are all exceedingly strange, both in their mannerisms and in how they act and talk. The dimensional travel does something to them, I think,” Jaheira explained, looking shaken. She and her husband both looked over at Harry, nodding their heads firmly in his direction. “Make no mistake. If his transformation had served to surprise us, that ogre mage and his pit fiend would have attacked us instantly. They are all of them fickle creatures, prone to violence if they can get away with it and think themselves the stronger. And that battle would be one we might not have one. Pit fiends are notoriously hard to kill, and that ogre mage seems to be of extremely high level. Your wariness served us very well, Harry.”

“Seeing as they were both level fifteen, I’d say so, yes.” Harry nodded, slowly returning his sword and shield to his quick slots while Jaheira blanched. “I wonder, will that ability to carry over into actual people, or was it just picking up on how unusual that boy was?”

“If you, you are no longer a, a, able to be tricked or I, I, led into an ambush Harry, I swear I will kiss you,” Khalid laughed in relief, throwing an arm around the younger man, in a very un-elvish act. Staring at that ogre mage, Khalid had felt their death coming

for them. Khalid had a great fear of powerful mages, and that one certainly had fit the bill even before Harry had shared his level with them.

“Wait, what?” Imoen gaped, never having heard about this mage ability before. “Dimensional crossings are a thing? I mean, that’s a learnable spell?”

“No, it is not, not for us born on the Prime material plane. Planar travelers are an exception to the rule about actually traveling between the dimensions. Many of them travel from one dimension to another routinely, and not just the fiends from hell like that pit fiend or others like them. Some are born with the ability, like many Tieflings, half-devils. Others acquire it, but all of them use it routinely to simply slip from one dimension to another, and even the good-leaning members are quite odd to deal with, their dialogue a strange mix of different tongues, full of weird idioms. That is about as much as I can tell you about it. Why the interest?”

“Can you imagine the kind of heists you could pull with that!?” Imoen asked, having already come up with an excuse to cover her interest. After all, they hadn’t told everyone else about her and Harry’s semi-otherworldly origins.

Of course, that begs the question, if I go home like this, then does that mean I’ll never be able to merge back with my original body? I know Harry’s disappeared, so does that mean his new body completely replaced his old one, even if we’re able to get back? Damn! Wouldn’t everyone back home be surprised! They lose the scrawny but well-intentioned Boy Who Lived and get back the 18-year-old battle-hardened warrior Harry, son of the Murder-Manwhore.

The giggles the pink-haired girl fell into caused Jaheira to shake her head and looked over at Harry. He just shrugged his shoulders and indicated Khalid should get a move on. “We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s find our original route and get a move on.”

It was pushing evening when the forest began to slowly transform around them. The normal green-leafed trees were slowly replaced by a new variety of trees, their leaves looking almost fire-tipped, something that caused Harry and Imoen to stop and stare. Khalid slapped him on the shoulder as he headed back down the column, switching out with Jaheira at the front. “T, t, they are called f, f, fire leaf trees lad. They come in clumps, and a, a, are somewhat rare, but t, t, they are normal t, t, trees. I am told t, t, that they can be c, c, cultivated to create some a, a, amazing tasting m, m, maple syrup, but they are simply a variety of m, m, maple trees.”

“Whatever they, are the view is amazing,” Harry breathed. “It almost looked up as if we had changed seasons for a moment there.”

Soon after that, the sun began to set, and everyone decided that it was time to find a place to stay for the night. They would not be making Nashkel today, and that meant they were down to only two days before their friends would be beyond resurrection.

It was as they were doing so that they were hailed, the voice coming out of the rain to one side and somewhat above them, on top of what Harry had taken to just be a large piece of rock, but which was actually a small bluff. “You there! What are adventurers doing in Amn? Have you come down to spy on our supposed troop buildup? Why else would you be traveling through territory that rightfully belongs to my family?”

The voice was that of a woman. It was sharp, condescending, arrogant and yet almost childish sounding in comparison to the tone Jaheira could sometimes use, haughty more than certain. It was a voice that took itself very seriously indeed and was used to other people doing so, but Harry, for some reason that he decided to put down to his Greater Observation skill, felt it was not a voice with much actual experience behind it.

“Family land?” Harry looked over at Khalid, who shook his head then added an extra shrug of the shoulders as if indicating that it was all news to him that this area was owned by a single noble family.

A moment later, the speaker came down from a small promontory. The trail that led down was small, only enough room for one person to make their way down. The first person down it was a man, but he was obviously a guard of some kind, heavily armed, and well-muscled. Added to this was what Harry could see via his AAS.

Name: Delgod.

Race: Human

Class: Level 5 Warrior.

Delgod is an employee of the Argrim family and one of two bodyguards assigned to lady Sendai, the family heiress. He will keep to his chosen word and contract, knowing the future of mercenaries who break deals with their employers is very short indeed,

particularly in Amn. Both the law and the Shadow Thieves frown on that idea. He is an archer by trade but carries a short sword and buckler as well.

Attitude towards you: True Neutral.

Whatever his personal feelings, Delgod will follow Lady Sendai and whatever brand of idiocy she is trying on today. Knowing that like a new cloak, she might well never come back to it again.

Attitude towards his charge:

You can sense that he is physically interested in her, but that interest wanes whenever she opens her mouth. And he would never think of acting upon that kind of thing. What happens to mercenaries who break their word is nothing in comparison to mercenaries who take liberties with their client's daughters.

The next person down the small trail was the aforementioned lady Sendai. She was a little bit older than Harry had expected, looking to be in her mid-twenties rather than mid-teens, with a haughty demeanor and well-formed body hidden underneath a cloak and formed metal chest plate. It was obviously an item that had seen quite a bit of wear but was just as obviously extremely expensive, it's molding accentuating her body perfectly without being too overt. This was accompanied by bangles on both wrists, a large necklace and earrings.

Imoen whispered in Harry's ear that she had seen something of this fashion in books written the past few years from Amn. Apparently, ostentatious displays of wealth were the thing to do in high society there. Harry personally felt it was a waste, but the one piece of jewelry that really caught Harry's attention was Sendai's helmet. The thing looked as if it had golden horns for goodness sake! *What the heck is the point of gold on a piece of armor? Especially a helmet?*

Name: Lady Sendai of house Argrim.

Race: Human.

Class: Level 6 Warrior.

Lady Sendai is the quintessential rich bitch aristocrat.

Harry had to stop for a moment to bite at his lip to keep from laughing. Evidently, his AAS system had finally run into someone besides Jaheira that it didn't like it all. Once he was certain he wasn't going to start laughing, Harry continued to read what he could see looking at the woman.

Caustic, sarcastic, domineering to those under her, ass-kissing those above, a typical aristocrat. Her tongue is almost as dangerous as her long sword, and she looks angry and annoyed even beyond her normal mode at the moment. You can also tell that some of her jewelry is enchanted, although you get the impression that most of it is enchanted simply to look better on her than to help her in a fight.

Attitude towards you: Haughty Disdain.

Sendai believes that you are beneath her, just like everyone else that is not a nobleman of Amn. Be warned, she has little to no sense of empathy or proportion and is liable to act without care of the consequences.

After Sendai came a third person, another warrior, who like the first, was armed with a short sword, chain mail armor, and a longbow. His name was Alexander, and he too was a warrior, but that was all Harry could read before Sendai barked out, "Well!?" staring at the adventures angrily. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing on my family's lands? Or are you just going to stand there staring in awe at my beauty? I have to tell you, that kind of thing gets old after a few minutes, and I normally have peasants who stare too long flogged."

"Girl," Jaheira began as Harry scowled, "I have no idea where you think you are, but this land is not, as far as I know, owned by anyone. Indeed, is it not Amn's policy that any lands near its borders are held by the Council of Five?"

The council of Five, Harry had learned before this, was the ruling body that governed Amn. Five people were chosen by blind ballot by the powerful merchant houses that were the nobility of Amn to anonymously lead the nation. Harry had long wondered how that worked but now wasn't the time to ask a local how such a thing was possible.

"Trivialities." The woman waved Jaheira's words off as if they were not important at all. "My family has used the Fire Leaf Forest as our personal hunting ground for centuries. Ownership is nine-tenths of the law. And it would behoove that an adventurer, a mere bronze class vagabond, to remember your place. Do not speak to me, a gold caste, as if we are equal, and not even assume that you understand what real power is like."

Sendai added a sneer to her words at that, looking Jaheira up and down with such disdain it was like the half-elven woman was dung on her shoe.

Bronze and gold were two examples of the social-statuses used in Amn. Wealth was everything in Amn.

Looking at Jaheira's suddenly flinty gaze, Harry realized that letting Jaheira continue to speak would be simply adding fuel to the already lit fire of this conversation. He took a step forward, nodding his head as politely as he could manage to despite the woman's attitude. "If that is the case, then we beg your pardon. We are traveling through to Nashkel in the hopes of getting our friend aid from the priest there."

The woman's eyes flicked to him, then over to where Minsc stood well back of the others, carrying the unconscious form of his which. "A likely story," she sneered. "You're probably bandits or some such, returning with a kidnap victim, perhaps?"

Minsc growled even as he began to slide backward away from the Amnians. "Minsc does not like the way this pretty lady's words show her true nature. To even think that Minsc had stolen his Witch. That is an insult that most warriors of Rasheman would see as worthy of being challenged to a duel!"

"As if I would lower myself to duel with an ore like you," The woman scoffed, using the term that meant menial, criminal or slave in Amn. "But you're still on my family's lands and must pay some kind of toll I feel, even if I were to be so foolish as to let you go, which I am debating. Marching you all back to be hung could be most amusing and may well help my family's standing if we turn in such spies from Baldur's Gate."

"Now that we will not be doing!" Harry shot back firmly, his own temper fraying somewhat. "Not only have I never heard of you or your family, but we are not citizens of Baldur's Gate or Amn. We are adventurers, seeking to finish one quest while finding another in Nashkel."

"Hey, that's true!" Imoen laughed, but it was one with an edge to it as she looked at the other woman. "My friend and I are very well-read, and I've read every book about Amn, and it's history. I've never even heard of your house. How can a minor house that's never been in the history books for anything possibly own territory this large?"

“You dare insult my house! I’ll have you flogged for that before you are hung!” Sendai shrieked. Evidently, she could dish out the insults but not take them. She grabbed her longsword from its scabbard as she ordered, “Delgod, Alexander, take them!”

Before the first arrow could fly, Imoen disappeared into her Hide-in-Shadows, and Harry was suddenly holding his warhammer and his tower shield. The first arrow fired by the two guards slammed into his tower shield, skittering off it to one side as the three Amnians stared at him in shock, astonished by how quickly he had armed himself after having seemed to be only armed with a warhammer.

Harry instantly took advantage of this. “Minsc, fall back, protect Dynaheir. Khalid with me. Jaheira...”

A blazing bolt of lightning was already flying from the tip of Jaheira’s fingers towards the young woman, who cried out in shock, and a squalling cry of “You dare!” was heard as one of the bangles on her wrist’s bloated in light, a shield momentarily intercepting the weapon.

Sendai has used a charm of protection against the elements. The charm has worked but seems to be of poor quality. It will only work once more before being overwhelmed.

Two more arrows flew, both of them aimed towards Jaheira now, but Harry interposed himself quickly, cutting them off halfway before they could hit the half-elven, the arrows shattering on his shield. Then one of the warrior bodyguards grunted in pain, dropping his bow as Imoen appeared next to him, her short sword stabbing. A last-second move to the side for some reason, possibly to grab another arrow from his quiver, had saved him from the full power of a Backstab, but the wound was deep and bleeding. He raised his own sword, quicker than she had expected, but still too slow to hit her as she danced away, before coming in again with her short sword.

Sendai surprisingly met Khalid’s charge, which had continued after Harry had broken off to interpose his shield between the archers and Jaheira, their shields clashing together, but her strength seemed equal to Khalid’s. The two of them exchanged sword thrusts, and Khalid swiftly proved the better swordsman, pushing the haughty woman back on her heels within a few thrusts.

The next second, Jaheira’s Tangling Vines spell struck, entangling the woman, Khalid, her two bodyguards, and Imoen. Imoen, however, had been expecting it. Her opponent had not, and she leaped back and away as the man became entangled, cursing

while more of his blood began to flow down from his wound. Imoen shifted out of using her sword to her short bow, and before the man could break free, she had an arrow in the air from only about fifteen feet away.

Her aim was true, indeed at this range, it might've well been impossible for her to miss. The arrow took the man in the throat, punching straight through and out the back of his neck. "GGGgggg...." He gurgled, one hand raising to grab at the shaft, but then collapsed onto his face, dead but still twitching.

With that man dealt with, Imoen shifted her attention to the other archer. He had sent another arrow shaft out, this time at Khalid, who, like Harry, used his shield like it away, though this had allowed Sendai to break away from their exchange. The woman had also kicked out of the Tangling Vines and was moving back and way from the once more advancing Harry and Khalid.

The other archer, Alexander, turned on Imoen quickly, sending a shaft her way, which forced her to dodge, before she was caught by the Tangling Vines.

Before he could fire again, A sling stone took the man high in the side, right underneath one outstretched arm as he pulled back on his bow, while Harry raced forward to rejoin Khalid in pressing Sendai. "Knock her out, don't kill her!" Harry ordered, shaking his head "I don't think she's enough of a threat to warrant killing all three of them."

Khalid grunted agreement and batted aside Sendai's desperate lunge with her longsword, but the woman's attention on Khalid had allowed Harry to close, and with a thought, his hammer disappeared, and he grabbed at her wrist, twisting hard, forcing Sendai to drop her sword to the ground. A shield strike followed, smashing Sendai nearly off her feet, as Harry grabbed at her -rather stupid - horned helmet, tearing it off Sendai's head.

What Harry would have done at that point would never be known, as, unbeknownst to Harry and Khalid in the midst of battle, Jaheira had followed on their heels. Now she sidestepped around her husband, causing both men to twitch in surprise and vow to work on their situational awareness, before rearing her hand back in a slap.

Sendai, as a Warrior, should have been nearly immune to a slap from Jaheira, a Druid. But, despite being a warrior, Sendai was a very short woman, and while her strength might have been enough to stand against Khalid, her constitution and durability

had evidently suffered. The slap caused her to reel backward. A second later, even as her face firmed from its initial shock, her eyes flashing with anger, a second slap rang out.

This caused Sendai to stumble to her knees, and Jaheira reached down and very gently lifted her face forcing Sendai to look up at her. "In the future, consider your actions more carefully, and do not act in such a precipitous manner."

With that, Jaheira reared back and slapped the other woman again. This was enough to send the Amnian heiress unconscious to the floor of the forest.

"Bloody Hell," Harry muttered, shaking his head. He then looked over to the only Amnian still on his feet and, hefting his warhammer once more from his quick slot, lifted it menacingly. "Surrender?"

Grumbling, Alexander agreed, dropping his weapon and holding his hands up.

"W, w, will the Argrim f, f, family pay for your friend t, t, there to be revived?" Khalid inquired politely, shaking his head at this bit of idiocy. Sendai's aggressive arrogance and stupidity had been astonishing.

Alexander nodded. "They'll pay. And for all her mouthing off like that, you all should probably steer clear of Amn for a while. Her family really is powerful, even if it is also kind of new on the scene. They're not likely to forget this humiliation."

"Then perhaps they should teach their heiress some more manners, and a little something called empathy?" Jaheira muttered, then paused, one hand going to her neck, her eyes widening.

Harry was about to ask what was wrong when he felt something hit him in the back right underneath his chest plate. He grunted in pain as the message:

You have been Backstabbed, minus forty health.

Your lung has been punctured, you have been afflicted with the negative status, Internal Bleeding. Your movement is impaired, and you will lose health -4 for every thirty seconds until it is healed.

Blood beginning to drip from underneath his chest plate, Harry turned and saw a man in typical thief armor: studded leather armor with a hood and a short sword dancing away from him.

Name: Vax

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Thief

Attitude towards you: He just stabbed you!

Vax is a thief who works freelance in Amn, which should tell you quite a bit about his abilities and the kind of jobs he takes. Only the best thieves and killers can operate free of Shadow Thief oversight. Oddly enough, beyond his extreme ability with Hide-in-Shadows, he is more of a Fighter than a thief, relying on his partner to disable traps and any actual thievery. His short sword is also nasty looking.

“Sorry,” Vax sneered as he spoke almost conversationally as he backed away before coming in rapidly, throwing out a short sword in an expert series of thrusts that Harry’s tower shield took even as he stumbled back. “But business is business. And we’ve been following that stupid bitch for a while now. Seemed like a good time to take two birds for the price of one.”

At the same time that Vax had begun to attack Harry, darts had been hurled at both Imoen and Jaheira, hitting them in their necks, causing them to crumble to their knees. Both women were also hit with a status change.

Jaheira and Imoen are stunned.

Stunned will last for two minutes + 20 seconds for every point below 18 Constitution the afflicted individual has.

Until it fades, the stunned individual will be unable to perform any action.

Khalid turned, blocking a dart with his shield, but another dart on the heels of the first slid past his shield, hitting Khalid on the side of his neck. He fell, stunned as Alexander scrambled for his sword from the ground.

A man appeared out of Hide-in-Shadows then.

Name: Zal

Race: Human

Class: Thief Level 6

Attitude towards you: Disdainful Apathy. You are a secondary mark to him, nothing more.

Zal is Vax's partner in crime. He has a thieving ability that makes him one of the best but isn't all that good in a fight beyond his ability to throw darts, something that is surprisingly good. He can use throwing daggers, darts or anything else that comes to hand but lacks Vax's ability with short swords. Weathering his long-range attacks, though, is something few can do.

He kicked Jaheira away from Sendai, before he reached down for her, a dagger appearing in his other hand like magic.

"Minsc, take the dart thrower!" Harry shouted, having seen out the corner of his eye that his large friend had pulled out his bow and readied an arrow. He had hesitated to shoot, for fear of the movement doing some harm to Dynaheir, and the battle looked to have been over for a moment.

He twisted around now, sending the shaft towards the man standing over Sendai, as the guardsman Alexander engaged the man who had just backstabbed Harry, before stumbling backward with a cry of agony as the man cut off his sword hand at the wrist.

Harry, however, had time to use Lay on Hands. This stopped his internal bleeding for now. He charged forward, and the man had barely a second to turn before Harry's hammer slammed into his side, crushing his ribs. A studded leather gambeson was no match for a warhammer, and he stumbled back with a grunt of pain as he tried to raise his weapon.

Harry dodged his return blow easily and brought his hammer around again, crashing into the side of the man's head, pulping it and sending his corpse collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

He then turned to the crippled Alexander, who had stumbled to his knees, holding his hand with his other one. Swiftly pulling out a piece of clothing from his item box, Harry began to make a tourniquet a few inches above the wound, while Khalid, who had greater constitution than Imoen or Jaheira, hurried to his wife's side, stopping just a second to behead the man who had been hurling darts a moment ago. Minsc's arrow had taken him in the shoulder, making him easy pickings for Khalid.

Removing the dart from Jaheira's neck helped to revive her within seconds, and she shook herself, looking around. Then she stumbled to her feet and hurried over to Harry, using a spell of medium healing on him, then two minor healing spells on Alexander. This caused the blood flow from his chopped off-hand, which Harry had already been trying to stop, to cease entirely.

But of course, his hand did not start growing back. That was beyond any spell that Jaheira had access to. Indeed, even at the height of her powers, reattaching limbs was beyond a druid's ability. Another healing spell deadened the man's pain and made the wound started to close up. A fourth, and Jaheira was out of minor healing spells, shaking her head in annoyance.

"Stupid girl," she muttered curses to Sendai, under her breath at the amount of trouble that girl it caused. "I swear her parents should have spent more time taking a switch to her backside than..."

"How much are you getting paid for this?" Harry interjected, cutting through her diatribe as she looked at Alexander.

"Not nearly enough," the man replied caustically, shaking his head angrily. He looked around for his severed hand and picked it up, the hand disappearing in his item box for a moment. That would preserve the hand, although the wound would have to be reopened by a priest to reattach it. "Still, just like reviving Delgod, the Argrims will pay for this too."

"I think we might wish to take some kind of idiocy fee from Sendai. As well as taking everything these two themes had on them," Jaheira suggested.

Harry chuckled. "We'll take Delgod's weapon and armor. That will at least make him easier for you to carry and will compensate us along with a third of any gold Sendai has. She keeps her weapons. Imoen, search the body of the thieves, and take anything they have."

"Sendai's got at least six-hundred gold on her. Take it, and be well," Alexander said with a chuckle. He was remarkably upbeat for someone who had lost a hand. After all, he still had his life, and most adventurers wouldn't have bothered with kid gloves after the insults Sendai had sent their way, to say nothing of actually starting a fight.

Shaking his head, Alexander watched as the adventurers took what they wanted from Sendai's unconscious body, noting absently that neither of the two men had joined in on the looting, leaving it to the bossy half-elf.

Indeed, Harry had turned his attention fully onto the two thieves, whose ability to use Hide-in-Shadows to evade his map and the Darts of Stunning had used had come far too close to actually overwhelming them. On them, Harry found Three Darts of Stunning and something that looked even more interesting.

Bracers of Archery: The Dale's Protector

During a dangerous meeting with a rival ruler, the king of the Great Dale requested the protection of his best archers in addition to his usual guard. The archers, each equipped with an enchanted bow and bracers, hid within range of the gathering. As predicted, enemy troops attempted to seize the king and force their will over his rule. But none had anticipated the amazing accuracy and lethality of the hidden archers. The king was able to escape unharmed; in fact, none of the ambush members even lived to approach him

+2 Missile Weapon Attack bonus. +2 Missile attack speed.

Harry instantly handed them back to Imoen with a grin, and her eyes widened as she too read the description, quickly putting them on instead of the Bracers of Defense +1, which Jaheira took with a nod of thanks. Imoen also took the Short Sword +1 that Val had been using. With that, the group moved away from Alexander and his unconscious mistress. By this point night had fallen, and normally they would simply make camp where they were without any better option in sight.

However, Harry, instead of suggesting that, ignored the hunger pangs from his stomach as he turned to the others. "So, does anyone else think we should just push on through the night? I'm getting the impression that staying in this area is more trouble than it's worth."

"Agreed," everyone else answered as one, as Jaheira shook her head, looking around in something approaching horrified wonder. "Since when did this place become such a haven for craziness?"

To that, no one had an answer, and she sighed then looked to her husband. "Shall we?"

It took the two half-elves no time at all to discover which way they had to go. It turned out that they had indeed come a little too far south, thanks to the 'young boy' and his search for his 'dog'. Coming back, they reported this to the others, with Jaheira adding, "And the next time you feel something off about someone, pray tell us."

I did, I just didn't have enough to go on to say whether or not he was a threat, that's all," Harry retorted defensively.

Before they set off, however, Dynaheir moaned, causing Minsc to stop instantly, unbuckling the makeshift holder that was containing his Witch to his back, turning and gently setting her down on the ground.

OOOOOOO

For Dynaheir, it was like trying to break the surface after drowning in a nightmare. A nightmare that had begun when the gnolls had attacked her and her warrior companion, Minsc. That memory segued into the barbarous torture of the gnolls, their smells, the horror of the food they had tried to make her eat. Dynaheir could remember the snap of her fingers as they broke and could feel them twitching now.

Yet there was no pain in the movement, and even before she opened her eyes, she moved her fingers lightly against one another, wondering at their wholeness once more. More than that, she could feel grass underneath her back. Nearby, she could hear the sounds of a forest, felt a fire to one side, distant enough to not be a threat, close enough to warm her slightly.

As a Witch of Rasheman, Dynaheir was almost as open to the spirit realm as a druid was to nature. She could feel the forest all around her and knew that there were no gnolls of vile creatures nearby. She was free. It was only when she was certain of that fact that Dynaheir opened her eyes to see Minsc hovering over her. "So, I am rescued. And this is no trick, then if you, my stalwart guardian, are here."

She tried to raise a hand, but it fell back, as Dynaheir realized she still felt as weak as a kitten. As that fact hit her, the rest of her body's sensation flood back into Dynaheir's mind, and she could feel her head was throbbing something fierce.

“Lady Dynaheir, my Witch! Your eyes have opened! Thank goodness! Thank goodness for goodness! Together, you, Harry, and our friends, we will find the minds who set those wicked gnolls upon us, and bring them a good butt-kicking!” Minsc began to bellow to cry like a babe almost, reaching forward as if to hug Dynaheir.

But a female voice cut across his blubbling. “Enough of that, Minsc! I realize this is an emotional time, but moving Dynaheir will not help her feel any faster. My name is Jaheira,” the woman went on as she knelt down, holding a finger in front of Dynaheir’s eyes as someone else moved a torch slightly closer. “I believe you have a nasty concussion, but I need to make certain that now that you are waking up that your mind has taken no permanent damage.”

Obligingly Dynaheir followed the moving finger with her eyes, idly noting the woman was at least a half-elf and one of imposing beauty at that. But following the finger, Dynaheir quickly found her eyes watering. “My head is throbbing most noticeably, but I am at least able to follow your movements. It causes me some pain, but no more than could be expected from a concussion.”

“It looked as if you were beaten badly at some point, Miss. Can you tell us why they were so interested in you?” Another voice, this time that of a man, young but confident, spoke out of the darkness.

“I have no idea, to be frank. It smacks of some greater purpose, but the gnolls did not speak common around me,” Dynaheir answered, grimacing as she tried to turn her head to find the speaker only to stop as more pain shot through her head. “And who are you to ask such?”

“I’m sort of the leader of this group,” the voice answered, and then three more faces leaned into the light of the torch so that Dynaheir could see them. Dynaheir’s eyes flicked first to Jaheira, then up to Khalid, easily able to tell that both of them were older by far than the young man who had spoken. She had seen that face before somewhere, and her eyes widened for a second before she got control of her expression once more, sending a prayer to the Spirits, shaking her head in amusement. The spirits of the world move in mysterious ways. Here I come to find the one, the man who might be the fulcrum to ushering in a new Time of Troubles or stopping such in its tracks. I am first captured only to be rescued by Minsc in the company of the very individual I was searching for!”

For a moment, it was all Dynaheir could do to not laugh aloud at the irony. When she got control of herself, she said, "I think you most kind adventurers. I am uncertain what payment my large companion was able to give thee for your aid, but understand that I consider myself in your debt."

OOOOOOO

Smiling at the fact the woman seemed to have most of her faculties Harry took a moment to read the information above Dynaheir as it changed.

Name: Dynaheir

Race: Human

Class: Mage level 7.

Relationship status: cautious optimism. Due to your aiding in rescuing her from durance vile, you have 1800/3000 Respect, 2000/3000 Trust.

Dynaheir is a Witch of Rasheman, who is on her spirit quest, a rite of passage similar to her companion's dajemma. She seems very sure of herself, is possessed and is very demanding of her companions. She is concerned about the sanity of her bodyguard, though she has an obvious respect for him and will not go far from his side. Beware her tongue, for it is as sharp as a dagger, and she is not afraid to use it if you do something she disapproves of.

Finished reading, Harry banished the message with the ease of an eye-flick, before shaking his head firmly. "No debt. Debts come and go, and debtors never make good companions."

Jaheira began to laugh gaily, with Khalid joining her a second later. "Gorion! That was a Gorion line," she chortled, slapping Harry on the shoulder lightly. "I have said it before, but Gorion was a good teacher."

"He was a good man, which I think rather more important," Harry retorted, smiling slightly over at the other woman before turning back to Dynaheir, noticing idly that had won him another fifty respect and trust points with Jaheira, and a hundred friendship points with Khalid. "We rescued you because it was the right thing to do and because Minsc pled with us to help him. Now, I count Minsc among my friends and companions,

and even were a good deed not worth doing on its own, there would be no talk of debt between us.”

Dynaheir smiled at that. “Very well, but if you do not count I debts, then will you at least allow me to join you and my companion permanently? To take part in your adventures going forward?”

“If you wish to do so once you are fully healed up, and you learn about what we are about at the moment, then...”

“You should hear it! Dynaheir, Harry, his companions they have chosen to look into the iron shortage, of which we heard about the moment we set foot on the ports of Baldur’s Gate. They believe some evil villain he is about it, and have found clues, and believe that even your being captured might have been due to the same vile villain!” Minsc cut in eagerly.

“Then your cause is just, and I doubly wish to join you.” Dynaheir smiled. “Although I will not begrudge time spent healing myself up.”

“We’re nearly to Nashkel, where we hope to be able to revive our companions slain during our assault on the Gnoll fortress. Hopefully, that same priest will be able to help with your difficulties.”

“Companions? There were more than the four of you plus my good guardian, then? I am sorry to hear that others died in my rescue.”

Inwardly, Harry breathed a sigh of relief that this was going so well. Minsc hadn’t blurted out about his gamer abilities, as Harry had been worried about, and Dynaheir was remarkably calm about things. Although from the look in Jaheira’s face, she wasn’t so sanguine about that. Perhaps that sort of mental distance was another sign of a concussion? Harry didn’t know and wasn’t going to ask.

His relief, alas, came too soon.

“Do not be sorry until you hear that one the identity of one of the slain,” Minsc grumbled, looking surly at the memory of Edwin. Although Edwin’s magic had made many of the battles they had fought against the gnolls far easier than they would have been, indeed Edwin’s magic had made more than a few winnable when they would not have been otherwise, Minsc had not warmed to the idea of him working with them. “Harry,

with his silver tongue, was able to convince the Red Wizard who dogged our footsteps to join us in rescuing you. He died in the doing fighting against the dungeon boss, the chieftain of the gnoll tribe, a warrior's death for one who did not deserve such."

Dynaheir's eyes widened, and she tried to sit up, only to fall back in pain. "GAaagh, y, you did what! The Red Wizard! How..."

Cursing his earlier optimism, Harry decided to grab the bull by the horns. "We ran into him near a xvart village that was allied with the gnolls who had taken you. We wiped them out and were able to then find our way to the gnoll fortress afterward. Edwin joined us because he was both in the area and needed aid and because I convinced him that upon our rescuing you, you would be willing to answer ten questions of his, freely and without guile."

"You had no right to promise that!" Dynaheir shouted before grasping her head with both hands.

As Dynaheir spoke, Harry received another message, one he felt rather redundant frankly.

Ouch. Your actions have cost you -800 trust with Dynaheir. I guess she really doesn't like knowing you had dealings with the Red Wizard, even if it helped to save her life.

Jaheira shook her head, holding out some herbs that she had found while the others had been setting up camp. "Eat these. Raw, they have more power, although they will taste awful. They will help with the pain, but I am unwilling to try to help heal your mind if it has truly taken some hurt. Your eyes are not tracking very well, and one of your pupils is more dilated than the other, indicating further damage."

After swallowing the herbs, Dynaheir looked up angrily at Harry. "You had no right to promise that. Do you have any idea what you have done? I am a witch of Rasheman. I have the True Sight, which has allowed Rasheman to remain free of the Red Wizards and the Nar for generations ever since they started to encroach on our borders. With your promise binding me, you have handed this Red Wizard a key to breaking that defense."

"Have I?" Harry retorted, crossing his arms. "Is this True Sight something a wizard can learn? Is it something they don't know about already? Judging by how you're saying that you have used it to offset their plans, I can't see them not having at least discovered

that it existed. And I never said you couldn't steer the answers in one direction or another. Or are you saying Edwin is smarter than you?"

That caused Dynaheir's anger to sputter out for a moment. Then she shook her head, wincing once more at the movement even as she began to munch on more herbs that Jaheira was handing her. The grimace on Dynaheir's face was for both Harry's words and the fact that Jaheira had several handfuls more of the herbs for Dynaheir to eat. "Perhaps, perhaps not. But the more they know about it, the more they will be able to offset it, to possibly obfuscate the truth of their plans from us. As much as I loathe everything they stand for, the Red Wizards are excellent at wizardry."

She hissed in anger but then sighed. "...Yet, if the Red Wizard died to try to free me, and you promised him this, I am bound by that promise as if I made it myself. But I will not forget this." She fell silent for a moment, before asking warily, "And do you assume that he will continue to travel with you?"

"I have no idea," Harry shrugged. "Perhaps he'll leave after asking his 10 questions, perhaps not. Certainly, I won't turn him away if he decides to continue journeying with us. But I won't stop him if he doesn't wish to either."

That caused Dynaheir to hiss again, but Harry wasn't about to lie about that with her. Edwin's magical strength had impressed Harry, and the fireballs, in particular, were crowd-pleasers.

"Very well. I had already determined that I would travel with you, given the friendship you and Minsc both speak of. Now I have yet another reason to make certain that the Red Wizard..."

"His name is Edwin," Harry interjected mildly. "Regardless of his reasons, he **did** die to help free you."

Dynaheir ground her teeth but nodded. "Edwin, then, to keep him from influencing you."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and was about to use the idiom whatever floats your boat, before realizing he hadn't heard that kind of thing since arriving in this weird world. "As you wish, my lady," he said instead. "Although I think you and Minsc should both make that your decision to follow us after you are fully healed and have all your mental faculties back. For now, I think introductions are in order all around."

Listening to the names, Dynaheir looked at each individual as they were introduced. But most of her attention remained on Harry, almost to the point where Imoen wondered if maybe she had a bit of a crush on her handsome savior.

The group stayed where they were that night as Dynaheir was fed another two bowls of soup, this time accompanied with some fresh deer meat grilled over a fire, courtesy of Khalid and his bow. She fell asleep soon, but since Harry and Imoen had already made camp.

The next day they roused at dawn, with Jaheira gently rousing Dynaheir once more to eat more broth and some more deer meat. While Imoen fed the Rashemani woman, Jaheira examined her reaction times once more, halting Dynahier from moving whenever she tried to do so, making the younger human woman become somewhat annoyed.

This was assuaged by Minsc filling Dynaheir in on the battle to save her, moving from when they attacked the xuart village on. But thankfully, Minsc had taken to heart the fact that Harry and Imoen wanted to reveal their secrets to his Witch in their own time. He did not mention any of the Blood Magic spells that they used during the battle in his retelling.

As the tale finished, Dynaheir finally shook her head slightly, looking over at Harry and the others. "The battles you waged to save me sound fraught enough that I will not quibble about paying for Edwin's aid," she said, although she still sounded a little too chilly toward Harry as he looked at her.

Harry shrugged his shoulders at that, looking a little uncomfortable at the praise, while Imoen simply nodded as did Jaheira and Khalid. "While more preparation time before tackling that dungeon would've been nice, we won through in the end. And so long as we can get to Nashkel in enough time, without anything permanent happening to our companions. For all they annoyed me each in their own way, I would not wish permanent death on either of them."

"And with that," Harry announced on the heels of Jaheira's words, "I think it's time to be off. Minsc, are you still good to carry Dynaheir?"

"Carry!?" Dynaheir exclaimed. "I am not some rucksack that needs to be carried! I can walk on my own."

Harry shook his head slightly. "If that was true, you'd be able to feed yourself at the very least." Dynaheir had stopped fighting Imoen's feeding her after only a few token protests.

"Furthermore, your head has taken such damage that I would much rather you not move it, and that it stays in its protected position in the makeshift carrying case that my husband made," Jaheira said, her lips twitching slightly.

Dynaheir looked over at the thing beside her makeshift bedroll, then tried to just sit up, a prelude to standing up, which failed miserably. She groaned, holding her head in both hands and falling back slightly.

Jaheira looked over at Khalid and Harry, and Harry nodded. She moved to Dynaheir's side and began a healing spell, bringing her health up further by 10 points, then further again by another spell. The pain in Dynaheir's head subsided at this but did not disappear entirely, while the rest of her aches and pains, having been kept immobile after having been held captive for so long, disappeared entirely, making her much more comfortable. Physically anyway. As Imoen and Jaheira began to move her back into the carry case, she grimaced them in embarrassment. "This is humiliating."

It only got worse when Khalid and Harry moved over to lift the carry-on case, a thing of various wooden pieces and leather straps that Khalid and Imoen had devised between them, on to Minsc's back. He put his left hands underneath the back of the underside of her thighs as they went around his back, while Dynaheir's arms hung loosely over his shoulders as the rest of her was kept in an upright position, a strap across the forehead keeping her head upright in a somewhat padded wooden box. "It is like I am a baby being carried!"

"But my Witch is even lighter than a baby if just as precious!" Minsc laughed, followed by a squeak from Boo. "And Boo says that you should not worry overmuch about your dignity. At least you have your life for the moment, your dignity can return in time."

Dynaheir's eyes moved from where they had been trying to stare over Minsc's head down to one of his shoulders, grimacing as she stared into two beady eyes. "I see you still have that little creature then? Dare I ask how you kept it hidden during our captivity?"

"Such a question is best left to scholars. Boo is very tiny, and there is so much of mighty Minsc to search."

Dynaheir grimaced, and Imoen laughed, saying that had been one of the first questions she had posed when they first met up with Minsc.

With that, the group was off once more, moving at a brisk pace through the woods, with Minsc taking up the rear with Jaheira and Dynaheir on his back. Dynaheir's embarrassment did not fade for the rest of the day, as they travel through the fire Leaf Forest, through the day and pushing into the evening.

Harry found himself at the head of the column with Khalid again as they finally broke out of the forest, finding themselves on the edge of what looked like a small bit of farmland ahead of them. Harry could make out what looked like the lights of a cabin of some kind, behind which loomed a wall of dirt and wood, blocking out what might be more lights the distance in either direction.

"N, n, Nashkel," Khalid announced, slowing down slightly as Imoen came out from the forest behind the two men. "O, o, or rather, the o, o, outskirts of it."

After the more forest wise Minsc and his precious burden joined them with Jaheira, the group made their way forward, moving along the edge of the farmland until they found a path through it, leading to the palisade and the guards standing watch there.

They still saw the adventurers coming and seems to be on a hair-trigger as one of them hailed them, saying, "Hold there, strangers!"

The parties moving out of the darkness did so, and the guards seemed to relax slightly. The spokesman shouted out, "State your business in Nashkel."

"I wish to resurrect two of our comrades, get healing for a third, and then see about a job," Harry replied before anyone else could say anything.

The guards asked them to step further into the light of the torches, and then to wait there as they sent someone for their lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, is it?" Jaheira murmured, her brows furrowing. "A captain should be in charge of the Nashkel town watch, not a lieutenant. And there did seem to be a bit of a pause before he used the lesser rank."

"We'll find out, I'm sure," Harry shrugged, before moving over to help Minsc with the backpack, as Dynaheir had just growled out that she wanted to see if she could stand.

She could, if on wobbly legs, and she remained there, standing on her own but leaning against Minsc, scowling in irritation at her weakness.

As Harry looked at the guards, he noticed a message appearing in his line of sight, once more giving him more information on what he was looking at.

Amn Soldier

Another variety of the same type of guardsmen at the Friendly Arm Inn the normal soldier of Amn isn't really a match for an adventurer except for very low-level ones. Unlike the guards, the Amnian guards are extremely well-trained to use group tactics against adventurers. They also come in two varieties, polearm bearing and crossbow bearing.

At that, Harry nodded internally. *The polearm using men to hold you back, circle and pin you in place and the crossbows to make the kill. Simple but effective. Shouldn't be a problem so long as they don't start a fight, though.* With a mental shrug, he continued reading.

They also tend to be found in numbers far greater than most adventurers can deal with, like the soldiers of any other nation. An adventurer could deal with three or four of them. Few adventurers could deal with a company, few parties a brigade, and none could deal an entire army, backed up by their own adventurers.

Soon after Harry finished thinking through that and looking over the guards in question, the two guards sent into the town returned with a third man. He was wearing the same chest plate and colors as the other guards arrived, but this one was an actual adventurer.

Name: Oublek.

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Warrior.

An adventurer who joined up with the Amn Army, Oublek is young for his rank, which implies he is possibly ambitious to have risen to be a lieutenant. But he could be incompetent as well, given the normally staid nature of life in Nashkel, it's hard to tell. He certainly isn't a native, like the rest of the guard.

Attitude towards you: true neutral, leaning towards low-key eagerness.

While not exactly happy to see you, it doesn't seem personal. At the same time, Oublek might be on the lookout to use a band of Adventurers any way he can, for both the town and his own interests.

"Are you the bounty Hunter Greywolf and his band?" The man inquired abruptly as he moved towards the group, leaving his guards behind at the break in the wall.

"We are not." Harry saw no point in trying to pretend to be someone he was not. "In fact, we're not bounty hunters at all. Although we do have a lot of gnoll ears to turn in for the bounty if you all have the same system as Beregost does."

The man rocked on his heels, staring in some surprise at them before nodding. "Very well, I can authorize payment for those ears, fifteen gold per ear."

Harry frowned, wondering if he should haggle, then deciding he should. "Did you know that there was a knoll fortress two days travel from here?" Harry revealed, before letting his voice harden. "I'll admit it came as something of a surprise to us. And they were very strong. In fact, the fortress had evolved into a dungeon, a level 3. We cleared them out and lost two of our comrades to them. I'm certain that your town can afford more than a mere fifteen gold per ear, especially since that was less than Beregost paid for bandit scalps."

A part of Harry should have been horrified at the idea of using trophies to earn money like this. But for some reason, either due to his Gamer's Mind and its eclectic effect on his emotions, or because he was becoming inured to the violent nature of this world, it didn't bother Harry much. Something he was oddly thankful for, since he figured this wouldn't be the last time he used such a means to gain money.

Looking apologetic, Oublek shook his head. "I can't authorize any more gold than that, so you'll have to take it or leave it."

But Harry wasn't done. "Hold on, you just said 'authorize any more gold'. What if I didn't want gold?"

The Lieutenant narrowed his eyes but slowly nodded. "Given the level of danger you just talked about, I suppose some other kind of type of recompense would be acceptable. What were you thinking of?"

“Could you send a message along with us to the priest of your local temple, so that he doesn’t charge us as much as he would normally for a resurrection?” Jaheira requested, stepping in quickly, knowing that Harry wouldn’t know about the price of that kind of thing.

“Yes,” Oublek answered instantly, I can do that, I’ll have him mark the price down as if you were a member of the Amn Army. That’ll be two hundred gold per head resurrected rather than the normal six hundred he charges for Adventurers.”

Harry grinned and held out his hand. “In that case, I believe we have an agreement. If you can go and to the gold, by the time you get back, I should have been able to pull out the bag from my Item Box.”

The man laughed commiseratingly, as that was a frequent complaint of adventurers. He quickly turned back and murmured something to his guards, who began to relax and then headed deeper into the town, while Minsc walked Dynaheir around, under Jaheira’s watchful eye. Meanwhile, Khalid and Harry made a show of emptying out their Item Boxes to bring out the various bags holding the ears of the knolls that they had killed. There were actually one hundred and three of them.

Several of them were the blue or orange color of the Elites or Flinds. And one of them was even larger, large enough to be the size of a throwing dagger-like those used by the thief from the evening before. It came from the dungeon boss.

Whispering quickly, Khalid convinced Harry to set those special ears aside. They were worth quite a bit more than just fifteen gold after all, even with the four hundred gold discount they were getting on the resurrections of their allies. The dungeon boss’s ear alone would be worth at least a thousand gold on its own.

The Lieutenant came back quickly, and after opening the bags, nodded to one of his men, who began to count them out, tossing the ears into a small, extremely hot fire set into a portable brazier, where they went up in greasy smoke. Eventually, the deal was concluded, with Harry and the party gaining a thousand, three hundred gold and the letter of introduction to the priest.

Jaheira had been silent throughout this, concentrating on watching Dynaheir’s face as she had the Rashemani through a series of exercises to test her balance, and her stomach. The effect of the malnutrition and the concussion was alas still very plain for

her to see. As they finished though, "Tell me Goodman, is Mayor Denard still offering money to adventurers interested in looking into the issue with your mines?"

"He is indeed. Heck, he'll probably be asking you to stop by if you take a room at the inn, right quick too." Oublek grumbled. "I wish I have enough men to look into it ourselves, we only have a group of twenty guards here. That's not enough to both keep the town safe and look into the issue with our iron at the same time."

One of the other guards spoke, holding up a hand. "If you all want more information, there's a few ex-miners and miner's wives they can talk to. We've been losing miners down there for weeks now. It's getting to be dangerous, and the mine boss, Emerson, is urging the mayor to let him close."

Ding

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue, has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

Due to Jaheira's questions and the severity of the issue facing Nashkel, one of the guards of Nashkel has mentioned that the problem within the mine has also been killing the actual miners rather than just damaging the iron somehow as you might've thought previously. Perhaps you should prepare for trouble if you enter those mines?

Harry nodded thoughtfully as if he was reacting to the guardsman's words while really thinking about the implications of the new clue. *So, this won't be just an investigation, but possibly another dungeon battle? Not good, but it doesn't seem as if we'll be facing gnolls either. They aren't exactly good at keeping a low profile for very long, and given a normal gnoll's height, I doubt they would be happy to spend long amounts of time underground either.*

With the idea of getting as prepared as possible, Harry asked about where they could buy and sell some gear, thinking about what he would want down in the deep dark of a mine as well as the kind of terrain that implied something that might not have occurred without his Greater Observation ability urging him on. He also made a note to talk to Jaheira and Dynaheir and Edwin, if the Red Wizard still wished to travel with them, about the spells that would be most useful in such an environment.

As he was handing over the gold, Oublek paused as if struck by an idea, but he was just a little too obvious, and Harry's eyes narrowed little. "You and your band are

obviously extremely skilled to kill this many gnolls and only lose two of your number. Would you mind taking on the job for the town guard?"

"It would depend on whether or not it was a rush job," Harry warned. "We were just talking about our looking into the Iron Intake Issue."

Oublek blinked, then chuckled dryly. "Iron Intake Issue, is it? That's kind of funny."

"No, it isn't," Imoen sighed. "It really isn't. Don't humor him, please."

Harry turned and mock-glared at her, before looking back to the Lieutenant. "Like I was saying, unless it's time-sensitive, we can think about it."

Scratching at his cheek for a moment, Oublek frowned before nodding. "I don't think it's time-sensitive, although it could well be. You see, the guard here was led by captain Brage. But he went mad a few days ago.

"Mad, you say?" Dynaheir queried sharply, speaking up for the first time, turning from where Minsc had been helping her walk around. "Some kind of spell?"

"No, or at least we don't think so. It seemed to be a gradual thing. Over a week, the captain became standoffish, quick to anger. Then one day, he cuts down two of our men, smashed down the door to our barracks, and ran off. He was screaming some kind of poem at the top of his lungs, waving his sword in the air."

"Were there any witnesses to this fit?" Jaheira questioned, interest and wariness plain in her voice.

"All the guards saw him that weren't on duty saw him charging out of the barracks, miss," the Lieutenant, replied shrugging his shoulders. "the captain also cut down several farmers on his way out of town, to go with the two slain guards. Brage's now a wanted murderer. If you are hunting or heading along the Sword Coast to the northwest of us – that's the direction he ran out of town - and run into him, we would pay with eight hundred gold coins for proof of his death. He's a menace, and I'm afraid he's going to attack other people until he's put down."

Harry frowned. Whether or not it was the Greater Observation skill, or he was just getting better on his own at reading other people (which he doubted frankly, Harry had never been very good at that), Harry could tell that the man was earnest, but also not telling them everything. There was a gleam of some kind of greed or something else in his

face, Harry reflected. But reluctantly, Harry nodded. "It can't be our priority, but we can look into it if we can."

A new small side Quest has been added to your journal: **Find the missing Captain Psycho.**

The former captain of the Nashkel guard apparently went crazy, going from moody and withdrawn to full-on psycho killer. He attacked and killed several of his men and a few townsfolk before running into the hills. Perhaps, if you have the time, you can bring him to justice? If you have a good enough tracker with you, anyway.

Reward: 500XP, 250 gold.

Oublek nodded, then gestured to the two guards who had remained on guard in front of the way deeper into Nashkel. "In that case, I'll thank you kindly if you can, and welcome to Nashkel."

As soon as he passed through the two guards, Harry paused, as suddenly he saw another pop-up message, this one wrapped in gold.

You Have completed Chapter 1. Chapter 2 Begins now.

Gorion's grave lies well behind you, and you have a price on your head supposedly from the same armored giant who slew your foster father. Yet you have set aside a direct pursuit in favor of perhaps discovering what connection your enemy has to the Iron ore shortage slowly dragging Baldur's Gate and Amn into war. Traveling with the Harpers Jaheira and Khalid, longtime friends of Gorion you have finally arrived in Nashkel.

What answers lie here, what threats you may face, you have no idea. All that is certain is that you have taken a step forward in your quest for Justice, or revenge.

After that, another message popped up, follow by a third.

The Main Quest, **Iron Intake Issue, has been updated!**

You have arrived at Nashkel. Whatever problems there are, and you have discovered enough to know there are many of them, they start here.

You have discovered the Following Information:

1: bandits, thieves, and possibly others are involved in cutting off iron shipments going to Baldur's Gate, and possibly into Amn.

2: Even when they cannot stop shipments entirely, the bandits add something, some kind of bizarre alchemical product, to the iron, weakening it to the point where even the best blacksmith can't work with it.

3. Other mines in the Sword Coast, particularly those involved in mining ore, have been attacked by sub-humans, destroyed or taken over. Nashkel is now the largest mine still operating on the Sword Coast.

4: This activity has been part of a marked increase in bandit and subhuman attacks throughout the Sword Coast. Enough to nearly shut down trade save for large, well-guarded caravans.

5: The iron issue is becoming such a problem that there is talk of war between Baldur's Gate and Amn. This is possibly a goal of the individual or group creating these disturbances.

Even as Harry eye-clicked that away another message took its place.

Congratulations!

On your way to Nashkel, you found all the clues you could on the way here to the Iron Intake Issue. Now, once you go into the mines, you will have all the pieces in hand to not only try to solve the problem but know where to go to find the people behind the scheme.

What you do with that information will be up to you.

Reward: + 1000 experience to all Party members, + 1 to the base wisdom of all party members.

Imoen nudged Harry, while Khalid and Minsc looked at him from where they stood, all but Khalid having both seen the message and their experience increase. Khalid hadn't gotten either reward, alas. "Well, that was kind of cool. More experience is always interesting, right?"

Nodding, Harry smiled briefly at her, though he was more thankful for the plus one to his wisdom stat. Without the points Harry had earned during the 'character creation' page, his wisdom stat was one of the lowest stats he had.

At the same time, Harry was wondering what they could possibly do to such a long-reaching conspiracy. Kill every enemy in front of them? Sure. Solve the issue in

Nashkel's own mines? Probably. But a conspiracy like that, that was way bigger than they could fight unless they could hunt down and kill its head. And frankly, Harry was uncertain even if they could find the man behind all this, that they would be strong enough to do so. The whole chapter thing barely registered to him at all, frankly.

Coming out of his musings as he felt cobblestones instead of dirt under his feet, Harry blinked then looking around, before staring over a series of houses to what was obviously the top of a church. "Well, I don't think we need to wonder about where the church."

"Most churches are ostentatious like that," Jaheira observed, disinterest and disapproval plain in her voice.

"S, s, some of them c, c, can be beautiful though," Khalid added.

That caused Jaheira to scowl, but she also nodded in agreement. "Indeed, my husband, they can be. The ones in Athkatla, for instance. That entire region of the city is gorgeous. But all too many churches become symbols of self-aggrandizement of the local priests rather than the deity they are supposed to serve."

Harry looked at the two half-elves. "Do either of you have problems with temples specifically?"

"A, a, are you asking if w, w, we have problems with s, s, specific religions?" Khalid asked in turn, before chuckling. "N, n, no, we do not. W, w, we prefer worshipping in the Elvish w, w, way, under the v, v, verdant green of the f, f, forest to Rillifane Rallathil. B, b, but we acknowledge o, o, other ways of worshipping t, t, the gods of Light and n, n, neutrality."

Nodding, Harry didn't reply verbally. Instead, he simply moved down the pathway leading deeper into Nashkel.

Inside the outer parapet, which wasn't nearly as complete as it should be, there were two more farms, along with the tavern house called the 'Belching Dragon Tavern' they passed by before they met with the main road leading through the town north to south. From there, the church was even more obvious, one of the four largest buildings in the town. Its front lawn was marked by dozens of gravestones of various sizes.

There weren't many people moving around this late, although when they passed another tavern, which marked itself as an inn, the noise of revelry was quite loud. Jaheira, however, frowned at it, her eyes narrowing, her long ears twitching. "That was not the sound of normal revelry. That was the sound of someone trying desperately to forget that there's trouble abroad."

Khalid chuckled darkly, his head canted to one side as they listened. "A, a, abroad nothing! That is t, t, the sound of people t, t, trying to forget t, t, there's trouble right here in t, t, their own lives."

Jaheira snorted, taking her husband's hand and squeezing it briefly. "Forgive me, I misspoke."

The taunting tone of her voice and the chuckle that Khalid let out told those around them this was a private joke, but Harry got the gist of it anyway and smiled faintly even as he thought about that and what else he was seeing. "Building a parapet, lots of nervous people, and... what is that clear area over there for, do you think? By the barracks."

That area wasn't lit by the torches that lined the main road or the entrances to the tavern and church, but Khalid and Jaheira, with their half-elf night vision, saw what was there easily. "A recently cleared zone, and lots of wood and stone. They are preparing to enlarge the barracks. Preparation for war," Jaheira growled. "We have not arrived a moment too soon, methinks."

About ten minutes' walk brought them to the church, which looked rather more like a church back in Harry's old dimension than the one temple he had seen previously, the one to Garl Glittergold back in the Friendly Arm Inn. It had a single roof, which looked like any normal house's roof, if much larger. But its four corners were marked with pillars leading up along the corners before rising even higher, tapering to odd little points Harry didn't have a word for. The outer edifice of the temple was marked out by blue tiles in lines, and its front was marked by two long tapestries of blue.

Above the doorway was a large gauntleted hand made of stone. In the center of the back of the armored hand was an eye. This marked out the temple as belonging to Helm, the Watcher. Realizing this, Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise, knowing that was one of the gods to whom Paladins swore allegiance to.

Entering the temple, Harry found that the interior looked like pictures of churches he had seen back in his old life. It had pews on either side of a single walkway, and at the front, there was a pew. Gauntleted fists here and there made out of marble stood alongside the walls, each of them marked with the All-Seeing Eye.

In the center of the church was an older man, although he wore armor. He turned as they entered, sizing them up in turn, his eyes alighting on Harry intently for a moment before smiling. And moving towards them. "Welcome, initiate. Have you come here to place yourself within the palm of the Vigilant One?"

Harry paused, cocking his head as he reworked what he had been about to say. "Is it that obvious?" he said instead while looking at the information which had popped up over his head. The man's dot on his map was the blue of a normal civilian, the same for the guards before, but unlike the guards, who hadn't gotten their own names in Harry's AAS, this man did.

Name: Nalin. Priest of Helm.

A middle-aged man with the shoulders of an Adventurer and the eyes of a man of God, he is Nashkel's resident priest and healer, a very important man around these parts. In other words, be polite. At the moment Nalin is looking somewhat careworn, and you notice that his eyes look sleep-deprived. Yet he still stands straight, and he holds a mace in one hand like he knows how to use it.

Note: as a priest, Nalin is something of a gray area between civilian and Adventurer. You will see information like the above on him, but no more, and he is not a threat to anything but your time.

"For those of us in the priesthood, yes, it is obvious that you are both a paladin and that you have not yet sworn yourself to the service of any particular God. To put it in layman's terms, your soul looks like it is white, a canvas that is yet to be painted the colors one of the gods of Light."

When he saw Harry's surprise and confusion, the man laughed. "Do not take it personally young one, that is simply an analogy, how I view it, not the reality. Of course your own experiences and beliefs will have already painted your soul in their colors. But I have forgotten my manners. I am Nalin, priest of Helm."

Shaking his head, Harry decided to set this topic the side for now. "I would like to talk about Helm and his dogma. I come from Candlekeep, and the only God they give lip service to is Oghma. I know about the other gods, but not what the gods of Good would demand of their paladins. But that's not why we came here right now. We have two companions who need to be revived."

Nalin gestured to the pews to one side of him. "I can do that, of course. But we really do need to talk to one another. About that and something Oublek has no doubt told you about Captain Brage and what happened to him."

Harry paused from opening his Item Box, looking at the man thoughtfully. "He did mention that, and I will tell you the same thing I told him. Captain Brage can't be our priority going forward."

"Indeed. While this Brage fellow could prove a threat to anyone he meets while trapped in his madness, you can see even in your own town the impact the iron shortage has had. It might well plunge the Sword Coast into war. That would cost far more lives in the end," Jaheira added with a sigh.

The man looked between the two of them, then around at the others for a moment, before slowly nodding. "I agree that if you're able to solve the mining issue, it will be a boon for the town and the surrounding area. However, what I wish to say about Brage is simple: I believe the man was cursed, not driven mad through natural means somehow. As such, if he is brought before to me whole of body, I could remove the curse."

"That sounds far more feasible than someone simply going crazy overnight and spouting poetry. If we run into the poor man, we will endeavor to capture him rather than slay him out of hand," Jaheira answered.

Harry raised an eyebrow at them, then chuckled and shook his head. "Well, I suppose that I will agree with our... illustrious leader...here. But how do you think he was cursed?" he drawled.

At her old joke being turned around on her, Jaheira had the grace to look a little abashed. But Jaheira was also happy that Harry was going along with her suggestion, earning him forty trust points with her, even as the game made yet another snarky comment at her expense. He ignored it, though, concentrating on what the priest was saying.

“Yes,” Nalin answered instantly. “His sword. He was reported to be wielding a sword in practice the day before he went mad and used the same sword to murder his victims. But Brage is not a swordsman normally. He has something of the skill set, but he very much prefers a mace, much like I do. He and I have sparred often enough over the years, and I know him. A claymore is not his chosen weapon. So if you can bring both man and sword back here, I will destroy the curse and weapon both.”

“I can’t promise that we will be able to look into this, or even capture him alive as you want. That will depend on how hard he fights us and what binding-type spells our group’s magic users have available to them at the time,” Harry warned. “But I can say we will try.”

So saying, Harry completed the motion of opening up his Item Box, and once more going through the motions of emptying out several of the things before coming to the bodies of Garrick and Edwin, one after another. Before the priest could speak, Harry held up the note Oublek had given him. “Oh, and I have a message from Lieutenant Oublek. We made a deal that you would only charge us a third of the normal price for the resurrections. We’ll pay full price on all your other spells, though.”

He handed the note Oublek had given them over, and the priest read it quickly, frowning a little before shrugging. “Very well. For you, a prospective Brother under the Eye of Helm, I will not quibble on this.” With that, he moved over to the two bodies, and Harry had laid out on the pews, placing his head on Garrick’s forehead. White and blue Light flared from his hand, running down into Garrick’s head and then down to the wounds in his side and chest, both of which closed as the others watched. The blue Light soon faded, and only the white was left, thrumming from every pore of the young Bard.

A second later, the Light faded, and Garrick’s eyes snapped open as he began to gasp, shaking, one hand going down to his chest and then his side. A groan of agony and remembered terror left him, a wail of shock as events slowly came back to him. “Ahhhhhhh!!!”

Nalin has used: Resurrection.

This is a healing spell that can bring back the dead so long as their bodies are not missing the important bits. A man without an arm can be resurrected. A man without a head or a heart cannot be.

The resurrection spell only returns the user to life at about a twelfth of their overall health.

This meant that Garrick's aches and pains were still there, minus the one killing wound he had taken. Harry was about to ask Nalin to use some healing spells on him when Garrick shrieked and began to thrash. This caused Nalin's hand to fall off his head, and he stood up, grabbing at his weapon which he wasn't carrying. "What, how, where! I, oh, oh god, I hurt so, so much, agghghh!"

"Garrick, calm yourself", Jaheira soothed, reaching out to touch him, but he flinched away.

"They're right, Garrick," Harry added.

This was followed up by Imoen and Khalid joining in. "You are safe. You are alive."

Dynaheir added her own voice then. "Be calm, young man. You died but were brought back. It is a traumatic experience, I know. But you will soon be healed to full health if you but calm down and allow him to work."

At the sound of another female voice, Garrick looked around, staring at Dynaheir, where she was being aided in standing by Minsc. "You, you're the, the lady we were trying to rescue," he stammered. "I, I..."

"Was this your first time being resurrected, young man?" Nalin soothed. "Do not worry. It can take even the strongest thus. But if you calm down, your druidic friend and I will heal you of your physical wounds. Your mental disorientation alas will not be so easily defeated."

Garrick nodded convulsively, still staring around wildly, his whole body twitching. Jaheira began to intone healing spell of her own, her hands moving slowly so Garrick could track them, and between them, Nalin and Jaheira healed Garrick up to nearly full health.

That seemed to help Garrick calm down even more than Dynaheir's voice had, but he still looked a little shocked to Harry's eyes. *I think it was a good thing that we disarmed him at the same time I put his body into my Item Box.* At the same time though, Harry saw two messages appear in front of him.

Garrick has been resurrected. He knows however that he died during a battle that you were leading.

Due to the fear and horror this has evoked in the young Bard, you have lost all your accumulated respect and trust points with Garrick.

Right on the heels of this message though was another message which told Harry had, at the same time he'd lost all that progress, made up a goodly portion of it.

You have paid to have Garrick Resurrected. While he died under your leadership, this is still an act of amazing trust and kindness.

Due to this action, you have gained you have earned +200 Trust and +100 Respect with Garrick. You have 200/500 Trust, 100/500 Respect with Garrick.

When they were done healing Garrick, Nalin turned to Dynaheir. "Now for you, my dear. If my eyes do not deceive me, you are still suffering from both malnutrition and a brain injury. Let us see what I can do..."

Four spells later, all of which cost around a thousand gold and visibly tired the priest out, Harry was impressed. The malnutrition was still there but greatly reduced. And while she too looked tired, Dynaheir was standing tall, her black eyes were tracking very well, and her fingers were no longer twitching, something that only Jaheira had noted.

When it came to his turn to be seen to, Edwin dealt with being resurrected far better Garrick had. His eyes shot wide open, he gasped and grabbed at his chest, where the wound that had killed him had once been. Edwin then looked around, intelligence returning to his eyes quickly. "I see..." he rasped. "So, we were at least able to fall back. Or dare I think you were able to win, even without my most puissant self with you to the end?"

As Edwin spoke, Harry noticed two new messages appearing in front of him again.

Edwin has been resurrected. He knows however that he died during a battle that you were leading.

But this is not the first time Edwin has died. Therefore, you have only lost half your accumulated respect and trust points with him.

And next came the reaction to being resurrected page.

You have paid to have Edwin Resurrected. While he died under your leadership, this act of kindness is one so out of his realm of experience that it has utterly floored the Thayan, even if Edwin would never admit it.

Due to this action, you have gained you have earned +1000 Trust and +2500 Respect with Edwin. You have 1300/4000 Respect, 2490/4000 Trust with Edwin.

While Harry was reading that message, Edwin was looking at the woman we didn't know standing so near Minsc, the large barbarian standing with his hand on his sword hilt and assayed a smile. "Ah, so we did win, and this is the Witch. Interesting. I've never quite understood why the women of Rasheman are so dusky-hued, whereas the men are more typically pasty and pale like the addled one. Perhaps I will make that one of my questions that I will demand as recompense for my aid in your rescue."

"Be grateful that I believe that one's word and repaying aid is important, unlike you and the rest of you Thayans. Or else I would not have agreed to this questioning at any price that." Dynaheir sneered. "I understand from Minsc that if you do not return with your answers, that you would be in some trouble. Perhaps it would behoove you to act more grateful?"

"Yes, yes just as soon as you act grateful for being rescued from possibly be eaten or tortured to death." Edwin drawled looking over at Nalin, nodding with some, if scant, respect to the priest. "I believe that I can pay for some healing as well if you have such, priest."

Nalin's eyebrow rose in surprise at the group's odd interplay, as well as Hedwin's attitude. But he nodded slowly, raising his hand over Edwin, healing him until Edwin declared that he was back to two-thirds health, which was more than enough for now.

He pulled out some gold from his pouch, which he was somewhat surprised to still feel on his person. handing it over to Nalin as the priest told him the price. He then looked over at Harry and the others, nodding once to them. "Thank you. You need not have resurrected me after so short acquaintance, and while I know myself to be the most intellectual and suave of men, it takes a special individual to recognize that brilliance and work to keep it in the world."

"Has he always been this egotistical, or is it the shock of being resurrected that has made him forget to keep such thoughts within his own mind," Dynaheir quipped.

“Wow, you two are either going to kill one another or Fuck one another, I’m not sure which,” Imoen snarked, the crudity of it’s shocking both of them into silence for a moment.

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re welcome. You decided to fight at our side and fought through several fights with us, so paying for your resurrection seemed only natural. Although if you and Dynaheir keep sniping at one another, I might come to change that opinion,” Harry added hastily. “Now, do either of you need more healing?”

Edwin shook his head, though he added that he felt as weak as a day old kitten. Garrick didn’t say anything. He was still looking shocked and somewhat out of his wits, though.

“Good.” Clapping his hands, Harry turned to the half-elven couple. “Jaheira, Khalid, if you could lead our two recently resurrected companions along with Dynaheir and Minsc to the nearest inn, I would like to spend some time talking with this priest about Helm.”

Edwin grimaced. “Of course it would be Helm, who else could it be but the most arrogantly self-important and self-righteous of the gods?”

“Edwin, could I ask you to wait on asking Dynaheir the questions that you will be asking her until I arrive? I’m not interested in the answers, but I think you might want Imoen and me there to help keep the peace.”

“He speaks sense once more, astonishing. Yes, I will wait,” Edwin replied. “To ask the questions, but not to get something to eat or drink.”

With that, Jaheira nodded towards Harry, and led the way out of the temple.

OOOOOO

Although he had concentrated on Dynaheir’s presence, and what it might mean for his personal future in order to get over the shock of resurrection, that shock was still working its way through Edwin’s system, and he moved slowly after the others, with Garrick beside him looking pasty-faced and pale even in the scant Light of the torches that illuminated the main street of Nashkel. The walk to work to the tavern was silent, and slow because of this, which fit Edwin’s desires perfectly. He had a lot to think about.

Not the resurrection itself. As part of their training, Red Wizards and even most wizards of any Order were forced to go through the resurrection process at least once. It was never pleasant, but Edwin knew he would get over it with time. What Edwin could not get over was the fact that someone else had gone out of their way to resurrect him. Someone Edwin had barely known for two perhaps as many as three days. That was shocking.

Of course, it also shows a strong grasp of my abilities and strength and how it adds to the party, and Harry might well have simply made the logical strategic decision that my aid is valuable going into the future. Or perhaps Imoen bugged him into it. I know she was taken with me, although perhaps sleeping with that dryad as I did to show Garrick how it is done might have offset some of her growing affections. And yet, and yet regardless of his reasoning, it does put me in his debt. A position one such as I am not suited to be found in.

And yet on the other scale side of that scale, there are some mysteries to be investigated here. Points of interest perhaps about how Imoen and Harry act at times, what they were able to accomplish during our assault on the now. Yes, there are questions.

“Tell me,” he inquired after a few minutes thought, “how did we fare in the battle after I fell?”

At those words Garrick twitched, looking at Edwin, then the others and Edwin bit back a sneer. The boy was perhaps the most rabbit-like human he had ever met. *I had not thought him a great warrior before this, but was that truly his first brush with his own death?*

Not to Edwin’s surprise, the half-elf wench was the one who answered him. “We won eventually. It wasn’t easy, but we were able to eventually win through. The battle against the dungeon boss was dangerous indeed, and went down to the wire, as Imoen put it. But we won in the end. After that, we found ourselves on the second story of the keep from the majority of the remaining gnolls, where they were had gathered around the last respawn point. We created a killing ground there. Harry blocked the staircase up while we used tangling vines and fire to slay the gnolls below.

“Excellent. While I was not there personally, it always does the heart good to hear that such base creatures were burned alive. Especially after their chieftain got so lucky as to kill me. I will want to know how many days I was stuck in limbo and what all else has

happened, but that is for later. Right now, I need a drink.” Edwin ended, as they pushed their way into the inn’s taproom.

“Here, here!” agreed Garrick and Khalid, causing Jaheira to facepalm and look at her husband in annoyance.

OOOOOOO

Back in the temple, Harry had sat down with Nalin on a pew with Imoen nearby, looking on interestedly. Nalin looked at her in confusion for a moment before shrugging. “You wish to know of Helm?”

“I wish to know more about the Watcher, and what precisely he would ask of his paladins. What kind of oaths would I be forced to swear in his service? Does he have his own Order of Paladins, or would I be expected to act on my own or become a member of the Radiant Heart?” Harry questioned.

Nalin nodded and then began to speak of Helm. He spoke of Helm’s devotion to defense and to law and order. All the oaths that Harry would have to swear dealt with upholding those three things. “Indeed, of all the gods, perhaps only Helm is truly dedicated to the idea of law and order above everything else. Even his own thoughts of right and wrong.”

“Is that why he killed Mystra?” Imoen interjected, having heard that story before.

Mystra, like all the other gods, was thrown out of Heaven for the transgression of a few, by Ao, the Over-God in the act that started the Time of Troubles. But she had attempted to somehow regain access to Heaven. Helm, charged by Ao to guard the gates of Heaven until the Tablets of Fate were returned to Ao, kept her from entering, eventually killing her.

“Helm was indeed forced to slay Mystra, goddess of magic,” Nalin replied, sounding both sad and resigned. It was obviously a question he had been asked before several times. “But do not think that Helm took any joy in so harsh a duty, indeed after the act was done, great Helm wept, the tear becoming a crystal of such purity it has since been seen as a holy relic. Her death was simply what was required of him. Helm had been tasked with defending Heaven, of keeping the gods out until the thieves were forced to admit their folly. Was it a harsh duty? Yes. But justice often is.”

“And Helm couldn’t simply of I don’t know, tried to talk her out of entering?”
Imoen shot back.

“Do you think he did not? No one but the reborn goddess and Helm knows what truly happened in their clash. There were no other witnesses bar Ao, who would not take part in such. So no one can say how it truly started, why she was struck down beside the two of them. And even Mystra has not spoken of it. She even admitted her folly of attempting to enter without Ao’s permission. Any idea that Helm simply attacked Mystra or struck her down in cold blood for the temerity of turning up once more at the gates of Heaven are completely spurious,” Nalin responded, his tone hardening noticeably. “Do not make assumptions without all the facts.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, but he still looked a little dubious. “You haven’t told me what specific oaths I would be required to swear. Or my question about Helm having a specific Order for his paladins.”

“Helm has a single order of Paladins, called the Vigilant Eyes of Helm. They are a small Order as yet, having replaced the disgraced Companions of the One True Vision. Many other Paladins of Helm join the Order of the Radiant Heart. And as for Oaths, whenever a paladin swears to Helm, he is required to swear to five basic tenants and then four more beyond them by Helm himself, speaking through the priest who takes his vows. I have only done that twice in my lifetime. And both times, beyond the five starting tenants, they were very different.”

“Tell me of the five tenets then, and what other requirements you know of. And could I ask, if it isn’t so personal, what other vows the two paladins you took the oaths of had to swear?”

Nalin nodded and answered, his voice becoming deeper and more sonorous. The First one is simple: Never betray your trust. Give your word rarely, but if you do, keep to it as you would your Word of Honor to Helm himself. The second is to be fair and diligent in your conduct as you uphold the laws of Helm and whichever realm you find yourself in providing those laws follow the dictates of Helm. The third is to obey the orders of those raised above you by the laws of the land and the word of Helm unless those orders do not follow Helm’s justice.”

The priest chuckled. “The fourth and fifth are the most martial in tone, really. The fourth is to be vigilant. Stand, wait and watch carefully. Always be on the lookout for the

evil in the world. Your foes will make themselves known. The fifth is to care for your weapons so they may perform their duties when called upon. Anticipate violence and be ready, but do not act rashly. Demonstrate purity of purpose in your role as a guardian and protector of the weak, poor, injured and young.”

Hearing these, Harry heard little he could argue about really, except...*Where’s the human element? I mean, there’s a bit there at the end, but there’s way too much emphasis on following orders and obeying the law. If I obeyed my superiors, Voldemort would have been resurrected, and I wouldn’t be here at all. And the laws of the land are, well just look at Amn, where the law basically is money makes the rules. I can’t see myself just blindly obeying those who have higher station than me. Yeah, way too much emphasis on obedience, and there’s no place in there for a person’s own ideas of right and wrong.*

“And um, the other Vows you’ve heard?” He asked, still thinking about what he had just heard and what they would mean if he sword to follow Helm.

Nalin chuckled once more, his eyes far away, staring into the past. “The first person I swore to the service of Helm was sent on a specific request and had to swear an oath of celibacy.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose at that, and Imoen squawked indignantly. “Now hold on! I know that’s not normal!”

“It was required for this man and his Paladin Quest, the quest every Paladin is sent on after swearing service to their God. He was being sent to kill a coven of sirens who lived north and west of here directly on the Sword Coast.”

“Why?” Harry questioned bluntly. “I mean, siren’s are normally harmless, like dryads, right?” They did go ‘rabid more often than dryads, but even so, it wasn’t exactly normal for them to be a threat to anyone who let them alone.

“Because they were sirens. They were preying on local fishermen, I assume,” the priest waved that off.

Harry’s eyes narrowed a little. “So, there were complaints from the fishermen?”

“Or their wives?” Imoen guessed with a wicked giggle. Like dryads, sirens were a female-only race.

“No, Ahaha!” there are no places where you could fish near here, so how could there be? The Watcher knew, and so this young Paladin was sent on this quest. The other was not given any specific quests but was tasked to head to Baldur’s Gate and to wipe out all treachery there. Helm had decided that he needed more presence in the city. It was becoming too lawless. Why there was even a sighting of a Drow there. Filth like that should be slain on sight. A single hero does not stand against an entire race devoted to death, and power through sex and torture.”

Harry frowned, leaning back in the pew. “I, I have heard about the killing of Mistral before, but your points on that topic were well thought out. And I like the idea of a protector, of always watching for danger and protecting the weak. But I think there must also be a human aspect to this. There must all always be an ability to take each individual as I see them, and I think I think Helm is just a little too impersonal, too quick to judge for me. And far too quick to give and obey orders. I’m sorry.”

Nalin sighed. “It is not for everyone, the harsh duties of Helm. I will not proselytize further. But remember that you only can use your turn undead four times now, and your lay on hands once. You will not be able to do more than that until you swear to follow a god of Light. Only when you start obeying Helm and keeping his Laws will you gain true strength.”

Harry shook his head at that but thanked Nalin for the information before asking him what healing potions he had for sale, buying all of them. With that, he shook the man’s hand before leaving the church with Imoen. As they turned to the north, towards where the tavern was, he spoke up, looking over at Imoen. “So, what do you think?”

“I think he tried to sell you a bill of goods, and I think Helm is a little too full of himself for me,” Imoen answered without hesitation. “You?”

“That’s pretty much what I thought,” Harry sighed. “The problem is, I think that that is going to be an issue we’ll see with all the gods I can swear my service to as a paladin. None of them are going to be as personable as I could wish. I was kind of worried about that while I was doing my character creation, but I was so worried about the idea of adventuring alone that I took it anyway for access to the healing spells.”

“That and the fact that you, like every other little boy, want to be the hero on the white horse, charging into danger,” Imoen teased. She didn’t often bring up Harry’s original age any longer, but right now, it seemed to be appropriate. Even so, Imoen idly

wondered how long it would be before she simply forgot the fact that Harry had been a twelve-year-old boy before they came to this weird world.

“That too,” Harry flushed in embarrassment, looking away from the older girl’s knowing gaze.

“Good. I’m glad you’re not jumping at the first God to come along.”

“Everyone keeps saying that as if it was a possibility.” Harry sighed. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Not stupid, Harry. Well, at least I don’t think you’re stupid,” Imoen amended. “The dryad might have, or she might have known that the temple in this area was Helm, and Helm takes a dim view on dryad’s sirens, and so forth as we just saw firsthand.” Harry had mentioned the dryad’s advice on that score and on life in general to Imoen as they hiked through the woods.

“I think it’s more Helm frowns on anything that would take away humans free will than anything else. Although I could be wrong. But if you don’t think I’m that stupid, why...”

“The healing spells. Your Lay on Hands spell works as well as a minor healing spell, and you can’t tell me that having access to more of those wouldn’t be helpful. Hell, it might be the difference between life and death. But I don’t want you to make a decision that will affect the rest of your life for the good of the party instead of yourself.”

As she finished speaking Harry and Imoen both noticed a popup screen appearing in their line of sight.

The side quest (large) **Pray for your Future** has been updated.

In your quest to choose a God to swear your sword arm (or hammer arm) to, you have learned more about Helm. Despite agreeing with many of his tenants, you have decided that Helm’s idea of Order, Obedience, and Protection is not ‘human’ enough for you, coming with a bit more in the way of dogma and self-righteousness that you can stomach.

This decision is permanent, and you can no longer take up Helm’s Gauntlet in service to the Eternal Watchman.

This leaves you only Lathander, the Morning Lord, Illmater, the God of Martyrs and Tyr, God of justice and righteous war for you to choose from. Or does it?

The two of them stared at the message for a moment then looked at one another, shrugged and continued to the tavern. Asking for the room the two half-elves rented, they were directed to the third story of the inn, where Jaheira had purchased a room for three days, assuming that would be enough time for them to investigate the mines.

The room was the same size as the room they had rented back in the Friendly Arm Inn, at least in total floor area. But it wasn't nearly as nice, and it didn't have two separate area rooms attached to it for the men and women. Or, as they had broken down, for the married couple and the semi-siblings. Instead, the room was lined with beds on all three sides bar the interior wall, where a small table sat with several chairs around it. There Edwin and Garrick sat with the two Harpers, as Dynaheir laid out on a bed nearby with Minsc in a chair beside her.

When they entered, the first person to comment was Edwin, who looked at Harry coolly. "Dare I assume that you had enough basic intelligence that you did not swear yourself to Helm the Blindly Despotic?"

"I did not," Harry replied dryly, "or else a certain Red Wizard might well have been doing himself a favor by running right now, wouldn't he? After all, the red wizards are not known for their charity or good deeds."

Bah, whoever says charity says stupidity in the same breath," Edwin scoffed.

"I'll remember that the next time you need resurrecting."

Edwin scowled at that, but subsided, while Dynaheir sneered at him.

"I did not swear to Helm. Let us just say that Helm is a little too, too..."

"Sanctimonious," Imoen replied promptly

"That will work. And perhaps a little too arrogant that law and order mean right and just."

"Truly, you will find that in every God, Harry." Jaheira shook her head. "It is a rare divinity that admits that someone else might actually have a different point of view, and yet not be immediately thought of as wrong."

“Isn’t that lovely,” Harry sighed. “We really are made in their image, aren’t we?”

Everyone there bar Minsc chuckled at that, and Harry looked around at Jaheira. “Dare I ask if they are willing to bring up some hot water and a tub? I can’t be the only one who wants a bath right now, can I?”

“Indeed not!” Dynaheir practically shouted before the other two women could do so. “Although I am sad to say, I will probably need help to both enter and exit the tub.”

“Actually, as bad as this room is, this inn has one thing going for it...”

“B, beyond their decent w, w, wine,” Khalid interjected.

