

MEERRY Christmas! Alas, the Eagles lost, but eh, they fought hard behind their second string quarterback.

This is going to be the largest of the two/three chapters I put out from now on this month. It hasn't been edited by anyone, as I just finished it today. And even Justlovereadin' couldn't get it back to me in time for it to be out for Christmas. I also don't have any color coding going on here. It doesn't cover over to Patreon, and I am so tired right now, I can't force myself to do it LOL. The next episode of *Semblance of Hope* will be out tonight as well.

Wish me luck from here on trying to push out two smaller chapters in the same amount of time...

Chapter 12: Civilization Can Be More Dangerous Than Wilderness

As everyone sat down and waited for the wolf steaks to cook, Imoen began to lay out her group's adventure after Harry and Jaheira had been separated from their friends. Despite being exhausted and in a good deal of pain, Imoen pulled no punches, first pointing out how Khalid had nearly come to blows with "That Moon-sword guy. I've forcefully pushed his name out of my head. I need that memory space for more important things. Like how to tie my boot laces in pretty bows."

From there, the pink-haired pint-size thief went on, describing how badly flawed their ability to work together had been without Harry along to soothe feathers, worsened by Khalid's single-minded insistence on finding his wife as quickly as possible. This earned him some words in Elvish from Jaheira, both admonishing and kind, which he responded to in his stuttering manner.

Eventually, they got to the last portion of the adventure, where they were ambushed by the group of Ankheg, and Harry, Jaheira and Viconia rejoined the group in time to save their lives. "Which, now that I have time to ponder it, is rather galling. That we, the so-called rescuers, instead had to be saved in turn," Edwin grumbled.

Branwen guffawed, then held her ribs and then her head consecutively. "HAHAHAHoooww....it hurts to laugh. But do not take our brush with death so badly, little man. Say rather that we are truly blessed by Tempus. for how else could Harry and the two lovely Elven ladies arrive so fortuitously if they were not divinely guided?"

Growling, Edwin looked to protest the term little man. "I am a perfectly proportionate specimen of Thayan manhood, you northern giantess! You would not know..."

Before Edwin could continue Harry spoke up from near the fire pit. "Speaking as the result of one God being unable to keep it in his pants, I would rather that we not attract the attention of any deity, light or dark. Not until we are powerful enough to survive their attention anyway." Harry paused then, before bringing up a hand to slap his face. "And I just realized how foolish that is coming from a paladin who has yet to decide which deity to pledge himself to."

Jaheira laughed at that, as did many of the others, with Viconia taunting Harry for being foolish. "Perhaps then being a paladin is not your path? Can you, what is the phrase, ask for a do-over?"

That cracked Imoen up even more, of course, knowing this whole life was something of a do-over, or more accurately an entire new life. Harry too laughed but kept most of his attention on the food.

The only one who had not been sufficiently disarmed by the moment of levity was Khalid, who still glared at Viconia. But before he could say anything Harry asked, “and where is the dagger of nope now?”

Several of his listeners chuckled at the use of that label, looking over at Imoen, who preened a little at Harry using the name she had come up with for the cursed item. “We’ve got it in my Item space. None of us were willing to physically touch the thing, so we levitated it into a bag.

“Good thinking. We might want to do something with it going forward, after a good night’s rest and around of healing.” Harry frowned thoughtfully tapping his chin. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if that kind of thing gave us a quest of some kind. And, if that moron’s words about undead being his death... well it could act like some kind of lodestone, or something? So whatever we do, I doubt we want to take it back to civilization with us?”

Imoen grumbled a bit at that but nodded. It made sense after all.

“T, that is all w, w, well and good, but now we must t, t, talk about the elephant in the r, r, room!” Khalid began angrily.

“Has Khalid actually seen an elephant? Minsc has seen them in books, and thinks they are most magnificent looking animals. Although Boo believes they are too large to be real, and this is coming from a miniature giant space hamster, whose heart is bigger than Minsc! Do they really shoot water out of their tusks?” Minsc asked excitedly.

“I remember a book that mentioned that! *Strange and Unusual animals of the World?* I loved that as a child,” Branwen added, clapping her hands together in delight and beaming over at Minsc.

“It is just a figure of speech, my large friend,” Dynaheir said, patting Minsc on the shoulder while rolling her eyes at Branwen for encouraging him. “And much of that book is based on hearsay, so should be taken with a grain of salt. Obviously the animals do not fling water through their tusks, it comes out of their long prehensile noses.”

“I do not believe that! While even in the Underdark I have heard of the creatures called elephants, they are supposed to have the ability to create fangs or claws from the end of their noses. What purpose would shooting water out of your nose serve when they can do that?” Viconia asked, while Harry smirked down at the food he was cooking.

Despite Khalid’s rising anger, the group spent several minutes commenting on what an elephant would truly look like, with Imoen cheerfully joining in, and Jaheira simply laid out on the ground nearby, watching the proceedings with jaundiced amusement. When Harry glanced her way, the blonde half elf gave him a slow wink, indicating that her thoughts were going down much the same road Harry was. That as a way to release some of the tension in the group, this random conversation and the jokes from directly before worked quite well.

However, it did come to an end eventually, just as Harry was finishing the wolf steaks.

When everyone had their plates and were now in a much happier frame of mind, Khalid's tone of voice had changed dramatically, although the topic had not. "W, w, while I am ecstatic t, t, to have you and my wife b, b, back and whole Harry, I c, c, cannot leave the issue of Viconia being a d, d, **drow** alone. I have r, r, run into drow before and it h, h, has never ended well."

"I agree my husband that her race could be held against her. But we both know of the example of Drizzt Do'Urden, do we not?" Jaheira interjected archly. "If a drow can become one of the greatest heroes of Faerun, then perhaps there is hope for their race as a whole. Further, Viconia, tell them who you worship."

Viconia's lips pulled back into a sneer, as if she was fighting the urge to tell Jaheira where she could stuff her orders, but she subsided, shaking her head very slightly finishing the bite of wolf steak before speaking. "While all drow are raised in the worship of the despicable spider goddess, Lolth, I have since switched my worship to Shar. I have renounced the Spider Queen, and the vile society she forces her followers to follow."

At that, Branwen frowned a bit, although not too much. She was eating a most magnificent steak at the moment, and Viconia had used a healing spell on her during the battle earlier. "While Shar is an evil deity, I cannot deny she is better than the spider Queen, who is treacherous to everyone, friend and foe alike. The fact that Viconia was willing to change her allegiance speaks well of her. It is also night. Anyone who would willingly take a moon deities name in vain at night would be foolish indeed."

Harry glanced up at the stars above, noting the moon, as Viconia snarled, "you know nothing! In comparison to the Spider Bitch, Shar is magnanimous and righteous! She alone answered my prayers when I asked for aid in the under dark, she alone guided my steps out, around foes and through violence, until I finally was free, away from the Spider Queen's reach. Is it any wonder that I have pledged Shar my worship?"

"Pragmatism and faith together, an interesting juxtaposition. And one I cannot help but to approve of," Edwin murmured. "And Harry, I do believe you said earlier that it is only because of Viconia and her healing spells that you and Jaheira are alive?"

"That's right," Harry answered firmly.

But Viconia shook her head, pointing an empty fork at him. "Say it true. You at least were able to look after yourself well enough before my arrival with those fools from Baldur's gate on my heels. It was Jaheira who truly needed my healing spells."

"You're underestimating things. I might've been able to fight off those idiots following you, but that's a far cry from getting myself and Jaheira back to some semblance of civilization, especially without the ability to rest a full eight hours so I could recover my lay on hands spell," Harry argued back. "And then I would've run into that mad mage and his slimes on my own, or maybe a Ankheg. Without having healed myself to the point where I could fight at my full ability."

Everyone there winced a bit at that, and Viconia allowed herself to preen a bit, knowing Harry was right, while Jaheira continued the tale. She spoke clinically about her own injuries, looking over at her husband, whose fierce determination to question Viconia faded with every injury she mentioned,

then went on to mention Harry's, which Viconia had told her about. "If not for Harry protecting me while we were being flung about in the underground current, I would've had my skull bashed in so badly even resurrection would never of work. And if not for Viconia, I would still be in a coma."

"In that case, Minsc and Boo are both in agreement. The pretty black skinned elf is a welcome addition to our party. One can never have too many healers after all, and she has already proven to be a good warrior, just as Branwen and Jaheira have," Minsc exclaimed.

"Actually, I think that Viconia's skin is more obsidian than simply black. There's also a slight bluish tinge to it," Harry quipped.

"Viconia is right here and would rather that you all stop talking about Viconia as if she wasn't," Viconia growled, although her lips were quirked upwards as she took a dig at everyone there in general, and Minsc's way of speaking in particular. Then she looked over the fire at Harry, cocking one silver eyebrow in amusement. "And have you truly been staring at me so hard to notice such things, Harry of Candlekeep?"

"I like to keep an eye on everyone within my party," Harry rejoined virtuously.

Viconia slight humming noise, and the way she shifted a bit, drawing attention to her body, told Harry she didn't quite believe him, and Harry tried to fight hard against the blush that came to his face when he saw her curves in the firelight. *Dammit, have the Gamer's mind which gives me the ability to control my emotions and I lost my virginity to a freaking elder nymph. But I can still get flustered by a girl? How unfair is that? And she isn't even trying hard!*

You have gained 20 interest points with Viconia. Your ability to both banter and show embarrassment amused her to a certain degree.

It is obvious that while in combat she likes your take charge attitude, outside of combat, Viconia would rather you were a bit more... biddable perhaps? Or perhaps less self-assured? It makes her feel more confident in your interactions, which she likes, although even with your Observation skills you cannot tell why that is.

Remember, even with your advance there is a limit to what any man can discern of the female mind. Especially this particular female's mind.

"... If she has already proven herself to such a degree, I cannot object to her joining us I suppose," Dynaheir murmured, staring between Harry and Viconia for a moment, unaware of Harry's Observation skill kicking in.

Then for some reason Dynaheir glanced over at Edwin, her frown deepening before disappearing, mollified by the sight of Branwen sitting next to the mage. *The good in this party still outweighs the evil, and Harry's actions up to this point have shown his own sense of morals well.* "So long as you do not let her thoughts, and more importantly perhaps, her body influence you going forward," she warned.

While Viconia rolled her eyes at the other woman's obvious jealousy, Harry shook his head. "I'm not one to let a pretty face influenced me overmuch. And no Viconia, that wasn't a challenge."

“Was it not?” Viconia allowed a small sensual smile to cross her lips as she looked over the fire again at Harry, before very obviously licking her spoon for a moment with her long, purple-colored tongue. Then she turned away, as if dismissing Harry. “As if you would be any challenge regardless, male.”

Harry laughed at that, although to be fair, he also hadn't been able to look away from her little show just then. Feeling his collar just a bit too tight for a moment, Harry fought the urge to loosen it, as he turned to look at Khalid. “Well Khalid, I hope this has set your mind at ease?”

In contrast to the others, Khalid still was frowning a little, before Jaheira reached out and tapped him lightly on the back of the hand. At that, the last vestiges of his anger seemed to dissipate, and the half-elven warrior nodded. “I thank y, y, you Viconia for helping to save m, m, my wife's life, and the life of my c, c, companion, Harry. I tell it t, t, true though, if you and Harry h, h, had not exchanged the oaths you had, I w, w, would still be looking at y, y, you with suspicion. I once helped to r, r, rescue an elf from drow captivity, a, a, and the tortures he had gone t, t, through under the tender care of y, y, your people haunted me for m, many a night after.”

Viconia snorted. “If you were able to rescue him and his mind was still intact enough to want to come with you, he got off lightly. And believe me, my own nights, once I awoke to the sophistry and self-devouring nature of our society, were not very pleasant either.”

Harry nodded at that, remembering how Viconia had told him about how her family had turned on Viconia when she refused to sacrifice a young child to Lolth. How her own mother had thought to sacrifice her, before her brother, the only one of her family to care for Viconia, had killed their mother. Only to be then turned into a drider before the siblings could escape. A drider that was then unable to ignore Lolth's commands.

“That may be, but then you understand why I look at you with suspicion. I will not object to join us, a but trust will take longer.”

“Who said anything about trust?” Edwin quipped. “I certainly did not. Then again, I am uncertain if any of you are intelligent enough to prove trustworthy so that is par for the course.”

Ignoring Edwin's words, or the sneers that it evinced from several of the others, Harry directed the conversation back to the dagger of nope. “Do you have any idea where we need to take that dagger?”

“Somewhere to the south and west of where he met the idiot. He said east, but he wasn't coming from that direction, so I figure retracing his steps is a better bet. Maybe if we do get a quest, we'll get some more information? But I think we should wait until tomorrow for whatever we do with it.”

“After we heal up, yeah,” Harry nodded, then smirked and pointed at Imoen. “And you might be very interested in another talk Viconia and I had while waiting for Jaheira to recover.”

From there, Harry explained the experiments he and Viconia had run on the blood magic spells.

Imoen was astonished, completely. The idea of simply directing her magic to do what she wanted was, well it went well beyond anything she had ever heard of back in her old world. The ability

to use a spell silently, fine. Without a wand? Some wizards could do that. Even shifting what a spell did was something she had heard of, like shaping the contours of the shield spell say, or the size of the bubbleheaded charm's bubble. But this? No spell, no previously created construct to guide your magic, just your willpower? That was beyond bizarre, but also incredibly fascinating.

Edwin's eyes practically gleamed eagerly, and he and Dynaheir spent several minutes asking Viconia and Harry questions about the experiments about what his magic could do, about the drain, and about why Imoen and Harry had begun to use their own types of spells before this.

It was an eye-opening discussion for all of the magic users, although Edwin was somewhat annoyed as he realized exactly how strong this blood magic could be in the right hands. *And if Harry or Imoen get their hands on any kind of regeneration item, it will become even more so. But for myself, no... I doubt that I will ever be able to make full use of their blood mage spells. But duplicating their abilities, creating my own spells... yes, that is still my ghoul. That, and making use of the Advanced Adventuring System when I can.*

For his part however, Khalid was more interested to know that Jaheira had joined himself, Imoen, and Minsc in Harry's party. He was even willing to put up with Viconia being able to do the same thanks to her oath to Harry. "I w, w, want to know if there is a difference b, b, between the level canceling e, e, enchantment I know I am u, u, under in comparison to my w, w, wife, and if looking at her information o, o, on the same topic will give us a, a, all more information about it."

"He has not yet looked husband. I wished to wait until we had returned to the larger group before doing so," Jaheira answered.

Khalid looked startled then amused at that, saying allowed that he wasn't certain why she had done so. Jaheira just scowled a bit at that, rolled her eyes, and then turned to Harry, asking politely if he would be willing to look at her stats.

Harry did so, pulling up her character sheet in front of his eyes, and going through the pertinent information quickly.

Name: Jaheira

Gender: Female

Race: Half-Elf

Classification: Level 25 Warrior (-20)

Strength: (10)

Willpower: (88) -39

Dexterity: (69) - 60

Constitution: (54) -48

Durability: (15)

Wisdom: (29)

Charisma: (20)

Intelligence: (16)

Luck: (10)

“I’m going to skip over the racial stuff, considering that it would also give us your age, and I know that no woman likes to talk about that,” Harry quipped, although he was immensely impressed at seeing Jaheira’s full stat sheet, as he had Khalid before him. While they had talked about their stats in general terms, what they knew of them anyway, the amount of strength they had both gained in their time as adventurers was inspiring. *Given the fact half-elves only get two stat points per level plus a third in dexterity automatically, everything else is a sign of their own growth.*

“Wise,” Every woman there bar Branwen and Imoen announced dryly. Those two were laughing at his words, although Harry noticed he gained ten Interest points with Viconia, ten Friendship points with Jaheira and Imoen. Branwen and Dynaheir had both gained ten points in Trust.

With a snort, Harry continued reading after Jaheira gave him the okay to go on to list her Learned Skills. Beyond the active ones Harry had already seen Jaheira use there were several which impacted her stats.

Wilde Will: As a druid, Jaheira has spent time communing with the spirits of nature, bonding, conquering, and discussing with each as the spirit dictated. During this time, Jaheira’s Willpower has been honed to a tremendous degree, doubling again the amount of Willpower she had at the point she discovered this skill.

Long Strider: As a druid, Jaheira had to learn to go for long periods of extreme physical activity without food or rest. In doing so she has inherited the Constitution of the animals of the forest. The amount of Constitution Jaheira has is based on how many weeks she went with only the barest minimum of food or water while traveling through one of the many old forests of Faerun.

Hunter, level 7: As a Druid Jaheira is a skilled Hunter, able to track man or beast, regardless of terrain or size of the quarry.

Status disorders:

Curse of the Dread One:

In his past, Khalid was subjected to a curse by a powerful magician. This curse decreases his level by approximately 80% and does much the same to 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.

The information about the curse was pretty much the same as it had been on Khalid's, giving them no further information about how to release the two older adventurers from it. Jaheira was somewhat amused to note how much points in willpower she had, although the fact that her intelligence wasn't as high annoyed her somewhat. And much like with her husband, all the parameters had been badly degraded by the curse.

Viconia was looking at the two half elves with respect, understanding how far ahead of her they were in strength and ability, that it was only this curse that had brought them down to the level of the rest of the party. The courage it showed to continue adventuring even in such file conditions also won some approval from Dynaheir and Branwen, who had not .

"So the only clue we have to somehow get rid of the curses to find an ancient god of some kind, one who had a particular hate for vampires," Harry mused, shaking his head. "They can't be all that common can they?"

"Well, common or no, we can't do anything about that right now. I think we need to take stock of our equipment and everything Harry, now that you and I can maybe start to repair things a bit more economically, maybe we can look into repairing some of our stuff," Imoen said.

Listed not make for pleasant conversation. Harry still had a quiver of arrows in his item box, and shared them with the archers, but they had all shot their own arrows dry. Everyone had battered armor, or in the case of the magic users, holes torn out of their robes. Although obviously, the robes of the two wizards weren't magical or gave them any real defense.

The regular equipment had also been badly battered, although there, Harry's ability to identify a items durability didn't help all that much.

"Even with our ability to cast to repair enchantments for the same price as we would only have done one before, that is a tall order," Imoen grumbled. "Especially for me and my week ass short self. Dammit, I should've done more training back in candle keep rather than just lock picking and sneaking around." *Seriously original Imoen, I cannot piss on you enough for how lopsided your body is!*

"You do realize you have three healers in the party now, yes?" Viconia questioned harshly. "With the three of us around, you should be able to at the very least repair the party's weapons, even though we will be using much of our healing magic to get you all into fighting shape."

"True. Tomorrow will be a day of healing I think," Harry answered. "I would like to suggest that all three of you concentrate on healing spells in your spell books tonight, with two attack spells. Jaheira, if you could make those your tangling vines spells? Those are my only suggestions."

Persuasion check passed.

Jaheira responses to good common sense, and your requests certainly matched that standard.

