**This has been beta-read by Udodelig Urningin. It’s his first time folks, and you know my issues with spotting small mistakes LOL.**

**Bhaalson Chapter 3: Gaming with Friends**

**Putting out the fires around them took the two of them some time, and by the time they were finished, the sky was noticeably lighter than it had been, dawn breaking over the forest. After they were done with that, though, Harry looked between Imoen and Gorion’s body before deciding that the buildup of messages in his upper-right line of sight was getting annoying. Anything to put off dealing with Gorion’s death again for a time was a good thing in his mind.**

**“We need to talk about all the pop-ups that we saw during the fight that we didn’t have time to reply to.” He said aloud. Harry had played around with his character screen back during the tutorial phase and figured out how to only let the most important message screens through to him in combat, while putting the others in a queue to look at later, but this was the first time that system had been put through its paces in real combat. He thought it had worked very well, with only the messages that had direct impact on the battle showing up at the time, such as in Imoen’s ability to Backstab, her getting into range to join his party and the fact that having the two of them in a party had given her and Harry some added bonuses or, on the other side of the ledger, notices about the injuries they had taken. But his queue was seriously full up now, and it was going to bother him a lot until he cleared it off.**

“Let’s look at the combat data first,” Imoen said. Harry looked at her, and she shrugged. “Harry, no matter how much training you might’ve had, this is only your first fight. I think the both of us needs to get a better handle on how this gaming stuff works in combat.”

“Second actually. Some idiot tried to assassinate me back in Candlekeep, in the inn outside the keep,” Harry said, but he didn’t argue with Imoen’s point, pulling up all of the information that had popped up during the combat. Important message boxes were outlined in gold, while combat boxes came in red, but they also included little triangles of red colored in each corner.

And they had organized themselves thanks to his earlier fiddling, which Harry reflected was very helpful. *Should really have gotten more than one wisdom point for that, really.* The first few red boxes that popped up was information about ghouls.

“Information on the monster, Ghoul, has been added to your lexicon. The lexicon will house all the information on every monster or creature that your party runs into, filling in the information beyond the name of the beast that the lexicon will already have within. This information will include things like weaknesses, strengths, and disposition. To use the lexicon, say the name, and then the name of the beast in question.”

“Lexicon,” Harry muttered, then blinked as the image of a ghost-like book filled his vision turning around to look at Imoen when he heard her gasp. “Wait can you see it too?”

“Yep. But…” Imoen reached forward, waving her hand in the air looking for all the world like she was trying to swat a fly. “But I can’t interact with it, darn it.”

“Maybe you will if you are the one to call for it. For now though…” With that, Harry reach forward, and tapped the near-see through book. “Ghoul.”

At his touch the book expanded by about four times so that both Harry and Imoen could see the writing within. At the same time, an image of one of the undead creatures Harry had killed in hand to hand combat appeared to one side. Harry couldn’t interact with the image, but the information to one side was pretty useful even without that. The information read:

Ghouls are undead creatures that, according to folklore, are said to be created after the death of a man or woman who engaged in cannibalism, but really just about any unburied body can turn into one given time and enough ambient magic in the area around the corpse. Ghouls can paralyze those enemies they attack with their claws or fangs, any touch on open skin is enough to let their touch begin its work. They are the weaker, more common versions of Ghasts, and can be easily distinguished by their green skin as opposed to the brown skin of the latter.

**Strengths**: they are undead, so if you don’t kill the brain or cut off limbs they won’t notice anything else you do to them. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed. Strength varies from individual to individual but is generally higher than most normal non-adventuring humans. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

**Attitude towards adventurers:** unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. But Ghouls, like Ghasts, also want to eat your brains, but they aren’t picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

**Weaknesses:** Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

“See Harry, this is what I’m talking about!” Imoen said throwing her arms up in irritation. Then she put them behind her head as she stared at the message with Harry, reading through the information about ghouls again. “This stuff would’ve been hugely helpful to know. Those things had been darn tough to kill in hand to hand after all. And what the heck is the difference between Ghoul and Ghast?”

That question was answered in second later, as Harry intoned that name. Instead of just getting the name though, he saw another message box disappearing from his que, and, a second later, the information on this monster appearing in front of him.

Ghasts are the more dangerous versions of ghouls for many reasons. Made from the bodies of stronger humans or other species, they can exhibit both self-control and a certain low cunning that Ghouls cannot. Further, they are stronger, faster, and able to command Ghouls at times. Their claws and fangs are capable of not only paralyzing opponents like their lesser kin but also of inflicting disease, which has a cumulative effect on anyone thus touched. When more than one is encountered, they can be quite dangerous to low-level parties, and are best fought with ranged weapons and spells.

**Strengths**: They are obviously undead, so if you don’t kill the brain or lop of limbs, they won’t notice. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed and strength, all of which is higher than most level three Adventurers. Paralyzing effects and disease come from their touch. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

**Attitude towards adventurers**: unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. Ghasts, like their lesser cousins the Ghouls, also want to eat your brains, but they aren’t picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

**Weaknesses**: Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

Harry blanched, as he read about the disease that this more evolved version of ghouls contained in their claws. “Bloody hell… Um, I’d guess that was the ghoul that my Turn Undead aura turned to dust. The Luck stat, it’s not just for show.” He quipped but it fell flat.

“We need to figure out a way to read this information in combat, because that could’ve killed us right there Harry if you were unlucky enough to try to fight that thing in hand-to-hand. And me too, geez.” Imoen shook her head, her bubblegum pink hair rustling.

“From what Gorion once told me, death isn’t actually so eternal here most of the time. That is, if my body is still intact, you could use a resurrection spell or scroll on me to bring me back.” Harry replied, trying to be helpful.

From the look in Imoen’s face, that attempt failed just like his earlier quip, and Harry tugged at the neckline of his undershirt for a moment looking away from her glower and twitching fingers even as he felt a little warm inside. He was still getting used to the fact that Imoen really did care for him, but moments like this really brought it home to him, and he smiled as he realized that even without Gorion, he still had a friend, a family member, on this journey of his despite how they had both gotten here.

The next few messages were about experience points awarded for each of the enemies they had killed. The ghouls had given them 175 experience points, the one ghast a whopping 650. The wolves only gave 65, but surprisingly that was equal to the Gnoll Veterans that they had killed on their charge to help Gorion. The wolves and Gnoll Veterans also had their own lexicon pages, but Harry didn’t bother opening them now. The mage they had killed didn’t but gave the two friends a nice 800 experience.

“I have to say, it is kind of morbid to get experience points from killing things.” Imoen murmured shaking her head as they continued to read the messages. “But on the other hand… meh, they started it.”

Going through the XP message boxes brought them to the first character specific message they had seen. It was lined with pink and gold, the pink in it matching Imoen’s hair color exactly. And it was just as important as it looked.

“Congratulations you have leveled up! Imoen is now a level Five Thief. Steal, trap, pickpocket, and stab your way to if not fame then fortune. After all, everyone wants to die happy and rich, don’t they?

Imoen’s chance of successfully using Backstab, Hide in Shadows, Detect Traps, and Unlock locked items or traps has risen by 2.5%. Specific experience can further aid these skills. You have been assigned stats points, of which you will receive four per level. You have been assigned a skill point of which you will receive one per level. As Imoen is now companion to the Gamer, the Gamer can help you distribute these points rather than have them be assigned based upon the action that leveled you up. Use them wisely and remember to always not over specialize too much. No one wants to play with a glass cannon after all.”

Ignoring Harry’s querulous query of ‘what’s a glass cannon’ Imoen whooped, throwing a fist in the air. “Awesome! I was so afraid that once I leveled up I’d have to deal with my stat points and skill points being distributed randomly! Remember about my Metamorph ability from being Imoen being disabled due to Imoen’s lack of stats? It’s almost depressing how less physical she was than my own body. Distribute them Harry distribute them now please?!” She pleaded, reaching over and actually shaking Harry.

“All right, all right, hold your horses, I want to see why I didn’t level up.” With that, Harry opened his profile. There he saw that he was kind of close to leveling up. His ‘experience points earned’ green ink was almost half full along the long bar that indicated how much experience points he needed to gain the next level.

In reading the number corresponding to the bar there, Harry nodded slowly, realizing that since he was Level Five already, and each level was about half again as much is the level before he still had more than two thousand XP or so to level up whereas Imoen had barely begun to fill in her bar to get to Level Six.

With Imoen vibrating in eagerness to add to her stats, Harry deliberately took a bit of time to open the next few screens. Teasing her like this was fun, and there was a lot of things he wanted to learn about how his Gamer ability impacted combat, especially how different it was in comparison to how it was normally for people in this world. Of course he’d probably have to wait to answer those specific questions if he ever could, but at least there were a few things he could figure out right now. This included looking to see what he could find about what it meant to be in a party, and how that impacted combat. All these messages were in gold, lined with black.

“Congratulations, you have worked together with your party member to kill your enemies. Note, when part of a party, experience points are distributed evenly, with additional **reputation points** going to the killer of any particularly strong monster or a doer of some other kind of great deed. An example of this would be killing a particularly high level monster, human or other sentient being.

Notice: Reputation Points can be colored by the nature of the action taken. If you, say, walk into a house and kill all the people within, that too gains reputation, the negative kind. If you invade a bandit hideout and wipe them out while freeing their captives, that gains you positive reputation points. Fall into the negative numbers, and you will find people you interact with treating you like the village leper, only without the charm. Gain reputation, and people might treat you better than they normally would their fellow man.

Notice: At this moment your reputation is: **zero**. You are unknown to everyone but your closest acquaintances, even people back in Candlekeep do not think of you overmuch, positively or negatively.

Furthermore, combat builds trust. There is no such bond as the bond between men, or women, who face battle together. Your trust with your companions will go up slowly but surely in combat situations in which you and they perform well.

Notice: Your relationship level with Imoen is **Family**. Imoen will receive a +4 to damage and +6 to defense while part of your party.  The odds of activating dual attacks, combo and other team-based attacks is increased with every relationship level, and certain skills and abilities can be shared between party members.

Notice: the active ability Backstab, normally a thief only ability, has been added to both your combat abilities. It will be added as an active buff under the right circumstances i.e., when you can actually do so. Congratulations, you can now stab people in the back. Aren’t you special?”

Ignoring the sarcasm from his Gamer ability, if it could even be called his, Harry was face broke into a smile, the first one that had shown on his face since Gorion had died. “That is awesome!”

“You better believe it Harry! This body of mine doesn’t have enough strength or skill with any weapon to really do much damage with any weapon but a whip at this point, and even then I’d only be good for stinging. Backstab though, makes me actually useful in hand to hand combat without my needing to rely on my blood mage spells,” Imoen said with a grin. “And I bet it will help you too when we can get around to using it.”

Nodding at that, Harry moved on, ‘clicking’ on the information which would describe what a party was meant to be.

“Congratulations, you have formed a party with Imoen! Parties are groups of individuals who have decided through friendship, Fellow feeling, or a shared goal to work together. Party members can share experience, distribute loot evenly between them, create dual attacks, combo attacks, and during combat will share both active and constant buffs. For example, you have learned the thief style Backstab. This is a thief only combat ability normally. You cannot learn thief only out of combat abilities such as detect traps.

Further, Imoen cannot in turn learn Turn Undead. This is a paladin skill based upon the religious learnings that you have gone through up to this point. But the aura of Turn Undead will spread out from her as well as you, the Gamer, when you activate the skill yourself. However, once you learn Power Strike, which is an active skill that warriors, paladins and other close combat types can learn, as a party member, Imoen will be able to learn it in turn. Further, Imoen’s inactive combat buff ‘Fight Like a Jack Rabbit’, can carry over to you, so long as you are well enough to use it or not encumbered.

“That was sort of informative,” Imoen mused. “Although I get the impression that a lot of this is because of your Gamer ability Harry. The whole sharing thing I mean.”

“Are you going to argue with it?” Harry asked, sounding a bit more like himself now, as he got into the mystery and continued to learn about his Gamer ability. “Personally, I’m more interested in combos and dual attacks.”

It turned out that dual attacks were simple enough. All that meant was that to two or more party members attacked the same target, adding to their chances of getting through its guard and/or its armor.

Combos were a little trickier. These kinds of attacks built on one another, creating a greater effect than any single attack of a similar level of skill would have in the first place.

“’For example, if you have two mages in the party, and one uses a fireball spell, and the other a slick oil spell, well, you can just imagine what would happen. Goodness, gracious great rolling plains of fire’,” Harry read aloud, then looked over at Imoen, whose grin had become positively manic as she went into her happy place for a moment.

“I am **so** going to be a wizard when I get the chance to dual class!” She shouted suddenly, thrusting her fist into the air again.

Harry shrugged at that. “I’m looking forward to being able to heal and getting more Turn Undead spells under my belt. Face it, without that, we would have been in a very bad way to last night against those ghouls.”

“Reread that stuff again Harry about sharing skills,” Imoen said becoming serious again. After Harry did so, she nodded slowly. “All right, it is a game changer, no pun intended. But this working as a party thing, it’ll force us to think about tactics instead of just going all in and charging. I wonder though, since we’re in a party like this, does that mean that you’re the party leader? That you could actually give me orders in battle even if I don’t agree with them?”

Harry blanched, then asked hesitantly, “Wait, did you feel compelled to follow my orders when we were working together during the battle?”

Cocking her head, Imoen tried to think about what she had felt during that fight, beyond the adrenaline the fear and the exultation of combat anyway. “I think I felt a little tug, maybe? But I had agreed and went along with your plan because it made sense.”

Harry thought about it too, and murmured, “trust goes both ways.” Imoen looked at him and he shrugged his shoulders looking a little embarrassed. “Trust is part of a relationship, whatever that relationship might be. I think that if you didn’t trust me, you might have been able to fight off that effect, and maybe go your own way, but because you didn’t, we worked together. But if you didn’t trust me, even if I trusted you, we wouldn’t be able to work together, and the buffs wouldn’t cross over.”

“That makes sense,” Imoen said with a nod. “Now, what are those two other large messages, the ones in gold and red.”

Seeing as gold was the color for important messages, Harry had left them for nearly last besides quest messages, which he knew were shown by orange boxes. He now clicked on them, his eyes widening.

“Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked a new inactive skill: **Leadership**. You are the leader of your party, and as such, your charisma will be enhanced. People who join your party will defer to you however subtly. Further, you will see a willingness to follow your lead based upon how much trust your actions or words have garnered with them.

Your Leadership level is 0. While you lead your party, that party is not only too small to matter, but your ability to lead them is mostly untried.”

Reading this aloud, Harry became very worried. “That, that sounds like I’m trying to, I don’t know, control them through a mild confusion spell or something. I don’t like that idea one bit.”

“No Harry it doesn’t.” Imoen said quickly before Harry could worry himself into a tizzy. “Some people just have a certain charisma, which can convince other people to follow them. It’s nothing to do with spells and it’s nothing they force upon other people to do. It is just that some people lead and other people follow. I know I’m a follower, with a tad bit of hero worship thrown in,” she added bluntly, thinking about how she had felt about Dumbledore for so long. “I’d hate trying to lead, and I’m more than happy to follow someone else.”

When she put that into words, she could see Harry calming down, and had to hide a grin. Whatever his Gamer ability thought, Harry’s ability to be a leader had nothing to do with him forming a party, he had already been a leader before this. She had seen how people deferred to him back in Candlekeep. Even the Seekers had deferred to them at times, coming to him with questions about this or that book that they knew Harry had read. That was nothing to when he was in the kitchen. The Seekers and workers assigned there followed his orders there as if they were gospel. Even when he interacted with guests or the other servants Imoen could see it.

That was a very small sample set admittedly, but she also remembered stories about how he had gotten people to follow him back in their own world and how she’d followed him in this fight. It wasn’t every 12-year old who could convince his friends to follow him into the unknown like he had in trying to get past the locked door on the third floor. She hadn’t even tried to take over from him, in spite of the fact that she had more combat training than he did.

After recovering slightly from his moment of concern, Harry kept reading. “Leadership is based upon your overall experience, charisma, and the trust you build within your party. The more time you put into building trust or gaining reputation the more you get out of it. Eventually leadership can allow you to have several status buffs when dealing with other people in terms of commerce, combat, espionage, dealing with local governmental authorities, and even becoming an authority.”

“I wonder what that means, ‘by becoming an authority’?”

“Maybe becoming a noble?” Imoen replied scratching at her cheek thoughtfully. “That would be kind of cool I’ll admit.”

“Maybe, or maybe since I’m a Paladin, it means that my leadership skill will help me to gain recognition or high office?” Harry said with a shrug. “I’m not certain how I feel about that honestly.”

“Well, leave it for now. That message is right, since it’s just the two of us, I doubt leadership is going to matter much in the short term. What’s the next one say?”

“Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked the inactive skill: **Tactics**. A tactician is someone who sees opportunities or dangers in the most mundane of settings, can plan ahead and can turn events to his advantage. Where one person would see a hill, a tactician would see a high place to put his archers so that they can command the battlefield. Where a normal person might see a tree, a tactician could see a lookout position, a trap ready to be made, or a shadow for his thief to hide in.