Rolling her eyes, Jaheira went on. “It has a bathhouse. Two areas, men and women, with four tubs each.”

“Then I suggest we take advantage of it. After that, we’ll get some food to go with the wine you’re all drinking. When we all have full stomachs will be the time for some serious discussions. And yes, Edwin, that means your questions. Although I will demand that ask them politely.” Harry paused, then looked at the Red Wizard with a smirk. “If you can figure out how. We might need to find you a dictionary to teach you what that means.”

“Imbecilic Neanderthal! I know what polite is, I also know that it is best savored, used sparingly rather than spent willy-nilly,” Edwin shot back.

Harry chuckled at that, shaking his head, amused by the wizard’s attitude. He had the snarky attitude and the sarcasm down far better than Snape or Malfoy, and yet he lacked the personal hatred of either, which made it easy for Harry to deal with.

Harry was also amused to note that his stance on Helm had won him some respect from both magic users. Yet that overall, Harry was closer to the point where respect and trust would merge into friendship with Edwin than with Dynaheir despite the saving her from the Gnolls thing. It amused him, although he was still somewhat put-off by the idea that the AAS had told him about the two of them no longer being able to become a couple.

The boys and ladies left the room and split off at the entrance to the bathing area, with Minsc very reluctant to let Dynaheir out of his sight. He was forced to do so by her shout of “Will you leave off, Minsc! I like that you are so protective of me, and I

understand where your concerns are coming from. But I truly doubt that anyone is about to assassinate me in the lady's bathhouse in Nashkel.”

It turned out that Dynaheir was completely correct. No one was going to assassinate **her**. The assassins had a different target entirely.

Harry, Khalid, Minsc, Garrick and Edwin filled up the men's side of the bathhouse, each of them with their own copper tubs and warm water.

“Even though this will no doubt open me up for japes, I must say it. I feel alive again,” Edwin announced with a pleased sigh as he laid his head back against the head of the tub, allowing the water to come up to his chin.

Harry chuckled but did not follow up on the obvious opening there, too busy enjoying his own bath.

Nearby, Minsc grumbled, and all the others had noticed that he had laid out his claymore by the tub, instead of by Khalid's weapon by the door. Of course, even naked Harry had access to his Item Box, so he wasn't truly unarmed, even if you discounted the blood magic spells. But it still amused Harry that even here, Minsc was prepared to leap into action.

“How can you be so blasé about it!” Garrick grumbled, shaking his head from where he sat in his own tub, clasping his knees to his chest. “That was the most terrifying thing I've ever...”

Edwin sighed theatrically. “You have ever, not I. To be a wizard is to brush with death, to be an adventurer more so.”

“Don't let him fool you, Garrick,” Harry warned, leaning back in his own tub. “Edwin is probably feeling the effects of being resurrected just like you. But this wasn't the first time for him.”

“It, it gets easier than?”

“Not at all,” Khalid, Edwin and Minsc replied together, causing Harry to blink at them all.

“E, e, every time you d, d, deal with the disorientation, t, t, the impact of having l, l, lost two or three d, d, days of your life, the j, j, jarring sensation of moving from o, o, one

place to another, o, o, of being suddenly elsewhere, w, w, where you knew a, m, m, moment ago you were d, d, dying,” Khalid expanded.

“I hope to never find out,” Harry shuddered. And that was the truth, and not just for himself either. As the gamer, he wasn’t certain what would happen to Imoen if he died, or, if, as someone who had technically been kind of slotted into the life and body of someone else, that Harry would be the one to come back from such a thing.

Minsc Then began to regal them with the times – he’d died and been resurrected six times – he had died, each time more lurid and heroic sounding than the last. This continued until Harry noticed Garrick was going green, and Khalid was starting to flinch a bit. Harry then asked Minsc to quit, and the bathhouse fell silent, just enjoying the water and the fact they were getting clean for the first time since leaving Beregost.

As the water was starting to go cold, Harry was considering the idea of using a fire spell underneath the water to heat it up once more, and more particularly, how to get away with it with Edwin there. But before he could convince himself to instead get up and out of the tub because he was turning prune, the door opened.

At first, no one seemed visible there, then there was a flash, and a man stood there, the same moment a blinking red dot appeared on Harry’s map. His shout of warning was cut short as a cloud of bilious green fog formed in the doorway before shooting into the room, expanding quickly to fill the entire bathing area. Seeing it coming, Harry ducked under into the water, praying that whatever this was, it wouldn’t be able to affect him through the water.

An unseen Enemy has cast Stinking Cloud.

This is a Level 2 Evocation type spell that will knock its victims unconscious. Worse, causing victim pain will not cause them to wake up.

Those who hold their breath can leave the cloud without suffering any ill effects, although those remaining in the area covered by the cloud must continue to hold their breath until the cloud dissipates.

Grimacing, Harry kept on holding his breath as he stared above him out of the water into the air above the copper tub. Thankfully, it seemed as if the cloud was indiscriminate, as there was no immediate follow-up attack, allowing Harry to pull out his sword from his weapon’s space. This was no time for half-measures.

Soon Harry's breath left him, and he was forced to hold himself in the water through will alone, thrashing slightly as his body demanded he rise and take a breath. But Harry refused to give in to the urge, taking minus one to his health every second he remained underwater. Soon Harry had lost fifteen health, and when the cloud vanished – not dissipated, but simply disappearing – he burst out of the water, standing up in the tub so violently it rocked his bath onto its side

Edwin was the only one who had somehow kept his senses. He had leaped out of his own tub and retreated to the corner, trying to hide behind Khalid's copper tub as he eyed the two who had just entered warily. As Harry gasped in a lungful of air, he heard the other man mutter, "So, my enemies among the Red Wizards have found me again?"

The other three were all unconscious, slumped against the side of their tubs, all of them having moved to try and pull themselves out of the tubs before the cloud had hit. This meant they weren't in danger of dying at least, but they weren't going to be any help now.

Out of the doorway came a woman in chain mail, charging forward with a club raised. "It might be unladylike, but I'm gonna have to bash your head in, I am!"

Name, Neira:

Race: human

Class level Six Cleric.

Attitude towards you: You're a bounty mark. It's not personal. She just has to kill you for the money.

A Cleric of a Neutral Evil Dark God, Neira moonlights as an assassin on top of being a cleric. No, it doesn't make sense, but there you go. Other than that, she's charging forward to engage you with a club rather than trying to use any offensive spells she might have. What this says about her general level of intelligence should be obvious.

Behind her, a man was moving in from the now-closed doorway. In both hands he held axes, and as the woman charged Harry, he raised one, hurling it over her shoulder towards Harry.

Name: Nimbul

Race: Human

Class: Leve 5 Mage/Thief

Attitude towards you: See the Axe hurled towards your head.

A low level Dual-class Adventurer, this man has the abilities of a low-level thief and mage. While this makes him dangerous, it will also have severe penalties to his stamina, health points, and indeed anything physical beyond dexterity. What he can use in terms of weapons and gear will also be sharply limited. This could be why he isn't even wearing a leather cuirass like any sane thief.

Harry used his other quick-slot to pull his Tower Shield out of his Item box, blocking the incoming axe and sending it skittering to one side. Then he was smashed out of the tub by the power of the woman's club strike, slamming into his shield it caused him to stumble, upending him to the floor. Only the tower shield saved him from the next blow as he sprawled out with his legs still caught by the side of the tub, but a hasty kick caused Neira to back away just enough for Harry to get rid of his weapons for a moment and twist around, getting his legs out of the tub and rolling to one side before once more equipping them.

Edwin was no help, at present, having just been forced back into hiding behind the tub as another throwing axe was hurled his way. It nearly clipped Khalid instead but flew on to crash into the wall.

Meanwhile, Harry had finally gotten his feet under him and now was blocking Neira's furious blows while stabbing out with his own sword. She took it on her own medium shield and replied with a blow that came in on Harry's leg, his shield out of position due to moving in to position to block an axe thrown at Harry from the advancing Nimbul. As he stumbled back in pain, the blow nearly having deadened his leg though not strong enough to break his bones, Harry found his sword locked with the woman's club.

For a moment, Harry was about to decide to use his Blood Magic spells, but then Boo was there, running up the woman's leg. "Whaggg, what the heck!?"

This cost her as Harry stabbed forward, his blade impacting along her side. The tip of the sword didn't quite penetrate enough to kill the woman thanks to the splint mail the woman was wearing, a better version of chain mail. But the impact still cracked ribs and caused her to stagger away, going to one knee in agony.

Harry twisted around, forced to take another axe from Nimbul but then charged forwards toward him. With the woman injured and probably going to take a moment to use a healing spell, the man was now the immediate threat, and his axes could also do more damage if they landed. The Cleric's club couldn't kill Harry unless she got in a shot to his head.

As he charged towards the axe-thrower, Edwin had moved around the room and was by Minsc. He had no attack spells left, his memorized spells having all disappeared due to his death. But on his hands, he wore a few rings with single spells on them. Two of them contained Dispel Magic. He used the charge on the second such ring on Minsc now, knowing he would be more aid than Khalid, having brought his claymore with him. Indeed, he had noticed Harry's sword and shield and was wondering about them, adding that into his earlier observations.

But now was not the time for such things. "Wake up, buffoon! We are under attack!"

Harry took too more blows to the shield from the throwing axes before he reached the man. A desperate hack from one axe was deflected to the side, and then Harry's longsword +1 slashed forward. When his blow hit, the observation Harry's AAS had noticed before was proven correct: Nimbul didn't have much health to speak of, and no armor. The Magically enhanced blade slashed upwards at an angle opening his side and up to his chin, sending him stumbling backward in a welter of blood as he gurgled to his death.

Turning, Harry was expecting to see Neira charging him again, and the woman had indeed turned in his direction. But she only took two steps before Minsc was there, bringing his sword downwards from behind and slightly to the side as he leaped out of his tub. The neutral evil Cleric barely had a second to turn before the large Claymore clove down through her shoulder and into her body. Kicking the dead body off of the blade, Minsc snarled. "Assassins! Were they after my Witch as well?"

"I doubt it, Minsc," Harry replied as he began to calm down, while nearby, Khalid finally began to rouse from the effects of the stinking cloud. He reached down, and after sending his tower shield back to his item box, grabbed up a towel left by the doorway, tying it around his middle with shaking hands. "This isn't the first time I've been attacked by assassins. I'd wage both of these have bounty notices on them too."

As his aches and pains started to register, it was only the Gamer's Mind that kept Harry from hyperventilating at how close he had been to dying just there, especially after the earlier discussion of resurrection and his own thoughts on the matter. *If not for his Item Box abilities, and Minsc, that could've gone badly indeed. Dammit, I completely froze, forgot about my blood magic spells! Of course, there's Edwin here and, oh crap...*

inwardly Harry cursed, turning to glance over at Edwin, who was already looking at him speculatively, playing with his goatee with one hand as the other held a towel to cover his lower regions. "That was most interesting, and most lucky for you, that the first thing you take out of your Item Box is a weapon. Unless, of course, weapons are all you have in its present?" The way he posed that question made it clear that he would not believe that answer, and Harry scowled.

"Actually, yes. Remember, I had to carry you and Garrick's carcass in there. So my weapons really were the only thing in there." With that, Harry got out of the tub and moved over to the body, searching it quickly, if nowhere near as quickly as he would have without Edwin there.

Edwin chuckled at that, moving past Harry to where their clothes had been left in cubicles along the inner wall. "Oh yes, most interesting. Regardless, I believe that we are now even. Unless you think that you could have continued to fight both attackers without my waking up the barbarian."

"Heh, maybe, maybe not. But if you want to call us even on that Edwin, that's fair enough," Harry shot back, moving over to help a still out of it Khalid and Garrick as they both came to. He paused to slap Minsc on the shoulder, saying, "Tell me whatever Boo's favorite food is, and I will prepare it tonight, my large friend. Your giant miniature space hamster saved my life there." He snorted, looking over at Edwin. "In fact, he was just as much help as you were, Edwin."

"Hmph!" the wizard scoffed, even as a smirk appeared on his face, amused by how well Harry was handling this attempt on his life.

Staring at them and then around at the ruins of the bathhouse, a now-aware Garrick shook his head, shivering and not because of the now only lukewarm bathwater. "I'm done," he announced, and for some reason, Harry felt that he was talking more about than just about the bath.

Minsc on the other hand had knelt by the woman's body, finding the message about Harry's bounty, shaking his head in disgust. "The forces of evil truly have no honor to do this, as if it is but the work of a moment to pay for someone's life! Truly evil knows no bounds right Boo?"

At that word, the hamster appeared on his shoulder, and Harry chuckled, while Garrick and Khalid slowly got out of their tubs. Meanwhile, the rest of the world finally decided to notice what had been going on, and shouts of alarm and the stamp of boots reached his ears from outside.

Of more immediate interest to Harry though was the bounty notice Minsc handed to him, which he read through quickly. It had more information than the others, including two names: Tazok, and Tranzig.

The Main Quest *Vengeance or Justice* has been Updated.

You now know the names of two of your ultimate enemies henchmen. Weather they are major players in his organization is not apparent just yet, nor where they might call home, but both were implicated in the transfer of funds to Nimbul and Neira. Despite having no other clues, this is still more than you had before. Perhaps tracing their route might prove a good idea?

Rewards: Beyond staying alive, who cares?

On top of that, both attackers had some decent equipment on them, which Harry divest them of as Edwin answered the pounding on the door by sticking his head out, a bland, "And what kept you simpering fools hmmm?" on his lips as he smirked at Imoen and Jaheira, both covered in towels and the inn's owner standing behind them.

Harry ignored the subsequent shouting match in favor of identifying two items of interest among the attackers gear.

Ring of Infravision: 'Topsider's Crutch'.

Merchants that dare the risks of trading with the Drow of the Great Rift are often given these items to aid in their movements underground.

Gives the wearer infravision, the ability to see better in the dark.

This was accompanied by another short sword +1 for their collection, and a helmet. It was a full helmet, covering everything but the eyes, and it was called The Eyes of Truth:

Eyes of Truth: Helmet of Infravision.

A relic of a past Adventurer who made a point of entering the deepest and darkest caves she could find. This was one of the secrets to her success

Gives the wearer infravision, the ability to see better in the dark.

After the incident was fully explained to the innkeeper, the men met up with the womenfolk back at the room to find Jaheira tapping her foot on the ground in annoyance, while Dynaheir looked somewhat amused and chagrined. “Truly, I did not think I would be tempting fate so much with my last words to you before we split off, my large friend.”

Jaheira ignored this as she, after making certain her husband was alright, turned on Harry, tapping his chest with a demanding finger. “Is it possible, Harry, that you can enter in a tavern or inn and **not** cause trouble?”

“It does seem to be a trend,” Harry said mildly, although his eyes flashed warningly at her, and along with a toothy smile made Jaheira realize that he wasn’t exactly happy about being attacked every time he turned around either and didn’t need to be taken to task about things outside his control.

With a slight apologetic nod, she subsided, shaking her head while Khalid simply smiled slightly, moving to her side. As he did, Harry blinked at a new message that had just popped up in front of him, confusion filling him. Only his recent training in not reacting to these messages kept him from gaping.

Congratulations. You have earned 50 respect from Jaheira.

Just...what? Maybe she likes how you stand up for yourself? Women are weird. This is not the first, nor the last time that sentence will appear before you.

“The foods here,” Imoen announced mildly, her eyes raking Harry up and down, searching for any injuries. Finding none beyond bruises, Imoen smiled slightly. “Did the message on the assassin tell us anything new?”

Minsc and Harry exchanged smiles at that, as Harry spoke of the two names mentioned in the message. It wasn't much, but it was something they could follow up on after they were done in the mines. Then Harry added, "But apparently my head's only worth six hundred gold. I'm getting insulted really. What with all of the assassins we've killed so far, you'd think that word would get around that taking my head is not exactly cost-effective."

Garrick looked at the food on the table laid there by a few of the inn's workers a moment before, then around at the others, all of whom were joking and chuckling at the recent brush with death, even Harry quipping about having to pay for another bath for Minsc in the same breath as he thanked Minsc for his help while everyone bar Dynaheir, whose body was still weak, took a chair at the table. The blasé attitude towards the near death experience made Garrick's mind up for him, and his face firmed.

He took a gulp of the wine, then set his cup down resolutely even as Edwin began to speak. "Now, before we get too deep into our cups, perhaps I shall ask my questions of the Witch before all of us are to replete with food and wine to concentrate on such serious matters."

"Before you say anything, I have something to say too," Garrick interrupted the goateed man, most rudely in Edwin's opinion. "I'm done."

When the others looked at him in confusion, Garrick went on. "I know I told you I wanted to travel with you all. To help discover what was causing the iron shortage, but this whole thing, with the fighting the gnolls and, and my death, I, I am seriously having second thoughts about being an adventurer. I think at this point, I'll just stick to being a bard. Adventures are something that should only happen in stories."

"I see," Harry leaned back, looking at the Bard. A part of him had expected this seeing how twitchy the young man had been. *Although come to think of it, isn't Garrick a little older than me? But then again, I had my first brush with death before I even came to this world. Heck, three brushes with death. First, the troll with Hermione, then Voldemort's spirit in the forest and then at the end of the year with Quirrell.*

"I will be sorry to see you go, Garrick, but I understand your decision. The adventuring life is not for everyone" Harry answered with a nod. "And being a bard, I don't doubt you'll find work here for you to do, or wherever you wish to go from here." Harry said, while internally, his mind had moved on to what this meant, and specifically,

how to make certain that the Bard didn't blab some of his and Imoen's secrets. Garrick wasn't the best when it came to keeping secrets, and like Jaheira, he knew way too many of Harry's for his liking.

Before he could think of what to do about that, or even say anything further, Imoen spoke up, once more showing how quick she was on her mental feet.

Imoen hopped to her feet, moving around the table toward Garrick. "In that case, come on Garrick. I'll join you for a last drink or two-dozen, okay? And tomorrow, once you're over your hangover, heh, we'll give you your share of the gold he took from the Knolls, and one of the emeralds we found there. That'll be a great going-away present, right?"

"Emeralds! Those are expensive...erm, I mean, I, did you really find some in, um..." Garrick trailed off, completely disarmed by the offer of both drink and gold and the fact Imoen had sidled up to him, pulling one of his arms into her chest.

Imoen has used Flirty Little Lass.

Imoen has used her body and wiles to cloud Garrick's mind.

Garrick is now Charmed.

Garrick never noticed Imoen nodding slightly to Harry, or how Harry's brows furrowed before he nodded. It looked as if Imoen had a plan, and Harry decided to trust this problem to her. Thus, with a series of farewells, Garrick left the room, with Imoen on his arm.

But Harry had been watched by Edwin. The Red Wizard made certain to not react, ostensibly staring into his wine glass but put this little tidbit alongside several other interesting factoids he had noted with his mighty intellect about the two youngsters from Candlekeep. It was very evident to him that the two had some secret, something that impacted their abilities in combat. And further, that they were determined to keep it. *Well, more power to them in that. But is this secret a learnable skill, or something else I can take advantage of. First things first, however.*

After taking a deep drink of his wine, Edwin set it down with a sneer for the vintage before looking over at Dynaheir.

“Now, with the ignoramus out of the way, perhaps we should get onto more important matters. Me and my questions for you, Witch.” With a smirk on his lips, Edwin produced parchment and ink, along with a rather delicate, well-crafted quill.

Dynaheir grimaced angrily, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair, reminding Harry strongly of some of the older girls in Hogwarts when they were being annoyed with one of the boys for some reason, causing a faint smile to appear on Harry’s face, but he wiped it away quickly. This was a good thing considering the fact Dynaheir shot a look towards Harry. He blandly looked back at her, shrugging his shoulders.

Scowling, she turned back to Edwin. “Very well! Ask your questions. Ten, and only Ten. I will not answer a single question more.”

“Have no fear Witch, I know well the price I earned. And speaking of, if I decide to split off Harry, I will demand some of that cash and one or two of those emeralds you mentioned.”

“You can have one emerald, and seven-hundred and fifty gold on top of it. That’ll be your share of the gold, minus the amount I had to pay for your resurrection,” Harry replied promptly.

Edwin snorted at that, but nodded agreement. It was after all a very fair allowance of money, and he was in no position to demand further.

With that, Edwin turned back to Dynaheir, fingers tapping together as he steeped his hands on the table. “They well. I suppose the first question I should ask, is what precisely is the nature of your Precognition powers? The source of it.”

“Yes that is the first question you should ask,” Dynaheir answered instantly, before falling silent.

Edwin narrowed his eyes, and Harry coughed. “Dynaheir remember, Edwin died to help us get you out of there.”

“And I well remember that and remember that you were no position to demand payment of it in this manner.” Dynaheir’s shot back grimly, before sighing. “But very well. I cannot tell you how the precognitive abilities passed on. It is more shamanistic in nature than magical. A series of different potions imbibed over time after a Witch is recognized as

having magical powers gives us the ability to communicate with the Spirits and see through the skein of the future.”

Edwin scowled at that and wrote it down and was about to ask what the ingredients of those potions were before frowning. “Wait. I recall that occasionally, young witches have been taking in raids before the main attacks or invasions were launched, apparently surprising Rasheman despite the precognition powers of you and your fellows. All of them died within a week. These potions: if you stop taking them before a certain point, do they kill you?”

“That is correct,” Dynaheir replied, her tone grave and bitter at the mention of kidnapped young witches. “To be a Witch of Rasheman is to walk with death.”

Edwin snorted. “In that, you apparently have more in common with Red Wizards than you may wish to think.” With that, Edwin used three more questions on the type of potions, the number of times one had to be taken, whether or not there was any way to wean someone off them before she fully came into her shamanistic powers. Unfortunately, while Dynaheir answered those questions, she could not tell him what manner of concoction these potions were. The secret of their creation was one only the most senior Witches ever learned, of which there were a scant hundred scattered across Rasheman.

With a sigh, he left that behind. If the potions were what he termed alchemical rather than magical, there was scant little the Thayans would be able to do to discover it’s secrets. But that did not mean there weren’t other things that he could learn from the Witch. From there, he asked about how the Witches’ foresight worked, and in particular, why Witches went abroad so often.

“You do not even know that when you Red Wizards have dogged the steps of many a sister?” Dynaheir scoffed, shaking her head. “You truly know nothing.”

Edwin glared at the woman. “At least we have actually created a culture instead of mere tribalism squatting in the fields, defecating out rules, ideas and self-righteous buffoons, blind to the issues their ways of life cause them.”

Harry and the half-elven couple all privately thought that series of insults were kind of strange, not having the background necessary to understand their import. But they did seem to strike for some reason, and Dynaheir glared angrily back at him.

“Why do I have an urge to send them both to their corners until they learn to play nice?” Jaheira snarked in a mocking whisper to Harry. Harry smirked, elbowing her very lightly in the side, while Khalid chuckled on her other side.

This caused the two magic users to glare equally at all three of them, until Minsc boomed out, “Boo thinks you are both being rather silly, and are indeed acting like young children, unwilling to share. Boo and Minsc well know that there are deep, troubled waters between the Red Wizards and Rasheman, and as representatives, you need to act thusly. But from the outside, if you strip away that aspect, it all sounds silly. And it is not like these issues are personal, after all. The Red Wizard has only followed us for a few months, and you, my Witch, never participated in any battles against Red Wizards before.”

“Personal, no. But the Red Wizards have tried to conquer Rasheman more than a dozen times in our lifetimes, Minsc! I will not forget that!”

“Because you are blocking our rightful expansion,” Edwin shot back easily. “We need the resources and the space Rasheman represents. It has never been personal, or based around hate, only power.” He finished, as if that made it all better.

“You say power, but the fact that you are here means that you are not high within the Red Wizards does it not? Who really gains from your conquests? Not the common man, not your common wizard, only the Lords of your group.” Dynaheir retorted, a sneer on her face. “Face it. You call me a barbarian, and I will cheerfully say that I am such. But at least I am no man’s pawn, no man’s willing slave.”

Edwin snarled, and made to stand up, but Harry rapped the table with a knuckle sharply, growling out, “Enough.” *Heh, now I know maturity doesn’t equal age. Good grief, even after admitting they’ve never been involved in these wars between their nations they can’t let their anger subside.*

“By my count Edwin, you have two questions left after Dynaheir answers this last one. Make them count, and then we can go want to other topics, ones that will hopefully not have the two of you at one another’s throats. I will say this now, if you both stay within my adventuring cadre, I will demand a certain level of professionalism. You don’t have to like one another, but you will have to work together.”

The two magic users scowled, but Dynaheir eventually turned back to Edwin. It was evident that even if she was not willing to bury the hatchet, she was happy that she

had gotten in the last word of this latest exchange. "As to your question as part of their last training exercise, every Witch is given a vision quest. With the aid of an older, more learned Witch, we send their minds out to the future, further than we have ever done, not to the future that is certain, but the future that is only possible."

"The realm where other prognosticators dwell," Edwin sneered, but rote that down as well.

"They see dangers to the world, which can come in various guises, and are then sent with a guard chosen from among the warrior tribes, one who is also set to leave Rasheman as part of their Dajeema. Together they seek out this great danger to the world and deal with it however they may."

"And your search brought you to the sword Coast? Intriguing. And no, that was not one of my questions." Edwin added hurriedly. "You are here, I can therefore extrapolate what your goal, or rather what this great evil might be."

For his last two questions, Edwin changed the topic of questioning to how the images appeared to Dynaheir, how detailed they were and how they could figure out which future had the best odds of occurring, thus knowing which they needed to interact with quickly. Grinding her teeth, Dynaheir answered all of the questions, knowing that she was giving away secrets, but knowing that she couldn't give Edwin the one answer he wanted, the formula for the potions that witches were given to attain their precognitive powers.

"And that's ten," Harry interjected himself smoothly into the conversation at that point. "I also think you're running out of parchment anyway, Edwin."

Edwin blinked and looked down at the parchment he had been using. His handwriting was small and neat without a single blot. Edwin would dare say that even one of the vaunted Candlekeep Keepers would not be able to match his precise notetaking. Yet there was no denying the fact that the parchment was full. He waited a moment, then send it to the side with small weights at either corner, using a tiny cantrip on the quill, running it above the parchment to instantly dry the ink.

"Indeed, much of that was fascinating. The majority of it amply confirmed what we already knew, but everything about the precognition was new, including its origins. I am well compensated for my brush with death, I feel. Thus the question becomes, where do we go from here?"

As he posed that question, Edwin tensed. Now that the agreement between them was completed, a Red Wizard would not hesitate to stab him in the back, then dump his body out the window. Perhaps with some of the local rotgut spilled on it, to make it seem as if he had stumbled out a window and broken his neck. That was the type of life that Edwin had led, a life where people could be stabbed in the back almost as easily as they can breathe, where every day without a dagger in your back was a victory.

“Do you wish to continue traveling with us?” Harry riposted, before looking over at Dynaheir and Minsc. “

“What are your long and short term goals? I... am unwilling to go directly back to Thay. My being given this assignment, you understand that a few individuals might still be searching for me due to certain misunderstandings,” Edwin scowled, not liking to admit that Dynaheir had been close to the mark with her earlier comments.

Harry thought for a moment, then answered, choosing his words carefully. “My long term goal is justice for my murdered stepfather. I was brought up in Candlekeep by a man named Gorion, a former adventurer. When it became time in my training as a paladin to go out and find a god to pledge myself to, we were ambushed barely two hours away from Candlekeep. Since then, as you discovered earlier Edwin, whoever was behind that ambush has taken to hiring assassins to dog my steps. So both justice and self-preservation demand that I remove this individual.”

You have learned +20 respect, +80 trust with Edwin.

Edwin evidently is astonished yet happy with the fact that you're not automatically attacking or killing him at the moment now that your agreement is done. He is also understanding of your cause.

“Due to some of the things that we found on one of the attackers persons, we believe this individual is connected to the iron troubles that are currently spreading across the sword Coast. I intend to do what I can to halt that scheme, while growing in strength and ability as I do,” Harry finished.

“Which is why you are here,” Dynaheir nodded. “Your cause is just. But there is more, is there not? There is some reason, not safety, not anger, not greed or past wrongs made right by perpetuating violence through you and Gorion. Something else drives this individual to see to your death. What is it?”

Realizing this could be a way to shift any interest or scrutiny about his various abilities to another, more acceptable target than his AAS system, Harry decided to start slowly, as if reluctant to share this. "We, That is, Gorion was not my real father, as I said. But he, he believed that perhaps my father's legacy might be more than mortal. And given my strengths, my physical and mental abilities, and my age, along with rumors that Jaheira and Khalid passed on, I..."

Both Dynaheir and Edwin were of well above normal intelligence. They worked out what all that might mean for themselves, and Edwin's eyes widened in surprise. "So the rumors are true, the God of murder might well have left behind progeny? Yourself and, perhaps, this individual? I have heard of such, but never before met someone who professed to be a son of Bhaal."

"We prefer to call him the Murder-manwhore, actually," Harry replied mock-primly. Dynaheir laughed at that, while Edwin looked a little startled. "What? He's dead, it's not like he's going to care. And do you have any idea how many women he must've slept with? Thousands. If he was not a manwhore, what was he?"

Still laughing, Dynaheir nodded. "Hehehe, y, you are attempting to tell us that being with you is dangerous. Once more, you wish to have Minsc and me at the least to join you with an open eye to what that could mean."

"Garrick and Edwin dying was a bit of a wake-up call for me, no matter how short their deaths ended up being," Harry admitted. "I don't like having people die around me, but it's worse if you all don't know the severity of the issue that you're getting involved in."

"Acceptable," Edwin snorted. "At present, at any rate. Although I would hesitate to be so open in the future."

Harry chuckled at that, while internally, Edwin frowned. "What exactly does that entail for you personally? Most of that sort tend to be more violent, more unrestrained, with a strong pension towards violence."

"Whereas I don't have any of those," Harry said cheerfully. "I'm good at violence, but I could certainly not be involved in violence any further and be quite happy. However, I do seem to have a few skills that most adventurers do not. I have the ability to access my Item Box freely. I'm also stronger and faster, and a little more durable I think than most adventurers at my level."

At the mention of levels, Dynaheir shook her head slightly. "Hehe, A son of the God of murder who wishes to become a paladin, to serve one of the gods of Light. That is certainly an interesting development."

"I am not that asshole's son! He might have somehow convinced my mother to sleep with him once, under circumstances I have no idea nor desire to look into. But my father is Gorion. I acknowledge the connection to the Murder-whore, but not to him as an individual or his creed," Harry growled out fiercely.

"Good," Dynaheir and Edwin said together, surprising one another, and making them each shoot looks of anger across the table at the other.

After a moment, Dynaheir continued. "Despite the use of True Sight being venerated in Rasheman, I firmly believe that every man can make his own destiny. We, Minsc and I, will continue to travel with you."

"Yes!" Minsc shouted, thrusting his sword up to the ceiling. "More travels with Harry, with Imoen, with Jaheira of the sharp tongue and Khalid of the mighty blade! Butt-kicking for goodness!"

Tapping his fingers on the table, Edwin's thoughts flickered like lightning, ignoring the other's laughter at Minsc's over the top attitude. With what he had about the witches, Edwin could return home, turn in his report, and be assured that at least for a while, one high Lord would be protecting him from the anger of another. *And yet if I could return with those answers and the strength I am certain to gain from being around this one and the troubles he causes, perhaps even figuring out a way to harness that power for myself... yes, he mused. I believe it is better to stay with this goody-to-shoes and his followers. And in the future, perhaps they will be better meat shields than in this last venture.*

"I believe that I will stay with you as well, at least for now. I will be forced to leave you if you go to Baldur's Gate. I have been warned away from that city," he added, with a scowl on his face. "But I will travel with you until you turn your attention there. Which I predict you most certainly will. Wherever this conspiracy ends, it will have its hooks deep into Baldur's gate as well. Nothing happens on the Sword Coast that does not eventually lead back to that city."

Jaheira nodded sharply. "Good. In that case, might I suggest that we adjourn the serious portion of this discussion? Tomorrow, we will ask the mayor about access to the

mines, and then will head down into them. Until then, let's see what information we can gather in the taproom."

Edwin scoffed, waving one hand. "Begone with you. I have no wish to rub all elbows with the plebeians, and a few moments of quiet time alone with the wine will be quite nice."

Harry nodded, but then added, "Might I suggest though that you stock up on defensive spells tonight and fewer fireballs? I can't imagine explosive type magic inside an enclosed space like a mine is a good idea."

"I'll take your words under the appropriate level of advice," Edwin sneered, but it was a somewhat good-natured one as Harry pushed the bottle of wine towards him. He saluted the younger man, then leaned back his chair, pulled out a book from somewhere, and began to read, occasionally sipping at the wine.

Dynaheir, on the other hand, nodded at Harry's words as she considered how best to integrate herself into the rest of the group, leaning back in her bed and pulling out her own spellbook. With there no longer being just the two of them, and further the environment they were going into, summoning spells and various hold person magics which she specialized in would be of limited utility. *Summon Monster might still be good, but perhaps invocation-type magics would be better. Yes, Cone of Cold, and... hmmm...*

Khalid, Harry and Jaheira left, heading downstairs, but Minsc, still not trusting Edwin, stayed with the two wizards. In the taproom, Harry noticed Garrick and Imoen in a corner doing shots of some kind of heavy alcohol, with Imoen drinking heavily, but looking sober in relation to the Bard. She sent him a wink, then went back to plying Garrick with drink in an age-old manner. "Chug, chug, chug!"

Okay, I don't think there's enough drink in this inn to make him forget our Blood Magics and stuff, but Imoen acted like she had a plan, so I will leave it to her. With that, Harry sat at the bar and struck up a conversation with the barkeep and the people there about the local foods and their prices into the cost of metal and leatherwork, before moving onto the mines.

The Two Harpers left and headed to the town's other tavern to do the same.

Eventually, they had a slightly better picture of what was going on. It turned out that the mines had been linked plagued by a few disappearances over the years. Nothing

major, but it was an ongoing drain on their manpower at the lower levels. The citizens acted as foremen and special advisors, while slaves made up most of the mine's workforce. Most of the miners who had disappeared had been slaves, and as such, their disappearances hadn't really registered as important.

But not only had the disappearances gotten more frequent, but it began to happen at higher levels of the mine, and actual citizens started to disappear too. No longer could anyone fool themselves into thinking that it was simply people running into trouble. Something was down there. Furthermore, much of the iron they had gotten out of the mine had been tainted even before it reached the surface.

"It's as if the land around here is sick or something," pontificated one wag, a well-dressed fop of a man who looked as if he felt himself the expert on everything, with really having nothing to back it up. "Captain Brage, he was saying all along that he should ask for help from the Army and then lead a full company down there to clear out whatever was troubling the mine."

"After all, without that mine, this town is toast! Finished!" slurred another man, a much heavier drinker than the first. "It's really the only large-scale employer in the area. Forestry can only pay so much, and wha' kinda life is that fer a man anyway?"

And they couldn't use slaves for it, Harry thought angrily. From his readings of various books in Candlekeep, Harry had known that slavery was a thing in this world but knowing that and hearing about the reality were two different things.

Nonetheless, Harry rather doubted that he could do anything about slavery as a whole. And considering that Amn used convicted criminals, murderers and rapists as slaves for their mines, his desire to do anything was shrunk further.

Beyond that, Harry spent some time with an elderly widow. She kept on begging him to help find her husband, who had been lost down in the mines somewhere. Harry had promised to look into the matter, getting a minor quest for his troubles, but since it was so in keeping with the general thrust of the Iron Intake Issue, he didn't even bother reading it.

Hours after having left, Harry and the two returned to the inn to the room that Jaheira and Khalid had rented them. Khalid was looking a little drunk around the edges and was leaning heavily on a scowling Jaheira, but whatever he was saying to her seemed

to be putting a bit of color into her own cheeks, something Harry found himself amused by as he held the door open for them.

Inside, they found Dynaheir had fallen asleep, along with Edwin. The two of them had eaten at least as much as Minsc of the food they'd left behind, the large warrior reported. He was sitting upright in a chair, his sword in his hand, staring between the doorway and the now sleeping Edwin.

"You get to sleep too," Harry whispered. "I'll stay up for Imoen."

"And what exactly is Imoen doing to make it so that certain information does not get shared by Garrick accidentally?" Jaheira whispered, leaning over to speak directly into Harry's ear after dumping her husband in one of the beds nearest the door.

Shivering slightly at the feel of the air on his ear, Harry looked at her in surprise, and she rolled her eyes. "Harry, the two of you have been very good about keeping... that kind of thing... secret. I really would prefer not to think of you as a simpleton who would just turn around and forget such when it happens to involve an acquaintance."

Harry sighed but nodded. "You're right. The problem is I don't know what she's doing either." At Jaheira's incredulous look, he shrugged. "She's the one who discovered our... secret, and she's always been better at it than me. Who knows what she might do? Maybe some kind of magic to make him forget?"

At that, Jaheira nodded since it made sense.

"Go on," Harry gestured towards the bed again even as he moved toward the door, intent on waiting outside in the hall. "You get some sleep. I'll wait up for Imoen."

When she appeared, Imoen didn't seem as sad or guilty about whatever she had done as Harry had expected, although Imoen was moving slowly, looking kind of weak and injured. "it's done," She reported, looking past Harry longingly at the door to their room. "But I need some healing and sleep."

"What did you do?" Harry questioned in a whisper as his hands flickered, twisting around one another for a moment before he thrust out one hand towards her, thumb extended to a 90° angle from two of his fingers outstretched, the other two held close to the palm.

At the touch of Lay On Hands, Imoen straightened up, breathing a sigh of relief and whispering a 'thank you', before going on. "I used a spell to modify his memory. It's called Obliviate. It nearly drained me entirely, minus sixty to my HP! But I was able to use the spell. Garrick won't remember anything about the advanced adventurer system, our pasts, or our spellwork, only the battles we fought together."

"Excellent!" Harry hugged her briefly before handing over a few of the healing potions he has bought from the priest. "And you don't have any regrets?"

"Nah, not after he admitted that he was already writing a song about us, the 'hidden mages'," Imoen rolled her eyes, then punched Harry in the shoulder when she noticed he still looked worried. "Don't worry about it, Harry. Garrick was an okay guy, but only okay. You're my bro, and I know that keeping that stuff a secret is going to be a big game-changer for us both in the future. Now, let's get some freaking sleep. Have I mentioned how cool it is your AAS skill means I won't have a hangover?"

Harry smiled at her, then helped her into bed before moving over to his own. Tomorrow was another day, but right now, well, even if he wouldn't remember anything afterward, sleep sounded really flipping good right about now.

End Chapter

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 do hope that your refusal of her advances doesn't cost us our breakfast. Perhaps you should have taken one for the 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 groll 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 Conjuraton 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 are 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, 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 has 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 wares, 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 wizard's 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

This has been edited by Justlovereadin’. **He did it in about 24 hours folks, the lateness of the chapter is on me and my lack of spare time today.** Despite that, I hope you enjoy it.

A Warning: big combat chapter.

Chapter 9: Kobold Capers

As they entered what the foursome that composed Harry’s ‘party’ knew was a dungeon, Harry began to issue orders. “Imoen, Minsc, can you both use hide in shadows in here?” The question was mostly for Minsc’s sake, rather than Imoen. His ability to use the skill came from his Ranger status after all, and Harry wasn’t certain if it was as limiting as the one Jaheira could use, Forest Melding, which he knew she could not use outside forests. She had also said at one point it wasn’t as good against actual enemies either.

Thankfully Minsc simply nodded, and Harry went on, his eyes flicking around the area. It was a large circular cavern where numerous mine rails connected together before heading outside. There were two miners and seven slaves scattered around the area, working at the walls of the mine in a desultory fashion. The hardship of the mine, or perhaps the oppressive atmosphere, and was such that only their clothing made Harry able to tell one group from another.

In the center of the room standing by several carts and piles of equipment were four guards. The carts around them looked almost like barricades, and the guards were nervously fingering their crossbows as they stared at the tunnels leading off the cavern. Harry didn't even glance at the Observation information, knowing what it would tell him: these men were close to panicking.

Ahead of where they entered, two tunnels were set very near to one another, the mine rails of one leading into the other before connecting to what Harry thought of as the main rail line, which swept from east to west. Harry thought of it in those terms because a small compass was part of the map his Map ability was building as he and the others walked forward towards the center of the room. Both ends of the main rail line curved around the edge of a tunnel, although the tunnel itself did not follow them exactly, making it clear to Harry that the tunnels might break apart just out of sight into multiple passageways.

"Good. In that case when we start moving I'll want you two to scout ahead of us. The rest of us will move forward in formation, once we sweep this room and what I think is a very short tunnel right in front of us." So saying, Harry debated asking the miners and guards some questions, but decided to wait a moment, instead looking over at Khalid and Jaheira. "You two are the only ones who have any experience in tunnel fighting. Do you have anything else you want to add now that we're in here?"

Jaheira nodded, looking towards Harry with some concern as Khalid had just finished telling her about the dungeon status of the mines. "I will say child, that was a good thing you were able to discover or take so many items which can give one infrared vision. In battle it is always what you cannot see that can kill you, and in the darkness, the number of such things multiplies. Here on the first floor it might not matter, but deeper in, it certainly will."

"Any use of light will also tell our enemies where we are," Khalid said in his usual stuttering manner, frowning as he too glanced around. He moved to one side, leaning

over one of the mine carts. He picked up some of the ore within, hefting it in one hand before shrugging his shoulders, speaking slowly so that his stutter barely impeded his ability to get his words across. "If there is something wrong with this, I cannot tell. It certainly feels like iron should and is heavy enough."

Shaking her head, at her husband's comment, Jaheira continued to address Harry's question. "I am not certain of the science behind it, but in the deep places of the earth there are sometimes hidden pockets of of volatile gases. While we mentioned how they often react to an open flame, at times they can also kill you via suffocation. Air may be an issue here when we go beyond the first floor. Don't be afraid to retreat."

She looked over at her husband, a grimace on her lips. "Some monsters can also burrow through the ground. Given the fact that no evidence of whoever is behind this mine's travails has surfaced before now, it is clear they are covering their trails somehow. So we must be aware of that as well. Khalid and I might be able to hear them, but then again, we might not."

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, scratching at his lightning bolt scar thoughtfully while to one side, the two mages were silent for now, though for once their thoughts were entirely in line with one another: annoyance. They had known coming in that fire-based spells were not advisable here, but that depleted their combat ability more than either liked, and both had still memorized several fire spells just in case.

With that, he moved over to Imoen, gesturing her to join him as they moved to talk to the guards. "You know that the whole no fire thing goes for you too when you're out on your own, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. No fire, no lightning either. Darn it," Imoen grumbled, having hoped to make use of *Lacero* in case of ambush. Her ability to use that spell so well could be a lifesaver in a close-in fight like they would run into down here.

Having spotted the Adventurers, the guards looked a little more relaxed, and relieved too. The first words one of them said confirmed this. "Thank the gods, another band of Adventurers. I hope you all have better luck than that other group."

"I prefer to not rely on luck, actually," Harry answered with a snort. "But for that I need information. What can you tell us?"

“Erm, about what?” another guard asked. “If’n yer asking about what’s happening, we don’t know nothing. None of us’ve even seen what’s taken our friends, the miners or the slaves.”

“You’ve lost people too?” Imoen asked.

“Yeah, more’n a few. We, we don’t patrol past the second floor no more and even then only in teams of four. Before today, that number would have been enough, but, well, a, a patrol went out hours ago. They should’ve come back by now...” a third guard dithered.

“Calm down, please. Do you know their route? Were they going to a specific location? Are there specific locations we should be aware of?” Harry questioned, keeping his voice soothing, hoping that would keep the guards calm enough to give them some information.

This didn’t work as well as he could have wished, and the two of them barely got anymore information from the guards than they already had. Even worse, the guards didn’t seem to have made a study of the mine. There was no prepared map the party could use as a reference, and the four of them didn’t know anything about anything beyond the first floor. Although they did at least tell Harry the number of slaves and miners in the mines at present: forty and sixteen.

This prompted the Advanced Adventurer System to pop up a new message:

Nashkel Mines Dungeon Clearing Tasks has been updated:

You have been told that there are 40 slaves, 16 miners, and 8 guards within the dungeon at the time you have entered the dungeon. Of these, 7 slaves, 2 miners and 4 guards are by the entranceway. They are thus safe. The others are not, and finding them, or what happened to them, is part of your task in defeating this dungeon.

Slaves: 7/40

Miners: 2/16

Guards: 4/8

For every miner, guard and slave alive once the dungeon is cleared and the mines revert to being mines rather than a dungeon, your party members will receive + 80 experience.

For every miner's death which occurred after you entered the dungeon that you can confirm by bringing something back, you will receive + 20 experience.

For every miner whose death after you entered the dungeon you cannot confirm or whose identity you cannot discern, you will lose experience – 40.

Dead slaves lose you no experience. Finding slaves or miners slain before you entered the dungeon does not give you experience.

Your Travel Companions are not eligible for any of these bonuses or negatives.

While Harry and Imoen had been talking to the guards, Dynaheir and Branwen had been talking to the miners, while Jaheira and Khalid moved around the area, examining samples taken from the various carts. Most only had a few bits of ore, nowhere near as much as they could contain. Dynaheir and Branwen though, had something more important to report.

“One of the Miners, a man named Gord, told us there is a miner with four slaves working to the east of us. Beyond that, there are ten more miners at minimum on this level with more slaves working for them. He also said there might be two more miners, but he has no idea where ‘the young idjits’ are,” Branwen chuckled, before becoming serious, pointing to the eastern tunnel. “Regardless, I would ask that we stop to talk to each group and make certain they are all right.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. In fact, when we see them we’ll want to get them back here. I don’t want any of the miners or slaves under foot.” *Especially if this dungeon’s respawn point on this levels start respawning up here when we are on the second level. And getting them back to this cavern seems to be all we need to do to protect them.*

A final glance around his group told Harry that they were all ready, and he nodded, then asked them all to get into formation, three by three. He and Branwen took the lead, with the two magic users, extremely reluctantly, taking the next row, while Khalid and Jaheira took the back row.

Your party and it's Traveling Companions have form a Formation: **The Line** (small scale, incomplete).

Defensive +1/5th of each frontline warrior's base damage.

Attack +1/2 of each long-range combatant's base damage.

Note: due to the low level of this dungeon, Formations will lose their potency far more slowly than in higher-level dungeons. Just remember that Formations are tools, and like all tools they are not applicable in all battles.

Seeing that, Harry smiled faintly, but Edwin did not let his good humor last for long. “Why are you having me stand beside this, this self-righteous, sanctimonious weakling of a witch!?” Edwin scoffed.

“I agree! Putting this one beside me is just asking for trouble. It is not beyond the bounds of a red Wizard to stab an ally in the back, let alone someone like myself, who they have fundamental differences with. Trusting the Red Wizard to act in a manner befitting the party is one thing, to forget he is a Thayan is quite another.”

“Ah, at least you acknowledge Thayan superiority, woman. You get that right at least.”

“Superiority? Arrogance does not automatically make you superior, especially when one has so little as you to be arrogant about, you...”

“Wow, they seriously are either going to kill one another or fuck the hate out at some point,” Imoen whispered to herself, forgetting that Khalid and Jaheira had half-elven hearing.

In an instant Jaheira’s finger flicked the thief’s ear, while her husband broke out into a fit of coughs to cover his chuckles. “Child, I did not need that image in my mind!” The twitching of her lips though gave that the lie, and Imoen grinned at the older woman undependably.

Unaware of this byplay, Harry held up a hand to interrupt Dynaheir as behind her, Minsc began to breathe in deeply, a sure sign he was about to let fly with one of his bombastic statements. “It makes more sense from a tactical perspective. I realize that you two don’t get along, but neither of you are front line combatants. And Jaheira reminded us moments ago that we might be facing an enemy who can burrow through the ground to get behind us. Putting you both in the middle is the best option to prevent your deaths from an ambush and in a position to use your powers to best effect on both sides of the battlefield, thus turning the tide as I doubt the enemy will be able to match your magic.”

“While your attempt to use the Red Wizard’s ego against him is as admirable as it was obvious, that does not mean your point is without merit,” Dynaheir grumbled. “Still, do not expect us to do aught but work together to better the group. Anything more is impossible.”

“I am not asking for more,” Harry answered tartly. “I want us all to work together. Getting along is secondary to working towards a common goal.”

While Edwin snorted agreement at that, Dynaheir fell silent, watching Harry as he and Branwen, who patted him commiseratingly on the shoulder, took up position at the front of the group. *But what exactly are those goals in the long run, oh fulcrum?* Every time she interacted with Harry, she became more certain that he was the one she was here to aid, to guide to the proper path for the good of the world.

At Harry’s gesture, Minsc and Imoen left quickly, racing ahead of the others, activating their hide in shadows ability. While no longer visible to any of them, they still appeared on Harry’s map as green dots, which rapidly began to expand said map. Within minutes they had concluded that yes, the tunnel did split into two passageways. One way was short, ending in a dead end with four slaves operating under a single miner. The other passageway shifted until it was pushing southward, and it was down this trail that Minsc and Imoen travelled quickly.

Even though he knew he shouldn’t, Harry was concentrating most on that aspect, rather than the way ahead of him as he led the others in their wake. He did halt the party momentarily to talk to the miner overseeing the group of slaves, whose name was ‘Miner Ruffie.’

A representative of the neutral class, Miner, Ruffie is extremely jittery, staring into every shadow as if waiting for it to come alive and eat him. Perhaps because he has seen something similar happen. You can tell he is determined to do his job, but equally ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. He also seems rather callous in terms of the lives of his work team of slaves, as he is out here with three of them rather than another miner.

“We’re adventurers who have been hired to try to clear out this mine of whatever is infesting it. Do you have anything you can tell us?”

All of the slaves shook their heads, not looking up from their work, their eyes dead and uncaring. But Ruffie repeated something Harry had heard earlier from Gord. “We, we’re allright here, um, I’m near enough to run back to the entrance. Just er, well, I think

there are a few more miners who haven't checked in in the past two hours. Beldin and Kylee." He paused, shivering. "The, they're young morons, don, don't know what they might be up to, but I wo, wouldn't er, that is, they might've braved the demons somewhere."

"Demons?" Edwin scoffed.

At that low question, Ruffie's body started to tremble, and he looked longingly over the adventurer's shoulder. "Th, the demons, the, they come from the dark, it' it's rising rising from the deeps. Th, they take us, have taken a lot of us. The mine, it, it's judging us for our sins!"

Shaking his head at how close the man seemed to be to having a breakdown, Harry spoke soothingly, raising a hand. "Okay, let's not talk about the demons. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

Shifting the talk away from the 'demons' seemed to help Ruffie calm down, and he slowly came back to himself. "Um, yes. Four guards were patrolling the area. They, they should be around here somewhere. U, Unless the demons got them!"

With a gesture, Harry sent his people into motion once more, with Branwen beside him murmuring, "Methinks that one's mind has been broken. Mind you, I cannot tell if that was easy or hard. Still, talk of demons is patently false. If even a single demon had been summoned, this whole mine would have been empty of people long since."

"True, he did speak of the demons in plural," Harry murmured.

As they moved down the southward tunnel, Harry once more became almost a zombie, concentrating most of his attention on the map, frowning. Ahead of them, there seemed to be a small room to one side, then the tunnel split again. *I am not liking all the splits, is that normal for a mine?*

Voicing this though, Khalid answered him, his normal stutter almost soothing after the near histrionic Ruffie. "It is. Miners after all have to follow the veins of whatever ore is in the area. You won't find many mines whose floor plan is actually organized as you might wish."

"Damn." Harry muttered.

As they went, the map began to propagate small, blue dots to signify single slaves chained to posts against the walls. Harry frowned as the number grew, noting how shocky and twitchy miners and slaves alike were.

Branwen however was not looking at the miners or even ahead of them down the passageway that Imoen and Minsc were scouting for them. Instead, she was looking at the walls. "I believe that Khalid's warnings about borrowers might be all too accurate."

She tapped it with her hammer then and Harry asked, "What are you doing?"

"My father worked at a mine for a time, part time."

"Part time?" Harry interrupted, one eyebrow rising quizzically. "How can someone be a parttime miner? Isn't it a fulltime job like everything else?"

Branwen laughed, shaking her head. "Mine, fish, you must do one or the other where I am from! Twas just my father's luck that his father's fishing ship survived, and he could take over fishing when he wanted to."

"So can you tell us anything?" Jaheira questioned, looking at the other woman appraisingly. For all her boisterous attitude and her profession as a priestess of Tempus, Branwen seemed to possess a lively sense of humor, and some common sense too, which made Jaheira approve of her on general principles.

"I never listened to stories about his days in the mines, I always wanted to hear more stories about combat and fighting, which I regret now. I can tell iron ore from steel but that is about it. And yet, I can tell you something else, something from my own observations. This area is an odd mix of stone and heavily packed earth, which adds weight to Jaheira's comment and further, something that is intelligent enough to cover his tracks."

There was a dinging sound, and a portion of Harry's line of sight was occlude by a message:

You have found a clue! Whoever is behind the disappearances of the miners and everything else going on in the mines of Nashkel also has to dig through the bones of the earth themselves, and if they have done it before, what is to stop them from doing it again?

Destroy or incapacitate any entrance to the mine bar the main one.

“For instance,” Branwen went on, raising her hammer and bringing it down against the wall. “I can tell that this portion here, is much weaker than one might suppose.” The hammer smacked into that area, and it collapsed, revealing a small, narrow passage.

When she did that, and entirely new segment of the mines opened up for them and on Harry’s map. Harry stared at it, then looked at how narrow it was. They would only be able to march one of rest, and even then, most of them would have to crouch down pretty badly, even Imoen.

Khalid and Jaheira stared at it, then shook their heads as one. “A blind,” they said, with only Khalid stuttering to show the difference between them.

“What’s a blind?” Harry asked, frowning, noting absently that the green of Minsc and Imoen had stopped among a cluster of blue dots right where the tunnel split again just out of sight of the rest of the party.

“An area created so that people could hide there, jump out, and retreat. They would not be stationed there overlong.” Jaheira looked at the others all around her. “We’re going to be very careful, this kind of technique could have been why none of the other adventurers who entered the mine ever returned.”

“They walk forward, they run into an enemy, and then from the sides of the tunnel come more enemies,” Harry thought aloud, rubbing at his scar grimly. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Soon enough they came to the same crossway that Imoen and Minsc had reached already. There, Imoen was doing her darndest to get a group of two miners and five slaves to talk to her, with far less results that she would normally get in such an endeavor thanks to her Flirty Little Lass ability.

Seeing even more slaves, Khalid and Jaheira grimaced as they had every time before. It seemed to pain them tremendously, although Harry noticed that both of the magic users, Branwen and Minsc all looked much more stoic about it, the Rashemani going so far as to ignore the slaves condition utterly.

“Is slavery that prevalent in the Sword Coast?” Harry whispered, not wanting to interrupt Imoen’s subtle questioning. He knew that she had way more people skills than him, not to mention the fact that she was a cute girl, and the people she was talking to

were all men. Most of whom were slaves, who had undoubtedly been out here away from women for a long time.

“It is prevalent in many human nations but to an elf, being so confined... well, death would be preferable, frankly. To be locked away like that, I cannot think off the top of my head any crime that would cause an elf or half-elf to believe that would be an appropriate punishment. But you humans have your own way of dealing with things,” Jaheira replied.

It was interesting to hear Jaheira talk about races like that Harry reflected as he slowly nodded, looking over to Edwin and Dynaheir for an explanation. It was very clear despite being half-elf, as in her mother or father had been human, she was much more connected to her Elven heritage. Or perhaps, it is simply the fact there are so many half-elves, that they have created their own culture, and that it mirrors that of the elves to a certain degree.

He shook his head of such thoughts as he listened intently to the two mages, who told him that it was lawful to take those accused of crimes and enslave them until they worked off their debt to society. “Depending on the severity of the type of work that they are doing can vary wildly. For example someone sentenced to work in a mine like this might have killed, raped, been part of a band gang caught in the act, or, considering that this mine is run by Amn, offended someone among the high and wealthy there,” Dynaheir supplied, her tone becoming bitter on the last few words, causing grunts of agreement from the married couple.

“I don’t like that last,” Harry scowled.

“Yet it is true,” Edwin rejoined. “The strong will always make life difficult for those that annoy them. Else, what use is having power in the first place?”

“Still, that doesn’t mean we should have them underfoot,” Harry said, thinking about the new task he’d gotten after talking to the guards in the entrance-cavern. The half elves looked at him in confusion as to the others, but Harry simply shrugged, and moved over to the band of miners and slaves, gesturing Minsc to follow him. “Minsc, do you think you could cut through this iron?”

“With the Chesley Crusher I certainly could! Are we freeing these poor folk?” Minsc asked excitedly, Boo chittering from his shoulder before disappearing into his armor.

“As we don’t know their story, we’re not going to free them entirely. But I definitely don’t want them underfoot here in minds. Imoen, run back to the guards by the entrance. Tell them we’re going to be freeing and sending both the miners and slaves their way, we’ll move back the way we came and free the slaves we’ve already passed. Whatever else, we can’t protect them at the same time as we’re trying to discover what’s going on down here.” He then shrugged his shoulders winking at the big Ranger. “And if they are able to escape, more power to them.”

Each group of slaves was chained to one another and a post set against the walls of the mine. The Miners didn’t have the keys to these, which meant the guards had to come by and free them, while the miners could just walk back. Or, more importantly, flee. That disturbed Harry immensely, reminding him too well of a joke Imoen had told him about running away from lions. You only had to be faster than someone else, not the lion itself.

“And if they were here to pay for grave crimes?” Dynaheir asked, not objecting, simply questioning.

“I was sent here because I was accused of stealing from my master,” Said one of them, staring at Harry with hope in his eyes. “Accused, mark you. I volunteered to swear that I didn’t do it in the temple of Helm himself, but I was simply sentenced and sent here to cover for the fact that the Master’s own daughter was doing the stealing, to pay for her drug use!”

Harry looked over at members of the team, and Khalid spoke up for them nodding his head firmly, his words coming through despite his stutter. “You cannot lie in a temple of Helm. If anyone tried, their hands would wither and fall off, as if they had been given some kind of wasting disease.”

“Bah!” Edwin spat. “Of course he would say such a thing. This is no temple of the prejudiced fist here, after all.”

“True, but there is a temple to Helm in Nashkel,” Dynaheir volunteered, more to annoy Edwin than anything else. She was more of a law-abiding sort, so simply freeing all these slaves was a bit beyond what she was comfortable with. “If the slaves are willing to confess to Helm there, then I would wager they have earned their freedom. What happens after that will be up to the locals. We will have done our part by clearing this mine of whatever force has poisoned it.”

Minsc swiftly went on releasing slaves with the miners swiftly moving to help. Harry sensed that this camaraderie was very strange, and that in normal times the real miners had as little to do with the slaves as they could get away with. But they were all terrified of being in the mine at all at this point, even here on the first floor, and being told to basically run off, was something they all could agree on.

Imoen returned at that point, slightly out of breath having run back the way they'd come and deactivating hide in shadows so abruptly that the miners and slaves all jumped in fright some of them even crying out in shock. Many of these men were strong, burly sorts, but whatever fighting spirit they might've had at one point, had clearly been drained out of them.

Putting that aside, Imoen reported, "The guards aren't happy, but are willing to let the slaves and miners all stay in that main cavern for now. Beyond that, they won't say, but since there were four of them, and we'll be freeing lots of slaves..." she shrugged.

Harry moved without a word, gesturing the miners and slaves ahead of them. "Come on, we'll guard your back until you're back in sight of the entrance cavern and then return here to resume our patrol."

"Bless you for this sir," muttered one of the miners. "Don't know why we keep on getting sent in here, old Emerson is getting desperate. Even here on the first level we've started to lose people these past few days."

"We were told that outside, but we were also told that you had more guards. Where are they?"

"They lied," miners said simply. "We've lost a lot of guards as well as miners, and most of them don't come into the mines any further than the entrance. There's a band of four around her somewhere, but where they are..." the man shrugged.

That made Harry angry, but he didn't show it, simply nodding pleasantly to the man who had admitted this and gesturing him on to join his fellows. "In that case, it is doubly important that we get you and your fellows out of here."

Although, he thought, we have covered what, a third of this floor, and still haven't seen this guard patrol? Not good.

Returning the miners and slaves to the entrance cavern went without a hitch, though the glares the guards sent their way showed that Imoen had understated their anger at what the adventurers were doing. They were then able to retrace their steps to where they had paused before, with a bit more information on where other miners could be found. But that didn't matter so much as what the map was telling them.

Looking at where the path split Branwen voiced the question they were all wondering. "So, where do we go from here?"

Jaheira looked at the area, then glanced at Harry, mouthing the word 'map' in a way that the two magic users and Branwen could not see. For a moment, Harry didn't get it, then he did, and began to explain what he saw on his map in a whisper that even Jaheira and Khalid could barely hear.

You have earned + 50 Respect from Jaheira.

It looks as if Jaheira liked how quick you were to follow up on her idea.

"This one will lead back to the entrance way, or link back up with another tunnel that will do the same, given how it is going southwest" Jaheira relayed the information Harry was saying. "That one, the one that lies straight, takes us further south and east. Which I think will lead to the border of the mine, or perhaps a dead end."

Harry nodded, looking at them all thoughtfully. "All those in favor of making certain that we can't be attacked from behind say Aye."

"Aye," said every voice there, and Harry nodded. "Imoen, Minsc, you two lead the way again, the rest of us will follow up. Branwen, keep on checking the size of the tunnel as we go. We need to try and surprise whoever is behind this before they can try to get the jump on us."

With that, the group once more began to move out of the known areas of the map, with Imoen and Minsc enlarging it once more and Harry and Branwen leading the others behind them, with Branwen slowly starting to fall back into the main group as she checked every yard or so of the mine's walls. But it wasn't the blind Jaheira and Khalid had explained which was the most dangerous thing they could come across in these mines. That honor lay at their feet, literally.

One minute Harry was stepping forward, and his foot trailed against something above the floor of the tunnel. As soon as the thought went through his mind that that wasn't usual, there was a sound from one side, and small darts flashed out of the wall to one side.

You have tripped a snare, Dart Wall.

This trap was connected to a series of spring-loaded darts hidden in tiny alcoves on either side of the tunnel. These darts can range from simple metal or wooden darts to the magical variety. Luckily for your clumsy self, this trap seems to be loaded with normal metal darts, although the size of the trap still means it is dangerous. Dodge if you want to survive.

Harry started to dodge, while elsewhere, the rest of his band were still the same, with Dynaheir muttering imprecations and Branwen cursing like a sailor. The group began to take hits, not enough to get through their armor in most places but doing some damage. The only exceptions were Khalid and Jaheira. The enhanced Dexterity of half-elves came into play here, allowing Jaheira to dodge or use her buckler to deflect darts coming her way, while Khalid simply blocked most of them.

At the same time, several red dots moved in from the far end of the passageway as Imoen and Minsc raced back to the rest of the group.

They were halted and seemed to be embroiled in a fight just out of sight as arrows began to land among the company. But with Harry and Branwen in the lead, the others were largely protected by their shields and armor bodies. This let Khalid and Jaheira start to fire back with Edwin and Dynaheir following suit.

An arrow still got through Branwen's chest plate, though it didn't penetrate very far. Instead, it seemed to enrage the priestess, who roared a battle cry and charged forwards. "In Tempus' name, you skulkers in the dark will feel my fury!"

"Branwen, wait!" Harry shouted, suddenly knowing what was going to happen even as he blocked still more arrows coming his way. He tried to take a step after her, but another trap was tripped behind him, this one a spear from the wall which stabbed into his leg, causing him to collapse, using his one good leg to support him in a crouch as he held his tower shield in front of him.

To Harry's shock, Branwen didn't spring any traps and was able to close with the enemy. The archers instantly tried to switch targets to her, while Branwen shouted out, "The attackers are little lizard-like creatures with large back legs, claws and wielding short swords!"

Imoen and Minsc burst into sight then, joining up with Branwen and urging her back to the rest of the group as blinds on either side of them opened, revealing several more of the enemy while another opened up behind the party that they all had missed in the ceiling, dumping the kobolds out almost on top of Khalid, who danced back and away from them, nearly running into Jaheira's back. And this time, Harry could see what they were dealing with, and he yelled, "Kobolds! Khalid, 'ware behind!"

"Of course! Of course they are kobolds. How did I not see it earlier!?" Khalid stammered, already turning, dropping his bow to the floor of the tunnel and pulling out his sword from his item space, slashing out at two kobolds. They fell back in a welter of blood and gore, his powerful strike having bisected the one, and gone halfway through the others just before stopping.

A healing spell washed over Harry, and his wound started to disappear. He pushed himself to his knees, thrusting his shield to one side, catching a short sword wielded by a Kobold as the little creature attempted to charge forward to fight him hand-to-hand.

The next second, his sword flicked out, stabbing the thing through the roof of its mouth, and into its brain.

"Jaheira, you and Edwin, help Khalid at the back. Dynaheir, back Imoen up!"

With that, Harry charged into the small horde of goblin sized creatures to their front. As he did, Harry noticed where they had all come from. Instead of just hiding in small blinds in the walls, these creatures had devised small hideaways in the roof.

But Despite the initial effectiveness of their traps, the kobolds hadn't brought enough actual archers to the fight. And in close range, only Imoen was in danger from these creatures. Dynaheir used her spells to give the thief some room to move, and she sprinted behind Harry, before pulling out her short bow and attacking the kobolds from there.

Another pair of kobolds fell, one to Harry's blade, another to a stone from Jaheira. This seemed to take the fight out of the last few of them. They turned and ran, one of

them being smashed down by Branwen's hammer as Harry saw the glowing red dots all turn yellow on his map.

Seeing this, Branwen shouted in joy. "Our enemies flee, my friends! After them, so that we may reward their cowardice with its just dessert in Tempus' name!"

"Yes! More but kicking for goodness!" Minsc bellowed, his voice even louder in the tunnel than Branwen's had been.

Both warriors started forward, and Harry took a brief second to stare at in shock before racing after them, with Imoen on his heels. "Don't, it's a trick!"

But too late. The two warriors had chased the last of the kobolds down the tunnel into the dark beyond where Imoen and Minsc had run back to engage the kobolds when they first made themselves known. And there, as Harry had feared, were a series of traps.

Harry had barely reached Minsc tackling him to the floor when Branwen, a step ahead of the Ranger, tripped another trap. This one was a bear trap.

Your traveling companion, Branwen, has been caught in Bear Trap.

This is one of the simpler traps out there, made of two jaws of metal which close via a spring when the pressure pad within the trap is touched. Despite being a simple trap, it is extremely deadly, immobilizing the individual and badly injuring the limb caught within its jaws.

Further, the trap can be made deadlier in many ways, from serrated teeth to simply sprinkling the jaws with poison or even shit, which will make any wound taken fester quickly.

-40 base damage to the individual caught in this trap. Anyone caught in this trap is Immobilized.

Branwen cried out in pain as the jaws caught her leg mid-run, dumping her to the earth.

Biting his lip to keep from cursing, Harry rolled off of Minsc, ignoring his thanks, and looking up at the big man angrily as he pulled him to his feet. "Minsc, do me a favor and don't go running off like that again!"

“Indeed, my large companion, chasing off after the enemy like that is not your task. Your task is to guard me. Where would I be without my stalwart defender, and what kind of honor would you do yourself or your Warrior Lodge if in so doing you died such an ignominious death?” Dynaheir asked as she joined them with the others trailing after, having slain the last few of the kobolds at range.

“Alas, fair Dynaheir is correct. Your protection should be uppermost in my mind at all times. But my warrior blood was up, and I could do not think clearly, no matter how hard Boo bit me,” Minsc replied, shaking his head. This was accompanied by a squeak from Boo, who suddenly was standing on his shoulder.

“Wherever did that rodent come from?” Edwin murmured, frowning.

Dynaheir did not reply, while Jaheira moved past them, kneeling down next to Branwen as Harry moved over, gripping the sides of the bear trap. With a grunt of effort, he released the trap, and Jaheira instantly began to heal Branwen’s wounded leg, as Branwen did the same with her own healing spell. The combination of the two miner healing spells healed Branwen’s leg, getting her health bar up to two-thirds full. She was still sore, but that was fine.

All of us are a little sore after this battle, really, Harry thought.

“In the future, Branwen, if you could perhaps exhibit some common sense, I would be very grateful!” Harry ground out, trying to keep his voice formal for a moment, before shaking his head and throwing his hands up as he stepped back, waving back the way they had come. “We **just** saw that these kobolds like traps a lot! And you not only ignored that but left the rest of us behind to chase after a few retreating kobolds.”

Branwen looked annoyed at being dressed down like that but then shrugged her shoulders and nodded. “I will admit you are correct Harry, I did not anticipate that, nor did I think of the implications of traps. I will not do it again. But I will say I have never run into kobolds before, so their abilities are unknown to me.”

Seeing the matter as finished, Harry explained what they knew about kobolds using his bestiary, then glanced at his map again before looking towards Imoen. “Imoen, I’m afraid we’re going to have to be relying on you for all of our forward scouting from now on. Minsc, you can back her up, but always be a few steps behind her because Imoen is also going to be searching for traps as we go along.”

Imoen winced. “My Detect Traps skill isn’t all that good, and my Disarming Traps skill is even worse. I always more enjoyed training my Hide-In-Shadows skill, as well as my Pickpocketing.”

While the others rolled their eyes at that, Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. “It is what it is. From what I understand, after a certain point the disarming skill simply becomes faster, not actually better, right?” When Imoen nodded, he went on. “Then that doesn’t matter. So long as you can spot the traps in the first place, we can take our time or even go around traps when possible. I hope.”

“Whatever we do, it will slow us down tremendously,” Imoen warned.

“I refuse to put us all in danger if I can avoid it. Unless you’re talking about hours on end for each trap in turn? Then I don’t see a problem.”

“Your willingness to put the well-being of your companions and Party Members above the need for speed has been recognized as the qualities of a good leader.”

You have earned + 100 friendship points with Minsc, Imoen, and Khalid.

You have earned +200 Trust points with Dynaheir, Branwen, Jaheira and Edwin.

Both your formal Party Members and Traveling Companions seem to like the fact you are prioritizing their safety over any imagined advantage speed could give you.

Harry shook his head at that, dismissing the message as he wondered, not for the first time, what kind of leaders his fellow Adventurers were used to.

“In that case, I’ll start now by going down the rest of this passage,” Imoen began, already moving in that direction.

But Minsc interrupted her before she could do anything. “Wait!” When Imoen looked at him, Minsc looked a little conflicted and then sighed. He reached up to Boo, taking the giant miniature space hamster in his hand, holding Boo out to Imoen. “Boo believes that he can help you with the detecting of traps. He is a very wise giant miniature space hamster for all his youth, and his eyes are tiny gimlets, seeing everything!”

Imoen hesitantly reached out, letting the giant miniature space hamster crawl to her hand, then up her arm, giggling at the sensation, and giggling even more when Boo sat at the crook of her neck and shoulder, his whiskers ruffling her skin. The others all stared

at this before looking at one another, wondering what to do, but neither Harry nor Imoen joined them. They were too busy staring at the message which had appeared in front of the Party Members.

Minsc has willingly passed his animal companion, Boo, to Imoen. This act of selflessness has earned Minsc + 1 to Willpower.

Note: Boo is an Animal Companion and can give certain buffs and additional abilities to those he travels with (upon).

For Minsc, this came in the form of an enhanced defense against mental magics. In the case of Imoen, this has added 20% to her Detect Traps skill. Boo will also aid in her situational awareness, being able to look in a different direction than Imoen and can see almost as good as an elf in the dark.

Whether or not that last is normal for giant miniature space hamsters, you cannot say. But Boo's ability to help in various ways is more proof, if you needed any, that there is something special about this little creature.

Dynaheir could not see this note, and she raised a hand to her face, rubbing at her eyes in annoyance. "Minsc, I realize that you are... overly attached to your tiny companion, but surely this is not the time for japery."

Having seen the same message as Harry's other party members – presumably since it dealt with him and Boo directly - Minsc seemed to vibrate in place for a moment, his eyes alight with delight, but before he said anything, Harry clamped a hand on his shoulder, whispering as Imoen answered Dynaheir "Not now, my large friend. We will talk about the magnificence that is Boo when we decide to bring Dynaheir into my and Imoen's secrets, all right?"

Pouting Minsc stayed silent, but the effort was hard on him, and when he turned to Harry, Harry nodded firmly. "Yes, Minsc, we saw it too. Boo really is special."

That was enough for Minsc, who fell silent.

"It's fine Dynaheir." Imoen said at the same time Harry and Minsc were talking. She knew that that twenty percent would help her tremendously in spotting any traps, so she quickly headed the argument off, although she didn't read off the message. "It's the

thought that counts, right? Thanks, big guy. I'll take good care of Boo, and he'll help me take care of all of us."

Despite his inner delight, Minsc nodded gravely and wagged a finger in front of Boo's head. "You be good. Keep silent. Even your small squeaks are mighty indeed at times. And stay on Imoen's shoulder. She is not me to be comfortable with you skittering all over her body in such a way."

Imoen blanched at that, but she quickly shook her head, adding her own agreements to Minsc's in an undertone as she turned away. She then pulled Hide-In-Shadows around her and heading forward from the party. On the heels of that notification, Harry saw another.

Imoen has activated skill: **Detect Traps.**

This is a Thief skill that allows one to do precisely what it says: detect any and all traps or alarms in the area around the Thief. So long as the Thief's skill is good enough anyway.

Disarming traps is also part of the Detect Traps skill. But disarming them is somewhat more difficult, the Thief performing at -10% of his or her Detect Traps score.

Due to being a Party Member, you too will see the traps Imoen finds, but you will not disarm them. Detect Traps is a passive thief skill, so i's passive ability to see traps can be shared once the Thief first sees a trap. Disarming them is an active knowledge-based skill and cannot be shared between Party Members.

Once more, Khalid and Minsc saw this message and at first looked surprised, then gleeful, before quickly controlling their expressions before any of the non-party Members could notice. Khalid then moved over to his wife, murmuring something so low that only another half-elf could've heard, and her ears twitched a bit, as she turned to look at him, then over to Harry, nodding her head once in acknowledgment of how important that skill could be in the future.

As she moved forward with Minsc following on her heels in his own Hide-In-Shadows, the others cautiously followed the two scouts, now looking much warier, keeping eyes both behind and to the sides, where Harry had begun to test the walls as Branwen had been, listening as she instructed him for the different sounds. "Khalid, you and Jaheira both looked appalled at the fact that you didn't think of kobolds and surprised that it actually is kobolds. Why is that?"

“Kobolds are a natural kind of enemy to find in a mine like this. They can see in the dark as well as we half-elves can and are at home underground like dwarves and other subterranean species are. Further, they are known to be able to create traps quite well. And yet the sophistication of this operation, the way that trap sprung, the multiple layers? Those are things you would not expect from a kobold. Not under normal circumstances,” Jaheira replied to both of them.

“I have not had many dealings with the small creatures before. They are rather beneath a powerful mage like myself. But that does beg a follow-on question,” Edwin began.

At the same time, Harry looked ahead of them, having just seen a notification of Imoen removing the trap. In contrast, a bright red line had appeared on his map, only to disappear a second later.

Imoen has detected a trap. Imoen has disarmed a trap. Imoen has gained +10 throwing darts, one long string, one pressure pad.

Imoen has gained 50 experience.

It gave her experience, which was nice, as was the fact that Imoen would now have the plans for a similar trap.

“Who then is doing their thinking for them, and how could whoever it is a force the kobolds into following orders?” Edwin finished.

“Good questions,” Harry agreed, although he was surprised to not see a pop-up coming up because of it. He supposed that was a little too obvious considering everything that was going on and what they had already learned. “Ones we will only be able to discover if we keep clearing this mine.”

Imoen came back then, reporting to the others what Harry had already seen on his map. “I ran into a few traps, but the tunnel dead-ends ahead of us. I searched around for any hidden alcoves and found a small trapped one.” She held up a few glass vials, shaking them. These are empty, but they were all placed there as if they were still precious.”

Harry nodded, looking at the vials. “Keep them for now. We might find a use for them at some point. For parts of your own snares if nothing else.”

She nodded and placed them back in her item space, causing Branwen to shake her head, but she said nothing. She simply put down the idea of someone being able to actually utilize their Item Space in a timely manner as something only a rookie Adventurer would think, not having realized yet that Harry and all of his Party Members could indeed do that very thing as Edwin had.

Dynaheir merely watched on, humming thoughtfully.

“Let’s move back the way we came then, and Imoen, you’re still in the lead. Keep detecting traps.”

“You expect there to be more behind us?” Edwin inquired, frowning lightly.

“Luck works both ways. Just because we tripped a few traps going forward doesn’t mean there aren’t any that we could now trip going back,” Harry shrugged.

This actually proved to be the case. There was one trap that the Adventurers hadn’t sprung on the way. But despite that, they were back at the intersection where they had met the second group of slaves and miners. And since there was no choice but to turn left, they did so now. With Imoen in the lead and Minsc following up, Harry once more set their formation in two parallel lines.

Soon, the tunnel split once more. One tunnel moved north towards the entranceway, while the main tunnel continued forward, slowly curving back north as well. Another offshoot seemed to curve back the way they came, a far sharper curve than the tunnel they had been following, while right past that point, another passageway could be seen on the left. Deciding to take the one that went back the way they came, Imoen led the group in that direction.

But for all of their wariness about traps, they haven’t run into any yet. What they did find was that this tunnel started to dip down.

As the tunnel’s dip downward began to be accompanied by steps cut out of the ground next to the mine rails, Harry called a halt, shaking his head and having the group retrace their steps, raising his voice to bring back Minsc and Imoen. “We’ll want to finish up this level first before heading down to the next level. That way, we can’t be attacked from behind when we’re in bad shape and heading for the surface, and the miners and slaves are safe from further assaults.”

Imoen frowned thoughtfully, staring around them. "In that case, maybe I should lay out my own traps?"

Harry looked at the others, and everyone agreed it was a good idea, although not for the same reason Harry did once it had occurred to him. *I wonder if her traps will appear on my map too? That way, if they are tripped, we'll know of it immediately.*

Working for a few moments, Imoen laid out several simple tripwires attached to a few bear traps. The bear traps were easily the heavier items from the new materials she had been gathering since starting to detect and take apart the traps she found. And they did indeed appear on Harry's maps, which he was overjoyed to see.

With that done, they retraced their steps once more, heading back the way they had come to the large intersection. From there, they headed west along the main mine rail they had been following toward the other passageway leading off to the left. There, Imoen and Minsc found not more traps but another ambush.

Harry watched as red dot started to propagate on his map, then Minsc returned to report to them. "Imoen says she is not certain what is behind them, but there are at least two of those odd blind spots on the wall and seven kobolds waiting."

Thinking quickly, Harry looked around at the group, Especially the two wizards. "Can you two modify your spells, your Magic Missile spells in particular? I think only one or two strikes from that would kill a kobold, and if you could do that, we could use the two of you to do a lot of damage to the group of enemies we can see, while the rest of us form up to deal with the ones hiding behind the fake walls."