“That is sound practice. I will exceed to that request. Although, once we are all back up to fighting strength, I will cut back on the healing spells. I like to have at least one, perhaps as many as three nature’s call spells, and a summoning spell,” Jaheira answered.

Harry nodded, before gesturing to Edwin. “Edwin, considering that we might need to deal with undead, and that might include ghouls and other creatures that can level drain with a touch, it might be a good idea for you to read up on more monster summoning spells.”

“Do not presume to give me orders on what spells are best in what situation, paladin. Your blood mage abilities can only cover you so far. Well do I understand the nature of the mid and high tier undead. And I will make certain that I add at least two more summoning spells to my normal repertoire,” Edwin snorted.

Charisma Check failed.

While you are speaking sense, Edwin rejects your suggestions out of hand. He will follow them anyway because he was going to do it in the first place, but wants it known he is doing it on his own connivance.

Somewhat par for the course with this one really.

Dynaheir lacked summoning spells like Edwin’s. So she would be their main magical damage dealer going forward.

At that point, Jaheira began questioning Khalid and Imoen about the impact of their completed mission in the Nashkel mining complex. She was somewhat annoyed that the group had left Nashkel so quickly after returning from the mines, so fast they didn’t even know how the mayor had sent the information on, only that he had sent it to Amn first, then Baldur’s Gate.

Theories about what would happen once news of what the party had discovered in the mines was circulated dominated the discussion around the fireplace for a time before people began to nod off. At that point, Harry called it a night and divvied out the watches. This was quite easy as only Harry, Minsc and Branwen still had the endurance necessary to be on watch in the first place. The others all bedded down along with Branwen and Minsc, with Harry taking first watch.

The other two would take their turns after and both Imoen and Jaheira made Harry promise not to try to simply stay up all night. “Rein in those heroic impulses of yours Harry and think beyond tomorrow morning. We might need you in peak fighting condition, and getting at least a few hours rest will help,” Imoen wagged a finger in Harry’s face, her tone admonishing and amused.

“Fine, I promise I will wake either Minsc or Branwen up for their time on guard,” Harry mumbled back, shaking his head. “I am a paladin though, Imoen. Having heroic impulses should be assumed.”

“Perhaps in the main, but the best paladins also have common sense, Harry Potter,” Jaheira retorted, thumping him on the shoulder before moving over to lay out near her husband.

“Common sense... hmmm... never ran into that back in Candlekeep... or Hogwarts,” Harry snickered lightly to Imoen who snorted in reply.

The rest of the group were already sleeping by that point but Branwen and Minsc. The two of them set themselves up at two sides of the camp, the third side being backed up by a large rock outcropping.

As she closed her eyes, Viconia reflected on her impressions of the party so far. Harry and Imoen's relationship was close one, reminding her poignantly of the few good times she'd had with her brother, and Viconia's thoughts shied away from examining either too closely at present. Far easiest to think about the rest of the group. *The half-elf seems both suspicious of me, yet altogether under the control of his wife, which is as it should be.* Minsc too is under the control of Dynaheir. He is a big brute, and quite forthright, easy to handle. Whereas Dynaheir has made no bones of the fact that she disapproves of me. Sad, she seems a strong woman, and I rather think she and I can get along if we look past our preconceived notions... well, so long as she is not after Harry and believes I have designs on him.

That thought amused her a bit. Viconia admitted she probably could influence Harry through use of her body. *He is a young paladin, which means a young man, after all. But such things would be fleeting. And while bantering with him is amusing, I require stability and someone willing to guard my back for me. If he is looking at my backside, how would Harry be able to do that? Besides, Harry was the first person up here to offer his hand to me without ulterior motives. While I would not be against continuing our banter, anymore is not something I am interested in pursuing. It would somehow cheapen the... the...friendship?*

Viconia paused, turning on her side to stare out into the darkness to where Harry sat on a boulder, staring out into the darkness. *Friendship? Is, is that what I feel? That is... in the culture of the Underdark, such a thing would be practically begging to be stabbed in the back, literally or figuratively. But up here... Viconia shook her head, turning back to look up into the stars above. No. Not yet. Perhaps in time, but now, Harry and are merely... acquaintances. Our oaths bind us, I can trust them, far more than I am willing to trust mere feelings.*

With that, Viconia left the slightly thorny issue of Harry behind to move on to the last three members of the party.

Edwin will be one to watch. He made a joke of it, but given the reactions of the others, I think he truly does not see anyone in the party as a friend. More the party is interesting, in terms of the blood mage spells, and what they could possibly mean for his own research. He shows his self-interest openly, and his disdain for the others, in particular Minsc and Dynaheir. He would no doubt sell me out if he thought that it would benefit him in some way. Still, he is a man, and obviously will be easy to manipulate based on that simple fact.

Like Dynaheir and Jaheira, Branwen is far more respectable than the simpering women of the caravan I have dealt with previously. It is good to know that even human women on the surface can be strong in their own right. Although unlike Dynaheir, she does not seem to dress to use her feminine wiles against men. She is much like Jaheira in that regard. More a male Minsc but also a cleric of... Tempus was it? I am unfamiliar with that god, but for one so bluff and blunt as Branwen appears to be. Or perhaps she has hidden depths? We will see.

Closing her eyes, Viconia let out a snort as she tried to get comfortable on the hard ground. *They are certainly an eclectic bunch. And I have to wonder why they are all in a single party? And how they have got along so far without blood being spilled. Edwin and Dynaheir obviously have problems with each other, which carries over into Minsc's interaction with the red wearing wizard. Harry didn't tell me much about how they all came to work together. Could it be Harry's leadership skills? He mentioned them, although at the time I was more interested in the formations and the bonuses they could give people taking part in them. Regardless, traveling with his band will be interesting, if not as safe as traveling alone with Harry and Jaheira was.*

With that, Viconia shook her head, and, with her hammer to one side of her tried to fall asleep.

However, a full night's sleep was not going to be on the cards for any of them. While Branwen was on watch, Harry woke up as his gamer system warned him.

There are enemies about. You cannot sleep.

On the heels of those words Harry woke up as normal in this world, going from fully asleep to fully awake instantly. Rolling to his feet, he was already looking at the map and moving to stand by Branwen by the time Branwen hissed out a warning, her voice carrying throughout the camp. "There is movement out in the dark to the right from my position."

Harry was not alone in waking up quickly. Every member of his party benefited from that and the fact they slept dreamlessly and woke up seamlessly. So his party quickly got to their feet, while Edwin and Dynaheir, the only ones, bar Branwen, who were not in Harry's party as his AAS skill thought of it, only slowly stirred. Edwin was a bit faster, and held a dagger from somewhere as he rose to his feet,

"I'm seeing nine red dots on my map, moving slowly, but they are so close they must have come out of Hide-In Shadows," Harry reported tersely, thinking things through., his thoughts moving quickly as he took in his party. *None of the others are in a fair state to fight. Branwen is barely in the yellow in terms of health, and Minsc is much the same. Imoen's still well in the red, damn it. A single hit and she'd be down for the count. Viconia, Jaheira and I are in relatively okay shape, but even then, we're all in the lower yellow in terms of health. And we don't know what's out there. The only real thing our supplies have going for them is that the*

"Fuck. Alright, Jaheira, Viconia, split out to the side just in case, right and left. Edwin, Dynaheir, backs to the rock. Khalid, Imoen, you're on long range. Branwen, Minsc and I will hold the center. Form a Square, and if any of you have summoning spells left, use them."

Khalid fell back into the center of the camp, putting him by Dynaheir's position along with Edwin, while Jaheira obeyed, splitting off from her husband to the same flank as Minsc just in case the enemy, whatever they were, flanked them. "At least there are enough throwing stones still in our supplies," Jaheira muttered, as Viconia, to the surprise of the others, moved to join the frontline fighter's facing out into the darkness.

"I am not so good a shot with a sling stone as I would like, and as battered as we all are, you all might need my help on the front lines," Viconia explained tersely. "Do not argue, Abaloth! My eyes are better even than a normal elf's and I can see what is coming towards us. Ghouls and ghosts!"

“Fuck. Long range fighters, take the formation Concave Line!” Harry ordered, and the others slowly moved into position. “We need the bonuses right now more than we need to guard our flank. The rest in a line fifteen feet in front of them.”

In actuality, with the four frontline combatants forward of the rest of the bad, the formation Concave Line wasn't quite accurate, and Harry was pleased to see a notification popping up.

You have created a New Formation: **Defensive Trapezium!**

A good formation to use if you have enough party members or allied companions, this formation only has one front towards the enemy. Beware of getting flanked!

Each Frontline Warrior only takes half damage of any blow dealt.

The Backline Warriors gain +2 to any attacks.

As the enemy finally came within sight, Harry's identify skill quickly allowed him to realize Victoria had been all-too accurate, they were indeed facing ghouls and ghosts, six ghouls, three ghosts. 'Oh fuck me, why do I think this has something to do with the dagger?'

Imoen could tell the same thing, and her shriek of indignation reverberated across the night. “Dammit, why! None of us even physically touched the damned thing! I thought cursed items only activated when you equipped them.”

“That is the thinking of the ignorant and foolish,” Edwin drawled, looking worriedly around the darkness. Not having a Ring of Infravision, it's helmet equivalent or elvish sight, he was nearly blind right now. “Most cursed items work like that, but if the dagger has already been activated by removing it from it's resting place, it is altogether likely that...”

“No more talking! The dead have come to us to be returned to the earth, my friends! Let us oblige them!” Branwen shouted.

“TURN UNDEAD!” Harry bellowed, and from him and his party the power of the skill blasted out. Two of the ghouls instantly turned to dust as they rushed into the trio at the front. Another ghoul turned tail, racing out into the night. The rest, alas, came on, and then the battle was joined.

Grimacing as his tower shield shuddered under the hit of one of the undead, Harry recalled what his bestiary said about these creatures. They are susceptible to fire a long with holy magic right? We've tried holy magic, so... With that, Harry placed one hand on the flat of his blade, trying to create a spell that would cover the blade with fire, his mind flickering back to the blue fire spell that Hermione had been so fond of when it got cold at Hogwarts. *She used that thing every darn day once autumn hit.*

But his attempt didn't work.

“**Warning!** You are attempting to add a magical property to a weapon that already has magical properties imbued into its very makeup. This will weaken the pre-existing magic as well as the effect of your own spell.

Compatibility is still an issue regardless of magic school.

With a shrug, Harry quickly equipped one of his spare swords from his box. *The magic on my sword only gives it plus one, but fire is like fifty percent more effective, and can light them on fire, too.* Thankfully for Harry, just as his shield was knocked out of alignment, the spell took.

You have used a blood mage spell. However, as this spell basically copies a spell you have seen in this world, the Flame Blade, it will only Cost you -5 to health.

This was followed by the appearance of a gold and red box, denoting its importance, but Harry had no time for it right now. Even as the hits to his spell caused him to clench his teeth – as deep in the yellow he was, any health loss hurt - Harry's sword ignited from the guard up to the point in blue flame.

Despite being locked in combat, Viconia and Branwen looked at Harry in surprise, but couldn't do more than look away. The ghouls however instantly retreated for a moment, getting in the way of the tougher ghosts, giving Harry time to talk to them. "Sorry, if I had enough health to be able to do this to all of your weapons to fight, I'd do it, but I figure any little bit of help I can give us..."

Branwen and Viconia both nodded, and seeing the undead hesitating still, Branwen quickly began to intone a spell of her own, calling upon her magical hammer spell.

Branwen has used Spiritual Hammer.

"Minsc, come forward, we need your Chelsey Crusher," Harry ordered. Harry switched out his position at the center of the line with Minsc at that point, putting one of the magic using weapons at either end of the line. Luckily, this didn't seem to impede the formation any, which Harry had been a bit concerned about.

A second later, the ghouls recovered their courage and screeched their bestial warcries, coming on once more, although only a single ghost made for Harry himself at first. Arrows and slingstones flew around them to hit the ghouls with no apparent effect, and then Minsc roared, and chopped forward with his Chelsey Crusher. The first ghoul to hit the line was chopped into, the Chelsea crusher slicing a diagonal line through his body. The next ghoul nearly bowled him over, but Minsc stood his ground thanks to the additional properties of the formation.

The ghost which came at Harry found the flaming sword too much close up and it shied away, hissing in fury. An instant later, Viconia's hammer crashed into the side of the beast that had attacked Minsc. It stumbled, but did not go down, and its return strike nearly tore the weapon from her hand.

"I do like to see another woman of culture!" Branwen shouted as she brought her magical hammer around, slamming into the shoulder of a ghoul as she stepped into its range, using her shield to block its bite. The blow sent it stumbling, the shoulder disintegrating under the blow. A second later, she went low, shattering his kneecap and sending it to the ground.

There Minsc stomped on it hard, leaping into the air for a moment to bring down both his feet. "Feel the boots of justice!"

"While a certain part of me would indeed prefer to use some kind of a bladed weapon, hammers are quite elegant when you think about it. They take a great deal of skill to use properly," Viconia answered with a nod, even as she used her own medium shield to try and block the next blow. But Viconia did not have Minsc's strength, something she had been made very (and humiliatingly) aware

of once she was able to see her own stats. The strike bowled her over despite the addition of the formation's benefits.

The ghoul leaped for her, and Viconia might well have been bitten if Harry's flaming sword didn't trike out from the side. The burning blade chopped into the side of the creature's neck, sending it crashing to the ground, even though the strike hadn't been strong enough to remove its head from its undead shoulders. There the ghoul flailed at the wound, where flames were licking at the dead flesh, trying to put it the fire out.

A second later, Viconia's hammer smashed into the top of its head as she got to her feet.

Behind the front line the shaft of the hammer tried their best. But the wizards were out of spells, and none of them could do more than slingstones or, in the case of a weary Imoen and wounded Khalid, arrows. Arrows and slingstones barely did anything to the undead, but they did occasionally disrupt an attack, and at one point some stones hit a ghastr's face, putting an eye out as well as its teeth right before it could push past Harry's defense.

This gave his shield and sword ability time to get his shield up between his body and the ghastr, its jaws scrabbled at the metal of the tower shield, causing a harsh grating noise. Harry's sword took it in the gut, but the creature kept on coming, even as flame began to move up and down its body from the wound.

Branwen was similarly locked in battle with one ghoul, while Viconia found herself on her knees again from a powerful back and blow from a third, as it joined its fellow battling Minsc. A fourth flung itself at her, and Viconia barely got her her shield up above her head, blocking the creature's mouth and upper body as it tried to reach down and around it to tear at her flesh. Luckily at that moment her Turn Undead Aura, which was still in effect, slowed the creature, and it almost instantly turned away, trying to retreat

The Chelsey Crusher kept the two creatures attacking Minsc at bay, and Viconia brought her hammer down onto one of the retreating ghoul's knees. While ghouls did not really feel pain from physical blows like this one, their bodies still had weaknesses as much is a human would. As Branwen had already proven once, a hammer smashing your kneecap into pieces would ruin anyone's day, undead or alive, magical strike or not.

The creature collapsed onto its side, with Viconia rolling out of range of his wildly flailing arms and getting to her feet again. "I am getting most annoyed at being knocked off my feet so often!"

From the ground, the creature nearly pulled Minsc down, it's claws raking at his greaves and punching through. But he was strong enough to withstand its grip, and the Chelsey Crusher came around, slicing his head entirely off its shoulders. This took the massive halberd out of position from guarding Minsc from the other ghouls attacking Minsc however, and one grabbed at its the shaft of the crusher, holding it still is the other lunged forward, it's mouth gaping open.

At that point, Imoen stepped forward, exchanging her bow and arrow for her short sword. Within two steps she was behind Minsc, then she leaped onto Minsc's back, stabbing forward over his shoulder. Her sword embedded itself into the mouth of the second creature attacking him, and through the back of his skull. "Thanks for the assist, big guy!"

“Should that not be Minsc’s line?” Minsc asked, as he brought the crusher around again, hurling the creature trying to wrench the weapon out of his hands to the side.

The last ghastr facing Harry fell as Harry and he turned his attention to the one Branwen had been fighting, which had gotten in a lucky shot at her sword (hammer) arm. Harry’s still flaming sword took the creature from behind, stabbing into it deeply. It turned with a snarl of pain and anger, only for the Chelsea crusher to come down from on high, splitting its skull in twain. Meanwhile the creature Minsc had flung was finished off by Viconia and a hail of slingstones.

“Well, that was fraught, but quickly over,” Viconia grumbled, shaking her hammer to one side to rid it of ghastr flesh. “Ugh. I have lived my life in the Underdark. I have fought Illithid, I have seen torture done and battles in the charnel pits. Yet even so, the stink of these creatures offends me.”

“We need to get going, find another place to set up. As for the ghouls and the dagger...” Harry scowled, and asked Minsc to send over the bag containing the dagger from his Item Space to Harry’s. When he had the bag in his hand, however, he discovered that his Identification could not work on it.

Warning: Observation is not Identification. To activate the Identify skill on an item, you must hold it in your hand.

Your observation skill however can tell you that the item within is magical in nature, and chill to the touch, to the point it can be felt through the simple burlap bag. The smell of onions however probably comes from the bag rather than the dagger.

“Damn. I really don’t want to touch this thing, but if it’s bringing the ghouls to us...”

Harry broke off as Jaheira touched his shoulder shaking her head. “Ghouls do not have any Hide-in-Shadows skill. Yet these you said were practically on top of us?” When Harry nodded, she went on. “In that case, they might have been summoned somehow by the dagger.”

“The druid speaks true, some items can be cursed to call upon various types of enemies. There were items of power like that in Thay, for certain. All such items however have a period of dormancy,” Edwin opined.

Harry scowled a bit, then asked Edwin and Dynaheir if they thought his touching the dagger would give them more information. He was extremely leery about touching the damn thing given what Imoen and the others had said about how maddened it’s previous holder had seemed. But both wizards nodded.

“We need to know if we are safe to rest, Harry. If not, we need to know if we can safely dispose of it,” Dynaheir said with an apologetic shrug.

“Given your willpower, it might not even effect you,” Jaheira added, a wicked smirk suddenly appearing on her face as she went on teasingly. “I recall you were Immune to the Elder Nymph’s Charm... if not her charms.”

“Oh, ouch, that joke was so flat it hurt,” Harry pouted at the half-elf, while her husband laughed beside her.

“Elder Nymph?” Viconia asked in question, her eyes alight with interest. “I have heard of nymphs, of course, but there seems to be a story behind this.”

Harry groaned, then got the group moving. “Whatever happens when I touch this thing, we’ll need to move on, so get the fires out, and any gear. Do any of you have any idea which direction we should look for another campsite? I don’t think we want to break out further to our east, since that will put us into Ankheg territory. I really don’t want to bet on having killed all of the ones using that range.”

“T, t, the best bet is to head n, n, north from here, straight north f, f, for a bit. If anyone spots a likely place to set up a defensible camp we’ll do it.”

