

I am not British, nor a programmer.

Before the chapter begins, I neglected to check where Everska was before posting the last chapter. It is nowhere near Baldur's Gate, unfortunately, which means that Xan's original reasons for being in the mines is not accurate. I will go back and rewrite that segment to match the reality tomorrow, but I go into details here as to why he was after Mulahey, and kind of build up that character a bit.

Also, While **Morte24** has gone through 2/3rds of this chapter, he hasn't gotten the last portion back to me. You will note a * in the normal scene break notification where the segment he hasn't seen begins.

Beyond that, I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 10: Washed Away

Everyone remained silent as Xan explained the trouble he had run into on the next level of the mine-turned-dungeon. "To be truthful, I am uncertain how they divined my presence after getting down this far. Certainly never of the clumsy miners, slaves or kobolds saw me. Still, I suppose my expertise in traps is somewhat lacking, and I rely on my Grey Cloak too much. so perhaps I tripped something down there. Such is life I suppose, one should always be aware that it is fleeting. But perhaps we should look on the bright side. I didn't die immediately. Of course that was so that I would be tortured and used to spice the kobolds' meals, but at least my inevitable doom was delayed."

As Xan fell into what seemed a well-trodden refrain, Harry took a glance up from where he was cooking to glance over to where Xan's information rested at the corner of his eyes.

Name: Xan

Class: Enchanter Greycloak of Everska, level 5

Xan is a Greycloak – investigators and hunters – of Everska, the largest and most ancient elven city in Faerun. He is a morose fellow whose luck seems to have turned on him here in the Nashkel mines. As an Enchanter and Greycloak, which is a very specialized class, Xan has a very mixed bag of abilities. Beware, for Xan is also fanatical about finding his moonblade, the symbol of his status as a Greycloak. This weapon is magically bonded to Xan, and being without it is the same as missing a hand or foot.

Relationship status: N/A

While willing to work with you for a time, Xan has duties that will take him back to Everska after your mutual enemy, Mulahey, is dealt with.

That, Harry reflected, is probably a good thing. He seems to be rubbing Jaheira and Khalid the wrong way, and if he really is morose he's going to set off Imoen either by her wanting to needle him, or just getting on her nerves.

As if to add some evidence to Harry's thoughts, Jaheira commanded, "Enough maudlin talk, tell us what you saw." Despite having mellowed noticeably once she began to eat Harry's food, she was still very annoyed with the Everska elf.

Xan tried to glare at Jaheira, but his rumbling stomach took his attention away for a moment. After a few bites, he began once more, continually speaking a few words before breaking off to take another bite. "The stairwell, it is an actual set of stairs not a natural formation or tunnel, comes out onto a large, cleared area, a cavern much like this one. It abuts another. The opening is about seven, perhaps eight feet wide. But the size of the opening matters not, because the majority of it opens out into water."

"Water?" Harry inquired, handing over another sandwich to Xan as he spoke. "like on the second floor, a natural underground lake?"

"Not big enough to constitute a lake, no. A small pool, rather, although the depth of it is undoubtedly deep enough to drown us all in its depths with ease. A walkway of stone leads out from the entrance to what looked like a small hut of some kind, or perhaps a small cave? I don't know, as I was ambushed at the entrance to that area. The water will undoubtedly propagate many gray slimes, and the area that we will come out into will be covered with kobolds."

Before anyone else could tug Xan up short on his downward spiral, the elf paused, frowning. "Or rather, it was. I believe that your destruction of the various dungeon Heart Stones might stop that. Although of course that just means our doom will come in some other fashion."

"Hmmm... what about traps?" Imoen mused, one eyebrow rising in query.

"Many of those. I detected and deactivated two near the stairwell, but one eluded me, of course. That led to my Hide-in-Shadows being compromised and to my eventual doom, if not for your lucky intervention," Xan agreed.

"And what of this Mulligan fellow? You mentioned you had seen him and that he was seemingly behind everything occurring here in the mines," Dynaheir questioned, biting into her own stew. "By the Spirits of Earth and Air, Harry, your food truly is magnificent."

While Harry thanked the dusky-skinned woman for her words, Xan thought, chewing, before replying, gently correcting the witch's misname. "Mulahey was indeed there. I imagine that the central edifice I espied is his home down here. After all, while he might be working with these kobolds, he is human, and will surely need his own space. Kobolds carry certain diseases that can transfer over to humans with ease... and fleas."

The little word play made some of his listeners smile, although Xan didn't seem to notice, going on in the same morose, sighing sort of tone. "I think, although I am uncertain on this, that there was another entrance as well."

Harry spent a few moments eating his own meal, then set it down, staring around them. "I don't like the fact that we're coming through the front door like this. But we don't actually have another door to go through, unless anyone thinks they could find this second entrance from the surface?"

Everyone there shook their heads, and then Khalid ended that argument with the weight of a battleship. "B, b, besides, if we leave the dungeon, it w, w, will start to rebuild itself. A, after a week, it w, will, will be back to full strength."

"It's always a week?" Harry leaned forward in interest.

"Yes it is. If one cannot clear a dungeon completely, then after a week, it will have reformed its numbers, spawn points and natural dangers. That doesn't include traps, as those are laid by the denizens of the dungeon, but everything else will be rebuilt."

So there is no do over here, understood, Harry mused internally, shaking his head. *And obviously that means the quest to clear the dungeon couldn't be completed either.*

For the rest of the meal, Harry and the others questioned Xan about how he had gotten down here, why he was interested in Mulahey and the cavern below them, and his abilities. As Harry's observation skill had told him, Xan had a very varied bag of tricks. As an Enchanter, he should specialize in spells to enhance abilities and attacks, but he didn't have any of those spells remaining in mind. Instead, he had two Acid Arrow spells, a few Charm Person spells, and a Color Spray attack spell. He also had the Knock spell, which Harry hadn't heard of before.

Beyond that, Xan wore a light gambeson. He was missing the so-called Greycloak, which apparently was heavily enchanted for him (or by him, Harry wasn't certain), but the gambeson at least would give him some protection, as Harry and the others weren't carrying any extra armor.

Perhaps just as importantly in the long term was the information Xan shared about his current mission. He had tracked Mulahey here from near the elven city of Everska, where the human male had attempted to enter for some reason past the mighty magical defenses. He had apparently been involved in some foul rite Xan didn't go into designed to make a hole in those defenses. It had failed, but that kind of thing was something the Greycloaks took very seriously, and the cities elders, called the Hill Elders for some reason, had dispatched Xan to find out why the attempt had been made.

During his hunt, Xan had learned Mulahey apparently was known as a professional problem-causer. He was willing to do anything, work with anyone in order to cause chaos. "He

is a priest of Cyric, which means that every death and piece of chaos he causes is in a way a homage to his god.”

“What kind of spells does he have?” Harry asked, watching Branwen warily as a creaking sound came from her. The name of the dread god Cyric seemed to infuriate her, her hand now gripping her hammer’s shaft in a way that threatened to shatter the wood.

“I witnessed him using a modified version of Entangle, one with thorns, in a battle against some particularly stupid bandits. Another spell that somehow targets the mind, though I do not know the specific spell,” Xan sighed. “Beyond that, I know he wore chain mail when he questioned me, along with a mace at his belt. Such is the totality of my knowledge of his combat skills despite how long I have chased him. Perhaps I do not deserve my rank as a Greycloak.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Harry made a note of the spells then asked some questions about Mulahey’s past. Xan had followed him across several countries, but when asked about who Mulahey was working for now, had no answer. “He is loyal if nothing else. I believe he works for a large cabal, but it is not the Xhentarim. Nor does he work for the priesthood of Cyric as a whole, or at least he seems to have gone out of his way since I began to stalk him to keep away from other followers of that foul god. No, he represents someone new hiding the shadows.”

“And he came up from Amn to Nashkel?” Jaheira questioned, scowling once more, although this time the scowl was about what Xan was saying rather than Xan himself. “Blast it. We, my husband and I, were somewhat leaning to Baldur’s Gate being the source of this chaos in the Sword Coast. They are a bit more open in terms of those who can wield wealth and power, and Amn has the Shadow Thieves. But we have yet to find any real evidence pointing in that direction.”

“Ah, do not put that thought away. I am certain Mulahey deliberately came up from Amn overland,” Xan answered in the affirmative. “He arrived in Athkatla by sea, and certainly could have gone to Baldur’s Gate faster by sea. No, he made that decision intentionally. I had thought it was to throw me off, but now you say it, that seems to be false hubris on my part. Mulahey had no idea of my presence such a small threat was I, and now that you say that, that choice of travel could be to muddy the waters further.”

“True. We haven’t discovered anything pointing to either Amn or Baldur’s Gate strongly. What we’ve found shows that whoever it is isn’t tied to the current power structure, although they have a **lot** of money. Beyond that, they have a way with bandits, monsters, and an extremely proficient alchemist.”

At that, Harry glanced at Xan, but he shook his head. “No. Mulahey has shown no sign of being an alchemist of any sort. Indeed, he isn’t able to create his own healing potions. I saw him buying several of them, and even a most evil-aligned Priests can create impure healing potions.”

Shrugging Harry gestured around them. "Well, this place is pretty defensible. Minsc, you and I will be on first watch, Imoen and Khalid next. Let's get a good eight hours sleep before we move on, folks."

OOOOOOO

Astonishingly, the group indeed got a good eight hours sleep in without interruption. It was clear their destruction of the Heart Stones was having an impact, as no new spawns came upon them. After a small breakfast, and once more wearing the Ring of Infravision and the Prince's Ring of +1 to protect herself, Imoen scouted ahead, moving down the stairwell quickly.

By the time she reached the open cavern at the bottom Imoen was already using Detect Traps, and she could see easily that whatever Xan might have said, the traps he had disarmed were back. There were at least six traps she could see, and that was before she got to the far end of the cavern and its entrance to the walkway over the water.

Yet while undoing the traps was somewhat easy, there were seven kobolds here in the first cavern, all of them the elite fire arrow users. *Still, I bet I can deal with them easily enough. And there's no one around now...*

With that, Imoen gestured, and a Leviosa spell picked up several rocks nearby, which she tossed forward with a gentle movement of her fingers, the spell not having broken her Hide-in-Shadows thanks to her body not moving as she used it.

You have used a modified Blood Mage spell, *Leviosa*. -10 to health.

While the hit to her health was less than nice as always, the spell did its work. Each of the rocks smacked down into two traps, setting them off. Two of the kobolds died to their own hidden barbs, while another keened in agony, one of its legs clamped in another trap.

This set the surviving kobolds to moving this way and that, trying to figure out where the enemy was, which activated two more traps. The kobold commandos might be elite troops in terms of their ability with their bows and special arrows, but in every other manner they were still just kobolds. That meant they were somewhat stupid, and when they were attacked, they fell quickly.

The traps nearly swept the room, and Imoen came out of Hide-in-Shadows, launching an arrow at the last of the kobolds. The creature died, and Imoen waited where she was, mind at the ready to use a spell just in case something was hiding. But there was nothing, and after a moment, Imoen was once more hidden in Hide-in-Shadows, moving forward.

The doorway where Xan had been attacked was just as he had described, and she found another trap there. Disarming it quickly, she then moved forward over the walkway, its sides lapped by the water within which Imoen could see several grey oozes moving. *Crud, and those things are immune to normal weapons too. Still, we have built up more than two dozen fire arrows, and the wizards have most of their spells too.*

More importantly, there were a few traps there too. Two easily gave way, somewhat odd given how much trouble she'd had the traps up on the other level. *Oh, no, that was too easy, and the why is... yep.* Beyond those traps was a third, and Imoen grimaced as her attempt to undo it failed. *Fuck. But if I try again, will my Hide-in-Shadows fade?* Grimacing, she moved away from the trap, looking around.

As Xan had implied there was what looked to be a kind of mound hollowed out in the center of the cavern. There was a fire inside it, and indeed several torches lighting up the cavern, quite unlike the kobold zone of the third floor. And in what looked like the entrance to the cave was a somewhat thin and spindly man, sitting on what looked like a patio chair smoking a pipe. He wore a set of chain mail over a dark purple gambeson. At his side, Mulahey wore a spiked mace and a medium shield.

He was also staring at the entranceway straight through where Imoen was standing. If not for the fact that she knew her Hide-in-Shadows hadn't been broken that would've been really creepy. As it was, she simply shook her head and continued to study the area. There was what looked like a landing at the far end of the cavern, but there didn't seem to be any kind of pathway to it. There was a walkway around the center mound though.

When she returned to the others what she had seen, Imoen scowled and admitted she had made a mistake. "I think this Mulahey guy knew we were coming and set those traps and kobolds here as an early warning system. Which I sprang. Sorry, guys."

"What's done is done," Harry hummed thoughtfully. "But you did take out all the traps in the water-cavern?"

"Only the first two by the entrance. I figured they were just too easy and after looking again, I spotted another one set directly in the middle of the path. I tried to undo it but couldn't."

Nodding, Harry looked at Jaheira. "Could you summon up some animals? I want our backdoor guarded. And Edwin, summon up some monsters to send forward to spring that trap and any others out there."

"A most intelligent thought," Edwin approved. "It seems that even a simian can learn."

Snorting Harry went on. "Then you and Dynaheir please use Fireball and Smog. Hopefully the monsters will draw out the gray oozes, and that'll enable us to clear the board of them first. Given the trouble that we ran into with the Knoll Chieftain, I do not want us to fight both the monster mob and a Dungeon Boss, no matter if he's actually a human outside the dungeon if we can help it."

"He shows much wisdom for someone so young," Xan murmured to Jaheira. "One would almost think he had lived to be fifty, instead of being a merely human eighteen."

If he thought to make fun of Harry and thus create some kind of solidarity between long-lived folk, he failed miserably. Jaheira's eyes narrowed, and Khalid shook his head with a sigh. "S, s, since we have met young Harry, he has a, a, always kept his attention firmly on the idea t, t, that his first job is to keep his party alive. H, h, he's become quite g, g, good at it."

Harry sent Khalid a grin and a nod, indicating he understood that was a compliment. Meanwhile, Harry had been looking at the information that had popped up on his map when Imoen caught sight of the man, scowling.

Name: Mulahey.

Class: level 10 priest of Cyric.

Race: Human

Gender: Male

While only a level ten priest, Mulahey is still the dungeon Master, and as such, will have a near unlimited source of magical power. This will allow him to use spells far beyond his normal level although the number of spells he uses will still be limited by that level. What those levels might be you cannot tell at this range. Mulahey will be tougher, stronger and faster than any normal priest, empowered by the dungeon he has helped to create.

Warning: Mulahey will also act like a Heart Stone! While this is unusual, so too is having a living human become part of a dungeon.

Mulahey's cavern will spawn Grey Ooze in reaction to his Heart Stone Aura in ever diminishing returns as the battle goes on.

Scowling, Harry moved back to the others, removing the spell from himself. He whispered out what he said seen to Khalid as he passed, who quickly gave the information to Jaheira. Although Harry was surprised to see Xan twitching his ears in the half-elf's direction, as if he too heard Khalid's stuttered words.

"All right, let's do it. Branwen up with me again, right behind the summoned monsters. Imoen and Xan at the back with Dynaheir and Edwin. Let's have a bit of space between that group and the two in the front line. Minsc, you'll be in that space. Khalid you too. Keep the summoned creatures Jaheira summoned behind you, Imoen. Branwen, you and I will try to close with Mulahey as fast as possible, if we can. But if there are too many grey oozes, we'll pull back and play for the long game."

They all nodded, and Edwin and Jaheira used their summoning spells. At a gesture the two orcs that Edwin had summoned into being moved forward, while the wolves that Jaheira had summoned stayed still in the main cavern snarling and facing the walls and the stairs.

The two orcs were about quarter of the way across the pathway over the water toward Mulahey before they sprang the first trap that Imoen had warned them about. Bear traps appeared but another trap right in front of that one which she hadn't seen activated as well. Spikes all along the pathways shot straight up into their feet, and both orcs fell screaming.

However, their sacrifice did the the trick.

While human or perhaps even kobold troops could have stopped themselves from revealing their position, the grey oozes were animals, mindless monsters acting on instinct when they sensed movement. Sensing the two orcs they instantly pulled themselves out of the water and began to ooze towards them. A second later, they were hit by the fireball from Edwin, and the sleeping fog from Dynaheir.

The fireball wounded five of the grey oozes, one so much it actually caught on fire. In contrast, the sleeping fog didn't do anything to the oozes, presumably because they didn't really sleep, and it didn't spread fast enough to catch Mulahey as the dark priest quickly used his own spell to protect himself.

Mulahey has used the spell **Clear Air**.

This is a spell that is used to do precisely what it says, clear the air. This will negate enemy spells which impact the quality of the air, or any natural gases that are in the area which the caster could not survive breathing. It's a good, all around spell, especially for someone who apparently has been living in the depths of a mine.

By that point, Branwen and Harry had pushed their way out onto the path, but Harry's hope of getting completely across the expanse to close with Mulahey proved fruitless. The spike trap didn't reset, instead covering the pathway with spikes that slowed his and Branwen's charge.

Meanwhile more grey oozes appeared pulling themselves up out of the water with a sound like 'glorp', blocking their path forward, the spikes not bothering them. More moved forward from the water, their slime-substance letting the slimes move on the water like solid stone.

As he charged forward, Harry took a brief moment to be grateful he had kept longsword +1 they had found in the gnoll's fortress. It would let him kill the grey oozes when they got close. But even as he thought that, Harry noticed that Branwen hadn't called for her Spiritual Hammer and cursed. "Remember Branwen they are immune to normal weapons!"

"Ah, I had forgotten glorious leader. My thanks." With that, Branwen took a step back, and began to call upon Tempus.

Grumbling, Harry shifted to the side to protect her, calling up Minsc as he did so to help as best he could. "And remember to use magically enhanced weapons!"

As the grey oozes pressed forward, Minsc barely got there in time, wielding the Chesley Crusher to ward off the oozes just as a piece of ooze got past Harry's defense to hit Branwen in the leg. She stumbled back but did not lose her spell even as the ooze. A moment later, the Spiritual Hammer appeared in her hand, and she struck out, knocking a quarter of the health from one of the grey oozes.

"That's right, get them my pretties, get them! You will never leave this cavern alive!" Mulahey roared in delight thrusting his mace towards the adventurers as if directing the oozes forward.

"That's it?" Imoen exclaimed from behind Harry, her voice audible now as the flames of Edwin's fireball subsided. "I thought the villain was supposed to always monologue and tell you something important. I am bitterly disappointed in my fantasy books, seriously."

Harry couldn't help but laugh as did Branwen even as they struck the grey oozes which were now pushing in from either side. However, it was slow going. The Grey oozes squirmed and thrust out, crashing into shield and armor, and Branwen's attack wasn't doing much damage. And quickly, more and more grey oozes appeared, pushing forward ahead of them. Some even began to lob bits of their slime over the heads of others, keeping Imoen and the archers hopping around in the opening.

This was made worse when Mulahey gestured to either side. His mace's movements had in fact been a summoning spell which he finished quickly. When the spell ended, ten Skeleton Archers appeared, pulling themselves out of the ground of the walkway around Xan's cave.

Mulahey has used Animate Dead (advanced).

Animate Dead is a level 3 Priest spell that pulls a Skeleton Warrior from the ground to fight for the summoner. No, there doesn't actually have to be bodies around for this spell to be cast. Usually this spell summons one warrior per level after level three, but Mulahey has become a Dungeon Boss, and as such, can use the spell at a far higher level than his base ability may suggest.

Instantly the Skeleton Archers began to fire at them, aiming at Branwen, who had just slain a Grey Ooze. As a priest of a Good-aligned god, she seemed the natural enemy of the undead creatures, as Harry knew that they wouldn't notice his own status as a paladin until he used his Turn Undead skill.

For her part, Branwen would have been in danger, if not for the fact that Harry had given her the Amulet of Protection they had gotten in the circus outside Nashkel when Branwen joined them. That provided enough of a defense that most of the arrows didn't do anything. Harry saw her health was still dropping as each of them struck leg or chest, but none of them penetrated. Harry too felt a few arrows hit his tower shield, and he grimaced.

With the spikes on the ground slowing their advance, with the Grey Oozes pressing on either side they weren't going to get to Mulahey quickly. "Branwen, fall back to Minsc, we'll fort up! Edwin, Dynaheir, Khalid, concentrate on Mulahey. We'll hold the oozes back," Harry ordered. "Xan, Color spray on the left flank."

Now Harry and Branwen moved back in lockstep, shortening the front once more, halting the oozes who had been making for Khalid and Minsc, who had resumed his position at the start of the walkway. When Harry and Branwen took their place, the Ranger and half-elf fell back, and the others retreated back into the other cavern slightly. Minsc kept using the Crusher to help Branwen and Harry hold the front line, while Khalid started to use bow and arrow. Unfortunately, this was a little too muddled for them to form a new formation and get a bonus.

But that was alright by Harry. With Minsc backing them, Harry and Branwen pulled the attention of the oozes to them, so they didn't try to get past the trio to attack the long-range fighters, which they could have given the ooze's ability to move on the water.

Xan moved to one side of the entranceway, thrusting his hands out toward the waterway on the left of the entranceway. The Oozes there were quickly bathed by the spell Xan had described earlier, which indeed looked like a rainbow.