"Hah! Alas, it does not work quite that way, although it would be most interesting if it could," Edwin announced with a sigh. "Spells of that nature cannot be changed in any such matter. They must have a single initial target."

"Ah well, it was worth a try." Harry shrugged his shoulders, then looked over at Jaheira. "Would you mind using a Tangling Vines trap? With fire being unusable down here, I think we want to save our more offensive spells for later. After all, who knows how big this mine is."

Jaheira nodded and prepared to cast the spell while Harry turned back to the others. "The same goes for you two, I'm afraid. Conserve your spells, for now, one Acid

Arrow from you to start with Edwin, and then the next fight, Dynaheir, you can lead us off with your own.”

“A most intelligent plan,” Dynaheir approved as Imoen came out of the darkness ahead of them. While Minsc had reported back, she had continued her way forward, using Hide-In-Shadows to slip around the kobolds.

“I found a few traps on the other side of this ambush and a few more of those fake walls,” she reported. “Anyone wants to bet that the kobolds we can see will break as soon as possible and try to retreat back through those traps to pull us in?”

“Were you able to disarm them?”

“Yep!” Imoen smirked. “I was, and then I put down a few of my own right in front of the second group of fake walls. Although I have to say, I could only see the blinds because of Boo. I passed right by one of them until he nearly bit my ear off,” Imoen admitted with a wince.

“Still, that was a great idea, Imoen,” Harry enthused before sending a nod to Minsc, causing Minsc to puff himself up with pride at his little companion. Then Harry pulled his sword up and readied his shield. “Minsc, you’re at the back of the group just in case. There’s not enough room in this tunnel for more than two of us in the front line. Imoen, center with Dynaheir, Jaheira and Edwin. Khalid, Minsc, be ready to switch to melee weapons if we are attacked from behind, but start the fight with bows.”

Imoen had already pulled out her own bow and stood ready next to Jaheira, nudging her in the side with a cheerful wink. “I bet I kill one before you do.” Jaheira rolled her eyes, but she was smiling even so. Imoen’s irrepressible nature had rubbed off on her slightly, not that she would ever admit it. *That might well encourage the girl*, the half-elf thought, as she followed the front ranks forward.

As soon as Jaheira saw the enemy, her hands gestured, and she completed the spell Jaheira had prepared in her mind, sending out Tangling Vines.

The group of kobolds, only one of whom was an archer, were all entangled quickly, and Harry turned aside, stepping in front of one of the marked fake walls. When it opened up, Harry was already slicing down, cutting the head off a kobold. Another took his shield to the face before being stabbed in turn.

On the other side of the tunnel, Branwen was doing the same. Meanwhile, another fake wall had opened up behind them, as Harry had feared. Branwen's ability to find them was somewhat hit or miss. Khalid continued his long-range fire while Minsc shifted this broadsword, slicing not only one, but three kobolds in half in one Cleave, sending their entrails and body parts flying everywhere. Imoen, the two wizards and Jaheira ignored this portion of the battle, raining fire down on the trapped kobolds ahead of them.

Soon all of them were down, and Harry moved forward with Branwen. "Anything else beyond the next portion of this ambush?"

"Five dead slaves," Imoen answered bluntly from behind him, shaking her head. "And two dead kobolds. At least this group seems to have fought back."

Harry nodded, and he and Branwen led the way forward. They stepped in front of the next pair of fake walls, then smashed them down when they didn't seem to open.

The kobolds inside had been hiding there, not hearing the sound of their traps going off, and being cowardly, they hadn't wished to reveal themselves. Harry had barely a moment to notice the yellow dots signifying their panicked status on his map before Branwen was smashing two of them down with her hammer. One of them tried to get past Harry, too frightened to even strike at him, but Harry didn't let that stop him from slicing the creature's head off. The next second and a sling stone from Dynaheir took the last in the side of the head, crushing its skull.

The battle over Harry asked Branwen if she wanted to say something over the dead slaves, which she did, praising the miners for fighting back against their killers in Tempus' name. When she finished, they all make their way back the way they had come. From there, they began to make their way straight north. This meant they intersected with the main cavern before turning west along another passageway there, finding a group of slaves, nine all told and freeing them to head back to the entrance.

A little further to the west, they discovered an ambush point and the bodies of four more slaves. But once more, the kobolds didn't prove any danger to the prepared, wary Adventurers. Once you realized they were there and disarmed the traps, all of the advantages shifted immediately to the adventuring party.

Harry had Imoen put down a few traps here and there, then the group turned back to the entranceway. There Harry reported to the guards, telling them what they had found.

“Have you discovered our missing companions?” One of the guards demanded before he could speak. “You sent all the useless slaves back here but didn’t find our friends?”

Growling, Minsc made to move forward, but Harry blocked him with an arm across his chest. “Those slaves are people too, and we won’t be responsible for their deaths. And if you need to think about it in those terms, they can do more good for the mine by working the walls right here or just waiting until we’ve cleared it instead of dying. As for your fellow guardsmen? We haven’t seen anything of them yet. Could they have gone down to the next level for some reason?”

The guards all looked at one another, then sighed as one. “God damn it Marl...” One of them muttered.

“Aye, Sir Adventurer, they might’ve. Marl, he’s got a new sweetheart ya see, and old Emerson, he offered two hundred gold for any information about what’s been attacking our miners. He, he might’ve led the other morons down there. Damn it, we should’ve said something when we saw him pick out his brother and the other two hotheads.” One of the guards groaned.

“Crap,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “You realize that depending on how much time has passed there might not be much chance of them being found alive, right? If we had gone after them right away, that would be different, but clearing the first floor has taken us too much time.” *And there are way too many traps around for me to let us just barrel ahead after them.*

“Aye, we know,” One of the other guards scowled, shaking his head. “Ain’t your fault, sir. Idiots will be idiots, and young idiots are the worst.”

“Well, regardless, we’re now prepared to go down to the next level of the mine, so we’ll keep our eyes open. Who knows, we might get lucky,” Harry answered, although his tone implied he wasn’t very hopeful. “We won’t be back to report like this again until the mine is cleared, but I wanted to give you a heads up on what’s been going on.”

“That’s more than the other adventuring party did, that’s for sure,” One of the guards nodded his head in thanks to Harry, who returned to his party. After making certain they had explored the entirety of this floor, he led the way back to the mine shaft, which began to slope downwards. The guards, and two missing miners would have to be found below.

When they reached the ramp, they found that the trap that Imoen had laid there remained there, a green bar across Harry’s map and in his party members’ eyes. After they moved over it, Imoen took the lead, with Minsc behind her to back her up once more as everyone else moved into the line formation, which Harry was starting to think of as their normal marching formation.

The sloping tunnel started to curve inward, becoming a spiral heading downwards, and soon they were on the second level of the mine, directly beneath the first one. “Now, what are the odds that this area is laid out precisely like the first floor,” Harry murmured as he looked around, before sighing as he saw only one tunnel leading out of the small area they had come out onto. “Right, of course not. That would be too easy.”

The group moved off without further comment, the first tunnel swiftly splitting into two. One continued forward in front of the group, while the other branch went off at a ninety-degree angle or straight north on Harry’s map. Harry didn’t like that and had Imoen once more laid out a few traps behind them before following the mine rails forward, although he was noticing a worrisome sight as Imoen continued to use Hide-In-Shadows and Detect Traps at the same time, she seemed to be moving a little slower. As if the exercise was slowly exhausting her.

They soon came to an area where another branch led off north of the main tunnel. Past that was a much larger intersection, where the mine rails also split. There, Imoen had paused once more, the reason obvious to Harry thanks to his map: two dozen red dots overlapping one another to either side in the intersection and then still more along the second side passage. There seemed to be seven kobolds along that second side passage, along with several red marks of traps and even more kobolds on the other side of the traps in the main intersection, so many that the whole area looked covered in red. *That, that is a lot of kobolds.*

But to his surprise, Minsc and Imoen did not come right back. Instead, Imoen, showing a bit too much daring than sense in Harry’s mind, moved back, then headed north along the second side passage. Imoen then began to make her way back and down

a new tunnel there, which seemed to connect to the previous side passage and then on to the main intersection on the other side. With that done, Imoen rejoined the group by taking that first side passage, coming up behind Khalid right before deactivating her Hide-In-Shadows. "Hey, buddy."

"GAAHH!" Khalid yelled, though Imoen had the presence of mind to cover his mouth, while behind her, Minsc appeared looking a little sheepish.

"Don't do that, girl! I don't want my husband's stutter to become even worse!" Jaheira growled, although for the life of him, Harry couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

Deciding not to ask, Harry simply looked at their two scouts and had them tell the rest of his traveling companions what he already saw on his map while Harry quickly made up a plan. "Alright, I think now is the right time to start using more spells. Jaheira, you should cast Tangling Vines into the main intersection. Dynaheir, follow up with a Stinking Cloud. We'll stay back and kill the kobolds at the range while Branwen and I guard that first passage. Minsc and Khalid will be on our left flank just in case enough of them think to come around that way."

Everyone nodded, as Harry's plan was simple and made sense, not even Edwin becoming annoyed at his small role in the plan. Moments later, everyone had formed up into a new position. Given how they had to spread out, they fell out of formation, but it would work.

Harry and Branwen charged forward, then quickly skirted into the side passage, smashing into a few of the kobolds there, while Dynaheir behind them launched a spell in the face of the group of kobolds that had quickly grabbed up their weapons and turned to the adventurers directly in the center of the main passage. A thick smoky fog bloomed out from her hands, creating a wide area of fog directly above the heads of the kobolds, descending quickly. The next second, the Tangling Vine spell hit, trapping the few kobolds who had avoided the Stinking Cloud.

While Harry and Branwen held the side passage against the kobolds there, Jaheira, Khalid, and Edwin cleaned up the first area. But as Harry had been worried about, there were a lot of kobolds ahead of them. Many began to move around them via the other main tunnel, coming at the Adventurers from the side passages. Khalid and Minsc moved forward quickly, guarding their back, and with the Tangling Vine and Stinking Cloud

keeping their original line of advance safe, this allowed the Adventurers to deal with these attacks pretty well.

The fight slowly turned into a grind, with the kobolds attempting to get past the four Warriors. Meanwhile, Jaheira, Imoen and the two mages attempted to kill the still significant number of unconscious or trapped kobolds in the intersection before they could rejoin the fight. This worked, but Harry and Minsc both took minor wounds, and the few archers on the other side struck Jaheira and Edwin, forcing Jaheira to use two more of her healing spells.

Soon, though, the kobolds were dead or running, and Harry shouted out, "Push them, we don't want any of them to get away! Dynaheir, everyone bar Minsc and Khalid, with me! We'll break through here and flank the ones they are fighting."

Bringing the long-range Adventurers to bear on the group in front of Harry and Branwen allowed them to break them, and once the kobolds were running, cutting them down took no time at all. Once that was done, Branwen and Harry led the others around, moving to the right of the larger passageway to the north of the original one, then coming back down the first side passage, pinning the surviving Kobolds between them, Minsc and Khalid. At that point, the kobolds broke but had nowhere to go, and all that was left was killing them.

Soon they were back in front of the intersection, where Imoen began to disarm the traps while Jaheira looked over Minsc and Harry's wounds. Meanwhile, Harry noted a few body parts scattered around, while his Gamer system announced he had found the body parts of three more slaves.

From a small alcove to one side, a muttered voice whispered, "We're saved!"

Harry turned in that direction and called out, "Are you a miner or a slave? Whichever you are, the way to the upper level is clear. I suggest running."

To Harry's surprise, two men stepped out of hiding. One of them pushed his way out of a crate, where he had somehow fitted his extremely lanky frame into it like a contortionist. Another man climbed down from a support beam, where a portion of the roof directly above the support beam had fallen away, leaving a small alcove. He was dirty and grimy, but he was still alive and extremely thankful for it, bowing profusely to the adventurers.

Miner Beldin and Miner Kylee.

These miners are some of the youngest and fittest of the miners you have seen. They are also perhaps the stupidest. But then again, it is said that the gods favor fools since your timely arrival seems to have saved them from the kobolds. Or perhaps eventual starvation if they could have remained hidden.

This was followed by another message:

Congratulations. You have found and apparently rescued all the miners and slaves in the Dungeon. You still must find:

Slaves: 40/40

Guards: 4/8

Find them all or their remains and identify them if you want to complete this prerequisite to clearing the Dungeon.

“I saw my life flashing before my eyes. Every time, one of them would pick his nose or shake his head, swore they’d smell me or something,” the miner named Kylee said, pulling Harry from his reading.

Beldin also nodded profuse thanks. “I knew twas just a matter of time ‘fore one of those little critters began to poke things just for fun.”

“Hah, you’d know all about poking things just for fun, wouldn’t ya, Beldin?” Kylee joked.

“Oh hush up, willja, I tol’ you, I was so drunk, I didn’t know she were ya mom,” Beldin replied.

Resolutely not looking in Edwin, Jaheira or Imoen’s direction, Harry interrupted the brain trust before it could get going. “That’s fine, but why were you down here anyway? We were told that the miners and slaves had been pulled back to the upper level.”

Both men looked a little embarrassed. “We, er, yeah, we was told not to come down here except with the guards. But, um, we saw a guard squad coming down here and um, we had found a really good vein of iron a few weeks back. And we both thought we could sneak down, maybe make our weekly quota and then some, and then have the

guards protect us as we head back up. Only, er, those kobolds came out of nowhere, and um, we ain't seen the guards since."

Harry stared at them, then his hand rose and smacked into his forehead with such force that he actually took two points of damage. Whether or not it was because of the hit or because of that bit of gross stupidity, he didn't know. *Damn, the Advanced Adventuring System was spot on with these two.* "Fine, whatever. As I said, the way back to the ramp up to the first level is clear. "If you run, you might be able to get there without any further trouble. But before you go, can you tell me anything about this place?"

"I can do that. There be two places of importance on this floor. The first is da waterway. You'll find it straight ahead of you 'long the main passage. It curves a bit, and on the other side of another crossway is da waterway. It's basically a pond, with a wooden bridge set into it," Kylee offered.

"At that large crossing, you'll find a track that leads southwest to a large cavern. It's da central gathering area for the second floor, where most of us used to spend our hours off," Beldin added.

Eyes flicking upward, Harry was somewhat annoyed that this information hadn't given him anything new on his map. Still, at least I know somewhat more what's out there and what to shoot for. "Anything else?"

"The deeper you go, the more tunnels ya'll find. A lot o' small offshoots, they'll link back up around standing areas of iron ore that are bein' worked." Belkin replied before shuddering. "Or were, any road."

"Yeah, most've what you'll find is heap lots of those little critters. We saw bands of them passing by," Kylee agreed. "Five or six of them came while we've been stuck down here. Or maybe it was the same one each time? Who's to say?"

That was helpful, and Harry nodded his thanks for the information, then gestured them on their way. Unlike with the miners and slaves they had found on the first floor, Harry made no move to help lead these two to safety. In his mind, the stupidity they had shown meant they were honestly not worth the time. And besides, the route back to the ramp was clear anyway.

Edwin, Dynaheir and Jaheira all thought much the same and spent several minutes actually agreeing with one another on that score, exchanging jokes at the miner's

expense. Meanwhile, Imoen and Minsc pulled out some jerky, eating a few bites while Khalid and Harry conferred on what they should do.

Then Edwin said something actually disturbing. "I find it most amusing that you didn't mention the traps the pink-haired one put down before sending those buffoons on their way."

Harry and Imoen's eyes widened, and Imoen raced after the two miners, shouting out, "WAIT!!" in a loud voice. For a moment, as Edwin guffawed and the others looked a little sick, all of them having forgotten the same thing, Harry stared at nothing, worried he would soon see some kind of message informing him that he and his party were now murderers.

But then, Imoen came back, shaking her head in shock.

"What's wrong Imoen? W, were you too late?" Dynaheir nearly whispered, while Branwen closed her eyes, praying to Tempus.

"Nope. I... they were already past them! They didn't even notice, just passed right over them." Imoen said, utterly shocked. "I er, I told them to go straight back to the entrance and to watch out, but um... I don't think it was necessary."

"Tsk. I suppose it is right then what they say: the gods favor fools," Edwin snarked.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, and then asked, "Well, with that, um, taken care of, where do you all think we should go from here?"

"Let's hug the outer edge of the mining area for now. I don't want us to get into a position where we could be surrounded by several of these small offshoots Kylee mentioned," Khalid stuttered out his suggestion.

"Call him idiot number two. It is a far more accurate label," Edwin snorted.

Despite the Red Wizards snark, everyone approved of the plan, and they went north. From there, they traveled roughly eastward, with Imoen finding still more traps until they came upon a small guard post now manned by six kobolds.

"Right, there're no traps, so we should be able to wipe this group out quickly. Let's just make certain none of them get away," Harry whispered after Imoen and Minsc

rejoined them. "Same as before, guys. Let's take them at a run. The only way kobolds can hurt us is with archers, so let's make certain we can take that out of the equation quick."

With that, Harry and Branwen led the way, smashing into the small group of kobolds. However, just before they struck, Khalid, once more at the back, twisted around, staring into the darkness behind him for a second. An instant later, a kobold came out of Hide-In-Shadows, stabbing at him. He deflected it with his bow before pulling out his sword and shield from his Item Space, reequipping them quickly enough to surprise the kobold, who quickly fell to his blade. But there were still more of them coming out of Hide-In-Shadows from directly behind the group, a group of eight.

"Edwin, backup Khalid, Jaheira, you too!"

Normally, against enemies like kobolds, that would've been enough. Even with surprise on the side of the kobolds, there weren't enough of them. But, a second later, Harry looked down as he felt something under his foot twist. "FUCK!"

A yellow kind of magical energy flew out from one of the walls, exploding amid his friends, and Harry read out a message.

You have tripped Fear Snare.

This is a Snare created around a magic scroll primed with magic and now waits for a final release.

The spell Fear has been visited upon your party and traveling companions.

Due to your high Willpower, you have resisted the spell, Fear.

Khalid, Jaheira, and Imoen and Minsc all felt it. Minsc instantly began to roar, the fear forcing him into his Berserker state, as he lashed out at friend and foe alike, nearly cutting Jaheira in half, missing by a hair's breadth thanks to the fact she was already running away but still catching her on her side with the guard of his sword hard enough to toss her off her feet, where the normally self-controlled half-elf scrambled, before getting to her feet and running off. Khalid also fell under the spell's influence, racing after his wife down the tunnel further east.

Imoen had worse luck. She was in the interior of their formation and bolted straight south down the other passageway the guard post had been designed around. Within seconds, her foot caught on another rope, triggering another trap there.

Imoen has activated Bear Trap.

Imoen has lost -twenty to health. Imoen is now incapacitated and immobilized.

“AAAAGGGGGHHHH!” Imoen cried out in pain, the cry echoing around the mine.

The cry wrenched at Harry even as he slew a kobold in front of him and shouted orders to the two mages. “Dynaheir, Edwin, come forward here with Branwen and me. Leave Minsc alone for now. He can handle himself.”

“You do not have to tell me twice!” Edwin shouted as he barely dodged around a sword thrust, feeling the blade cut into his robes before he returned fire with a Magic Missile to the face. It was gross overkill, but it still saved his life and allowed him to fall back to Dynaheir and Harry and Branwen while Minsc bellowed and chopped at another kobold to one side.

With the two warriors forging a path for them, they made their way back the way they came to a little offshoot heading after Imoen. By the time they got to her, Imoen’s pain had brought her out of the fear trap. As Harry helped her pull the bear trap off of her leg, Imoen whimpered, shaking her head in shock. “S, sorry! I never even saw that one.” She then was actually able to smile at Harry despite the pain of her leg. “I, it looks like Boo and I both screwed up there.”

Harry nodded but said nothing more, simply lifting her into his arms, hugging Imoen to him while Branwen began to use a few healing spells on the woman’s leg. After looking around, he sighed, then looked at Branwen. “You all should stay here. I’m going to see if I can find Jaheira and Khalid. Hopefully, they didn’t rush right from one battle into another.”

“And if they did?” Edwin demanded harshly. “It is very clear that when it comes to Mind Magics, both of them are liabilities, the male worse than the female admittedly, but still.”

“Do you have a point, Thayan? Or are you just looking to vent your spleen?” Dynaheir questioned tartly.

“It is simple woman, so simple that even a Witch from the wilds of Rasheman should be able to see what I am implying. If we are to run into similar traps, then we

should think about leaving such liabilities behind. Perhaps they could guard the way back up for us if they can make themselves useful at all.”

“It matters not what you think, wizard, for Tempus has given us a way to combat such fears. Remove Fear is a priestly spell that I have in abundance, and I can break the spell of any such trap if I am quick enough to catch all thus impaired before they can run away.”

“Good to know, but let’s save that for an actual battle. Hopefully, we won’t need it right now.” With that, Harry moved off, seeming to completely ignore Edwin’s words until he said over his shoulder, “I will remember that suggestion the next time that you are a liability in a battle, Edwin.”

“As if that could have her happen to one of my puissance,” Edwin shot back.

Harry was grateful to find that Minsc had already begun to come out of his Berserker mentality, apparently having slammed his head into one of the supports with enough force to knock himself out temporarily. He shifted to his feet, rubbing at his bald pate self-consciously. “Minsc is sorry, friend Harry. Without Boo, I am even more susceptible to dastardly Mind Magics than normal. I could only turn aside and aim my mighty blows away from fair Dynaheir.”

“It’s alright, Minsc. You were still a major help, protecting our back while we went after Imoen. Thank you,” Harry replied, knowing that was the only reason why Edwin and maybe even Dynaheir had survived given the trap and how close the kobolds had come to them. This caused Minsc to tear up and grab Harry in a bear hug, but Harry dodged, shaking his head. “None of that, Minsc! We need to find Khalid and Jaheira.”

“Ah, you are right, of course,” Minsc shook his head. “Let us find our fragile friends before they come to further mischief.”

Thankfully for the two half-elves, their fear had continued to send them in the same direction, continuing in the direction that the party had been going, around the northern edge of the mine heading east. They had run into a dead-end there. Harry found them both huddling against the wall, looking as if they had tripped at least another trap. However, Harry hadn’t seen any notification of Khalid doing so. When he walked up to them, they looked at Harry and Minsc as if they were going to bolt away, but Harry simply stood there, blocking the way back towards the rest of the mines, and spoke softly and gently. “Jaheira, Khalid, it’s us. Your friends.”

“Indeed,” Minsc boomed, which caused both half-elves to flinch, not that Minsc noticed. “We are your companions and brothers-in-arms, much evil have we slain, and much more will we continue to kick going forward. But you need to steal your heart against the fear that you are feeling, for it is the work of the weevils of evil, do not let the whispering musings of the fearful vileness take control of you, for it is their own fear that they are projecting upon you, for they see the righteous but kicking that we will bring upon them!”

“Yes, thank, you Minsc,” Harry laughed, shaking his head and leaning against the wall. Why don’t you go back and get the others and bring them up here. I haven’t seen any more trouble on the way, and hopefully, that means we won’t see any more trouble for a second.”

Of course, Harry’s words were simply too good for the universe to pass up, and just as Minsc and the others came from the southern passage moving towards where Jaheira and Khalid were still trembling against the far wall of the dead end, a group of seven kobolds came up behind them.

And instead of being mostly armed with short swords, all of these kobolds were armed with arrows and bows. They began to fire at them the instant they saw the adventurers, forcing the party to dodge or evade.

Yet in response, Harry and the others though simply shifted to their own long-range weapons and began to fire back at them, with Harry striding forward and the others forming up behind him, still blocking Jaheira and Khalid from fleeing entirely. “Dynaheir, Edwin, one spell each, conserve your Magic Missiles,” Harry ordered.

Edwin was tempted to use Magic Missiles because he was contrary but did not because soon enough, they had further trouble as Harry saw an announcement.

You have been in the Dungeon long enough for a respawn to occur. Respawn points have activated on the first and second floors.

Note: Respawn rate is currently set at three hours. Respawn times will increase with every Heart Stone destroyed. Destroy all Heart Stones to stop enemies from respawning at all.

And one aspect of the tunnel fighting that none of them had thought of yet was how far the noise of combat could spread in the mine tunnels. This was not the same thing as the outside of the gnoll fortress with the heavy rain to cover their actions.

Before the Adventurers could deal with the second group of patrolling kobolds, the same group of Hide-In-Shadows using kobolds that had attacked them from behind appeared once more, charging towards Dynaheir and the now-healed Imoen as they held the right flank of the group. And from behind the archers that they had previously been fighting came the sounds of more than two dozen kobolds, all racing down the passages towards them from the large intersection they had previously wiped out.

“Minsc, fall back and provide cover for Dynaheir and Imoen on the right. Branwen forward with me. Edwin, Dynaheir, try to keep up the pressure on the archers, and use your Stinking Cloud,” He said, as one of their arrows nearly smacked into his shoulder, bouncing off of the chest plate.

Such was the number of enemies coming at them that even Edwin did not make a comment. Instead, Branwen brandished her hammer to the sky, shouting out, “In Tempus’s name!”

Branwen has cast Spiritual Hammer. Calling upon her god, this spell brings into existence a magical hammer, This weapon made of pure faith strikes as a magical weapon with a bonus of +1 for every 6 levels of the caster. The base damage inflicted when it scores a hit is exactly the same as a normal war hammer.

The glare of the hammer that Branwen was now wielding seemed to take the attacking kobolds aback, and Harry charged into their midst without even thinking about it, laying out sword and shield, turning the battle in an instant. Branwen followed him in with the bellow of laughter. “Yes, yes that is the way, into the enemy, let Tempus decide the righteous!”

At the back of the kobolds group, the archers began to fall back, one of their dots turning yellow on Harry’s map, while on the other side of the battle along the right passageway, Minsc had barreled into the group of attacking kobolds there, smashing them over like nine pins, and was now dealing with them along with Imoen and her short bow.

But the last thing that Harry wanted was for one of them to get away, knowing there were still more kobolds out there. Seeing more of the Kobolds now starting to flee thanks to his and Branwen’s charge, he cursed and was about to use one of his own blood

may magic spells to stop them when suddenly Tangling Vines began to appear all around the archers. The spell caught all of them, including the kobolds who had already turned to flee and the back of the group that it charged forward into short sword range.

Jaheira and Khalid came out from where they had been hiding at the far end of the cul-de-sac, with Khalid's bow in his hand and Jaheira's sling already launching a stone. Both of them looked grimly determined to work off any embarrassment on the kobolds, and the battle swiftly began to ebb out for lack of living enemies.

The moment the battle ended, Jaheira turned to Harry and the others. "I have to apologize for myself and my husband. That Fear spell captured both of us in its grip, and we could not escape. I am... heh... afraid that even I am at times susceptible to such as that, especially when I do not have a moment to prepare myself beforehand."

With his Advanced Adventurer System, Harry could tell there was a bit more to it in Jaheira's case. Like Imoen, she was dealing with a 'minor claustrophobe' status ailment. This seemed to accrue a -10 to Willpower, which meant they were both more susceptible to mental attacks. In Imoen's case, it had begun the moment they had entered the Dungeon. For Jaheira, it had begun when they had come down to this level, and Harry had missed it, which he cursed himself for now.

But Harry wasn't going to point that out to the proud half-elf and waved her words and Khalid's following nod away. "No apologies necessary. You weren't the only ones affected."

Imoen threw an arm around Khalid's shoulders, squeezing briefly, dealing with her own brush with the Fear spell as she did most things: by humor. "Yep, that's us, the scaredy-cat quartet. Hey, that sounds like a troubadour band, and you two are already Harpers, so..."

Minsc thrust out his jaw, straightening his back to add to his formidable height as he glowered down at Imoen. "Minsc is not a scaredy-cat! Minsc has not ever been a scaredy-cat, no matter what some mean people back in my Lodge might've thought when I was young before I grew strong enough to hurl them through the Lodge walls. Minsc simply did not have Boo with him. If he had, then no amount of magical whisperings or fearful mutterings would've bothered him!"

“I understand big guy,” Imoen soothed patting him on the arm, “and I really do. But Boo’s been a major help to me too. Unless he can give you the ability to detect traps, I’m afraid he has to stay with me for a bit.”

“Let it only for it be for a bit then,” Minsc grumbled, actually pouting for a moment while he contemplated the giant miniature space hamster on Imoen’s shoulder.

Dynaheir put her hand on his other shoulder, reaching up to do so. “She is right, large one. Your... your little creature is performing a necessary service to the party.” She sounded as if saying that was like pulling teeth, but still went on doggedly. “After all, these enemies do not fight with honor or even courage, not even the courage of most evil creatures. They fight from ambush and traps. And in that, Imoen is our best bet.”

“Truly, but where did those enemies come from? Both groups seem to have come from the area of the mines that we had already cleared. Surely they could not have moved back into them in such numbers and so short a time from elsewhere in the mine,” Branwen began, then her eyes widened. “Unless...”

Harry nodded at her, then looked around at the others. “I think this place has been turned into a dungeon,” he said bluntly, finally imparting the knowledge he and his formal ‘Party Members’ had seen when they had finished talking with the mine boss. “Which means we’re not just looking for miners or clues as to what the kobolds are doing, we’re looking for the Heart Stones and the Dungeon Boss.”

“Yes!” Branwen shouted in tandem with Minsc, who Harry supposed must have either forgotten or simply be that jubilant at the idea. It was hard to tell with the boisterous Ranger. “A dungeon, a chance to win glory so closely after my ignominious defeat by Tranzig. This is a sign from Tempus!”

“Yes, a second dungeon to clear for the butt-kicking trio of Minsc, Boo and Harry!”

Harry laughed but looked over at Imoen. “You said you didn’t detect that trap. Do you think you could detect similar ones now?”

“It doesn’t work like that, Harry. I mean, I can recognize similar traps most of the time, but only if I’ve seen them in the first place, and I **didn’t** see that one. But I’d certainly be willing to try,” Imoen answered, covering her concerns with the ease of long practice.

But Imoen's status ailment of being a minor claustrophobe was still there, and Harry let her see his concern for a moment, but she waved it off. "Seriously, I'm fine, Harry. I'm also all we got in terms of detecting traps. I'll handle it."

Harry continued to look at her for a moment, then sighed in resignation, acknowledging that point. Then an idea occurred to him, and while the others thought he was staring out into the dark of the tunnel, Harry tried to flip back to the first level of the mine, thinking. He couldn't quite figure out what kind of mental command would do it for a moment, but after a few seconds, his mental command of Nashkel mines first floor worked. *Yes! And... yes, Imoen's traps are still there, some of them anyway. I can see them on my map.*

That means they can both act as early warning systems and, in a limited fashion, eyes and ears left behind us. Excellent! They hadn't done that before in the gnoll fortress. Harry hadn't been able to see them, only receiving notifications of Imoen putting them down. Now, thanks to his Mapmaker and Greater Observation skill, he could see a lot more than he had. *I wonder if I'll be able to share the map with my party at some point? Something to think about.*

With that, a plan formed in Harry's mind. "I think we should retreat to that first intersection. When we're there, you'll put down traps. If that is a respawn point, the traps will cut down on the number of kobolds we'll have to deal with from that angle."

"Won't we run into a lot of opposition there now?" Dynaheir objected though it was more of a question than an argument. She had never been in a dungeon before and didn't quite know how they worked.

"Not as many as you might think. Most of the kobolds there heard the fight already going on here and attacked us in this group. We might run into a dozen or so, but they won't have put down traps of their own, and we just smashed a patrol too, so there shouldn't be any surprises, at least not from our rear or flanks."

As the others nodded, talking to one another in low tones, Harry let himself fall to the back of the group, asking Minsc to take his place as they did didn't need any scouts in this portion. They knew where the enemies would be, and they were traveling areas which it already been cleared of traps. Right now, Harry wanted to think without worrying about being at the front. With that, Harry went through the backlog of blocked messages, those messages he had set his Gamer skill to not show during the battle for fear of getting

in the way. There, he found six notices of experience gained from kobolds who had died thanks to Imoen's traps.

Each of them read the same, so when Harry read one, the others disappeared.

Imoen's Trap, Flying Dart has slain a kobold.

Your party has gained + 5 experience.

Imoen's trap-building ability has gone up by +.005%.

Hah! Early warning and defense all rolled into one. When we get out of here, I will want Imoen to , what's the phrase, grind out her skill in traps. They are a game-changer, not only tactically but strategically too.

As Harry had suspected, most of the kobolds who had appeared in that respawn point had already attempted to attack them, and after a short fight against the remainder, Imoen was able to put down traps. Several of them, all around the area.

After Imoen was finished, she and Minsc again began to patrol forward. The rest of the group followed as they made their way back to the position they had run into the fear trap. There, they took a small passage south, finding another set of mine rails heading towards where Harry supposed the intersection right before the tiny lake the miners had mentioned could be. In the other direction, it moved eastward in a curve, with a few offshoots.

Moving along this new rail, they sprang three ambushes easily and ran into one patrol, which they slew at range while moving along the outer edge of the mine. Soon after the last ambush, the mine rail went one way as the tunnel split in two. The rail continued south in one tunnel while the other moved more westerly.

Keeping to the mine rail tunnel for now, Imoen led the group to what was obviously another respawn point directly in front of what looked like the entrance to the third level of the mines, which itself was in a wider tunnel than any they had seen yet. But this one was easier than the last to take care of since there were no side passages to worry about. Once Imoen had confirmed she had taken out the one trap right before the respawn point, Harry saw no reason to waste time. He led the group in with Branwen, Khalid and Minsc joining him in a wedge, with the others behind them.

It didn't, alas, unlock a new formation, but that was okay. The tunnel here was wide enough for the Adventurers to stand four abreast, and they crashed into the kobolds with, in Branwen's words, "All the might of Tempus' hammer given fleshly form!" With Imoen guarding their back, they didn't run into any trouble, and Dynaheir's use of Stinking Cloud knocked out the majority of the kobolds was almost unnecessary.

Afterward, Imoen set up several traps once more, but here she got a little clever. "Grease traps and fire traps?" Harry's eyes widened as he saw what she was doing.

"Yep. I mean, we aren't going to be around here when these traps go off. So any impact from using fire underground isn't going to impact us."

Edwin snorted, then bestowed a smile of approval on Imoen. "My word, but that is a most interesting mind you have there. Grease to stop their movement and fire to light up the grease. It will work most astonishingly well on kobolds, who by their nature are somewhat cowardly at the best of time."

"Your approval fills me with shame," Imoen drawled back in a passable impression of Edwin's own voice, which caused him to chuckle.

They sprang two more ambushes, slaying several more than a dozen more kobolds, before coming upon another guard point. This one was the tiny lake that the miners had mentioned. The fight there was short and brutal as another Fear trap was there. But this time, Boo had spotted it, even if Imoen hadn't deactivated it, and Branwen passed around numerous Remove Fear buffs.

Branwen has cast Remove Fear.

This is a level 1 priest spell usable by clerics and paladins (those who have performed their vows to a specific deity anyway). The spell maximizes the morale of the target humanoid, negating any panic they may be feeling. It also protects the target from magical fear effects for the duration of the spell.

Staring across the short, wooden walkway that was set along the center of the lake, Harry frowned. "I... don't like the look of that other entryway. It looks too close to that first respawn point we ran into, and beyond that, the intersection there is way too open. If we go that way, there's far too many ways the kobolds could get around our front line."

He then sighed, pointing to a hand that was just visible in the doorway. "To say nothing of that hand and what it implies."

Slowly nodding as she stared at the same thing, Imoen agreed. "Yeah, and I would wager that the entrée-way over there has the same kind of Fear Trap we ran into here. And more. If I'm visualizing it right, this area is the center of this floor."

"That would certainly make sense. Even if the miners would need to boil it, having a source of water like this would be important for many things, not just food and drink," Branwen answered, frowning as she tapped the butt of her hammer.

"Right. Imoen, put our own traps in the center of the span and here at the entrance. We'll go back and head further south," Harry decided.

As she did so, Imoen changed to glance into the water and paled visibly, halting her work and backing away. "Harry, you need to see this."

Moving over, Harry and a few others looked down into the brackish water. With stones wrapped around their limbs, the bodies of three guardsmen, identified by the chain mail they were still wearing, lay at the bottom of the tiny pond. "Ah..." Harry acknowledged, uncertain what to say right now, ignoring the notification that he had found three of the four missing guards. Reading it right now would be too damn morbid.

"By Tempus, we will avenge them," Branwen growled.

"Hmm, a most ingenious use of their bodies, if rather grotesque. They kill the guards, thus spreading fear, then dump the bodies here, despoiling the water. And removing those bodies would be quite a task, too, so even if the locals could reclaim the mines after we defeat the Dungeon and it reverts, they will still be there. And it is further proof a semi-intelligent mind is behind this rather than some kobold with delusions of grandeur."

Moving south along the eastern edge of the lake, the group continued to clear out the mines. They tripped four more ambushes and slew another patrol before making their way back up north towards the other end of the lake from the south. And if Harry and the other frontline fighters hacked and butchered the bodies a bit or overused Cleave, no one said anything.

While they were exploring south of the lake, the respawn time once more ticked over, but thanks to the traps Imoen had already dropped and the distance they had put between themselves and the respawn points, the time passed without any issue. Her grease and burning arrow trap wiped out the second respawn point, and the first was badly denuded of strength, leaving only the patrols to deal with. And even those surprise patrols couldn't take the party by surprise now since Harry had them in the Line Formation again, with Minsc and Khalid at the back and Imoen tucked in with them.

They quickly wound back through the area they had already cleared, wiping out the patrols who had also spawned again, slaying the kobolds throughout the floor once more before returning from another angle to the large intersection on the western side of the lake. It was becoming obvious that if you took the kobold's ambushes out of the equation, they were really no threat to a well-led group of Adventurers.

Although there, they found the fourth guard and eight more dead slaves, proof that the kobolds could be deadly against civilians and non-Adventurers. The slaves confused Harry for a moment before he remembered that the depredations in the mine had been going on for a long while before he entered it. These slaves, unlike the guards, who gave him a notification about having found them, must have died long before Harry and his band entered the mine.

With that thought, Harry looked down another passageway they hadn't gone down yet. "This must lead to the area where the miners said they had their gathering area. And I will wager anything anyone would care to put forward that it will contain a Heart Stone."

"Excellent," Edwin said grimly, wiping sweat from his forehead. The constant movement and tension had begun to wear on him and Imoen. The two of them had the least amount of Constitution of the entire group by a wide margin. Astonishingly, despite her all-too-recent recovery from malnutrition and other status ailments, Dynaheir's Constitution was such that she could keep up easily.

Harry looked over at Imoen and Minsc. "Take your time. We'll be on your heels and will move forward quickly, but I want to know what's there before we attack."

As the two of them moved off, Harry turned to Branwen. "How many more Remove Fear spells do you have?"

"I have enough to use on the total party once each before I needs must rest," Branwen answered with a smile. She, unlike the magic users and the Thief, was having

the time of her life. Kobolds were intensely squishy and rather amused her, as did bringing justice to them for their murders.

Catching her amused smile, Harry shook his head, deciding not to ask what was funny. "Ignore me, Dynaheir and Edwin. We've got enough Willpower to resist those spells most of the time and don't have a status ailment like Imoen and her mild claustrophobia." That had come out at one point after the battle on the lake path, although Jaheira's suffering from the same thing had not, and Harry wasn't about to mention it now.

Edwin attempted to look superior at that, smirking at the others, while Jaheira and Khalid simply sighed. While it was fact, neither of them liked having their weakness rubbed in their faces like that.

Seeing that, Harry shrugged apologetically, but he didn't take his question back or say anything to lessen the blow. He got the distinct impression that if he tried, Jaheira would probably smack him upside the head. On the other hand, not mentioning her claustrophobia won him a hundred trust points with her. And for once, the AAS didn't stick on a snarky comment.

"Let's eat something," he said aloud. He handed out several healing berries around the group, ignoring the fact this showed once more that he could use his Item Space far better than most Adventurers while thinking about using one of the Gourds of Power but deciding against it. They had two of those remaining after the fight in the Gnoll Fortress, and using them against kobolds was overkill. But everyone was hurting a bit by this point, tiny wounds slowly adding up, and using the remaining healing berries let Jaheira and Branwen husband their healing spells.

Once the others had their own food, Harry bit into some jerky talking quietly with Branwen and Dynaheir while waiting for the two scouts to come back as Edwin meditated and Jaheira and Khalid spoke to one another in Elfish. He was interested in the cultures the two women represented, and he could tell that Dynaheir was interested in him too.

Not as a man, he didn't detect that, and certainly, his Observation skill hadn't seen anything of that sort, but there was something else going on there. In return, her questions were all about Harry's childhood in Candlekeep, his background and what he planned with his life beyond getting justice for Gorion. Dynaheir was pleased to hear it was justice he was seeking, but she seemed to want to hear something more.

Branwen, on the other hand, seemed more interested in something much closer to hand.

“I have heard from Minsc and Imoen both that you have often resorted to using a hammer. Yet I have seen aught of that. Why would a paladin trainee turn his back on the noble hammer?” the priest of Tempus asked.

“I haven’t actually turned my back on it, but I am more skilled with the sword, and the sword is more versatile,” Harry began.

Branwen interrupted him with a loud scoff that echoed around the tunnel. “BAH! That is that poncy half-elf’s influence talking. A hammer can do just as much damage as a blade can in a battle and can be even more dexterous.”

Ignoring Khalid’s stuttering mutter of ‘p, p, poncy!?’ Branwen hopped to her feet, grabbing up her hammer and pulling Harry into the center of the area, watching with some amusement the scowl on Dynaheir’s face. “Come, let me show you.”

When Harry pulled out his hammer, Branwen began to teach him the intricacies of the hammer, with Branwen giving instructions and explanations. “You stand thusly! And thus, you keep your grip tight but your wrist loose. Do not simply overpower each strike. That is foolish. You must keep light on your feet. Do you let the weight of your tower shield dictate things? No! You are more than strong enough to swing a hammer without putting too much effort into it. You must use that strength better!”

Which, to Harry’s chagrin, opened up a similar quest to the one he had developed after learning about the sword from Khalid. He had to work on his footwork (again), his shoulder and arm strength, and wrist dexterity, and until he got them to where he could be called proficient, his skill with a hammer would be hampered. But the upshot, Strength +2, was such that Harry couldn’t begrudge the loss in current combat ability, and he continued to follow Branwen’s instructions.

“You see?” Branwen exulted, watching Harry finish a series of extremely intricate strikes with his hammer. “I will make a hammer wielder of you yet.”

“I think I am going to have to step up Harry’s training after we are done with this dungeon,” Khalid stuttered to his wife. “I refuse to let such a promising swordsman choose another weapon.” Jaheira chuckled at that but said nothing, simply watching the two practice while also keeping her ears open for a sign of any further kobolds.

The two of them trained together for about ten minutes before Minsc returned, reporting that Imoen had found a few traps. Once he was no longer concentrating on Branwen and her training, Harry could already see that on his map, watching as she disarmed them.

The group then moved forward, finding themselves going around a curve in the tunnel, where the traps had been. Harry signaled a halt and waited for Imoen and Minsc to go forward into the area ahead of them.

Meanwhile, he looked at the map, ignoring the mock-growl Branwen released as he switched to a sword, watching as the two scouts entered the large circular cavern. Sure enough, he saw a marker there, a silvery scintillating thing which, when he looked at it directly, popped up the information:

Heart Stone #1.

You have found a Heart Stone, which will now appear on your map thanks to a synergy of your Greater Observation and Mapmaker skills. Within the Nashkel Mines, this is the first Heart Stone you have found, thus its designation. The numbers are arbitrary, determined by in which order you find them. Do not read any further importance into this...yet. Perhaps if your Greater Observation and Tactics skills upgrade further, this will change in the future.

Given your Advanced Observation skill, you can tell this Heart Stone point is connected to the respawn point on the first floor and maybe half the patrols on this floor. There are no patrols on the first floor.

Durability: 60/60

You can also tell that this Heart Stone is of lesser quality than what you have seen previously in the Gnoll Fortress. The quality of the respawned enemies will be lesser, and the Heart stone's durability is less.

Imoen soon reported back, shaking her head. "There are at least twenty kobolds in that area, and I think a few of them might be a little special. One of them is definitely a shaman, but the others, I'm not certain what they are, but they are taller, and their skin is redder than the others. And there are several traps within the cavern, traps I couldn't get close to, thanks to how much the kobolds are moving around in there.

Harry thought about it for a few moments, then looked over at Jaheira. "How many summon animals spells do you have?"

"Four," the druid answered promptly understanding his plan. "I will use one if you wish and we can send them forward to spring those traps."

"Once the battle begins, yeah," Harry agreed. "First, we'll hold at the entrance to the area. Dynaheir, use the Stinking Cloud spell again, Edwin, I'd like for you to take out that shaman before he can make a problem of himself."

"I will do so," Edwin said with a nod.

"Branwen, if you could hit us all with Remove Fear now?" As Branwen complied, Harry looked up at Minsc. "Minsc, judging by how wide Imoen said that entrance is I want you to join Branwen and me in the front line. Khalid, keep back of the others just in case. I really don't want us ambushed from behind again, even if we're pretty certain we've wiped out all the patrols again. When the Stinking Cloud begins to dissipate, Jaheira, you can send in your summoned animals."

With that, everyone readied themselves, and Imoen finished off the bit of jerky she been chewing, wiping her hands on her leather Jerkins, before pulling out her short bow and moving to stand in front of Dynaheir and Jaheira.

You have formed the Formation, **Hammer Time**.

X 4 to melee speed **once** combat begins.

X 2 damage after combat is joined.

Harry looked at the information again, smiling as he noted that the formation was one of the ones he had used against the previous Dungeon to good effect while attacking. Harry was in the center, with Branwen to one side and Minsc to the other. He grinned at the big man, nodding his head. "Ready?"

"Minsc is always ready to release the boot of justice upon villainy!" He said jubilantly, with Boo once more on his shoulder, having left Imoen behind for the moment.

"Indeed, our large companion says it truly. Into the storm of battle, for Tempus!" Branwen shouted, hefting her hammer.

Harry grinned and led the way forward around the curve in the tunnel, moving to take up positions in the opening. The kobolds had already heard Minsc and Branwen's shouts, and a few of them had begun moving already towards the entrance. As the three adventurers moved forward with the others behind them, the kobolds chattered to one another then charged, the majority of the crowd in the cavern coming towards them.

Harry and Branwen raised their shields while Minsc used his claymore to block the first cut coming his way. Weapons flicked out, slaying the first group of kobolds to reach them, while arrows flew in both directions. A spell of Magic Missiles also flew out before a Stinking Cloud spell hit the center of the room, spreading quickly and downing many of the attacking kobolds.

This left nine of them to charge forward into close combat with the trio of warriors, and though one or two were able to get in a few licks on Minsc, Harry and the rest were quickly able to put them down. But the Heart Stone began to spawn still more kobolds in groups of four. Many fell unconscious as they appeared, but enough didn't to add more weight to the enemy's charge. Yet given the disparity in size and the fact the kobolds could not get around them, the front of the 'T' held firm.

The only trouble in the battle began when the Stinking Cloud began to dissipate. At the far end of the mob of kobolds, which continued to grow, kobold commandos began to fire at the group. This was the larger, red-skinned kobolds Imoen had seen, but she hadn't recognized them, perhaps because the only previous time they'd dealt with kobolds had been at night, so the color hadn't occurred to her.

Magically imbued fire arrows flew towards the Adventurers, hitting the trio of combatants at the front of the formation.

Minsc took a few arrows to his chest, but his Plate Mail +1 protected him bar a gash across his collarbone from an arrow that sliced through the thin area between plate mail and helmet. Harry grunted under the impact of several arrows hitting his shield, which had interposed itself between him and the commandos. Branwen fell to her knees, one of them having hit her in the thigh, but she was already casting a healing spell on herself, while Jaheira was concentrating on summoning up her animals on the other side of the battle line.

The animals in question, a trio of wild dogs, growled and instantly began attacking the kobolds, knocking into them and, more importantly, triggering the traps within the

large circular room. Dozens of darts flew out, impacting the dogs and the kobolds around them while a series of bear traps snapped shut, crippling the kobolds stuck in them by literally removing their legs. This was followed a second later by a Fear trap impacting the center of the room.

But thanks to Branwen's spell work and Harry's planning, it didn't do anything to the attackers. Instead, it greatly impacted the kobolds, a dozen of whom began to run away in every direction bar towards Harry and the others.

The commandos were still trouble, and a moment later, another shaman spawned thanks to the Heart Stone. But Edwin had been on the lookout, and before the new shaman could get a spell off, he joined his predecessor in death thanks to another round of Magic Missiles.

Harry slashed down at a kobold, slicing its head off, then shouted to be heard over the tumult of battle. *For all they are ambush specialists, once they are in a fight these kobolds are awfully noisy.* "Imoen, can you detect any more traps in there?"

"No! Jaheira's animals tripped them all," Imoen replied, releasing an arrow at one of the kobolds. The creature went down, but she had to duck away as his fellows shifted their fire to try and arc their arrows over the front line.

"Good. Push forward!" Harry ordered his two companions, who did so instantly. Harry and Branwen knocked the attacking kobolds off of their feet, using shields to batter them forward and forward again while their weapons flicked out. In contrast, Minsc used a Cleave technique and then charged over the body parts of his foes, roaring gleefully as his claymore slew or crippled a kobold with every strike, only occasionally being forced to defend himself thanks to the difference in reach.

"Edwin, Dynaheir, destroy the Heart Stone!" Harry shouted, then ordered, "Front line, be ready to stop. Minsc, you'll have to get behind Branwen and me when it blows. You don't have any shield."

Edwin and Dynaheir began to cast Acid arrow and Magic Missile towards the Heart Stone. It took them four spells each, but as the kobold commandos fire started to cause more wounds among the party, the stone finally started to crack, then shatter. That shattering was as violent as it had been in the gnoll fortress, and the shards slew the majority of the commandos and many of the kobolds who had run forward to engage the attackers, their own bodies acting almost like shields for Harry and his allies.

With the spawning enemies done, the only group still fighting were eight kobolds in front of the party and three enemy kobolds commandos at the far end who had been out of the blast radius. But they seemed to have used up their fire arrows, and Harry charged across the intervening space, cutting down two more kobolds as he did so.

Branwen and Minsc charged with him, while the others spread out, finishing the kobolds off who had been knocked over by their charge or who had fled to the outer edge of the room in an unsuccessful and mad attempt to get away, fueled by the Fear Trap. Finally, the last kobold died, and the area was clear.

Congratulations, you have destroyed a Heart Stone!

The Dungeon respawn rate has changed, becoming 25% slower than previously. The new respawn rate is five hours.

Note: Given this Dungeon's level, when a Heart Stone is destroyed, the respawn zones connected to that Heart Stone that have previously been cleared will automatically respawn. Half the patrol points tied to the remaining Heart Stones will also respawn. Ambush points will not. Any ambush point you clear will remain such for the duration of your stay in the Dungeon.

Further, given the level of this Dungeon, there is no overarching intelligence controlling the kobolds actions, even if one is controlling their objectives and supplying them with tools and material. Thus, no enemy will be aware of events on this floor or any other. You still need to worry about word of your presence spreading on the floor you are currently exploring, but not beyond that.

Behind that, Harry saw several experience notifications appeared behind that notice from the several dozen kobolds who had just died thanks to Imoen's traps. He winked over at her, and she grinned back at him before Harry turned his attention to the rest of the room. "All those in favor of a real meal break, say aye!"

When the ayes had it unanimously, Harry looked over at Minsc. "Grab up that minecart over there Minsc, let put a few of those in the entranceway just in case. Two-hour break people, eat or rest I don't care which. But Imoen, when we're ready to move on, I will want this room trapped as well. Just in case.

"You know, these traps are going to have to come down after we're done here, right? Or else they'll be just as dangerous to the miners as they are to the kobolds."

Harry shrugged, then actually smirked a little. “Yes, I suspect so. We’ll mention that to the Mayor. We’ll even offer to get rid of them for a small remuneration.”

While Branwen and Dynaheir looked a little annoyed at that, the others laughed, with Edwin chortling the loudest in approval.

While the others were going through a few after-battle checks of equipment, refilling stone pouches and quivers, as well as taking arrows from the cobalt commanders in Khalid’s case, Imoen just moved over to the wall and laid out in front of it, pulling out her sleeping roll. Like Harry, she no longer cared about showing anyone their ability to really make use of their Item Space. And even if Harry hadn’t been doing that before, Imoen was too knackered right now to care. Within seconds, her eyes were closed, and she was asleep, far faster than she would normally be able to thanks to Harry’s Gamer skill affecting his Party Members.

Edwin followed suit, disdaining to offer any aid to the various things occurring all around him, while Branwen joined Minsc and Harry in creating a makeshift barricade. Dynaheir and Jaheira were more interested in the various items around the room, in particular a set of pots set up over small fires along one wall. “Harry, you and Edwin might wish to take a look at this. Your Observation skill could make more out of it than our own,” Dynaheir announced.

“Is something wrong?”

“Not wrong, simply strange. This pot is apparently full of what my own Observation skill is telling me is simply ‘Mysterious Liquid’.”

Harry frowned at that, and Minsc waved him off. “Branwen and I have this, friend Harry. If my Witch believes that liquid is important, it is.”

At that, Harry left them by the entrance and moved over to join the two women. As he did, he too looked at the liquid bubbling in the pot. It was green, viscous looking, almost like acid but not quite. And as he looked at it, a new notification appeared in front of him.

Mysterious Liquid.

Despite your Observation skills, this liquid defies your analysis. Yet, it is highly unusual and very strange to look upon. You can also tell that it is important because it is set to one

side and in a special clay pot. Perhaps this is something to do with the weakness in the iron?

“Okay, yeah, I’m not getting any more information from it than you all are, which is weird in itself,” Harry murmured. “Dynaheir, Edwin, you two are most likely to know what potions we might be dealing with here. Do you have anything to add?”

Grumbling, Edwin moved over to join them, annoyed his rest was disturbed. As he joined them, Branwen and Minsc finished their work on the barricade and began to remove the bodies, piling them into one corner. They would be burned after the group moved on.

Harry took a moment to look at his map again, noting a few areas that they had yet to explore, as well as the traps that Imoen had left behind them. That was something they would have to be doing almost automatically from now on every time they had to explore the Dungeon, Harry reflected. It wasn’t exactly like letting some spell that could allow them to see other areas of the map, but it was almost as good, and guarding their back was always a good idea. *And frankly, those areas don’t look all that large.*

“This is clay, not pewter as would be normal,” Dynaheir began, tapping the side of the cauldron in front of her as she said aloud what Harry’s Observation skill had already pointed out. “And I did not detect any kind of scent that I am familiar with within this green goo.”

“It looks bizarre like no potion I’ve ever seen before, and I have seen many. Part of being a Red Wizard is to apprentice in laboratories that deal with such. I am uncertain what we see here,” Edwin scowled, unused to being so thwarted.

“So this could be the stuff they’re using to weaken the iron?” Harry questioned.

“Quite possibly, but if so, it certainly was not made by kobolds,” Edwin declared firmly.

“Unfortunately, I must agree with the Red Wizard,” Dynaheir said, shaking her head as yet another impossibility of this odd group forced itself upon her.

Harry moved over to the nearest dead body and pulled out a short sword, which he moved to stick into the green goo.

“While I’m happy that you are using an enemy’s weapon and not your own finger for that, I am still uncertain if that is a wise course of action,” Jaheira warned.

“If you have a better idea, I’ll listen, and... My own finger? Seriously?” You say that as if you’ve seen someone do that before.” Harry shook his head incredulously.

“Oh, we have,” Khalid said with his normal stuttering laugh from where he was still gathering flame arrows.

Jaheira chuckled a wry twist to her lips. “You only need to see one guard investigator taste something then go ‘Yes, this is indeed Slab Wurble,srcurlbe srcup’, and fall on his face before you realize that that method of investigation is rather a poor one.”

Harry shook his head at that, then held up the blade so that everyone could see what was happening as he pulled it out of the goop, some of the goop balanced on top of the blade. Then they watched as the goop on the blade began to fade, soaking into the sword's metal as if the sword was a sponge rather than metal. “...I am guessing that is not natural at all.”

“Poisons, oils, and other things of that nature should be smeared on a blade. Yet even then, they do not simply disappear into it, Jaheira answered tartly, though her tartness was that of concern and shock rather than actual annoyance. “So this is not just a chemical we're dealing with. It is also magical.”

“So this is a very unusual compound whatever it’s doing to the metal?” Harry questioned even as he moved towards the wall nearby cavern.

“You are understating things tremendously,” Dynaheir shook her head with a very concerned look on dusky her face. “Mixing magic with chemical reactions is alchemy, and beyond the point needed to make things go boom, it is very, very rare.”

“And how much would something like this cost?”

“Cost to come up with a formula, or cost of buying the ingredients and make it in bulk?” Edwin said professionally. “Those are two very different things. To say nothing of getting them here in such quantity that they can make use of it like this. How much of that liquid is needed to ruin a ton of iron, say? We don’t know, but I would estimate that it is extremely potent.”

Nodding, Harry indicated he understood Edwin's point and was unsurprised to see a small message popping up, explaining how he now had a clue as to who or what might be behind all this.

Your Main Quest, **Vengeance or Justice** has been updated.

Money and power. You knew your enemy had all of these before given the trouble racking the Sword Coast. However, you now know that they have access to something even more precious: knowledge. Creating an entirely new alchemical creation, a fusion of chemistry and magic, is very difficult, even if you can pay for it in the first place.

Whoever is behind this is very well-connected to even discover someone able to create this kind of potion, let alone convince them to do so and in such vast amounts to be used in this scheme. After all, even diluted, the Kobolds and their allies must have access to several tons of it to affect all the iron being dug out of these mines, let alone the iron being shipped elsewhere in the Sword Coast.

All this points to a powerful noble or merchant. Or perhaps a Pirate Lord? Regardless, whoever it is **must** be tied into the upper echelons of society wherever they are hiding, even though everyone else you've been talking to has said those in such positions would not have anything to gain from a war.

While all that was accurate, it wasn't important, and Harry set it aside. He hefted his sword up and began to attack the wall. He swung the short sword once, twice, and then a third time before the blade broke, shattering like glass almost on the fourth strike. Bits of it pattered off his armor, and one bit actually nicked the side of his helmet, but none found exposed skin. "Well, I believe we have discovered what is wrong with the iron."

Side Quest (Large): **Iron Intake Issue** has been updated. You have discovered a clue!

With the Mysterious Liquid in hand, you know exactly what has been done to the iron to make it so brittle and weak, although the how of it eludes you.

You have partially finished this Quest. You know the how. Now you must put a stop to it. Why do you suddenly think this was the easy part?

Harry smiled, then looked over at Imoen, who had woken up at the sound of his sword shattering and was now reading the message in front of her. "Imoen, you found

those glass flasks on the first floor. Let's fill them up with some of this liquid. How many do you have?"

"Five," Imoen yawned, pulling them out and setting them beside her before turning and going back to sleep.

Harry nodded at that, then glanced around his companions. "Edwin, Dynaheir, Khalid and myself. Each of us will take one of those vials filled with this liquid. When you get a chance, you two," he addressed the wizards, "I would like you to experiment with this liquid, just to see if we can figure out what went into it. And Khalid, you can send off a sample to your fellow Harpers. Er, you can get them something like that, right?"

Grumbling about Harry being a little too free with their Harper status even among this company, Jaheira nodded. "We can, although we will not be able to receive any information about it until we reach the Friendly Arm Inn at the latest. We don't have any Harper agents in Nashkel, but we can send the vial south into Amn to the Harpers there with ease."

"Good. And Imoen and I will keep two samples to hand over to the mine boss and Mayor. That should be a major help in making Baldur's Gate and Amn both realize someone else is playing them here."

Jaheira nodded approval at that, and Harry idly noted he had gained another 50 respect with her as well as with Edwin and Dynaheir. "For now, once everyone has eaten whatever they wish, I suggest we all bed down for a nap."

"For how long?" Edwin asked instantly. "I believe that both the Witch and I would benefit from the time to memorize new spells."

"Not that long," Harry said, shaking his head. "We have to deal with respawning too often for that idea. Three hours. That should give us time to get to the next level and start exploring before the next respawn time." *And one of the respawn points on this floor and a few of the patrols are still working.*

Tsking, Edwin nodded and went back to attempting to rest while the others gathered by the barricade, having a small meal and talking quietly as their fellows rested. But after two hours, they were moving on once more, with Imoen in the lead.

OOOOOOO

Imoen led the way towards the entrance to the next floor down of the mind, pausing here and there. They'd done a once over throughout the level, wiping out the patrols that had been respawned when they had destroyed the Heart Stone, but the Grease and Fire Arrow Traps had worked very well, wiping out the second respawn point right over the entrance to the next floor. While Harry and the others had then gone through two of the tunnels they hadn't yet explored, Harry sent Minsc and Imoen over to check on that, then put up her traps once more. By that point, the rest of the group rejoined her, and Harry had made certain Imoen was still good to go before asking her to lead the way down to the third floor.

Thinking of Harry, Imoen had to smile. *Looking at him now, there's no way that anyone would think he was only twelve, if that, back in our old world. Back in the time loop, I could still pick out mannerisms, facial expressions, bits of knowledge he didn't have, moments where he'd look lost, which showed his real age. But ever since we hit the road, he's been stepping up big time, not just as a leader but also as a man. Not just his tactical sense but how he makes friends and then watches out for them.*

All that Imoen was very happy to see, as well as the fact that Harry was no longer as self-effacing as he had been when they first met, which was one of the mannerisms she had least liked. Even after who knew how many years he spent in the tutorial, he still had seemed shy, almost withdrawn despite his abilities, even up to when they reached the Friendly Arm Inn, facilitating wildly between independent and confident and shy and withdrawn. Now, though? Now Harry was growing into his own, and it was great. *If only he could become a bit more confident when it came to girls. Heh, if he could play the game, he'd be deadly.*

Shaking that thought off, Imoen's mind twitched over to the group they had gathered around them. She liked them a lot too. Minsc was a given. That big softy had become a firm friend of theirs almost right off the bat thanks to their willingness to put their lives on the line to protect or rather to retrieve Dynaheir. *And the fact he's actually kind of my type, big, kinda dense and funny, is nice too.*

Dynaheir is still something of an unknown, but she seems to have good instincts, and her magical powers are nothing to sneeze at. I still don't have as good a handle on her personality, but that will come in time. On the other hand, Jaheira and Khalid have grown on me. Khalid's a nice guy, with a few drinking issues, and though she's really prickly, Jaheira's good people too. Reminds me of a hedgehog, to be honest, all prickles on the

outside but soft underneath. Branwen seems to be nice enough too, a female Minsc almost, heh! That gal's thighs are something else!

She frowned then, leaning down to examine something on the floor, before shaking her head and moving on, deeper into the darkness away from the broken torch. *It's getting darker here. Still, I've got that ring of Infravision...*

With that thought, she pulled out the second of two rings Imoen had. The first was the one called 'the Prince's Ring', which was a Protection +1 ring. At first, Imoen had been a bit confused about how something like that, a passive enchantment, would work. But she had seen in several fights since that it did work, making her leather armor and even her skin a bit tougher than they should be. The other was the ring Harry had bought at the Circus. The others, bar the half-elves, all had similar items, which would be a very good thing down here.

As the world turned red around her and Imoen began to see through the dark like it was a somewhat cloudy evening, Imoen (and ooh boy did she love leaving the Nymphadora name behind) allowed her thoughts to shift back to the last member of their party. *The only fly in the ointment is Edwin, but even there, like Harry's mentioned several times, the pros outweigh the cons.*

There was no doubt in Imoen's mind Edwin was a rampaging egotist who only really cared about himself. But even that didn't mean he was irredeemably evil, like the Zhentarim agents they'd met. And who everyone else had to apparently fight without me yesterday, she grumbled to herself, keeping the grumble inside with ease as she looked around, letting her Thief's instincts do their job for a moment. *Still, Edwin's proven his abilities if not his morals and...*

Her thoughts cut off as Boo nuzzled into her ear. "gah, okay, little guy, sorry. Woolgathering isn't good, I get it," Imoen grumbled, pushing the little hamster away from her ear and moving on.

Imoen kept her wits about her now as she and Boo made their way forward, with Minsc following about a yard or so behind them. But despite her renewed concentration on the task at hand, Imoen and Boo could still miss traps occasionally. This happened a moment later as Imoen felt her hand, which had been tapping the wall, meet a wire, and she cursed as it moved under her hand. *Shit! I didn't even see it!*

The next second, a Fear Trap lashed out, impacting her mind. Imoen bit her lip to keep from crying out as she came out of Hide-in-Shadows, turning to bolt down another passageway that had just opened up to one side of her.

But Minsc had been following on her heels and had somehow avoided the trap. He now came out of Hide-in-Shadows, grabbing at Imoen's arm in a gentle grip. "Wait, friend Imoen, the feeling will pass! Do not let the vile whisperings of the cowardly evil drag you down!"

Then arrows began to hit him and Minsc and Imoen from the darkness, as four kobolds hopped forward towards them, short swords extended. Behind them, two more kobolds continued to fire at the Ranger, believing, accurately, that Minsc was much more of a threat than the far shorter human.

Those arrows failed to penetrate Minsc's Chest Plate +1, and they bounced away from Imoen, too, thanks to the Amulet of Protection which had been added to her inventory as well for this caper. But one of them still left a gash on her forearm, adding to her terror, and despite her best attempt to keep silent, Imoen began to break away from Minsc, turning and racing away.

The lack of any other wounds seemed to confuse the kobolds, and they paused in their rush. A second later, three of them went down to a Cleave from Minsc, which cut all three into pieces, sending their entrails and bodies flying throughout the tunnel.

Then he was bellowing and charging towards the archers, taking several more hits from her arrows, which just bounced off his chest plate, although one of them lodged in his shoulder right where the plate mail ended. But kobolds didn't do the proper thing. They didn't run. So when Minsc crashed into them, the battle was over before he even raised his sword.

Down another tunnel, Imoen had barely enough self-awareness left to hear a clicking noise under her foot as she ran, and with a yelp of pure terror, Imoen forced herself into a roll. This landed her at the feet of five more kobolds, who instantly jumped on her. Imoen tried to dodge, but the sword of one of them nicked her side despite the kobolds getting in one another's way more often than not.

The pain of that and the danger she was in helped start to break Imoen out of the fear spell's influence. *Get up, girl, get up and fight! I'm not going to die down here! I'm not going to die in the dark!*

The next second, to her frank astonishment, Boo had leaped off her shoulder and into the face of one of the kobolds who had been about to run her through. The kobold cried out, falling back and reaching up to its face, but Boo's teeth had already found one to l's eyes, biting. Then Boo was leaping down to the kobold's shoulder and skittering into its jerkin, heading down. The kobold began to dance in place, thrashing so much the other kobolds backed away, but they still tried to attack Imoen even as their friend's hands flew from its ravaged face down to between his legs, a low keening wail sounding from the kobold, as it dropped to its knees.

As for Imoen, the Amulet of Protection and her ring's addition to her armor once more helped her. Between them and the leather armor the next sword strike further, although it left a long open slice around across one of her boob's, which caused her to yelp in pain and rising anger now that she had finally thrown off the fear effect.

It also reminded Imoen, for the first time in a while, that she had way more resources to bring to the fight than just her Thief skills. "GAH, remember you're a Witch, you daft bitch!" She growled to herself, then thrust out her hands to either side.

A Cutting spell sliced two of the attacking Kobolds around her in half, and Imoen dodged around another sword strike, battering the sword aside with her own, which appeared in her hand from her Item Space. "Ooh, it's almost like magic," she quipped to the somewhat stunned look on the kobold in front of her, getting more of her mental equilibrium back.

A Stupefy spell hit both her remaining attackers, dipping her health into the midrange, but her sword made quick work of them. After slicing the throat of the one Boo had dealt with, Imoen reached down to pick up Boo, who was meticulously cleaning his whiskers. "Thanks, Boo. I think you just earned yourself a cracker. And if Dynaheir gives you grief, you come to me, and I'll bop her on the nose."

Boo chittered at her, and the two of them turned back the way she had come when Minsc barreled into view, his bow in hand, his sword back in his Item Space to let him run easier. "Friend Imoen, have you regained your senses?" he questioned instantly.

"I have, big guy. Sorry about that," Imoen answered with a scowl before slinging her arm around his waist in a quick hug, feeling a little light-headed and even more tired than before, thanks to the Blood Magic spells she'd used. "And thanks again for Boo. He saved my life here."

“Ah, it is good to know that Boo is still proving himself a most amazing giant miniature space hamster. But I see he has been eating both eyeballs and other...ball-like objects. You know that is not good for your diet, Boo. You will never find a proper mate if you become overweight,” Minsc reproved, wagging a finger in front of Boo while hugging Imoen back with his other arm. “And what is this ‘boom shakalaka’ you speak of, and what does it have to do with Imoen and me?”

Chuckling, Imoen moved away from Minsc, pointing back the way they had come. “Come on, let’s meet back up with the others. And when we get out of this dungeon, I’m going to lay out in the sun for at least an entire day. Most of which I’ll spend wishing more strongly than I’ve ever done since learning about how much trouble a pony would be that I will never have to enter another dungeon again. At least not like this one.”

“Ah, but dungeons or where the vilest evils always hide, ready to pounce on the unwary like a spider in a web!” Minsc boomed before Imoen smacked his shoulder.

“None of that, Minsc! Remember, we’re still in enemy territory here. Now, come on, let’s get back to the others. *And when I get him alone, me and Harry are going to talk about Magical Vows. I think it’s time we stop holding back for fear of secrets getting out. Power is only useful if you can actually, you know, use it, darn it!!*

OOOOOOO

Harry watched as Branwen and Jaheira healed Imoen back to fighting strength. Her explanation of what she had run into, and the wound she had taken to her side and her... pectoral (Harry wasn’t about to call it a boob, Imoen would never let him hear the end of it) had been enough to convince Branwen that she had run into something which it drained her health pretty badly, but already, Harry could see the questions piling up behind Dynaheir’s eyes. The wounds that Imoen had taken did not match up to the amount of health that she had lost.

It was obvious that both magic users were starting to add two and two together. *Branwen might be doing the same, but she doesn’t seem to be as naturally curious as the two magic users are, and she hasn’t been with us as long either. Funny how much those two have in common despite their antipathy.*

For now, Harry set that worry aside to concentrate on the most important thing. “And again, you didn’t see the trap?”

“Not at all. I was going slowly. I was careful, using the Ring of Infravision and listening for Boo’s warnings. There was no sign of a trap, and then, boom, Fear Trap in the face,” Imoen reported, waving her arms like a windmill in annoyance.

“Mighty Boo is also concerned. He says that even his gimlet gaze was unable to spot this trap,” Minsc added.

Scowling, Harry surreptitiously looked at party information on Imoen, looking at how far she had to go before her next level up and the percentage of her Detect/Disarm Traps skill. Unfortunately, she wasn’t close at all.

“Well, crap. We might be forced to use summoned animals and monsters to clear the passages ahead of us,” Harry shook his head. “It won’t be as good since any kobolds in the area will come to see what is going on, and any ambush will react to it too. But it is their traps that make kobolds so...”

“Don’t we have a Grapes of Insight?” Khalid asked in his usual stutter, and everyone turned to him. “It was one of the fruits that the dryad gave us.”

“Will that help?” Harry asked intently.

“It helps with everything that relies on Intelligence and Wisdom, so it should help Imoen to find and disarm traps,” Jaheira answered enthusiastically, smiling over at her husband.

“Good enough,” Harry said with a nod and looked over to Imoen as he pulled out the fruit from his Item Space, uncaring of the looks he got from Branwen, Edwin and Dynaheir. He handed the grapes over to Imoen with orders to use it when they reached the next floor and started exploring.

“Might I also suggest, that we start to use our summoning spells in battle if we need to?” Edwin began, his tone implying that he would be doing that whatever Harry said. “The Witch and I have used many of our direct assault spells that don’t use fire at this point. Destroying the Heart Stone took it out of us both.”

“That makes sense, but try to keep one in reserve both you and Jaheira,” Harry answered. “It’s always good to have an ace in the hole.”

The third floor’s entrance almost instantly branched into three passageways. Imoen had raced down the rightmost passage after tripping a Fear Trap on the central

tunnel, but beyond that, two things bothered Harry. For one thing, the only light he could see was a ways down the central tunnel. None of the torches they had seen previously seemed to be here at all.

But Khalid and Jaheira seemed bothered by something else as they looked around, scowling. Harry noticed and asked them what was wrong, to which Jaheira replied, "There is a very annoying sound of dripping water in the background. It isn't very loud, thankfully, but it is there, like, like an aural itch almost. Most annoying."

"Makes me glad for my merely human hearing then," Harry quipped before looking at Imoen. "Since you ran that way, we might as well start to the right this time."

"Right," Imoen nodded, leading the way as she chomped into the fruit.

The passageway split off, or rather this passage and the next were connected often by side passages. This made areas of standing stone and dirt, which concerned Harry since it meant that any force of Kobolds could try and circle them from the side or behind easily.

The first group of kobolds they ran into was squatting in the center of an intersection that looked like a 'Y' on the map with the bits of at least six long-dead slaves nearby. It was quite large, a force of sixteen kobolds led by a Kobold commando. Unfortunately, the traps that Imoen could see thanks to the Gourd of Insight were right underneath the kobolds. That meant there was no way that they could charge in two hand-to-hand without tripping them, much to Branwen's annoyance.

But Harry was concerned as he looked at his map and listened to Imoen's verbal report, Minsc having stopped the instant he spotted the kobolds. "I... I don't like this. This area isn't open, but there are too many side passages."

"Should we retreat then, mayhaps back to the northernmost passage?" Jaheira asked.

"No, I don't think so. But be ready with one of your Tangling Vines spells just in case. Dynaheir, don't use your Stinking Cloud spell. We need to conserve those for now," Harry requested. "The rest of you, take this group from range. Branwen and I will back you up if need be."

The instant that Harry and the others began to fire at them from range, Harry's words proved prophetic. The other tunnels, two on their left, with one behind their position, and one on the right behind them, came alive with the sounds of kobolds. Fifteen or twenty – it was hard to tell with the red dots overlapping as they were - of the little creatures attacked, forcing Harry to change their formation on the fly.

Most of them seemed to be coming from the right passage, but Harry didn't trust that. "Jaheira, Tangling Vines to the left! Imoen and the rest of you concentrate fire on the right, Branwen, Khalid, make a wall there, Minsc cut down any that get through Jaheira's Tangling Vines! I'll hold here."

As the others leaped to obey, Harry was swarmed by the first group of kobolds, but his sword flickered out this way and that, Cleave letting him slice down two of them before he stabbed a third. But then, thanks to the amount of punishment it had taken since they entered the mines, his blade shattered. "Why does that happen only at the worst time!" he snarled, then pulling out another sword from his Item Space, hacking and slashing. Now was not the time to try to switch to his hammer.

The left flank of the attack stalled out thanks to Jaheira, who nodded in approval at seeing Harry's plan work so well. *The boy was right and proves once more my husband, and I were correct to trust him as much as we do.*

Using her Tangling Vines spell as an area denial weapon had been an excellent idea because it caught the kobolds on that side who had been using Hide-in-Shadows. There proved to be another fourteen on that side, along with the three there previously, split into smaller groups that came at them from both of the tunnels on that side. Thankfully, her spell spread out over enough area to cover both passageways where they intersected this one.

Now, Jaheira's sling went to work, and a stone flashed out, crashing into the head of one kobold, then another.

Meanwhile, Branwen and Khalid had charged forward while Dynaheir and Edwin had begun their spell work. And disdaining Harry's earlier words, Edwin expended one of his Summon Monster 1 spells.

Two green goblins appeared amid the kobolds, activating traps there that the party hadn't yet seen. After that, Harry's aspect of the fight started to peter out, while the concentration of most of their firepower slaughtered the kobolds on their right flank.

“The only thing the kobolds didn’t do well enough in this ambush was they didn’t bring enough archers,” Harry said afterward, wiping at some of the blood on his face. His helmet had been knocked askew by a kobold who had gotten in under his guard and basically thrust his short sword nearly straight up, catching Harry on the side of the neck and chin slicing his helmet’s chin strap as it went.

“Indeed,” Branwen nodded, similarly cleaning off gore from the head of her hammer. “These little creatures have a true mastery of ambush and traps, but when it comes to the actual combat...”

“Do not disparage them,” Jaheira warned. “Never underestimate your opponent like that. Yes, kobolds are individually weak and somewhat cowardly. But in large groups, especially in a situation like this, they can be extremely dangerous. As Harry said, if they had more archers, especially on the left flank, this battle would have gone against us quickly.”

“That’s what I was getting at,” Harry nodded her way, then looked over at Imoen, who was working on one of the final traps which hadn’t been tripped by Edwin’s summoned monsters. Meanwhile, Minsc had gone down the rightmost trail, heading north. “Any luck?”

“No,” Imoen grumbled, “I, I don’t think I’ll be able to disarm this. And... I can’t even tell what it is, darn it. I think it’s another magic-based spell, but not a Fear Trap. I don’t think we need to mess with this one.”

Frowning, Harry nodded. “Well, at least the miners were good enough to leave us a lot of tunnels for us to take instead.”

“Peons, honestly. There is nothing a Thief can do that magic cannot do better.” With that, Edwin gestured with one hand. An Acid Arrow raced out, striking the center of the area that Imoen had said marked the edges of the trap.

There was a click, and a pushing noise, as two blasts of fire leaped out from either side, causing Imoen to gasp and fall back, rolling along the ground back towards the others.

Edwin’s Acid Arrow has triggered the Trap, **Flame Tongue.**

This mechanical trap is a medium-level snare that hides two large gaskets of gas within the walls, which are then ignited by a spell component you cannot quite understand, thanks to not having enough specific knowledge about alchemical properties and magic.

If hit by this spell, a person will be Immolated. This is a level above the status ailment: Burned and will result in -80 health instantly, with -10 health every second after.

Imoen stared at the flame as it continued to gout out from the sides of the passage, feeling a little light-headed. Judging from the looks the others had, they too were feeling it, and Harry instantly ordered them all to retreat a ways back to the first of the left tunnels, dragging Khalid away as he seemed about to pass out on the spot.

Once there, they began to breathe more easily, and Imoen spoke up, pointing back towards the trap, which she could barely see from here. “Okay, does everyone else agree with me that that trap is way beyond any other trap we’ve seen so far?”

“I fully agree with that,” Jaheira growled. But she wasn’t looking at the trap. Instead, she was looking beyond it. “Khalid, does that not look like a helmet of somewhat better repair than most kobold equipment?”

Khalid stared as well, then nodded, his stutter coming out even more than normal as he and Jaheira both seemed to be still struggling to breathe a bit. “It is. I believe we have found the remains of the last group of adventurers.”

“Honestly, I’m more surprised that they got this far than anything else,” Branwen said bluntly. “We have been traveling calmly and carefully, which most Adventurers that I have met would deem cowardly.”

“Bah, you just need to meet better Adventurers then. Of course, the best Adventurers would not be caught dead grubbing down in this hole, nor would we if I had my druthers,” Edwin grumbled.