“And if more ghouls show up?” Dynaheir asked scowling a little. “We don’t know how often that dagger can call them forth. We need you or one of us to identify the dagger, Harry, and I don’t have such a spell.”

“Nor do I,” Edwin admitted.

Scowling Harry nodded, and reached into the bag, taking comfort in Jaheira’s reminder of how he had previously staved off mental effects.

As he pulled out the dagger, a notification instantly blossomed in front of him. “Bah, I would’ve preferred it to be more impressive. That dagger looks more like something the youngest child of the weakest house in the Under Dark would’ve been given. Not something I would have thought would have a curse on it.”

“Well, it does, and it’s a doozy,” Harry murmured, waving her to silence as he read the notifications.

Corpse Caller

This Dagger is a heavily cursed Item. It gives no bonuses to damage or defense. It was once part of a set, but that is all you can tell.

The curse placed on the dagger makes it the target point for a wide-area summoning spell able to summon up 4-12 gnolls or ghouls into an area several hundred feet wide randomly. They can be on top of their target or hundreds of feet away, there is no way to tell.

With the original user dead, these monsters are not under the command of the holder of the dagger. Instead they will seek him out wherever he goes. If the dagger is not returned to it’s resting place, the Curse will still send undead after the former holder, although in far smaller, more random groups.

This summoning spell has a cooldown time of eight hours. The cool down time starts once half the previous wave of undead have been slain.

Time remaining: 7 hours, 49 minutes.

The next pop up was another notification, one that appeared in front of not only Harry, but his entire party, as it was a quest notification. Viconia swore for a second, this being the first time she had seen such, but then she read the information over just as the others were doing, while Harry relayed the information to Branwen, Dynaheir and Edwin.

You have accepted a side quest (minor), Return the Dagger. You did so by basically seeing this dagger. Sometimes quests work like that.

This dagger, the Corpse Caller, was stolen from the crypt of the mighty mage, Tackilos. He was a well-known adventurer who specialized in summoning spells, the control of Undead beats, and treasure hunting. How and why he was buried in a crypt is a bit of a mystery, but the fact remains he was. This dagger was cursed during his death to help protect the tomb.

This dagger was first stolen out of the Tackilos' tomb by the unlucky thief Hentold. Ever since then, Hentold has been plagued with both visions of death and actual death. Until Corpse Caller is returned, the curse upon the Dagger will continue to plague anyone who has seen it.

(And yes, this means the unlucky thief did not actually escape without punishment. The ghoul summoning aspect of the curse won't follow him. The dreams will continue...

Notice: due to Gamer's Mind, you are immune to the curse's mental aspect.

Notice: every eight hours, Corpse Caller will call a group of 4 to 12 ghouls will be summoned either in the vicinity of the dagger, regardless of if it is being wielded or carried in an Item Box, or around the last individual to see it. Return the Dagger, or else, basically.

Warning: While you are protected by Gamer's Mind, your companions are not. If a sufficient time goes by before the dagger is returned, the Psychosis Curse will start to spread.

Harry read this aloud, and then smiled faintly as he looked at his map while Edwin complained bitterly about the fact that the foolish thief had escaped his righteous wrath for sticking them with such an annoying item. "We do not even know where this crypt is... Unless your smile is a sign that you are waiting to spring something upon us, Harry of Candlekeep. Some other means with which your AAS is able to make your, and by extension and most importantly **my**, life simpler?"

"You're getting better at figuring me out Edwin, I'm not certain I like that," Harry retorted, and was amused to note that he had gotten a bump in Respect for it from the Red Wizard, five points and a snort of amusement to go with them. "But yes, I do know at least in which direction this tomb resides. An orange arrow just appeared on my map pointing south and west. And Jaheira was right, my Willpower allowed me to ignore the mental side of the curse. But we were seriously lucky..."

"HAH See? Tempus himself looked down upon us. He did not allow us to be taken unawares, instead we were faced with a face-to-face battle, a fight we could win or lose depending on our skill of arms," Branwen announced. She had pulled out a mug of ale from her Item Space instead of cleaning up the camp and now waved it around grandly.

Still grimacing, Harry grabbed the mug out of her hand and took a long draft despite her protestations. "Well, that or luck. Regardless, it isn't something we can do about. We've held the dagger, despite not actually touching the damn thing."

"That map ability of yours is utterly amazing. You will note that was not a complaint of any sort, merely an observation, Harry," Jaheira said, patting his arm companionably a smile on her features that Harry knew would not have been there before their death-defying adventure together. While Jaheira

was slow to befriend someone, once she was a friend, a lot of her walls came down. "Lead the way, we will follow."

"Not right now we freaking won't," Imoen grumbled, slumping against a tree nearby. She was still one of the worst wounded, despite not being physically so thanks to how many spells she'd been forced to use in the battle against the Ankheg. Her earlier exertion against the ghost that head nearly bit Minsc had worn her out considerably. "I need some sleep, and some healing, in that order."

"That is... almost enough time for us to get a full night's sleep and memorize our spells. But is there any way to ward the ghouls off?" Dynaheir mused.

"I might have a solution for that. Viconia's comments about the ghouls' stench reminded me of something. Minsc, come with me, I will need your strength." With that, Jaheira was already moving, leaving behind the others as she headed out into the darkness beyond the campfire light.

Minsc shrugged, looked over to his witch, who nodded, and then he raced after her.

Party member Jaheira has activated Forest Meld.

Party member Minsc has activated Hide-in-Shadows.

Shrugging his shoulders at that, Harry got the rest of the group moving, looking at Khalid. "The two of you are the most experienced here, particularly with the Sword Coast. Where are we?"

Both half elves frowned at that, with Jaheira requesting that he be a bit more specific, and Harry shrugged. "In relation to the road leading down from Baldur's Gate to Nashkel. If we find that, we can get anywhere else we want to."

Khalid frowned a moment, conferring with Edwin of all people, pointing southward, then westward, and finally discussing how long it had taken Imoen and the rest of her party to reach this area. Then, somewhat stiffly, he asked Viconia how long she had been on the run. With those points of reference, Khalid was able to figure out where they were. "W, w, we've gone quite a ways n, n, north of the mines. I, I, in fact, we might be n, n, nearer to Beregost," Jaheira finally reported. "I b, b, believe if we go north w, w, west f, f, from here, we will eventually reach the town."

"Can you tell me how many days it would take? And do you think you could direct us there even if we take this quest to return the Corpse Caller?"

"Three to four in g, g, good weather. In b, b, bad, five to six. No m, m, more than that. And y, y, yes. I think Jaheira and c, c, could do that."

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, and then mentally went over the amount of food they had on hand. Harry still had spices to spare and would for months yet, and they had enough wolf meat for two days given their numbers. They had however just used the last of the vegetables. They also didn't have any fruits to speak of, and they only had bread enough for another day if that.

"and it is that hardtack stuff," Imoen muttered, making Harry realize he had been murmuring aloud. "How the hell you can make it actually edible is beyond me, Harry."

Harry snorted at that, shrugging his shoulders. "Being a Master Chef has to come in handy sometime you know. The point is, if that dagger takes us too far out of our way, we're going to start

running out of food really quickly. No way could we get back to Beregost even now without hunting as we go.”

“L, I leave that to Jaheira and I,” Khalid volunteered. “It w, w, will not be the first time we h, h, have done so.”

“So long as we can eat regularly, I will be pleased. I have starved before for a long period of time, it is not pleasant,” Viconia grumbled.

Harry nodded at Viconia’s words, remembering his childhood with the Dursleys. Too often growing up getting a full stomach meant a few bites of leftovers, if that, stolen when no one was looking.

While they had been talking, everyone had been busy gathering up their equipment and putting out the fire. Meanwhile, Minsc and Jaheira went about the business of collecting something from the Ankheg remains returning quickly. The body beneath the creature’s flexible armor had been left in place when Harry used his ability to strip these scattered corpses of their armor beforehand. Something about that process had also cleaned the armor, for which Harry had been very thankful at the time.

But now, Jaheira had a purpose for the meat. Or rather, a specific part of the meat. That part was the large pheromone sacks, which were held in places around the giant bug’s body. Returning to the others, she explained. “Once we have found a proper campsite, we can spread these sacks around, and the smell of the giant bugs will keep every other animal away. Even undead will be affected, they won’t want to come close to something they can’t corrupt, or eat, no matter the demands of the dagger.” Jaheira explained when they returned.

“That’s kind of strange to think of, that ghouls would have so much brainpower as to know what they couldn’t eat, but so long as it works, I’ll be fine with it,” Imoen muttered, shaking her head. “I need some serious sleep guys.”

Harry agreed both with Imoen’s point and Jaheira’s plan and between him and soon the group was on the move once more, with Harry carrying Imoen on his back, having given the Ankheg plates over to Minsc for safe keeping. The ranger and the Druid ranged ahead of the rest of the group, guiding them into a tiny gully. It was barely large enough for all of them to lay out inside, but with decently high walls and only one entrance, where a large tree grew. The top of the gully was also lined with stones. So if the undead appeared anywhere but right on top of the group, they would be in a good defensive position.

Jaheira and Minsc then spent several minutes spreading around the pheromone sacks, before returning to the rest of the group, where Minsc and Harry stood guards as the rest of the group bedded down once more, with many of them muttering prayers to their chosen deities that this time, their sleep would be uninterrupted.

OOOOOO

Fleur shook her head as she watched Hermione and the runes teacher talked excitedly about something. *I don’t know what I am more surprised by, that Hermione was able to test up into my runes class after only a few months here in the Beauxbatons, or the fact that she has become something of a teacher’s pet?* While there was nothing inherently wrong with either of those things, occasionally,

Hermione's drive in certain subjects... Well, it had begun to concern Fleur over the past few months. Her young friend was so extremely intelligent, that Fleur knew all too well. *But at times there seems to be an almost manic air to her, an internal need to learn more that goes beyond the natural.*

A flash of that need was on Hermione's face as she turned away from the teacher, but it had disappeared within a step, and Fleur decided not to address it right now. Instead, she asked, "What did Madame Chardin want with you, Hermione?"

The slightly annoyed expression that crossed Hermione's face gave Fleur the answer, and she laughed. "Don't tell me you went off on another tangent in your last essay?"

Hermione grumbled and looked away. "Fine, I won't tell you."

That didn't stop Fleur from laughing, and the older French girl gently pulling the younger girl into a sideways hug. Hermione didn't fight the motion, actually nuzzling into Fleur's side, reminding her of Gabrielle, Fleur's younger sister, for a moment. She had long since noticed that Hermione enjoyed touches like this, being somewhat friendship starved. *It is a malady I am all too familiar with myself,* Fleur thought, tightening the hug slightly before letting Hermione go so they could walk side by side down the hall.

Fleur had tried to coach Hermione into giving the teachers just enough information to cover the subject at hand, but Hermione always wanted to give as much information as possible. Where she had gotten in the habit, Fleur didn't know, but all of the teachers had taken her to task on it occasionally. While reading through Hermione's essays was often quite informative even to the teachers, getting through them and that needed to grade it and then the other essays was too much.

"Laugh it up Fleur," Hermione grumbled. "I will have you know that my comparison between the Futhark MaN-N rune and the Shang bone inscription Rénlèi was so in depth, that Madame Chardin is thinking of assigning more compare and contrast essays in the near future. And giving me some extra credit for over the summer."

"Only you would be happy with such a thing. And do not think that I will come to your aid when other students learn that you have given us more work Hermione." Fleur shook her head. "Come, it is lunch time, and if I know you, you will ignore food in favor of the library again."

Hermione didn't reply to that, both of them knew the truth of it. Soon they were sitting down along with many of the other students in the cafeteria, where both of them proceeded to get looks from many of the other students. Fleur got looks because of her Veela heritage, while Hermione got looks both because of her magnificently frizzy hair, as well as the fact that she was sitting with a sophomore student, and the fact that she was a British Muggleborn.

Even now, months since she had begun school here, the locals were not used to her. Or rather, how she had made no efforts to be 'normal' to fit in. No, Hermione cared too much about her education to do anything but excel, and having a stranger do that was hard for Fleur's fellow French to take. *And her friendship with me makes it only harder.*

Hermione ignored it, having slowly become used to those kinds of looks while she was friends with her Harry Potter. Instead, she struck up a conversation with Fleur about charms. The two of them

had discovered a shared passion for the subject, and Hermione thought Fleur should find a Charms Master to take her on as an apprentice after she graduated.

This was something Fleur had considered before, but it would be very difficult given her heritage, though. It would undoubtedly encourage any man to... take certain ancient liberties with her as his apprentice. And there were few unmarried women Charms Mistress's out there, competition for their attention was intense.

Thinking about such things now when she had three years to plan them out might have seemed odd, but Fleur had many different ways she could go with her skill set. And that was just one of them. Indeed, it wasn't even the one Fleur was most interested in.

"I still don't understand why you would want to enter the dueling circuit," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "I understand you have the skills for it, but with all your complaints about not wanting to be the center of attention because you are a Veela, I would assume that anything to do with being in the limelight like that would be something you would walk a hundred miles to get away from. You know that no matter how good you become, people will assume that being a Veela gave you a leg up on your competition. Maybe even assuming that you seduced the judges or whatever."

"You are letting your cynical side show 'ermione. Zat is not attractive," Fleur answered, gently poking Hermione in the cheek and speaking English for a moment to add eight to her words. "While zat may be true up to a certain point, as my fame grows and I prove my ability, zose kind of comments will fall by ze wayside."

"Really? And you would really want to fight other people for a living rather than become a charms mistress?" Hermione's button nose wrinkled at that.

Fleur smiled, tossing her hair back over her shoulder arrogantly as she switched back to French. "You are assuming I cannot do both."

The two of them looked at one, then broke into giggles, both of them amused at Fleur's acting ability. While she was somewhat arrogant about her cultural heritage, believing that the French culture was superior to all others, her personal arrogance was an act she only put on to warn off other people from interacting with her. Once you got close to Fleur, you realized that she was actually quite a caring, self-effacing individual.

At that point, Hedwig came in, flying through the charmed windows above. As always the snowy owl garnered a lot of attention just as much as its mistress, or who everyone assumed was the owl's mistress anyway. Hermione well understood that Hedwig worked for her but was not hers like Crookshanks was. Like Hermione herself, the owl missed Harry immensely, and without him around was somewhat listless.

In its claws, the owl carried a copy of the Daily Prophet. Fleur snorted when she saw that, shaking her head. "I do not understand why you keep getting that rag delivered to you Hermione. It is only fit to line the cages of particularly incontinent animals. I wouldn't even have them near Hedwig's cages, fearing they would hurt her brain."

Hermione laughed at that, and the two of them having finished their meal, stood up. Hedwig grabbed up a piece of bacon from Hermione's plate, which she had requested came with every meal just

for the owl, winging away once more. "It's the only newspaper in the United Kingdom, and I like to keep abreast of what's going on back there as well as I can."

"That may be true, but has it told you anything you couldn't find from our papers?" France had a lot of different papers. But all of them had their own particular point of view, and you had to sift through them to really understand what was going on. Yet even so, you still could arrive at the truth far better than you could from just a single source like the Daily Prophet.

"The names of several pureblood families who are moving to France. Families with 'former' Death Eaters in them, which your newspapers were not covering," Hermione replied blandly. That news had broken out a few weeks ago. Apparently unhappy with the direction that the ministry had begun to take after the fall of Malfoy and his influence there, several families were looking to leave while the leaving was good.

"Are you hoping that those fools will not include some old school-yard nemesis of yours?" Fleur asked, not reacting to the dig, knowing that the younger girl had a point. While France had a lot of papers, few of them covered anything going on beyond its borders.

"Hardly. None of them have the intelligence necessary to make trouble for me here in Beauxbatons, not with the headmistress so hard on direct acts of bullying or name-calling."

Fleur smiled, tapping her own chest, and Hermione laughed. "And yes, there is also you to consider, my dear."

Fleur smiled in turn, pulling the other girl into another hug. It was **so** nice to have a friend like Hermione, one who wasn't affected by her Aura, and didn't listen to the gossip about her. Despite the difference in their ages, the two of them had become extremely close over the past few months.

They resumed their journey a moment later, moving slightly apart as Hermione turned her attention back to the paper, and Fleur pulled out a paper of her own, Charming The Future, a research magazine devoted to Charms. There were a few new Charms that were slowly being introduced to the wider magical world, and Fleur was very interested in one of them in particular, the Animalist Charm.

The two of them barely acknowledged the other students, simply nodding in their direction when called to by one or two of the people they were somewhat friendly with.

Fleur made a point of ignoring a comment from one young man muttering about how "bookworms always flock together... Get it?" To his friend who laughed like a hyena. So long as laughing at them or pointing was all they did Fleur was more than willing to ignore them... for the moment.

The older girl finished her reading quicker than Hermione and began to tap the rolled up magazine against her lips thoughtfully as she considered what she had read, before blinking, and then nudging Hermione. "We're almost at the entrance. Was there anything in there that was interesting?"

"Quite a bit actually. Several new rules at Hogwarts which apparently are not sitting well with the so-called dark families, but the headmistress is doing a magnificent job of cleaning the place up. That just goes to show how badly Professor Dumbledore ran the school before this, frankly."

Fleur frowned a little. Much like the glimmers of something too close to obsession for Fleur's presence of mind, she had noticed before this that Hermione didn't have any of the adoration or awe of

Dumbledore that the majority of their generation did given his actions in the war against Grindelwald. Fleur had thought she would, having been a student at Hogwarts itself. But, just like when asked about Harry Potter, Hermione would always clamp up when it came to why her opinion of Dumbledore was so low.

“There was also an outbreak of Infreri, but Dumbledore apparently dealt with it almost on his own. That’s kind of amazing, both that there was an outbreak, and that he was able to deal with it on his own, I suppose,” Hermione went on, handing the paper over to Fleur, who had stopped and stared at her in shock at the mention of the undead creature.

She took the paper and quickly read it, noting with some disdain that the article tried to blame Dumbledore for the outbreak, but didn’t particularly do a good job of it. There was another article in the same magazine that featured an interview of the man himself by another reporter which completely discredited Skeeter’s take on things.

She had just finished reading, when a voice from nearby shouted out two words that caused her heart to stop in her chest. “Die Mudblood! Avada Kedavra!”

The spell flew towards Hermione a green dart flying through the air as fast as an arrow, joined by another aimed towards Fleur herself. *Mama... Papa, Gabrielle, I am sorry...*

But while Fleur had been caught completely off-balance, Hermione had been looking in the right direction when the attackers flung off their Dissilusion Charms began their attack and was already flinging up a spell. “Avis!”

To the attacker’s astonishment, this spell, which simply conjured a flock of birds into the air, worked to stop the soul destroying Death Curse. The green darts hit the mass of birds, and two birds fell dead, but that was all.

With death no longer staring her in the eyes, Fleur’s dueling instincts came to her as fury rose within her. “Assassins! You, you bastards will pay for this!”