Your tactics level is level 1. You are able to command your fellows and put them in a position to do damage, but the use of terrain, and the idea of planning ahead for combat still eludes you. You will gain only 25% chance to succeed to any command given to a party member. Make decisions, command your party in battle, and lead them to victory, and your tactical ability will level up, opening further features and buffs for you and your party.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Harry said scratching at his own lightning scar, which Imoen had recognized as something he did when he was thinking hard. “They are both inactive skills, but leadership doesn’t say anything about me being able to level it up, whereas tactics is something I can level up through my actions in future fights. That’s interesting. It implies that maybe my choices and decisions in the future will impact my leadership level, rather than simply my actions in battle.”

“I’ll admit that the idea of tactics and gaining the ability to see that kind of thing is great Harry, although again I don’t see leadership as all that important right this second. But can we get the leveling up now?!” Talks growled.

“I want to read the journal entries first,” Harry said mildly, but acquiesced when Imoen made little grasping moves with her hands towards his throat. “All right, all right! Let me just see if I can open your status screen.” He looked at her, then pushed out of finger towards her, stabbing something right above her head, where he saw her name as he intoned status screen.

**Name:**Imoen

**Gender**: Female

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Thief level 5

Strength: (4)

Willpower: (4) +4

Dexterity: (19)

Constitution: (5)

Durability: (4)

Wisdom: (10)

Charisma: (6)

Intelligence: (21)

Luck: (11)

Bloodline Skills:

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

To their surprise, the big of background information on Imoen had changed too.

**Background notes**:

Now fully integrated into the world of the Forgotten Realms, Imoen (the Auror in training formerly known as Tonks) has joined the Gamer in his quest to find his, and therefore her, place in the world beyond the walls of Candlekeep. A thief of some varied skill, a combative personality well used to hitting above her weight level, and an innovative thinker who likes to party as much as stabby, she is the best horrible friend anyone could ask for, the kind you love to hang out with even if it gets you in trouble with everyone else.

In the upper-right corner of the screen, Harry could see the little + that was the sign of Imoen being able to level up, which he clicked on. The same screen appeared, but now there was a new message between Imoen’s class and her stats, while the (+) had disappeared from where it had been.

“You have Leveled up. You have four Stats and one skill point to disperse. Please assign Stat points now. You will then be taken to the skills page.” Beside that message were four red dots, and there was a (+) sign next to each stat line.

When Tonks attempted to try to shift her status points though, she found out that she couldn’t. when she tried to interact with the open page, her hand passed right through. It looked as if even as a companion to the Gamer, she couldn’t use all the abilities of the Gamer. “Oh, come on!”

“I think we just figured out a part where the Gamer ability is different from everyone else’s ability to level up in this world,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I’d wager that while experience is the same, only the Gamer can freely manipulate his stat points. Whereas you, since you used agility and the thinking skills, I bet that your stat points would’ve automatically gone into the typical thief stuff, dexterity, intelligence, and luck, maybe. Certainly your stats look like that’s what’s happened so far.”

“But since you’re the Gamer, and I’m your party member, you can distribute them for me, while I can watch, but still can’t do it myself!” Imoen grumped. “I can’t say I’m exactly happy about that, but since I have no interest in leaving you on your own, Harry, I can go along with it for now.”

She winked at him, her anger instantly dissipating, and Harry smiled back, Gorion’s death firmly pushed to the back of his mind as the two of them read these messages. Imoen was not so foolish as to believe he was fully over it even with that weird Gamer’s Mind bloodline skill, but she would be there for him when he broke down at night, when the nightmares would come. For now, forcing him to learn more about his abilities, and what they could do with them, was the most important thing.

In the next moment however, Harry’s face went back to the blank expression it had been, as both he and Imoen read the journal entry. It read like the more officious overarching world messages.

**Chapter 1:**

**Dawn has broken on the day after your life has been changed forever. Ambushed the evening before, you were forced to fight for your life only to see Gorion cut down before your eyes, even his powerful magic unable to stop the onslaught. It was his wish that you flee, but that does not remove the feeling of rage or bitter regret that now overwhelms you. The armored fiend had said he would kill you too, and even seemed to imply he was after you from the start, just like the murderer who tried to kill you back in Candlekeep. If only Gorion had given you some clue as to why someone could be after you, but now he is gone, and you are lost. Candlekeep is near, but you will find no quarter there. The readers pay for their serenity with rather draconian entry rules, and without Gorion's influence, their doors will remain closed.**

“Chapter 1,” Harry mused, grinding his teeth a little at the reminder of Gorion’s death but otherwise not reacting. “I wonder how many chapters there are, and if they have something to do with the game, or if we are going to be able to affect them in some way.”

“I honestly don’t think we’ll ever be able to figure that one out until we actually start doing it Harry, so why don’t we just go on to the next bits,” Imoen replied softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. That next bit happened to be another journal entry, but this one was in the quest log portion of the journal.

“A main quest has been added to your journal: **Vengeance or Justice**! With Gorion’s death, your purpose becomes clear. You have decided to set out and find his killer as well as the reasons for his death. What did that strange armored giant mean when it said it would come for you? Was your death the end goal of this strange man’s machinations, or simply a means to an end, and if so why? This journey will teach you both about yourself and about your place in the world, but one thing is clear at the outset, you must search for your answers.

And when you have those answers, you Harry, will have to decide what to do with it. Will you seek out vengeance, brutally murdering your way through the Sword Coast to get your answers? Or will you serve justice, searching for your answers yes, but also aiding the people you meet, solving the problems plaguing the various people around you, and becoming a true paladin one who can be an inspiration to all? Only time, and your choices along the way, can tell.”

“As if I’d ever let you just search for vengeance and murder everyone that gets in your way, Harry,” Imoen said, rolling her eyes. “That was possibly the least informative quest thing I’ve ever seen, honestly.”

“I think that’s probably because we’ve already set out on the first steps of that path,” Harry mused, once more scratching at his lightning bolt scar as he stared at the journal entry hovering between them, with Imoen leaning against his side companionably. He had stiffened when she first leaned against him like this back in his room in Candlekeep, but he had since gotten used to these little cuddle type touches from her and took them as a sign that the two of them were close friends, something like the way everyone was on the Quidditch team occasionally. “Shall we go on to the next one?”

When Imoen nodded, Harry clicked on the other two quest logs. The first one had the heading of ‘Iron Intake Issue,’ and Imoen groaned. “Oh god alliteration, really? Please don’t let that be a trend! That kind of thinking get as old as puns, and that quickly.” Ignoring her, Harry looked at the information underneath the header.

“Gorion had evinced a high interest in what had been going on with the iron coming up from the south, and the fact that poor iron quality might cause a war between Amn and the city-state of Baldur’s Gate. Perhaps his interest, and the interest of the Harpers, of which he was a retired member - if anyone can be said to truly retire from such an organization - could be tied into the attack on the two of you by the armored giant. Although why he would be after you would become a separate mystery in that event, it is still a place to start if you so desire. And after all, didn’t Gorion say that you might meet new allies on the road in searching for the reason behind this problem?”

“That seems self-explanatory too Harry,” Imoen said with a nod. “I’d wager that if we decide not to look into these friends of Gorion’s they won’t be willing to help us in turn. Did he tell you anything about them by the way?”

Harry told Imoen about what Gorion had said about his two friends, which hadn’t been much, but he did agree with Imoen that was very easy to see that they would have to look into this issue to get on the Harpers good side. And after all he’s finished, the Harpers are a kind of secret spy right? If anyone can figure out stuff about this giant that killed Gorion it’ll be them.”

With a nod, Harry and on to the next side quest, which read ‘Pray for Your Future’. For a moment Harry and Imoen just looked at it, then both of them as one raised a hand and slapped it to their faces, groaning aloud. “Really, cocking really!?” Harry muttered shaking his head. “Bad jokes, now?”

“Well, we’ve seen before that your Gamer side seems to have a sense of humor, when it isn’t in full on Voice of the World mode anyway.” Imoen said with a shake of his head. “The Gamer ability is going to help you a **lot** Harry, so I suppose we need to take it’s very dubious sense of humor in stride.”

With another groaned, Harry began to read the sub quest information.

“Now that you are out and about in the real world, the time has come to choose the deity to which you will swear your service to. Will it be Helm, the Vigilant? Will it be Lathander, the Morning Lord? Willy you serve Illmater, the God of Martyrs? Will it be Tyr, God of justice and righteous war? The decision will be yours but be warned, this choice will have major long-term ramifications, not only for you and your abilities, but how you are perceived by your party and the public at large. Furthermore, once you have made a decision, you will **never** be able to take it back. Unless you fall from grace, thereby losing all of your paladin abilities... and giving yourself a whole new slew of problems.”

Since that also was self-explanatory, despite their shared irritation at the joke in the quest’s title, Harry moved on quickly to the two minor quests below that. These read ‘loot the bodies for clues’, and ‘making certain the dead don't rise again’.”

After exchanging a glance with Imoen, Harry quickly looks clicked on the first one, reading it aloud. “’It’s a long shot, but perhaps one of the armored giant’s followers might have had some paperwork, or other kind of clue that could point you in the direction you need to go from here. Loot the bodies for profit and information’, plus 300 XP.”

The next read:

“in this world, unburied corpses can become a danger to anyone, rising as undead ranging from skeletons, to ghouls, all the way to skeleton lords and Lichs depending on the level of the deceased, the anger and emotions they died with, and any surrounding magic in the area around them or on their persons. Make certain that your former enemies do not return for an encore in any way you can devise.”

“Well, neither quest is worth a lot of experience, but I suppose that we do need to get on with it. And…” Harry said, looking over to where Gorion’s body still rested, waiting for its own burial if they could do it. “I suppose we need to do something with Gorion’s body as well.”

Imoen wordlessly moved over to the nearest body, the wizard they had tag-teamed earlier, leaving Harry to move over to Gorion on his own. After kneeling beside his father figure’s body for a long few minutes, Harry sighed and then reluctantly started to rifle through Gorion’s pockets. He found forty gold coins in a small money pouch, three broken daggers, their blades shattered like the sword Imoen had lost last night, and two mana potions, the information of which he read about quickly.

“Small Mana potion. This potion is meant to refill a little bit of a mage’s mana. Mana, as well as the spells a wizard or mage has in their spellbook, determines what spells a mage is able to perform per day. Each spell comes with a mana cost, visible to the mage or to the party leader if they have enough trust between them. If a mage cannot meet the cost of a specific spell, the spell cannot be performed, hence the need for potions like this.”

*I wonder if I could use this potion to get out of having my health to power our ‘Blood magic’ spells*, Harry mused, before moving on with his search.

In Gorion’s other pocket he found two notes in parchment covered in a wax tube. One of them was a note, a letter of introduction that harry was to use should anything happen to Gorion and he met any of his ‘friends of the trail’, which Harry knew to mean fellow Harpers and perhaps others. The second was a note that went a long way to telling Harry how Gorion had found out so much about the Iron Issue despite never leaving Candlekeep. “Imoen, come take a look at this.”

Imoen turned from where she had been looting the corpse of the mage, hurrying over at the interest she heard in Harry’s voice. “What is it?”

Harry held up the parchment he found, then opened it, so that they could both read it together.

“My friend Gorion,

Please forgive the abruptness of this letter and the manner of its arrival, but time is short. What we have long feared will soon come to pass, though not in the manner foretold, and certainly not in the proper time frame. As we both know, forecasting these events has proved increasingly difficult, leaving little option other than a leap of faith, in many ways.

Despite my desire to remain neutral in this matter, I could not, in good conscience, let events proceed without some measure of warning. The other side will move very soon, and I urge thee to leave Candlekeep as soon as this message reaches you with your young charge. You know they will come for you both, you for the threat you are now, and him for who he is. The open road may seem equally threatening, but a moving target is much harder to hit, regardless of how sparse the cover. A fighting chance is all that you can reasonably ask for at this point.

Should anything go awry, do not hesitate to seek aid from travelers along the way. I do not need to remind thee that it is a dangerous land, even without our current concerns, and a party is stronger than an individual in all respects. Should additional assistance be required, I understand that Jaheira and Khalid have responded to your overtures already and can be found at the Friendly Arm Inn. They know little of what has passed between us, what we were working on and what you were guarding, but they are ever thy friends, and will no doubt help however they can.

Luck be with us all, as I am very afraid we will all need it. I sense the Time of Troubles is not done with this world just yet.

Signed, a man who is truly getting too old for this,

E

“Well, that was… bloody freakin’ cryptic. Honestly, this guy sounds as if he’s talking about prophecies but doesn’t want to give anything away to anyone who could read this,” Imoen grumbled. “It sounds like a big fat conspiracy though.”

“A big fat conspiracy that has something to do with me. The armored giant really was after both Gorion and me. For different reasons but… this is making me feel far too much like the whole ruddy Boy Who Lived Nonsense.” Harry said, scowling.

Imoen had nothing to say to that. After a few minutes talking about what this meant, and who this ‘E’ could be, she went back to looting the bodies of the dead elsewhere, leaving Harry to keep searching Gorion’s bodies.

The next thing he found was hidden in a small, very well-crafted pouch under one shoulder, invisible to anyone seeing Gorion in his jerkin and even hidden to the touch until Harry had put his hands underneath the shirt. Pulling the item out, Harry held it up to the light, staring at the tiny, exquisitely crafted harp. It was about as big as two fingers, and every little detail on it was perfectly etched out, with numerous little etched designs on the wood. It even had real strings between the two arms of the harp, although they were all broken now.

After that, Harry found a necklace around Gorion’s neck. It was a simple, thin silver chain with a small square locket. Inside it was a tiny painting of a young Harry and Gorion. Gorion looked younger of course, his hair a solid brown rather than a mix between brown and white, but other than that he looked the same, smiling jovially towards the painter. Harry’s own painting looked like an odd mix of his new body, the one he’d created for himself and his old body, he one Harry Potter had been born with. He was taller and broader than Harry remembered being back in his old life, but the lightning bolt scar and the messed up hair and the thin face was the same, as were his eyes.

For several minutes Harry just stared at it, ignoring the few popup screens he saw to one side, his Leader ability telling him what Imoen had finished her own search and with it they had finished looting the dead. Instead he was working on the question of if he should take this keepsake with him or let it here with Gorion.

After a few minutes pondering that question, Harry decided to leave the necklace behind with Gorion. He already felt wrong on taking everything else the man had been carrying with him. *Let Gorion take this with him at least. I won’t take it from him.*

Once he was done with Gorion’s body, Harry moved over to join Imoen, and between the two of them performed the grisly work of piling the bodies of the gnolls, the human attackers, and even the heads of the undead ghouls, up in one place and setting them on fire. It was either that or the even grislier task of chopping heads off and removing them from their bodies, and neither Imoen nor Harry was up to that.

With that done and noticing that the experience they had gotten from those two tasks still wasn’t enough to level him up, Harry turned his attention onto distributing Imoen’s level up stats.

When they opened up her status screen, Imoen interrupted. “Wait, can I see yours?” She blanched a second after that left her mouth, but thankfully the joke flew straight over Harry’s head, and she breathed a sigh of relief as all he did was open up his own stat page.

**Name:** Harry Potter.

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Paladin level 5

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (8) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer’s mind, Parselmouth, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Background notes**:

Having now stepped out into the wider world beyond the tutorial, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived of one world, has discovered he might be the equivalent or something worse in this one. His father figure taken from him through violence, Harry and his cousin Imoen (the pink-haired troublemaker formerly known as Tonks) must search for answers as to why he seems to have been marked out as Fate’s Bitch. Is it just luck, or is there something deeper, something…sinister at play? Regardless, Harry will have to face it as it comes.

The two of them compared them side to side, and Imoen whistled. “Is it, is it normal for a level five thief to be that far behind a level five paladin? You have fifty-two more points than I do, minus the four we haven’t distributed yet.” After working through the tutorial and Imoen’s life up to that point, Imoen/Tonks had eighty-eight stat points, with four to be added. Harry had a hundred and forty.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think so, Gorion mentioned that I had quite high stats for my level several times,” He laughed shaking his head. “Not that I was all that high obviously, Gorion’s stats were much higher than mine all around, although they were also a little more eclectic than you would think when he told me about them. He had points in everything well into the thirties, and his wisdom and intelligence were in the sixties. Now come on, tell me where you want your points to go.”

That was easy for Imoen. She put two into Strength, which had the immediate effect of adding a further ten pounds to the weight that she could carry, which had been a measly thirty pounds. She put one in Intelligence, which was already her strongest stat, but which would become important if she was able to reach level twelve and could then choose a second class. The last point went into Constitution, which again was horrendously low for her.

“All right, now that I can hold more, I want some more arrows, a second short bow,” Imoen muttered, looking through the pile of stuff that she had taken from the dead bodies. “And another sword and a staff.”

“What about your skill point?”

Imoen blinked then whirled like a cat, moving back to Harry quickly. “Right, yeah, show me my skill sheet.” She paused in thought, then added, “And yours too.”