“Uh, guys, that trap’s not deactivating. That’s so not good.” The flames had cut off, but Imoen, still using her Detect traps spell, could tell the trap was still there. This was the first trap they had run into that reset after use, and as Imoen had mentioned, this wasn’t a good sign.

Minsc came back down the same passage he had left by, shaking his head. “Mighty Minsc saw the flash of fire and light from ahead of him and heard Harry’s order to

retreat. That passage leads to the other side of the 'Y' shaped intersection. There is another curving around the underside of the 'Y', but I did not finish exploring down it. At the top of the 'Y' where it intersects the path Minsc was just on, there is a little alcove, but nothing else."

"Okay, Imoen, trap all of these tunnels. Minsc was able to go around this trap. He'll show you the way to the other side of that intersection. It's got to be a respawn point with numbers like that. We'll follow right behind you from now on. We won't have as much time to plan out anything, but it should still let you spring most of the traps and keep us close in case you run into trouble, which Jaheira and Khalid should be able to hear quickly."

"Fine, but Harry, you and I need to talk soon. We need to start thinking about... certain things," Imoen said, giving Harry a pointed look and wiggling her fingers toward herself, Harry and then mouthing the word 'magic'. Harry understood but wanted to put off talk on that score for now. It was something they had to approach carefully and better, in a place that was safe or at least defensible.

With Imoen in the lead like this, the next two fights were close and furious. As Harry had feared, the kobolds were able to surround them both times, shifting back and away from the frontline combatants and trying to come at the center of their group. After the second battle, Harry decided to mix up their formation. He had Minsc and Branwen switch places with Branwen stationed in the center with the mages and Jaheira, while Khalid held the backline by himself, and Minsc and Harry led the way.

As they moved, the Adventurers noticed numerous small watery pools scattered around without any seeming rhyme or reason. These were the source of the dripping noises which bothered the half-elf couple so much.

When Harry asked the others, only Branwen could tell them why this was. "I've seen much the same thing before. When a mine gets too close to a large body of water, sometimes the water will seep in. Or if the mines are below the waterline, you'll deal with water coming up out of the ground."

However, these pools hid a deadly danger.

The party had just found another Heart Stone set in the easternmost area of the map. This was off the central tunnel, which ran straight through the floor to the entrance

to the next, and was not a cavern. Instead, it was another intersection. One passage went east from the main one, intersecting another that ran north to south on a bit of an angle.

And worse, the enemy protecting this Heart Stone were more numerous and simply better than the forces they had faced before, although this wasn't clear at first because of their locations down the two side passages. On top of fifteen regular kobolds and kobold archers, there were eight kobold commandos and three shamans along with several traps that Imoen couldn't reach among them. The traps were also wide enough to cover the whole tunnel, forcing Imoen back.

With Imoen unable to get close enough to see either side of the intersection, the shamans came as a nasty surprise to the party as they charged into battle. One of them cast *Tangling Vines*, catching Harry, Minsc, Branwen and Dynaheir, while the others were able to get away. Khalid and Jaheira danced among the vines, their greater dexterity once more proving its worth.

"Edwin, Dynaheir, Jaheira, deal with the shamans! Imoen, Khalid, try to snipe at those commandos! Don't worry about the front line for now," Harry ordered as he blocked the sword flow from one of the kobolds, then rammed his shield poured into another, lifting the little creature up. To Harry's surprise, it scabbled at the shield, grabbing the top of it with one hand and attempting to thrust its short sword over the top towards Harry. Harry blocked it with his own sword, which took his sword arm out of position, an awkward move that cost him as the vines around him twisted, throwing off his balance.

The next second, a kobold stabbed him in the side with his short sword, while another tried to hack at his leg. "GAH."

Seeing this, Jaheira instantly stopped her attempt to shoot at the shamans, instead of moving to cast a medium *Healing Spell* on Harry, followed by another one expended on Minsc, who growled in anger as a blow hit his sword hand, cutting it to the bone along the back of the hand and making him drop his blade before Jaheira's spell healed the wound. Even so, his fist smashed that kobold's face into mush, and he roared, grabbing up his sword once more.

The next second, Harry's sword was knocked out of his hand, and another kobold was scrambling, moving forward on all fours to cut at his legs. Having no time, Harry

quickly pulled out another longsword from his inventory, stabbing down at that kobold while two more shamans began another spell.

At the same time, the Heart Stone spawned six more kobold warriors, who instantly hopped towards the party. But they were not a danger yet. The Shamans were. A series of buzzing noises caught Harry's attention, and a second later, he saw a new notification.

Your enemy has cast **Stinging Swarm**.

This spell calls into being a large swarm of buzzing, stinging, biting insects. The swarm will strike the caster's target, then spread to anyone else nearby who is in the same party.

Any individual hit with this attack will have to make a save against Fear. Any mages or wizards hit by the spell will be unable to concentrate on casting their own spells.

The swarm struck Edwin and Dynaheir, who began to fall back, slapping at their skin and nearly screaming in panic, but they didn't fall prey to Fear, simply retreating from the fight. Minsc was struck too, and due to his lower level of Willpower, the big Ranger fell into a panic, which instantly pushed him into his Berserker rage. But at the moment, that didn't matter as he, like Harry and Dynaheir, were caught, unable to move thanks to the Tangling Vines.

However, stinging bugs couldn't bother Jaheira. As a druid, she could not be harmed by spells that used animals or bugs in such a manner. The bugs didn't even perceive her as a target.

"Natures call!" Jaheira shouted, and a bolt of lightning threw out from her staff, slamming into one of the shamans, and the Tangling Vines spell holding Harry and Minsc in place faded.

Instantly, Harry grabbed Minsc by the shoulder, ducking underneath a blow from the other man's fist, shouting out, "The enemy! The enemy is there, Minsc! Charge! For your Witch, for butt-kicking!"

At the same time, Boo, who had rejoined Minsc for the battle, bit Minsc's other ear. Harry then pulled the other man along, dodging his wild sword swings until the other man got his feet under him. The two of them charged, battering aside the kobolds in their

way, not even bothering to kill them in an attempt to close with the shamans and the kobold commandos. Their arrows now began to streak into the group.

Behind them, Jaheira cried out, an arrow having found her side, the flame of the enchantment flicking out and setting her side on fire. Instantly Branwen turned from following the two men into the battle, kneeling beside the other woman and beginning a healing spell.

Instead, Khalid was there, launching himself forward in their wake, anger on what Harry could see of his face. "GRaah!!!" He was firing his arrows as fast as he could, barely even having time to aim, but each arrow found a commando.

And then, unfortunately, something new was added to the fight. From either side of the passageway the Adventurers had attacked from, new red dots appeared. Harry took a single glance in that direction, thinking it was just more kobolds coming out of Hide-in-Shadows. Instead, the things coming out of the water were not kobolds but something entirely new to Harry's experience, and a new bestiary page opened in front of him as he glanced at them.

Gray Oozes

A type of Slime, these Oozes can be found wherever it is dark, dank and cool. Like all such creatures, oozes eat through dissolving anyone caught within their Slime, causing tremendous pain to the victim as they meet a slimy death. They move somewhat more quickly than most of their brethren and are always hungry for prey.

Strengths: They are completely immune to normal weapons, Cold and Nature magic. Crushing or blunt damage is also extremely weak against them. When in water, Grey Oozes possess a rudimentary camouflage ability, the better to surprise their victims. They are not intelligent enough to feel fear, although they can feel pain.

Weaknesses: Grey Oozes are not immune to fire damage and are weak to magically imbued cutting blades. Light-based spells may also damage them.

Attitude towards Adventurers: Oozes do not possess enough intelligence or cunning to tell Adventurers from anything else that moves and is red-blooded. Alas, this just means they will eat an Adventurer just as easily as they would an animal.

Harry was then within reach of a shaman, who frantically scrambled for another spell, but Harry cut at his arm, lopping it off. His backstroke took the kobold in the throat, and then he was turning, staring at the new pair of enemies as they moved to attack the somewhat panicky magic users and Jaheira.

The magic users instantly retreated out of sight, while Branwen canceled her healing spell, shouting out, "By Tempus, you will not have them!" She began to hammer at the nearest Slime with her hammer.

This did nothing, and Harry roared out instructions, out of position to do anything, trying to slice his way back the way he had come through still more kobolds the Heart Stone had just summoned. Luckily any kobolds were just as little danger in close combat as they always were. "Branwen, they're immune to normal damage! It's Magic or nothing, and not Nature or Cold Magic either."

Meanwhile, Minsc was still hacking and slashing at the enemies in front of him, his longsword slicing kobolds in half. Khalid had abandoned his bow and closed with the commandos. Imoen had dealt with the last of the shaman so far and was now retreating out of sight down the passage heading north. Behind her a force of kobolds, including a few commandos and a shaman raced after her, abandoning the main fight.

This left the Heart Stone still spawning enemies, the wizards gone, Jaheira down, and Branwen facing the Gray Oozes.

The only one in a position to do anything about the Heart Stone was Harry, and with a glance Branwen's way, he moved in that direction.

"Then Tempus has given me a weapon that can smite these enemies still!" Branwen shouted as Harry did so, and she then called upon her god's name once more, shouting out, "Give me strength that I might smite this foe!"

With that, Branwen dropped her war hammer, and the same scintillating magical hammer appeared as she had used in the ambush back on the second floor. With it, Branwen wailed on the Slime in front of her, which recoiled in pain. The other two paused, before moving in her direction instead of attacking the vulnerable Jaheira.

That was good enough for Harry, and he reached the Heart Stone at that point. Placing his hand on it, he growled out, "Bombarda, watching as the Durability dropped from sixty to ten. Then he was dancing around it, stabbing his way through two more

summoned kobolds. This let him race back to Branwen and the Gray Oozes, who had begun to attack her from both sides, and had even caught one of her feet by the time he had damaged the Heart Stone.

Aiming for that one, Harry pulled out his magical longsword, and activated the special attack he had gotten from Minsc. "CLEAVE!"

The attack chopped into the Slime, hacking off a portion of its central mass. The Slime didn't like that. It reared up, trying to swallow sword and Harry both. Simultaneously the rest of its mass flattened out, shifting along the ground towards him, while the rest rose to grapple with his sword, but Harry was too quick and backed away.

At that point, the two wizards finally returned, the Stinging Swarm spell having run its course. Seeing them, Harry shouted, "I damaged the Heart Stone, but had to fall back to help Branwen. Finish it off."

The two wizards did so with alacrity, Dynaheir looking shamefaced and Edwin extremely angry. Magic Missiles flew, and soon, the Heart Stone exploded, the message of its destruction appeared but thankfully was small and out of the way of Harry's sight for now. A shard of the stone caught Minsc in the back, but didn't do much damage to him, although it did quite a bit to the Kobolds around it.

Meanwhile, Harry stabbed again and again at the Gray Ooze, doing some damage but not enough to finish it off, until the cooldown time on his Cleave ability ended. This time the attack cleaved the slime in two, and it seemed to collapse. Half of it shifted into the water, running down back into the pool, while the rest tried to reform. But Harry's wasn't having any of that. He started stabbing once more, and soon he saw the message:

You have killed a Gray Ooze. +275 experience.

By the time he was done with his opponent, Branwen had finished her own off and was kneeling next to Jaheira, looking up at Harry. "I need you to remove the arrow while I am finishing the spell. I'd also like another pair of hands to help me staunch the blood flow of blood to her thigh." Jaheira had taken another arrow to her thigh after Harry had been forced to concentrate on slaying shamans.

Instantly Khalid was there, kneeling down next to her, as Harry took up position on the other side. Around them, the battle continued but turned against the remaining kobolds, who had mostly been on the southern flank of the battle. Edwin used a Magic

Missile spell while Dynaheir using her last Stinking Cloud spell. With the Shamans gone and no more spawning, the battle didn't need him right now, letting Harry concentrate on helping Jaheira. "Tell us what you need to do."

Two healing spells later, Jaheira was well enough to start healing herself, using her last medium healing spell to do it and then reaching out to and laying a hand on his shoulder while nodding at Harry and her husband. "My thanks," she said to them both, and Harry noted that he had won 500 more respect and trust points, although Harry had to bite his tongue not to comment on the messages postscript.

I guess saving her life is enough for even Jaheira to acknowledge.

All right, the snarky tone needs to stop. Jaheira's mellowing, I can feel it. Harry thought to himself with a chuckle, moving over to check on Edwin and Dynaheir.

Edwin huffed and waved them off, while Dynaheir smiled wanly and thanked him for the concern. Both were covered in insect bites, which seemed to cause Edwin to shake slightly from the urge to scratch, but the spell didn't actually damage. In contrast, Imoen had raced through the crowd of kobolds, leading some of them down one of the side passages. In other words, out of sight of the rest of the party.

She was scorched, and her leather jerkin looked as if it had been set on fire in one area. Beyond that, the fact her health was in the red and that she moved as if she was both exhausted and drunk told Harry about what she had been up to.

Racing over, Harry reached her, nearly lifting Imoen up as he dragged her toward Branwen and Jaheira. "What happened?"

"Ugh, when I was planning to use our Blood Magic, I ran into another fire-based trap. Dodged the trap, mostly, but the fire caused so much smoke and used up so much air I needed to use a Bubblehead Charm to protect myself from it, and then had to quickly use a Stupefy to knock the kobolds out. I only had hoped to use one spell, darn it. My health was already low," Imoen whispered, leaning against Harry's side.

Harry scowled, shaking his head. "From now on, you are not putting any points into anything but Constitution and Durability. Hopefully, the two of them will help to give you some more health points."

“And tonight, Harry, we are going to be talking about our Blood Magic, understood? I realize we don’t want our secrets to get out, but we need to start using our magic more.” She growled. “In particular, if we run into any more moments like I just did, you need to know the Bubblehead Charm.”

Sighing, Harry nodded then, as Jaheira finished using one of her last healing spells on Imoen, gestured to the others to gather around, including Minsc, who was looking slightly shamefaced at the moment thanks to having lost himself to his Berserker nature once more. “All right. I think we’ve come to decision time here. You four, how many spells do you have left?”

“I have my turn undead Aura-based spells, three Minor Healing Spells, and I have one more Lay On Hands for emergencies,” Branwen began only to be interrupted.

“Then why are you not using it on us, woman?” Edwin growled, twitching this way and that to stop himself from scratching. “It is not becoming of one such as I to be brought to such a state by such as stinging bugs!”

“Really giving her a reason to help, Edwin,” Harry muttered, shaking his head.

But Branwen had ignored the wizard. Instead, he looked over at Dynaheir, indicating she should go next. “One Stinking Cloud, several Burning Hands, and one remaining Magic Missile spell, along with three flame arrow spells.”

Edwin snorted. “I am much the same, although I have one Acid Arrow spell left and three Magic Missile spells along with Three Fireballs.”

“Right... Jaheira?”

“I have two Summoning Animals spells, one Nature’s Call left, and the charges on my staff,” Jaheira said crisply, shaking her head, even as she used one of the spells woven into her staff to heal Minsc a bit. The Minor Healing Spell seemed to work since Minsc’s hand fell from his side, where he had been holding a broken rib. “That includes a single healing spell, now.”

“Alright.” Harry frowned, looking around as he pulled out a bag of jerky and handed it around. When everyone, even Dynaheir, who normally disdained the trail rations, Harry went on. “This isn’t a decision I am willing to make for us on my own. We

effectively have two more minor healing spells and no more Resist Fear spells. And we are all a little battered around the edges.”

Even with healing spells, the only one near full health was Khalid. The others were battered down to barely half in most cases, and even with Jaheira expanding a healing spell on her, Imoen had pushed her use of Blood Magic spells in this last fight.

“But we just smashed another Heart Stone, and Imoen’s traps have done their normal good job of cleaning up the respawn point that was tied to it. That means there’s only one Heart Stone left on this level and another on the next. So, should we fall back and take a full night’s rest somewhere? The place where we found the first Heart Stone looked defensible, or maybe up one of these tunnels here. ”

He waited for a beat, then went on. “But we would probably have to fight our way through at least one respawn point, and the fact that our destruction of this one will have reset all the ones it was connected to. I would prefer to find the last Heart Stone and find someplace else. But I’m not going to make that decision without your input.”

“I think that depends on how many more of those Grey Oozes we’ll run into,” Khalid began before Harry shook his head.

“No, it doesn’t. The Oozes were not immune to magical damage, which means Flame Arrows like those from the kobold commando corpses would be good against them. The problem isn’t numbers. It’s that they could be hiding in any body of water, and we wouldn’t see them until they popped out. I know I didn’t see them before they attacked. And we’ve seen around nine or ten small puddles and other water bits.”

The debate began at that point, with Branwen, Minsc and Jaheira wanting to go forward. Khalid wanted to rest, as did the two magic users, obviously. Imoen wanted to go on, but even after Jaheira used one of her staff’s final Healing Spells, she was still looking too shaky for Harry to give that much credence.

Eventually, it was agreed to fall back and find a place to rest. Looking at the map at that point, Harry found a place that looked inviting. “Okay, so here’s what we’re going to do. We can pull back to near that flame tongue trap, then go around it. Most of the kobolds there have already been dealt with, and the opposite side looks safe. A small alcove there, with two passages that Imoen’s already trapped, and another that looks to be a dead end.”

With Harry and Branwen again in the lead and the two scouts tucked in with the rest of the group, they began to move back the way they had come. As they marched, Imoen moved up behind Harry, whispering, “And what about our Blood Magic spells, huh?”

“You don’t get to use them anymore,” Harry growled, turning and poking her in the stomach before modifying his tone. “And I will start to use them if I have to. Meanwhile, start thinking about how those Magical Oaths you mentioned back at the inn will work. We’ll talk to them tomorrow morning after a good night’s sleep.”

Realizing that they didn’t know what the impact of creating a Magical Oath would be, Imoen agreed to that. If they waited for the morning, Branwen and Jaheira would be available to heal them.

Fortunately, the next two fights were easy enough. The respawned patrols were no match for the Adventurers even now, with Imoen and Edwin beginning to suffer from the exhaustion status ailment. This impacted their physical strength and dexterity, dropping those stats to half what they were normally.

Soon enough, the band of Adventurers were in the small alcove that Minsc had first discovered. Once there, Minsc, Khalid and Branwen began to put up small barricades to either side along the nearest passages there. Imoen also put down still more traps leading to the center of the ‘Y’ where the Flame Tongue Snare was. Dynaheir and Edwin rested on different sides of the alcove, with Jaheira acting as a mobile and vociferous peacekeeping force. And Harry cooked.

Soon enough, the smells of the food wafted around the area, and Edwin shook his head again. “Ah, me, another Harry-made meal. If this Paladin nonsense of yours doesn’t go the way you wish, you could make a much better life for yourself in the cooking industry. Even in Thay, you would make a pleasant enough living.”

Harry snorted as he set out steamed mushrooms. Minsc had been picking them up as they went along, and he had said they were edible. Harry now tried one and nodded, finding it good. “I’ll take the compliment in exactly the way it was meant, Edwin, so thank you and fuck you at the same time.”

That caused Edwin to chuckle, and Harry looked over to Jaheira, noting she was reworking some of the beads in her hair, leaning against her bedroll and seeming at her ease, humming a low tune to herself. He looked the other way and saw Branwen nearly

finished making two small walls in the center of the southern-most passage. “Branwen, Jaheira, any requests for the main course? Given how often you and Branwen’s healing spells kept us going, I think giving you the choice is the least I can do.”

“Steak!” Bellowed Branwen from nearby. “Although I confess to some wonder that a young Adventurer has such cooking skill to impress the haughty Thayan.”

While Edwin retorted to that, Jaheira rolled her eyes, addressing Harry’s original question. “I would prefer chicken or pasta, but I doubt we have any of that, so steak will have to do.”

Nodding, Harry pulled a haunch of venison he had bought in town out of his Item Space, laying it on a few plates he had already set out. Then he began to get to work, creating chunk-sized steak bites with a hearty sauce and steamed mushrooms. There was even bread to go with it. “We do have some pasta, but steak and pasta is not a connection I’ve attempted before,” Harry admitted to Jaheira.

After her first bite of the steak, which Harry had somehow known to leave medium rare for her, Jaheira had to concede that this was more than fine. Branwen’s over-the-top exclamations of the same thing nearly made them all flinch, staring out into the dark beyond the cooking fire for a moment. When it became clear none of the kobolds were close enough to react, they all turned back to their meal.

Talk during the meal turned to the dungeon and what they might yet find as they moved forward. This went on for some time, then turned to the spells the two Magic users had. Branwen and Jaheira’s spellbooks were still good to go, but going forward, Harry hoped to convince the two wizards to change some of their fire spells. But both balked at the idea. Fire spells were good to cause damage and intimidate enemies like kobolds, and if they got to a point where they could use them, both wanted access to those spells.

“Enough,” Harry sighed, admitting defeat. “Do it your own way, it’s been good enough so far. But now, everyone needs to get some sleep. We’ve still got a Dungeon Boss and two Heart Stones to destroy. Minsc and I will switch off watch times tonight to give you all as much benefit as possible.”

“Indeed, leave it to us! No evil will pass while Minsc and Boo are here to espy it out of the vile darkness!” Minsc exclaimed.

Thanks to the amount of death they had already visited upon the kobolds on this level and the fact none who had seen them had survived, the night passed uneventfully, though once more, Harry received a notification that the group hadn't gotten as much out of sleeping as they should have. That was okay though, since the magic users had gotten enough to renew their memorized spells.

The next morning, while Harry prepared a quick breakfast, Imoen decided to bring up their various party tricks once more. "Hey Harry, if we want to talk about a certain blood-business, I think now's the time."

Frowning, Harry spent a minute rubbing at his lightning bolt scar while the side conversations all fell silent, and then he nodded slowly. "I agree." He then looked directly at Edwin, who cocked an eyebrow at him, a smirk on his face as if he knew what was coming. *Which the ass probably does*, Harry reflected. *Just not all of it.*

Then he flicked his gaze to Dynaheir, who also was watching him with interest. *I don't know what her interest in me is, but I think above and beyond any Vow we make her take, we can put faith in that interest.*

His gaze went to Branwen. But she didn't seem aware of anything but was simply waiting for his orders, resting her hands on her hammer, the head of it placed on the ground.

"Imoen and I have secrets. Secrets which we have kept that would have made our battles up to this point easier," Harry began bluntly. "We are extremely concerned about our enemies, whoever they are, learning of these secrets, and even more in a way we are worried about the attention they might garner us from other quarters. But before we share this information, we will have your oaths."

Edwin guffawed, shaking his head with a laugh. "Did you honestly believe that any Oath you make me take will be binding? I thought you knew my personality well enough by now. I care not for anyone as much as myself. You are a droll fellow Harry, and oddly enough, there have been times when I have almost enjoyed your company. Still, if it comes to a choice between selling your secrets for my own life, I will do so in an instant, and that is not to say I would not make use of them anyway."

Minsc growled, hefting up his sword. And Dynaheir turned to Edwin with a sneer as Minsc raised his claymore. "Then perhaps, we should cut our losses here and now."

“Ah, a pun, or a play on words. The recourse of the truly sick minds among you,” Edwin drawled. “But I have gotten to know Harry’s personality over the time we have traveled together, and he is a true paladin, god or no. Perhaps you, Witch, would have the pragmatic wherewithal to order my execution. Harry would not.”

“No, but if you do not give me your Oath, then you will not have your curiosity assuaged. Of all three of you, you’ve been with us the longest. You know there’s something unusual about Imoen and me. Only by taking the Oath will you find out what that is.” For a given value, anyway. The biggest secret, where Harry and Imoen came from, would remain solely their own.

“That is true,” Edwin conceded with a wry snort. “But, again, I believe that my self-preservation to be more important.”

“And you are making the mistake that I am simply going to ask you to swear on some God or other, rather than on your own magic,” Harry went on with a smirk of his own before he turned to Imoen and said. “You’re the one that figured this out.”

Edwin glanced at Imoen, who smirked impishly. “In Candlekeep, I found a series of old tomes that mentioned magical vows. That’s what we’re going to do now. Essentially, you will vow to keep our secrets and vice versa in pain of your own Magic turning on you. Done right, your own Magic will keep you from accidentally revealing it, and if you attempt to reveal our secrets purposefully, your Magic will turn on you, burning you from the inside out before you can do so.”

“But you will inform us of your secrets afterward?” Dynaheir asked, frowning.

“Yes,” Harry nodded heavily. “And, we will more openly use those secrets in front of you going forward.”

“What if one does not use Magic? I am a priest. My powers come from Tempus,” Branwen questioned.

“In your case, I’m presuming that you can promise on your God’s name and have it bind you.” Harry cocked one eyebrow at her. “Besides, I don’t think you’re the type to give your word and not mean to keep it.”

“True, on both counts!” Branwen laughed quietly for her but still carrying a bit, again they all tensed before breathing sighs of relief as it didn’t seem to have carried. “It

is not often done outside of the Oath's we take when we join the priesthood. But yes, I can vow on Tempus' name. However, the results will not be nearly as drastic as you say this magical Oath would be for Edwin and Dynaheir. Tempus will strike me down if I try to break it, but I am uncertain if it would stop the breaking in the first place, and I do not think it will stop me from doing so accidentally."

Harry frowned at that, thinking hard and cursing. "We should've thought of that. Still, even mentioning all this means we've come too far to back off now." He looked over to Dynaheir. "Do you want to go first?"

The Rashemani Witch nodded firmly, holding out her hand. "Cast your spell Imoen, and I will keep your secrets. I would do so even without the vow, but better safe than sorry."

You have gained +200 Respect, plus 100 Trust with Dynaheir. While she is still wary of your association with the Red Wizard, your forthright manner, as well as your caution, has won Dynaheir's trust. While it might be for her own reasons, she seems to approve of your wish to keep your Blood Magic and other abilities as much a secret as possible.

Perhaps eventually, she might even tell you why that is.

Minsc's relieved exhale sounded loudly as Harry finished reading that message. "Your Witch is as honest as I would've expected, Minsc," he laughed, nudging the larger man in the chest. "I'm glad we're taking this step so quickly."

Minsc chuckled too, as Boo, once more on his shoulder, chattered happily. "Yes! For my journey, for my Witch's Vision Quest and for the good of all, Harry and Minsc and Imoen and Dynaheir, together will be doing much butt-kicking for goodness!"

Rolling her eyes, Dynaheir remained holding out her hand to Imoen. "Yes, yes, Minsc, please be quiet now and let Imoen work."

"We'll go over the wording of the oath first," Imoen cautioned, although that didn't stop her from reaching out, clasping the other woman's arm firmly in thanks.

That didn't take as long as she had feared, though, and within minutes, Harry moved forward at that point, touching both of their shoulders.

The two of them had talked quietly about how to do this without a wand and had decided that the words and intent behind them would hopefully be enough to draw out

their Blood Magic, which would cause a reaction in the other mage's Magic. If it did, Imoen reflected that it could be big. If the Magic they were all using was the same, it would imply that she could at the very least use magical scrolls, if not outright, use the magic of this universe without the need to dual-class.

"Ergo Fides," Imoen whispered, bringing to mind the memory of seeing her mother perform a magical vow as part of some court thing she hadn't understood at the time. And as everyone watched in shock, tendrils of Magic, swirls of white light, appeared around and Imoen and Dynaheir's arms where they were joined, binding the two together.

"I, Dynaheir, do so swear to keep the secrets of Imoen and Harry of Candlekeep. To never willingly or unwillingly share their secrets and will never speak of them except with those who also know those secrets," Dynaheir said firmly. "So I swear on my magic, so mote it be."

Edwin's eyes narrowed as he watched, scratching at his beard thoughtfully, and he then looked over at Harry, as her pulse "I, Imoen, do witness this oath." Finally, it was done, and Imoen gasped, swaying backward. As she did, Harry saw a message appear in front of him, this one in gold and orange, marking its importance.

Imoen has taken part in a Blood Ritual, a magically infused Oath!!

In this world, giving your word and swearing oaths of this nature are important! Oaths are rarely given, and the Gods of Light take them very seriously.

In doing this Ritual, Imoen has taken it to an entirely different level, binding the Magic of the Rashemani Witch called Dynaheir to this secret. You and Imoen better know what you're doing, or else the consequences for Dynaheir and for Imoen might be very grim.

As it is, the cost to Imoen has already been grim. As the binder, Imoen has lost half of her available health points.

As Harry was reading this, Imoen had nearly collapsed to her knees, shaking her head woozily. Jaheira instantly moved to her side and began a healing spell. Two Minor Healing Spells later, Imoen was back to fighting fit but still looked shaken. "I am not doing that again!"

“You’re right. I’ll do it,” Harry replied instantly. “I have a larger health pool than you and can take that hit when we bind Edwin.”

“Ah, and now we come to it,” Edwin drawled. “Binding. Binding me to your secrets, with an entirely new magical spell, one I’ve never even heard of with no recompense to me beyond having my curiosity assuaged? I think not.”

“Even if you might be able to figure out how to use our secrets yourself?” Harry asked archly, and Edwin paused, losing some of his steam.

“You haven’t told me enough of your secrets to make me believe that is even possible,” Edwin answered, but it was a thin thing, and Harry simply shook his head. Edwin had seen enough to know that perhaps he could indeed learn something from Harry and Imoen’s abilities.

“And this binding is not an onerous one. It is simply binding you to keep something secret. And someone like you is all too used to keeping secrets, aren’t you? And you owe me.” Edwin’s eyes narrowed, and Harry smirked at him. “I helped you find out what you wanted from Dynaheir where you wouldn’t have been able to with our help. And when you died to get to her, I paid for your resurrection.”

Scowling, Edwin had to concede those points. He looked over at Dynaheir, one eyebrow raised. “Well, woman, what is the effect on your end?”

“I...” Dynaheir shook her head to clear it. While not in pain as Imoen had been, she had been mentally shaken by the Oath too. “I don’t know. I have not yet been informed of their secrets, nor have I attempted to tell anyone else. I felt something shift within me I think, like a wall or room within my mind bound by bands of power as the vow took hold. But other than that, I am uncertain.”

Edwin scoffed, and yet, his eyes were still lighting up with extreme interest. Oh yes, knowledge was certainly power, and perforce, having access to knowledge of what these to do, and perhaps replicating it as this seemed to indicate was possible? Oh yes, that was indeed worth it, as Harry had said. Whether or not he would remain with the group after this adventure was another question. *But I will willingly allow myself to be part of this experiment for that.* “Very well. Let us get this Oath over with, and then let us hear this great secret.”

The second magical vow went as well as the first had, with Edwin quickly finding the same small 'room' in his mind, which had somehow been installed into Dynaheir's mind.

Since she didn't use Magic, Branwen requested that she wait until she was told the specific secrets. This went about as well as could be expected.

While Edwin stroked his goatee thoughtfully, Branwen leaped to her feet, staring at Harry and Imoen even pulling back from where she had been healing Harry as he began to talk about the reasons behind their odd abilities. "You are children of Bhaal!? How... how in the name of Tempus... that is..."

"Sired by Bhaal, not children of the fucker," Harry answered tartly while noting Dynaheir didn't seem all that surprised. "Bhaal might be my sire, but he is **NOT** my father. The same goes for Imoen."

That put Branwen on the backfoot, and she slowly nodded. "I, I understand. It was just surprising. And I have to admit to some interest as to how it will impact you're becoming a true Paladin."

"I'm trying not to think about it frankly. Not until I find a god I wish to follow. Helm did not seem right for me." Harry's tone was dust-dry, and Branwen laughed.

"Hahaha, I can see why that might be. Helm is a rather humorless, black and white sort of deity," she chortled. "Such has its place, but I cannot see you worshipping such. Still, what does this mean in terms of your riddles?"

"Indeed, while your heritage is fascinating, it is not enough for all this mystery. The Sons and Daughters of Bhaal are known to have powers, it is true. But you have long implied that both of you have much the same powers. Beyond a basic physical power-up, that would be beyond what is currently known of the more special powers those whose blood runs with Bhaal's power possesses," Edwin murmured, his eyes narrowed. *And it is not something I could learn or take advantage of over much blast it!*

Harry had let Jaheira and Branwen both use their last healing spells on him, so he was around 2/3rds of his total health. Now with a shrug, he gestured to one side and the next second, Imoen's favorite spell, Lacero, appeared in his hand. "Well, for a start, how about coming up with our own school of magic?"

Edwin and Dynaheir both leaned forward in interest, and Harry turned over the discussion on that score to Imoen. That discussion went on for some time before blossoming out into including the Advance Adventurer System Harry had access to. The idea of Harry being able to allocate stat points and see them in the first place among his party members was incredible, to say nothing of the Map, Item Space and other things, which explained away a lot of the oddities the trio who hadn't known about it before had noticed.

Here, the conversation got side-tracked for a moment. "Indeed, we party members can at times see similar notifications, although not as much as our leader can. But more importantly, we all saw one when I offered Boo to aid Imoen! Harry's powers, it recognized Boo's might!"

"...What?" Dynaheir asked, staring at her guardian blankly. "That's..."

"It's true!" Imoen interjected, while Khalid and Harry just nodded. "We all saw the system acknowledge Boo as a giant miniature space hamster, and he has **really** been helping me with the traps. There's no way we would have gotten past so many without issue without Boo helping me."

"But, but that, that is..." For once, Dynaheir looked lost for words while Jaheira simply rubbed at her face, muttering about the randomness that is life.

"Actually, the way he helps Minsc is even better. He gives Minsc fifteen points to Willpower, and near-immunity to mind magics," Harry added, smirking somewhat at the shock this revelation had evoked.

"Interesting. I wonder what sort of knowledge could be gleaned from a in-depth examination of that little creature," Edwin mused. He stopped speaking as Harry and the others, bar a still shocked Dynaheir stared at him. "It was a joke! Mostly. But at any rate, you hadn't told us yet what we need to do to partake of this aspect of your powers, since it is obvious we have not yet done so."

There was more than a bit of consternation on the need to acknowledge Harry as a friend before joining his official party, and what that meant. Edwin was furious at it, but also the quickest to get over the idea of someone being able to specifically see the amount of trust and respect Edwin had for them when he learned how high a bar both were before he would truly 'befriend' Harry. Branwen and Dynaheir were harder to convince, but Jaheira helped there, pointing out that the points were awarded or taken

away by Harry's actions and he had never acted in a way so as to appeal to or otherwise manipulate anyone.

When Branwen admitted this, Harry decided it was time for her to give her own Oath. "I trust now that you know that you too will give your word to keep Harry and Imoen's secrets, Branwen? You need only look at the expression of greed still present on Edwin's face to realize that rumors of their power alone would bring us all far too much attention."

While Edwin scoffed and attempted to control his face a bit more, Branwen nodded and intoned a vow to Tempus. "I vow to keep the secrets I have heard this day from Imoen and Harry of Candlekeep on the word of Tempus!"

Attention: your Traveling Companions has vowed to keep your status as a Bhaalson and Blood Magic-user a secret on the name of her god.

As stated numerous times before, Oaths like this are serious business in the land of Faerun. Branwen will literally die before sharing your secrets now.

This is a sign of her trust in you, which has gone up by +400.

"Do not think that this is the last time we will be speaking about these Blood Magic spells we will be having," Edwin warned. "I will admit that your Oath was well chosen now. Indeed, I can think of forty high-level Red Wizards who would not hesitate to capture you to experiment on you, to say nothing of keeping your abilities from reaching the ears of your actual enemies. But that does not mean I will not attempt to grasp such magic for myself."

"HA!" Imoen laughed, moving over to her bedroll, stowing it in her Item Space. "It goes both ways, you know. I want to see if I can figure out how to use your type of spells just as much as you want to use mine."

Edwin paused at that as if the idea hadn't occurred to him, but Dynaheir merely nodded. "Agreed. We must discuss this further, hopefully in a place where we can perform some experiments without being seen or in danger. But for now, it is good that going forward, you will both be using your powers openly."

“Yeah, but remember the caveat. Our spells come straight from our blood, not mana,” Harry reminded them all. “Now come on, we can’t just sit here and talk about Imoen and my abilities all day.”

The group made their way once more around the area containing the Flame Tongue snare, and then began once more to scout out the floor, heading south down the main passageway. Almost halfway down it, the tunnel’s nature seemed to change, the supports disappearing, the tunnel becoming rounded at the edges, the walls seeming to have been dug by an animal.

Looking around them, Branwen instantly stated that the tunnels they were now moving through were natural instead of delved. “This might be how the kobolds entered the mines.”

“Agreed.” Remembering one of the goals they had been given to clear the dungeon had been to find any other entrances to the mine, Harry scratched at his lightning bolt scar, then said slowly, “Imoen, put down a few traps along this length. Minsc, guard her while she does. Branwen, knowing what to look for now, would you be able to tell if any of the tunnels we’ve passed were kobold make?”

When she nodded, Harry decided. “Okay. Then while Imoen is busy here, we’ll retrace our steps. If we assume they have to have come in from the same general direction if not the same point, two other tunnels went south enough that they might be other ways the kobolds could enter the mine.”

“And if so, what of it?” Edwin scoffed.

“If so, we knock down the supports in those tunnels on this side of that entrance. It’s a start. And maybe on our way back up, we trap them to the nth degree too.” While the slang seemed to throw them off for a moment, everyone, even Edwin, agreed with that idea.

Between them, Harry and Branwen were able to smash down enough of the supporting beams to cause minor cave-ins, although that in itself wasn’t fun. They had to run away the instant the dust started falling. Even so, they nearly were crushed several times. But when they finished, Harry received a notification.

Congratulations! You have taken the first step to end the kobold threat to the Nashkel mines once and for all.

While your attempts to cause small cave-ins have worked to a certain degree, the kobolds are good burrowers. You may have to do more to block the kobolds from coming back in the future. Finish the job to get full credit for completing this goal.

All this took some time, especially since they had to go around a few still active traps like the Flame Tongue spell. But thanks to having destroyed two Heart Stones already, the respawn timer didn't end while they were doing it. They were back with the two scouts and exploring the second half of the floor soon after, having only dealt with three small patrols.

Entering the kobold caves, the group found themselves in an almost entirely different area, a mix of natural caves and kobold tunnels. It was a veritable warren, with traps in numerous places and enemies. In the next several hours the group fought their way through three ambush points and four patrols.

The patrols in this area were more numerous, twelve kobolds with half at least in Hide-in-Shadows. But they were also more complacent, moving around smaller zones in the warren of tunnels the kobold side of the floor seemed to be. This allowed the Adventurers to, astonishingly, circle a few of these patrols a few times, wiping each patrol out easily. They also, thankfully, didn't run into any more Grey Oozes, despite the number of standing water sources growing several times.

The ambush points were more troublesome, simply because each of them was centered around one or even two traps that Imoen couldn't disarm. Dealing with this ate up Jaheira and Edwin's summoning spells, but the wreckage of the ambushes that remained after the traps went off were easy enough to deal with.

All of this took nearly five hours, and the respawn time was just over two hours away when Imoen discovered what they were looking for and more.

{the section above and below was rewritten to add in the night's sleep before the battle. If you see any hints of the previous version – someone else being tired, a mention of the magic users running out of spells, please point it out.}

OOOOOOO

Imoen was tired once more. Even getting six hours sleep hadn't been enough, and while Branwen and Jaheira had healed her to almost two-thirds health, that didn't help much with her mental exhaustion. *And my Mild Claustrophobe debuff doesn't help*

matters. Damn this body sometimes. Honestly, endurance used to be one of my strongest qualities. In so many ways, heh.

Shaking her head of the time she'd literally ridden Charlie Weasley into unconsciousness, Imoen concentrated on her surroundings once more. She had a job to do.

The party had basically been crisscrossing this segment of the mine, clearing and mapping out one side of the main tunnel and then the other. In this manner, they had been able to turn the tables on enemy patrols many times. They had just left a passageway that ended in water that looked disturbingly deep, the second such they had found, and now the Adventurers were skirting around the end of the main tunnel they had entered the kobold tunnels from. However, as Imoen hugged the right wall, she felt it end in another entranceway to what she first thought was another tunnel.

Although this one was marked by a trap which Boo spotted, chittering into her ear. Stopping Minsc, Imoen moved forward and began to deactivate the trap, noting that this tunnel seemed to have staircases built into it. *So, the entrance to the next floor maybe? It's wide too, that's annoying. Harry and the other meat shields will have to spread out and won't be in mutual support.*

Imoen was thinking in those terms because she could see the light of several fires ahead of them down those wide stairs. Moving back to Minsc, she told him what she saw in low tones, then moved on to the other end of the intersection, where she had also seen another tunnel.

This one had two puddles of water that Imoen glared at in suspicion. Boo, too seemed to tense as he stared at them, but the two of them moved past with no trouble. Soon they came upon a thinner tunnel, which she passed through so slowly, staring at the ground with deadly intent. But on the other side, past another body of water, was a tunnel leading down. It was the only place in the kobold den that had wooden beams, and the stairs went down very steeply, so much so it created noticeable darkness there.

Shaking her head, Imoen placed a trap there, then another on the narrow passage, before two more were put by the two puddles of water. *Well, I call them puddles, but they look too deep for that, really.*

Minsc had waited there by the two puddles, and they nodded at one another before moving back to the others, reporting what they had found. When they did,

though, they found the group looking somewhat grim, or in the case of Edwin, jaundiced and amused. *That seems to be his normal state of being, I suppose.* The others were easier to read. "What's wrong?"

"I can hear someone down that way," Jaheira announced, pointing down the wide stairs to the right, which Imoen had bypassed at first. "Someone is cursing in Elvish."

"Be careful, you two. We're not going to run in to rescue whoever it is, but we need more information," Harry said, looking at Imoen even more than Minsc.

"Right. We'll be back." Imoen replied for the both of them.

About a hundred yards on, Imoen also began to hear the cursing. *Mind you, I can't speak Elvish, but the tone of cursing is universal.*

The wide stairs quickly halted in what was another natural cave. In the center of which was another Heart Stone and a strong force of kobolds. Imoen counted at least fourteen kobold commandos, four shamans again, along with thirty regular kobolds armed with swords and bows. They were all gathered around four fires or moving about their own business, although thankfully, Imoen and Boo could not see any traps among them.

More importantly, the source of the cursing was obvious at the far end of the cavern. There, a cage dangled above the ground by a good foot from a long chain that seemed to go up around a stalagmite. Inside was an Elven man with blue hair, delicate features, and a hard angular face, one that was now locked in a rictus of hate as it looked around at the kobolds all around them.

Staring at him, then around, Imoen decided to push her luck. *What is life without risk?* With that, she stood up on tiptoe, whispering in Minsc's ear. "Stay here, and keep me covered. I'm going to try to get close to that guy. I want to know why he's here."

Minsc didn't dare reply with more than a nod, unwilling to even try to reply verbally. *Heh, at least he knows his normal volume setting is the equivalent of loud to the rest of us.*

With the Ranger covering her with his bow, Imoen made her way forward, moving around the edge of the cavern between the kobolds with difficulty. They didn't exactly like staying still for some reason, bouncing all over the place, snarling and snapping at one another.

Eventually, Imoen was by the cage, where she hid behind it in the deepest shadow she could find. There she leaned in, whispering in as low a voice as she could manage, "Don't react and don't look around you. Just keep glaring like you are. My name's Imoen, and I'm with a band of adventurers. Were you part of the original adventurers sent into these caves?"

The man had stilled instantly as she spoke, his face going from a rictus of fury to something more like carved granite before slowly subsiding, slumping against the back of the cage as if his anger had completely drained him. The kobolds who noticed all laughed and snickered.

Thankfully, none of the kobolds saw Imoen because the only light in the cavern- or beyond it - was supplied by their large cook fires, which rather nicely killed the kobolds' night vision. So even if they might have been able to see her in the shadows, once her speaking caused her Hide-In-Shadows skill to cut out, they wouldn't now.

"My name is Xavier, and no, I was a single adventurer. I come from Evereska. I was sent to discover what was going on here, as Baldur's Gate is but several weeks journey from our borders. I was able to make my way down to this level and beyond to the one who is controlling the kobolds, a wizard named Mulligan. But there, my potions of invisibility ran out at a most untimely moment, and he was able to capture me before handing me off to these kobolds."

"So rumors of the troubles along the Sword Coast have reached that far?" Imoen murmured, shaking her hand. "That's not good."

Xan might have smiled, although it was so minute that Imoen had trouble making it out in the dim light of the cooking fires. "Indeed not. Faerun can ill afford the turmoil of the Kraken and the Giant going to war."

That took Imoen a bit to work out until Imoen remembered the talks she'd witness back in the Friendly Arm in. Baldur's Gate was best known for its large, powerful navy, while Amn was a mercantile nation with a decent-sized army but whose navy was small and defensive. The analogy made some sense then. "Okay, I guess. What's one more group of wannabe do-gooders," she muttered in some amusement. "So if we break you out, would you agree to work with us?"

"Yes," Xan answered instantly. "Although there is a condition. When I was captured, my moon blade was stolen from me. I will have it back. If after the battle is won,

you do not help me find my blade or try to keep it from me, you and yours will become my enemy.”

Imoen shrugged. “Since I don’t even know what a moonblade is, I don’t see that happening, so no worries. Sit tight. I’ll be back with friends.” With that, she turned, activated Hide-in-Shadows, and was gone before Xan could say another word.

OOOOOO

“And you say this place doesn’t have any hidden alcoves or other passages?” Harry asked. The second Heart Stone and the fact the passages to the north and south of it that had hidden more enemies had caused them a lot of trouble. “No cover, no way for them to retreat or get behind us? No water that could hide slimes?”

Imoen nodded. “No other entrances but this one. I checked around the edges just in case there were any fake walls. I didn’t find any, although I found more glass vials, already full of samples of that solution they add to the iron. And no water either, not past the start of the stairs. There’s those two,” she gestured to their right, “But I already set traps down there.”

“All right, how many traps did you see?”

“Several, mostly around the entranceway, and the only reason I could see them at all is that I went around them the first time, and Boo was able to spot them from the other side,” Imoen knew that Harry already knew where those were, thanks to the Map ability, but it had to be said aloud for the others since only Harry could see his map.

“Thank you, Branwen. And I think that means we are ready to do this. Let’s go save this elf and then finish this dungeon,” Harry intoned. “I don’t know about any of you, but I am missing the sky, something fierce. And this time, we’re going to do something a bit different. Oh, and Edwin, Jaheira? You can use fire spells now. I think there’s enough air coming in and evidence to say that there are no other explosive gases in this segment of the mine. And if the kobolds haven’t suffocated themselves from all the fires in there, there’s enough air, too.”

“And if there isn’t, we have a spell to deal with it,” Imoen quipped. She had taken the time that morning to teach Harry the Bubblehead Charm with Dynaheir and Edwin both watching, taking notes with interest. Both seemed hopeful that they could eventually figure out how to use the same spells without sacrificing their health doing it.

Both magic users looked pleased, and Harry went on, explaining the battle plan. Imoen and Minsc would start the battle at the back of the group this time. Since the traps were in the direct center of the kobolds, they couldn't get to them. Instead, Jaheira would use one of her summoning spells to deal with them, while the two scouts would keep an eye on the pools of water near the left side of the entrance.

At the front of the group, Harry, Khalid and Branwen at once more formed the top of the formation, Hammer Time. Harry had the center, was on Branwen on one side and Khalid on the other. Behind them, Dynaheir was poised with her Stinking Cloud attack and Edwin with a fireball. After that, Jaheira would use her Summon Animal spell to spring the various traps within the large cavern. Meanwhile, the two magic users would deal with their alternates among the kobolds.

"Ready?" Harry asked the others.

They all nodded, and Harry hefted his longsword in one hand and his tower shield on his other before breathing in deeply. "All right, now!"

With that, the front line trooped around the corner and down the stairs into the cavern, spreading out as they came, which, alas, broke the formation. This meant they wouldn't have its buffs going forward. Behind them, the others waited a heartbeat before moving in.

The trio in the lead was spotted almost instantly. The kobolds began to chatter and jump towards them, grab up weapons, or begin spells. This was halted almost at once when Edwin's fireball struck the center of the cavern, expanding outwards, slaying more than a dozen of the enemy. "Hahaha! Yes, yes! Die in magical fire and know your place in regards to that of one who wields the true power of Magic!"

The next second, a series of fire Arrows from Dynaheir followed along the edge of the cavern.

But the kobold commandos were much more numerous here in any previous fights, with more spawning in groups of six from the Heart Stone as the fire from Edwin's Fireball faded. With his tower shield +1, Harry was still more than capable of ignoring the arrows shot at him. Khalid's defensive bonus when wielding his longsword also came into play, his medium shields a blur as it bounced off arrows away, or the arrows simply hammering harmlessly into his plate mail.

Branwen had only the Amulet of Protection, and this wasn't nearly as good. She collapsed instantly, taking an arrow to the thigh, again, and another one to the shin of the same leg. But she shattered the shafts with her hammer and stood up roaring in a fury, trusting Jaheira to heal her, which the druid began to do almost instantly. "Come fellows! Come and face the hammer of Tempus!"

Since her next blow caved in the head of a kobold to it closed with her, Harry supposed she was still all right and turned back to slay the first kobold to reach him with a simple thrust before chopping into the shoulder of the next. Keeping an eye on the entire battlefield was difficult, but by this point, Harry had gained enough experience with it to do so and to keep himself safe, his sword flickering in and out, lashing at the kobolds as they closed, his Sword and Shield style protecting him in turn.

Behind him, the Magic Missiles flew into one shaman just before he could get his spell off. Yet this didn't kill the shaman, and Harry wondered why until he noticed that this shaman wasn't marked as a shaman in his Observation skill, but a kobold Shaman Elite.

The next level up from a normal shaman, most of that upgrade comes in a single area: health. Yes, even kobolds know that they are simply too squishy to survive a battle with the other races most of the time. This shaman has survived to gather such power that he has actually been able to do something about that limitation.

However, it didn't save him. This was because when Dynaheir's Magic Missiles hit him a second later, his own spell backfired. This caused a backlash that turned him into a fiery pillar rather than one of the attackers.

But two of the enemy shaman did get their spells off, and flights of stinging bugs raced toward the attackers. "Edwin and Dynaheir fall back!" Harry shouted, hoping that Jaheira's immunity to stinging bugs would hold here. It did, and the next second, her last spell, Nature's call, lashed out, crashing into one of the shamans, who died most spectacularly.

At the same time, the second wave of stinging bugs came towards Harry and his fellows in the front line. It had been targeted at them this time rather than the two wizards behind them. Seeing this, Harry decided to try out something. Killing a kobold, he then thrust forward with the hand holding his sword in the direction of the incoming swirl of bugs. "Stupefy!"

The Stupefy spell lanced out above the heads of the kobolds and crashed into the swarm that he had targeted. The entire swarm collapsed, all of the bugs within it knocked out. The second swarm came on, though, the first having shielded it with its own bodies, and Harry grimaced as it hit him, then quickly spread to Khalid and Branwen despite the fact they had spread out.

Being already injured, Branwen yelled and shrieked, but Jaheira was quick to use another healing spell on her. Fast enough that Branwen didn't break and flee.

Khalid too yelled and shimmered, slapping at himself. But he didn't break either, his Willpower for once being enough to keep him in the fight. But he also began to suffer from a harsh defensive penalty.

Khalid has been struck by stinging bugs.

Although he has resisted the fear and confusion aspect of this attack, attempting to swat at the bugs biting him with his shield hand will pay a - 4 penalty to all defenses.

This proved to be nearly deadly a second later, as an enemy kobold got underneath Khalid's sword strike and lashed out with a blow at his stomach. His chest plate saved him, the blow ringing against his armor, but the blow knocked him off balance, causing him to stumble back. A pommel strike sword dealt with that enemy, and Harry turned back to his own part of the fight just in time to use his longsword to block a similar blow that would've taken him in the side.

More kobolds continued to pile in, while more commandos also appeared along with more Shamans summoned by the Heart Stone. This forced the long-range shooters, who included Imoen now, to target them, leaving the three scattered frontline fighters to face the tide on their own.

A fireball lanced out over the battle line, crashing into the center of the room, slaying several recently summoned commandos before they could join the battle and causing more of the kobolds at the back of the melee to break and run for the corners of the room. It also caused Xan some pain, although not directly, simply by the heat of the fire. "Watch where you are flinging that mortal!"

"Beware, prisoner, my name is Edwin, and mortal or no, I am certainly far better than an elf whose own incompetence allowed him to be captured against such meager opponents."

At the same time, Dynaheir had stepped forward as Branwen paused to heal herself, kneeling down to let the other woman thrusting her hands over Branwen's head. From her hands, the spell Burning Hands created a tongue of flame which in all several of the attacking kobolds, forcing them back.

Then Branwen was standing up, nodding her thanks to the other woman, and the attack continued, while Harry used another Blood Magic spell, a cutting spell slicing an area clear of kobolds for a moment before more piled in from either side of him, causing him to grimace.

There were still too many of the enemy, and the front line was still dealing with the stinging bugs, and Branwen's arrow luck continued, with several of the enemy commandos shooting at her. She blocked them all but doing so caused her to open her defenses once more, and an instant later a blow caught her on the back of her knee, which nearly severed the limb. It was only saved by a hasty Lay On Hands spell while Dynaheir defended her. But to heal herself she would have to fall back, else she would open herself up to more injury. "Gah, what it is with you little creatures and attacking my legs! It is a coward's tactic!"

"They can only reach so high Branwen, and I thought we already established their general cowardice." Slaying another kobold in front of him, Harry lashed out with another Cutting spell, slicing through large segments of the mob in front of Branwen's position, gaining her some time to breathe. "Pull back, Branwen. Minsc, get up here and replace Branwen."

Branwen protested this half-heartedly, but she really couldn't heal herself and fight at the same time. And Jaheira had turned her attention to aiding her husband.

The next second, Harry took an arrow to his shoulder, then a slice to his helmet, which was nearly knocked from his head. Khalid had taken several Fire Arrows, and it was only his wife's healing spells that kept him from being crippled as Branwen had been. "Khalid, fall back. We need to shrink the line. Dynaheir, Stinking Cloud to one side, Jaheira, Tangling vines to the other, then the back of the mob."

Dynaheir had already begun to concentrate on the melee combatants, so she obeyed with alacrity. Meanwhile, another stupefy allowed the two remaining frontline fighters to fall back. And then Minsc was beside Harry, wielding his giant longsword Claymore.

Almost instantly, the remaining enemy kobold commandos stopped trying to fire ineffectually at Harry, whose tower shield had still staved off almost all of their fire. Instead, they fired over his head into the rest of the party and at Minsc. For Minsc, his Chest Plate +1 much the same job as Harry's tower shield. He took a few hits to his legs, but even they were somewhat armored with leather jerkins, and the two arrows that stuck simply made the large man laugh.

Dynaheir, on the other hand? She nearly fell, crying out in pain at the wound to her chest, and Edwin cursed, canceling a spell when an arrow nearly took him in the head, and another struck him in the shoulder.

Harry twisted around shouting out, "Hold the line, Minsc, Khalid!" and grabbed at Dynaheir, who had moved behind him, about to use another Burning Hands spell. Swiftly grabbing at her arms, Harry held her on her feet and used his Lay On Hands paladin skill.

The wound healed, but Dynaheir was still weak and was out of the fight for now. Meanwhile Edwin backed away rapidly, although thankfully his own robes had a fire-resistance spell which saved him from the damage of the Fire arrow to the chest. He had then lashed out with another Magic Missile spell, killing that commando as still more spawned.

Gritting his teeth, Harry moved back into the front of the line, and he and Minsc made short work of the kobolds which attacked them. However, the enemy commandos, now having built up their numbers again after Edwin's decimation, proved again that they were the main threat, as the rest of their party was being forced backward and away from them, and more arrows were getting through all of their defenses, so much so that Harry ordered Branwen to not join them just yet. Her armor was the worst of them all, and she had already used too many of her healing spells for one battle. "We have to break through the rest of this horde. Jaheira, are there any more shamans?"

"No, Edwin dealt with the last one right before he fell back," Jaheira reported, having kept up with the melee line rather than retreating, trusting in her helmet and better armor. "No more have been spawned, but there are at least fourteen new kobold commandos in there, and I just saw two more appear."

Harry growled, then glanced at his health bar, which was in the orange thanks to the injuries he had taken and the spells he had already used. Imoen had used some spells to help guard the side of the cavern Jaheira had used Tangling Vines are, and despite their

rest and the healing this morning, they were both hovering at around half health. But there was no help for it. “Imoen Stupefy in front of you.”

Knowing it would be the last spell he could use, Harry lashed out with a stupefy spell at the same time as Imoen. The group of kobolds directly in front of him and Khalid collapsed, leaving only a handful directly in front of Minsc. “Now, Branwen, help Minsc!”

With that, Harry and Khalid charged forward, pushing the unconscious bodies or stepping on them in their haste to get across the cavern to the kobold commandos. Two more fire arrows struck Harry, and his health bar began to blink crazily at him, the last spell having pushed him down into the red. But then another fireball from Edwin was skirting over his head to crash directly into the center of the room. The Heart Stone shattered, and the damage of its shards and the fireball did in most of the group of regular kobolds, along with many of the kobold commandos.

The others Minsc dealt with, hacking them to pieces, as Harry nearly skidded, slamming his shield into one, then slicing another head off, before his blade was back up and stabbing. But once more, his sword proved to not be immune to the iron issue and shattered.

Harry took a blow to his forearm before his war hammer appeared in his hand, and he began to lay about with it all around.

That left only the enemy who had previously broken, fleeing to the edges of the cavern, and Imoen and Jaheira moved quickly to silence them along with Khalid. Minsc and Branwen dealt with the group in front of the large man while Harry leaned against the wall, breathing in deeply, feeling almost anemic now, since most of the damage he’d taken had been dealt by using his spells.

Staring at the message informing him of the destruction of the Heart Stone that was followed by several dozen more messages about the traps Imoen had left behind doing their work, Harry slowly breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, who is up for some food, and healing?”

This won laughing approval from even the two half-elves, and he chuckled as Jaheira and Branwen both knelt beside him, their hands flashing as they used a Medium Healing Spell each on Harry. That left Branwen below half her prepared healing spells, with Jaheira only slightly better.

They were interrupted by a cough from the cage as Zan made himself known once more. "That is all well and good, but if you wouldn't mind releasing me now!?"

Harry gestured, and Imoen moved over to the cage, releasing the man. He looked at them all as he stood up to his full height, showing that he was actually a little taller than Harry, although not as tall as Minsc, and nowhere near as built as either of the human men. Indeed, he was almost as lithe and scrawny as Imoen.

"I thank you for freeing me, but I must retrieve my moon blade," the man said, sighing and shaking his head.

"Wait, you can't expect to do that alone," Harry objected. "This is a dungeon, we have yet to meet the Dungeon Boss, and I don't doubt it's this Mulligan fellow that you mentioned to Imoen. That means he'll be stronger and tougher than you might expect. "

"Besides, you are in no shape just yet to fight someone like that. One would think that your mishap earlier would teach you some caution, Jaheira interjected tartly, moving over to heal Minsc from a few of his wounds.

Xan glared at her then said something Elvish to her and Khalid, which caused both of their backs to straighten, but Jaheira replied equally sharply. The man recoiled, and Jaheira turned away.

"Translation, please?" Harry requested as he stood up and began to move to the cleanest portion of the cavern to start a cooking fire.

Khalid shook his head, his normal stutter giving his words an odd staccato rhythm. "He said something about us proving ourselves only too human when we did not see the importance of his moonblade. Jaheira replied by saying that that is an ancient misconception and that his attack on us was itself unworthy of one of the Greycloaks of Everska."

"...I'm missing a lot off of the social understanding. I need to understand the nuances there, aren't I?" Harry sighed.

"Indeed," Khalid laughed before going on in his normal stutter. "And I didn't translate entirely. Suffice it to say that if the man had not just been rescued from durance vile, I would have words with him."

Jaheira's, muttering about how she wouldn't even bother with words and that the pointy end of her scimitar would find a new sheathe, told Harry far more. He looked angrily over at the man, shaking his head in disgust. "I was going to offer my group's help in getting your moon blade back. After all, we have to face this Mulligan fellow ourselves, so adding one more reason to do so wouldn't be much trouble. Now, I'm wondering if you're actually worth it if that's your attitude after having been saved."

The elf sighed and seemed to shrink in on himself, making him seem even less healthy than before. "I, I apologize. For my people, being captive like that is extremely trying on the spirit, and to think of another touching my moonblade made it even worse. I take back my words and to you and to your half-elf companions."

He then said something else in Elvish and bowed from the waist, arms out before him, then drawing them in as he stood up. This seemed to mollify Khalid, although Jaheira still looked very annoyed. But she didn't look as if she was going to attack the fellow any longer, which was a plus in Harry's book.

"Minsc, Branwen, Khalid, if you wouldn't mind seeing to the bodies on the other side of the cavern? I don't want them near where we're going to be sitting and eating."

With more Harry-made food on the offing, Minsc and the others set to with a will. Earning some points in the book, Xavier moved over to help, again apologizing under his breath for his earlier words. Soon enough, a light stew and some bread were finished, with slices of venison from Nashkel made into tiny steaks searing merrily over the fire.

Staring at the food, Xan gulped, shaking his head in awe. "That, that looks amazing, especially when considering we are deep in a dungeon. But I, I suppose if we go to face a dungeon boss, it could be considered our last meal."

"That's a rather morose thought," Imoen grumbled. "You can eat jerky if you keep talking like that."

"While I wouldn't go that far, I would say that telling us everything you know about the next floor and Mulligan would help us survive, wouldn't it?" Harry questioned. "So why don't you tell us what you can..."

End Chapter

Chapter 10: Washed Away

Everyone remained silent as Xan explained the trouble he had run into on the next level of the mine-turned-dungeon. “To be truthful, I am uncertain how they divined my presence after getting down this far. Certainly never of the clumsy miners, slaves or kobolds saw me. Still, I suppose my expertise in traps is somewhat lacking, and I rely on my Grey Cloak too much. so perhaps I tripped something down there. Such is life I suppose, one should always be aware that it is fleeting. But perhaps we should look on the bright side. I didn’t die immediately. Of course that was so that I would be tortured and used to spice the kobolds’ meals, but at least my inevitable doom was delayed. ”

As Xan fell into what seemed a well-trodden refrain, Harry took a glance up from where he was cooking to glance over to where Xan’s information rested at the corner of his eyes.

Name: Xan

Class: Enchanter Greycloak of Everska, level 5

Xan is a Greycloak – investigators and hunters – of Everska, the largest and most ancient elven city in Faerun. He is a morose fellow whose luck seems to have turned on him here in the Nashkel mines. As an Enchanter and Greycloak, which is a very specialized class, Xan has a very mixed bag of abilities. Beware, for Xan is also fanatical about finding his moonblade, the symbol of his status as a Greycloak. This weapon is magically bonded to Xan, and being without it is the same as missing a hand or foot.

Relationship status: N/A

While willing to work with you for a time, Xan has duties that will take him back to Everska after your mutual enemy, Mulahey, is dealt with.

That, Harry reflected, is probably a good thing. He seems to be rubbing Jaheira and Khalid the wrong way, and if he really is morose he’s going to set off Imoen either by her wanting to needle him, or just getting on her nerves.

As if to add some evidence to Harry’s thoughts, Jaheira commanded, “Enough maudlin talk, tell us what you saw.” Despite having mellowed noticeably once she began to eat Harry’s food, she was still very annoyed with the Everska elf.

Xan tried to glare at Jaheira, but his rumbling stomach took his attention away for a moment. After a few bites, he began once more, continually speaking a few words before breaking off to take another bite. “The stairwell, it is an actual set of stairs not a natural formation or tunnel, comes out onto a large, cleared area, a cavern much like this one. It abuts another. The opening is about seven, perhaps eight feet wide. But the size of the opening matters not, because the majority of it opens out into water.”

“Water?” Harry inquired, handing over another sandwich to Xan as he spoke. “like on the second floor, a natural underground lake?”

“Not big enough to constitute a lake, no. A small pool, rather, although the depth of it is undoubtedly deep enough to drown us all in its depths with ease. A walkway of stone leads out from the entrance to what looked like a small hut of some kind, or perhaps a small cave? I don’t know, as I was ambushed at the entrance to that area. The water will undoubtedly propagate many gray slimes, and the area that we will come out into will be covered with kobolds.”

Before anyone else could tug Xan up short on his downward spiral, the elf paused, frowning. “Or rather, it was. I believe that your destruction of the various dungeon Heart Stones might stop that. Although of course that just means our doom will come in some other fashion.”

“Hmmm... what about traps?” Imoen mused, one eyebrow rising in query.

“Many of those. I detected and deactivated two near the stairwell, but one eluded me, of course. That led to my Hide-in-Shadows being compromised and to my eventual doom, if not for your lucky intervention,” Xan agreed.

“And what of this Mulligan fellow? You mentioned you had seen him and that he was seemingly behind everything occurring here in the mines,” Dynaheir questioned, biting into her own stew. “By the Spirits of Earth and Air, Harry, your food truly is magnificent.”

While Harry thanked the dusky-skinned woman for her words, Xan thought, chewing, before replying, gently correcting the witch’s misname. “Mulahey was indeed there. I imagine that the central edifice I espied is his home down here. After all, while he might be working with these kobolds, he is human, and will surely need his own space. Kobolds carry certain diseases that can transfer over to humans with ease... and fleas.”

The little word play made some of his listeners smile, although Xan didn't seem to notice, going on in the same morose, sighing sort of tone. "I think, although I am uncertain on this, that there was another entrance as well."

Harry spent a few moments eating his own meal, then set it down, staring around them. "I don't like the fact that we're coming through the front door like this. But we don't actually have another door to go through, unless anyone thinks they could find this second entrance from the surface?"

Everyone there shook their heads, and then Khalid ended that argument with the weight of a battleship. "B, b, besides, if we leave the dungeon, it w, w, will start to rebuild itself. A, after a week, it w, will, will be back to full strength."

"It's always a week?" Harry leaned forward in interest.

"Yes it is. If one cannot clear a dungeon completely, then after a week, it will have reformed its numbers, spawn points and natural dangers. That doesn't include traps, as those are laid by the denizens of the dungeon, but everything else will be rebuilt."

So there is no do over here, understood, Harry mused internally, shaking his head. And obviously that means the quest to clear the dungeon couldn't be completed either.

For the rest of the meal, Harry and the others questioned Xan about how he had gotten down here, why he was interested in Mulahey and the cavern below them, and his abilities. As Harry's observation skill had told him, Xan had a very varied bag of tricks. As an Enchanter, he should specialize in spells to enhance abilities and attacks, but he didn't have any of those spells remaining in mind. Instead, he had two Acid Arrow spells, a few Charm Person spells, and a Color Spray attack spell. He also had the Knock spell, which Harry hadn't heard of before.

Beyond that, Xan wore a light gambeson. He was missing the so-called Greycloak, which apparently was heavily enchanted for him (or by him, Harry wasn't certain), but the gambeson at least would give him some protection, as Harry and the others weren't carrying any extra armor.

Perhaps just as importantly in the long term was the information Xan shared about his current mission. He had tracked Mulahey here from near the elven city of Everska, where the human male had attempted to enter for some reason past the mighty magical defenses. He had apparently been involved in some foul rite Xan didn't go into designed

to make a hole in those defenses. It had failed, but that kind of thing was something the Greycloaks took very seriously, and the cities elders, called the Hill Elders for some reason, had dispatched Xan to find out why the attempt had been made.

During his hunt, Xan had learned Mulahey apparently was known as a professional problem-causer. He was willing to do anything, work with anyone in order to cause chaos. "He is a priest of Cyric, which means that every death and piece of chaos he causes is in a way a homage to his god."

"What kind of spells does he have?" Harry asked, watching Branwen warily as a creaking sound came from her. The name of the dread god Cyric seemed to infuriate her, her hand now gripping her hammer's shaft in a way that threatened to shatter the wood.

"I witnessed him using a modified version of Entangle, one with thorns, in a battle against some particularly stupid bandits. Another spell that somehow targets the mind, though I do not know the specific spell," Xan sighed. "Beyond that, I know he wore chain mail when he questioned me, along with a mace at his belt. Such is the totality of my knowledge of his combat skills despite how long I have chased him. Perhaps I do not deserve my rank as a Greycloak."

Nodding thoughtfully, Harry made a note of the spells then asked some questions about Mulahey's past. Xan had followed him across several countries, but when asked about who Mulahey was working for now, had no answer. "He is loyal if nothing else. I believe he works for a large cabal, but it is not the Xhentarim. Nor does he work for the priesthood of Cyric as a whole, or at least he seems to have gone out of his way since I began to stalk him to keep away from other followers of that foul god. No, he represents someone new hiding the shadows."

"And he came up from Amn to Nashkel?" Jaheira questioned, scowling once more, although this time the scowl was about what Xan was saying rather than Xan himself. "Blast it. We, my husband and I, were somewhat leaning to Baldur's Gate being the source of this chaos in the Sword Coast. They are a bit more open in terms of those who can wield wealth and power, and Amn has the Shadow Thieves. But we have yet to find any real evidence pointing in that direction."

"Ah, do not put that thought away. I am certain Mulahey deliberately came up from Amn overland," Xan answered in the affirmative. "He arrived in Athkatla by sea, and certainly could have gone to Baldur's Gate faster by sea. No, he made that decision

intentionally. I had thought it was to throw me off, but now you say it, that seems to be false hubris on my part. Mulahey had no idea of my presence such a small threat was I, and now that you say that, that choice of travel could be to muddy the waters further.”

“True. We haven’t discovered anything pointing to either Amn or Baldur’s Gate strongly. What we’ve found shows that whoever it is isn’t tied to the current power structure, although they have a **lot** of money. Beyond that, they have a way with bandits, monsters, and an extremely proficient alchemist.”

At that, Harry glanced at Xan, but he shook his head. “No. Mulahey has shown no sign of being an alchemist of any sort. Indeed, he isn’t able to create his own healing potions. I saw him buying several of them, and even a most evil-aligned Priests can create impure healing potions.”

Shrugging Harry gestured around them. “Well, this place is pretty defensible. Minsc, you and I will be on first watch, Imoen and Khalid next. Let’s get a good eight hours sleep before we move on, folks.”

OOOOOOO

Astonishingly, the group indeed got a good eight hours sleep in without interruption. It was clear their destruction of the Heart Stones was having an impact, as no new spawns came upon them. After a small breakfast, and once more wearing the Ring of Infravision and the Prince’s Ring of +1 to protect herself, Imoen scouted ahead, moving down the stairwell quickly.

By the time she reached the open cavern at the bottom Imoen was already using Detect Traps, and she could see easily that whatever Xan might have said, the traps he had disarmed were back. There were at least six traps she could see, and that was before she got to the far end of the cavern and its entrance to the walkway over the water.

Yet while undoing the traps was somewhat easy, there were seven kobolds here in the first cavern, all of them the elite fire arrow users. *Still, I bet I can deal with them easily enough. And there’s no one around now...*

With that, Imoen gestured, and a Leviosa spell picked up several rocks nearby, which she tossed forward with a gentle movement of her fingers, the spell not having broken her Hide-in-Shadows thanks to her body not moving as she used it.

You have used a modified Blood Mage spell, *Leviosa*. -10 to health.

While the hit to her health was less than nice as always, the spell did its work. Each of the rocks smacked down into two traps, setting them off. Two of the kobolds died to their own hidden barbs, while another keened in agony, one of its legs clamped in another trap.

This set the surviving kobolds to moving this way and that, trying to figure out where the enemy was, which activated two more traps. The kobold commandos might be elite troops in terms of their ability with their bows and special arrows, but in every other manner they were still just kobolds. That meant they were somewhat stupid, and when they were attacked, they fell quickly.

The traps nearly swept the room, and Imoen came out of Hide-in-Shadows, launching an arrow at the last of the kobolds. The creature died, and Imoen waited where she was, mind at the ready to use a spell just in case something was hiding. But there was nothing, and after a moment, Imoen was once more hidden in Hide-in-Shadows, moving forward.

The doorway where Xan had been attacked was just as he had described, and she found another trap there. Disarming it quickly, she then moved forward over the walkway, it's sides lapped by the water within which Imoen could see several grey oozes moving. *Crud, and those things are immune to normal weapons too. Still, we have built up more than two dozen fire arrows, and the wizards have most of their spells too.*

More importantly, there were a few traps there too. Two easily gave way, somewhat odd given how much trouble she'd had the traps up on the other level. *Oh, no, that was too easy, and the why is... yep.* Beyond those traps was a third, and Imoen grimaced as her attempt to undo it failed. *Fuck. But if I try again, will my Hide-in-Shadows fade?* Grimacing, she moved away from the trap, looking around.

As Xan had implied there was what looked to be a kind of mound hollowed out in the center of the cavern. There was a fire inside it, and indeed several torches lighting up the cavern, quite unlike the kobold zone of the third floor. And in what looked like the entrance to the cave was a somewhat thin and spindly man, sitting on what looked like a patio chair smoking a pipe. He wore a set of chain mail over a dark purple gambeson. At his side, Mulahey wore a spiked mace and a medium shield.

He was also staring at the entranceway straight through where Imoen was standing. If not for the fact that she knew her Hide-in-Shadows hadn't been broken that would've been really creepy. As it was, she simply shook her head and continued to study the area. There was what looked like a landing at the far end of the cavern, but there didn't seem to be any kind of pathway to it. There was a walkway around the center mound though.

When she returned to the others what she had seen, Imoen scowled and admitted she had made a mistake. "I think this Mulahey guy knew we were coming and set those traps and kobolds here as an early warning system. Which I sprang. Sorry, guys."

"What's done is done," Harry hummed thoughtfully. "But you did take out all the traps in the water-cavern?"

"Only the first two by the entrance. I figured they were just too easy and after looking again, I spotted another one set directly in the middle of the path. I tried to undo it but couldn't."

Nodding, Harry looked at Jaheira. "Could you summon up some animals? I want our backdoor guarded. And Edwin, summon up some monsters to send forward to spring that trap and any others out there."

"A most intelligent thought," Edwin approved. "It seems that even a simian can learn."

Snorting Harry went on. "Then you and Dynaheir please use Fireball and Smog. Hopefully the monsters will draw out the gray oozes, and that'll enable us to clear the board of them first. Given the trouble that we ran into with the Knoll Chieftain, I do not want us to fight both the monster mob and a Dungeon Boss, no matter if he's actually a human outside the dungeon if we can help it."

"He shows much wisdom for someone so young," Xan murmured to Jaheira. "One would almost think he had lived to be fifty, instead of being a merely human eighteen."

If he thought to make fun of Harry and thus create some kind of solidarity between long-lived folk, he failed miserably. Jaheira's eyes narrowed, and Khalid shook his head with a sigh. "S, s, since we have met young Harry, he has a, a, always kept his attention firmly on the idea t, t, that his first job is to keep his party alive. H, h, he's become quite g, g, good at it."

Harry sent Khalid a grin and a nod, indicating he understood that was a compliment. Meanwhile, Harry had been looking at the information that had popped up on his map when Imoen caught sight of the man, scowling.

Name: Mulahey.

Class: level 10 priest of Cyric.

Race: Human

Gender: Male

While only a level ten priest, Mulahey is still the dungeon Master, and as such, will have a near unlimited source of magical power. This will allow him to use spells far beyond his normal level although the number of spells he uses will still be limited by that level. What those levels might be you cannot tell at this range. Mulahey will be tougher, stronger and faster than any normal priest, empowered by the dungeon he has helped to create.

Warning: Mulahey will also act like a Heart Stone! While this is unusual, so too is having a living human become part of a dungeon.

Mulahey's cavern will spawn Grey Ooze in reaction to his Heart Stone Aura in ever diminishing returns as the battle goes on.

Scowling, Harry moved back to the others, removing the spell from himself. He whispered out what he said seen to Khalid as he passed, who quickly gave the information to Jaheira. Although Harry was surprised to see Xan twitching his ears in the half-elf's direction, as if he too heard Khalid's stuttered words.

"All right, let's do it. Branwen up with me again, right behind the summoned monsters. Imoen and Xan at the back with Dynaheir and Edwin. Let's have a bit of space between that group and the two in the front line. Minsc, you'll be in that space. Khalid you too. Keep the summoned creatures Jaheira summoned behind you, Imoen. Branwen, you and I will try to close with Mulahey as fast as possible, if we can. But if there are too many grey oozes, we'll pull back and play for the long game."

They all nodded, and Edwin and Jaheira used their summoning spells. At a gesture the two orcs that Edwin had summoned into being moved forward, while the wolves that Jaheira had summoned stayed still in the main cavern snarling and facing the walls and the stairs.

The two orcs were about quarter of the way across the pathway over the water toward Mulahey before they sprang the first trap that Imoen had warned them about. Bear traps appeared but another trap right in front of that one which she hadn't seen activated as well. Spikes all along the pathways shot straight up into their feet, and both orcs fell screaming.

However, their sacrifice did the the trick.

While human or perhaps even kobold troops could have stopped themselves from revealing their position, the grey oozes were animals, mindless monsters acting on instinct when they sensed movement. Sensing the two orcs they instantly pulled themselves out of the water and began to ooze towards them. A second later, they were hit by the fireball from Edwin, and the sleeping fog from Dynaheir.

The fireball wounded five of the grey oozes, one so much it actually caught on fire. In contrast, the sleeping fog didn't do anything to the oozes, presumably because they didn't really sleep, and it didn't spread fast enough to catch Mulahey as the dark priest quickly used his own spell to protect himself.

Mulahey has used the spell **Clear Air**.

This is a spell that is used to do precisely what it says, clear the air. This will negate enemy spells which impact the quality of the air, or any natural gases that are in the area which the caster could not survive breathing. It's a good, all around spell, especially for someone who apparently has been living in the depths of a mine.

By that point, Branwen and Harry had pushed their way out onto the path, but Harry's hope of getting completely across the expanse to close with Mulahey proved fruitless. The spike trap didn't reset, instead covering the pathway with spikes that slowed his and Branwen's charge.

Meanwhile more grey oozes appeared pulling themselves up out of the water with a sound like 'glorp', blocking their path forward, the spikes not bothering them. More moved forward from the water, their slime-substance letting the slimes move on the water like solid stone.

As he charged forward, Harry took a brief moment to be grateful he had kept longsword +1 they had found in the gnoll's fortress. It would let him kill the grey oozes when they got close. But even as he thought that, Harry noticed that Branwen hadn't

called for her Spiritual Hammer and cursed. "Remember Branwen they are immune to normal weapons!"

"Ah, I had forgotten glorious leader. My thanks." With that, Branwen took a step back, and began to call upon Tempus.

Grumbling, Harry shifted to the side to protect her, calling up Minsc as he did so to help as best he could. "And remember to use magically enhanced weapons!"

As the grey oozes pressed forward, Minsc barely got there in time, wielding the Chesley Crusher to ward off the oozes just as a piece of ooze got past Harry's defense to hit Branwen in the leg. She stumbled back but did not lose her spell even as the ooze. A moment later, the Spiritual Hammer appeared in her hand, and she struck out, knocking a quarter of the health from one of the grey oozes.

"That's right, get them my pretties, get them! You will never leave this cavern alive!" Mulahey roared in delight thrusting his mace towards the adventurers as if directing the oozes forward.