A shield flashed up around herself, as well as around Hermione, catching the next few spells from their attackers. Another spell caused the shield to explode in a bright flare, and then Fleur was on the attack. The Duelist’s Handshake, a prepared spell chain came to her mind, and she launched it at her opponents. A Bombarda separated the two, a stunner and a leg locker was all blocked by hasty Protegos, before a disarming spell nearly caught on one of the attackers when his shield faltered, the spell chain so fast and fluid that it looked as if all of them came out at once and the attackers began to panic.

The other attacker rolled away, using a smoke screen spell to gain some distance, but Fleur was not alone. Hermione had used another conjuration spell, this time launching the birds forward aiming into the smoke. “ARGGH Pestilential mudblood, what is with the birds!?”

By the time the attacker dealt with them all, Hermione was behind the doorway leading back into the school, launching another spell towards the man. Several stunners left her wand one after another, but she was slowed by the fact that Hermione had yet to perfect silent casting, and certainly not under strenuous circumstances like this. “Stupefy, Stupefy, Stupefy!”

Still, she held that man's attention for long enough for Fleur to make put the other man down. He was flung backward by a fireball, screaming as his legs were set on fire, before a stupefy knocked him out entirely. With that done, Fleur turned to the other man, feathers appearing everywhere on her arms and legs as her face began to turn almost birdlike.

The second assassin had heard his companion crying out in pain. Now he stared between the two younger women, and snarled, "Damn you! We will wipe that filth clean, Veela, and when we to you..."

That was as far as he got before a single spell from behind caught him, freezing him in place as a band of magical police appeared, apparating into the area. "School alarms reported the use of the Unforgivables! Everyone here will freeze in place and present their wands for inspection!" Bellowed one of the Aurors.

Reining in her anger, Fleur strode forward, holding her wand lengthwise, her feathers slowly disappearing. Thankfully her change had not gone too far in her face, so she was still able to speak in a human tongue. "I am Fleur Delacour, daughter of Andre Delacour, and I will willingly submit my wand, knowing that in doing so I will not be able to call upon a lawyer later. However, one of the attackers is over there and his wand has been broken. Further, they attacked a minor, and by law, Madame Maxime must be here for any questioning of Hermione,"

With that, the young Veela put herself between two of the Aurors and Hermione both of whom had raised wands in her direction. Whether or not either had similar feelings about Muggleborn as their attackers Fleur didn't know, but she did know that such sentiment was somewhat prevalent among the Aurors here in Paris. It was the main center for muggle-baiting, and the Pureblood movement here in France. *More reasons why Madame Maxime has been thinking about transferring the school grounds elsewhere.*

"I am here Fleur," a booming voice said from behind her, and out of the doorway strode the half-giant Mistress of Beauxbatons. She glared at the wizards who had been attempting to possibly start something with Hermione and both quickly tried to look as if they were simply casing the area. One sneered at her before doing so, but quickly retreated at her growl, before the large woman turned to her students. "Now, perhaps one of you can tell me what happened here?"

To say that headmistress was furious at this assault was putting it mildly. She harangued the Aurors for several moments, demanding the death penalty for both of the men. Since they had used the Unforgivables, they would normally have been sentenced to life imprisonment, but since they had also attacked two minors with an Unforgivable spell, Madame Maxime, as her magical guardian as long as she was within the environs of Magical France, was fully within her rights to demand such.

Hermione looked a little green at that, and argued for leniency on the attackers, to everyone's surprise bar Fleur, who knew that Hermione was a gentle heart. She was also now starting to shake, her eyes noticeably dilating as she realized how close she had come to death.

Thankfully, the questioning ended quite quickly for both of them, since neither of their wands registered an Unforgivable, and it became clear that Fleur at least, was more than willing to testify in court if need be. Hermione, as a Muggleborn and a minor, would not be called to the stand. But Fleur might be called to testify under Veritaserum.

Afterward, Fleur insisted on coming with Hermione to the home of her family had bought in the suburbs of Paris. “Your parents might wish to look to protect themselves once you tell them what happened. If such sentiments as what we just dealt with are becoming more prevalent now that the United Kingdom has seen fit to allow their dark aligned families to make trouble elsewhere, your parents could be targeted. But I can ask my papa to act as a go-between them and the goblins to get some wards placed up.”

At that, Hermione’s objections to not needing a minder on the streets of Paris faded, and the two of them faded. This proved fortuitous because in half a block she was shaking, and by two she was nearly shivering, unable to stay on her feet. Fleur bundled her into a café for a time, sitting with her until Hermione’s wits recovered, grateful for her own Veela blood. It’s white-hot anger at what had nearly occurred kept Fleur from feeling the shock and fear Hermione was, and her praise for the girl’s quick thinking and resourcefulness sped up Hermione’s recovery.

That did not mean the discussion with Hermione’s went any better, however. That particular discussion went well into the night, so much so that Hermione’s parents asked Fleur to stay the night rather than have her try to get home. Their home obviously wasn’t on the local Floo network, and Fleur would have to go back to school and then from there head home. Fleur acquiesced and bedded down in the guest room that night after sending a message to her family via Hedwig of where she was.

The next morning, Fleur woke up, and moved to help Hermione’s mother with breakfast, only to be chased out of the room with a ladle, laughing lightly at the experience. The two Granger parents were quite nice, although Hermione’s father had yet to develop a full immunity to Fleur’s Veela Allure. Still, with his wife around pinching him occasionally, he was passable enough, and last night, his concerns for his daughter had overridden it.

“Go, shoo, shoo! Guests don’t need to help in this kitchen Fleur, and you know it.” If you want to do something, get Hermione out of bed. She’s always slow to wake up in the mornings these days.” Emma Granger ordered.

Nodding, Fleur went back upstairs and gently opened Hermione’s door.

She stuck her head inside and was about to say something to get Hermione up and out of bed, but what Fleur saw inside caused the words to die in her throat as her eyes widened. For in the corner of the room was a large computer screen, one that was currently running some kind of mapping program. Fleur was not too clear on the muggle part of what she was seeing, although she had heard a few mumbles from Hermione over the months. But a map was easy enough to identify. As was the number of runes carved into the computer’s boxy shape.

Fleur opened the door further and entered quickly, closing it behind her with a sharp click, which seemed to wake Hermione up a bit. Her hair sticking out even more in every direction, the young girl groggily mumbled, “Whu, whu time is it, Mum...”

“I am not your mother Hermione, which means you have some explaining to do!” Fleur announced harshly, striding forward.

Hermione’s eyes widened in shock, and she looked up at Fleur quickly. “Fleur, I, i, it’s not what you think!”

“I have yet to decide what I think. But what I am looking at, is a computer, a Muggle **technological device** with runes inscribed on it in various places! Which we learned at the start of this year in Runes is forbidden!”

Hermione stared at her, then to her experiment, and then her eyes narrowed. That look of obsession was in her eyes again, and then to Fleur’s astonishment, Hermione was reaching for her wand. But before Hermione could reach her wand where it lay on her dresser, Fleur summoned it to her quickly, shaking her head. “I’m appalled you would think of attacking me Hermione! I thought we were friends!”

“I wouldn’t... I....” Hermione’s words stumbled to a halt at Fleur’s glare, and she wilted, the obsessive look disappearing. “I’m sorry,” she announced meekly.

Fleur glared at her, cocking her head to one side thoughtfully, her momentary ire cooling. “You really aren’t the kind to attack someone else on the drop of a knut... I wonder what you are working towards that would drive you to such a move. Are you calm enough to explain now? Explain why you are breaking the Statute of Secrets?”

“I am not breaking the statute of secrecy. That computer isn’t connected to any Muggle network or whatever. No one even knows I own it, my father bought it for me,” Hermione protested feebly.

“Hermione, you and I both know that the Statute of Secrecy expands into experimentation with electrical devices and computers in general since they first appeared! Those things are supposed to be somewhat intelligent, and one of the biggest rules of magic is to never trust anything unless you can see its brain! Magic and advanced technology like that, the study of how they can interact is the stuff of Unspeakables.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m doing it,” Hermione admitted staring up at Fleur. “I, I’ve been working on something, on this ever since...” She stumbled to a halt and Fleur looked at her thoughtfully.

It was very obvious to her that Hermione wanted to come clean, to share her secret, but also wasn’t certain how would be taken. With a sigh, Fleur set Hermione’s wand in her outstretched hands, and then slowly raised her hand to push some of her friend’s hair out of her face. “I am going to go and tell your mother that you and I will be having breakfast up here, and when I do come back, you are going to start from the very beginning.”

Thankfully, Emma Granger had to head into work early that morning, and Dan understood he couldn’t handle Fleur’s Veela Allure for overlong without his wife around. So soon enough Fleur was back in Hermione’s room, the two of them sitting on her bed, as Hermione explained what she wanted to do: Figure out a way to find locate where Harry Potter had gone and bring him back.

Fleur leaned back against the headboard thoughtfully as she looked at the younger girl finish off her breakfast, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “I have often thought that you were driven just a little too much for it to be natural Hermione, so it is somewhat of a relief to understand now what you are after. But I am still struggling with **why**. Did Harry Potter truly make that big an impression of you that you are willing to risk what might happen if your experiments are discovered? Years in magical prison is no joke. And do not tell me you are in love with the boy. You’re not so softheaded as to throw away everything just for that.”

Hermione spluttered a bit, then shook her head, a thoughtful frown coming to her face. “I, I don’t think I was in love with Harry, I might have eventually moved in that direction, but at the time, he was too young, I was too young. I’m still too young come to think of it!” She almost glared at Fleur for the suggestion but the Veela simply laughed and waved her hand, indicating Hermione should go on.

“So it, isn’t that. He was my friend, a real friend, not like Ronald Weasley, who I haven’t been in contact with since leaving the United Kingdom. I... at first I just wanted to save him because he was my friend. That, that kept me going even when we moved to France. I feel compelled to find him. That’s all I can say.”

Fleur frowned, staring at where Hermione’s hands were ringing themselves out, her utensils now placed on the plate. There was something **off** here. Hermione being curious Fleur can certainly understand. Hermione being obsessive about learning again, that was obvious. But Hermione going this far, planning to still go further? Nearly attacking her? While Harry Potter might been her friend, this obsession was far too much.

And then it hit her like a cold bucket in the face. *Maman’s lessons! The lessons about debts and contracts she gave me when my Allure came in!* “Hermione... Tell me again about the troll incident.”

Blinking, Hermione did so, and Fleur started to question her closely about how Harry and Ronald treated her leading up to that event, and then their specific actions during the incident. Hermione answered her questions, still looking confused, but Fleur was getting an image here.

It is like Maman said, a truly heroic act, one without ulterior motives... Chuckling to herself, Fleur waved away Hermione’s confused look. “Gabrielle would be so jealous...” Before Hermione could question why Fleur’s younger sister would be jealous, Fleur became serious, pointing a finger at Hermione like it was a wand. “Hermione, have you ever heard of life debts? I cannot recall if they are taught at Hogwarts, I know they are not at Beauxbatons, but my Maman told me about them. We Veela are... susceptible to such in a way normal Witches are not.”

“Um... no, I haven’t hear that term.” Hermione frowned. “But it sounds simple enough, you owe someone a debt for saving your life correct?” Hermione answered,

“A life debt isn’t something so easy!” Fleur exclaimed, shaking her head. “If someone saves your life while risking his own without thought of recompense or any other thought beyond saving you, magic itself will demand you make recompense.” She frowned then, before deciding to use the lecture her mother had given Fleur word for word. “An Auror cannot be the subject of a life Debt because it is part of their job. A child cannot be in a Life Debt to a parent because his or her defending that child is simply a part of parenting. Similarly, life debts between family members are very rare. But Life Debts are very old magic, magic that is part of the very fabric of the world, and they cannot be broken.”

Fleur counted points off her fingers. “Harry Potter didn’t have any previous relation to you other than a classmate. He wasn’t trying to make amends as this Ronald Weasley character was, instead, he only wanted to rescue you. And then he put his own life on the line, far more so than Ronald did to save you. I think that created a life debt between you two. And I think you are being driven to try and discover his location, to try and learn if he is still alive and now, because your Life Debt to him is forcing you to.”

Hermione had turned back to Fleur halfway through her explanation, and was now staring at her, her eyes narrowed in calculation. "I...you might be right. But what are we going to do about it? Is, is there any way to get out of it?"

For once, Hermione didn't look at all sure of herself. "I don't... I know I started this mission of mine purposefully Fleur, but you're right, its gone on too long, I'm willing to go too far for it to be all my own idea." Then her face firmed. "But I know that Harry is alive, and I know that no one else is doing anything to find him! Not Dumbledore, not the Unspeakables. Only me."

"Why are you so certain about that?" Fleur was confused and dismissive. "Hermione, I know Dumbledore and many others tried to look for him for the first few weeks. You're smart, and I'll admit none of those oldsters would have thought about using a computer, but even so..."

"The first thing that told me Harry's still alive is Hedwig," Hermione answered firmly.

Fleur frowned at that, still confused, and Hermione pointed to where Hedwig perched. The snowy owl had woken up when Fleur entered the room the first time and now looked back at the two girls. "Post Owls might be smart, but they can't read for example, and I know that Hedwig has read over my shoulder a time or two. They can't communicate nearly as well as Hedwig can, nor are they so empathic. All of that is a sign that Hedwig was not just an owl to Harry Potter, but his familiar."

"... And if a familiar's bonded dies, the creature in question either dies with them, or loses all of its intelligence," Fleur breathed, her eyes widening.

"Exactly. I... I also reached out to Lord Black, that is Sirius Black. The one who was released from prison?" Fleur nodded, remembering that story. "I, at first it was just because he was supposedly Harry's Godfather and had been sent to prison without a trial. But then I told him about Hedwig."

Hermione hopped to her feet and moved over to her desk, pulling out a message. She held it out to Fleur, who read through it quickly.

Hermione,

Your message about Hedwig still having her intelligence is astonishing and I tried to follow up on it the only way I could that no one else would have thought of: I reached out to some old acquaintances (really more rivals/enemies for the name of Darkest Family Ever before the colonization era, but I digress) of my family over in America. Voodoo Witch Doctors work with the soul a lot and know more about it than any of us in Europe, although most are insular, and waaaay too quick to break out the cursed dolls. Suffice to say after several weeks of being given the run around, threats, and two full magical duels, I have it on good authority that Harry's soul has not passed over. He isn't on this plain of existence either, but he is still somewhere! What this old mutt can do about it is another matter entirely but thank you for giving an old dog some hope.

I will be in touch if I think of any way to follow up on this.

Yours sincerely,

Sirius, Black, Lord of House Black.

"I... Voodoo?!" Fleur exclaimed, before beginning to curse. She had heard a bit about voodoo before from her Papa, but to actually go in search of witch doctors, that was insane. *Mind you, as a godfather, he might be under the same magical pressure as Hermione. I don't know enough about the oaths for that position to know.*

"And last, there is this Life Debt itself!" Hermione exclaimed, now excited. "I would wager anything that if Harry died, my Life Debt would be canceled. No way would magic think I could pay that back to someone dead, right?"

"... Merde..." Fleur sighed. "Well, you convinced me that Harry's alive at least."

"So... you won't turn me and for my experiment?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"No Hermione, I won't. But I will demand from you a promise that if it turns out you cannot follow Harry or bring him back safely, you won't throw your life away. If I have that... If I have that, I'll help you figure out what has happened to him. There has to be some way to break a Life Debt if literally nothing can be done to fulfill it and looking for information on that will not be as dangerous as playing around with mixing magic and computers." Fleur let that sink in a moment before holding out a hand to the girl. "Do we have a bargain?" Fleur asked, holding out a hand to the younger girl.

Hermione looked down at her hand for a moment, then up into Fleur's serious expression. Then she slowly reached forward and grasped the older girl's hand, shaking it. "In that case, what do you think we should do?"

"I think we need more information. I will talk to Maman, and we will have my Papa and this Black start asking questions about the official and unofficial tale of what happened to Harry Potter. But no more experiments until we know more, understood?"

The younger girl nodded meekly, and Fleur sighed before hopping to her feet, rubbing her hands. "Now, come. The day is wasting and we have class soon."

OOOOOOO

The sun was almost directly over the band of adventurers the next day before the welcome report of having slept for eight hours appeared in Harry's eyes. Even more pleasant was what this message meant: they hadn't been attacked again during the night. "It looks like your idea with the Ankeg saliva sacks worked, Jaheira..." His smile disappeared as he actually looked at his map. "Although there are four red dots out there to our southwest. Anyone willing to wager what those are?"

No one said anything, and Harry looked over to Imoen who was merely groaning where she lay, making no move to get up despite being wide awake like the rest of Harry's party. Harry moved to kneel beside her, gently brushing away her hair, before looking over at the three healers. "I hope you three got enough sleep last night, because all need some healing right now."

All three of the healers nodded and began to move around the camp using their healing spells to bring the health points of the rest of the party up, with Branwen moving to heal Imoen. "Come now, my short friend, let me help you with the touch of Tempus."

"I ain't short, your over-tall," Imoen grumbled, before moaning in relief as the healing magic washed over her. "Oooo... that feels good. Crap, I didn't realize how bad it was until I woke up, the pain was second fiddle to the exhaustion. Hitting the red in your health via blood mage spells is no joke."

"It is rarely a joke to be so ill," Branwen quipped, using another spell. Another Cure Light Wounds got Imoen back up to near green on her health bar before Branwen used a Cure Medium Wounds on herself.

Despite the proliferate use of healing spells, all three healers kept a few healing spells back in case of emergencies. This meant that none of the band ambushed by the giant bugs were in the green, bar Imoen, and she was only in the green thanks to how small a health pool she had. Jaheira, Viconia and Harry were better off, both in terms of their health and their equipment, but that didn't solve the arrow issue, or the fact that most of the others were battered around the edges.

As the healers worked, Harry created a breakfast for them all.

Now healed, Imoen and Minsc left the group, ranging out to where the four dots were on Harry's map, reporting back that they were four more ghouls. "They're all clustered under a tree, glaring in this direction, but the smell of those ankheg pheromone sacks are keeping them at bay."

"Is there any way we can take some of that stuff with us?" Harry asked intently. "it seems seriously useful."

"I'm afraid not. Much like food can spoil in your Item Space, the pheromones will lose potency... and be commensurately smellier to human and elvish senses," Jaheira added sardonically. "Still, we might be able to use it for one more night. And the sacks don't have any alchemical use, so they are otherwise worthless."

Harry's answer to that was immediate. "So glad you're volunteering to carry it, Jaheira."

Scowling Jaheira grumbled but obeyed while her husband chortled, but when it came time to, still moved to place a few of the pheromone sacks, each of which was around five pounds. Harry did however pay ahead for this service by giving both of them an extra share of the bread he had somehow softened and made tasty.