Once more, Harry pulled up both of their sheets to compare them side by side, noticing almost immediately that the skill sheet didn’t show the Blood Mage stuff.

**Harry Potter Skill List**:

Weapons Skills:

Weapon and Shield \*\*\*

Longsword \*\*

Warhammer \*

Life Skills:

Master Chef: You are a master of cooking and can make even the simplest meal a treat. Chance to cook something other people will find amazing, 42% chance rate.

Loremaster: Thanks to your growing up in Candlekeep and your desire to learn, you have begun to learn how to identify items. Chance to identify unknown objects, 22% chance rate. (Note, this percentage can go up through use)

Natural Charisma: Despite what Harry might think sometimes, he does have a natural ability to draw others to him: Chance to have people react positively to you, 17% (Note, this percentage can go up or down through personal choices)

Class Specific Skills:

Turn Undead: Percentage chance to turn undead into ash, 25%. Can be used five times per day.

All other class specific skills are locked until the Gamer has chosen a god to follow.

Miscellaneous:

Leadership: 0

Tactics: 1

Besides that, was Imoen’s skill sheet:

**Imoen Skill Sheet:**

Weapon Skills:

Short Sword \*

Dagger \*

Staff \*

Short bow \*

Life Skills:

Friendly: You are friendly by nature and can bring out the talkative side in everyone around you: ability to learn something new via discussion 50% chance rate to learn important information.

Flirty Little Lass: You are flirty and able to grab the attention of men anytime you choose, and even sometimes make them do what you want them to do, 42% chance to confuse men, for various effects.

Reading Your Opponent: You are a master of body language and can often spot when people try to lie. Plus 20% chance to spot a person’s true feelings or goals when talking to them.

Class Specific skills:

Pickpocket: 62 percent chance to successfully (get away with it 52%)

Hide in Shadows: chance to successfully hide before you go all stabby, 65%, depending on your environment

Detect traps: 23% chance to spot a trap before you or your allies get caught in it.

Set Traps: 14% chance to create something that could make your life easier.

Pick Locks: For the LOOT!! Chance to unlock those pretty chests, 29%

Unlike Harry’s skill sheet, Imoen’s didn’t have a place for miscellaneous skills, yet. Harry figured she might be able to learn something later. And when she tried to get Harry to add a second skill point to the short bow skill, it didn’t work. “It looks like thieves can’t have more than one skill to any weapons proficiency,” Harry said with a shrug. “Any other choice?”

Imoen growled but told him to put it to sling. It was clear to Imoen that she could never fight someone up front just now, and she already had skill points in dagger and short sword, which filled in the short rang needs of Backstab. All her other skills would need to be shifted to keeping her out of the reach of their enemies.

Once Imoen was satisfied, Harry nodded over towards where Gorion still lay. “We’ve put it off as long as we can,” he said with a sigh. “Come on, it will go faster if we both work on it.”

**Because the ground was so rocky where they had fought, Harry and Imoen were unable to dig a grave, and as battered as they still were, their health points not having grown back much, they didn’t want to use their Blood Magic spells. Instead they had to create a cairn, placing rocks over Gorion’s body. Once finished, they stood staring at Gorion’s final resting place, with Imoen placing her hand on Harry’s shoulders, but leaving him to his thoughts. She had only been in the game for a short time in comparison to Harry, and she had not been nearly as close to Gorion as Harry had become, but she knew how she would feel if her father had died back in their old lives.**

There moment of introspection was interrupted by a loud female voice shouting to the right of them. “Ho there, young ones.”

The two of them turned, with Imoen’s hands dropping to her sword, and Harry’s flashing to his own with a speed that made Imoen blink. *FUCK,* Harry thought, *how the heck did they sneak up on me like that?* He glanced up to the area map and he realized with a start he actually hadn’t used it the night before.  *I’m going to have to get better at that kind of thing if I want to survive in this world.*

But neither of them pulled weapons out just yet, as they stared at the two people who were making their way up the hill towards them, stopping as they stared at the pile of burning bodies, before moving well around it, and continuing on towards Harry and Imoen.

From here the two from Candlekeep could see that both of them were wearing leather leggings and cloaks, their hoods pulled over their heads at the moment. One was holding a bow in his hands, and a shield on his back, it’s top just barely visible over his shoulders. The other was holding a staff, with what looked like a cudgel at his belt and a slingshot as well. It was only as the two of them came closer that the second figure’s figure was able to be seen, marking her out as a woman.

When they reached the two by the grave, who had yet to answer them, simply watching them come, the woman barked, “Well, what has happened here?! A fire fit to burn the woodlands, sparked by a large pile of bodies both undead and human. Most unusual and dangerous. And two young people who look barely old enough to be away from the farm. What has happened here?”

Her accent was somewhat unique, Imoen thought. It almost sounded Eastern European perhaps, like the accent she’d once heard from an Auror from Russia. *Doesn’t change the fact she sounds a bit of a rhymes with punt though.*

Harry growled taking a step forward angrily. “You come upon us in front of a cairn for the fallen and all you do is bark commands? Why the hell should we answer any question you put to us?”

The woman paused, looking down at the cairn as if only now recognizing what it was, before sighing. “I… Apologize. My husband and I have been traveling for many weeks now, and we were waylaid by several wolf packs last night just as we were going to make camp, then five ghouls after we tried to put some distance between us and the bodies of the wolves. When we saw the fire, we had feared what we would find here.”

“It’s been a long night for all of us,” Imoen said shaking her head. “But if you don’t mind, both Harry and I would like to see who we’re talking too.”

“That, that’s a v-very acceptable req, q, quest,” said the man speaking up for the first time. “And you must ad, d, admit my dear, that, that, they did a very good job moving the bod, d, bodies of the dead away from anything tha, a, that could’ve caught fire.” Unstringing his his bow and slinging it over his back, the man pulled back his hood and pushed back his cloak.

The face revealed when the man pulled back his hood was that of a brown-haired and brown-eyed half-elf. Half-elves had more pointed ears than humans and were slimmer of build than humans tended to be, with a slightly more pointed face than humans, especially around the chin. Their eyes were also a bit larger and more luminous than a humans’ would be. The man wore full plate armor under his cloak of better quality than what Harry was wearing if only in its construction, and his suit was complete with arm and leg guards which Harry didn’t have. The quiver at his side was also half-empty, and as Harry looked at the quiver, he got a notice from his gamer abilities.

“Fire arrow. This special type of arrow will do fire damage due to a spell placed on its tip. Useful for dealing with the undead, trolls, houses and other flammable objects.”

Of course, Harry also got some information when he looked at the man. In the air above him, the man’s name glowed with the blue of an adventurer, and when Harry looked at it, more information popped up.

**Name**: Khalid

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Half-Elf

**Classification**: Level 32 Warrior

**Relationship Status, Strangers**: 200/1000 Trust, 200/1000 Respect. You’ve only just met, and while Khalid is not going to hold that against you, he certainly isn’t going to trust you either.

That was all the information Harry’s Gamer gift could give him from a complete stranger, as the relationship bar said.

He also had a face made to worry. The man’s face was long, the expression one Harry felt fit the word lugubrious, with frown lines and smile lines around his mouth, drooping eyes, and a twitch to his features to match his stutter.

All this made Imoen chuckle shaking her head. “You’ve got the look of a worrywart to you, but you need a long beard to tangle your fingers in when you mutter to finish the image,” she quipped.

That caused the woman to bark out a laugh as her husband chuckled shaking his head at the odd comment. “Half-elves very are very rarely able to grow facial hair child, it is after all, something elves cannot do.” Her husband looked at her, and the woman seemed to frown within the cloak before pulling her hood back.

**Name:** Jaheira

**Gender**: Female

**Race**: Half-elf

**Classification**: Level 33 Druid.

**Relationship status, Suspicious**: 0/10,000 Trust, 0/10,000 Respect. Gifted with a more suspicious {some would say bitchy} attitude than her husband, Jaheira is not only unwilling to trust you, but is actually openly suspicious of you. Don’t take it personally, she’s that way with everyone.

Unlike her husband, Jaheira wore only chain mail, which matched her druid class from what Harry remembered, although it Harry was now much leerier of the staff in her hand then he had been a moment before. From his readings Harry knew that Druids could do quite a lot of damage with staffs and could place spells on them to command nature around them. And much like a wizard with his staff, a druid’s staff would allow the druid to cast the spells within without the need for verbalization.

Like her husband Jaheira was a half-elf. This meant she a thin rather than curvy body, which made Imoen think happy thoughts as Jaheira looked only to be a B-cup maybe, which was below what Imoen herself had at this moment. *Although if I ever get the chance, the first thing I’m going to morph is my chest!* Back in her old life, Imoen normally went around with a high C, low D-cup at best. And for some reason she missed it a lot in this world.

But even Imoen had to admit that Jaheira’s face was gorgeous. It was a thin, slightly more pointed face than a human’s, with high cheekbones showing her Elven heritage, her skin without pock mark or freckle, her mouth showing no lines around it like Khalid’s. She had a dirty blond hair done up into a series of tight braid along the top while being loose at the back and sides, with tiny cloth wraps around small bits of it, here and there, her hair framing her long, pointed ears. She had light green eyes, almost turquoise actually, under well-cared for eyebrows, and a face devoid of other cosmetics. She had simple banded earrings one to an ear and two tiny scars barely noticeable on her chin.

“The two of you are married then. Might I ask your names?” Harry asked, looking between the two half-elves*. After all, I can’t exactly say that I’ve already been able to see them.* That was one other thing that he had learned during his time in the tutorial. Other people did not see even a little bit of what he could when he looked at items or people.

“We, we are indeed, and my nam, m, name is Khalid, and thi, i, this is Jaheira. I am sorry for your loss, bu, u but pray, can we have your names as we, e, ell?” Khalid asked.

Harry nodded slowly, looking between the two of them. “Gorion mentioned the two of you,” he said abruptly. “I’m Harry, his ward. But we were supposed to meet at the Friendly Arms Inn.”

“Indeed, we were. But plans changed,” Jaheira said shaking her head, and then pausing as she stared between Harry and the cairn before sighing. “But I believe that your own plans changed even more than ours, and that you ran into trouble far sooner than even Gorion had suspected. Is that not the case?”

Harry nodded silently, gesturing down to the pile of stone that he and Imoen had placed over Gorion’s body. “I’m very afraid it is. We were waylaid last night by a large group of warriors, a few mages, several ghouls, at least one ghast and their leader, a giant armored behemoth. He was at least a foot and a half taller than me, and broader in the shoulders too.”

Harry and Imoen then related the tale of the fight during the night, talking about how Imoen had snuck out of the Candlekeep for friendship’s sake, causing Khalid to nod at her approvingly, and Jaheira to roll her eyes but say nothing. Indeed, neither of them said much. Khalid simply stared down at the grave of their friend crossing his arms in front of him and sighing. Jaheira went to her knees beside it, putting her hand out on top of it, as she began to mutter underneath her breath while Harry and Imoen told the tale.

She built up her power slowly, until it was a light green glow around her fingers, and suddenly, she pulled her hand away, releasing what looked like a small seed from her palm at the same time. It gripped onto the stone of the cairn and began to grow as a message appeared in Harry’s vision.

“Jaheira has used Honored Oak. A Druid only spell, this spell creates a sapling over the resting place of a fallen friend to watch over him in repose. While not very powerful, the sapling will create an area around the grave that will repulse anyone with negative feelings towards the grave itself or the person within. It is a high honor to have the sapling placed upon a grave, one few druids would extend to non-druids.”

“Thank you” Harry said, leaning forward to gently touch the tree, bowing his head formally towards Jaheira. “With the undead we saw last night, and with the ambient magic of this forest, I had feared…”

Jaheira’s eyebrow rose in surprise, then she smiled. It was a smile touched by grief, but it was real, nonetheless. “Gorion was a good teacher I see.” Then she became serious looking between the two youngsters. “But that is all well and good, and we have so far allowed you to prove your bona fides by your story. But Gorion would surely have had something upon his person to prove both who you are, and your connection with him to us when we met. May we see it?”

“So long as you show us yours,” Harry replied, causing Imoen to bite her lip to keep from giggling.

Khalid and Jaheira both noticed her reaction and Khalid laughed, understanding where she was coming from, while Jaheira rolled her eyes. “I see that someone here still needs to be doing a little bit of growing up, do they not?” She said shaking her head before looking at Harry, nodding her head slightly as a message appeared in his vision.

“Congratulations. Your forthright manner along with the respect you showed her, has gained you +10 respect with Jaheira. Keep going and like a mighty woodsman, you might be able to chop that tree down and actually become friends with her… In about 1000 years. Give or take.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to bite his lip to keep from laughing, since he had already determined that Jaheira would be a very tough nut to crack respect-wise. Still, he watched without saying anything as she reached into her person, and pulled out from somewhere, Harry tried not to think of where after all she was a married woman, a small golden harp. It was perfect, and as she ran a light nail over the strings it let loose a low dosage tone, from within could be heard her name. “Jaheira…”

Khalid also brought out a similar harp, although the way he did was more prosaic: simply reaching into a small pouch at his belt. But when he played his finger along the strings, it too sang his name. “Khalid…”

When they finished, another message appeared in front of Harry’s vision. *This is getting old*, he thought, *is it going to be like this every time I meet new people, or is it just because these two can be my new companions like Imoen?* Despite that, he read the message quickly, trying to keep his eyes from giving anything away. *I need to figure out how to maybe shift these messages to mental only or something, like a voice inside my… yeah, no, never mind. Bad idea.*

Jaheira and Khalid have shown you their bona fides. They are Harpers, a society dedicated to keeping the balance upon this world from the shadows. It is a secretive order and like any such they do have enemies, large and small. Joining your rising star to them can be good or bad. Choose wisely.

For a moment, Harry wished that he could speak to Imoen without these two listening in, but really, there was no choice. He and Imoen were alone in this world and the Harpers, for all that they probably had their own long-term goals, could help him achieve his goals. Thus, before Harry could even really think about it any consequences to the act, he had reached into his pouch, and pulled out the small harp he had taken from Gorion’s body, holding it out towards Khalid.

Khalid took it holding it up to the light and sighing as he saw the broken strings. “It will not sing again, a Harper has passed on,” he whispered, before putting it into the same pouch as he had already put his own back.

Jaheira nodded slowly, looking down at the grave. “That proves indeed, the the person within this is our old friend, but we had already known that. And now we know that you had naught to do with his death, else you would not have been able to pick up the enchanted harp. But your own relationship to him is still in the air.”

Nodding Harry pulled out the letter of introduction that Gorion had had prepared just in case something happened to him. “There is another way I could prove myself I suppose,” he said with a sigh gesturing down to the grave. “He had a locket of the two of us, a painting from years ago. But..”

Jaheira shook her head, taking the message and reading it quickly before handing it over to Khalid. “Leaving it there might with Gorion seem sentimental to some extent,” she said shaking her head “but it was well done as well. Regardless of what you think occurs in the afterlife, taking such things into the grave with you can let one rest more easily.”

Congratulations? You have lost -10 respect for sentimentality with Jaheira, but gained +50 to Trust. It’s going to be a bit of a give-and-take with this woman, isn’t it? Your Relationship status has changed to Strangers. She no longer thinks the worst of you. Hooray.

Congratulations! You have won five hundred respect with Khalid. Your relationship with Khalid has risen to Semi-Friendly. While he still isn’t certain about you, he is willing to at least be friendly towards you.

As another notice appeared, saying that “Harry had now tied his star to the Harpers, whether or not this was a good idea will become clear in time.” Imoen spoke up.

“So, you two are the more experienced adventurers,” she said, looking between the two half-elves. “The plan for us was to head onto the Friendly Arm Inn, so is that still a good plan, or do you have anything to add?”

The two Harpers exchanged a glance then shrugged, and Jaheira gestured over their shoulders, already pulling her hood back up over her head, and grabbing up her druid staff from where she had laid it by the cairn. “Other than a suggestion that we get a move on, we have no issue with your current destination, no. Anymore we can talk on the way. Only a fool would stay where the enemy knows where they are, especially one of such proven deadliness. Gorion was one of our strongest, and if he could be overcome, I do not want to meet the individual who did it without quite far more of an argument to hand.”

“Yes, but I have to tell you,” Harry said, grabbing up his own cloak and pulling it on since it did look like it was going to rain again, “that finding the person who killed Gorion is going to be one of my primary goals. I’m all for doing good, I wouldn’t be a paladin in training if I wasn’t, but I want his killer brought to justice.”

“And,” Imoen spoke up again, grabbing up her own cloak and hurrying after the other three “from the way he was speaking, the guy was after Harry here as well, so going after him in turn is just common sense.”

“What, what do y, y, you mean?” Khalid said, turning towards them even as he walked on next to his wife. Their strides were the kind of loping strides that could eat up miles, and Harry and Imoen quickly fell into step with them.

Wincing, Harry decided to just go with it, although he wasn’t certain that he liked the idea of these two near strangers knowing that he was somehow important to the dark armored strangers plans. Sure enough, a second later after he explained it, another message appeared.