"That's it?" Imoen exclaimed from behind Harry, her voice audible now as the flames of Edwin's fireball subsided. "I thought the villain was supposed to always monologue and tell you something important. I am bitterly disappointed in my fantasy books, seriously."

Harry couldn't help but laugh as did Branwen even as they struck the grey oozes which were now pushing in from either side. However, it was slow going. The Grey oozes squirmed and thrust out, crashing into shield and armor, and Branwen's attack wasn't doing much damage. And quickly, more and more grey oozes appeared, pushing forward ahead of them. Some even began to lob bits of their slime over the heads of others, keeping Imoen and the archers hopping around in the opening.

This was made worse when Mulahey gestured to either side. His mace's movements had in fact been a summoning spell which he finished quickly. When the spell ended, ten Skeleton Archers appeared, pulling themselves out of the ground of the walkway around Xan's cave.

Mulahey has used Animate Dead (advanced).

Animate Dead is a level 3 Priest spell that pulls a Skeleton Warrior from the ground to fight for the summoner. No, there doesn't actually have to be bodies around for this spell to be cast. Usually this spell summons one warrior per level after level three, but Mulahey has become a Dungeon Boss, and as such, can use the spell at a far higher level than his base ability may suggest.

Instantly the Skeleton Archers began to fire at them, aiming at Branwen, who had just slain a Grey Ooze. As a priest of a Good-aligned god, she seemed the natural enemy of the undead creatures, as Harry knew that they wouldn't notice his own status as a paladin until he used his Turn Undead skill.

For her part, Branwen would have been in danger, if not for the fact that Harry had given her the Amulet of Protection they had gotten in the circus outside Nashkel when Branwen joined them. That provided enough of a defense that most of the arrows didn't do anything. Harry saw her health was still dropping as each of them struck leg or chest, but none of them penetrated. Harry too felt a few arrows hit his tower shield, and he grimaced.

With the spikes on the ground slowing their advance, with the Grey Oozes pressing on either side they weren't going to get to Mulahey quickly. "Branwen, fall back to Minsc, we'll fort up! Edwin, Dynaheir, Khalid, concentrate on Mulahey. We'll hold the oozes back," Harry ordered. "Xan, Color spray on the left flank."

Now Harry and Branwen moved back in lockstep, shortening the front once more, halting the oozes who had been making for Khalid and Minsc, who had resumed his position at the start of the walkway. When Harry and Branwen took their place, the Ranger and half-elf fell back, and the others retreated back into the other cavern slightly. Minsc kept using the Crusher to help Branwen and Harry hold the front line, while Khalid started to use bow and arrow. Unfortunately, this was a little too muddled for them to form a new formation and get a bonus.

But that was alright by Harry. With Minsc backing them, Harry and Branwen pulled the attention of the oozes to them, so they didn't try to get past the trio to attack the long-range fighters, which they could have given the ooze's ability to move on the water.

Xan moved to one side of the entranceway, thrusting his hands out toward the waterway on the left of the entranceway. The Oozes there were quickly bathed by the spell Xan had described earlier, which indeed looked like a rainbow.

Xan has used Color Spray.

A low level Alteration type spell this invocation creates a spray of multi-colored magic that blinds and knocks unconscious low-level enemies caught in its spray. Despite looking like a rainbow, there is nothing nice about it, as even doing damage to those caught under its enchantment will not wake up.

A moment later the front stabilized and Branwen began to lay into the now comatose oozes facing her side of the walkway.

Meanwhile, the archers and wizards were trying to suppress their fellows and target Mulahey, as Harry had asked. Magic Missiles from Dynaheir impacted the priest of Cyric. The man squawked in outrage, and began a defensive spell, although the strike didn't seem to inconvenience him much. Indeed, it didn't even slow his spell, which washed over his body a second before Edwin's next fireball landed.

Mulahey has used Protection From Fire.

Just like it says on the tin, this is a level 3 Priest spell. Available across the board regardless of faith the alteration spell protects the target from fire. Over fifty percent of fire damage is negated, with more added on per every level beyond level 3.

Two of the Skeleton Archers exploded as the fiery impact lashed over their forms. But the others were just hurt and continued to fire shifting that fire onto the mages causing Edwin to fall back. "Curse that foolish chaos-worshipping simian, I despise it when my magics are so blocked by those of less wit."

"Switch to dealing with the grey oozes then! We need to thin their numbers. Jaheira, try to break Mulahey's attention!" Harry ordered, grunting as a bit of ooze got past his shield, striking his foot. The slime tried to pull him off the walkway, but Harry's magically enhanced sword sliced down and into the ooze, forcing it away before a stab finished that ooze off. Only for two more to take its place.

Behind the embattled frontline, Jaheira heard Harry's orders (though she thought of it more as a request), and targeted her Summon Animal spell to the other side of the battered line of Skeleton Archers. A moment later, two wolves suddenly appeared on the rocky promontory right outside Mulahey's cavern, and immediately began to attack the skeleton archers.

In response, Mulahey used Dispel Magic, although his spell was more powerful than the version of the spell Harry had seen before. The spell dissipated both skeleton archers and animals. An instant later, Mulahey used another summoning spell, grinning evilly as the grey oozes continued to press the front line back. A moment later, he began another spell which spat out towards the party.

Mulahey has used Evil Entangle.

Much like the regular druid or Priest spell, this spell creates entrapping vines and blades of grass throughout the target area. This spell however has been modified to be used in a smaller area and not just work on the ground. Mulahey has also imbued the spell with a bit of Evil magic. The entangling vines this spell creates has thorns which can wound those trapped.

“Get back!” Harry shouted, but the spell was traveling too quickly for him to do anything more.

The spell struck, and the vines caught Jaheira, Khalid and Minsc, both half-elves crying out in pain as thorn-covered vines caught at their legs. Minsc simply bellowed, pulling at his legs and making the injuries from the thorns worse.

From the sides of the entranceway and the roof vines groped for the adventurers. One caught Minsc in the helmet, another tried to catch Imoen only to flail at where she had stood as she jumped backward. Another though caught Xan, the thorns digging deep into his shoulder as he cried out. “Damn it, we are all doomed, doomed to tentacle hell!”

“Oh god why did you say that!” Imoen grumbled, firing an arrow into a grey Ooze that had been about to flank Branwen. The grey oozes were undaunted by the flailing vines coming from the walls and walkway, their slime-forms allowing them to just move through the vines like they would ignore strikes from nonmagical weapons.

However, Khalid and Xan’s attacks had also struck Mulahey, and he stumbled back, angry at the flame arrow that struck him. But it was Xan’s extremely accurate slingstone that did the most damage. It caught him right in the eye, and Dungeon Boss or no Mulahey was still human. That shot blinded him in that eye for a moment, though it didn’t take out his eye as it should have. As a Dungeon Boss, Mulahey’s basic endurance had been enhanced to a decent degree.

This still allowed Harry and the front line warriors to dispatch several of the grey oozes, although Branwen too was caught in the vines, and Harry took a hit to his backplate from one of the questing vines. Luckily the pain from the thorns didn't do much damage to the more well-armored among the band.

For a few moments, there was no spellcasting from either side as the oozes and the frontline fighters exchanged blows, and Imoen and a slightly wounded Xan tried to hit Mulahey only to fail.

A moment later, Dynaheir, who had retreated back out of the area effected by the Entangle spell, used a Dispel Magic of her own. With that, and with the Grey Oozes now attacking only from one side as their numbers started to ebb, Harry was able to see that the spike trap had reset. "Xan use Knock on the walkway!"

Blinking at the command, Xan took a moment to reply. As he did, Khalid and Jaheira rejoined the fight, although Jaheira waited a moment to cast a healing spell on Khalid, who had been limping. Khalid had been caught by several of the entangling vines, and the thorns had caught him in the back of the knee, lacerating him. In contrast, Jaheira's chain mail and hauberk had been dented and torn in places, but her legs had avoided damage as she had been caught by a vine which had grown out of the side of the entryway.

Xan has used Knock.

A spell devised for mages who don't want to travel with thieves but still want to steal stuff, this spell can do a myriad number of things, as Xan told you. This includes anything from opening locked doors to destroying the inner workings of traps.

With a low-key grinding noises that came from under their feet the spike trap broke.

"Charge!" Harry ordered and he and Branwen started forward.

Yet the now-recovered Mulahey wasn't done with his little surprises. As soon as they reached the halfway point of the walkway, he pulled a lever of some kind, and a new path rose out of the water leading to the back of the cavern, where Xan had spotted what could be another entrance. "Come out my pretties, it is time to feed these fools to our oozes!"

“We are not your pretties, you ass!” Shouted a female voice as a group of four women came out from behind the central area across the water, racing forward towards the embattled adventurers across the new pathway. “I’m very sorry I am, or really rather not, because there is a price on your head. The iron throne be wanting you dead son of Gorion,” shouted one of them. And in my Cyric’s name, I will have you!”

The four women were a motley crew. The woman in the lead was well armored, with plate mail and a gambeson the same color as Mulahey, although the woman’s plate mail descended to cover her crotch in a way that looked like it was supposed to be a leotard, with her thighs covered by mesh until they met knee-high boots. She also had a very overdone armor bust. In her hand, she wielded a mace, carried a medium shield and on her head she had a horned helmet.

Name: Lamalha, cleric of Cyric

Another cleric of Cyric, Lamalha is about as blood-mad as they come. Leader of the all-women team of assassins called the Amazons, she is vindictive, sadistic, cold-blooded, and is a literal gusher for murder. Get the picture? She is one bad woman. She also likes mind-assault type magic.

Beside her another woman in heavy armor stalked like a tigress, gulping down a potion as she came. Yet while Lamalha’s face was one only a mother could love, this woman was immensely attractive, a pert nose, thin cheeks, perfectly kissable lips with red lipstick and long eyelashes. She too wore plate mail that looked more like a leotard near the belt, although she lacked the fishnet thigh stockings, instead having sensible leather leggings marked with scales here and there. Her weapons were the same as Lamalha, although her mace was not the spiked variety.

Name: Zeera, Cleric of Cyric.

Although a Cleric of the murder-bastard like Lamalha, Zeera prefers to preach up close and personal. Her armor is the same, but she moves like someone better-trained than her companion. Don’t let her good looks fool you. While she won’t enjoy flaying or dominating your mind, the idea of bringing her mace in conjunction with your head will still make this woman happier than an artist with an unlimited budget and a cornucopia of hallucinogens to test.

Behind the two of them stood two long-range combatants, although they didn't look nearly as intimidating as the two women in the lead. One of them was a thief who wore leather armor that looked almost like a bikini complete with a bare midriff.

Name: Maniera, fighter/thief.

Despite wearing an outfit that looks more like a marital aid than armor, Maniera is actually quite dangerous. You can tell her barely there leather bikini is enchanted. Despite her short sword, she is a long range fighter, and you need to be aware of her darts, as they look to be enchanted too.

The last figure was actually the most normal. Another woman, she wore a simple hood and leather armor combination, and bore a longbow. Only a hint of long hair could be seen, and unlike the others, you could barely see a hint of chest.

Name: Telka, Fighter/Thief

Another Fighter/Thief, Telka is the last member of the Amazons. While not as eye-catching as her fellows, the longbow in her hands should not be underestimated. You can tell her leather armor is enchanted like Maniera's, and possibly something with her arrows or quiver.

Grimacing, Harry and Branwen paused in their charge across the walkway, turning to receive the two attackers racing forward. This pause, and the fact the rest of the party was busy cleaning up the last of the Grey Oozes, allowed Mulahey to use another spell aiming behind the front line combatants.

Mulahey has used Hold Person. Imoen has failed the Willpower save.

Behind Harry, Imoen paused mid-pull, her eyes wide as she froze in place, one arm behind her head stuck there by the spell. From her frozen lips a scream of pure frustration came, causing Xan and Edwin to both flinch a bit.

And then, right before she came close enough to be within range of Branwen and Harry, Lamalha paused, casting a spell of her own.

Lamalha has used Rigid Thinking.

This is a level 3 invocation type spell that many Priests can use on single targets. Don't ask about the name of the spell, it's a mystery even to the Priests who use it. When under the

effects of the Rigid Thinking spell, the victim will randomly wander, attack the nearest person, or stand confused.

The spell struck Dynaheir, and a brief message that signaled she had failed to resist it sprang up in Harry's sight. The Rashemani witch cried out in pain as her spell rebounded and then her eyes went vacant and she stumbled back, turning and flailing at Edwin and Imoen before wandering off. As she did, Harry noticed her dot on his HUD's map had turned yellow.

Seeing that double hit to their back line, Harry paused for just a moment, shouting out, "Edwin, keep up the pressure on Mulahey, Khalid, close with him! Jaheira one offensive spell, then defensive!"

However, beside Harry, Branwen didn't seem to care what had happened to Dynaheir and had not paused. Now lashed out towards the two female clerics, launching into a... theological discussion as her blow sent Lamalha stumbling, although the woman had taken the strike on her shield. "Foul accursed worshiper of the mad one, I will slay you and your brother-in-vileness both!"

"HAH! You, I can see the touch of Tempus, that oaf on you, blonde one! Why not come to our side, I assure you that Lord Cyric will introduce you to far more refined sensations than that one," Zeela taunted.

"Never!" Branwen shouted, her Spiritual Hammer crashing down into Zeela's shield.

However, as Zeela set her feet and pushed back, this left Lamalha open, and she lashed out towards Harry with a spell, hoping to incapacitate him before he could join Branwen.

Lamalha has used Rigid Thinking.

Rigid Thinking has failed due to your high Willpower.

"You're going to have to do better than that!" Harry taunted as he joined Branwen, his sword flicking out.

Blocking the blow, Lamalha snarled at his dismissal of her spell. "Keep that bitch off me, Zeera, I'm going to break his will, and..."

That was as far as she got before Branwen's hammer slammed into her shield, sending her stumbling backwards almost off of the walkway. "You do not have enough time to bandy taunts with Harry right now. This priest of Tempus is in your face, you stupid, murder-worshipping whore!" Branwen barked.

Behind Harry, Khalid moved forward now that the way across to Mulahey was cleared. At the same time an Entangle spell struck. While unable to create vines from the water, the new walkway and a portion of the walkway around the central hump of dirt were covered by the vines. Mulahey and three of the Amazons, both long-range fighters and Zeera, found themselves captured in the vines, unable to move.

But this didn't stop them from being deadly. Imoen took a fire arrow to the chest but couldn't even move due to being held in place. She was defended by her Prince's ring, but even so, her health dipped, and Jaheira turned her attention to her even as a dart whizzed by her head. And the entangle didn't stop Mulahey, from using Animate Dead once more. Several skeleton warriors, both archers and halberd users, appeared. The halberd wielders moving forward to engage Khalid along the walkway, keeping him from their master.

At the same time, Edwin fell back with a cry as he took another arrow to the chest from Telka. Once more, Jaheira was instantly there pulling the arrow out and healing the wound, while the archer took an acid arrow from Xan in return. This caused her to scream as she convulsed and stumbled back, but Telka wasn't killed outright thanks to her enchanted leather armor, although portions of it did melt away.

As Harry and Branwen were busy trying to keep the two new clerics from launching further spells (although Zeela didn't seem in any rush to do so) Mulahey cackled. "Yes, yes, fight, fight for Lord Cyric! The Iron Throne will know who it's greatest servant is, Tazok, you bastard! I know you led these fools to me I know it!"

"Ah, now that is more like it," Imoen grumbled as she finally overcame the Hold Person spell on her. She instantly fired, targeting the dart Mulahey, interrupting another spell.

A second later, Dynaheir was back too, her own Willpower having let her slowly overcome the oddly named Rigid Thinking spell. But even as she started a spell, Dynaheir fell back once more with a cry of pain as a dart from the silent Maniera crashing into her head with punishing force.

Even as he turned the mace of Lamalha away, Harry noticed that Dynaheir's had been hit by the Blind debuff. The blood from the head wound she had just sustained had dripped into Dynaheir's eyes, blinding her as surely as if she had been hit by a spell.

Jaheira turned to her, while now healed, Edwin rejoined the battle targeting the few remaining grey oozes that were trying to assault Minsc, where he was standing protecting Harry and Branwen's back, unable to close with the new enemies. "Minsc, know that this is nothing to do with you, you are simply in the way of my mighty magic! I do not wish to have to deal with a berserker as well as these new enemies," Edwin shouted, sounding almost panicky. The Acid arrow to the chest had somewhat unmanned the haughty wizard.

The Thayan wizard's last fireball spell flew from his outstretched hands. This finished off the oozes while also wounding Minsc, fallen back grimacing at the flame that rolled over him.

Seeing his backfield having trouble with the skeleton archers and the Amazons, Khalid having trouble, Harry turned slightly away from the Amazons, taking a chance. Using his Item Box ability he switched out to his throwing hammers, and the next second he hurled one towards the archer, Telka. The hammer crashed into the slight woman and she was hurled off her feet with a cry of agony.

But Harry almost paid for this momentary distraction. Lamalha's mace darted past Branwen's block, aiming at Harry's back. He turned, grunting under the impact as he took the blow on his shield, thankful for his Sword and Shield Style buffs that made such moves automatic.

His other hand empty at present due to his having thrown the throwing hammer a moment ago, Harry tried to grab at her mace's shaft, trying to pull it out of position, but failed. Lamalha's strength was equal to his own and she simply pulled back out of range of his grasping hand and raised her mace high.

Before she could strike, Harry's tower shield interposed himself, taking the blow, although it lost ten points to its remaining Durability in the process. *Time to stop holding our spells back, I think!*

A quick Repairo spell from the same hand holding the shield restored it back to 40/100 Durability.

Seeing the brief flash of that magic, Lamalha's eyes widened before Harry's other hand filled with his longsword and he thrust forward. Her own skill with Sword and Shield Style allowed Lamalha to interpose her medium shield between the magical blade and her chest, deflecting it, and the two of them began to hammer at one another, pushing this way and that, unable to move much to either side thanks to the nature of the walkway and Branwen and Zeela struggling beside them.

Regardless, neither Amazon could get off another spell. Branwen was fully engaged with Zeela, the two of them exchanging almost as many taunts as blows, and while she was still moving Telka was still not rejoining the fight. That left Maniera and the skeleton archers to keep Edwin, Xan, Imoen and Dynaheir busy. But another Evil Entangle kept all three magic users from using magic, the wounds from the vines stopping them from concentrating. Imoen though was struck by another hold person spell, to her constrained shout of "FUCKing ooze sucking kobold arse licker!"

Minsc too was unable to get any headway. While the Chesley Crusher had allowed Minsc to damage the grey oozes, his clothing was still sizzling slightly by the heat of the fireball from Edwin despite a healing spell from Jaheira. And Mulahey had just used another spell, summoning more grey oozes out of the water this time. "Get them, get them my ooze, feed on their flesh."

"Khalid, Minsc fall back to the entryway and switch weapons. Branwen pull back, your Spiritual Hammer might be running out," Harry shouted. "Minsc, you and Xan give her cover fire. Dynaheir target the enemy adventurers!" Then Harry turned his attention to Lamalha, growling, "Cleave!"

The Power Strike crashed into Lamalha's defenses, nearly cutting her shield in two, and causing her to fall to her knees. Harry then hammered down with several more strikes, which Lamalha barely blocked.

Obeying his orders, Minsc unequipped his halberd. This let him move too fast for the grey oozes to catch. The next second he had an arrow notched and firing along with Khalid and Xan as Jaheira began another spell, only to cry in pain as a flame arrow smacked into her chest. It didn't penetrate her chain mail, but it still hurt, interrupting her spell.

Harry's fierce defense allowed Branwen to retreat, although she was already bleeding from several wounds she had taken from Zeela. But standing alone against Zeela and Lamalha instantly proved tough.

"Power strike!" Lamalha bellowed as she swung her mace up towards Harry's chest. Her medium shield was in shambles and her arm bleeding badly, but her mace crashed into Harry, bypassing his shield and breaking ribs hurling him backward.

You have been hit by **Power Strike**.

The blunt weapon version of **Cleave**, this acts like a critical hit, doing twice as much damage.

The next blow nearly took him in the face, but Harry's hastily raised sword met the shaft of the mace, and then Harry rushed forward, pushing her off balance. "Distraction please!"

"Incoming!" Dynaheir shouted, even as her Stinking Cloud flashed out to encompass a quarter of the cavern. The spell caught both Maniera and Telka, knocking out the two long-range attackers, although it didn't catch the two female clerics, who continued to press Harry hard.

Thankfully, this quickly made a difference elsewhere. Minsc and Khalid downed several skeleton archers in quick succession, while Jaheira and Branwen combined their efforts to get ahead of the wounds the rest of the company had taken. A moment later, Branwen resummoned her Spiritual Hammer and she, Khalid and Minsc made their way forward.

But as they did, Mulahey showed that he understood who the greater threat was. He ignored Harry and the other front line combatants for now, concentrating on lobbing spells over his head. Two more Hold Person spells flashed from his hands in quick succession, crashing into the very unlucky (and now wildly cursing) Imoen and Edwin. Although Edwin threw the spell on him off, this was followed by another spell that Harry had never seen before.

Mulahey has used **Cause Serious wounds**.

A level three Priest spell that is the antithesis of Cure Serious Wounds, this spell saps the health of the target for seventeen hit points. Normally a touch-based spell, Mulahey is able to use it at long-range due to his Dungeon Master status.

This spell ignores all armor bar magical resistance and even then, only holy-type magical resistance matters. It also cures intoxication.

Minsc took the hit and yowled in pain, stumbling to a halt. but Branwen quickly ended her own race forward, using one of her own spells to heal him up. But another Cause Serious wounds and Hold person combination hit them. The first one removed hit Khalid, and the second slammed into Xan, immobilizing him as the first had Imoen just as she was about to use some spells of her own.

But Edwin had switched to Magic Missiles, and he and Dynaheir's magic missiles crashed into Mulahey, ending his spellcasting and causing him to go to one knee as he pulled out a potion of healing for the first time. He downed two of them and by the time he had done so, Branwen and Minsc and moved forwards, eager to help their friend. Khalid though was still wounded, with his wife looking after him.

Seeing them come, Lamalha and Zeela fell back with Lamalha trying another Rigid Thinking, then a hold person on Harry as Zeela tried to hold Harry in place. But Harry ignored them all. "Edwin, finish off the long range fighters before they get up. Dynaheir, Jaheira, free Xan and Imoen and then concentrate on Mulahey."

Even as he spoke, Harry pushed Zeela back. Her mace was pushed to one side, and Harry knocked her off the edge of the causeway into the water, causing her to yell in anger even as he pushed past her to engage with Lamalha, stopping her next spell with a curse. "Blast you, I will send your soul to Cyric!"

The now bra-clad fighter/thief who had proven so deadly with her arrows took another acid arrow this time from Edwin to her chest, she shrieked and flailed, falling to the ground and trying to get the acid off her, ripping off her now-overcome enchanted leather armor and tossing it aside.

This left Maniera practically naked from the waist up, but alas, only Edwin of the menfolk she was facing was in any position to notice, and he was still furious about the arrow to the chest he had previously taken. "Your feminine wiles do nothing to me wench! Die and know the power of a mage will always..."

“Shut up and fight!” Dynaheir shouted, using a Magic Missile on Mulahey as she saw him trying to use another spell. The bolts of raw magic impacted Mulahey, causing him to falter, and fall back slightly into the opening to his private quarters.

Lamalha had yet to turn away from Harry, but without her friend, Harry’s larger shield, and better blade came into their own, forcing her entirely back onto the defensive as bits were chipped out of her mace, slowly ruining it to match her shield. This in turn allowed him to strike his chest with his offhand as he shouted out, “Turn undead!”

The holy aura of a paladin crashed out from him at that point, forcing the Skeletons holding off Minsc and Khalid on the main walkway to try and throw off his aura. It also caught the last of the skeleton archers. Both ran for the far end of the room, no longer taking part in that battle. One of the warriors completely disintegrated, while two others backed away slightly from him but did not fully break. One though did fall into the water, disappearing beneath its surface.

This cost Harry, as a blow from his opponent’s mace caught him on his side, nearly hurling him off the causeway in turn. Grimacing in pain, he backed away from her, moving closer to Mulahey.

By that point, Maniera had breathed her last was dead thanks to Edwin, but Zeela had been able to get to her feet to one side of Lamalha and Harry’s confrontation. Branwen, who had rushed forward too fast, leaving Minsc and Khalid behind, however was waiting for her. Before Zeera could get to her feet, Branwen’s spiritual hammer crashed down, knocking Zeela flat.

A moment later, Telka also fell unable to talk dodged Dynaheir’s next Magic Missile fusillade slamming into her. The spell caused her health to drop to nothing as huge holes in her chest and head exploded on impact, dropping her in a welter of blood.

This let Mulahey Animate more skeletons, purely skeleton warriors this time, putting between Harry and his fellows. But Harry still had his Turn undead spell going and now with Zeera down, told Branwen, “Take over!”

Nodding Branwen moved forward, her energy hammer crashing into Lamalha’s mace and pushing her back.

Harry in turn moved to help Khalid and Minsc against the warriors. His Turn Undead aura pushed into their number and the trio finally reached the wider walkway

around Mulahey's cave. There Harry began to dodge and strike at the undead wildly, renewing his Turn Undead and sending several of them retreating, getting in the way of the others.

For a few moments, all Harry could do was push them, moving this way and that, striking out and letting his Holy aura do its work. His sword sliced off several limbs, and stabbed one undead through the chest, dissipating whatever magic had created it while Imoen and Xan fired into the mass of undead and Minsc charged forward on Harry's heels. Even as busy as he was, Harry had to grin at his shout of "Begone back to your rest and let the good earth have you skeletons, lest you get the buttkicking of your un-lives! Go for their tendons Boo, their tendons!"

Meanwhile another series of Magic Missiles from Edwin struck Mulahey and an arrow from the now-recovered Khalid. Streaks of blood began to fall from small holes in Mulahey's armor, signifying the damage he was taking, even though as a normal Priest of his level those attacks should have killed him. Instead he fell back with a shriek, and desperately pulled at a bracelet he was wearing. "By the power of Cyric, come to me!"

Mulahey has activated Summon Creature through an object dedicated to the Evil God Cyric.

While you cannot examine the item until it is in your hand, it is presumably a high level item. What downsides it might have for anyone not of the Cyric faith who attempts to wear it is unknown, but knowing Cyric, probably very bad.

Two ghouls appeared between them, and instantly they began reaching for Harry, forcing him back. "Bugger!"

Harry fell back to the others and grateful to find that Jaheira had moved up with Khalid and Minsc. The skeletons they were fighting will were proving to be formidable thanks the wounds they had previously taken slowing them down.

From behind the frontline combatants Jaheira used one of her last healing spells on Harry, who shouted his thanks to her before using Turn Undead again. This time, the impact was even more damaging. Although none of the skeletons disintegrated entirely, nearly all of them broke, running away from the combatants, and Harry, Minsc and now Khalid raced after them, cutting them down as they moved towards where Mulahey had retreated around the walkway surrounding his house.

This allowed Harry to see along the pathway which the four female assassins had used. There, Branwen who had been pushing Lamalha had run into another trap. The bear trap caught her leg, causing her to stumble and cry out in pain. Lamalha quickly took advantage, her mace smashing into Branwen's chest and sending her to the ground with a howl of agony.

Standing above her, the priestess of Cyric raised her mace once more, shouting out gleefully "One more death to mark my love for you, my lord!"

Harry turned away from his fight, and leaped across the intervening distance, knowing even as he did he would be too late. Then Jaheira was there. She had raced forward behind Khalid and now covered the dozen steps between her and Branwen's form. As Harry was midleap Jaheira slammed a Nature's Call spell into Lamalha from near point-blank range. The woman shrieked, falling backwards, but her high health pool and plate mail allowed her to deal with the damage.

Then Harry landed, and before Lamalha could defend herself his magical sword flashed, stabbing. The thrust caught Lamalha through her gorget, piercing through her throat and out the other side. Lamalha finally began to gurgle her last, while Minsc and Khalid continued to battle against the undead.

"Nice save!" Harry congratulated Jaheira, and then without a word turned, readying himself to leap across the water once more

But Zeela, who had previously been dealt a death blow from Branwen, wasn't fully dead yet. Protected by his reformed skeletons Mulahey now lashed out with a spell that reached out for Zeela and roused her from the floor. And although he did pay for it in the form of an arrow and sling stone crashing into him from Imoen and Xan, the spell struck.

Mulahey has cast Final Act: Puppetry on Zeela.

This an extremely dark spell, which Mulahey has created during his tenure here as a Dungeon Boss. Only the extremely high magical energy he possess in that position allowed him to create this spell. That and his own dark mind and desires.

This spell takes the control of the mind of a dying individual, forcing them to attack or do a similarly simple command embedded in the spell as a final act of defiance and contempt by the caster to the dying individual.

Remember to always check if your opponents are really dead folks. No one likes being stabbed by a 'corpse' while rifling through its pockets for change.

Jaheira had her back turned to the woman, kneeling down beside Branwen, and Harry had turned away. Neither saw Zeela rising to her feet until it was too late. Khalid shouted out, "Jaheira I, lookout, behind you!"

But it was too late. Even as Jaheira turned, dagger no one knew the woman had been holding stabbed out. Getting directly underneath Jaheira's chain mail the strike stabbed deep, and Harry watched in shock as her health dropped from the high yellow deep into the red with that one strike.

Jaheira dropped to the ground as blood burst out from under her chain mail and her mouth, her to the floor. Zeela too fell dead, her body collapsing off the causeway into the water below once more, and permanently this time.

"JAHEIRA!!" Khalid shrieked, racing towards them, leaving Minsc on his own to forge through the undead still between him and Mulahey

"Damn it man, get back in there with Minsc, finish Mulahey off! I've got this!" Harry bellowed. Khalid balked, but turned back, only this time had let Mulahey begin another spell. And Harry's leap had brought his aura of Turn Undead away from the skeleton warriors, meaning they quickly rallied, holding the two warriors off despite Khalid venting his fury on them like a man possessed.

That spell struck among Imoen and the others and its impact was incredible.

Mulahey has used Unholy blight.

This spell calls upon energy from the Negative Energy Plane in order to open a channel between it and the targets. The result is that any good-aligned beings within the spell's area of effect take 4 points of damage per level of the caster, or half damage upon a successful dodge. This damage will continue until the spell dissipates after five minutes or is dispelled.

The spell once more caused both magic-users to break off their own spells. Imoen fell screaming as the pain of the spell wracked her body, while Dynaheir stumbled to her knees with a howl. Xan stumbled crying out, while Edwin ignored it. Another Magic Missile lanced out, hitting Mulahey and pushing him back.

Ignoring all this, Harry quickly knelt beside Jaheira, reaching for the dagger. But Jaheira grabbed his arm, shaking her head. "Let, let me cast another spell, and then pull it out."

Harry would have replied, but he saw some kind of spell coming towards him from Mulahey, a Cause Serious wounds spell, the spells a jagged black and deep umber color the shape of a diamond. Even as he read the description of the spell further, Harry acted, lashing out with his own spell, a Stupefy. The blast of red energy crashed into the incoming spell, dissipating it.

You have used the Dispel Magic Blood Mage Version. – 10 to health.

Grimacing as his health dropped into the yellow, Harry glared over at Mulahey, who was still casting spells before glancing back to the doorway. To his dismay, Harry saw Edwin down now victim of a Hold Person spell. Dynaheir was leaning against the wall bleeding from an arrow to her shoulder and she seemed entirely out of it, while Imoen was groaning slowly pushing herself to her feet, her bow in hand and firing as Xan moved forward, muttering something under his breath Harry couldn't hear, an arrow lodged in his leg.

Looking around wildly, Harry realized with a start that the skeleton archers who his first use of turn undead had scared off had come back to the fight. *God damn it, I should have remembered them!* But then he was turning back to Jaheira, nodding to her. The two of them worked together to pull the dagger in Jaheira's spleen out, healing the damage as they did, using up the last of Jaheira's spells.

As they finished Harry saw one of the Skeleton Archers finally collapse having taken too much damage for the spell within its form to keep it going. That left one last skeleton archer, three skeleton warriors and Mulahey himself.

"GRAAAAA!!!" Khalid roared, a sound that Harry would never have thought could come from the normally almost-timid warrior as he smashed one of those skeleton warriors down before racing along the narrow walkway towards Mulahey. Mulahey saw him coming, and desperately raised his mace trying to block the first blow and then get past Khalid for some reason back to where he had begun the battle despite that taking him toward Minsc who had just finished off another skeleton warrior.

Khalid still couldn't use cleave or any of the higher warrior abilities, but Mulahey had taken so much damage before this that his chest plate looked like Swiss cheese and

he had used his last healing potion before this, and it hadn't brought his health up past the halfway point. He tried to fight back, but soon, his mace, and the hand holding it, was sent flying, and Khalid ran him through, stabbing his sword deeply through one of the rents in the man's plate mail.

Mulahey fell, collapsing to one side as the spell holding his skeletons in place faded, and the battle was finally over.

"Minsc, go help Dynaheir and take Branwen over there with you," Harry ordered, knowing if he didn't Minsc would just do the first thing anyway. "We'll regroup over there."

As Minsc obeyed and Khalid moved towards Harry and Jaheira, Harry saw Xan moving in the other direction. Gently handing Jaheira over to Khalid, Harry moved to join him. As he reached the rocking chair that Mulahey had been sitting in when they arrived, he noted that the cave wasn't all that deep. Instead of being a true cave, it was only a few yards deep, the end of it visible. There was a small kitchen of all things, what looked like a small larder, a cot, a tiny bookcase and a large chest.

While Xan made for the chest, Harry murmured, "Remember Knock, yeah?" to the elf, moving past him to Mulahey's body. Touching Mulahey's corpse, Harry instantly became aware of what was on his person. This included his ruined armor, weapons two letters, which Harry pocketed without looking at right now and several items his Identify power went to work on as he touched them.

Talos' Gift: the Boots of Grounding

When a favorite Stormherald was murdered there, the Fortress of the Starshine Peninsula came under the attention of Talos. Talos promised the destruction of the city by multiple enchantments, causing earthquakes, tidal waves and storms. But Talos was even crueler than that, bestowing upon one random man these boots so that he could live through the god's wrath and share the city's fate with those he met. True to Talos' desires, these boots carry the tale of the god's wrath.

These boots bestow +50% electrical resistance

Shaking his head at the tale, Harry put the boots in his bag for now. The next magical item was the Ring of Holiness, which thankfully didn't have much of a backstory, but its impact was greater. It allowed the wearer the ability to memorize an extra divine

spell for each level of the user up to four extra spells when the user had reached level seven.

The third thing made Harry's skin crawl just to touch it. It was the symbol of Cyric, a gold starburst with a silver skull in the middle, its eyes rubies, its mouth a diamond, hanging from a gold necklace. Shivering Harry placed it in his Item Box, ignoring the "DING" noise that just went off and the notification that came with it.

That and the notes interested him, but he would go over them later. Just like after the Gnoll Fortress, Harry was too tired to care about the feat they'd accomplished, and his party too battered to celebrate. Yet even owning these notes was enough for the Advanced Adventurer System to award him.

Congratulations, you have cleared the dungeon, Nashkel Mines!

You have killed the Dungeon Boss and destroyed all the Heart Stones (4) within.

You have completed 2/3 Optional Objectives:

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

The kobolds have been given large amounts of an alchemical compound to use on the iron ore within the mine. This is the same type that is used on iron that has already been mined and sent off. This implies a connection to the various bandit groups and Tranzig.

You have gathered at least five samples of the alchemical compound! This is enough to prove your words to both the Mine Boss and Nashkel's Mayor.

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

While few were still alive by the time you entered the mines, you were able to save all the miners within.

Rewards:

+8,200 experience for every party member.

Note: Every party member will receive the experience points upon exiting and the mines reverting to normal.

Sighing Harry turned away. He was back in front of the entrance to the small living area quickly, then blinked, and shouted, Wait, don't touch that!"

Turning from where he had used Knock to open the chest, Xan had moved over to the bookcase, reaching forward. In his hand was a long, brightly sparkling blade, like someone had taken a sliver of the moonlight and made it into a blade. But more importantly, Xan did not use Knock or any other spell to check for traps.

As Harry had feared, a trap activated, and Xan took a flame arrow straight to the chest.

"GAAHHH!" Xan screamed, stumbling back. His health pool was large enough for him to live through the strike though, and he stumbled into the side the hammock. Collapsing back half-on, half-off the bed, he smashed into a lever hidden between it and the inner wall of Mulahey's small living area.

A second later, Harry felt something shift underneath them, and water began to break through the sides of that cavern as well as one area directly above them. Some of those streams were small, but many were not, the water fast-moving and the water swiftly rose throughout the cavern.

"What in the world!?" Imoen yelped, stumbling back from the walkway she had been about to step out on, pushing Dynaheir back.

"That vile beast he had one last working of evil to sink the feet of those doing good!" Minsc answered, rushing back, pushing Imoen and Dynaheir away from the edge of the water, which was now **very** rapidly rising to flood the other cavern.

Not able to swim it was only because Harry had the Gamer's Mind skill, that he didn't panic. Because of that skill, he had the thought of un-equipping all of his armor and weapons into his Item Box, making him much lighter than previously. "Run for it!" the now unarmored Harry shouted, racing forward, Xan on his heels.

In front of him a water spout from the side of the cavern caught Khalid and Jaheira, knocking them both to their knees. The two half-elves tried to get to their feet as the water continued to rise, but a stone from the now collapsing ceiling caught them both. Khalid fell to one side, Jaheira the other, and while Khalid mostly fell onto the now inches-unwater walkway, Jaheira was not so lucky. She fell into the water, sinking quickly.

Harry reached the bloody-faced Khalid, and grabbing his shoulder, Harry hurled him towards Xan, who had just raced past. Kneeling down into the water, Harry, grabbed at Jaheira, trying to pull her up before she could disappear. "Keep running!"

"J, Jaheira, no!" Khalid shouted, even as the water reached their waists and Harry's lowered neck. The man desperately did the same thing Harry had done, un-equipping all of his armor and other items in order to allow himself to push through the insanely cold water. But even so both he and Xan, with their lighter bodies, were barely able to keep their footing, let alone move. It was only by working together that they could move.

"Get them out Minsc, get them out!" Harry shouted, heaving Jaheira up to him, and Harry saw she was unconscious.

Luckily that status allowed him to strip her of her armor just like he had Mulahey's items a moment before. This made it easier for Harry to carry her forward, after the retreating Xan and the still protesting Khalid.

But by the time he did, the rest of the ceiling was coming down, and more water was pouring in. A stone crashed into Harry's shoulder, and Harry grimaced even as he continued on. But staring through the falling rocks, he saw the way forward was now completely blocked by falling stone or water. The last thing Harry saw of his party was Xan cold-cocking Khalid and dragging him off with a reluctant Edwin helping him, a look of utterly forlorn self-recrimination on Xan's face.

As the water all around him reached his neck and Harry felt his feet leaving the walkway beneath him, Harry had a wild idea. Using a spell Imoen had taught him just in case they ran into any noxious gases or spells like the Stinking Cloud, Harry he touched Jaheira's head, and then his own. The Bubbleheaded Charm activated, moving over both of their head, but dropping Harry's health pool into the yellow.

You have used the Blood Mage spell, Bubblehead Charm, twice. -30 to health.

Then the water was washing him away, and Harry only had a few seconds to hope that the bubbleheaded charm would hold, and that the water would carry them somewhere. Then the dark waters closed in all around him and Harry grimaced as he felt himself picked up by the swirling current of the river, grimacing as his shoulder thumped into a rock in the water. "Oh, this is sooo going to bloody suck!!!"

OOOOOOO

At first, Imoen and the others were too busy running to really take stock of themselves, let alone the fact they had been forced to leave two of their own behind. The cave-in caused by the released water continued, following behind them as they ascended to the segment of the dungeon that the kobolds had created. Indeed, it became worse, as the kobolds seemed to have burrowed between two underground rivers, one coming in from the side, the other from below. At every intersection, the water would be cascading along, so fast it sometimes took Imoen, Xan and Dynaheir's feet out from under them rising as it did.

This trend continued until they were back through the kobold's entrance to the main mines and even then, the water continued to spread, gushing out after them into the mines. Only when they were back to the second level of the mines did they finally leave the water behind them enough that Imoen was willing to slow down.

"Hold up, everybody. I think, I think that we've finally left the immediate danger behind us," Imoen said as the others came up the steps behind her, while Imoen turned her attention to the few notifications Harry's AAS had sent her way. *I haven't gotten any notifications about any of my traps going off, and with that earlier notification we all saw, that means we did it. We cleared the mine. No more spawning kobolds or anything else, so the route back's going to be clear. But Harry...*

She shook that thought off, nodding to Xan as he helped Dynaheir along. Early on in their pell-mell race to safety the elf had passed Khalid over to Minsc. The far larger, stronger barbarian Ranger now carried the still-unconscious Khalid on his back as if he barely noticed the unarmored half-elf's weight while Xan struggled even now to help the wounded Dynaheir along.

Edwin slumped next to Imoen, his face and body marked by blood, his robes soaked up to above the waist from the water. Altogether, the normally immaculate Thayvian looking quite bedraggled, and out-of-sorts. *Then again, we all are, to various degrees*, Imoen thought ruefully, looking down at herself. Whereas the water had come up to Edwin's waist at one point, Imoen had been knocked over into it several times, and looked like a drowned rat with slightly better taste in clothing. *Screw my low strength points, seriously, screw them right up the bum!*

Edwin had roused himself as they entered the mine proper, and he had time to downed the two healing potions he had bought himself in Nashkel. That meant he was actually the best healed of the party right now, including their temporary companion Xan and Imoen herself, who hadn't taken many actual injuries in the battle against Mulahey and the quartet Imoen would forever label mentally as the psycho sisters. Although of course, he didn't have very many spells left to him.

Branwen was sporting a battered leg and several other wounds along with still battered ribs and a bump to her noggin and several deep cuts to her head, blood matting her hair even now from when she had been knocked down by one of the evil priestesses. But after having been woken up by Jaheira before the disaster, the cleric of Tempus bore her wounds stoically, even laughing when Imoen had asked about them. "In the storm God's name, one must be strong, and ignore minor injuries like this."

It was Khalid though who Imoen was really worried about. Now she moved to him and found that Xan had done a very good job of knocking the half-elf out. He was still entirely out of it, though she felt he wouldn't be for much longer.

"Okay, does anyone have any objection to Branwen and Dynaheir getting the last of our healing berries?" Harry had split them between himself and Imoen, knowing she might need them as their scout along with giving her several healing potions.

And thank god we bought so many of those from Nalin. I wish we had more on hand rather than in Harry's item box, but at least we're all still healthy enough to keep moving, even though the idea of fighting again is not a pleasant one. And they might be of better use for Harry than us anyway.

None of the others objected while Minsc simply beamed at the largesse. But while Imoen had taken a few knocks to her back and head as they ran away, she hadn't been hurt much in the actual fight. *Freaking Hold Person spells, why was it always me or Edwin, huh?*

Suddenly, Imoen and Minsc were both startled almost to the point of jumping when a notification blared across their eyes.

Warning: you have moved too far away from the Party Leader to continue to share party abilities or bonuses. To partake in the Party abilities or form formations once more, you must be in the presence of the Party Leader.

The two of them looked at one another, but Imoen shook her head when Minsc made to speak, gesturing to Xan. Xan wasn't going to be part of the party for much longer, and given his loyalty was to Everska and his work as a Greycloak, Imoen didn't want the man to know anything more about their abilities than necessary. *The guy might've seen both me and Harry using our Blood Magic spells in the fight, but maybe not. Best to keep him in the dark, anyway.*

So instead of commenting on the message, Imoen gestured down the tunnel. "Once Dynaheir and Brannie have eaten the berries, we need to keep going."

"Do not ever call me Brannie again!" Branwen growled around a mouthful of healing berries, then burped genteelly. "Excuse me."

For some reason that struck Imoen as funny, and she laughed, shaking her head. But her laughter died quickly.

"Should we not wake up that one?" Edwin asked, gesturing to the unconscious form of Khalid, who Minsc was carrying over his shoulder. Minsc had found out, much to his grumbling annoyance, that unconscious individuals could not be carried in his item box. Still, even now he didn't seem much put out by Khalid's actual weight, and had stood there patiently as Dynaheir and Branwen ate the healing berries.

"Wait a moment," Branwen ordered, moving back a few paces down to where the water had finally stopped rising through the spiral ramp leading down to the next floor.

Soon she was back, and when Minsc placed him down on the ground, the priest of Tempus dumped a canteen of water over Khalid's head. He woke up with a gasp, staring around him, then groaning as his wounds instantly started to bother him.

"Easy Khalid, you've been battered, hell, so have the rest of us. That hit to your noggin knocked you the hell out," Imoen soothed, winking over at the others and Xan, who nodded in thanks for her covering for him.

"W, w, what, what happened?" he asked, reaching up to his head, his hand coming away with blood.

While the others might have tried to be diplomatic, Edwin had no such compunction. "The fool elf over there was caught in a trap, and then stumbled into some kind of dead man's switch. It somehow started a cave-in by filling the mine with water."

Khalid frowned for a moment, then nodded, the memory coming back to him, and then the others watched as his eyes widened suddenly as he looked around. “J, J, Jaheira! She fell in! Where...”

“We do not know,” Branwen soothed the man, moving over and using her final spell on the man’s head.

“W, wh, where is Jaheira?” Khalid said more slowly. “And w, w, where is Harry?”

“Gone, the pair of them,” Edwin shrugged, almost as if he did not care, but he was watching Imoen and Minsc closely, his eyes almost hidden by his red hood. “Drowned in the river. We might be able to somehow divine the course of the river, find their bodies and revive them, but even that is a low chance.”

“Edwin,” Imoen her voice a snap. “Shut up. There is a time for hard truth, and then there is a time for hope. This is a time for hope, and it will remain that way until we are up and out of here.”

“Verily, Imoen speaks truly! Minsc and Boo both believe that Jaheira and Harry are not the types to be felled by a mere river, no matter how dank and dark it might be. We should have hope my friends.” With that, Minsc moved over and helped Khalid to his feet.

But while Khalid allowed Minsc to do so, his eyes alighted on Xan, and both Edwin’s words and the memory of what had caused the cave-in flashed across his mind. He leaped forward with an inarticulate cry, grabbing the morose elf and shaking him, his voice somewhere between a hack and shriek. “You it’s y, ,y, your fault. You caused this. My w, w, wife, Jaheira, Harry, my friend, **you!**”

“Calm down, Khalid,” Imoen shouted, grabbing at his shoulder as Minsc did the same. “You’ve got reason to be angry but taking it out on Xan isn’t going to bring them back. Besides,” Imoen hissed into Khalid’s ear, low enough that even he had trouble hearing her, “I think they’re both still alive! We just saw a notification a moment ago, and if Harry was dead, we wouldn’t have.”

That seemed to calm Khalid down, but he still glared hatred at Xan. “Why d, d, didn’t you wait!?”

Freed of the half-elf’s grip, Xan sighed, holding up his hands and seemed about to say something when Edwin of all people spoke up in agreement with Khalid. “The half elf

is right. If not for Xan's haste in trying to find his gaudy little sword, and his eponymous Greycloak, we would not be as battered as we are, and our companions would still be here. Much as I hate to admit it, I'm going to miss Harry's presence if not for his food, then his somewhat acceptable humor."

Xan glared. "My Moonblade is a part of me wizard! How would you feel if someone had sundered you from half of your magical powers. That is the same kind of thing"

"You expect me to believe that a physical object like a Moonblade, no matter how amazing, can be as important to you as magic is a powerful wizard such as myself? You surely are a simian then! Do you think your bananas are so important?" Edwin snarked.

Xan growled, but turned away from Edwin's smirk, staring at them all. "I apologize," he announced. "I would rather that my mistake had brought my own doom down on me, rather than on your companions, And I would make amends if possible."

"Can you find them? "Dynaheir asked, also scowling. She had taken several head wounds since the start of the fight against Mulaehy one from a dart which it blinded her, another from a vine which had sliced her cheek, and finally, a third from a stone from the collapsing roof which had nearly brained her and would have if not for Imoen pushing her aside with just enough force to avoid the stone cracking her in the back of the head. That, plus the amount of exertion since had not put her in the best of moods.

Although, it did go further than that, as Imoen knew. *My spirit quest, my reason for being here in the Sword Coast revolves around Harry, and only to a lesser extent Imoen. If he has died, my quest will go unfulfilled, and a great evil will rise in this world,* the Rashemani witch snarled internally.

Imoen nodded. "Sorry Xan," *but not really*, she added mentally "but I think you trying to pay us back right now would be a bad idea for our group dynamic. We'll just say you owe us, and we can go our separate ways."

"I suppose that kind of thing would be normal given my bad luck." Grimacing, Xan looked back at Khalid, saying something in Elvish.

Whatever it was, Khalid responded hotly, and Xan finally nodded a final time. "Very well. I acknowledge my debt to you all, a debt twice spoken and true. I hope that we meet again, I may pay off this debt."

To Imoen's annoyance, that oath didn't spawn a notification. *Oh, that's not good. Could those have faded out too with the party abilities, skill sharing and such? Damn it.*

With none of the others saying anything bar Edwin's harrumph and sneering look, Xan turned, and made his way off away from group, heading up towards the entrance to the mines.

"Minsc wonders, does the foolish elf understand that we are all going the same direction for now?" the bald Ranger paused as Boo squeaked in his ear. as he did, Imoen noticed the little animal was somehow the only one of them dry, and wondered how that had happened before deciding she didn't want to know. "Boo has also mentioned that he needs some cheering up and mentioned a few herbs from Rasheman, but alas, we don't have any on us."

"Let's let Xan have a bit of a head start. How he'll explain himself to the guards or the mine boss, I don't know, and I don't care," Imoen said dryly.

"Bah, the simpleton's Greycloak is enchanted. It will allow him to pass unseen at need for a certain amount of time."

"L, I, let's just go," Khalid growled.

With Khalid's oppressive anger and sadness sitting between them, the rest of the trip back up to the mine entrance was a silent affair.

Seeing the sun ahead of them about a turn of the glass later was a welcome relief, as was the sight of the guards situated within the initial cavern leading out of the mine. The voice of the mine master when they exited the mines, however, was not nearly as welcome as the sight of the sun high above. "Well, what did you discover? Can I move my miners and slaves back into the minds? Time is money you know."

"Little man, if I had any spells left to my name, I would be torturing your mind with the powers of the Arcana right now," Edwin growled, his fingers twitching. "Alas for my own sensibilities, I do not have such spells."

"Shockingly, I find myself in agreement with the red wizard. Do not get used to this," Dynaheir drawled shooting a glance toward Edwin before without warning swinging her staff in an arc that brought the end flashing an inch in front of the mine owner's Emerson nose, sending him falling to the ground with a cry of shock. "Can you not count,

little man?!" she bellowed as she stood over him. "We have lost two of our number! And yet for all of that, we have emerged victorious, with the **dungeon** destroyed."

Emerson's eyes widened. "The, the mine wasn't a dungeon," he stammered. "That's impossible."

"Tell that to the number of respawn points we had to deal with or the number of Heart Stones. The number of kobolds down there couldn't have sustained themselves even if they ate all the missing miners," Imoen growled, shaking her head. "And then, we found the man who was behind it all." From there, she explained the events in the dungeon, going into detail when it came to the battle against the Dungeon Boss and the four female assassins. She didn't mention Xan though, seeing as he had somehow made his escape without Emerson apparently having even seen him. "Send someone down to the third level if you don't believe me."

Nearby two guards had moved forward early on in her tail, their halberds raised angrily at what they saw as a group of adventurers threatening their boss. However, Emerson had waved them off, listening intently. Dynaheir also handed over examples of the green alchemical muck, and examples of both the contaminated ore and the regular version. While he simply set the green bottle aside, Emerson was a mine boss for a reason and knew his ore. He could tell that there was something off with the contaminated ore, frowning in puzzlement at the smell of the contaminated sample.

"Pour that muck on a weapon if you don't believe it," Imoen offered.

"I will. You have more samples?" When Imoen nodded, Emerson went on. "Good. Take one of the pickaxes over there too, to help you create an example for the mayor if you need it." He respectfully bowed his head to Imoen and the others. "I'll apologize for my words. I had no idea that my mine had turned into a dungeon. None of the other adventuring teams survived to tell us about it."

At that point, Emerson proved to be more than fair. He wrote out a message on a piece of parchment a guard got for him, handing it back to Imoen. "I'm sorry for your losses." He added. "Hopefully Mayor Denard will realize you went above and beyond and add more money to your bounty."

Imoen just nodded, stone-faced, but she was in no way prepared to write off Harry or Jaheira. The reason being that she honestly didn't think she would still have her Item Box or gotten a notification a moment ago indicating she had gained respect from

Emerson. While the notification was so unimportant Imoen had brushed it aside unread, the fact of that notification appearing was not. *And the moment I am away from this lot, I will be using the point me spell to be certain.*

She looked over at the others as they left, the mine boss organizing the miners into teams. From what she heard, they would be going into the mine and see how high the waters had risen. They would have to take new and far more safety measures against cave-ins with such a massive amount of water directly beneath them, but Imoen thought they might be able to get the first two levels of the mine back in working order despite that. It would probably take months though, depending on how much of that alchemical gunk had been used on them.

Which means the iron still won't be flowing for at least half a year, damn it. Hopefully though, the idea that someone is behind the shortage in and of itself keep at least the money grabbers of Amn from deciding that war is the only recourse. Even if we don't have much evidence beyond Mulahey's words and the alchemical concoction. Still, they should be able to prove that someone is behind this trouble, if not who.

Turning back to the others, Imoen said brusquely, "We'll head to the mayor's house first, get our money, and then head to the temple. We'll get ourselves healed up as much is possible, before talking about our options going forward."

Both of the wizards instantly shook their heads, glared at one another, and then turned back to Imoen. "No." Dynaheir answered. "We're all on the verge of exhaustion, and we need our spells whatever we do from this point on. Remember Imoen, both priests and wizards need to rest to regain our memorized spells, unlike you and Harry"

"Further, we must decide on whether or not we can even find our wayward fellows, I believe that they are both dead, and thus out of our reach," Edwin added bluntly.

Imoen smirked, knowing something the others didn't, while Minsc just looked confused, obviously not having thought through the reality of seeing status notifications still. Khalid too was looking confused, but in his case Imoen didn't think he had seen the original notification about their moving away from Harry, so it was understandable. "Harry's too dumb to die. Besides, haven't you ever heard, the guy who saves the girl always lives."

“Those aren’t tall tales we live in Imoen,” Branwen said sighing sadly even as Imoen nee Tonks tried hard not to burst out into laughter. “In truth, I would rather to doughty warriors such as they lived as well, but...”

“Let’s wait until we get some healing, talk to the mayor, and are back in our room in the inn,” Imoen said firmly. “Then we can at least make this decision with clear heads, and not sore bodies all right? Suffice it to say though, I think that both Jaheira and Harry are still alive, and I wager I’ll be able to prove it once I have enough health points to use without being in danger of keeling over.”

That made both wizards look at her in interest, and Imoen once more held back a snicker. *For all their differences, the normal wizard’s love of knowledge seems to connect the two of them.*

“I, I, Imoen,” Khalid began, “I must...”

“Dynaheir’s right, we need some rest, Or do you think you can suddenly teleport to wherever Jaheira is?” Imoen barked back, now getting in his face in turn.

“H, h, how are you so calm!?” Khalid shot back. “H, h, Harry is...”

“Harry is my brother from an unknown mother, but I can’t serve him or anyone else by rushing off willy-nilly,” Imoen said simply, shrugging her shoulders. “But again, I know Harry’s alive. And if he is, Jaheira might be too.” Unfortunately she couldn’t be certain of that last bit.

“How a, a, are you so certain?” Khalid scoffed.

Since they were alone once more among those already in the know, Imoen explained the notifications she had seen both a moment ago during their talk with Emerson and the one about their moving too far away from Harry. “I don’t think I would have seen that if Harry was dead. In that case, I think the best I could hope for would be the AAS transferring to me. Worst case, it would just stop working entirely.

“Hmmpf, the AAS as you put it, is very useful indeed, although I remain somewhat annoyed that I must come to trust and respect a would-be god bothering sword-slinger such as Harry to get anything out of it,” Edwin grumbled, yet he looked happy enough. “Still, it is good to know that a chef of his skill is not yet gone from this world.”

Snorting at that, Imoen looked over at Khalid. “Does that satisfy you?”

“F, F, For now,” Khalid grumbled.

Unfortunately, Denard attempted to prevaricate, ignoring the very idea that the mines which fueled his town’s economy could have possibly become a dungeon. But the evidence was irrefutable both on that, and the idea of some larger conspiracy being involved.

Denard continued to argue until the pickaxe, which they had soaked in the green liquid, was snapped with a few blows against Branwen’s shield. The actual iron of the pickaxe, not the wood shattered after only a few taps. After that, he was more willing to see reason on that score but continued to argue about the dungeon aspect for some time.

Luckily, the trip to Nalin was far easier. Nalin thanked them for their efforts on behalf of the town and accepted the voucher for half price with joy. Within minutes of entering the whole group was healed to nearly perfect health.

The moment they were out of the temple, Khalid caught Imoen’s arm. “Y, you said that you had a s, s, spell that could let us find H, H, Harry and my wife. U, u, use it now,” he practically commanded.

“Get out your compass first,” Imoen ordered, watching as Khalid did so, pulling it out of his Item box, marking the fact once more that like Minsc and Imoen, he could make full use of the Item Box rather than need to sift through it for what he wanted.

In reply, Imoen pulled out a dagger, and set it on her palm, not holding it, rather setting it flat on her palm, as if she was going to do some kind of trick with it, which in a way she was. “Point me Harry Potter,” Imoen said, forming the magic within as she did.

You have used A blood Magic spell, Point Me. -3 to health.

This spell allows you to find individuals or items by pointing in their direction. The distance limit is unknown at present. It will not work to find individuals who you have not seen, are magically protected against simple precognition spells. Nor will it work on diffuse terms or powerful magical objects, the magic of which will disrupt this simple spell.

Grateful that the spell hadn’t taken more out of her, and making a note of that for later, Imoen gestured down at it with her other hand as the dagger swung in a full circle for a moment, before stopping, pointing north and east by Khalid’s compass. It was

pointing there and wasn't moving at all. "It's not pointing down, and if Harry was dead, the spell wouldn't work."

"Why not?" Edwin inquired.

Imoen barred her teeth at him. "Because there wouldn't be a Harry Potter, there would be simply a corpse. Corpses don't have names magic would respond to."

Khalid stared, then slowly nodded. "D, do you think t, t, that would work on..."

Shrugging Imoen gestured down to the dagger. "Point me Jaheira."

Again, the dagger twirled and for a moment, Imoen feared that the two of them had become separated. But, when the dagger stopped, it was pointing in the same direction as Harry.

At that, all tension seem to leave Khalid that point, and he nodded. "T, t, thank you." Then, he looked at over at the bar, and marched resolutely in its direction. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to get drunk.

Imoen blinked at that, then shrugged, deciding it wasn't the worst way of viewing things, and put it down to the fact that Khalid had these moments where he seemed to blame himself for no longer being as capable as he once had been before the Curse of the Dread One. Jaheira seemed to have the same moments, but she dealt with them by becoming sterner and harder. Regardless, she wasn't going to stop him.

Turning away, she smirked at the others. "I guess he wants to drown his worries. Personally, I want food more than drink."

"Why not both? I realize for simians such as yourself multitasking like that is difficult, but surely you can attempt it once," Edwin snarked.

Rolling her eyes, Imoen smacked him on his shoulder. "Nice one. Now come on, I want food and a soft bed, in that order."

OOOOOOO

Harry groaned as he slowly came to, staring up at the dawn sky above "Bloody hell, I'm alive?" He croaked, his words coming out ragged and weak. Really, Harry had only given himself a best two out of five chance in surviving his attempt to save Jaheira. But he seemed to be alive. "Well... that's...just brill. Wait... Jaheira!"

The thought rocketed through Harry's head, and he quickly stood staring around him for a split second before keeling over with a groan, a hand thrusting out the only thing stopping him from bashing his head into a rock nearby as his body's aches and pains suddenly cued up for his attention. This ranged from several bits of his body feeling like his skin had been worn away with sandpaper, to there being a kind of odd, searing pain in his side, his back feeling like someone had taken a beef tenderizer to it, and what felt like something loose in one of his feet. "Oh, and I'm freezing too, lovely. Although the cold might be keeping me from feeling the full impact of the pain. Ugh."

The cold he had been feeling was caused by the fact that half of his body was still in the water, and looking blearily through pain-tightened eyes, Harry realized his body had become wedged between two large rocks. The river, which looked both deep and fast, seemed to disappear out of sight in either direction, the portion of the river here flattening out slightly as the river turned slightly. Harry had been deposited into the rocks along the outer curve.

And nearby, what looked like a wig of wet blonde locks caught Harry's eye. "Jaheira!"

When several croaking shouts didn't seem to rouse the woman, Harry turned his attention at last to the information his Gamer's skill was giving him. Of course, the first messages were about his own state, and that made for grim reading.

You are Crippled:

You have broken your foot in several places. You will not be able to walk easily or very far without debilitating pain.

-6 to Dexterity.

-2 to Constitution.

Walking and running movement is halved. Any attempt to dodge will have a negative penalty.

This was followed by two other crippled notifications.

You have two broken ribs. Breathing might not hurt, but bending and moving and laughing... well be prepared for pain.

- 4 to Constitution

-5 to Durability.

All movement which involves anything above the waist will be accompanied by pain, and cause a -4 penalty to Willpower. Any attempt to dodge will have a negative penalty.

The second read:

You don't know what, but something in your back is sprained.

-6 to Constitution.

-6 to Durability.

With a weary groan, Harry looked at his overall health bar, and noticed another notification, which came up as Harry's eyes latched onto his health bar.

Health: 18/50 (120)

Note: your max health is impacted by the crippled wounds you have taken. Even healing cannot bring you to your full health unless your crippled injuries are also healed. You've been banged around like a squishy billiard ball, and that won't change until someone with actual knowledge of healing sees to you.

While Harry had no idea about Jaheira's starting stats, her own wounds were quite bad, and at least in one way worse than his own. And once more, he could really do without the snark even as he read them one after another.

Crippled:

Traveling Companion Jaheira's back is broken in several places Never mind walking, moving at all will be impossible until her spin is healed.

All movement is impossible, and her Durability and Dexterity are both set to 0.

-20 to Constitution.

Bleeding:

Portions of Traveling Companion Jaheira's body have had the skin scrapped away. While no longer bleeding much thanks to the cold of the water slowing her circulation, she lost a good deal of blood.

-9 to Constitution.

Crippled:

Traveling companion Jaheira has taken a a blow to the head. She is not only concussed, there might even be some internal bleeding and damage to her brain. While knocking the bitch out of her might be an interesting experiment, this has taken it a bit too far. Jaheira will remain unconscious until she is seen to by a competent healer.

- 10 to Willpower

-10 to Constitution.

Warning: imperfectly healing Jaheira's mind could have lasting damage to her already badly battered wisdom and intelligence stats.

That last warning was noticeably bad, but what was worse was Harry could tell that she was still alive, but not her overall health. "Still, I should be able to at least make certain she stops bleeding. And I can fix up some way to stop her head from moving too..."

With that, Harry began to pull things out of his item box. First, he pulled out the impure potion of health, downing it and nearly moaning in relief at the aid it gave him. He could feel his body getting better. That feeling kept going as he ate half of the healing berries left in his item box, and finally, he was up to 42/50. "Technically healthy enough to fight and move, but not really."

Thankfully, the majority of the pain from his crippled status had faded into a dull throb, which Harry willfully ignored as he went to work. Bits of clothing they used for wrapping wounds came out of his Item box next, and some wood the band had gathered before entering the mine to use for cooking fires. Remembering what he and Khalid had done to create the carry-bag that had held Dynaheir, he did the same thing very, very slowly for Jaheira, grateful beyond words that his hands hadn't been all that battered beyond a few bruises and cuts, all of which had healed up already.

Storing his jury-rigged carrier into his Item Box, Harry slowly crawled towards Jaheira. There, after checking for a pulse – more out of habit than anything else, he slowly

pulled her out of the water, grimacing and blushing as he did. Like Harry's clothing, several bits of Jaheira's clothing had been torn or shredded, along with large portions of her skin.

This bared one of her pert breasts, and although half of her breast was red and sore, that didn't stop Harry from shaking his head at the sight, and quickly pulling out a spare shirt. Thankfully like before when he touched Jaheira, Harry Harry didn't need to physically change her clothing. Rather, he simply reversed what he had done to remove her mail shirt, placing the spare undershirt onto her body.

"Fuck, I should have tried to put our armor back on. I was only worried about drowning, not being battered though," Harry murmured, trying hard to keep his mind working as his hands started to pulp some of the healing berries. As he did, he slowly pushed the pulp into Jaheira's mouth. The feel of her lips around his fingers was decidedly, and very wrongly, erotic, but he couldn't stop himself from thinking it after seeing Jaheira's chest a moment ago.

Harry fed her the rest of the healing berries, deciding there was no point in keeping any around given their current dire circumstances. When it was done, he shuddered a bit, and pulled his fingers out of the half-elf woman's mouth, then glanced down her body, grateful to see that most of her sores and cuts were gone. Several bits of raw, bleeding skin remained, but Harry quickly put makeshift bandages over them all, one after another.

"And now we're out of spare clothing. Joy. If we hadn't just had a bath, I would be worried about what I smell like," Harry murmured, still speaking aloud more because the sound of his voice helped Gamer's Mind keep him calm. Because Harry knew their current situation was very fucking bad. "Still, first things first, Harry-me-lad. Get away from the river, find a hiding place, get warm, food. Healing berries alone do not a meal make."

After making sure the wounds were covered, Harry took out the carrier from his item box and with a grunt of pain, lifted Jaheira the little bit he needed to get her into the carrier. Securing her there took several minutes, but then it came time to really push. Resigned to the pain to come, Harry took out one of the Gourds of Power, and drank it down, hoping the additional strength would give him some help here.

You have drunk Gourd of Power. + 6 to your base Strength score for one hour.

"Heh, wish I could put unconscious people into my item box right now. This is going to ruddy SUCCCK!!!" With that, Harry lifted Jaheira, carrier and all, in his arms,

figuring that was better than trying to get her onto his back. Even so, the world went red for a second, and a warning popped up.

Warning: Due to your ill-advised attempt to pick up your Travelling Companion, Jaheira, you have aggravated your triple-crippled status. Seriously, what part about CRIPPLED didn't you understand?

-20 to health

Despite that, Harry continued to move forward, up the small rise behind the stones lining the river's edge. Soon, Harry spotted a good hiding place. Several trees had come down, creating a small camp area. It wasn't as hidden as Harry would have liked, but Harry knew that continuing on wouldn't be a good idea. There, he set Jaheira down, and then after breathing in deeply, began to move around once more, ignoring the throbbing from his foot, back and side with ever increasing difficulty, although thankfully, he didn't seem to be doing anymore permanent damage to his health.

"Thank God for the Item Box," he reflected once more, happy to see that everything within was fine, completely undamaged and usable. Within moments he had started a fire and pulled out his own bedroll. Sitting on it, he pulled out some food and set a stew to simmering within minutes. With that done, Harry slowly shifted so he was sitting with his side against a portion of the downed tree, , summoning up several of his weapons from his item space laying them out.

As battered as they were, Harry knew the two of them had no business fighting, but neither could they run. Getting Jaheira up here from the river had nearly killed Harry, and there was no way he'd leave her behind. *Not even if we could come back and resurrect her. I have no idea where we are in relation to a temple that could do the deed, and Branwen didn't mention having the skill.*

Waiting for his stew to cook, Harry reached out with his map powers, enlarging the small map that usually sat to the upper left portion of his vision, until it covered his line of sight from one end to another, hoping that he would see the green dot of one of the party members. If so, Imoen and the others would be able to see him in turn. However, he didn't.

Instead, what Harry saw were small green triangles around the circle of the map's circumference at one point pointing in the same direction. He stared at it, then chuckled

wanly, and tried to be a bit upbeat about things. “Well, we’ll both know what direction to go. They might even be able to move around obstacle.”

With his lame foot, Harry wasn’t certain he would be walking anywhere anytime soon. Especially after the injury he had dealt himself when moving Jaheira.

With that thought, Harry slowly moved over, and made sure Jaheira was as comfortable as possible. Then he fed her some of the soup, before gorging on the rest, laying out on his bedroll, his sword to hand, the fire fed with a few more bits of wood. *No shield though, I think if I tried to raise my tower shield I might rupture something. And I know the fire works as a beacon for anyone trying to find us, but it could also help to scare off animals.*

With that, Harry laid on his uninjured side and tried to get some sleep.

But Harry didn’t sleep for long, his sleep disturbed by growling noises coming from nearby, and he stood up, startling several small wolves where they had started moving towards them from out of the woods around.

Taking out a piece of wood, Harry tossed it onto the fire, creating sparks, which set the wolves back several paces, and then raised his sword as he slowly got to his feet, trying not to bother his wounds further. With that, he shifted from his sword to a bow and arrow. Launching an arrow out quickly, it hit one of the walls in the side.

“GUH!” Unfortunately, that movement pulled at his back and side, although it only took two points of health this time.

He quickly shifted to his Throwing axes and hurled the last three at the wolves. This movement didn’t pain him, and with the wolves so close his skill with them didn’t matter. He struck two of the wolves, the axe heads slicing into one wolf’s shoulder and another’s head, spraying blood everywhere.

Two more however reached Harry, and he quickly switched weapons to his longsword, as he was born to earth with a cry of pain. The wolf on top of him however had skewered itself on his hastily switched-in sword, and even as it still scabbled, and tried to bite him, the wolf began to go limp. Grimacing, Harry rolled, putting it underneath him.

The other wolf attacked now, but Harry quickly brought his blade around in a arcing attack. "Cleave!" he shouted, and the next second, the blade had sliced the wolf's head clear off.

Harry sighed as the last three wolves turned yellow on his heads-up display and began to retreat quickly. "Well, at least wolves are easy enough to deal with. And I do **not** want to look at my health bar right now." The Cleave, thankfully had not battered him any more than he already was, but the wolf's charge had.

He laid down again next to the fire, after making sure there were enough bits of wood on it to keep burning, and despite the sun now being high in the sky laid back to sleep. It was really, the only thing he could do right now. *I don't have enough health to even try the small wound spell that Imoen mentioned, and only by sleeping can I get by lay on hands spell back.* Really, if Jaheira didn't start to improve on her own to the point she could use her magic, they would be stuck here for a long while.

The next time Harry woke up he was greeted by the welcome message of an eight hour nap, and the knowledge that came with it that it had given him his Lay On Hands spell back. "Now, I could use Lay on Hands on Jaheira, but..." Harry shook his head, and without any further hesitation used the spell on himself. The messages he had read the night before had warned him about the head trauma Jaheira had. *I can't do anything about that, and the um, the healing berries helped her about as much as I could. I guess I could get her health up more, sure, but with wolves around, I have to be in as good shape as I possibly can be with my crippled status.*

He could feel the impact of the spell and saw his health bar was no longer blinking at him, though it still only read 38/50. His crippled statuses were still there obviously, and every time he moved, the ribs, spine and foot sent jagged bolts of pain through his body.

But Harry persevered, standing up and looking around them thoughtfully, trying to figure out if he could create some kind of hide here, so that even if another band of roving wolves or whatever came upon them, they couldn't be seen. The pain continued to drill into Harry as he moved around, picking up bits of loose wood from a recent storm the area, and attempting - and failing - at dragging large tree branch over to where Jaheira rested. "Right, that's not going to work."

With that not working, Harry, still ignoring the aching from his foot and his other wounds, slowly started to spiral out, searching for a better place to hide. Nearby he found

a small dip in the land. Although visible from one side, the other three sides were covered in brambles and small, bushes rising through several large rocks. "That will do... now for the hard part."

Instead of trying to carry Jaheira, Harry rigged up a rope through the back of the carrier he had placed Jaheira in, and then began to pull her along. This caused her to gasp and groan, and Harry whispered an apology more than once as he dragged her along, noticing the twinges of pain he was getting now was once more impacting his overall health.

But he persevered, and eventually, Harry reached their new hideaway. There Harry tucked the woman into the hide. With his work done, Harry leaned back, and began to go through the multiple injury notifications that had built up. He then blinked as he saw that one of the notifications was a red color, indicating a status change of some kind.

He clicked on it, and his eyes widened in surprise as he read it aloud.

"I've got the willpower! Due to your endurance of an immense amount of pain, you have created a permanent buff. +2 to Constitution, +4 to durability". That's nice," he murmured, when he clicked on it, that seemed to somehow activate the buff. Instantly, the pain he was feeling faded a bit, not a lot, but he could certainly feel the difference, and he saw that his overall health had grown to 70 (140). "I'm still only at 15 health, but nice."

With his new buff helping him endure the pain of moving, Harry moved around the area, setting some small traps. Although unlike Backstab, Harry hadn't learned the ability to detect/set trap from having Imoen in his party, so they were just strings and bits of metal from Jaheira's chain mail. The chain mail had, after all taken more than a few hits, and the edges had been very ragged. "Still, they will do to warn me if someone or something using Hide in Shadows tries to sneak up on us. the last thing I need is to take a hit from some spider before I know he's there."

With that done, he moved back to Jaheira, and began to make some soup, humming to himself over the open fire. He noticed idly that the green arrows that denoted the rest of his party had moved along the edge of the map. That might mean that Imoen and the rest were trying to move around an obstacle. They were all still together though, which was good. Harry had been kind of concerned about that. *There are so many strong personalities in our group, it wouldn't be a surprise if they came to blows, especially*

with Edwin and Dynaheir in the group. Still, I hope that Imoen can keep the peace between them.

With a sigh, Harry shook off his concerns on that score though, and leaned back, deciding, since he was fully awake, and didn't think he could just go to sleep by closing his eyes even with his Gamer power, to read through the notes he had taken from Mulahey's body. Both were written in the same handwriting and were signed by Tazok.

The first detailed Mulahey's orders and mentioned two mercenary groups on retainer to Tazok's employers, the Chill and Blacktalons. The second warned Mulahey of his idiocy in letting the kobolds kill the miners, showing that Tazok perhaps hadn't known Mulahey and the mines had merged somehow into a dungeon. Which was fair enough since Harry had not even a vague understanding of how that was possible either.

More importantly though, the second message mentioned Tranzig, the man who had turned Branwen to stone, was staying in Beregost. "Excccellent..."

As he thought that, his view was suddenly filled with a gold and red outlined notification box.

The main quest, 'Iron Intake Issue', has been updated. You have found clues! Combined with the information already in your mind, these messages have told you several important points.

One, Tranzig is the middleman between someone named Tazok and Mulahey, the man behind the Nashkel mines running into problems. And Tranzig can be found in Beregost...

Two, Tazok is **not** the leader. He specifically speaks of superiors. Perhaps the Iron Throne the Assassinating Amazons spoke of? Regardless, you have run into so many priests of Cyric as part of your investigation that it is impossible to believe his priesthood isn't involved. Not good at all.

Three, you now know the name of two mercenary bands that are behind the assault on trade caravans, the Chill and the Blacktalons. What to do with that information isn't obvious however.

"Hah, I actually hadn't connected the priesthood to the Iron Throne consciously, but that's nice anyway," Harry mused, before scowling. "Not that I'm in any real rush to run into even this Tazok guy. Not after the drubbing we got against his minion, Dungeon Boss or no. I... we, Imoen, me, the rest, we all need to get stronger."

With that, Harry stood up, ignoring the pain from his back and foot as he began to go through some of the exercises Khalid had supplied him to work on his footwork and grip.

Then he sighed, sat down, and sat next to the fire, working on another meal for himself and pouring out a bowl of stew for Jaheira. "Note to self, pick up a book or something for downtime. Waiting for the others is going to possibly kill me with boredom."

OOOOOOO

The next day, with their spells memorized and everything else ready, Imoen redid the point me spell on a small shaft of wood, which, oddly, reminded her of her old wand. *Funny, I don't think I've thought about my wand for months now, despite how fond of the thing I was. Silly to think of it now, I suppose.*

With the small shaft of wood pointing once more the direction they would have to go, she looked around at the others, only noticing as she did that Khalid had not returned last night, and that Minsc was nowhere to be seen either.

When she asked where they were, Dynaheir shrugged. "Minsc left to go and drink with Branwen and Khalid the night before."

"I returned late the night before. Both Minsc and I had quite a bit of fun regaling one another with tales from our past. Boo too was into it, and proved a most hilarious little fellow," Branwen replied, amused at how Dynaheir's eyebrow began to twitch. Even after his miniature giant space hamster status had been confirmed, Dynaheir had a lot of trouble seeing Boo as anything more than a necessary nuisance. "When I began to yawn, however, Minsc decided to stay with Khalid and watch over him."

"And how did that go?" Imoen questioned hesitantly, uncertain how Khalid would act if he got drunk while in such a bad mood.

Branwen frowned a bit. "I... I believe that drinking raised his spirits, as it should have. Perhaps a bit too much. I will not say more, and hope there will be no need."

"Huh. Well, the good news at least is that the AAS seems to remove the whole hangover nonsense," Imoen mused, wondering about Branwen's reticence.

“And yet once more you give me more reason to become part of your official party,” Branwen guffawed while Edwin also looked interested. Hangovers were the bane of any true drinker after all.

Shrugging, Imoen looked over at the wizards, making certain they were both ready. While Edwin still wanted to know how far Harry was, that was his only concern going forward, and indeed, he seemed almost affable after a night spent in an acceptable bed after an equally decent meal.

Below, they found Minsc and Khalid both awake, waiting for them. Minsc had ordered a set of meat skewers and was sharing one with Boo as he moved to take up position beside his witch, handing out skewers to the others, save Edwin, who sneered at that lack, but not overmuch considering he would have turned it down anyway.

Khalid however was by the entrance to the kitchen, speaking softly to a buxom brunette there. “OOOh... fuck...” Imoen whimpered, her mind drawing a unhappy picture. “Please no.” *I knew he liked to look at human women but...*

“Have no fear,” Minsc interrupted her whimpers, smiling cheerily. “Boo and Minsc made certain that no matter how affected by drink Khalid became, he did no more than flirt. Even if Boo needed to bite Khalid’s earlobe a time or two. Khalid seemed to pass through a time where he flirted overmuch due to the drink, before coming back to earth when Minsc mentioned Jaheira. After that, he still looked, but did no more. We both fell asleep in one of the booths, and the innkeeper decided to not attempt to move us until the fires were lit in the kitchen this morning.”

“And what’s he doing now?” Branwen questioned, while Imoen breathed a sigh of relief, and made a note to keep an eye on Khalid in the future.

“Apologizing for a few remarks he made,” Minsc replied with a shrug.

Soon, Khalid joined them, looking a little shame-faced before he shrugged his shoulders and flexed his fingers, very obviously getting his game face on. “I, I, is everyone ready to go? I warn you, I w, w, will force a hard pace w, w, when we leave Nashkel behind.”