Xan has used Color Spray.

A low level Alteration type spell this invocation creates a spray of multi-colored magic that blinds and knocks unconscious low-level enemies caught in its spray. Despite looking like a rainbow, there is nothing nice about it, as even doing damage to those caught under its enchantment will not wake up.

A moment later the front stabilized and Branwen began to lay into the now comatose oozes facing her side of the walkway.

Meanwhile, the archers and wizards were trying to suppress their fellows and target Mulahey, as Harry had asked. Magic Missiles from Dynaheir impacted the priest of Cyric. The man squawked in outrage, and began a defensive spell, although the strike didn't seem to inconvenience him much. Indeed, it didn't even slow his spell, which washed over his body a second before Edwin's next fireball landed.

Mulahey has used Protection From Fire.

Just like it says on the tin, this is a level 3 Priest spell. Available across the board regardless of faith the alteration spell protects the target from fire. Over fifty percent of fire damage is negated, with more added on per every level beyond level 3.

Two of the Skeleton Archers exploded as the fiery impact lashed over their forms. But the others were just hurt and continued to fire shifting that fire onto the mages causing Edwin to fall back. "Curse that foolish chaos-worshipping simian, I despise it when my magics are so blocked by those of less wit."

“Switch to dealing with the grey oozes then! We need to thin their numbers. Jaheira, try to break Mulahey’s attention!” Harry ordered, grunting as a bit of ooze got past his shield, striking his foot. The slime tried to pull him off the walkway, but Harry’s magically enhanced sword sliced down and into the ooze, forcing it away before a stab finished that ooze off. Only for two more to take its place.

Behind the embattled frontline, Jaheira heard Harry’s orders (though she thought of it more as a request), and targeted her Summon Animal spell to the other side of the battered line of Skeleton Archers. A moment later, two wolves suddenly appeared on the rocky promontory right outside Mulahey’s cavern, and immediately began to attack the skeleton archers.

In response, Mulahey used Dispel Magic, although his spell was more powerful than the version of the spell Harry had seen before. The spell dissipated both skeleton archers and animals. An instant later, Mulahey used another summoning spell, grinning evilly as the grey oozes continued to press the front line back. A moment later, he began another spell which spat out towards the party.

Mulahey has used Evil Entangle.

Much like the regular druid or Priest spell, this spell creates entrapping vines and blades of grass throughout the target area. This spell however has been modified to be used in a smaller area and not just work on the ground. Mulahey has also imbued the spell with a bit of Evil magic. The entangling vines this spell creates has thorns which can wound those trapped.

“Get back!” Harry shouted, but the spell was traveling too quickly for him to do anything more.

The spell struck, and the vines caught Jaheira, Khalid and Minsc, both half-elves crying out in pain as thorn-covered vines caught at their legs. Minsc simply bellowed, pulling at his legs and making the injuries from the thorns worse.

From the sides of the entranceway and the roof vines groped for the adventurers. One caught Minsc in the helmet, another tried to catch Imoen only to flail at where she had stood as she jumped backward. Another though caught Xan, the thorns digging deep into his shoulder as he cried out. “Damn it, we are all doomed, doomed to tentacle hell!”

“Oh god why did you say that!” Imoen grumbled, firing an arrow into a grey Ooze that had been about to flank Branwen. The grey oozes were undaunted by the flailing vines coming from the walls and walkway, their slime-forms allowing them to just move through the vines like they would ignore strikes from nonmagical weapons.

However, Khalid and Xan’s attacks had also struck Mulahey, and he stumbled back, angry at the flame arrow that struck him. But it was Xan’s extremely accurate slingstone that did the most damage. It caught him right in the eye, and Dungeon Boss or no Mulahey was still

human. That shot blinded him in that eye for a moment, though it didn't take out his eye as it should have. As a Dungeon Boss, Mulahey's basic endurance had been enhanced to a decent degree.

This still allowed Harry and the front line warriors to dispatch several of the grey oozes, although Branwen too was caught in the vines, and Harry took a hit to his backplate from one of the questing vines. Luckily the pain from the thorns didn't do much damage to the more well-armored among the band.

For a few moments, there was no spellcasting from either side as the oozes and the frontline fighters exchanged blows, and Imoen and a slightly wounded Xan tried to hit Mulahey only to fail.

A moment later, Dynaheir, who had retreated back out of the area effected by the Entangle spell, used a Dispel Magic of her own. With that, and with the Grey Oozes now attacking only from one side as their numbers started to ebb, Harry was able to see that the spike trap had reset. "Xan use Knock on the walkway!"

Blinking at the command, Xan took a moment to reply. As he did, Khalid and Jaheira rejoined the fight, although Jaheira waited a moment to cast a healing spell on Khalid, who had been limping. Khalid had been caught by several of the entangling vines, and the thorns had caught him in the back of the knee, lacerating him. In contrast, Jaheira's chain mail and hauberk had been dented and torn in places, but her legs had avoided damage as she had been caught by a vine which had grown out of the side of the entryway.

Xan has used Knock.

A spell devised for mages who don't want to travel with thieves but still want to steal stuff, this spell can do a myriad number of things, as Xan told you. This includes anything from opening locked doors to destroying the inner workings of traps.

With a low-key grinding noises that came from under their feet the spike trap broke.

"Charge!" Harry ordered and he and Branwen started forward.

Yet the now-recovered Mulahey wasn't done with his little surprises. As soon as they reached the halfway point of the walkway, he pulled a lever of some kind, and a new path rose out of the water leading to the back of the cavern, where Xan had spotted what could be another entrance. "Come out my pretties, it is time to feed these fools to our oozes!"

"We are not your pretties, you ass!" Shouted a female voice as a group of four women came out from behind the central area across the water, racing forward towards the embattled adventurers across the new pathway. "I'm very sorry I am, or really rather not, because there is a price on your head. The iron throne be wanting you dead son of Gorion," shouted one of them. And in my Cyric's name, I will have you!"

The four women were a motley crew. The woman in the lead was well armored, with plate mail and a gambeson the same color as Mulahey, although the woman's plate mail descended to cover her crotch in a way that looked like it was supposed to be a leotard, with her thighs covered by mesh until they met knee-high boots. She also had a very overdone armor bust. In her hand, she wielded a mace, carried a medium shield and on her head she had a horned helmet.

Name: Lamalha, cleric of Cyric

Another cleric of Cyric, Lamalha is about as blood-mad as they come. Leader of the all-women team of assassins called the Amazons, she is vindictive, sadistic, cold-blooded, and is a literal gusher for murder. Get the picture? She is one bad woman. She also likes mind-assault type magic.

Beside her another woman in heavy armor stalked like a tigress, gulping down a potion as she came. Yet while Lamalha's face was one only a mother could love, this woman was immensely attractive, a pert nose, thin cheeks, perfectly kissable lips with red lipstick and long eyelashes. She too wore plate mail that looked more like a leotard near the belt, although she lacked the fishnet thigh stockings, instead having sensible leather leggings marked with scales here and there. Her weapons were the same as Lamalha, although her mace was not the spiked variety.

Name: Zeera, Cleric of Cyric.

Although a Cleric of the murder-bastard like Lamalha, Zeera prefers to preach up close and personal. Her armor is the same, but she moves like someone better-trained than her companion. Don't let her good looks fool you. While she won't enjoy flaying or dominating your mind, the idea of bringing her mace in conjunction with your head will still make this woman happier than an artist with an unlimited budget and a cornucopia of hallucinogens to test.

Behind the two of them stood two long-range combatants, although they didn't look nearly as intimidating as the two women in the lead. One of them was a thief who wore leather armor that looked almost like a bikini complete with a bare midriff.

Name: Maniera, fighter/thief.

Despite wearing an outfit that looks more like a marital aid than armor, Maniera is actually quite dangers. You can tell her barely there leather bikini is enchanted. Despite her short sword, she is a long range fighter, and you need to be aware of her darts, as they look to be enchanted too.

The last figure was actually the most normal. Another woman, she wore a simple hood and leather armor combination, and bore a longbow. Only a hint of long hair could be seen, and unlike the others, you could barely see a hint of chest.

Name: Telka, Fighter/Thief

Another Fighter/Thief, Telka is the last member of the Amazons. While not as eye-catching as her fellows, the longbow in her hands should not be underestimated. You can tell her leather armor is enchanted like Maniera's, and possibly something with her arrows or quiver.

Grimacing, Harry and Branwen paused in their charge across the walkway, turning to receive the two attackers racing forward. This pause, and the fact the rest of the party was busy cleaning up the last of the Grey Oozes, allowed Mulahey to use another spell aiming behind the front line combatants.

Mulahey has used Hold Person. Imoen has failed the Willpower save.

Behind Harry, Imoen paused mid-pull, her eyes wide as she froze in place, one arm behind her head stuck there by the spell. From her frozen lips a scream of pure frustration came, causing Xan and Edwin to both flinch a bit.

And then, right before she came close enough to be within range of Branwen and Harry, Lamalha paused, casting a spell of her own.

Lamalha has used Rigid Thinking.

This is a level 3 invocation type spell that many Priests can use on single targets. Don't ask about the name of the spell, it's a mystery even to the Priests who use it. When under the effects of the Rigid Thinking spell, the victim will randomly wander, attack the nearest person, or stand confused.

The spell struck Dynaheir, and a brief message that signaled she had failed to resist it sprang up in Harry's sight. The Rashemani witch cried out in pain as her spell rebounded and then her eyes went vacant and she stumbled back, turning and flailing at Edwin and Imoen before wandering off. As she did, Harry noticed her dot on his HUD's map had turned yellow.

Seeing that double hit to their back line, Harry paused for just a moment, shouting out, "Edwin, keep up the pressure on Mulahey, Khalid, close with him! Jaheira one offensive spell, then defensive!"

However, beside Harry, Branwen didn't seem to care what had happened to Dynaheir and had not paused. Now lashed out towards the two female clerics, launching into a... theological discussion as her blow sent Lamalha stumbling, although the woman had taken the strike on her shield. "Foul accursed worshiper of the mad one, I will slay you and your brother-in-vileness both!"

"HAH! You, I can see the touch of Tempus, that oaf on you, blonde one! Why not come to our side, I assure you that Lord Cyric will introduce you to far more refined sensations than that one," Zeela taunted.

"Never!" Branwen shouted, her Spiritual Hammer crashing down into Zeela's shield.

However, as Zeela set her feet and pushed back, this left Lamalha open, and she lashed out towards Harry with a spell, hoping to incapacitate him before he could join Branwen.

Lamalha has used Rigid Thinking.

Rigid Thinking has failed due to your high Willpower.

“You’re going to have to do better than that!” Harry taunted as he joined Branwen, his sword flicking out.

Blocking the blow, Lamalha snarled at his dismissal of her spell. “Keep that bitch off me, Zeera, I’m going to break his will, and...”

That was as far as she got before Branwen’s hammer slammed into her shield, sending her stumbling backwards almost off of the walkway. “You do not have enough time to bandy taunts with Harry right now. This priest of Tempus is in your face, you stupid, murder-worshipping whore!” Branwen barked.

Behind Harry, Khalid moved forward now that the way across to Mulahey was cleared. At the same time an Entangle spell struck. While unable to create vines from the water, the new walkway and a portion of the walkway around the central hump of dirt were covered by the vines. Mulahey and three of the Amazons, both long-range fighters and Zeera, found themselves captured in the vines, unable to move.

But this didn’t stop them from being deadly. Imoen took a fire arrow to the chest but couldn’t even move due to being held in place. She was defended by her Prince’s ring, but even so, her health dipped, and Jaheira turned her attention to her even as a dart whizzed by her head. And the entangle didn’t stop Mulahey, from using Animate Dead once more. Several skeleton warriors, both archers and halberd users, appeared. The halberd wielders moving forward to engage Khalid along the walkway, keeping him from their master.

At the same time, Edwin fell back with a cry as he took another arrow to the chest from Telka. Once more, Jaheira was instantly there pulling the arrow out and healing the wound, while the archer took an acid arrow from Xan in return. This caused her to scream as she convulsed and stumbled back, but Telka wasn’t killed outright thanks to her enchanted leather armor, although portions of it did melt away.

As Harry and Branwen were busy trying to keep the two new clerics from launching further spells (although Zeela didn’t seem in any rush to do so) Mulahey cackled. “Yes, yes, fight, fight for Lord Cyric! The Iron Throne will know who it’s greatest servant is, Tazok, you bastard! I know you led these fools to me I know it!”

“Ah, now that is more like it,” Imoen grumbled as she finally overcame the Hold Person spell on her. She instantly fired, targeting the dart Mulahey, interrupting another spell.

A second later, Dynaheir was back too, her own Willpower having let her slowly overcome the oddly named Rigid Thinking spell. But even as she started a spell, Dynaheir fell back once more with a cry of pain as a dart from the silent Maniera crashing into her head with punishing force.

Even as he turned the mace of Lamalha away, Harry noticed that Dynaheir's had been hit by the Blind debuff. The blood from the head wound she had just sustained had dripped into Dynaheir's eyes, blinding her as surely as if she had been hit by a spell.

Jaheira turned to her, while now healed, Edwin rejoined the battle targeting the few remaining grey oozes that were trying to assault Minsc, where he was standing protecting Harry and Branwen's back, unable to close with the new enemies. "Minsc, know that this is nothing to do with you, you are simply in the way of my mighty magic! I do not wish to have to deal with a berserker as well as these new enemies," Edwin shouted, sounding almost panicky. The Acid arrow to the chest had somewhat unmanned the haughty wizard.

The Thayan wizard's last fireball spell flew from his outstretched hands. This finished off the oozes while also wounding Minsc, fallen back grimacing at the flame that rolled over him.

Seeing his backfield having trouble with the skeleton archers and the Amazons, Khalid having trouble, Harry turned slightly away from the Amazons, taking a chance. Using his Item Box ability he switched out to his throwing hammers, and the next second he hurled one towards the archer, Telka. The hammer crashed into the slight woman and she was hurled off her feet with a cry of agony.

But Harry almost paid for this momentary distraction. Lamalha's mace darted past Branwen's block, aiming at Harry's back. He turned, grunting under the impact as he took the blow on his shield, thankful for his Sword and Shield Style buffs that made such moves automatic.

His other hand empty at present due to his having thrown the throwing hammer a moment ago, Harry tried to grab at her mace's shaft, trying to pull it out of position, but failed. Lamalha's strength was equal to his own and she simply pulled back out of range of his grasping hand and raised her mace high.

Before she could strike, Harry's tower shield interposed himself, taking the blow, although it lost ten points to its remaining Durability in the process. *Time to stop holding our spells back, I think!*

A quick Repairo spell from the same hand holding the shield restored it back to 40/100 Durability.

Seeing the brief flash of that magic, Lamalha's eyes widened before Harry's other hand filled with his longsword and he thrust forward. Her own skill with Sword and Shield Style allowed Lamalha to interpose her medium shield between the magical blade and her chest,

deflecting it, and the two of them began to hammer at one another, pushing this way and that, unable to move much to either side thanks to the nature of the walkway and Branwen and Zeela struggling beside them.

Regardless, neither Amazon could get off another spell. Branwen was fully engaged with Zeela, the two of them exchanging almost as many taunts as blows, and while she was still moving Telka was still not rejoining the fight. That left Maniera and the skeleton archers to keep Edwin, Xan, Imoen and Dynaheir busy. But another Evil Entangle kept all three magic users from using magic, the wounds from the vines stopping them from concentrating. Imoen though was struck by another hold person spell, to her constrained shout of "FUCKing ooze sucking kobold arse licker!"

Minsc too was unable to get any headway. While the Chesley Crusher had allowed Minsc to damage the grey oozes, his clothing was still sizzling slightly by the heat of the fireball from Edwin despite a healing spell from Jaheira. And Mulahey had just used another spell, summoning more grey oozes out of the water this time. "Get them, get them my ooze, feed on their flesh."

"Khalid, Minsc fall back to the entryway and switch weapons. Branwen pull back, your Spiritual Hammer might be running out," Harry shouted. "Minsc, you and Xan give her cover fire. Dynaheir target the enemy adventurers!" Then Harry turned his attention to Lamalha, growling, "Cleave!"

The Power Strike crashed into Lamalha's defenses, nearly cutting her shield in two, and causing her to fall to her knees. Harry then hammered down with several more strikes, which Lamalha barely blocked.

Obedying his orders, Minsc unequipped his halberd. This let him move too fast for the grey oozes to catch. The next second he had an arrow notched and firing along with Khalid and Xan as Jaheira began another spell, only to cry in pain as a flame arrow smacked into her chest. It didn't penetrate her chain mail, but it still hurt, interrupting her spell.

Harry's fierce defense allowed Branwen to retreat, although she was already bleeding from several wounds she had taken from Zeela. But standing alone against Zeela and Lamalha instantly proved tough.

"Power strike!" Lamalha bellowed as she swung her mace up towards Harry's chest. Her medium shield was in shambles and her arm bleeding badly, but her mace crashed into Harry, bypassing his shield and breaking ribs hurling him backward.

You have been hit by **Power Strike**.

The blunt weapon version of **Cleave**, this acts like a critical hit, doing twice as much damage.

The next blow nearly took him in the face, but Harry's hastily raised sword met the shaft of the mace, and then Harry rushed forward, pushing her off balance. "Distraction please!"

“Incoming!” Dynaheir shouted, even as her Stinking Cloud flashed out to encompass a quarter of the cavern. The spell caught both Maniera and Telka, knocking out the two long-range attackers, although it didn’t catch the two female clerics, who continued to press Harry hard.

Thankfully, this quickly made a difference elsewhere. Minsc and Khalid downed several skeleton archers in quick succession, while Jaheira and Branwen combined their efforts to get ahead of the wounds the rest of the company had taken. A moment later, Branwen resummoned her Spiritual Hammer and she, Khalid and Minsc made their way forward.

But as they did, Mulahey showed that he understood who the greater threat was. He ignored Harry and the other front line combatants for now, concentrating on lobbing spells over his head. Two more Hold Person spells flashed from his hands in quick succession, crashing into the very unlucky (and now wildly cursing) Imoen and Edwin. Although Edwin threw the spell on him off, this was followed by another spell that Harry had never seen before.

Mulahey has used Cause Serious wounds.

A level three Priest spell that is the antithesis of Cure Serious Wounds, this spell saps the health of the target for seventeen hit points. This spell ignores all armor and magical resistance and even then, only holy-type magical resistance matters.

It also cures intoxication.

Minsc took the hit and yowled in pain, stumbling to a halt. But Branwen quickly ended her own race forward, using one of her own spells to heal him up. But another Cause Serious wounds and Hold person combination hit them. The first one removed hit Khalid, and the second slammed into Xan, immobilizing him as the first had Imoen just as she was about to use some spells of her own.

But Edwin had switched to Magic Missiles, and he and Dynaheir’s magic missiles crashed into Mulahey, ending his spellcasting and causing him to go to one knee as he pulled out a potion of healing for the first time. He downed two of them and by the time he had done so, Branwen and Minsc moved forwards, eager to help their friend. Khalid though was still wounded, with his wife looking after him.

Seeing them come, Lamalha and Zeela fell back with Lamalha trying another Rigid Thinking, then a hold person on Harry as Zeela tried to hold Harry in place. But Harry ignored them all. “Edwin, finish off the long range fighters before they get up. Dynaheir, Jaheira, free Xan and Imoen and then concentrate on Mulahey.”

Even as he spoke, Harry pushed Zeela back. Her mace was pushed to one side, and Harry knocked her off the edge of the causeway into the water, causing her to yell in anger even as he pushed past her to engage with Lamalha, stopping her next spell with a curse. “Blast you, I will send your soul to Cyric!”

The now bra-clad fighter/thief who had proven so deadly with her arrows took another acid arrow this time from Edwin to her chest, she shrieked and flailed, falling to the ground and trying to get the acid off her, ripping off her now-overcome enchanted leather armor and tossing it aside.

This left Maniera practically naked from the waist up, but alas, only Edwin of the menfolk she was facing was in any position to notice, and he was still furious about the arrow to the chest he had previously taken. "Your feminine wiles do nothing to me wench! Die and know the power of a mage will always..."

"Shut up and fight!" Dynaheir shouted, using a Magic Missile on Mulahey as she saw him trying to use another spell. The bolts of raw magic impacted Mulahey, causing him to falter, and fall back slightly into the opening to his private quarters.

Lamalha had yet to turn away from Harry, but without her friend, Harry's larger shield, and better blade came into their own, forcing her entirely back onto the defensive as bits were chipped out of her mace, slowly ruining it to match her shield. This in turn allowed him to strike his chest with his offhand as he shouted out, "Turn undead!"

The holy aura of a paladin crashed out from him at that point, forcing the Skeletons holding off Minsc and Khalid on the main walkway to try and throw off his aura. It also caught the last of the skeleton archers. Both ran for the far end of the room, no longer taking part in that battle. One of the warriors completely disintegrated, while two others backed away slightly from him but did not fully break. One though did fall into the water, disappearing beneath its surface.

This cost Harry, as a blow from his opponent's mace caught him on his side, nearly hurling him off the causeway in turn. Grimacing in pain, he backed away from her, moving closer to Mulahey.