For showing trust in near complete strangers you have lost -10 respect from Jaheira, but also won +20 trust from both Khalid and Jaheira.

Harry surreptitiously blinked that message away and fought the urge to reach up and rub at his lightning bolt scar in sheer confusion. *How the heck does that work? Women!*

Harry knew that respect and trust could directly fed into relationship changes from one level to another, although he wasn’t certain what would happen if these two went from near strangers to other levels. Imoen was on the low side for family, but still family, which was a bright status bar which range from light yellow, where she was now, to bright green. Khalid and Jaheira, whatever their official relationship level said, were wary acquaintances at best, and Harry wondered idly how that would work in terms of the party tactics and such. But since they hadn’t been offered a place in his party just yet from the Gamer system or whatever, he supposed that he had to build up the trust before that became an issue.

“That is most strange to my ears, but you have my gratitude for sharing such upfront, even if it was better for you not to do so” Jaheira said honestly, shaking her head. “However, you are correct in that searching for an enemy like that is only right and proper when he has marked you out so. But it cannot be our priority. The Harpers sent us here to look into the iron shortage issue, and we must do that before taking on any personal quests, although the two goals might be intertwined. Do not worry young ones,” she said, her tone becoming that of a stern task mistress almost as she looked at the two of them as they walked along. “Khalid and I will do what we can to guide your steps for now.”

Harry growled, shaking his head and stopping, moving into Jaheira’s personal space, causing Khalid to stop too pressing his hand against Harry’s chest for a moment. “Now hold on a minute! Yes, we might be young, but we are not stupid or unlearned, nor are we as Harpers such as yourself. Yes we will investigate the iron shortage, but if you’re with us, it’s a partnership of equals to a dictatorship with you and your husband telling us what we’re going to do, where to go or whatever. We will discuss what we do together and make a decision together. If you don’t like that, then I’m sorry, friends of my father or not, we will continue on to the Friendly Arm Inn and we can say goodbye to one another there.”

Two messages instantly appeared in front of Harry’s face once more, causing his lips to thin ever so slightly. Luckily that looked appropriate for the moment as well.

Standing up for yourself has gained you +50 respect with Jaheira, +25 trust with Jaheira.

Standing up to his wife has cost you -10 to trust, -50 to respect with Khalid.

*Weird,* Harry thought, not for the first time.

“I, I cannot say that I like that,” Khalid said shaking his head. “Su, r, surely the path of wisdom is t, o, to listen to your elders.”

“Oh,” Jaheira said with a laugh. “And if **we** had done that, would we have even been married, my husband? They are right. This is the start of their journey, their lives away from the nest. They must make their own choices. But you are agreed with us, that the iron shortage must be looked into?”

A quests screen popped up, although Harry would’ve thought had he had already agreed to this. Still, he supposed he had to say it formally, and he nodded, holding out his hands. “Yes, Imoen and I will help you search for what is causing the iron shortage.”

“In that case, oh illustrious leader,” Jaheira said with a faint smile even as she shook Harry’s hand “where do **you** think we should go from the Friendly Arm Inn?”

Imoen laughed shaking her head. “Nashkel of course. Whatever is happening, it starts in the mines, that’s obvious.”

“Although we shouldn’t do it openly,” Harry said shaking his head. “That giant from last night could warn people to look be on the lookout for us, so maybe disguises will be necessary once we reach there. We could pose as mercenaries looking for jobs maybe. And we need to know how far this iron shortage has spread, as well as **how** it has spread.”

“Spot check failed!” A message said in Harry’s line of vision. “Your charisma roll has failed. You have not convinced your audience of your point of view. Get to know them better before trying to convince them that you are right about something like this, young whippersnapper!

“I agree with going to the Friendly Arm Inn and south, but we need to check in along the way at various places to gain some more information about what is going on in the sword Coast. This area is a hotbed of many different political and ideological groups, we need to know the lay of the land before we can figure out where to go from there,” Jaheira said authoritatively. “Perhaps even hunt down some bandits here and there, bandits are, oddly enough, sometimes the best sources for information in their chosen hunting grounds.”

Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, and once more Harry wished that he could talk to Imoen about the messages he was seen. Luckily at least some of them had appeared in her view too, something he would later learn later that night when they had a chance to talk alone. But for now, they simply communicated with their faces and eyes before Harry turned back to the two half-elves.

“I don’t see a problem with that honestly,” Harry said with a shrug. “We need the experience anyway. I just feel as if we will need to hide our identities eventually when we get to Nashkel.”

This response earned more respect points from both of them, although Harry noted that it was a very small increment for Jaheira, and that he had a looooong way to go before any change in their relationship status happened there. But despite that, he nearly had to grin a manically as he saw the next message popping up, and he heard Imoen gasp to one side although neither of the half-elves responded as Harry finally saw a message he had been hoping for.

Jaheira and Khalid have been added to your party. Warning, party skills and abilities are effected by the trust and relationship status between the party members. Due to their low relationship status with you, party skills are disabled for the half-elves Jaheira and Khalid. However, certain bits of information about that your two new party members are now available and you can see their positions on your map as green (allied) dots on your map.

Whistling quietly, Harry quickly began to ask Jaheira and Khalid about the road to the Friendly Arm Inn, as well as how the two of them and Gorion had communicated, while he indicated with one hand that Imoen should fall behind them. She looked at him quizzically for a moment, before he surreptitiously gestured as if he was punching a button with a finger, then towards the two of them again with a flick of his other fingers.

Realizing what Harry wanted, Imoen fell behind the other two, and then clicked over their heads, where she too could now see their names. When she did, she got a bit more of a status screen than Harry had been able to before although still not much, some background on both of them along with their ability with various weapons appeared, and she read through it, whistling silently. It turned out that though he had been using a bow when they first showed up, Khalid also was very skilled with sword, having two skill points spent there, whereas Jaheira was equally skilled with the sling and staff and club, but also had a point in scimitars. She could even see some of the spells that Jaheira could command, including several healing spells. That was amazing, and she had to grin over their heads at Harry winking at him appreciatively, which caused him to smile back at her.

The four of them continued on throughout the rest of the morning and into the mid-afternoon while the clouds continued to threaten rain but not actually open up on them. Jaheira led the way directing them through the woods a ways away from the actual path leading out from Candlekeep to the main road but paralleling it for the most part in a way that neither Harry nor Imoen had the skills to do without getting lost in the dense woodlands. As a Druid of course Jaheira had both a feeling for the woods and the experience. When Imoen asked, she actually proved to be willing to impart some information about the woodlands as they passed through, her normal caustic and standoffish character giving way to a somewhat kinder, more instructor-like attitude.

Going off the beaten path like this, it was almost inevitable they would run into trouble but even running into trouble taught Harry more about his Gamer ability, and how it differed from what everyone else in this world seemed to be able to do. He paused as they crested a small hill, frowning as he looked around while a message appeared in his vision, it’s outline red and throbbing.

Warning, you have entered an enemy zone. An enemy zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range. These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.

The others looked at him quizzically, while Imoen, who had been a step behind him also paused just as she reached him. She looked at him, nodding slightly to indicate that she had seen the same message, and Harry crouched, looking ahead of them, as if he had spotted something through the woods.

“What is it, child?” Jaheira asked.

Harry was beginning to get tired of that child stuff from her. Even though it was technically true that he was a child, it smacked too much of the way Dumbledore addressed him back in his old life for him to want to take it now. He looked at her irritably but decided not to bring it up just yet. Instead, he pointed out and down into the woods, ahead of them. “I thought I saw something moved out there, something white between the trees,” he prevaricated quickly.

“Spot check failed, Khalid and Jaheira still do not trust you enough to take your word for such things and view your inexperience in a negative light.”

“If there was something there child, I would have seen it, or at worst sensed it through the feel of the forest,” Jaheira said shaking her head.

“I, I too would have se, e, seen it, we are after all half-elves, we, e, e, have better eyesight,” Khalid said, smiling companionably at Harry, and reaching out to smack him on the shoulder. “You are just, just a little twitchy after your first battle last night. It happens to a, a, all of us, even paladins are not im, im, immune to such things.”

With that the two half-elves took the lead and headed down the incline of the hill. Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, then without a word, Imoen took a single step back into a shadow, and activated Hide in Shadows, while Harry pulled out his longsword and moved down the slope ready for trouble.

And just as he had seen, trouble did find them. One moment all was pristine and clear in the forest, then Harry spotted three red dots on his map, which he was keeping an eye on now almost religiously. Before he could shout a warning though, three arrows suddenly zipped out of the forest to the left of them towards Khalid, who gasped, but somehow was able to get his shield off his back their way, in a move that Harry recognized as a skill from the Weapon and Shield skill, much like his own. Another arrow zipped towards Jaheira, but she ducked underneath it, and quickly began to intone a spell.

Jaheira has used Barkskin. Barkskin is a spell that covers the user’s body in a bark-like armor, adding +6 to her durability.

Watching this, Harry couldn’t stop himself even if he knew it was kind of childish. *But then again, despite what my body looks like, at least a part of me is still a 13-year-old right? I’m allowed to be childish a bit right?* With that thought bolstering him, he asked snidely, “Do you believe me now?” as he raced unerringly towards where the three arrows had come from, knowing that Imoen would probably be following him in the shadows.

Running around a massive tree, he discovered the attackers, sixteen red dots on his map, were groups of undead skeletons. There were six archers and ten melee specialists and, all of whom held a large glaive’s in their hands and moved towards Harry as he came towards them.

As he looked at them, information about them popped up from his Lexicon. Reading through it, Harry breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that changed the way the Gamer skill seemed to have changed how it acted once he and Imoen had found out about the lexicon, as any conscious attempt to change how information appeared had not worked up to this point. Now apparently reacting to his desires the instant he met a new type of monster, the lexicon page would splash up a small summary.

Skeletons. Simple undead constructs of bone and sinew these are the lowest of the low in terms of undead, but they can be dangerous in numbers. Unlike most undead, they are nearly immune to fire-based spells on top of their high endurance against dark type spells. But they are still weak against holy magic and are very weak against blunt damage. Swing that hammer paladin, swing!

Seeing no reason not to follow the suggestion of his Gamer skill, Harry instantly dropped his sword back into his item box and grabbed out the warhammer he had taken from Candlekeep as he had his sword. He also shouted aloud “Imoen, wait for it, then target one of the archers!” Then without pause he slammed one hand into his chest as he shouted, “Turn Undead!”

Harry has activated the aura skill, Turn Undead. Chance to turn any undead into ash, 25%

Then he raced forward, bringing the aura Turn Undead created with him. One of the melee attackers immediately collapsed, failing it’s saving throw, and he engaged the other two closest as Khalid raced to join him, shouting out “good, g, good lad!”

Between attacks, Harry was able to watch Khalid in action. Unlike Harry, he didn’t seem to have a secondary melee weapon to switch to, but that was fine by the half-elf. He wielded his sword and shield like extensions of his body, using minute shifts of stance and shield to ward off attacks that Harry had to just block full on with his weapon. His sword lashed out in precise, flashing attacks, stabbing, cutting, hacking at the undead, hitting the portion of their anatomy or armor he was aiming at practically every time.

While Harry knew that the enemy wasn’t one to demand a high level of skill, Khalid still looked impressive to his own, relatively inexperienced eyes. And he and Jaheira worked together like a well-oiled machine. Once Khalid had joined Harry at the front, Jaheira had remained staunchly behind him, using her staff to aim a series of spells into the melee at their enemies, never once hitting Khalid or Harry and always protecting Khalid from an enemy he didn’t see, or entangling the foe he currently faced to let Khalid dispatch the Undead Skeleton more easily.

Between each spell she would use a sling in her other hand, hurling three or four sling balls forward before using magic once more. She did decent damage and aim, but her spells were the druid’s best offense.

Their ability to communicate and work together without words was extremely impressive, although Harry was quick to realize it did exclude him. That would be something they would need to work on, he thought, as his warhammer smashed into the head of an Undead Skeleton, crushing it to powder, while two more moved to engage him.

Just then, Imoen appeared, an arrow taking another Undead Skeleton in the back of the neck, right into its spine. It didn’t go down, but as the message about Imoen having successfully performed a Backstab (with a bow, no less) Harry instantly leaped to the side, moving with that Undead Skeleton when it turned in the direction of Imoen’s attack. As it did, Harry’s hammer licked out above its shield, smashing into its shoulder and neck.

“You have performed a dual attack and a flank attack! Damage increased by X 2.”

The Skeleton, whose health bar had been in the yellow before this fell to the ground dead as Harry’s attack chopped half of its health bar away in a single blow. *Okay, dual attacks might have seemed obvious, but they can be devastating if done properly, and with a bit of tactics.*

For her part, Imoen had taken the opportunity to disappear back into shadows, then came out elsewhere a second later, stabbing at one of her original targets, the four Skeleton Archers standing back of the fight and firing arrows into it. Her attack did crippling damage this time, upending the Archer onto its side. Jaheira took the opportunity to change targets too, and two quick sling stones smashed into the injured archer, taking one of its arms off and again dumping the Undead Archer to the ground.

Harry’s Turn Undead aura cut out, but he instantly recast it, thumping his chest with the same hand, which was wielding his warhammer, shouting out “Turn Undead!” This close the renewed aura caught all the remaining Undead Skeletons in its area of effect, and four of them this time failed their saving rolls, falling into dust. This left six of them, plus the two as yet uninjured Skeleton Archers.

It also made all of the melee combatants turn to him. Harry though didn’t have a problem with this. “Jaheira, use one more Entrapping Vines, then switch targets to the archers. Khalid, pull back around and engage them too.”

“Who are… I was joking about you being our inestimable leader, child!” Jaheira grumped, but since she had just dodged an arrow that could have taken her in the eye and Khalid’s shield had more than a dozen shafts stuck in it, to say nothing of Harry’s, she agreed with this shift of tactics. She obeyed, casting out another spell to cause vines to grow below the feet of the six remaining Undead Skeletons, making it so they could not move, although this time she also caught Harry in it. That too was alright though since he was trapped within hammer range of one of his enemies, with the others unable to come to their fellow’s aid.

Within minutes the three of them had the two remaining Archers fell swiftly. Then the three of them turned and, with Khalid getting out his longbow, started to pelt the captured undead from a distance. Harry took a few hits on his shield, and one hit to his armored chest before they were done, but all in all, even Jaheira had to admit that the tactic had worked out well enough. “Against these weak enemies at any rate,” she added with a shake of her head. “Do not let it go to your head, Harry. Although, I must say you did a good job spotting these Skeletons before myself or Khalid did.”

“In, indeed, you, you also performed adequately when combat began. A bit head, he-he-headstrong, perhaps, and, and your movements seemed un, uncoordinated. Bu, but such things can b, be changed with experience.” Khalid added.

“Congratulations, you have gained forty respect points with Jaheira, seventy points with Khalid. Keep on chopping, woodcutter, you’ll get there eventually… maybe. Your relationship level with Khalid and Jaheira remain unchanged, a big fat neutral.”

“Indeed, you were quite skilled for two so young. But I note that you are moving somewhat stiffly. Were you injured in that battle?” Jaheira asked, showing a more caring side than she had since erecting the Honored Oak.

“Um, no, not really, a few scratches. I did break a rib last night, but I took a healing potion for it.” Harry replied, shaking his head. “Imoen also took a few wounds last night. Heal her first.”

Imoen grumbled at that but since her health bar hadn’t regenerated, said nothing. It seemed as if a slower HP regeneration time was yet another ‘perk’ of being a thief.

“Hah, and in that you show your lack of experience, Harry. Healing potions are well and good, but if you have broken a rib, say, unless the broken portion of the bone has remained where it should, the healing will not be able to repair the damage. You might not know anything was wrong intellectually, but our bodies are often far more intelligent than we thinking, sentient beings like to think.” So saying, Jaheira moved towards her as another message about earning trust appeared in front of Harry.

He was just wondering why he’d earned trust rather than respect points there when Jaheira began to talk, her hands glowing with blue light as she held them in front of Imoen’s face. “Still, it is well that you had me heal Imoen before your own wounds, Harry. While I do not have much time for romantic drivel, seeing to your lover’s physical wellbeing is a different story.”

“What!?” Imoen yelped, while Harry simply gawked at the female half-elf. “Harry and I aren’t like that!”

“Oh? I thought you must be, your leaving your life in Candlekeep behind for him and all.” Jaheira replied, sounding both amused at their reactions and nonplussed at being wrong.

“As for leaving my life in Candlekeep behind, that was a much easier choice than you might think. As for Harry no. Not only don’t I see him that way, we’re practically family really, but I’m so not his type.”

“Hmm, and what is his type?” Jaheira asked, amused to see Harry turn away and move off towards her husband rather than wait around for her to heal him in turn. To see the self-possessed, confident young man be so embarrassed was somewhat amusing.

“Elf girls and bookish types with a penchant for svelte bodies,” Imoen replied with a laugh. “You should have seen how smitten he was with this one Seeker who had returned home recently. I had to practically coach him so he wouldn’t trip over his own tongue talking to her.”