Seeing Edwin about to make a scathing remark, Imoen decided it was a bit too early to let the two of them have at one another, so spoke up quickly. “Fine by me,

although remember that I'll be the one deciding on our route going forward. Let's get a move on."

Leaving the inn, Imoen lead the group out of Nashkel once more, heading eastward. They would skirt around the edge of the mine area, putting it to their south as they head north and east following the pull of the dagger that Imoen had hung at her side.

The group was mostly silent as they left the town, until, alas Noober popped up, coming out from behind one of the houses. Spying them, he hurried over, already talking in his high-pitched whine as he did. "I don't believe it, you're the most violent group I've ever met. Is this an adventurer thing? What is it about me asking questions that seems to set people off? I'm just curious! Come on, you have to answer my questions, you're the most interesting things around here, and I won't stop until..."

Imoen again surprised everyone by being the first to react to the annoyance for the second time. She grabbed Noober around the throat, halting his stream of noise, and then dragged him back behind the house where he had first come from. There was a sound from within, and when she came back out, she was no longer wearing a short sword at her side.

Dynaheir hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Did, did you just... that is, I realize he was irritating, but actually killing..."

"I didn't kill him, Imoen said, smiling beatifically. "However, unless someone else comes around to help him, he is going to have a devil of a time bothering anyone else for a bit."

Intrigued, Edwin moved around the corner and then began to guffaw. "Ah, that looks a most fitting fate for one so annoying!"

Noober had been stuck against the side of the house. Two short swords held him there, making an 'X' in front of his neck making it so that if he moved, he would cut himself. In his mouth, a piece of clothing had been stuffed, muffling his gagged words.

Branwen and the others also looked, and though Dynaheir looked somewhat disapproving, she made no move to actually help Noober get loose. Nor did Minsc who looked, then shook his head. "Minsc is once more reminded of one of the most important lessons his father smacked into his head. Women can be most terrifying when angered, and thus should be avoided at any costs."

“While I think this is a tad cruel, I suppose it isn’t as cruel as killing him out of hand,” Dynaheir mused.

“Or setting him on fire, which would have been my own way of dealing with the little nuisance,” Edwin opined. “Come, we have spent far too much time near this worm, I can feel my vast intellect slowly stagnating being so close to him.”

Imoen nodded, and with a final jaunty wave at Noober, who was still trying to speak, astonishingly, she turned away rejoining the rest of the group. Soon they were out of the town, heading in a straight line in the direction Imoen’s ‘wand’ was pointing.

As they did, Khalid spoke up once more. “Since s, s, speed is of the essence, I propose t, t, that we look to avoid t, t, trouble as much as possible.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Minsc and you can range ahead of us, and we’ll try to keep as quiet as we can when we get away from the mine and everything. Just like we did with Minsc and Jaheira heading toward the groll fortress. Only this time, I think we should use signals somehow to warn of trouble since we don’t have Harry’s map skill.”

“That is both an adequate concept and an annoyance that such is needed,” Edwin grumbled.

Dynaheir shook her head. “Truly, I think we should all benefit from this. I think in our time in the mines we might well have gotten a bit too complacent, relying on the various AAS abilities you and Harry brought to the task.”

While Edwin sneered at her and privately thought the woman was just disagreeing with him on principle, Khalid and Minsc conferred and after only a few moments, had decided on a series of signals for danger, obstruction, and even beware. The last one was for danger that had somehow become aware of the group or the two scouts.

After memorizing the sounds of the various animal calls the two had decided on, however, Dynaheir asked them to come up with one for simply strangeness. “You all told me enough about the journey through the Fire Leaf Forest enough to believe that running into oddities on the road is just something that will happen here on the Sword Coast. And as you have mentioned, we lack the time to do aught right now about such beyond move around them.”

“True,” Khalid, Minsc and Imoen all said as one, causing the group to laugh.

“Truly, it is a sign of both the times we live in and the god’s favor that we Adventurers need never fear boredom,” Branwen chortled.

As Imoen had predicted, their course since leaving Nashkel brought the group somewhat near to the mines crossing the same area but at a diagonal and heading further northeast. Now out in the wild, the group set aside their amusement at Noober’s fate. Minsc and Khalid both moved forward, with Khalid using all his skills as a hunter to move quietly although he was unable to move as unseen as the Ranger with his Hide In Shadows skill.

However, not an hour after they had left the last signs of human habitation behind, Minsc used the predetermined signal for ‘strangeness,’ a series of owl hoots in four series of twos. “Of course!” Edwin grumbled. “Of course our tempting of the gods has not gone unnoticed.”

Moving cautiously forward, the group met with Khalid quickly, who looked just as confused as they did, and then a moment later, Minsc returned, coming out of the Hide In Shadows technique as he did. “This is very strange, my friends. There seems to be a single person out here, and he is he is working on some kind of Sculpture Boo thinks he is not right in the head to be doing that out here in the wilderness, but Minsc remembers that many artists in Rasheman imbibed a little too much in the shaman’s special mushrooms, so perhaps it is the same in this land?”

“Almost certainly”, Edwin and Khalid murmured as one, before looking at one another, then away.

“Can we go around him?” Imoen asked, and then as the others looked at her, explained. “Like Edwin, I think this is a sign of trouble, and I would rather we avoid it if we can.”

“Minsc is afraid we could not go around him to the north, as there is a series of large rocks there creating a ridge in the land. Minsc saw them begin, although Minsc admits that getting through them could be done, although it would slow us down. I do not know what lies to the south,” Minsc answered.

Khalid however shook his head. “I m, m, moved in that direction, and I found e, e, evidence of a very large wolf’s d, d, den. As it is daytime, t, t, they will be home, and attack u, u, us as a pack if we come c, c, close. I am afraid t, t, that we will have to brave t, t, this

mad sculptor and whatever o, o, oddity he represents if we w, w, wish to keep up our p, p, pace.”

“UUGGGGHHH...” Imoen groaned, then nodded. “Well, if we have to, we have to. Let’s get going.”

Moving through the woods, the group quickly came to where the artist was working. As Minsc said, to one side a large series of boulders began heading north away from the artist. The artist himself seemed to be working on a sculpture yes, one of a woman. An elven woman judging by the ears, and one of surpassing beauty too, given the face, and body. That was about all Imoen could tell as she led the group past the man at a brisk pace.

He looked up, and seemed about to say something, but seeing them move to pass him by rather than in his direction halted whatever words he was going to say in his throat. Imoen noticed he looked youthful, perhaps only a bit older than Imoen herself, and was dressed richly. But his clothing had definitely seen better days, torn in multiple places and with his hair looking as if a bird had nested in it.

Unfortunately, their group was not the only one to spot the artist.

“Ho, there he is, fellows! As I’ve told you three many a time, Greywolf’s nose never lies. Now let us kill the damn fool and be about it. We are near Nashkel, and I know another bounty awaits us there along with a good inn and maybe even a few willing wenches.” From the other direction came a group of four adventurers, who in turn paused, staring between Imoen and her band and the artist.

Before the self-styled Greywolf, a name Imoen recognized, or Imoen herself, could speak, the artist shouted aloud, “Hark adventurers, I am the famed sculptor, Prism. Here I stand near to completing my greatest work, an ode to the goddess-upon-the-earth that is Ellesime. But I need to finish her face, just her face! After that, I do not care what happens to me, but the work must be finished, this, paltry show of my love for she who is the most gorgeous being upon Faerun. Pray defend me from these scoundrels until I finish and I will reward you well.”

“We’re not exactly,” Imoen began but Minsc cut her off.

“Minsc believes that the artist fellow is wrong in the head, but if he is being threatened, warriors of goodness will have to stand and defend him!” the Ranger bellowed.

“Minsc, we really don’t have time to...” Dynaheir argued, only to be cut off in turn, something that set her eyebrow to twitching.

“What’s this? The fool artist was able to actually pay someone to defend him? Do you know what he did? He stole the emeralds of a very, very important person down in Amn. They hired me, Greywolf, to come and take them.” The leader of the group said.

He was a tall man with a build more like that of a swimmer or fencer, putting his body somewhere between Minsc’s massive build and Khalid’s far thinner frame. The other three were built along somewhat similar lines, although their armor was all leather armor rather than the chest plate and vambraces Greywolf sported.

Damn it, I wish more of Harry’s skills carried over to the rest of us. Knowing their levels, classes and so forth would be really good about now, Imoen grumbled internally.

The man paused, staring at Imoen and her pink hair and a ta gesture, his men began to spread out around him. “...But it does seem to me as if I also have seen a description of you before. Girl, where did you come from?”

Imoen’s eyes narrowed, and with a sinking feeling, she tried to lie. “Baldur’s Gate. Not that it’s any business of yours. Look, we’re just passing through, if you want to take this guy back, I’d suggest waiting until he finishes his work. He looks as if he is about one breeze away from falling over anyway, that way you won’t have any trouble with him after.”

“Your words have some merit,” Greywolf answered, even as Minsc began to protest. However, that is not where you are from. You have the look about you of Imoen of Candlekeep, the one who travels with Gorion’s ward. Now, while the bounty for you and he are not as legal as the one on this fool, the money is still too good to pass up. Take them,” he ordered, as the group behind him started forward.

However, Dynaheir had already begun to mold the spell, and a stinking cloud landed in among the other adventurers, knocking two of them out quickly. The edge of the area-effect spell was barely a few steps behind

Minsc bellowed "Go for the eyes Boo, go for the eyes!" as he shut charged forwards, his claymore in hand.

Taking a step back, Imoen instantly activated Hide In Shadows, moving around Greywolf and Minsc as they crashed into one another. Greywolf was big, but Minsc was even bigger, and stronger. He forced the other warrior back several paces, before Greywolf set himself, and was able to knock the next few blows to one side, trying to sweep his sword up into Minsc side only to have it blocked.

But to Imoen's surprise, there was a faint flash of some kind of magic on the point of impact, and frost began to appear. *Some kind of enchantment to add frost damage? Awesome.*

The other bounty hunter, an archer, began to fire at Dynaheir, only to stumble back as an arrow from Khalid found his side, followed by several magic missiles from Edwin. He didn't fall, merely stumbling back, sorely wounded, but then he dropped his bow for a short sword and shield as he moved forward.

The next moment, Imoen was there, coming out of Hide In Shadows, stabbing down into one of the unconscious people.

Critical Hit. You have achieved backstab.

Critical Hit. You have struck an unconscious opponent.

Your target is Dead, with a capital D. Ouch.

She then disappeared into the shadows again, dodging a hasty blow from the former archer.

He staggered again as another arrow struck his back, and Imoen watched as he turned yellow on her map, and he began to run away only to finally succumb to Dynaheir's Stinking Cloud. A shot from Branwen's sling took him in the back of the head, shattering it.

The next moment, several magic missiles from Dynaheir hit Greywolf, and he faltered to, although he was now driving Minsc back, his sword flashing out to move through the big man's defenses. But even as Imoen raced back out of the area impacted by the Stinking Cloud spell, Khalid moved forward switching to his sword and shield style. He was followed by Branwen, who pulled her hammer from her waist, bellowing, "By Tempus' name, those who take lives for mere coin will never win the day!"

The three of them quickly moved apart, forcing Greywolf to turn his head one way or the other in order, almost forcing him back into the Stinking Cloud to keep the trio from circling him.

Seeing this, Imoen turned, sending a cutting spell towards the last of Greywolf's followers, unwilling to enter the Stinking Cloud area again. The spell struck, and Imoen turned her attention back to Greywolf, the last follower then being set on fire by Edwin.

But Greywolf seemed to be made of sterner stuff. "Cleave!" he shouted, bringing his sword around, and nearly taking Minsc off of his feet despite the fact that the Cleave had been blocked by Minsc's blade. The blades shattered, and only the Plate Mail +1 that Harry had forced Minsc to take from the Gnoll Fortress kept him from being cut in half. Even so, he crumpled, falling to his rear as the blade hammered into his chest.

Then Greywolf was turning, bringing his sword around in an arc. Khalid blocked it, but the lighter half-elf found himself stumbling back, unable to match the human male's strength, although in turn Greywolf could not get through Khalid's defense. Then Branwen was there, her hammer flashing in only to be blocked by a wily twist from Greywolf, who responded with a slash at her leg the blade's top kept from Branwen's thigh only by her Sword and Shield Style interposing her shield in time.

Deciding she'd had enough of this, Imoen gestured, and a stupefy spell crashed into Greywolf from behind. the use of another spell caused Imoen's health to drop to just above the yellow, leaving her at thirty-five out of sixty. But it worked to knock Greywolf to the ground.

Khalid, never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, instantly stabbed down, performing both a Critical Hit, and, because Greywolf was face down on the ground much like Imoen's first victim, a backstab. The strike went through the bit of neck armor, Imoen couldn't remember what the name of it was, that Greywolf was wearing, penetrating straight through his throat.

"Well, that was interesting," Imoen drawled. "Next time Minsc, don't be so quick to bellow, yeah?" With that mild reproof given, Imoen went along, touching the bodies, searching for anything interesting, and coming away with a piece of paper on the aforementioned bounty for the artist, but not for her. However, Greywolf's sword came up as inherently magical, and Imoen sighed. "Really wishing that I could use Identify right now. This blade's obviously got a really nice magical enchantment on it."

“Truth, but look at it this way, we have yet another reason to hurry along and find Harry,” Branwen answered, looking at the weapon in interest, as did Dynaheir.

Nodding at that, Imoen turned to Prism, about to give the artist a piece of her mind only to blink in surprise. “Did one of the bounty hunters get an arrow through to him?”

The others all turned to see the artist slumped to the ground in front of his statue. Branwen, who had just been about to heal Imoen from her use of Blood Magic moved over to Prism instead, checking on the man. “He’s dead, the overwrought, love-besotted fool’s heart went!” She shook her head with a resigned sigh. “Should we carry him to the town and have him revived?”

Bock, Edwin scoffed. “Why ever would we? I know these self-made artiste types They care not about their own lives, only about the art. This one obviously thinks this statue is his finest work and was willing to die for it. Enough to even turn to thievery if the bounty hunter’s words were true. And judging by the eyes of that statue, I rather think they were.”

Scowling in confusion moved closer to the statue. Standing next to Branwen and Edwin, she could see the image was gorgeous. If this woman was real, Imoen knew she would have felt an immense amount of jealousy. *High cheekbones, full mouth, pert nose, a perfect chin, hair down to her bum, a good chest for an elven woman, legs longer and better-looking than mine. Yeesh, yep, I’d be jealous for sure.*

But she understood what Edwin was speaking about the moment she saw the eyes of the statue, for the eyes were emeralds, literally. The almost reminded her of Harry’s eyes for a moment, set in a feminine face. “That’s a little at weird,” she muttered, shaking her head as she stared at the image.

She reached for them instantly and pulled them out of the statue, pocketing them quickly. This drew a gasp of shock from both Khalid and Dynaheir, but a guffaw from Branwen and Minsc. Edwin too nodded his head sagely, saying “Waste not want not after all. The statue certainly is not going to complain. And if he wanted people to actually see his art, this ode to a woman I rather doubt the fool shared one word with, Prism would have created it in some city somewhere.”

He snigged haughtily, waving a languid hand at the statue even as he blushed faintly. “As it is, I rather think the statute is distressingly plain even with the emeralds. Any

mage of any skill could summon up a succubus that makes this woman's beauty seem like the most common of city strumpet.

"I call bullshit on that," Imoen answered tartly, with the others agreeing, causing Edwin to huff turning away from the statue. Such was its beauty though that even he could not help but look at it out of the corners of his eye. The loss of the emeralds did not detract much from the whole.

Shaking her head, Imoen asked Branwen to heal her, then held out her hand once more, "Point me Harry Potter."

Edwin watched as the spell worked, shaking his head with a slight look of irritation. "Divination spells like that should not be so simple, nor as accurate as you claim this one is." He hadn't had much luck reversing even a simple Blood Magic spell yet, but their efficacy, speed of casting still interested him immensely.

"I'm just thankful it's not pointing downward at an angle into the the earth," Dynaheir argued. "Still, we know which way to go."

"And it will keep on pointing in that direction even if we have to make a detour over some natural block or something," Imoen agreed. "Whatever happens from here on, we avoid strangeness, got it everyone? Going through the rocks would have been way easier and less annoying than this fight."

When the others agreed with varying degrees of enthusiasm, Imoen turned and gestured Minsc and Khalid forward "Let's get moving then."

Moments later, the group was gone, leaving behind the statue, it's dead creator and the quartet who had been sent to slay him all dead on the forest floor. Artist or bounty hunter, the wolves to the south would no doubt see to the body's 'care' in due time.

OOOOOOO

Having slept the requisite eight hours, Harry once more cast Lay Hands on himself, then moved over, kneeling beside Jaheira and feeding her some of the stew slowly. "Damn it, if I knew how to heal her head wound, a single night's rest would have us both on our feet. But as it is..." Harry sighed.

While Harry could see where Imoen, Minsc and Khalid were in terms of direction, that told him nothing about how far away his official party members were. Still, he'd made a decent enough defensive perimeter here. *And with my trifecta of crippling wounds, there's no way I'd be able to move Jaheira. Even a Leviosa spell would knock my health down to the point a group of wolves like those from last night could kill me. No, the best idea is still to stay put, as much as that annoys me.*

Moving back to his own side of the small, hidden fire he had created the evening before, Harry fed the fire a bit, then tried to go to sleep but found it impossible again. He was fully rested, and the sun was up, and thanks to his Gamer skill, Harry just didn't feel sleepy or tired if he had gotten enough sleep the night before. Sighing, Harry stood up and, once more ignoring the pain shooting through his broken foot and his back, not to mention his side aching like fire, Harry began to go through the forms Khalid had shown him with the sword. Luckily so long as he moved slowly, getting up and sitting down, his health didn't decrease more than a few points thanks to his stacked Crippled debuffs.

He'd done pretty well over the past two days with building up his Stance and Body Movement skills, although obviously, he couldn't do anything that involved lower body strength yet. Still, if he could get those two down pat, Harry would be a lot closer to unlocking the two extra skill points, which would be a huge help, as would getting rid of the slight negative bonus to his skill set. That wasn't anything major, just a reduction in his power to hit, chance to hit and chance to block while in combat, but even so, getting rid of it would be nice.

This kind of repetitive work hurt, but it was something to keep Harry's mind and body going. *And the Gamer aspect allows me to track my progress in a way that I couldn't in my past life,* Harry thought, before frowning pensively.

I haven't thought about my past life in... how many time loops before Imoen appeared? Her presence had reminded Harry starkly of Earth and everything there, but even then, he didn't think about it often. Harry wondered what had happened to Hogwarts and to his old friends. *Or were they still friends? Given how they didn't contact me, especially Hermione, with her knowledge of the nonmagical world, I just don't know about that.* Regardless, this was his new life, and Harry vowed to make the best of it.

That turned his attention to his own circumstances again. Specifically, Harry mused on why he only had access to one Lay on Hands spell and why he couldn't use more. *What God of Light am I going to swear to?*

Helm was definitely a no-go at this point. Despite Nalin's best efforts to make Helm sound a little less than the equivalent of a law-abiding cock, Helm was far too judgmental, too filled with his own righteousness. Torm remained a possibility, as did the rest of the good gods who Harry

could see himself worshipping. But Harry really hadn't put much thought into either of them or the other more esoteric gods who paladins looked to for command or aid in battle and life.

Suddenly, his comment last night came back to Harry, and his eyes widened as he brought a hand up to smack his forehead with enough force to make his back hurt and lose him a point of health. "I'm a bloody idiot!"

With that, Harry reached into his bag and pulled out the book Gwyneth Mirrorshade had given him back in the Friendly Arm Inn. "Damn it, it seems so long ago, but it was only what, less than a month? And I completely forgot about it... Yep, I didn't hit myself nearly hard enough."

Evidently, his AAS skill felt the same thing because the second Harry had the book in hand and had finished speaking, a gold-outlined message appeared in his vision.

The side quest (large) Pray for your Future has been updated.

You have finally remembered the book, *An Adventurer's Guide to the Gods of Light and Darkness*, has been in your possession. Seriously, there's a limit to how often you can use the 'I'm busy' line.

No, you're not getting any experience for this.

"Ruddy plonker," Harry grumbled. "Fine, I get it. I was an idiot. But name one time on this trip I actually had time to sit down and read that wasn't best used to sleep or get to know my party members?" He waited a tick, then took the silence (and the lack of further snark like when he had been told about the Birds and the Bees) as a victory before continuing to read the rather large notification that was behind the initial one, depicting the book.

This book is known as an **Information Book**.

This book will give you a brief but intense overview of the gods of Light who call to paladins or vice versa. This will include knowledge of their churches, beliefs, and the benefits that worshipping them gives their paladins. Occasionally that last can be very singular, modified to the individual. In some cases, not.

The changes wrought on a paladin upon choosing his true faith are deep and profound, and so is the impact on the mental and physical aspects of the paladins. Each god bequeaths a distinct set of permanent buffs debuffs and can even impact existing abilities, physical and mental.

If you find a god whose faith calls to you in this book, you will start down that path now.

Warning: Reading this book is a very immersive experience.

You will be unable to leave the book except between segments and will not be aware of your surroundings. Much like if you had been hit by Color Spray, any wounds done to you while

unconscious will not wake you up. Further, the time spent on each god is unequal and cannot be determined before starting.

Harry grimaced at that but understood he could read through the book one god at a time, which would lessen the threat somewhat. Setting aside the book and getting to his feet with difficulty, Harry moved around the makeshift camp, making certain the fire was hidden from a distance, the smoke invisible, and the traps set. With that done, Harry returned and lay down, the pain in his back making sitting up difficult. Then, wondering how this was going to go, Harry opened the book and began to read, only to find his mind pulled forward into the book, the world around him disappearing.

It was almost as if Harry was floating in a sea of clouds, words belaboring him from every direction, the sound impossibly loud and impossibly... well, just all-encompassing. That was the only word for it.

“The gods of Good are varied, both in their powers and personalities. Herein you will discover something of their aspects, abilities and the power they can give those who follow the tenants of their specific faith!”

An image appeared then of a man, large, well-formed, but thin, almost emaciated despite his muscles. He was also heavily wounded, not in the manner of one or even a few deadly wounds, but in terms of hundreds of different types of wounds. Some looked like whip marks, others from arrows. A few looked like he had been flayed in segments or burned. His whole body was covered in a litany of pain, his arms and hands chained, yet he stood defiant, a fierce grin on his face.

“Illmater, the god of visions, suffering and wounds, Illmater is one of the main three gods whose worshippers together have created the Order of the Radiant Heart. Illmater is the god of the oppressed and persecuted, giving aid in enduring their pain or sending visions of their suffering to his paladins, who will do all they can to aid those in such dire straits. Not a particularly violent god, Illmater gives no added bonus to any weapons style or skill, but his enhancements to the body calls to monks, who use their bodies as their primary weapons. As such, he is represented by both paladins and monks equally.”

The image changed, this time showing two visions, one after another. The first was a heavily armored man fighting back several armed pirates or other similarly colorful fighters while groups of slaves fled behind him. The next was that of a bald man in chains, sitting on what looked like desert sand as taunts, jeers and stones were hurled at him. Then they were gone, and the original image was back, but smaller, set to the side.

It was also moving like a video. The chained god of suffering stood staring ahead of him unbowed as more wounds began to appear on his body. At the same time, a strange feeling of

being watched gripped Harry as a sound, like a low-key howling or whimpering noise, began to underlay the monstrously loud voice.

“Endurance, martyrdom, perseverance, and suffering, these are the traits which call to Illmater and which his followers embrace. To be a paladin of Illmater is to seek out the oppressed, the persecuted and aid them. You do not serve justice or law, only extend the hand of aid to those in most need.”

As the voice spoke, a set of lines appeared to one side of the moving image, looking much like the notifications Harry normally saw from his AAS system.

Paladins of Illmater benefit from an added specialty in Healing Magic and Beneficial Necromancy, the magical ability to ignore damage done to the body or protect the soul from attacks. They also gain a +1 to Durability per level after taking their oaths. All positive healing or buff spells will be enhanced to X2 the impact.

+2 Lay On Hands per level. You will learn the spell **Ignore Pain** and the special skill, **Persevere**.

As a Paladin, you will learn Cleric spells starting level 9 or the next level up after choosing your deity.

There is a commensurate negative buff to offensive strikes or attack spells. 50% reduction in damage done to all offensive strikes.

Warning: The negative debuff will carry over into your Blood Magic spells! As a paladin, you must abide by the rules of the god you give service to, even in something so singular as your Blood Mage skills. Further, like your skills, that debuff will carry over into any Combat Formation.

Harry found the words looping as the god’s image was replaced by still more of his followers, while the whole thing waited, as if for Harry to do something, and he examined the words, and he slowly shook his head. “No,” he mused, his voice carrying an odd vibration to it here in this weird mental space, and his thoughts muggy, difficult to push out, almost like a weight was on his mind.

Still, he forced them out, somehow knowing as he did that what he said was both the truth and irrevocable. “No, I don’t think so. I am a little too aggressive to be a paladin of Illmater. I would rather slay the slaver than help the slave endure. The skill and spells look nice, but not enough to let me set aside the impact on my offensive skills. Plus, I think I’m already building up a Bloodline Skill that will give me some of the same durability buffs.”

A second later, Harry was back in his own body, staring around him, grateful that the odd keening sound that had been in the background there hadn’t followed him. A small glance at the sun showed that he had only been in the book for a few minutes, and then he nodded slowly

before turning back and concentrating on the book once more. A second later, he was floating again in the sea of clouds as the massive voice bombarded his mind and a new image appeared in front of him.

“Chauntea, the Earth Mother. An integral part of the cycle of all life, she is the Goddess of life, farming, and the agrarian life, sometimes called the kinder counterforce of Silvanus, the elven god of forests. Druids, farmers and Gardeners look to her, but also a few rather scattered paladins.”

The image of Chauntea had long shiny white hair, gathered in a long braid that flowed down her back, brown skin and a lean, toned body. Her body was the kind shaped by hard work rather than training or fighting.

All in all, Harry thought the Goddess looked like a Molly Weasley who’d kept herself fit. “Urrrrgh...”

“The church of Chauntea is one of the most all-inclusive, welcoming all regardless of gender or race. Paladins who follow her teachings are tasked as hunters or preventative teachers. They hunt down those who corrupt or pollute the land and those who work on it. This can mean leading an investigation into a noble or a peasant riot against the same. They also teach and try to prevent natural disasters as best they can by teaching how best to nurture the Earth and thus receive Chauntea’s bounty.”

“No,” Harry forced out at that point, shaking his head and with an effort of will turning away from the images which showed a man clad in armor, his arm covered by spiked roses, leading a charge up a hill with hundreds of farmers behind him. “Er, while I can see the benefits, and I’m trying to not be sexist or anything, but Chauntea is definitely not someone he could follow. I...”

Harry’s voice flattened out into a sigh, but he still pushed the thoughts out. “I don’t think I am made for teaching. Not only have I never really enjoyed working in the garden, but I... I think in this life or my last I am called to war and conflict, for better or worse.”

Beyond that, Chauntea seemed too... soft, too sedentary. She was undoubtedly an excellent mother figure, but not someone Harry could swear his service to. Indeed, Harry kind of felt that Silvanus, the harder, more wild-edged god of nature, was closer to someone Harry could serve. *Although how much of that is the discussions I’ve had with Jaheira and Khalid about their beliefs, I don’t know.*

Know Thyself. In a moment of introspection, you have come to at least some understanding of your nature that you were perhaps willfully blind to before.

+ 1 to Wisdom.

As he found himself in his body once more, Harry chuckled wryly. “Well, I haven’t seen anything like that in a while. Neat. I suppose that’s my Advanced Adventuring System’s way of telling me I need to take more moments to think, huh?”

To his mild surprise, that comment did not elicit a response from the AAS, and with a shrug, Harry looked up at the sky. Very little time had passed, and Harry decided to dive into the book once more.

The next image was almost chosen to be the complete opposite of Chauntea. It was that of a giant of a man, young, well-muscled, wearing something that looked like a Roman toga. His visage radiated light like the morning sun, and his hair burned on his head, an orange-red fire.

“Lathander, the Morninglord!” the voice boomed. ***“A deity who calls to creativity, dawn, renewal, birth, athletics, spring, and youth. He is favored by and favors those who battle the undead and blesses those who plant new life.”***

The man seemed to change, becoming clad in armor as he fought off what looked like flying shadows in the shape of men and women. Behind the image of the god, the sun began to rise, blazing out and destroying Lathander’s enemies.

“While not one of the Triad, Lathander calls to those unafraid to bring the dawn to dark places and loathes evil, especially undead. A man of Lathander is blessed by the dawn and is laid to rest at dusk, with the night lit by raucous celebration.”

The image changed to men in bright armor, anointed with many different bright colors and the sun of the dawn on them battering their way into a house, fighting a group of vampires that seemed to come from every side. Unlike the last images, these were moving, and the voice continued to speak as they did. And as they did, the beauty of the armor the paladins were wearing became apparent, each suit different, equally colorful and artistic.

“The Order of the Aster is the small, very restricted group of paladins that look to Lathander. They are hard to join but are also part of the greater Order of the Radiant Heart. They are known as the fiercest slayers of undead in all Faerun. When joining, one can be taught significant skills for use against the undead especially. This includes faith-based enhancements that will negate the spells of undead liches, making the Order of the Aster all the more feared.”

Paladins of Lathander gain benefits in strength and dexterity + 1 per level after taking their oaths. All damage done to the undead will be enhanced X2 the impact. The skill Turn Undead will also be enhanced to X4 its normal efficacy during the day.

+1 Lay On Hands per every other level. You will learn the spells **Protection From Evil**, Detect Evil, and the special activated Combat Skill, **Empowered Self**.

Paladins of Lathander also gain the Class Skill **Youthfulness**. This is a constant buff like a Life Skill or Bloodline Skill, which will slow the aging process by half its normal impact on your body during the day.

Note: Many paladins of Lathander also exhibit the Class Skill, **Go Forth and Multiply**: Your Potency will be incredibly enhanced, and only powerful magical contraceptives will be able to stop you from getting a woman pregnant regardless of her race.

“JUsstt what!?” Harry deadpanned, forcing the words out despite the pressure even more now than it had been for Illmater, although far less than Chauntea. Harry put that down to perhaps Chauntea being such a quick, easy decision on his part. “I... well, er... no. I don’t think so. While it’s closer, there’s a hint of too much glitz and glamor there. While I like art and beauty, I’m not about to devote myself to its deity.”

Harry then made a mental shrug. “Besides, their combat abilities seem to be a little too specialized. But it was definitely closer.”

Once more, Harry found himself back in his body, staring around him thoughtfully. “Huh. okay, that took a while.” The sun was noticeably higher in the sky now, near noon, in fact. “One more than a break for lunch.” Reaching down, Harry touched the book once more.

“The Goddess Sune!”

With those words, a human female of unearthly beauty dressed in something that looked more appropriate for the bedroom than the world around him appeared. She had long crimson hair and ruby red, slightly plump lips. Her red hair stayed even as the rest of the appearance changed, skin color age, and bust all shifting from one moment to another, until it stopped on golden skin, while her eyes began to change. They had first been sky-blue, then honey, and now shifted into eyes of shining emeralds.

At the sight, Harry grimaced and, for the first time, tried to close his metaphysical eyes to the sight in front of him. “GAH Sttoooopp that, she looks like me mum! I am so bloody not going to worship someone who looks like me Mum! That’s all sorts of wrong!”

“Love, beauty and passion, with a connection to Life and Light, like Lathander, Sune is not one of the normal Triad, but she does have her own order, Sisters and Brothers of the Ruby Rose.”

Intrigued, Harry opened his mental eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as the book had changed the image. Instead of Sune, there were several paladins, among them the first female

fighters Harry had seen so far for some reason. They were fighting to protect what looked like a temple as a long line of refugees or worshippers raced inside from what looked like a horde of orcs, gnolls and men. Some used weapons and used traditional armor, but others stood behind the line with various instruments.

“A knightly order affiliated with the Church of Sune, the Brothers and Sisters of the Ruby Rose are made up of paladins, fighters and bards, something that no other order can boast. Their primary mission is to guard Sunite temples and holy sites, and occasionally accompany clerics doing good works or questing for something important to the Lady of Love.”

“NOPE!” Harry pushed out, grimacing again even as the images changed. This image was of a paladin protecting several women from a group of ogres, dashing in and out. Harry could somehow tell that those strikes were perfectly controlled and directed, almost superhumanly so, making even Khalid’s incredible skill look slow in comparison.

Still, Harry could tell this lady wasn’t for him. “No. Too restricting, too much about following the will of Sune and protecting her temples. That is not what I think of when I think of a paladin. Fighting alongside them could be interesting, but I won’t swear to this Goddess. Maybe if she was a rival to Cyric or some dark goddess, that could add some more interest, but not from this information.”

The image of Sune came back, and now, beyond the red hair, nothing of her looked like his mother. For one thing, Sune wore the body of a teen now, one extremely busty, with skin that looked like a mix of copper and brown, with eyes of gold. The image almost seemed to wink for a moment before it was gone.

Blinking, Harry stared into the book for a moment, then resolutely put it aside, getting up and moving to the fire, ignoring the pain stoically from his back and side. Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, Harry felt more drained mentally than physically. “That, that was surely something...”

Still, Harry knew that the book also had left two deities to explore who human paladins could look to. Torm, who Harry had heard a lot of before, and Tyr, who again Harry had heard of in conjunction with Paladins, the two other members of the Triad, with Tyr being their avowed leader even now when Ao All-Father had seared his eyes for not seeing the attempted theft of whatever it was Bhaal and Cyric had stolen.

Somehow, Harry knew one of these two would be the one to call out to him. Which was in deep question. “Still, it’s interesting to see how the AAS system and this Information Book interact and how the different paladins differ. Kind of fun.” *At least, I hope it was the AAS system that was doing that. I really don’t like the idea it could be anything else...*

But before he could delve back into the book, his ruminations were interrupted by seeing a blue dot appear on his map. It came closer, and then Harry made out a noise somewhere out past his little cordon. It was the sound of running feet, of someone racing as fast as their feet could carry them. "What the..."

Standing up slowly, Harry grimaced in pain, setting aside the ingredients he had been preparing for a wolf-meat stew, glancing at his display, his grimace enlarging as he saw that he was still barely forty-five out of seventy. "Damn it..." Whatever was coming, he'd have to face with only his sword. *One spell will put me on my ass!*

The sound of running feet came closer, and a female voice reached his ears, one huffing and cursing but still noticeably female. It was a tone Harry hadn't heard before, deeper, somehow hypnotic perhaps, or that could be her language. Harry was uncertain. A moment later, she hit the outskirts of his little noise traps, and her cursing grew.

Unable to just ignore a woman who seemed to be at her wit's end – and well away from civilization to boot – Harry raised his voice. "Come ahead if you need help, though I have little to give." Harry couldn't keep some bitterness from his voice. "I would prefer to take aid myself right now."

The noise paused and then resumed, still rushing towards him, then around the set of fallen trees, coming around them only to stop and stare.

This let Harry do the same, taking in the woman who had somehow stumbled upon him both with his eyes and his Observation skills. She was elven for certain, there was no missing her eyes, but the woman was trying hard to hide her body at the moment, with a heavy cloak and a scarf around her face, with gloves covering her hands and full, if somewhat tight, pants. But her race through the forest had torn her clothing in several places, showing both chain mail underneath and a skin color that looked dark blue, almost black. Her eyes were a light yellow color shining from underneath her hood, which in turn was torn in several places, showing silver-blue hair underneath.

Name: Viconia DeVir, Level 7 cleric of Shar.

Viconia is an exiled drow who has come to be exiled to the surface or perhaps is here of her own volition, you do not know. To say the least, she is extremely wary of humans and strangers, both perhaps thanks to something recent, perhaps thanks to her race, or perhaps both. Although one could cause the other.

You can tell Viconia is sore and tired, riding the ragged edge of exhaustion.

Relationship level: Trust: 400/7000, respect 20/7000.

Viconia is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt because of your offer of aid but now is rethinking that since she is uncertain if you can really help at all.

Well, I finally met someone who could be even harder to befriend than Jaheira, Harry thought wryly, shaking his head slightly. Still, that told him a lot about what was going on here. At Candlekeep, he had read about the Drow and understood they were not welcome on the surface. Even one of the most famous adventurers of the Age, Drizzt Do'urden, had been looked at with hatred and disgust when he first came to the surface and even now faced those who could not see past his race.

Viconia had not been having a good day. In fact, she had not been having a good week, and this was after a life spent in the Underdark and the city of Menzoberranzan, where life was cheap even for one such as Viconia, a daughter of the powerful DeVir clan. But there, while treachery and death could come from every corner within her family, at least she had not been attacked simply because she was Drow.

First came the moment when the caravan master saw Viconia's true skin color. Then, when she had refused his advances, he had ordered her captured. She had been able to escape him, only to be spotted instantly by a Flaming Fist officer off duty. He had chased her, and ever since, Viconia had been on the run in an unknown and bizarre land.

Viconia thought she had lost him for a time when they had pushed south beyond the area around the Friendly Arm Inn. For more than a day, she thought she was safe. Then someone found Viconia's trail, and the officer was on her trail once more, with seven of his fellows with him. That had been the most unpleasant moment when she looked up from making camp at the sight of an arrow coming towards her head. Only a hasty healing spell, and the fact that first fool had shot so quickly his fellows weren't in place yet saved her life. And since then, they had been hurting Viconia, dogging her every step. Three times she'd been certain she had lost them, only for them to find her trail once more. By this point, she was torn between believing they were toying with her or a concern that the gods were truly against her. She wasn't certain which it was.

And now this complication. A man who offers aid yet seems almost dead on his feet.

Admittedly, the human male was tall, almost imposing despite wearing no armor. He was powerfully muscled, wide in the shoulders and waist as humans were, standing at least a foot or more above her own height, and Viconia knew that she was actually quite well-built for a surface elf in terms of height as well as chest. She had become used to humans being taller and more powerfully built than her, but seeing one in only a thin undershirt like this was something else. And his eyes grabbed her attention as well, emeralds in a face made hard by experience and pain, yet with smile lines visible even so, reminding her almost of her brother.

Perhaps it was that memory that made Viconia stay, or perhaps it was the old saying, any port in a storm. Regardless, she stayed and held her hands up. "Hail, stranger. I seek aid."

"So I see, Harry answered, lips quirking wryly. "I said I'd be willing to help, but other than hiding you milady, I don't know how much help I can be. I am currently dealing with broken ribs, a sprained back and a broken foot. My ability to help you then is very limited, though if you lack weapons, I can at least remedy that."

"I can heal you, yes, if you trust me to do so? I have one Cure Serious Wounds left in me, which will let me heal one such wound."

"My back," Harry answered instantly. "Then tell me what you're running from? While I know a drow would face persecution, you seem far too panicked and far too away from civilization for this to be just some random racist issue."

You have gained +100 trust with Viconia. You have lost -40 respect with Viconia.

Apparently, while she likes the fact that you are so quick to offer help, you have also made it clear that you really need some yourself and are willing to offer aid too quickly.

She moved forward, walking behind Harry, causing him to turn, frowning a bit. "You have to touch me to use that spell?"

No, but it makes it easier to direct it, and I am at the end of my endurance, both physical and mental," Viconia growled, glaring up at him. "Now, will you accept my aid so that you are actually able to aid me in turn as you claim you wish to or am I going to have to flee again because you are so afraid of me, Abaloth?"

Smirking slightly, Harry held up a hand, and he was suddenly holding a sword. "Very well, my lady, but give me your name pray, so I know who is actually seeing to my injury. And to keep the peace, I won't ask what that term means."

She huffed, rolling her eyes. "I am no lady to be given false respect as your tone seems to indicate. Ironic drollness is not something I require. I am Viconia. You will address me and respect me, as such."

"You say you're no Lady, but you're still quite caustic and haughty for someone who is on the run," Harry drawled.

To her credit, Viconia finished the healing spell she had begun, laying her hand on Harry's sure to the back, directing the healing energies of her spell inward to his spine. As she did, Viconia's scowl disappeared, and she shook her head in surprise at what she found. "Your back

wasn't sprained. You had two chipped disks back there. Any more damage, and you might have been paralyzed."

"I know," Harry drawled before breathing in and smiling at the lessening of the pain he'd been dealing with for some time. He also noticed that removing one of his crippling wounds had an immediate effect, bringing his current health up to sixty and overall health up to eighty. "But thank you even so."

But he was still looking at her, and Viconia shook her head, her scowl returning. "You ask if I am caustic. Life has given me reason to be. You asked me if I am overly proud? If I do not hold myself to my own standards, I am nothing. And if I can run no longer, I will not cower before my death like a craven."

Harry nodded slightly. "I can respect that. But why are you being chased so fanatically?"

"Fanatically... a good term. For truly, I am being chased for no reason I can understand," Viconia's scowl redoubled even as she slowly pushed back her hood, searching Harry's face for any sign of anger or hate as she did. "I realized early on my time on the surface that my race was against me, and yet, this time, it seems to have been taken to an extreme. When my race was discovered, I fled from a caravan heading to Balder's Gate. I was then spotted once again almost on the heels of that by a Flaming Fist officer."

"That's the mercenary company that acts like Balder's Gate's city watch and army," Harry supplied.

"Regardless of their task, the officer spotted me and was quick to chase after me with some of his men. Since then, I have spotted several others, and it seems almost as if they have made a sport of it!" Viconia snarled in anger, a look that should have made her face seem ugly, but somehow it didn't.

"That does seem strange," Harry mused. "The Flaming Fist might be mercenaries, but their loyalty to Baldr's Gate is solid, and we are so far beyond their normal area it isn't even funny."

A part of Harry was surprised that his comment didn't create any message from the AAS. *Heck, I'm not even getting a quest to save the girl or something? I feel abandoned.*

"I know not nor care. Now, make good your words and give me a weapon!"

"I can do better than that," Harry answered, pulling out the chain mail that Mulahey had been wearing, along with Harry's spare hammer and Mulahey's medium shield. "Can you handle all that?"

Viconia stared avidly at the armor and weapon, grabbing them up, swiftly tossing her cloak aside, and shimmying into the chain mail armor. This showed that Viconia was wearing what could best be described as rags underneath. To be sure, it covered Viconia's body at different points in a very strategic manner. But didn't leave much to the imagination.

And suddenly, Harry had a very active imagination. Viconia's body was incredible. It had the svelte, toned thinness of surface elves but also showed marked muscle in her legs and a much larger chest than Harry had yet seen on any elf, or indeed, understood was the norm for elves. Her skin was a lustrous dark blue color as Harry had seen through the rents and her cloak, but somehow, seeing so much more of it brought that fact home even more.

However, Harry knew this was not a moment for that kind of thinking. Nor did he think that Viconia would welcome it at all from someone she had just met. "How many people are we talking about here, and how far behind you were they?"

"I do not know," Viconia answered promptly. "I know two of them were on my trail this morning and nearly caught me, and another sent an arrow my way a bare shift of the sun ago. I have tried to throw them off my trail before, but they always find me somehow."

"Do they use dogs to track you?"

"What are dogs?" Viconia asked her in return, some confusion showing through even as she finished settling the chain mail over her body, grimacing slightly at the feel of the metal on bare skin in places.

"Er animals kept by many humans and other surface dwellers either as pets or work animals. They can be very cuddly."

Viconia snorted. "I have only seen humans, and I have no idea what the term cuddly is either, Abaloth, pray do not use words I must strive to deduce the meaning of."

Right back at you, what does that even mean?" Harry shot back, although he was, smiling at Viconia's tart tones, feeling a strange calmness wash over him with violence imminent. He didn't know if it was his Gamer's Mind or what, but he welcomed it even so. "And how many of your pursuers have you seen?"

"It means a waste, someone who would be sacrificed to Lolth out of hand," Viconia snorted. "And speaking of more important matters, I have seen as many as nine at once, the time they nearly caught me that was spoiled by the premature shooter. Since the second day of this chase, the fewest I've seen when they actually come close enough to attack me is five."

"Five is manageable," Harry murmured. "If we get lucky, and if your patch job on my back holds up. Nine could be a lot of trouble."

"It will hold up for now. Your ribs are still broken, and your foot is mangled as well," Viconia answered tartly. "And my own tiredness is going to get in my way. Further," she looked a little annoyed, grimacing her teeth before finally admitting, "With this chain mail, I am somewhat encumbered, unfortunately. I will not be able to move quickly."

"Then I'll take point, and you can guard my back. With my foot, I'm not going to be moving much either," Harry answered with a laugh that was rather more sardonic than humorous. "And we will see what we will see. Although I don't suppose you have any offense of spells?"

"I have three remaining though I used all my summoning spells already," Viconia supplied, nodding in approval at the question. "I have Slay Living, Mental Domination, and Flame Strike."

Damn, that's some interesting spell choices, even if I have no idea what a Slay Living spell can do. The others are self-explanatory, at least. "Good. I would ask you to wait on the Mental Domination until you can use it on their leader, if he can be identified, or until we pair their numbers down. At least, I assume that such a spell would take you out of the fight too."

"Correct, and that makes sense." Viconia then watched as Harry moved around, pulling axes out of his Item Box, setting them aside, and moving forward, setting out small wooden skewers in the ground. "Those won't do much, you know."

"They might force someone to look down. In a fight like this one, that can be important," Harry rejoined, although he was watching his map at the same time and had just seen several blue dots appearing. Blue meant that they were neutrals. *That's not going to last.*

"I stand corrected," Viconia grumbled. She had to get used to men speaking to her like this here on the surface. The Drow were an extremely matriarchal society, so the idea of a male contradicting her was strange. Especially in this case, it was a simple correction instead of the start of an attack on her in some fashion. "You seem to have an eye for tactical opportunities."

"I am the leader of my adventuring party, so it comes with the territory," Harry answered, trying to downplay his skills. *Still, if this fight is as tough as I fear, then I might need to tell her more.*

"And you don't have any more healing spells or potions? Because they're coming," Harry announced, equipping his plate mail, grimacing at the weight of his tower on the arm on the same side as his still-broken ribs. In his other hand, Harry still held his longsword. *Damn it, my tower shield won't be worth more than one, two blows at most. Still, I have Jaheira's shield too.*

"No," Viconia snorted. "I have been forced to use them all in the past few days and did not get enough sleep to recoup my losses. And how do you know?"

“Understandable. As for how we know, I...” Harry paused, and both he and Viconia turned toward the sound of a set of Harry’s noise-maker traps going off, wooden bits clacking together in an area around the semi-circle that Harry had created.

“The bitch must be close!” Came a shout, full of some emotion Harry could not identify. Hate, yes, but also something else, a dark joy maybe? Whatever it was, it made Harry’s jaw clench and Viconia raise her hammer.

“What is this, though? No way that drow whore would have thought of setting up something like this.” Another voice asked. This one was querulous but equally as filled with that unknown emotion.

“Who cares? Let’s finish her off. I can’t cover our absence for much longer. We’ve had some fun already, boys. But it’s time to move on to the other kind,” A third voice said. This one had a kind of verbal sneer to it, as well as a haughty note.

“Fun, fun is it,” Viconia snarled. “I swear to Shar with my last breath I will curse them so hard their manhood falls off at the sight of a woman if they touch me!”

Harry nodded but said nothing, and a moment later, two groups of men came around the back of Harry’s hide.

Almost all of them read as simply Flaming Fist soldiers, much like the Amnian soldiers Harry had seen back in Nashkel. They wore plate mail, helmets with wings to either side of their heads, shields and swords, or bows.

Only one of them stood out. This man didn’t wear armor that visually looked any better, but the notification Harry saw via his observation was truly fascinating.

Corrupt Flaming Fist Officer, Artius Gist.

While on the surface, Artius appears a normal, upstanding field commander of the Flaming Fist, in reality, dark thoughts lurk behind the eyes of the younger brother of Felonius Gist. Always in his older brother’s shadow, Artius has turned to crime and taking bribes. There is a lot of fury in him visible on his face, and you can tell Artius isn’t someone who has a lot of self-control.

You can see a bulge of some kind of book under his plate mail armor as if there is a hidden pocket welded into the exterior that is supposed to look like a specially made stomach bulge. What could be there could be very interesting...

“Viconia, I’m going to try and rile them up a bit, target the one who answers with your Flame Strike Spell,” Harry hissed. He heard her grunt in reply as Harry moved forward. “ “HOLD!”

He bellowed, putting as much strength and commands into the words as he could as he held up his sword, pointing at the officer.

All nine of Viconia's attackers slowed down, staring at him. "Who are you to tell us to hold, fool?"

"Who I am doesn't matter. What does is you hunting this woman down like she is some kind of animal. Though I suppose with your looks, an animal is the only way you could get anything," Harry snarked.

"You bastard!" Artius bellowed. "I am a flaming Fist officer, and you will respect my authority!"

Harry snorted. "What is a Flaming Fist doing so far from Baldur's Gate then? As best I know, you lot only approach from a few days north of the Friendly Arm Inn, and we are well south of that? Did you get lost? Should I call your family to come get you?"

"GRAAAH!!!" Artius snarled, and Harry snickered as he saw the man's dot on his map go from neutral blue to red, and he charged forward. The other dots shifted to red, too, as Artius bellowed. "Kill him, boys! And remember, we want her alive, for now anyway..."

Harry charged forward, kicking up a rock toward Artius, who blocked it with his shield. Then Harry slammed shield-to-shield with him, hurling Artius off his feet even as Harry turned, his sword flicking out towards one of the other Flaming Fist officers. "Viconia!"

Viconia's flame strike struck a second later, a pillar of flame coming from the air above him. While it didn't kill Artius, it set him on fire, and he rolled desperately trying to put out the flames licking at his skin, breeches and under jerkin, screaming for aid.

Several of his men went to help him, while two others looked down at their feet, yelping in pain as they trod on the makeshift stakes Harry had made mere moments before. This left Viconia and Harry facing three opponents to start the fight.

Harry blocked one sword strike with his shield, grimacing as he saw the tower shield's durability rating fall to seven. *I'll need to cast Repairo on it after this.*

Pushing that strike to one side, Harry lunged forward, punching his sword into the side of the other, hitting his side so hard it dented the plate mail. Meanwhile, Viconia struck at the one who had attacked Harry, her hammer finding his forearm and breaking it.

Both men fell back, and Harry danced in, slicing at the third man who brought his sword around to block the blow. "CLEAVE!" Harry's power strike shattered his sword and hurled the man

to the Earth, his armor slashed clear through. Harry then twisted to the side, blocking a blow meant for Viconia from Harry's second victim. "Go low."

Obeying, Viconia left off, moving to finish the man Harry had struck with his cleave. Instead, her hammer swung in an arc under Harry's shield, cracking into the Flaming Fist's leg right below the knee.

"Now pull back," Harry ordered, and somewhat shockingly, Viconia did it, although he could hear her grumbling.

Internally even though she was annoyed at a male ordering her about like this, Viconia was elated. Three of her would-be torturers were on the ground already. Not dead, but out of the fight for certain. *And it is because of Harry's plans. Amazing.*

Noting absently that he had just gained five-hundred respect and trust points with Viconia, Harry held up his shield, blocking several arrows, which finished the tower shield off. But only two of the attackers kept their distance, and Harry grinned evilly as he switched out his shield with Jaheira's. "Bad move, more of them should have kept their distance."

"I rather think they thought to overwhelm us in close, and here they come!" Viconia growled.

True enough, Atrius was back on his feet, and the three men who had been helping him moved forward with him. Arrows zipped in from the two archers, forcing Harry and Viconia to block them, then the four attackers were on them, while two of the other Flaming Fist soldiers, the one Harry had struck with a cleave and the one with a broken arm, also moved. The one with a tear in his armor pulled back, pulling out a longbow, while the other moved forward with just his shield.

"Back to back, Viconia," Harry ordered, grimacing as he felt a sword strike on his shield again while his own longsword became locked with one of the others.

"I do not need to be told every little thing, male! This is not my first fight, blast it, just my first fight since coming to the surface," Viconia snarled even as she obeyed. Her shield took a blow meant for Harry while Harry blocked a blow meant for her other side, allowing Viconia to hammer a strike into that man's own shield.

"Should I look for sunblock then?" Harry quipped even as he struggled with their attackers, losing health now from the pain of his exertions, exacerbating his broken foot and ribs. *Damn it, I don't think we can win this.*

"Whatever is sunblock, and why do I think you are making jokes at my expense, Abaloth!?"

Grinning tightly at that, Harry redirected his next strike, and his sword's tip sunk into a Flaming Fist soldier's thigh. As he screamed, the man's shield arm flew out to one side, and he began to fall, blocking Artius for a second. Harry's blade pulled out and swung without a second's thought, cutting into the man's helmet, shearing through the cheek guard and into his skull.

Blood spattered back onto Harry's chest and neck almost into his face, but worse was the fact that the three longbowmen all targeted him at that point. They had spread apart, and now all of them fired from positions around the melee. Harry's shield blocked two arrows falling down to six Durability, while the third arrow flashed over his shield, impacting Harry's chest.

Sheer agony flashed through Harry's mind, and though the arrow barely penetrated, the impact carried to his ribs, which had already been screaming at him, and it was all Harry could do to not fall to his knees. "GUUHUUH..."

I need to do something to silence those archers, but they're too separated to get with one spell... with that, Harry unequipped his sword and attempted to throw one of his axes, only for his lack of skill with axes to come into play. The throwing axe barely even reached the archer, and by the time it did, it had turned, the blade of the axe hitting his thigh, no doubt leaving a bruise, but little else.

"Damn it!" Harry hissed before being forced to go sword-to-sword with Artius. He was a much better swordsman than his followers, and crippled as he was, Harry couldn't keep up with him. Two strikes nearly got through his Sword and Shield style, and Harry couldn't strike back. Luckily, Viconia was able to keep the other three attackers off him, and they, in turn, blocked the archers from targeting her.

As Jaheira's medium shield started to collapse in turn, Harry unequipped it and then thrust forward, scowling, "Stupefy!"

The use of the spell knocked Harry's health bar down into the red, leaving him gasping, but he had caught Artius and one of Viconia's attackers.

Viconia gasped, seeing the spell impact. "What in the world!?"

But she had no time to worry as Harry grabbed her arm and hurled her over Atrius' body. "Kill the archers!"

Rolling forward through the gravel and dirt, Viconia snarled, but her shield twitched, blocking an arrow meant for her, and she had to mentally concede Harry's point even as she tossed her shield aside, which allowed her to move unencumbered. "Do not throw me again like that, Abaloth!"

With that, Viconia charged forwards, getting the attention of the archers. One of them threw his weapon down and began to run, while the other two tried to pull out short swords. One of them failed to do so before she was on him, and her warhammer crashed into his face, shattering bone and hurling him backward in red ruin. A sweep to the side caught the other man's short sword and turned it aside, at which point Viconia smashed the edge of her shield down into the man's leg. The Flaming Fist officer stumbled to one knee, and her sideways blow crashed into his face, breaking his neck and denting his helmet.

By the time she did, Harry had finished off Atrius and was now dueling with the last armed Flaming Fist soldier. The one whose arm Viconia had broken was trying to use his shield to support his companion, but they were the last of her attackers still on their feet bar the one running away.

But there was still the man with the broken leg, and Viconia moved over to him. He tried to thrust his sword up at her, but Viconia's hammer licked out almost daintily and slammed into the hand holding the sword, crushing his fingers. Then she stood over him and thought about using her Slay Living spell before simply using her hammer to crush his skull with three blows, turning his helmet into a mess and his head into so much mush. *Ah, that was satisfying.*

Meanwhile, Harry's sword thrust out, taking the last armed man in the throat. As he fell, the man with the shield finally broke, turning to flee. But as he did, Viconia was there, and with manic glee, she targeted the man's knee. The Flaming Fist soldier fell, and Viconia kept hammering the man well after he died.

If he had any strength, Harry might well have stopped her. Instead, he had collapsed and only shouted out, "F, find the runner! He's going that way!" pointing straight north.

Viconia stopped, staring at the mangled remains of her victim, then to the north and slowly shook her head. "I cannot see him and have no woodcraft. Not here on the surface, anyway. I don't know if I could find his trail, let alone this place once more unless I travel in a straight line."

"F... fuck," Harry ground out before collapsing. "W, well, I wouldn't be heading to Baldur's Gate for some time anyway."

"We," Viconia stated firmly, and Harry's eyes widened at the message his AAS displayed a second later.

Announcement: Due to your use of your Blood Magic spell and your help, the Trust and Respect relationship meters have been replaced with Respect and Interest. As a Drow on the surface, Viconia has decided that trust is a commodity she cannot afford to spend on many but has decided to do so on you as much as she is able.

Viconia now views you as a **Traveling Companion.**

Respect stays the same but be warned: good deeds will only carry you so far with Viconia. As you have already seen, Viconia respects strength, ability and power. Prove to be too much of a bleeding heart, and despite that aspect having been why you helped her, Viconia will lose respect for you.

Interest should be self-explanatory, but if you want it spelled out, if you max out Interest and Respect, your relationship will change in a new and interesting manner...

Relationship: 3000/7000 Interest 520/7000

As Harry read that off, Viconia kept on speaking, her words confirming the change. “You helped me when you had nothing to gain from it, Harry, the first to extend his hand to me since I came to the surface. While I would never say I need allies, having someone I could trust to watch my back in this battle was a very nice feeling. As was seeing that mysterious power.” The drow woman practically purred the last word. “It looks as if you have secrets, perhaps several. I would like to know them, and I will travel with you for now.”

Even as Harry tried to think of what to say and how he and Imoen had made Branwen swear to keep their secrets, Viconia’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed. Staring at the collapsed form of the gorgeous elf woman, through bleary eyes, Harry didn’t react for a moment. Then as his pain from using a Stupefy spell finally began to fade, he turned to look up at the sky. “Fucking really?! If this is a challenge from someone out there, could I at least know what I’m trying to win here?”

Thankfully for Harry’s blood pressure, the woman did not stay asleep for long after Harry began to feed her.

Waking up to an odd, if most flavorful taste in her mouth, Viconia stared at Harry wildly, pushing against his hand. “W, what!? what did you feed me!?”

“Stew. Wolf-meat stew. Sorry, I figured you needed some food.” Without even any change in expression, Harry dipped the spoon into the bowl, then took a sip himself before looking at Viconia. “Satisfied?”

“You, you can cook as well?” Viconia questioned.

Harry noted absently that had made him gain a hundred interest points, hiding a snicker at the accompanying note.

Evidently someone who can cook herself, Viconia knows the importance of good food and is both impressed and astonished that a man can cook, perhaps better than she can, although trying to figure that one out could be troublesome.

But this wasn't time for jokes. This was time for something serious. "Among many things. Things that you have seen only a bit about just yet. Enough to interest you apparently, and I'm not foolish enough to think you are just traveling me because you suddenly know you need someone to watch your back up here on the surface and trust me to do the job."

Viconia snorted and shook her head. "Trust has only a bit to do it. I trust you to be able to do it."

"And I have to trust you to keep my secrets. Not just while we are traveling together but if we part company," Harry said firmly. "As you are a cleric, I require an oath on the name of your god."

Her eyes widening, Viconia stared at Harry, then her eyes narrowed. "You know what you are asking?"

"I have a cleric to Tempus in my party. The very same night we met, I had her swear an oath. We had tried to travel with people before who were not in on our secret, and it severely limited our abilities, so much so that two died and had to be revived later. So yes, if you want to travel with me, you will give me your oath."

For several minutes, Viconia stared at Harry, who calmly ate some of the stew before moving over to spoon out more into the bowl from the pot over the fire. Then she smiled, and Harry noted that he had just earned another hundred interest points for her, as well as a hundred respect points. Evidently, intelligence was just as important as power to Viconia. "Very well, Harry. I will give you my oath. So long as you do the same."

"Excellent. Although as I don't have a god at present, I will need to wait to give you my own return oath until you've healed me a bit." Viconia scowled, and he shrugged. "My abilities require a sacrifice of health, and I don't have much remaining at present. Fighting for you and moving you into my little hide didn't exactly help me."

After a few minutes glaring, Viconia nodded, not liking the reminder of her weakness but accepting she would need to take a step forward here. *And I can look at it as if this is my first step forward in paying back the debt I owe him for saving my life.*

She spent a few more minutes spent going over the wording with Harry before Viconia held her hand above her head, closing her eyes. "This Oath should really be given at night, but

needs must. I, Viconia DeVir, swear on the name of Shar to keep the secrets of Harry of Candlekeep and his party until my death so long as Harry does the same for mine.”

Attention: your Traveling Companion Viconia has vowed to keep your secrets on the name of her god. Like Branwen, Viconia will die before sharing your secrets now, although given the nature of the Dark Goddess of Magic, Shar, Viconia will probably die screaming.

This is a sign of her Interest in you, which will go up commensurate to her reaction to your secrets.

Note: Shar is an evil deity! If Shar so wishes, Viconia’s oath may be overturned, but only if Shar becomes aware of it. As it is daytime, her power is nonexistent at the moment.

“Now, tell me how you, a paladin, was able to cast something that looked like a wizard spell?” Viconia nearly ordered before glaring down at her stomach as it betrayed her.

“Hehe, well, I suppose I can talk while you eat, that is if this lowly male’s food meets your requirements?” Harry taunted.

Scowling, Viconia glared at him as she tried to get to her feet, but failed, only to fall back.

“You’re exhausted and malnourished. You’ve had to run here from near Baldur’s Gate, which is weeks to the north,” Harry intoned as he moved to kneel by Viconia’s head, holding out a spoon of the stew. “And I rather doubt you’ve had an easy life of it before that.”

“Heh, easy. Male... Harry... you have no idea,” Viconia grumbled. She tried to feed herself, only to nearly drop the spoon of stew into her cleavage, something that won a blush from Harry, which Viconia in turn noticed. A smile appeared on her face, and the thought about that for a second before opening her mouth, wordlessly ordering Harry to feed her.

Rolling his eyes, Harry did so, and Viconia concentrated for some time on just the food, acknowledging the food was some of the best Viconia had ever tasted, even when compared to back home in Menzoberranzan. After a time, she had finished the bowl, and Harry turned away, moving back to the fire and filling another bowl of stew.

Viconia was about to protest she could eat no more and order Harry to tell her the secrets she had just vowed to keep. But Harry turned aside, moving to the other side of the fire.

It was only now that Viconia realized they were not alone. On the other side of the fire lay a half-elven woman with blonde hair, unconscious. Viconia stared at her for a moment, then stated, “You have mentioned your companions, and I was uncertain what to make of that. Is that woman one of them?”

“Yes. Her name’s Jaheira. More than that, you’ll learn once you can help heal her. She and I were separated from the rest of our party. That’s a whole tale, though, so I’ll have to lead up to it a bit,” Harry responded.

Seeing the care, Harry was giving the woman made Viconia frown. “Just the two of you? The half-elf, she is your lover?”

Harry shook his head firmly, blushing a bit. “No, she and her husband are just part of my party. We were fighting underground, washed away by a trap into an underground river. We survived, but I’m a paladin who hasn’t chosen a God, and she is a druid who took serious wounds to her head, so we haven’t been able to move much.”

“How long have you been out here, and will the rest of your band come to find you?” Viconia looked at Harry closely. “And should I be worried about what kind of sanctimonious so-called god of light might require your service?”

“We’ve been here for a day and a half, I think. Maybe more, considering I don’t know how long it was before I woke up. As for requiring my service, that isn’t how it works. Although I will say, I kind of agree with the sarcasm. The more you look into the gods of light, the more you become aware that they don’t really preach love and harmony,” Harry drawled as he handed a skewer of meat and mushrooms over to Viconia, urging her to eat a bit more.

“Of course not,” Viconia snorted, although she took the food readily enough. “Love and harmony, what is the point of those foolish emotions anyway?”

“Well, love leads to the next generation among humans and surface elves,” Harry answered tartly, causing Viconia to snort. “Harmony though, I’ve not seen a lot of that one.” He then smirked, put his hands together, and tried to sound like Imoen at her most annoying. “Can’t we all just get along?”

He timed it perfectly, just as Viconia had taken a bite, and she spluttered, spitting it out into the fire in front of her. She glared at him, then shook her head with a scowl. “What addle-brained moron came up with that? And as for love, bah,” she waved her hand. “That is not something that is well known among my people. Indeed, it is a weakness.”

Harry thought about asking if there was something behind that, but considering that he just saw a flash of real rage go across Viconia’s face, he decided against it. They had just met, after all. There would be time enough once they got to know one another.

“What about you?” Viconia asked, “what is your personal belief system?”

“I like to think I try to take people as they come,” Harry said with a wink, spooning up a mouthful of his own stew finally, wincing at the agony of his ribs. He had willfully ignored it, but he

was down to a bare fifteen health now. "But if you wronged me or harmed those I care about, I have very few squabbles on what I will do not do to take revenge."

Viconia leaned forward with interest, not noticing, perhaps, that this allowed Harry to gain a glimpse of her cleavage, which was most striking. "Vengeance, not justice?"

The blue of her skin seems to add something to the scene.

"Well," Harry said with a shrug, looking away. "Justice or revenge would drive me in the same direction right now. I... I will say that how I go about achieving my goals is just as important as what label I give it. My father," he paused, looking at her. "Do drow..."

"Yes, we have sires. They are just not important. Although I have spent enough time on the surface already to know that is not the case here. Continue," Viconia quickly answered, a scowl on her face. "And pray do not treat me like an idiot. I might not yet be used to life up here on the surface, but at least I understand much of it."

"In any event, my father, or the man who raised me, well, I was being targeted, and so was my father. We were attacked, and my father slain before my eyes. I would've died too, if not for a final act of revenge from my old man."

Viconia smiled thinly at that. "Yes, final acts of revenge are quite sweet when done right."

Harry cocked an eyebrow, inviting her wordlessly to elaborate, but Viconia hesitated, and Harry's face firmed up. "We are going to travel together, and I will be sharing mine with you. I think you should share something of yourself with me. Unless it is extremely painful instead of simply secret. Recall that I will also be vowing to keep your secrets the moment I can without killing myself."

"It is both, but..." Viconia hesitated before staring at the finished skewer, setting it aside. "This is part and parcel of why I am on the surface, so I suppose you have a right to know, especially since my troubles might follow me. But only when we can share secrets both ways."

Harry nodded and, changing the subject, jerked a thumb towards Jaheira. "If I help you over, can you tell me anything about Jaheira's injuries?"

When Viconia nodded, Harry got up and lifted Viconia to her feet, helping her stumble over to Jaheira, although he lost another few points of health doing it. His groan of pain was heard by Viconia, and the Drow made a note to heal Harry first after a good night's sleep. Then she sat beside Jaheira and let her fingers trace from the half-elf's face into her hair as her priestly senses pushed out through her fingers.

“Her head trauma is somewhat severe, not in terms of blunt force damage only, but she seems to have taken several dozen small hits to the head, which has caused accumulated damage to her brain. Was she recently healed in her side as well?”

Harry nodded, and Viconia went on. “That wound isn’t quite as severe as the head trauma, but whatever happened to the two of you happened to tear open that injury. You did a good enough job bandaging it for a male...” she threw out, smirking slightly at Harry’s eye roll.

Already within a few moments of meeting him, I am rather coming to enjoy getting those little rises out of him. Amusing, Viconia mused.

“It will take me a Cure Serious Wounds to heal the brain damage and a Cure Medium Wounds spell to heal her side. After that, Jaheira might well have to sleep for at least another eight hours or more to fully recover. You did well continuing to feed her. That and the rest has done her some good in terms of rebuilding her body’s blood,” Viconia finished.

“And me?”

Viconia looked at Harry, and then shrugged, and gestured him to lay out next to her. Now feeling much better, Viconia turned and knelt next to him in turn, first studying his foot.

“The foot will need a Cure Medium Wounds Spell,” Viconia said, removing her hands from his foot and then trailing her other hand up his side, touching the broken ribs. These though you aggravated severely during the fight. Again, I will need a Cure Serious Wounds to heal it. As for your back... rollover,” she ordered brusquely.

Harry did so, grunting at the pain, but then blushed as Viconia began to touch his back, trailing her thumbs up and down his spine for a moment. *Is it just me, or is she taking her time now?*

My word, human men can be for more muscled than Elven males, even the best of drow warriors, Viconia thought to herself, somewhat amused at the musculature of the young human man. The feel of those muscles twitching under her fingers was fascinating.

You have gained 20 interest points with Viconia. You have gained 100 respect points with Viconia. She likes them muscley.

While Harry was trying not to think about that, Viconia went on. “Unfortunately, the same can be said for your back. That battle truly did you a mischief. I am astonished that you were even able to fight so well. Let alone do anything else.”

“I have always been more stubborn than what is good for me,” Harry chuckled.

Viconia snorted. "Foolish." Harry made an interrogative noise, and Viconia smirked, pulling away from his back and ordering him to roll over again so they could speak face-to-face as she sat down beside the fire again. "What others call stubbornness, I call a will to live and **win**. That is necessary to get anywhere in this life, to achieve anything. That, and a certain amount of viciousness."

Again a dark look crossed her face, but Harry spoke up before she could try to figure out what to say next. "It is simply taking viciousness too far or having viciousness be your goal that makes it bad."

Viconia nodded, her eyes looking at Harry appraisingly. *Most intriguing indeed.* "I will need a night's rest before my healing spells return. Should I prioritize you or your companion?" she asked abruptly, looking around for a place to rest.

Harry thought about it for a moment, then gestured around them. "Do you think that more of that group is going to come after you?"

It was Viconia's turn to think for a moment, and she reached up, stroking fingers through her hair as she did, the motion arresting Harry's attention for a moment. "I do not believe so. It is possible, but I doubt it."

Harry nodded, then, with a twist of his hand was holding one of the gourds of power. *I'm glad I didn't think about eating it now, not that it would have helped me much. My strength wasn't in question even in that fight, just my ability to bloody move!*

He tossed it to her, and Viconia caught it, looking at it and her eyes going wide. "That's my last one. Prioritize getting Jaheira's mind back together. Then yourself. But if trouble comes before you can heal me, you might have to be the one to handle it."

Viconia nodded, once more looking impressed with Harry's ability to deal with pain. But personally, Harry put it down more to the Gamer's Mind than even his new permanent buff.

"I believe that is a good idea. Viconia placed the Gourd of Power next to her head, knowing that her own ability to use her Item Box was extremely limited.

"I believe with that, both of us need to get some sleep." Viconia made to object, but Harry shook his head. "The traps I laid out should at least wake us up in time if we're attacked in the night, and my map ability will also give me some warning. Besides, you need sleep, and frankly, I'm so battered, there's no chance of my staying awake for very much longer either now that my stomach's full."

Viconia snorted at that but did not argue. Soon enough, both of them were falling asleep, although Viconia, unable to use Gamer's Mind, took some time to do it. And as she did, she

thought about the young man who had saved her life, his odd abilities, what they could mean, and this quest of his. *Interesting, most interesting. Well, at least my time on the surface now will be both safer and much more interesting...*

End Chapter

Chapter 11 New Revelations, New Allies, Big Problems

Much to Imoen's chagrin, Harry and Jaheira turned out to be quite a ways further away than she had hoped anyway. She and the rest of their party had been traveling in the direction of the Point me spell, which Imoen checked every time they had to move around some natural obstacle, hadn't deviated at all. They had been forced to make camp a day out from Nashkel while it was raining out, and hadn't been able to find any cave, or even any trees they could use as cover. There were trees around, but they were spindly things, with few branches to them and not nearly enough in the way of cover for the adventurers. The best they had been able to do was Minsc using his large cloak and a few bedrolls to make a kind of tarpaulin between two rocks for them to hide under.

In other words, it had been a damn miserable night. Made worse by the message the Advanced Adventuring System popped up into Imoen's face when she woke up.

With both the threat of enemies around and uneven terrain, you have had a fitful night's rest.

Only half of your endurance has been returned. Spells have not been memorized.

Despite the message though, Imoen felt like she slept fine. She hopped to her feet energetically, cracking her neck and shoulders as he stretched, preparing a cold breakfast. Minsc and Khalid both woke up similarly energized, getting to their feet and speaking quietly before Khalid left the camp, heading out with his bow in hand to see if he could find something to add to their larder. Meanwhile, Minsc, with Boo on his shoulder, moved to unhook the makeshift tarpaulin over their equally makeshift camp.

Branwen and the two magic users had a harder time of it, coming awake somewhat groggy and annoyed at the noises the three party members were making. Branwen pushed herself upright against one of the rocks, then with a sigh got to her feet, helping Minsc with the tarpaulin, shooing the two magic users out of their bedrolls with threats of dripping water on them.

The two magic users glared at her but began to move and Branwen turned to Imoen. "In truth, I believe when we were talking about the powers your Advanced Adventuring System gives you and your party members Imoen, we missed one of the most important ones. I do not know about the rest of you, but I have served in various warbands before this. The ability to get a good night's sleep regardless of how long or short the night would have been a positive godsend at times."

"Pun unintended I hope. One would think even a blonde barbarian warrior would not stoop to the lowest form of humor," Edwin muttered, pulling a special mug out of one of his pouches and taking a sip. The special mug was one of the few truly enchanted items he had on his person. With a whispered incantation, the mug heated the concoction within up until there was a faint steam coming from its small opening, and he drank from it greedily.

Dynaheir looked at him, at his cup, then bit her lip and turned away. There was no way she was going to let the smug Thayan know she was irritated by the fact that he had what looked like tea in the morning and she wanted some. Instead, she latched onto Branwen's observation. "True. But there is something else as well. Now that the secret is out Harry and Imoen will no longer have to hide their Blood Magic spells. And when we rescue Jaheira and Harry from whatever trouble has undoubtedly found them, we will have two healers as well. I will assume therefore that you would be willing to use more spells from now on?"

"While I am extremely interested about these Blood Magic spells and what they tell us about the very nature of magic, I would caution you against profligate use. If we are in a village or town, I would say that using them would be atrociously stupid. Tongues wag, and the speed of your incantations and indeed the spells themselves would stick in the mind of anyone who knew even the tiniest bit about how magic is usually done. The last thing you want to do is to have well the red wizards like myself decide that you have become interesting enough to dissect," Edwin warned.

"Oh look, he does care," Imoen taunted, winking at Edwin.

The red wizard rolled his eyes. "Child, there is only one individual Edwin Odesseiron cares about, and that is Edwin himself. You and your brother have been both fascinating and admittedly not entirely horrible traveling companions, but do not forget that I am in this for my own self-interest and curiosity."

“And there go my warm and fuzzy’s. But in answer to your question Dynaheir, yeah, I would be willing to experiment, and for sure I’m going to continue using them as we need going forward although Edwin is right about not wanting to have any witnesses. An ace in the hole is only so good as you’re able to hide it from your enemies, you know? And we’ve seen signs all along that the big bastard who is after my brother and I have connections in a lot of places. Further, I... don’t know about really experimenting once we get Jaheira back. The blood mage spells take so much of our life out of us, that even if it’s Harry’s the one doing the experimenting, one out of every three healing spells told have to be used on him to keep them going.”

Coming back then, Khalid shook his head, indicating that he had not found any sign of animals nearby. How far he went was an open question as he’d only been gone for five minutes if that, but the look in his eyes and the sight of his twisted into an anxious grimace was such no one questioned it. “L, l, let’s get g, g, going. T, t, the sooner we find my wife and H, H, Harry the better.”

Dynaheir and Minsc and Branwen all argued back that they should wait until he had some breakfast and after a second, as the de-facto leader, Imoen decided to let them take some time over their breakfast. “It will be our only warm meal for the day, and it’s not like any of us are cooks like Harry, Khalid. Better to start the day with as good a meal as we can have.”

This consisted of warm gruel, basically, although with fresh fruit, strawberries and raspberries they had bought along with strips of cooked chicken meat from Nashkel. Not a candle on anything Harry had made while out in the wild, which Edwin pointed out every other moment. Something that Imoen would have found annoying if she wasn’t thinking the same thing. As they cleaned up, she quipped, “Well, food is just another reason to find our wayward swimmers quickly, you know? So let’s get going.”

Near midday, while still following the point me spell they came upon their next obstacle. This took the form of a wide chasm in the ground, spreading from one horizon to the other directly across the path the point me spell pointed. Minsc examined it closely, conferring with Khalid, who stared around him, seeing further than the others could thanks to his half-elven eyesight. “Khalid and Minsc are in agreement. Both of us have seen such things before, and given the size of the crevice, we believe that the chasm starts a little ways to the north. If we go that way, we will be able to get around it faster.”

“How long out of our way will that take us, and what kind of terrain would we find? We’ve been oddly lucky so far; our route going forward hasn’t been all that difficult despite that waste of simian seed Greywolf and his minions attacking us as they did,” Edwin snorted, shaking his head.

“I agree with Edwin,” Imoen said, looking over at Branwen. “And we do have a healer right here after all.”

Branwen looked at her quizzically a but instead of explaining, Imoen looked back at Minsc and Khalid. “I don’t suppose either of you are afraid of heights?”

Both of the warriors looked at one another in confusion then Imoen pointed at Minsc, intoning, “Wingardium Leviosa.”

You have used the Leviosa Blood Mage Spell on a heavy object.

-25 to Health.

Without a word, Minsc began to rise into the air, causing him to whoop in shock. “What is going on?! What magic is Imoen casting on this poor ranger and his mighty friend? Boo is an adventurous Miniature Giant Space hamster and is enjoying being weightless, but Minsc very much prefers to have his mighty feet on the ground!”

“Hang on Minsc, this won’t take long.” As the others watched, Imoen moved her arm around in a half-arc with Minsc following the movement of her hand through the air.

“I do not like this at all, no not at all! DO not drop mighty Minsc, please, Imoen!” The ranger babbled his arms flailing while Boo clung on to his shoulder. “Boo can only comfort Minsc so much.”

Imoen’s arm movements directed the spell, taking him out over the chasm, and then across the other side as Imoen made little pushing motions with her hands sending him further away. Soon he was on the other side, his monologue having not stopped since Imoen and lifted him off the ground.

“Make sure there’s no other monsters or anything around Minsc. I’m going to send over Dynaheir, then Khalid, then Edwin and finally Branwen,” Imoen announced.

Edwin had watched all this, both intrigued by the efficacy of the spell, and how quickly Imoen had been able to use it just like all the other blood mage spells. Although he

was not looking forward to actually crossing. It looked most undignified, flying under someone else's power like that. *Just add it to the numerous reasons you have to become stronger in magic Edwin, so that you can fly under your own magical might rather than someone else's. Especially a talented amateur like Imoen who has seemingly just stumbled onto an entirely new school of magic.*

Dynaheir on the other hand was a little disturbed as Imoen explained how much of her health points that had taken. "I am wondering if had to attempted to lift us all at once, if that spell would have killed you. Your Blood Mage spells are inherently different from magic of the sort the Thayan and I use. Indeed, you are more Sorcerer than Wizard, but unlike them, your magic comes from your own blood rather than a inherent connection to the weave."

"Ah, but the breathe of what Imoen and her fellow Bhaal-child can do is far wider than those dilettantes," Edwin demurred. "And we have already determined that their spells are not as singular as a Sorcerer's is."