By that point, Maniera had breathed her last was dead thanks to Edwin, but Zeela had been able to get to her feet to one side of Lamalha and Harry's confrontation. Branwen, who had rushed forward too fast, leaving Minsc and Khalid behind, however was waiting for her. Before Zeera could get to her feet, Branwen's spiritual hammer crashed down, knocking Zeela flat.

A moment later, Telka also fell unable to talk dodged Dynaheir's next Magic Missile fusillade slamming into her. The spell caused her health to drop to nothing as huge holes in her chest and head exploded on impact, dropping her in a welter of blood.

This let Mulahey Animate more skeletons, purely skeleton warriors this time, putting between Harry and his fellows. But Harry still had his Turn undead spell going and now with Zeera down, told Branwen, "Take over!"

Nodding Branwen moved forward, her energy hammer crashing into Lamalha's mace and pushing her back.

Harry in turn moved to help Khalid and Minsc against the warriors. His Turn Undead aura pushed into their number and the trio finally reached the wider walkway around Mulahey's cave. There Harry began to dodge and strike at the undead wildly, renewing his Turn Undead and sending several of them retreating, getting in the way of the others.

For a few moments, all Harry could do was push them, moving this way and that, striking out and letting his Holy aura do its work. His sword sliced off several limbs, and stabbed one undead through the chest, dissipating whatever magic had created it while Imoen and Xan fired into the mass of undead and Minsc charged forward on Harry's heels. Even as busy as he was, Harry had to grin at his shout of "Begone back to your rest and let the good earth have you skeletons, lest you get the buttkicking of your un-lives! Go for their tendons Boo, their tendons!"

Meanwhile another series of Magic Missiles from Edwin struck Mulahey and an arrow from the now-recovered Khalid. Streaks of blood began to fall from small holes in Mulahey's armor, signifying the damage he was taking, even though as a normal Priest of his level those attacks should have killed him. Instead he fell back with a shriek, and desperately pulled at a bracelet he was wearing. "By the power of Cyric, come to me!"

Mulahey has activated Summon Creature through an object dedicated to the Evil God Cyric.

While you cannot examine the item until it is in your hand, it is presumably a high level item.

What downsides it might have for anyone not of the Cyric faith who attempts to wear it is unknown, but knowing Cyric, probably very bad.

Two ghouls appeared between them, and instantly they began reaching for Harry, forcing him back. "Bugger!"

Harry fell back to the others and grateful to find that Jaheira had moved up with Khalid and Minsc. The skeletons they were fighting will were proving to be formidable thanks the wounds they had previously taken slowing them down.

From behind the frontline combatants Jaheira used one of her last healing spells on Harry, who shouted his thanks to her before using Turn Undead again. This time, the impact was even more damaging. Although none of the skeletons disintegrated entirely, nearly all of them broke, running away from the combatants, and Harry, Minsc and now Khalid raced after them, cutting them down as they moved towards where Mulahey had retreated around the walkway surrounding his house.

This allowed Harry to see along the pathway which the four female assassins had used. There, Branwen who had been pushing Lamalha had run into another trap. The bear trap

caught her leg, causing her to stumble and cry out in pain. Lamalha quickly took advantage, her mace smashing into Branwen's chest and sending her to the ground with a howl of agony.

Standing above her, the priestess of Cyric raised her mace once more, shouting out gleefully "One more death to mark my love for you, my lord!"

Harry turned away from his fight, and leaped across the intervening distance, knowing even as he did he would be too late. Then Jaheira was there. She had raced forward behind Khalid and now covered the dozen steps between her and Branwen's form. As Harry was midleap Jaheira slammed a Nature's Call spell into Lamalha from near point-blank range. The woman shrieked, falling backwards, but her high health pool and plate mail allowed her to deal with the damage.

Then Harry landed, and before Lamalha could defend herself his magical sword flashed, stabbing. The thrust caught Lamalha through her gorget, piercing through her throat and out the other side. Lamalha finally began to gurgle her last, while Minsc and Khalid continued to battle against the undead.

"Nice save!" Harry congratulated Jaheira, and then without a word turned, readying himself to leap across the water once more

But Zeela, who had previously been dealt a death blow from Branwen, wasn't fully dead yet. Protected by his reformed skeletons Mulahey now lashed out with a spell that reached out for Zeela and roused her from the floor. And although he did pay for it in the form of an arrow and sling stone crashing into him from Imoen and Xan, the spell struck.

Mulahey has cast Final Act: Puppetry on Zeela.

This an extremely dark spell, which Mulahey has created during his tenure here as a Dungeon Boss. Only the extremely high magical energy he possess in that position allowed him to create this spell. That and his own dark mind and desires.

This spell takes the control of the mind of a dying individual, forcing them to attack or do a similarly simple command embedded in the spell as a final act of defiance and contempt by the caster to the dying individual.

Remember to always check if your opponents are really dead folks. No one likes being stabbed by a 'corpse' while rifling through its pockets for change.

Jaheira had her back turned to the woman, kneeling down beside Branwen, and Harry had turned away. Neither saw Zeela rising to her feet until it was too late. Khalid shouted out, "Jaheira I, lookout, behind you!"

But it was too late. Even as Jaheira turned, dagger no one knew the woman had been holding stabbed out. Getting directly underneath Jaheira's chain mail the strike stabbed deep,

and Harry watched in shock as her health dropped from the high yellow deep into the red with that one strike.

Jaheira dropped to the ground as blood burst out from under her chain mail and her mouth, her to the floor. Zeela too fell dead, her body collapsing off the causeway into the water below once more, and permanently this time.

“JAHEIRA!!” Khalid shrieked, racing towards them, leaving Minsc on his own to forge through the undead still between him and Mulahey

“Damn it man, get back in there with Minsc, finish Mulahey off! I’ve got this!” Harry bellowed. Khalid balked, but turned back, only this time had let Mulahey begin another spell. And Harry’s leap had brought his aura of Turn Undead away from the skeleton warriors, meaning they quickly rallied, holding the two warriors off despite Khalid venting his fury on them like a man possessed.

That spell struck among Imoen and the others and its impact was incredible.

Mulahey has used Unholy blight.

This spell calls upon energy from the Negative Energy Plane in order to open a channel between it and the targets. The result is that any good-aligned beings within the spell's area of effect take 4 points of damage per level of the caster, or half damage upon a successful dodge. This damage will continue until the spell dissipates after five minutes or is dispelled.

The spell once more caused both magic-users to break off their own spells. Imoen fell screaming as the pain of the spell wracked her body, while Dynaheir stumbled to her knees with a howl. Xan stumbled crying out, while Edwin ignored it. Another Magic Missile lanced out, hitting Mulahey and pushing him back.

Ignoring all this, Harry quickly knelt beside Jaheira, reaching for the dagger. But Jaheira grabbed his arm, shaking her head. “Let, let me cast another spell, and then pull it out.”

Harry would have replied, but he saw some kind of spell coming towards him from Mulahey, a Cause Serious wounds spell, the spells a jagged black and deep umber color the shape of a diamond. Even as he read the description of the spell further, Harry acted, lashing out with his own spell, a Stupefy. The blast of red energy crashed into the incoming spell, dissipating it.

You have used the Dispel Magic Blood Mage Version. – 10 to health.

Grimacing as his health dropped into the yellow, Harry glared over at Mulahey, who was still casting spells before glancing back to the doorway. To his dismay, Harry saw Edwin down now victim of a Hold Person spell. Dynaheir was leaning against the wall bleeding from an arrow to her shoulder and she seemed entirely out of it, while Imoen was groaning slowly

pushing herself to her feet, her bow in hand and firing as Xan moved forward, muttering something under his breath Harry couldn't hear, an arrow lodged in his leg.

Looking around wildly, Harry realized with a start that the skeleton archers who his first use of turn undead had scared off had come back to the fight. *God damn it, I should have remembered them!* But then he was turning back to Jaheira, nodding to her. The two of them worked together to pull the dagger in Jaheira's spleen out, healing the damage as they did, using up the last of Jaheira's spells.

As they finished Harry saw one of the Skeleton Archers finally collapse having taken too much damage for the spell within its form to keep it going. That left one last skeleton archer, three skeleton warriors and Mulahey himself.

"GRAAAAA!!!" Khalid roared, a sound that Harry would never have thought could come from the normally almost-timid warrior as he smashed one of those skeleton warriors down before racing along the narrow walkway towards Mulahey. Mulahey saw him coming, and desperately raised his mace trying to block the first blow and then get past Khalid for some reason back to where he had begun the battle despite that taking him toward Minsc who had just finished off another skeleton warrior.

Khalid still couldn't use cleave or any of the higher warrior abilities, but Mulahey had taken so much damage before this that his chest plate looked like Swiss cheese and he had used his last healing potion before this, and it hadn't brought his health up past the halfway point. He tried to fight back, but soon, his mace, and the hand holding it, was sent flying, and Khalid ran him through, stabbing his sword deeply through one of the rents in the man's plate mail.

Mulahey fell, collapsing to one side as the spell holding his skeletons in place faded, and the battle was finally over.

"Minsc, go help Dynaheir and take Branwen over there with you," Harry ordered, knowing if he didn't Minsc would just do the first thing anyway. "We'll regroup over there."

As Minsc obeyed and Khalid moved towards Harry and Jaheira, Harry saw Xan moving in the other direction. Gently handing Jaheira over to Khalid, Harry moved to join him. As he reached the rocking chair that Mulahey had been sitting in when they arrived, he noted that the cave wasn't all that deep. Instead of being a true cave, it was only a few yards deep, the end of it visible. There was a small kitchen of all things, what looked like a small larder, a cot, a tiny bookcase and a large chest.

While Xan made for the chest, Harry murmured, "Remember Knock, yeah?" to the elf, moving past him to Mulahey's body. Touching Mulahey's corpse, Harry instantly became aware of what was on his person. This included his ruined armor, weapons two letters, which Harry pocketed without looking at right now and several items his Identify power went to work on as he touched them.

Talos' Gift: the Boots of Grounding

When a favorite Stormherald was murdered there, the Fortress of the Starshine Peninsula came under the attention of Talos. Talos promised the destruction of the city by multiple enchantments, causing earthquakes, tidal waves and storms. But Talos was even crueler than that, bestowing upon one random man these boots so that he could live through the god's wrath and share the city's fate with those he met. True to Talos' desires, these boots carry the tale of the god's wrath.

These boots bestow +50% electrical resistance

Shaking his head at the tale, Harry put the boots in his bag for now. The next magical item was the Ring of Holiness, which thankfully didn't have much of a backstory, but its impact was greater. It allowed the wearer the ability to memorize an extra divine spell for each level of the user up to four extra spells when the user had reached level seven.

The third thing made Harry's skin crawl just to touch it. It was the symbol of Cyric, a gold starburst with a silver skull in the middle, it's eyes rubies, its mouth a diamond, hanging from a gold necklace. Shivering Harry placed it in his Item Box, ignoring the "DING" noise that just went off and the notification that came with it.

That and the notes interested him, but he would go over them later. Just like after the Gnoll Fortress, Harry was too tired to care about the feat they'd accomplished, and his party too battered to celebrate. Yet even owning these notes was enough for the Advanced Adventurer System to award him.

Congratulations, you have cleared the dungeon, Nashkel Mines!

You have killed the Dungeon Boss and destroyed all the Heart Stones (4) within.

You have completed 2/3 Optional Objectives:

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

The kobolds have been given large amounts of an alchemical compound to use on the iron ore within the mine. This is the same type that is used on iron that has already been mined and sent off. This implies a connection to the various bandit groups and Tranzig.

You have gathered at least five samples of the alchemical compound! This is enough to prove your words to both the Mine Boss and Nashkel's Mayor.

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

While few were still alive by the time you entered the mines, you were able to save all the miners within.

Rewards:

+8,200 experience for every party member.

Note: Every party member will receive the experience points upon exiting and the mines reverting to normal.

Sighing Harry turned away. He was back in front of the entrance to the small living area quickly, then blinked, and shouted, "Wait, don't touch that!"

Turning from where he had used Knock to open the chest, Xan had moved over to the bookcase, reaching forward. In his hand was a long, brightly sparkling blade, like someone had taken a sliver of the moonlight and made it into a blade. But more importantly, Xan did not use Knock or any other spell to check for traps.

As Harry had feared, a trap activated, and Xan took a flame arrow straight to the chest.

"GAAHHH!" Xan screamed, stumbling back. His health pool was large enough for him to live through the strike though, and he stumbled into the side the hammock. Collapsing back half-on, half-off the bed, he smashed into a lever hidden between it and the inner wall of Mulahey's small living area.

A second later, Harry felt something shift underneath them, and water began to break through the sides of that cavern as well as one area directly above them. Some of those streams were small, but many were not, the water fast-moving and the water swiftly rose throughout the cavern.

"What in the world!?" Imoen yelled, stumbling back from the walkway she had been about to step out on, pushing Dynaheir back.

"That vile beast he had one last working of evil to sink the feet of those doing good!" Minsc answered, rushing back, pushing Imoen and Dynaheir away from the edge of the water, which was now **very** rapidly rising to flood the other cavern.

Not able to swim it was only because Harry had the Gamer's Mind skill, that he didn't panic. Because of that skill, he had the thought of un-equipping all of his armor and weapons into his Item Box, making him much lighter than previously. "Run for it!" the now unarmored Harry shouted, racing forward, Xan on his heels.

In front of him a water spout from the side of the cavern caught Khalid and Jaheira, knocking them both to their knees. The two half-elves tried to get to their feet as the water continued to rise, but a stone from the now collapsing ceiling caught them both. Khalid fell to one side, Jaheira the other, and while Khalid mostly fell onto the now inches-unwater walkway, Jaheira was not so lucky. She fell into the water, sinking quickly.

Harry reached the bloody-faced Khalid, and grabbing his shoulder, Harry hurled him towards Xan, who had just raced past. Kneeling down into the water, Harry, grabbed at Jaheira, trying to pull her up before she could disappear. "Keep running!"

“J, Jaheira, no!” Khalid shouted, even as the water reached their waists and Harry’s lowered neck. The man desperately did the same thing Harry had done, un-equipping all of his armor and other items in order to allow himself to push through the insanely cold water. But even so both he and Xan, with their lighter bodies, were barely able to keep their footing, let alone move. It was only by working together that they could move.

“Get them out Minsc, get them out!” Harry shouted, heaving Jaheira up to him, and Harry saw she was unconscious.

Luckily that status allowed him to strip her of her armor just like he had Mulahey’s items a moment before. This made it easier for Harry to carry her forward, after the retreating Xan and the still protesting Khalid.

But by the time he did, the rest of the ceiling was coming down, and more water was pouring in. A stone crashed into Harry’s shoulder, and Harry grimaced even as he continued on. But staring through the falling rocks, he saw the way forward was now completely blocked by falling stone or water. The last thing Harry saw of his party was Xan cold-cocking Khalid and dragging him off with a reluctant Edwin helping him, a look of utterly forlorn self-recrimination on Xan’s face.

As the water all around him reached his neck and Harry felt his feet leaving the walkway beneath him, Harry had a wild idea. Using a spell Imoen had taught him just in case they ran into any noxious gases or spells like the Stinking Cloud, Harry he touched Jaheira’s head, and then his own. The Bubbleheaded Charm activated, moving over both of their head, but dropping Harry’s health pool into the yellow.

You have used the Blood Mage spell, Bubblehead Charm, twice. -30 to health.

Then the water was washing him away, and Harry only had a few seconds to hope that the bubbleheaded charm would hold, and that the water would carry them somewhere. Then the dark waters closed in all around him and Harry grimaced as he felt himself picked up by the swirling current of the river, grimacing as his shoulder thumped into a rock in the water. “Oh, this is sooo going to bloody suck!!!”

OOOOOOO

At first, Imoen and the others were too busy running to really take stock of themselves, let alone the fact they had been forced to leave two of their own behind. The cave-in caused by the released water continued, following behind them as they ascended to the segment of the dungeon that the kobolds had created. Indeed, it became worse, as the kobolds seemed to have burrowed between two underground rivers, one coming in from the side, the other from below. At every intersection, the water would be cascading along, so fast it sometimes took Imoen, Xan and Dynaheir’s feet out from under them rising as it did.

This trend continued until they were back through the kobold's entrance to the main mines and even then, the water continued to spread, gushing out after them into the mines. Only when they were back to the second level of the mines did they finally leave the water behind them enough that Imoen was willing to slow down.

"Hold up, everybody. I think, I think that we've finally left the immediate danger behind us," Imoen said as the others came up the steps behind her, while Imoen turned her attention to the few notifications Harry's AAS had sent her way. *I haven't gotten any notifications about any of my traps going off, and with that earlier notification we all saw, that means we did it. We cleared the mine. No more spawning kobolds or anything else, so the route back's going to be clear. But Harry...*

She shook that thought off, nodding to Xan as he helped Dynaheir along. Early on in their pell-mell race to safety the elf had passed Khalid over to Minsc. The far larger, stronger barbarian Ranger now carried the still-unconscious Khalid on his back as if he barely noticed the unarmored half-elf's weight while Xan struggled even now to help the wounded Dynaheir along.

Edwin slumped next to Imoen, his face and body marked by blood, his robes soaked up to above the waist from the water. Altogether, the normally immaculate Thayvian looking quite bedraggled, and out-of-sorts. *Then again, we all are, to various degrees*, Imoen thought ruefully, looking down at herself. Whereas the water had come up to Edwin's waist at one point, Imoen had been knocked over into it several times, and looked like a drowned rat with slightly better taste in clothing. *Screw my low strength points, seriously, screw them right up the bum!*

Edwin had roused himself as they entered the mine proper, and he had time to downed the two healing potions he had bought himself in Nashkel. That meant he was actually the best healed of the party right now, including their temporary companion Xan and Imoen herself, who hadn't taken many actual injuries in the battle against Mulahey and the quartet Imoen would forever label mentally as the psycho sisters. Although of course, he didn't have very many spells left to him.

Branwen was sporting a battered leg and several other wounds along with still battered ribs and a bump to her noggin and several deep cuts to her head, blood matting her hair even now from when she had been knocked down by one of the evil priestesses. But after having been woken up by Jaheira before the disaster, the cleric of Tempus bore her wounds stoically, even laughing when Imoen had asked about them. "In the storm God's name, one must be strong, and ignore minor injuries like this."

It was Khalid though who Imoen was really worried about. Now she moved to him and found that Xan had done a very good job of knocking the half-elf out. He was still entirely out of it, though she felt he wouldn't be for much longer.

“Okay, does anyone have any objection to Branwen and Dynaheir getting the last of our healing berries?” Harry had split them between himself and Imoen, knowing she might need them as their scout along with giving her several healing potions.

And thank god we bought so many of those from Nalin. I wish we had more on hand rather than in Harry’s item box, but at least we’re all still healthy enough to keep moving, even though the idea of fighting again is not a pleasant one. And they might be of better use for Harry than us anyway.

None of the others objected while Minsc simply beamed at the largesse. But while Imoen had taken a few knocks to her back and head as they ran away, she hadn’t been hurt much in the actual fight. *Freaking Hold Person spells, why was it always me or Edwin, huh?*

Suddenly, Imoen and Minsc were both startled almost to the point of jumping when a notification blared across their eyes.

Warning: you have moved too far away from the Party Leader to continue to share party abilities or bonuses. To partake in the Party abilities or form formations once more, you must be in the presence of the Party Leader.

The two of them looked at one another, but Imoen shook her head when Minsc made to speak, gesturing to Xan. Xan wasn’t going to be part of the party for much longer, and given his loyalty was to Everska and his work as a Greycloak, Imoen didn’t want the man to know anything more about their abilities than necessary. *The guy might’ve seen both me and Harry using our Blood Magic spells in the fight, but maybe not. Best to keep him in the dark, anyway.*

So instead of commenting on the message, Imoen gestured down the tunnel. “Once Dynaheir and Brannie have eaten the berries, we need to keep going.”

“Do not ever call me Brannie again!” Branwen growled around a mouthful of healing berries, then burped genteelly. “Excuse me.”

For some reason that struck Imoen as funny, and she laughed, shaking her head. But her laughter died quickly.

“Should we not wake up that one?” Edwin asked, gesturing to the unconscious form of Khalid, who Minsc was carrying over his shoulder. Minsc had found out, much to his grumbling annoyance, that unconscious individuals could not be carried in his item box. Still, even now he didn’t seem much put out by Khalid’s actual weight, and had stood there patiently as Dynaheir and Branwen ate the healing berries.

“Wait a moment,” Branwen ordered, moving back a few paces down to where the water had finally stopped rising through the spiral ramp leading down to the next floor.

Soon she was back, and when Minsc placed him down on the ground, the priest of Tempus dumped a canteen of water over Khalid's head. He woke up with a gasp, staring around him, then groaning at his wounds instantly started to bother him.

"Easy Khalid, you've been battered, hell, so have the rest of us. That hit to your noggin knocked you the hell out," Imoen soothed, winking over at the others and Xan, who nodded in thanks for her covering for him.

"W, w, what, what happened?" he asked, reaching up to his head, his hand coming away with blood.

While the others might have tried to be diplomatic, Edwin had no such compunction. "The fool elf over there was caught in a trap, and then stumbled into some kind of dead man's switch. It somehow started a cave-in by filling the mine with water."