Shaking his head with a low laugh, Khalid patted Harry on the shoulder commiseratingly. “You'll get u, used to it my lad, girls on the m, march can be as bad as goss, gossiping housewives.”

Harry smiled back wanly. “Well, so long as your wife has enough attention to lend us her woodcraft occasionally and your eyesight they can talk as long as they want.”

“Flattery will not work on me child,” Jaheira called out, and Harry could almost feel her rolling her eyes behind him.

“Hahaha, w, well, it worked on me,” Khalid said with a chuckle. “Still, we should get a move on if we want to reach the Friendly Arm Inn by tomorrow night.”

**OOOOOOO**

Back in Hermione land, there was much gnashing of possibly overlarge teeth and raging. “What the heck is going on with Harry!? First that message, now Headmaster Dumbledore, the headmaster himself, basically told me to mind my own business and forget about him for a time and I can’t even, ooh, I just know that boy’s gotten himself into trouble somehow!” The bushy-haired Gryffindor snarled, pacing around her room, one hand clenched around the message Hedwig had delivered to her from the Headmaster, which he had sent back to her in reply to one she had sent him one the other day.

Hedwig didn’t reply though, too busy gobbling bacon at the moment which let Hermione continue to rant. After more than two months of getting by on rats and mice, Hedwig had her priorities now that she was living with Hermione full time. The fact Hermione had her working every day, was another factor behind her hunger.

“All this talk about experimenting on a computer, using magic to fix such a complicated piece of technology, ugh what was that boy thinking!? But of course, he probably isn’t thinking, he never does, ugh Gryffindors, why am I in that house again? And why, if, if he’s… why can’t even the Headmaster give me any information!?”

Deciding the bushy-haired one had vented her spleen enough, Hedwig looked up from her meal at last, precking harshly at her, and adding a glare for good measure.

This caused Hermione’s angry monologue to skid to a halt, and she looked between the owl and the message in her hands, sighing as her anger, always caused more by worry for Harry rather than anger at him, dissipated. She reached out a tender hand, stroking the back of Hedwig’s head and down into her plumage. “Forgive me Hedwig, but, well, I had so hoped that whatever had happened to Harry would be a momentary thing, and it doesn’t look like that is at all right. To have you refuse to return to him, that can only mean he’s out of your reach somehow, but even then there was hope. Now, with the Headmaster shutting me out, I just don’t know what to do.”

Hedwig precked again, this time in tones of deep sorrow, nipping at Hermione’s fingers as she looked down at the remains of her meal. That had been the first thing Hermione had wanted to do after she read Harry’s letter to her: she had written out on a message the words ‘don’t do anything rash’ in as large lettering as she could fit on the note. But Hedwig had refused to take it. She couldn’t find her human any longer. She could, somehow, tell he was alive, but she couldn’t find him, which infuriated and scared the Snowy Owl in turns.

“Alright… enough ranting Hermione, let’s do what you do best: organize and analyze. Go back to the beginning and work your way on from there.” The young girl moved over to sit down on her bed, nibbling at her fingernails. “Subject one, Harry’s activities. Point one, Harry did try to reach me numerous times, but something was blocking him. I might have only his word for it, but given the, the tone of his letter to me, weeks ago, I can only accept that as truth.”

She looked up askance as Hedwig’s claws flexed, making her perch, which Hermione had bought the day before for her on a family outing, to groan alarmingly. But the bird didn’t communicate anything further, simply glaring straight ahead as her claws continued to flex.

*Right, not going to go there,* Hermione decided. “Point two, because of that lack of contact, which wasn’t only with me, but Ronald, he became a little… manic, in his attempts to try and find some way to escape, physically or mentally from the Dursleys. Not that, with what I’ve deduced about them, I can’t understand that. He then, and this I find hard to believe, made his way to Diagon Alley somehow in search of help to repair a computer. This despite knowing magic and technology often mix in unusual ways.”

“Point three, this mission was helped along by a House-elf, a species of which I most certainly need to find a book about. This house elf warned him about going to Hogwarts, that there was some threat there. And Harry, for reasons he didn’t go into detail about decided that was a good idea and promised not to return. That is… also odd, but perhaps a separate factor.” Hermione continued, counting off points.

Point four, since then, you, Hedwig, can’t find him. This means he is either behind massively powerful wards, wards which aren’t friendly to him, or at the very least not to familiars. Very much not a good thing.”

Hedwig precked, and rolled her head around, as if to say ‘no duh’ in such a way that even someone with the understanding of a teaspoon would be able to understand what she was implying. Hermione though simply nodded and continued to count off points on her fingers.

“Point five. My attempt to find anything about Harry in the muggle world has not done very well, although I was able to find the Dursleys. And thank goodness Harry once mentioned his aunt and uncle’s names. But as far as the nonmagical world is concerned, Harry Potter might as well not exist, which is horribly confusing since I know Harry went to Elementary school, he told me so himself.”

“Subject two, point one, my attempts to ask the headmaster for information, even after sharing the message with him and those two old… gentlemen with him did not in gain me any further information.” At this point, Hermione began to speed up, becoming more incensed.

“Point two, judging by their age, clothing and manner, all three were important individuals in the Magical community but have no understanding of nonmagical technology. We can thus assume that they have no understanding of magic and its interactions with technology. In other words, the so-called experts are not, in fact, experts, and are whistling in the dark.”

“Point three: my continued demands for answers from the headmaster have gone from being brushed aside, to being threatened to remain quiet, and now to simply being ignored beside a ‘we are aware of the problem thank you’ reply **irritates** me, especially since he just reused the response he gave me the second time!”

“Point four, without recourse to the headmaster, many of my contacts in the magical world, my head of house, Madame Pomphrey and Madame Pince become suspect as they are all his employees. Which leaves me with my fellow children to interact with, and there… I am afraid my own personality is against me, as I only had one other friend. Ronald… well I doubt he would know anything unless, did you bring him a message too girl?” Hermione asked, slowing down..

Hedwig righted her head then shook it once in a clear negative.

“Right then. So no trying to get Ronald to help, just as well really. I think… I think that concludes my points. Bugger.” Hermione ignored Hedwig’s look of surprise at her relatively minor curse, thinking hard. “But if the magical world can’t be trusted, then I have to fall back on my nonmagical resources. That means that I have only one way to get more information: by going to the source.”

Convincing her parents to come with her to the Dursleys was actually relatively easy. The two of them had been worried about Harry ever since Hermione had shared her suppositions with them, and three days of inactivity on that point had bothered them almost as much as Hermione, although they too were much more incensed on how little paperwork there was about Harry Potter at all. Hermione’s mother, Emma, couldn’t join them, being on duty at the practice today, but Hermione and her father took his car out that very afternoon.

“Oh my word, it’s like entering a cookie cutter world,” Dan mumbled, as they slowly drove through the area around the Dursley’s home. “Little Whinging is it, do you suppose the local homeowners association gives points for making their houses so alike to one another? Bloody freaky this is.”

Hermione giggled a little at the irony in that statement, having heard from Harry that his relatives had often called him a freak. At first she had thought that was because of his magic, and while horrible, was somewhat understandable. Later on, she realized it had nothing to do with magic, and everything to do with Harry.

Soon enough they were pulling up outside of the Dursleys house on Privet drive, and the Grangers got out, with Dan in the lead as they headed to the door. Ringing the doorbell, they were soon answered by a horse-faced woman who looked at them askance, sending a near surreptitious sneer at Hermione’s hair. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

“I believe I am speaking to a Petunia Dursley?” Dan stated. “If I am, my daughter here has a few questions about a Harry Potter? Is he still staying here?”

“Who?” Petunia scowled. “No, no, there’s no Harry Potter here, you’ve got the right name, but I don’t know anything about a Harry Potter. Perhaps you’re looking for another Petunia Dursley too.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed, staring at the woman. “Perhaps his appearance will jog your memory, Mrs. He’s my age, thin, wears glasses, has a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He’s always wearing large hand-me-downs.”

At those words there was a rustling to one side, causing Dan to turn in that direction just enough to see the top of another woman’s head peeking out over the hedge separating another house from the Dursley’s. But Petunia looked blank, blank and now getting angry. “I’ve just told you I never heard that name before, and that description sounds far too much like a dirty street urchin to me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to making dinner. It’s, for some reason I seem to be out of practice on it.”

With that she banged the door in their faces, leaving the Grangers to stare at it in some confusion.

“That woman was, I think she was Obliviated of everything involving Harry Dad,” Hermione said with a frown. “It’s a spell designed to remove memories, which ones is controlled by the person casting the spell. That probably means this was a dead end. Darn it.”

“I don’t know lovey, but maybe the next door neighbor who reacted to that name knows something.” That caused the woman behind the hedge to twitch and move off, but a few minutes later, Dan was banging on the front door. “Ma’am, we know you’re in there, we’re just asking questions about Harry Potter, there’s no law against that, or against you talking to us.”

“Please, I just want to know what happened to my friend,” Hermione begged the closed door.

For a moment it looked as if the woman inside was going to just keep ignoring them. But finally, the latch on the door opened, and a female hand gestured them in.

Inside they found cats. Lots and lots of cats. Hermione liked cats just as much as the next girl, but even she felt that any number of them above three was just silly. This house had -yes, she counted them - at least fourteen on this floor alone. That went well beyond silly into the surreal. Still, the woman, who looked like the sort of crazy-cat lady you might picture in a storybook, hopefully had some answers for her and she could put up with the woman’s mild insanity for now. “You’re looking for Harry Potter? And where did you meet him, and don’t lie girl.”

“Hogwarts Ma’am. I’m a witch, a muggleborn,” Hermione replied promptly. “And I’m Harry’s friend, we’ve been friends since last Halloween. We’re also in the same house. But please, tell me what’s happened to him? He hasn’t responded to any message I’ve sent him, and I’m worried.” Hermione didn’t mention Hedwig being with her now. Hedwig was Harry’s, and this woman was a near stranger. “But who are you miss?”

“Arabella Figg, I’m a squib that Albus had looking after Harry.” Ms. Figg didn’t notice how both Grangers stiffened at that as she went on. “Good then. We’ll there’s not much to tell, not that Petunia’d be able to tell you anything. She’s been obliviated of anything to do with Harry, all the Dursleys have, even Marge. Still, I can tell you what happened, or as much as I was able to tell from out here.”

After about ten minutes of explanation, Hermione was both incensed and even more worried than before. As she and her father got back in their car, she was making plans. *If Harry hasn’t been returned from wherever he went, it’s obvious that I was right this afternoon: the headmaster and his so-called experts aren’t going about this the right way. But I still need a* ***lot*** *more information, and if the Headmaster isn’t willing to talk to me about this, then I need to solve it on my own. And if it turns out that there’s no way to get to him, well, I’ll just have to figure one out. A bit of the scientific method and knowing Harry’s starting point may serve where regular magical means have not.*

To do that, she needed two things: one, to know everything about what Harry had done she could, and two, everything the headmaster and his experts had figured out by this point. The second would be very, very hard. *But perhaps I can put the magical world’s fifth estate to good use for once. Get Dumbledore to share as much as we can force him to about his own research into it, maybe the others two.* As for the first thing she needed, thereit looked as if she was going to have to reach out to the Weasleys anyway, but not Ronald this time. No, she needed older, more devious minds for this.

Her parents though were more worried about the threat Harry’s message mentioned, as well as the fact that Dumbledore might well have known about how Harry was being treated at home. Hermione’s attempts to explain that Hogwarts was perfectly safe somehow had her spilling the beans about the Halloween troll, about Ron being a bully at first, and of course the dragon and the end of year adventure. How her parents forced that out of her she didn’t know, but her parents were now determined to try and find her some alternate schooling.

While they did that, Hermione, who had decided that if they couldn’t find Harry she would be perfectly fine with the idea of changing schools, moved on with her own plans. Two days later, Hermione looked up as Fred and George Weasley, with Ronald in tow alas, entered the Leaky Cauldron. She waved at them, and they came over, sitting at her table.

“So, Hermione…” One twin, possibly Fred, George or Gred or Forge, began.

“What kind of mischief…”

“Are you talking about?”

“Your message intrigued…”

“But did not explain much. I hope that…”

“It’s not something so plebian as replacing a stolen library book.” The second redhead finished.

“Aye, and why’d ya go to these two rather than me, eh? Aren’t we supposed to be friends?” Ronald said angrily.

Sighing, Hermione began to explain. It instantly turned out that the Weasleys had no more an idea about Harry missing than she had, and all three of their faces were grim as she finished explaining all she knew about what had been going on. “Ugh, I don’t know what this computy thing is, but mixing magic with muggle stuff, that’s dangerous, especially for something you say is kind of designed to think for itself,” Gred said, setting aside the twin-speak in his seriousness.

“Agreed. Our Dad always says, never trust anything that talks if you don’t know where it keeps it’s brain.” Forge continued. “But… what do you want us to do about it Hermione? If Dumbledore’s already on the case then…”

Here Hermione knew she had to tread carefully. She had begun to see the headmaster in a new light thanks to some pointed questions from her parents and Ms. Figg’s revelation that he knew about Harry’s home life, but the Weasleys didn’t have that. “Um, as intelligent and learned as Dumbledore is, he’s not very… muggle world savvy. I think if I can look at the computer, maybe even the type of game Harry was going to play, I might be able to help his inquiries in a way he doesn’t know to think about.”

Ronald grumbled at the idea of a computy thing being able to play games, muttering “Can’t be near as good as Wizard’s chess, can it? But did Harry show any interest in that, no. Still, yeah, that could help, maybe, if he was shrunk and is playing in the game or somethin’.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see what that’s got to do with us?” Gred asked, rolling his eyes at Ronald’s reaction.

“Well,” Hermione paused then blurted out, “How would you like to help me break into the Dursleys house? I need more information on what happened, and that’s the only place to get it.”

Instantly both twins showed her evil, eager smirks. “Tell us more…” they crooned as one.

**OOOOOOO**

Several days after Hermione had managed some mischief with the twin terrors, Dumbledore reached a decision. “I have to go to Egypt,” he said aloud to the emptiness of his office.

Over the past week Albus, working with a now-reluctant Croaker, had discovered that Tonks had been transported to wherever she was in spirit, but not physically. Thanks to her having activated the muggle contraption within the Department of Mysteries, he and the Unspeakables had been able to get a far better read on what had occurred. Because of that, they knew her physical form and her spiritual-self had been separated, but not destroyed as was the original intent of the Soul Trap. Somehow the rest of the magic on the muggle contraption, especially the house elf magic, had offset the destructive aspect, but not the portion of the runes on that item that separated the soul from the body. And with that knowledge, they now knew exactly what had occurred to young Harry as well.

This did not pair well with the pocket dimension theory, but it was now clear that whatever had happened, Harry Potter did not arrive wherever he was in his own body. Rather, he would arrive as a soul, and then interact with the world at large as a soul. Albus at first had the rather quixotic thought that perhaps in this manner he would be reborn, a soul searching for a body. But he was uncertain about how such a thing would occur.

Regardless, with the odds of finding Harry in his new pocket dimension the next best thing to impossible, Albus had decided to leave that task with the Unspeakables as two questions rose to primacy in his mind: what about the soul fragment that Riddle had accidentally infused with the young baby’s? And how did this effect the prophecy?

Albus had already discovered that the original Riddle fragment, the one that had taken over Quirrell last year, was still alive, so that ruled out the first, positive, outcome. Now, over the work of several days, Albus worked out that the shard in Harry’s soul was also probably transported with him to wherever he was now. That wasn’t good, but it also meant that the prophecy was still active. Yet, if neither were here, did that fragment still constitute a viable anchor for the original Riddle?

To that, Albus could not divine an answer on his own, and it was with a heavy heart that he decided he would need to devote some time to researching Horcruxes, and pocket dimensions. Luckily, both magical phenomena had been first developed by the Egyptians. And the magical portion of the Library of Alexandria was still out there, in small portions throughout the country. While Albus wasn’t looking forward to going to Egypt and needing to deal with the goblins there, who practically ruled the magical side of things in that country, he knew it had to be done.

*I may even have to step down as headmaster if it comes to it. Finding out about how those two phenomena interact is that important. If Riddle, the original fragment, is now truly unkillable because his anchor is so hidden from us…* Albus shivered at the thought, grateful now that Croaker and Moody were on the lookout for other anchors. *That just leaves me to find out if the one in Harry is still viable… and if it is… if it is and Harry ever returns, I might have to go back to my original plan of sacrificing him for the greater good.*

There was no way to separate a soul fragment from a soul like this. It had never been done before, but Albus had studied the scar extensively after Harry had ousted Riddle at the end of last year. The two could not be separated, the only way to kill one was to kill the other. *I had hoped the Soul Trap might have done that, taking the fragment of Riddle as payment, but that was not to be. And if that did not work, then it calls into question everything but the Killing Curse, which would more likely kill both souls. But, but to stop Riddle from rising once more, Harry’s life would be a small price to pay.*

Albus’ musings were interrupted by Minerva slamming the door to his office open, having used the assistant headmaster’s override password to get by the gargoyle. “Albus, have you seen this?!” she nearly shouted, slamming a copy of that day’s Daily Prophet down on his desk.