Each Sorcerer's spells were different in some fashion even though the actual result of the spell might seem similar. Then again, that rarely mattered. A fireball was a fireball regardless of the color of the flame. A spell to teleport the Sorcerer out of danger worked, even if they had to move their hands in a specific fashion or shout an activation arcana.

"Oy, you know I don't like hearing people talk about the murder-hobo. As to your question Dynaheir, it might have. That's why I said Harry would have to be the one to experiment," Imoen grumbled, shaking her head. "I seriously need to put some more points into my endurance, and hope that helps my health pool."

"If you all could stop talking, and Imoen could send me my witch across? I am becoming anxious given my place on this side of the chasm in comparison to my charge. Besides, if lifting Minsc took so much out of you, then lifting a Witch such as Dynaheir should be easy. All of Rasheman know witches are as light as feathers!" Minsc bellowed from the other side.

Edwin and Khalid both chuckled at that, while Branwen guffawed. But Dynaheir took it in stride, stepping forward, while pointing a finger towards Branwen and Khalid. "That is actually a good point. If the weight of the object you move must has an impact on how much magical life force it takes out of you, then we all need to be as light as we can going over."

Seeing her point at once, both Branwen and Khalid divested themselves of their armor and weapons quickly. Dynaheir flew over, even going so far as to hold her arms against her side so as to go a little faster, smiling somewhat at the sensation of flight. Khalid went next, acting almost as rigid as a board, holding his arms against his sides as he stared around his eyes almost wildly moving in his head while a little whimper came from him as he crossed over the gorge.

And to Branwen and Imoen's astonishment, Khalid without his armor weighed just as much as Dynaheir. The half elf just didn't have the size or powerful muscles of a human man at the same level. Soon though he was on the other side, and thanks to the party's ability to use their items space more effectively, was instantly armed and ready for combat. The same would not be said about Branwen when it became her turn.

"Dynaheir was right, as I figured she would be," Imoen muttered as Branwen used another healing spell on her, breathing easier as the spell hit. "Moving Minsc like I took twenty-five health, moving Dynaheir took five, moving Khalid without his armor the same. I should have thought of that before trying to lift Minsc the first time."

"I will wager that I will be a bit more than the two of them when it becomes my turn. I might not be as mightily muscled as Minsc is, but neither am I a wallflower of a half elf," Branwen teased, even if Khalid couldn't hear her across the gorge. It had been a running joke throughout the day that she, a human woman, was much more heavily muscled than Khalid was, despite the fact that Khalid had heavier armor, and was admittedly the better warrior of the two. Indeed, the comparison wasn't even close, hence why Branwen liked to tease him about his lack of muscles.

"Edwin first," Imoen intoned firmly turning to the red wizard.

He grumbled, but stowed his staff in his own item space, before stepping to the edge of the gorge. A moment later he rose into the air, and began to flounder his way forward, finding the experience most disagreeable. "This is utterly graceless and without any redeeming quality whatsoever! Why is my moving my arms not having an impact on where I'm going or how fast? Yes, this is most definitely the last time I will allow you to use this spell on my mighty person."

"Mighty person'," Branwen repeated, sneering and nudging her shoulder against Imoen, an interesting feat given the difference in their heights. Branwen was as tall as Harry, who stood more than a foot taller than Tonks in her new life. "Mighty indeed. He

looks like one of those balloons you sometimes see the gnomes make for their children, a particularly ugly one fit only for target practice perhaps.”

Imoen snickered, shaking her head. “Yeah, he doesn’t exactly look all mysterious and all-powerful now does he? Maybe I should keep this spell in reserve for when he lets too much of his ego show.”

“I don’t have nearly enough healing spells to keep you going if you do that,” Branwen demure it, the two women sharing a laugh while Imoen set Edwin on his feet on the other side of the gorge. Luckily for inter-party cooperation, this put him out of hearing range.

Branwen cast another two small healing spells on Imoen, bringing her back up to full health, then looked at her. “Are you going to be able to get yourself across?”

“I... hope so.” Imoen murmured, looking a little worried. “Directing myself while I’m in the air might be a problem though.”

“In that case, it is a good thing I brought rope along,” the blonde haired Viking-like woman said, patting Imoen gently on the shoulder.

As with normal adventurers and their item space, it took her a while to get her rope out, and then everything else back in. But once she was done, Branwen placed a loop of rope around Imoen’s waist, tying it in place before stepping back, holding the other end with both hands, a wry grin on her face. “There, you’re all set. Now, fly me.”

Snorting, Imoen did so, noting that Branwen had been correct. Using the spell that time had taken twelve health, a little higher than both the wizards combined. “Makes sense, I would wager she at least ways nearly as much as both of them combined anyway. She has got to be the most heavily muscled woman I’ve ever met. Hell, I bet she could play rugby for the boys back home,” Imoen muttered, watching the blonde woman go across the gorge under her control, until she leaned on the other side. “Heh, she’d even be good at it, and not just because the boys would be too busy looking at her baps.”

Imoen waited until Branwen had her armor on and was waving at her, with Minsc also helping to take some of the rope, before pointing at herself. “Oh, I hope this works.”

Now, Imoen knew that she wasn’t exactly built as well as in her Tonks body. Indeed, she was both the shortest, and possibly the lightest member of the party. She

didn't have Dynaheir's thighs, or the chest, and both Khalid and Jaheira topped her by a foot.

Despite that however, levitating herself took not only a lot of her health, another whopping twenty-five points, but concentration. She could feel the spell almost trying to get away from her, as if she couldn't quite figure out how to keep it going, pointing at herself and just floating there, her mind stuck in an endless loop of keeping the spell going. It made trying to move herself nearly impossible, and indeed, she couldn't even answer to Dynaheir's shout of "Are you all right?"

After a second with no response, Dynaheir took charge, ordering, "Pull her across. Something seems to have gone wrong but she is in the air at the very least."

"Of course, fair Dynaheir!" Minsc boomed with a laugh. "Although Boo is of the mind that everyone should be able to work weightless as he can, it is truly not a natural thing for us two legs."

With the strongest members in the party pulling her across, Imoen was back over solid ground on their side of the gorge in no time. There, as she felt Branwen touch her shoulder, Imoen finally released the spell, collapsing onto her side even as the cleric hurriedly began to cast a healing spell.

"Why the hell, why was that so hard!?"

"Self-transfiguration is one of the most advanced stages of magic, as is teleportation, even such relatively straightforward spells such as dimension Door. While you were not trying to transfigure yourself, you were trying to shift your body in space and time, so perhaps some of the same rules may apply? Fascinating. Especially since you said you have used a low-level healing spell on yourself?" Edwin inquired, a scroll in hand along with a magical pen.

"I wouldn't call Episkey a healing spell. It closes small wounds, it doesn't give you back your health or speed up the healing process," Imoen answered, touching her head groggily. "But yeah, I think the same rules kind of apply. I had a hell of a lot of trouble keeping the image of myself floating in my head, so much so I couldn't even think of moving once I was in the air. And are you actually taking actual god-damned notes?! Fuck you, you smarmy cock!"

“Ah, as Imoen is obviously feeling better, perhaps we should move on?” Edwin drawled, putting away his writing utensils.

Without a word, Khalid moved off, with Minsc hurrying after him at Dynaheir’s nod even as Branwen helped Imoen to her feet. “While Edwin’s overall attitude leaves much to be desired, he is correct perhaps in his supposition that using such spells on yourself is often harder than you might think. But practice can also help in that area,” Dynaheir said to the younger woman.

“I hope so,” Imoen answered, thinking Branwen for help, even as she pulled out her armor and her weapons again, sliding her short bow over her shoulders. *And it makes me happy that we’ve already seen my metamorphic ability listed, I just access it yet. It was an actual spell, one I’d have to concentrate on every time I used it, that would be just me off so much! Almost as much as the whole small health pool thing. Seriously original Imoen. If I ever meet your spirit, I’m going to smack you upside the head so hard! What the heck did you do, just training your dexterity without any endurance?*

The group continued on, and soon the terrain around them began to change. It went from scrub and flatland to hilly, with numerous small trees and bushes scattered around despite the naturally rocky ground. The hills and the amount of trees and other things began to obscure their line of sight, and Minsc and a very reluctant Khalid fell back to the rest of the group, no longer ranging ahead of them too far so they could keep one another in sight.

Without Harry’s ability to map, the ability to scout ahead was sharply curtailed. At least in Imoen’s and the others opinion. *Have we gotten spoiled? Nah! Imoen thought. It’s not getting spoiled, it’s being pampered. There’s a difference... somewhere.*

OOOOOO

Much like Imoen, Harry was greeted the morning after meeting Viconia with a message on how he slept but thankfully, he and Viconia had made the campsite livable enough that they got a full night sleep, and spells would have been also memorized. *Not that I have to personally worry about that. Magic is strange here in comparison to back in my original world,* Harry reflected, before pausing, wondering when he had started to call his original world that instead of ‘home’. Released a snort as he realized that, for all the strangeness of this world, the Advanced Adventuring System, the whole background his new life being that of a son of Bhaal, and going adventuring and so forth, he really did

prefer it to his old one. *It's probably really childish, and a throwback to my original body but hey, no Dursleys!*

“Please do not tell me that you are one of those annoying people who is always cheerful in the morning? I am still getting used to the fact that there is a sun in the sky to indicate day and night, and mornings are most definitely not my time of day,” Viconia grumbled from nearby.

Snorting, Harry turned to address her only to blush a bit. The drow had kicked off some of her blanket in the night, and had apparently decided to sleep without pants on. Currently he was able to see an indecent amount of blue thigh, incredibly toned blue thigh, Harry noticed. Desperately concentrating on her face, Harry was grateful to note that she had been wiping at her eyes as he had gawked. “Er, sorry, um, my cheerfulness in the morning is due to one of my abilities, one of the ones I’ll be sharing with you later. It allows me to go from sleep to full wakefulness.”

Also sleep off a hangover, but mindful of Imoen’s concerns on this score, Harry did not mention that most powerful of abilities.

Viconia pulled her hands away from her face, staring at Harry, then shrugging although to Harry’s eyes, perhaps aided by his identify skill, she looked a little nervous on top of her interest. “I see. Then I look forward to learning more.”

Trying to change the subject, and not look at the thigh Viconia had yet to tuck away, Harry looked over to Jaheira, getting to his feet and moving over. Jaheira had moved in the night, which was probably a good thing given her current situation. “If you’ve memorized your spells, would you mind healing Jaheira now?”

Viconia agreed, her mental spell slots full once more. After a moment putting her leggings on, she moved over to join Harry where he knelt down beside the blonde half-elven woman. Examining her, Viconia reflected that she was quite a beauty. Jaheira was a bit more built in the shoulders, and hips perhaps than most surface elves, much like that of Viconia, although she did not quite match up to Viconia’s chest. Despite that, the little scars on her chin did not ruin her face, rather, they added individualism and strength.

Of course, those observations were on the surface. Internally, Viconia was wondering how the half elf would react to her presence. Elves and dark elves had a complicated and extremely bloody history, going as far back as her own people had existed and even before that thanks to Lolth and her machinations. *I suppose if she*

doesn't attack me instantly, I can count that as a win. I rather doubt Harry would be pleased if I am forced to slay his companion in self-defense.

Setting those thoughts aside, Viconia cradled Jaheira's head, concentrating on her magic as she cast a spell directly into Jaheira's skull.

Leaning away from the woman, Viconia frowned slightly shaking her head. "Brain trauma is always difficult to quantify unless you are a specialist. I believe that my spell will have healed any physical damage, but she will still stay asleep for some time as her mind pieces itself back into shape. I confess that I have not had much experience with brain trauma myself, but I read as much as I could in the texts about it and other problems. She will need more care, and more delicious food."

Viconia did not mention what kind of texts she had read. Learning that the books had been written by a torturer explaining how far you could push a humans brain before it cracked under torture was probably not helpful information. Nor did she like to admit to any kind of lack of experience. That kind of thing could be seen as a weakness all too easily.

Not noticing Viconia's discomfort Harry smirked at the delicious food remark, turning away and heading towards the fire pit. "I suppose that means you would like to be fed too?"

"I would say that is my payment for healing your companion and continuing to help you and her," Viconia shot back, although she softened her stance by asking if there was anything she could do to help.

For a moment, the two of them were silent, sitting on either side of the fire pit as they worked on breakfast, with Viconia doing some of the grinding and chopping for Harry. When they spoke, it was about what they would be doing going forward. Now that Viconia had already used one spell to heal Jaheira's brain, Harry suggested she heal the two of them back up to full health which for Viconia wouldn't take much, but Harry still was dealing with quite a few wounds. Despite her help from the evening before his back was in a good deal of pain, and his foot and ribs were both still broken.

Still, she had known that was coming thanks to their conversations the day before and had changed her spells to match, leaving her with only two offensive spells for the day. She warned Harry of this, saying, "Once I heal you, you may be in the position to be our most able defender, a situation I quite dislike. I will put up with it today, but not for

lover long. I prefer to cover both healing and offense myself. And I am only agreeing to do so now because of our agreement to exchange a vow and your help with my pursuers.”

Still, the food was excellent, and Viconia mellowed as the meal went on, deciding that it was most definitely another checkmark next to the idea of continuing to travel with Harry. She watched as Harry fed Jaheira the extremely heavy, thick wolf meat soup – as opposed to the stew from last night, this one had the wolf meat chopped finely - that he had made for breakfast, munching idly on a kind of savory wolf meat stick that he had also made for them. They would be a staple for them once they started moving forward. “By the way, you explained you and this woman were fighting underground, but not why you were there or who you were fighting. I know it had something to do with the enemy who hunted you and your male role model, but no more.”

Snorting, Harry nodded. “Were you in Baldur’s Gate Long enough to... ah, sorry, you said you hadn’t reached it yet. Did the caravan merchants mention the iron shortage?”

“Yes, they did,” Viconia nodded, frowning thoughtfully. “I believe they said something about the iron being tainted, or weak?”

“Exactly. Most of the iron along the Sword Coast comes from the mines in Nashkel. For reasons that would take a long discussion on the odd economy of the area to explain. Anyway, the shortage seems to be part of a...” From there Harry explained the clues they had found about the Iron Intake Issue, the number of bandit groups, and everything that had led Jaheira, Harry and their companions to Nashkel and its mines.

Hearing the mines had shifted into a dungeon appalled Viconia, who shivered. “There are numerous places like that in the Underdark, and none of them are pleasant. The fact you all survived is a testament to your strengths and abilities.”

You have won 50 interest points from Viconia.

Remember: Viconia appreciates intelligence, power, and physical ability.

“Yeah, well, there were a lot of close calls. And if not for Imoen’s ability to find traps and her and my... skills...” Harry gave Viconia a look, indicating those skills were some of the secrets he had yet to share, to which Viconia let out a unladylike snort and Harry went on. “We wouldn’t have made it through.”

Viconia plied Harry with further questions about the mine, the quests they had been given, and what it had been like. This took the rest of the meal, and afterward, Harry left Viconia to clean up. She did so without protest, wishing to do her part and not become lazy, watching Harry all the while as he left the camp. He had removed the bodies last evening after Viconia had fallen insensate, dumping them away from the camp.

He hadn't gone far, thanks to how bad his back and side had been acting up, but he'd been able to move the bodies using his item space, unlike with Jaheira or Dynaheir before her. Still, he hadn't wanted to keep the bodies around, less they attract animals into the camp.

But he hadn't bothered searching their bodies at the time. That had just been one thing too much given the pain he was in at the time. His thinking then was, *it's either search the bodies or conserve my energy enough to make food. Gee, tough choice.*

Now, however, he had a few specific things he wanted. One was to grab up another spare shield and hammer, just in case. The other was to strip them of any valuables and their undershirts. More cloth was always handy. And most importantly Harry rifled through Atrius's corpse to find the hidden pocket that was molded into the interior of his plate mail. A moment later he had it opened and within, Harry found a series of papers and documents, outlining some kind of money trail? Or something, anyway. There were a list of what looked like dates a street name maybe? And a tally of money that wound down several different documents.

It certainly looked interesting and given how Atrius had hidden them they must have been important, or perhaps incriminating given Atrius' label as a 'corrupt' flaming fist officer. But Harry didn't have enough local information to make head or tails out of the names and the money was just a list of money with plus and minuses next to it. The only hint was a line that said 'send message to C and Bs' but again, there wasn't enough there to tell who was being talked about or the message.

So Harry wasn't surprised to not see a new popup saying he had discovered something important to one of his main quests. *Damn. I wonder if Jaheira and Khalid would be able to figure this out?*

With a sigh, Harry stowed the bundle of papers into his item space before returning to camp. There, Viconia peremptorily held out her hand. "Bandages."

“Cloths,” Harry retorted, getting a wry snort from the woman even as she took the clothing from him and began to tear it into strips. Item spaces killed all germs so they would be safe, if not clean, which she took care of by placing them in hot water. Unfortunately, Harry didn’t have any soap on him, something he made a note to rectify when they reached a town.

Between the two of them, they replaced the various makeshift bandages that Harry had used on Jaheira. This would let Viconia husband a few of her healing spells just in case. When that was done though, Viconia turned to Harry. “And now for your wounds, and then your oath to me.”

A part of Harry wanted to think of some way out of performing a magical oath to keep Viconia’s secrets. But considering the one she made to him yesterday was built on doing so, he had no choice if she wanted to stay with him. Harry had enough of keeping secrets from his travelling companions.

Harry had once more aggravated his side and spine a bit, but Viconia’s massage from the night before had helped somewhat, along with the Cure Medium Wounds she had used on him before the battle. Another medium healing spell finished the work on healing his spine and knitted his ribs together. A second such spell finished the work on them, followed by a Cure minor wounds which healed his foot.

As Viconia worked, Harry watched messages appear in front of his eyes marking out her work. The last one read:

Congratulations, you are no longer Crippled (x2). Thanks to Viconia’s numerous spells, your equally numerous wounds have been cured.

Your health is now, 100/140. You received a bump to your health due to the I’ve Got the willpower’ perk.

God it is so nice to not been in pain anymore! Harry thought, nearly slumping in relief. He wasn’t at one hundred percent, but forty missing health points was nothing when previously that would have been the majority of his life force. He still felt a few aches and pains, accumulated small bruises and injuries, and his back was still stiff, since Viconia had to direct her magic to heal the most serious wounds first, but that was still way better than it had been. “Thank you...” he whispered out.

Viconia chuckled, oddly touched Harry's heartfelt words, yet also somewhat put of by the amount of weakness Harry was showing. *Then again, given his numerous wounds and the fact he was able to fight so well yesterday even crippled three times over, perhaps it is not weakness, so much as an acknowledgement of debt? Regardless, I know what he must do to make it up to me.*

With that in mind, Viconia stood up from where she had crouched beside Harry, her hands around his lower leg. "There. I believe you are certainly in good enough shape to give me your oath as you demanded I do last evening on the name of Shar."

Nodding Harry took a moment to stretch, before gesturing Viconia to stand in front of him, holding out his arm. "Are you ready? I will warn you if you haven't been an active part of one before, Magical Oaths are not like swearing on the name of a god except they are both serious business."

Viconia was not one to doubt herself. She had made the decision the evening before to go through with this and wasn't about to back down now. "I am," she announced firmly.

Nodding back, Harry closed his eyes for a second, murmuring, "Ergo Fides." As he spoke those words, Harry felt the magic rousing within him, pumping through his body almost as if it really was a part of his very blood, a light thrumming sensation just beneath the skin. *Is this what magic feels like to sorcerers here? Or is it just me and Imoen, as our magic is part of us?*

Setting that thought aside, he clasped Viconia's arm, forearm to forearm. As they touched, Harry's magic began to sprout from his arm in the form of long thin tendrils of glowing white colored magic reached out to Viconia. She watched him anxiously, one hand ready to grab her hammer, the other ready to be wrenched away should Harry try anything funny.

But Harry didn't try anything funny. That wasn't the kind of person he was. Instead, he voiced his Oath to Viconia, as she had him. "I, Harry Potter, vow to keep Viconia's secrets until death so long as she keeps my own, to never betray her trust, or turn against her unless her own actions warrant it. Ergo Fides."

"I, Viconia DeVir, do witness this Oath," Viconia declared, trying hard not to show her relief. *Praise Shar, he went through it. I, I will at least have one person here on the surface I can trust to watch my back and keep my secrets.*

Indeed, Viconia did not know the half of it. Given the dual nature of their oaths, something interesting occurred. Just like with Harry taking Edwin's Oath, the message that appeared as his magic faded away was in gold with an orange background. But what Harry didn't expect was the words it said, which he read even as he fell to one knee, gasping in air at the cost of the oath.

You have taken part in a Blood Ritual, a magically infused Oath!

In this world, giving your word and swearing oaths of this nature are important! Oaths are rarely given, and the Gods of Light take them very seriously. Seriously, stop doing this kind of thing! You just got all those health points back, and now you're back to half your current score.

Be Warned! Once more, if she becomes aware of it, Shar can easily cancel Viconia's side of these shared oaths. On your side, should you break it, the consequences will be severe, as it will if Viconia breaks it of her own will. Shar is not a forgiving deity.

If Shar does order Viconia to break her oath, you will be able to tell if this occurs... possibly before Shar orders her to try and kill you. Maybe.

This message was followed by another, even longer one.

Performing this Ritual was a direct result of Viconia's similar vow to you. Given the nature of these vows, the regular respect/interest or trust points necessary to become a party member have been waived. After all, your trust is now going to be enforced by your very life and that of her deity.

Viconia has become a Limited Party Member. A limited companion will be part of your party and will gain access to several aspects of being a party member. Gain further points in respect and interest to let Viconia have access to the full gamut of your parties abilities.

Viconia, as a Level 1 Limited Party Member will have access to the shared, controlled Item Space. She will be able to make the most out of formations, unlike travelling companions.

Viconia will not be able to share or gain skills. She will not be able to see her stats, although you can. You will not gain the ability to manage any new stat points earned through level ups until Viconia is a level Level Three Full Party member.

Shaking his head at how they had just stumbled into this kind of thing, Harry had to think for a second through the haze of renewed pain before he realized the most important reason behind this new circumstance when it came to the AAS. *The dual oaths. Edwin, Branwen and Dynaheir made vows to us, but not vice versa. But because I promised to do it, and because the oaths are so reciprocal, it makes some sense, I guess, whereas with Edwin, there wasn't anything like that since we had him backed into a corner.*

As the second gold and orange colored message disappeared, it was replaced by a third, one which Harry had seen three times before.

Viconia has become eligible to become a Limited Party Member. Would you like to add Viconia to your party?

That same message, only reversed, had appeared in front of Viconia, who blinked at it in surprise before looking over at Harry, her eyes narrowed. "I take it that this 'party' thing is part of your secret? I have seen similar messages before, although most of those caused by the actions of others were negative in nature."

Hearing the slightly accusing tone in Viconia's words, Harry very deliberately sat down on the ground. He crossed his legs, his hands on his knees so as to appear as nonthreatening as possible. He did this so obviously that Viconia snorted in amusement, and Harry won another ten points of interest from her, along with a statement that she enjoyed a sense of drama and humor like any woman.

"What you just saw is indeed part of one of my skills. In fact it is part of one of my base skills the one from which a lot of other abilities spring: the Advanced Adventuring System. Essentially, it takes all of the normal adventuring abilities, takes a lot of them to the next level and gives me direct control over the majority. You mentioned my having control of my item space. Now that the AAS skill will be treating you as if you were a party member, you will be able to do the same. Try it out."

"It is not as if I have much in my item space to begin with," Viconia muttered, putting her hammer into her item space, and then imagining herself taking out the shield Harry had given her before the battle last night. Instantly it was in her possession, and not just in her hand, but on her arm, causing her to stiffen in surprise. She put it back in, and then played with the item space for a time, calling on different items in a random fashion to test what was going on. It worked, every time.

Finally, she stopped, bouncing the Gourd of Power Harry had given her the night before in one hand for a time as she looked at him thoughtfully. “All right, so your skill has changed something about my ability to use my Item Space. While in this case it’s changing my own skills is beneficial, in the long term its ability to do so is... disturbing.”

If not for the oath he took leading directly to that change, Viconia mused, I would be much angrier about this right now. But as his oath to keep my secrets as I do his let this occur, I cannot truly distrust it as much as I possibly should. That and... the power he used. This AAS skill is just the base of it. How much more is there to discover, and how can it all help me grow stronger in turn?

There was no disdain for Harry in that thought even as Viconia mused about using him. It was simply a fact of life to Viconia: that one should use everything and everyone you could to get stronger. “Explain to me more about this AAS skill,” Viconia practically ordered.

Although Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly at her tone, he agreed, explaining what they had discovered about the AAS up to this point, although he left out certain things, such as the fact that the skill called itself the Gamer System initially, the effect it had on his mental acuity – the Gamer’s Mind - and of course, his own origins. He went over the map in detail, explaining that she now appeared on it as a green dot, the same as himself and Jaheira. He explained about the sharing thing, and how he had learned Cleave through that along with Backstab.

Viconia became annoyed at the fact she was but a Limited Party Member, but understood why. Their oaths gave an excellent basis for trust, enforcing it in fact. But closeness, friendliness? The fact that it didn’t enforce that kind of thing actually made her feel slightly better. But the bit that most interested her was the fact Harry could see her stats. Her eyes gleamed with nearly fanatical light as she leaned forward, giving Harry a view down her shirt very deliberately. She had taken off her armor as part of her experiments with her Item Space, and had seen no need to put it back on. “Can you share my stats with me? The idea of seeing your own stats, of being able to set your own stat points, that is an amazing concept.”

Nodding, Harry held up a hand, pointing above Viconia’s head and saying, “Status Screen.”

A moment later, the green colored status screen of a party member appeared in front of Harry. Harry hadn't really noticed the color before, but figured it made sense, matching the party members' dots on the map.

Name: Viconia DeVir

Gender: Female (DUH)

Health: 70/80

Race: Drow

Class: Level 7 Cleric

Strength: 6

Willpower: 12 (+5)

Dexterity: 19

Constitution: 10

Durability: 4

Wisdom: 15

Charisma: 14

Intelligence: 14

Luck: 5

Harry very carefully did not mention the gender at all, figuring that was redundant, although he had to bite back a snicker at the 'duh', always amused by the snark of the AAS. *Yes, AAS, I've already noticed more than once that yes, Viconia is female and beautiful. And may I just say thanks again for the whole Gamer's Mind thing? It might be designed for combat, but it really helps a lot in these situations.* While Harry was no longer a virgin and had spent several months going through the same series of dates/romantic interactions, women were still more of a mystery to him than he liked. *But hey, at least I don't act like Garrick. Heh.*

For her part, Viconia did not notice the slight smirk from Harry, or the fact she was still giving him a view down her shirt. If she had, she would have just been amused by it. Looking was free, and if Harry was swayed by his interests in such things it could give her a means to influence him. But instead of thinking about that, Viconia was shocked. No, she was appalled. “By Shar, I knew I was weak, but that weak? Strength of Six? SIX!? And a Constitution of ten, and durability for four?! UGH, this, this weakness is an affront!”

Harry chuckled dryly. “If it’s any consolation, my durability is only fourteen. I er... had negative durability for a bit there when I was Crippled, but once you healed me the once, it went away, thankfully. I’d kind of been worried a single hit would make me implode like a grape. I think we squishy folk can’t really get a lot out of durability until it’s in the twenties? I’m guessing there. But we don’t have scales or any other kind of natural armor.”

“I can understand that, but my Constitution annoys me, especially after my flight from Atrius and his ilk,” Viconia grumbled, before looking down at her arms in equal displeasure. “And I refuse to be weak. As soon as I am able I will attempt to gain greater physical strength. I might have pushed the stats that would help my cleric skills, but even so...”

Her teeth began to grind at the very idea there was an area she was so weak in, and Harry interjected, “Well, I do know some exercises that can build strength. And if you become a full party member, then I will be able to assign any stat points you earn from leveling up. It will be slow, but if you gain two stats points like Half-elves do with one extra assigned to wisdom or dexterity, it can still build up over time.”

At that, Viconia smiled at him, a real, beaming, entirely unforced, non-crooked smile for the first time. “That will be tremendous, thank you, Harry.”

“Guh...” Harry grunted, shifting in place to try and cover the noise, flushing slightly as another message appeared overlaying the pre-existing status screen.

Willpower Check Passed. You have a strong will and have thrown off Viconia's accidental attempt to Charm you. You’re not charmed at all... right?

Snorting internally at the message, Harry looked back at Viconia, finding her leaning back now against a fallen log, no longer giving him such a good view down her shirt. Trying to convince himself this was a good thing, Harry asked if she wanted to hear the second sheet of her Stat sheet.

When she answered in the affirmative, Harry read it aloud. This was the page that had racial abilities, like skills and other abilities which impacted stats, along with the weapon skills. "You have a skill point in war hammer, sword and shield, mace and sling. Beyond that, I'll just read it out verbatim."

Racial Skills:

Drow: As a drow, Viconia will live as long as an elf would without seemingly aging. Don't ask about her age. She is able to see in the dark even better than most elves, and has 50% magical resistance regardless of magical type.

Life Skills:

Survivor, level 3: Due to her life thus far, Viconia has become a survivor. She is able to push her Constitution far more than her mere numbers suggest, overriding her Constitution with her Willpower, adding a +5 in distress. Viconia is also able to ignore hunger or other debuffs for short amounts of time. However, if she crashes while still under the influence of the Survivor Status Buff, Viconia will be afflicted by a commensurate hit to her health.

Willful level 5: Rather than being a snide way to say someone is headstrong, this skill is a sign of the harsh tests that Viconia has faced and defeated. She is nearly immune to Charm or other mental attacks and has a strong urge to go her own way, never letting society choose what is right or wrong, let alone control Viconia's actions. She is also somewhat tone deaf, however. Do not ask her for an opinion on emotional issues or anything about local society, and not just because she's liable to be ignorant about them. +5 to Willpower.

Cook level 2: Having been out on her own for several months, Viconia has added to her already semi-competent repertoire of cooking skills. She can cook over an open fire, deduce what tastes good, and can tell when she has done something wrong by tasting it, and can make a somewhat decent meal.

Poacher, level 2: Viconia has learned how to create simple traps for small animals. They don't always work, but they can be effective up to anything the size of a fox.

"Hmmpf, that is more like it," Viconia murmured, further appeased by the Survivor effect, while Harry was trying hard not to stutter at the whole fifty percent magical resistance thing. For several minutes the discussion devolved into one devoted to stats,

what they both knew about how to raise them or gain them, then it segued into one about quests, the other things that the AAS let Harry control, and then back to the whole party concept, and the fact Harry could see Viconia's response to his actions as a series of numbers in terms of interest and respect.

Throughout this discussion Viconia's attitude had mellowed and beyond looking positively jealous about his Identification and observations skills she seemed to have taken everything in stride. To Harry's surprise, this included the whole the relationship points now that it had come up in the conversation.

When Harry brought that up, Viconia shrugged. "The fact that you are so open about it makes me trust your words more than I would if you attempted to obfuscate the truth. I also believe firmly that while your system will be able to tell what I think of your actions or words, it cannot change my own opinion or the thoughts of them. The fact that you can see these relationship points thus becomes a intriguing, rather than something to be concerned over." She then glared at Harry, somewhat ruining her philosophical air. "But if I detect any such thing, or sense that you are trying to act in a manner that I would be pleased by just to get those points, I will probably leave the party that at that very moment."

She waited until Harry nodded at that before going on. "I am also wondering how you gained such a skill."

Grimacing, Harry raised a hand acknowledging what she said, before quickly moving on, crossing his arms as he turned the conversation back on Viconia lest it become too one-sided. "You will have to continue wondering for a little bit. Now that I have shared some of my secret with you, it's your turn. This is not a one way street., Viconia."

Viconia glared at him, and at first, Harry was afraid she wouldn't share any of his secrets. *How would the magical oath react to that?* He thought worried. The wording kind of hinted they both had to share secrets, and if they didn't he wasn't certain what would happen.

But eventually, Viconia's glare shifted toward the fire, which still burned nearby from breakfast. As she stared into it, Viconia began to speak. "Drow culture is very much driven by three main concepts. Women are more worthy than men. Power makes right, and something everyone should strive for. And Lolth and her priesthood are the center of our world and should be obeyed, revered, and feared at all costs."

The loathing in Viconia's words were unmistakable, and she shook her head. "I, I see no problem is striving for power, that is a tenant of all life, to become stronger to affect those around you and defend yourself. But in drow society, all drow submit to the priestesses of Lolth and thus give them power over you. I, I was a faithful priestess of Lolth for decades, and did many things I thought questionable, but all served a greater purpose, or so I thought."

She waited for Harry to jump to conclusions, to denounce her or to sneer at her thoughts on power, but he didn't. He was, however, reminded of the sorting hat's song. *Viconia would have made a perfect Slytherin, just like Edwin. But not all Slytherin were evil. Nott was okay, and so was that foreigner, Zabini, and the hat wanted to put me in Slytherin too. So just like I can take Edwin as I find him, I can accept Viconia's past... I hope.*

Seeing that Harry wasn't going to interrupt her, Viconia went on. "At one point... three years ago perhaps? I do not know how long it took, me to escape the Underdark. Regardless of when it occurred, I was tasked to ritually kill an infant in the name of Lolth, to send the soul of a baby born in the slave pens to the Spider Queen. I, I refused. I could not go through with it. It was a moment of weakness, and a rival in the priesthood jumped on, killing the child." She laughed bitterly. "My moment of compassion saw no return but the fact my house fell out of favor with Lolth."

She paused again, her bitter laughter returning for a few seconds becoming darker. Sacrificing magical items, gold or servants mattered not at all. I had denied Lolth her due, and she wanted me in turn to prostrate myself before her, to admit my wrong. I refused, and when a lesser house was tempted to assault House DeVir I aided in its destruction. But instead of offering them up as sacrifices, I sent no souls her way, simply slaying them all outright. I would not submit any longer, not to Lolth and her pointless, cruel and capricious ways."

"Good for you, but I can't imagine your fellow drow took it well," Harry murmured, pleased with Viconia's stance. He had no issues with killing anymore, something he blamed on the whole Quirrellmort incident, the violence in this world and his Gamer's Mind skill. But sacrificing someone, let alone their soul? No. That was way too bloody far.

"You speak the obvious Abalolth," Viconia snorted, but continued her story. "My mother decided enough was enough at that point, and decided to sacrifice me to Lolth to appease her anger. She made a full ceremony of it, the Feast of Pain, hoping to save our

family by sacrificing my body and soul. But I had a brother named Valas. He and I had always gotten along well, perhaps his friendship was the start of my turning away from the ways of Lolth, when I discovered early on that not only are males not always worthless for aught but seed, but also that working together made you stronger.”

Viconia’s face twisted, part grief and part fond memory perhaps? “Valas was a powerful wizard and when he interrupted the Feast of Pain he killed our mother when she attacked him after freeing me. We won our way out of the ritual chamber, but Lolth had turned one of her eyes to us. Before we left the room, my brother was, was already changing into a drider, a half-man, half-spider monster. I in turn was finally stripped of my clerical powers.”

Harry grimaced, shaking his head. “That, that reminds me uncomfortably of Gorion’s sacrifice. And as for siblings, I have a half-sibling, sort of, named Imoen. I cannot imagine what I would be willing to do to someone if they tried to sacrifice her to any goddess, regardless of pantheon. I’m sorry that your brother was turned into a drider but I think I would have chanced the same thing in his place. Or maybe gone big.”

Cocking her eyebrow, Viconia looked at him quizzically, feeling somewhat drained by sharing her tale as she had. It was not something she would’ve been willing to do otherwise, but Harry had already shared something amazing with her, and their vows demanded a certain reciprocity. “Go big? What you mean by that?”

“I would have disrupted the ceremony in a more circuitous way. Maybe planted some kind of delayed action alchemical concoction to explode underneath your mother and whoever else was in the room, shaped so it left the sacrificial area alone? Or maybe in the building somewhere else, her room, maybe? Make it somehow look as if Lolth was preemptively warning your mother it was bad idea?” Harry shrugged, internally shaking his head. *Maybe the hat was right, I would have made a good Slytherin.* “Something like that. Directly challenging and killing your mother would not be the totality of my plans. It would have been the most fun, but that’s not the same thing.”

Viconia surprised herself by laughing at that, shaking her head, sending her silver hair side to side catching Harry’s attention despite the fact that she had pulled the hood of her traveler’s cloak over her head. This was not because she had to hide her features, but simply because the hood gave Viconia some protection from the sun, which her skin and eyes were nowhere near used to yet. “While such ideas are delightful, my mother was no fool, even if she was a product of our society. The priesthood routinely sweeps the temple

for anything that should not be there, my mother had dedicated slaves as taste testers, and our personal ritual room was built far too strongly for anything outside to actually damage it enough to cause such an instability.”

“And I didn’t even think about poisoning her,” Harry chuckled, shaking his head. “Not a bad idea though. “But how did you go from being a priestess of Lolth to a cleric of Shar? Unless she was just waiting, watching for an opportunity nearby?”

“No. It is your turn to share it once more,” Viconia announced, staring at Harry, although she was smiling now, not as wide as when Harry offered to help her redistribute her points, but still warmer than before. The hardest portion of sharing her past was over with, and Harry had proven to be an extremely pleasant listener. *Nor did he make the mistake of trying to sympathize with me overmuch. Rather he sympathized with my brother’s actions. If he had tried to sympathize with me, or to say that I made the right decision, or any such thing, I would’ve been most angry, as he would be speaking from ignorance of the true cost of my actions.*

You have earned +100 interest and +100 Respect points with Viconia.

She evidently likes the fact that while you understood her actions, you didn’t show any kind of sympathy for her plight.

Keeping that in mind, Harry nodded back at Viconia, then went into his own tale. How he had recently learned that he was a son of the dead God of Murder, and really didn’t want to acknowledge that aspect of his upbringing at all. That he had been brought up in candle keep by Gorion who turned out to be a famous adventurer, and that his fellow foundling, Imoen was one as well. How Imoen had found the secrets of Blood Magic and what it was. And how the man they were after was somehow connected to the Iron Intake Issue.

“In this case, I rather imagine the two will be closely aligned,” Viconia murmured thoughtfully. “Yet as a paladin, I suppose you need to be mindful of your motivations, not just your actions. I know that is the case in some ways with my own cleric role, although Shar would no doubt force me to take a very different path than your own eventual patron.”

As the conversation went on, Harry wasn’t done with shocking Viconia with his responses to her tale just yet. When she covered the rest of her story, how Shar had helped her escape the Underdark by giving her back her cleric skills, and even guiding her

to an underwater entrance to the underworld. Harry was merely interested, not disgusted by some of the things she had needed to do in order to gain access to the underground river through series of enemies, commenting only, "I have had some experience with underground water and rivers. I didn't like them much."

When Viconia came to explain how she had killed the merchant who had tried to force himself on her, again, Harry's response was far more pleasant than the alternative. "If he tried to force himself on you, you're killing him in self-defense is perfectly justified. Mind you, stabbing him through the balls while you held his mouth closed wasn't something I would've done, but considering his attempted crime, it makes perfect sense."

Viconia snorted at that, amused, but pleased that even a paladin would see the rightness of her actions. *Of course, this particular paladin has yet to give his vow to any gods, so perhaps that will change? Still, at least at present he does not seem to have a problem with my actions.*

However, Viconia was far more interested in Harry's powers. And since she had just explained how some of her spells had changed when she's shifted allegiance to Shar, she could now turn the conversation back to them them. Specifically, the Blood Mage skill.

Harry explained once more how it had been Imoen who had figured out that they could use their magics to empower spells despite their classes, how it took from their life's blood with each spell and how she had found out it worked best when directed by words taken from an ancient tome in Candlekeep. That was the best explanation for the occasionally spoken spells Harry and Imoen used.

Viconia was extremely interested in everything about this new, unknown magical school and pleased by the fact that Harry was already keeping it a secret. "Having a secret power like that to fall back on is always a good idea. But I do have questions. Why do you even need magical spells?"

"What do you mean? They allow you to control and mold the magic, much the same as any spell would," Harry protested. "Wizards, druids and clerics all need words and gestures, or just gestures for simpler spells and words for larger ones, the verbal and somatic components. Why does that surprise you?"

"Because most magic users are pulling magic from the world around them, or the Weave directly in the case of sorcerers. Similarly, druids pull the power of nature to them and mold it through the use of spells. They must shape the magic as it comes into their

hands. You do not pull the magic from anywhere, if the magic comes from the blood have the magic inside you. That is a far more raw connection to magic than anything I have heard of. And if it is, then surely this simpler the better. Simply use your imagination and willpower, rather than set spells. Do not limit yourself like that.” Viconia commanded, remembering along the discussions she’d had on the nature of the various types of magic with her brother.

While somewhat annoyed at her tone, Harry took Viconia’s words to heart. Thanks to the necessity of clearing the dungeon, even after getting their oath he and Imoen hadn’t had the time to talk about their magic with the two magic users, so it was possible. “Well, if you’re willing to heal me as I experiment, then maybe we can see what happens.”

Viconia assented to this with a wave of her hand indicating Harry should get on with it in the same abrupt movement. Then she leaned back, crossing her legs and watching as if Harry was about to put on a show for her amusement, but also taking in everything keenly. “Remember it is your imagination that you must train first, create the image, then enforce it on the world.” *Show me the power of your divine blood...*

Turning, Harry looked over at a nearby downed tree, one of the ones that marked the edge of their small camp. Raising his hand, Harry pointed his palm at it, but rather than using any of the pre-existing spells that Imoen had taught him, he followed Viconia’s suggestions. He created the image of what he wanted in his mind, and then sort of thrust it out, forcing it onto reality. A second later, the tree was pulled out from his roots, and a second after that splinters were sent everywhere but in towards the camp as it exploded.

Harry stumbled, going to his knee, as a message appeared in front of his eyes.

You have used your blood mage ability.

While it is not specific spell, any use of your blood mage abilities must have a commensurate drain on your health. -15 to health.

“That was a lot harder than using the spells, forcing that image out took it out of me,” Harry sweating a bit. “Although the cost wasn’t nearly as much in terms of my actual health. Weird.”

“That is something you can practice with, however.” Viconia said. Somehow as Harry had been concentrating on the image he wanted she had crossed the intervening distance. Now she stood behind him, leaning against Harry’s back as she stared at the

destruction, her expression avid. Harry blushed at the contact, but she moved away quickly, even as she continued speaking examining the area for the damage the spell had done.

She was particularly interested in the damage the splinters had done to the surrounding area. That had **interesting** possibilities. "If your connection to the murder hobo, and I quite like that term Harry, is true, then it stands to reason that not only will your power have something to do with blood, but it will be raw, and thus able to be shaped by your will."

"It's true that despite being harder to pull off, the spell didn't actually take as much out of me as the two spells closest to what I was doing would have. Although it was more than a few other minor spells, so I doubt they will be going away," Harry mused. "I will have to experiment with this further, but if I can do something like that, with half the cost using a levitate spell and then an explosion spell, that could be huge."

Viconia nodded, although her thoughts had little to do with the actual power Harry had now, so much as what it represented. That Harry really was the son of a God, and what that in turn implied. *He is a power. Young yet, but one that will grow in time. And one that I could perhaps manipulate. At least to the extent that he will be willing to protect me in the future. I just need to point his mind in the proper direction, and he willingly followed my directions here.*

"Any more suggestions?" Harry asked.

"Not at present. Nothing specific anyway. I would suggest that you practice this kind of ability at least twice every day. Perhaps more often once your acquaintance over there is on her feet and able to add her own healing spells to mine. Although I would like to see you use your lay on hands spell as well."

Viconia watched as Harry used his Lay On Hands spell, noting the differences. Viconia had been concentrating her senses on him all the while and she had seen the magic leaving Harry's hands when he cast his Blood Mage spell. But before that, there had been no buildup, no glow of condensed magic as there was with the Lay On Hands spell. For all intents and purposes before Harry had used the attack spell, he had seemed a normal Paladin, without any magic of his own.

And when he used the Lay On Hands spell, he was pulling from the Aether all around them, the underlying deific magic of the planet, much like any other paladin would

who had yet to swear his Oath to a particular deity. *So he is a dual wielder in some fashion but without the actual classification... or the limitations. Fascinating. But what is the limit of his magic? Is there some way to help him gain more power via his Blood Mage ability beyond the obvious of raising his Constitution stat and thereby his health?*

She reported her findings to Harry musing about the last point aloud before confessing she didn't have any other idea at present for him to try out. "Perhaps a wizard would be able to help further."

"What you've already done is a major help. Why should I be so limited in my selection of spells? It's my magic after all. Like a muscle, it'll do what I tell it to and I just need to be aware how hard I can push," Harry exulted.

"Exactly! Well thought out," Viconia answered, just as enthusiastic for her party leader and new defender to get stronger. "I could wish that my connection to Shar gave me such abilities, but I believe it comes from the fact you are a demigod, in a very strict sense of the term, combined with your father's actual realm of control that makes you able to use the spells."

Harry was about to mentally refute this almost automatically at the idea of calling Bhaal his father in any way, shape or form, but when he pushed past that, Harry actually thought about it for a few seconds. Maybe that was how he was able to power the spells? After all, being from another dimension only explained where he got the spells themselves, not the ability to power them. *Maybe she's onto something there? Unless magic is part of our soul... which would mean it comes from me and Imoen, which would be much more palatable, honestly, but probably not something I would say.*

The two of them continued to talk and exchange minor stories throughout the day, as Viconia said that Jaheira wasn't going to be ready to be moved for at least another day, perhaps more. When it came to mental damages, keeping Jaheira's head still was a must. And Harry's decision to make himself healed completely meant that Viconia would need to rest again before using her healing spells.

When Harry suggested that he could use his own magic to heal Jaheira, Viconia warned against it, her tone tart. "Perhaps if her wounds were entirely physical, you could try. But at the moment, even healing her physical wounds would take a commensurate amount of health from you which is the last thing we want. And unless you are able to

visualize her mental functions such a fashion that you can then push your idea of her repaired mind onto reality, I don't see such an attempt working."

"Couldn't I simply imagine the concept of wellness, or something like that?" Harry muttered, scratching at his lightning bolt scar. "You would think so."

"I do not think it works that way. Again, how someone else thinks is not something you can visualize," Viconia snorted, gesturing back to the area where the tree had exploded. "You can visualize changes to the physical world like that to it great degree, but imagining how a body is supposed to work and imposing that on reality, let alone doing the same to a mind is different."

Harry tsked at that but dropped the subject. Viconia was right after all. "How many minor healing spells do you have left? If I can't heal Jaheira, I'd like to experiment a bit."

"Rather than me using them to heal the rest of her injuries? I'm not arguing against it, simply commenting that it does not seem to fit your personality, oh mighty paladin," Viconia drawled, making Harry wince. He had indeed forgotten about Jaheira's other injuries, concentrating wholly on her head injury and the possible brain trauma now that Viconia had replaced the original bandages he had used to help the various wounds. But she did have other injuries, not just the large amount of scrapped skin, but her broken back, which would have made her a quadriplegic without magic to heal her.

With a sigh, he stood up, and headed out of the camp. "I'm going to see if I can make a fishing rod, and get us some fish for lunch and dinner. If you could use a few of the spells on her that would be great but keep two in reserve?"

Viconia snorted, and then turned to Jaheira, using two of her remaining four Cure Minor Wound spells on her, before deciding that unlike Harry, she had no desire to do anything much today but rest and recover. She laid out near the half Elven woman, staring up at the sky in something like bemused wonder and chagrin. "When am I ever going to get used to views like this?" she snorted again before pulling her hood further down to cover her eyes and leaned back, closing her eyes.

Harry was back several hours later, and found Viconia sleeping, one arm over her eyes as she slept on her back. His return to the camp had her up on her knees, her hammer and shield in hand as Viconia glared around herself for any kind of danger. Seeing Harry there, she subsided somewhat, although her eye twitched at the five fish that he had caught. "Impressive, for a male I suppose."

“And actually fruitful too. I hadn’t seen a stat change in a while. A skill yeah, that Constitution skill I learned that I told you about. But something that will change my stats had become unusual. But this worked. It gave me plus one to my Dexterity.”

Viconia grunted at that. It wasn’t uncommon for adventurers of all sorts to run into things that helped their stats along in small ways like that, but actually seeing such notifications and knowing the stats were being added was just incredible. As was the fact that Harry had already informed her that half elves at the very least had their stat points from leveling up distributed in such a tilted manner towards that same stat. Viconia didn’t personally like that at all, she would much prefer to have been able to spread out her stats, covering all her bases and having no set weaknesses.

But in comparison to the rest that the Advanced Adventuring System allows him, that is... “Wait, why are you carrying the fish on the pole? Foolish male, did you forget your own abilities with item space?”

“No,” Harry answered halfheartedly, shaking his head and not meeting Viconia’s eyes. She snorted, which Harry was rapidly coming to understand was part of her nonverbal communication abilities and he glared at her. “So was that a no on fish?”

“I am not so hungry at the present moment, although I would undoubtedly eat anything you came up with,” Viconia answered acknowledging that Harry was a far better cook than she was, something she was somewhat amused by. “I will admit I have not tried human seafood though. In the Underdark, there are numerous fish for the darkness. But most of them are poisoned, and there are several that are so poisoned the whole point to capture them is the poison rather than the meat.”

“Well you’re about to see another little aspect of the Advanced Adventuring System.” With that, Harry laid out the fish, then touched it scales with two fingers. A second later, the scales were deposited in a pile to one side, and the fillets of fish had been taken out so well that it almost looked as if the smaller bones had simply been magically removed from existence.

Viconia stared, then stood up quickly. “My Poacher skill allows me to make small snares and other traps as well. If you can do that, there is no need to limit ourselves to simply fish, foolish one! I will be back!”

Harry was still laughing as she stomped out of sight, still growling implications at his intelligence.

OOOOOOO

Despite the fact that they were still a few hundred yards ahead of the others, when they ran into trouble the advanced warning of Khalid and Minsc pausing and coming back towards them hardly mattered, because a second later, the people they had been retreating from came into view. It was a band of hobgoblins, a semi-human species Imoen hadn't encountered before. The band was ten strong, with one of them wearing heavy armor, full plate mail like Khalid, only where his looked streamlined and a mix between the armor of an elf and human, the hobgoblin's looked like something from a fantasy villain's wardrobe, with heavy pauldrons, spikes coming from his shoulders, and large horns on his helmet.

The band of orcs spread out as the team came together, although they didn't immediately attack. Instead, they just spread out, and their leader held up a hand staring at the group as Khalid and Minsc fell back to meet the others, standing as a unit.

"Well, it appears as if getting lost at least paid off and a little bit. It looks as if you're off the hook for now. Glartheb," the hobgoblin in the heavy armor at the center of the group growled, making one of the other hobgoblins breathe a sigh of relief, slumping in place. Ignoring his minion, the hobgoblin turned to glare at Imoen and her group, who had spread out to face the newcomers, with Edwin and Dynaheir ready to drop behind some limited cover, a series of rocks built up almost like cairns nearby. "Surrender. We want your armor, your iron, your gold... and whatever else catches our fancy. We're the Chill, and I'm its... raggh... second-in-command...Ardenor Crush... graah, second, second-in command... that, that blackguard bastard..."

Saying his rank like that seemed to infuriate the hobgoblin and watching him snarl under his breath caused Imoen to really, really wish that she had Harry's Observation ability when it came to people. *Oh, I can read guys well enough, but hobgoblin faces are just different enough to throw me off, and body language is too damn tricky.*

Although I can see that orange glow around him, which isn't giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling. The only time Imoen had seen something like that was the dungeon bosses the band had dealt with. And isn't the Chill a mercenary band or something? I think I remember hearing about them at the Friendly Arm Inn.

"Er, I don't suppose there's room to negotiate, is there?" Imoen began only to pause as Khalid and Minsc let fly with their arrows at the same time two of the hobgoblins

did. "Guess not!" Imoen yelled as she ducked to one side, rolling on the ground as one of the arrows went through where she had been standing.

Ardenor blocked the arrows negligently with his shield in the same automatic manner that Imoen had seen Harry and Khalid show, making it easy to see he had some knowledge of Sword and Shield style. The red-skinned hobgoblin bellowed something in a language Imoen had never heard. *Damn but if that didn't sound like the Black Tongue of Mordor,*

But that was the last internal joke Imoen had attention to give as at Ardenor's command, the enemy archers raised their bows. Ardenor and two others did not, moving forward as their fellows spread out.

"Dynaheir, Khalid, try to deal with the..." That was as far as Imoen got before both the wizards were already doing their own thing, Khalid switching out his longbow with a sword and shield of his own and moved to meet their charge. Minsc moved to follow, his own longbow replaced by his claymore, his favored weapon in close combat. There was a second's delay, then Branwen charged towards two of the archers, howling a warcry.

As she did, Imoen's vision was overlaid by a announcement box, telling her that her charisma check had failed and that the rest of her traveling companions would not follow her orders in battle just as Imoen had to duck to the side again as an arrow passed her by inches. "Tell me something I don't know!"

Branwen crashed bodily into one of the archers who hadn't retreated fast enough, sending him stumbling onto his ass. With him down, Branwen howled out "For the Glory of Tempus!" and then cast some kind of spell towards the one who had retreated. Once again Imoen found herself wishing for Harry's ability to identify things, but surprisingly, it worked in this instance. *Perhaps because it was an ability Branwen's using instead of an individual?*

Branwen has used Call Lightning.

This is a priestly spell that calls down lightning. A spell that grows stronger with the user, the number of lightning bolts created going up by one for every four total levels. The bolt of lightning flashes down from the sky at the priest's target. After that, the bolt will spread to other nearby enemies in a far weaker style.

This spell must be cast outside, or else it will not work.

The lightning bolt struck the hobgoblin, slaying him instantly and then creating little arcs of lightning that spread through the enemy ranks, causing injury and making several of the archers to pause, shaking their heads or grimacing in pain. Then Branwen turned her attention to the downed hobgoblin at her feet, crushing his skull with a single blow.

But by that point, the other six archers had spread out so that even a Fireball spell couldn't hit more than one. Edwin did try anyway, killing one archer outright and causing two to stagger. But they stayed on their feet, firing back, and Edwin gasped as one of the arrows took him in the knee. Another hit his chest. His robe saved him from dying, but it was obvious that he was in pain, and he intoned another spell, one Imoen had not seen in a while. A dome of Protection from Normal Weapons appeared around Edwin as he he glared at the hobgoblins who had struck him, standing up painfully as he began to twine his fingers together. "You will learn to not anger the mighty Edwin Odesseiron you subhuman rat!"

At that point, Imoen had dodge around several other arrows coming from different directions, and it was with a start that she realized more archers had appeared from behind the first group, allowing the rest of them to spread out still further to fully circle the adventuring group. *"CRAP!" Is this the kind of thing Harry had to keep his attention on? Damn it, I am going to make him try and figure out a way to share his map skill with the rest of us the minute we can!*

Dynaheir too was having trouble with the majority of the archers, who seemed to know the first rule of combat in this world: gank the mages first. The dusky-skinned Witch had ducked behind a boulder and, lacking Edwin's Protection From Normal Weapons spell, was now was using her sling instead of her spells, ducking out from behind cover to sling her stones with

But she, Edwin and the frontline combatants had taken just enough attention away from Imoen to let her close with Dynaheir's position. Two hobgoblins who had just reached a position to fire at Dynaheir from behind were cut down by a wide angle cutting spell, which literally cut both hobgoblins in two.

You have used a Blood Mage Spell, Defindo.

-25 to health.

Cursing the impact to her health, Imoen looked around as a bellow from Ardenor reached her. Whatever he said caused several of the archers attacking Minsc and the others to her, and the other two magic users. At first she thought it was because of her use of spells, but as she looked back, she saw Ardenor charge forwards with two of the other hobgoblins to engage Branwen and the others.

Khalid was the first to reach them, and thus was the first to be sent to the ground with an overhand strike that slammed into Khalid's shield with such power that it sent the half-elf stumbling. As the strike hit, Khalid saw a notice flash in front of his face.

Ardenor has used Power Strike!

Since this was an attack the party had seen from Lamalha, there wasn't any further information, but there didn't need to be to tell Khalid his shield arm had just gone numb, and that his shield had been cracked along its edge. Desperately, the swordsman twisted around to dodge another blow, his sword flicking out into a slash at the hobgoblin leader's nearest leg. But the hobgoblin simply stayed his ground, his armored greave taking the strike on his leg with barely a grimace. For his trouble, Khalid nearly lost his sword to a strike that took him the arm, his own plate mail deadening the blow though. Thankfully like Cleave there was a cool down period, and the blow wasn't a Power Strike.

Still, Khalid was able to set his feet and lash out several times in quick succession, moving around Ardenor's clumsy strikes, his speed and skill on display. But as he did, Ardenor took a blow on his mace's shaft, directing it to the side. The next moment, the enemy warrior had stepped in and did a move that Harry had tried to perform several times.

But even though he had learned the technique from Khalid, Harry could only impart some of the physical force of this move. That there was more to it was very apparent as Ardenor's shield seemed to thrum with energy arcing all around it in a corona as it smashed into Khalid's armor-clad chest, the energy exploding as the contact occurred.

Ardenor has used Shield Bash.

This is a high level warrior skill only usable by level eighteen and on.

This move uses the shield to bash the enemy off balance. The enemy must make a saving check against Strength or lose his footing at best. At worst, he can be knocked entirely off his feet and unconscious from the sheer force of the strike.

Warning: as an activated skill, Shield Bash has a cooldown time. You can only use Shield Bash once every ninety seconds.

Khalid cried out as he flew backward through the air landing on the ground, having trouble getting his breathing back.

Thankfully, Ardenor didn't have much time to capitalize as a second later an overhand strike smashed into his hastily upraised shield. The Cleave from the ranger shattered his shield, but Ardenor proved he was no mindless warrior as he flung the ruined shield at Minsc's feet a second later, causing the Ranger to stumble, his next strike going wide digging a furrow into the ground. Before the massive man could recover Ardenor stepped forward and his mace crashed into Minsc's helmet from the side, sent him stumbling to one knee. Had that strike hit anyone else in the party that blow might well have finished them off, but Minsc had both health and durability to spare and he roared as his sword flashed back, forcing Ardenor back.

Meanwhile, Imoen had stumbled into cover with Dynaheir. "Protego!" She stumbled as the drain of a second Blood Magic spell hit her, but the protective energy sphere covered the two women and Imoen shouting to be heard by Edwin who was outside the shield. "Okay, are you two willing to listen to me?"

Edwin grunted, but did move towards the two women, seeing two of the archers sling their weapons and charged forward with short swords. They didn't carry any shield, but seemed to think they could overcome his Protection From Normal Weapons or Imoen's Blood Magic in close range. *And perhaps they are right, I have not seen her use this spell before.*

As the two hobgoblins bypassed the already existing melee around Khalid, Minsc and Branwen, they began to hammer on the outside of Imoen's shield with her swords. The archers started to turn their attention away, believing the protection was two-way rather than one way, hoping to finish off the front line fighters quickly.

Imoen saw all this as Dynaheir nodded to her question, looking rather shamefaced. "I apologize Imoen, when I look at you I still see your age and experience, rather than your strength."

“Whatever,” Imoen grunted, turning her attention to the battle around them. “I’ll take care of the two sword users, but that’s going to be it for me and Blood Magic until Branwen can heal me. The archers have clumped together on the left. Edwin, that’s your target. Dynaheir, I think our friends need some help with that big bruiser. Magic missiles and keep them coming. Edwin and I will finish off the archers.”

The attackers had started with ten, with nine more joining them. They had lost seven since, but the rest were still fighting, and even as Imoen spoke, the clump of archers was dispersing once more. The Chill seemed to be decently organized and trained despite being hobgoblins, and Imoen made a note of that.

Seconds later Both wizards had spells ready when Imoen’s Protego failed. Her cutting spell took both of the attackers across the chest, cutting them both into two even bits. Then she grabbing out a bottle of wine, tossing it forward. Edwin’s fireball struck a second later, slaying two of the archers and lighting several others splashed with cooking oil. Despite having moved enough to not get caught at the initial impact point, the three went up like bonfires shrieking as they ran away, completely panicking.

But the archers on the other side had taken Branwen under fire, and she was now down on the ground, several arrows in her back and side. She was still alive thanks to her armor stopping much of the arrow’s power, and having been at full health going into this battle, but was out of the fight, using a healing spell to keep herself alive despite her wounds. Khalid on the other hand was back on his feet and ignoring the archers closed with Ardenor taking the pressure off Minsc for a moment.

A series of Magic Missiles crashed into the center of Ardenor’s chest, shattering his entirely unmagical plate mail armor, and sent him sprawling backwards, but he was still able to stave off a strike from Khalid and dodge one from Minsc. The next second another series of Magic Missiles from Dynahier struck, and this time without any protective armor in the way, blew off chunks of his chest and arm. He was still alive though, and began roaring, his eyes glowing red as he once more called on one of his Warrior skills.

Ardenor has used the Berserker skill.

Ardenor has used Power Strike.

Khalid gasped as Ardenor’s strike shattered his already battered shield and the arm underneath it, sending him stumbling backwards. But Khalid kept his wits about him, and even as he stumbled back his sword came up in a strike aimed not at the hobgoblin’s body

but at the arm holding his mace. The hit struck cleanly, cutting Ardenor's hand off at the wrist.

The next second, Minsc was there, running the man through with his Claymore. Even with more than a yard of steel stuck straight through his already ravaged body, Ardenor was still bellowing in berserk fury, waving his hands as if to punch at Minsc, who was standing well out of his range.

But instead of pulling away, Minsc shouted back, "But kicking for goodness!" And, with his sword stabbed through the hobgoblin leader, Minsc called on Cleave. Wrenching the blade up and out, the strike cut through ribs and everything else until exiting from the top of Ardenor's head, leaving him looking as if some giant had hacked into him, spraying blood everywhere.

Meanwhile, Imoen and Edwin had used arrows and magic to finish off the most of the remaining archers, while Branwen had gotten to her feet thanks to Dynaheir giving her cover fire, and had finished off one of the other two hobgoblins who had closed into melee range. The other lay dead nearby, slain earlier by Khalid or Minsc.

The remaining three archers took one look at their dead leader and instantly broke all three fleeing in every direction. Khalid grimly pulled out his longbow,, shooting one of them in the back, as another fell to a Flame Arrow from Dynaheir, and the third found himself suddenly frozen, as if he had been turned to stone.

You have used Immobulus!

This Blood Mage Spell impedes the target's ability to move, freezing the target in place, somewhat like the Basilisk's Gaze, only not.

-10 to Health.

Imoen's already low health finally got to her, and Imoen found her vision blurring along the edges as the consecutive use of her spells put her deeply into the red. "Definitely, definitely needs to put more into Constitution, dammit!" She muttered, even as she slumped to her knees, gasping in air. "Screw my decision to put my last points in strength and charisma!"

Fastidiously, Edwin cast one last Melf's Acid Arrow at the downed enemy, slaying him before pulling out one of the healing potions he had bought for to himself from the

priest back in Nashkel. "Yes, your speed with those spells of yours is more than offset by the fact you cannot cast in succession. Unless you discover some other means to power them. Perhaps blood sacrifice?"

"Ugh... it pains me I even thought to take that suggestion seriously," Imoen grumbled, leaning against the unwounded Dynaheir. "Help Dyna, I'm falling to the Red Side."

"Never call me Dyna again and I will promise to save your soul from the Thayan," Dynaheir promised, causing Edwin to sneer at both of them in disgust, striding forward on his own.

Thankfully for all concerned, Branwen had taken Imoen's suggestion about her spell priorities to heart and barring one offensive spell and Spiritual Hammer, she had built her spellbook with healing magic in mind. Now those spells came in handy, keeping them all her feet, although none of them were in real fighting shape. "Damn! That was a tough fight. Did anyone else see more than an orange glow around the guy?" Imoen said, leaning against Minsc's side now as he knelt beside her, with Dynaheir standing nearby.

"I o, o, only saw the orange g, g, glow," Khalid said, shaking his head. And I only noticed that once we started to fight.

"And that's another thing. Why in the world did you two charge forward like that?"

"It s, s, seemed a good idea at t, t, the time?" Khalid answered.

"Aye, and if Minsc had not charged forward, friend Khalid would have been hard pressed against that beast."

"I'm just saying guys, that we need to start working together! More than his level, whatever that might have been, it was his ability to get his troops to fight together that made them dangerous. If not for Edwin's protection spell and mine, we might have lost this fight simply because the Chill's archers would have struck both of our magic users down, and me with them! Look, I know I don't have anything like Harry's leadership skills, and if someone else wants to give out orders in a fight, that's fine by me. But none of this fight as individuals crap anymore! We just got a sign we cannot afford it, even against low level enemies."

Everyone looked at one another, and Dynaheir nodded firmly. “Young Imoen is right. While all of us have more experience than she does, it was only Imoen who tried to make us work together. I suggest that from now on, we try to keep that in mind going forward.”

The others slowly nodded bar Edwin who merely grumbled that, “So long as you do not go so far as to try and control every spell my puissant self uses, I suppose I will follow your lead on the tactical level.

“I’ll take what I can get,” Imoen snarked right back, glancing at her some display again, noting her health was once more in the forties. “How are all of you feeling?”

“Pretty much like we look,” Branwen shot back, also looking a little shamefaced at how she had gone haring off again. *And this after nearly getting myself killed when I ran into those kobold traps in the Nashkel mines. I need to remember that there is more to battle than just closing with the enemy, Tempus take it.*

“How many healing spells,” Imoen began only to pause when she saw Branwen was already shaking her head.

“I’ve use them all up,” the blond announced. “We’re all at pretty much fighting health, but that Ardenor really took it out of Khalid and Minsc. And I was struck by far too many arrows to be healthy.”

“Cock,” Imoen grunted. “Alright, we’re going to keep going for now, plan to break every few hours every time one of you spots a place we can set up tonight in relative comfort. Its best we get some sleep tonight than push ourselves to exhaustion. And we won’t be of use to them if we arrive find them wounded and can’t do anything about it because we already used Branwen’s magic. Better to arrive late and actually be able to do something.”

Everyone else agreed with this while Khalid bit his lip hard enough to draw blood as he looked between them all, then out around the hills all around them. But he eventually nodded. “F, f, fine.”

He stood up from where he had been crouching without a word and began to lead the way away. The others started to follow, leaving Branwen and Imoen to take up the rear, Imoen shook her head, asking Branwen to wait. She stopped by Ardenor’s body,

searching it quickly but efficiently. She found some gold, the fact his mace needed to be identified, and a single note. The note read:

You are a fool if you think I will side with you in your power struggle, Ardenor. As long as the Chill continue to obey my orders to sow discord across the Sword Coast, I do not care who leads them. Your weakness lost you the position, and you make yourself seem weaker begging to me for aid. Be careful, lest I think you too weak to serve at all, let alone in command.

Do not contact me again unless you do so as leader of the Chill once more.

S.

Reading this aloud caused Imoen smiled as a message appeared in front of her, the gold of an important message.

The Iron Intake Issue quest has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

You had overheard talk that hobgoblins and other demi-humans were making trouble in places throughout the Sword Coast, much like the bandits you have already fought. Now you know that the Chill, a reputable mercenary group, is in the area, and under command to cause trouble.

It takes no great leap of logic to see they are involved in the Iron Intake Issue. So the Chill are obviously providing manpower to the secretive group moving behind the shadows, led by someone with the initial 'S'.

Still smiling at her good fortune, Imoen looked around, only to realize that Minsc and the others had left her and Branwen behind, pulled along by Khalid's single-minded frustrations. "Shit, really!? Don't they remember they don't know where to go without me?"

"Anxiety knows no bounds such as that. Come, let us run and catch up with them," Branwen guffawed, clapping Imoen on the back so hard she nearly stumbled back to the ground.

"Gods damn it Harry, where are you? How am I supposed to keep this group together without you?" Imoen growled, even as she raced along a still chuckling Branwen.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere, Harry had just finished the final touches on his seared fish skewers, when the message appeared in front of his eyes. “Huh, I wonder what Imoen and the others are up... to... wait, I can still see stuff like this despite the fact we’re separated by so much distance?!” His eyes widening at the implications, Harry began to laugh like a madman who had just finished his latest creation for world domination. *Oh, I am so going to figure out how to communicate via the Party connection, and when we do...*

This was the sight Viconia came back to and she sighed. “Wonderful. The first surfer who I have remotely enjoyed being around, and indeed only the second male I might have come to respect has gone insane. Isn’t that just typical.”

That didn’t stop Harry’s laughter, indeed, it made him laugh all the harder right up until Viconia threatened him with her war hammer.

The next day, Harry and Viconia were attacked early in the morning while Harry was putting the finishing touches on breakfast, and Viconia was still laying out on her bedroll. She wasn’t asleep, instead, she had turned on her side and was writing down something on a piece of parchment she had asked Harry to conjure up for her the day before with a long quill that she had taken from her item space, something she hadn’t shown him the day before. What she was writing Harry had no idea, only that she was concentrating fully on it, rather than even acknowledging him that morning beyond a bare nod in his direction. However, when their guests arrived, her concentration wavered.

Two wildcats, a variety of wild animal Harry hadn’t seen before prowled into the camp as if they owned the place, having completely bypassed the primitive traps he and Viconia had put up. From the chagrin on Viconia’s face as she stared at them from her bedroll, she too found that somewhat galling. Although maybe not as much as Harry did for how the wildcats natural Hide in Shadows, like the spiders back in Beregost, had hidden them from his map. *There has got to be a way to pick out people and things hiding that way!*

The two animals were large, almost as large as a panther, but looked to be built along slightly bulkier lines, with heavier fore-shoulders, and wide, silent paws that made no noise as they moved. They also had large, tufted ears, and mouths full of long fangs as they hissed at Harry. The two of them moved apart, ready to leap at him from two different angles, forcing him to turn his head in either direction to follow them.

[A new page has been added to your bestiary.](#)

[Wildcat.](#)

A rare animal to see most of the time, the primitive, wild cousin to the housecat is both larger and hardier than his domesticated brethren. While normally it would avoid people, if hungry enough, these animals will attack humans or other adventurers.

Attitude towards adventurers: ambivalent. Much like cats, they can take or leave people depending on what mood takes them. Just don't expect to pet one.

Strengths: wildcats have their own variety of the normal Hide in Shadows skill that certain animals can exhibit. This allows them to move silently and unseen as per normal, but also to practically ignore traps of any nature. It makes them a particularly annoying neighbor to farmers who might be keeping livestock anywhere around the place.

Weaknesses: fire, normal weapons. While some varieties of wildcat might have evolved in highly magical areas and have magical resistances, these examples of the breed are very few and far between.

Even as the animals advanced on them, Harry was already crafting the spell he wanted to use to deal with them. He wanted it to be a little creative and wanted to use a variety of magic he had yet to really work with, fearing the blood cost of it in this world, and honestly never having done much beyond the classwork for it.

But Imoen told me my dad, my original one, was amazing at Transfiguration. So let's see if I can follow in his footsteps. He gestured, and the first wildcat to leap towards them crashed into a wall that rose from the ground.

You have used Blood Magic. -15 to health.

Wait, what, only fifteen for creating a wall like that? The same as the explosive tree spell? That news astonished Harry, even as he rolled away from where he had been crouching a moment ago. He ended the roll and pushed back the way he had come, his sword in hand stepping into the beast before it could leap away. Yet despite his speed, the wildcat still was able to dodge most of his thrust, taking a gash along its side rather than being stabbed. The first wildcat meanwhile was groggily getting to his feet, yowling in pain, its eyes crossed almost comically.

Harry backed away, his sword flicking out into the second wildcat's face, forcing it away. His eyes were wide with sudden surmise, and seeing that look on Harry's face, Viconia stopped from where she had been pushing yourself to her feet, grasping her hammer from her item space. *That is the face of someone who has just had a revelation. I wonder what sort?* She thought, calming down somewhat.

Harry gestured with his other hand, and a blast of air thrust out into the wildcat's face as it came at him, hurling the creature up and away out of the camp towards the river just as he had

imagined in his mind. It didn't reach the river, but the wildcat's caterwauling broke off with the abruptness of a broken neck as it crashed into the various rocks there. And just as he had hoped to see, the same notification appeared in front of his eyes followed by a experience announcement of a hundred and fifty experience.

You have used blood magic. -15 to health.

Harry turned to the other beast, about to use magic again to deal with him, awestruck at the revelation, and wondering how to explain it to Viconia, who was now watching him with one eyebrow rising. But he paused as he saw the beast's crossed eyes, as it stumbled to the side, its yowling now somewhat pitiful. Harry couldn't bring himself to finish the creature off, remembering some of the cats in Hogwarts and especially Professor McGonagall's feline form as he looked at it.

So he hesitated and was about to use a stupefy spell on the beast. But Viconia on the other hand showed no such hesitancy. Seeing Harry pause, she walked up behind the beast, and with a single methodical strike to the back of his head, slew it with her Warhammer. "You looked as if you were working something out there for momentary. I wished to let your thoughts run their course, but one should not allow inner revelations like that get in the way of winning a fight. Introspection can come after."

"Not a cat person are we?" Harry quipped, instead of replying to the question evident in Viconia's tone, thinking things through still.

Viconia huffed, and then her hands began to move, shifting this way and that as she used a Cure Medium Wounds spell to use on Harry which flashed through the intervening distance, instantly raising Harry's health by thirty. "My mother kept several. Vicious little monsters the lot of them. And I studied cats well enough to know that while wildcats like that are playful enough, their play is the kind that can turn into cruelty far too easily. I am in favor of a certain measure of cruelty when necessary, but it is not something one should take joy in, as far too many of my folk do."

She then moved to the fireplace, deftly taking the bubbling cauldron off of the fire and setting it aside, serving up to three bowls, and moving with two of them over to Jaheira, slowly feeding the woman even as her eyes tracked back to Harry. "Now, tell me what you were thinking of."

Amused by the dichotomy of Viconia's commanding tone and almost solicitous actions, as well as feeling more than a little bit of pride in how happy Viconia was at his food, Harry did as she bid. "I told you about how the spells we were using, Imoen and I, and that each of them had their

own set cost in terms of the amount of health they would drain from us. But my experiments yesterday and just now... each time I've experimented since, it took a flat cost of fifteen."

Viconia's eyes widened at that, staring at him in surprise. "Truly? Spells have levels to them, and all of them take a certain amount of intelligence and willpower, as exhibited by the need to gain levels to access many of them. I initially thought that your spells were much the same, and simply cost you more in a similar manner. I am... Uncertain as to what to make of what you just said."

Noticing the woman didn't look pleased at those words, Harry nodded, and then, with a flick of his wrist was holding his nearly ruined power shield. He said it on the ground beside him, along with his own food for the moment, far more interested in his experimentation than food at the present. Viconia's eyes watched the shield even as she listened to Harry. "One of the spells Imoen and I came up with is a repair spell, something we can use on items which have a durability rating. Regular items, like swords and war hammers with no magic in them don't have a rating like that. But this shield is a magically enhanced item a plus one. I was able to repair it before. Each application of the repair spell gave us a certain amount of durability back. I can't remember how much durability but it wasn't a total repair."

Viconia followed his thoughts, also looking down at the shield then over at the wall which was already crumbling into dust from where it had risen from the ground. "None of the other... We cannot call them spells... Directed will perhaps? Somewhat wordy I will admit but it will do for now. Regardless, the outbursts of directed will you have experimented with do not have direct correlations to single spells you have used previously. You mentioned that you would've had to use two spells to do what you did to the tree before, and you did not mention anything about being able to control the very ground like that."

"Exactly. I thought at the time, that one spell taking up more health than one of those spells, but not as much as both combined would have been fair enough. But the spell to transmute the ground should have taken more. It was much harder to visualize the outburst of directed will as you put it with that than it was to do the compressed blast of air I used on the wildcat the next moment, although not as much as with the exploding tree. But it took the same amount of health to do all three."

"So there could be something wrong with the spells you have been using." Viconia smiled triumphantly at that. "It sounds more and more as if your Blood Magic gives you access to the same manner of control of magic a deity would have. Their workings often take willpower and strength, and your spells are doing much the same."

"Maybe. Let's see..." Harry answered, not sharing any of his own internal thoughts. *What was it called again when I first used a spell in this world? Cheating like a bitch, right? Because the*

spells I was using at the time and Imoen later used are not from this universe. Whatever underlying structure has created the game-like overlay everyone here can use had to scramble in order to make a space for our spells, just like it had to merge Imoen and Tonks' original selves.

But what if it wasn't just the spells themselves, but what fueled them that this world has issues with? If it's actually me and the spells, well me and Imoen anyway, then it makes sense that we were both getting hit with double the amount of penalties or whatever.

It wasn't a direct correlation and Harry knew it. But the repair spell and the levitate spell he could experiment with. Not using the spoken version of the spells, not trying to form his magic into that kind of mold, but rather something different.

He stared down at his shield, remembering the first time he had spotted it pulling it out from behind several other shields in the Friendly Arm Inn's storage room, having spotted it's greater properties through the other notifications. He remembered how it had looked at the time, and then, slowly changed that image, taking away some of the dents adding a little bit of shine to it, until he had an image in his mind of the shield fully restored to pristine glory rather than battered normality.

Viconia stayed silent, watching, her hands pausing from her self-appointed task of feeding Jaheira, wondering what thoughts were going through the god-born young man's head. Harry was a thinker, she had discerned that within moments of meeting him, and it was almost amusing to watch the thoughts in his head, because he lost all self-control of his face, his mouth twitching this way and that, forming a frown then a smile, then a grimace of exertion as she watched, his brows knitting together.

It was a level of openness that Viconia had never previously seen before, not even from her brother. *The merchant and his ilk were able to put on masks well enough at need, but that was all they were, masks. Harry I doubt would understand the need to do so at all, let alone be able to normally. It is strange, and something I should not get used to, yet also somewhat nice to be around someone so unguarded. Not that I will ever tell him that course.*

Ignoring a notification that just told him he had one ten interest points from Viconia for some reason, Harry slowly gestured his hands forward, thrusting out his will into the world.

As before with his spells, Viconia was able to track its building up, a glow appearing from Harry's hands and wrapping around the shield connecting him and the shield momentarily despite a good foot separating the two of them. A moment later, the shield flashed, distorting. There was a series of shrieks of warping metal, and when it stopped, the shield sat there, looking pristine, almost gleaming in the sunlight.

Eagerly Harry pulled up the information On the shield.

Tower shield +1

Durability, 100/100.

A magically enhanced shield, this tower shield gives greater protection against all manner of weaponry. Although heavy enough to impede the movement or agility of those of fifteen strength were below, this shield has now been fully restored to its former glory and will continue to serve its owner well.

And beyond that was another message, one Harry was just as eager to see.

You have used a Blood Mage spell. -15 to health.

"It's back to 100 durability, which I wouldn't have been able to do with a single spell! And, it cost the same again, fifteen health!"

Setting Jaheira's semi-empty bowl down, Viconia took a moment to cast a minor healing spell on Harry, restoring his health before turning to her own meal. Harry belatedly did the same, the both of them silent for a few moments as they worked their way through this, with Harry taking over feeding Jaheira afterward.