Dealing with the gnolls in the daylight was utterly anticlimactic to what had happened the night before. Refreshed, healed and with the magic users having their spells, it only took a few moments to send all three undead beasts to the ground from range. Even arrows and sling stones could do eventually enough damage to put a gnoll, especially when helped with a few magic missile attacks from the magic users.

The party moved off quickly after that, with Minsc in the lead ranging ahead of the party using his Hide-in-Shadows skill, and Jaheira and Khalid well out on the edges, looking not so much for danger as game. By the time they stopped that night, Jaheira had returned with several rabbits, and Khalid had killed a small wild boar. Along with the fresh meat Jaheira had also found several clumps of garlic and wild carrots.

With all of that, Harry was able to make boar kebabs for the evening meal, and a rabbit stew for the morning after, while turning the wolf meat into jerky.

However, between those two meals, there were two goal attacks. The first time happened about two hours after they had set out, the timer for the next iteration having already started during the night. This time five skeleton warriors appeared, but Imoen had set up several traps around the party, which had stopped to take up a defensive position. The snare traps and clamp traps held the goals in place, and the wizards used one more Magic Missiles spells each to add to the parties long-range punch putting all five of the skeleton warrior down with relative ease, although the archers had used up more than half of their remaining arrows, something Harry hadn't anticipated.

When Minsc reported this, he looked at the wizards among them, then Harry. "Minsc does not suppose that any of you would be able to conjure up extra arrows for all of us?"

"Conjuration or transfiguration like that is not something I have practiced, my large guardian," Dynaheir demure shaking her head.

Edwin scoffed. "As if I would waste my mighty magical potential on something so plebian."

Harry looked over at Imoen, who shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe? I know I could probably conjure up an arrow, but how long would the conjuration last? A better idea would be to collect a few of the arrowheads to use as templates, and then find pieces of wood that would make for good arrows if we transfigured them to look like an arrow."

Khalid, the only trained bower among them, winced. "A, a, arrows are not that easy to make, y, y, you know." From that point he went into a long discussion about various types of wood that made for good arrows, the need to make certain they were all straight and well made, and the need to fletch the arrow, which Imoen hadn't mentioned at all. This went on while everyone's eyes crossed until Jaheira gently interrupted him, and the party got moving once more.

The next time the timer was close to counting down was just before full night. This time, though, Harry decided to add even more to their defenses. "We've gotten lucky twice in that the groups were small and easy to handle. I'm not going to assume our luck will continue."

With that, Harry spread out the party in teams of two to the compass points. The area they were going to fight in was extremely sparse, but they could each find small defensive areas. Minsc and Dynaheir were situated high up on a small rocky outcropping, while Jaheira and Viconia were up in the trees, Viconia having argued volubly against such a thing. "Just because I am a type of elf does not mean I am at home in the trees! This is demeaning!"

"Just remember to hold on when you slingstones. It is awfully easy to fall out of a tree when you are doing something like that. And do not get me started on how hard it is to fire arrows while in a normal tree," Jaheira grumbled back.

Viconia's annoyance faded for a moment, and she looked over at the older half-elven woman, cocking her head to one side. "There seems to be a story there."

"Never you mind!" Jaheira muttered, shaking her head, looking away with a faint blush on her face visible for a moment in the firelight below. Harry stood next to the firepit, the dagger in one hand.

Edwin and Khalid took up position toward another point in the compass, with Imoen and Branwen at a fourth.

Harry and the fire was the center of the compass. And Imoen had also set up several dozen traps around the area directly inside the makeshift cross they'd created. And all together, this meant two things. One, Harry had created a new, albeit very odd, formation.

You have created a new Formation: **Escalade Ambush.**

By breaking up your party and allies in order to take advantage of knowing where your enemies will appear, you will be able to attack your enemy from multiple directions from long range.

All Ranged Damage dealt, magical or mundane, by party members will deal an additional half again.

Defense Against Ranged damage is increased by half.

All Ranged Damage dealt by allied combatants will be raised by ¼.

All Enemies will have a 25% change of their morale failing.

Warning! This tactic is extremely susceptible to outside attacks. Your party

And second was the effect of this on the next battle...

You are making use of the tactic: **Killing Zone.**

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.

Grinning viciously, Harry reflected that he was getting better at this tactics thing. "Is everyone ready? Because ready or not, the timer is ticking down!"

"Your Advanced Adventuring System is immensely interesting, and I really must consider long and hard about giving you a similar oath to the one you took from the drow woman," Edwin muttered, to which Khalid snorted, the only one close enough to hear him.

Nor was he the only one seriously considering that. Back in the Nashkel Mines, Edwin and Dynaheir had been bound by their own magic to keep the secrets of Harry and Imoen's joint abilities and where they came from, that is, the fact they were both Bhaalspawn. To them, and indeed the whole party, that was the only secret Harry was sharing. Branwen had also given Harry an oath.

But none of them had joined Harry's party. All of them knew they had a way to go before building up the Trust and Respect points (a strange concept, but one all of them had gotten used to quickly. Indeed, Edwin thought seeing such was the most subtle but helpful of the AAS tools) to joining Harry's party.

So it was no wonder that all three were thinking of Viconia's specific oath, which had somehow, thanks to the dual nature of it, bypassed the needed prerequisite, letting Viconia join Harry's party.

A moment later, the ghouls appeared, and Harry's smile faded a bit. *Well, it looks like my guess about our luck failing was spot-on.* "Twelve ghosts!"

And just as earlier that day, the ghosts appeared almost directly on top of their position spread out. But this actually wasn't all that good for the ghosts either. Eight of them instantly became caught in several of the traps Imoen had laid out before everyone began to fire. Edwin flung down a fireball, and Harry created a Protego around himself to stave off the explosions. Two of the ghosts were burnt to a crisp right away, while several others were set on fire, and under the influence of that and the tactics Harry was using more than half began to panic, their red dots on Harry's map turning yellow.

As the flames around around his shield receded, Harry's shield came up automatically to batter a ghost aside, his sword coming across, it's edges blazing with fire. Fire Arrows from Dynaheir slew one of the fleeing ghosts, while Edwin used Magic Missile to good effect on another. Meanwhile, slingstones from Viconia and Jaheira were battering into the ghosts, along with from Imoen. Minsc and Khalid also kept their distance, using the last of their arrows.

Soon, the last of the ghosts was down, without a single one of them having hit even Harry, who had been at the center of the zone. The ghosts which hadn't panicked had been pulled every which way, unable to close without taking fire from every other side.

As the party regrouped, everyone was astonished at how well it it worked.

"G, g, ghosts are supposedly incredibly d, d, dangerous, especially large groups of t, t, them. A low level p, p, party like ours should never've b, b, been able to slaughter them so e, e, easily!" Khalid said shaking his head. "It w, w, wasn't too long ago that a g, g, group of three ghouls w, w, were almost too much for Jaheira and I to handle."

"There's a difference between fighting an even battle, and creating a set piece one," Harry said, his tone thoughtful as if he was working it out as he went, which he was. This, coupled with the battle against the xuart village, had been a revelation. *Especially in comparison to the battle against Mulahey and those Talos worshippers.* "You shouldn't compare this to a real battle, compare it instead to the battle in the gnoll fortress after we slew the chieftain."

Everyone there nodded, and Harry smiled over at Imoen, who grinned. "Your traps and the wizard's fire were the real reason why that went off so well Imoen. Remind me to keep you supplied with equipment to make more of those."

Imoen grinned over at him, flinging her arm around his shoulder and pulling him into a hug with some difficulty. She was more than a foot shorter than he was, after all. "No problem. That was pretty awesome to watch."

As they moved away from the smell of the dead gnolls, though, Harry had something better to report. "The arrow just turned into a.at the far edge of my map. So should we push on tonight?"

"How far can your map reach again?" Imoen asked.

"5 miles, give or take. It's enlarged every time I've leveled up," Harry announced.

Edwin shook his head slowly at that, while the other more experienced adventurers also instantly saw how powerful an ability that could be eventually.

Especially, in Dynaheir's opinion, if Harry was then paired with a magic user who specialized in long-range enchantments or attacks. Only the most powerful magic users could cast magic so far away

from their body, but those who could, were utterly devastating, as the Red Wizards had found out to their cost every time They attempted to invade Rasheman. *Even a more plebeian kind of strategy, several trap users say, when coupled with Harry's map making ability, could be horrible to contemplate. They could put down traps everywhere just out of sight of enemies, then trick them into chasing them, and...*

"In that case, I suggest we push on. Unless you three need rest?" Branwen asked, looking over at Imoen, Viconia and Dynaheir, jolting the witch out of her thoughts. The two of them had the least amount of Constitution of all of them, although no one knew what Dynaheir's Constitution was exactly. And if you took her Survivor (Level 3) skill, Viconia was next in line.

While Dynaheir answered with a 'thank you, but no' Viconia huffed and did not replying verbally. Smirking, Imoen moved over to her, flinging an arm around Viconia's shoulders much more easily than she had Harry's, there being only half a foot difference in their height. "That's right, pick on the weak girls. Go on, hit us while we're down."

Viconia slowly twisted her head amount to gaze into Imoen's eyes, her lips squirting into a smile. "Where I come from, touching someone like this is only done in the most intimate of moments. Although I must admit to being somewhat pent up, I had not anticipated you offering. Are you interested in discovering the dark delights that only I or one of my race could show you?"

It wasn't often Harry saw Imoen blush. From the talks they'd had back in Candlekeep, Harry knew that as Tonks, she had been an inveterate flirt. That had continued in this life, joining the original Imoen's flirtatious attitude.

Now however, Imoen **blushed**, and hastily removed her arm from around Viconia's shoulders as if Viconia had suddenly become too hot to handle. *Damn it, I'm the flirter, not the flirted! It doesn't help that I can all too easily imagine the kind of things a gal from a matriarchal BDSM society would be into.* "It was just a friendly gesture! Don't read so much into it."

"Now that is a pity," Viconia drawled, reaching forward and lightly running her finger down Imoen's cheek. "Perhaps child, you should learn from this, yes? Occasionally playing with fire is not a good idea."

While the rest of them laughed, Imoen's stumbled away, trying hard not to catch any one's eyes as Viconia turned back to Harry as if nothing had happened. "If we are within 5 miles, I believe we should push on. Let us get this over with."

Harry nodded, and the group pushed on. Another hour's march through the darkness brought them to the outskirts of the tomb. This turned out to be a small structure, almost like a sepulcher, made entirely of stone, with a series of small stone blocks around it. The steps leading down into the side sepulcher were dark upon dark when they arrived, but the majority of the party could see in the dark thanks to various items with the Infravision enchantment on them, or in the case of Viconia and the married couple, their natural abilities.

But, to Harry's astonishment, only two ghastrs and four skeleton soldiers met them. Skeleton soldiers had halberds and could strike over the shoulders and heads of the two ghastrs charged at the

group in the lead, but once more, the group made use of formations and their spell superiority made the battle almost easy. The undead fell quickly, with the last crushed by a swing from Branwen's hammer.

"We are now out of slingstones. We will have to start using's random stones from now on," Jaheira reported, with Imoen and Viconia reporting close to or at that same point. Given the issue with the arrows, Imoen had switched to a sling and slingstones the day after they all met up.

Harry nodded, understanding that would impact the amount of damage their long-range abilities could do. Considering that they hadn't discovered any more arrows or anything like that, it meant that until they could resupply, the group would be down to magic spells and close-range combat. *Which probably means Imoen and I should step back and use our blood magic more often until we get back to Beregost.*

The group continued deeper into the tomb, finding several rooms dedicated to coffins, before finding the main sarcophagus of the individual himself. Harry could tell this because of the blinking orange dot on his map, something he was gleeful about, knowing it signified how his map would be able to help him in the future with similar quests.

On top of the sarcophagus was an elaborate carved sculpture of a man, a mage in long flowing robes with large, heavily built gauntlets, a circlet around his head, a staff at his side. At his belt was a depiction of a dagger.

Staring at the sarcophagus alone made Harry wary, and he well understood that dead mages often turned into liches. Harry looked at Jaheira and Khalid. "So is it fine to just leave the dagger on top..." His voice trailed off as both of them shook their heads, and he sighed. "I was afraid of that. If this ancient mage awakens and tries to attack us, I am going to blame the two of you."

Jaheira snorted at that, but Viconia was already moving to stand in one of the corners, crouching down behind a large ornate stone urn. "If that is a possibility, perhaps you should treat this as if it was a battlefield?"

Harry nodded and directed the rest of the group around the area, with Imoen putting down traps and various places, and the mages readying their spells. When that was done, Minsc and Harry moved back to this, guess, and working together lifted the stone slab up and off. The thing was ridiculously heavy, so neither of them would have been able to move it on their own without relying on Minsc's berserker ability.

Inside was the desiccated skeletal corpse of the ancient king, with an empty dagger sheath and a sword without a sheath, it's metal rusted in the light of the torch that Minsc held above the inside of his prophethess. As the others watched, Harry wordlessly slid the dagger into its sheath, and quickly stepped away, his sword appearing in his hand as Minsc readied his Chelsey Crusher. If the skeleton transformed into a lich, only magical weapons would work on it.

But nothing happened again, and both Harry and Minsc looked at one another. "Let's lift that cover back in place. Branwen, if you could help us here."

Getting the damn thing off the ground would have been harder with just the two of them, but with Branwen helping, they were able to lift it up and get it back into place quickly. Only when it clacked into place did Harry breathe a sigh of relief as a welcome notice appeared in front of his eyes.

You have completed the quest (minor), **Return the Dagger.**

The dead mage can now rest easily, knowing that his possessions have been returned to him.

Rewards: +900 XP

Your party Gains an extra +2000 XP for surviving four rounds of undead summoning.

Harry read that aloud for a moment, then looked around at the others. "That's it? Really? For all the trouble that thing caused, we just get a little under three thousand experience?"

"Remember all the Experience we gained in killing the undead, Harry," Dynaheir answered.

"Indeed! For me, that was enough for my magnificent self to Level Up!" Edwin murmured, his eyes locked on a screen only he could see for a moment, before he felt something, a rush of energy and power within him. It was slightly different than a normal level up, and he felt as if something inside of him had changed. Only a magic user would have been able to feel it, but Edwin could feel a change within his body, and not just one from having his stats added to as was normal when leveling up. *Blast it. If I had access to my stats via Harry's AAS system, I could discover what has changed. Without it, I am changed in some fundamental fashion, I can feel it, and... the change is mental. But that is all.*

Everyone else looked at Edwin, but he remained silent, and Viconia smirked as she moved to leave, feeling a little frisky as she walked past Harry from her former position at the back of the room, she began to swing her hips just a tiny bit more than necessary. "Not every quest has to have an appropriate climax, I suppose. Come, we should put at least a mile between us and this place before bedding down tonight, yes?"

Harry found his eyes drifting down to Viconia's hips for a moment, noting once more that her curves were noticeably more pronounced than a normal elf's. But thanks to Gamer's Mind, he was able to pull his eyes away before anyone else noticed. "Viconia's right. Let's get out of her folks."

The others all nodded and followed Viconia out of the room. Harry was last. He looked around as he walked out, looking into the other rooms of the crypt. There were several of them, each dominated by two sarcophagi. These were much less ornate than the mage's but still well made. None looked as if they had been searched, and Harry felt that was the path of wisdom here considering the fate of the thief.

But one of the rooms caught his eye, and he walked into it, asking Imoen to come back for a moment. With Imoen looking for traps, the two of them entered the room while Branwen and Minsc waited by the doorway, the others behind them pausing as well.

What had caught Harry's eye was the sight of what looked like writing chipped out of the stone above a small mantle on the far wall. "Whoever is good at languages, could you join us for a moment?"

It turned out this was Edwin and Khalid, although Viconia also took a look before shaking her head and rejoining the others. With Minsc helpfully handing over his Ring of Infravision to the mage, Edwin and Khalid worked together for a moment, before translating the writing. "It is in Dwarfish, but the is abominable..." Edwin grumbled. "Still, it solves at least the minor mystery of this place. Still, I believe between us the half-elf and I have it."

“L, I, less of the half-elf, p, p, please,” Khalid grumbled, before gesturing Edwin to read it aloud.”

Edwin snorted but did so, making his voice a bit more dramatic and sepulchral than . “Jonthor’s wounds finally took him, as it did Bannera, Tackilos and his folk. We have failed. Here the clan of Stoneblade will lie to rest the adventurers who tried to help us in our quest to avenge the death of the Trollkiller clan. For those who find this note, take heed: should you follow us on this road, know it is long and perilous. The tower of our ancestor’s friend still lies unconquered. Test you might against it at your peril.”

He shrugged then, his voice turning back to normal. “The marks for his name are the worse of the lot, and I doubt it truly matters who wrote it.”

Imoen had been listening to this with half an ear, looking around the room with her Detect Traps skill activated. Now as Edwin finished speaking, she was kneeling down next to one of the Sarcophagi. “Well, there looks to be something here. Detect Traps can help me spot hiding places too. It’s not trapped, but...”

She began to work at a small segment of the bottom base of the sarcophagus for a moment, wiping away at segments, revealing what looked like lines in the stone. A tiny chisel from her thieves’ kit worked at the edges for a second, then the rectangular segment she had marked out snapped out, revealing a small space behind it. Imoen looked inside, then, very deliberately used a levitate spell to pull the item within out. A moment later, a small box of some kind of wood thumped down onto the top of the sarcophagus.

Imoen has seen what was once hidden! Plus 2.5% to her chance to Detect Traps. If Imoen keeps using this skill, her ability will go up

Everyone looked at it, and then back at Harry. After a second he sighed, and with Minsc patting him on commiseratingly on the shoulder, reached forward. “It isn’t boobytrapped, right?”

“Nope, get on with it Harry,” Imoen grinned.

“I feel so used right now,” Harry grumbled, before breaking the beeswax seal keeping the top of the box in place. Within, he found a dagger. “Cock, another one?”

This dagger was a bit more ornate than the other. It had a gem mounted in the guard, which was made of four prongs, two normal looking, with small upward curving bits at the edge. The other two however curved backward and looked sharp. Frankly it looked like it would be very annoying to work with, and maybe only able to stab? Harry wasn’t certain of that, but the scowl of disapproval on Khalid’s face when he asked made the experienced warrior’s opinion plain. The blade itself looked good, but the gem, which looked like onyx or something similar, seemed to suck in the light of the torches.

Underneath the dagger was what looked like some kind of leather padding. The padding did seem to have marks on it, so Harry noted it might be writing or something. But the dagger kept his and everyone else’s attention for a moment.

“That dagger is intensely magical... and evil,” Viconia growled. “I... I think I have senses such magics before. It is not cursed, I do not believe, but be wary, Harry.”

Branwen and Dynaheir both agreed, staring at the dagger warily while Jaheira backed away. "It is an unnatural thing, Harry, somehow my senses are telling me this."

"Aye. I agree with Viconia, the thing is evil or has been steeped in evil.