Khalid frowned for a moment, then nodded, the memory coming back to him, and then the others watched as his eyes widened suddenly as he looked around. "J, J, Jaheira! She fell in! Where..."

"We do not know," Branwen soothed the man, moving over and using her final spell on the man's head.

"W, wh, where is Jaheira?" Khalid said more slowly. "And w, w, where is Harry?"

"Gone, the pair of them," Edwin shrugged, almost as if he did not care, but he was watching Imoen and Minsc closely, his eyes almost hidden by his red hood. "Drowned in the river. We might be able to somehow divine the course of the river, find their bodies and revive them, but even that is a low chance."

"Edwin," Imoen her voice a snap. "Shut up. There is a time for hard truth, and then there is a time for hope. This is a time for hope, and it will remain that way until we are up and out of here."

"Verily, Imoen speaks truly! Minsc and Boo both believe that Jaheira and Harry are not the types to be felled by a mere river, no matter how dank and dark it might be. We should have hope my friends." With that, Minsc moved over and helped Khalid to his feet.

But while Khalid allowed Minsc to do so, his eyes alighted on Xan, and both Edwin's words and the memory of what had caused the cave-in flashed across his mind. He leaped forward with an inarticulate cry, grabbing the morose elf and shaking him, his voice somewhere between a hack and shriek. "You it's y, y, your fault. You caused this. My w, w, wife, Jaheira, Harry, my friend, **you!**"

"Calm down, Khalid," Imoen shouted, grabbing at his shoulder as Minsc did the same. "You've got reason to be angry but taking it out on Xan isn't going to bring them back. Besides," Imoen hissed into Khalid's ear, low enough that even he had trouble hearing her, "I think

they're both still alive! We just saw a notification a moment ago, and if Harry was dead, we wouldn't have."

That seemed to calm Khalid down, but he still glared hatred at Xan. "Why d, d, didn't you wait!?"

Freed of the half-elf's grip, Xan sighed, holding up his hands and seemed about to say something when Edwin of all people spoke up in agreement with Khalid. "The half elf is right. If not for Xan's haste in trying to find his gaudy little sword, and his eponymous Greycloak, we would not be as battered as we are, and our companions would still be here. Much as I hate to admit it, I'm going to miss Harry's presence if not if for his food, then his somewhat acceptable humor."

Xan glared. "My Moonblade is a part of me wizard! How would you feel if someone had sundered you from half of your magical powers. That is the same kind of thing"

"You expect me to believe that a physical object like a Moonblade, no matter how amazing, can be as important to you as magic is a powerful wizard such as myself? You surely are a simian then! Do you think your bananas are so important?" Edwin snarked.

Xan growled, but turned away from Edwin's smirk, staring at them all. "I apologize," he announced. "I would rather that my mistake had brought my own doom down on me, rather than on your companions, And I would make amends if possible."

"Can you find them? "Dynaheir asked, also scowling. She had taken several head wounds since the start of the fight against Mulaehy one from a dart which it blinded her, another from a vine which had sliced her cheek, and finally, a third from a stone from the collapsing roof which had nearly brained her and would have if not for Imoen pushing her aside with just enough force to avoid the stone cracking her in the back of the head. That, plus the amount of exertion since had not put her in the best of moods.

Although, it did go further than that, as Imoen knew. *My spirit quest, my reason for being here in the Sword Coast revolves around Harry, and only to a lesser extent Imoen. If he has died, my quest will go unfulfilled, and a great evil will rise in this world,* the Rashemani witch snarled internally.

Imoen nodded. "Sorry Xan," *but not really,* she added mentally "but I think you trying to pay us back right now would be a bad idea for our group dynamic. We'll just say you owe us, and we can go our separate ways."

"I suppose that kind of thing would be normal given my bad luck." Grimacing, Xan looked back at Khalid, saying something in Elvish.

Whatever it was, Khalid responded hotly, and Xan finally nodded a final time. "Very well. I acknowledge my debt to you all, a debt twice spoken and true. I hope that we meet again, I may pay off this debt."

To Imoen's annoyance, that oath didn't spawn a notification. *Oh, that's not good. Could those have faded out too with the party abilities, skill sharing and such? Damn it.*

With none of the others saying anything bar Edwin's harrumph and sneering look, Xan turned, and made his way off away from group, heading up towards the entrance to the mines.

"Minsc wonders, does the foolish elf understand that we are all going the same direction for now?" the bald Ranger paused as Boo squeaked in his ear. as he did, Imoen noticed the little animal was somehow the only one of them dry, and wondered how that had happened before deciding she didn't want to know. "Boo has also mentioned that he needs some cheering up and mentioned a few herbs from Rasheman, but alas, we don't have any on us."

"Let's let Xan have a bit of a head start. How he'll explain himself to the guards or the mine boss, I don't know, and I don't care," Imoen said dryly.

"Bah, the simpleton's Greycloak is enchanted. It will allow him to pass unseen at need for a certain amount of time."

"L, I, let's just go," Khalid growled.

With Khalid's oppressive anger and sadness sitting between them, the rest of the trip back up to the mine entrance was a silent affair.

Seeing the sun ahead of them about a turn of the glass later was a welcome relief, as was the sight of the guards situated within the initial cavern leading out of the mine. The voice of the mine master when they exited the mines, however, was not nearly as welcome as the sight of the sun high above. "Well, what did you discover? Can I move my miners and slaves back into the minds? Time is money you know."

"Little man, if I had any spells left to my name, I would be torturing your mind with the powers of the Arcana right now," Edwin growled, his fingers twitching. "Alas for my own sensibilities, I do not have such spells."

"Shockingly, I find myself in agreement with the red wizard. Do not get used to this," Dynaheir drawled shooting a glance toward Edwin before without warning swinging her staff in an arc that brought the end flashing an inch in front of the mine owner's Emerson nose, sending him falling to the ground with a cry of shock. "Can you not count, little man?!" she bellowed as she stood over him. "We have lost two of our number! And yet for all of that, we have emerged victorious, with the **dungeon** destroyed."

Emerson's eyes widened. "The, the mine wasn't a dungeon," he stammered. "That's impossible."

"Tell that to the number of respawn points we had to deal with or the number of Heart Stones. The number of kobolds down there couldn't have sustained themselves even if they ate

all the missing miners,” Imoen growled, shaking her head. “And then, we found the man who was behind it all.” From there, she explained the events in the dungeon, going into detail when it came to the battle against the Dungeon Boss and the four female assassins. She didn’t mention Xan though, seeing as he had somehow made his escape without Emerson apparently having even seen him. “Send someone down to the third level if you don’t believe me.”

Nearby two guards had moved forward early on in her tail, their halberds raised angrily at what they saw as a group of adventurers threatening their boss. However, Emerson had waved them off, listening intently. Dynaheir also handed over examples of the green alchemical muck, and examples of both the contaminated ore and the regular version. While he simply set the green bottle aside, Emerson was a mine boss for a reason and knew his ore. He could tell that there was something off with the contaminated ore, frowning in puzzlement at the smell of the contaminated sample.

“Pour that muck on a weapon if you don’t believe it,” Imoen offered.

“I will. You have more samples?” When Imoen nodded, Emerson went on. “Good. Take one of the pickaxes over there too, to help you create an example for the mayor if you need it.” He respectfully bowed his head to Imoen and the others. “I’ll apologize for my words. I had no idea that my mine had turned into a dungeon. None of the other adventuring teams survived to tell us about it.”

At that point, Emerson proved to be more than fair. He wrote out a message on a piece of parchment a guard got for him, handing it back to Imoen. “I’m sorry for your losses.” He added. “Hopefully Mayor Denard will realize you went above and beyond and add more money to your bounty.”

Imoen just nodded, stone-faced, but she was in no way prepared to write off Harry or Jaheira. The reason being that she honestly didn’t think she would still have her Item Box or gotten a notification a moment ago indicating she had gained respect from Emerson. While the notification was so unimportant Imoen had brushed it aside unread, the fact of that notification appearing was not. *And the moment I am away from this lot, I will be using the point me spell to be certain.*

She looked over at the others as they left, the mine boss organizing the miners into teams. From what she heard, they would be going into the mine and see how high the waters had risen. They would have to take new and far more safety measures against cave-ins with such a massive amount of water directly beneath them, but Imoen thought they might be able to get the first two levels of the mine back in working order despite that. It would probably take months though, depending on how much of that alchemical gunk had been used on them.

Which means the iron still won’t be flowing for at least half a year, damn it. Hopefully though, the idea that someone is behind the shortage in and of itself keep at least the money grabbers of Amn from deciding that war is the only recourse. Even if we don’t have much

evidence beyond Mulahey's words and the alchemical concoction. Still, they should be able to prove that someone is behind this trouble, if not who.

Turning back to the others, Imoen said brusquely, "We'll head to the mayor's house first, get our money, and then head to the temple. We'll get ourselves healed up as much as possible, before talking about our options going forward."

Both of the wizards instantly shook their heads, glared at one another, and then turned back to Imoen. "No." Dynaheir answered. "We're all on the verge of exhaustion, and we need our spells whatever we do from this point on. Remember Imoen, both priests and wizards need to rest to regain our memorized spells, unlike you and Harry"

"Further, we must decide on whether or not we can even find our wayward fellows, I believe that they are both dead, and thus out of our reach," Edwin added bluntly.

Imoen smirked, knowing something the others didn't, while Minsc just looked confused, obviously not having thought through the reality of seeing status notifications still. Khalid too was looking confused, but in his case Imoen didn't think he had seen the original notification about their moving away from Harry, so it was understandable. "Harry's too dumb to die. Besides, haven't you ever heard, the guy who saves the girl always lives."

"Those aren't tall tales we live in Imoen," Branwen said sighing sadly even as Imoen and Tonks tried hard not to burst out into laughter. "In truth, I would rather to doughty warriors such as they lived as well, but..."

"Let's wait until we get some healing, talk to the mayor, and are back in our room in the inn," Imoen said firmly. "Then we can at least make this decision with clear heads, and not sore bodies all right? Suffice it to say though, I think that both Jaheira and Harry are still alive, and I wager I'll be able to prove it once I have enough health points to use without being in danger of keeling over."

That made both wizards look at her in interest, and Imoen once more held back a snicker. *For all their differences, the normal wizard's love of knowledge seems to connect the two of them.*

"I, I, Imoen," Khalid began, "I must..."

"Dynaheir's right, we need some rest, Or do you think you can suddenly teleport to wherever Jaheira is?" Imoen barked back, now getting in his face in turn.

"H, h, how are you so calm!?" Khalid shot back. "H, h, Harry is..."

"Harry is my brother from an unknown mother, but I can't serve him or anyone else by rushing off willy-nilly," Imoen said simply, shrugging her shoulders. "But again, I know Harry's alive. And if he is, Jaheira might be too." Unfortunately she couldn't be certain of that last bit.

“How a, a, are you so certain?” Khalid scoffed.

Since they were alone once more among those already in the know, Imoen explained the notifications she had seen both a moment ago during their talk with Emerson and the one about their moving too far away from Harry. “I don’t think I would have seen that if Harry was dead. In that case, I think the best I could hope for would be the AAS transferring to me. Worst case, it would just stop working entirely.

“Hmmpf, the AAS as you put it, is very useful indeed, although I remain somewhat annoyed that I must come to trust and respect a would-be god bothering sword-slinger such as Harry to get anything out of it,” Edwin grumbled, yet he looked happy enough. “Still, it is good to know that a chef of his skill is not yet gone from this world.”

Snorting at that, Imoen looked over at Khalid. “Does that satisfy you?”

“F, F, For now,” Khalid grumbled.

Unfortunately, Denard attempted to prevaricate, ignoring the very idea that the mines which fueled his town’s economy could have possibly become a dungeon. But the evidence was irrefutable both on that, and the idea of some larger conspiracy being involved.

Denard continued to argue until the pickaxe, which they had soaked in the green liquid, was snapped with a few blows against Branwen’s shield. The actual iron of the pickaxe, not the wood shattered after only a few taps. After that, he was more willing to see reason on that score but continued to argue about the dungeon aspect for some time.

Luckily, the trip to Nalin was far easier. Nalin thanked them for their efforts on behalf of the town and accepted the voucher for half price with joy. Within minutes of entering the whole group was healed to nearly perfect health.

The moment they were out of the temple, Khalid caught Imoen’s arm. “Y, you said that you had a s, s, spell that could let us find H, H, Harry and my wife. U, u, use it now,” he practically commanded.

“Get out your compass first,” Imoen ordered, watching as Khalid did so, pulling it out of his Item box, marking the fact once more that like Minsc and Imoen, he could make full use of the Item Box rather than need to sift through it for what he wanted.

In reply, Imoen pulled out a dagger, and set it on her palm, not holding it, rather setting it flat on her palm, as if she was going to do some kind of trick with it, which in a way she was. “Point me Harry Potter,” Imoen said, forming the magic within as she did.

You have used A blood Magic spell, Point Me. -3 to health.

This spell allows you to find individuals or items by pointing in their direction. The distance limit is unknown at present. It will not work to find individuals who you have not seen, are magically

protected against simple precognition spells. Nor will it work on diffuse terms or powerful magical objects, the magic of which will disrupt this simple spell.

Grateful that the spell hadn't taken more out of her, and making a note of that for later, Imoen gestured down at it with her other hand as the dagger swung in a full circle for a moment, before stopping, pointing north and east by Khalid's compass. It was pointing there and wasn't moving at all. "It's not pointing down, and if Harry was dead, the spell wouldn't work."

"Why not?" Edwin inquired.

Imoen barred her teeth at him. "Because there wouldn't be a Harry Potter, there would be simply a corpse. Corpses don't have names magic would respond to."

Khalid stared, then slowly nodded. "D, do you think t, t, that would work on..."

Shrugging Imoen gestured down to the dagger. "Point me Jaheira."

Again, the dagger twirled and for a moment, Imoen feared that the two of them had become separated. But, when the dagger stopped, it was pointing in the same direction as Harry.

At that, all tension seem to leave Khalid that point, and he nodded. "T, t, thank you." Then, he looked at over at the bar, and marched resolutely in its direction. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to get drunk.

Imoen blinked at that, then shrugged, deciding it wasn't the worst way of viewing things, and put it down to the fact that Khalid had these moments where he seemed to blame himself for no longer being as capable as he once had been before the Curse of the Dread One. Jaheira seemed to have the same moments, but she dealt with them by becoming sterner and harder. Regardless, she wasn't going to stop him.

Turning away, she smirked at the others. "I guess he wants to drown his worries. Personally, I want food more than drink."

"Why not both? I realize for simians such as yourself multitasking like that is difficult, but surely you can attempt it once," Edwin snarked.

Rolling her eyes, Imoen smacked him on his shoulder. "Nice one. Now come on, I want food and a soft bed, in that order."

OOOOOOO

Harry groaned as he slowly came to, staring up at the dawn sky above "Bloody hell, I'm alive?" He croaked, his words coming out ragged and weak. Really, Harry had only given himself a best two out of five chance in surviving his attempt to save Jaheira. But he seemed to be alive. "Well... that's...just brill. Wait... Jaheira!"

The thought rocketed through Harry's head, and he quickly stood staring around him for a split second before keeling over with a groan, a hand thrusting out the only thing stopping him from bashing his head into a rock nearby as his body's aches and pains suddenly cued up for his attention. This ranged from several bits of his body feeling like his skin had been worn away with sandpaper, to there being a kind of odd, searing pain in his side, his back feeling like someone had taken a beef tenderizer to it, and what felt like something loose in one of his feet. "Oh, and I'm freezing too, lovely. Although the cold might be keeping me from feeling the full impact of the pain. Ugh."

The cold he had been feeling was caused by the fact that half of his body was still in the water, and looking blearily through pain-tightened eyes, Harry realized his body had become wedged between two large rocks. The river, which looked both deep and fast, seemed to disappear out of sight in either direction, the portion of the river here flattening out slightly as the river turned slightly. Harry had been deposited into the rocks along the outer curve.

And nearby, what looked like a wig of wet blonde locks caught Harry's eye. "Jaheira!"

When several croaking shouts didn't seem to rouse the woman, Harry turned his attention at last to the information his Gamer's skill was giving him. Of course, the first messages were about his own state, and that made for grim reading.

You are **Crippled**:

You have broken your foot in several places. You will not be able to walk easily or very far without debilitating pain.

-6 to Dexterity.

-2 to Constitution.

Walking and running movement is halved. Any attempt to dodge will have a negative penalty.

This was followed by two other crippled notifications.

You have two broken ribs. Breathing might not hurt, but bending and moving and laughing... well be prepared for pain.

- 4 to Constitution

-5 to Durability.

All movement which involves anything above the waist will be accompanied by pain, and cause a -4 penalty to Willpower. Any attempt to dodge will have a negative penalty.

The second read:

You don't know what, but something in your back is sprained.

-6 to Constitution.

-6 to Durability.

With a weary groan, Harry looked at his overall health bar, and noticed another notification, which came up as Harry's eyes latched onto his health bar.

Health: 18/50 (120)

Note: your max health is impacted by the crippled wounds you have taken. Even healing cannot bring you to your full health unless your crippled injuries are also healed. You've been banged around like a squishy billiard ball, and that won't change until someone with actual knowledge of healing sees to you.

While Harry had no idea about Jaheira's starting stats, her own wounds were quite bad, and at least in one way worse than his own. And once more, he could really do without the snark even as he read them one after another.

Crippled:

Traveling Companion Jaheira's back is broken in several places Never mind walking, moving at all will be impossible until her spin is healed.

All movement is impossible, and her Durability and Dexterity are both set to 0.

-20 to Constitution.

Bleeding:

Portions of Traveling Companion Jaheira's body have had the skin scrapped away. While no longer bleeding much thanks to the cold of the water slowing her circulation, she lost a good deal of blood.

-9 to Constitution.

Crippled:

Traveling companion Jaheira has taken a blow to the head. She is not only concussed, there might even be some internal bleeding and damage to her brain. While knocking the bitch out of her might be an interesting experiment, this has taken it a bit too far. Jaheira will remain unconscious until she is seen to by a competent healer.

- 10 to Willpower

-10 to Constitution.

Warning: imperfectly healing Jaheira's mind could have lasting damage to her already badly battered wisdom and intelligence stats.

That last warning was noticeably bad, but what was worse was Harry could tell that she was still alive, but not her overall health. "Still, I should be able to at least make certain she stops bleeding. And I can fix up some way to stop her head from moving too..."

With that, Harry began to pull things out of his item box. First, he pulled out the impure potion of health, downing it and nearly moaning in relief at the aid it gave him. He could feel his body getting better. That feeling kept going as he ate half of the healing berries left in his item box, and finally, he was up to 42/50. "Technically healthy enough to fight and move, but not really."

Thankfully, the majority of the pain from his crippled status had faded into a dull throb, which Harry willfully ignored as he went to work. Bits of clothing they used for wrapping wounds came out of his Item box next, and some wood the band had gathered before entering the mine to use for cooking fires. Remembering what he and Khalid had done to create the carry-bag that had held Dynaheir, he did the same thing very, very slowly for Jaheira, grateful beyond words that his hands hadn't been all that battered beyond a few bruises and cuts, all of which had healed up already.

Storing his jury-rigged carrier into his Item Box, Harry slowly crawled towards Jaheira. There, after checking for a pulse – more out of habit than anything else, he slowly pulled her out of the water, grimacing and blushing as he did. Like Harry's clothing, several bits of Jaheira's clothing had been torn or shredded, along with large portions of her skin.

This bared one of her pert breasts, and although half of her breast was red and sore, that didn't stop Harry from shaking his head at the sight, and quickly pulling out a spare shirt. Thankfully like before when he touched Jaheira, Harry Harry didn't need to physically change her clothing. Rather, he simply reversed what he had done to remove her mail shirt, placing the spare undershirt onto her body.

"Fuck, I should have tried to put our armor back on. I was only worried about drowning, not being battered though," Harry murmured, trying hard to keep his mind working as his hands started to pulp some of the healing berries. as he did, he slowly pushed the pulp into Jaheira's mouth. The feel of her lips around his fingers was decidedly, and very wrongly, erotic, but he couldn't stop himself from thinking it after seeing Jaheira's chest a moment ago.

Harry fed her the rest of the healing berries, deciding there was no point in keeping any around given their current dire circumstances. When it was done, he shuddered a bit, and pulled his fingers out of the half-elf woman's mouth, then glanced down her body, grateful to see that most of her sores and cuts were gone. Several bits of raw, bleeding skin remained, but Harry quickly put makeshift bandages over them all, one after another.

"And now we're out of spare clothing. Joy. If we hadn't just had a bath, I would be worried about what I smell like," Harry murmured, still speaking aloud more because the sound of his voice helped Gamer's Mind keep him calm. Because Harry knew their current situation

was very fucking bad. “Still, first things first, Harry-me-lad. Get away from the river, find a hiding place, get warm, food. Healing berries alone do not a meal make.”

After making sure the wounds were covered, Harry took out the carrier from his item box and with a grunt of pain, lifted Jaheira the little bit he needed to get her into the carrier. Securing her there took several minutes, but then it came time to really push. Resigned to the pain to come, Harry took out one of the Gourds of Power, and drank it down, hoping the additional strength would give him some help here.