"Perhaps, perhaps the spells themselves, the ones your friend Imoen made up were part of the reason why the cost of your spells were all over the place as they were. The system of the Weave rejected them to a certain degree, not enough to completely disallow them, but enough to add a price on to their usage. Beyond that, I stand behind my earlier comment. The power within you is yours. Make it respond, make answer to you rather than simply assume that you know the limits of your powers. And in that fashion Harry, you can become strong!"

Now it was Harry who let out a snort in response, but didn't disabuse her words, instead simply reflecting that there seemed to be a lot of different names for the 'Gamer' system everyone else in this world could access to a certain degree. He had found several different names for it, but Harry felt it was probably created either by Mystra with the help of a lot of the other gods, or by Lord Ao the Over-god, the one who controlled the gods of this dimension and who had been the reason why the gods of light and dark had been thrown down during the Time of Troubles. *The man seems a righteous arse, but he's the only one who would have the power to create such a system when you think about all the aspects of it, the spawning, the dungeons, the levels, the stats, skills and everything else.*

But that was neither here nor there, and Harry concentrated back on the current conversation. "I think you're right. Maybe because of my murder-hobo heritage, my blood was imbued with a certain amount of magic, which I'm able to simply manipulate in various manners,

completely separate from the Weave. But coming up with spells themselves was a little too much for the world as a whole to handle given the pre-existing schools of magic.”

“ Which demands the question: if you learn spells, cleric, druid, wizard or sorcerer spells, given your Paladin status, could you use them without any penalty? Or perhaps with a lesser penalty at any rate,” Viconia mused. “Such spells are part of the world system that all adventurers can use, so only the source of their power would change. I will not be drawn on whether it would cost you more energy but, perhaps it could work.”

Snickering, Harry decided to mix reality with the story of how it had been Imoen to discover the Blood Magic spells. “When Imoen first discovered the blood mage spells, she saw a popup, like all adventurers see pop-ups when they level up. It told her ‘congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch’.”

Viconia burst out into laughter. “HAHAHAHAHA!” The word bitch having been one that she had heard far too often since coming to the surface world, most of the time directed at her. But hearing it like this make it very clear what the intent of the words was, and she could only laugh wildly at the idea of somehow forcing the world system to respond in such a manner.

She slowly recovered, shaking her head from side to side, noticing with some amusement that Harry watched her silver hair like several varieties of surface world birds that she had seen it done in the past. *Is that the color that fascinates him, or the movement?* Setting that question aside for later experimentation, she turned her words to the conversation at hand. “If indeed you and your half sibling are cheating in such a manner, then perhaps playing by the rules and using spells that already exist will further bypass your class restrictions.”

Harry nodded, then looked at her, cocking an eyebrow up. “Would you mind if I looked at your spell book?”

Reluctantly, Viconia pulled out her spellbook. This was not a simple item, for all that it looked like a regular book, its cover made of some blue leather, with a design of scales on it. But Harry had read in Candlekeep and had since seen that such books were sold bound to the individual, growing with the magic user. Each were largely unique, although they would obviously have the same kinds of spells as another cleric of the same deity or wizard of the same school would.

Each spell represented months if not years of rote spellcasting, occasionally working with magical foci or material components as they memorized the spells. When the individual spellcaster finally had their spells perfected, they then wrote those words into their spellbook, which had two parts to it, one the long term memory portion, and the other, the invocation portion. These were the spells the wizard, cleric, or druid prepared on a daily basis, transcribing them from the long

term memory. They had to re-memorize the words or gestures every day to cast the spell correctly.

With levels came speed of casting and a greater access to spells the cleric or wizard found or learned as they rose in power. The higher level spells were more powerful or more mentally intense, but the magic users personal level also had a direct connection to how many spells they could keep in the invocation, or spell slot, segment of their spellbook. The higher the level, the more spells you could cast as well as the higher level of spells you have access to, although those spell slots were not evenly spaced across the levels.

For an example, as a level 7 cleric, Viconia had a total number of nine invocation slots per day. She had three slots for level one spells, three for level two, two for level three spells, and one for level four. She had yet to learn any higher spells, and Harry had read once that levels 5-8 were a bit of a dead zone for clerics in terms of learning new, high level spells. Instead they gained more slots for lower level ones,

Viconia watched Harry like a hawk as he took in the page she had opened it to, the Cure Light Wounds spell, represented by a large cross center of the page and a series of hand movements and words set around the cross. Harry stared at it, his hands moving through the motions described, with Viconia calling out corrections occasionally.

However, when he tried to cast the spell, nothing happened. It didn't fizzle out, nor did Harry report any buildup of magic within his body. "It was like I was just waving my hands around and mumbling nonsense words for no reason."

"Now, that can mean one of two things. One, your blood magic cannot substitute the magic needed to power our spells as clerics such as I need our gods to do. That makes sense, as cleric spells come from our chosen deities. Recall I mentioned I did not have access to spells when the Spider Queen cast me out until I proved my worth to Shar. Perhaps once you have pledged to a god, you will be able to use these spells."

"Hmm, that might be why I don't have a more than the one Lay On Hands spell, right?" Harry murmured.

"I would not know. Paladins are not exactly known in the Underdark, and I have not met one save in combat before this for obvious reasons," Viconia drawled.

Chuckling, Harry raised his hand indicating she had scored a point, and asked her politely to share what she thought was the second reason his spells could have failed, and Viconia shrugged. "Our idea of using such spells was off, and there is a limit to how much cheating you can get away with. The only way to know that would be to try to learn a wizard or druid spell."

“Well, with Jaheira unconscious, I rather doubt I would be able to access her spellbook.” As part of the soul binding, such items could not be removed from her person, nor even accessed without her consent. The spellbook only had a physical form when the magic user was using it, regardless of school.

“As for wizard spells, while we found one or two on our adventure, the wizards in my party took and added them to their spellbooks. I didn’t keep any, which I realize was a mistake. My and Imoen’s desire to keep our Blood Magic a secret bit us in the ass here. We should have found someone we could trust back in Candlekeep, blast it.” *But we both thought we had figured out our Blood Magic skills as best we could, that the local schools had nothing to do with ours... and I was going stir crazy relieving the same day for months on end. I still don’t know how long I was there before Imoen showed up, and I don’t think I want to.*

Grunting at that, Viconia nodded, wondering internally if even though his classification said paladin, that Harry would indeed be able to make a vow to any particular God. She could all too easily see his heritage held against him in such a moment. *There is also his own personal morals to consider, and while he is as helpful and righteous as paladins are supposed to be, I have yet to see the annoying sanctimoniousness that the breed is supposed to have. Yet even without access to any existing spells, Harry’s sheer flexibility is fascinating. That stone wall spell looks like a refined version of an Erupting Earth spell, but that is a mid-level wizard spell. As is the fact that Harry’s abilities are only limited through means of his imagination and ability to concentrate. I would wager that as he grows in level, his abilities to use this blood mage skill will also grow so long as he keeps working at it, irrespective of his Constitution.*

When Harry agreed to this point he was not at all surprised to see a pop-up window appear in front of him in the gold and red colors of a primary quest.

Grimacing a bit at that but acknowledging the AAS was right on that point, Harry explained what he had just seen to Viconia, who rolled her eyes. “Life itself is always the grandest prize of all, Harry of Candlekeep. Any tool you can use to turn events in your favor you should do so. That is the nature of power.”

“Yes, but I also have to be careful. Experimenting like this with you nearby and no other call on your healing spells is fine, but I can’t rely on that all the time. The rest of the world won’t pause for us while I experiment. And I think my imagination needs work. Doing that repair spell on my shield took way too much concentration. Can you imagine me trying to do something like that, or something else that would turn a battle around, while I’m be fighting at the same time?”

“True, it could be troublesome,” Viconia answered with a nod. “Yet that is the kind of thing that Druids and clerics such as myself often face. Many of us are front line combatants, and there are tricks and skills that you can use to better concentrate on multiple things at once.”

This prompted another pop up, that of a side quest.

That was how they spent their morning, with Harry practicing the mental exercises that Viconia told him about, which consisted of training himself to concentrate only on one sense at a time, or tossing a rock between his hands as Viconia demeaned him, shouted at him, or even tossed stones of her own at his side and head. To say that Viconia enjoyed this was an understatement, but thankfully she only threw them just enough to distract.

This was a lot harder than it sounded, but Harry was progressing very well in it despite that, something Viconia noticed once the sun was high above them. “You seem to already have had some training in this methodology. That is good and will help you learn faster.”

“I think it’s actually my Leadership skill coming into play,” Harry demurred. “I’ve learned to keep the whole battlefield in mind while also engaged in direct combat. This is a bit more internalized than that, but there are still parallels.”

“True, you did mention your leadership skills. I will be interested in seeing these formations of yours in action,” Viconia mused. “Although I am not looking forward to the reactions of your band to my presence.”

“We’re an eclectic bunch. I don’t doubt that some of them will object, but I won’t have people in my party acting like racists,” Harry growled. “If they have had run-ins with your people and have actual bad memories, that is one thing and I can accept it even as I demand they move past it. But if they are simply letting prejudice guide their thoughts, that is something I’m going to hammer very, very hard.”

Viconia nodded in acknowledgment a slight uptick of her lips serving as thanks instead of actually voicing the word. Although Harry noticed he didn’t get any notification about gaining more respect or trust. Evidently with Viconia, talk was cheap, and she was waiting to see if he could back it up.

“Do you think Jaheira is good enough to move now?” Harry asked, staring up at the sky. “While my map is telling me in which direction Imoen and the others are, it’s too small to tell me how far they are, and I’d rather be moving towards them rather than simply passively waiting for them to show up. And frankly, this place is wearing on me.”

“Heh, I too would rather be active than passive. Waiting for your enemies to come to you is always a foolish move, unless you are in a place of power. This certainly is not such, and moreover you must realize that your destruction of these mines will have caused reverberations. The more you are out here in the wild, the more your opponents will have time to prepare.”

“That goes both ways though,” Harry argued as they finished cleaning up their lunch, moving over to Jaheira whereupon Viconia laid a hand on the half Elven woman’s forehead. “We can also prepare. For instance, you’ve already helped me in a lot of ways.”

“As you have me, male,” Viconia retorted shaking her head. “You saved me from my pursuers and have willingly stated your wish to continue to defend me against such people in the future so long as I travel in your party and we have vowed to keep one another’s secrets. This is an equivalent exchange, do not think of us as simply friends helping one another, as I have heard many surface dwellers say.”

Harry winced at that, realizing the very idea of friendship was, while not entirely outside Viconia’s experience, something she had rarely else in the past. Perhaps with her brother who had sacrificed himself, maybe with one or two other people? But like Harry had originally been raised in a neglectful cold and semi-abusive household, so too had Viconia been brought up an entire society led by a matriarchal hierarchy built on cruelty and the idea that power makes right. “Well then, I hope to show you that friendship is its own reward, and while this relationship between us might have started as a mere transaction, who is to say what it can change into?”

Even as the words left his mouth, Harry winced, realizing how flirtatious that sounded. *Good grief, I did not mean it like that! Yes she’s sexy as all hell, but she’s going to be a party member, and having a fling with someone you are going to travel with strikes me as a really stupid idea.*

Thankfully for Harry’s ego or nerves, Viconia didn’t reply to that, beyond huffing under her breath in amusement. She had enjoyed talking to Harry the past two days, but that was scant consideration in her mind. If he had been a weakling, Viconia would never have even countenanced talking to him at all, let alone the exchange of promises and vows. Harry’s power mattered far more than the friendship he was offering her. If friendship grew from an exchange of strengths, then so be it.

After a moment of concentration, Viconia nodded, standing up from where she had been kneeling next to Jaheira. “While her thoughts might still be somewhat addled when she wakes, and I would prefer her to keep sleeping, the rest of her wounds have been healed.”

“Well, if she needs to keep sleeping until she wakes up on her own, I can carry her,” Harry answered with a shrug. “I might not be able to put her into my Item Box like I could if she was dead, but she isn’t exactly heavy... now that I’m no longer Crippled, anyway.”

Hearing that, Viconia’s lips twitched, wondering again if there was something going on between Jaheira and Harry. His willingness to go out of his way to help her, to protect her like this was something she was entirely unused to seeing save between those of family. And even then, not often. *Valas was the only one of my entire family willing to fight for me, after all.*

Still, it is quite obvious that Harry gives his all to such acquaintances. I am entirely unused to such a thing, but... It is not unpleasant. Nor is it something I wish to become used to. After all, if his search for his enemy takes him to Baldur’s Gate, I will be forced to leave. There is no chance that the murder of that Calimshan merchant has not been discovered. And if such a thing occurs, having become soft will not serve me at all.

You have gained +100 Interest points from Viconia. You have lost -40 Respect from Viconia.

Viconia is very much of two minds about your actions and your offer of friendship. A part of her is quite happy to have met someone who is willing to take her at face value and judge Viconia by her actions rather than preconceived notions of good and evil. Yet at the same time, she is very worried about becoming too used to such things, and thus losing her edge and her ability to identify threats.

Seeing that, Harry could only shake his head. He could understand both sides of that coin, although he very much preferred the first reaction to the latter. But he couldn’t really say she was wrong to be concerned. Viconia was a drow, and like it or not, prejudice was a thing. *And unlike most prejudices back in my old world, most drow really are bloody evil.* Viconia would have to be on her guard here on the surface until she had as amazing a reputation as Drizt Do’Urden.

But Harry hoped that eventually she would realize that lowering the walls around certain people was not such a weakness after all.

Soon, the camp was cleared, and Harry knelt down to one side of Jaheira. Viconia pulled the half-elven woman to a sitting position, then draping her over Harry’s back. She then used a spare belt that they had taken from the corpses of her previous pursuers, tying Jaheira around Harry’s back just in case, as her arms draped across his shoulders down his front. This left Jaheira’s head to loll against one of Harry’s shoulders, set into the padding made from strips of the cloth taken from the dead corpses so it wouldn’t be jostled.

She watched as Harry moved around the camp with Jaheira on his back, getting used to her weight, and then pulling his Warhammer and tower shield and then sword out of his item space, practicing taking a stance and attacking. It looked very awkward, but it wasn’t slowing Harry

down as much as Viconia had feared. “Do you really think you will be able to rely on hand to hand combat with her on her back?” Viconia snorted. “I did not take you for that level of a fool, Abaloth.”

“Animals that can use Hide in Shadows to get within biting range are a thing as we saw this morning. And I’d rather plan for the worst than assume otherwise,” Harry rejoined, causing Viconia to snort as she knew he had a point. Harry had explained the map function to her before this, and she understood its limitations as well.

Moments later, the two of them were on their way, heading, according to Harry anyway, south by southwest. Viconia couldn’t navigate here on the surface very well, and resolved once more to buy herself a compass at the earliest possible moment. Regardless, Viconia knew they were not retracing the steps she had taken, and that was all to the good in her opinion.

“Do you have any indication of how far away they are? Understand you can see the direction of your other party members, but...”

“No idea. My map can push out for about a mile in every direction, but that’s all I can tell you. We have some walking to do,” Harry answered, his tone philosophical. Viconia snorted at his tone but Harry had gotten used to that from her already and went on without any hurry. “So, do drow have word games or something else they can do to pass the time on a long march? Or would you be willing to play some of ours?”

“So long as you do not think I will be so foolish as to wager anything on the outcome of such games, I would be interested to know human style word games,” Viconia chuckled without humor. “My own people’s tend to have a very violent or cruel tilt to them. Nor should you assume you need to fill up the silence with inane patter. If I become annoyed, I will inform you of it, and you had best take it as a given that pushing further will go poorly for you, male.”

“So long as you call me Harry more than male or the other curse, I’m fine with that.” Harry retorted then began one of the games that Imoen had come up with back in Candlekeep as they left the camp behind them.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Harry and Viconia were dealing with the inquisitive wildcat couple, Imoen was extremely unhappy and showing this with remarkable grasp of vocabulary that had all of her listeners even wincing or grinning in amusement, depending on their mood. “May the gods of the Mind Flayers sear their tiny brains to ash, why do these fucked up warped kangaroo-lookin’ kobolds keep attacking us in threes or fours?! I’d understand if we were now running into their territory or something like that, but attacking us like this is only slowing us down and for no real gain either way.”

The kobolds they had been dealing with were dumb, and lacked any kind of gold on them. Khalid or Minsc always spotted them moving through the scrub hills, the group slowed down, and waited to see if the kobolds spotted them and if not, the group turned away, shifting further south or north or even once back away from a group to keep from fighting their way through. And when the Kobolds did spot them, they closed quickly only to be dealt with by a rain of arrows and sling stones. Not once was a spell needed to deal with them, or even a sword, yet even that took time if not as much as changing direction.

“It’s either go through them, or go around them,” Edwin answered philosophically. “We made the choice of trying to go around them, and it is now unfortunately biting us on our collective rear. Far be it from me to say I told you so but, I did. When will you simians learn that Edwin Odesseiron is always right?”

“No one likes a smart arse Edwin.” Grumbling, Imoen recast the point me spell twice, once for Harry, and once for Jaheira, while Branwen healed her up almost as it quickly. “Still in the same direction, still alive, still together. I’m going to stop using the second spell for now. Sorry Khalid, but there’s no point to it, even if the health hit is only three points.”

Khalid scowled, but did not argue and Imoen went on. “All we can do is just keep going. But going around these clumps of enemies is slowing us down too much. Minsc, Khalid,” she looked at the two scouts. “Stay with us this time. Minsc, you can stay in Hide in Shadows, that’ll give us a nice little dagger in their back. But from now on, we go straight there as a group. Khalid, you’ll be out ahead of us a few dozen yards, that’ll be enough to give us warning. We punch through anything that’s in our way from now on.”

“Very well, but I will warn you of the same thing that we ran into even when we had Harry’s map. Animals can Hide in Shadows, as you learned with the giant spiders in that house in Beregost. And there are other ways to hide from even my senses,” Khalid warned.

Minsc’s voice almost overrode the half-elves and wasn’t nearly as helpful. “While Boo says I am being too pedantic, whatever that means, I would say that a dagger in the back is not nearly as good as a Claymore to the face! Further, daggers in the back are a certain sign of villainy at work, while Claymores to the face can be righteous depending on the mighty hand of goodness that wields them.”

“It was a figure of speech Minsc,” Imoen grumbled, although she smiled as he she did so, believing that Minsc had attempted to lighten the mood a bit. “And I know that Khalid. But we have Branwen here in case of a close ambush, and if they appear in long range, then it sucks to be them.”

Chuckling at that, Khalid nodded, and led the way ahead, his bow in hand and an arrow ready to be put to the string.

OOOOOOO

Jaheira woke up groggily, somewhat annoyed that whatever bed or sleeping roll she was sleeping in was so hard. *Wait, it is not just hard, but bouncing...* For a moment as her eyes fluttered she could not figure out what was wrong, but then she matched these suggestion to other times she had been carried by acquaintances or her husband after pushing herself too hard or being wounded without another healer around.

The broad shoulders she felt did not match her husband which both annoyed and amused as she became somewhat more aware of her surroundings. As she did, a female voice she did not know announced, "Your burden is waking up, male. Best you slow down a bit. There's that boulder over there you can set her down on easily."

Moments later, Jaheira found herself sitting down on a boulder as Harry knelt halfway down, delicate fingers unlatching a belt from around their bodies. "H, Harry, what, where..." she stared at Viconia, her eyes widening in shock. "WHO!? A drow!?"

Before Jaheira could think, instinct took over, and her fingers scrabbled for weapons which were not there. Not at her side, or indeed in her Item Space. Indeed, she had nothing in her Item Space. As she realized that, and that she was wearing her undershirt and leggings, Jaheira flushed, about to open her mouth and flay Harry to the bone. But then the memories came back to her. Of the dungeon, and of the final trap, of pain from the back of her head, and then... wetness? That last memory was a bit vague, but coupled with the rest caused her to pause.

"You see, Abaloth? It is as I said. None save you have been able to look past my race while on the surface," the drow woman snarled, glaring at Jaheira.

Jaheira looked back at her coldly, crossing her arms over her chest as she tried to look as intimidating as she could in her under things. Which wasn't very much, really, but Jaheira still tried. "I do not just see your race, woman, but my past experiences with Drow. Or are you telling me you would not see such as I in the same light were our positions reversed?"

"Hey now," Harry growled, getting between them. "There will be none of that here. Jaheira, while I don't know about your past meetings with Drow, Viconia isn't one of the drow you ran into, right?" Jaheira nodded at that, as it was obvious, since all of them were dead. "Then don't hold the actions of those drow against her. As for holding her race against Viconia, or you holding Jaheira's against her, Viconia, that's just simple racism, and I won't have it in my party."

You have earned +100 Interest and +40 Respect with Viconia. She evidently likes the fact you are going through with your words about sticking up for her with your companions.

To Harry's surprise, his words did not win or lose him any relationship points with Jaheira. Instead, she looked at Viconia with a scowl still on her face, but it slowly switched to a wry look. "Two questions. One, how long was I out?"

"Er... three or four days depending on when you start counting," Harry answered cautiously.

"And I suppose I have this... drow to thank for our recovery from whatever happened to us? And that I have you to thank for being alive?"

"Yes, and yes. And wasn't that three questions?" Harry snarked, causing Viconia to chortle.

"Hush, they were interconnected enough to count as one. This is a third though. I don't suppose you are in any way being mentally coerced or anything similar?" When Harry shook his head with an eyeroll, Jaheira looked over at Viconia, and gathering her will, did something that was almost physically painful. She apologized to a drow. "Then I thank you for your help. I am Jaheira of Tethyr, and I am in your debt."

Viconia's eyes widened, and she looked at Jaheira with respect. "I, I thank you for that. And I am Viconia DeVir, of the surface world now. I would not be welcome by nearly any of my folk should we ever meet such, bar this Drizzt individual I have heard of from Harry. And..." her eyes flicked to Harry before she shook her head. "Let us not talk about debt. Harry here helped me first."

"Ah, so you have truly developed a way of finding trouble that is like Gorion then," Jaheira drawled, before going on more seriously. "But tell me what happened to the two of us. My last memories are somewhat addled, but I recall, I recall the water claiming me, then nothing."

Listening to Harry explain their underwater adventure and the amount of injuries they had sustained, Jaheira shivered. The very idea of being awake as the water closed over her, as darkness of the underground tunnel consuming, frightened Jaheira more than nearly anything she had ever faced. And yet, both of them had come through it. Horribly wounded admittedly, but still alive. And Jaheira knew that had she been on her own, that would not have been the case.

"You, you saved my life," she said, staring at Harry and slowly shaking her head from side to side. "If I, or even if Khalid had gone with me instead of you, both of us would've drowned for certain, or been battered into too many pieces to be put back together again even by magic. But you, you saved my life."

Harry looked a little uncomfortable, something that Jaheira had noticed occasionally cropped up when he was given compliments. "Let's just call it even for all the times your spells kept me on my feet during a fight. Besides, I consider us friends, and in a life or death struggle, saving one another's lives should be kinda assumed you know?"

Snorting, Jaheira rolled her eyes. "Take the compliment young Harry. And I, I consider you a true friend as well, not just a traveling companion. Saving me, diving down into the water as you did, that is something only a true friend would do, not someone you were simply traveling with, no matter your alignment or how friendly you were."

As Jaheira spoke, two messages appeared in Harry's line of sight. One was in the normal blue, the other green.

You have earned +5000 respect and +5000 trust points with Jaheira.

Jaheira is now a Friend, and able to become a Party Member.

Holy hell! You have climbed the mountain, you have made friends with Jaheira, the unrepentant, paranoid, standoffish, aloof half-elf. Is this a magical moment, or serendipity? Regardless, you have teamed the shrew to an extent that only her husband and a handful of others had done previously and both of you can grow stronger because of it.

The second message was far shorter, but just as important.

Would you like to add Jaheira to your party?

Trying not to laugh at the somewhat astonished tone of the Advanced Adventuring System had taken Harry hit the yes button with a flick of his eyes, before looking at Jaheira. The blonde woman blinked as she in turn saw the same message that her husband, Minsc and Imoen had seen.

You have become Friends with Harry Potter. Would you like to join his party?

She looked across at Harry, indicating with a flick of her finger what she was seeing. "I would very much like to join your party Harry, although could you refrain from looking at my stats or anything else thus revealed until we reach Khalid and the others? I rather doubt you will see anything that you have not already seen in his, but sharing your stats with someone is somewhat too intimate for me to do with someone without my husband around."

"Understandable," Harry agreed instantly, and a moment later, Jaheira hit the accept button as Viconia looked on. And as Jaheira explained how she had just learned Backstab but could not learn Cleave due to class and strength restrictions, she became mildly irritated. Harry felt something of the sort as well since Cleave was both a strength and class restriction.

Jaheira cannot learn Cleave.

As a druid, she believes that everything in nature has its place, and so such damage-dealing skills are not allowed to her... Despite being able to use Backstab. No one has ever accused the universe of being consistent.

Regardless, the Backstab skill and having access to the party's Item Space plus all the other benefits of being in Harry's party was amazingly interesting. "Excellent. Thank you Harry Gorionson. I will be very interested to see my stats and everything else when we have a chance when we rejoin Khalid and the others. But now, let us hurry on."

Harry looked over to Jaheira, asking solicitously, "Do you think you're well enough to wear some armor and your weapons?" Even with item space, having your weapons on hand was just faster, and as Harry had already experienced, the item space wasn't willing to simply shift your armor directly onto your person mid battle.

Experimentally Jaheira crouched down, and then to Harry's amusement, actually performed a few push-ups, stretches and sit ups, testing her body for any lingering soreness. She found a few, but none that worried her as she nodded at Harry. He transferred some of her armor and the other items over to her.

Jaheira put the chain mail and undershirt on quickly, resting the shield on her back and her club at her side, instead taking the staff she had been given by the Elder Dryad in hand as they continued on their way.

With the two women now ignoring one another, the trio moved off, only to pause as Harry held up a hand, pointing ahead of them. "Depending on the terrain, there is a band of red dots ahead of us that might be able to see us if we keep on this course. I'm all for diverting to our right to get away from them, unless you can tell me something about the terrain around here, Jaheira?"

"If we go right will start to come up into a series of hills. Whether or not those hills lead to a mountain or simply keeps going as hilly territory I cannot say from this far away. Would you like me to take point?" Given her ability to forest meld, Jaheira could hide herself as well as of the using Hide in Shadows, which made her the most useful scout of the three of them, especially given her half-elven eyesight. Viconia had much the same eyesight, but the sun blinded her at distances. "I'm sorry to say I have never been in this territory before, so anything I tell you will be but a guess built on what my experience and nature senses tell me."

Harry nodded, and Jaheira instantly began to call on her skill, fading away from side and heading away. But unlike with previous time she had done so, Harry smiled as the green dot indicating Jaheira stayed on his map.

Almost as soon as Jaheira had disappeared from her sight, Viconia snarled, "Well, that went about as well as one could expect, especially from a half elf. I'm very happy she did not attempt to attack me, or else I would've been forced to defend myself, regardless of our agreements, Harry of Candlekeep."

"She was able to step away from committing violence, and so were you. Yeah, I'll take that as a win," Harry drawled, refusing to take sides of the argument, believing both of them had shouted things that were better left unsaid and which came from past experiences and bigotry rather than the individual in front of them.

Viconia snorted, and Harry idly noted that he had lost -100 more Interest from her, which pretty much matched the amount he had won throughout the day. *I sense this is going to be a theme with Viconia.*

Ignorant of Harry's inner thoughts despite knowing about the relationship points system, Viconia agreed verbally with Harry's comment, before going on to say, "However, I would wager that Jaheira might well have attacked me had she had her weapons at the time."

Harry had nothing to say to that, and Viconia snorted again, amusement dancing her eyes as she looked at him, before gesturing in the same direction the Jaheira it disappeared in. "Come then human. Let us catch up with your half-elf acquaintance."

The way she said acquaintance was somewhat odd, but Harry let it go, merely picking up the pace to head after Jaheira, keeping one eye on the map at all times.

The three of them traveled like this for a time, with Jaheira pushing out ahead of them underneath her invisibility skill, only returning occasionally, turning back to get a proper direction from Harry. In this manner they moved around several groups of what Jaheira identified as wild animals and kobolds, who seems to dominate this area in terms of numbers. Harry idly wondered if that meant there was a respawn village nearby. *But we haven't entered an enemy zone, so that's doubtful.*

"There might well be, but I do not believe that it will be as close as you might assume, Kobold bands tend to spread out far more widely than you might think. They are not the same as the Xvarts we dealt with before, who tend to stay closer to their villages unless forced to spread out by stronger beasts," Jaheira warned, her words following Harry's thoughts.

"I find it annoying that such creatures can be found both above and below the ground. I wonder if kobolds are the rat equivalent of the monster world?" Viconia murmured.

Harry shrugged. "It does tend to look like it. If rats had shamans and special commandos who could fire fire arrows at you and traps that are an extremely dangerous threat. Let's break for

an early dinner, and then we'll push on through the night. You two can see in the dark, and I have a ring of Infravision, so there's no need to stop."

Internally, Viconia wasn't happy with that idea, despite liking the idea of travelling at night. Her Constitution was such that she was having trouble keeping up already. But she refused to show weakness, and simply nodded, following on Harry's heels. Jaheira stayed with them as they ate on the move. As the sun began to glow red in the distance, she returned, urging them to turn back to their leftmost, heading further south word rather than Southwest at one point. If they kept on going the direction they were heading before, they would run into further hills, quite rocky ones, which would be difficult to move through.

When the trio followed Jaheira's suggestion, they broke out from the scrub brush onto a flat rocky plane, much like Harry had seen pictures of Mongolia or places in America, but with rockier soil. There, Jaheira's forest melding, which hadn't been perfect up to this point anyway, failed her completely, and she waited for them to catch up to her. Regardless, they were soon on their way once more, as above them, the sun continued to fall.

OOOOOO

Imoen's hope of cutting their way through whatever enemy was between them, Harry and Jaheira rather than wasting more time going around was challenged for the first time a little bit over an hour later. Ahead of the rest of the party, Khalid held up a hand, then pointed to the side of his helmet, indicating that he was hearing something in the distance.

The others caught up to the half elf, who pointed directly ahead of them at a small break in the rolling hills a small ravine that looked to lead down to flatter terrain. That was a good thing, in Imoen's opinion. The going for the last few hours been pleasant. They had been going uphill for that entire time and it wasn't like there was a trail or anything like that out here.

Khalid's words though were less welcome. "I, I, I'm hearing the sounds of wild d, d, dogs or another pack of kobolds. If it is k, k, kobolds, and then t, t, they're on the trail of s, s, something. Kobolds never yip s, s, so loudly unless t, t, they are on the trail of s, s, something. And they're h, h, heading this way."

"A suggestion then. Ugh, to still be in the position of needing to make suggestions rather than commands," Edwin grumbled before going on, pointing out the same terrain feature Imoen had spotted. "There seems to be a small ravine almost there, at the edge of my eyesight but in the same direction we are going. I imagine that several of us could hide along the sides of it, awaiting whatever is coming our way. Thus we can know instantly whether or not whatever is going on is worth our time or energy to deal with."

“For once, I believe the overly-groomed wizard has a point,” Branwen mused. “If the kobolds are chasing some other monster, why bother getting involved? If we can hide well enough to fool them, anyway.”

“Bah, that is pure jealousy talking. You only wish you could be as well groomed and poised as I, Cleric,” Edwin scoffed.

Ignoring Edwin’s comment, and Branwen’s reply of a snicker and throwing her head back to show off her long blonde hair, Imoen nodded. “Point. And if we can hide ourselves, we can set up a little bit of an ambush, and at least make the fight quick if it comes to it.” She looked at the two wizards, asking politely for them to prepare a magic missile spell each, but hold off on using them if it was just kobolds. The wizards had only been able to memorize a portion of their daily spells the night before due to their sleeping conditions, which meant they had to conserve their spells.

“You have been awfully quiet large one. What troubles you so?” Dynaheir said, looking over to Minsc.

Imoen realized with a start that she hadn’t heard Minsc shouting out about justice or even speaking to Boo for several hours, not since she had made the decision to just go straight ahead rather than avoid trouble. That really wasn’t like him, and now Imoen looked at him as well, while in the distance faint sounds could be heard through the rocks and scattered trees.

“Minsc is faintly troubled. I am a ranger as you well know fair Dynaheir, although I have not been in this area of the world before and do not know the signs of all the animals both large and squishy that abound in nature. And yet, there have been some strange signs for the last few hours. The fact that they have continued for so long is also strange to me. Strange slash marks on the ground, small holes well covered but smelly, as if an animal had left behind its droppings, and the sight of trees downed not from action of lightning or wind, but from below.”

Khalid became instantly concerned, even as he gestured the others to start hiding themselves. “The k, k, kobolds might not have good e, e, eyesight during the day, but w, w, whatever they are chasing might. B, b, best to get undercover now. And M, m, Minsc, could you come with m, m, me? Explain these m, m, markings you’ve seen.”

With that, the group split off. Branwen, Imoen and Edwin found themselves on one side of the shallow ravine, hiding behind a series of boulders. Edwin poised behind a bush growing out of them, which would do little to nothing to slow his magic missiles but did an alright job of hiding him from sight... or would if he wasn’t wearing red robes against a light green, brown and gray background.

Wizards in this world would fit right in with the Wizarding World back home, I swear, Imoen mentally snickered, enjoying the irony as she activated Hide in Shadows, her bow in hand just in case. Beside her, Branwen simply hid behind a rock, laying almost flat in order to hide her body from sight, and doing a decent job of it too, her sling by her side.

On the other side of the shallow ravine, Khalid had pulled his cloak around himself, and somehow crouching between a dead tree and the rock he became almost invisible to the point that even Imoen had trouble spotting him despite having followed his movement with her eyes for a part of the time. It wasn't a specific skill, just the half elf's hunting skill coming out in another manner. Minsc had also pulled Hide in Shadows around himself, while Dynaheir proved Imoen's earlier concerns about magic users. She had lain out beside a downed tree, but her hair was visible above it, and a bit of her cloak peeked out between cracks in the tree. *Note to self, take the whole wizards robes not being built for hiding more seriously in the future.*

Luckily for the ambushers, neither the kobolds nor their quarry seemed to have any attention to spare for their surroundings.

Their quarry was a human, which complicated matters in Imoen's opinion. *Why couldn't it be another monster?* The runner seemed a young man, maybe around Imoen's age, maybe a little older. He was dressed like a thief, complete with a hood, which had blown back from his face by the speed of his running, and he was breathing raggedly, staring behind and all around him, his eyes wide with horror.

"Good grief, what a weak-willed young man. While running away from a powerful foe is only the path to wisdom, running frightened like that from small pack of four kobolds is something else. Even a level one, should be embarrassed by that," Edwin grumbled. "Please don't tell me we're going to step in to help this fool? It is a waste of our time and effort, as he will most likely die if faced with a slightly more aggressive than normal chicken."

While Branwen laughed at Edwin's words, she made no reply, gripping her sling, ready to jump out. But Imoen knew that Edwin wasn't making a joke, he was being serious. The idea of saving a random stranger was just not one Edwin would normally contemplate. Not unless he knew they could pay for their rescue.

Alas for Edwin's sensibilities the kobolds had spotted the ambushers. One of the kobolds barked to the others in their language, pointing to the side, where Dynaheir's hair could be seen sticking over the top of the downed tree. Two of the kobolds instantly began to pull bows off their backs, while the others fell back towards them, looking around in some confusion and worry. Kobolds were not the bravest of creatures, but they were intelligent enough to know that if there was one person hiding nearby, there might be more.

This did not save them. Imoen fired her arrow, her Hide in Shadows failing. "No spells but take them down."

It was almost over before the young man the kobolds had been chasing could blink. Arrows and slingstones rained down from either side, killing three of the four kobolds almost instantly. The fourth kobold squeaked in horror, turned and tried to run, but two arrows from Minsc and Khalid took him from behind, sending him down to join his fellows.

With the four kobolds down, Imoen made her way down towards the young man, her hands now empty to show she came in peace. "Hey, it's all right now."

The young man apparently did not agree, because his response to her gentle words was, "Ahh! W, who are you!? Don't kill me, I'll give it back, just don't kill me, don't let him get me!"

Imoen instantly backed up, remembering one of the first real pieces of advice she had ever gotten in the Auror corps. *Never get close to crazy if you can help it. You don't know what they'll do, and it might be contagious.* "Easy their guy, we're not whoever you think we are and the kobolds are gone. No one's going to hurt you here."

"Speak for yourself, I have half a mind to smack him upside the head for being so yellow-livered," Branwen murmured, having moved forward to join Imoen while the others remained where they were, watching just in case there was more trouble coming. "Cowardice is an affront to Tempus, and the fact that makes me agree with Edwin's earlier joke only adds to my ire."

Ignoring the blonde cleric's words, Imoen continued to hold her hands up as the man babbled, "No, no. Not the kobolds, the horrible demise I see in my mind every time every time I close my eyes! Can't concentrate my mind, my mind... I didn't mean it! I'll give it back!"

His eyes suddenly latched onto Imoen like a drowning man on a lifeline, causing her to take another step back, as he stepped forward, suddenly pulling out a dagger from his belt, holding it out to her, hilt first thankfully, or else he might have taken a few arrows in the chest. "You, you can return it, you can take it, give it back!"

"Give back what, the dagger? Who are we talking about here?" Imoen said, backing away again to put Branwen between the madman and her. Branwen had no issue with this and had already grabbed her hammer from her belt, holding it in one hand at the ready.

"A cave, east of here, a cave I opened, oh I disturbed its slumber, I was, I was foolish, I," the man babbled. "It haunts me, and I get no rest! Please, take it, take this dagger to the tomb."

At that, Branwen and Imoen both stepped back almost as one, one because she was not pleased with what she was hearing, and the other because she could see a side quest coming a

mile away. *Let's hear it for being genre savvy folks!* Imoen thought. "No way! Just drop the damn thing, I'm not touching it and neither is Branwen."

"Indeed foolish one! If you disturbed the rest of the dead, then whatever happens is on your own head, and I will have no part it," Branwen added.

"Just take it! I will nothing more to do with it." The man then flipped the dagger and tossed it towards Branwen to land at her feet. "I will not have the dead be my doom!"

And with that, the man raced towards the two women, disappearing into Hide in Shadows between one moment and the next with an adroit use of the skill that caused Imoen to blink in surprise. Given his previous actions, she hadn't thought the cowardly idiot would be able to use a skill like that. Then he was past them, only the sound of his running feet giving away his position for a moment. The dagger remained where it had been thrown, at Branwen's feet.

Moments later, the others moved down from their ambush points to join the two women, and Imoen, who had not moved to pick up the dagger, held up a hand. "All those in favor of not touching the dagger of nope say Aye?"

"Aye," came several voices, with Dynaheir adding, "if that fellow is truly being haunted by a spell from an undead Lich or even some lesser spirit, the spell might have been on the dagger itself. It will not let him go unless someone does return the dagger."

"Exactly. I'm not touchin' nothin'. What about the idea of returning it though?" Imoen asked, giving herself a slight Cockney accent for a second causing Branwen and Minsc to laugh.

Once more, Dynaheir spoke up first. "Normally I would be for doing so, simply because it is a good thing to do to save a life. But given the way he just tossed it at you and ran, I do not think we are under any obligation to do so, given our own task the present moment. Two lives weigh against one in this."

"I for my part would be interested to see if there were any actual magic to be learned or a secret to be discovered here but would rather not do so and help such a quivering simpleton," Edwin grumbled.

"Let's be off," Khalid said, the tone of voice almost coming out is in order.

"Minsc would rather help the foolish young man, for doing so is an act of goodness. But my Witch is correct. We needs must hurry to find Harry and fair Jaheira, lest some evil befall them without Minsc's mighty boot to defend them. Perhaps we can see to this on the way back?" Minsc suggested.

“That works. I’m still not going to touch the dagger though. Anyone have a bag that it can be placed in? And then put in our Item Space?”

To Imoen’s suggestion, Khalid offered a small pouch, an extra slingstone pouch that he kept on him. With the dagger dropped in via a Leviosa spell from Imoen, he then put into his Item Space, and peremptorily pointed them all further down towards the direction the Point Me-enchanted stick had been pointing before this issue had begun. Imoen picked the stick up again, holding it in her palm, watching it shift to point in the correct direction before nodding to Khalid, who instantly moved ahead of the rest of the group, who trailed behind him.

At that point, Branwen remembered the earlier conversation with Minsc, looking between the half Elven the ranger shouting out, “By the way Khalid, did you and Minsc decide what kind of animal he was seeing signs of?”

Khalid paused, turning to us shout back, “Ankheg.”

That single word caused a shiver to go up Branwen, Dynaheir and Edwin spines, and all three of them began to look around warily, even as Imoen looked on in confusion. “What is an Ankheg? I mean I know the name, I’ve heard it a few times before, but I always thought of it as some kind of giant mole creature... wait, wasn’t there something back in Berefast about the smith there paying for their hide...”

“You have the giant part of that statement correct, the rest however? Perhaps you should have spent more time reading, rather than practicing your japery?” Edwin scoffed, even as they followed the others.

That caused Imoen to scowl and start an argument with him even as they followed the others still following Imoen’s directions. Imoen got so into the argument that her time in Candlekeep meant she had read more books than Edwin would ever see let alone read that she completely forgot about the actual question she had been asking, until the question was answered in no uncertain terms a few hours later.

The sun was setting by the time they had broken out from the last of the hills and rocky areas onto a kind of plane. The terrain here reminded Imoen of cartoon pictures she had seen growing up of America’s Wild West, semi-arid land stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, and Minsc noticed that he was seeing signs of wilds horses.

And it was here where the question about what an Ankheg was became moot.

Khalid had paused, staring out into the distance. His half-elven sight let him see much further away than most would have and he wanted to taked advantage of the fact that there was

nothing blocking his line of sight now. The others joined them, and he was about to open his mouth, when there came a rumble under their feet.

“Scatter!” Edwin shouted first, with the others all shouting the same thing, everyone racing in different directions. A second later to one side of where Minsc had been standing a large mound of earth about the same size as Imoen laying down burst up and out, pushed from below.

What popped out of the ground was a real monster. Five feet across and at least fifteen feet long perhaps, depending on how much was still below ground, the monster looked like a cross between a ant and a praying mantis to Imoen’s eyes, with wide, multifaceted eyes and large mandibles click getting as they stared at the humans. It’s huge, mantis like forearms were as thick across as Minsc’s legs for most of their length, the edges of their natural blades looking immensely sharp, but also covered in some greenish muck dripping down from small slits in the side of the arm.

Thankfully the monster’s first blow was a backhand as everyone had scattered, but this only meant that instead of trying to slice Minsc in half the strike merely sent the large man flying.

He rolled with the hit, coming back up with his Claymore in hand. “Foul monster, you sneaky ways will not avail you against the team of Minsc and Boo! Though you are large and strong, you will still be squished by the mighty boot of justice like the evil mosquito before you!”

From where he ran off, Khalid turned quickly and fired, aiming for the monster’s eyes. But his arrow shattered on the ankheg’s armor, causing him to curse. “Switch to fire arrows or magic! Regular attacks won’t do anything to them.”

“Them?” Imoen demanded, even as she obeyed, sending a blasting spell towards the ankheg.

Once more, the world answered her question for her rather than her companions. Even as her spell struck there came several more rumblings, and three more ankheg burst out from the ground. One of them sent a spray of green gunk Edwin’s way, and he cried out in agony. Even though he had dodged much of it some of the gunk hit his foot, sizzling and melting its way through his armor and foot at the same time as if it was acid.

“Oh. Them,” Imoen whimpered, seeing the one she had struck with a blasting curse still alive as the smoke cleared, lashing out with another acid spitter attack towards Khalid. His shield caught the acid mucus, but instantly began to sizzle and pop as the acid ate into the metal and wood of the shield with ease.

The swordsman tossed it away, and closed, his blade lashing out with all the speed and skill the half-elven warrior possessed. Khalid’s longsword was magical in nature Imoen

remembered, +1 to attack and +4 to defense if she remembered correctly. That meant it was one of the few weapons in their arsenal which might actually damage these creatures.

Imoen however had concentrated too much on that one aspect of the fight, and the other Ankheg were also attacking. Two had popped up so close Minsc was now fighting to keep their attention in him as Dynaheir raced away, and the other had joined its fellow in spitting out insanely dangerous acid attacks. Branwen was nearly killed almost instantly last minute sacrifice of her shield defending her head from an acid strike. But this defended her long enough for her healing spell to take care of Edwin's foot, letting him get back to his feet.

It fell to Dynaheir to point out the group's disadvantageous position. "Back! Get some distance. Minsc, switch to that halberd of yours! Your Claymore will do nothing to these creatures!"

Dodging around a strike from one of the monsters who had burrowed nearly under the group, Imoen activated her Fight Like a Jackrabbit skill, adding to her evasion skill and strength. It wouldn't last long, not even ten minutes, but Imoen hoped that would be enough. She also discarded the idea of using short sword. Although a magical +1 weapon, it just lacked the range she needed to fight these monsters effectively.

"Lacero!" At her Blood Magic spell, a fire whip appeared in her hand. Instantly she leaped upward, evading a strike from another ankheg almost automatically thanks to her activated skill. While in the air, she lashed out at it in turn with her fire whip, catching the bug monster across one of its huge eyes, which seemed to be natural weak point.

Critical Hit! You have landed a lucky strike on an enemy ankheg's eye.

Although it did not succeed in blinding it, the pain from the wound will impact its combat effectiveness going forward.

The ankheg screamed, falling back into its hole for a moment.

But just as it did so, another one came up from below, bursting out from behind her. Thanks to her skill she was able to dodge its first slashing attacks, lashing out with her whip, but a third strike caught her underneath her arms, hammering into her ribs and tossing her away with a cry of pain as she felt several of them groan under the impact despite her armor.

Spells now rained down from Dynaheir and the healed Edwin a series of Acid Arrow and Magic Missiles hitting the first, already wounded monster, the one who Imoen had hit earlier with a Bombarda. Their spells, aimed at weak points in its armor, did a lot of damage, forcing it to burrow away. The same could not be said for the ones engaging Branwen and Minsc, and Khalid

had been flung away earlier by that same monster, his helmet smashed off and blood running from a deep gash to the side of his head.

And even as the one monster retreated that left three of the monsters, with one of them in close, and two of them launching acid spitter attacks. One such came towards Imoen, and she hastily shouted out, "Protego!"

The shield was struck by the acid, which stuck to it, sizzling and biting into the magic, but not getting through as she heard a shout nearby from Dynaheir to Edwin, "dammit, they have a fire resistance you fool! Switch to something else."

"Do not order me about woman!" The pain response came. The wizard of Thay's foot had been healed by Branwen, but he was still in a good deal of pain from it.

"Retreat! Edwin, use Summon Monsters!" Imoen shouted, canceling her Protego and hopping away, ducking under another acid attack from an ankheg as the one she wounded just now popped out of the ground to come at her again enraged from the injury but showing no sign of it. "Retreat!"

OOOOOO

While Imoen and the others began to fight for their lives against a nigh-overwhelming foe, Harry, Jaheira and Viconia were making their way towards them, when Harry paused scratching at his lightning bolt scar thoughtfully. The two women turned to look at him, with Jaheira asking, "you see something on your map I take it?"

"I wonder if I will be able to get a skill that will let me share my map with my party members. That and communicate directly between us. That time I saw an update to the Iron Intake Issue is still in my mind," Harry mused, staring ahead of them. "Anyway, We just entered an enemy zone. But there is a blue dot out there. Right in our way too."

"Blue dot?" Viconia inquired. "That is not the color of an enemy correct, you said that was red. Broken enemies are yellow and allies, green. You did not mention blue." She did not question the enemy zone comment. Whether or nit a beast spawned was immaterial to her, the whole world was dangerous to her.

Ignoring the faint tone of disapproval that Viconia was giving him, Harry nodded. "Blue is neutral. Peasants, bar keepers, farmers, people like that. What one is doing all the way out here, I have no idea. The question is, should we see what is going on, or avoid it?"

"We go straight," Jaheira declared firmly. "I have been seeing signs of Ankheg for the last two leagues or so, and if some fool is out here treasure hunting or what you have you, we will

need to save him from his own idiocy. Besides, hurrying along as fast as we can out of this territory is a very good idea, and going forward will hopefully be faster than going back.”

I do not wish to fight Ankheg in my weakened state. The last time Khalid and I fought them, we had our original levels, and it was simple enough then. Now? We would be hard-pressed to fight two of the creatures as a full party, let alone with Harry, DeVir and myself. Although, he does have access to his Blood Magic, so perhaps we could win? Regardless, whatever this fool is ahead of us needs to be informed his danger.

About fifteen minutes of walking brought them to the point Harry could see the individual ahead of them. Instantly, Harry was able to identify him, and read the notification aloud. “Narcillicus Harwilliger Neen, level 7 mage, the Slime Enthusiast. Narcillicus is a middle-aged man who seems to be obsessed with something that he is doing currently with two long, thin cages on the ground beside him, to almost the exclusion of all else. Huh, I can’t see the cages from here.”

“I can, and really? Slime Enthusiast? The name does not conjure good images,” Jaheira murmured, shaking her head.

“Indeed. Are you certain we must save this fool from being out here in a dangerous environment?” Viconia asked, showing the first moment of solidarity the two women had since Jaheira it woken up.

Harry thought that was a good sign, and decided that, although a part of him wanted to save the man regardless, that Jaheira should make the choice to continue going forward or not. She did with a nod of her head, and the three of them troops closer. Soon they closed and, since they had made no move to hide their footsteps, Narcillicus became aware of them. He turned from where he was standing casting some kind of spell into the cages beside him.

But at the same time, Harry nearly let out a whoop, the one fist into the air. This caused Jaheira and Viconia to look at him in surprise, and he smiled widely at them both. “The arrows of Minsc Imoen and Khalid, they just turned to green dots at the far edge of my map.”

Before Jaheira could respond to that bit of good news, Harry’s face suddenly becoming serious. “And something just ambushed them from close-up.”

“Ambushed them, how?” Jaheira questioned hurriedly.

“I can’t tell from this far away, but it looks like ambush at a slight distance? Not at the far end of arrow range for sure, maybe darts? We need to get within eyesight for me to use my Identify skill.”

Harry watched for a few seconds and saw a third red dot joining the other two, further away from the others, but still close enough to engage Imoen and the others obviously, followed

by two more. "Three more dots joined them and neither of the other two have gone down yet as they would have if they were spiders or maybe even adventurers using invisibility potions. Fuck."

As the two of them had been speaking, the three travelers had continued forward. Now they were in decent range for a dialogue, and Narcillicus spoke up before Harry could suggest they skirt around the man and his odd cages. "Ah, strangers! Excellent. You are just in time to witness the culmination of my experiment."

"When anyone uses the word experiment in such a manner, I normally look around for the torture devices," Viconia growled from the depths of her hood, taking a step back and to the side of Harry and Jaheira, looking around them warily.

"None of that, or rather none of that on human beings at any rate. No, my experiment have to do completely with slimes," Narcillicus answered, seeming to take no offense at Viconia's words in his enthusiasm. Although, he did seem to notice Viconia's feminine form underneath her cloak, as well as Jaheira's face, looking between them and Harry with a tinge of what looked like jealousy for a moment before continuing his response to Viconia's words in a obviously prepared monologue.

"I believe I have developed a spell to empathically control any gelatinous creature and bend it to the will of the spell user. Slimes, jellies, oozes, all of these can now be controlled and turned on other enemies! Can you imagine that, imagine turning a dungeon's own creatures against their fellows? At this point the spells takes an entire hour to caste and several reagents but both will be minimized with further experimentation, I am sure. I have finished casting, and now I await the time the spell will take to sink into the two mustard jellies that I have caged here. Rejoice stranger! Soon you shall bear witness to the results of my endeavor."

Jaheira was the most experienced the trio and had fought several varieties of jellies and slimes before this. Recognizing the mustard jellies name, Jaheira stared at the man in horror. "Are you mad, man? Releasing mustard jellies into the local environment without knowing whether or not you will be in control of them?!"

Her tone and words seemed to touch something within Narcillicus to the quick and he glared at Jaheira, stabbing an angry finger at her just as the containers opened. "You dare to mock me! I have spent years working for this, and you, you strangers, you are just like all the others, calling me mad, deriding my work, my passions. Well, I will show you!"

Mustard Jelly

A type of Slime, these Jellies are normally found in deep, dark, and above all poisoned or befouled territories, like sewers or swamps. Like all such creatures, oozes eat through

dissolving anyone caught within their bodies causing tremendous pain to the victim as they meet a slimy death. They are slow to move their bulk, but quick to attack, and have both a long range and short range attack

Strengths: They are completely immune to normal weapons, electricity, piercing damage and many other forms of attacks, especially missiles, cold and magic. Like other slimes, they are not intelligent enough to feel fear, although they can feel pain. Their attack deals poison and slow damage unless the target makes a defense save.

Weaknesses: Like all slimes, fire is the best weapon against these creatures. Slashing damage is also effective. They are also slow moving, so getting away from them is somewhat easy if you need to run.

Attitude towards Adventurers: Like other slimes, Mustard Jellies do not possess enough intelligence or cunning to tell Adventurers from anything else that moves and is red-blooded. Alas, this just means they will eat an Adventurer just as easily as they would an animal.

The two slime monsters moved to either side of Narcillicus at some unspoken command, and the wizard leered at Jaheira's eyes alight with the madness of a little man too often taunted and now suddenly given power over others. "You see! My slimes are now under my command. Indeed, I think you have come upon me now not as witnesses, but as the other side of the experiment. Come my beauties, show these fools your might!"

With that, the two mustard jellies, who had previously been yellow on Harry's map, turned red along with the mage who instantly began to move his hands to create a spell.

However, Viconia had been prepared, and a spell lashed out from her to crash into the man before he could finish his own. Her Hold Person spell failed, but did cause the wizard to stumble back, his own spell dissipating from his hands. It was very evident he didn't have much combat experience.

But the mustard jellies moved forward, and Jaheira pulled back hastily. "They will be immune to all normal damage! Your magic sword might do some slashing damage to them, but I do not know about your blood mage spells, and I am going to be useless here!"

Harry nodded, having the new entry to his bestiary that had popped up into his face a moment before even as he worryingly looked at his map, where four red dots had surrounded the rest of his group, and undoubtedly the rest of their traveling companions. *At least they have killed one of whatever the heck they're fighting.*

Setting that aside with an ease he put down to his Leadership and Tactics skills, Harry concentrated on the here and now, smacking aside an attack from one of the mustard jellies with his shield, which did not sizzle or start to degrade under the strike thanks to its own magical properties. "They're immune to electricity but not fire!" He shouted and cast his own spell. Harry imagined the spell like a flare of flame appearing from the front of his shield and blasting outward in an arc.

Keeping the image in his head was tough, but luckily, for him anyway, the two mustard jellies had turned their attention to Viconia, whose spell had wounded their master. She cried out as one of them struck her, its long-range spitting like attack hitting her and instantly casting two debuffs on her.

Viconia has been hit by Slow. This debuff will cause her to move at half her normal Dexterity-given speed.

This will last for forty minutes unless the spell is dispelled.

Viconia is Poisoned. Viconia will lose one point of health for every half a minute until dispelled. Further, the pain of it will make it nearly impossible to cast spells.

At the same time, Jaheira had closed, but as she had feared, her staff didn't seem to do enough damage. She fell back quickly, casting Barkskin on herself and Harry, the spells coming from her staff, which the Ancient Dryad had re-empowered for her. The defensive spell would shield them from some of the physical damage, and she hoped it would block the poison aspect of the mustard jelly's attacks entirely.

The mustard she had attacked then struck back, and Jaheira was smashed off of her feet. Luckily, Jaheira's hasty defensive spell kept the Poison and Slow at bay, but the strike still knocked her off of her feet and took a chunk from her health bar.

The two women's sacrifice had allowed Harry to finish concentrating on his spell, and now he thrust his will out into the world in the form of a crescent moon of flame that shot out from his shield. The magical fire struck the mustard jelly fighting Jaheira and it exploded, sending bits and pieces of jelly everywhere including on to Jaheira.

She squawked in slimy outrage, as the enemy wizard shouted. "Damn you! How dare you do that to my jellies! Feed on them my pretties, feet on all three of them!"

At that point, with her immediate enemy trying to reform, Jaheira turned to him, and closed. The man stumbled back, his eyes wide as he realized his danger. He tried to cast the spell, but Jaheira's staff end intersected his hand, causing him to cry out in pain. He was too slow to dodge the next strike either and it nearly laid him out.

Yet at the same time, Harry cried out in pain as a strike from the mustard jelly remaining intact got through his defenses from the side, hitting his sword arm high up in the shoulder. And unlike with Jaheira, her Barkskin spell wasn't able to slow both of the Mustard Jelly's debuffs.

You have been Poisoned.

Viconia had fallen to the ground and rolled nearby, trying to get the slime off of her, and in seeming to do so, the mustard that had been attacking her turned its attention to Harry. But the pain from her poison was still too much for her to concentrate on spell, and so she could do nothing, except race forward shouting out, "I will deal with the mage, you help Harry!"

While she was not feeling very generous towards Harry at the present second thanks to having gotten a face full of slime a moment ago, Jaheira turned away from the rapidly retreating mage, and began to attack the remaining slime from behind. While the hits didn't do any damage, the slime instantly shifted its attention to her, grabbing her arm and staff, trying to melt it away, but the druidic magic within kept this from working.

Harry thrust to his feet and darted forward. Using his magical blade, he sliced into the monster, carving away chunks of it to scatter everywhere around them. The monster warbled in pain, and tried to envelop his arm in turn, but Harry pulled it out, grimacing at the pain of his continuing poison.

Another strike from the mustard jelly sent both of them reeling and this time, the other debuff took hold in Harry. But Jaheira luckily again was able to get her shield up in time to save her face from being directly and continued to not be impacted by the debuffs the mustard jelly dealt.

She felt a rib ago a second later as another strike got through her defenses, and fell backward. Seeing that, Harry grimaced, and once more slashed at the monster with his sword, moving slow slowly he felt as if the slime had enveloped his legs and arms and everything, trying to concentrate through his pain. *Dammit, I need to heal this poison away...*

A second later, a blow from the slime nearly took Harry off his feet, and he realized that the battle was no time to experiment with that kind of thing. Instead, he concentrated on something he could do. He and Imoen had discussed the possibilities of transfiguration coupled with the spells of this world before, and now he conjured a large vial of oil into his hand, which he hurled into the side of the slime.

The mustard jelly caught it, enveloping the thing in itself, and then Harry stepped forward, his blade covered with a magical fire that he had just created, ignoring the pain the spell crafting demanded from him. The mustard jelly retreated, but Harry noticed the other slime was back in one piece, having reformed from his initial flame strike but still horribly weakened. "Jaheira, fall back and heal Viconia! Viconia, some kind of attack spell of that slime, finish it off!"

Jaheira instantly obeyed, moving over to Viconia, who had finished off the mage with a hammer blow to the skull that had shattered his head like an egg. As healing magic from the other woman washed over her, the drow breathed a sigh of relief, and then instantly obeyed Harry's order just as Harry finished his own opponent off.

Turning, Jaheira was in time to see Harry's blade penetrate the vial he had created as it floated within the slime. The oil was instantly ignited by the fire in his sword inside the monster. Slimes, after all, did not have the same properties of water to put out such fires. The fire quickly spread causing the monster to squeal, and then slowly just collapsed in place.

You have slain Mustard Jelly. 2000 XP.

You slain Mustard Jelly 2000 XP.

You have slain Narcillicus, Slime Enthusiast, 800 XP.

These notifications made Harry breathe a sigh of relief. However, that was not the only thing he saw. The monsters around Imoen and his other companions were still there, and his companions hadn't moved all that much, retreating away to the point where one of them had become an arrow again. But it was obvious they were fighting for their lives. And despite his own recent brush with violence and death, Harry wasn't about to let that stand.

"Viconia, heal Jaheira and me but leave at least one medium healing spell and two of your Cure Light Wound. The rest of our party is facing something else out there, and I think we need to take it from behind whatever it is... which means it's time to be sneaky..."

OOOOOO

To say that Imoen and the others were not having a good time of was put it mildly. A single ankheg would have been a tough match for their party, with high health points, extremely good durable armor, and both close range and long range acid attacks coupled with raw strength and the ability to borrow through the ground. With five of them ambushing the group, they were having trouble staying alive even though they had gotten lucky and been able to force one to flee early on.

Edwin's summoned monsters fell quickly but they had let the group retreat back out of the rocky plane, which at least let them find cover, although the continued Ankheg attacks had forced them to scatter. The group also had a lot of fire arrows, which Harry had distributed to the others occasionally during the dungeon dive when they took them from kobold commandoes. The fire arrows were hurting the ankheg when they hit but Imoen knew that the spells of the two magic users should have made the bigger difference.

But neither could concentrate on their magic long enough to get off a higher level spell, and Magic Missiles, Agannazar's Scorchers, and Flame Arrows or Acid Arrows were not doing enough damage as they couldn't keep firing at any one ankheg at a time. They had to just pop out from cover and hit whichever ankheg they could. The Ankhegs were now moving far slower than at first, and more than one of them showed plates that had been battered by impacts, or burn marks here and there, but the adventurers had to keep getting lucky.

Branwen, who had found her slingstones not doing much of anything, only had a few Cure Light Wound spells left after healing the group of their wounds from the initial ambush. Worse, their cover was disappearing, something Imoen knew as she could hear her own hiding place disappearing under the sizzle of an acid attack.

Nearby, Dynaheir cried out in pain as one of the spitting strikes finally caught her, striking her in the arm as she was too slow to get behind cover. The strike not only splashed acid across her arm, neck and even a bit of her face, but the impact very obviously broke her arm, snapping it at an odd angle and causing the witch to fall on her face. "AAGGGGG!!!"

Another similar acid spit nearly caught Edwin who had astonishingly reached out from cover higher up the tiny hill to grab at the wounded Witch. But he dodged just enough to fire off a magic missile spell, which struck the same animal that had attacked him. "Fall damn you, fall to the sorcerous power of Edwin Odesseiron!!"

Despite his shouting, Edwin sounded close to breaking. But someone else was also responding to Dynaheir's injury.

"No! You will not have my Witch!" Minsc bellowed. Switching out from the Chelsea Crusher he had been using against one of two Ankhegs who had burst out of the ground right in front of him, he raced off with nothing in his hands barely dodging under a blow from it as he raced towards Dynaheir.

As he darted away, this left Khalid and Branwen to face both of the ankhegs who had just closed with the party. Grimacing, Imoen darted out of cover, racing between her comrades and closing, using another Lacero spell to both of the ankhegs. "Branwen, back away and hit me with a healing spell, and then get Dynaheir back on their feet!"

Thanks to her Fight Like a Jackrabbit, Imoen was able to dodge every strike from the two bug monsters. Her whip lashed out in turn, but only once did she score a long burn mark on the side of one of the ankhegs, doing little damage. The creature's armor was pretty darn good. Second later, one of Branwen's last healing spells washed over her, and Imoen used the renewed help to launch a cutting spell towards one of the beasts. The creature raised one of his arms, intercepting

the spell but the cutting spell removed the arm at the weird bug like elbow. It squalled in agony, and yet still was able to strike hard, launching another acid attack towards the distant Dynaheir.

Minsc got there just in time to defend the downed witch, with Branwen on his heels. But the ranger howled in pain as the acid ate into back of his helmet. Tossing it away saved his head, but blinded him to the next strike, which struck him in the back, sending acid splashing everywhere along his back, lower back and thighs. "GARGH!!!!"

"Dammit!" Imoen shouted, bringing her whip around again, this time aiming at one of closer ankheg's eyes. The strike again really didn't harm the monster as much as it should have, although it blinded that eye as Imoen had one of the others earlier. That particular Ankheg looked to be the one that had just sent Edwin skittering into cover.

But this time her strike gave Khalid an opening, which he took instantly. He took a step to the side dodging a wild blow from the wounded beast then darted in, his sword stabbing deep into the monster. Thanks to it's magical properties, his sword was able to punch through the chitin of the ankheg, but the monster's armor was so thick the sword couldn't penetrate deeply enough to do crippling damage.

Another series of magic missiles flew from Edwin, the beast who previously had him pinned having turned to take Branwen under fire. The Magic Missiles crashed into the beast, finally doing damage as it struck burnt or weakened plates of chitin, blowing several of them off. But it still turned, launching another spit of acid towards Branwen from behind.

The cleric was forced to thrust her shield up to take the blow, and the acid strike began to sizzle and bite into it, causing her to toss the now useless hunk of metal and wood to the side. "Blast it these beasts are overly hard on our equipment!" She had lost two of her warhammers by this point, and all of their shields were gone by now.

"AAGGGH!" Khalid screamed as the monster he had just attacked leaned down and bit his shoulder hard, it's mandibles biting into his plate armor. Although it couldn't quite break through at once, the bite crushed his shoulder and collarbone. The monster then lifted the half-elf off of the ground, shaking him like a dog would a rat as acid filled saliva .

Imoen launched another attack spell at the monster who was biting Khalid.

You have used the Blood Mage Spell Rifela.

This spell creates a magical bullet that then flies at high speeds to penetrate its target.

-25 to health.

The penetrating spell impacting the same point that Khalid's sword had struck earlier, finally causing the animal some real pain. It dropped Khalid, crying out and falling onto its side, shuddering, trying to push himself upright, only to fail. The spell had obviously hit something important inside the beast.

But putting down one of the monsters was but a minor reprieve. Khalid was down, and now as the other monster he and Imoen had been fighting closed on him, the fourth monster caught Branwen with a scythe blow to the side. The hit smashed her to the ground, her armor sizzling, her face disfigured and the woman howling agony from the acid that continually dripped from the ankheg scythes.

Even as her vision began to pulse red and her head started to throb in pain from all of the spells she had used, Imoen tried to close with the last of the monster facing her and Khalid, tried to get the monster's attention even though she knew it was going to be useless.

Suddenly, two healing spells struck the party. One, a Cure Serious Wounds spell, hit Minsc. He had just been smashed to his knees. His back and legs having been hit by a acid strike. But the armor they had found in the gnoll fortress was a Chest Plate +1, and was thus able to take the strike without melting. Now as the spell hit and healed his wounds Minsc, suddenly free of pain, twisted from where he had been hovering over Dynaheir, bringing out his Chelsea Crusher at the same time. "CLEAVE!" He howled.

The head of the the glaive crashed into the monster's side, not penetrating, but dealing crushing damage to it, breaking several of the armors plates, and doing some internal damage as the beast coughed blood with its next exhalation, squalling in pain.

The other healing spells struck Branwen, who rolled away twisting until she had her feet under her, and her magic hammer in hand, coming back up to strike the monster who had just been about to finish her off.

At the same time, Harry appeared.

The three of them had closed using an invisibility spell that Imoen had taught Harry back in Candlekeep. They both agreed Hide in Shadows was better, but since Harry couldn't use that nor could Viconia, this was a good alternative. And just like before, Harry had been able to come up with a spellless alternative to the original, which cost less in terms of health.

As they had come close, Harry had read the bestiary page, making plans.

Ankheg

A giant bug monster, this creature uses acid-assisted scythes to cut through the ground like it was loose dirt. This monster usually works together with a nest of up to six adults and numerous

young at a time and needs a huge range in order to feed themselves. Their normal prey are... well, anything they can get their scythes on really. They aren't fussy. Nor are they that intelligent, although they have exhibited a very simple kind of pack mentality if working together. Ankheg also have an acid spit attack, and acid scythe strike will do -20 damage each time they strike dead on.

Strengths: physically strong, able to move quickly underground. Their armor is incredibly tough, giving them +15% resistance against most types of damage, including low level magical spells save cold and fire. Slashing and penetrating damage resistance is 30%. While they can be wounded by regular weapons, it will take a long while.

Weaknesses: Ankheg cannot see behind themselves and while they have good eyesight, they use vibrations to find their prey, a ability that can be overloaded. They are weak to fire and cold, and their base resistance to magic is only on their chitin, not the rest of their bodies.

Attitude towards Adventurers: Mmmm... yummy. A single adventurer can feed an adult Ankheg for a full day. This means your something of a great food source.

With that information in mind, the three of them had moved to be behind the Ankheg, and now, as Jaheira used her staff's stored spells and Viconia did the same, Harry was in the perfect position to finish off the monster fighting Khalid and Imoen. Even with backstab Harry didn't want to trust his sword to that kind of armor. Instead, he leaped upwards, bringing his hammer down on the top of the monster, smashing his hammer into the back of the head right where the neck began. There were several smaller plates there letting the ankheg move its neck better, and he hoped they were not as thick as the rest of chitinous plates.

This proved to be the case as the back of the monster's neck exploded.

Harry has used Backstab.

Critical hit! -40 to enemy health.

Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.

Instantly, the monster collapsed, leaving only two of the creatures, both of them wounded. And Edwin had been left alone by the monsters due to Minsc's berserker charge into the ones attacking the back of the group. "Fireball!"

Minsc and Dynaheir were both caught in the back last from the explosion, and stumbled away, wounded but not on fire, as both of the remaining ankheg were. Dynaheir had fallen unconscious by this point thanks to the wound she had taken earlier, and now that the monsters were distracted by being slightly on fire, she turned away from them and raced to her side.

Following Harry's earlier instruction to put the enemy down before seeing to the rest of their party members' wounds, Jaheira added to the ankheg misery by casting the lone attack spell in her staff, the Stinging Flies spell. Similarly Viconia began her own attack spell, while Harry, knowing that he was one of the ones that were still in fighting shape, charged through the others, shouting behind him, "Branwen, Get Dynaheir out of there and then see to Khalid!"

The cleric nodded as Harry closed with the two remaining monsters, while Edwin also fell back towards the rest of the group. A berserk Minsc remained where he was, bellowing in fury as he hacked and slashed with the Chelsea Crusher, its cursed impact to a normal person's speed doing nothing to the mighty Ranger. Now with the magical glaive and his Berserker-assisted strength, he chopped limbs off crushed armor or shattered it entirely with each strike.

As Harry closed, the Rasheman Ranger was in turn struck by another acid assisted blow. This was enough to finally overcome the magic in the chest plate that Harry had given him after the battle with the Gnoll chieftain. Armor collapsed under the strike from the acid, and Minsc screamed, his fellows of fury segueing into a scream of agony as he once more felt the sting of the acid these monsters used so profligately.

Switching out to his magical sword, Harry darted around Minsc, closing with the same monster he had been striking, stabbing his sword into one of the areas where the armor of the ankheg had been smashed clean off. With the armor out of the way, his sword sunk deep into the beast, instantly hitting something vital as it fell backwards, the tension keeping the upper body upright ending instantly. Like Imoen's earlier opponent it was still alive and twitching, but Harry left it there, leaving his sword embedded in the monster for now, trusting in its magical properties to save it from any minor acid damage it might accumulate and worried that removing it might take too long, having felt it get stuck between some ribs.

A second later, his war hammer struck the other monster's wounded arm, hitting directly onto the wound causing it to flinch. The next attack missed and then the spells from Viconia and Edwin arrived, shaving off large amounts of its health points. The magic missiles hit hard, imploding one of the creature's eyes, smashing off both of its antennae, and searing one side of its mouth. Viconia's spell, Flame strike, hit, dropping the monster to the ground in agony.

Harry's hammer crashed into the side of the monster as it reeled under the impact of the spells, and a moment later, Harry saw another opening just like in the last. He took a blow to the side for his troubles, the beast's strength incredible even now, but in the next moment, a last Acid Arrow from the now healed Dynaheir again struck the monster, finally killing it.

Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.

As it felt aside, Harry quickly moved away, knowing Minsc would not be able to control himself, and not wishing to use a cheering charm or something like that at the moment. Given the number of wounded the party had that would have just put one more weight on the shoulders of their already beleaguered healers.

While he and Minsc had been finishing off the last two of the monsters still fighting, Imoen, Jaheira and Khalid had finished off the monster that had been crippled earlier in the battle, while Viconia began to heal the most wounded. Now it and the one that Minsc had been attacking both died, leaving the battlefield to the adventurers.

Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.

Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.

That meant that he and the others had gotten a good chunk of experience today, to add to the amount won clearing the dungeon, and Harry was pleased to see it. All that meant he was fully a third to the next level, which would take as much experience as Harry's previous levels. What he was not pleased to see was Khalid, despite his injuries just being healed by her, now threatening Viconia. "Harry, what are you doing traveling with a drow!?"

"What are you doing being almost food monsters? Adventuring takes you and strange direction sometimes," Harry quickly quipped, moving towards them. "Besides, she saw the only reason your wife is on her feet currently, and me too, to be blunt about it. And without that, all of you would be dead right now."

Charisma Check passed. Your attempt to diffuse the situation with humor and information both has worked on Khalid.

As Harry saw that message, Khalid lowered his sword to the ground, looking over at his wife. Instead of the effusive hug or snog that would've occurred between a human couple, he simply smiled at her, and spoke in Elvish. His stutter was still apparent, but his eyes now latched onto Jaheira like she was a lodestone.

Jaheira replied in turn in Elvish, even as she began to use shreds made from the cloth of the foes Viconia and Harry had killed to bind some of the wounds that Branwen had taken. Luckily, healing spells cleared out runes as well, so there was no danger of acid still being in the woman's wounds, although the spell hadn't actually closed many of her burns, the spell having concentrated on removing the acid first. If she had been hit with a Serious or even Cure Medium Wounds spell, it would've removed and closed the wounds, but as it was, Branwen, Dynaheir and Minsc would all be walking mummies for a time, while Khalid's arm would need a sling.

Still, Viconia's spells had kept them all in the land of the living. At the moment, after two hard fights, that was all that could be asked. *And Jaheira can add her own healing spells to the pool. We'll all be up and back to normal in a day. Damn, but magic is great.*

Charisma check passed. Your show of good humor has caused Branwen to push past awkwardness in facing a representative of a nominally evil race.

For her part, Branwen hesitated at seeing Viconia's face, but now nodded at her, and stood there stoically as Jaheira saw to her wounds, murmuring something that Harry couldn't hear. Jaheira replied in a similar manner, and the priest of Tempus bellowed in laughter.

Charisma check failed. While still willing to follow your lead, Dynaheir is now questioning your sanity. Luckily for you, she's also so sore and too tired from the fight to do anything beyond question it internally.

Edwin didn't seem to care one way or the other about Viconia's race, which Harry was happy about, although perhaps he should have seen it coming. And Imoen was looking too out of it to care. Seeing that, Harry moved over to where Imoen it slumped to the ground, staring straight ahead, her eyes closely shot as she tried to leave her breathing. It was very obvious that Imoen had pushed her use of blood magic spells, and Harry used his Lay on Hands spell, restoring some of her health. This proved just enough for her to look up at him and smiled wanly, which probably meant she had pushed her blood magic spells to the point where another spell might well have killed her outright.

"Khalid, you probably know the most about ankheg. Can we stay here safely? I don't think any of us are in a position to travel very far." Harry asked, while in the background Minsc continued to bellow, getting his rage out.

Khalid nodded, still having trouble tearing his eyes away from his wife. "Ankheg g, g, groups routinely have a gigantic t, t, territory, but there could be as m, m, many as twelve or fourteen of them in s, s, such a nest. However, t, t, there are very rarely more t, t, than four or six adults in s, s, such a group. And we s, s, slew them all. I, i, if we head back away down toward w, w, where our band came from, we should b, b, be able to find a place w, w, we can hold up f, f, for the night."

Grimacing at the idea of fighting even immature ankheg as battered as they were, Harry nodded, and looked over at Minsc shouting, "Boo, bite him on the ear. We need to get going."

There was a squeak, barely heard over the continuing sound of Minsc's bellowing cries, as the miniature giant space hamster appeared from underneath the tatters of Minsc's under-clothing. Climbing him like he was a giant tree, the hamster was soon perched on his shoulder, whereupon Boo squeaked a few times, then Minsc hard on the ear.

Just as Harry had hoped, the mental impact that Boo had on Minsc carried over to halting his rampage. The ranger slowly shook his head, then stared down at his shoulder before the Chelsea crusher vanished from his hands, into his item box and he began to put the giant miniature space hamster with two gentle fingers as he looked around him. "Alas, my berserk fury has taken me again. Still, seeing as everyone is still in one piece, Minsc will simply be grateful."

"Let's get moving and find a place where we can rest securely," Harry announced, carrying Imoen over to Jaheira instead of answering Minsc's barely heard murmur. The blonde druid used her staff's last stored healing spell on the girl, letting Imoen regain enough health to at least walk on her own, although her head was still weaving from side to side, and her eyes weren't quite tracking, going from staring all around to being clenched tight in pain.

As the others all nodded, Harry moved from one of the monsters to the other, putting his hand on them. Viconia watched, smiling slightly and shaking her head, while Khalid muttered about cheaters as his touch allowed Harry to simply remove the armor of the monsters into his Item Space. "I am not familiar with these creatures. Is there a reason why you are so intent on using that particular skill on their hide? I presume you are leaving the meat behind despite the fact it looks more edible than the rest."

"Yes." Jaheira answered for Harry. "Chitin like that can be made into an amazingly good suits of armor. Armor light enough to be carried by myself, you and Branwen yet give us the equivalent of full plate mail protection."

Two monsters down, Harry shook his head with a chuckle. "That may be, but in their raw state these ankheg plates heavy. Minsc, Branwen? Do you think you're up to carrying one each?"

"Minsc can carry two, friend Harry! And both Minsc and Boo rejoice at once more being reunited with you!" Minsc said, having finished calling down.

"Excellent and it's good to see the two of you too, Minsc! That'll give four of us some very good armor, and considering what happened to yours during the fight, we're going to need it." The last was said ruefully, as Harry transferred the two ankheg shells to Minsc, before doing the same for each of the other dead bodies, taking one himself and giving Branwen the other. They were all in the same battered condition, but they were all ankheg shells, which meant it was still useable once they returned to Beregost and the smith there.

This process, which should've taken a team of rangers several hours took Harry but minutes, with Khalid grumbling about it under his breath, although not with any heat. Jaheira on the other hand simply chuckled, and whispered something in Elvish causing her husband to start then smile before nodding.

Once the process was done the group moved as quickly as their wounds would allow. Imoen was only able to get along on her own two feet with Branwen helping her, making her the slowest of them. Thankfully, they didn't have to travel far to find a place where they could make a temporary camp. This was a dried up riverbed that wound around a dead tree creating a small ditch, interspersed with a few large boulders. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it would cut down the avenues of attack a monster or person could use to get the drop on them. Which was really all any of them cared about this point.

Soon, all of them were slumping around the area, and Harry had set up a small fire pit at the base of the tree, where he began to cook them a meal, with Viconia helping and Jaheira going around helping the others set up their bedrolls. When a series of wolf steaks began to simmer over the fire, Harry pointed his cooking knife towards Dynaheir, seeing as Imoen was still very out of it. "We all have stories to tell obviously, but why don't you all start first. Then we'll get to talking about Viconia, Jaheira and my little adventure."

End Chapter