Nodding Harry waited until Dynaheir gave her opinion, which matched Jaheira's adding, "I feel as if I am staring at something that is betwixt two worlds, or has captured something that is not of this world? My senses as a Witch of Rasheman are not pleased with it being in my presence, to say the least."

With a sigh, Harry reached down and touched the dagger. And thankfully, his Identify skill was up to the task... for the most part, anyway.

Soultaker Dagger.

The Soultaker Dagger was crafted by a bizarre mix of duergar and dwarven craftsmanship. Normally the two dwarven races would not ever work together, their relationship akin to that of surface elves and drow. But this dagger is one of very few examples where the two dwarven races realized they had a common enemy and created a weapon to fight them. This dagger can capture the soul of planes walkers, particularly demons.

It was used by the great warrior, Durlag Trollkiller to capture the soul of a powerful demon named ***** many years ago.

Beyond its ability to capture souls, it is a normal dagger and it has no magical enhancements.

In other words, at present it serves as a prison, only.

Warning! You are not high enough level to discern the name of the soul trapped within.

For a moment as Harry relayed this information, everyone was stunned. Then Viconia shook her head. "I see, yes. I have been in the presence of other weapons like that, and the Soul Prison near Menzoberranzan. Do not attempt to break it. The soul within will be freed rather than slain. Tis best to be rid of the thing."

"Now wait a moment, having a demonic soul to study would be most interesting," Edwin protested, before scowling. "Although the fact we are not high enough level to know its name disturbs me. Perhaps then we could sell it?"

"IS there any mental effect to studying the dagger?" Jaheira asked, reaching forward to touch Harry's shoulder frowning as she examined his face.

"No. There wasn't even a notification like there was with the other dagger. It does feel like something would try to influence me though, doesn't it?" Harry asked dryly.

"In t, t, that case, keep it for n, n, now, Harry. Jaheira and I c, c, can send it off to p, p, people who can lock it a, a, away when we get to Beregost, o, o, or perhaps the Friendly Arm Inn."

At Khalid's words, a quest box popped up. But not just in front of Harry. Because this was a mandatory quest it seemed to appear in front of everyone in his party, causing Viconia to snort in amusement at the shocked expressions that appeared on the married couple's faces.

You have been given the side quest (medium) Protect the Soultaker Dagger. As an ally of the Harpers Khalid and Jaheira, this is a mandatory quest.

Having discovered the vile Soultaker Dagger, Jaheira and Khalid want to make certain the soul within cannot escape or be used by evil purposes. Guard the dagger from those who seek it until they get in touch with their fellow Harpers and someone comes to collect it.

Reward: 10,000 gold.

Contact with the Harpers.

“Well, that is interesting. And Edwin, unless you know someone who would be willing to meet us in Beregost and could pay 10,000 gold, I think it’s a no,” Harry quipped, slipping the dagger into his Item Box. As he did, he explained to the three members of the band that had not seen the message what had happened.

While Edwin was a little annoyed that the Harpers, who he thought were a sanctimonious bunch of balance lovers would benefit from this rather than himself, he shrugged his shoulders at Harry’s point. He couldn’t come up with a buyer like that, and

Dynaheir’s thoughts were much more prosaic. “How does your AAS skill know how much you will be paid?”

“... good question. I don’t think I want to look into it too deeply, frankly,” Harry murmured.

Jaheira and Khalid were both silent, astonished that their words had given Harry a quest, while Minsc was ecstatic. “Yes! Another quest, another chance to lure the forces of evil to where we can give them a good buttkicking!”

“I agree, my large friend!” Branwen agreed, throwing an arm around Minsc’s shoulders as she raised her hammer. “That foolish thief must have had his penitent feet directed to us by the Tempus. The quest says that there will be people coming for it. Well, let them come, say !!”

Imoen on the other hand was concentrating on something else entirely. She had pulled out the padding underneath the dagger and unfolded it onto the top of the sarcophagus. “And then there’s this, guys and girls.”

“Women please,” Viconia retorted, a sly smirk on her face. “I do believe you are the only ‘girl’ among us.”

Imoen huffed at that but didn’t meet anyone’s eyes as they crowded around the map. On it was shown the section of the Sword Coast they were currently in, along with a single mark with the name Durlag written in Common underneath it.

“I was going to mention this anyway, but Durlag is a name known to me. Several hundred years ago, before Khalid or my time, there was a dwarven adventurer by that name. A very famous one, known as one of the richest adventurers of his time...” Jaheira murmured. “I am not one to be swayed by money, but it is a name to conjure with regardless.”

You have discovered a map showing the location of the famous **Durlag’s Tower** on it.

An extremely rich, extremely paranoid dwarf who retired from adventuring, Durlag built the tower with his extended family before moving in. However, several decades later, all contact with those within the tower cut off. No one has been able to enter and survive since, and reports of what are found within are few and far between.

Notice: This map is an item needed to start a quest, but that quest will not begin until you reach the tower in question.

“No...” Harry finished relaying this information, which the others had not seen, it not being an actual quest but an Identify box, and instantly turned it down. “We are in no way strong enough to try that tower if this mage and his band, and hell, it sounds like they had a clan of dwarves with them, failed.”

“Indeed n, n, not,” Khalid shook his head, looking not just wary but fearful. “I, I would not have c, c, chanced this with the b, b, band Jaheira and I w, w, were a part of w, w, when we were cursed.” Jaheira agreed with that, and the rest of the group did as well, though Edwin and Viconia both looked intrigued.

So was Harry, honestly. It wasn't that he wasn't interested in the tower and what it might contain, but knew they were too weak right now. It was only because of Harry and Imoen's blood mage spells they had survived a few of the adventures they'd already had, and there was no way this tower wouldn't be far more difficult. “Let's get out of here,” Harry announced, placing the map in his Item Box. “It's something to shoot for, but not right now.”

Everyone else there agreed, and the band left the crypt behind quickly.

Compared to their trip to the crypt, the way back to Beregost, which carried them northwest, was quite simple, if lengthy and at times abysmal. For a week, they were only attacked wild dogs and a maddened bear once each. They were also attacked by a large group of xvarts, over thirty strong, which was their only real battle. But thanks to the map ability Harry had seen them coming, and Imoen laid out some traps. She was now close to leveling up, thanks to the added experience of putting down traps which, since it was a Thief Only skill, didn't cross to the rest of the party. And she was eagerly looking forward to getting more of her strength and dexterity back from her past life.

During this time, Harry and the other magically inclined individuals had several dozen discussions, pausing to experiment with his and Imoen's magic. They discovered what Harry had suspected after covering his sword with fire was indeed true: so long as Harry and Imoen's Blood Mage spells were close to an existing spell, the impact to their Health Pools was dropped to a third. It didn't matter what school it was, only that the imagined, visualized effect was close to an existing spell.

But there were two very large things going for the Blood Mage spells. One, it didn't seem to matter what level spell they tried to imitate. Both Imoen and Harry could use Fireball a Level 3 spell, while Imoen was able to use Cone of Cold, one of Dynaheir's highest level spells. Harry had trouble visualizing those for some reason. And this was not limited to just combat spells either. Better, thanks to visualization being the most important aspect of casting, Harry and Imoen's Blood Mage spells didn't need to completely match the existing spell. This allowed for some interesting effects, and the two of them were still wondering about the full scope of their skills.

To say that Edwin and Dynaheir were a bit jealous was to put it quite mildly. This only increased when Harry showed that he could cast silently.

Yet despite putting this time to good use, the weather had turned against them. Cold biting rain came and went, the chill of winter upon it, making everyone aware they would need to buy winter gear when they reached Beregost, and miserable on top of it. Branwen, Dynaheir and Minsc began to give Viconia, Harry and Imoen some advice on moving in cold climates that all of them needed. There were chilly portions of the Underdark, but snow was unheard of, and both Harry and Imoen/Tonks hadn't ever been traveling by foot through winter either.

The biting rain was bad enough to get on with, soaking through everyone's clothing, although Imoen was able to warm them up with the equivalent of a warming charm. Between them, Harry and Imoen kept them going, but by the time they saw houses in the distance, all of the group were tired, bedraggled, and in somewhat desperate need of fruit and vegetables, as none of either had been found since Jaheira's wild carrots, and they had lasted the large group little more than three days even with Harry's magic touch trying to enhance them further.

A few moments after first seeing signs of civilization, Viconia called a halt. She and Imoen worked together for a few moments to cover her hands and face with strips of cloth to hide her obsidian skin from being seen. Harry was annoyed it was necessary, but understood why it was needed, and the other women, even Branwen, helped a bit in crafting Viconia's outer outfit.

Moments later, they were met by a roaming patrol of guards, which they outnumbered severely, something the guards noticed instantly. However, one of them recognized the original quartet from Harry's party the first time they'd been through here and calmed the locals down quickly. "You all are adventurers, right? Back from some quest or other?"

"Pretty much. We might want to pass on to yours superiors what we were doing..." Harry trailed off looking over to Khalid and Jaheira, both nodded. "We were near the Nashkel mines and helped solve the issue there. The iron shortage should solve itself shortly once trade gets going again."

Most of the guards looked pleased at that, while one looked as if he didn't actually believe Harry's words. But the sergeant in charge of the group waved them on, giving Harry a bright blue painted stone to show that he had been passed through the outer guards.

"They looked quite wary, did they not?" Edwin mused.

"That's what my Greater Observation skill said. They are leery, fearful, and on guard. Also, not getting much sleep," Harry reported.

The band of adventurers all looked at one another, and Jaheira shook her head. "It appears as if the other arrow in our hidden foe's quiver is still deadly, then."

Harry nodded, knowing she was commenting on the fact the various bandits might well be working for the same group behind the tainting of the iron coming out of Nashkel.

The next group of guards met them when farmland shifted into the main town area, and the blue stone worked to get them past, although this group also looked wary their eyes flicking past the band to look out over the distant forest line. Once more Harry told the guard that he might want to talk

to their officers about what they had been doing, and this time a runner was sent off to the same officer Harry had flirted and made out with the last time he was in town.

“We’ll meet her at the inn whenever she wants. We’re not going anywhere very quickly, and all of us need some hot food, hot baths, and warm beds,” Harry said gesturing up to the sky, which again looked like it was going to rain anytime soon.

The guard followed his gaze, nodding morosely. “Tell me about it. You couldn’t pay me enough to go adventuring, I like my creature comforts I do.”

“While I would in no way call myself a creature, I applaud your level of self-awareness. But comfort certainly sounds good at the moment,” Edwin gestured deeper into the town with annoyance. “Let us move on!”

Harry led the way through the town, and soon they found one of the inns the Burning Wizard. It was the one with the best rooms available, and Harry, thanks to Imoen and the others having gotten the money for the job in the mines, had more than enough money for all of them to get the best rooms available. It spread them out a little, but Harry was fine with that. The Elvish couple got one room, Branwen Imoen and Viconia shared another, Minsc, and Dynaheir a third, and Edwin and Harry a fourth.

Several of the adventurers conked out instantly, wanting a nap after finally changing into dry clothing. Branwen and Jaheira went for a bath, while Harry, Khalid, and Edwin went for food. For Khalid and Edwin, this meant drinking as well. For Harry, just food, after which he turned to their room to dry out by the fireplace. He stuck his feet out towards the fire, propping them up on a small stool, and leaned back, sighing contentedly as the heat of the fire washed over him, letting his eyes close for a time.

However, their arrival had not gone noticed.

Many of the inn’s normal customers had seen the group arrive, and one man had reacted to it. Harry had been too eager to get up to their rooms and get out of his wet travel clothing that he hadn’t noticed the blue of a neutral turning yellow for a moment, before the man disappeared into Hide-in-Shadows and headed towards the door.

An hour later, Harry had also fallen asleep in front of the fire when a servant poked her head in, and asked, “Mister Harry of Candlekeep? Mistress Vai of the city guard is downstairs. She wants to talk to you.”

“All be down in a moment,” Harry answered smiling over the girl, amused to note that in so doing, he had gained increased interest from the girl. That reminded him of the barmaid back in Candlekeep, but he wasn’t about to pursue a romantic relationship with her or the officer in question despite the fact they’d had a quite nice make out session last time they’d passed through Beregost. The events leading to Garrick joining Harry’s party had probably soured relations between them anyway.

Downstairs, Harry was surprised to see Imoen and Viconia there. The two sat together at a booth in the far corner of the main bar room, talking about something in a low tone, while Imoen wrote out a list of some kind between them. Harry wondered if that was about ongoing experiments with their blood magic or a supply list of some kind, but he decided to leave it to her whichever it was. *I’m pants*

at clothing, and Imoen is just as good at haggling as I am, or better with her Flirty Little Lass Skill. "Hey girls, I thought you both would still be sleeping."

"Our stomachs woke us up, and then we decided to stay up for a bit and enjoy being back in civilization," Imoen replied for Viconia, who simply sneered a bit under her hood, the movement of her lips barely visible under a mask.

"While for me civilization is most decidedly not what I want, so far it seems that no one has noticed my features thanks to our precautions. The mask and the gloves have helped tremendously. I have also not noticed bounty posters with my face on them or even a more general, 'beware of drow' message. Eating however has been most annoying."

Harry patted Viconia on the shoulder, feeling her twitch under his hand. "Remember, you're not going it alone any longer. If the townsfolk turn on you, we'll defend you."

Imoen frowned a bit at that. She wasn't certain the entire party would leap to Viconia's defense like Harry was implying, not against the normal civilians unless the conflict could be resolved without violence. Still, she agreed with the sentiment. "Yeah Viconia, we got your back."

Viconia snorted at that, a sound that implied 'I will believe it when I see it', before nodding at Harry, her eyes going noticeably softer for a moment. "You at least I will believe would do so, yet I will endeavor to ensure it does not become an issue. For now, I think you need to speak to the woman in official-looking armor glaring at your back. That is not a jealous look, but she is certainly impatient."

Snorting, Harry bid momentary farewell to the two girls before moving through the inn, which was mostly empty at this time of the afternoon, toward officer Vai. As he did, his Observation skill activated.

Officer Vai

Vai is currently a bit annoyed, although not due to any lingering feelings of attraction to you. Instead, she seems somewhat frayed around the edges. Her armor is marked with dents, and her eyes show a certain amount of tiredness. While she isn't as on-edge as the guards you met out on wide patrol, it is clear that she has been dealing with a lot of issues related to her job since the last time you talked to her.

She is interested in you, but not romantically. Instead, Vai is clearly hoping to use you and your party to help the issues plaguing Beregost.

"Harry, sit. The drinks are on me to start with, if that continues, that depends on the news you can tell me. We've heard that someone, apparently you and yours if the reports I got from my guards were accurate, could solve the issue with the mines from the Mayor of Nashkel. But I've seen no real details of what was going on. The mayor probably has more information, but he isn't sharing it with me," Valeria said brusquely, gesturing Harry to sit across from her in the booth she had taken over.

Harry frowned, sitting across from her and taking a sip from the wine she'd poured out. "I'm uncertain why he wouldn't." *After all, I already have assassins after me, right... fuck. I've been an idiot.* "Actually, considering the amount of money and influence whoever is behind this has to have, I would prefer if you kept this to yourself. In fact, if you could spread a rumor that my party was only

peripherally involved to solving the mine issue, and my first bragging was just a rookie adventurer with a big mouth, I'd like that."

For actually showing some self-preservation instinct, you are rewarded +1 to wisdom. Keep it up!

OY! Ruddy AAS, you can be a real arse, Harry grumbled internally, but the thoughts lacked real heat. He really shouldn't have mentioned that he and his party had been behind stopping this cabal's plans. I've already got a target on my back, sure, but the last thing I need is for that to grow, or, worse, for the enemy to decide simple assassins aren't enough and have them send large parties of paid adventurers after us. Our luck with having no witnesses to my and Imoen's Blood Magic only has to fail once, and we lose our biggest ace in the hole, and after that, they'll know for certain to send their best, which we aren't ready for.

"I can do that, so long as you tell me the full story," Vai agreed. "But I need to know. The mayor's an asshole, but well connected with Baldur's Gate and very good with money matters. We're well maintained and armed as a guard force, but the town's been plagued by troubles for weeks. Not just animals, but bandits attacks and other things pushing our border. No one's died yet inside the town... not since your last visit anyway... but a lot of livestock's been lost, and two farms torched."

Harry winced at that, then proceeded to tell her what they had discovered in the mines. The fact that the minds of been turned into a dungeon astonished Vai, being well beyond her experience. The information that some alchemical concoction had been added into the iron before it was taken out of the mine and occasionally after word, was worrisome. Alchemical agents like that were not easy to create, and to create in bulk would've cost even more. This was also connected to the bandit issue, so she could easily understand why Harry thought it would affect the town's security.

As Harry finished, she took a long draft from her ale, setting it down and putting her feet down from where she had propped them up on the other side of the booth. "I... don't know this Tazok, but Tranzig is in town. He rents out a house on Fortune's Way. According to his papers, he is a spice dealer of some repute, with contacts all over the place, and has often sent his spices, and a few guards, in various directions. I can't say I've ever interacted with him, as Tranzig's never done anything in town to draw attention to himself, not even a drunken pass I at a married barmaid. But since this message mentions him, making a connection between Mulahey and Tranzig, I'll get us a writ of search for his residence and get back to you later today. If he is involved, you might already know you're in town, and it's best to hit him quickly."

"I want to stop by the armor, we need more arrows, marsh some of our shields need replacing, and we've got something I want to sell to him for better armor in the future. But after that," Harry nodded. "You're right, it's best to strike quickly."

Officer Vai nodded, then stood up, patting Harry on the shoulder. "I'll meet you outside the Inn in an hour and a half, alright? You'll need me with you when we search the house. You're not out in the wilds here."

Harry snorted at that, remembering the battle against the giant spiders, but thanked Vai anyway, before leaning back in the booth and held up a hand, asking a waitress to get him a cup of water. *Back in my old life, I suppose I would be looking forward to butterbeer or a soda. Here it's beer,*

wine or ale. Funnily enough though, I don't think I'll ever become a big drinker, of them really interest me.

He was about to stand up to head over to talk to Imoen and Viconia again when a voice hailed him. "Hello there, Aspirant Harry. I take it that you're being back in town means your hire finished with your quests down south?"

Harry turned, and waved Paladin Bjornin over. He remembered the man from the last time they been through Beregost: a paladin who had been ambushed by a group of ogres or half ogres. Harry wasn't certain, but he could look at his quest log. "Bjornin, good to see you, come take a seat. I just ordered a water for myself, but there's ale from officer Vai if you want to finish it off. And yes, we're done down south."

"Good to hear." Bjornin sat down across from him, then took a sip from the ale, looking at Harry shrewdly. "You have yet to choose a God I see, although I believe you have become stronger. You've gained at least a level since I saw you last."

Harry nodded, but didn't go into detail, which Bjornin seemed to respect, smiling faintly. "It is unusual for an aspirant to get past Level 5 without choosing a deity. Still, it isn't entirely unheard of either. So long as you keep to the righteous path, and think very clearly about your choices, that is all anyone can ask."