You have drunk Gourd of Power. + 6 to your base Strength score for one hour.

“Heh, wish I could put unconscious people into my item box right now. This is going to ruddy SUCCCK!!!” With that, Harry lifted Jaheira, carrier and all, in his arms, figuring that was better than trying to get her onto his back. Even so, the world went red for a second, and a warning popped up.

Warning: Due to your ill-advised attempt to pick up your Travelling Companion, Jaheira, you have aggravated your triple-crippled status. Seriously, what part about **CRIPPLED** didn't you understand?

-20 to health

Despite that, Harry continued to move forward, up the small rise behind the stones lining the river's edge. Soon, Harry spotted a good hiding place. Several trees had come down, creating a small camp area. It wasn't as hidden as Harry would have liked, but Harry knew that continuing on wouldn't be a good idea. There, he set Jaheira down, and then after breathing in deeply, began to move around once more, ignoring the throbbing from his foot, back and side with ever increasing difficulty, although thankfully, he didn't seem to be doing anymore permanent damage to his health.

“Thank God for the Item Box,” he reflected once more, happy to see that everything within was fine, completely undamaged and usable. Within moments he had started a fire and pulled out his own bedroll. Sitting on it, he pulled out some food and set a stew to simmering within minutes. With that done, Harry slowly shifted so he was sitting with his side against a portion of the downed tree, , summoning up several of his weapons from his item space laying them out.

As battered as they were, Harry knew the two of them had no business fighting, but neither could they run. Getting Jaheira up here from the river had nearly killed Harry, and there was no way he'd leave her behind. *Not even if we could come back and resurrect her. I have no idea where we are in relation to a temple that could do the deed, and Branwen didn't mention having the skill.*

Waiting for his stew to cook, Harry reached out with his map powers, enlarging the small map that usually sat to the upper left portion of his vision, until it covered his line of sight

from one end to another, hoping that he would see the green dot of one of the party members. If so, Imoen and the others would be able to see him in turn. However, he didn't.

Instead, what Harry saw were small green triangles around the circle of the map's circumference at one point pointing in the same direction. He stared at it, then chuckled wanly, and tried to be a bit upbeat about things. "Well, we'll both know what direction to go. They might even be able to move around obstacle."

With his lame foot, Harry wasn't certain he would be walking anywhere anytime soon. Especially after the injury he had dealt himself when moving Jaheira.

With that thought, Harry slowly moved over, and made sure Jaheira was as comfortable as possible. Then he fed her some of the soup, before gorging on the rest, laying out on his bedroll, his sword to hand, the fire fed with a few more bits of wood. *No shield though, I think if I tried to raise my tower shield I might rupture something. And I know the fire works as a beacon for anyone trying to find us, but it could also help to scare off animals.*

With that, Harry laid on his uninjured side and tried to get some sleep.

But Harry didn't sleep for long, his sleep disturbed by growling noises coming from nearby, and he stood up, startling several small wolves where they had started moving towards them from out of the woods around.

Taking out a piece of wood, Harry tossed it onto the fire, creating sparks, which set the wolves back several paces, and then raised his sword as he slowly got to his feet, trying not to bother his wounds further. With that, he shifted from his sword to a bow and arrow. Launching an arrow out quickly, it hit one of the walls in the side.

"GUH!" Unfortunately, that movement pulled at his back and side, although it only took two points of health this time.

He quickly shifted to his Throwing axes and hurled the last three at the wolves. This movement didn't pain him, and with the wolves so close his skill with them didn't matter. He struck two of the wolves, the axe heads slicing into one wolf's shoulder and another's head, spraying blood everywhere.

Two more however reached Harry, and he quickly switched weapons to his longsword, as he was born to earth with a cry of pain. The wolf on top of him however had skewered itself on his hastily switched-in sword, and even as it still scabbled, and tried to bite him, the wolf began to go limp. Grimacing, Harry rolled, putting it underneath him.

The other wolf attacked now, but Harry quickly brought his blade around in a arcing attack. "Cleave!" he shouted, and the next second, the blade had sliced the wolf's head clear off.

Harry sighed as the last three wolves turned yellow on his heads-up display and began to retreat quickly. "Well, at least wolves are easy enough to deal with. And I do **not** want to look at my health bar right now." The Cleave, thankfully had not battered him any more than he already was, but the wolf's charge had.

He laid down again next to the fire, after making sure there were enough bits of wood on it to keep burning, and despite the sun now being high in the sky laid back to sleep. It was really, the only thing he could do right now. *I don't have enough health to even try the small wound spell that Imoen mentioned, and only by sleeping can I get by lay on hands spell back.* Really, if Jaheira didn't start to improve on her own to the point she could use her magic, they would be stuck here for a long while.

The next time Harry woke up he was greeted by the welcome message of an eight hour nap, and the knowledge that came with it that it had given him his Lay On Hands spell back. "Now, I could use Lay on Hands on Jaheira, but..." Harry shook his head, and without any further hesitation used the spell on himself. The messages he had read the night before had warned him about the head trauma Jaheira had. *I can't do anything about that, and the um, the healing berries helped her about as much as I could. I guess I could get her health up more, sure, but with wolves around, I have to be in as good shape as I possibly can be with my crippled status.*

He could feel the impact of the spell and saw his health bar was no longer blinking at him, though it still only read 38/50. His crippled statuses were still there obviously, and every time he moved, the ribs, spine and foot sent jagged bolts of pain through his body.

But Harry persevered, standing up and looking around them thoughtfully, trying to figure out if he could create some kind of hide here, so that even if another band of roving wolves or whatever came upon them, they couldn't be seen. The pain continued to drill into Harry as he moved around, picking up bits of loose wood from a recent storm the area, and attempting - and failing - at dragging large tree branch over to where Jaheira rested. "Right, that's not going to work."

With that not working, Harry, still ignoring the aching from his foot and his other wounds, slowly started to spiral out, searching for a better place to hide. Nearby he found a small dip in the land. Although visible from one side, the other three sides were covered in brambles and small, bushes rising through several large rocks. "That will do... now for the hard part."

Instead of trying to carry Jaheira, Harry rigged up a rope through the back of the carrier he had placed Jaheira in, and then began to pull her along. This caused her to gasp and groan, and Harry whispered an apology more than once as he dragged her along, noticing the twinges of pain he was getting now was once more impacting his overall health.

But he persevered, and eventually, Harry reached their new hideaway. There Harry tucked the woman into the hide. With his work done, Harry leaned back, and began to go through the multiple injury notifications that had built up. He then blinked as he saw that one of the notifications was a red color, indicating a status change of some kind.

He clicked on it, and his eyes widened in surprise as he read it aloud.

“I’ve got the willpower! Due to your endurance of an immense amount of pain, you have created a permanent buff. +2 to Constitution, +4 to durability’. That’s nice,” he murmured, when he clicked on it, that seemed to somehow activate the buff. Instantly, the pain he was feeling faded a bit, not a lot, but he could certainly feel the difference, and he saw that his overall health had grown to 70 (140). “I’m still only at 15 health, but nice.”

With his new buff helping him endure the pain of moving, Harry moved around the area, setting some small traps. Although unlike Backstab, Harry hadn’t learned the ability to detect/set trap from having Imoen in his party, so they were just strings and bits of metal from Jaheira’s chain mail. The chain mail had, after all taken more than a few hits, and the edges had been very ragged. “Still, they will do to warn me if someone or something using Hide in Shadows tries to sneak up on us. the last thing I need is to take a hit from some spider before I know he’s there.”

With that done, he moved back to Jaheira, and began to make some soup, humming to himself over the open fire. He noticed idly that the green arrows that denoted the rest of his party had moved along the edge of the map. That might mean that Imoen and the rest were trying to move around an obstacle. They were all still together though, which was good. Harry had been kind of concerned about that. *There are so many strong personalities in our group, it wouldn’t be a surprise if they came to blows, especially with Edwin and Dynaheir in the group. Still, I hope that Imoen can keep the peace between them.*

With a sigh, Harry shook off his concerns on that score though, and leaned back, deciding, since he was fully awake, and didn’t think he could just go to sleep by closing his eyes even with his Gamer power, to read through the notes he had taken from Mulahey’s body. Both were written in the same handwriting and were signed by Tazok.

The first detailed Mulahey’s orders and mentioned two mercenary groups on retainer to Tazok’s employers, the Chill and Blacktalons. The second warned Mulahey of his idiocy in letting the kobolds kill the miners, showing that Tazok perhaps hadn’t known Mulahey and the mines had merged somehow into a dungeon. Which was fair enough since Harry had not even a vague understanding of how that was possible either.

More importantly though, the second message mentioned Tranzig, the man who had turned Branwen to stone, was staying in Beregost. “Excccellent...”

As he thought that, his view was suddenly filled with a gold and red outlined notification box.

The main quest, 'Iron Intake Issue', has been updated. You have found clues! Combined with the information already in your mind, these messages have told you several important points.

One, Tranzig is the middleman between someone named Tazok and Mulahey, the man behind the Nashkel mines running into problems. And Tranzig can be found in Beregost...

Two, Tazok is **not** the leader. He specifically speaks of superiors. Perhaps the Iron Throne the Assassinating Amazons spoke of? Regardless, you have run into so many priests of Cyric as part of your investigation that it is impossible to believe his priesthood isn't involved. Not good at all.

Three, you now know the name of two mercenary bands that are behind the assault on trade caravans, the Chill and the Blacktalons. What to do with that information isn't obvious however.

“Hah, I actually hadn't connected the priesthood to the Iron Throne consciously, but that's nice anyway,” Harry mused, before scowling. “Not that I'm in any real rush to run into even this Tazok guy. Not after the drubbing we got against his minion, Dungeon Boss or no. I... we, Imoen, me, the rest, we all need to get stronger.”

With that, Harry stood up, ignoring the pain from his back and foot as he began to go through some of the exercises Khalid had supplied him to work on his footwork and grip.

Then he sighed, sat down, and sat next to the fire, working on another meal for himself and pouring out a bowl of stew for Jaheira. “Note to self, pick up a book or something for downtime. Waiting for the others is going to possibly kill me with boredom.”

OOOOOO

The next day, with their spells memorized and everything else ready, Imoen redid the point me spell on a small shaft of wood, which, oddly, reminded her of her old wand. *Funny, I don't think I've thought about my wand for months now, despite how fond of the thing I was. Silly to think of it now, I suppose.*

With the small shaft of wood pointing once more the direction they would have to go, she looked around at the others, only noticing as she did that Khalid had not returned last night, and that Minsc was nowhere to be seen either.

When she asked where they were, Dynaheir shrugged. “Minsc left to go and drink with Branwen and Khalid the night before.”

“I returned late the night before. Both Minsc and I had quite a bit of fun regaling one another with tales from our past. Boo too was into it, and proved a most hilarious little fellow,” Branwen replied, amused at how Dynaheir's eyebrow began to twitch. Even after his miniature giant space hamster status had been confirmed, Dynaheir had a lot of trouble seeing Boo as

anything more than a necessary nuisance. "When I began to yawn, however, Minsc decided to stay with Khalid and watch over him."

"And how did that go?" Imoen questioned hesitantly, uncertain how Khalid would act if he got drunk while in such a bad mood.

Branwen frowned a bit. "I... I believe that drinking raised his spirits, as it should have. Perhaps a bit too much. I will not say more, and hope there will be no need."

"Huh. Well, the good news at least is that the AAS seems to remove the whole hangover nonsense," Imoen mused, wondering about Branwen's reticence.

"And yet once more you give me more reason to become part of your official party," Branwen guffawed while Edwin also looked interested. Hangovers were the bane of any true drinker after all.

Shrugging, Imoen looked over at the wizards, making certain they were both ready. While Edwin still wanted to know how far Harry was, that was his only concern going forward, and indeed, he seemed almost affable after a night spent in an acceptable bed after an equally decent meal.

Below, they found Minsc and Khalid both awake, waiting for them. Minsc had ordered a set of meat skewers and was sharing one with Boo as he moved to take up position beside his witch, handing out skewers to the others, save Edwin, who sneered at that lack, but not overmuch considering he would have turned it down anyway.

Khalid however was by the entrance to the kitchen, speaking softly to a buxom brunette there. "OOOh... fuck..." Imoen whimpered, her mind drawing a unhappy picture. "Please no." *I knew he liked to look at human women but...*

"Have no fear," Minsc interrupted her whimpers, smiling cheerily. "Boo and Minsc made certain that no matter how affected by drink Khalid became, he did no more than flirt. Even if Boo needed to bite Khalid's earlobe a time or two. Khalid seemed to pass through a time where he flirted overmuch due to the drink, before coming back to earth when Minsc mentioned Jaheira. After that, he still looked, but did no more. We both fell asleep in one of the booths, and the innkeeper decided to not attempt to move us until the fires were lit in the kitchen this morning."

"And what's he doing now?" Branwen questioned, while Imoen breathed a sigh of relief, and made a note to keep an eye on Khalid in the future.

"Apologizing for a few remarks he made," Minsc replied with a shrug.

Soon, Khalid joined them, looking a little shame-faced before he shrugged his shoulders and flexed his fingers, very obviously getting his game face on. "I, I, is everyone ready to go? I warn you, I w, w, will force a hard pace w, w, when we leave Nashkel behind."

Seeing Edwin about to make a scathing remark, Imoen decided it was a bit too early to let the two of them have at one another, so spoke up quickly. "Fine by me, although remember that I'll be the one deciding on our route going forward. Let's get a move on."

Leaving the inn, Imoen lead the group out of Nashkel once more, heading eastward. They would skirt around the edge of the mine area, putting it to their south as they head north and east following the pull of the dagger that Imoen had hung at her side.

The group was mostly silent as they left the town, until, alas Noober popped up, coming out from behind one of the houses. Spying them, he hurried over, already talking in his high-pitched whine as he did. "I don't believe it, you're the most violent group I've ever met. Is this an adventurer thing? What is it about me asking questions that seems to set people off? I'm just curious! Come on, you have to answer my questions, you're the most interesting things around here, and I won't stop until..."

Imoen again surprised everyone by being the first to react to the annoyance for the second time. She grabbed Noober around the throat, halting his stream of noise, and then dragged him back behind the house where he had first come from. There was a sound from within, and when she came back out, she was no longer wearing a short sword at her side.

Dynaheir hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Did, did you just... that is, I realize he was irritating, but actually killing..."

"I didn't kill him, Imoen said, smiling beatifically. "However, unless someone else comes around to help him, he is going to have a devil of a time bothering anyone else for a bit."

Intrigued, Edwin moved around the corner and then began to guffaw. "Ah, that looks a most fitting fate for one so annoying!"

Noober had been stuck against the side of the house. Two short swords held him there, making an 'X' in front of his neck making it so that if he moved, he would cut himself. In his mouth, a piece of clothing had been stuffed, muffling his gagged words.

Branwen and the others also looked, and though Dynaheir looked somewhat disapproving, she made no move to actually help Noober get loose. Nor did Minsc who looked, then shook his head. "Minsc is once more reminded of one of the most important lessons his father smacked into his head. Women can be most terrifying when angered, and thus should be avoided at any costs."

"While I think this is a tad cruel, I suppose it isn't as cruel as killing him out of hand," Dynaheir mused.

"Or setting him on fire, which would have been my own way of dealing with the little nuisance," Edwin opined. "Come, we have spent far too much time near this worm, I can feel my vast intellect slowly stagnating being so close to him."

Imoen nodded, and with a final jaunty wave at Noober, who was still trying to speak, astonishingly, she turned away rejoining the rest of the group. Soon they were out of the town, heading in a straight line in the direction Imoen's 'wand' was pointing.

As they did, Khalid spoke up once more. "Since s, s, speed is of the essence, I propose t, t, that we look to avoid t, t, trouble as much as possible."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. Minsc and you can range ahead of us, and we'll try to keep as quite as we can when we get away from the mine and everything. Just like we did with Minsc and Jaheira heading toward the gnoll fortress. Only this time, I think we should use signals somehow to warn of trouble since we don't have Harry's map skill."

"That is both an adequate concept and an annoyance that such is needed," Edwin grumbled.

Dynaheir shook her head. "Truly, I think we should all benefit from this. I think in our time in the mines we might well have gotten a bit too complacent, relying on the various AAS abilities you and Harry brought to the task."

While Edwin sneered at her and privately thought the woman was just disagreeing with him on principle, Khalid and Minsc conferred and after only a few moments, had decided on a series of signals for danger, obstruction, and even beware. The last one was for danger that had somehow become aware of the group or the two scouts.

After memorizing the sounds of the various animal calls the two had decided on, however, Dynaheir asked them to come up with one for simply strangeness. "You all told me enough about the journey through the Fire Leaf Forest enough to believe that running into oddities on the road is just something that will happen here on the Sword Coast. And as you have mentioned, we lack the time to do aught right now about such beyond move around them."

"True," Khalid, Minsc and Imoen all said as one, causing the group to laugh.

"Truly, it is a sign of both the times we live in and the god's favor that we Adventurers need never fear boredom," Branwen chortled.

As Imoen had predicted, their course since leaving Nashkel brought the group somewhat near to the mines crossing the same area but at a diagonal and heading further northeast. Now out in the wild, the group set aside their amusement at Noober's fate. Minsc and Khalid both moved forward, with Khalid using all his skills as a hunter to move quietly although he was unable to move as unseen as the Ranger with his Hide In Shadows skill.

However, not an hour after they had left the last signs of human habitation behind, Minsc used the predetermined signal for 'strangeness,' a series of owl hoots in four series of twos. "Of course!" Edwin grumbled. "Of course our tempting of the gods has not gone unnoticed."

Moving cautiously forward, the group met with Khalid quickly, who looked just as confused as they did, and then a moment later, Minsc returned, coming out of the Hide In Shadows technique as he did. "This is very strange, my friends. There seems to be a single person out here, and he is he is working on some kind of Sculpture Boo thinks he is not right in the head to be doing that out here in the wilderness, but Minsc remembers that many artists in Rasheman imbibed a little too much in the shaman's special mushrooms, so perhaps it is the same in this land?"

"Almost certainly", Edwin and Khalid murmured as one, before looking at one another, then away.

"Can we go around him?" Imoen asked, and then as the others looked at her, explained. "Like Edwin, I think this is a sign of trouble, and I would rather we avoid it if we can."

"Minsc is afraid we could not go around him to the north, as there is a series of large rocks there creating a ridge in the land. Minsc saw them begin, although Minsc admits that getting through them could be done, although it would slow us down. I do not know what lies to the south," Minsc answered.

Khalid however shook his head. "I m, m, moved in that direction, and I found e, e, evidence of a very large wolf's d, d, den. As it is daytime, t, t, they will be home, and attack u, u, us as a pack if we come c, c, close. I am afraid t, t, that we will have to brave t, t, this mad sculptor and whatever o, o, oddity he represents if we w, w, wish to keep up our p, p, pace."

"UUGGGGHHH..." Imoen groaned, then nodded. "Well, if we have to, we have to. Let's get going."

Moving through the woods, the group quickly came to where the artist was working. As Minsc said, to one side a large series of boulders began heading north away from the artist. The artist himself seemed to be working on a a sculpture yes, one of a woman. An elven woman judging by the ears, and one of surpassing beauty too, given the face, and body. That was about all Imoen could tell as she led the group past the man at a brisk pace.

He looked up, and seemed about to say something, but seeing them move to pass him by rather than in his direction halted whatever words he was going to say in his throat. Imoen noticed he looked youthful, perhaps only a bit older than Imoen herself, and was dressed richly. But his clothing had definitely seen better days, torn in multiple places and with his hair looking as if a bird had nested in it.

Unfortunately, their group was not the only one to spot the artist.

"Ho, there he is, fellows! As I've told you three many a time, Greywolf's nose never lies. Now let us kill the damn fool and be about it. We are near Nashkel, and I know another bounty awaits us there along with a good inn and maybe even a few willing wenches." From the other

direction came a group of four adventurers, who in turn paused, staring between Imoen and her band and the artist.

Before the self-styled Greywolf, a name Imoen recognized, or Imoen herself, could speak, the artist shouted aloud, "Hark adventurers, I am the famed sculptor, Prism. Here I stand near to completing my greatest work, an ode to the goddess-upon-the-earth that is Ellesime. But I need to finish her face, just her face! After that, I do not care what happens to me, but the work must be finished, this, paltry show of my love for she who is the most gorgeous being upon Faerun. Pray defend me from these scoundrels until I finish and I will reward you well."

"We're not exactly," Imoen began but Minsc cut her off.

"Minsc believes that the artist fellow is wrong in the head, but if he is being threatened, warriors of goodness will have to stand and defend him!" the Ranger bellowed.

"Minsc, we really don't have time to..." Dynaheir argued, only to be cut off in turn, something that set her eyebrow to twitching.

"What's this? The fool artist was able to actually pay someone to defend him? Do you know what he did? He stole the emeralds of a very, very important person down in Amn. They hired me, Greywolf, to come and take them." The leader of the group said.

He was a tall man with a build more like that of a swimmer or fencer, putting his body somewhere between Minsc's massive build and Khalid's far thinner frame. The other three were built along somewhat similar lines, although their armor was all leather armor rather than the chest plate and vambraces Greywolf sported.