On it, Albus read the headline, “***Boy Who Lived missing! Dumbledore and the Ministry Clueless! Is this connected to the recent arrest of Lucius Malfoy? The public demands answers!”***

Shaking his head and removing his glasses to rub at his nose, Albus sighed. “One wonders how Rita fits all that into a single headline. Regardless, I had feared this would come out soon enough.”

“What are you going to do Albus? That article, it mentions you by name, and then casts aspersions on where Mr. Potter was left for so long among muggles who abused him. Rita’s going to rile up the mob, and you know that the Ministry will be gleeful to throw you to the wolves.”

“I rather think you are mixing metaphors my dear, but your meaning is still quite clear. Nonetheless, I believe that the truth can be used without much harm done. I was hoping to wait to tell you my dear, but I fear that I must step down as headmaster.” Minerva gasped, but Albus went on unhurriedly. “While the chances of getting Harry back intact decrease with every day that goes by, there is still a chance and I must be free to pursue it into the new year.” *And to hunt down Riddle’s other Horcruxes too.* “For now, I think I will schedule a press conference for this coming Wednesday.”

So busy was Albus dealing with the public fallout, that he never realized that Ms. Granger had not only stopped sending her daily requests for information. She had instead sent a letter stating her intent to transfer.

**OOOOOOO**

It took Harry and the others five days travel to reach the area around the Friendly Arms Inn patrolled by the Arm’s live-in mercenaries. During that time, the four of them had slowly melded into an actual party, as Harry’s Gamer ability put it, at least in some ways. They had yet to run into enough combat to give them the experience needed to work together, and after failing the first time Harry was reluctant to try again to convince Jaheira or Khalid about the necessity of training together.

Khalid was more than willing to train with Harry one on one, and Jaheira was willing to discuss her Druid powers, and talk about their experiences with either of the youngsters, which she still called them much to Harry’s displeasure, made worse by the fact that he thought that his displeasure was part of the reason why she did it. But when it came to be talking about group tactics and working together in a fight, neither of the more experienced adventurers were willing to discuss it, outside of the minimum.

But on the more noncombat side of the ledger, things were looking very good, all four of them figuring out what they could do in terms of their roles in the party. On the march, Imoen was scout, with Jaheira acting as rear scout, and Harry and Khalid in the center, able to react to anything they saw while Jaheira would use her Druid powers to feel out the life force as she called it of the forest as they traveled through. This also put Imoen, who had a map ability like Harry’s, at the front, with his one at the center of their formation.

This had allowed them to get the drop on several groups of wolves and other beasts and had kept them from running into anything unprepared. Khalid and Jaheira put it down to Imoen becoming better at moving through the forest silently and Jaheira’s own Druid abilities, but it wasn’t.

Although, moving through the forest alone was an experience to Harry and Imoen. They both came from a society that had conquered the world around them to a great degree. Even the magicals didn’t live as they would have thousands of years ago for example, instead living in the cities or near the farmsteads of non-magicals, with little of the raw, original nature of the area near them.

But this forest, it was like what Europe might’ve been before the Dark Ages. Before the times of the Romans maybe. An endless forest as far as the eye could see, thick, unyielding, a forest moreover that most certainly had **not** gotten used to humans and other sentient creatures in its midst, whatever the humans and others themselves had done to create their homes and roads. Even the Forbidden Forest paled in comparison to this forest and looking at the map of the Sword Coast Harry knew it actually was quite small in comparison to ones found deeper inland.

When they brought it up, the two half-elves were amused. “Ah, I had forgotten what it was like to be so innocent. But you come from Candlekeep, and I suppose have never truly been far from that mighty bastion of all that is written and moldy.” Jaheira did not mind book-learning, but she disdained those who thought learning was more important than using what you learned in the real world.

“The forest was here before you were born, before even I was born or Khalid for that matter,” Jaheira added teasingly looking over at her husband, who mimed looking affronted quite easily with his normally sour, depressed expression. “It will be here far after we are all dead and gone. The forest has a memory not as we would understand the term, but it still understands. It still knows, and it knows that we are ephemeral, that we are foreign. We will leave, our marks on the world will fade, and it will still be here.”

Around the camp, their jobs settled down just as easily. Jaheira would create the camp, where again, Imoen and Harry would learn something about life on the road. In this case they learned more about how to hide such things from casual observation then either had known was possible, merging the camp into the forest. It was excellent training, since Harry hadn’t figured out a way to link his map to a warning system of some kind. He could tell enemies were on his map, but that was a conscious thing. The map itself wouldn’t warn him of it.

While they went about that, Khalid would head off to hunt for their meals. He was, despite being a warrior who professed to prefer sword and close combat, much better than even Imoen with the bow, which was only to be expected admittedly, although it got Imoen’s back up something fierce.

After the camp was set up, Harry would cook, which was something of a surprise to the two older adventurers their first night camping together.

**Flashback:**

“What are you doing young one? Harry,” Jaheira corrected herself as Harry looked at her with a light glare from where he had just pushed Khalid away from the fire that her husband had just created. “I was about to start cooking us a warm meal, but if you do not wish for one, pray tell me rather than be rude about it.”

“That’s not cooking, that was simply burning with a bare modicum of style,” Harry retorted. He pulled out from his ever-handy item box several different spice bottles that he had bought back in Candlekeep, taken little by little and added into bottles every day back in the tutorial. Given how much of each spice he had, and the amount those spices went for, Harry knew his bottles of spice were actually more expensive than the jewels he had ‘farmed’ during his tutorial. But he’d only sell them a bit at a time, considering that unlike those gems, the spices were also useful.

He then pulled out a few ingredients, and several pans which he’d had the Candlekeep’s blacksmith make for him out of bronze, with no iron in it. It cost him several jewels he had gathered over the time in the tutorial, but again, to Harry that was a very cheap price. He actually had every single pan or other tool he might need to cook in his item box.

Jaheira blinked at it all, a small smile flickered across her face as she once more about her head. “I see Gorion was very proactive when it came to prepare you for the road. I should’ve expected it, I suppose. Although I have to wonder how high your Chef rank is given how much time that can take.”

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” Harry replied, even as he twitched, since even with his previous knowledge of cooking, Jaheira was right: it had taken him a lot of time to become good at cooking in this world. Primarily because there were no appliances but even so, the fact was he had abused the tutorial in a lot of ways to prepare for this journey.

He and Imoen had talked about that, their stats, and their pasts, and exactly how much to share now and into the future. The tutorial, the whole time starting over thing would remain a secret along with where they came from as long as they could keep it. But even the lie Imoen had come up with to explain some of their abilities such as Blood Magic, would be an easier lie to swallow than the idea of time simply skipping like that to anyone who understood even the simplest concepts of magic. Which, as a Druid, Jaheira certainly would.

“Still,” she went on, staring as Harry continued around the campfire, “it is most interesting that you and Imoen are both able to use your item box so easily.”

“Gorion mentioned that,” Harry replied mildly, as he set the spices he would need for the deer that Khalid had brought in. He had spotted signs of a herd earlier that day. “Something about your item boxes not being so organized?”

“And thus of limited utility,” Jaheira said with a nod. “Very few adventurers are born with the ability that you and young Imoen seem to have been born with. Neither my husband nor I have such a skill, hence our packs. But an item box such as yours is only limited by the physical weight you can carry, and never will you seem to be encumbered. It is almost enough to make one jealous.”

“Enou, u, enough about that,” Khalid said, as he watched Imoen begin to prepare the meat, grimacing as she did so. “I think youn, n, young Harry has time before Imoen is done with her chor, r, chore. Come Harry, I would like to test yo, o, your skills.”

Harry nodded, and not three minutes later was staring up at the stop sky as his Gamer ability intoned “you have been disarmed and floored by Khalid in this spar. You have lost. Remember that the path to wisdom is fraught with peril, and bruises in equal measure. It is how you deal with the bruises that matter the most.

“How did you do that?” he asked slowly, as he pushed himself to his feet. “I thought I had you there.”

“Your stan, n stance was wrong,” Khalid explained calmly. “Your sword was o, o on target, and I will admit t, t, to some surprise at that. But your entire move, mo, movement needs work. It’s almost as if you trained just your ar, ar, arm work rather than see, se, seeing how your swordplay pl, pl, plays into and is built upon the foundation o, o, of your body’s movements.”

Harry grunted irritably at that, and Khalid chuckled. “Do, o, don’t worry, that is a mistake that many young adventurers ma, ma, make. They don’t realize it, because su, su, such lear, learning doesn’t show up in your sk, sk, skills.”

Harry nodded rueful agreement that, then glanced at Khalid’s blade. “Before we go again, can I see your sword? It doesn’t look like a typical blade, not in length or girth.” Harry actually knew it wasn’t a normal sword because when he looked at it, he got a popup of “Unidentified sword, you cannot identify this blade without your party member’s permission.” He saw much the same when he looked directly at Jaheira’s druid staff.

“Of course Harry,” Khalid said with a smile I was wondering if you would notice.

To one side, Imoen snickered shaking her head. “Did you just agree to show Harry your… “

Khalid nodded slowly not getting the joke for a few seconds before his wife groaned. “Honestly child, do you have any maturity whatsoever?”

“There’s maturity, and then there’s not actually knowing what humor is. Those are two very different things,” Imoen shot back, and the two women started to needle one another mercilessly.

To one side Harry looked up from where he had been inspecting Khalid’s Bastard Sword (+1 to attack +4 to defense) and gave it back to the man as they moved softly away from the two women, heading back to the fire.

**End Flashback**

From the start, the relationship of the two women was very odd to say the least. Harry often wondered if this was how it was for women all the time, since it somewhat resembled how Hermione would get along with lavender and Parvati, friends one moment laughing at something or other and then the butt of jokes and needling them back the next. Although laughter was in far less supply on Jaheira’s part. The cool blonde-half-elf replied with half-smiles and eye-rolls most of the time, but she did have a wicked sense of humor.

For their part, the two men got along well enough. Khalid, for all his stutter, was a decent trainer, and Harry created several low-key combat abilities he never even knew about: Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement. According to the Gamer’s information about them, these skills would eventually re-merge with his already existing skills. But until he mastered them, they would remain separate. None brought a combat bonus with them; indeed, they impacted his overall defense negatively at his current level, but in creating them Harry had activated a quest which would give him two more skill points to add to his abilities, which was major. Imoen had said she had seen much the same thing when taking lessons from Jaheira about how to move silently through the woods.

On a personal level, Khalid had something of a sense of humor, which paired well with Harry given that his social awkwardness did rear its head occasionally even now. Neither took pleasure in needling or making fun of others and spent much of their time talking about the nations Khalid had seen, and the skills needed on the road. Harry learned Khalid loved riding, but had a fear of elephants, whereas Jaheira couldn’t stand being around horses, and had issues with bears. “For some reason, the instant they see her they go wild and attack. No idea why.”

In turn, Khalid learned about how many books Harry had read in Candlekeep, his desire to do good in the world which fueled his paladin training, and other such things. Nothing major on either side, just funny, amusing anecdotes as the two men got to know one another without the shouting and verbal sparring of the ladies.

At night, the four of them would retire to their tents, which Harry had instantly offered to carry in his item box, gaining a few more trust points with the married couple. To Harry and Imoen it was simple common decency to split the party up like that with the married couple having their own tent, and Harry and Imoen their own. It made for some awkward moments for the youngsters, but once Imoen put her foot down and told Harry to take care of his ablutions while she got undressed for bed and vice versa, they were fine.

But it would surprise them that the half-elf couple did not point of fact need a tent for ‘marital activities’ as Imoen had put it when they decided on that. The difference between half elves, and indeed elves, and humans went far deeper than looks, or even the body types each race was genetically predisposed to. Elves were practically immortal, at least as humans understand the term. They could live for thousands of years, and their mental and emotional psyches were built to think in those lengthy terms. As such, they didn’t build, create, propagate, or grow as fast – from their perspective- as humans, and that carried off over into their relations with one another.

While there was a tremendous amount of love and understanding since Khalid and and Jaheira had been together for 200 years by this point, there was no sense of passion as humans would understand. Love yes, and the two always cuddled of a night, but there was no pressing need, be it emotionally or physically, to take it further than that so often. A few times a month was enough for more than that, and even that was more than many purely elven pairings would indulge in, in their own lands. That wasn’t to say they weren’t passionate. They simply directed those passions differently.

Instead two of them would talk, or read books, and other such activities. Of course, now that they were no longer alone, they talked about the two youngsters, more often than not speaking quietly about the oddities they had begun to notice even upon that first day with them.

“It is strange,” Jaheira said the night before they broke out of the woodlands, as she pulled off her feet and began to massage her ankles and arch, sighing with a faint smile on her face as she did so. *Time for new boots, methinks.*  “I tend to notice it more in Imoen than Harry if I am honest, but there are, I would say emotional and mental moments of, of disparity perhaps? The mental and emotional maturity that they show is not quite matching to their physical age?”

“I understand what you’re say, say, saying,” Khalid replied with a nod, still stuttering his words despite it being only the two of them. Most didn’t realize this, but Khalid’s stutter had nothing to do with shyness or anything of that nature, rather it was lasting damage from a spell that had gone wrong in spectacular fashion when he was nearby. “Im, Im, Imoen comes off as more mat, mat, mature than her years suggest. Sub, sub, subtle ways, how s, s, she holds herself, the way Imoen m, m, moves her body, even how she looks a, a, at Harry. She is sup, su, supposed to be the younger of the two, but how she ac, acts towards him, you would not know it.”

“Exactly, and that despite his taking the leadership position between the two of them. Whereas Harry shows an almost childlike immaturity at times, especially when it comes to missing Imoen’s more ribald jokes. But that is a minor mystery in comparison to the large one that I believe we have both noticed in Harry,” Jaheira replied.

“In, in, indeed,” Khalid said with a slow nod, staring through the closed flap of their tent towards the other tent, where his half-elf hearing could make out the noise of conversation, punctuated by a laugh from Imoen. He smiled hearing it. Imoen was certainly the life of the party in terms of her personality and getting the others to talk. Harry seemed to almost have something of a brooding personality at times, which was perfectly understandable given Gorion’s recent demise, but Imoen refused to let him remain that way for very long before she would cajole him or Jaheira or Khalid, both of whom were more silent individuals, into speaking.

Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to his wife, smiling as she slowly started to undress, taking in her form as an artist would a magnificent painting. A stir of baser desire also flashed across his mind, but he quashed it, knowing now was not the time for such. *Perhaps if we stay a few nights in the Friendly Arm Inn.*

“But it is h, h, his various abilities that surprise me. He is when it is a, a, all said and done on, on, only a Level 5 Paladin. Yes, he sh, should be looking for the deity he wi, wishes to pledge himself too. Yet, h, h, his various strengths and abilities physically are fa, far higher than they, sh, sh, should be. His knowledge of co, co, combat isn’t, but his str, str, strength, his dexterity, both are much h, h, higher than they should be.”

He looked at his wife her confirmation that she had seen the same thing, and she nodded firmly. “The same is for Imoen if on a smaller scale from what I have seen when I have sparred with her. I have noticed her dexterity and agility are far higher than her level would suggest, even without her amusingly named passive skill of ‘Fight Like a Jackrabbit’. I would say from their stats and skills they are at least in the nine to eleven level range, perhaps a bit less?”

“Ex, ex, exactly! it makes me wonder how they ha, ha, have been trained before this. After all, Gorion is n, n, not one to concentrate so m, mu, much on one area.”

“Gorion concentrate on only the physical side of things?” Jaheira scoffed at the very idea, and the two of them exchanged a brief chuckle before lapsing into companionable silence as they thought about their old friend. Though human, Gorion had been one of their closer companions for more than thirty years before he had retired to Candlekeep, and both of them had many fond memories of him, from when he was a young man straight to when he had become an experienced and dangerous Adventurer.

“It makes me wonder how they have been able to build up their physical abilities to such an extent,” Jaheira said breaking the silence by reiterating the question they had been wondering about before. Of course both half-elves knew of ways to build up strength and dexterity, but such means were of limited return after a short period of time.

“So either Imoen and Harry has discovered new ways that the two of us don’t know about to heighten their physical abilities, or something else is going on. And it makes one wonder furiously to think about their parentage in particular,” Jaheira mused, to which her husband simply nodded, sharing a dark glance with her.

After a moment she went on, putting both their thoughts into words as was her wont. “And then of course there is their item boxes, and a few other minor things I notice about the two of them. Mysteries that are adding up to something. I am not doubting that they are good youths you understand my husband, it is just odd, that is all.”

Khalid nodded. “A m, my, mystery to be ce, ce, certain. Yet perhaps one they wi, wi, will enlighten us upon as we continue to get to k, k, know one another.”

Jaheira nodded, and the two of them turned in for the night, curling up against one another under their shared blankets.

The next night, they finally came out of the woodlands into the more settled area around the Friendly Arm Inn.