Again Harry nodded, thanking the man for his words, and saying that he was giving the decision some thought. "Honestly, I've narrowed it down to two, although some of the choices surprised me greatly."

"There are indeed more gods out there that have their own paladins than most people believe. The triad of course dominate, but there are some esoteric choices out there." Bjornin tried to keep his voice from sounding dismissive, but he couldn't keep his eyes from rolling a little, as he went on to mention one of the gods that had stomped Harry when the choice for her came up. Chauntea for example."

Harry shared a laugh with the man, and then Bjornin became serious. Taking another sip of ale, he began. "You mentioned officer Vai, did she talk to you about what's been happening here in Beregost?"

"Not in any detail, although we probably will in the next few days. And I remember you had a quest for us, something about half ogres?"

"Indeed. That group has been stepping up their depredations of late and seem to have grown by at least two more members. The good news is that my leg has healed enough, and I was able to earn enough money to buy myself some weapons and armor to replace those I lost, so if you are willing to take on the job, I will be joining you for that quest," Bjornin answered firmly.

The quest Half Ogres Near Beregost has been made.

The band of half ogres has grown since the last time you are in Beregost. This will impact the amount of money you gain, although not the experience because Bjornin is now healthy, and will be joining your allies for the battle.

That put Harry in a quandary, but after a few minutes he nodded. *After all, I don't know how long it will take Fuiruim to make our Ankheg plate. And we might as well take some odd jobs around here for bits of experience. I'm certain I can convince the others to stay at least a few days.* "In that case, will be happy to have you. My party however just arrived back in town after quite a while out in the wilds. We need more equipment ourselves frankly, and there's one aspect of our job we must finish in town first. Give us a day of rest after that, and we will be good to go."

"Excellent! In that case, I will see you the day after tomorrow here in the morning." Bjornin smiled, and the two of them clasped hands over the table. However Bjornin wasn't done talking just yet. "Beyond my own issue, you might have noticed the increased security. The mayor was actually willing to pay more money to bring in more guards recently due to the half ogres and another group of bandits that have been sighted in the area. One was bold enough to attack a caravan heading up to Balder's Gate within sight of the town. Orcs and half orcs apparently. Human bandits also have been seen."

The Main Quest **Iron Intake Issue** has been updated. You have found new information. With the iron flowing once more, the cabal have stepped up their efforts to interdict the flow of trade throughout the Sword Coast. Beregost, situated as it is, is now in even more danger than before. The guards are not quite overstressed just yet, as the town itself has yet to come under attack, but directly outside of its outskirts is another story entirely.

Do what you can to alleviate this problem and you may find more clues to who is behind everything, as well as hidden rewards.

"Then it looks as if will be staying in town for a bit," Harry said firmly, not acknowledging the notice.. "I'm not going to just keep on traveling north if so many bandit groups around here causing trouble."

"That's what I hoped you'd say," Bjornin said, before looking around a little furtively. "There's also another rumor I just heard from someone outside this inn. I don't suppose sitting here you've seen a drow, have you?"

Harry's eyes narrowed, but he wiped the expression away from his face quickly. "I can't say I have, and I've been here talking to Vai for the past few hours. I've seen several elves with hoods, but that's all. Why, and why would seeing a drow be so bad?"

"You really have been sheltered! Surely in Candlekeep you've read about the depredations of the dwellers of the Underdark!" Bjornin guffawed, shaking his head. "Come now, you know that that kind of sorts brings trouble."

Harry smiled thinly. "Say that to Drizzt."

Bjornin blanched a bit, looking away. "Yes well, I suppose there is always at least one good apple among a continent's worth of bad ones. But he is the exception that proves the rule. Indeed, ask him, and Drizzt will tell you that his folk cannot be trusted. They are all murderers, sadists and torturers. They bring trouble wherever they go, and everyone knows it."

"I prefer to judge people as they come, rather than for the actions of their race," Harry shot back firmly.

“That speaks well of you, Harry, but you should know that some races are evil. Much like the kobolds or gnolls, the drow are steeped in villainy before they come out of the womb. It takes an incredibly strong, good soul, to be able to survive in their culture without being corrupted. And whenever the drow come to the surface, that always means trouble.”

Harry was tempted to argue further, but two things stopped him. One, the fact that it might look suspicious if he did, and two, a notification popping up into his line of sight.

Warning! The bias against drow is both deeply rooted and rooted in fact.

The vast, vast majority of drow are indeed as vile and dark as they are reputed to be. As such, it will be rare indeed for any drow, even one such as the hero Drizzt, to be viewed in even a neutral light. If news gets around that you are traveling with a drow, many doors will be closed to you regardless of the individual in question. It will negatively impact your reputation: how people view you via the stories about your deeds that have traveled before you as an adventurer.

You cannot fight several hundred years of examples of drow cruelty for one individual, and even Viconia knows this. Be very, very careful who you allow to discover her true nature.

While that rankled, Harry could see the sense of it. He decided that would be another way of determining between Torm and Tyr to which he would pledge his allegiance. If they could not see past a person’s race, or even the deities they might serve, Harry would have a major problem with them.

I know she serves Shar, and that’s not exactly a good deity, but that’s a hell of a lot better than the deity she was born to serve. Viconia isn’t evil, not as I define the term anyway. She is no mass murderer, no torturer for pleasure, no rapist or anything of that sort. I don’t doubt that she would be willing to do many things I wouldn’t to survive, but that’s not the same thing.

“I see what you’re saying, although I wouldn’t be willing to attack a drow who was simply traveling the Realms unless they made trouble. I would watch them closely, and be ready for it if they did, but preemptively attacking is not something I would be willing to do.”

Charisma check passed.

Bjornin has been unable to see past your prevarication, taking it at face value that the idea of attacking someone without true proof of wrongdoing is the issue here, rather than the fact that you are unwilling to take race into account at all.

“That’s speaks well of you Harry, and I completely understand,” Bjornin answered magnanimously. “But you haven’t seen anything of the sort?”

“No. I haven’t seen anyone that could be said to have black skin other than an elf who came in looking as if his face was covered with charcoal. Maybe that is what the rumor began? Townsfolk are quite credulous after all,” Harry answered, hoping to deflect any interest in his own party, or in Viconia herself, who was still sitting at a nearby booth speaking to Imoen and a young barmaid for some reason. The fact that Imoen was laughing, and Viconia was gesturing with her hands as if describing something - possibly perverted Harry couldn’t tell from here but the barmaid was blushing quite rosily- was probably a good cover, but it never hurt to try.

Charisma check passed.

Bjornin has now completely dismissed the idea of there being a drow in Beregost.

Bjornin nodded, and the two of them passed a few more moments as the older paladin asked Harry about the type of fights he been in since Bjornin had last seen the younger man. Then, as the ale was finished, Bjornin stood up, shook Harry's hand once more and headed out the door, not even glancing in Imoen and Viconia's direction. Their talk quickly returned to a quiet one as the barmaid left, looking as if she wanted to write something down, which Harry decided not to look into too closely.

Harry waited a few more moments, drinking the last of his water before standing up and moving over to the girls, explaining what he talked to Vai and Bjornin about. He finished by apologizing for the fact that Viconia would have to keep wearing her disguise.

"You know, we could use a color change charm on you..." Imoen murmured thoughtfully, as she looked at Viconia speculatively.

Viconia however shook her head. "While that's seems well within the realm of possibility for your Blood Magic spells, indeed most magic schools have something similar the answer is no. My folk have extreme magical resistance, and I rather doubt any such spells would take." Viconia scowled a little. "Further, while I am not particularly proud of my society, I am too proud of my abilities and skills to wish to hide what I am overmuch. I realize that is a strange dichotomy, but there you are."

"It was just a thought. Although I wonder if Harry had made the suggestion, would you have agreed?" Imoen teased.

"No. Rather, I would have shot it down even more harshly," Viconia drawled, not rising to the bait. "Besides, he seems to like my skin color the way it is, do you not, Harry?"

Not rising to the bait, Harry redirected the conversation. "Anyway, we've been here for a few hours, I think that's enough of a rest. I'm going to grab Minsc and Branwen and the three of us will go over to the smithy. If the two of you find the others and ensure they're ready to go in an hour? This trip we're only going to dump the Ankheg plate and buy some basic equipment arrows and sling stones and so forth, So not everyone needs to be with us."

The two women nodded, and Harry left them to find Branwen and Minsc. Minsc was easy enough to convince to come with them although Dynaheir was still napping, as were Dynaheir and Edwin. Because none of them were in Harry's party, they didn't get as good a sleep as the party did while out in the wilds so the trip from the tombs to the town had hit them harder than the others, even though both of them had more Constitution than Imoen.

As they walked, Harry explained what officer Vai and told him t Branwen, whose eyes almost seemed to smoke with fury when she heard Tranzig's name, the man who had turned her to stone. "I fully agree with officer Vai. We must strike swiftly. I will not allow that craven to escape me!"

"We'll go after Tranzig soon, don't worry," Harry soothed. "Just wait another hour and we'll all help you take your vengeance on him. Just remember, we want to question him first."

"Oh, he'll talk. While Tempus might frown on torture, there are ways to make a person talk even with without harming them physically. Fear can be a great motivator, and I mean to put the fear of Tempus himself into that bastard!" Branwen snarled.

The smithy was much as Harry remembered it, although the service they got instantly changed when Harry pulled out the first of the Ankheg shells. At that point, Taerom came out from the back, shouting over his shoulder, "Keep the bellows going, we need a set amount of heat throughout the blade. None of your waffling about or I'll take my switch to you."

Name: Taerom Fuiruim.

Occupation: Smith.

A famous Smith from the south, Taerom has come to Beregost to leave his past behind, along with his past enemies. He is one of the best blacksmiths on the continent, and commissioned work will still show it even now with the quality of iron so low.

Current attitude: curious, interested. The man dearly wants to work with your materials but will try to drive a hard bargain besides.

"Well now, you have something rare their stranger. So rare, it's hard to work with..." The man began.

Harry however was fully primed to argue the man down thanks to his Greater Observation skill, and several times during the discussion, his skill popped in to give him more insight on the man's current mood. Eventually the two of them reached an agreement both of them were happy with: selling two sets of ankheg shells to create three outfits from the remainder, with the remnants to be sold at fifty gold per pound, half the normal price.

Since Harry's method of harvesting the shells allowed him to pull literally every plate off the ankheg, he had far more of the plates than normal. So this was a tremendously good price for Harry and would leave Taerom with enough plate for several more suits, which he could sell at price.

"I don't suppose you know where you could harvest more of these, do you?" Taerom asked after the deal was struck.

"Actually, I do. I remember a farmer mentioning something about them invading his farm up near Baldur's Gate. And I'd be willing to sell you more if we come across them. But I'm not going to tell you how long that will be," Harry laughed. "Now, unless you want to handle the business herself, I have other things to buy here."

"I'll leave you to it then. Just remember, there's no haggling on already finished pieces, large or small." Taerom said wagging a finger at Harry, smiling slightly. "I saw you eyeing that Shadow Armor, and my Shield +1 collection."

Taerom enjoyed the bargaining session, and his opinion of you has grown. He is far too used to dealing with penny pinchers who look down on him as a mere menial, or people who become mean-spirited during the negotiations.

You are more likely to get a good deal out of Taerom from now on, so long as you work with him directly anyway. However, he is adamant about not marking down his prices for regular goods. Considering how much of his business is wrapped around that, it is obvious why.

Soon, the trio was heading back to the Inn, with arrows and slingstones aplenty, and a few shields and helmets to replace that which had been lost against the Ankheg. This included a Medium Shield +1. Harry had also sold off quite a bit of the items they had discovered on the bodies of the quartet of female warriors and Mulahey, along with several gems, and swords they had gotten from the kobolds and undead.

They found the rest of their band sitting at a booth, with Khalid and Jaheira arguing, a low hissing sort of argument, as Jaheira glared at her husband, who was looking a little sheepish, but refused to relinquish his grip on a bottle of wine.

Harry however picked up the wine cork, and plugged it in to the bottle, smirking a little. "Enough for that tonight, Khalid. We have an individual to hunt down, and hopefully detain."

"Detain? If that word means behead in Candlekeep, Harry, then you are closer to the truth," Branwen growled, her anger rising within her again.

"Haul play. Revenge is a dish that is best served cold, along with greasy things on sticks," Viconia murmured. Then she scowled. "That did not translate to calm well."

The others laughed a bit, but her joke seemed to calm Branwen down, and Harry gestured to the rest of the party. "Officer Vai's waiting for us outside, let's get going."

Vai nodded to the group as they came out of the Inn, looking at Minsc, Dynaheir, Edwin, Branwen, and the cloaked Viconia with some interest. Their names had come up in Harry's discussion with her about the mines, but Harry hadn't gone into details about how he had met each of them. "Your party really has grown quite a bit since the first time you passed through Beregost. Although I note you don't have Garrick with you. I hope he didn't die. He was a young idiot, his head full of clouds and bad songs rather than reality, but he didn't deserve to die out on the road."

"He did, but we revived him," Harry replied dryly. "After which Garrick seemed to have the same idea and decided to travel further south with a caravan of some kind."

That caused Vai to shake her head with a snort of laughter. She plied the group with questions as she led the group west through the town, then around a corner of the road before they came to a culvert, a series of houses set in a curve. The curve was somewhat filled with an apple grove, but the party bypassed those, heading towards the second to last house in the curve heading southward. This was a two-story affair, maybe a three-story one if it had an attic with a sloped roof. The house was raised off the ground, with two steps leading up to the front door.

"It's actually got two entrances, both of which can act like a front door. I haven't been inside, so I don't know which is the real front door and which is the servant's entrance, but the other one opens onto one of the main roads into town, and there's a lot of traffic there. I didn't want to cause rumors, so I have a few guards more than normal loitering around the area."

Harry nodded, though he was tempted to send Imoen over there under Hide-in-Shadows to keep an eye on the door just in case. He decided against it when Jaheira asked how many soldiers were stationed there. Hearing there were eight of them with five more within sight around a crossway told him he didn't need to worry about enemies escaping from there.

Thankfully, it seemed as if they were not expected, judging by the startled look of the servant who opened the front door. He was a dapper-looking elderly gentleman wearing black pants and a white shirt. He seemed to scowl a bit as he raised an eyebrow and stared down his nose at officer Vai. "Officer."

More important to Harry was the fact that the man was a yellow dot on his map, appearing there as soon as the door opened.

"Remember that my map skill can't see what's behind closed doors. And this guy is yellow on my map," Harry hissed, to which Edwin, the closest to him, nodded. Thanks to their enhanced senses, the half-elves and Viconia also heard. Each of them twitched their heads in acknowledgment and began to whisper to the other party members.

At the same time, Vai was speaking to the man, holding up her warrant and pointing over his shoulder, her tone brisk and no-nonsense. "Open up. I have a warrant to question your employer Tranzig and search the premises."

"What! My master is an important man and..." The man began, but Branwen moved forward, pushing aside Harry and Edwin. She grabbed the man by the shoulder, lifting him up with one hand, before tossing him onto the grass. The man squawked in outrage and fear as he found himself cast aside by the large, powerfully built woman, but Vai simply nodded at him and said simply, "Don't go anywhere. We'll be questioning the servants too."

By the time she finished speaking, Branwen had opened the door, and the rest of the party hurried after Branwen and Harry, who was the next through, hissing at Branwen to calm down even as he took in the room they found themselves with. Inside, they found themselves in an open foyer, a series of stairs that turned halfway up its length leading up to the second floor. The dining room could be seen to one side, and another door led probably to the kitchen or a servant's quarters, perhaps underneath the stairs. *Well, at least we're coming through the front door, I guess... I suppose that makes sense with the warrant and everything, but tactically...*

Two maids looked up from where they had been working in the dining room, apparently setting out silverware for a meal. Looking at them, Harry almost found himself a little distracted by the fact that they wore what looked like French maid outfits. How the heck that style had somehow crossed dimensions, he didn't know, but both girls were good-looking, young, and... also yellow dots on Harry's map.

His eyes narrowed, Harry took in information appearing in front of him, quickly passing from one information box to another without pause.

Name: Tricia, maid(?)

While Tricia is certainly good-looking enough to be part of the eye candy around a rich man's mansion, she also seems automatically wary of you and quite a bit more intelligent than most girls who fall into that category would be judging by how her eyes are flicking all over your party. Almost like someone trying to determine who is the most dangerous threat.

Name: Eleanora, maid(?)

While not nearly as intelligent looking as Tricia, given the blank stare she has on her face as she looks at you, that blank stare itself is a bit unnerving. Not only on someone so good-looking but in general, as it speaks of someone who has seen and done things that most people would prefer not to. Her wrists and forearms are also a little too powerful looking for a regular maid.

But other than the two maids, there didn't seem to be any real sign of trouble. A part of Harry wanted to put that down to the fact that his party had just barged into their place of occupation. But his Observation skills examination of the two told him more.

Taking in the area around him, Harry strode forward quickly, saying aloud, "Spellcasters to the back, I want us to treat this as if..."

That was as far as he got before the ambush was sprung. Vai, who had been moving towards the stairs waving off the maids, paused as she stumbled across a heretofore hidden tripwire at the very foot of the stairs. She fell forward with a cry as her foot was pulled out from under her. A dart launched from seemingly nowhere embedded itself in her thankfully armored side as the trap activated.

Simultaneously, several people came out from under Hide-in-Shadows all around the party, fighters using invisibility potions or thieves using their own skills. Ahead of the group, someone from the other side of the door into the kitchen flung it open, revealing a man in a cloak. That man was already thrusting his hands forward as he completed the spell. The spell was white and smoky almost in nature, coming forward as a cone that covered the entire party before they could try and spread out.

You have been afflicted by Silence. As this is a physical status effect spell, your Willpower is no barrier.

This spell creates complete silence in the affected area, a wide cone fifteen yards across at the widest and twenty yards in length. All sound within is impossible, be it conversation or spells. This spell does not continue to affect the area after being cast; only those in the area at the time of the casting are affected by the silence.

This spell's longevity depends on the level of the caster.

Duration of the spell currently afflicting you: 35 minutes.

This was followed by an even more unwelcome message.

You are in a **Killing Zone**. The enemy has surrounded you and put you entirely on the back foot.

All ranged damage is doubled against your party and its allies.

All close combat attacks have a 25% chance of succeeding.

+50% chance for your allies and party to panic.

Harry had barely time trying curse, no sound coming from his mouth before the first of the attackers were on him. The man was a sword wielder and seemed one of the most heavily armed attackers. Another spellcaster appeared on the second floor, looking down at them from behind the banister.

Name: Tranzig

Class: Level 9 Mage

Race: Human

Gender: Male

A level 9 Mage, Tranzig is a semi-decent spellcaster who is almost entirely self-taught. He is arrogant and somewhat manic when in combat, his normal guise of affable aloofness fading out instantly into a kind of foul-mouthed frenzy. Not battle lust, simple mania. He is highly intelligent and very rich thanks to his contacts with the shadow Cabal, hence his ability to set up this trap.