Damn it, I wish more of Harry's skills carried over to the rest of us. Knowing their levels, classes and so forth would be really good about now, Imoen grumbled internally.

The man paused, staring at Imoen and her pink hair and a ta gesture, his men began to spread out around him. "...But it does seem to me as if I also have seen a description of you before. Girl, where did you come from?"

Imoen's eyes narrowed, and with a sinking feeling, she tried to lie. "Baldur's Gate. Not that it's any business of yours. Look, we're just passing through, if you want to take this guy back, I'd suggest waiting until he finishes his work. He looks as if he is about one breeze away from falling over anyway, that way you won't have any trouble with him after."

"Your words have some merit," Greywolf answered, even as Minsc began to protest. However, that is not where you are from. You have the look about you of Imoen of Candlekeep, the one who travels with Gorion's ward. Now, while the bounty for you and he are not as legal as the one on this fool, the money is still too good to pass up. Take them," he ordered, as the group behind him started forward.

However, Dynaheir had already begun to mold the spell, and a stinking cloud landed in among the other adventurers, knocking two of them out quickly. The edge of the area-effect spell was barely a few steps behind

Minsc bellowed “Go for the eyes Boo, go for the eyes!” as he shut charged forwards, his claymore in hand.

Taking a step back, Imoen instantly activated Hide In Shadows, moving around Greywolf and Minsc as they crashed into one another. Greywolf was big, but Minsc was even bigger, and stronger. He forced the other warrior back several paces, before Greywolf set himself, and was able to knock the next few blows to one side, trying to sweep his sword up into Minsc side only to have it blocked.

But to Imoen’s surprise, there was a faint flash of some kind of magic on the point of impact, and frost began to appear. *Some kind of enchantment to add frost damage? Awesome.*

The other bounty hunter, an archer, began to fire at Dynaheir, only to stumble back as an arrow from Khalid found his side, followed by several magic missiles from Edwin. He didn’t fall, merely stumbling back, sorely wounded, but then he dropped his bow for a short sword and shield as he moved forward.

The next moment, Imoen was there, coming out of Hide In Shadows, stabbing down into one of the unconscious people.

Critical Hit. You have achieved backstab.

Critical Hit. You have struck an unconscious opponent.

Your target is Dead, with a capital D. Ouch.

She then disappeared into the shadows again, dodging a hasty blow from the former archer.

He staggered again as another arrow struck his back, and Imoen watched as he turned yellow on her map, and he began to run away only to finally succumb to Dynaheir’s Stinking Cloud. A shot from Branwen’s sling took him in the back of the head, shattering it.

The next moment, several magic missiles from Dynaheir hit Greywolf, and he faltered to, although he was now driving Minsc back, his sword flashing out to move through the big man’s defenses. But even as Imoen raced back out of the area impacted by the Stinking Cloud spell, Khalid moved forward switching to his sword and shield style. He was followed by Branwen, who pulled her hammer from her waist, bellowing, “By Tempus’ name, those who take lives for mere coin will never win the day!”

The three of them quickly moved apart, forcing Greywolf to turn his head one way or the other in order, almost forcing him back into the Stinking Cloud to keep the trio from circling him.

Seeing this, Imoen turned, sending a cutting spell towards the last of Greywolf's followers, unwilling to enter the Stinking Cloud area again. The spell struck, and Imoen turned her attention back to Greywolf, the last follower then being set on fire by Edwin.

But Greywolf seemed to be made of sterner stuff. "Cleave!" he shouted, bringing his sword around, and nearly taking Minsc off of his feet despite the fact that the Cleave had been blocked by Minsc's blade. The blades shattered, and only the Plate Mail +1 that Harry had forced Minsc to take from the Gnoll Fortress kept him from being cut in half. Even so, he crumpled, falling to his rear as the blade hammered into his chest.

Then Greywolf was turning, bringing his sword around in an arc. Khalid blocked it, but the lighter half-elf found himself stumbling back, unable to match the human male's strength, although in turn Greywolf could not get through Khalid's defense. Then Branwen was there, her hammer flashing in only to be blocked by a wily twist from Greywolf, who responded with a slash at her leg the blade's top kept from Branwen's thigh only by her Sword and Shield Style interposing her shield in time.

Deciding she'd had enough of this, Imoen gestured, and a stupefy spell crashed into Greywolf from behind. The use of another spell caused Imoen's health to drop to just above the yellow, leaving her at thirty-five out of sixty. But it worked to knock Greywolf to the ground.

Khalid, never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, instantly stabbed down, performing both a Critical Hit, and, because Greywolf was face down on the ground much like Imoen's first victim, a backstab. The strike went through the bit of neck armor, Imoen couldn't remember what the name of it was, that Greywolf was wearing, penetrating straight through his throat.

"Well, that was interesting," Imoen drawled. "Next time Minsc, don't be so quick to bellow, yeah?" With that mild reproof given, Imoen went along, touching the bodies, searching for anything interesting, and coming away with a piece of paper on the aforementioned bounty for the artist, but not for her. However, Greywolf's sword came up as inherently magical, and Imoen sighed. "Really wishing that I could use Identify right now. This blade's obviously got a really nice magical enchantment on it."

"Truth, but look at it this way, we have yet another reason to hurry along and find Harry," Branwen answered, looking at the weapon in interest, as did Dynaheir.

Nodding at that, Imoen turned to Prism, about to give the artist a piece of her mind only to blink in surprise. "Did one of the bounty hunters get an arrow through to him?"

The others all turned to see the artist slumped to the ground in front of his statue. Branwen, who had just been about to heal Imoen from her use of Blood Magic moved over to

Prism instead, checking on the man. "He's dead, the overwrought, love-besotted fool's heart went!" She shook her head with a resigned sigh. "Should we carry him to the town and have him revived?"

Bock, Edwin scoffed. "Why ever would we? I know these self-made artiste types They care not about their own lives, only about the art. This one obviously thinks this statue is his finest work and was willing to die for it. Enough to even turn to thievery if the bounty hunter's words were true. And judging by the eyes of that statue, I rather think they were."

Scowling in confusion moved closer to the statue. Standing next to Branwen and Edwin, she could see the image was gorgeous. If this woman was real, Imoen knew she would have felt an immense amount of jealousy. *High cheekbones, full mouth, pert nose, a perfect chin, hair down to her bum, a good chest for an elven woman, legs longer and better-looking than mine. Yeesh, yep, I'd be jealous for sure.*

But she understood what Edwin was speaking about the moment she saw the eyes of the statue, for the eyes were emeralds, literally. The almost reminded her of Harry's eyes for a moment, set in a feminine face. "That's a little at weird," she muttered, shaking her head as she stared at the image.

She reached for them instantly and pulled them out of the statue, pocketing them quickly. This drew a gasp of shock from both Khalid and Dynaheir, but a guffaw from Branwen and Minsc. Edwin too nodded his head sagely, saying "Waste not want not after all. The statue certainly is not going to complain. And if he wanted people to actually see his art, this ode to a woman I rather doubt the fool shared one word with, Prism would have created it in some city somewhere."

He snigged haughtily, waving a languid hand at the statue even as he blushed faintly. "As it is, I rather think the statute is distressingly plain even with the emeralds. Any mage of any skill could summon up a succubus that makes this woman's beauty seem like the most common of city strumpet.

"I call bullshit on that," Imoen answered tartly, with the others agreeing, causing Edwin to huff turning away from the statue. Such was its beauty though that even he could not help but look at it out of the corners of his eye. The loss of the emeralds did not detract much from the whole.

Shaking her head, Imoen asked Branwen to heal her, then held out her hand once more, "Point me Harry Potter."

Edwin watched as the spell worked, shaking his head with a slight look of irritation. "Divination spells like that should not be so simple, nor as accurate as you claim this one is." He hadn't had much luck reversing even a simple Blood Magic spell yet, but their efficacy, speed of casting still interested him immensely.

“I’m just thankful it’s not pointing downward at an angle into the the earth,” Dynaheir argued. “Still, we know which way to go.”

“And it will keep on pointing in that direction even if we have to make a detour over some natural block or something,” Imoen agreed. “Whatever happens from here on, we avoid strangeness, got it everyone? Going through the rocks would have been way easier and less annoying than this fight.”

When the others agreed with varying degrees of enthusiasm, Imoen turned and gestured Minsc and Khalid forward “Let’s get moving then.”

Moments later, the group was gone, leaving behind the statue, it’s dead creator and the quartet who had been sent to slay him all dead on the forest floor. Artist or bounty hunter, the wolves to the south would no doubt see to the body’s ‘care’ in due time.

OOOOOOO

Having slept the requisite eight hours, Harry once more cast Lay Hands on himself, then moved over, kneeling beside Jaheira and feeding her some of the stew slowly. “Damn it, if I knew how to heal her head wound, a single night’s rest would have us both on our feet. But as it is...” Harry sighed.

While Harry could see where Imoen, Minsc and Khalid were in terms of direction, that told him nothing about how far away his official party members were. Still, he’d made a decent enough defensive perimeter here. *And with my trifecta of crippling wounds, there’s no way I’d be able to move Jaheira. Even a Leviosa spell would knock my health down to the point a group of wolves like those from last night could kill me. No, the best idea is still to stay put, as much as that annoys me.*

Moving back to his own side of the small, hidden fire he had created the evening before, Harry fed the fire a bit, then tried to go to sleep but found it impossible again. He was fully rested, and the sun was up, and thanks to his Gamer skill, Harry just didn’t feel sleepy or tired if he had gotten enough sleep the night before. Sighing, Harry stood up and, once more ignoring the pain shooting through his broken foot and his back, not to mention his side aching like fire, Harry began to go through the forms Khalid had shown him with the sword. Luckily so long as he moved slowly, getting up and sitting down, his health didn’t decrease more than a few points thanks to his stacked Crippled debuffs.

He’d done pretty well over the past two days with building up his Stance and Body Movement skills, although obviously, he couldn’t do anything that involved lower body strength yet. Still, if he could get those two down pat, Harry would be a lot closer to unlocking the two extra skill points, which would be a huge help, as would getting rid of the slight negative bonus to his skill set. That wasn’t anything major, just a reduction in his power to hit, chance to hit and chance to block while in combat, but even so, getting rid of it would be nice.

This kind of repetitive work hurt, but it was something to keep Harry’s mind and body going. *And the Gamer aspect allows me to track my progress in a way that I couldn’t in my past life,* Harry thought, before frowning pensively.

I haven't thought about my past life in... how many time loops before Imoen appeared? Her presence had reminded Harry starkly of Earth and everything there, but even then, he didn't think about it often. Harry wondered what had happened to Hogwarts and to his old friends. *Or were they still friends? Given how they didn't contact me, especially Hermione, with her knowledge of the nonmagical world, I just don't know about that.* Regardless, this was his new life, and Harry vowed to make the best of it.

That turned his attention to his own circumstances again. Specifically, Harry mused on why he only had access to one Lay on Hands spell and why he couldn't use more. *What God of Light am I going to swear to?*

Helm was definitely a no-go at this point. Despite Nalin's best efforts to make Helm sound a little less than the equivalent of a law-abiding cock, Helm was far too judgmental, too filled with his own righteousness. Torm remained a possibility, as did the rest of the good gods who Harry could see himself worshipping. But Harry really hadn't put much thought into either of them or the other more esoteric gods who paladins looked to for command or aid in battle and life.

Suddenly, his comment last night came back to Harry, and his eyes widened as he brought a hand up to smack his forehead with enough force to make his back hurt and lose him a point of health. "I'm a bloody idiot!"

With that, Harry reached into his bag and pulled out the book Gwyneth Mirrorshade had given him back in the Friendly Arm Inn. "Damn it, it seems so long ago, but it was only what, less than a month? And I completely forgot about it... Yep, I didn't hit myself nearly hard enough."

Evidently, his AAS skill felt the same thing because the second Harry had the book in hand and had finished speaking, a gold-outlined message appeared in his vision.

The side quest (large) Pray for your Future has been updated.

You have finally remembered the book, *An Adventurer's Guide to the Gods of Light and Darkness*, has been in your possession. Seriously, there's a limit to how often you can use the 'I'm busy' line.

No, you're not getting any experience for this.

"Ruddy plonker," Harry grumbled. "Fine, I get it. I was an idiot. But name one time on this trip I actually had time to sit down and read that wasn't best used to sleep or get to know my party members?" He waited a tick, then took the silence (and the lack of further snark like when he had been told about the Birds and the Bees) as a victory before continuing to read the rather large notification that was behind the initial one, depicting the book.

This book is known as an **Information Book**.

This book will give you a brief but intense overview of the gods of Light who call to paladins or vice versa. This will include knowledge of their churches, beliefs, and the benefits that worshipping them gives their paladins. Occasionally that last can be very singular, modified to the individual. In some cases, not.

The changes wrought on a paladin upon choosing his true faith are deep and profound, and so is the impact on the mental and physical aspects of the paladins. Each god bequeaths a distinct set of permanent buffs debuffs and can even impact existing abilities, physical and mental.

If you find a god whose faith calls to you in this book, you will start down that path now.

Warning: Reading this book is a very immersive experience.

You will be unable to leave the book except between segments and will not be aware of your surroundings. Much like if you had been hit by Color Spray, any wounds done to you while unconscious will not wake you up. Further, the time spent on each god is unequal and cannot be determined before starting.

Harry grimaced at that but understood he could read through the book one god at a time, which would lessen the threat somewhat. Setting aside the book and getting to his feet with difficulty, Harry moved around the makeshift camp, making certain the fire was hidden from a distance, the smoke invisible, and the traps set. With that done, Harry returned and lay down, the pain in his back making sitting up difficult. Then, wondering how this was going to go, Harry opened the book and began to read, only to find his mind pulled forward into the book, the world around him disappearing.

It was almost as if Harry was floating in a sea of clouds, words belaboring him from every direction, the sound impossibly loud and impossibly... well, just all-encompassing. That was the only word for it.

“The gods of Good are varied, both in their powers and personalities. Herein you will discover something of their aspects, abilities and the power they can give those who follow the tenants of their specific faith!”

An image appeared then of a man, large, well-formed, but thin, almost emaciated despite his muscles. He was also heavily wounded, not in the manner of one or even a few deadly wounds, but in terms of hundreds of different types of wounds. Some looked like whip marks, others from arrows. A few looked like he had been flayed in segments or burned. His whole body was covered in a litany of pain, his arms and hands chained, yet he stood defiant, a fierce grin on his face.

“Illmater, the god of visions, suffering and wounds, Illmater is one of the main three gods whose worshippers together have created the Order of the Radiant Heart. Illmater is the god of the oppressed and persecuted, giving aid in enduring their pain or sending visions of their suffering to his paladins, who will do all they can to aid those in such dire straits. Not a particularly violent god, Illmater gives no added bonus to any weapons style or skill, but his enhancements to the body calls to monks, who use their bodies as their primary weapons. As such, he is represented by both paladins and monks equally.”

The image changed, this time showing two visions, one after another. The first was a heavily armored man fighting back several armed pirates or other similarly colorful fighters while groups of slaves fled behind him. The next was that of a bald man in chains, sitting on what looked like desert sand as taunts, jeers and stones were hurled at him. Then they were gone, and the original image was back, but smaller, set to the side.

It was also moving like a video. The chained god of suffering stood staring ahead of him unbowed as more wounds began to appear on his body. At the same time, a strange feeling of being watched gripped Harry as a sound, like a low-key howling or whimpering noise, began to underlay the monstrously loud voice.

“Endurance, martyrdom, perseverance, and suffering, these are the traits which call to Illmater and which his followers embrace. To be a paladin of Illmater is to seek out the oppressed, the persecuted and aid them. You do not serve justice or law, only extend the hand of aid to those in most need.”

As the voice spoke, a set of lines appeared to one side of the moving image, looking much like the notifications Harry normally saw from his AAS system.

Paladins of Illmater benefit from an added specialty in Healing Magic and Beneficial Necromancy, the magical ability to ignore damage done to the body or protect the soul from attacks. They also gain a +1 to Durability per level after taking their oaths. All positive healing or buff spells will be enhanced to X2 the impact.

+2 Lay On Hands per level. You will learn the spell **Ignore Pain** and the special skill, **Persevere**.

As a Paladin, you will learn Cleric spells starting level 9 or the next level up after choosing your deity.

There is a commensurate negative buff to offensive strikes or attack spells. 50% reduction in damage done to all offensive strikes.

Warning: The negative debuff will carry over into your Blood Magic spells! As a paladin, you must abide by the rules of the god you give service to, even in something so singular as your Blood Mage skills. Further, like your skills, that debuff will carry over into any Combat Formation.

Harry found the words looping as the god’s image was replaced by still more of his followers, while the whole thing waited, as if for Harry to do something, and he examined the words, and he slowly shook his head. “No,” he mused, his voice carrying an odd vibration to it here in this weird mental space, and his thoughts muggy, difficult to push out, almost like a weight was on his mind.

Still, he forced them out, somehow knowing as he did that what he said was both the truth and irrevocable. “No, I don’t think so. I am a little too aggressive to be a paladin of Illmater. I would rather slay the slaver than help the slave endure. The skill and spells look nice, but not enough to let me set aside the impact on my offensive skills. Plus, I think I’m already building up a Bloodline Skill that will give me some of the same durability buffs.”

A second later, Harry was back in his own body, staring around him, grateful that the odd keening sound that had been in the background there hadn’t followed him. A small glance at the sun showed that he had only been in the book for a few minutes, and then he nodded slowly before turning back and concentrating on the book once more. A second later, he was floating again in the sea of clouds as the massive voice bombarded his mind and a new image appeared in front of him.

“Chauntea, the Earth Mother. An integral part of the cycle of all life, she is the Goddess of life, farming, and the agrarian life, sometimes called the kinder counterforce of Silvanus, the elven god of forests. Druids, farmers and Gardeners look to her, but also a few rather scattered paladins.”

The image of Chauntea had long shiny white hair, gathered in a long braid that flowed down her back, brown skin and a lean, toned body. Her body was the kind shaped by hard work rather than training or fighting.

All in all, Harry thought the Goddess looked like a Molly Weasley who'd kept herself fit. "Urrrrgh..."

"The church of Chauntea is one of the most all-inclusive, welcoming all regardless of gender or race. Paladins who follow her teachings are tasked as hunters or preventative teachers. They hunt down those who corrupt or pollute the land and those who work on it. This can mean leading an investigation into a noble or a peasant riot against the same. They also teach and try to prevent natural disasters as best they can by teaching how best to nurture the Earth and thus receive Chauntea's bounty."

"No," Harry forced out at that point, shaking his head and with an effort of will turning away from the images which showed a man clad in armor, his arm covered by spiked roses, leading a charge up a hill with hundreds of farmers behind him. "Er, while I can see the benefits, and I'm trying to not be sexist or anything, but Chauntea is definitely not someone he could follow. I..."

Harry's voice flattened out into a sigh, but he still pushed the thoughts out. "I don't think I am made for teaching. Not only have I never really enjoyed working in the garden, but I... I think in this life or my last I am called to war and conflict, for better or worse."

Beyond that, Chauntea seemed too... soft, too sedentary. She was undoubtedly an excellent mother figure, but not someone Harry could swear his service to. Indeed, Harry kind of felt that Silvanus, the harder, more wild-edged god of nature, was closer to someone Harry could serve. *Although how much of that is the discussions I've had with Jaheira and Khalid about their beliefs, I don't know.*

Know Thyself. In a moment of introspection, you have come to at least some understanding of your nature that you were perhaps willfully blind to before.

+ 1 to Wisdom.

As he found himself in his body once more, Harry chuckled wryly. "Well, I haven't seen anything like that in a while. Neat. I suppose that's my Advanced Adventuring System's way of telling me I need to take more moments to think, huh?"

To his mild surprise, that comment did not elicit a response from the AAS, and with a shrug, Harry looked up at the sky. Very little time had passed, and Harry decided to dive into the book once more.

The next image was almost chosen to be the complete opposite of Chauntea. It was that of a giant of a man, young, well-muscled, wearing something that looked like a Roman toga. His visage radiated light like the morning sun, and his hair burned on his head, an orange-red fire.

"Lathander, the Morninglord!" the voice boomed. ***"A deity who calls to creativity, dawn, renewal, birth, athletics, spring, and youth. He is favored by and favors those who battle the undead and blesses those who plant new life."***

The man seemed to change, becoming clad in armor as he fought off what looked like flying shadows in the shape of men and women. Behind the image of the god, the sun began to rise, blazing out and destroying Lathander's enemies.

“While not one of the Triad, Lathander calls to those unafraid to bring the dawn to dark places and loathes evil, especially undead. A man of Lathander is blessed by the dawn and is laid to rest at dusk, with the night lit by raucous celebration.”

The image changed to men in bright armor, anointed with many different bright colors and the sun of the dawn on them battering their way into a house, fighting a group of vampires that seemed to come from every side. Unlike the last images, these were moving, and the voice continued to speak as they did. And as they did, the beauty of the armor the paladins were wearing became apparent, each suit different, equally colorful and artistic.