The change between forest and settled area was quite abrupt.  One moment they were moving through trees whose ages could be best told in millennia and then they were among scrub brush and scattered fields, an actual road, or rather two roads, for the first time since their journey had begun. One was running parallel to their route to one side just a bit further away than bowshot, showing the two youngsters that Jaheira had led them perfectly through the woods.

Visible in the distance further ahead of them to the east, there was a main road, its stone cobbles rattling with the loud noise of several carts moving along it. Harry and Imoen also saw the blue dots of several dozen people scattered across the fields and onto that road at the furthest reaches of their map.

To one side of that road in the distance, beyond the range of their maps, they could see a large stone building surrounded by four smaller buildings, each of them set within 20 yards or so of of the stone outer wall of the large mansion within. None of the outer buildings were made of stone, instead being made of thatch and wood, but they too had smaller hedge walls around them. Around this center they saw numerous guards along with farmers and travelers traveling along the road.

None of the famers closer to them even looked at them askance coming overland and they moved to join up with the road that would have led from Candlekeep to here, before it intersected the wider road. This was the road to the south and north, the South Beregost Road.

To Harry and Imoen’s surprise, Khalid and Jaheira pulled up their hoods as they moved forward, making themselves look as nondescript as they could. The cloaks hid their armor, but left Jaheira’s Druid staff and Khalid’s bow and quiver to be seen. They looked almost like villagers, or perhaps hunters rather than Adventurers now.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked quickly, looking around them.

“It is better to get the lay of the land before announcing your presence, child, much like you said we might need to later on, so we do here,” Jaheira said shaking her head. “We have friends at the Friendly Arm Inn, and yet it is civilization, an important crossroads, which allows for the presence of enemies at the same time.”

Harry and Jaheira shrugged, before pulling up their own hoods way. “We do kind of stand-out don’t we,” Harry said gesturing towards Imoen’s hair and his own lightning bolt scar.

“In a word yes,” Jaheira said dryly, shaking her head as she stared at his hair. “Honestly, what were you thinking child, pink?”

“I like pink!” Imoen shot back shaking her head. “It doesn’t seem to bother my hide in shadows ability at all, so while I can’t exactly blend into a crowd, I can hide myself just fine.”

“Those are two very different things and blending in is often even more advantageous in non-combat settings,” Jaheira remonstrated, and the two of them were off again while Harry and Khalid shook their heads.

Moments later they had reached the crossroad. They were about to turn to make their way a bit north to head to the inn, but they were halted by two other fellows, coming down the main road.

The two were an odd pair to be sure. One was a halfling man, dressed in decent chain armor, wielding a long dagger and a small shield, with several long, thin scars marking his face. The one who addressed them was a tall human man with wavy hair down to just below his ears whose face looked as if it had been marked by someone wanting to make him look like a demented jester without the white makeup. He had a series of eight dots on his forehead right above his eyes, cry lines under his eyes, and then what looked like thin smile lines moved from his mouth in either direction.

“Ah, two young people travelling these roads alone. You must either be most puissant, or idiotic to do so. I wonder which it is. Still, the answer to such a question must be found by asking the person in question. Ho my Good fellows,” the human man shouted in a louder voice, as if his earlier words hadn’t been audible. “From where do you come? And have you news of the road?”

Harry looked at the two people who had moved into their way, taking in their appearance slowly while his Gamer ability gave him what information.

**Name**: Xzar

**Gender**: Male

**Class**: level 35 Necromancer.

**Relationship Status**: unfriendly, -500/1000 respect, -1000/1000 trust (yes there are negative numbers). This individual does not like you, or indeed many other people. It’s nothing personal, Xzar simply has a very twisted view of the world and the people within it beyond himself.

The information gained from the other fellow was much the same, although he was a 24 dual level Fighter and thief, with a level 24 in Thief and 16 in Fighter. His relationship was also Toxic. “Nothing you do or say will change the opinion of this fellow that you, like nearly every individual in the world not named Mortarion, is better dead than alive. Don’t let your children grow up to by gleeful psycho killers, boys and girls.”

For a moment, Harry thought that Jaheira or Khalid would speak up, but the two of them had suddenly fallen behind Harry and Imoen. Indeed, they were so far away by now they weren’t even in speaking distance, leaving the two of them to talk to these two fellows as if the two half-elves had never been part of the same party.

Harry blinked at that but took it in stride as much is he could, moving forward himself and nodding. *I don’t like their relationship status, but I am not going to start something here unless they do the same.* “I’m afraid that we don’t actually have much information from the south. We came from Candlekeep way.”

“Indeed, and how is the ancient repository of what other people seem to think it’s important? Still drear, boring, and self-important, full of people nearly as dry and flammable as their books?” asked the mage, chuckling at his own humor. “Honestly, how does that place still exist despite the fact that it has the most ridiculous method of gathering knowledge that I have ever heard of.”

“Somewhat, but I’ll agree it was rather boring and dry there? As for why we are traveling I could say that we are on a search to find ourselves, Harry said with a shrug. “I am a paladin, and I need to figure out what denomination to follow. Candlekeep didn’t have any churches or sects there for me to study at. My friend Imoen has come with me for the adventure of the road.”

“Ick, a paladin, guh, I hate good-doing lickspittles like that. What say we kill him, and then have some fun with the girl. I’ll wager I’ll be much more fun than the boy who’d rather spend the night praying than plowing girl,” the assassin quipped, leering at Imoen.

She huffed, but didn’t look away, crossing her arms under her chest and cocking her hips at the halfling. “Don’t get any ideas Short and Stabby. I like my man a good deal taller than you,” she said, while also indicating something else entirely by pulling two fingers away from one another in a parallel, stopping, after a glance at the dwarf, with her fingers barely two inches away.

“I’ll have you know, that I am most disproportionate to my size my dear, and I like stabbing things. Don’t make fun of my pastimes less you find yourself it’s recipient.” Mortarion retorted with a cackle, causing Imoen to roll her eyes.

“Pray then keep it and your daggers in your pants. I don’t want to see you using either of them.”

“If we could get back on track,” Xzar said coldly to her and his companion before trying to smile naturally at Harry, the expression more of a rictus on his face than anything else. “You wouldn’t have happened to hear aught about the activities of any bandits in the area would you?”

Harry and Imoen both shook their heads, and the man sighed. “Ah, so you are both deaf and dumb. Excellent, those are both things I look for in companions. For, there is strength in numbers. If you have not pressing business to the north of here, could we interest you in joining with us. The two of you may see young at first glance, yet experience is the best teacher, and we have need for meat shields. that is companions, on this journey.”

“To that I would ask you the same question you put to us,” Harry said with a smile as he fought to keep from either rolling his eyes or killing this psycho where he stood. “Why are you journeying?”

The two unknowns exchanged a glance, and Xzar went on a little more slowly. “We have business in the South. The issue of the iron shortage has been noticed in the great city to the north, and the two of us, among others less intelligent and more expendable to be sure, have been sent South. Yet it seems to me, that it will take someone of my vast, overpowering intellect to discover what is going on.”

Mortarion seemed to dispute that, snorting and spitting to one side while Imoen rolled her eyes at the man’s ego.

“But whatever is causing it, we must take part of it, err, take it apart. The iron shortage issue is causing far too many problems in far too many quarters, there are lines that have been crossed, which we cannot allow. If it was directed, controlled and allowed to bear only certain fruit, perhaps there could be some purpose to it, yet at the moment, that is most decidedly not the case.” Xzar went on.

“You’re saying that you’re not going to try to solve the issue?”

“Oh,” Xzar said with a wave of his hand. “Perhaps, perhaps if that serves our purposes, and if there is not a certain amount of profit to be made.”

“Profit?” Harry asked incredulously. “From the iron shortage, with war threatening over the horizon?”

“You sound astonished at the notion, ah, but you are a paladin-in-training. I apologize, I’ll speak slower so you someone of your limited intellect and naïve world view can understand.”

“I understand it,” Harry said hurriedly. “I’m just wondering how exactly you would be able to take over something that has obviously been going on for some time and has already built up to this level. Just the two of you?”

“I, then you’re much wiser than I expected a paladin to be. Yes, I understand your concerns. But never fear, my friend Mortarion and I are quite capable. Quite… capable,” he repeated, his lips twisting into a sneer, as magical energies began to accumulate around each hand.

Harry slowly nodded at that, and the halfling suddenly barked out “Well, what about it. Are you willing to join us? We cannot promise that you would be able to find a a temple to pray to along the way, though why’d you want to do that when there’s killing and wenching to do, but you might find experience, answers, and perhaps, in a bit to knowledge about the world.”

A pop-up window once again appeared in Harry’s vision.

You have been offered the chance to join forces with the most unlikely and somewhat confusing pair of Xzar and Mortimer. Warning, while the idea the idea of additional party members is always good, adding new partners is always a chancy business. Especially with obviously crazy people. Yet crazy money spends as well as sane:

If you chose to add these two to your party, the quest ‘Xzar and Mortarion’ will become active. Rewards include 3000 XP, greater relations with Xzar (not Mortarion, he’s just crazy that way) and their mysterious backers.

Harry idly wondered who these two represented. It was evident that Mortarion at least had been speaking not only of themselves but of a larger group. *And it might be just an impression, but the way they speak, it’s more like they are affronted at the very idea of the iron shortage happening without their being a part of it than worry about the fact that it is happening at all.* Harry didn’t know what to make of that. He also could tell they were both a very long way from sane, and in fact were possibly just plain crazy. *I don’t think anything good can come from being around these two for an extended period of time.*

Still, Harry decided to be diplomatic for now. “I’m sorry, but I have to decline. For one thing, I wouldn’t want to hold you up, as we do have business at the Friendly Arm Inn, that could take us several days to complete. For another, I truly do wish to first find a god to follow, before deciding upon my path afterwards. But, the iron shortage issue does interest me and perhaps down the road, when my journey takes me South, we can work together then.”

“You speak like a burgher and yet you speak with a certain amount of decorum to your betters,” conceded Xzar overriding the halfling’s response, which was unprintable. “Still, our offer is not one made more than twice young ones. Be aware of that the next time we meet.”

“And if that happy day at comes, we will see you then. Good day.” Harry replied.

With that, the odd pair passed Harry and Imoen, with Mortarion sneering at them both, drawing a thumb across his neck as he passed them. As they passed where Khalid and Jaheira were ostensibly reading the side and speaking quietly to a farmer while helping him with his cart which had busted an axle very conveniently they both slowed down slightly, so slightly Harry didn’t notice but Imoen, a master of body language, did.

Harry was still confused about the two Harper’s odd actions. They waited until the two crazies were out of sight before moving over to Imoen and Harry, who asked the two of them, “What was all that about?”

“It was better that you handle speaking to those two, child,” Jaheira said with a shake of her head. “Do you know what they were?”

“You mean beyond insane?” Harry asked, frowning as he cocked his head at her. “A mage and a thief, I think, why?”

“I was not asking for their Adventurer class,” she said dryly shaking her head. “I was asking about their affiliation.”

While Harry was still looking confused, Imoen was looking at the two Harpers, crossing her arms. “Do you want to set share something with the class?”

“We co, could smell those two, a m, m, mile away,” Khalid said, his voice quite a bit colder than either of the two humans had ever heard before. “Do you kn, kn, know about the Xhentarim?”

Harry slowly nodded, turning to look down the road towards where Xzar and Mortimer had been going. “They’re a group like the Harpers, only directly opposed to you, they serve their own ends or evil I believe.

“Correct,” Jaheira said coldly. “They are the sworn enemies of the Harpers, and we have had run-ins with various members of that group before. Those two were unknown to us, but the signs and the feeling is there for those who have the ability to see. That, and yes, they were both obviously insane,” Jaheira added dryly.

“Why were you so friendly to them?” she asked abruptly almost glaring at Harry as she crossed her arms and stared angrily at him.

Harry shrugged. “I could tell they were kind of crazy too you know,” he said, scratching at his lightning bolt scar, even as he looked at the blonde half-elf in amusement. “And while I didn’t know they worked for the group you spoke of I could tell they were part of a larger organization. I therefore didn’t see any reason to be anything but friendly. It was a false friendliness, but I doubt they care, and besides, it serves no one for us to have to dodge assassins from another quarter or have another group of spies starting our path that we will already have the deal with.

Jaheira called down somewhat at that, nodding her head slowly. “I had hoped it was something like that and not you trying to keep your options open for more spurious reasons,” she confessed.

As Jaheira spoke, a message appeared in Harry’s vision denoting that he had won 300 Trust and 80 Respect from Jaheira and the by-now normal double that amount with her husband. That meant he was more than halfway to becoming an actual friend or whatever the next level up from traveling companions/acquaintances was with Khalid (the Trust aspect being full now), and still way less than that with Jaheira.

“You speak wisdom for one so young,” Jaheira went on, of course not seeing the message Harry had. “Pray keep it up.”

Harry chuckled rather wanly at that, reminded of his secret, about how old he was back in his original body, whatever his new body might tell anyone. To one side, Imoen giggled wildly into her hand thinking about the same thing, actually having to put her hand over her mouth for a moment.

Blinking at the odd response to her statement, Jaheira shook her head, and gestured the three of them to move along. “Come, the Friendly Arm Inn beckons.”

The four of party members moved to join the small queue looking to enter the inn via a small side road connecting it to the main road heading north and south. There was an even dozen men and women in line there with packs or carts waiting there. Still, the guards inside moved through it quickly, with the biggest wait occurring with the one cart directly ahead of them. By the time it was their turn the previous fellows had moved off, leaving the entrance deserted on the other end as well as behind them.

“Number of rooms needed and the duration of your stay,” said a guard with a clipboard, looking up at them. “No names needed, just the number of rooms an’ the duration,” he intoned by rote, sounding extremely bored.

Above his head, Harry read, “Friendly Arm Guard, level 14. A neutral non-Adventurer (any relationship beyond simple acquaintance is impossible) who is assigned to the thankless task of saying hello to people like you.” That told him nothing about how tough an opponent the guy might be, since Guard, certainly hadn’t been an Adventurer class. *Still, it’s not like I’m going to try and start trouble here.*

“Four of us, probably one, maybe two nights at most,” Jaheira said crisply, “and two rooms. Or one if you do not have two.”

“We have room, although they’re not the least expensive,” the guard said shrugging his shoulders. “Nor the most expensive. We’ve got a lot of people here tonight, and a a caravan going in either direction came in last night, and the one going south has yet to leave, wanting to add more people to it. Safety in numbers you understand.”

Harry nodded at that, hearing the same phrase that Xzar had used moments ago.

“In case you haven’t been here before,” the man said, his voice shifting back into the dull rote response tone that he had been using earlier. “The rules of the Friendly Arm Inn at are as follows: No cheating at dice, if you are caught, we not only will evict you, we will remove one of your hands. No armed fighting outside the training pits. You draw steel we draw blood. You can practice and spar in the training pit if you must, but your blunted weapons will be inspected. You keep your room clean. There is to be no use of magic whatsoever within the room’s confines other than memorizing spells. Rowdiness is allowed in the tap room, so long as steel is not drawn but not the courtyard or the upper levels.”

“Payment is to be prompt, produced upon entrance into the inn proper at the the innkeeper’s desk. Any attempt to get out of that or finagle, and we will toss you out. The prices are what they are, there is no haggling allowed, but if you conduct business with anyone else, that’s up to them. We have a temple here to the Gnomish god Garl Glittergold, and the normal rules of such a temple apply on top of the rules we’ve already mentioned. If you cannot abide by these rules, seek rooms elsewhere.” The guard finished with a sneer, the face of a man who knew his Inn was the only one for miles in any direction.

Harry nodded, and replied for the group that they were all fine with that, when Jaheira looked at him questioningly at as if asking if he and Imoen could pay their own way.

“Is there someone on staff who would be interested in buying some jewels?” Harry asked instead of replying to her query.

The man nodded and gave the name of one of the workers inside the inn who handled such transactions but warned him that he would have to pay for his night before being allowed into the barroom proper where the was working. “You can pay for your second night after your first, but you have to pay to enter,” the guard intoned as if it was a religious law rather than simply a rule of the inn.

Harry nodded, and the four of them were finally allowed through the main portcullis into the courtyard of the large manor that had been converted into the Friendly Arm Inn.

The manor itself was about four stories taller than the outer wall which itself was three stories, a large building that was several times larger than the inn back at the entrance to Candlekeep, although it would have been dwarfed by the actual keep. Like Candlekeep, the manor was entirely built of stone and tiles, with the manor built up on stone pillars, allowing the ground floor to be used as a paddock. for horses. There were two small farms inside the outer wall visible from the entrance, one with several cows, the other with a good number of stumpy trees. From the portcullis they could see places where the courtyard was dotted by tents, put up next to carts.

As they moved into the courtyard Harry was taking it all in, but while he noticed the guards, he didn’t notice how tense they were. Imoen did. She might have only been an Auror trainee, but she had learned the one, universal rule of guards and police everywhere: guarding like this was the most boring occupation of all time. It took minds perfectly capable of staring at the same stretch of woodland for hours on end without dying up and going home. At night, the guards should be the next best thing to bored.