Tranzig was showing this manic side as Harry hastily read the information off. Instead of launching spells, he began shouting, "Did you think to catch me unawares, adventurers?! My man recognized that blond bitch, and I knew you would be coming for me regardless of anything else, you northern slut!"

Harry had a brief second to wonder why bad guys always wanted to make speeches or taunt their opponents while his sword redirected the second strike aimed his way before striking back. The other man was large, almost equal to Harry's size, and powerfully built under full plate armor. Harry couldn't take the time to read the information that his greater observation skill allowed him on the man now as he came on, but it was clear by the way he battered Harry's sword aside and came back in quickly with his own, locking blades and then pushing them this way and that, trying to get an advantage, that the man was skilled.

However, worse than his current opponent was that Harry could not give orders to his group.

Thankfully, his warning about the butler or whatever the man's position was had put them all on edge, and his shout right before combat began had heightened it. When one of the maids leaped towards the group, Branwen met her halfway, the two women exchanged a series of blows, and then Branwen was carrying the woman's second blade out of the position and punching her in the face hard, sending her stumbling. The short sword the woman had been using fell out of her nerveless grasp a second later from a hammer blow to her arm, and Branwen's next blow took her in the center of the chest. The strike hurled the one called Eleanora to land back first on the dining table with a crash.

Tricia had disappeared just as her fellows had come out of hiding. She reappeared a second later beside Jaheira, stabbing her in the side. Jaheira's chain mail took the blow, even as she gasped, and she twisted around, bringing her scimitar into her hand so quickly it took the woman by surprise. Tricia still blocked the blow, retreating slowly as the other attackers rushed to engage Minsc, Imoen, Viconia, and Khalid.

Edwin and Dynaheir quickly retreated to the doorway, putting the others between them in the most of the attackers, aiming their slingstones at two of the attackers who seemed intent on flanking the rest of the group and attacking them directly. They had seemingly forgotten the mage on the second floor and couldn't aim at the other mage through the tumult.

Another trap went off, and Minsc bellowed in unheard pain as a bear trap caught one of his legs. He flailed and was somehow able to stay on his feet, but his weapons and shields were both out of position, and he took several hard blows to his chest. The Chest Plate +1 that Harry had given him from the treasure from the gnoll chieftain worked, turning many of the blows, denting but not allowing Minsc

to take too much further injury. The next blow shattered one of the horns on his helmet, sending Minsc stumbling, causing him even greater pain from the clamped bared trap on his leg.

But that blow cost the individual who had launched it. Khalid's sword took him across the throat, dumping his body to the ground a second later before coming back into guard, locking with another attacker's blade, twisting and pulling it this way and that until it was out of position, Khalid's shield arm came up, and the edge of his shield caught the man in the wrist.

The other attacker, a thief wielding a short sword, screamed, and since he hadn't been impacted by the Silence spell, that and the sound of his arm breaking joined the growing tumult.

A moment later, Harry was still dealing with his own attacker when Tranzig finished his taunting. A second later, a fireball exploded in the middle of the group. All of them screamed, taking damage, but only Jaheira had to stop and roll to put out a fire growing in her hair while Dynaheir slammed back against the house's outer wall, and Edwin somehow escaped damage while standing right next to her.

For his part, Harry stumbled forward, shocked and angry at not having seen the attack coming. *Dammit, I need to get better at concentrating on multiple things at once.*

He lashed out with a kick that caught his primary attacker on the leg, causing him to stumble. The man's sword strike went wide, and Harry's sword caught him on the side. His blade was turned by the steel plate there, but it visibly dented under the blow of Harry's magical blade, and as the blow hit, Harry willed his magic into the blow, thinking he wanted to make the man fly away.

You have cast a Blood Mage spell.

As it is not a spell of this world or its local magical schools, you will pay a full allotment.

-15 to Health.

Astonishingly, the spell worked far better than Harry had expected. The man was lifted off his feet with a cry of pain and sent hurtling backward into the doorway into the kitchen, where he crashed into the mage there, disrupting his next spell.

Meanwhile, Imoen had activated her skill Fight Like A Jackrabbit. With its help and her natural agility, she was dancing around several attackers, her short sword in hand, as she tried to visualize a spell and figure out what she wanted to do.

A magic missile attack came her way, but Imoen somehow got her tiny buckler up in time to take several of them, only getting hit by two as the buckler, slagged by the successive strikes, fell off her somewhat seared arm. This seemed to surprise one of the thieves attacking her, but a fighter was able to take advantage of it. His hammer slammed into her side, sending her into the startled thief. Both fell to the ground at Viconia and Jaheira's feet.

Imoen recovered faster than the thief, her short sword stabbing into the man twice before she rolled away to avoid another blow from someone else. On the ground, she kicked out, catching that man in the lower leg, upending him into the ground and onto her sword. But she couldn't pull it back in time, and the next second, the same hammer wielder, some cleric or other, crashed into the back of her head while Jaheira and Viconia were busy with several more attackers

Imoen groaned as her face was smashed into the ground, and she tried to push herself to her feet. But another blow to her spine caused her to slump, crying out in agony as her vision swam. Thanks to being at full Health coming into this fight, Imoen was still in the yellow, but only barely, and Imoen could feel something inside her give.

While the sound of Imoen's agony went unheard, Viconia had noticed her plight. She had been near an ornamental vase that somehow had remained undamaged from the earlier Fireball. Now taking a chance, Viconia kicked out at it hard, sending it flying into the side of Imoen's attacker. The next second she had to use the shaft of her hammer to block a sword strike.

This gave Imoen enough time to finish visualizing the spell she wanted, and a cutting spell lashed out from her hand up into the man attacking her. Despite the man's armor, the spell cut the apparently low-level cleric in two, sending blood and viscera everywhere.

This caused Tranzig to start in shock, his spell fizzling out. "What! How did... what just happened? A dual class? No, I've never seen that spell before. Some kind of wand with a new spell on it? It must be. There's no other explanation," the wizard mumbled before his hands began to move again to cast a spell. "I can search her corpse for it after."

This time, Harry saw the Fireball coming. And even as he was locked in battle with two of his attackers, both thieves, thankfully unlike the first man he'd been fighting, had been able to Harry mentally construct the spell he wanted to shape.

An instant before the Fireball flew, Harry let loose with his spell, covering the battlefield with a Protego.

You have used a blood mage spell.

This is not a spell that has many similarities among the magical schools present in this world, and thus you are penalized the full amount.

-15 to Health.

The spell from the enemy wizard hit, splashing across the shield, doing nothing even as Harry stumbled at the second drain to his Health in this fight. A moment later, the spell cut off, but it had done its job.

Above, Tranzig gaped, as did the wizard by the doorway, having pushed the armored fighter off of him. But once more, both tried to explain away what they had seen despite never having witnessed a spell like that before.

Now aware of the threats the two mages posed, Dynaheir and Edwin began to pepper Tranzig and the man in the doorway with sling stones. Both men ducked into cover and began to prepare further spells, although Tranzig was just a little too slow and clutched at his shoulder for a moment in pain.

Vai finally got to her feet, the needle and not having done much damage, but the tripwire part of the trap had lived up to its name. But unlike Harry, she hadn't been caught in the Silence spell. She pulled out and blew on a whistle quickly, three long, loud bursts of sound, and then drew her sword and charged up the stairs. "Tranzig, you are under arrest!"

Unfortunately, Vai ran into another trap, this time a deadfall. The stone under her foot gave way, causing her to again fall forward even as something in her leg broke.

Seeing this, Tranzig laughed manically. "You see, my dear, foolishness like that will get you killed. Arrest? You don't have a cell that could hold me! And if you're waiting for your fellow guards, don't bother. I activated a golem in the kitchen and had one of my men send it outside to keep them busy."

Near the door, Dynaheir cried out in still-silenced pain as a dagger found her back. The thief's sword nearly went entirely through the witch's body, Backstab and Critical Hit, both having activated and doing tremendous damage to her.

Panicking, Edwin turned, bringing around his staff to crack it against the man's head, sending him stumbling. With that, Edwin backed away rapidly into the now-empty dining room as the thief advanced on him.

While Viconia rejoined the struggle against a group of fighters pressing Khalid, Jaheira and Branwen hard, Imoen had pushed herself to her feet. But between the spell she had used, the Magic Missiles and the two hammer blows, she was deep in the red again, just as she had been after the battle with the Ankheg. The next strike from one of the enemy fighters got entirely through her defenses, the sword lashing out and down, cutting through her leather armor and the body underneath to leave a long gash and sending her stumbling backward with another silent cry of agony.

Harry saw this and turned, taking a blow in the side and then another one in the back from his opponent, the same heavy fighter he'd been fighting at the beginning of the battle. But even so, he was able to leap across over one of the dead bodies on the ground to crash bodily into the attacker facing Imoen. He bore the man to the ground, unequipping his shield and sword to grab the man's head smashing it hard into the ground with enough force to shatter his opponent's skull.

Rolling to his feet, he touched Imoen lightly, using his Lay On Hands spell. Thankfully, the spell didn't need any words, and the spell kept her alive and aware just long enough for Harry to shove her toward the door. Harry then turned to block a blow from the heavy fighter who had followed him, battering aside Minsc and Khalid, who were also locked in battle with several others. The three ladies were also hard pressed, Viconia had taken an arrow to her thigh, two archers joining Tranzig by the second-floor balcony.

Why they were late to the battle Harry didn't know, but regardless, their addition took a bad situation into the dire territory. The whole place was a melee now, with spellfire in the form of Acid Arrows slicing down into the adventurers along with arrows from the archers on the second floor.

For a moment, Harry had to fight a bit of despair, even as he battered an attack away with his hastily equipped sword and then pointed peremptorily toward the door. Imoen was too badly injured to be more use in this fight. *And if she can get outside, maybe she can get us some help!*

A movement to his other side drew Harry's eye even as Imoen began to retreat towards the door, moving slowly, something in her back fighting every movement now, along with her other wounds. But Harry had no time to spare for Imoen as Edwin stumbled back, blind now from a cut across

his forehead. As he did, his previously green dot on Harry's map gaining a yellow outline as his courage broke.

Thinking quickly, Harry blocked another blow from the man he was fighting, then disengaged with a kick to the stomach just long enough to turn, equip one of his throwing axes and hurl it toward the woman attacking Edwin. It struck Tricia right in the back, doing a critical hit and backstab damage just as Tricia had to Dynaheir a moment before. With a scream of agony, Tricia fell to the ground beside her previous victim.

Dynaheir had collapsed, either from blood loss or permanently, Harry couldn't tell. Thankfully Branwen and Viconia had just downed another attacker between them, and then Jaheira had nearly slain a second, pushing the man backward. The fight wasn't lost, but the spells and arrows were now taking a toll. Khalid's armor was melting in places due to an acid strike, and Jaheira was favoring her side.

Harry grimaced, realizing as an arrow glanced off his tower shield that he needed to do something, or this fight would go entirely against them. A moment later, Viconia snarled in agony as a series of Magic missiles from the man in the doorway hit her. Like Imoen, she was able to block several with her shield. The Medium Shield +1 Harry had bought her earlier stood up to the strikes doggedly, but one flashed past, nearly dumping her to the ground as it struck her thigh.

But by that point, Harry had crafted the next spell he wanted to use. Even as his shield took another strike from his opponent, Harry pulled his sword back and pointed over the man's shoulder at the second floor. A split second later, a fireball flashed out from the tip of his blade.

You have used a blood mage spell.

Since this use of your magic almost matched the magic of this world, you will only be penalized a minimal amount.

-5 to Health.

Despite the amount of Health it took, the result of this spell was pretty good. The explosion of the Fireball slammed into the area between the two archers to one side and Tranzig to the other. Tranzig cried out in pain, stumbling away from the fire, but both archers were slain, instantly turning into screaming, flailing torches. Vai was also caught at the edge of the explosion and yelled out in anger at the heat of it, but with her leg broken even as she pulled herself out of the trap she had fallen into. Vai was in no place to complain.

But the battle was in no way over.

Viconia gasped as a sword caught her in the side, her chain mail turning the blow, but the strike still caused her some significant injury as something within her seemed to rupture. The next blow, she couldn't stop, and it tore her helmet off, cutting deeply into her cheek.

Then Minsc's claymore took the man in the side. Regardless of the plate armor, the man was wearing, the blow sheared straight through the metal and through his body, cutting him in half as, with a soundless roar of anger, Minsc began to lay out all around him. He had seen his dead or dying Witch, and the Berserker had taken him.

Khalid stumbled away from Minsc, avoiding a strike from his sword and leading one of his opponents into the return strike from the berserk ranger. Jaheira was not so lucky and fell backward with a silent cry as her shield arm, which had taken another strike from the maddened ranger, broke.

Neither of them nor the embattled Viconia saw the man behind Khalid, and Harry's shout of a warning went unheard. The man stepped forward, but Khalid's armor turned the weapon, and Khalid twisted around, viper quick, his sword slicing into the man's side. Thanks to its magical properties and perhaps the weakness of his opponent's armor, the chain mail could not stop the strike, and the man fell, and a few of his ribs shattered.

Seeing Branwen downing another one of their enemies and Edwin returning to the fight with a slingstone to the mage in the kitchen doorway, Harry raced towards the stairs. As he did, another spell lashed out at an attacker, cutting him in two. But now Harry was feeling the effects of the spells he'd been using, his Health deeply in the yellow now.

But he couldn't afford to stop. Just as another fighter engaged him, Harry saw Jaheira was down. Minsc was obviously still locked in his berserk fury, while Khalid was now fighting three other opponents. Viconia was down as well, her face matted with blood through her mask, although Branwen was defending a woozy Jaheira as she tried to get to her feet with one arm.

A moment and a deflected Fire Arrow later, Branwen finished with her own opponent for a moment, and Harry was able to turn from his own to catch her eyes and gesture towards Vai and the stairs, hoping that the Fireball he'd let off had tripped all of the traps on the stairs. He'd seen a single notice and hoped that was the only one.

Then he had to fight against one of the other attackers as he came at them, and for several moments, all Harry could do was concentrate on himself and Khalid, the two of them fighting side by side to the left of where Minsc was still swinging his blade, caught in the bear trap. Together, they fought the four enemies still fighting on the ground floor while Branwen raced up the stairs in Harry's stead.

Where the hell are the guard!?! Surely they should have heard Vai's whistle, Harry growled out as he took another strike to his tower shield. *Thank goodness Imoen, and I used our Repair spells on the trip here.*

A hissing, sizzling noise drew his attention then, and Harry watched in horror as an Acid Arrow crashed into Branwen, melting her armor. With the amount of damage she'd already taken to her armor, the acid finished the job, and she was forced to unequip her armor lest the acid get to her skin. Branwen continued to race up the steps wearing only her underclothing, a heavy shift. As she closed with Tranzig, Harry was forced to turn her attention back to the battle around him as a blow got past his shield to crash into his shoulder.

Tranzig caught her first blow on his staff, stumbling back in the force of it. Then from below, the mage in the doorway fired up at Branwen. Magic Missiles crashed into her legs, puncturing them and dumping her to the ground.

She stumbled, but her anger was such that Branwen didn't fall. She brought her hammer down and around, getting underneath Tranzig's staff to crash into his leg, upending the man. The next second

she was bringing her hammer down on his head just as the wizard below finished another spell. More Magic Missiles burst one after another into Branwen, and a second later, Branwen's head exploded like a rotten pumpkin joining Tranzig's.

Below, Harry didn't see this, gasping as a sword point went in underneath his chest plate's back into his back, but thanks to having moved to adjust his positions slightly, it wasn't a perfect Crippling Blow. The Backstab worked, and Harry howled in agony as he felt his health dip well into the red, and a notification appeared.

You have been backstabbed!

You are now crippled. Your lung has been pierced. You have internal bleeding.

Even with your I've got the Willpower skill passive, Internal Bleeding will kill you within twenty minutes without healing.

Fighting the urge to panic even through the Gamer's Mind, Harry blocked another blow from his opponent in front of him, then, despite already being in the red, Harry lashed out all around him with a cutting curse similar to the one that Imoen had used earlier. Three of the four attackers in front of him and Khalid were caught in the blast and sliced into ribbons.

A second later, Khalid's sword took the attacker who had stabbed Harry through the face. But even as that man fell, Khalid was smashed off his feet by the swordsman that Harry had started the battle dueling. Somehow the man had dodged to the side, using some skill that Harry hadn't seen before and avoiding Harry's magical assault. His Greater Observation ability told him it was Dance Like a ballerina, Strike like an Elephant.

This combat passive is designed to emphasize dodging your opponent's strikes no matter how strange you look. This works particularly well against magical attacks

It is a high-end warrior skill that can only be learned through combat, not taught or found in a training manual.

Then Jaheira was there. Landing on the man's back, she pulled his helmeted head back and sawed her scimitar across his throat.

Harry started moving towards the damned mage in the kitchen doorway, who suddenly realized he was the only one standing. It was only then that Harry became aware of Branwen's body. He paused, and a slingstone took the man in the head. Then Harry rushed up the stairs to Branwen, hoping his first glance had been wrong.

A moment later, Harry stared at Branwen's corpse, Gamer's Mind now working overtime to deaden his emotions. *No head, she can't be revived*, he thought woodenly before slowly turning back and trying to help Vai to her feet, noting the pain-filled, absolutely furious expression on her face.

Below, the mage was now faced with a furious and blood splattered Jaheira rushing toward him. But Edwin's slingstone once more disrupted his spell, and he was forced to raise his staff to defend against the scimitar wielding Jaheira. Furious at the demise of her husband, Jaheira attacked like a mad woman, and soon the last attacker was down.

Seeing that, Harry smiled, wanly stopping his efforts to pull Vai out of the trap. Instead, he slumped to the top of the stairs, leaning against the banister as his vision swam. Blackness and red started to fight to cover his vision, and he didn't even acknowledge Jaheira racing up towards him or the door opening and Imoen rushing inside, followed by several battered guardsmen as unconsciousness took him.

The last thing he saw before darkness swept in was a single box in his line of vision.

Congratulations, you have leveled up!

End Chapter

Well guys, hope you liked this.

You might notice that I enhanced the quest for the dagger in order to introduce Durlag's Tower early. I decided that Ulgoth's Beard and the quests/people there were not worth keeping around. Most of the characters there will appear in Baldur's Gate itself. NO, the party is not strong enough to head to the Tower just yet. Yes, they will do so before going on to the events in Baldur's Gate. The Soul Taker Dagger will also be a reason to introduce a certain character early...

And this last battle will spur Harry and the others to realize they need to get stronger before pushing their overall goal of investigating Sarevok and his followers. They just got reamed by an admittedly large, but not very high level group of Adventurers because they weren't prepared.