“The Order of the Aster is the small, very restricted group of paladins that look to Lathander. They are hard to join but are also part of the greater Order of the Radiant Heart. They are known as the fiercest slayers of undead in all Faerun. When joining, one can be taught significant skills for use against the undead especially. This includes faith-based enhancements that will negate the spells of undead liches, making the Order of the Aster all the more feared.”

Paladins of Lathander gain benefits in strength and dexterity + 1 per level after taking their oaths. All damage done to the undead will be enhanced X2 the impact. The skill Turn Undead will also be enhanced to X4 its normal efficacy during the day.

+1 Lay On Hands per every other level. You will learn the spells **Protection From Evil**, Detect Evil, and the special activated Combat Skill, **Empowered Self**.

Paladins of Lathander also gain the Class Skill **Youthfulness**. This is a constant buff like a Life Skill or Bloodline Skill, which will slow the aging process by half its normal impact on your body during the day.

Note: Many paladins of Lathander also exhibit the Class Skill, **Go Forth and Multiply**: Your Potency will be incredibly enhanced, and only powerful magical contraceptives will be able to stop you from getting a woman pregnant regardless of her race.

“JUsstt what!?” Harry deadpanned, forcing the words out despite the pressure even more now than it had been for Illmater, although far less than Chauntea. Harry put that down to perhaps Chauntea being such a quick, easy decision on his part. “I... well, er... no. I don't think so. While it's closer, there's a hint of too much glitz and glamor there. While I like art and beauty, I'm not about to devote myself to its deity.”

Harry then made a mental shrug. “Besides, their combat abilities seem to be a little too specialized. But it was definitely closer.”

Once more, Harry found himself back in his body, staring around him thoughtfully. “Huh. okay, that took a while.” The sun was noticeably higher in the sky now, near noon, in fact. “One more than a break for lunch.” Reaching down, Harry touched the book once more.

“The Goddess Sune!”

With those words, a human female of unearthly beauty dressed in something that looked more appropriate for the bedroom than the world around him appeared. She had long crimson hair and ruby red, slightly plump lips. Her red hair stayed even as the rest of the appearance changed, skin color age, and bust all shifting from one moment to another, until it stopped on golden skin, while her eyes began to change. They had first been sky-blue, then honey, and now shifted into eyes of shining emeralds.

At the sight, Harry grimaced and, for the first time, tried to close his metaphysical eyes to the sight in front of him. "GAH Sttoooooopp that, she looks like me mum! I am so bloody not going to worship someone who looks like me Mum! That's all sorts of wrong!"

"Love, beauty and passion, with a connection to Life and Light, like Lathander, Sune is not one of the normal Triad, but she does have her own order, Sisters and Brothers of the Ruby Rose."

Intrigued, Harry opened his mental eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as the book had changed the image. Instead of Sune, there were several paladins, among them the first female fighters Harry had seen so far for some reason. They were fighting to protect what looked like a temple as a long line of refugees or worshippers raced inside from what looked like a horde of orcs, gnolls and men. Some used weapons and used traditional armor, but others stood behind the line with various instruments.

"A knightly order affiliated with the Church of Sune, the Brothers and Sisters of the Ruby Rose are made up of paladins, fighters and bards, something that no other order can boast. Their primary mission is to guard Sunite temples and holy sites, and occasionally accompany clerics doing good works or questing for something important to the Lady of Love."

"NOPE!" Harry pushed out, grimacing again even as the images changed. This image was of a paladin protecting several women from a group of ogres, dashing in and out. Harry could somehow tell that those strikes were perfectly controlled and directed, almost superhumanly so, making even Khalid's incredible skill look slow in comparison.

Still, Harry could tell this lady wasn't for him. "No. Too restricting, too much about following the will of Sune and protecting her temples. That is not what I think of when I think of a paladin. Fighting alongside them could be interesting, but I won't swear to this Goddess. Maybe if she was a rival to Cyric or some dark goddess, that could add some more interest, but not from this information."

The image of Sune came back, and now, beyond the red hair, nothing of her looked like his mother. For one thing, Sune wore the body of a teen now, one extremely busty, with skin that looked like a mix of copper and brown, with eyes of gold. The image almost seemed to wink for a moment before it was gone.

Blinking, Harry stared into the book for a moment, then resolutely put it aside, getting up and moving to the fire, ignoring the pain stoically from his back and side. Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, Harry felt more drained mentally than physically. "That, that was surely something..."

Still, Harry knew that the book also had left two deities to explore who human paladins could look to. Torm, who Harry had heard a lot of before, and Tyr, who again Harry had heard of in conjunction with Paladins, the two other members of the Triad, with Tyr being their avowed leader even now when Ao All-Father had seared his eyes for not seeing the attempted theft of whatever it was Bhaal and Cyric had stolen.

Somehow, Harry knew one of these two would be the one to call out to him. Which was in deep question. "Still, it's interesting to see how the AAS system and this Information Book interact and how the different paladins differ. Kind of fun." *At least, I hope it was the AAS system that was doing that. I really don't like the idea it could be anything else...*

But before he could delve back into the book, his ruminations were interrupted by seeing a blue dot appear on his map. It came closer, and then Harry made out a noise somewhere out past his little cordon. It was the sound of running feet, of someone racing as fast as their feet could carry them. "What the..."

Standing up slowly, Harry grimaced in pain, setting aside the ingredients he had been preparing for a wolf-meat stew, glancing at his display, his grimace enlarging as he saw that he was still barely forty-five out of seventy. "Damn it..." Whatever was coming, he'd have to face with only his sword. *One spell will put me on my ass!*

The sound of running feet came closer, and a female voice reached his ears, one huffing and cursing but still noticeably female. It was a tone Harry hadn't heard before, deeper, somehow hypnotic perhaps, or that could be her language. Harry was uncertain. A moment later, she hit the outskirts of his little noise traps, and her cursing grew.

Unable to just ignore a woman who seemed to be at her wit's end – and well away from civilization to boot – Harry raised his voice. "Come ahead if you need help, though I have little to give." Harry couldn't keep some bitterness from his voice. "I would prefer to take aid myself right now."

The noise paused and then resumed, still rushing towards him, then around the set of fallen trees, coming around them only to stop and stare.

This let Harry do the same, taking in the woman who had somehow stumbled upon him both with his eyes and his Observation skills. She was elven for certain, there was no missing her eyes, but the woman was trying hard to hide her body at the moment, with a heavy cloak and a scarf around her face, with gloves covering her hands and full, if somewhat tight, pants. But her race through the forest had torn her clothing in several places, showing both chain mail underneath and a skin color that looked dark blue, almost black. Her eyes were a light yellow color shining from underneath her hood, which in turn was torn in several places, showing silver-blue hair underneath.

Name: Viconia DeVir, Level 7 cleric of Shar.

Viconia is an exiled drow who has come to be exiled to the surface or perhaps is here of her own volition, you do not know. To say the least, she is extremely wary of humans and strangers, both perhaps thanks to something recent, perhaps thanks to her race, or perhaps both. Although one could cause the other.

You can tell Viconia is sore and tired, riding the ragged edge of exhaustion.

Relationship level: Trust: 400/7000, respect 20/7000.

Viconia is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt because of your offer of aid but now is rethinking that since she is uncertain if you can really help at all.

Well, I finally met someone who could be even harder to befriend than Jaheira, Harry thought wryly, shaking his head slightly. Still, that told him a lot about what was going on here. At Candlekeep, he had read about the Drow and understood they were not welcome on the surface. Even one of the most famous adventurers of the Age, Drizzt Do'urden, had been looked at with hatred and disgust when he first came to the surface and even now faced those who could not see past his race.

Viconia had not been having a good day. In fact, she had not been having a good week, and this was after a life spent in the Underdark and the city of Menzoberranzan, where life was cheap even for one such as Viconia, a daughter of the powerful DeVir clan. But there, while treachery and death could come from every corner within her family, at least she had not been attacked simply because she was Drow.

First came the moment when the caravan master saw Viconia's true skin color. Then, when she had refused his advances, he had ordered her captured. She had been able to escape him, only to be spotted instantly by a Flaming Fist officer off duty. He had chased her, and ever since, Viconia had been on the run in an unknown and bizarre land.

Viconia thought she had lost him for a time when they had pushed south beyond the area around the Friendly Arm Inn. For more than a day, she thought she was safe. Then someone found Viconia's trail, and the officer was on her trail once more, with seven of his fellows with him. That had been the most unpleasant moment when she looked up from making camp at the sight of an arrow coming towards her head. Only a hasty healing spell, and the fact that first fool had shot so quickly his fellows weren't in place yet saved her life. And since then, they had been hurting Viconia, dogging her every step. Three times she'd been certain she had lost them, only for them to find her trail once more. By this point, she was torn between believing they were toying with her or a concern that the gods were truly against her. She wasn't certain which it was.

And now this complication. A man who offers aid yet seems almost dead on his feet.

Admittedly, the human male was tall, almost imposing despite wearing no armor. He was powerfully muscled, wide in the shoulders and waist as humans were, standing at least a foot or more above her own height, and Viconia knew that she was actually quite well-built for a surface elf in terms of height as well as chest. She had become used to humans being taller and more powerfully built than her, but seeing one in only a thin undershirt like this was something else. And his eyes grabbed her attention as well, emeralds in a face made hard by experience and pain, yet with smile lines visible even so, reminding her almost of her brother.

Perhaps it was that memory that made Viconia stay, or perhaps it was the old saying, any port in a storm. Regardless, she stayed and held her hands up. "Hail, stranger. I seek aid."

"So I see, Harry answered, lips quirking wryly. "I said I'd be willing to help, but other than hiding you milady, I don't know how much help I can be. I am currently dealing with broken ribs, a sprained back and a broken foot. My ability to help you then is very limited, though if you lack weapons, I can at least remedy that."

"I can heal you, yes, if you trust me to do so? I have one Cure Serious Wounds left in me, which will let me heal one such wound."

“My back,” Harry answered instantly. “Then tell me what you’re running from? While I know a drow would face persecution, you seem far too panicked and far too away from civilization for this to be just some random racist issue.”

You have gained +100 trust with Viconia. You have lost -40 respect with Viconia.

Apparently, while she likes the fact that you are so quick to offer help, you have also made it clear that you really need some yourself and are willing to offer aid too quickly.

She moved forward, walking behind Harry, causing him to turn, frowning a bit. “You have to touch me to use that spell?”

No, but it makes it easier to direct it, and I am at the end of my endurance, both physical and mental,” Viconia growled, glaring up at him. “Now, will you accept my aid so that you are actually able to aid me in turn as you claim you wish to or am I going to have to flee again because you are so afraid of me, Abaloth?”

Smirking slightly, Harry held up a hand, and he was suddenly holding a sword. “Very well, my lady, but give me your name pray, so I know who is actually seeing to my injury. And to keep the peace, I won’t ask what that term means.”

She huffed, rolling her eyes. “I am no lady to be given false respect as your tone seems to indicate. Ironic drollness is not something I require. I am Viconia. You will address me and respect me, as such.”

“You say you’re no Lady, but you’re still quite caustic and haughty for someone who is on the run,” Harry drawled.

To her credit, Viconia finished the healing spell she had begun, laying her hand on Harry’s sure to the back, directing the healing energies of her spell inward to his spine. As she did, Viconia’s scowl disappeared, and she shook her head in surprise at what she found. “Your back wasn’t sprained. You had two chipped disks back there. Any more damage, and you might have been paralyzed.”

“I know,” Harry drawled before breathing in and smiling at the lessening of the pain he’d been dealing with for some time. He also noticed that removing one of his crippling wounds had an immediate effect, bringing his current health up to sixty and overall health up to eighty. “But thank you even so.”

But he was still looking at her, and Viconia shook her head, her scowl returning. “You ask if I am caustic. Life has given me reason to be. You asked me if I am overly proud? If I do not hold myself to my own standards, I am nothing. And if I can run no longer, I will not cower before my death like a craven.”

Harry nodded slightly. “I can respect that. But why are you being chased so fanatically?”

“Fanatically... a good term. For truly, I am being chased for no reason I can understand,” Viconia’s scowl redoubled even as she slowly pushed back her hood, searching Harry’s face for any sign of anger or hate as she did. “I realized early on my time on the surface that my race was against me, and yet, this time, it seems to have been taken to an extreme. When my race was discovered, I fled from a caravan heading to Balder’s Gate. I was then spotted once again almost on the heels of that by a Flaming Fist officer.”

“That’s the mercenary company that acts like Balder’s Gate’s city watch and army,” Harry supplied.

“Regardless of their task, the officer spotted me and was quick to chase after me with some of his men. Since then, I have spotted several others, and it seems almost as if they have made a sport of it!” Viconia snarled in anger, a look that should have made her face seem ugly, but somehow it didn’t.

“That does seem strange,” Harry mused. “The Flaming Fist might be mercenaries, but their loyalty to Baldur’s Gate is solid, and we are so far beyond their normal area it isn’t even funny.”

A part of Harry was surprised that his comment didn’t create any message from the AAS. *Heck, I’m not even getting a quest to save the girl or something? I feel abandoned.*

“I know not nor care. Now, make good your words and give me a weapon!”

“I can do better than that,” Harry answered, pulling out the chain mail that Mulahey had been wearing, along with Harry’s spare hammer and Mulahey’s medium shield. “Can you handle all that?”

Viconia stared avidly at the armor and weapon, grabbing them up, swiftly tossing her cloak aside, and shimmying into the chain mail armor. This showed that Viconia was wearing what could best be described as rags underneath. To be sure, it covered Viconia’s body at different points in a very strategic manner. But didn’t leave much to the imagination.

And suddenly, Harry had a very active imagination. Viconia’s body was incredible. It had the svelte, toned thinness of surface elves but also showed marked muscle in her legs and a much larger chest than Harry had yet seen on any elf, or indeed, understood was the norm for elves. Her skin was a lustrous dark blue color as Harry had seen through the rents and her cloak, but somehow, seeing so much more of it brought that fact home even more.

However, Harry knew this was not a moment for that kind of thinking. Nor did he think that Viconia would welcome it at all from someone she had just met. “How many people are we talking about here, and how far behind you were they?”

“I do not know,” Viconia answered promptly. “I know two of them were on my trail this morning and nearly caught me, and another sent an arrow my way a bare shift of the sun ago. I have tried to throw them off my trail before, but they always find me somehow.”

“Do they use dogs to track you?”

“What are dogs?” Viconia asked her in return, some confusion showing through even as she finished settling the chain mail over her body, grimacing slightly at the feel of the metal on bare skin in places.

“Er animals kept by many humans and other surface dwellers either as pets or work animals. They can be very cuddly.”

Viconia snorted. “I have only seen humans, and I have no idea what the term cuddly is either, Abaloth, pray do not use words I must strive to deduce the meaning of.”

Right back at you, what does that even mean?” Harry shot back, although he was, smiling at Viconia’s tart tones, feeling a strange calmness wash over him with violence imminent. He didn’t know if

it was his Gamer's Mind or what, but he welcomed it even so. "And how many of your pursuers have you seen?"

"It means a waste, someone who would be sacrificed to Lolth out of hand," Viconia snorted. "And speaking of more important matters, I have seen as many as nine at once, the time they nearly caught me that was spoiled by the premature shooter. Since the second day of this chase, the fewest I've seen when they actually come close enough to attack me is five."

"Five is manageable," Harry murmured. "If we get lucky, and if your patch job on my back holds up. Nine could be a lot of trouble."

"It will hold up for now. Your ribs are still broken, and your foot is mangled as well," Viconia answered tartly. "And my own tiredness is going to get in my way. Further," she looked a little annoyed, grimacing her teeth before finally admitting, "With this chain mail, I am somewhat encumbered, unfortunately. I will not be able to move quickly."

"Then I'll take point, and you can guard my back. With my foot, I'm not going to be moving much either," Harry answered with a laugh that was rather more sardonic than Humorous. "And we will see what we will see. Although I don't suppose you have any offense of spells?"

"I have three remaining though I used all my summoning spells already," Viconia supplied, nodding in approval at the question. "I have Slay Living, Mental Domination, and Flame Strike."

Damn, that's some interesting spell choices, even if I have no idea what a Slay Living spell can do. The others are self-explanatory, at least. "Good. I would ask you to wait on the Mental Domination until you can use it on their leader, if he can be identified, or until we pair their numbers down. At least, I assume that such a spell would take you out of the fight too."

"Correct, and that makes sense." Viconia then watched as Harry moved around, pulling axes out of his Item Box, setting them aside, and moving forward, setting out small wooden skewers in the ground. "Those won't do much, you know."

"They might force someone to look down. In a fight like this one, that can be important," Harry rejoined, although he was watching his map at the same time and had just seen several blue dots appearing. Blue meant that they were neutrals. *That's not going to last.*

"I stand corrected," Viconia grumbled. She had to get used to men speaking to her like this here on the surface. The Drow were an extremely matriarchal society, so the idea of a male contradicting her was strange. Especially in this case, it was a simple correction instead of the start of an attack on her in some fashion. "You seem to have an eye for tactical opportunities."

"I am the leader of my adventuring party, so it comes with the territory," Harry answered, trying to downplay his skills. *Still, if this fight is as tough as I fear, then I might need to tell her more.*

"And you don't have any more healing spells or potions? Because they're coming," Harry announced, equipping his plate mail, grimacing at the weight of his tower on the arm on the same side as his still-broken ribs. In his other hand, Harry still held his longsword. *Damn it, my tower shield won't be worth more than one, two blows at most. Still, I have Jaheira's shield too.*

“No,” Viconia snorted. “I have been forced to use them all in the past few days and did not get enough sleep to recoup my losses. And how do you know?”

“Understandable. As for how we know, I...” Harry paused, and both he and Viconia turned toward the sound of a set of Harry’s noise-maker traps going off, wooden bits clacking together in an area around the semi-circle that Harry had created.

“The bitch must be close!” Came a shout, full of some emotion Harry could not identify. Hate, yes, but also something else, a dark joy maybe? Whatever it was, it made Harry’s jaw clench and Viconia raise her hammer.

“What is this, though? No way that drow whore would have thought of setting up something like this.” Another voice asked. This one was querulous but equally as filled with that unknown emotion.

“Who cares? Let’s finish her off. I can’t cover our absence for much longer. We’ve had some fun already, boys. But it’s time to move on to the other kind,” A third voice said. This one had a kind of verbal sneer to it, as well as a haughty note.

“Fun, fun is it,” Viconia snarled. “I swear to Shar with my last breath I will curse them so hard their manhood falls off at the sight of a woman if they touch me!”

Harry nodded but said nothing, and a moment later, two groups of men came around the back of Harry’s hide.

Almost all of them read as simply Flaming Fist soldiers, much like the Amnian soldiers Harry had seen back in Nashkel. They wore plate mail, helmets with wings to either side of their heads, shields and swords, or bows.

Only one of them stood out. This man didn’t wear armor that visually looked any better, but the notification Harry saw via his observation was truly fascinating.

Corrupt Flaming Fist Officer, Artius Gist.

While on the surface, Artius appears a normal, upstanding field commander of the Flaming Fist, in reality, dark thoughts lurk behind the eyes of the younger brother of Felonius Gist. Always in his older brother’s shadow, Artius has turned to crime and taking bribes. There is a lot of fury in him visible on his face, and you can tell Artius isn’t someone who has a lot of self-control.

You can see a bulge of some kind of book under his plate mail armor as if there is a hidden pocket welded into the exterior that is supposed to look like a specially made stomach bulge. What could be there could be very interesting...

“Viconia, I’m going to try and rile them up a bit, target the one who answers with your Flame Strike Spell,” Harry hissed. He heard her grunt in reply as Harry moved forward. ““HOLD!” He bellowed, putting as much strength and commands into the words as he could as he held up his sword, pointing at the officer.

All nine of Viconia’s attackers slowed down, staring at him. “Who are you to tell us to hold, fool?”

“Who I am doesn’t matter. What does is you hunting this woman down like she is some kind of animal. Though I suppose with your looks, an animal is the only way you could get anything,” Harry snarked.

“You bastard!” Artius bellowed. “I am a flaming Fist officer, and you will respect my authority!”

Harry snorted. “What is a Flaming Fist doing so far from Baldur’s Gate then? As best I know, you lot only approach from a few days north of the Friendly Arm Inn, and we are well south of that? Did you get lost? Should I call your family to come get you?”

“GRAAAH!!!” Artius snarled, and Harry snickered as he saw the man’s dot on his map go from neutral blue to red, and he charged forward. The other dots shifted to red, too, as Artius bellowed. “Kill him, boys! And remember, we want her alive, for now anyway...”

Harry charged forward, kicking up a rock toward Artius, who blocked it with his shield. Then Harry slammed shield-to-shield with him, hurling Artius off his feet even as Harry turned, his sword flicking out towards one of the other Flaming Fist officers. “Viconia!”

Viconia’s flame strike struck a second later, a pillar of flame coming from the air above him. While it didn’t kill Artius, it set him on fire, and he rolled desperately trying to put out the flames licking at his skin, breeches and under jerkin, screaming for aid.

Several of his men went to help him, while two others looked down at their feet, yelping in pain as they trod on the makeshift stakes Harry had made mere moments before. This left Viconia and Harry facing three opponents to start the fight.