Instead, all the guards were tense, wary. They kept their eyes peeled to the world beyond the walls, and moved in groups of three, with the majority of them on the guardhouse’s roof above the portcullis. None seemed to be looking away from the outside, and she frowned, shaking her head and wondering why they were tense, but kept silent about it for now, moving after the others as they made their way through the darkened courtyard to the side of the manor where there was a staircase leading up to the inn’s main room.

As they came around the corner, Imoen and the others saw a smaller building set to one side. It had two wings spreading out straight from either side of a central dome, with the roofs of the wings being curved too. Along the front of the church was a row of roses, the red of them visible in the light of two braziers set to either side of the doorway and from within could be heard small chime. In front of the church were several dozen more tents and people could be seen sitting around small fires here and there.

However, Imoen and Harry ignored all that for what their area maps were telling them. At the top of the stairs were the silhouettes of two people, one of them leaning over the side of the railing, looking as if he was about to puke, with the other one standing beside him, shaking his head. It looked as if someone had simply drunk too much and was paying for it while his friend looked on, but there were a few bits that didn’t quite fit. First, these two were Adventurers, their levels, a Fighter level 14 and a Mage Level 22, by the names of Skitter and Tarnesh respectively.

But, although only Harry realized it, Tarnesh wasn’t drunk. If he was, that information should have been shown in a status bar under his name. Harry had seen such things before back in Candlekeep. Drunkenness, confusion, even poison (someone hadn’t cooked a fish properly), all of them showed up in a special status bar on the short information shown by looking at a person’s name. Here there wasn’t any of that.

But Khalid and Jaheira didn’t seem to notice anything, and the four of them made their way up the stairs. However, as Harry move up the steps into the light of a torch set at the corner of the manor, the man who had been calmly standing beside his friend looked at him straightened abruptly, smirking suddenly. “Ho friends, what brings you to the Friendly Arm Inn this night?”

Jaheira opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, the man attacked, a sword appearing almost as if from an item box in his hand as he lunged forward. The attack was so sudden, that Jaheira barely got her staff up in time to block it and could do nothing but stumble back down the stairs. “Nature’s fury, what…”

At the same time the man puking at the railing came alive, twisting around to face them. As he did he finished the words of a spell he had already started triumphantly thrusting out his hands towards Harry and his companions, who were all now pulling out weapons roused by the sudden attack on Jaheira. “Magical Thrust!”

The group of four found themselves blown off of the staircase, all four of them landing in a tumble on the ground below, with Jaheira rolling with the impact, and Khalid tumbling, but pushing himself to his feet and pulling out his sword and shield quickly as the shock of the sudden assault left him. Imoen too rolled coming to her feet and then in a smooth move even Harry hadn’t seen her do she stepped to the dark of one side

Harry didn’t take the fall nearly as well as the other three, but he had already pulled out his sword, and retained it in his hand. He didn’t bother summoning his shield just yet, instead concentrating on what his map was telling him for a brief second, seeing several blue icons showing other people had suddenly turned red. None of them were among the guards, but two of them were among the stable hands, and four others were among the people who had been lounging around a few of the tents behind them.

Two of those strung arrows to their bows and fired in the next instant. The attack would have struck an unsuspecting Khalid in the back if not for Harry shouting “Duck!” With that he took the man in a tackle and hurled them both to the ground. The arrows whizzed by overhead, causing Khalid to stare at them, then at Harry as he wondered how the boy had seen them coming, but not questioning it just then.

“We’re surrounded!” Harry shouted, “Imoen, take out that mage! Jaheira, tangling vines on that group of enemies over there, Khalid guard our back.” With that and ignoring Jaheira’s shout of irritation at his ordering them about, Harry leaped up and charged forward towards the first opponent that had tried to to attack Skitter, believing it more likely that he was of a higher level than the others, since it seemed as if everyone else was following his lead.

The man was fast, far faster than Harry had thought, his sword flashing forward, but Harry had been training with Khalid who was an even higher level Fighter, and he blocked the blow, much to his enemy’s surprise. Skitter was caught with his sword arm overextended, and Harry tried to take him in the side, thrusting hard for the man’s side. But Skitter somehow got his shield around and in the way of Harry’s blade, sending it to one side. Then they were trading blows, and Harry was slowly pushed back.

Growling, Jaheira realized that Harry’s call had been correct as she stared at the four men racing forward towards them from the tents. Smashing her staff into the ground she activated one of the spells set within it, and vines grew at the point of impact, flashing towards the four attackers, all of whom would, had Harry time to notice, be showing up in his view as Bandits, one of the many types of non-Adventurer combatants out there. She caught three of them, and with a shout Khalid moved past her to engage the first man sword to sword for a brief instance before his skill overcame the attacker, slicing deeply into his side.

That left the two archers and one other, a man who revealed himself to also be a mage, though like with the others Harry hadn’t seen it, not having looked directly at them since the battle began. Now both that mage and the one up on the balcony intend the same spell. Magic Missiles, a low level but quick casting spell flashed from their hands, tiny bolts of pure magical energy that hit like tiny hammers. The number of them varied based on the level of the caster, starting at three and adding an extra missile per two levels. Four flashed from the man on the ground, and 12 from the man above them.

One man had targeted Harry’s back, the other as Khalid engaged his fellow. Harry twisted, around just enough to take most of the missiles sent his way on his shield, only one of them getting through to slam into his thigh with punishing force, although his shield cracked in places, and Harry’s Gamer ability warned “Warning, your shield’s durability has fallen to 2/100. It can barely stop a breeze now let alone a blow.”

Between one second and the next, Harry had tossed the shield at Skitter, forcing the other warrior to back away. Then he was holding another tower shield pulling it from his Item Box. For a moment Skitter just gaped, as did the mage above them. “You can’t do that! Even an Item Box doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, I just did,” Harry quipped, charging forward, smashing his sword into Skitter’s then going shield to shield and pushing the other man back. As he did so another message showed up, visible only to him.

You have attempted Shield Bash! Warning, Shield Bash is a Warrior skill that must be learned prior to use. Your attempt has failed but has opened up the ability to learn the move in the future.

However, while the two original attackers were being at least put on the backfoot by the two from Candlekeep, behind them Khalid, with his sword stuck in his opponent’s chest, wasn’t able to twist his body around to bring his shield up in time to stop the Magic Missiles coming his way. The blows from the Magic Missiles caught him off balance and smashed him off of feet once more.

He landed at Jaheira’s feet groaning, while her spell tangled vines hadn’t done nearly as much as Harry had hoped to slow the advance of the for coming up at them from behind. She too gave a cry as an arrow found her in the shoulder, causing her to drop her Druid staff even as she healed herself with her free hand, grabbing at her waist and the cudgel there.

Harry cursed, then looked on up with a smile as Tarnesh, the mage above them, screamed as Imoen suddenly appeared in the darkness beneath the stairway, stabbing up between two of the slats and into his foot. He stumbled to his knees, holding his ruined foot, and whimpering.

But unfortunately for them all he had enough presence of mine to toss himself back onto the balcony, away from Imoen. And the balcony, unlike the steps, was solid wood, without any slits to stab through. Grimacing, Imoen dropped down to the ground, disappearing into shadows again. *Huh, I think I’m getting the hang of this whole hit and run thing the Thief class has going for it.*

At the same time she had dropped to the floor, Harry had twisted around. “Jaheira, catch!” tossing his shield to Jaheira, who quickly used it to defend herself, even as she strained somewhat to lift it. Jaheira block the few blows from her opponents with Harry’s shield, as she fumbled at her belt for her club, and the first attacker to reach them through her tangling vines fell screaming as her husband stabbed up at them, regaining his feet but slowly until Jaheira turned her healing on him.

But that moment of largess cost Harry. Before he could pull out his last spare shield, Skitter’s blade caught his, and though Harry’s sword turned his enemy’s blade, the sword shattered, and he cursed, before wheeling away from that opponent, hurling the remains of his ruined sword into the man’s face, as another message appeared.

Your weapon has been destroyed, -10 to attack. Your weapons destruction has injured your hand, laceration damage to palm and the back of your wrist.

Despite that pain, Harry reached into his item box and pulled out his Warhammer, bringing it around in a powerful two-handed blow into the side of Skitter, who had flinched back from the hilt to the face. He let loose a scream as his ribs cracked and was hurled to the side.

With the one mage nursing a badly wounded foot, Harry saw that Jaheira quickly moved to engage the others. Khalid had blocked two more arrows and another magic missile spell, but this had allowed the last two bandits around him to attack Jaheira, who had taken another arrow to the side. her armor had blocked the arrow, but barely.

Another spell lashed out, a confusion spell that swept over them all. This caused both Khalid and Jaheira to lower their defenses for a second, while Harry dropped his hammer to land in the dirt at his feet. If they had time, their Willpower would come into play to throw the spell off, but the last two attackers who had charged forward were free of Jaheira’s tangling vines and advancing. One of them even activated his own Hide in Shadows as he came.

But then Harry was on the last one visible smashing into one him bodily, taking the bandit to the ground. Once down, Harry slammed a punch into his face that nearly splattered his brains all over the place a show of strength that took Jaheira aback for a moment as she threw off the last bit of confusion.

Then the man who had disappeared earlier into shadows came out from behind Harry, and his sword was out and flashing before she could even shout a warning.

But Imoen was suddenly there, coming out of her own Hides in Shadows technique, grabbing at the man’s wrist with one hand, as her sword flashed up. The man parried it with a dagger but was not prepared for a red glow that suddenly appeared around Imoen’s hand, causing him to slump, while Jaheira blinked wondering what she had just seen. The next instant, that man died, as Khalid’s blade found him, stabbing him hard the side.

This left Jaheira to take out the mage and the two archers. Fully recovered from her Confusion she did so in no uncertain terms. With a roar she started her own chant, and the spell lashed out not into her opponent but up into the nighttime sky.

Jaheira has used Call Lightning. This bolt of lightning flashes down in a vertical stroke at any of the priest or druid’s enemies. The first enemy struck by the lightning will be the enemy targeted, but after that the lightning will spread out to any nearby enemy, creating a small, but localized lightning storm. No Allies will be harmed by this show of Nature’s Fury.

The message appeared to Harry and Imoen’s eyes before a lightning strike flashed down, electrifying the low level mage and his two archer allies. All three of them screamed and died, writhing on the ground while at last the guards on the walls noticed something was going on.

*About damn time!* Harry grumbled, hearing the shouts in the distance over a strange humming noise in the background. It was with some trepidation that Harry turned in the direction of the noise to see Tarnesh standing once more on his ruined foot on the balcony above them.

In their rush to finish the other attackers, Harry and his party had neglected to finish off the first two, especially Tarnesh, the mage that Imoen had stabbed earlier. Skitter had healed himself somewhat with a potion and taken position again on the steps guarding his companion. The mage was the worse threat though, having had time to chant another powerful spell. “Fireball!” he shouted, thrusting his hand down towards them. A ball of flame twice as large as a basketball flashed out towards them.

Tarnesh has used Fireball. The Quintessential magical spell, this favorite of all wand-wavers everywhere creates a large fireball that detonates upon impact with the ground, expanding into an explosive cloud that burns everything in its path, while also blowing those of shorter stature or weight off their feet. The damage, duration and power of the spell, like most spells, is directly connected to the level of the mage.

But even as the spell flashed towards them, Imoen and Harry were already moving. Imoen was closer to Khalid at the moment, and took him at a run, taking him off his feet and placing her own body over his. At the same time Harry grabbed Jaheira, pulling her around, and taking possession of his shield again holding in between the two of them and the incoming spell.

Of course, the two half-elves didn’t know this, and for a moment, Jaheira wondered if Harry had lost his mind. A regular shield would be no match for a fireball spell, and she wondered if all of three of them were about to die. Injured multiple times since the battle began and having not had time to heal herself back up to full health, Jaheira knew she and Khalid at least lacked the health to survive a fireball from a high level mage, which Tarnesh must be given the number of Magic Missiles he had conjured earlier.

But then twin bright glows enveloped Harry and Imoen just as the explosion hit, and Jaheira gasped as the fire of the fireball spell and the slight impetus that it would’ve given them washed over and away from the two of them, leaving Harry and Jaheira, and Khalid and Imoen not only not burning, but not even injured.

The blue faded quickly, and Harry rushed forward, hoping to get to the stairwell and up towards the mage.

However, Tarnesh recovered from his own surprise quickly, and lashed out once more with the old mage stand by. Once more Magic Missiles flew, targeting Harry. Harry grunted as his shield once again shattered under the impacts, followed quickly by three of them slamming into his chest, and his health bar decreasing deep into the red and Skitter, moved forward to finish him off, his blade raised high over his hand in a two handed grip, his face a rictus of agony from his ribs,.

But then, Khalid was back in the fight, pulling up his bow and arrow and loosing it into the throat of Skitter. He fell with a bloodcurdling scream, losing his sword to grasp at his neck and Harry leaped over his body, bringing around his hammer in a two-handed swing. The mage’s head splattered everywhere, gore flying back into Harry’s face and upper body, as his body collapsed to the side.

Harry breathed heavily, staring around him, as guards from the wall and main entrance to the courtyard **finally** rushed towards them. Thankfully several bystanders had seen the whole thing from the shadows and started shouting out what had been happening to the guards as they rushed forward. That meant none of the guards in turn turned red for enemy on his map as they moved forward.

One moved through the carnage quickly, nodding gruffly to Harry and the others as he apologized for what had happened. “This shit’s not supposed to happen in the Friendly Arm Inn,” he said, as Harry stared down at the body of the man he’d just killed, the fifth such man he’d killed so far.

To his credit, Harry was a little worried about that aspect despite his Gamer’s Mind keeping him from falling into a funk about it. Looking up he simply nodded to the guard, gesturing around them. “I take it, that means we can search their bodies for clues as to the why of this attack?”

“Yeah, because me and Harry here’ve never been away from Candlekeep before, and I doubt this could have been a crime of passion towards my companions,” Imoen quipped as she knelt, cleaning her short sword on the nearest dead body. Luckily the magic of the fireball spell was what sustained it’s flames, and the fires it had begun quickly puttered out.

“Indeed not,” Jaheira muttered, while Imoen moved to help her sit Khalid up from where he had fallen onto his side after shooting the arrow that had taken out Skitter. Like Imoen, he was a little battered around the edges, especially his head, Imoen not having had time to be gentle when she tackled him to the ground. And alas, Jaheira knew Khalid often was effected more by Confusion spells since the miscast spell that had given him his stutter.

While the two ladies were seeing to their wounded companion, Harry dealt with the guards, who started to clean up the bodies after Harry searched them. He didn’t find much of interest until he got back to Skitter’s body, finding on him a message that explained this attack.

BOUNTY NOTICE: Be it known to all those of evil intent, that a bounty has been placed upon the head of Harry, the foster child of Gorion. Last seen in the area of Candlekeep, this person is to be killed in quick order. He can be identified by the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He might be in company of a pink haired girl of short stature but still human descent. Those returning with proof of the deed shall receive no less than 200 coins of gold for his head. A further hundred shall be yours for the confirmed death of the girl, but none for her alone. As always, any that reveal these plans to the forces of law shall join the target in their fate.

As Harry read that message, a quest bar appeared in his view.

“**Someone Out There Hates You**: It looks as if the armored giant is no longer willing to get his own hands dirty and has gifted you with a bounty. This might turn the hands of all those evil or criminal in this land against you, until, that is, they realize taking you might be costing them more than gold. Kill forty assassins and you might make the rest of the underworld think twice about tangling with you. Just don’t let innocents get caught in the crossfire. This is a mandatory quest that can be achieved over time for a reward of 2000 XP and Reputation +1.”

You have Survived an Assassination attack: XP reward of 500 plus the XP for each attacker: Tarnesh, 800 experience, Skitter, 400, Bandit X 6 at 70 experience each, Bandit Mage X1 at a hundred.

An instant later, these two messages were superseded by another one that Harry had been hoping to see for a while now. “Congratulations, you have leveled up. Harry is now a level 6 Paladin.” It was all Harry could do to not thrust a hand in the air and shout in triumph.

Despite his jubilation however, Harry knew he couldn’t deal with that just yet. He had to deal with the locals, while Jaheira was too busy fussing, and there was no other term for it, over Khalid and Imoen, who looked a little sheepish but happy at the reaction from the standoffish Druid. It didn’t stop her from going “Aw, you really do care.”

For which she earned a smack upside the head and a “Oh, grow up child!” From the other woman.

Rolling his eyes, Harry put the bounty notice he’d read into his item box and continued to loot, waiting for the others instead of entering the inn now. *My party members folks, warts and all.* As he thought that, he realized he wouldn’t have it any other way.

He didn’t notice Jaheira’s speculative glance going between him and Imoen. *What in the world was that, that magical shield? No Paladin or Thief should be able to do that. So what was that? And the red glow Imoen showed earlier. Hmm… I think tonight Khalid and I must have a talk with these two. There is far more going on here than meets the eye.*

End Chapter