Harry blocked one sword strike with his shield, grimacing as he saw the tower shield’s durability rating fall to seven. *I’ll need to cast Repairo on it after this.*

Pushing that strike to one side, Harry lunged forward, punching his sword into the side of the other, hitting his side so hard it dented the plate mail. Meanwhile, Viconia struck at the one who had attacked Harry, her hammer finding his forearm and breaking it.

Both men fell back, and Harry danced in, slicing at the third man who brought his sword around to block the blow. “CLEAVE!” Harry’s power strike shattered his sword and hurled the man to the Earth, his armor slashed clear through. Harry then twisted to the side, blocking a blow meant for Viconia from Harry’s second victim. “Go low.”

Obedying, Viconia left off, moving to finish the man Harry had struck with his cleave. Instead, her hammer swung in an arc under Harry’s shield, cracking into the Flaming Fist’s leg right below the knee.

“Now pull back,” Harry ordered, and somewhat shockingly, Viconia did it, although he could hear her grumbling.

Internally even though she was annoyed at a male ordering her about like this, Viconia was elated. Three of her would-be torturers were on the ground already. Not dead, but out of the fight for certain. *And it is because of Harry’s plans. Amazing.*

Noting absently that he had just gained five-hundred respect and trust points with Viconia, Harry held up his shield, blocking several arrows, which finished the tower shield off. But only two of the

attackers kept their distance, and Harry grinned evilly as he switched out his shield with Jaheira's. "Bad move, more of them should have kept their distance."

"I rather think they thought to overwhelm us in close, and here they come!" Viconia growled.

True enough, Atrius was back on his feet, and the three men who had been helping him moved forward with him. Arrows zipped in from the two archers, forcing Harry and Viconia to block them, then the four attackers were on them, while two of the other Flaming Fist soldiers, the one Harry had struck with a cleave and the one with a broken arm, also moved. The one with a tear in his armor pulled back, pulling out a longbow, while the other moved forward with just his shield.

"Back to back, Viconia," Harry ordered, grimacing as he felt a sword strike on his shield again while his own longsword became locked with one of the others.

"I do not need to be told every little thing, male! This is not my first fight, blast it, just my first fight since coming to the surface," Viconia snarled even as she obeyed. Her shield took a blow meant for Harry while Harry blocked a blow meant for her other side, allowing Viconia to hammer a strike into that man's own shield.

"Should I look for sunblock then?" Harry quipped even as he struggled with their attackers, losing health now from the pain of his exertions, exacerbating his broken foot and ribs. *Damn it, I don't think we can win this.*

"Whatever is sunblock, and why do I think you are making jokes at my expense, Abalolth!?"

Grinning tightly at that, Harry redirected his next strike, and his sword's tip sunk into a Flaming Fist soldier's thigh. As he screamed, the man's shield arm flew out to one side, and he began to fall, blocking Artius for a second. Harry's blade pulled out and swung without a second's thought, cutting into the man's helmet, shearing through the cheek guard and into his skull.

Blood spattered back onto Harry's chest and neck almost into his face, but worse was the fact that the three longbowmen all targeted him at that point. They had spread apart, and now all of them fired from positions around the melee. Harry's shield blocked two arrows falling down to six Durability, while the third arrow flashed over his shield, impacting Harry's chest.

Sheer agony flashed through Harry's mind, and though the arrow barely penetrated, the impact carried to his ribs, which had already been screaming at him, and it was all Harry could do to not fall to his knees. "GUUHUUH..."

I need to do something to silence those archers, but they're too separated to get with one spell... with that, Harry unequipped his sword and attempted to throw one of his axes, only for his lack of skill with axes to come into play. The throwing axe barely even reached the archer, and by the time it did, it had turned, the blade of the axe hitting his thigh, no doubt leaving a bruise, but little else.

"Damn it!" Harry hissed before being forced to go sword-to-sword with Artius. He was a much better swordsman than his followers, and crippled as he was, Harry couldn't keep up with him. Two strikes nearly got through his Sword and Shield style, and Harry couldn't strike back. Luckily, Viconia was able to keep the other three attackers off him, and they, in turn, blocked the archers from targeting her.

As Jaheira's medium shield started to collapse in turn, Harry unequipped it and then thrust forward, scowling, "Stupefy!"

The use of the spell knocked Harry's health bar down into the red, leaving him gasping, but he had caught Artius and one of Viconia's attackers.

Viconia gasped, seeing the spell impact. "What in the world!?"

But she had no time to worry as Harry grabbed her arm and hurled her over Atrius' body. "Kill the archers!"

Rolling forward through the gravel and dirt, Viconia snarled, but her shield twitched, blocking an arrow meant for her, and she had to mentally concede Harry's point even as she tossed her shield aside, which allowed her to move unencumbered. "Do not throw me again like that, Abaloth!"

With that, Viconia charged forwards, getting the attention of the archers. One of them threw his weapon down and began to run, while the other two tried to pull out short swords. One of them failed to do so before she was on him, and her warhammer crashed into his face, shattering bone and hurling him backward in red ruin. A sweep to the side caught the other man's short sword and turned it aside, at which point Viconia smashed the edge of her shield down into the man's leg. The Flaming Fist officer stumbled to one knee, and her sideways blow crashed into his face, breaking his neck and denting his helmet.

By the time she did, Harry had finished off Atrius and was now dueling with the last armed Flaming Fist soldier. The one whose arm Viconia had broken was trying to use his shield to support his companion, but they were the last of her attackers still on their feet bar the one running away.

But there was still the man with the broken leg, and Viconia moved over to him. He tried to thrust his sword up at her, but Viconia's hammer licked out almost daintily and slammed into the hand holding the sword, crushing his fingers. Then she stood over him and thought about using her Slay Living spell before simply using her hammer to crush his skull with three blows, turning his helmet into a mess and his head into so much mush. *Ah, that was satisfying.*

Meanwhile, Harry's sword thrust out, taking the last armed man in the throat. As he fell, the man with the shield finally broke, turning to flee. But as he did, Viconia was there, and with manic glee, she targeted the man's knee. The Flaming Fist soldier fell, and Viconia kept hammering the man well after he died.

If he had any strength, Harry might well have stopped her. Instead, he had collapsed and only shouted out, "F, find the runner! He's going that way!" pointing straight north.

Viconia stopped, staring at the mangled remains of her victim, then to the north and slowly shook her head. "I cannot see him and have no woodcraft. Not here on the surface, anyway. I don't know if I could find his trail, let alone this place once more unless I travel in a straight line."

"F... fuck," Harry ground out before collapsing. "W, well, I wouldn't be heading to Baldur's Gate for some time anyway."

"We," Viconia stated firmly, and Harry's eyes widened at the message his AAS displayed a second later.

Announcement: Due to your use of your Blood Magic spell and your help, the Trust and Respect relationship meters have been replaced with Respect and Interest. As a Drow on the surface, Viconia has decided that trust is a commodity she cannot afford to spend on many but has decided to do so on you as much as she is able.

Viconia now views you as a **Traveling Companion**.

Respect stays the same but be warned: good deeds will only carry you so far with Viconia. As you have already seen, Viconia respects strength, ability and power. Prove to be too much of a bleeding heart, and despite that aspect having been why you helped her, Viconia will lose respect for you.

Interest should be self-explanatory, but if you want it spelled out, if you max out Interest and Respect, your relationship will change in a new and interesting manner...

Relationship: 3000/7000 Interest 520/7000

As Harry read that off, Viconia kept on speaking, her words confirming the change. "You helped me when you had nothing to gain from it, Harry, the first to extend his hand to me since I came to the surface. While I would never say I need allies, having someone I could trust to watch my back in this battle was a very nice feeling. As was seeing that mysterious power." The drow woman practically purred the last word. "It looks as if you have secrets, perhaps several. I would like to know them, and I will travel with you for now."

Even as Harry tried to think of what to say and how he and Imoen had made Branwen swear to keep their secrets, Viconia's eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed. Staring at the collapsed form of the gorgeous elf woman, through bleary eyes, Harry didn't react for a moment. Then as his pain from using a Stupefy spell finally began to fade, he turned to look up at the sky. "Fucking really?! If this is a challenge from someone out there, could I at least know what I'm trying to win here?"

Thankfully for Harry's blood pressure, the woman did not stay asleep for long after Harry began to feed her.

Waking up to an odd, if most flavorful taste in her mouth, Viconia stared at Harry wildly, pushing against his hand. "W, what!? what did you feed me!?"

"Stew. Wolf-meat stew. Sorry, I figured you needed some food." Without even any change in expression, Harry dipped the spoon into the bowl, then took a sip himself before looking at Viconia. "Satisfied?"

"You, you can cook as well?" Viconia questioned.

Harry noted absently that had made him gain a hundred interest points, hiding a snicker at the accompanying note.

Evidently someone who can cook herself, Viconia knows the importance of good food and is both impressed and astonished that a man can cook, perhaps better than she can, although trying to figure that one out could be troublesome.

But this wasn't time for jokes. This was time for something serious. "Among many things. Things that you have seen only a bit about just yet. Enough to interest you apparently, and I'm not foolish

enough to think you are just traveling me because you suddenly know you need someone to watch your back up here on the surface and trust me to do the job.”

Viconia snorted and shook her head. “Trust has only a bit to do it. I trust you to be able to do it.”

“And I have to trust you to keep my secrets. Not just while we are traveling together but if we part company,” Harry said firmly. “As you are a cleric, I require an oath on the name of your god.”

Her eyes widening, Viconia stared at Harry, then her eyes narrowed. “You know what you are asking?”

“I have a cleric to Tempus in my party. The very same night we met, I had her swear an oath. We had tried to travel with people before who were not in on our secret, and it severely limited our abilities, so much so that two died and had to be revived later. So yes, if you want to travel with me, you will give me your oath.”

For several minutes, Viconia stared at Harry, who calmly ate some of the stew before moving over to spoon out more into the bowl from the pot over the fire. Then she smiled, and Harry noted that he had just earned another hundred interest points for her, as well as a hundred respect points. Evidently, intelligence was just as important as power to Viconia. “Very well, Harry. I will give you my oath. So long as you do the same.”

“Excellent. Although as I don’t have a god at present, I will need to wait to give you my own return oath until you’ve healed me a bit.” Viconia scowled, and he shrugged. “My abilities require a sacrifice of health, and I don’t have much remaining at present. Fighting for you and moving you into my little hide didn’t exactly help me.”

After a few minutes glaring, Viconia nodded, not liking the reminder of her weakness but accepting she would need to take a step forward here. *And I can look at it as if this is my first step forward in paying back the debt I owe him for saving my life.*

She spent a few more minutes spent going over the wording with Harry before Viconia held her hand above her head, closing her eyes. “This Oath should really be given at night, but needs must. I, Viconia DeVir, swear on the name of Shar to keep the secrets of Harry of Candlekeep and his party until my death so long as Harry does the same for mine.”

Attention: your Traveling Companion Viconia has vowed to keep your secrets on the name of her god. Like Branwen, Viconia will die before sharing your secrets now, although given the nature of the Dark Goddess of Magic, Shar, Viconia will probably die screaming.

This is a sign of her Interest in you, which will go up commensurate to her reaction to your secrets.

Note: Shar is an evil deity! If Shar so wishes, Viconia’s oath may be overturned, but only if Shar becomes aware of it. As it is daytime, her power is nonexistent at the moment.

“Now, tell me how you, a paladin, was able to cast something that looked like a wizard spell?” Viconia nearly ordered before glaring down at her stomach as it betrayed her.

“Hehe, well, I suppose I can talk while you eat, that is if this lowly male’s food meets your requirements?” Harry taunted.

Scowling, Viconia glared at him as she tried to get to her feet, but failed, only to fall back.

“You’re exhausted and malnourished. You’ve had to run here from near Baldur’s Gate, which is weeks to the north,” Harry intoned as he moved to kneel by Viconia’s head, holding out a spoon of the stew. “And I rather doubt you’ve had an easy life of it before that.”

“Heh, easy. Male... Harry... you have no idea,” Viconia grumbled. She tried to feed herself, only to nearly drop the spoon of stew into her cleavage, something that won a blush from Harry, which Viconia in turn noticed. A smile appeared on her face, and the thought about that for a second before opening her mouth, wordlessly ordering Harry to feed her.

Rolling his eyes, Harry did so, and Viconia concentrated for some time on just the food, acknowledging the food was some of the best Viconia had ever tasted, even when compared to back home in Menzoberranzan. After a time, she had finished the bowl, and Harry turned away, moving back to the fire and filling another bowl of stew.

Viconia was about to protest she could eat no more and order Harry to tell her the secrets she had just vowed to keep. But Harry turned aside, moving to the other side of the fire.

It was only now that Viconia realized they were not alone. On the other side of the fire lay a half-elven woman with blonde hair, unconscious. Viconia stared at her for a moment, then stated, “You have mentioned your companions, and I was uncertain what to make of that. Is that woman one of them?”

“Yes. Her name’s Jaheira. More than that, you’ll learn once you can help heal her. She and I were separated from the rest of our party. That’s a whole tale, though, so I’ll have to lead up to it a bit,” Harry responded.

Seeing the care, Harry was giving the woman made Viconia frown. “Just the two of you? The half-elf, she is your lover?”

Harry shook his head firmly, blushing a bit. “No, she and her husband are just part of my party. We were fighting underground, washed away by a trap into an underground river. We survived, but I’m a paladin who hasn’t chosen a God, and she is a druid who took serious wounds to her head, so we haven’t been able to move much.”

“How long have you been out here, and will the rest of your band come to find you?” Viconia looked at Harry closely. “And should I be worried about what kind of sanctimonious so-called god of light might require your service?”

“We’ve been here for a day and a half, I think. Maybe more, considering I don’t know how long it was before I woke up. As for requiring my service, that isn’t how it works. Although I will say, I kind of agree with the sarcasm. The more you look into the gods of light, the more you become aware that they don’t really preach love and harmony,” Harry drawled as he handed a skewer of meat and mushrooms over to Viconia, urging her to eat a bit more.

“Of course not,” Viconia snorted, although she took the food readily enough. “Love and harmony, what is the point of those foolish emotions anyway?”

“Well, love leads to the next generation among humans and surface elves,” Harry answered tartly, causing Viconia to snort. “Harmony though, I’ve not seen a lot of that one.” He then smirked, put his hands together, and tried to sound like Imoen at her most annoying. “Can’t we all just get along?”

He timed it perfectly, just as Viconia had taken a bite, and she spluttered, spitting it out into the fire in front of her. She glared at him, then shook her head with a scowl. “What addle-brained moron came up with that? And as for love, bah,” she waved her hand. “That is not something that is well known among my people. Indeed, it is a weakness.”

Harry thought about asking if there was something behind that, but considering that he just saw a flash of real rage go across Viconia’s face, he decided against it. They had just met, after all. There would be time enough once they got to know one another.

“What about you?” Viconia asked, “what is your personal belief system?”

“I like to think I try to take people as they come,” Harry said with a wink, spooning up a mouthful of his own stew finally, wincing at the agony of his ribs. He had willfully ignored it, but he was down to a bare fifteen health now. “But if you wronged me or harmed those I care about, I have very few squabbles on what I will do not do to take revenge.”

Viconia leaned forward with interest, not noticing, perhaps, that this allowed Harry to gain a glimpse of her cleavage, which was most striking. “Vengeance, not justice?”

The blue of her skin seems to add something to the scene.

“Well,” Harry said with a shrug, looking away. “Justice or revenge would drive me in the same direction right now. I... I will say that how I go about achieving my goals is just as important as what label I give it. My father,” he paused, looking at her. “Do drow...”

“Yes, we have sires. They are just not important. Although I have spent enough time on the surface already to know that is not the case here. Continue,” Viconia quickly answered, a scowl on her face. “And pray do not treat me like an idiot. I might not yet be used to life up here on the surface, but at least I understand much of it.”

“In any event, my father, or the man who raised me, well, I was being targeted, and so was my father. We were attacked, and my father slain before my eyes. I would’ve died too, if not for a final act of revenge from my old man.”

Viconia smiled thinly at that. “Yes, final acts of revenge are quite sweet when done right.”

Harry cocked an eyebrow, inviting her wordlessly to elaborate, but Viconia hesitated, and Harry’s face firmed up. “We are going to travel together, and I will be sharing mine with you. I think you should share something of yourself with me. Unless it is extremely painful instead of simply secret. Recall that I will also be vowing to keep your secrets the moment I can without killing myself.”

“It is both, but...” Viconia hesitated before staring at the finished skewer, setting it aside. “This is part and parcel of why I am on the surface, so I suppose you have a right to know, especially since my troubles might follow me. But only when we can share secrets both ways.”

Harry nodded and, changing the subject, jerked a thumb towards Jaheira. "If I help you over, can you tell me anything about Jaheira's injuries?"

When Viconia nodded, Harry got up and lifted Viconia to her feet, helping her stumble over to Jaheira, although he lost another few points of health doing it. His groan of pain was heard by Viconia, and the Drow made a note to heal Harry first after a good night's sleep. Then she sat beside Jaheira and let her fingers trace from the half-elf's face into her hair as her priestly senses pushed out through her fingers.

"Her head trauma is somewhat severe, not in terms of blunt force damage only, but she seems to have taken several dozen small hits to the head, which has caused accumulated damage to her brain. Was she recently healed in her side as well?"

Harry nodded, and Viconia went on. "That wound isn't quite as severe as the head trauma, but whatever happened to the two of you happened to tear open that injury. You did a good enough job bandaging it for a male..." she threw out, smirking slightly at Harry's eye roll.

Already within a few moments of meeting him, I am rather coming to enjoy getting those little rises out of him. Amusing, Viconia mused.

"It will take me a Cure Serious Wounds to heal the brain damage and a Cure Medium Wounds spell to heal her side. After that, Jaheira might well have to sleep for at least another eight hours or more to fully recover. You did well continuing to feed her. That and the rest has done her some good in terms of rebuilding her body's blood," Viconia finished.

"And me?"

Viconia looked at Harry, and then shrugged, and gestured him to lay out next to her. Now feeling much better, Viconia turned and knelt next to him in turn, first studying his foot.

"The foot will need a Cure Medium Wounds Spell," Viconia said, removing her hands from his foot and then trailing her other hand up his side, touching the broken ribs. These though you aggravated severely during the fight. Again, I will need a Cure Serious Wounds to heal it. As for your back... rollover," she ordered brusquely.

Harry did so, grunting at the pain, but then blushed as Viconia began to touch his back, trailing her thumbs up and down his spine for a moment. *Is it just me, or is she taking her time now?*

My word, human men can be for more muscled than Elven males, even the best of drow warriors, Viconia thought to herself, somewhat amused at the musculature of the young human man. The feel of those muscles twitching under her fingers was fascinating.

You have gained 20 interest points with Viconia. You have gained 100 respect points with Viconia. She likes them muscley.

While Harry was trying not to think about that, Viconia went on. "Unfortunately, the same can be said for your back. That battle truly did you a mischief. I am astonished that you were even able to fight so well. Let alone do anything else."

"I have always been more stubborn than what is good for me," Harry chuckled.

Viconia snorted. "Foolish." Harry made an interrogative noise, and Viconia smirked, pulling away from his back and ordering him to roll over again so they could speak face-to-face as she sat down beside the fire again. "What others call stubbornness, I call a will to live and **win**. That is necessary to get anywhere in this life, to achieve anything. That, and a certain amount of viciousness."

Again a dark look crossed her face, but Harry spoke up before she could try to figure out what to say next. "It is simply taking viciousness too far or having viciousness be your goal that makes it bad."

Viconia nodded, her eyes looking at Harry appraisingly. *Most intriguing indeed.* "I will need a night's rest before my healing spells return. Should I prioritize you or your companion?" she asked abruptly, looking around for a place to rest.

Harry thought about it for a moment, then gestured around them. "Do you think that more of that group is going to come after you?"

It was Viconia's turn to think for a moment, and she reached up, stroking fingers through her hair as she did, the motion arresting Harry's attention for a moment. "I do not believe so. It is possible, but I doubt it."

Harry nodded, then, with a twist of his hand was holding one of the gourds of power. *I'm glad I didn't think about eating it now, not that it would have helped me much. My strength wasn't in question even in that fight, just my ability to bloody move!*

He tossed it to her, and Viconia caught it, looking at it and her eyes going wide. "That's my last one. Prioritize getting Jaheira's mind back together. Then yourself. But if trouble comes before you can heal me, you might have to be the one to handle it."

Viconia nodded, once more looking impressed with Harry's ability to deal with pain. But personally, Harry put it down more to the Gamer's Mind than even his new permanent buff.

"I believe that is a good idea. Viconia placed the Gourd of Power next to her head, knowing that her own ability to use her Item Box was extremely limited.

"I believe with that, both of us need to get some sleep." Viconia made to object, but Harry shook his head. "The traps I laid out should at least wake us up in time if we're attacked in the night, and my map ability will also give me some warning. Besides, you need sleep, and frankly, I'm so battered, there's no chance of my staying awake for very much longer either now that my stomach's full."

Viconia snorted at that but did not argue. Soon enough, both of them were falling asleep, although Viconia, unable to use Gamer's Mind, took some time to do it. And as she did, she thought about the young man who had saved her life, his odd abilities, what they could mean, and this quest of his. *Interesting, most interesting. Well, at least my time on the surface now will be both safer and much more interesting...*

End Chapter